

What's At Issue in the Siege of Madaya: Mass Starvation, or a Few Fake Pics?

January 14, 2016

Throughout the world, people have been shocked by the scenes of starving people in the Madaya concentration camp in southern Syria, besieged by the Assad regime and its allied death-squad Hezbollah (which has invaded Syria from Lebanon). Some 40,000 people are trapped, besieged and starved as a weapon of war by the dictatorship which has used every conceivable means to maintain its power over the last five years; people are reported to be eating grass, insects and cats and dogs.



Yet it appears that the main task confronting leftists - i.e., opponents of exploitation, oppression and injustice, advocates of a "another world is possible" - is once again to find whatever excuses, whatever obfuscation, whatever mitigation they can on behalf of the tyrannical fascist regime responsible.

Perhaps not unexpectedly, though, they are often as incompetent as they are mendacious. I am referring to a number of allegations about several false images that have published in some media. As examples, I will just use three links that were sent to a list-serve I am involved with, the GreenLeft Discussion Group:

1. From the Baathist organ El Akhbar: 'Fake Images of Starvation in Madaya Surfing the Web' <http://el-akhbar.com/en/Fake-Images-Starvation-Madaya-53082/>(while obviously media connected to a fascist state is not leftist media, it is being spread by leftists)
2. 'Madaya: BBC caught recycling footage from Yarmouk' <https://thewallwillfall.wordpress.com/2016/01/11/madaya-bbc-caught-recycling-footage-from-yarmouk/>, and
3. 'West Media Starves Truth in Syria', by the indefatigable defender of the Assad regime, Finian Cunningham, on the oddball conspiracist site 'Information Clearing House' <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article43915.htm>

Before looking at the charges, we need to underline a couple of important points.

Starvation siege is real

First, the starvation siege is real (like a host of other medieval sieges, accompanied by massive aerial bombing, throughout Syria). Reports from Doctors Without Borders (MSF: <https://www.msf.org.au/media-room/press-releases/press-release/article/syria-siege-and-starvation-in-madaya.html>), Amnesty International (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/01/harrowing-accounts-of-life-under-siege-in-syria/>), the Red Cross (<http://eaworldview.com/2016/01/syria-1st-hand-from-madaya-first-impression-really-heartbreaking/>), the United Nations, the Syrian-American Medical Society (<https://www.sams-usa.net/foundation/index.php/componentarticle/2-uncategorised/245-madaya-siege-report>), among countless others, testify to this.

The UN humanitarian chief, Stephen O'Brien, said about 400 "are in grave peril of losing their lives" if not evacuated immediately

(<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/madaya-un-plan-to-evacuated-400-starving-people-from-village-after-being-trapped-by-assad-regime-a6807006.html>), and MSF has reported that 23 patients in the health centre it supports have died of starvation since the beginning of December. MSF Director of Operations, Brice de le Vingne, claiming this "is a clear example of the consequences of using siege as a military strategy," laid the blame squarely on the Syrian regime:

"Madaya is now effectively an open air prison for an estimated 20,000 people, including infants, children and elderly. There is no way in or out, leaving the people to die. The medics we support report injuries and death by bullet and landmine wounds from people that tried to leave Madaya" (<http://www.msf.org/article/syria-siege-and-starvation-madaya-immediate-medical-evacuations-and-medical-resupply>).

Thus, even if every image published were fake - which would be a problem, certainly, and call into question motivations etc - it wouldn't alter the facts of what is going on.

The issue of false images

Second, the overwhelming majority of images would appear to be genuine. According to chief official of the UN representative for the Office of Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Yacoub El Hillo, "It was at times difficult to determine whether what we were seeing was actually fabricated or exaggerated," but after stepping foot in Madaya, he confirmed, "It is not. It is not. I am sad to say it is not. These are true stories coming out of Madaya"

(<http://mobile.abc.net.au/news/2016-01-12/united-nations-confirm-images-of-starving-children/7084492>).

However, it is true that some images have been published which are not from Madaya, whether intentionally or otherwise. Given that the numbers of images coming out of this terrible war are probably in the millions, it is hardly surprising that fake images abound on all sides. The absolute experts on it are the regime and its armies of propaganda outlets, spin doctors, death squad allies and the Russian and Iranian Fox News equivalents. The difference is that, whereas in the case of Madaya, it appears a few fake images have slipped into the story of a genuine tragedy, the regime's propagandists sometimes create "events" that are backed in their entirety by nothing other than fake images.

One good example was the 'Adra massacre' of late 2013. According to the Putinist spin machine RT, the militia Jaysh Islam, based in the bombed out, besieged, Gaza-Plus ghetto of East Ghoutta, invaded Adra, another Damascus suburb held by the regime, and carried out a particularly gruesome massacre of some 80 people of the largely minority (Christian and Alawite) population. The problem is that the entire "evidence" produced for this "massacre" was a bunch of images all of which were fake (see: <http://lopforum.tumblr.com/post/70411153632/alleged-adra-massacre-collated-media>).

In comparison with this level of dedication to manufacturing "facts" out of air, the relative handful of fake images produced about Madaya, a crisis that cannot be denied, simply does not compare (although such unprofessionalism and sloppiness is not alright - especially because it gives the tyrant-lovers an opening to divert attention from the real issue of mass starvation to their conspiracies and irrelevancies).

But now let's look at the three stories by Assad-lovers who believe finding fault with the oppressed and terrorised is more important than condemning the oppressors and terrorisers.

The article 'Madaya: BBC caught recycling footage from Yarmouk' (<https://thewallwillfall.wordpress.com/2016/01/11/madaya-bbc-caught-recycling-footage-from-yarmouk/>) shows that the BBC used footage from the Yarmouk Palestinian camp in southern Damascus in June 2014 in a video about Madaya. Yes, clearly a mistake was made. The article shows both youtubes with the image of a young man shouting about the situation. However, on the Madaya video, this scene from Yarmouk lasts a total of two seconds. The rest would appear to be Madaya.

Why would the BBC deliberately fake one image for a mere two seconds, "to build the climate for war on Syria" as the Assadists would have us believe, when they have plenty of genuine footage, especially given that the genuine footage is so much more harrowing than a healthy-looking young man shouting? Surely this is just minor incompetence?

The Baathist el-Akhbar source ('Fake Images of Starvation in Madaya Surfing the Web' <http://el-akhbar.com/en/Fake-Images-Starvation-Madaya-53082/>) provides several images which were taken at other times. It begins with one about a smiling young girl which Al-Arabiya news has claimed is a Madaya resident:

"This photo that has gone viral on the web to win the world sympathy and turn it into a global condemnation of the Damascus government has been taken in Amman, the Jordanian capital, and belongs to a Syrian refugee covered in an al-Arabiya news channel report in January 2014, where she was called Syria's Mona Liza."

This is true. Here is a story about the original photo:

<http://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2014/01/118759/picture-of-a-syrian-mona-lisa-selling-gum-in-amans-streets-goes-viral/>

It is certainly incompetent of Al-Arabiya to post its own photo and claim it is something else. But although Akhbar claims the photo has "gone viral," I must say that I had not seen it until now on countless pages about the Madaya crisis. There have been a number of photos of starving people, including children, that have gone viral, but none of them that I've seen a lot of are among these handful of fakes.

One interesting thing here is that Akhbar shows that this one is from Jordan's massive Zaatari refugee camp, which houses 100,000 who have fled Assad's terror; the starving boy she is being compared to is actually from East Ghoutta; another image of a starving man is from East Ghoutta; and a starving baby is also from Yarmouk. Incompetent, even deliberately, perhaps; but what these Baathist mouthpieces try to skip over is that the reason photos of starving children and adults can be found in Yarmouk and East Ghoutta is the same that abundant images are available from Madaya: yes, the Assad regime also bombs, besieges and starves East Ghoutta, Yarmouk, Moademiyah, Daraya and countless other poverty-stricken southern communities which resist its rule.

For the apologists, mixing up which children are being starved to death by Assad is a much bigger crime than starving all of them to death. For East Ghoutta, it claims the man "died of cold, malnutrition and disease," but of course it does not tell us why. With the baby in Yarmouk, it says "Palestinians have long been taken hostage by the ISIL and al-Nusra Front terrorists." However, the photo was taken on March 31, 2014, according to Akhbar, yet ISIS did not invade the camp until April 2015! The starvation, as is well-known, was due to the long-term Assad-regime starvation siege on Yarmouk, nothing to with ISIS. Baathist organs are thus just as incompetent as Al-Arabiya, and in this instance, far more malicious. Nevertheless, this Akhbar article at least has some real exposure, unlike 2 seconds of a 2 minute video, as in the first source.

The third source, Cunningham's article

(<http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article43915.htm>), is mostly just his wild Baathist propaganda, but it does touch on the question of images, and gets it all wrong. Cunningham begins:

“Take the image of the malnourished little girl whom the BBC and the British *Independent* newspaper claimed was from the Syrian town of Madaya. Turns out the girl is from south Lebanon. Her name is Marianna Mazeh. The photo published widely this week by Western media is from three years ago ... Turns out too that Marianna’s family are infuriated that her forlorn image is being circulated for propaganda purposes. “I live in Tayr Filsey [south Lebanon], not Madaya, and I am fine,” the little girl told Al Manar news agency.” [Go to Cunningham’s article for embedded links.]

Trouble is, the image that Cunningham shows at the BBC and Independent links - a baby in a hood that has indeed “gone viral” and is seen on a great many Madaya solidarity pages - is not the same image as the one that “Marianna” claims to be in his other link. “Marianna” in Lebanon claims to be the same smiling young girl that Akhbar claims is a Syrian refugee in Jordan - so while Cunningham gets his images wrong, Cunningham and Akhbar make rival claims about who the smiling girl is.

Cunningham assures us that “she is now aged seven and apparently has made a full recovery from her earlier emaciated condition,” noting “the reason for her previous illness is not clear.” Of course, the smiling girl photo was not of an emaciated girl with an illness.

Regarding the claim that “Syria’s Mona Liza” is actually “Marianna” from Lebanon, the link in question is a video of Marianna and her father speaking. Is it the same girl several years later? While not impossible for a face to change shape, it is unusual for eye colour to change from green to dark. At no time in the video does Marianna or her family show a photo of Marianna several years earlier, except a blurry one within a family photo, still less a copy of the actual photo which they claim to have taken.

Like much else on the Internet, therefore, the Baathist exercise in disproving either propaganda or incompetence turns out to be propaganda and incompetence. Meanwhile, Assad’s war against the southern communities goes on.

The Political Context

Around a million communities throughout Syria are currently under siege, and of 52 active sieges, 49 are imposed by the regime, 2 by rebels in Idlib (of the Shiite villages Foua and Kefraya) and one - Deir Ezzor - by both ISIS and the regime (<https://breakthesieges.org/en>).

The context of Assad’s starvation siege of Madaya is his stepped up war against the working-class communities around Damascus which have been in revolt against the regime since the outset, and stepped up Russian bombing all over the south (where, needless to say, Russia engages in its “war on ISIS” in a region where ISIS does not exist, like elsewhere). In the context of the current flurry of imperialist-driven “peace” discussions, the regime is going out of its way to consolidate its position with an all-out carpet-bombing and starve-till-you-submit campaign.

It is deeply ironic that the pro-Baathist propaganda machines claim the “propaganda” around Madaya is, yet again, you guessed it, part of some imaginary imperialist war-drive against the nice “elected, secular government” of Assad (a particularly egregious example of this pro-Baathist propaganda, oblivious to facts is this shitty piece: (http://blackagendareport.com/madaya_victim_of_war_against_syria). These people, who presumably still haven’t noticed some 16 months of actual U.S. bombing of Syria - bombing everyone except Assad - have reality turned on its head.

The imperialist and Russian Vienna “peace process” aims to get the regime and selected opposition representatives to form a “transitional” authority, which would keep Assad in power till at least March 2017, after which “elections” would allegedly take place. The U.S. has now explicitly accepted this timetable for Assad to remain in power another 14 months (<http://news.yahoo.com/apnewsbreak-us-sees-assad-staying-syria-until-march-081207181-politics.html>).

In the meantime, this “transitional” regime, and Russia, the U.S. and various other countries currently bombing Syria, would together launch an all-out war against ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and any other opposition militias deemed to be “terrorists” by these countries. An initial list drawn up by the Jordanian monarchy included the names of 160 rebel groups (<http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/jordan-presents-list-160-terrorist-groups-syria-international-council-2106399989>)!

In the initial discussions, the U.S. and other western governments pushed for a 6-month “transition” period in which Assad would remain in power (note that even this 6 months, or even one day, was rejected out of hand by every wing of the opposition, who agreed to negotiate with Assad only on the basis that he resign at the beginning, not end, of the transitional regime).

However, as analyst Scott Lucas explains, these earlier goals to get the process moving earlier (and finished earlier) were “unlikely to be met amid disputes over which opposition and rebel groups are acceptable, continued Russian and regime bombing of opposition areas and assassination of rebel commanders, and Assad’s rejection of discussions until “terrorists” have been defeated” (<http://eaworldview.com/2016/01/syria-daily-us-plan-assad-stays-until-march-2017-in-political-transition/>).

Put another way, once the regime and Russia responded to these meekly put western proposals by continuing this bombing, assassinating, rejecting and so on, the U.S. and the West decided, OK, let’s give Assad an extra year to finish bombing the opposition to bits, assassinating more leaders, starving more communities to death, torturing to death thousands more, and hence properly defeating all the troublesome “terrorists” (i.e., everyone fighting Assad), who, after all, are no more loved by the US than they are by Assad and Russia.

In particular, given that the opposition rejects the imperialist blueprint for Assad to remain in power throughout the alleged “transition” period, it seems most likely that imperialist rulers have decided to look the other way while Assad bombs and starves their support base into submission; and so given this extra year or more by the “international community” to continue bombing all these “terrorists” (aged from under one to 100 or more), Assad is now going for broke to fulfil this international expectation.

Commenting on the delays by the UN and other international organisations, Ahmed Moadamaini, representative of the Coordination Committees of Moadamiyeh, another southern town under siege, claimed “quite frankly, today the street no longer trusts the United Nations and considers them partners in these crimes.” In reference to the international plan to keep Assad in power till 2017, Ahmed further noted that:

“After all this misery, we are sure that the UN, in one way or another, doesn’t want Assad to leave... so they do not make a move to stop this disaster taking place and to try him for war crimes.”

UN special envoy Staffan de Mistura claims this alleged “political solution” will be facilitated by “local ceasefires” in bombarded and besieged areas, but, according to reporter Imogen Lambert, “Syrians say that this forces them out of their homes and cities, and allows Assad to gain further

ground in opposition-held regions,” giving as an example the Assad regime “issuing strongly worded threats to Moadamiyeh that the city will be annihilated if locals do not immediately evacuate, with sieges intended to put more pressure on locals to accept deals.”

However, “we would rather die honest and free than live in humiliation and slavery,” according to Ahmed
(<http://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2016/1/8/starved-into-accepting-a-political-solution-in-syria>).

Drop Food, Not Bombs

For those less concerned with whitewashing fascist regimes and being apologists of the use of starvation as a war tactic, the slogan “drop food, not bombs” became a rallying cry:

“The UK has shown it can drop bombs in Syria: they are no help to the starving. Now it is time to show what good the UK and its armed forces can do for people inside Syria. Protect civilians: Begin RAF food aid drops to Madaya now”

(<http://leftfootforward.org/2016/01/syrians-call-for-raf-food-drops-on-madaya-where-people-are-starving-to-death/>; also

<http://www.thestruggle.org/air%20drop%20food%20to%20towns%20under%20siege%20in%20syria.htm>, [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2016/01/12/snp-mp-calls-for-uk-to-dr_n_8961776.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2016/01/12/snp-mp-calls-for-uk-to-drop-bombs-in-syria_n_8961776.html)).

Meanwhile, the international campaign over the starvation in Madaya did score an important success, in forcing the regime to allow the UN to bring in food, thus temporarily breaking the starvation siege. For all the nonsense talk about a “propaganda” campaign uses fake images to beat the war drums, the reality is that the campaign brought food to children’s stomachs.

Importantly, solidarity came from the region as well. Palestinians in Yarmouk refugee camp, similarly besieged and starved by the regime, sent their solidarity on a number of occasions (<https://syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com/2016/01/04/messages-of-solidarity-with-besieged-madaya/>). Palestinian children in Yarmouk sent a message to Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah: “O Hassan the Trumpet [a derogatory name for the ‘resistance’ leader]: The road to Jerusalem does not pass through Madaya or Yarmouk. Try another one” (<https://www.facebook.com/RadioFreeSyria/photos/a.382885705129976.91927.363889943696219/959717220780152/?type=3&theater>). Likewise, hundreds of Lebanese demonstrators blocked the Beirut to Damascus highway to protest Hezbollah’s involvement and show solidarity with Madaya (<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2016/Jan-09/330983-protesters-block-masnaa-crossing-over-madaya-siege.ashx#>).

Meanwhile, a group of Lebanese Shiites published a document rejecting the siege and Hezbollah’s role in the war in Syria, rightly comparing the “siege logic” to tactics used by Israelis against Arabs and Palestinians for decades, and they condemned the sectarian displacement of population in Syria, declaring full solidarity with the Syrians demanding freedom. They reject Hezbollah’s claim to be acting on behalf of the Shia (<https://twitter.com/mustafafahs/status/685527418040270848>)

Madaya, and the rebel-besieged towns in Idlib

While a small victory has been won, it must be noted that this aid had been held up despite the UN knowing for some time how desperate the situation was. As the ‘Break the Sieges’ site (<https://breakthesieges.org/en>) explains:

“The UN is choosing not to deliver aid to the besieged areas in Syria without the Assad regime’s permission. This is permission the UN does not even need, since Security Council resolutions 2165,

2191 and 2258 authorise it to deliver aid without the regime's consent. Unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles are being created as people starve, in some cases just a few minutes away from stockpiled aid."

It seems that one reason for this was to appear so-called "even-handed," by delaying aid to Madaya until its arrival could be synchronised with aid arriving in the besieged Shiite towns Foua and Kefraya in Idlib. While this may sound very fair, the reality was that people were starving to death in Madaya by the day, as delays continued, while this was not the case in Foua and Kefraya.

And here may be the place to say a few words about these sieges. The Baathist cheer squad has made much of these two sieges, claiming they allegedly don't get the same coverage as the 49 sieges the regime is imposing on opposition communities.

Foua and Kefraya are not simply "Shiite villages"; they are armed regime outposts in opposition-controlled Idlib province. Surrounded by rebel-held territory, it is hardly surprising that the rebels launch offensives against regime-held territory. Irresponsible claims that they are targeted "because they are Shiite," and the rebels of course "hate the Shia," ignoring the fact that they are regime camps, are irresponsible. Moreover, one reason the rebels haven't prioritised taking these towns, despite being vulnerable and completely surrounded, and instead have pushed south into (mostly Sunni) south Idlib and Hama province, is precisely because of opposition to the rebels within these towns.

However, what this has meant is that the rebels have tended to increase or reduce the pressure on these towns in response to greater or lesser regime pressure on besieged towns in the south, such as Zabadani and Madaya. By thus using them as bargaining chips, however, the rebel leadership is effectively locking in the sectarian logic pushed by the regime. A rebel leadership with a less sectarian outlook than some of the actors in Idlib (especially Nusra) would make genuine anti-sectarian overtures to the Shia communities in these two towns, like the deals they have done with small Alawite communities in neighbouring Hama

(<http://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/even-assads-supporters-are-baulking-now#full> - notably, Nusra is less prominent in the Hama front, which is dominated by Ahrar al-Sham and the Free Syrian Army).

Actually, there is some evidence that non-Nusra rebels, even Ahrar al-Sham, have tried to resist the sectarian logic driven by the regime and its Iranian backers. Notably, during the negotiations to end the regime-Hezbollah siege of Zabadani (a town nearby Madaya) several months back, where Ahrar al-Sham negotiated on behalf of the Zabadani population directly with Iran, the Iranian-Hezbollah demand was for a complete population swap between Zabadani and Foua/Kefraya. Ahrar, backed by other rebel groups, rejected this plan for mutual sectarian cleansing.

In any case, however, there is a difference between legitimate military offensives and actual siege. The difference is that in a siege, civilians are not allowed in and out to obtain food and so on, under threat of violence. If the Idlib rebels are imposing actual siege on Foua and Kefraya, then this must be condemned like all sieges (and of course, it is condemned by every international declaration on Syria; see Amnesty's even-handed condemnation of both sides: <https://t.co/eune0Fd7I8>).

An important difference exists, however, related to the question of power in Syria. Only the Syrian regime has an airforce. Apart from using it to bomb the country back to the Stone Age, it also uses it to drop food - and arms - to the besieged communities in Idlib. This is one reason people are not starving in these two towns, though the situation is reportedly grim. In addition, the Syrian Red Cross entered Foua and Kefraya in December, with the rebels' authorisation, and evacuated 450 wounded pro-Assad fighters and civilians as part of the final Zabadani deal

(<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-evacuation-idUSKBN0UB0DE20151228>).

In contrast, it is not only in Madaya, but also in other towns besieged by Assad – towns that haven't got a mention during the Madaya crisis, such as Moademiyah – that people are dying of starvation. Thus the mantra of being “even-handedly” giving focus to rebel-besieged towns where no one is starving had the effect of keeping the focus away from other towns where they are.

All sieges must end. But when people are being deliberately starved to death, anyone claiming to believe in justice and to oppose oppression knows what the priorities are. ‘Drop food, not bombs’ to break the siege was the slogan that arose from genuine solidarity.

This post originally appeared here.