

Western Media and the Syrian MacGuffin

by Tianna Sukkariéh
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It is a tragic, yet characteristic hallmark of warfare, that the capacity for truth is compromised by ambivalence within the political or geopolitical landscape. This ambivalence, a mere widespread blaze of folly and contradiction, is fueled by the contributions of multiple political and corporate entities all ironically asserting that their solutions might put out the flame. In order to theorise the mechanics of any modern conflict, it is imperative to take into account our existence in the digital age, as well as the physical and psychological effects of ‘mainstream’ media on mass consumers.

Popular media has become a precious tool in the geopolitical interests of imperialist nations such as America, Britain, France, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. When we establish a connection between the regional interests of these countries in regard to the Middle East and the narratives they broadcast through their influential media corporations, the ensuing indication is not so hard to conceive; that there exists, a public platform for these nations to systematically subvert the narrative of the Syrian war as pretext for a greater geopolitical scheme (i.e. regime change, balkanisation). I do not profess to be an expert on the political nuances of the Syrian war, nor an analyst of media coverage from all public angles, however, this essay will attempt to frame a new perspective that can assist in generally understanding the role of different media platforms in the war on Syria and the tactics Western media uses, to undermine the true history of the Syrian struggle for peace.

The eruption of the Syrian conflict in 2011 saw the development of not only the most documented and photographed war in human history, but also the collapse of the integrity of Western media outlets and corporate institutions, whose injection of poisonous agendas into their coverage of the conflict have only escalated the devastating war. This very coverage has also facilitated blind acceptance of Western interventionism in the Middle East, by means of proxy Islamist death-squads. The substance of the Syrian war, and of any war for that matter, when it comes down to it, relies on three key elements: denial, fraud and fabrication. First, there is the denial of basic realities and international law. For instance, the notion that Syria is a sovereign nation and any internal political outcomes of the conflict will be decided by Syrians only, or, the

reality that Western and Gulf states are illegally training and funding, violent jihadist militias to destabilise the country. Next, we have the fraudulent framing of key events. Some major examples of such fraud in mainstream media coverage include; the militarisation of the ‘peaceful protests’ (2011), the ‘chemical weapons’ attacks in Ghouta (2013) and Khan Sheikhoun (2017), as well as the battle and liberation of Aleppo (2016). Finally, we have the fabrication of larger narratives, which facilitate and cover up the West’s imperialist intentions in the Middle East. Perhaps the biggest fabrication peddled by the popular media, is a narrative which relies on the existence of a ‘moderate opposition’ that fights for a democratic, pluralistic Syria. Of course, this vital dependence on a false pretext unfortunately, but inevitably, promotes a response in which consumers of Western media champion the war effort and become mouthpieces for the ‘democratic revolution’.

American scholar, Brené Brown once summed up the power of the corporate media when it comes to crisis reporting. She says: “It’s in our biology to trust what we see with our eyes. This makes living in a carefully edited, overproduced and photoshopped world very dangerous.” Accordingly, when looking at the war on Syria, we see just that. One elaborate production. However almost painstakingly clear is the overarching dichotomy, between what is real and what our western governments need us to think is real, in order for them to pursue their hegemonic ends with pristine optics. Keeping on with that motif of production, illusion, and deception, a narrative cannot hold without having structural techniques that allow for the larger story to maintain its sense of integrity. Thus, we come to the premise of this essay: *The Syrian MacGuffin*. A MacGuffin, an odd enough term in itself, might leave people contemplating; how could such a strange and ridiculous-sounding concept have a place in discussing this war? Correspondingly, this essay will aim to dissect the peculiar term and demonstrate how it in fact, has a very real and practical application when it comes to understanding how the media indirectly propagates Western imperialist doctrines.

A MacGuffin, a term coined by Alfred Hitchcock in 1939, in fiction, is a plot device in the form of some goal, desired object or abstract ideal that the protagonist, or in this case, the moral proposition of public opinion as facilitated by popular media, pursues. In simple words, it is the trigger for the plot. By the end of a narrative, the MacGuffin becomes typically unimportant to the overall plot and loses its significance as the events of the story unfold. Essentially, ‘MacGuffinisation’ is a concept which explains how the plot design which unravels throughout the quest to attain a ‘goal’, is of more revelatory value than the desired outcome itself. In this case, it is important to put aside the ranging political perspectives surrounding the war and focus on framing the Syrian conflict as a basic narrative. By doing this, it becomes quite clear how Western media, utilises, through sentimentalised journalism, the quest for ‘freedom’, ‘peace’ and ‘human rights’ as a means to justify its prolonging of the bloodshed in Syria for its regime change agenda. So much so, that the concept of humanitarianism is now nothing but a MacGuffin, an evocative-*sounding* but ultimately disposable plot device for Western imperialism and its long-term plan for regional transformation.

Fundamentally, Western media operates under two key strategies that manifest the ways in which imperialist forces engage with this humanitarian MacGuffin, and deceive consumers of the mainstream coverage. These strategies are; *a)* selective sentiment and the politicization of compassion and *b)* the whitewashing of terrorist agendas and the provision of a media platform for terrorist organisations under the farce of creating a ‘moderate opposition’.

Firstly, we have selective sentiment which refers to how corporate media capitalises on human emotion to not only cover up its destructive foreign policy (that has led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocent people in this conflict), but also as a warmongering device. In order to keep the tape rolling on their imperial plans, the West has adopted a somewhat deranged 'saviour complex' that pushes for larger scales of 'humanitarian' intervention. Compassion has been politicized in this conflict through a media framework that selectively covers casualties and so-called 'rescue operations' from sources and perspectives allied with extremist, US-backed contras on the ground in Syria. A prominent example of this is the 'White Helmets' group which claim to be a neutral, first-response team and have won multiple awards for documentaries covering [staged] rescue missions in rebel-held Syrian towns, yet have proven to be, along with photo and video documentation, aligned with Al-Qaeda forces and other Islamist factions fighting on the ground. The very fact that this information is concealed in Western fawning over the organisation, shows the extent of the media's grip on consumer sentiments. News corporations dictate to people, whose lives matter. They not only instruct people on who they should weep for, but on how they should harness their emotions to advocate for more war. Returning to the fact that the Syrian war is and has been the most photographed and documented war in human history, I pose the question; at what cost is this so? When we analyse the effects of dishonest visual media on mass consumers, we are given insight into how the manipulation, fabrication and distribution of false images and videos, are tools used on a worldwide scale to whitewash and propagate the terrorist deluge in Syria. French philosopher, Jacques Ellul asserts that psychological warfare is the hardest war tactic to defend against because no international court of justice is capable of protecting against psychological aggression.

Bana Alabed, a 7 year old Syrian girl, became a figure who emerged on social media during the battle and liberation of Aleppo. Her innocent face was plastered on a Twitter profile which consistently projected anti-Assad propaganda under calculated accord with jihadist agendas. "Dear world, it's better to start 3rd world war instead of letting Russia & Assad commit #HolocaustAleppo." Shameless profiteering from Bana's persona is the epitome of how Al Qaeda linked rebels, facilitated by their monopoly over the sentiments of Western digital media, labor the persona of a young child as a figurehead of the warmongering effort. Her Twitter account, set up to document the 'siege on Aleppo' which was proven to be a complete fraud, goes to show the extent the opposition will go to, that is child abuse, to call for more war. There is probably nothing more upsetting than the exploitation and employment of children in this dirty war. Particularly by the Western media.

Next is the case of Aylan Kurdi, the 3 year old Syrian boy whose image made global headlines after he drowned in the Mediterranean sea on the 2nd of September 2015, fleeing from the war. The subsequent front page by UK based newspaper, 'The Sun' featured an exclusive poll which stated that "52% [of surveyees] SAY BOMB SYRIA NOW", unscrupulously printed next to an image of the young boy, with 'For Aylan' captioned above his face. 'For Aylan', they suggest, Western governments should send more bombs and create more destruction. This event sparked a thought-process that to avenge his death and the suffering of refugees, we must engage in more war. As if war is for the people. (War is never for the people).

The "MacGuffinization" of justice for Syria, peddled by the media politicizing where we should focus our 'compassion' inherently communicates how actual foreign policies and principles of

politicians don't matter to their supporters. It only matters that in the destructive quest to obtain those imperial policies, the supposed 'heroes' (our 'moderate', head-chopping freedom fighters) defeat the villains (the Syrian government defending its sovereignty). It's all about the narrative, the emotions, and what political commentators cynically call 'the optics'. Through images and propaganda we can see exactly how the media have framed their beloved heroes and sinister villains, and how such propaganda correlates with the greater scheme for regime change, destabilisation and the erasure of Syrian sovereignty.

Even more so than visual propaganda, language, has also played a detrimental role in the media's coverage of Syria. Trigger words are utilised to almost cheerlead the humanitarian MacGuffin, particularly in the digital age where infamous 'hashtags' are weapons that cloud critical and fair investigation into the events they aim to distort. Popular hashtags that trended around the time of Aleppo's liberation last year were absolutely detached from the reality on the ground, where government forces and their allies were defeating Al Qaeda affiliated groups who besieged the town in 2012.

#AleppoisBurning #SaveAleppo #AleppohasFallen #AleppoGenocide. Of course, a simple click on any of these 'hashtags' would redirect consumers of digital journalism to claims of massacres, slaughters and rapes, the 'house-to-house' murder of civilians and a deadly blockade against civilian evacuation in Eastern Aleppo, all supposedly perpetrated by the Syrian army. Proportionately, these claims fueled a level of hysteria that went beyond the need for objective proof, photo evidence and reliable testimonies, none of which existed. Missing from these hashtag streams, was the explicit content emerging of Islamist rebels shooting at civilian evacuations being directed by Syrian armed forces, Syrian soldiers transporting elderly women on their backs to government enclaves, triumphs in the streets of liberated towns, and photos of Christians celebrating Easter for the first time in 5 years. The 'fall of Aleppo', proven; phony, assumed and unaccounted for.

Further, let us examine the second strategy in corporate media's dirty information war on Syria. The media actively participates in the 'whitewashing' of terrorist agendas and the provision of a media platform for terrorist organisations under the farce of creating a 'moderate opposition'. On July 28 2016, the Qatari-based Al Jazeera channel aired an address by Jabhat Al Nusra's leader Mohammad Golani, who announced that the group was changing its name to 'Jabhat Fateh al-Sham' and its official flag from black to white. This formal dissociation from Al-Qaeda aimed to portray the group as 'moderate opposition', within a 'nationalist narrative' enabling them to maintain strong popular support from Western and Gulf states. To be arduously forward, this involved, the leader of a terrorist organisation being given a platform, initially by Al Jazeera and later on by CNN, to announce a tactical rebranding under the name Jabhat Fateh Al Sham. We are expected to believe that a new name is synonymous with a shift from the group's radical, violent and sectarian ideologies. These Salafist Ideologies are the ones that dominate the military opposition in Syria.

Surprisingly, it is William Shakespeare who analogizes this particular event rather well. *"What's in a name? That which we call a rose. By any other name would smell as sweet."* So indeed, what's in a name? That which we call a terrorist, by any other name would smell as foul, evil and depraved. It is nothing short of abhorrent and hypocritical that the media allows such a platform, which does nothing but bury the fact that the true threat to Syrians, does not lie in the fake

narrative of a government massacring its own people. Rather, it lies in deceptive propaganda that sugarcoats the role of terrorist groups in the destruction of Syria. As time goes on, it becomes clearer that ideas of peace and humanitarian advocacy mean nothing to Western powers, who justify their imperialist aggression by cowering behind false narratives.

It is not especially clear anymore, what is still allowing Western states their false sense of moral authority or even more so, affording them a public sense of legitimacy and credibility in the stories our media circulate. We have seen time and time again how that as the values and agendas of corporate institutions evolve according to foreign policy, so too does the depiction of on the ground events in Syria. At each corner, we see the imperialist narrative crumbling and somewhere further down the same path; a narrative shift; a reestablishment of priorities; a constantly evolving web of deception fueled by the demonisation of a sovereign government. It's an absurd case, that peddles a cartoonishly ignorant disposition. As if somehow, if they repeat 'chemical weapons' or 'Aleppo's last hospital' or 'moderate freedom fighters' enough times, a bloodthirsty, villainous Bashar Al Assad will appear with a resignation letter and a hall pass to annex Syrian land, destabilise the population and seize Syrian resources.

When certain institutions control what the masses consume as 'truth', just like the corporate media does, they also have the power to manipulate what the masses see as falsehoods, conspiracy theories and treacheries. That is perhaps, the biggest frustration and most upsetting tragedy that befalls the information war that we are faced with today. The fact that many organisations, voices of reason and logic, as well as individual experiences, are silenced by those who control content creation and distribution. The silence of justice, in modern times, is drowned out by imperialist, Zionist corporations who scream out words like 'peace' and 'freedom' down the camera lens and gain pleasure in knowing that the only echoes that reverberate are those of war, greed and hegemony behind the camera. Alfred Hitchcock liked to call it the "MacGuffin" — a mysterious objective in a narrative that sets the whole chain of events into motion. But despite the supposed centrality of the MacGuffin whether it be human rights, freedom or peace, just like this war, a Hitchcock movie is always about something else.

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