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How Propaganda Feeds War on Syria

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Western propaganda against countries targeted for “regime change” can be especially insidious because mainstream journalists abandon skepticism and go with the flow, such as the case of Syrian “torture” photos, writes Rick Sterling.

There has been a pattern of sensational but untrue reports that lead to public acceptance of U.S. and Western military intervention in countries around the world.

For instance, in Gulf War 1 (1990-91), there were reports of Iraqi troops stealing incubators from Kuwait, leaving babies to die on the cold floor. Relying on the testimony of a Red Crescent doctor, Amnesty International ‘verified’ the false claims.

Ten years later, there were reports of yellow cake uranium going to Iraq for development of weapons of mass destruction.

One decade later, there were reports of Libyan soldiers drugged on viagra and raping women as they advanced.

In 2012, NBC broadcaster Richard Engel was supposedly kidnapped by a pro-Assad Syrian militia but luckily freed by Syrian opposition fighters, the “Free Syrian Army.”

All these reports were later confirmed to be fabrications and lies. They all had the goal of manipulating public opinion and they all succeeded in one way or another. Despite the consequences, which were often disastrous, none of the perpetrators were punished or paid any price.

It has been famously said, “Those who do not learn from the past are doomed to repeat it.” This report is a critical review of the so-called “Caesar Torture Photos” story. As will be shown, there is strong evidence the accusations are entirely or substantially false.

Overview of ‘Caesar Torture Photos’

On Jan. 20, 2014, two days before negotiations about the Syrian conflict were scheduled to begin in Switzerland, a sensational report burst onto television and front pages around the world. The story was that a former Syrian army photographer had 55,000 photographs documenting the torture and killing of 11,000 detainees by the Syrian security establishment.

The Syrian photographer was given the code-name “Caesar.” The story became known as the “Caesar Torture Photos.” A team of lawyers plus digital and forensic experts were hired by the Carter-Ruck law firm, on contract to Qatar, to go to the Middle East and check the veracity of “Caesar” and his story. They concluded that “Caesar” was truthful and the photographs indicated “industrial scale killing.”

CNN, London’s Guardian and LeMonde broke the story which was subsequently broadcast in news reports around the world. The Caesar photo accusations were announced as negotiations began in Switzerland. With the opposition demanding the resignation of the Syrian government, negotiations quickly broke down.

For the past two years the story has been preserved with occasional bursts of publicity and supposedly corroborating reports. Most recently, in December 2015 Human Rights Watch (HRW) released a report titled “If the Dead Could Speak” with significant focus on the Caesar accusations.

Following are 12 significant problems with the “Caesar torture photos” story:

1. Almost half the photos show the opposite of the allegations.

The Carter Ruck Inquiry Team claimed there were about 55,000 photos total with about half of them taken by “Caesar” and the other half by other photographers. The Carter Ruck team claimed the photos were all “similar.” Together they are all known as “Caesar’s Torture Photos.”

The photographs are in the custody of an opposition organization called the Syrian Association for Missing and Conscience Detainees (SAFMCD). In 2015, they allowed Human Rights Watch (HRW) to study all the photographs which have otherwise been secret. In December 2015, HRW released their report titled “If the Dead Could Speak.”

The biggest revelation is that over 46 percent of the photographs (24,568) do not show people “tortured to death” by the Syrian government. On the contrary, they show dead Syrian soldiers and victims of car bombs and other violence (HRW pp 2-3). Thus, nearly half the photos show the opposite of what was alleged. These photos, never revealed to the public, confirm that the opposition is violent and has killed large numbers of Syrian security forces and civilians.

2. The claim that other photos only show “tortured detainees” is exaggerated or false.

The Carter Ruck report says “Caesar” only photographed bodies brought from Syrian government detention centers. In its December 2015 report, HRW said, “ The largest category of photographs, 28,707 images, are photographs Human Rights Watch understands to have died in government custody, either in one of several detention facilities or after being transferred to a military hospital.” They estimate 6,786 dead individuals in the set.

The photos and the deceased are real, but how they died and the circumstances are unclear. There is strong evidence some died in conflict. Others died in the hospital. Others died and their bodies were decomposing before they were picked up. These photographs seem to document a war-time situation where many combatants and civilians are killed.

It seems the military hospital was doing what it had always done: maintaining a photographic and documentary record of the deceased. Bodies were picked up by different military or intelligence branches. While some may have died in detention; the big majority probably died in the conflict zones. The accusations by “Caesar,” the Carter Ruck report and HRW that these are all victims of “death in detention” or “death by torture” or death in “government custody” are almost certainly false.

3. The true identity of “Caesar” is probably not as claimed.

The Carter Ruck Report says “This witness who defected from Syria and who had been working for the Syrian government was given the code-name ‘Caesar’ by the inquiry team to protect the witness and members of his family.” (CRR p12)

However if his story is true, it would be easy for the Syrian government to determine who he really is. After all, how many military photographers took photos at Tishreen and Military 601 Hospitals during those years and then disappeared? According to the Carter Ruck report, Caesar’s family left Syria around the same time. Considering this, why is “Caesar” keeping his identity secret from the Western audience? Why does “Caesar” refuse to meet even with highly sympathetic journalists or researchers?

The fact that 46 percent of the total photographic set is substantially the opposite of what was claimed indicates two possibilities: Caesar and his promoters knew the contents but lied about them expecting nobody to look. Or, Caesar and his promoters did not know the contents and falsely assumed they were like the others. The latter seems more likely which supports the theory that Caesar is not who he claims to be.

4. The Carter Ruck Inquiry was faulty, rushed and politically biased.

The credibility of the “Caesar” story has been substantially based on the Carter-Ruck Inquiry Team which “verified” the defecting photographer and his photographs. The following facts suggest the team was biased with a political motive:

- The investigation was financed by the government of Qatar which is a major supporter of the armed opposition.

- The contracted law firm, Carter Ruck and Co, has previously represented Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, also known for his avid support of the armed opposition.

- The American on the legal inquiry team, Professor David M. Crane, has a long history working for the U.S. Defense Department and Defense Intelligence Agency. The U.S. government has been deeply involved in the attempt at “regime change” with demands that President Bashar “Assad must go” beginning in summer 2011 and continuing until recently.

- Crane is personally partisan in the conflict. He has campaigned for a Syrian War Crimes Tribunal and testified before Congress in October 2013, three months before the Caesar revelations.

- By their own admission, the inquiry team was under “time constraints” (CRR, p11).

- By their own admission, the inquiry team did not even survey most of the photographs

- The inquiry team was either ignorant of the content or intentionally lied about the 46 percent showing dead Syrian soldiers and attack victims.

- The inquiry team did its last interview with “Caesar” on Jan. 18, 2014, quickly finalized a report and rushed it into the media on Jan. 20, two days prior to the start of United Nations-sponsored negotiations.

The self-proclaimed “rigor” of the Carter Ruck investigation is without foundation. The claims to a “scientific” investigation are similarly without substance and verging on the ludicrous.

5. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) is involved.

In an interview on France24, David Crane of the inquiry team describes how “Caesar” was brought to meet them by “his handler, his case officer.” The expression “case officer” usually refers to the CIA. This would be a common expression for Professor Crane who previously worked in the Defense Intelligence Agency. The involvement of the CIA additionally makes sense since there was a CIA budget of \$1 billion for Syria operations in 2013. Crane’s “Syria Accountability Project” is based at Syracuse University where the CIA actively recruits new officers despite student resistance.

Why does it matter if the CIA is connected to the “Caesar” story? Because the CIA has a long history of disinformation campaigns. In 2011, false reports of viagra fueled rape by Libyan soldiers were widely broadcast in Western media as the U.S. pushed for a military mandate.

Decades earlier, the world was shocked to hear about Cuban troops fighting in Angola raping Angolan women. The CIA chief of station for Angola, John Stockwell, later described how they invented the false report and spread it around the world. The CIA was very proud of that disinformation achievement. Stockwell's book, *In Search of Enemies*, is still relevant.

6. The accusers portray simple administrative procedures as mysterious and sinister.

The Carter Ruck inquiry team falsely claimed there were about 11,000 tortured and killed detainees. They then posed the question: Why would the Syrian government photograph and document the people they just killed? The Carter Ruck Report speculates that the military hospital photographed the dead to prove that the "orders to kill" had been followed. The "orders to kill" are assumed.

A more logical explanation is that dead bodies were photographed as part of normal hospital / morgue procedure to maintain a file of the deceased who were received or treated at the hospital. The same applies to the body labeling / numbering system. The Carter Ruck report suggests there is something mysterious and possibly sinister in the coded tagging system. But all morgues need to have a tagging and identification system.

7. The photos have been manipulated.

Many of the photos at the SAFMCD website have been manipulated. The information card and tape identity are covered over and sections of documents are obscured. It must have been very time-consuming to do this for thousands of photos. The explanation that they are doing this to "protect identity" is not credible since the faces of victims are visible. What are they hiding?

8. The Photo Catalog has duplicates and other errors.

There are numerous errors and anomalies in the photo catalog as presented at the SAFMCD website. For example, some deceased persons are shown twice with different case numbers and dates. There are other errors where different individuals are given the same identity number.

Researcher Adam Larson at A Closer Look at Syria website has done detailed investigation which reveals more errors and curious error patterns in the SAFMCD photo catalog.

9. With few exceptions, Western media uncritically accepted and promoted the story.

The Carter Ruck report was labeled "Confidential" but distributed to CNN, the Guardian and LeMonde. CNN's Christiane Amanpour gushed over the story as she interviewed three of the inquiry team under the headline "EXCLUSIVE: Gruesome Syria photos may prove torture by Assad regime." Critical journalism was replaced by leading questions and affirmation. David Crane said "This is a smoking gun." Desmond de Silva "likened the images to those of holocaust survivors."

The Guardian report was titled “Syrian regime document trove shows evidence of ‘industrial scale’ killing of detainees” with the subtitle, “Senior war crimes prosecutors say photographs and documents provide ‘clear evidence’ of systematic killing of 11,000 detainees”

One of the very few skeptical reports was by Dan Murphy in the Christian Science Monitor. Murphy echoed standard accusations about Syria but went on to say incisively, “the report itself is nowhere near as credible as it makes out and should be viewed for what it is: A well-timed propaganda exercise funded by Qatar, a regime opponent who has funded rebels fighting Assad who have committed war crimes of their own.”

Unfortunately that was one of very few critical reports in the mainstream media. In 2012, foreign affairs journalist Jonathan Steele wrote an article describing the overall media bias on Syria. His article was titled “Most Syrians back Assad but you’d never know from western media.” The media campaign and propaganda has continued without stop. It was in this context that the Carter Ruck Report was delivered and widely accepted without question.

10. Politicians have used the Caesar story to push for more US/NATO aggression.

Politicians seeking direct U.S. intervention for “regime change” in Syria were quick to accept and broadcast the “Caesar” story. They used it to demonize the Assad government and argue that the U.S. must act so as to prevent “another holocaust,” “another Rwanda,” “another Cambodia.”

When Caesar’s photos were displayed at the House Foreign Affairs Committee in Congress, Chairman Ed Royce said “It is far past time that the world act.... It is far past time for the United States to say there is going to be a safe zone across this area in northern Syria.”

The top-ranking Democrat on the House Foreign Affairs Committee is Eliot Engel. In November 2015 he said, “We’re reminded of the photographer, known as Caesar, who sat in this room a year ago, showing us in searing, graphic detail what Assad has done to his own people.” Engel went on to advocate for a new authorization for the use of military force.

Rep. Adam Kinzinger is another advocate for aggression against Syria. At an event at the Holocaust Memorial Museum in July 2015, he said, “If we want to destroy ISIS we have to destroy the incubator of ISIS, Bashar al-Assad.”

The irony and hypocrisy is doubly profound since Rep. Kinzinger has met and coordinated with opposition leader Okaidi who is a confirmed ally of ISIS. In contrast with Kinzinger’s false claims, it is widely known that ISIS ideology and initial funding came from Saudi Arabia and much of its recent wealth from oil sales via Turkey. The Syrian Army has fought huge battles against ISIS, winning some but losing others with horrific scenes of mass beheading carried out by ISIS.

11. The Human Rights Watch assessment is biased.

HRW has been very active around Syria. After the chemical attacks in greater Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013, HRW rushed a report which concluded that, based on a vector analysis of incoming

projectiles, the source of the sarin carrying rockets must have been Syrian government territory. This analysis was later debunked as a “junk heap of bad evidence” by highly respected investigative journalist Robert Parry.

HRW’s assumption about the chemical weapon rocket flight distance was faulty. Additionally it was unrealistic to think you could determine rocket trajectory with 1 percent accuracy from a canister on the ground, especially from a canister on the ground that had deflected off a building wall.

In spite of this, HRW stuck by its analysis which blamed the Assad government. HRW Director Ken Roth publicly indicated dissatisfaction when an agreement to remove Syrian chemical weapons was reached. Roth wanted more than a “symbolic” attack on Syrian government forces.

Regarding the claims of “Caesar,” HRW seems to be the only non-governmental organization to receive the full set of photo files from the custodian. To its credit, HRW acknowledged that nearly half the photos do not show what has been claimed for two years: they show dead Syrian soldiers and militia along with scenes from crime scenes, car bombings, etc.

But HRW’s bias is clearly shown in how it handles this huge contradiction. Amazingly, HRW suggests the incorrectly identified photographs support the overall claim. They say, “This report focuses on deaths in detention. However other types of photographs are also important. From an evidentiary perspective, they reinforce the credibility of the claims of Caesar about his role as a forensic photographer of the Syrian security forces or at least with someone who has access to their photographs.” (HRW, p31) This seems like saying if someone lies to you half the time that proves they are truthful.

The files disprove the assertion that the files all show people who were tortured and killed. The photographs show a wide range of deceased persons, from Syrian soldiers to Syrian militia members to opposition fighters to civilians trapped in conflict zones to regular deaths in the military hospital. There may be some photos of detainees who died in custody after being tortured, or who were simply executed. We know that this happened in Iraqi detention centers under U.S. occupation. Ugly and brutal things happen in war times. But the facts strongly suggest that the “Caesar” account is basically untrue or a gross exaggeration.

It is striking that the HRW report has no acknowledgment of the war conditions and circumstances in Syria. There is no acknowledgment that the government and Syrian Arab Army have been under attack by tens of thousands of weaponized fighters openly funded and supported by many of the wealthiest countries in the world.

There is no hint at the huge loss of life suffered by the Syrian army and supporters defending their country. The current estimates indicate from 80,000 to 120,000 Syrian soldiers, militia and allies having died in the conflict. During the three years 2011-2013, including the period covered by the “Caesar” photos, it is estimated that over 52,000 Syrian soldiers and civilian militia died versus 29,000 anti-government forces.

HRW had access to the full set of photographs including the Syrian army and civilian militia members killed in the conflict. Why did they not list the number of Syrian soldiers and security forces they identified? Why did they not show a single image of those victims?

HRW goes beyond endorsing the falsehoods in the “Caesar story”; HRW suggests the cataloguing is only a partial listing. On page 5, the report says, “Therefore, the number of bodies from detention facilities that appear in the Caesar photographs represent only a part of those who died in detention in Damascus.”

On the contrary, the Caesar photographs seem to mostly show victims who died in a variety of ways in the armed conflict. The HRW assertions seem to be biased and inaccurate.

12. The legal accusations are biased and ignore the supreme crime of aggression.

The Christian Science Monitor journalist Dan Murphy gave an apt warning in his article on the Carter Ruck report about “Caesar.” While many journalists treated the prosecutors with uncritical deference, he said, “Association with war crime prosecutions is no guarantor of credibility – far from it. Just consider Luis Moreno Ocampo’s absurd claims about Viagra and mass rape in Muammar Qaddafi’s Libya in 2011. War crimes prosecutors have, unsurprisingly, a bias towards wanting to bolster cases against people they consider war criminals (like Assad or Qaddafi) and so should be treated with caution. They also frequently favor, as a class, humanitarian interventions.”

The Carter Ruck legal team demonstrated how accurate Murphy’s cautions could be. The legal team was eager to accuse the Syrian government of “crimes against humanity” but the evidence of “industrial killing,” “mass killing,” “torturing to kill” is dubious and much of the hard evidence shows something else.

In contrast, there is clear and solid evidence that a “Crime against Peace” is being committed against Syria. It is public knowledge that the “armed opposition” in Syria has been funded, supplied and supported in myriad ways by various outside governments. Most of the fighters, both Syrian and foreign, receive salaries from one or another outside power. Their supplies, weapons and necessary equipment are all supplied to them. Like the “Contras” in Nicaragua in the 1980’s, the use of such proxy armies is a violation of customary international law.

It is also a violation of the UN Charter which says “All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other matter inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations”.

The government of Qatar has been a major supporter of the mercenaries and fanatics attacking the sovereign state of Syria. Given that fact, isn’t it hugely ironic to hear the legal contractors for Qatar accusing the Syrian government of “crimes against humanity”?

Isn't it time for the United Nations to make reforms so that it can start living up to its purposes? That will require demanding and enforcing compliance with the UN Charter and International Law.