

White Helmets or Whitewash?

Ross [00:00:28] Welcome to Renegade Inc. The broad definition of propaganda is information, especially of a biased or misleading nature used to promote a political cause or point of view. So what is the British taxpayer not being told about the ongoing war in Syria? Joining me to discuss Britain's role in Syria, the independent journalist Vanessa Beeley and security analyst and former British army officer Charles Shoebridge. Welcome to you both. Thanks for swinging by. People look at the Syrian conflict and they look at broadly what's going on in the Middle East, and they often think they're confused. If you go back to 15th of March 2011 broadly when it started and until today, there hasn't been a clear narrative of what's gone on in Syria. Can you condense what's gone on and why we're in the situation we're in?

Charles Shoebridge [00:01:25] Well, there is actually a clear narrative, but it's a narrative that's been largely, I think - and Vanessa would definitely, I think, come in with more on this later on - it's a manufactured narrative. It's a narrative that an oppressed people have risen up en masse against their dictator, that those uprisings were brutally suppressed and that then led to the spontaneous eruption of an armed rebellion, an indigenous armed rebellion that was then over the next few years, crushed brutally again by Assad and his Russian and Iranian allies, plus Hezbollah and anybody else they want to put in. Of course, the reality of that, even from an outsider, is far more nuanced and far this far more, of course, involved. When you look at the timing, of course, of the Arab Spring, it was, I think, inevitable that Syria would be caught up in that as indeed most of the Middle East was. Therefore, I think, people as elsewhere, saw an opportunity - people I'm talking about policymakers and those that tried those policies in the West. Allied to that a campaign, if it was against Western countries would be called subversion and sedition in terms of the BBC and others channelling what again we would call propaganda if it was directed against us to Syrian activists and so on, funding Syria activists. And added to that mix, then the influence and the output of outside powers - regional powers - such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, all with their agendas for expanding their own influence and of course, combating Iran, of which Syria was a close ally. And you can see that throwing all out into the mix makes it a very complex situation of numerous outside interests, including the West, particularly Britain and the United States, that again, were long enemies of Assad seeing an opportunity, just as they did in Libya, to actually fund, arm and arguably actually direct the course of that rebellion - that rebellion which has now caused upwards of half a million deaths.

Ross [00:03:14] When you talk about the opportunity that policymakers had, as well as sovereign states around the world, what was that opportunity specifically?

Charles Shoebridge [00:03:24] Well, I think if you want to put a phrase on it would be regime change. I mean, Assad is somebody who - and again, will come into that in more detail, I'm sure - someone who has not spent to the will of the Western powers. And I would include in that Israel. He remains implacably opposed to Israel and its policies, particularly towards the Palestinians. Therefore, he hasn't been in any way compliant with Western policies. The idea that the West is sponsoring democracy, for example, in Syria - in some cases that might be happening. No doubt there is some element of that, not for the Western governments, but perhaps some organisations would like to see democracy. So they may be

genuine in that. But overall, as we saw in Libya and elsewhere, what you see is that this drive towards human rights and democracy being used by Western powers, particularly Britain, American France, to actually drive the real policy, an agenda which is of regime change, to overthrow his government or, as an alternative - and I would argue they've been relatively successful with this as they were with Libya and Iraq - to create a situation of such extreme instability that it effectively knocks out the country of Syria, as it has done Iraq, as it has done Libya as a coherent, functioning state, particularly a state that would be opposed to Israel.

Ross [00:04:33] Vanessa, good guys, bad guys. War is black and white. There's no nuance. There's no areas of grey. The West is exporting democracy, human rights, often at the barrel of a gun. And actually, Assad bad guy. And this has been the very simplistic narrative. You are living in Syria. Tell us about it. And is it as black and white as the media make out?

Vanessa Beeley [00:04:54] No. I'd like to add to the very good summary that Charles just gave. If we look at the very early days of the war and I've taken a lot of testimonies from people both in security forces, but also in, for example, the real Syria Civil Defence in Latakia and various other areas who described the very early arming of these violent insurgents. These weren't peaceful protesters. Peaceful protesters do exist inside Syria. There is a peaceful opposition to the Syrian government. It would be insane to say that there isn't. But that peaceful opposition - and I've interviewed many members of that opposition - would not take up arms or US supplied grad missiles to target their own people in order to achieve the reform. I don't like to use the term democracy because it's been over used and abused by the West to introduce its military adventurism in a number of countries, but there is an existing opposition. But they are against this violation of international law, this invasion of Syrian sovereign territory by a number of proxies and mercenary groups. Yes, there may have been originally indigenous members of that group, but they would be almost entirely members of the Muslim Brotherhood. And the Muslim Brotherhood has been a long-term tool and instrument of particularly U.S. coalition imperialism and neo colonialism. Going back to the 80s, even going back prior to that, the Muslim Brotherhood were activated, if you like, as a tool to destabilise Syria. So I think what we've seen is a kind of repeat spin cycle in 2011, starting with the Muslim Brotherhood factions, which would then power multiplied by the more extremist and better armed and better funded factions such as al-Qaeda and ISIS. I make no differentiation, by the way, between ISIS and al-Qaeda. They are both proxies of the US coalition. They basically come from the same Wahhabist root. The only difference is, in my opinion, is the funding stream, whether it's coming in from Qatar or coming in from Saudi Arabia, that's it. But ideologically, they are very similar.

Ross [00:07:06] And Wahhabi - ism is the ideology that drives this and that ultimately emanates from Saudi Arabia?

Vanessa Beeley [00:07:13] Yeah.

Ross [00:07:13] When then you look at this war, the changing face of it, from when it started to now that the profile, if you like, of this whole conflict has changed dramatically and proxies, have been used quite effectively. Could you just talk us through how strategically proxies have been used and other groups to do other nations bidding.

Vanessa Beeley [00:07:33] Well, if we look at it, I think the rebranding of these various groups is really a sort of distraction technique by the US coalition and its allies, because if we look at the proxies that are on the ground, whether it's ISIS or al-Qaeda or it's a number of non designated as terrorist groups like al Shabaab, Jaish al-Islam, who are still carrying out terrorist atrocities against Syrian civilians and are described as terrorists when they come on to European soil, for example. But in Syria, they remain rebels. I mean, this is the hypocrisy of the narrative of this conflict.

Ross [00:08:08] Rebels or moderate rebels?

Vanessa Beeley [00:08:09] Of course, moderate rebels, yeah, if we really want to use the terminology. But I think it's very difficult to differentiate between the handlers or the management of these proxies, because all the nations that are conducting this hostile aggression against Syria are involved. We know recently that Israel has admitted to arming the militant groups inside Syria, including al-Qaeda. It has provided medical treatment for these groups. The US coalition, and that includes Britain, the EU, are responsible in many ways for the financing and the arming of those group. We have the Timber Sycamore operation...

Ross [00:08:48] Just explain what that is, because Jeffrey Sachs did a very good job of explaining what Timber Sycamore is.

Vanessa Beeley [00:08:52] So basically it's the sort of deep state the CIA operation to train and arm the proxies that are supposedly toppling the Syrian government inside Syria. And this began, I think in 2012. It was euphemistically called the training program..And this basically advocated the supply of arms, equipment and financing to the various extremist armed groups inside Syria.

Video clip [00:09:19] This happened because of us. These six hundred thousand are not just incidental. We started a war to overthrow a regime. It was covert. It was Timber Sycamore. People can look it up - the CIA operation together with Saudi Arabia still shrouded in secrecy, which is part of the problem in her country. A major war effort shrouded in secrecy, never debated by Congress, never explained to the American people signed by President Obama, never explained.

Vanessa Beeley [00:09:52] Britain is also implicated in this. I mean, humanitarian 'aid', which is entering Syria through Turkey, has already been investigated, in fact, by BBC Panorama, where they expose the fact that the Free Syrian police, an entity or a construct that is financed by the Conflict Stability and Security Fund run by the British Foreign Office, funds were being diverted to the terrorist groups. We know also of the existence of the White Helmets and we'll come onto that maybe a bit later. But all of these groups and these proxies are basically receiving financing arms through a number of members of the US coalition. So I think it's very difficult to kind of differentiate very clearly which member of that coalition is managing which group, particularly because the groups themselves sort of I see it as a mafia operation. They will split into different factions and those factions will war amongst themselves over territory, over power, over status, over money and over control of civilians. But effectively, they are dominated by Nusfra Front, particularly in Idlib and in other areas

by ISIS. Those two being, if you like, the two wings that are the best equipped and the best operators.

Ross [00:11:04] I feel a bit better because that is so fiendishly complicated. It's stacking jellyfish because you don't quite know where you should be fighting. And British taxpayers listening to this, and civic minded people think, why the hell are we sending any pound, shilling or pence over there? Why are we? What's the British...?

Charles Shoebridge [00:11:20] Yeah. I mean, I would add to - and it relates back to the first question you asked about narratives - is what Vanessa has just said - it's interesting that what she's described is pretty much actually mainstream now. That isn't meant as a criticism at all.

Ross [00:11:34] She's been there for years. But suddenly now you dismiss it all.

Charles Shoebridge [00:11:34] It is actually a criticism, of course, to say it's mainstream because it means you are probably wrong. But you're not wrong, of course, because people like us and many others have been saying exactly the same for many years. And of course, that's the point I'm going to make, is that on this particular issue is that what Vanessa described is pretty much mainstream now. It's pretty much accepted. And even in the mainstream newspapers that the West was supplying, especially to Timber Sycamore, is actually out in open its up in open particular because it was admitted when it was ended. So it was admitted in a big flow of publicity we're not arming the militants anymore. Of course, media should have said, well, hang on, haven't we spent the last five years and we weren't arming them? So people, yes, of course, have been described again and again as conspiracy theorists. And again and again, it's proved to be correct and it's the mainstream's attitude is, why didn't we tell you that before? Well, actually, no, you didn't. But going on from what we are saying their, of course, we're talking about the realm of geopolitics, of geostrategic issues, where, of course, absolutely everything is not what it appears to be and that there is always an underlying motive that isn't what it's presented to be. And so the British public is paying, in total, billions to groups...

Ross [00:12:44] There's a specific figure, 2.8 billion.

Charles Shoebridge [00:12:46] That includes, of course, a lot of things. But it's all stuff that the British public, if they knew the details of, would be asking why? Why, for example, are we funding a supposed to rescue organisation called the White Helmets in Syria when we are making cuts to fire brigades when our own rescue services can't get their funding? And of course, the reason is because actually it's more important. It's more important to the agenda that governs policy makers decision making because the White House is largely a British invention. Okay, a lot of people think it's American because America, of course, has put a lot of money in and so on. But this is typical British manoeuvring, as we've seen with the White House. It's as part of an information operation and information management operation that we need to look at in conjunction with all of the others. And that's where this vast sums of money have gone. And these vast sums of money have gone largely not actually to people on the ground, even to people we perhaps might not like in Syria. It's largely gone to public relations agencies in London, in New York, that have spent millions and millions of pounds promoting these organizations as a means of driving the narrative forward. The bad guy, good guy narrative, the White Helmets are great and the people they support are great. And

Assad, of course, is evil. And as we've discussed and acknowledged, it's much more complex than that. You would have thought that the White Helmets, if they were genuine rescue organisation, would be funded from the UK's aid budget. But they're not. They're funded from the secret, not open to scrutiny, even by parliamentarians properly, Conflict and Stability Fund. And you have to ask, what is the purpose their. And when questioned about this even ministers in the past have said because they're furthering UK interests and we don't want to talk about the details. And that is exactly what we've been saying for ages, that that is the primary driver of these groups. And just one quick question. If their main aim, of course, of setting up the White Helmets as a British invention was to be a rescue organisation, why have we not set up the White Helmets in Gaza, in Mosul, in Raqqa, in Yemen? There have been no White Helmets set up there. Why? Because those countries and those places I've mentioned are all being bombed, not by Syria or Russia, but by Britain and its allies.

Ross [00:14:56] Welcome back to Renegade Inc. Before we talk more about Britain's role in Syria with Vanessa Beeley and Charles Shoebridge, 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 Hadi Nasrallah. 'The Syrian army is on the verge of liberating Idlib City, al-Qaeda's capital in the province. Expect another, quote, chemical attack scenario staged by al-Qaedas, quote, White Helmets in an effort to stimulate international condemnation and intervention to hinder the liberation of Idlib'. Too conspiratorial?

Vanessa Beeley [00:15:31] No, not at all. And what people are maybe not aware of is that Russian media and RT in particular, have been releasing information of suspected, about to be staged, chemical attacks in Idlib. This isn't conspiratorial either, because what people don't realise is that civilians in the areas that are about to be liberated are feeding information to the Syrian Arab army commander in order to enable them to liberate the towns with as little civilian life loss as possible, but also feeding them information about the gathering's of White Helmets, setting off of chemical weapon attack and scenes and staging. And I've interviewed many people who've had their children abducted previously by the White Helmets, by the extremist armed groups. And they know that from family members and from information they're receiving that those children are being moved around Idlib. So, no, this is not conspiracy theory stuff at all.

Charles Shoebridge [00:16:25] But you can imagine just how terrifying that must be for Syrian families that have lost their children that are missing. And then they see, for example, the photographs and videos, horrific videos and photographs from places like Douma, where the alleged chemical attack of 2019 took place almost exclusively child victims that died in a manner that actually hasn't yet been established, because, of course, the OPCW declined to exhume bodies. They declined to ask, has anybody else so far declined to establish actually how these victims really died? Because I think it's really clear from what was common sense anyway and as scientists have said, including OPCW whistleblowers, that these people were almost certainly not killed by chlorine or indeed by any identifiable chemical weapon.

Ross [00:17:07] Next, from Rebuilding Syria. 'Art is flourishing again in the city of Raqqa'. Now we can focus on all the horror stories and the propaganda. But, you know, and I've seen you tweet, you know that life is becoming normal for a lot of Syrians again.

Vanessa Beeley [00:17:21] I mean, it's extraordinary. I think when Jon Snow tweeted out very recently regarding the propaganda film documentary, For Sama, and he tweeted out after The Death Of Aleppo. I mean, you know, the extraordinary thing and the thing that. Yes. And this was just sort of horrendous comment from him, which, of course, you know, then led to a number of attacks from Syrians saying, how dare you describe our city that is now liberated and is now reviving as 'dead', you know. And I mean, this is it. With each liberation comes this revival, this rebuilding, this restoration. I remember going into east Aleppo days after the liberation to see the locals sort of carrying wheelbarrows of stone and little hand turns and cement mixers going to start rebuilding their homes. This is Syria. They will always rebuild and they will always restore it.

Ross [00:18:15] Next from Louis Allday: 'While much of the left continues to pretend that it doesn't exist unless Trump threatens to withdraw, the US's illegal occupation of Syrian territory continues, of course, killing civilians'. What do you think of this? Because he's been quite honest. Trump, as far as he's said, I want the oil.

Vanessa Beeley [00:18:36] I'm not sure he's been honest. I'll say he's been transparent, which I guess is perhaps amounts to the same thing. But I struggle with thinking of him as honest.

Ross [00:18:43] But it's rare for a U.S. president to say, look, we want the natural resources.

Vanessa Beeley [00:18:47] Yeah, it's rare.

Ross [00:18:48] I mean Barack Obama would never have said that. He's of banged on about some kind of human rights..

Vanessa Beeley [00:18:52] Yeah, I mean, I think what is very important to understand here is that actually the US doesn't want the oil. They want to stop Syria having the oil, because this means with the effect of sanctions and the fact that the oil is being prevented from reaching Syrian civilians and infrastructure, of course, that's part of the collective punitive measures against the Syrian people.

Ross [00:19:14] And finally, from Amaju Baraka: 'It is really incredible how propaganda works. The US with over 800 to 1000 bases in 140 nations, a military budget bigger than next seven nations combined. And the history of subversion and interventions globally. Russia, the Chinese are the aggressors, according to the capitalist press'.

Charles Shoebridge [00:19:37] I mean, you've got of course, countries are pursuing and blocs of countries are pursuing their national interests. There's no question about that. We happen to live in the West. We are subject to a relentless torrent of propaganda that masquerades as news and comment from our media. That hasn't changed. It's been the same from the beginning of the Syria conflict. Even now, even though they acknowledge that, for example, Idlib is effectively a hotbed of militancy in terms of even American government and others saying that this is governed now by Al Nusra, nonetheless, they still pump out the propaganda that actually somehow it's wrong to clear this place and it's wrong to describe it as a liberation, despite the fact that when the West did the same or very similar, but with far more civilian casualties in places like Mosul or Raqqa, their there is no problem describing it as liberation.

Ross [00:20:25] Vanessa, in that first half, we talked about the White Helmets and you look at these heroic men going into these war torn situations, rescuing kids. What's not to like about a wonderfully heroic white army of White Helmets going and sorting out these stricken individuals in war?

Vanessa Beeley [00:20:42] Okay, let's break down who these heroes are. First of all, they're not Syrian, although there may be some Syrian operatives within their ranks. They were effectively created, as Charles pointed out, by British intelligence, funded also by the US, by Qatar, by the EU. In other words, all members of the hostile coalition that is waging war against Syria and has been for nine years. They were created in Turkey and Jordan. They had a training base in Jordan. And they were then infiltrated not into Syria, per say, but into areas that were occupied by the proxies, their armed proxies of those very hostile nations.

Ross [00:21:22] Right.

Vanessa Beeley [00:21:22] Of course, that are dominated by Nusra Front. That's an accepted fact. As we've pointed out, that's no longer a conspiracy theory. That's now mainstream narrative. And so, therefore, they operate exclusively in those areas. They are under the control of Nusra Front-dominated extremist gangs, but they also collaborate with and work alongside, for example, in Douma, where there was recently the alleged chemical attack in 2018. It became very clear that the White Helmets were actually responsible to a large degree for the media narrative that we're helping and promoting Jaish al-Islam, one of the most brutal groups inside Syria, and enabling them to get the financing they received from, for example, Saudi Arabia. So they were effectively acting as a lobbying instrument for Jaish al-Islam. Now, this is not so curious when one considers that the White Helmets are funded by the secret slush fund, the Conflict Stability and Security Fund. But the PR and media is also being funded by the same fund by the Conflict Stability and Security Fund through Incostrat, which was an organisation set up or co-founded by a member of Mayday Rescue. James Mesurier's wife, Emma Winberg and by Paul Tilley, another former military operative. What we see here are very clear streams of financing going into operations, both violent extremist military operations and then, if you like, the counterbalance, the so-called humanitarian operation, which is nevertheless acting in parallel with those military extremist operations.

Ross [00:22:58] And ultimately, are you saying that the British taxpayer, the British public, are putting their hard earned cash towards this campaign?

Vanessa Beeley [00:23:05] Yes, I'm very clearly saying that. And, you know, that's been really my mantra for the last three or four years is why is there not a public inquiry into this organisation? It stands accused by Syrian civilians who've lived under their occupation of a number of atrocities and war crimes, including summary executions of civilians, including child abduction, organ trafficking, murder, theft, deprivation of humanitarian aid, etc. The mounting evidence against this group of the fact that they have worked alongside the terrorist and extremist groups and they have not provided rescue assistance for the civilians. They've provided it for the militant groups, but they've not supplied it to the civilians. And this is all documented. This is all based on testimony from Syrian civilians. And my view has always been they should be legally reviewed. There should be an independent inquiry into this

organisation, because we as taxpayers, if you like, have a responsibility to ensure that happens, because, yes, our taxes are funding this organisation.

Charles Shoebridge [00:24:10] You've got an organisation that really from the outset, almost from the outset, that any objective scrutiny would tear holes in the narrative of this just being a rescue organisation. If you look at, for example, I was asking like this is now five years ago and asking questions that journalists should have been asking, such as, how is it that all of our tweets are in English? How is it that their tweets at that time and certainly their responses to situations when people like myself were challenging, for example, their participation in executions and so on, that was all documented on video, the responses were always coming after many hours in New York time. They were always coming from people that said something like, well, our response, she was quite quick. Eight working hours isn't too bad. And you think, what kind of organisation in a warzone is working to working hours. The other issue is, you've got a situation where when you looked at the accountability aspects, it's not just in terms of their conduct, but also in terms of their financing, the description that Vanessa gave a little bit of earlier. A lot of work has been done on the financing of the White Helmets and these various satellite companies and so on. Again, I speak of some experience in this field. And when you look at the structure of this corporate network with its corporate structure, it's far less akin to what you'd expect from a rescue organisation and far more akin to what you see as a money laundering operation.

Ross [00:25:28] This war hasn't just been raging in Syria. There's been a information propaganda war on the British people. True or false?

Charles Shoebridge [00:25:34] Yeah, absolutely true. But that's integral to it because, of course, it's at one level at least. It's a democracy. And therefore, there needs to be legitimization of the government's policies. In other words, they're giving their reasons through the press why we're following these policies of supporting rebels - supporting rebels, that, of course, if the UK people were to see, and they have had glimpses of this, of course, were to see the true nature of the rebels concerned - there would be no question that it would be considered ludicrous, as indeed it is, that these people were ever involved in spreading democracy, human rights, rights for women, gay people and so on. It's completely opposite. That is just a cover for supporting a foreign policy that will overthrow a government or disrupt a government that is not conducive to Western policies.

Ross [00:26:15] How does Syria end, very briefly and - I know it's a massive point to be very brief on - but how does Syria end, how does this conflict end?

Vanessa Beeley [00:26:22] In my opinion, what we've seen as a massive global power shift. And I would say that, you know, Russia has benefited tremendously from the conflict in Syria, quite rightly, because it has demonstrated itself to be an honest broker, which the US and the UK have never been.

Ross [00:26:40] And it's also been invited by Assad.

Vanessa Beeley [00:26:42] Exactly. It's an invited ally of Syria, as is Iran and as are Hezbollah - a very important point to make. I think the recent events, the assassination of Kassim Suleimani and the decision by Iraqi parliament to basically kick America out of Iraq

is a very important one. I think the American hold on the region is sliding. And I think, unfortunately, we will see it get a lot tougher before it gets better.

Ross [00:27:10] Vanessa, Charles, 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.