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## Syria: the human rights industry in 'humanitarian war'

Tim Anderson

### Abstract

A proliferation of self-appointed watchdogs and 'human rights' agencies have helped market the idea of 'humanitarian intervention', in recent years. This can be seen most starkly in the long proxy war on Syria. These advocacy groups have argued the extreme pretexts thought necessary to ignore conventional international law against intervention and foreign support for armed groups. Yet most such groups are paid or co-opted by the same governments which back military intervention. This paper examines the role of this human rights industry during the war on Syria. It begins by looking at the marketed popularity of 'humanitarian war', then at the normalisation of associated conflicts of interest. The third part examines two large agencies, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, presenting evidence to demonstrate systematic bias, including engagement in fabrications over the war. Part four studies two more specific agencies, custom built for this war, 'The Syrian Campaign' and 'The White Helmets'. Once again, sufficient evidence is presented to show their partisan role. Together with powerful states, corporate media and other contracted advocacy bodies, these agencies have found an important place in the marketing of humanitarian war.

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Humanitarian war, based on older notions of imperial prerogative and the more recent doctrine of a 'responsibility to protect' (R2P), has spawned a new human rights industry. While billions were spent by the USA and its allies to back anti-government armed groups in Syria, hundreds of millions were poured into the propaganda war, amplifying the voices of a network of self-appointed watchdogs, media and 'human rights' agencies. From mid-2011 Washington began support of anti-government forces, gradually moving this diplomatic offensive and the provision of 'non-lethal aid' into the training and arming of a sectarian Islamist insurgency. This was done both directly and through regional allies such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar. That insurgency was distinct from and took refuge under the political reform rallies of 2011 (see Anderson 2016a: Ch 4). In mid-2014 the US resorted to direct military intervention, supposedly to fight a large terrorist group (ISIS) in eastern Syria and Iraq, while neglecting the other terrorist groups (led by Jabhat al Nusra/HTS) in western Syria. Both groups and their associates were and are banned organisations, according to UN Security Council resolutions. Nevertheless, US Vice-President Joe Biden and General Martin Dempsey, then head of US armed forces, admitted that their key allies were financing and arming all of these armed groups, whether 'moderate' or 'terrorist' (Biden in RT 2014 and Usher 2014; Dempsey in Rothman 2014).

Parallel to these admissions and the direct military intervention, a western human rights industry pursued a mostly one-sided propaganda war against the Syrian government. There were multiple claims that the Syrian army was (for some unexplained reason) slaughtering Syrian civilians and children; claims which were hotly contested but which formed an important part of the pretext for humanitarian war (Anderson 2016a: Ch 4, 8 & 9). However this paper will demonstrate that many of those 'human rights' agencies were paid or co-opted by the war makers. The diplomatic offensive, the direct and indirect recruiting and supply of armed groups and the funding of an array propaganda agencies follows closely the model

outlined in successive editions of the US Army's 'unconventional warfare' manual. That model includes propaganda campaigns to help 'shape popular perceptions', create an 'intense sapping of morale', build an appeal to foreign sympathisers and delegitimise the target state (DOA 2010: 2-4). This particular propaganda campaign included Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty International, but also purpose built groups such as 'The Syria Campaign' and 'The White Helmets'. Many other self-appointed 'watchdogs', media agencies and 'human rights' groups also received funds from the US, Britain and France, and their associated corporations (see section 2). US coordination helped build a well-integrated, if unsuccessful, effort to topple the government of Syria.

Bricmont points out that the United Nation's key purpose, to prevent wars of aggression, has been subverted by doctrines of 'humanitarian intervention' (Bricmont 2006). Heningsen refers to a 'human rights industrial complex', drawing on the good intentions of 'hard-working and extremely well educated individuals' (Heningsen 2016). This style of 'human rights' advocacy is certainly big business. Amnesty International, now deeply embedded with the US State Department, spends around 280 million Euros per year (Amnesty 2017a); Human Rights Watch, closely aligned to the Democrat side of US politics, boasts over US\$220 million in assets (HRW 2017: 5); while 'The White Helmets', a paramilitary, first aid and public relations group, aligned to jihadist groups and set up by a former British soldier, had been paid more than US\$100 million for its Syrian war activities by both the British and US governments (Beeley 2017d).

A problem for serious discussion of such issues, during a conflict, is what we might call 'vexatious propaganda', which attempts to impose barriers on conflict debate. Just as a vexatious litigant tries to monopolise argument in the courts, so vexatious propaganda, by constant repetition of its themes, tries to monopolise the themes of discussion. In the case of the Syrian conflict, such attempts to control debate have come from media aligned to states committed to overthrow of the Syrian government. This propaganda has been extreme, to evade the normal constraints of international law. Discussants can contest the allegations, it seems, but not change the agenda. Nevertheless, at least in the interest of a subaltern narrative on the war, this paper insists on a distinct question. It is not a defence of the Syrian Government from every accusation made by its opponents, nor a discussion of the so-called 'Arab Spring'. It is an interrogative analysis of the propaganda industry that has destroyed reasonable debate over the conflict.

Underlying all of the recent Middle East wars is a modernist doctrine which empowers neo-colonial voices, agents of domination dressed up as independent mediators. Yet the great contradiction of this western project, in the name of human rights, is its disregard for the first article of the International Bill of Human Rights: the right of peoples and nations to self-determination (UN HRC 1984). In face of this apparent constraint, the contemporary notion of a 'responsibility to protect' was created (UN 2005; Bass 2009), and has unleashed new pretexts for military intervention. That presents an extraordinary conundrum for independent states. There is the insistent demand that the Syrian state ('regime') cannot use its national army to defend the Syrian people, nor liberate its cities from foreign backed proxy armies, without approval from the state sponsors of that same terrorism.

This paper will characterise the human rights industry as a key legitimacy driver of the normalised 'humanitarian wars' of the 21st century, illustrating the phenomenon through the activity of some prominent human rights agencies. Independent evidence shows that pro-intervention propaganda over a series of critical incidents has been consistently one-sided,

breaching elementary principles of fair assessment and amplifying partisan stories throughout the war. Whatever abuses might have been committed by the Syrian Army and its allies, any chance of a balanced perspective has been swamped by the 'humanitarian war' narrative. A target nation with no strong international voice has little chance of being heard.

On the other side, human rights agencies embedded with the big powers have rarely questioned the gross breaches of international law carried out by their sponsoring states. Instead, partisan and contrived reports continue to fuel humanitarian war, inviting repeated 'false flag' atrocities to create the 'exceptions' thought necessary to incite deeper foreign intervention, in breach of international law and sovereign rights (see Anderson 2016: Chapters 8 and 9). The first and second parts of this paper will discuss the human rights pretexts for 'humanitarian war' and its normalised conflicts of interest; the third and fourth will document sufficient examples of extreme bias, including active fabrication, to prove the partisan character of four key agencies: Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, The Syria Campaign and The White Helmets.

### **1. Human rights pretexts for humanitarian war**

Humanitarian war is not new; its roots can be traced to the European liberal imperialism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Liberalism's theoretical emphasis on individualism, a non-interventionist state and peaceful exchange tends to mask its colonial history. For example the English liberal, John Stuart Mill, famous for his writings on individual freedom, called British colonialism 'the best affair of business in which the capital of an old and wealthy country can engage'; adding 'the same rules of international morality do not apply ... between civilised nations and barbarians' (Sullivan 1983: 601). This version of liberalism imagined that 'barbarians have no rights as a nation, except a right to such treatment ... [to] fit them for becoming one' (Mill 1874: 252-253). Mill believed in virtuous British intervention, for example to 'mediate in the quarrels ... [and] intercede for mild treatment of the vanquished' (Mill 1859: 2).

That 'civilising mission' legacy was adopted by the North American traditions of 'exceptionalism', distinct from European imperial traditions and in favour of evangelised missions of 'freedom'. Despite its colonial era purchases (e.g. Louisiana) and conquests (e.g. Mexico, Cuba), the United States of America consistently rejected the status of an imperial power. The self-image of an exceptional state, a 'light on the hill', remained central (Gamble 2012). This tells us that North American power places greater emphasis on modernist idealism than the Europeans, who often still defend their imperial legacies. US imperialism, on the other hand, pretends that it has no imperial legacy. In that sense it appears, at least nominally, more consistent with the post-colonial body of international law developed through the United Nations after 1945.

Contemporary war propaganda therefore draws on this idealism, albeit for traditional ends: to elevate the mission of the aggressor, and to disqualify resistance, in particular from those defending their own peoples and nations. It includes co-opting the contemporary, popular norms of 'human rights' and subsuming them in imperial-modernist language, such that all human rights problems are 'ours' to solve. The delicate matter of the self-determination of peoples and nations is thus collapsed into insistent narratives of 'failed' or 'fragile' states, from which peoples must be rescued from their very own 'dictators', elected or not.

Yet imperialism is imperialism. In what came to be known as the 'American Century', and with a hoped for 'New American Century' (Pitt 2003), there has been alternation between a 'realist' version, where goals and methods are more direct, and a liberal version, where there is consolidation of hegemonic ideology. Traditional aims, of the civilising mission and of excluding competitors remain (Fischer-Tiné and Mann 2004; MacKenzie 1986), but with phases of assertion and legitimation. In the contemporary context, with a looming energy crisis and Washington 'losing' Iran to that country's Islamic Revolution, there was a declaration from 'liberal' Washington that the Persian Gulf region was central to 'the vital interests of the United States of America' (Carter 1980). This formalised the claim for US extraterritorial privilege - practised in the Americas for over a century - to the Middle East region. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the apparent rise of a unilateral global system, the idea of a New American Century began to focus on complete control of the resource rich Middle East region. This was not about simple control of particular oilfields or gas pipelines, but domination of an entire region. Terrorism and unilateral disarmament claims provided pretexts for the 'realist' invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. A 'New Middle East' would be created through 'creative destruction'; implicitly sectarian violence (Karon 2006; Nazemroaya 2006). A senior US general spoke of Pentagon plans to take over 'seven countries in five years', beginning with Iraq and Syria and ending with Iran (Clark 2007).

However liberal imperial doctrine had been re-shaped in the 1990s in the Balkans, where claims of extreme crimes provided the pretexts for NATO moving in to dismantle the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, playing on ethnic divisions (Oberg 2014). Human rights agencies embedded with US foreign policy bodies began to play a more important role. Supposed western inaction over the 1994 mass killings in Rwanda helped boost western demands for intervention; in fact the US supported the 'regime change' that followed the Rwandan massacres (Philpot 2013). Humanitarian intervention arguments reshaped traditional debate lines over US foreign policy. In 2000 former Human Rights Watch director Holly Burkhalter argued, in a 'white paper' on behalf of the US State Department, that Washington should engage more in military intervention on 'humanitarian' grounds, supposedly to prevent great crimes. Her position was more assertive than that of the US military, which argued a more cautious line, linked to US interests (CFR 2000). The resurgent idea of 'humanitarian intervention' thus began to erode the older distinction between militarist 'hawks' and diplomatic 'doves'.

Popular western revulsion at the Bush administration's 2003 invasion of Iraq, on a notorious false disarmament pretext (Hoeffel 2014), allowed US liberals to seize the initiative. Greater legitimacy had to be built into the New Middle East project. The notion of 'smart power', to counter the uglier 'realist' approach, was spelt out by Suzanne Nossel, an official with Human Rights Watch who later worked with Hillary Clinton in the US State Department and, in 2012, became head of Amnesty International (USA). In a 2004 article she argued for a reassertion of US 'liberal internationalism'. Washington should offer 'assertive leadership', in the tradition of 'exceptionalism', to drive a range of goals, but 'unlike conservatives, who rely on military power as the main tool of statecraft, liberal internationalists see trade, diplomacy, foreign aid, and the spread of American values as equally important' (Nossel 2004). This multifaceted approach was consistent with the Pentagon doctrine of 'Full Spectrum Dominance' (Garamone 2000), linking military to economic, political and communications hegemony.

The US State Department drove the new doctrine of a 'responsibility to protect' (R2P) through a UN committee. The 'International Commission on Intervention and State

Sovereignty' in 2001 posed the idea of 'sovereignty as responsibility', with a focus on violence within weak and new states. The 'World Summit' of 2005 then declared that states had the responsibility to prevent great crimes but, if they failed, the international community should be 'prepared to take collective action ... through the Security Council' (UN 2005: 138-139). Much of this text was adopted in UN Security Council resolution 1674, the following year (UNSC 2006).

However in its substance the R2P is an imperial doctrine which seeks to normalise war and enhance the prerogatives of the big powers to intervene. Edward Luck argues that there is no necessary contradiction between this doctrine and state sovereignty. However he admits a tension is posed, in that R2P ideas 'might be used by powerful states ... to justify coercive interventions undertaken for other reasons' (Luck 2009: 17). Indeed, the R2P does not change international law, but it does attract greater attention to Chapter VII intervention powers of the Security Council. The doctrine does promote 'a new norm of customary international law', (Loiselle 2013: 317-341), even suggesting an obligation to intervene.

The first experiment with this norm was seen in NATO's 2011 destruction of Libya, a small country with the highest living standards in Africa. The pretext here was alleged civilian massacres, in the wake of a jihadist insurrection in eastern Libya. The British Guardian, a key supporter of 'humanitarian intervention', claimed that 'hundreds of civilians' had been killed in 'protests' (Cronogue 2012). Amnesty International, for its part, supported the claims of 'killings, disappearances, and torture' (Amnesty 2011: 8). Amnesty International backed the intervention in Libya, while pretending an 'even handed' criticism of the tiny country and powerful NATO forces. Kovalik observes that Amnesty called for 'immediate action' by the UN against Gaddafi, then made some mild admonishments to NATO during the bombing campaign (Kovalik 2012). The storm of accusations and intervention claims rapidly led to UN Security Council resolution 1973, which called for the protection of civilians through a 'no fly zone'. Exploiting this 'civilian protection' mandate, NATO bombers intervened, the Libyan government was overthrown and Gaddafi was publicly murdered. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton publicly gloated over the President's death (Daly 2011). However NATO had grossly overstepped the UNSC mandate.

The false pretexts for this war were soon exposed. Genevieve Garrigos of Amnesty International (France) admitted there was 'no evidence' to back her group's earlier claims that Gaddafi had used 'black mercenaries' to commit massacres (Cockburn 2011; Forte 2012; Edwards 2013). US academic Alan Kuperman demonstrated that Gaddafi's crackdown on the Islamist insurrection in eastern Libya was 'much less lethal' than had been suggested. Indeed, contrary to the popular western narrative, Gaddafi had not threatened a civilian massacre and had 'refrained from indiscriminate violence'. By later estimates, of the almost one thousand casualties in the first seven weeks, only about three percent were women and children (Kuperman 2015). It was when Libyan government forces were about to regain the east that NATO intervened. Ten thousand more people were killed after the NATO intervention, and the Libyan state was destroyed. 'No evidence or reason' came out to support the claim that Gaddafi planned mass killings (Kuperman 2015). The UNSC had been deceived, and the trust placed in NATO was betrayed.

This immediate abuse of the R2P in practice caused dismay. Dunne and Gelber say that the Libyan experience undermined the idea of an R2P 'norm', with the NATO shift from a 'no fly zone' to regime change 'betraying' the UN trust and showing the partisan nature of intervention (Dunne and Gelber 2014: 327-328). Brown agrees, saying that the Libyan

intervention demonstrates that the suggested 'apolitical nature' of a responsibility to protect 'is a weakness not a strength ... the assumption that politics can be removed from the picture is to promote an illusion and thus to invite disillusionment' (Brown 2013: 424-425). The doctrine lost its intellectual gloss. Nevertheless, with a Democrat administration in Washington and an incipient proxy war in Syria, 'humanitarian war' arguments were not dead. Feeling betrayed by the experience on Libya, Russia and China would block 'no fly zone' proposals for Syria, at the Security Council. Yet even if a UN Security Council resolution were not possible, the 'moral' arguments for humanitarian intervention in Syria were well in train.

## **2. Normalised conflicts of interest**

The US-led 'smart power' interventions in Libya and Syria illustrate very well how, in a neoliberal era, traditionally understood conflicts of interest are ignored. Washington moved rapidly into the Syrian conflict, at first providing 'non-lethal' support to anti-government groups, then providing arms directly to some of those groups; and all that while selling billions of dollars of arms to the Saudis, who had armed Syria's Islamist insurrection from the beginning (see Anderson 2016b). Despite being a belligerent party, the US Government pretended to act as an arbiter of the war. The US and its allies (especially Britain and France) also funded a range of 'media activists', such as the Aleppo Media Centre (Beeley 2016b), information sources and 'human rights' advocates, such as the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the Syrian Network for Human Rights, Bellingcat and the Human Rights Data Analysis Group (see Graphic 1). The independence of all these agencies is compromised by their belligerent patrons.

That conflict of interest was also seen in the United Nations commission set up in mid-2012 to assess the human rights situation in Syria. In early 2012 the UN appointed US diplomat Karen Koning AbuZayd to co-chair, with Brazilian Paulo Pinheiro, a Geneva-based UN Commission on Syria, replacing the former in-country Special Mission (UNSMIS), led by Norwegian General Robert Mood (Reuters 2012). The appointment of AbuZayd was a partisan move by the UN administration as, by that time, the US was backing the armed opposition in Syria. The replacement of UNSMIS by an AbuZayd-led Commission was important because a massacre of villagers at Houla, outside Homs city, was to be the first major test of 'responsibility to protect' doctrine against Syria. The AbuZayd-Pinheiro commission tried to blame unidentified government aligned thugs, but without substantial evidence, motive or names (HRC 2012: 20). The report was strongly criticised at the UNSC, with Russia, China and India refusing to accept it as a basis for action against Syria. Fifteen independent eye-witnesses had publicly identified Farouq Brigade (FSA) leaders and local collaborators as having committed the crime (Anderson 2016a: Ch. 8). That same armed group had declared a boycott on, and threatened reprisals against those who participated in, Syria's 2012 national assembly elections.

Five years later the AbuZayd-led commission tried to portray as a 'crime' the liberation of the city of Aleppo from al Qaeda aligned groups. The commission falsely claimed that there had been 'daily air strikes' on the eastern part of Aleppo city, leading up to its liberation (HRC 2017: 19). Yet it was reported widely in foreign media that air strikes on the east part of the city were suspended on 18 October (BBC 2016; Xinhua 2016). NPR's Merrit Kennedy (2016) reported 'several weeks of relative calm' during the 'humanitarian pause, aimed at evacuating civilians. The 'resumption' of airstrikes almost one month later was aimed at the armed groups in rural Aleppo, not on the shrinking parts of the city held by the al Qaeda aligned

sectarian jihadists (Pestano 2016; Graham-Harrison 2016). Nevertheless, al Qaeda aligned 'media activists' claimed the city was still being bombed (CNN 2016). The UN commission, as Gareth Porter pointed out, 'did not identify sources for its narrative ... [but rather] accepted the version of the events provided by the 'White Helmets'', a jihadist auxiliary funded by the US and UK governments (Porter 2017). This was a feature of the wider cycle of war reporting.

Washington's openly stated ambition, since mid-2011, to overthrow the Syrian Government led by Bashar al Assad ('Assad must go'), taints all the agencies and advocates that take money from the big power. This is simple logic, but the obvious must be stated. Agencies which support US Government policy and practice are more likely to get finance; those against will not. No agency engaged with the polemics of the Syrian conflict can claim to be independent if it is on the payroll of governments committed to the overthrow of the Syrian Government. Nor can those committed to the jihadist 'revolution' claim to be independent sources of information.

For example, a large part of the western media coverage of the conflict relied on a single person, Rami Abdul Rahman, a Syrian exile based in England, who calls himself the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR). Many of the stories about Syrian body counts, 'regime' atrocities and huge collateral damage come from this man (Skelton 2012; Christensen 2016). Yet for the first few years of the conflict Abdul Rahman flew the flag of the Muslim Brotherhood led 'Free Syrian Army' on his website (SOHR 2015; see **Graphic 5**). He claimed to collect information from a network of associates in and around Syria. It is logical to assume these are also mostly anti-Government people. Western advocates often claim that Syrian, Russian and Iranian sources are to be disqualified for their bias; but they rarely say the same of sources linked to and embedded with the anti-Syrian Government armed groups. That is an untenable position. Abdul Rahman admitted early on that he gets 'small subsidies from the European Union and one European country that he declines to identify' (MacFarquar 2013). As he lives in England that latter source is almost certainly an agency of the UK government.

Like the SOHR, the Syrian network for Human Rights (SNHR) is another virtual one-man band based in England. It claims to be 'independent, non-partisan, non-governmental' and is run by Fadel Abdul Ghani (SNHR 2016). The tiny group trumpets 'accountability' yet its sources of funding are nowhere declared. The only thing made public seems to be that: 'SNHR funds its work and activities through unconditional grants and donations from individuals and institutions' (MOA 2017). More recently, even that sentence was removed from the group's website. Abdul Ghani is closely linked to jihadist groups and so is a clear partisan player. He told a journalist in 2013 that US air strikes on Syria were necessary, even if they killed civilians. Using the first person to speak of the armed opposition he added: 'If we don't try to take out Assad's missiles and tanks, [Assad] will continue using them against civilians' (Scaturro 2013). A method note on the SNHR site admits that the group cannot collect reliable data from Syria. They say 'the likelihood of documenting military victims from the opposition is rather slim' as the SNHR cannot get to battlefronts and because of 'the secrecy of the armed opposition'. Similarly, Syrian Army and allied militia victims cannot be calculated due to 'the absence of a clear methodology' (SNHR 2017). Like Abdul Rahman, Abdul Ghani has no training in research. They both compile 'data' in a fairly ad hoc manner from their own partisan networks.



**Graphic 1: Key sources of 'information' on Syria are mostly funded by the same western governments that provide weapons to the anti-government armed groups**

Key 'sources' used by Amnesty International and the US-co-chaired UN Human Rights Commission on Syria	
	<b>Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR, Rami Abdul Rahman).</b> Funding: "small subsidies from the European Union and one European country that he declines to identify" (NYT). No research training. Britain based.
	<b>Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR, Fadel Abdul Ghani).</b> Funding: "unconditional grants and donations from individuals and institutions". No research training. Britain based.
	<b>Bellingcat (Elliot Higgins).</b> Funding: Soros OSF and NED (US Congress). No research training. Britain based.
	<b>Human Rights Data Analysis Group (HRDAG).</b> Funding: Soros OSF and NED (US Congress). US based.

Nevertheless, UN commissioned groups and Amnesty International make use of 'data' from the SOHR, the SNHR and another similarly compromised US-based group called the Human Rights Data Analysis Group (Price, Gohdes and Ball 2014). This HRDAG gets funding from US foundations, including George Soros' Open Society Foundation, and directly from the US Government through the Congress funded National Endowment for Democracy (NED) (HRDAG 2017). That group, in turn, said 'four sources were used for this analysis ... Syrian Center for Statistics and Research (CSR-SY), Damascus Center for Human Rights Studies (DCHRS), Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) and the Violations Documentation Center (VDC) (Price, Gohdes and Ball 2016: 1). Those are all anti-Syrian government sources, networked together. Similarly, an untrained researcher and blogger Elliot Higgins, with his small group called Belling Cat, reinforces the US 'war narrative' against Syria. Higgins admits that his group receives money from (amongst others) the Open Society Foundation (run by billionaire George Soros) and from the US government funded NED (Higgins 2017). **Graphic 1** shows this network of partisan and western government funded sources. Collaboration in a one sided war narrative was sought and bought from these and other agencies. Let us turn now to the role of the larger, better known human rights agencies.

### **3. Selling humanitarian war: Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International**

This section examines the humanitarian war role of the large agencies Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty International (Amnesty). I will demonstrate in this section that both are, or have become, deeply embedded with powerful states, with a view to 'civilise' but more critically to legitimise globalist agendas and disqualify resistance. Both attract hundreds of millions of dollars from western states and linked foundations; neither have any real community or democratic accountability. The role of HRW and Amnesty during the 'smart power' interventions against Libya and Syria may have caught some by surprise; but there was a longer history to their support for US foreign policy. Yet because the Syrian conflict has been so protracted, and so reliant on sustained ideological pretext, it has served to highlight the partisan role of these agencies. This section explains how both agencies have become embedded in Washington's 'humanitarian wars', presenting sufficient evidence of their partisan character.

### 3.1 Human Rights Watch

Human Rights Watch is a New York based corporation funded mainly by other US corporations and foundations. Unlike the National Endowment for Democracy, it is not directly government funded; however it works closely with Washington. In 2010 billionaire George Soros donated \$100 million to the agency (Strom 2010), no doubt giving Soros significant leverage in the group. Indeed, after HRW founding member Aryeh Neier left the group to become President of Soros's Open Society Foundation, Ken Roth rose to Executive Director. He remained in that position for the next 25 years (1993-2018). The HRW budget in 2016 was \$76 million and its assets were \$234 million (HRW 2016a: 15). It maintains close links to the Democrat side of US politics and to the foreign policy elite group the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR). On the board and a former chairperson is James Hoge, editor of *Foreign Policy* magazine from 1992-2009. Many other HRW board members are from the US corporate elite. Some donors insist that the group focus on a particular area. In 2016 about 90% of the company's assets were 'restricted' by donors (HRW 2016b); that means restricted in time or dedicated to particular projects.

HRW can therefore be said to represent a corporatised, US based lobby on rights issues, catering to the wealthy and closely aligned to US foreign policy (Anderson 2010). Despite its refusal of government funds, conflicts of interest are apparent. For example, HRW director Ken Roth regularly attacks US foreign policy enemies, but has been criticised for saying little about President Obama's killer drone program (Bhatt 2014b). The main objects of HRW in Latin America, for many years, were Cuba and Venezuela; mostly ignoring Colombia, key US ally and the biggest killer of journalists, trade unionists and lawyers (Anderson 2010). At times the political motivation has been explicit. The 2008 HRW report on Venezuela under the late President Hugo Chavez mainly focused on issues of political discrimination in employment and the judiciary (HRW 2008). It was criticised by more than 100 academics (including this writer) for not meeting 'even the most minimal standards of scholarship, impartiality, accuracy or credibility' (Acuña et al 2008). HRW responded: the report was written, according to HRW Director for the Americas, José Miguel Vivanco, 'because we wanted to demonstrate to the world that Venezuela is not a model for anyone' (Roth 2008). The political agenda was clear.

A similar letter, a few years later, met a similar response. 130 academics led by two Nobel Peace laureates asked HRW to close the 'revolving door' it had with the US Government (Pérez Esquivel et al 2014). They again criticised HRW for ignoring gross abuses by US Government, while singling out US foreign policy opponents, such as Venezuela. The critics demonstrated repeated interchange of US officials (presidential advisers, US ambassadors, military, and CIA and State Department staff) with HRW, demanding that the group close its 'revolving door' by banning or imposing 'cooling off periods' for 'those who have crafted or executed U.S. foreign policy' (Pérez Esquivel et al 2014). Roth (2014) rejected any idea of a conflict of interest, saying HRW had a great diversity of staff. Nor did he see any problem with HRW having Javier Solana, a former head of NATO on its board (Bhatt 2014a). Only with the transition from Obama to Trump (that is, from a liberal to a realist regime), did the more Democrat-aligned HRW shift ground. Indeed the US, for the first time in 27 years, was listed as a 'major human rights abuser' when Trump had been in office for just a few days (Moran 2017).

Here are three areas of HRW activity during the war on Syria which demonstrate that the group's integration with Washington has been put into practice. First there is the patently false account HRW gave for the start of armed conflict in Syria. In a March 2012 report,

which included some token criticism of the armed jihadists, HRW asserted that 'the protest movement in Syria was overwhelmingly peaceful until September 2011' (HRW 2012). A mass of independent evidence shows this assertion to be quite false. The late Jesuit priest, Father Frans Van der Lugt, who lived for more than 40 years in Syria before he was murdered by Jabhat al Nusra (al Qaeda) in Homs in 2014 said this:

'I have seen from the beginning armed protesters in those demonstrations ... they were the first to fire on the police. Very often the violence of the security forces comes in response to the brutal violence of the armed insurgents' (van der Lugt 2012).

Similarly, the Ankara-based Australian academic Jeremy Salt wrote, in October 2011:

'The claim that armed opposition to the government has begun only recently is a complete lie. The killings of soldiers, police and civilians, often in the most brutal circumstances, have been going on virtually since the beginning' (Salt 2011).

Another priest, Belgian Father Daniel Maes - who was resident at the 6<sup>th</sup> century Mar Yakub monastery in Qara, 90km north of Damascus - said there was 'no civil uprising' in Syria, the violence was foreign paid and contrived (Azizi and Maes 2017). Recognising independent voices in a conflict is important.

The 'peaceful protestor taking up arms' myth was dismantled by independent researchers and journalists. Rather, the armed jihadists had infiltrated political reform demonstrations. The Saudi-armed insurrection in Daraa (Anderson 2016b) spread into Homs in early April 2011. General Abdo Khodr al-Tallawi (with his two sons and a nephew), Syrian commander Iyad Kamel Harfoush and off-duty Colonel Mohammad Abdo Khadour were killed by jihadists (Narwani 2014). On 11 April North American commentator Joshua Landis (2011) reported the death of his wife's cousin, a soldier in Baniyas. Compiling information on soldier deaths, independent journalist Sharmine Narwani reported that in April 2011 eighty-eight Syrian soldiers were killed 'by unknown shooters in different areas across Syria' (Narwani 2014). In June 2011 journalist Hala Jaber reported on the 'armed jihadists' who had infiltrated demonstrations in Idlib, shooting unarmed police (Jaber 2011). These violent jihadist agents drove the peaceful protests off the streets. HRW (2012) recognises nothing of this.

Second, there was the issue of Qatar's morgue photos, released in January 2014. These photos, presented by an anonymous defector code-named 'Caesar', purported to show thousands of 'opposition' prisoners in Syria who had been tortured to death by 'the regime'. Many of the photos seemed to come from a morgue attached to a major hospital in Damascus. 'Caesar' was given asylum by the tiny oil-rich monarchy of Qatar, a major sponsor of the jihadist groups (Shapiro 2013; Dickinson 2014). The story was thus sponsored by a belligerent party and uncorroborated. Qatar hired some British lawyers to provide a 'bootstraps' seal of approval. Thus it was reported that 'senior war crimes prosecutors say photographs and documents provide 'clear evidence' of systematic killing of 11,000 detainees" (Black 2014). Forensic science experts were said to have examined and authenticated samples of 55,000 digital images, comprising about 11,000 victims. 'Overall there was evidence that a significant number of the deceased were emaciated and a significant minority had been bound and/or beaten with rod-like objects', the Qatari financed report said (Black 2014). Dozens of photos were widely publicised, but the full file was not made public.

Almost two years later HRW got the full file, and ran much the same story, except for one important extra detail. Almost half the photos, HRW admitted, were those of 'dead army soldiers or members of the security forces', or the victims of 'explosions, assassinations ... fires and car bombs' (HRW 2015: 2-3). This had never been mentioned before and, for the rest of the HRW report, was not mentioned again. Without making public the full file, HRW

said that ‘the largest category of photographs, 28,707 images, are photographs of people Human Rights Watch understands to have died in government custody’. Those photos had a consistent numbering pattern to them and there were ‘multiple photographs of each body’, sometimes as many as twenty. These photos were estimated to ‘correspond to at least 6,786 separate dead individuals’ (HRW 2015). However HRW, while admitting that at least 27,000 photos of dead bodies did not depict prisoners of ‘the regime’, proceeded to ignore them. HRW simply said ‘this report focuses on analyzing the first category of photographs in greater detail’ (HRW 2015: 3). The casual reader of the HRW report might not even have noticed the admission that almost half these secret photos had nothing to do with ‘industrial scale’ killing of ‘opposition’ people (Black 2014). It was a particularly brazen deceit by HRW to maintain the original story, when they knew better. Rick Sterling (2016) pointed out that partisan publicity over these photos came on the eve of peace negotiations.

A third area of evidence, showing the partisan character of HRW information on Syria is the recycled and rebadged photos of HRW Director Ken Roth. Columnist Yalla La Barra writes that, over 2014 and 2015, Roth became obsessed with Syria’s President Assad and the theme of ‘barrel bombs’. According to La Barra’s count, Roth made 65 posts on Twitter about Assad and ‘barrel bombs’ during 2014, and 135 in 2015. This did not include other anti-Syrian comments, including Assad’s alleged ‘use of chemical weapons against his own people’ (La Barra 2015). The suggested motive for the alleged crime of ‘barrel bombing’ is unclear. The constant reference is to a supposedly improvised bomb, typically dropped on a building from a helicopter. In most senses that is little different to any other sort of bomb during war. However the meaning suggested by Roth and others is that it is either an ‘indiscriminate’ bomb, or a bomb only dropped (for some unexplained reason) on civilians.

### Graphic 2: Ken Roth’s ‘barrel bomb’ campaign: photo switching



In any case, Roth’s tweets were insistent, biased and reckless. The head of HRW said little about Saudi Arabia, Qatar, USA, UK and France arming all kinds of extremist jihadist groups in Syria. His focus, like that of Washington, was the Syrian Government. He made a series of reckless errors, as shown in **Graphic 2** and **Graphic 3**. In early 2015 he posted a photo of bombed out Kobane (a.k.a. Ayn al Arab, the Kurd-Arab city which had resisted ISIS attacks, then suffered US bombing) suggesting it was damage from Syrian ‘barrel bombs’ (MOA 2015a). Soon after that Roth posted a photo of Israeli bombing damage on the Gaza strip,

suggesting it was damage from 'Assad's barrel bombs' in Aleppo (Johnson 2015; MOA 2015b). That photo switching is shown in **Graphic 2**. Soon after that Roth posted, as 'Assad's barrel bomb' damage in Aleppo, a photo which was originally titled by the US Getty agency 'destruction in the Hamidiyeh neighbourhood of Aleppo as local popular committee fighters ... try to defend the traditionally Christian district ... [from] Islamic State group jihadists' (MOA 2015c). That 'reinterpretation' is shown in **Graphic 3**. Three 'mistakes', all in the one direction, are enough to illustrate the partisan activity of the HRW director.

### Graphic 3: Ken Roth's 'barrel bomb' campaign: 're-interpretation' of photos



If that were not enough, Roth tried to link President Assad to the 1945 nuclear attack on Hiroshima. On 9 August 2015 he posted a photo of post-bomb Hiroshima, with the comment 'For the planners of the Hiroshima bomb (like Assad today) the point was to kill civilians' (Roth 2015). The attempt to link Syria to a notorious US crime was extreme cynicism. Roth's behaviour illustrates well the partisan and unreliable reporting by his group of the Syrian conflict. HRW remains deeply embedded with Washington, especially with the State Department and the liberal side of US politics. The evidence cited here demonstrates the agency's partisan character. It cannot be regarded as an independent source.

### 3.2 Amnesty international

Amnesty International began in 1961 as a non-government letter writing agency, campaigning for 'prisoners of conscience'. It foreswore 'political' involvement, but this seems to have changed, at least by the time of the First Gulf War (1990-91). Since then the group has collaborated in pretexts for several US-led wars.

Amnesty claims independence from governments, and many branches do not accept government money; however others do. The group has received many millions of dollars from the British Government, the European Commission, and from the governments of the Netherlands, the USA, Israel (NGO Monitor 2012) and Sweden (Ferrada de Noli 2015). Clearly some states exercise influence. For example, the Israeli government 'funded the establishment and activity of the Amnesty International branch in Israel in the 1960s and 70s', after which Israel's Foreign Ministry relayed instructions and further funds to this Amnesty branch (Blau 2017). Amnesty International globally raises and spends around 280 million Euros per year (Amnesty 2017a), getting its funds from a range of supporters including

several western governments, the highly politicised 'Open Society' groups run by George Soros and the pro-Israel 'American Jewish World Service' (Source Watch 2014).

Jean Bricmont, author of the 2006 book *Humanitarian Imperialism*, observes that, before the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, both Amnesty International and HRW pretended a 'neutral' position, urging 'all belligerents' to abide by the rules of war (Bricmont 2006). They chose to say nothing about an aggression which was characterised as 'illegal' by the then Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan (MacAskill and Borger 2004). An Amnesty official confirmed this stance of taking 'no position on the use of armed force or on military interventions in armed conflict, other than to demand that all parties respect international human rights and humanitarian law' (Bery 2012). Amnesty similarly ignored the external interference in Syria, including the arming of terrorist groups (Sterling 2015). It then proceeded with a highly partisan commentary on the conduct of war, ignoring what the Nuremberg Tribunal had called 'the supreme crime' of a war of aggression.

By the 21<sup>st</sup> century the Amnesty leadership was well embedded in US state and foreign policy and cross-linked to HRW. Author of the US Democrat 'smart power' doctrine Suzanne Nossel, for example, moved from Chief Operating Officer at Human Rights Watch to Deputy Assistant Secretary for International Organisations at the US Department of State, before becoming Executive Director of Amnesty International (USA) (HRI 2012). By 2017 Amnesty USA employed seven current and former US Government officials (Open Secrets 2017).

Amnesty effectively had no-one 'on the ground' during the Syrian conflict, with one exception. In late 2016, during the battle for Aleppo, media coordinator for Amnesty in Australia Samuel Hendricks told this writer 'we do not currently have staff on the ground in Syria ... it is simply not feasible ... [however] our senior crisis response adviser Donatella Rovera, has crossed the border into Syria 10 times ... [and] we've been documenting atrocities since the conflict began' (Hendricks 2016). However Rovera only went (illegally) into the jihadist held northern areas of Syria. She had prepared the group's partisan and misleading reports about Libya; the discredited claims that Amnesty France would later retract (Cockburn 2011; Kuperman 2015). Yet she was contracted to prepare a set of similar stories on Syria. On the basis of her visits and testimony from jihadist controlled areas, Amnesty reported alleged 'ongoing crimes against humanity' by the Syrian Army (Amnesty 2012a).

Other than Rovera's reports and some interviews outside Syria, Amnesty relied on those same sources embedded in the 'regime change' project, including Rami Abdul Rahman's 'Syrian Observatory for Human Rights'. Although the SOHR does not reveal its method, Amnesty researcher Neil Sammonds claimed Abdul Rahman's 'information on the killings of civilians is very good, definitely one of the best, including the details on the conditions in which people were supposedly killed' (MacFarquar 2013). Sammonds does not demonstrate any basis for concluding that information from this openly partisan source was 'very good'.

Salil Shetty, Secretary General of Amnesty International, claimed that Amnesty investigates 'in a very systematic, primary, way where we collect evidence with our own staff on the ground ... [with] corroboration and cross-checking from all parties ... it's very important to get different points of view and constantly cross check and verify the facts' (Shetty 2014). Yet, contrary to these claims, the group relied on third party evidence from sources closely linked to armed groups in Syria, in particular the SOHR and the SNHR. Scottish academic Tim Hayward criticises Amnesty for its claims that its research has been 'systematic', from

'primary sources', verified by corroboration and cross checked with all parties concerned. He concluded that Amnesty research on Syria does not qualify on any of those counts (Hayward 2017).

Let's look at several areas of Amnesty activity which demonstrate the group's partisan integration with Washington. First the group has a track record of backing false pretexts for US-led wars. Amnesty pretended to corroborate an important pretext for US intervention in the 'First Gulf War' (1990-91), to drive the Iraqi army from Kuwait. This was the notorious televised lie by Kuwaiti 'Nurse Nayirah' that Iraqi soldiers had taken over a Kuwait hospital and, wanting to seize valuable medical equipment, threw babies out of incubators and left them to die on the cold floor. This story was supported by the London secretariat of Amnesty, claiming they had corroboration for 'Nayirah'. Former Amnesty (USA) board member Francis Boyle (2002) says the group 'rammed' it through without proper scrutiny. In fact, 'Nayirah' was the daughter of Kuwait's ambassador to the USA. After the military intervention, including a huge massacre of retreating Iraqi soldiers within Iraq, the 'Nurse Nayirah' story was exposed as an exercise in fabrication using PR firm Hill and Knowlton to coach 'Nayirah' in her lines (Stauber and Rampton 2002; Regan 2002).

In 2012 the new Director of Amnesty (USA), Suzanne Nossel, launched a campaign supposedly in support of the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan. Amnesty's billboards at the time of the 2012 NATO summit in Chicago declared "NATO: keep the progress going!" (**Graphic 4**). The not too subtle corollary was to praise NATO's ten year military occupation of the country, on a pretext dreamed up by then US President George W. Bush. Outraged observers branded this as Amnesty 'shilling for US wars' (Wright and Rowley 2012). The group later admitted it had sent a 'confusing' message (Colucci 2012).

#### **Graphic 4: Amnesty praises NATO's ten year military occupation of Afghanistan**



Amnesty also corroborated the false stories about Libya, campaigning strongly against the government of Muammar Gaddafi. Head of Amnesty (France), Genevieve Garrigos, claimed the Libyan president was threatening Libyan civilians and had used 'black mercenaries' to kill civilians. At this time, Al Jazeera (owned by the monarchy of Qatar, which also funded Libya's armed Salafist groups) was telling lies about shootings at a Benghazi demonstration. After NATO bombing had destroyed the Libyan state, Garrigos admitted that there was 'no evidence' to support the claims over 'black mercenaries' (Teil 2011; Timand2037 2012;

Kuperman 2015). In a similar way, Amnesty ran a series of unreliable and partisan stories to inflame the war on Syria (Sterling 2017).

**Graphic 5: What conflict of interest? Amnesty, like the 'White Helmets' and the 'Syrian Observatory' (SOHR) all fly the red starred flag of the armed jihadists**



Second, aligning itself to its openly partisan sources, Amnesty flew the flag of armed jihadists on its websites, next to a 'peaceful protestor' flashing a peace sign (**Graphic 5**). By the time of this 2012 graphic 'Free Syrian Army' groups had engaged in sectarian killings, using genocidal slogans (Blanford 2011; Anderson 2016a: 123) 'Fight bad guys' would become one of Amnesty's slogans, a not too subtle, populist advocacy of 'humanitarian war'.

Using jihadist-linked sources, Amnesty joined the US-based groups Avaaz, Human Rights Watch and The Syria Campaign, funded by US billionaire George Soros, to call for UN Security Council Chapter Seven (armed) action against Syria, while claiming it remained 'even-handed'. As with Libya, the pretext was defending civilians: 'the main victims of a campaign of relentless and indiscriminate attacks by the Syrian army' (Amnesty 2012b).

Third, Amnesty adopted the claims of current and former sectarian jihadists that there were mass hangings at a small prison in Saydnaya. 'Up to 13,000 secretly hanged in Syrian jail, says Amnesty' was the headline (Chulov 2017). While the death penalty exists in Syria and no doubt many of those convicted of murder during the conflict have been executed, this exaggerated claim must have been designed to attract scandalous publicity, again in support of expanded western intervention. Amnesty had joined its interviews with a few dozen anonymous people in Turkey to 'data' provided by the jihadist-aligned, UK-based Syrian Network for Human Rights. Amnesty alleges there were 'extermination policies' resulting in 'the deaths of hundreds – probably thousands – of detainees' (Amnesty 2017: 7). From the vague 'hundreds – probably thousands' the report scales up to 'between 5,000 and 13,000', before finally planting a headline of 'up to 13,000' (Amnesty 2017; Turbeville 2017). This was a transparent exercise in number manipulation and extremist language.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said the report 'does not correspond to reality ... [appearing to be] the result of mathematical calculations on the basis of testimony of unnamed people' (Press TV 2017). Independent observer Peter Ford, the former UK ambassador to Syria, asked why this report came just as the peace talks in Astana



seemed to be making some progress? Amnesty had used anonymous witnesses in Turkey and, according to Ford, those 'nameless sources are wrong on basic information'. The former ambassador had visited Saydnaya several times and says the prison there was far smaller than Amnesty suggested. The building he saw at Saydnaya 'could not possibly accommodate more than ten percent of those numbers' [10,000 to 20,000] (Sputnik 2017).

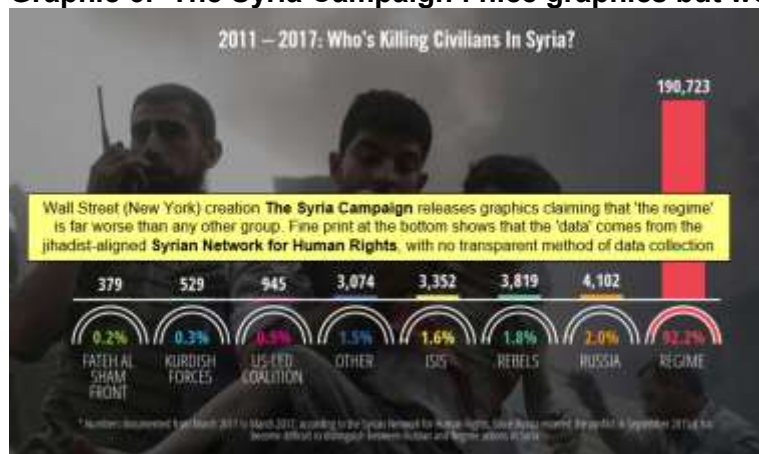
Analysts asked how it was possible that there were no detailed previous reports of these 'mass executions', and on what information were the numbers based? Key source the UK-based SNHR presents no clear method of data collection and does not make detailed information publicly available. Only 95 were given names (MOA 2017). Amnesty presented some rather wild guesses, based on anonymous interviews and a notorious partisan, exile source. These were not the acts of a professional or impartial body.

#### 4. Custom built agencies: 'The Syria Campaign' and 'The White Helmets'

Several custom built agencies were set up and most often funded by western governments, specifically to service the 'war narrative' needs of the Syrian conflict. This section will not make a comprehensive documentation of all those agencies. Rather, it will demonstrate the embedded nature of two - The Syria Campaign and The White Helmets - providing evidence of how they have systematically misled the public.

The Syria Campaign is a Wall Street (New York) agency set up to run an online 'war narrative' campaign, with eye-catching video and graphics. Their speciality is in marketing. Key messages are that the Syrian government is by far the worst human rights abuser and that the great majority of Syria's refugees are running from the Syrian Army and President Assad. Their data, once again, comes from partisan agencies, in particular the SNHR and the SOHR (TSC 2017). Packaged messages along these lines have been picked up by much of the western media (e.g. Naylor 2015).

#### Graphic 6: 'The Syria Campaign': nice graphics but worthless data



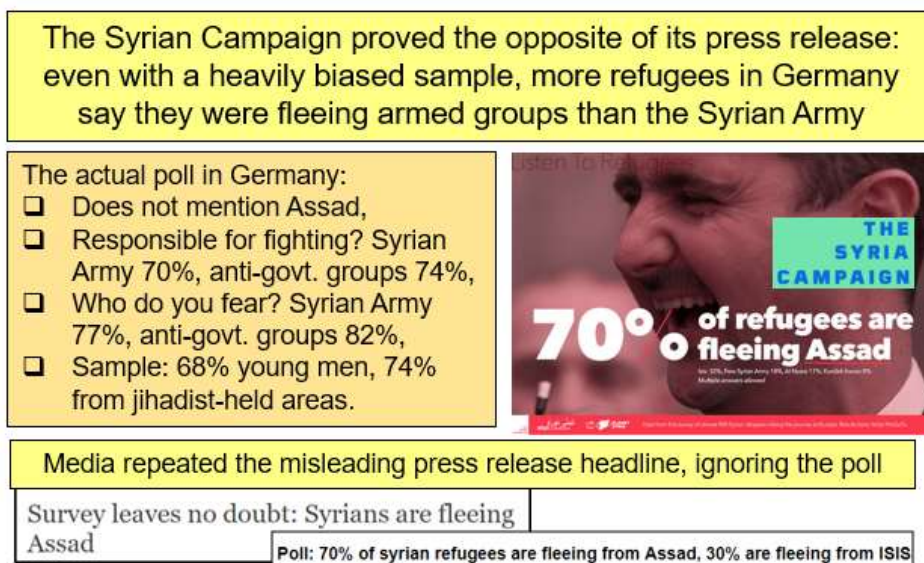
The Syria Campaign (TSC) was set up by people linked to Avaaz, through a mother company called 'Purpose'. The New York group adds some 'Syrian' credibility through links to a few jihadist 'activists', such as photographer Khaled Khatib (Morningstar 2015). With funds from the Soros groups, they were anti Syria and pro regime change from the start. In June 2014 TSC tried to block Facebook from hosting Bashar al Assad's presidential election campaign page (Rushe and Jalabi 2014). Avaaz, The Syria Campaign and The White Helmets shared campaigns for a Libyan-styled 'no fly zone', making often outlandish claims. Without any

credible evidence Avaaz claimed 'women in Syria are being forced to stand in front of tanks and act as human shields before they're stripped and raped by soldiers' (Avaaz 2013). This was while sectarian Islamists were openly boasting about their kidnapping and raping Syrian women and girls, crimes backed by fatwas from their pseudo-religious leaders (Chumley 2013).

TSC has been active in the recycling of war photos. In August 2015 Avaaz and TSC ran photos of dead children's bodies in building rubble, claiming they were victims of Syrian Government attacks on Islamic Front-held East Ghouta (countryside Damascus) in 2015. That same photo was used a year earlier to illustrate a story of ISIS having massacred 700 tribespeople in Deir Ezzor (Chronicle 2014). Tracked back further, the same photo was claimed in March 2014 by Getty News and photographer Khaled Khatib, said to portray child victims of earlier 'barrel bombing' in Aleppo (Getty Images 2014). Khatib is described as an 'activist' who operates in areas occupied by Free Syrian Army armed groups, and an 'Aleppo member of 'Syrian Civil Defence', aka the White Helmets (al Khatib 2015; Laughland 2015).

In an attempt to prove that the millions of Syrian war refugees were mostly running from the Syrian Government, TSC (2015a) commissioned a poll in Germany. In the poll, 889 Syrian refugees were said to have been interviewed in Berlin, Hanover, Bremen, Leipzig and Eisenhüttenstadt. Candidates 'were approached on entering or leaving registration centers'. However the survey does not specify how sampling choices were made; nor does it provide a sampling error (TSC 2015b). Where there is no clear statement of sampling method and no calculated sampling error there is no basis for asserting that any survey represents a broader population. The results are then almost useless, except as anecdotes.

The poll cover note, headline and graphics highlight a claim that '70% of refugees are fleeing Assad' (TSC 2015a). This is a false characterisation of the actual survey which, in its questions, does not even mention 'Assad' (TSC 2015b). Second, those whom the refugees fear do not add up to 100%. That is, respondents could agree with several options. Nevertheless, the three relevant questions seem to be number 9 ('Who was responsible for the fighting?'), number 14 ('Who did you fear getting arrested or kidnapped by?'), and number 18 ('What was the main reason for you to leave Syria?'). In questions 9 and 14 there were multiple options, so results tally to much more than 100. (TSC 2015b; see also Anderson 2016c). In responses to Question 9, 70% identified 'Syrian Army and allied groups' as 'responsible for the fighting'. However 82% also identified other armed groups (ISIS, al Nusra, FSA, YPG, other rebels). Removing the Kurdish YPG, which had until then generally fought terrorism in coordination with the Syrian Army, the total is 74% anti-government armed groups. With Question 14, 77% said they feared 'getting arrested or kidnapped by' the 'Syrian Army and its allied groups'. However, the combined total of feared anti-government groups is 82% and, if we add the YPG, 90%. The answers to both questions suggest these respondents feared anti-government armed groups more than they feared the Syrian Army. This is the reverse of the impression conveyed by '70% ... fleeing Assad'. Yet most journalists ran with the TSC press release headline. For example, Deutsche Welle reported: 'Survey leaves no doubt: Syrians are fleeing Assad' (Fuchs 2015).

**Graphic 7: 'The Syria Campaign' poll demonstrates the opposite of its headline**

Further, the TSC poll was on its face highly unrepresentative. Those Syrians interviewed in Germany were mostly young men, and most of them from jihadist held areas. Women and children barely exist in this poll. The poll states that 74% were from areas held by anti-government armed groups, and 68% were young men. There were hardly any from the government held areas of Tartus, Latakia and Sweida; and Damascus was seriously under-represented (TSC 2015b; Anderson 2016c) (**Graphic 6**). In summary, the TSC poll did not show that most refugees were 'fleeing Assad'. To the contrary, and despite the seriously biased cohort, the poll suggested that those sampled were more fearful of anti-government armed groups.

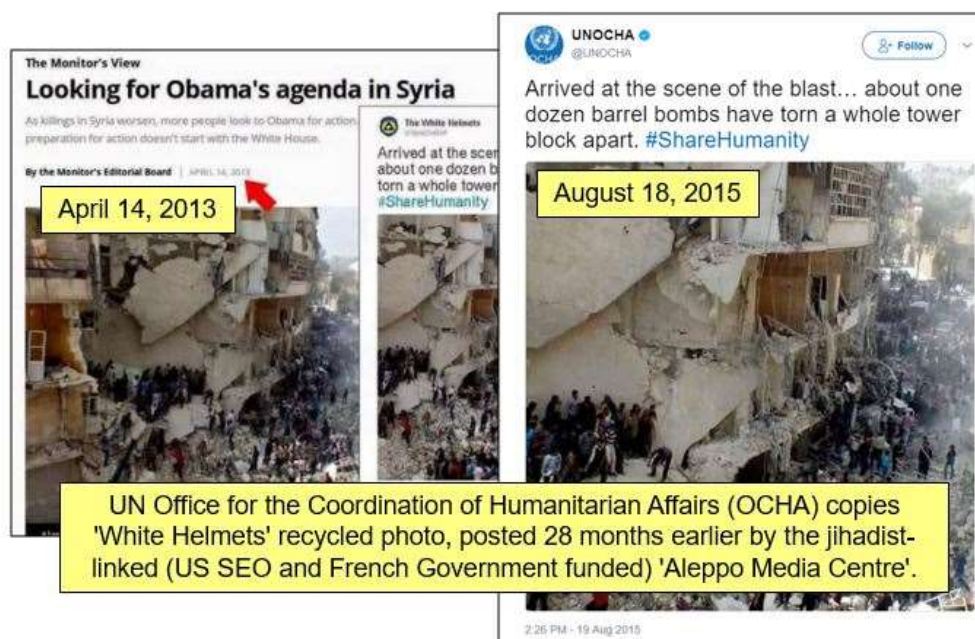
The White Helmets (TWH) is a group famous for its self-promoting video and photos of members rushing from the scene of a bombing with children in their arms. By 2016 they claimed to have rescued '70,000 people' from Syrian government bomb attacks (RT 2016). Yet their videos hide the fact that there is a real Syrian civil defence (linked to the fire brigade, with red helmets) which serves almost the whole country (Beeley 2017a). This western created 'cuckoo' is a jihadist auxiliary, founded by former British soldier-mercenary James le Mesurier, and exclusively associated with the al Qaeda held areas of western Syria (Webb 2017). At first the group hid its sources of finance but over 2015-2016 it was revealed that most came from USAID and the British Government (Beeley 2015c; Beeley 2016a). Despite claiming independence and humanitarian motives, a 2017 report counted about \$120 million in funds from western governments. From 2014 to 2017 there had been at least \$23 million from the US Government, \$80 million from the UK Government and more than \$16 million from the EU, Netherlands, Danish and German governments (2CW 2017); the same governments which had been arming the jihadist groups.

Several White Helmet associates in Syria, Mosab Obeidat, Khaled Diab, and Farouq al Habib have strong links to the armed groups and their funders. Obeidat worked for Qatar's Red Crescent for some years, then 'with the US Department of State in Jordan' (MayDay Rescue 2015). Diab also worked for the Qatar's Red Crescent, where he was accused of providing about \$2.2 million to terrorist groups in Syria (Cartalucci 2013). Habib was a member of the 'Homs Revolutionary Council' (Beeley 2015c). TWH shared with HRW the theme that 'Assad's barrel bombs ... are the greatest threat to Syrians' (Roth 2015a).

TWH are also deeply involved in the recycled war photos game. Immediately after Russian air support for the Syrian Army began, on 30 September 2015, the White Helmets published a photo on its Twitter account, depicting a bleeding girl and claiming she was injured during a Russian airstrike. This false claim was immediately exposed by Russian media, as the photo had been first published five days before the air strikes (Sputnik 2015). Throughout 2016 video and photographs appeared showing men in White Helmets uniforms not only mingled in alongside and helping the jihadist groups - including in the torture and murder of Syrian soldiers and civilians - but switching their medic uniforms for armed group logos and weapons. That is, the armed fighters were themselves White Helmets personnel. There are now compilations of many dozens of such photos (e.g. COS 2017; SWB 2017). One White Helmets self-promotion video, supposedly showing rescue attempts on a baby, was denounced by Swedish Doctors for Human Rights as showing 'medical malpractice and misuse of children for propaganda aims' (Ferrada de Noli 2017).

This photo switching has misled UN agencies. On 19 August 2015 TWH posted a picture of a damaged building in Aleppo, saying 'arrived at the scene of the blast ... about one dozen barrel bombs have torn a whole block apart'. The words and picture were adopted and reposted by the UN's Humanitarian Affairs Office (UNOCHA 2015; see **Graphic 7**). However that picture had been published 28 months earlier, attributed to the jihadist-linked Aleppo Media Centre (CSM 2013). This AMC, in turn is funded by the Washington based Syrian exile group the SEO, and the French Government (Beeley 2016b). The reliability of the 2013 photo-story is also in doubt. However we do know that (1) the 2015 photo-story, with its text, was dishonestly recycled by the White Helmets, and that (2) this fabrication was (probably unwittingly) adopted and propagated by a UN agency.

### Graphic 8: White Helmets recycled photo reposted by UN agency



If there were any doubt about their partisan and jihadist credentials, the head of al Qaeda in western Syria, Abu Jaber al Sheikh, praised TWH as 'hidden soldiers of the revolution' (Vino 2017). After the eastern part of Aleppo city was liberated and almost 100,000 civilians came flooding out, a number of Syrian, Iranian, Russian and independent journalists were

there to ask them about their experiences. Former residents of occupied east Aleppo called them 'Nusra front [al Qaeda] civil defence', saying they worked together with the armed groups and rarely provided any assistance to ordinary people (Beeley 2017c). Over May-June 2017 The White Helmets were filmed attending executions in Aleppo and Daraa and, in the latter case, parading severed heads and dismembered bodies before dumping them in a garbage heap (Live Leak 2015; O'Connor 2017; Beeley 2017b).

The White Helmets also played a role in taking samples from the site of a chemical weapons incident in Idlib (Khan Sheikhoun) to the OPCW, a UN agency in Turkey. Syria and Russia say the aim was to blame the Syrian Airforce for the attack. This story was backed by the White House and its embedded agencies, such as Bellingcat; but it was rejected by independent US experts Ted Postol and Scott Ritter. Postol, a Pentagon forensic consultant, said whatever chemical was used had not come from the air, but had been detonated on the ground (Postol 2017). Former US arms inspector Scott Ritter said intervention by the partisan White Helmets had destroyed the integrity of the chain of command of tissue samples, so the OPCW was in no position to judge from where it came (Ritter 2017). Professor Paul McKeigue, examining the UN's OPCW/JIM report, rejected the suggested sarin "fingerprinting" exercise (which sought to link the Syrian sarin stocks, disposed in 2014, with the samples provided by the jihadists in Idlib). He also concluded that US provided flight path data for Syrian aircraft was "incompatible" with the air strike story (McKeigue 2017). The White Helmets misled the OPCW, just as they had misled the UNOCHA. Once again, these were partisan, paid groups in action.

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

'Humanitarian war' has a long colonial and neo-colonial history, but these days requires strong ideological campaigns and renewed doctrine. To this end, 'human rights' groups have been both co-opted and funded for legitimising purposes. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International are the most prominent examples of a human rights industry embedded with US foreign policy. In the proxy war on Syria, other purpose built public relations groups have been created, like The Syria Campaign and The White Helmets, funded by the big powers and associated private foundations. Together these groups form a highly politicised industry, which seeks to bury or 'normalise' its conflicts of interest. The joint project has been an attempt to legitimise western military intervention on humanitarian pretexts, avoiding the non-intervention and anti-war principles of international law. The project seeks to disqualify or demoralise resistance to imperial strategy, aiming at division or destruction of independent states in the process of building a US-led 'New Middle East'. The evidence of fabrications and partisan campaigns carried out by this network is massive. Yet war propaganda has never relied on reason and evidence.

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