N. Ahmed, *State Propaganda in Syria: From War Crimes to Pipelines* (London: International State Crime Initiative, Queen Mary University of London, 2018), 141pp, open access, free of charge

Reviewed by Michael Karadjis

Sorting fact from fiction is difficult in any war, let alone one as complex as that in Syria. In this extremely detailed piece, Dr. Nafeez Ahmed dissects propaganda from all sides of the conflict by “examining multiple contradictory perspectives together . . . with a view to determine the coherence or incoherence of narratives” (p. 11).

While Ahmed discusses crimes committed by rebel formations and the holes in their propaganda, his main target are so-called “critical narratives” – the propaganda of the Assad regime, Russia and various pro-Assad writers. Since “the Assad regime’s overwhelming role in mass murders, torture, rape, enforced disappearances, siege warfare and aerial bombardment” (p. 130) has been extensively documented by the UN, this report may seem superfluous. However, when Ahmed initially set out to examine the more controversial cases, he expected these critical narratives to be vindicated; but his meticulous research found them wanting. For example, when demonstrating regime culpability for the massacre of 108 civilians in Houla in May 2012, Ahmed writes that he is “ashamed” that he too “was fooled” by false reports blaming the Free Syrian Army (FSA) (p. 73).

The majority of the report consists of Ahmed’s analysis of a number of major crimes, including the chemical weapons attacks on Ghouta in August 2013, on Khan Sheikhoun in April 2017 and Douma in April 2018; the attack on a UN-organised aid convoy in September 2016; and the Houla massacre. In all these cases, the report – using an enormous amount of detail and a great range of sources – finds the regime almost certainly responsible. While Ahmed also finds problematic issues with some “official” narratives (i.e., those that blame the regime) that offer cause for scepticism, there are “no compelling or coherent alternative narratives of the main chemical weapons incidents in Syria” as the critical narratives are “ever shifting, riddled with contradictions and in some cases brazenly dishonest” (p. 108).

Ahmed begins by discussing the attempted manipulation of the scene of the Douma incident, presumably by pro-rebel activists, when some bodies were moved to a “collection point” to be photographed. Yet while this clumsy attempt at “staging” – widely condemned in opposition circles – was a gift to pro-Assad propagandists, Ahmed explains that “images were staged by manipulating *real dead bodies at the scene* . . . after *real violence* was committed” by Assad’s forces, but there was no evidence of staging of “the horrifying initial footage” of “the dead corpses of children with froth at their mouths” (pp. 29–31).

Ahmed takes apart various self-contradictory narratives put forward by the Syrian and Russian governments and the journalist Robert Fisk, who entered the site under regime escort. Russia's staged interview with 11-year-old Hassan Diab, who claimed there had been no gas attack, "was filmed at a Syrian military facility in Damascus in the presence of three Russian military police officers" (p. 67). This report was written before the publication of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) report in March 2019, which established there were "reasonable grounds" that chlorine had been used as a weapon, and dropped from the air, implying regime responsibility.¹

This leads on to a section where various claims about the White Helmets (WH), an organisation of volunteer first responders, are dissected. This begins with allegations by pro-Assad propagandists that the WH had filmed the Douma footage, using its inconsistencies therein to condemn them. Yet the footage was originally released by another opposition media centre; the WH "had not even been present at the scene of the incident in the immediate aftermath" (p. 31).

Ahmed examines some of their actions that appear to have put themselves, or those they are trying to save, in danger. As he notes, such "risk-prone behaviour" is hardly surprising, given that they lack training in "more complex forms of rescuing, because they have only received light training" (p. 39), this being the nature of a volunteer civilian force that has arisen in catastrophic circumstances. If they really were agents of the West, or of the jihadist brigade Jabhat al-Nusra, as often alleged, one might expect more polished operations.

Still, if they make errors due to "incompetence," Ahmed suggests it is "not unreasonable to doubt the reliability of evidence" they produce (p. 39). For example, Scott Ritter, the former UN investigator of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, criticised the OPCW, when assessing the use of sarin in the Khan Sheikhoun chemical attack, for relying on "none other than the White Helmets" (p. 39) to gain samples (the regime blocked the OPCW from accessing the site). Yet Ahmed demonstrates that samples were gained from other sources, *including the regime*, from which the OPCW established the use of sarin.

Although the OPCW indicted the regime for the sarin attacks both on Khan Sheikhoun and on Ghouta in August 2013, Ahmed meticulously examines various "critical narratives" on both events, composed by a dizzying array of writers, from famous investigative reporter Seymour Hersh to Ritter to a range of former US security officials, many gathered in the Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS).

Ahmed establishes the circular nature of their accounts. For example, Ahmed spends many pages on Hersh's account – sourced from an unnamed "former intelligence official" – which "reveals unnerving parallels with the tenor of VIPS' memo" and "a chronic lack of internal evidence as well as a conflict with other verified facts" (p. 87).

On Khan Sheikhou, Hersh's story contradicted the Syrian and Russian governments' narratives, and all proposed "incoherent alternative accounts" of what occurred (p. 97). Once "the Syrian and Russian governments conceded that their original claims . . . were entirely false," (p. 104) Hersh's story collapsed.

While most of these "critical narratives" have been debunked and rejected by the OPCW, Ahmed's report is a very useful place to find a thorough examination of all these narratives.

The final section turns to geopolitics, particularly the role of competing oil and gas pipelines. This narrative can be problematic, as it implicitly denies the agency of the Syrian people's uprising against a brutal dictatorship, suggesting they acted as proxies for various foreign states' interests. In this case, however, Ahmed makes clear that a genuine popular uprising did take place; as such, these issues may be considered one geopolitical factor helping explain particular interventions or alignments of various states.

Interestingly, Ahmed shows some of the most common narratives are false. According to a standard "critical" theory, the Gulf states and "the West" decided to overthrow Assad after he rejected a proposed gas pipeline running from Qatar through Syria and Turkey to sell gas to Europe, in favour of an alternative pipeline running from Iran through Iraq and Syria to the Mediterranean. There are a number of obvious problems here. "The Gulf" is hardly a category, since it was Qatar's rival, Saudi Arabia, through whose territory the pipeline was to pass, that blocked the proposal;² and both Gulf rivals initially gave strong support to Assad when the uprising broke out in 2011.³

In any case, Ahmed shows that Assad *welcomed* the Qatari proposal in 2009.⁴ Moreover, the alternative considered by Assad was not an Iranian pipeline; rather, in 2009 Syria signed a Memorandum Of Understanding for Qatar's ally, Turkey, to build a pipeline linking with the proposed Arab Gas Pipeline, which was to pipe Egyptian gas through Jordan and Syria to Europe. Both Jordan and Egypt were close allies of both the West and the Gulf.

The Iran–Iraq–Syria pipeline proposal was not signed until June 2011, months into the uprising. Moreover, Ahmed shows that Assad's ally Russia saw it as a dangerous "threat" to its own monopoly position in the supply of gas to Europe, whereas Europe was interested in reducing its dependence on Russian energy imports and pipelines.

Both the US and Europe actively courted Assad in the years before 2011, eyeing Syria as a transshipment hub through which energy exports from the region would travel. British-Dutch oil major Shell was contracted by Assad in 2007 "to devise a master plan for developing Syria's gas sector" as a hub linking Arab gas with Europe (p. 119). It is therefore no surprise that, when the uprising broke out in 2011, western governments gave no encouragement. Ahmed quotes US leaders

as making favourable statements about Assad, including Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee John Kerry, White House advisor Dennis Ross and State Secretary Hilary Clinton, whose April 2011 statement that Assad was a reformer “effectively gave Assad the ‘green light’ to crackdown” (p. 124).

Obama began calling on Assad to “stand aside” in September, “when it became clear that his brutal response to the Arab Spring protests in Syria would not quell the discontent, but likely accelerate it” (p. 125). Nevertheless, as Ahmed demonstrates, this was not aimed at bringing down the regime. Ahmed discusses documents commissioned by the US Marine Corps (USMC) in 2011 that anticipated the regime surviving the uprising, with the more likely threat to Assad to come from “an attempt by high-ranking military and business elite of the regime to mount a coup” (p. 128). While it is not explicit that the US preferred this route, its assessment is that neither Israel, Turkey, Saudi Arabia nor the US “appear interested in dealing with the destabilising effects of regime change in Syria in the region” (p. 128).

A later report, published by the US Army’s Joint Special Operations University in 2016, similarly notes that the West “wanted the Assads gone, but not the remaining government structure including the Alawite-dominated Syrian army and the security services.”

As the briefer and thus sketchier part of Ahmed’s book, the geopolitical analysis may be criticised in places for hasty conclusions and for occasional contradiction. However, the great detail about various energy pipelines and interests is extremely valuable, as are the report’s major sections debunking “critical” narratives on major war crimes.

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References

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4. Edward Yeranian, “Energy Rivalries Exacerbate Tensions in the Middle East,” *VOA News* (25 March 2017), <https://www.voanews.com/a/energy-rivalries-exacerbate-tensions-middle-east/3781864.html>, cited in Ahmed, 117.