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What's the Story? The interplay between Power and Narratives in Syria and Iraq

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Acknowledgements

In order to momentarily escape the grind of daily news, step back, and try to think, you need money. I am grateful to both the Said and the Asfari foundations, which offer chances for journalists like me to retreat from coverage into research, in order to attempt to produce something with more lasting value.

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Introduction

A great narrative contest is underway to tell the story of the wars in Syria and Iraq. The warring powers spin stories suitable to their pursuit of advantage and ultimate triumph. Often, the story is what they tell soldiers to convince them to kill and die, the vanquished to convince them never to resist, and everyone else to convince them it cannot be any other way.

The media are also narrating the wars. Some say they are impartial, others acknowledge bias in favour of certain values and ideals. All of them pretend to seek to understand and communicate some truth about what is unfolding in Iraq and Syria. But each of the warring powers wants its version of truth to prevail in the media as well as in its own unmediated content.

This is a study about the traces power leaves behind in the media as it seeks to gain sway over our collective imagination of the war.

I will begin by examining, in the first chapter, news coverage of the battle of Tikrit in mainstream Western media and in Arab media affiliated to the regional alliance led by Iran, known as the Axis of Resistance.

In the second chapter I will move to commentary on the same battle in the same two media camps.

Chapter 3 will be a look at the BBC film 'Bitter Lake', which begins in 1929 in the 'sand-dunes of Arabia' and ends in 2014 in Iraq and Syria, around the time and place where our story begins. For the purposes of this paper, the focus will be on the content that comes through from the script, and I will have to ignore the rich meanings that are delivered with visual sequences, music, and other effects.

In Chapter 4 I will examine stories on Iraq and Syria from the media of Islamic State.

All chapters will consist of an overview of the coverage, followed by my own observations.

I will then offer some conclusions, followed by an appendix on the trickiest of subjects; the intentions and beliefs of storytellers.

Throughout, I will explore the techniques of manipulating meaning and memory and conveying hidden moral codes, and the magic of distraction that keeps the real action out of sight. I will also explore the processes of thought, conscious and unconscious, a given story is likely to induce or inhibit.

But first, what is the story?

Let's begin by stripping away everything that is not of its essence. Stories are told in film and on stage, in words and images, paintings and graphics. They can be shrunk to a tweet and expanded to an epic, and they appear on radio and television, in newspapers and magazines. They can be tragic or comic, futuristic or historic, farcical or fantastic, or any mix of the above, and more. But none of these categories defines the story, and it would continue to exist without any of them. So what remains?

In his book 'The Poetics of Prose' Todorov proposes a 'grammar of narrative'.¹

An 'ideal' narrative begins with a stable situation which is disturbed by some power or force. There results a state of disequilibrium; by the action of a force directed in the opposite direction, the equilibrium is re-established; the second equilibrium is similar to the first, but the two are never identical.

Todorov speaks of narrative adjectives and narrative verbs; the former 'describe states of equilibrium or disequilibrium,' and the latter 'describe the passage from one to the other'.

In 'The Poetics of Prose' Todorov explores narrative in fiction, but there seems to be something more universal underlying his idea of narrative:²

...to combine a noun and a verb is to take the first step toward narrative...'

As long as we have states of equilibrium and disequilibrium, and passages from one to the other through the actions of characters, we cannot be far from Todorov's narrative realm.

Meaning permeates this narrative grammar. It emerges from the description of these states of equilibrium and disequilibrium, the actions that lead from one to the other, character traits, the relations between characters, and more.

I will consider the words 'narrative' and 'story' only partly interchangeable; the story is often contained within an article or a television package, whereas the narrative more often provides an overarching theme that binds stories together and gives them meaning. The narrative doesn't appear whole in one medium; a cartoon, for example, could contain a particular description of a character meant only to define that character within a narrative that is elaborated elsewhere.

To the extent that an item of news describes characters and relations between them and evokes past events and future possibilities, it is part of a narrative. I will look into content that fits into a wider narrative, wherever it appears and in whichever form. To the extent that meanings and morals match or contradict each other, they fall into similar or rival narratives.

But first, a few disclaimers:

1. On Methodology

This paper takes a sample of stories to analyze, often focusing on details and hidden meanings that must be analysed at some length in order to be appreciated.

It is a variant of ‘Critical Discourse Analysis’, and unlike other academic categories, contains no quantitative analysis that would allow for conclusions based on data sets and numbers that illustrate certain patterns.

So in dealing with news articles, for example, I chose to analyze them in contrast to what is different, such as in-depth commentary. That allows for an understanding of certain aspects of straight news coverage that can be better captured when contrasted with what is different.

The idea is to capture a snapshot of the narrative flow from across the media spectrum; this makes it possible to touch on media effects on a certain subject within a short period of time and limited space.

It remains to emphasize that in all the media categories I examine, there is variety that cannot be captured in this paper.

2. On Western media

I call them Western here for simplicity, but all the samples are from English-language media, and with the exception of AFP, all are from American and British news organizations.

3. On the media of the ‘Resistance’ Camp

The camp contains media in different languages addressing different audiences.

There is a variety of Arab media affiliated to this alliance. To name a few, there are the official media of the Syrian regime, the Hezbollah station in Lebanon al-Manar, the pan-Arab television broadcaster al-Mayadeen, and the Lebanese daily al-Akhbar. Each has its own narrative style and variations.

I only explore al-Akhbar.

Like the others, it tells its stories from the perspective of the ‘Muqawama’ (resistance) Axis. The camp is alternatively referred to as the ‘Mumana’a’ Axis, a term derived from the Arabic root of the verb ‘prevent’. It implies an obstructionist attitude to American power in the region. These two terms are taken by supporters to represent a main purpose of the alliance in the region.

Al-Akhbar takes a leftist position on economic affairs, and a liberal view on social liberties. To varying degrees, it is close to Hezbollah in Lebanon, the regime in Syria, and Shia political forces in Iraq. It contains occasional criticism of sectarianism in the Hezbollah camp, and corruption and authoritarianism in Syria, but on regional alignment and the current wars, it is clearly, consciously and solidly within the camp of Resistance.

I chose al-Akhbar because of its relative narrative flexibility when compared to other Arabic-language media affiliated to the camp.

The line between news and commentary is slightly blurred in al-Akhbar, so the first chapter, which focuses on news, will include some commentary. But it differs from the commentary I will examine in the second chapter, which goes beyond commentary on the day's news and examines a bigger picture.

4. On Islamic State

Their media are also varied. There's the visual production by their media institutions, such as al-Hayat and al-Furqan, which offer TV-style packages about life in the Caliphate as well as the war. They also have radio broadcasts. Islamic State are multi-lingual, with media releases in Arabic, English, Kurdish, Turkish and other languages.

What I have chosen to analyse for this paper is Dabiq, their English-language magazine, partly because it saves me a lot of time doing a particularly difficult translation. However, I believe that when it comes to content, which is my focus here, it is generally representative of the rest of their media.

5. On Islam

The only chapter that touches on issues related to interpretations of Islam is the chapter on Islamic State, although they are not the only party to the wars that offers a religious narrative. Other groups that identify themselves as jihadi groups include Hezbollah and Jabhat al Nusra (the Al Qaida affiliate in Syria) and many Syrian rebel groups. Religious discourse can also be found in the rhetoric of many states involved in these wars, including but not restricted to Iran and Saudi Arabia. There is clearly no time or space for a thorough examination of all of this, nor even for a proper examination of Islamic State's own religious discourse. But it is also not possible to offer much insight into Islamic State media without touching on the issue of interpretations of Islam.

6. On Quotes and Chronology

The order of appearance of quotes does not adhere to the chronology of the original texts (or film, in the case of Bitter Lake). I have tried my best to make sure my use of the quotes in a different sequence than their original appearance does nothing to distort the meaning. I hope I've succeeded.

7. On Intentions

Meaning occasionally has a way of emerging from a text without the intention, and sometimes even the awareness, of the author. As I read and re-read what I wrote, (and solicited comments on the text), I was struck by one impression which could emerge from my own words in spite of myself; the idea that the media are guided by some sort of elaborate conspiracy, an intricately designed system of thought-control, and that journalists who write these stories are deliberately and consciously thinking how to hide, obscure, and suggest certain meanings in order to serve the interests of power. If that meaning emerges from the text to your mind as you read, try to brush it away for the time being. I will have more to say on the subject in the appendix.

8. On morality

The term ‘moral’ and its variations are used frequently in this paper. I did not intend to inject a positive, negative, or neutral connotation to the term. I took it simply to mean that which concerns itself with issues of right and wrong. Amoral is that which does not.

9. On Translation

The translations of al-Akhbar content and the quotes from Abu Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami are my own.

1. The battle of Tikrit in News Coverage

In March 2015, two cities worlds apart came under a spotlight; Lausanne was hosting negotiations between American and Iranian diplomats about Iran's nuclear program, and Tikrit was the latest battleground in a strange kind of war.

On one side was Islamic State. On the other, a diverse set of actors who appeared to fall into two camps; one led by Iran, the other by the United States. Both were fighting Islamic State in Iraq as well as Syria, but it wasn't clear whether they were on the same side.

In early March, the Iranians and allied Iraqi Shia militias, known as the Popular Mobilisation Units or the Hashd al-Sha'bi in Arabic, launched a battle to retake Tikrit from Islamic State. They said they neither wanted nor needed the Americans to take part, and the Americans said they had no desire to be involved with them anyway. But in late March, the Americans joined the battle.

A dizzying stream of statements, news and commentary accompanied the spectacle amid a struggle to shape public perception of what exactly was going on between Washington and Tehran. Neither the negotiations nor the war was new; but for all actors in the region, an understanding of both was key. Were the Iranians and Americans talking about the war as well? Were they coordinating their attacks on Islamic State, competing in the battlefield, or a mix of both? What is each power's end game in Iraq, and in Syria?

The interplay between the negotiations and the war had started unfolding in the summer of 2014, when the Americans and Iranians sprang to action after the takeover by Islamic State of large parts of northern Iraq. But in March, it reached fever pitch. Almost every event was pulled into different narratives, linked to different events, and given different meanings.

1. Western News Stories

On the 26th of March, a few weeks into the start of the Iranian-led operation to retake Tikrit from Islamic State, the Americans announced they were joining the battle with aerial attacks on Islamic State in Tikrit.³ The AFP reported that the 'Iraqi government made a belated request for US air power after having relied initially only on Iranian advice and assistance.'⁴

The BBC quoted the head of US Central Command General Lloyd Austin assuring a Senate committee that 'once those conditions were met – which included Shia militia *not being involved* (emphasis added) - then we were able to proceed.'⁵ The Washington Post reported a build-up of anger on the frontlines in response to the American airstrikes, and a threat by Kataeb Hezbollah, one of the Shia factions, to shoot down 'any plane belonging to the US-led coalition in the area'⁶

Kataeb Hezbollah and another faction, Asaib Ahl al Haqq, say they'd suspend their fight in protest at the US entry. A spokesman for the former declared that 'it is not possible for Kataeb Hezbollah or any of the resistance factions to be in the same trench as the Americans.'⁷

And a spokesman for the latter said there was no need for the Americans anyway, and they only ‘came in order to usurp this major victory...’⁸

A couple of days later, the AFP quoted anonymous commanders confirming that ‘key Iranian-backed militia forces...suspended offensive operations after the strikes began’.⁹ But the next day, Reuters reported that the Shia factions, claiming that Abadi agreed to halt the US airstrikes, had returned to battle. Reuters also reported that Abadi’s office and American officials denied any such agreement.¹⁰

Then, between the end of March and the beginning of April, Tikrit was taken. The US deputy special presidential envoy to the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL Brett McGurk said that the advance of the ‘Iraqi forces’ into Tikrit was ‘backed by precision coalition airstrikes’, and promised more training for coming offensives.¹¹ And Reuters’ Ned Parker (in Baghdad) and ‘correspondents in Tikrit’ offered glimpses of the aftermath of conquest; a scene of vengeful violence captured in raw, grisly detail.¹²

2. Observations

The Iraqi government appears most confused. Caught between Tehran and Washington, its statements seem designed to avoid upsetting the militia, Iran, or the Americans.

The Americans and the militia each offer more consistent stories, but they contradict one another. In Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al Haqq’s version, the boycott was a *response* to the American entry, but in General Lloyd Austin’s version, the pull-out of the militia was a *precondition* that was achieved *before* the American entry.

To justify their return, some of the militias said Abadi had agreed in advance to halt the US airstrikes. But the PM’s office denied and American officials were ‘unaware’ of a freeze, and Brett McGurk was tweeting about American involvement during the final days of battle.

If the American precondition were serious, why didn’t the Americans react to the militias’ return? If the boycott in protest were serious, why did the militia return?

We can see where the propaganda aims of the Americans and the militia meet and where they diverge; both emphasize the distance between the US and Iran, and seek to dispel the impression of being in the same camp in this war. So in that sense, they’re telling the same story.

But the moral code is reversed; in the American narrative, the distance between the two signifies that the Americans don’t hang out with bad guys (the militia), and they only fight clean wars.

In the militia narrative, that same distance signifies that the militia don’t hang out with bad guys (the Americans), and that they don’t need them, because they’re strong.

Both of them try to obscure the fact that their war efforts seem to complement each other remarkably; the Americans offer a technologically advanced air-force that the Hashd doesn’t have, and the Hashd offers the ideologically driven force on the ground that the Americans don’t have.

So how do the media examine these issues?

In the BBC story that carries the words of General Lloyd Austin, six out of twelve paragraphs are either direct quotes or paraphrases. The rest is uncontroversial background. In this example, narration is effectively handed over by the BBC to the American general. His point of view stands alone, un-interpreted.

Most of the other stories offer more points of view, including from Baghdad and the militias. We see varying degrees of interpretation, with Reuters standing out: ¹³

'In language that appeared to intentionally omit the Iranian-backed militia, Lieutenant General James Terry...said the strikes were aimed at enabling 'Iraqi forces under Iraqi command'.

... 'The US government which deeply mistrusts the pro-Iranian Shi'ite militias, has sought ways to participate in the Tikrit battle without acknowledging working with forces backed by Tehran' ¹⁴

But more often, the dominant style is the neutral representation of the official statements. Most quotes are unchallenged, many are hardly even interpreted; and within the impartial style of news coverage, the stories of the characters dominate narration.

The pace changes with the conquest of Tikrit. In the AP¹⁵ and Reuters¹⁶ stories, narration is wrested back temporarily by reporters on the ground, now witnessing some of the events first-hand.

Older elements of the story are pushed out, including the American precondition, which is dropped from the AP, BBC, and Reuters¹⁷ stories on the final conquest.

But this old event may have acquired a new meaning. With the battle over, we have an indication that the precondition was a smokescreen; the militia and the Americans were involved, simultaneously, up to the end. But the precondition is out, and its new meaning is erased before it becomes apparent.

In their powerful dispatch from Tikrit, Ned Parker and the correspondents in Tikrit (anonymous for security reasons) see 'the fingerprints of the Shi'ite militias – and of Iran itself – ... all over the operation's final hours,' but make no such link to the US.¹⁸

Throughout, neutral and impartial language creates the impression of amoral coverage, but morality is delivered by stealth; badness (mostly deception in this case) is difficult to attribute to the Americans, because the cracks in their narrative are rarely pointed out. The American precondition, reported heavily when the Americans were advertising it, vanished when events revealed it to be either meaningless or a lie. The bulk of news coverage guards the goodness of the US, and misses the story.

3. Al-Akhbar News Stories

With al-Akhbar, let us observe the news narrative in three stages. The first is before the Americans joined the battle, the second is when they joined (the same few days covered

above in Western media), and the last is a month later, when Ramadi, the capital of Iraq's Western Anbar province, fell to Islamic State.

Stage 1:

In early March, the militia were advancing and the Americans were publicly distancing themselves from the battle. The paper lashes out against those who claim that the Hashd was advancing under American air cover:¹⁹

'The bigger problem is that those who spread this 'accusation' represent, without exception, the forces that are in open and subservient alliance with America and her army; as if their last remaining excuse...is to say to their opponents 'you are like us'.'

Stage 2:

During the final days of the battle of Tikrit, both the Americans and the Hashd were publicly stating involvement, and downplaying or denying the other's involvement.

Al-Akhbar repeats the claim by some factions that they made Abadi secure an American freeze on strikes before returning to action.²⁰ (This is the claim that was reported by Reuters, along with Iraqi and American denials.)

And Amer Mohsen attacks Arab media opposed to Iran for not explaining that the militia returned only after the Americans froze the strikes, and says:²¹

The leaders of the Hashd and its supporters attack the coalition in public and reject it and most of them believe that American planes are helping IS and providing them with aid. And they have fought the American occupation and entered its prisons. What do you want to prove, that you know their political direction more than they do? What is their interest, then, in all this lying and pretense? To trick you?

Stage 3:

More than a month later, Islamic State took over Ramadi; the capital of Anbar province. Al-Akhbar offers a retrospective view of what happened in Tikrit, under the headline 'Between Tikrit and Ramadi: How was the American Strategy Defeated in Tikrit?'²²

According to al-Akhbar, Washington 'wished to oversee, alone, material, intelligence and operational support for Baghdad', so it could gain leverage over Baghdad. Iran stepped in 'quickly' with its own support against IS, puncturing the American plan.²³ The Americans would have to be content with denying Tehran exclusivity, instead of seeking it for themselves.

Then the story of the final battle:²⁴

‘When the Hashd arrived to the outskirts of Tikrit, the final touches were made on the plan to liberate it. The hour of attack was set at dawn on the 27th of March. Suddenly, the unexpected happened; 24 hours before the time of the operation the ‘coalition’ planes entered the area of operations and started the aerial sorties, and it transpired in a matter of hours that they had received a green light from the Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al Abadi, to participate in the operation...it became perfectly clear that the hidden plan was to embarrass the Hashd (by the entrance of coalition planes into the battlefield) in order to drive them out of the operation...

But the advance of the official Iraqi forces stalled for four days on the outskirts of the city, prompting some Hash factions which still had forces in the vicinity of Tikrit to take a decision to break the impasse and push forcefully from several positions to help the police and the army, which had a decisive effect towards ending the battle within two days.’

But Abadi’s dealings with the Americans trigger a crisis between the Hashd and Abadi; the narrator tells of a fruitless meeting between the PM on one side, and Hashd leaders and General Qassem Sulaimani, the commander of Iran’s Quds Force, on the other. One Hashd faction threatens to ‘peel the skin off’ those who would ‘delegitimise the resistance.’ The paper called it a direct reference to the person of the Prime Minister.²⁵

Then Abadi announces an operation in Anbar without coordinating with the Hashd, but soon after, Ramadi, the capital of Anbar, falls to Islamic State. It was a resounding defeat for the Americans, and Abadi ‘woke up’ to the reality that he could not achieve real victories against Islamic State without a role for the Hashd.

Then comes the cream of the story: to illustrate the defeat of the American strategy referred to in the headline, the paper points to a statement by the Pentagon after the fall of Ramadi accepting the participation of Shia factions and considering it positive,²⁶ and states:

‘To fathom the weight of defeat this statement (the Pentagon statement) indicates, we need only remember what the former head of the CIA General David Petraeus said months ago about these ‘groups,’ having said that ‘their danger is bigger than that of IS,’ and that they pose the biggest threat to the long-term stability of Iraq.

The author concludes that Washington lost Iraq three times; first when they had to pull out of Iraq ‘under the blows of the resistance which was tied politically and ideologically and materially to Iran’ in 2011, then in the failure to get the treaty they wanted from Baghdad, and finally in the current contest.²⁷

Every time, he says, ‘the loss was in the interest of its number one enemy in the region, Iran.’²⁸

4. Observations on Al-Akhbar News Stories

The neutral style that suggests detachment in Western news narration is nowhere to be found in al-Akhbar.

In the retrospective piece, the narrator is visibly in the Hashd camp; he treats Washington with sarcasm and Prime Minister Abadi with contempt. He knows about a planned military operation, including the time it was decided; he knows about meetings between Hashd leaders, General Qassem Suleimani, and Abadi. He is privy to inside information, which he treats as accurate and credible. There is no reference, even anonymous, to his sources; the distance between what they tell him and what he tells us is almost eliminated, creating fusion between al-Akhbar's story and that of the Hashd.

Narration is fast-paced and rich in detail, and the American 'defeat' is a main theme, as is Iran's role in it. Not only did the Iranians bleed the Americans in Iraq, they made sure they left without what they wanted. The text highlights the military prowess and tough diplomacy of the Iranians and emphasizes American helplessness.

In al-Akhbar's narrative, the advance of the Hashd does not stall as it does in Western coverage. The pause between the initial advance and the American airstrikes is implied to be a planning pause; they were about to go in, but the Americans struck first.

As for the events after the Americans strike, we encounter a contradiction between the different stages of narration. The earlier claim of a suspension of American attacks is dropped from the retrospective piece, signaling it was never credible. The return of the Hashd to Tikrit, a dramatic and mysterious moment in the story, is thus obscured further; instead of the suspension, there's a jump to four days later, when the advance of *official* Iraqi forces stalls, and a Hashd force comes to the rescue.

The climax is the defeat of the Americans after the fall of Ramadi; From General Petraeus uncompromisingly attacking the Hashd, to the Pentagon forced to concede a role for them, the Americans are in retreat again.

The story here is the passage from a state of disequilibrium during which America is scheming against Iran, to the equilibrium where its strategy has been defeated. It is neatly captured in the connection drawn between the two statements, which are presented as measures of American defeat, illustrating the passage from intransigence to humility.

But there's a catch; Petraeus' views do not represent official policy. Al-Akhbar correctly introduced Petraeus as the *former* director of the CIA, but still implied that his views represent the current administration. Furthermore, there's a crucial omission of context. In his interview with the Washington Post to which al-Akhbar refers, Petraeus suggested that the administration rushed out of Iraq prematurely, and said that over the last few years 'there was a sense in Washington that whatever happened here was somewhat peripheral to our national security.'²⁹ In other words, he was speaking *in opposition* to current policy.

If we compare the Pentagon statement conceding a role for the Hashd after the fall of Ramadi to *official* American statements before, we get a different picture. Speaking in early March, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Martin Dempsey said Iran's role could be positive as long as it didn't result in sectarianism.³⁰ A week later, he was quoted to have said that the 'general consensus' within American armed forces and coalition partners was that 'the activity of the Iranians' against IS is a good thing, but that 'we are all concerned' about what happens

next.³¹

So American policy appears not to have changed *at all*. The statements before and after Ramadi maintain the same, pliable position, balancing expressions of ‘concern’ against conditional approval; the Americans simply don’t seem to be so bothered anymore by Iran’s ascendancy in Iraq.

Across the three stages we can discern an unchanging, almost obsessive theme; Iran is America’s number one enemy in the region, and the fighters of the Hashd are hostile to the Americans.

Unlike in the Western news stories we saw, conclusions are sought and drawn about the relationship between America and Iran, but the cracks in the story are more visible, and the illustration of American defeat is fatally flawed.

5. Mindless Machines?

None of the accounts so far offers clear and consistent answers to a central question of the story they offer; the nature of the relationship between Washington and Tehran.

The Western news coverage offers a boring story; more often than not, it’s basically X says so-and-so, Y says so-and-so, end of story.

With the exception of the battlefield accounts that convey some of the drama and tragedy of war, there is little attempt at storytelling that recognizes and reflects the mystery, intrigue, and even absurdity of the unfolding scene. Instead, the story has a dull, mechanical feel.

Al-Akhbar offers more action, drama, and intrigue, but its account is also more clearly fictitious.

In fairness to all our storytellers, they are often either far from the news, or have limited and controlled access to the story. To varying degrees, but especially in Western broadcasters, they are busy serving giant story-eating machines.

Television, the wires and news websites never stop churning out stories, and their writers, correspondents and producers feed an insatiable appetite. They record, edit, and store sound-bites, sequences and videos and then package them into defined formats, on radio, television, and online. In the news factory, many must write about countries they know little about and characters they’ve only just heard of. One story, two stories, three, record, cut, save and package. Next! Again and again and again, all the way until their shift ends, and they hand over the stories to another team that goes through the same mechanical processes, weaving the stories forward, forever and ever.

The mechanical, fragmented feel of the stories we give you must be, to some extent, the result of the mechanical processes through which they are produced.

There is little time for analysis, and sometimes there’s barely even time for thought. So let’s move up the mainstream ladder to in-depth commentary, perhaps we will discover there the secrets we missed in news.

2. The battle of Tikrit in commentary

We begin our exploration of Western commentary with a cartoon that illustrates and interprets the bizarre relationship between Iran and the US. From that we will move on to a piece in Foreign Policy, and then an editorial in the New York Times.

1. Western Commentary on Tikrit

A. 'Strange bedfellows'³²

Uncle Sam is in shock. He's just discovered he's in bed with General Qassem Suleimani, the commander of Iran's Quds Force who was said to be leading the battle for Tikrit on the ground.

The general looks like a man in charge. He's drawn the prized American to bed, and his eyes twinkle with delight as he relishes the moment. Nothing tells a story like a good cartoon, and this one in The Week offers a powerful version of an old story that keeps surfacing; the Americans are fumbling idiots who don't know what they are doing.

It evokes a past equilibrium, the normal state when the Iranians and Americans were enemies. In the expressions on the faces of Uncle Sam and General Suleimani, we understand how the passage occurred to the current state of disequilibrium; Suleimani lured him into bed without his even knowing it.

Poor Uncle Sam. Unfamiliar with the evil ways of the world, his innocence becomes all the more endearing in contrast to the evil cunning lining the General's smile, and that chilling sidelong glance.

B. 'Ethnic Cleansing'

In the middle of the battle of Tikrit, Michael Weiss and Michael Pregent, writing in Foreign



Policy, rip through the Obama administration with a thundering headline: ‘The US is providing Air Cover for Ethnic Cleansing in Iraq’.³³

The authors offer their insight into the inner workings of the war, detailing a mechanism of indirect coordination between the Americans and the Iranians, passing through official and unofficial Iraqi channels.³⁴

In a radical departure from the official American position as well as the news coverage we’ve seen so far, the authors declare that ‘Iranian intelligence operatives are now America’s eyes on the ground.’

They reach back six months in time to the battle of Amerli.³⁵ The ‘liberation of Amerli last October,’ they say, was a ‘PMU/Iranian-led endeavor’ that was ‘abetted by U.S. airstrikes in the early stages.’ The authors refer to a Human Rights Watch report which detailed wide-scale abuse and concluded that “building destruction in at least 47 predominantly Sunni villages was methodical and driven by revenge and intended to alter the demographic composition of Iraq’s traditionally diverse provinces of Salah al-Din and Kirkuk.”

Then, they dig up a story from memory to illustrate that no one in the US government should be surprised that ‘what amounts to an Iranian occupation of the Levant and Mesopotamia would lead to an increase in jihadist bloodletting’.³⁶

Dempsey has less of an excuse than most. A four-star general, he formerly commanded the First Armored Division in Baghdad, which in 2004 was the unit redirected, as it was about to go home, to fight the Shiite militias who had taken over Karbala and other southern cities, so he would have seen the precursor to the PMUs in action. Yet <he> somehow managed to brief legislators that the Islamic Republic’s role in Iraq might yet prove ‘positive’ –provided, that is, it didn’t lead to an uptick in sectarianism.

Then, an analyst quoted in the article says that the Popular Mobilisation Units (the Shia factions) are ‘the same guys, the same organizations’ that ‘killed hundreds of Americans during the war...’ and the authors remind us that they have ‘American blood on their hands and American interests furthest from their mind...’

The authors challenge John Kerry’s assessment that the US has a ‘common interest’ with a regime ‘whose proxies are currently burning people alive in their houses, playing soccer with severed human heads, and ethnically cleansing and razing whole villages to the ground’, and conclude that ‘whether or not a nuclear agreement with Iran gets signed in Lausanne this weekend...the unshakeable truth is that most of Iraq looks in the long term to remain a satrapy of the mullahs.’³⁷

C. ‘The Strict Western Interest’

Writing in the New York Times, Roger Cohen makes a case for current American policy under the headline ‘Iran Matters Most’:³⁸

‘Do the Iran deal. Defeat the barbaric marauders of Islamic State. In the fragmenting mayhem of the Middle East, these must be the American and Western priorities. They are objectives rooted in the strict Western interest.’

The author argues that talks with Iran had already ‘reversed the nuclear momentum in Iran’, that opponents of the talks have presented no serious alternatives, and that war ‘would cause no more than a hiccup in Iran’s nuclear program before spurring it to renewed and unmonitored intensity’:³⁹

‘This would be war without purpose, or war on false pretenses. We’ve seen enough of that.’

He defends broader U.S. policy in the region, saying that ‘America is making it clear to Iran, even before any possible deal, that it will not abandon its allies, including Egypt and the Saudis’.⁴⁰ And he identifies Islamic State, ‘the latest expression of the metastasizing Salafi Islamist ideology of murderous hatred toward Western civilization,’ as the subject on which American and Iranian interests converge.⁴¹

2. Observations on Western News Commentary on Tikrit

The cartoon’s characterization of the US is at odds with the official narrative of control. The Obama administration, like every other administration, seeks to portray itself as acting both morally and efficiently.

The cartoon rules out the possibility that the Americans know what they’re doing, and depicts as false the administration’s insistence on distancing itself from Iran and the militias. Being in bed together means they’re fighting the same war.

But it also rules out the possibility of theatrics *intended* to obscure policy; Uncle Sam didn’t *mean* to fight alongside Iran; he just discovered himself to be in that situation after General Suleimani had already tricked him to bed. Thus the US sheds the image of measured power promoted by General Austin and becomes naïve and out of control of its own actions, but its moral character remains mostly intact.

In the FP piece, almost the whole story is packed into the headline, where an explicit link is made between the American warplanes overhead and the sectarian army underneath. The warplanes are providing the Hashd with ‘air cover’, implying, for the first time, a relationship of *harmony* between Washington and Tehran.

It is illustrated in several ways. One is the insider’s view we get of the mechanics of coordination. Another is the battle of Amerli, which was concluded towards the end of August 2014. It did not make any appearance in the Western news coverage of Tikrit or in the pieces we’ve seen in al-Akhbar, despite offering a valuable insight into the impression of competition created by Washington and the Hashd. What’s all the fuss about preconditions and boycotts if the Iranians and Americans had *already* taken a city together, in broad daylight, six months ago?

If the competition now is real, what happened between Amerli in August 2014 and Tikrit in March 2015? The omission of Amerli as possible context in Western media coverage and in al-Akhbar means these questions could neither be asked nor answered in their accounts. And could Uncle Sam be *that* bewildered if the affair has been going on for so long, in public view?

Weiss and Pregent's story in *Foreign Policy* serves to expose the cracks within the other stories; it is a frontal attack on what Washington says and does, backed by broad and detailed knowledge. The clarity of the headline is matched within the text, as in the conclusion that 'Iranian intelligence operatives are now America's eyes on the ground.'

In terms of telling us what is going on, the story seems to make more sense than any other we've encountered so far. But what about the moral of the story?

In their piece, Weiss and Pregent introduce us explicitly to the concept of good and bad guys, in contrast to the Western news coverage we've seen, where morality is delivered in a multi-layered disguise.

Here, badness is made visible, explicit, and *Iranian*, and the Obama administration is tainted by association.

And as the story delves deeper into the past, different themes appear. Note this story, for example; in 2004, Martin Dempsey's unit was about to go home when 'the precursor to the PMUs' took over Karbala. We don't know anything about the equilibrium before the takeover. We don't know whom the Shia militias had taken over their own cities from, or anything else that was happening in Iraq at the time. We don't even know what had brought Dempsey to Iraq in the first place.⁴²

The desired meaning is that Dempsey 'would have seen the precursor to the PMUs' in action,' and has no excuse to say that Iran's role in Iraq might prove 'positive'. The way it is conveyed offers an example of a powerful device in news narratives; a foray into the past, followed by a clinical extraction of a compact story; the memory delivers a particular meaning and vanishes back into the fog.

Then the story takes a turn to the holy with the invocation of American blood. Beyond being American, the blood has no identity. Is it the blood of Americans in New York, or Los Angeles? In London or Paris? Is it the blood of civilian Americans in Baghdad? Within the story, the answer is obscured, but it is well known outside it; it is primarily the blood of armed Americans who had taken over Iraq in 2003, and it injects a powerful, subliminal message into the story.

Since badness derives from having that particular blood on one's hands, and since it is the blood of invaders, it follows that the only good reaction to the American invasion and occupation is to surrender and collaborate. Holiness thus extends from the blood to the invasion, and to American power.

Iraqi blood shed by the Americans doesn't exist in the story, but if the readers were to recall it from their own memory, they would notice it has been denigrated by implication. It is unholy, dispensable blood that stood in the way of the invasion.

The ability to erase it from existence within the narrative and to denigrate it *at the same time* stems from that tool we saw in action in news coverage; implying meaning within omission. Almost undetectable, it seems to slip past consciousness and settle somewhere in the back of the mind.

A main point, then, is that Iran is bad; another is that America cannot have a ‘common interest’ with people who are so bad. From these points we get a feeling that America’s complicity with Iran in ‘ethnic cleansing’ is *uncharacteristic*, thus reinforcing the essential goodness of Uncle Sam.

The end thought is that General Qassem Sulaimani governs Iraq. Back in September 2014, Foreign Policy published an article titled ‘All the Ayatollah’s Men’, which shares many of the features of this one, and ends with the following observation:⁴³

‘While ostensibly focused on defeating the Islamic State, these armed factions also promise to be hugely influential in shaping the future of Iraq’s Shiite community. Their radical ideology and organizational ties suggest that they will allow Iran a greater influence in Iraq than ever before. If Washington does not take steps now to check their growth, it may discover too late that it has effectively ceded Baghdad to Tehran — and that there is no going back.’

Beneath the layers of morality, the essence of these stories is the question of who wields power in Baghdad. We know that the last time an Iraqi held sovereignty in Baghdad was in early 2003, so to the extent that the Iranians took power in Baghdad, they took it from the Americans, not the Iraqis. Thus the end betrays the beginning; Baghdad belongs to America since 2003; it is America’s to cede, and America must not cede it.

In Roger Cohen’s piece in the New York Times, the purpose is articulated from the start. The job is to pursue the ‘strict Western interest,’ and the piece is about defending Obama’s policy mainly on grounds of interest.

Realistic, pragmatic, and aware of the faults and imperfections of the policy he advocates, Cohen measures it against what he sees as the even bigger faults of the alternative. The piece does not escape morality, but the really bad guys are Islamic State, not Iran.

‘Defeat the barbaric marauders of Islamic state’, he urges, describing them as ‘the latest expression of the metastasizing Salafi Islamist ideology of murderous hatred toward Western civilization that produced 9/11 and recent murderous rampages in Europe.’

We can see that he is more concerned with the Salafi Islamist ideology than with barbarity. If their *barbarity* makes defeating them necessary, then how to justify doing so in alliance with militias which are also engaged in barbarity? Both FP pieces quoted above highlight not just the barbarity, but the fact that it is being committed effectively in alliance with the US. Cohen defends the de facto alliance (without calling it such), but omits the barbarity.

So policy is not guided by morality alone, but by a focus on priorities and the possible; the ‘metastasizing’ ideology must be defeated, Iran is needed for that, and Obama’s on the right track. His policy is measured and realistic; he is not unconsciously drifting to the Iranian

camp, as in the cartoon, but consciously pursuing the American interest wherever it takes him.

3. Commentary on Tikrit in al-Akhbar

We now go back to back to al-Akhbar, with two opinion pieces; the first, by Amer Mohsen, is titled ‘The Arabs and Iran; the return to the eighties’.⁴⁴ It recalls the ghosts of the 8-year war in the 1980s between Iran and Iraq, laments the fact that they are haunting the region again, and digs into the US-Iranian relationship. The second piece by Nahed Hattar, titled ‘Decisiveness in Politics and ideology first’, urges radical political and ideological changes within the Iranian camp.

A. ‘The return to the 80s’

According to Mohsen, for most of the past three decades, America sought regime change in Iran, while Iran, acting rationally, sought simply to divert American power from Iran. But American aggression after the Islamic Revolution and the ‘crushing war’ with Iraq ‘bled the country and changed it deeply from within.’⁴⁵

Were it not for the war, Iran would have been pre-occupied by the ‘process of building the political system and balancing contradictory social interests’, and would not have had the incentive to build an effective military and ‘an economy of crisis and siege.’⁴⁶ Thus, the war that aimed to suffocate and contain Iran transformed it into ‘a regime with military priorities, always preparing for invasion.’

The author then ponders the possibility of change in a different direction;⁴⁷

‘If Iran were to... pull out from the act of resistance, that would simply mean the ‘endgame’ militarily and strategically, for every project that poses a military challenge to Israel, from Hamas to Hezbollah.’

Reflecting about the ‘ghosts of the 80s’ and the ethnic and sectarian divisions plaguing the region, he points to a ‘rhetoric of the unconscious’ in the Arab world which presents Iran as ‘the other,’ from which people have still not gained immunity despite the experience of the Iran-Iraq war.⁴⁸ The ‘sectarian imagination’, he says, is a ‘recipe for permanent civil war in the Arab Levant.’

B. Radical Solutions

The second piece proposes radical changes in the conduct of the Iranian camp’s war.⁴⁹ Hattar elaborates on geopolitical issues, with a special focus on the role of Turkey in supporting ‘terrorism’ in Syria, in addition to Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. But he says the ‘terrorists’ derive their strength not just from outside support, but from within society itself:⁵⁰

‘...in fact, from the heart of society, because of the rising obsession of certain national groups with sectarian disenchantment.’

Even the most nationalist and rational fighters among these groups implicitly supports terrorism...'

There can be no dialogue with terrorists except with arms, and in an offensive method free of any considerations.'

Hattar proceeds to the radical political solutions 'that address Sunni disenchantment in Iraq, and 'to a lesser extent' in Syria. The current order in Iraq is sectarian, and the Iraqi national state must be rebuilt, leaving sectarian identity out of politics, and addressing the Sunni feeling of injustice. Separatism must be rejected, most likely a reference to Kurdish aspirations for statehood.⁵¹

In Syria, he says the solution is easier as the constitution, the army, and the structure of the state are already national. So Syria only needs 'a radical political initiative, decided by Syrians without dialogue with anyone,' and 'a war government with the mandate of running the military and civilian affairs of the war...and the declaration of a state of emergency and national war to begin the counter-attack.'⁵²

The author turns to Hezbollah in Lebanon, which he says had decided to be 'wherever it should be' in the confrontation with 'Islamic fascism, from Lebanon to Syria to Iraq to Jordan' and also to 'confront the Israeli enemy in Palestine.'⁵³

Hezbollah cannot expand – as we want it to – while identifying as a Shia Islamist Lebanese party. It cannot expand without adopting the national Arab Levantine ideology, intellectually as well as organizationally. This ideology alone is capable of giving complete legitimacy to the resistance to move anywhere in the Levant and to attract all the ... mujahideen, on the basis of the Levantine Arab and human bond.

4. Observations on News Commentary in Al-Akhbar

In 'The Return to the Eighties', Mohsen departs from static portrayals of the American Iranian relationship; it could have gone in different directions in the 1980s, and it can go in different directions today.

Transformation is a main theme in the past and a real possibility in the present. Iran is rational, and could well change direction in response to a change in American policy. New possibilities appear, including the possibility of reintegration into the American order. And there are possible consequences of such a change *within* the Iranian camp; the narrator says it would be catastrophic to those who wish to continue along the path of resistance; they would lose a strong and dedicated backer in a region full of American proxies.

Thus the pronouncement of the spokesman for one of the Hashd factions that it is not possible for 'any of the resistance factions to be in the same trench as the Americans,' is broken, or at least qualified, and the narrative recognizes the reality of transformation as well as its unpredictability.

In the second piece by Hattar we encounter an attempt at constructing a new ideological foundation for the resistance camp. It is strikingly sweeping; Iraq is urged to abandon the constitution introduced by the Americans after the invasion and rebuild an 'Iraqi national state' free of identity politics. Even more boldly, Hezbollah is urged to abandon the ideology it has embraced since its inception in the early 1980s and formulate a new one.

The author wants it to switch to an undefined 'Arab Levantine' ideology, 'intellectually as well as *organizationally*', (stress added) for such an ideology alone can attract all the 'mujahideen' in the region and dissipate Sunni disenchantment. The implicit suggestion is that what Hezbollah is *doing* in Syria bears no relation to Sunni resentment; it's only what they're saying. So Hezbollah must consciously initiate a mid-battle metamorphosis; as it changes color, it can escalate the war, expand across the region *and* be loved again.

As for the Syrian regime, it doesn't need to transform at all; everything about it is already national; the structure of the state, the constitution, and the army. The only thing this model state needs to do is launch a 'comprehensive national dialogue' that excludes opposition figures as well as armed groups.

So we have sectarianism as a given, taking root in the heart of society across borders. We're left with two questions: what caused it, and what can resolve it.

The piling misery of four years of attacks by the diverse war machine of Camp Muqawama on almost all resistance in Syria is scratched out even as a possible contributing factor. So too is the accumulating legacy of a police state. That is done not just by omission, but by the idea that there is no contradiction between preserving the regime, escalating the war, *and* beginning to heal the sectarian divide.

Mobilization to war is assumed to be a simple affair; the Shia will still flock to Hezbollah's banner after it changes colors, and new (presumably Sunni) recruits will pour in across the region.

The radical recipe for the region excludes the Kurds. If everyone is going to be 'Arab Levantine' and fight together, what happens to the Kurds in Iraq and Syria? Neither ever found their place within the Arab national states of Saddam Hussein and the Assad family. In the former, they were displaced and gassed, in the latter, treated as non-citizens. How would they react to a renewed Arab ideology that seeks to stamp out their identity and force them, once again, into subservience to another identity that excludes them by definition?

For decades, Camp Muqawama stood for resisting American and Israeli power in the region. Hezbollah in particular was the feisty underdog who struck back with success, and was cheered on by masses across the region with little regard to sectarian identity. Central to their identity was the idea of fighting on behalf of the Mahrumeen (the deprived), and the Mustad'afeen (the weak and oppressed), terms with particular resonance among the displaced of south Lebanon who fled Israeli attacks and settled in the southern suburbs of Beirut in the late 1970s and early 1980s, forming a 'belt of misery' around the capital.

Today, most of the Mustad'afeen are in the opposite camp; they've been crushed by the war-machine of Camp Muqawama and driven in droves from Homs and Aleppo, Dera'a and Damascus into belts of even deeper misery all over the region.

As 'the axis of resistance' surveys the new landscape in the region, they find themselves sinking into open-ended sectarian war, and sliding towards the American trench.

What is the purpose, of this alliance, if no longer to resist American power? An ideological void emerges, forcing moments of introspection; but the war must go on, and the void is filled with masks and fantasy.

3. Bitter Lake

‘Bitter Lake’ is a two-hour BBC film that follows multiple storylines in a loose format, and binds them together into a story about narratives.⁵⁴ I will focus on two of these interlinked storylines. The first is about the ideology of Wahhabism, ‘...a radical, violent, and extremely puritanical form of Islam’, whose adherents ‘wanted to go back to a world based on the original teachings of the Islamic text.’ The second is about banks and political power in the West.

In 1929 Wahhabi puritans teamed up with the leader of the tribe of Saud, Abdul Aziz, to seize power in a large swathe of the Arabian Peninsula. But the Wahhabists had greater ambitions than simply propelling Abdul Aziz to power in the Peninsula; they ‘wanted to go on and create a caliphate across the whole of the Arab world, and to stop them, in 1929, Abdul Aziz machine-gunned them.’

The King established a monarchy in much of the Arabian Peninsula, and its vast oil reserves were waiting to be tapped. But Abdul Aziz couldn’t do it on his own, and in 1945, he met President Franklin Roosevelt in the Great Bitter Lake in the Suez Canal.

Roosevelt had emerged in triumph from two testing crises; a world war and a great depression. After the Wall Street Crash he’d passed laws restraining the banks, and launched a nation-wide construction effort. Now, he wanted to secure American control over Saudi oil, and he and the king agreed the terms of an alliance that ‘continues to the present day’; oil for America, wealth and security for Saudi Arabia.

Modernization kicked in, and Saudi Arabia was transformed from a nomadic society into an oil producer. But as King Faisal ascended to the throne in the 1960s, the monarchy was under renewed threat.

At home, the Wahhabi religious establishment that ‘had brought his family to power and gave his rule legitimacy,’ did not trust the idea of modernization, and abroad, communism was spreading throughout the Arab world. The king decided to use one threat to counter the other; with the growing oil income, he set up ‘hundreds of schools and institutes across the Islamic world,’ in order to spread Wahhabist ideas and create a force capable of standing up to communism. He was ‘taking the dangerous and unstable fanaticism at the heart of Saudi society and directing it outwards, beyond its borders.’

In 1973, Saudi Arabia raised the price of oil five times overnight in reaction to America’s support for Israel during the Arab-Israeli war. As a result, ‘billions of dollars flooded from West into Saudi Arabia most of which the Saudis didn’t know what to do with.’

The money found its way to Western banks, with unexpected consequences;

...it allowed the men who ran the banks and the financial system in American and Britain to begin to break free of political control...The banks...kept many of those dollars free from control by the American government... they became a vast pool of wealth known as petrodollars that could be lent and traded anywhere around the world without political control. As Western politicians struggled to deal with the economic and social chaos

that had been created by the oil price rise, their bankers were building a new global financial system based on recycling the Saudi billions. And the banks began to become rich and powerful again.'

Suddenly in 1979, the Saudi monarchy faced an uprising; a band of Wahhabi puritans rose in revolt in Mecca and took over the Grand Mosque. The authorities discovered that some of the attackers 'had been taught by the most senior religious leader in the country,' a reminder of how 'fragile their grip on power was.'

Meanwhile President Ronald Reagan was embarking on a campaign to support Afghan rebels fighting the Soviet occupation. The CIA and Saudi intelligence worked together to deliver arms and money to the rebels, but the Saudis went further; fresh from the shock of mutiny in Mecca, they 'encouraged young radicals to go and fight in Afghanistan' in order to get rid of their most dangerous domestic threat. Among those who went was Osama bin Laden.

The West was still reeling from higher oil prices and economic and social chaos. Factories were closing and living standards were declining. Wages were no longer growing, so politicians decided to 'get the banks to lend people money.'

...in the mid 1980s governments removed the restrictions on the banks' lending and a wave of borrowing spread through Britain and America... and the power to manage society began to move even more from politics to the financial system.'

Despite the industrial collapse, the arms industry was thriving; throughout the 1970s, 'British arms companies had signed more and more contracts with the Saudis.'

The trade had become 'essential to Britain', but in 1991, when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, the Saudis discovered they were 'incapable' of using the weapons properly, and 'had to turn to America and its military might for help.' Fresh back home from Afghanistan, Osama bin Laden couldn't take the idea that American troops would be arriving to the Arabian peninsula, so he begged the Saudi defense minister not to let them in, and offered to raise a fighting force in Afghanistan to defend Saudi Arabia from Saddam, but he was turned down. He eventually decided that America 'was the real enemy.'

Following the September 11 attacks in 2001, the US government slashed interest rates, and 'the banks lent money to anyone and everyone.' The politicians were 'looking to the financial system to stabilize the country.' The US also invaded Afghanistan in 2001, and Iraq in 2003, opening a new pathway for Wahhabism. Abu Mus'ab al Zarqawi who had been with Bin Laden in Afghanistan, went to Iraq and set up al-Qaida in Iraq, before the Americans 'dropped a large bomb on him.'

Meanwhile, there was another crisis in 2008. The 'whole intricate system of credit and loans that the banks had created collapsed.' But 'unlike President Roosevelt,' governments did not try to reform the system; 'they simply propped it up by literally pouring millions more pounds and dollars into the banks... they had no other idea.'

And Zarqawi's ideas were spreading:

Despite al Zaraqawi's death his organization survived and began to mutate into something even more ferocious and ambitious...In 2013 the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant was formed known as ISIS in the West. Its aim is to create a unified caliphate throughout the Islamic world...it is at heart the same violent dream that had driven the Bedouins who'd created the kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the 1920s. Back then the king of Saudi Arabia had found it necessary to try and exterminate them... he machine gunned them in the bleak sands of the Arabian peninsula. And now the Saudis along with the British and Americans are trying to do the same thing again. To kill the jihadis and their ideas in the sand dunes of northern Iraq and Syria.

Observations

In a way, Bitter Lake ends where the other stories begin.

For more than two hours, the narrator follows multiple storylines in Kabul, Helmand, Washington, London, and Moscow; the first and last mention of Iraq, Syria and the current war on Islamic State comes as the story draws to a close. How strange, then, that it tells us more about Iraq and Syria today than any of the stories we've seen above.

Within the two storylines we explored, on Wahhabism and Western banks, some valuable *context* comes into view.

To begin with, there's an emphasis on Saudi Arabia and its relationship with Wahhabism; as long as the ideology poses no challenge to the ruling family, the kingdom insulates it. But whenever it produces puritans who wish to take their beliefs to their logical end, they are crushed at home, and sent to spread their ideas abroad. It is the basic dynamic underlying the spread of Wahhabi ideas throughout most of the past century, and all of the present one.

Bitter Lake tracks the journey of these ideas. Powered by a combination of money and zeal, the ideology passes from the Arabian Peninsula, to schools and mosques around the world, eventually taking root in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Syria.

Then, new *characters* and *relationships* appear that were almost entirely invisible in the other stories we've seen so far.

The banks and the arms industry in the West play important roles in Western relations with Saudi Arabia, as well as in the domestic balance of power in Washington and London; petrodollars are recycled, weapons are sold, and power moves from elected officials to bankers. We can now see a circle of power and wealth through which money, oil, and arms have been flowing for decades, a circle that lies at the heart of the story.

How narrow the focus in news and commentary now seems, and how similar the stories that appeared so different before. It is only possible to observe this now that we've been exposed to an alternative; a storyteller who actually uses the zoom out button on his camera, allowing us to see a Grand Disequilibrium that forms the setting of any story involving the Wahhabi ideology, and lurks in the background of many other stories as well.

The contrast also allows us to observe a broader, more sweeping technique of manipulation at play in news and commentary; the ability to wipe out the basics of the story through 24/7 distraction with non-stories.

The battle of Tikrit is a classic example. It's not that the battle itself is not important; it's the *frame* through which it is reported that matters.

It would have taken a very minor zoom out to remember that America is bombing Islamic State all over northern Iraq and Syria. Do their strikes across that landscape not affect Islamic State's effort in Tikrit, their ability to maneuver and to reinforce, and to shift the focus of the fighting? Even if the Americans had never entered the battle of Tikrit directly, their campaign was bound to have had a negative impact on Islamic State, and a corresponding positive impact for the Hashd.

The impression of separation between the American and Iranian efforts is only possible if we imagine the battle of Tikrit as unaffected by military developments elsewhere on the battlefield, a narrow way of understanding and telling the story.

And recall the 'metastasizing Salafi Islamist' ideology of 'murderous hatred towards Western civilisation' that Roger Cohen, writing in the New York Times, named as the target of the current war, and whose defeat is an objective 'rooted in the strict Western interest'.

The use of the concept of metastasis, defined as 'the development of secondary malignant growths *at a distance from a primary site of cancer*'⁵⁵, (stress added) betrays a precise understanding on the part of Cohen of the nature of the ideology. But where is the 'primary site', in his narrative? If the purpose of the West's new war is to defeat the ideology, it's chosen a formula that has been fueling it for decades; insulate, export, and bomb. And what about that web of arms, oil and money that has guarded and enabled this process for decades?

With these characters and relationships in view, the American national interest begins to sound less national and more private, and the 'strict Western interest' less civilizational and more *sinister*. It is only by keeping this historical context out of the narrative that Cohen can deliver his punch-lines convincingly; a war with Iran now, he warned, would 'be war without purpose, or war on false pretenses. We've seen enough of that.'

What, then, is the purpose of the current war on Islamic State?

4. Islamic State

The Crusader-Safavid alliance has now become clear. And there is Iran along with her Great Satan America dividing areas and roles as they fight Islam and the Sunna.

*Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, spokesman of Islamic State*⁵⁶

Now we examine some stories from Iraq and Syria as told by their English-language magazine, Dabiq; I'll go through excerpts from four pieces from two different issues of the magazine.

1. 'The Punishing of Shu'aytat for treachery'⁵⁷

It is about the crushing retribution inflicted by Islamic State against a tribe in eastern Syria in 2014, but it begins in Iraq around a decade earlier, with a quote from Abu Mus'ab al Zarqawi;

“So we warn the tribes, that any tribe or party or assembly whose involvement and collaboration with the crusaders and their apostate agents are confirmed, then by He who sent Muhammad with the truth, we will target them just as we target the crusaders, and we will eradicate and distinguish them, for there are only two camps: the camp of truth and its followers, and the camp of falsehood and its factions.

Then the narrator turns to an evaluation of Zarqawi's statement, first by referring to the reaction of many Muslims who asked 'what do individual members of the tribe have to do with the actions of specific tribe members or even the decisions of tribal elders?' Such people, goes the story, 'assume that the “modern-day” city of individuality and individualism is all that exists outside their homes.'

The answer to their objections is two-fold; firstly, 'the case is different in many parts of the world', where many tribes still act 'like a body with some kind of bigoted head or like a gang maddened by the mob mentality of tribal arrogance...'

More importantly, 'the Prophet (sallallāhu 'alayhiwasallam) treated the Arab and Israelite tribes as collective wholes whenever tribe members broke their covenants with him.' Tribe members should be free from punishment only in cases when the 'tribe does not act as a group in opposing the Shari'ah.'

Finally, back to the story referred to in the title, 'The Punishing of Shu'aytat for treachery.'

These clans were left armed after they agreed to submit to the rule of the Shari'ah with the condition they hand over all heavy weaponry. They then betrayed their covenant by rebelling against the Islamic State. They ambushed Islamic State soldiers, and then tortured, amputated, and executed prisoners taken from the ambushes. All these crimes were carried out in opposition to the enforcement of the Shari'ah.

Thereafter the Islamic State surrounded their villages and ordered them to hand over the perpetrators of the crimes against Islam and the Muslims. The majority of their clans refused to comply...

2. ‘The Liberation of Dabiq’⁵⁸

This begins as a straightforward news story;

This month, the soldiers of the Islamic State launched a swift and brutal offensive in the northern Halab countryside.

The offensive ‘succeeded in liberating a number of towns and villages’, including Dabiq, ‘whose name our readers will no doubt recognize as the title of our magazine.’ Then the narrator explains the prophecy of Al-Malhamah al-Kubra (The Grand Battle), which will begin in Dabiq and end with the descent of ‘Isa Ibn Maryam’ (Jesus Son of Mary) who will lead the Muslims to victory.

We ask Allah to place us in the camp of the believers on the day of al-Malhamah and keep us firm until he grants us either victory or shahādah.

3. ‘The Birth of Two New Wilayat’⁵⁹

In the fourth issue, the magazine tells of the establishment of a new Wilaya (governorate) across the border between Iraq and Syria:

After demolishing the Syrian/Iraqi border set up by the crusaders to divide and disunite the Muslims, and carve up their lands in order to consolidate their control of the region, the mujāhidīn of the Khilāfah delivered yet another blow to nationalism and the Sykes-Picot-inspired borders that define it. The establishment of a new wilāyah, Wilāyatal-Furāt, was announced this month by the Islamic State in an effort to eliminate any remaining traces of the kufri, nationalistic borders from the hearts of the Muslims.

4. ‘Advice for those embarking upon Hijrah’⁶⁰

The third issue of Dabiq is titled ‘A call to Hijrah’, and urges Muslims everywhere to start planning their journey into Islamic State. This article offers several pieces of advice, the last of which is a warning against vanity;

Ibnul-Qayyim (rahimahullāh) said, “It has been authentically narrated in the Sahīh that he (sallallāhu ‘alayhiwasallam) said, ‘No one with a mustard seed of arrogance will enter Jannah.’ They said to him, ‘O Allah’s Messenger, a man might like to have good shoes and garments. Is that arrogance?’ He said, ‘No, Allah is Jamīl and He loves jamāl (beauty). Arrogance is disdain of the truth (out of self-conceit) and contempt for the people’ [Sahīh Muslim]. So

arrogance is disdain of the truth, rejection of it, repelling it after awareness of it, and holding contempt for people with an eye of scorn, aversion, and belittlement. There is nothing wrong with such if it is done for Allah. The sign that such is done for Allah is that the person holds even more disdain and belittlement against himself. But if he despises them because he considers himself great, then this is the arrogance which will not enter him into Jannah” [Rawdatul-Muhibbīn]

Allah knows best. We ask Allah to facilitate your hijrah. Āmīn.

Observations

It feels like a different world inside Islamic State narratives.

We observe in Dabiq values and moral codes that are articulated explicitly, unlike those in Western media that are implied beneath layers of disguise.

Islamic State appear to say what they mean and mean what they say. The values and beliefs preached are the values and beliefs practiced, and their actions appear to match their words. There is consistency in their narration which we have not encountered elsewhere.

Take the anatomy of the massacre of the Shu’aytat. First, they set the scene by explaining the tribal context. Then they explain the actions they took in accordance with the values they believe in.

The Shu’aytat episode is one for which they were severely criticized by their enemies in Syria and Iraq; they could have simply not spoken about it, or denied that a massacre had taken place, as do other perpetrators of massacres in the region.

The fact that they defended their actions indicates they do not care what people think, but that is only partly true. While they do not change their actions or beliefs in order to conform, they make every effort to convince others, especially Muslims whom they wish to persuade of the righteousness of their cause, to change *their* minds. Hence the anatomy of the Shu’aytat massacre, aimed at showing that they behaved in accordance with the Islamic faith, as they interpret it.

Another distinguishing feature of Islamic State stories is the constant and recurring attack on prevailing notions of normality and notions of good and bad.

Note for instance, the use of the word ‘brutal’ in the piece about the advance in Aleppo. Usually, brutality is used as an accusation to smear the enemy; here, it refers to the actions of Islamic State itself. The implied message is that brutality in warfare is a natural thing, and not necessarily bad.

Yet another distinguishing characteristic of Islamic State media is the fusion between the material and the mental, as in the piece about the establishment of a new governorate, Wilayat al-Furat.

It recalls a disequilibrium that lasted for almost a century; the colonial division of Iraq and Syria, which was accompanied by the rise of the idea of nationalism in the Arab world.

The disequilibrium consists of an external material division embodied in the border, and the nationalistic ideologies that took root inside people's minds. By demolishing the border, Islamic State achieved the passage from one material state to another; but by creating an administrative unit straddling the former border, it sought to reverse a collective *state of mind* that accompanied the colonial division.

There is also spirituality within their narration. The piece about the advance on Dabiq ends with a prayer to God to 'place us in the camp of the believers on the day of al-Malhamah.' The idea is that whatever divinely inspired zeal may guide Islamic State fighters today, it could all just dissipate tomorrow. Herein lies recognition of the fragility of the individual, and the terrifying possibility of transformation from faith to disbelief.

A more powerful example of spirituality can be found in the advice to those embarking upon Hijrah; it must be accompanied by humility, for as much as a 'mustard seed of arrogance' could undo everything Muslims think they have done in worship of God, and deny them the ultimate prize of paradise.

The moral code of Islamic State is visible in almost every story; it is taken from the Qur'an, as well as the words and actions of the Prophet, as they have been narrated across the ages.

From these early narratives of Islam, Islamic State extract meaning and carry it back to the present, where it is applied to the current situation. Thus, drawing on an almost endless reserve of stories, Islamic State build their moral universe.

In the case of the Shua'ytat, the moral is that tribes that act as collective wholes in opposing Shari'a should be treated as such. In the piece about Hijrah, the moral is that those who undertake Hijrah must not look down on others, because 'No one with a mustard seed of arrogance will enter Jannah.'

Such lines as *Ibnul-Qayyim (rahimahullāh) said, "It has been authentically narrated..."*, are typical beginnings of stories about things the Prophet said and did, a prelude to extracting a moral from his words and actions, and applying it in the present.

This is a trait Islamic State share with other jihadi and Islamist groups, for all Islamists draw on the body of narratives from the early days of Islam for moral, spiritual, and political inspiration.

And it is one massive ocean of narration they must navigate for that end; an almost endless labyrinth of stories, all cited with the purpose of extracting morals from the words and actions of the Prophet and the companions, in order to apply today. As Tarif Khalidi explains in his introduction to his book 'Images of Muhammad', it revolves around the 'core narrative' of the Prophet's life.⁶¹

Muslim biographers seem from an early date to have decided to include in their biographies of the Prophet the names of every single man or woman whose life in some way or another touched upon or intersected in the core narrative. It is as if some early Christian Gospel writer had decided to fill out the Sermon on the Mount and the feeding of the five thousand with the

names and life stories of every single one of those who were present, together with some account, long or short, of their life and subsequent fate.

These narratives of the early days of Islam merge with Islamic State's narration of news, and appear in the discourse of every jihadi and Islamist group. In parallel to the wars in Syria and Iraq, Islamist and jihadi groups have been debating Islamic history and contesting the meaning of these stories in order to defend their ideological and political positions.

It's not an easy task. Tarif Khalidi offers this view of the dilemmas of *all* biography:

... a biographer takes a grid and proceeds to place it on the life of the biographee... a chronological graph wherein the subject's life becomes readied for narrative... But whatever strategy is adopted, the question 'what was he or she really like?' still looms large, inescapable... 'A biography,' writes Virginia Woolf, 'is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many as a thousand.' Julian Barnes uses the image of a fisherman's net: 'The trawling net fills, the biographer hauls it in, sorts, throws back, stores, fillets, and sells. Yet consider what he doesn't catch: there is always far more of that.' I like to think that between them these two writers shattered the illusion of biography as a tidy and well-structured life.⁶²

Important as it is, the Prophet's example, extracted from these biographies, is not the primary source of guidance and inspiration for the Muslim faithful.

'Behold the revelations of the Manifest Book!
We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'an; perhaps
you will understand.
We narrate to you the fairest of narratives, through
what We revealed to you - this Qur'an.
And yet before it you were heedless.'

The Qur'an,
Joseph 12:3 ⁶³

The Qur'an is the ultimate source of guidance in Islam. Muslims consider it to be the word of God, and, in the words of Khalidi in his introduction to his translation of the Qur'an, regard it as 'supremely eloquent, supremely wise, and immune from all error or falsehood.'⁶⁴

According to Khalidi, 'in the pre-modern Islamic tradition, Qur'anic commentary and exegesis (*tafsir*) was widely regarded not only as the most meritorious of the religious sciences but also as the one most fraught with danger, because of the grave consequences of error.'

Qur'anic exegesis contains various sub-disciplines, including 'the subsidiary sciences of *tafsir* such as *asbab al-nuzul* (historical context), *al-nasikh wa'l mansukh* (harmony of laws), *gharib al-Qur'an* (linguistic obscurities), *qira'at* (variant readings), *i'rab* (grammar), *isti'arat* (metaphors), *bada'i* (rhetorical excellences) and *i'jaz* (divinely ordained inimitability).'

Different tafsirs offered ‘a wide spectrum of views on the irreversible justice of God, the freedom of the human will, the divine attributes, the ultimate destiny of sinners and a host of other theological, legal and historical issues embedded in the sacred text.’

No wonder, then, that different readings of the biographies of the Prophet and of the Qur’an also arrive at radically different conclusions on core political issues, such as the aims and conduct of Jihad and Shari’a.

How can we rate the truth of one interpretation over another? Can a certain point of theology be conclusively proven and others permanently discarded? Is there one, correct interpretation?

I won’t explore these questions, for that would be to stray away from the subject of narrative into one that is beyond the scope of this paper. But let’s just make one final foray into an issue from which all else seems to follow; the line between interpretation and absolute truth.

In the second issue of Dabiq,⁶⁵ Islamic State offer an opinion about the ‘twisted methodology of giving people the choice between absolute truth and complete falsehood’, and say that ‘it’s upon us all to work together to eradicate the principle of “free choice,” and never to deceive people by calling for it directly or indirectly;

Rather, we must confront them with the fact that they’ve turned away from the religion, while we hold onto it, grasping its purity, its clarity, its comprehensiveness, without any blemishes due to shirk, misguidance or heresy, and that we’re completely ready to stand in the face of anyone who attempts to divert us from our commitment to making the religion of Allah triumphant over all other religions, and that we will continue to fight the people of deviation and misguidance until we die trying to make the religion triumphant.

So Islamic State seem to believe that they have arrived at an understanding of the absolute truth. Recall their advice to those embarking on Hijrah, and the definition of arrogance they cite;

So arrogance is disdain of the truth... and holding contempt for people... There is nothing wrong with such if it is done for Allah. The sign that such is done for Allah is that the person holds even more disdain and belittlement against himself.⁶⁶

When they speak of the absolute truth, do they refer to the belief, uncontroversial in Islam, that it is contained in the Qur’an, or do they elevate their own *human* interpretation of the Prophet’s example and the Qur’an to absolute truth?

Between the two lies the most perilous margin of error; for what can be more arrogant than to assume a perfect grasp of the Divine truth?

Conclusions

My conclusions are not as conclusive as their name suggests, a situation I'd like to attribute to the difficulty of making conclusive statements about what is, after all, an endless narrative flow, a stream of collective consciousness whose full reality we cannot capture. As pointed out in the introduction, my methodology was to offer a close examination of a limited but diverse number of texts. Still, a number of themes emerge.

1. On Narrative as a war cry

Propaganda twists reality to suit the purposes of those who produce it. When the purpose is war, storytelling becomes the art of expanding a war cry into a narrative.

We see that most clearly in Islamic State media, which are distinguished from the others by their explicit character.

The rallying cry also appears in al-Akhbar, implicit at times, explicit at others, especially in Hattar's piece about 'radical' solutions.

But the most multi-layered war narrative is to be found in Western media. There, we find explicit calls to war, such as Roger Cohen's call in the New York Times to 'defeat the barbaric marauders of Islamic State,' but the bulk of the work is done implicitly.

First, the omission or distortion of history guards the image of Western power as essentially good, and disguises the interests and impulses of empire as those of the people, or even civilization and humanity.

The stage is thus set for a story where the West is the hero, and the only question is who the villains are, and who, by extension, the West should bomb, isolate, or befriend. The narrative wanders freely as it tries to define the varying shades of evil out there, but the essential goodness of the hero is untouched. Wars waged by the hero must be wars with a good cause, because the hero is good. Meanings (and not necessarily events) that threaten that narrative core are wiped out or twisted. As it happens, reality is so full of such meanings that the large-scale and systematic blurring of history is one of the defining features of Western news narrative.

We also see a focus on the savagery of whoever happens to be the number one enemy at any particular time.⁶⁷ A thorough examination of savagery in Iraq and Syria is likely to reveal that violence perpetrated by Islamic State is neither the widest in scope nor always the cruelest in kind. But the obsessive focus on it means that the question, so meticulously avoided, of the purpose of the war, is expelled even further from our minds. Eventually, it becomes offensive to even ask that question. It is a remarkable achievement that the West can go to war again with even *less* scrutiny from the media than in 2003.

Blood is a powerful tool at the disposal of war narratives. The blood of American soldiers who died serving an imperial impulse is invoked a decade later to promote the same impulse. The blood of Iraqis killed by other Iraqis is used to further a sectarian narrative and reality, which were set in motion by the invasion of Iraq, and to promote empire under the guise of protecting Sunnis from Shia.

2. On objectivity

Everything we hear is an opinion, not a fact. Everything we see is a perspective, not the truth.'

Marcus Aurelius

The use of neutral, impartial language is the pride of many Western media organizations. Journalists all over the world look up to this Western ideal, and the value of 'objectivity' is taken to be one of the marks of professional distinction.

But neutral language is the most powerfully deceptive tool in the arsenal of the Western news narrative. It creates impressions of amoral news, news without perspective, news free of ulterior motives, and perhaps even of human error.

As we have seen, these impressions are illusions. It is perfectly possible for a narrative told in the mechanical language of Western news narration to fall in line with the needs of war propaganda and to convey the morality of empire while implying a disinterested perspective.

Western news is also characterized by a relatively high level of factual accuracy. More often than not, when factual errors are made, or seen to be made, they are corrected.

That gives mainstream Western news organizations, and by extension media all over the world that adhere to Western news values, a lot of their credibility and authority. This owes in part to prevailing attitudes that confuse factual accuracy with truth to reality; as we've seen, the manipulation of meaning can be achieved with little or no manipulation of fact.

3. On official statements

'The trawling net fills, the biographer hauls it in, sorts, throws back, stores, fillets, and sells. Yet consider what he doesn't catch: there is always far more of that.'

*Julian Barnes*⁶⁸

Let's apply Julian Barnes' image of biography to the news narrative. The trawling net is always around where official statements are made. It fishes from official PR machines for the material it turns into 'news.' Within this bias for officialdom there are priorities; in Western news, for example, open, uncritical platforms are more often reserved for Western officials, such as General Lloyd Austin. To the extent that the pronouncements of officialdom are presented as they are without effort at interpretation, the news machine serves simply to magnify official propaganda.

These statements fill out a significant portion of daily news, but their more lasting power comes from their ability to *frame* the news. The Western news machine will eventually depart from official statements and look elsewhere to fill the story, but even as the fisherman timidly wanders elsewhere, he's already taken his cue on where to look and what to look for.

Unfortunately, we don't have time or space to consider what the net doesn't catch; but let's just say that when all the fishermen gather at the same spot, all the time, it begins to feel that this is the only place where news stories can be found. An illusion of inevitability is cemented, making it all look normal.

4. On Narrative flexibility

Western news media are characterized by a high level of flexibility, and occasionally present real challenges to official government narratives.

Weiss and Pregent, for example, writing in *Foreign Policy*, puncture the narrative of the current administration and challenge the frame so religiously adhered to by other Western news media. Roger Cohen in the *New York Times* poses a challenge to their piece and defends Obama's policy.

But these debates come within the context of an establishment split on how to deal with Iran, and are not independent of power. Rather, they reflect power's own internal deliberations, amid a struggle between two imperial impulses; a measured approach versus the pursuit of unrestrained empire.⁶⁹

5. On the stalled narrative

Like a broken record, the narrative gets stuck in a certain frame. Is it coordination or competition between the Americans and the Iranians? The question itself is misleading, implying a clean division, that it must be either one or the other. Stories seem to get stuck most often within a frame imposed by those in power, amid a desire to limit a complex phenomenon to one simple explanation. In this case, the Iranians and the Americans seemed to have the same need of denying coordination and playing up competition. In addition to serving their purposes, this narrative trap reduces reality to binary oppositions, and cuts out nuance and complexity.

6. On the narrative leap

It is the anti-dote to the stalled narrative. Amer Mohsen's 'The Arabs and Iran; the return to the eighties' is a good example; by making visible the reality and nature of transformation, it brings rivalry as well as alliance together in one analytical text, the former as a past (and maybe present) reality, the latter as a future (and maybe present) possibility. The story does not even mention the battle of Tikrit, but somehow offers more insight into it through an interpretation that absorbs *both* meanings. It's not that they are resolved, but simply evoked in a way that establishes the different possible combinations. With the new, complex meaning extracted, the particularities of Tikrit fade away, and the story can move on, awaiting further clarification in the future.

7. On the Muqawama news narrative

It offers an example of a historical crisis of identity, amid what could turn out to be a historical transformation.

Their main problem is not the past. It is the present that poses a challenge to their identity, as everything they claimed they stood for is flipped upside down; their defining idea was resisting the Americans on behalf of the Mustad'afeen. Now they're the spearhead against the Mustad'afeen (mostly in Syria), and fighting a war alongside the Americans (mostly in Iraq).

This leads to a confused war cry. On one hand, since their new enemies are Sunni, they need a sectarian cry to mobilize their own fighters and to demonize the enemy. On the other hand, they wish to maintain the rhetoric (and appearance) of Islamic unity that they've been using for decades.

The result varies across their different media, but what comes across all of them is the rhetoric of the 'war on terrorism', the most effective and universal tool of dehumanization in our time, used against everyone who resists, and occasionally against the wider society that supports resistance as well.⁷⁰

8. On the self-fulfilling narrative

*O people of the Sunna in Iraq and Sham and the (Arabian) Peninsula and Yemen, we have long warned you of the filthy Rawafid, and what we have warned you against has come to pass. And we still warn you. Yesterday they would lie to you and display to you the soft side of the snake, and here they are today baring their fangs and spewing their poison...*⁷¹

Abu Muhammad al Adnani, spokesman for Islamic State

He makes it sound as if the sectarian enmity of today is an unchanging essence that Islamic State grasped before it became apparent.

What he omits is the contribution of the actions and words of Islamic State (and its predecessors) throughout the past decade in making it happen. It's the difference between insight and foresight on one hand, and self-fulfilling narrative on the other.

This is not to suggest that the sectarian turmoil was caused only by the relentless attacks on Shia civilian areas that started soon after the American occupation in Iraq. There clearly are other causes as well. But such persistent violence is certain to have an effect in any situation, particularly when accompanied by such venomous rhetoric.

Beyond Iraq and the Shia, Islamic State seem to have a thing with absolutes that leads them to dangerous conclusions; can citizens of Islamic State still look for absolute truth in the Qur'an if Islamic State already has full access to it, 'grasping its purity, its clarity, its comprehensiveness'? Why even read the Qur'an if the truth it contains has been perfectly grasped by humans, who can now replace the Divine text as the source of ultimate guidance?

Thus in their stories we encounter the relationship between power and narrative at its most explicit. If and where Islamic State win, the narrative contest to extract meaning and morals from the Prophetic example and the Divine message would be concluded, as they narrate their way, sword in hand, to the end of the story.

9. On Narration from outside power and the Mainstream

Take Bitter Lake, for example. A lot about it can be challenged, but the point here is that the story is told from a Western perspective that is *independent* of power; we finally get to observe power, its history, its impact, the traces it leaves, and its current conduct from *outside*.

In terms of format, Bitter Lake is groundbreaking in many ways that I can't explore here, (much as I would have liked to). In terms of political commentary, one of the many reasons it is so refreshingly radical is the fact that in mainstream news, the *basics* of this and other stories are almost nowhere to be seen.

Can we understand the war without talking about the arms industry? Can we understand political and financial dynamics in the West independently of war? Can we even *begin* to tell a story about Islamic State (or al Qaida, or perhaps even the financial crisis) without at least some of the context presented in Bitter Lake? Surely the examination of these dynamics offers a powerful antidote to the prevailing subservient coverage.

But just how powerful depends on reach and impact. The BBC broadcasts its news stories into millions of minds every hour of every day, while Bitter Lake sits on the edges between the mainstream and the alternative; a one-off documentary on the BBC iPlayer versus the continuous drumbeat of news coverage. Which will seep deeper into the mainstream consciousness, and leave a stronger mark on the narrative flow, and by extension on attitudes, beliefs, and behavior?

The Muqawama narrative is backed by the collective reach of its media, and alternative views are squeezed out of the Shia mainstream. Islamic State narratives are backed, indirectly, by the insulation of the Wahhabi ideology for decades in Saudi Arabia, and its journey, fueled by petrodollars and that circle of wealth and power, from the Arabian peninsula to the sites of America's wars.

The bigger the microphone and the more frequent the repetition, the deeper the effect on mainstream attitudes, beliefs, and behavior. It is through this lens that we must view the impact of power on media narratives, and the impact of media narratives on social and political reality in Syria, Iraq, and beyond.

Appendix: A note on beliefs and intentions

'There's something that... David Hume pointed out a couple of centuries ago. In his work on political theory, he describes the paradox that, in any society, the population submits to the rulers, even though force is always in the hands of the governed. Ultimately, the governors, the rulers, can only rule if they control opinion...'

*Noam Chomsky, How the World Works*⁷²

'Thinking cannot be fully comprehended if emotions and motivations are ignored.'

*Joseph Ledoux, Neuroscientist*⁷³

'The left-hemisphere interpreter is not only a master of belief creation, but it will stick to its belief system no matter what.'

*Michael Gazzaniga, Neuroscientist*⁷⁴

What compels thousands of journalists and media workers across the assembly line of the news machinery to produce propaganda? More intriguingly, how does it happen in environments where overt pressure is minimal?

One answer is that in any environment, there are always subtle (and not so subtle) ways for pressure to come across, and for careers to be negatively affected.

While that is true to a certain extent, the phenomenon we are observing is more complicated. We are talking about established patterns of understanding and explaining the world, and about notions of good and evil that have survived for a long time.

The extent to which journalists so often fall in line cannot be overstated.

In his 1981 book 'Covering Islam', Edward Said demonstrated how American news coverage of the hostage crisis overlooked relevant history and the complexities of the unfolding Islamic Revolution in Iran, and transformed a fast-moving, fascinating story into a one-dimensional moral fable.⁷⁵

In Manufacturing Consent, Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman offer a comprehensive outline of a propaganda model, and show it in action, at times literally turning truth upside down. As America embarked on bloody campaigns to subvert popular will in Latin America and Asia at the height of the Cold War, resulting in unspeakable suffering, including

genocide, it was successfully presented as the hero facing the villains of communism and supporting the causes of freedom and democracy.⁷⁶

It's hard to understand why all this persists even when the monopoly on storytelling is as challenged by technology as it is today.

The idea that it's all a centrally designed and operated system of thought control, that armies of media workers are instructed to behave that way, and that they all consciously and deliberately look for ways to twist reality is simplistic.

But it's one thing to dismiss that notion, and another to account for the unmistakable patterns left by power on media narratives, especially before and during wars, when controlling public opinion matters most to those planning or waging them.

The phenomenon of so many media workers falling in line, often without even realizing there *is* a line, is itself quite unnerving.

That is what gives the elusive question of beliefs and intentions its urgency. How do our beliefs take hold and persist? How to examine beliefs in the social world, when we can barely speak with confidence about our own?

These issues are beginning to be examined by neuroscientists⁷⁷, but before we go there, let's sum up some of what's already been said about prevailing attitudes both among journalists and within wider society.

Adam Curtis, who gave us *Bitter Lake* and other powerful documentaries⁷⁸ says a 'vision of the world' prevails across the political spectrum in the West that has redefined political struggles as 'battles against dark demonic forces' that threaten the innocent, and the role of the West as intervention to save the innocent.⁷⁹

Edward Said says reporters, like all humans, internalize certain values that they feel no need to question. A 'consensus' emerges and acts with subtlety in the media, making certain notions, such as 'the notion that American military power might be used for malevolent purposes ...relatively impossible within the consensus,' and others, such as the idea that 'America is a force for good in the world...routine and normal.'⁸⁰

Chomsky and Herman say that that the operation of multiple propaganda filters means that 'media news people, frequently operating with complete integrity and goodwill, are able to convince themselves that they choose and interpret the news 'objectively''...⁸¹

Meanwhile, neuroscience has been revealing just how deeply wired into our brains the story is.

Michael Gazzaniga, a cognitive neuroscientist, says our left-hemisphere 'includes a special region that interprets the inputs we receive every moment and weaves them into stories to form the ongoing narrative of our self-image and our beliefs.'⁸²

He calls that region the interpreter 'because it seeks explanations for internal and external events and expands on the actual facts we experience to make sense of, or *interpret*, the events of our life.'⁸³

Any time our left brain is confronted with information that does not jibe with our self-image, knowledge, or conceptual framework, our left-hemisphere interpreter creates a belief to enable all incoming information to make sense and mesh with our ongoing idea of our self. The interpreter seeks patterns, order, and causal relationships.

More menacingly, this interpreter seems to have a mind of its own;⁸⁴

Experiments on split-brain patients reveal how readily the left brain interpreter can make up stories and beliefs. In one experiment, for example, when the word walk was presented only to the right side of a patient's brain, he got up and started walking. When he was asked why he did this, the left brain (where language is stored and where the word walk was not presented) quickly created a reason for the action: "I wanted to go get a Coke."

Now let's imagine some possibilities.

David Petraeus, lamenting the tragedy of Iraq, assures us that 'the hard earned progress of the surge lasted over three years,' but Maliki's sectarianism and Obama's rush out of Iraq blew it all.⁸⁵

The General's interpreter had to explain a surge of US troops that the General oversaw, a highlight of his career and one of the main things for which he will be remembered.

Maybe it could have told him that he's just another General who happened to preside over a particular period in the destructive imperial conquest of Iraq. But it had a better idea; see, the general is a noble and able military leader; he is the mastermind of the surge and its associated strategies, and the beloved of the Sunnis. He got them fighting al Qaida, and integrated them into the state. But his efforts were put to waste by Obama, who pulled out and left the evil Maliki to his own devices.

Unlike the example of the split-brain patient who thought he got up because he wanted to get a Coke, General Petraeus' interpretation is of consequence that goes well beyond his own life. His interpretation of events in Iraq makes it possible to present the lost opportunity of open-ended occupation as the solution that Obama failed to pursue, and perhaps a solution that should still be pursued.

This is certainly not to discount more cynical possibilities. Surely those in power understand the harm they're doing and do it anyway, understand the interests involved and pursue them anyway, and lie. But do they not also rationalize, like the rest of us? Do they not weave the events of their lives into a story, like the rest of us?

It would be a mistake to think of the unconscious techniques of rationalization and the cynical pursuit of power as mutually exclusive, just as it would be wrong to think that all of Petraeus' story is necessarily fictitious.

The benefits of the surge to the occupation, for example, were quite possibly real. He calls them 'progress', a word with a positive connotation but without precise meaning unless it is clarified: progress towards *what*? To the extent that it was successful, the surge caused

progress towards a more effective occupation, and towards co-opting elements that were resisting the occupation into the new order, and giving them the lead in enforcing the occupation, by bribing and arming them. This was more likely than not carried out with deliberate, calculating cynicism.

But the moral of Petraeus' story is more important than which of the facts within it are accurate and which are not. The moral springs from the initial assumption that what is good for the occupation is good for Iraq, an assumption which itself is rooted in the belief that the exercise and advance of American power is good for the world.

This is the narrative core that binds the different elements of Petraeus' story together, and which appears to wed the self-image of the General to the self-image of America.

The American historian Robert Kagan, a self-proclaimed 'liberal interventionist'⁸⁶, offers an interesting analysis of the American self-image in his book *Dangerous Nation*.

He says Americans see themselves as 'only sporadically...venturing forth into the world, usually in response to external attack or perceived threats.' He says this self-image 'survives, despite four hundred years of steady expansion and an ever-deepening involvement in world affairs, and despite innumerable wars, interventions, and prolonged occupations in foreign lands.'⁸⁷

Kagan observes a recurrent, self-reinforcing cycle at play;

Like most expansive peoples-the Greeks and Romans, for instance-Anglo-Americans did not view themselves as aggressors... Attaining even minimal security, however, required an ever enlarging sphere of control and dominance, for whenever one boundary of security was established, other threats always existed just beyond it. The 'original sin' of displacing the first Indians from their lands began a cycle of advance and conquest.⁸⁸

Let's draw some parallels between then and now; reading the two Foreign Policy articles cited in Chapter Two, and Petraeus' interview with the Washington Post, one gets a distinct impression that the authors and the general feel *entitled* to Baghdad, perhaps the same way the 'Anglo-Americans' felt entitled to 'defend' every new frontier they established by conquest, and to push forward from there.

And just as the Anglo-American settlers 'could easily view the Indians'⁸⁹ who were fighting for their very existence as aggressors, so too do the authors of the FP piece view the 'precursors to the PMUs' as having *taken over* their own cities from the American invaders.

Kagan offers a multi-layered explanation of the motives behind the aggressive expansion; they include, in addition to commercial motivations and territorial expansion and its defense, the 'conviction that they were serving a higher purpose, that their expansion was the unfolding of an Anglo-Saxon destiny.'⁹⁰

Their civilization, they believed, was beneficial both for those who advanced it and for those upon whom it was advanced.⁹¹

Those on the receiving end of the imperial advance also weave their own stories. Recall the assertion by one of the Hashd spokesmen that ‘it is impossible for any of the resistance factions to be in the same trench as the Americans,’ and the question in al-Akhbar ‘what is their interest, then, in all this lying and pretense? To trick you?’⁹²

Maybe it’s their interpreter tricking *them*, to preserve a cherished identity forged in the battlefield when they resisted the invaders, an identity that has never been under so much challenge as it is now when they fight with American air cover.

Fighters too have interests, and incentives to do with money, power and personal convenience. But for them the need to make sense of the war is even more urgent, because it’s *their* lives at stake, and because the war for them is personal in many more ways than it is for Petraeus.

For the dispossessed, identity is sometimes all they have; and identity too is a neural affair. In the beginning of his book ‘Synaptic Self; How our brains become who we are’, Joseph Ledoux says;

*The bottom-line of this book is ‘You are your synapses’. Synapses are the spaces between brain cells, but are much more. They are the channels of communication between brain cells and the means by which most of what the brain does is accomplished.*⁹³

What follows is a mind-blowing exploration of how a coherent self emerges from the neural interactions that take place inside our heads. But how does all that affect the social world we inhabit?

Gazzaniga says the phenomena inside our heads take place at more than one level; first, there is the physical brain, the world of neurons, electrical signals, synapses, and chemical neurotransmitters. Then there are the ‘indivisible’ mental properties that result from that which ‘can’t be described in terms of neuronal firings,’ and which are ‘sometimes called the emergent mind.’⁹⁴ And then, the third layer, the one that most concerns us;

*One becomes cognizant there is a system on top of the personal mind/brain layers which is yet another layer--the social world. It interacts massively with our mental processes and vice versa. In many ways we humans, in achieving our robustness, have uploaded many of our critical needs to the social system around us so that the stuff we invent can survive our own fragile and vulnerable lives.*⁹⁵

The move to the social layer is critical to understand the media. The internal dynamics of media institutions play a significant role in determining what stories we tell you and how we tell you these stories. A media institution is, after all, one giant interpreter.

Maybe we can think of it as a brain, and imagine the people who work in it as neurons, firing off to each other; and the ‘channels of communication’ between them as the synapses of the institution.

Internal communications, power structures, and departmental politics all give rise to different motivations and incentives.

Gazzaniga says there are many ways the ‘strength of a belief can be manipulated... it can be subjected to reinforcement and repetition; and emotional tags can be attached to it, or it can be diluted with competing ideas.’⁹⁶

Surely this applies to those who work in media as much as it does to those who don’t. In fact, maybe a little bit more, especially when it comes to ‘reinforcement and repetition’.

No one consumes sound-bites, for example, as much as journalists do. To get a clip on air for broadcast, media workers have to listen to it several times as they edit the raw version, piece it together and produce the program. You guys listen only once, and you can even choose not to listen at all. Ironically, to the extent that the media brainwash us, those of us who operate the machinery could well be at the highest risk.

But who’s doing the brainwashing? Propaganda cannot just happen on its own, any more than armies of journalists can all be in on the same game to deceive the rest of society.

The answer probably lies somewhere between the intent to deceive, the control those with such intent have over the means of deception, and the beliefs that arise and accumulate in individuals and society. We don’t know which comes first, the belief or the *manipulation* of belief; but ultimately, it all happens inside our brains; that’s where the story is, bouncing off our neurons, and emerging mysteriously as a mental state in constant flux. And it’s all thrown back and forth between individual minds and the social world. Every tweet, image, and sequence, every word, sound and graphic is a little fragment of a story thrown into the endless narrative flow that shapes our collective consciousness.

This all brings up the issue of freedom at a fundamental level. On one hand, we are aware of a powerful force inside our heads that operates *outside our consciousness*. On the other hand, we are *aware* of a powerful force inside our heads that operates outside our consciousness.

Can we ever break free?

More than three decades ago, Edward Said, lamenting the ties between the history of knowledge and conquest in the West, predicted the emergence of ‘an ‘Islam’ fully ready to play the role prepared for it by reaction, orthodoxy, and desperation.’⁹⁷

Beyond Islam and the West, what he seems to be describing is news narrative as a Play, and all of us as its Characters. Maybe we all end up playing roles ‘prepared for’ us by the accumulating narrative flow of our lives. But what role do *we* have in preparing our roles?

Maybe there’s a clue in the mainstream media; they stand as a reminder of how much wealth is spent to get through to the left side of our brains. After all, these mammoth story-telling machines that resemble and address our interpreter imply recognition of the potential that resides in our heads. It derives from the ability to ‘combine a noun and a verb’, and ‘take the first step toward narrative’; from the power to tell, and ultimately to live a different story.

Endnotes

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The mob ignored him and continued trying to hoist the body. White bone stuck out from his slashed neck, his head flopped from side to side, and the blood continued to gush forth.'

Reported by Reuters correspondents in Tikrit and Ned Parker in Baghdad. "Special Report: After Iraqi forces take Tikrit, a wave of looting and lynching." *Reuters*, April 3,2015

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‘One of the authors personally witnessed in Baghdad how the IRGC targets make their way into the U.S. targeting queue. Shiite militia commanders pass Quds Force-selected targets to Badr-affiliated Iraqi Security Force commanders on the ground (many of whom are, in fact, agents of the militias), who then pass them on as legitimate targets to Iraq’s Defense Ministry representatives in the Joint Operations Centers where U.S. advisors then put those targets into a queue for aerial sorties.’

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Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent, The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, (Vintage, 1994) p.171

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