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Six Ways the Media Has Misreported Syria

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As in the case of Libya, from *NY Times* to *Fox News*, from *Guardian* to *National Post* and from *Le Monde* to *Le Figaro*, the Western mainstream media's coverage of the Syrian conflict has been mostly simplistic and black & white with a Hollywoodian good (opposition) and evil (Syrian government) story. The basic storyline reported is: "The dictatorial Syrian government is torturing and killing Syrian protestors and civilians including women and children and that the Western countries and the Arab League want to protect these Syrian civilians". These outlets use any information that supports their stance regardless of its source and quality, and dismiss or ignore any information that brings it to question.

The bloody suppression of protestors by the Syrian government and also instability resulting from the armed insurgency aggravated by a complex set of foreign forces, each with its own set of vested interests, have resulted in significant suffering for the people of Syria. Western media's unquestioning, consensual, biased and melodramatic coverage of the Syrian events risks moving this conflict to a full blown war with grave consequences for the Syrian people and the region.

Here are the six ways that the Western media, across the board, have been uncritical and misleading in their coverage of the Syrian conflict:

1. *What do the majority of Syrians want?*

In the mainstream Western media coverage, there is an implicit assumption rarely questioned that the majority of the Syrians support the armed insurgency and that they want immediate departure of Bashar Assad. However, the only opinion poll that has been carried out by the Qatar based YouGovSiraj, since the start of the conflict claims that about 55% [1] of Syrians do not want immediate departure of Assad. The methodology for this poll is not robust. In addition, this stance might be not due to support for Assad rather, because the Syrian people are afraid of instability and civil war or because some believe in the reform intentions of Assad and still others because they might be benefiting from the existing regime. The 89% backing of the new Syrian constitution in the recent referendum with a turnout of 57% was also dismissed because of the ongoing violence on the ground and lack of independent supervision on the referendum [2].

Nonetheless, given the West's backing of the Syrian opposition is based on the "will of the Syrian people", for the media it is essential to expose and debate such polls and try to establish what the majority of the Syrians want before adopting a position on behalf of the Syrian people.

2. *Is the Syrian National Council (SNC) and the militarized insurgency representative of the Syrian opposition?*

The opposition is primarily represented by Syrian National Council (SNC) headed by a Syrian expatriate professor, Burhan Ghalioun who is based in Paris [3]. This organization which is run mostly by expatriates has been demanding foreign intervention in Syria and it rejects any sort of dialog with the Syrian government. Several independent media outlets and other Syrian opposition groups [4] have questioned SNC's lack of transparency about its members,

Six Ways the Media Has Misreported Syria

funding and foreign links and whether it is a legitimate representative of the Syrian opposition [5] [6]. Another organization claiming to represent the opposition is the Syrian Opposition Coordination body operated from inside Syria which is against foreign intervention and is for a dialog-based solution after an end is put to the violence and the political prisoners are freed. In addition, several militarized groups operate inside Syria such as Free Syrian Army who have been engaged in an armed conflict with the Syrian army and also have been attacking government buildings and other assets. These militia are reported to be a mix of deserting soldiers, foreign mercenaries and armed civilians [7] and they are armed by cross border smuggled arms allegedly funded/provided by foreign governments including those of Saudi Arabia [8], Qatar [9].

All these organizations are non-transparent and little is known about who runs them and who they are accountable to. The media has an important unfulfilled role in exposing the governance of these organizations and their internal and foreign political sidings and ideological agenda. Currently there is no proof that such organizations represent the will of the majority or a significant part of the Syrian people or the opposition.

3. How many casualties and killed by whom?

There have been casualties due to government suppression of civilian protests, due to armed conflict between government soldiers and armed militia and also due to reprisals and bombings by the armed militias. The number of total victims reported by the UN Human Rights Council which is now at 7,500, is regularly used by the Western media to refer to the extent of the repression in Syria. However, no breakdown is provided as to what percentage of this number represents civilians, what part opposition armed forces and what percentage soldiers. The UN has estimated that as of Feb 15, 2012, 1,345 Syrian soldiers have been so far killed in the conflict [10]f. This is a strong indication that what is happening in Syria is an armed insurgency verging on civil war and not only a government "killing and torturing its people". The violence perpetrated by both sides was exposed in the report prepared by Arab League monitors, which is the only existing first-hand account of what is happening on the ground. [11]. However this report was mostly ignored because it did not back the black and white account of the Arab League and the Western media. The Western media should show more responsibility in its use of casualty numbers, because such numbers are highly influential in driving international public opinion about the conflict.

4. Are the information sources unbiased and credible?

Operation of foreign journalists in Syria is limited by safety concerns. Consequently the Western media has been using other sources, mainly the Syrian Observatory on Human Rights and other opposition sources. Sometimes the media simply cites "activists" or a new largely unknown entity named "Local Coordination Councils" as the source for information without further detailing its sources. Syrian Observatory on for Human Rights (SOHR), which is the most common source, was originally run by a single person (Rami Abdulrahman) from Coventry, UK. SOHR has been recently contested by a competing organization with the same name. There is an ongoing bitter fight between the two SOHRs over who is the "authentic" SOHR [12]. The latter SOHR blames the former of links with the Syrian regime and of over-reporting of soldiers' and security officers' death. The former SOHR states that it wants the "bloodshed to stop" and that it is against foreign intervention, while the latter states that it supports a no-fly-zone in Syria. Obviously all such opaque organizations, which are openly against the Syrian regime, have an interest in biased and inflated reporting of the casualties in the conflict. High quality journalism necessitates thorough verification of sources and including the account of both sides of the conflict to ensure a balanced coverage. However, so far the Western media has unquestioningly used the numbers and coverage of these organizations in a one-sided manner without sufficient questioning.

5. What are the interests of countries pushing for regime change and foreign intervention?

The current conflict in Syria is smeared and complicated by the interference of a long list of foreign stakeholders each

Six Ways the Media Has Misreported Syria

with its own political agenda. Some of these interests are [13] [14]:

Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries
US and Europe: Replacing a Alaawite (Shiite) run government allied with Iran with a Sunni government more aligned with the GCC – On December 2, 2011, head of SNC, Ghalioun, said that if his party takes over Syria it would end the military relationship to Iran and cut off arms supplies to Hezbollah and Hamas, and establish ties with Israel; Distracting the international media from repression of peaceful opposition in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia

[15]; Removing a government allied with Iran which will help decrease the Iranian influence in the region; Removing a government with a mostly independent or anti-Western / Israel line of politics

Israel: Removing a government allied with Iran and Hezbollah. Syria is a key country bordering with Israel with an open pro-Palestinian agenda – Ghalioun announced that his future government will cut its military ties with Iran and Hizbollah [16]; and Distracting the Middle Eastern media coverage from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

Russia: Stopping the fast expansion of US allied governments in the Middle East (after Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya) and loss of one of the last of its allied Middle Eastern governments where it also has its last offshore military based

Iran: Protecting one of the last of its allied countries in the region. If the Syrian government falls, Iran would face increased isolation and pressure and risk of foreign intervention backed by the GCC, Israel and the West.

Turkey: Maintaining its influence in the post Assad regime which has geopolitical importance for Turkey

The media has so far been shallow in its coverage of the goals of the nations that are playing an active role in this conflict. The simple story is that all these governments want to “protect Syrian civilians”. However the complex mesh of vested interests is mostly left unexposed.

6. What are the “democratic credentials of the countries who want to take democracy to Syria?”

One key block of countries pushing for military intervention and regime change in Syria has been the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). It is important to remember that most GCC countries including Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are run by totalitarian regimes [17] facing local protests. Saudi Arabia recently sent troops to Bahrain to suppress peaceful protests [18]. The Western media should do a better job in debating the legitimacy of such actors in pushing for democratic change and for protecting civilians in Syria.

As in the case of Libya, this one-sided coverage of the Syrian conflict is facilitating the escalation of the conflict towards a civil war and foreign military intervention which might serve the short-term interests of many foreign countries and forces but would be disastrous for the people of Syria. The Western media has a significant and grave moral responsibility to move from the current one-sided and biased media lynching of the Syrian government to a more balanced, nuanced and comprehensive approach.

Post-scriptum :

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Six Ways the Media Has Misreported Syria

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- [2] http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-202_162-57385423/west-calls-syrian-referendum-a-sham/
- [3] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burhan_Ghalioun
- [4] <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/03/01/us-syria-opposition-idUSTRE8200SA20120301>
- [5] http://therealnews.com/t2/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=767&Itemid=74&jumival=8027
- [6] The Real News Network – The Syrian Opposition and the External Players; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QQeWU7Gm8c>
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