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The Left, Syria and Fake News

Editor's note: The reports of a chemical attack in Syria have generated controversy and conflicting claims about what happened and who was responsible. The April 7 event is still under investigation.

There is a deepening rift within the American left over the war in Syria. It is unfortunate that this rift is eclipsing actual activism to stop the suffering of Syrians. But since apparent support for Bashar Assad and Vladimir Putin is so strong among some sectors of the left, it is worth tackling the debate if only to try to get past it and on to the more urgent job of shining a light on the plight of Syrians and considering nonmilitary alternatives to ending the complex war.

Because some readers will instantly jump to the conclusion that my criticism of Assad and Putin's brutal war on Syrians must imply that I am in favor of the U.S. bombing Syria, let's put it on the record that, no, I am not in favor, nor have ever been in favor of the U.S. bombing any country for any reason. Bombs, especially those coming from the U.S., are never launched with the well-being of ordinary people in mind. They are launched for reasons that have more to do with geostrategic and/or financial interests. The U.S. was wrong to have been bombing Syria in order to oust Islamic State, and it is wrong to bomb Syria in order to attack Assad.

That American militarism has nefarious motives does not mean the U.S. has a monopoly on imperial ambitions, nor does it mean that only the U.S. (or Israel) is capable of hurting people on a large scale.

There is an unsettling feeling of *déjà vu* in the Syria debate. I recall my very first street protest in 1999 when Bill Clinton's administration began bombing the nation that was once Yugoslavia. I felt the need to oppose what seemed like a senseless and horribly violent approach to tackling a humanitarian issue. When I found the local protests that were taking place, there were multiple signs in support of the dictator Slobodan Milošević. At first I thought it was a misguided attempt to declare that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" and that by standing up to the U.S. Milošević was being erroneously considered a hero. In recent years I have concluded that there is a strong penchant among some sectors on the left to desire glorification of leaders and strongmen (and they're almost always men) who espouse a favored political position in opposition to the U.S.

When I began doing solidarity work with Afghan women, specifically the [Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan](#) (RAWA) in the early 2000s, I had a similar experience. While there was no specific Afghan strongman that the so-called anti-imperialist left could rally around, there was the legacy of Soviet occupation that sectarian groups strongly and inexplicably defended. RAWA members' position against the U.S. war after the 9/11 attacks was not enough to earn them respect among some on the left simply because they were also hugely critical of the bloody Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Some even viewed their denunciation of the fundamentalist and misogynist Taliban forces that they lived under as playing into the hands of the U.S. bombing campaign.

For years I excoriated the left for ignoring Afghanistan, a war that continues today. I can only conclude that there is little motivation among American leftists to protest a war where there is no charismatic anti-American strongman to defend.

Today, Syrians are viewed through a similarly flawed lens by sectors of the American left. Assad, a dictator by any definition, and his ally Putin are both seen as bastions of anti-U.S. resistance. The leaps of logic that some on the left are engaging in, in order to vilify Syrian rebels and civilians in favor of these two leaders, are breathtaking.

Many are casting the chemical attack on Douma as self-inflicted. The theory is that the rebels who until recently occupied the area inflicted the damage on Syrian civilians as part of some elaborate scheme to frame Assad. Many have suggested Assad had nothing to gain from attacking Douma. But Assad did have a clear strategic objective of ridding Douma of the rebel group Jaysh al-Islam, which had been holding Douma for years. Within hours of the chemical attack, Jaysh al-Islam forces caved to Assad's tactics and

gave him what he wanted when they [fled the city](#). Why would rebels frame Assad only to leave their stronghold right afterward?

Many are [citing](#) Robert Fisk's [reporting this week](#) from Syria on a doctor who was not a witness to the attack and yet claimed that the dozens of Syrians who died were asphyxiated by dust rather than poisoned by chemicals. Fisk made no attempt to explain the many reports of a chemical smell and of white foam at the mouths of victims. His report directly contradicts that of [Associated Press](#) and [Guardian newspaper](#) journalists who managed to corroborate with multiple sources including survivors that there had been a chemical attack from the sky. Earlier investigations by [Al-Jazeera](#) and [The New York Times](#) also concluded that the claims by survivors of the attack were accurate. Are we to believe that The New York Times, Al-Jazeera, AP and The Guardian are all part of some grand conspiracy to push the U.S. to bomb targets important to Assad?

Apparently, acknowledging the reality of the chemical attacks by Assad is akin to inviting the U.S. to expand its Syria war to Assad's targets. And so in order to oppose that, are we to deny the real suffering of Syrians? Are we to bend reality to suit our desire?

Just as there is a chorus contradicting the lived experiences of Syrian civilians, there has been an effort to undermine the White Helmets, a rescue program that has been accused both of receiving U.S. funding (it has gotten U.S. Agency for International Development money just as [other projects have](#)) and of being a front for al-Qaida.

How are so many on the left falling for such [fakery](#)? The Guardian's extensive [investigation](#) into a propaganda effort to discredit the White Helmets offers some answers. Just as it is all too easy to fall for fake news these days, it is also easy to corroborate sources and determine veracity with a little effort.

If leftist and progressive calls to curb American imperialism are to be taken seriously, our analysis of international relations and foreign policy needs to be far more sophisticated. Not everything needs to be viewed through the lens of leaders who oppose the U.S., as though no other country in the world is capable of or interested in flexing its power internationally and domestically. If we are truly concerned about the well-being of ordinary Syrians, we need to care about them whether they are being killed by Syrian, Russian or American forces. We can condemn the mass atrocities being committed by Assad and Putin *and* oppose any U.S. military interference in the region. Both these things can be true at once.

When the left accuses conservatives of falling for fake news, we may imagine our rational approach to the world makes us more immune to falsehoods. Sadly, in the case of Syria

(and Afghanistan and other nations), the left may be just as vulnerable to seeing all things through the lens of our political worldview rather than through facts. This does little to help ordinary people the world over who are victims of violence.

This piece first appeared at [Truthdig](#).