

When The Truth Bombs

Lord Jonathan Sumption Reith Lectures quote [00:00:29] "We will not recognise the end of democracy when it comes, if it does. Advanced democracies are not overthrown. There are no tanks on the street. No sudden catastrophes. No brash dictators or braying mobs. Instead, their institutions are imperceptibly drained of everything that once made them democratic. Labels will still be there, but they will no longer describe the contents. The facade still stand but there will be nothing behind it. The rhetoric of democracy will be unchanged, but it will be meaningless and the fault will be ours."

Ross [00:01:14] Joining me to discuss propaganda, the OPCW leaks and the ongoing battle for your mind, are the writer and investigative journalist Tareq Haddad and the co-director of the Organization for Propaganda Studies and convenor of the Working Group on Syria. Dr. Piers Robinson. Welcome to you both. Thank you very much for coming by. Tareq, you've now infamously wanted to write about what was going on in Syria. New evidence had come to light. You saw it. And as a journalist thought that you should report this because readers ought to know. What happened when you started speaking to editors at Newsweek about filing copy that you thought was relevant?

Tareq Haddad [00:01:53] So it kind of went in three different stages. So first of all, it was denigrating the sources I'd got my information from, which was something that I hadn't really seen before. I had my evidence from WikiLeaks, from the Mail on Sunday, verified by Reuters even that, you know, that didn't seem to be good enough. The other thing that happened was that the editors seemed to be completely happy to rely on Belling Cat, which obviously fit well for people that don't know. It's essentially a government propaganda arm. And then when I kept pushing the case, the attacks saw the smearing and the denigration started to turn on me. So even though I've always written about foreign affairs and international politics and I was trusted to do so, when I started to raise questions about certain stories, I started to be attacked and kind, they would say, 'you've had a reputation of being slightly inaccurate or you should leave it to more experienced journalists'. But if I wanted to write a story that Bashar al-Assad had killed two thousand people or whatever, I don't think anyone, my editorial staff, would have said, 'oh, no you're not experienced enough to write about Syria, please go ahead'. For me, the personal point that was no going back was when I was told that even though that Reuters had verified the documents, we still couldn't put this into print. And I thought this is part of something much more insidious here, because technically we should be able to rely on Reuters. And when there are other journalists that have done good reports like Peter Hitchens or Robert Fisk or whatever, and I can't reference that in my work and I'm attacked for doing so. But meanwhile, I'm perfectly allowed to quote, Belling Cat all day long, you know? But I can't quote someone like Robert Fisk or Seymour Hersh. For me, you know, someone who deeply cares about journalism, that was the point I said this is not acceptable.

Ross [00:03:33] And contextually Belling Cat for people who don't know and people who aren't on social media, what does that mean? Because they'll hear that word and say, Belling Cat, what is this?

Tareq Haddad [00:03:41] Yeah. So I think the perception that's painted to the people is that they're this gung ho group of investigative journalists that take open source material and they analyze it. The evidence now shows that they have funding from various sources like the National Endowment for Democracy or the Atlantic Council, essentially think tanks that are linked to NATO or the U.S. State Department. And essentially what they're doing is putting out false news stories, fake news stories, to build the perception or make the the public feel a certain way about an individual or a country.

Ross [00:04:10] Were you surprised at the ad hominem? Were you surprised that they play the man, not the ball attacks or had that not happened before?

Tareq Haddad [00:04:17] From Newsweek?

Ross [00:04:18] Yes.

Tareq Haddad [00:04:18] I was a little bit surprised because I've never had any issues with any of my editors. And I've tried to write controversial stories in the past. Naturally, usually I've had a decent feedback and it was pretty disappointing. But I don't know what else they can really do you know, they're kind of in a very ridiculous situation where they're caught up in a big lie. I would have expected a slightly more sophisticated response than this is a conspiracy theory.

Ross [00:04:41] Is that basically it. This is conspiracy. We've picked our line. There's a bit of group thing going on. We can't waver from that line. We've got to keep going?

Tareq Haddad [00:04:49] I think the entirety of the mainstream media are kind of in this big sort of catch 22 now because they're going to look more and more ridiculous the longer they don't address it. But then to address it, they would have to say, okay, our reporting has been terrible for the last 10 years on Syria or on certain issues. So there's not really any incentive for them to say, okay, we've got this wrong. Thankfully, I think the alternative media landscape has has grown and has done a lot of the documentation needed for stories like this to come out. And I'm personally very grateful, you know, to people like Piers and the alternative journalists that essentially they've done a lot of the groundwork in Syria. You know, people like me that, you know, more mainstream background, I could say, look, look at all this evidence which previously has been denied or not, there's been a reluctance to accept it. But I think now we're getting to the point that the alternative media is producing better media than the mainstream media. And we're going to start to see a shift.

Ross [00:05:45] You've identified this unholy trinity, if you like, and it's between the mainstream media to think tanks and also the military industrial complex. And what you are getting at is that people go and do fellowships at think tanks and they grow their little black book. They then talk to journalists. Journalists write stories. And all this, in a sense, paves the way for achieving military adventurism. A lot of people would hear that and say we're it's a bit conspiratorial. But have you seen those links?

Tareq Haddad [00:06:13] Yeah. The example that I think will resonate with most people is Fared Zakaria. So for people in the UK who might not be aware of who he is, he's a journalist in the United States working for CNN. And he's taken the exact same route that I've

kind of seen with many journalists. So does a kind of international relations or a policy degree at a top tier university. His case was Yale, but he's university degree is funded by the US State Department. So with Fareed Zakaria, he went to foreign affairs. He became the youngest editor of Foreign Affairs, which is it's the publication of the Council of Foreign Relations. So from there he becomes the editor of Newsweek and then becomes the editor of Time. And I saw this pattern with numerous journalists. They'll do a policy degree funded by the State Department. They'll go work for a think tank publication that is also funded by the State Department or certain military think tanks. And then they'll go to newsrooms. And then as I was looking through LinkedIn and Twitter, I saw numerous occasions where this happened. And I saw it with The New York Times, The Guardian, with journalists at all those publications. And I think that's why we've got this blanket silence on Syria, but also on Julian Assange and Jeffrey Epstein on Afghanistan papers, on Jeremy Corbyn. You could keep on going. Anything that doesn't fit the narrative of military or corporate interests doesn't get covered accurately in the media.

Ross [00:07:34] Piers, there's a fight for our cognitive map. And that often isn't about what is said and what's vigorously debated, it's often what is left unsaid. Omission journalism. Know anything about that?

Piers Robinson [00:07:47] Yeah. I mean, omission is one of the key ways in which issues are framed. I think Chomsky said that mission and what is not said is the biggest part of propaganda. So, you know, people live in an environment where they watch the news and they see a lot of controversy and arguing and think oh, well, this is independent media. I'm getting to see a bit of a fight going on here and a debate, etc. But what is really important is what is not being spoken about. And that's how you really control the cognitive map, how you control how people think. By making sure that issues which really raised substantial questions about ethics, power, etc. that those issues simply don't enter into normal, everyday discourse and conversation.

Ross [00:08:33] But there's a problem with this strategy because there's a pesky little thing called truth and a pesky little thing called facts. And especially when you have a social media landscape where people are increasingly sceptical. And if you take the UK, especially after WMD and how duped people felt when Tony Blair did what he did, you've now got an atmosphere here where increasingly, in fact, daily, many thousands of people don't trust official sources and they start coming to people like you and Tareq and start to say, well, what do you think about it, because you've obviously been looking a little bit closer? where are we at when it comes to, for instance, the OPCW? Because these facts now are coming out and the story is unravelling so very quickly. How does this continue? Because from where I'm sitting, it's very difficult to contain this truth bit.

Piers Robinson [00:09:22] Well, with this I mean, social media is very important in exactly the way you described it. We live in a world where if you want to try and bury a story, it is very difficult to do that because people are able to seek out alternative information sources and independent minded people - journalists or academics - are a position to communicate the truth and so on. So it's difficult to sort of control. I think the problem, however, is that even though there's a lot of unease and perhaps growing awareness, say, in relation to the OPCW or the war in Syria, there's still a struggle to really sort of consolidate that into what they say is a clear understanding of what has gone wrong. So it's a point you made that most

people suspect something is up because they can see, you know, they all go onto the Internet and they can see these alternative voices being smeared frequently, but they'll be thinking, well, there's something going on there. So people have a sense that there is something wrong. But then the tools that you need in order to try and piece things together, to see the big picture, is challenging. And I think that's challenging for people in this media environment. One of the things that we lack and we have lost, I think probably in the West and in democracies, is this sort of real strong sense of independent critical thinking for people having confidence in their own ability to work out what is going on. And so they have a lot of this information floating around and they can see that there are problems, but there's a lack of confidence to try and put two and two together.

Ross [00:10:54] Why have people started doubting themselves? Are they scared of being called conspiracy theorists?

Piers Robinson [00:10:58] That's one. The kind of smearing which is used on anyone who questions governments and so on has been a powerful part of that. But I think, and I don't know the answer to this, but having spoken to some educationalists over the last few years, I mean, there is a question of what we do in schools and what we do in terms of raising our children and how to think and middle class parents will often talk about this, you know, jumping through hoops to get to university and so on. But I think that education has become about getting kids to jump through hoops, not to become fully rounded, independent, confident individuals. And I think that might be part of the problem there. And, you know, I don't have great confidence in the education system that it's doing what it should really be doing in a democracy. If we are to regain democracy in the West, one of the places we have to start is this notion of independence of mind, critical thinking and training our younger generation to have the confidence and the intelligence to actually think for themselves.

Tareq Haddad [00:12:01] Journalists have an incredibly large responsibility, I think, and people need to educate themselves on propaganda. And, you know, I was surprised when I started to train as a journalist because I was always thinking about propaganda when I started is that I actually never received any formal training in propaganda or it was never discussed or even journalism ethics wasn't discussed in any of my courses or, you know, my kind of newsroom experiences. So I think that's definitely something that's lacking. And I think journalists need to accept that. For me, you know, it doesn't matter what the education system is like. And I think we still have a relatively good level of education, probably comparatively speaking, in the world. And I think people need to make a distinct effort to understand the history of journalism and how it had to deal with governments trying to change the narrative. And, you know, it's an important job.

Ross [00:12:48] We need to teach propaganda studies to journalists so they can know their enemy. What do you think of that?

Piers Robinson [00:12:54] And this is a point that myself and other colleagues have been making for many years is that academics don't properly understand propaganda and how important propaganda has been in Western democracies. It's been ruled out of the equation, so to speak. But until we start to understand that propaganda is an integral part of contemporary democracies, then we don't have the tools to fight against it. It is allowed to run riot, which I think is exactly what's been happening, especially in the realm of foreign policy

for a very long time now. But people need to understand it and this requires learning and it requires looking back into history. It also requires understanding how propaganda works, the institutions that are involved in it. And that's a big intellectual task. And that's one things which myself and other colleagues are trying to draw attention toward, to work on or to develop their research papers, et cetera, which focus on that. But, you know, that's been I think it was Kerry that said 'that the triumph of capitalism was to persuade everyone that they're not subjected to propaganda anymore. And it's one of the greatest propaganda achievements of big business. And that's very, very true. And it's true of a lot of most journalists probably and probably most academics. When you say propaganda, they think of Russia or China or they think of World War 2, for example. They don't realise quite how extensive these mechanisms are.

Ross [00:14:29] Welcome back to Renegade Inc. Before we talk more about the OPCW leaks and the ongoing battle for your mind with Tarek Haddad and Dr. Pierce Robinson, let's have a look at what you've been tweeting about in this week's Renegade Inc. index. First up, we got a tweet from Tim Haywood. Senior OPCW management were invited to this U.N. Security Council meeting, but declined to attend. That's telling, isn't it?

Piers Robinson [00:14:52] Perhaps they didn't want facts to get in the way of their story?

Ross [00:14:55] That pesky thing called truth.

Piers Robinson [00:14:57] Yes.

Ross [00:14:57] Next up from Peter Hitchens. 'Can anyone explain the reverence and support accorded to the amateur blogger, Eliot Higgins and his site Belling Cat, while the evidence on Syria of the experienced scientist and former OPCW inspector Ian Henderson is ignored by most media? Can you shed any light on this?

Tareq Haddad [00:15:17] I think it's part of the coordinated effort by the governments to paint Belling Cat as, you know, gung ho group of investigative journalists. And, you know, we've seen in The New York Times and The Guardian in so many places these profile pieces of Eliot Higgins and Belling Cat and the level of journalism is terrible. It's, you know, completely whitewashes their background, their financial interests and what they really do. And then, you know, the whole world has presented this fairy tale image of this guy from Leicester or wherever he is that's now solving Skripal, he's solving chemical weapons attacks and all these things that journalists have been unable to do. But this guy who was playing video games a few months before is now the world's best investigative journalist.

Ross [00:15:59] Next from Mark G.B. 'If the OPCW is to retain any credibility, the scientists who do the actual work must be heard disputing an official report that altered their findings. That is relevant. The desperate bleating of a kid obsessed with Russia, not so much'.

Piers Robinson [00:16:18] This is the big problem that we have here with what's going on is that we're in a world where people are being asked to not listen to scientists anymore. People who have expertise and knowledge and people are being asked to listen to somebody who has none of those attributes and so on. And it really is indicative of the kind of dumbing down and you, Belling Cat have got a bit of a track record of abusing scientists and harassing and

trolling scientists who deviate from the official line. And it's quite extraordinary we're in a world where we're being asked to not listen to scientists, but to listen to Belling Cat instead.

Ross [00:16:55] Next from Max Blumenthal. 'An ex OPCW investigator testified yesterday at the UN that no chemical attack took place in Douma, Syria. By my count, zero mainstream US media outlets have reported on this actual bombshell that destroys the justification for bombing Syria in April 2018. Finally, from a guy called Tarek Haddad. 'This is just getting embarrassing for Newsweek, referring to a tweet by Naveed Jamali. What Russia is doing with Bernie is trying to turn him into an unwitting asset in an attempt to cause infighting amongst Democrats'. Tareq, I've got to say that the mental contortions that these people have to go through to try and treat this phenomenon, isn't it?

Tareq Haddad [00:17:42] It's completely unbelievable because also he very openly, you know, says that he was a former spy. And apparently there's no problem with a former spy being an editor at large at Newsweek and then someone who's got absolutely no, you know, there's no evidence to suggest any links to Russia or anything. He gets criticized. And, you know, and it's it's part of a very obvious playbook that we all know now that anyone with anything that's anti-war is going to be painted in this exact same line.

Ross [00:18:10] Piers talked a lot in that first half about propaganda and how education is also involved as well. We can't just say it's the mainstream media. When we come to the OPCW, it's a story that you've been following very, very closely. A lot of people have the cognitive dissonance. They know there's something wrong. Just give us a potted history of the OPCW issue - where they stand at the moment and what is now unravelling when it comes to them having to relay this story about what really happened in Syria?

Piers Robinson [00:18:38] . Well, a potted history. The OPCW story is about the investigation of an alleged chemical weapon attack in Douma in Syria in 2018, which was controversial at the time because France and America and the U.K. bombed Syria within about six or seven days of that alleged event having occurred.

Ross [00:18:55] And the premise for the event was that Assad, winning the war, gassed his own people?

Piers Robinson [00:18:59] That a helicopter dropped two chlorine gas cylinders and killed sort of dozens of people in Douma. And that was the original event which the OPCW went out to investigate. What we know now after leaks and people from within the OPCW talking, is that the team who were initially deployed to Douma, and who did the investigation, that their first interim report was very clearly indicating that there were problems with the idea that the Syrian government had dropped cylinders, that there were indications that staging had occurred. And they were already pretty much shut out of the process after the interim report, which is what really started to cause I think dissent within amongst some of the team. And then ultimately the final OPCW report came out suggesting very strongly that the Syrian government dropped chlorine gas cylinders. And at that point, shortly after that, an engineering report was leaked, which suggested the opposite. And what we know now from all of the leaks and what we know now from the Courage Foundation panel, for example, is that there are serious problems with the final OPCW report, that the science does not back up the claims that are being made. And we know that from the leaked documents, we can see

that from the information coming out from OPCW scientists. And most spectacularly, we saw it with Ian Henderson addressing the UN Security Council, where he made very clear that he had been sidelined and he made very clear that the engineering assessment had indicated that staging had occurred at Douma.

Ross [00:20:28] You mentioned staging. Explain what that means.

Piers Robinson [00:20:32] Well, the issue that was raised, certainly in the first draft interim report, was that there were questions being raised about how the cylinders had arrived at their location and how the people who had died and the building at location two had died.

Ross [00:20:48] But according to the official narrative, the cylinders were dropped.

Piers Robinson [00:20:50] According to the official narrative, the cylinders were dropped from a helicopter. But the indications from FFM team who went to Douma was that that did not possibly seem to be the case, that the cylinders appear to have been placed by hand. And also great questions are raised by toxicologists as to how the people could have died. And what was pointed to was that people hadn't possibly died because of cylinders being dropped from a helicopter, but people had died through some other means that their bodies had been placed there and that the cylinders had been placed essentially staging to create the impression the Syrian government had carried out an attack. Those were the doubts and the questions which were raised by the FFM team who went to Douma. And that's what was contained in the original interim report.

Ross [00:21:34] Who is then talking to people within the OPCW saying that we need these results, we need it to look like this? Am I being conspiratorial when I say that, or is there active pressure being placed on the people within the organization to say, please make this story fit? What's going?

Piers Robinson [00:21:51] There's a very clear problem with the FFM missions, the fact finding missions in the OPCW. Though, the FFA missions report directly to the office of the director general, the most powerful figure there is the chief of cabinet bypasses the technical inspectorate. And the key problem there is that at the time of Douma, you had a British diplomat who was chief of cabinet. You then had him replaced by Sebastian Braha, who was a French serving diplomat. These are all obvious conflicts of interest, okay. Now, when you have a set up where an investigation is being carried out and you have countries who are belligerents in that conflict, having their diplomats in very powerful positions, then the organization becomes acutely vulnerable to influence and pressure being exerted. So that's the specifics in the case of OPCW. Any sociologist, any wise journalist, wise academic, knows that big institutions and international politics come under pressure from big players in the international system.

Ross [00:22:48] When this happens to organizations, and you've tried to report on this, the media, the mainstream media said forget it. Are you worried about the politicization and ultimately the total lack of transparency?

Tareq Haddad [00:23:01] Absolutely. I personally think that we're at a tipping point right now into tyranny. And, you know, I've been looking into the Julian Assange case and the

freedom of speech is really a very critical point at the moment. We hear a lot about human rights in Russia or how Russia treats its journalists. But, you know, we alluded to it there. The threats received and it's you know, we've had several others like that where, you know, David Kelly, famous example here in the U.K. in the Iraq war. And that was part of the reason I resigned, is that I realized that, you know, we're at the edge of decline. And, you know, it was either I could be quiet about this and let this continue or I have to say something and hopefully other people start to speak up. I do think that we're heading down this very dangerous trajectory at the moment. I think previously as well, United States and the U.K. could get away with lies on the international level because we were the the force on that stage. But now I think the situation has changed dramatically where breaking international law is not going to be tolerated the way it was never tolerated. But we could get away with it. But now I think the situation is, you know, like we mentioned, China and Russia are getting strong enough to be able to push back against this. And we talked a lot about the truth. You know, we can uncover the truth, but that doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. You know that other people will not know about what's going on. So we can live in our own little world in the United Kingdom, the United States of what we think all we're doing in the world. But actually the image across the rest of the world will be completely different and our influence will continue to shrink.

Ross [00:24:36] Where from here? How does this play out? I'm not asking you to crystal ball, but just give us an idea of the next months, how the OPCW react to this and what are the longer term implications if we want a peaceful planet?

Piers Robinson [00:24:49] I believe the OPCW and France, UK and US will double down. They will try to discredit anybody raising questions. But the harder they do that and the more they ignore the facts and so on, then I think ultimately in the long run, the more damage they're going to end up doing to the OPCW and themselves. They can probably hold on to this horse for a while. But you know that the truth and an accurate understanding of what's been going on will finally emerge at some point and to greater damage. The other problem with this is the risk associated with this, the risk of having an organization which can potentially rubberstamp an alleged attack and which can then become implicated in the initiation of a conflict. We're in a very fraught situation in the Middle East, potential of conflict with Iran. There's also China and Russia as well. If we have institutions such as this, which are not properly gotten under control and don't start to act independently, then they become trigger mechanisms for war.

Tareq Haddad [00:25:52] I don't think we can defer to other people anymore. I think it needs to be on a very individual level of every single person in their communities and their families or whatever that they need to stop being a little bit more honest about everything. You know, if you start to see something that is not quite adding up, you need to start addressing it because it's those things that slowly get, you know, build up to to make a bigger lie. And I think the only reason that we get to this stage is that it's people kind of fudging the truth.

Piers Robinson [00:26:22] People must act. I mean, we've had 20 years of war since 9/11 and these wars have destroyed countries. Millions of people have been killed as a result of these conflicts. I mean, we've been acting in a way which has caused phenomenal loss of life in the international system. And that just that simple fact alone means that people in the West

- because our governments have been so implicated in all of these conflicts -.have a moral responsibility to, yes, not to defer to other people, but to actually act to play their part in trying to get our governments, trying to rebuild our governments and our institutions actually from the ground up in order to stop this, the bloodshed which has been going on and which is carrying on as we speak.

Ross [00:27:06] You've both perfectly played your roles with terrier like approach to keeping these people on their toes and your bravery for walking away and not compromising. Thank you both very much. That's it from Renegade Inc this week. You can drop the team, a mail, studio@renegadeinc.com or you can tweet us at Renegade Inc. Join us next week for more insight from those people who are thinking differently. But until then, stay curious.