

Syria's struggle does not end with ISIS

THE OVERTON WINDOW



ERESH OMAR JAMAL

"He who controls the present, controls the past." -George Orwell

NARRATIVES shape our world. The deeper meaning of Orwell's words becomes clear when we know the true nature of Syria's crisis.

Two important events took place this week concerning the crisis. First, the western media pronounced the death of the Islamic Caliphate when US-backed forces dislodged ISIS from its last territorial hold in Syria—indirectly diverting credit for ISIS's defeat to the west. Before moving onto the second, let's look at some of the facts that needed to be drowned out by the fictional narratives created to make such portrayal possible.

When these facts are many, the manipulation of truth becomes all the more insidious. As Dr Tim Anderson, Senior Lecturer of Political Economy at the University of Sydney, wrote in his book—compiled from the information he gathered during his visit to Syria—*The Dirty War in Syria*: "To this day, many imagine the Syrian conflict is a 'civil war'... or some sort of internal sectarian conflict. These myths are... a substantial achievement for the big powers which have driven a series of 'regime change' operations in the Middle East region, all on false pretext."

Syria was on the west's regime change wish-list long before its crisis began. In one leaked US diplomatic cable from 2006 published by WikiLeaks, William Roebuck (at the time stationed in Damascus), now serving as the Deputy Special Envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, talks about a plan. The plan was to foster tensions between Shiites and Sunnis in Syria, to cause the government to overreact by increasing paranoia of an imminent coup, and use that to urge Islamic extremists to act against the Syrian government. Sounds familiar?

But the flaming of conflict didn't end there. In 2017, General Wesley Clark, former Supreme Allied Commander Europe of NATO, said this on CNN: "ISIS got started through funding from our [US's] friends and allies"—General Martin Dempsey, former US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff,

admitted the same to Congress in 2014. In 2015, *The New York Times* revealed that the CIA also "sometimes inadvertently financed the very militants it is fighting." But that too was well documented by then. A cable WikiLeaks published already exposed how "the CIA... armed Jihadists with anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles and other weapons from Libyan armouries that the agency smuggled by ratlines to Syria via Turkey." Later, investigative journalist Seymour Hersh uncovered yet more details about the ratlines and how they were used to smuggle chemical weapons into Syria for use by the "rebels".

But it wasn't only the US and its Middle Eastern allies that were involved. According to former French Minister for Foreign Affairs, Roland Dumas, top officials in the UK had told him they were plotting something in Syria two years before the conflict started. For those who might be shocked by that, here is what legendary journalist and filmmaker John Pilger had to say about it: "If you... go back and read the declassified MI6 dispatches from Syria they've been trying to do this [overthrow a pro-Russian government in Syria] since the 1950s."

This new "Great Game" for power and control has been a costly one for Syria. The annihilation of its infrastructure, death and displacement of its civilian population, will take years if not decades for it to recover from. Additionally, according to multi-award-winning journalist Robert Fisk, "a staggering 60,000 soldiers of the Syrian Arab army" had died by March 2016 in a country with an army of about 220,000 at full strength.

After all that, the second important event that happened this week was the signing of an order on March 25 by US President Donald Trump, recognising Syria's Golan Heights, occupied by Israel since 1967 but recognised internationally as a part of Syria, as Israeli territory. Having soaked up but survived the costly destabilising attempts from outside, this order is a huge insult to Syrians who, through immense united effort, fought back and defeated ISIS after eight devastating years of fighting. Whose common rallying cry throughout these difficult times had been: "every inch of Syria [shall be liberated]."

In a 2015 interview, Julian Assange, while discussing WikiLeaks' leaked cables concerning Syria and the various forces involved there, said that Israel was also a



SOURCE: TWITTER

party to the conflict mainly because it believed it could permanently "keep the Golan Heights" if Syria was "sufficiently destabilised". Now that ISIS has finally been defeated, that is exactly what this order seeks to do—which makes these two events, coinciding in the same week, all the more satirical on the one hand and tragic (for the Syrian people) on the other.

But why did Trump take such a move in violation of the UN Charter that protects the sovereignty of nations—Syrian sovereignty in this case. The main reason behind his decision is Israel's discovery of oil in the Golan Heights and a company called Genie Energy that was set up to extract it. Among its board of advisers are powerful people such as world banker Jacob Rothschild, descendant of one of the main creators of Israel, Media Baron Rupert Murdoch, ex-Vice President of the US Dick Cheney, the man responsible for the US invasion of Iraq, and ex-CIA Director James Woolsey.

Although the US has no need for the small

amount of oil in the Golan Heights being the world's largest crude oil producer, it wants to deny Syria the oil that it desperately needs. That is why the US continues to occupy parts of Syria east of the Euphrates, as that is where the majority of Syria's oil is located (other than the Golan). To prevent Syria from being able to rebuild itself and to permanently cripple it.

It is for this reason Israeli troops received wounded Al-Qaeda fighters during the Syrian conflict, treated them in Israeli hospitals, and sent them back to fight the Syrian army in Syria, as the *Wall Street Journal* reported in 2015. That was the purpose behind Israel providing weaponry to Syrian rebel groups—such as the Al-Nusra Front who would then pass them on to Al-Qaeda—as admitted by the former Chief of Staff for the Israel's Defence Forces in an interview with the UK's *Sunday Times* in 2019.

In an interview with Al-Jazeera's Mehdi Hasan, the head of Israel's Mossad said that Israel had no problem working with Al-

Qaeda because it never attacked Israel. Israel's Intelligence Chief, Major General Herzli Halevy, said during a speech that Israel would "prefer" an ISIS victory in Syria—rather than a victory for the Syrian government over ISIS.

In spite of all this, Trump signed the order for the US to recognise Syria's Golan Heights as Israeli territory. And he justified his decision saying that Israel's national security was being threatened by Syria. How? Simple: through narrative control.

Because narratives are what shape our world. And so, to create a world where left is right and up is down, all you need to do is draw up fictional narratives that would drown out the facts that reveal the true nature of reality—the truth about the crisis. A world where, "war is peace, freedom is slavery and ignorance is strength," as described by Orwell.

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The health challenges for the urban poor

OSMAN MAHMUD KIM

BANGLADESH is being urbanised at a rapid pace, fuelled by rural poverty, climate change and the promise of a better economic future. It is estimated that 300,000 to 400,000 new migrants leave their rural homesteads annually, heading for Dhaka (World Bank, 2007). Dhaka is overwhelmed by urban poverty and slums. Very high population densities and deteriorating city infrastructures worsen the already difficult living conditions of poor people living in Dhaka.

Issues of urbanisation have been taking centre stage as traditional focus of economic policymakers have been relegated to the rural front. Experts concur that the quality of life of the urban poor is also worse than that of the rural poor. The factors that differentiate the urban poor from the rural also include transient living, environmental hazards, social fragmentation, exposure to crimes, violence and accidents. Therefore, the transition from rural to urban life is far from linear and usually a complex process.

Often, the urban poor living in slums bear the largest burden of such hazards and the evidence suggest that slum-dwellers are considerably worse off in almost every aspect of life. Within this framework of multidimensional poverty, health remains at the forefront of deprivations faced by the urban poor.

While health shocks are a major source of vulnerability among low-income urban households, it is also important to recognise ill health as a chronic condition emerging from adverse living and working conditions



PHOTO: STAR

that often require greater resources to manage over the medium- to long term. Additionally, changing lifestyles, malnutrition, persistent social inequality, economic insecurity, and unstable social life have given rise to new health challenges—non-communicable diseases, substance misuse, and mental health problems.

Over the past 45 years, Bangladesh's health and nutrition policies and programmes have focused largely on rural health services and outcomes. The rural population, particularly the poor, can go to the community clinics at the village and ward levels for treatment of

basic diseases and material health care. Unfortunately for the urban poor, especially those living in slums, these facilities are non-existent. Often the only option these residents have are to either visit expensive private facilities or oft-neglected public hospitals. Thus, unless you have money, and a good amount at that, there aren't many places you can go to for treatment and relief.

Equitable access to quality health and nutrition services for the urban poor has emerged as a major and pressing development issue. Hospitals and clinics are not necessarily physically distant, but they are

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socially and financially distant from poor urban populations. Government facilities that are meant to cater to the poor are functioning badly. A recent investigation from the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) revealed an astonishingly sad scenario. About 40 percent of doctors in 11 public hospitals and health centres were found to be absent from their workplaces. Due to lack of supervision from the authorities, the doctors and nurses are often found to be very inefficient and this further weakens the prospect of poor people being unable to get access to proper healthcare services from public hospitals.

Strengthening and reinforcing local-level involvement by urban governments to be responsible for their health services, with support from the two relevant central ministries—Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development, and Cooperatives, and the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare—is required to resolve the health issues arising from rapid urbanisation. Also, aligning donor support from international organisations such as USAID and World Bank with the central government's urban health strategy is important to bring about viable change.

NGOs and private providers such as NGO Health Service Delivery Project, the Urban Primary Health Care Services Delivery Project, Marie Stopes Clinics, and BRAC Manoshi project fill in some of the gap in urban primary health. Yet, their scope and coverage are limited. The government can look to subsidise or support such organisations to enable them to operate on a broader scale across highly urbanised areas such as Dhaka and its suburban areas to ensure minimal health care services for the urban poor.

Failure to improve urban health could undermine and erode the gains that Bangladesh has achieved as the country continues to urbanise, not only in terms of health but in terms of the growth in consumption.

Overall, unless a strong government institutional mechanism is established, it is difficult to envision the urban poor's equitable access to primary health care services any time soon.

Osman Mahmud Kim, Intern (Research Assistant) at a large multilateral development institute.

QUOTABLE Quote



RUNE LAZULI
AMERICAN BASED POET

If you want to see the truth, you must be brave enough to look.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Bottled buy

6 Sandbar

11 Skirt

12 Decorative knick-knack

13 Himalayan land

14 Like good sentries

15 Puzzle

17 Uno doubled

19 Catch some z's

20 Jazz style

23 Further-more

25 Prefix with dynamic

26 Philly treat

28 Get news of

29 Tone down

30 Animal carrier

31 Fare carrier

32 Georgia, once: Abbr.

33 Twilight's lead-in

35 Herd member

38 Perfect

41 Skin features

42 Trap

43 Not dozing

44 Occupied

DOWN

1 Dripping

2 2001 Will Smith

film

3 Hot dog

4 Genesis site

5 Eye parts

6 Rogue

7 Swaying dance

8 Bonanza stuff

9 Vacuum's lack

10 Place to park

16 Sentry

17 Russian country

home

18 Different

20 Tomato variety

21 Some exams

22 Game of hands

24 That lady

25 Justice Dept. agency

27 Get by

31 Use foul language

33 Look for

34 Writer Ferber

35 Pampering place

36 Road rescue

37 History stretch

39 Common verb

40 Author Deighton

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

CRASH LEAK
RENEE DODGE
OTTER IOWAN
PIED VANITY
URN PAL NEA
PENDANTS
SAIL OPUS
PENNANTS
YES TOE RUT
ALCOTT NADA
CLONE WEVER
HIRES EVENT
TENS BELTS

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT