

## **Everything you were told about the Syrian war was wrong -- Until Now**

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That wars end very differently to our own expectations – or our plans – was established long ago. That “we” won the Second World War did not mean the Americans would win the Vietnam war, or that France would vanquish its enemies in Algeria. Yet the moment we decide who the good guys are, and who the evil monsters whom we must destroy, we relapse again into our old mistakes.

Because we hate, loathe and demonise Saddam or Gaddafi or Assad, we are sure – we are absolutely convinced – that they will be dethroned and that the blue skies of freedom will shine down upon their broken lands. This is childish, immature, infantile (although, given the trash we are prepared to consume over Brexit, it's not, I suppose, very surprising).

Well, Saddam's demise brought upon Iraq the most unimaginable suffering. So too Gaddafi's assassination beside the most famous sewer in Libya. As for Bashar al-Assad, far from being overthrown, he has emerged as the biggest winner of the Syrian war. Still we insist that he must go. Still we intend to try Syrian war criminals – and rightly so – but the Syrian regime has emerged above the blood-tide of war intact, alive, and with the most reliable superpower ally any Middle East state could have: the Kremlin.

I despise the word “curate”. Everyone seems to be curating scenarios, curating political conversations or curating business portfolios. We seem to be addicted to these awful curio words. But for once I'm going to use it in real form: those who curated the story – the narrative – of the Syrian war, got it all wrong from the start.

Bashar would go. The Free Syrian Army, supposedly made up of tens of thousands of Syrian army deserters and the unarmed demonstrators of Darayya, Damascus and Homs, would force the Assad family from power. And, of course, western-style democracy would break out, and secularism – which was in fact supposed to be the foundation of the Baath party – would become the basis of a new and liberal Arab state. We shall leave aside for now one of the real reasons for the west's support of the rebellion: to destroy Iran's only Arab ally.

We didn't predict the arrival of al-Qaeda, now purified with the name of Nusrah. We did not imagine that the Isis nightmare would emerge like a genie from the eastern deserts. Nor did we understand – nor were we told – how these Islamist cults could consume the people's revolution in which we believed.

Still today, I am only beginning to learn how Syria's “moderate” rebellion turned into the apocalyptic killing machine of the Islamic State. Some Islamist groups (not all, by any means, and it was not a simple transition) were there from the start. They were in Homs as early as 2012.

This does not mean that Syrian rebels were not brave, democratically minded figures. But they were mightily exaggerated in the west. While David Cameron was fantasising about the 70,000 Free Syrian Army (FSA) “moderates” fighting the Assad regime – there were never more than perhaps 7,000, at the most – the Syrian army was already talking to them, sometimes directly by mobile

phone, to persuade them to return to their original government army units or to abandon a town without fighting or to swap the bodies of government soldiers for food. Syrian officers would say that they always preferred to fight the FSA because they ran away; Nusra and Isis did not.

Yet now, today, as we report the results of the Turkish invasion of northern Syria, we are using a weird expression for Turkey's Arab militia allies. They are called the "Syrian National Army" - as opposed to the Assad government's original and still very extant Syrian Arab Army. Vincent Durac, a professor in Middle East politics in Dublin, even wrote last week that these Arab militia allies were "a creation of Turkey".

This is nonsense. They are the wreckage of the original and now utterly discredited Free Syrian Army - David Cameron's mythical legions whose mysterious composition, I recall, was once explained to British MPs by the gloriously named General Messenger. Very few reporters (with the honourable exception of those reporting for Channel 4 News) have explained this all-important fact of the war, even though some footage clearly showed the Turkish-paid militiamen brandishing the old Free Syrian Army green, white and black flag.

It was this same ex-FSA rabble who entered the Kurdish enclave of Afrin last year and helped their Nusra colleagues loot Kurdish homes and businesses. The Turks called this violent act of occupation "Operation Olive Branch". Even more preposterous, its latest invasion is named "Operation Peace Spring".

There was a time when this would have provoked ribaldry and contempt. No longer. Today, the media have largely treated this ridiculous nomenclature with something approaching respect.

We have been playing the same tricks with the so-called "American-backed" Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). As I've said before, almost all the SDF are Kurds, and they have never been elected, chosen, or joined the SDF democratically. Indeed there was nothing at all democratic about the militia, and its "force" existed only so long as it was supported by US air power. Yet the Syrian Democratic Forces kept their title unscathed and largely unquestioned by the media.

But when the Turks invaded Syria, to drive them from the Syrian-Turkish border, they were suddenly transformed by us into "Kurdish forces" - which they largely were - who had been betrayed by the Americans - which they very definitely were.

An irony, which is either forgotten or simply unknown, is that when fighting began in Aleppo in 2012, the Kurds helped the FSA grab several areas of the city. The two were fighting each other seven years later when the Turks invaded the "free" Kurdish borderland of Rojava. Even less advertised was the fact that the Turkish-FSA advance into Syria allowed thousands of Arab Syrian villagers to return to homes taken over by the Kurds when they set up their doomed statelet after the war began.

But the narrative of this war is now being further skewed by our suspension of any critical understanding of Saudi Arabia's new role in the Syrian debacle.

Deny and deny and deny is the Saudi policy, when asked what assistance it gave to the anti-Assad Islamist rebels in Syria. Even when I found Bosnian weapons documents in a Nusra base in Aleppo, signed off by an arms manufacturer near Sarajevo called Ifet Krnjic - and even when I tracked down Krnjic himself, who explained how the weapons had been sent to Saudi Arabia (he even described the Saudi officials whom he spoke to in his factory) - the Saudis denied the facts.

Yet today, almost incredibly, it seems the Saudis themselves are now contemplating an entirely new approach to Syria. Already their United Arab Emirates allies in the Yemeni war (another Saudi catastrophe) have reopened their embassy in Damascus: a highly significant decision by the Gulf state, although largely ignored in the west. Now, it seems, the Saudis are thinking of strengthening their cooperation with Russia by financing, along with the Emiratis and perhaps also Kuwait, the reconstruction of Syria.

Thus the Saudis would become more important to the Syrian regime than sanctions-cracked Iran, and would perhaps forestall Qatar's own increasingly warm - if very discreet - relations with Bashar al-Assad. The Qataris, despite their Al-Jazeera worldwide empire, want to expand their power over real, physical land; and Syria is an obvious target for their generosity and wealth. But if the Saudis decided to take on this onerous role, the kingdom would at one and the same time muscle both Iran and Qatar aside. Or so it believes. The Syrians - whose principle policy in such times is to wait, and wait, and wait - will, of course, decide how to play with their neighbours' ambitions.

But Saudi interest in Syria is not merely conjecture. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman remarked to Time magazine in August last year that "Bashar is going to stay. But I believe that Bashar's interest is not to let the Iranians do whatever they want to do." The Syrians and the Bahrainis are talking regularly about the post-war Levant. The Emirates might even negotiate between the Saudis and the Syrians. The Gulf states are now saying that it was a mistake to suspend Syria's membership of the Arab League.

In other words, Syria - with Russian encouragement - is steadily resuming the role it maintained before the 2011 revolt.

This wasn't what we in the west imagined then, when our ambassadors in Damascus were encouraging the Syrian street demonstrators to keep up their struggle against the regime; indeed, when they specifically told the protestors not even to talk or negotiate with the Assad government.

But those were in the days before two crazed elements emerged to smash all our assumptions, sowing fear and distrust across the Middle East: Donald Trump and Isis.

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