

How Western Media Misreports and Propagandises the Illegal US War on Syria

by Gareth Porter via jill - FAIR *Saturday, Aug 27 2016, 12:07am*

international / prose / post

How Media Distorted The Syrian Ceasefire Breakdown

Coverage of the breakdown of the partial ceasefire in Syria illustrated the main way corporate news media distort public understanding of a major foreign policy story. The problem is not that the key events in the story are entirely unreported, but that they were downplayed and quickly forgotten in the media's embrace of themes with which they were more comfortable.

In this case, the one key event was the major offensive launched in early April by Al Nusra Front—the Al Qaeda franchise in Syria—alongside US-backed armed opposition groups. This offensive was mentioned in at least two “quality” US newspapers. Their readers, however, would not have read that it was that offensive that broke the back of the partial ceasefire. On the contrary, they would have gotten the clear impression from following the major newspapers’ coverage that systematic violations by the Assad government doomed the ceasefire from the beginning.

Framing the Breakdown Before the Fact

Corporate media heralded the ceasefire agreement when it was negotiated by the United States and Russia in February, with the LA Times (2/2/16) calling it “the most determined diplomatic push to date aimed at ending the nation’s almost five-year conflict.” The “partial cessation of hostilities” was to apply between the Syrian regime and the non-jihadist forces, but not to the regime’s war with Nusra and with ISIS. The clear implication was that the US-supported non-jihadist opposition forces would have to separate themselves from Nusra, or else they would be legitimate targets for airstrikes.

But the relationship between the CIA-backed armed opposition to Assad and the jihadist Nusra Front was an issue that major US newspapers had already found very difficult to cover (FAIR.org, 3/21/16). US Syria policy has been dependent on the military potential of the Nusra Front (and its close ally, Ahrar al Sham) for leverage on the Syrian regime, since the “moderate” opposition was unable to operate in northwest Syria without jihadist support. This central element in US Syria policy, which both the government and the media were unwilling to acknowledge, was a central obstacle to accurate coverage of what happened to the Syrian ceasefire.

This problem began shaping the story as soon as the ceasefire agreement was announced. On February 23, New York Times correspondent Neil MacFarquhar wrote a news analysis on the wider tensions between the Obama administration and Russia that pointed to “a gaping loophole” in the Syria ceasefire agreement: the fact that “it permits attacks against the Islamic State and the Nusra Front, an Al Qaeda affiliate, to continue.”

MacFarquhar asserted that exempting Nusra from the ceasefire “could work in Moscow’s favor, since many of the anti-Assad groups aligned with the United States fight alongside the Nusra Front.” That meant that Russia could “continue to strike United States-backed rebel groups without fear...of Washington’s doing anything to stop them,” he wrote.

On the same day, Adam Entous of the Wall Street Journal reported that Obama's "top military and intelligence advisers don't believe Russia will abide by a just-announced ceasefire in Syria and want to ready plans to increase pressure on Moscow by expanding covert support to rebels fighting the Russia-backed Assad regime." For two of the country's most prominent newspapers, it was thus clear that the primary context of the Syria ceasefire was not its impact on Syria's population, but how it affected the rivalry between powerful national security officials and Russia.

Contrary to those dark suspicions of Russian intentions to take advantage of the agreement to hit US-supported Syrian opposition groups, however, as soon as the partial ceasefire agreement took effect on February 27, Russia released a map that designated "green zones" where its air forces would not strike. The green zones, according to the Russian Ministry of Defense, corresponded with Syrian opposition groups that had signed on to the ceasefire. Furthermore, Russia stopped bombing the Nusra-controlled areas of northwest Syria, instead focusing on ISIS targets further west, as Pentagon spokesperson Jeff Davis confirmed on March 14.

But instead of separating themselves from Nusra Front, the US-supported armed opposition joined with Nusra and its jihadist allies in a major offensive aimed at destroying the ceasefire. Charles Lister, a leading British specialist on the jihadists in Syria, has recounted being told by the commander of a US-backed armed group that around March 20, Nusra officials began a round of meetings with non-jihadist opposition groups from Hama, Latakia and southern Aleppo—including those supported by the United States—to persuade them to participate in a major offensive against the Assad regime, rather than in a ceasefire and political negotiations.

News media did not ignore the offensive launched on April 3 by Nusra Front and its "moderate" allies. The Los Angeles Times (4/4/16) described a "punishing attack" by Nusra and several "so-called moderate rebel factions" on the town of Al Eis, southwest of Aleppo, "overlooking the M5 highway, a vital artery connecting the Syrian capital, Damascus, in the southwest of the country, with the government-held city of Homs, in west-central Syria, and Aleppo in the north."

Associated Press (4/3/16) reported that Nusra Front's closest ally, Ahrar al Sham, together with US-supported factions had simultaneously "seized government positions in heavy fighting in northwestern Latakia province." The story quoted Zakariya Qaytaz of the US-supported Division 13 brigade as telling the agency through Twitter: "The truce is considered over. This battle is a notice to the regime."

The Vanishing Nusra Offensive

The Nusra-led offensive was a decisive violation of the ceasefire, which effectively frustrated the intention of isolating the jihadists. It led to continued high levels of fighting in the three areas where it had taken place, and Russian planes returned to Nusra Front-controlled territory for the first time in nearly six weeks. Yet after the first reports on the offensive, its very existence vanished from media coverage of Syria. No US newspaper followed up over the next two weeks to analyze its significance in terms of US policy, especially in light of the role of "legitimate" armed opposition groups in trashing the ceasefire.

Wall Street Journal correspondent Sam Dagher (4/4/16) suggested in his initial report on the offensive that it was a response to a Syrian air force airstrike in an opposition-controlled suburb of Damascus two days earlier, which activists said killed 30 civilians. But the offensive was so complex and well-organized that it had obviously been prepared well in advance of that strike. None of the other papers sought to portray the offensive as the result of a pattern of increasing military pressure on the Nusra Front or its allies. In fact, after the initial reports, all four major newspapers—the New York Times, LA Times, Wall Street Journal and Washington Post—simply ignored the fact that the

offensive had been carried out.

On April 19, three separate articles presented three variants of what became the broad media approach to explaining the fate of the ceasefire agreement. The Journal's Nour Malas and Sam Dagher wrote:

A limited truce in Syria, brokered by the US and Russia in late February, has unraveled in recent weeks, with government forces escalating attacks on several fronts and rebels relaunched operations around the northern city of Aleppo.

That formulation clearly suggested that either the regime had moved first, or that government and rebels had somehow both taken the offensive at the same moment; the former interpretation was encouraged by the headline, "Syrian Government Steps Up Airstrikes."

On the same day, New York Times Beirut correspondent Anne Barnard wrote a piece focused mainly on regime airstrikes in two Idlib towns, Maarat al Numan and Kafr Nable, that had killed as many as 40 civilians. Barnard's piece was headlined, "Ceasefire Crumbles as Bombings Kill Dozens"—suggesting that the airstrikes had somehow led to the "crumbling." Barnard did refer to an otherwise unidentified "insurgent offensive" that preceded the strikes, but did not draw any causal relationship between it and the bombing.

The article cited the opposition claim that the government had repeatedly violated the partial ceasefire, but didn't cite a single concrete instance of such a violation. And it appears to contradict that argument by observing that the Idlib airstrikes had ended "the relative respite from airstrikes that had lasted nearly two months"—i.e., from the time the ceasefire had gone into effect.

Yet a third article to appear that day, published by Reuters, explicitly asserted that the regime airstrike on a crowded market by Syrian planes to which Barnard referred was the cause of the failure of the partial ceasefire. "Syrian peace talks appeared all but doomed on Tuesday," it said, "after airstrikes killed about 40 people in a crowded vegetable market in rebel territory, with the opposition saying a truce was finished and it would keep out of negotiations indefinitely."

Parroting the Pentagon/CIA Narrative

Finally, on April 27, Karen DeYoung, associate editor of the Washington Post, wrote a news analysis piece looking back on what happened to the ceasefire. The piece never mentioned the major Nusra Front offensive in which US-supported armed groups had played a key role, passing on instead the distorted explanation of the fate of the ceasefire offered by national security bureaucrats. "Some Defense Department and intelligence officials," she wrote, "think Russia and its Syrian government client are clearly violating the ceasefire and provoking the opposition into doing the same."

Like the three April 19 articles, DeYoung focused entirely on military moves taken by the regime more than two weeks after the joint Nusra/opposition April offensive. She cited the Syrian government bombing of Kafr Nabl and Maarat al Numan the previous week, asserting that the towns were "heavily bombed by Assad after rebel forces threw out Nusra occupiers and civilians took to the streets in anti-Assad demonstrations."

But that characterization of the situation in the two towns, clearly aimed to support the notion that they were free of Nusra control, was false. In fact, Kafr Nabl had formerly been the home of the US-backed Division 13, but far from having been thrown out, Nusra Front had reasserted its direct control over the towns in mid-March, kicking Division 13 out of its base and seizing its US-supplied

weapons after a fight over the larger town Maarat al Numan.

DeYoung went so far as to embrace the CIA/Pentagon bureaucrats' argument that the United States should not have agreed to allow any attacks on Nusra Front in the ceasefire agreement. "The Nusra ceasefire exception had already left a hole big enough for the Syrian government and Russia to barrel through," she wrote, "and they have not hesitated to do so in pursuit of regaining the initiative on the ground for Assad."

The implication of the argument is that the United States should do nothing to interfere with Nusra's capacity to strike at the Assad regime. Thus DeYoung quoted an analyst for the Institute for the Study of War, which favors a more belligerent US policy in Syria, dismissing the military collaboration by US-supported groups with Nusra Front as not really significant, because it is only "tactical," and that Nusra merely offers to help those allies "retaliate" against regime attacks, rather than seeking a military solution to the conflict. Such arguments are merely shallow rationalizations, however, for the preference of hardliners in Washington for pitting Al Qaeda's military power against Russia and its Syrian client, enhancing the power position of the US national security state in Syria.

As more time passes, the media version of why the partial ceasefire failed has become even more simplistic and distorted. On July 12, DeYoung revisited the issue in the context of the Obama administration's negotiations with Russia on military cooperation against Nusra Front. This time she portrayed the ceasefire quite starkly as the victim of Syrian and Russian bombing:

Despite a ceasefire ostensibly in effect since February, Syrian planes have kept up a steady bombardment of both civilian and opposition sites—where they have argued that Al Nusra forces, exempt from the truce, are mixed with rebel groups covered by the accord. After observing the early weeks of the ceasefire, Russian planes joined the Syrian forces, including in an offensive last weekend that took over the only remaining supply route for both rebels and civilians hunkered down in the northern city of Aleppo.

Playing the role of ultimate media arbiter of how the attentive public is to understand the pivotal issue of why the ceasefire failed, DeYoung has deleted from memory the essential facts. In her narrative, there was no Nusra Front plan to destroy the ceasefire, and no April Nusra offensive to seize strategic territory south of Aleppo with the full participation of US-supported opposition groups.

The lesson of the Syrian ceasefire episode is clear: The most influential news media have virtually complete freedom to shape the narrative surrounding a given issue simply by erasing inconvenient facts from the storyline. They can do that even when the events or facts have been reported by one or more of those very news media. In the world of personal access and power inhabited by those who determine what will be published and what won't, even the most obviously central facts are disposable in the service of a narrative that maintains necessary relationships.

Author retains copyright.

In the video below, please note that the Pentagon spokesperson is very careful not to mention, IN SYRIA. He constantly refers to "our forces on the ground" but not, "IN SYRIA," where those forces are ILLEGALLY located. Furthermore, international LAW provides the legal and justified RIGHT for any sovereign nation to legitimately attack any foreign invading or occupying forces. So we must ask the duplicitous, criminal Pentagon, on which side of International LAW do you stand? Uninvited US forces 'IN SYRIA' are clearly HOSTILE INVADING FORCES, so the LAW-FLOUTING USA can expect

retaliation from Syria and its ALLY Russia -- but of course this is precisely what the criminal US government wishes. And the US public doesn't think its CLEARLY criminal government is intentionally provoking WWII, well, THINK AGAIN!

<http://fair.org/home/how-media-distorted-syrian-ceasefires-breakdown/>

Jungle Drum Prose/Poetry. <http://jungledrum.lingama.net/news/story-2344.html>