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The Syrian opposition: who's doing the talking?

The media have been too passive when it comes to Syrian opposition sources, without scrutinising their backgrounds and their political connections. Time for a closer look ...

Charlie Skelton

7/12/2012



The director of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Rami Abdulrahman, speaks on the phone in his home in Coventry on December 6, 2011

A nightmare is unfolding across Syria, in the homes of al-Heffa and the streets of Houla. And we all know how the story ends: with thousands of soldiers and civilians killed, towns and families destroyed, and President Assad beaten to death in a ditch.

This is the story of the Syrian war, but there is another story to be told. A tale less bloody, but nevertheless important. This is a story about the storytellers: the spokespeople, the "experts on

Syria", the "democracy activists". The statement makers. The people who "urge" and "warn" and "call for action".

It's a tale about some of the most quoted members of the Syrian opposition and their connection to the Anglo-American opposition creation business. The mainstream news media have, in the main, been remarkably passive when it comes to Syrian sources: billing them simply as "official spokesmen" or "pro-democracy campaigners" without, for the most part, scrutinising their statements, their backgrounds or their political connections.

It's important to stress: to investigate the background of a Syrian spokesperson is not to doubt the sincerity of his or her opposition to Assad. But a passionate hatred of the Assad regime is no guarantee of independence. Indeed, a number of key figures in the Syrian opposition movement are long-term exiles who were receiving US government funding to undermine the Assad government long before the Arab spring broke out.

Though it is not yet stated US government policy to oust Assad by force, these spokespeople are vocal advocates of foreign military intervention in Syria and thus natural allies of well-known US neoconservatives who supported Bush's invasion of Iraq and are now pressuring the Obama administration to intervene. As we will see, several of these spokespeople have found support, and in some cases developed long and lucrative relationships with advocates of military intervention on both sides of the Atlantic.

"The sand is running out of the hour glass," said Hillary Clinton on Sunday. So, as the fighting in Syria intensifies, and [Russian warships set sail for Tartus](#), it's high time to take a closer look at those who are speaking out on behalf of the Syrian people.

The Syrian National Council

The most quoted of the opposition spokespeople are the official representatives of the Syrian National Council. The SNC is not the only Syrian opposition group – but it is generally recognised as "the main opposition coalition" (BBC). The Washington Times describes it as "an umbrella group of rival factions based outside Syria". Certainly the SNC is the opposition group that's had the closest dealings with western powers – and has called for foreign intervention from the early stages of the uprising. In February of this year, at the opening of the Friends of Syria summit in Tunisia, William Hague [declared](#): "I will meet leaders of the Syrian National Council in a few minutes' time ... We, in common with other nations, will now treat them and recognise them as a legitimate representative of the Syrian people."

The most senior of the SNC's official spokespeople is the Paris-based Syrian academic Bassma Kodmani.

Bassma Kodmani



Bassma Kodmani of the Syrian National Council

Here is Bassma Kodmani, [seen leaving this year's Bilderberg conference](#) in Chantilly, Virginia.

Kodmani is a member of the executive bureau and head of foreign affairs, Syrian National Council. Kodmani is close to the centre of the SNC power structure, and one of the council's most vocal spokespeople. "No dialogue with the ruling regime is possible. We can only discuss how to move on to a different political system," [she declared this week](#). And here she is, [quoted by the newswire AFP](#): "The next step needs to be a resolution under Chapter VII, which allows for the use of all legitimate means, coercive means, embargo on arms, as well as the use of force to oblige the regime to comply."

This statement translates into the headline ["Syrians call for armed peacekeepers"](#) (Australia's Herald Sun). When large-scale international military action is being called for, it seems only reasonable to ask: who exactly is calling for it? We can say, simply, "an official SNC spokesperson," or we can look a little closer.

This year was Kodmani's second Bilderberg. At the 2008 conference, Kodmani was listed as French; by 2012, her Frenchness had fallen away and she was listed simply as "international" – her homeland had become the world of international relations.

Back a few years, in 2005, Kodmani was working for the [Ford Foundation](#) in Cairo, where she was director of their governance and international co-operation programme. The Ford Foundation is a vast organisation, headquartered in New York, and Kodmani was already fairly senior. But she was about to jump up a league.

Around this time, in February 2005, US-Syrian relations collapsed, and President Bush recalled his ambassador from Damascus. A lot of opposition projects date from this period. ["The US money for Syrian opposition figures began flowing under President George W Bush after he effectively froze political ties with Damascus in 2005."](#) says the Washington Post.

In September 2005, Kodmani was made the executive director of the [Arab Reform Initiative](#) (ARI) – a research programme initiated by the powerful US lobby group, the [Council on Foreign Relations](#) (CFR).

The CFR is an elite US foreign policy thinktank, and the Arab Reform Initiative is [described on its website as a "CFR Project"](#) . More specifically, the ARI was initiated by a group within the CFR called the "[US/Middle East Project](#)" – a body of senior diplomats, intelligence officers and financiers, the stated aim of which is to undertake regional "policy analysis" in order "to prevent conflict and promote stability". The US/Middle East Project pursues these goals under the guidance of an international board chaired by General (Ret.) Brent Scowcroft.



Peter Sutherland pictured at the Bilderberg conference

[Brent Scowcroft \(chairman emeritus\)](#) is a former national security adviser to the US president – he took over the role from Henry Kissinger. Sitting alongside Scowcroft of the international board is his fellow geo-strategist, Zbigniew Brzezinski, who succeeded him as the national security adviser, and Peter Sutherland, the chairman of Goldman Sachs International. So, as early as 2005, we've got a senior wing of the western intelligence/banking establishment selecting Kodmani to run a Middle East research project. In September of that year, Kodmani was made full-time director of the programme. Earlier in 2005, the [CFR assigned](#) "financial oversight" of the project to the Centre for European Reform (CER). In come the British.

The CER is overseen by Lord Kerr, the deputy chairman of Royal Dutch Shell. Kerr is a former head of the diplomatic service and is a senior adviser at Chatham House (a thinktank showcasing the best brains of the British diplomatic establishment).

In charge of the CER on a day-to-day basis is [Charles Grant](#), former defence editor of the Economist, and these days a member of the European Council on Foreign Relations, a "pan-European thinktank" packed with diplomats, industrialists, professors and prime ministers. On its [list of members](#) you'll find the name: "Bassma Kodmani (France/Syria) – Executive Director, Arab Reform Initiative".

Another name on the list: George Soros – the financier whose non-profit "Open Society Foundations" is [a primary funding source of the ECFR](#). At this level, the worlds of banking, diplomacy, industry, intelligence and the various policy institutes and foundations all mesh together, and there, in the middle of it all, is Kodmani.

The point is, Kodmani is not some random "pro-democracy activist" who happens to have found herself in front of a microphone. She has impeccable international diplomacy credentials: she holds the position of [research director at the Académie Diplomatique Internationale](#) – "an independent and neutral institution dedicated to promoting modern diplomacy". The Académie is

headed by Jean-Claude Cousseran, a former head of the DGSE – the French foreign intelligence service.

A picture is emerging of Kodmani as a trusted lieutenant of the Anglo-American democracy-promotion industry. Her "province of origin" ([according to the SNC website](#)) is Damascus, but she has close and long-standing professional relationships with precisely those powers she's calling upon to intervene in Syria.

And many of her spokesmen colleagues are equally well-connected.

Radwan Ziadeh

Another often quoted SNC representative is [Radwan Ziadeh](#) – director of foreign relations at the Syrian National Council. Ziadeh has an impressive CV: he's a [senior fellow at the federally funded Washington thinktank, the US Institute of Peace](#) (the USIP Board of Directors is packed with alumni of the defence department and the national security council; its president is Richard Solomon, former adviser to Kissinger at the NSC).

In February this year, Ziadeh joined an elite bunch of Washington hawks to sign [a letter](#) calling upon Obama to intervene in Syria: his fellow signatories include James Woolsey (former CIA chief), Karl Rove (Bush Jr's handler), Clifford May (Committee on the Present Danger) and Elizabeth Cheney, former head of the Pentagon's Iran-Syria Operations Group.

Ziadeh is a relentless organiser, a blue-chip Washington insider with links to some of the most powerful establishment thinktanks. Ziadeh's connections extend all the way to London. In 2009 he became a [visiting fellow at Chatham House](#), and in June of last year he featured on the panel at one of their events – ["Envisioning Syria's Political Future"](#) – sharing a platform with fellow SNC spokesman Ausama Monajed (more on Monajed below) and SNC member Najib Ghadbian.

Ghadbian was [identified by the Wall Street Journal](#) as an early intermediary between the US government and the Syrian opposition in exile: "An initial contact between the White House and NSF [National Salvation Front] was forged by Najib Ghadbian, a University of Arkansas political scientist." This was back in 2005. The watershed year.

These days, Ghadbian is a member of the general secretariat of the SNC, and is on the advisory board of a Washington-based policy body called the [Syrian Center for Political and Strategic Studies](#) (SCPSS) – an organisation co-founded by Ziadeh.

Ziadeh has been making connections like this for years. Back in 2008, Ziadeh took part in a meeting of opposition figures in a Washington government building: a mini-conference called ["Syria In-Transition"](#). The meeting was co-sponsored by a US-based body called the Democracy Council and a UK-based organisation called the Movement for Justice and Development (MJD). It was a big day for the MJD – their chairman, Anas Al-Abdah, had travelled to Washington from Britain for the event, along with their director of public relations. Here, [from the MJD's website](#), is a description of the day: "The conference saw an exceptional turn out as the allocated

hall was packed with guests from the House of Representatives and the Senate, representatives of studies centres, journalists and Syrian expatriats [sic] in the USA."

The day opened with a keynote speech by James Prince, head of the Democracy Council. Ziadeh was on a panel chaired by Joshua Muravchik (the ultra-interventionist author of the 2006 op-ed "Bomb Iran"). The topic of the discussion was "The Emergence of Organized Opposition". Sitting beside Ziadeh on the panel was the public relations director of the MJD – a man who would later become his fellow SNC spokesperson – Ausama Monajed.

Ausama Monajed

Along with Kodmani and Ziadeh, Ausama (or sometimes Osama) Monajed is one of the most important SNC spokespeople. There are others, of course – the SNC is a big beast and includes the Muslim Brotherhood. The opposition to Assad is wide-ranging, but these are some of the key voices. There are other official spokespeople with long political careers, like George Sabra of the Syrian Democratic People's party – Sabra has suffered arrest and lengthy imprisonment in his fight against the ["repressive and totalitarian regime in Syria"](#). And there are other opposition voices outside the SNC, such as the writer Michel Kilo, who speaks eloquently of the violence tearing apart his country: "Syria is being destroyed – street after street, city after city, village after village. What kind of solution is that? In order for a small group of people to remain in power, the whole country is being destroyed."



Ausuma Monajed

But there's no doubt that the primary opposition body is the SNC, and Kodmani, Ziadeh and Monajed are often to be found representing it. Monajed frequently crops up as a commentator on TV news channels. [Here he is on the BBC](#), speaking from their Washington bureau. Monajed doesn't sugar-coat his message: "We are watching civilians being slaughtered and kids being slaughtered and killed and women being raped on the TV screens every day."

Meanwhile, [over on Al Jazeera](#), Monajed talks about "what's really happening, in reality, on the ground" – about "the militiamen of Assad" who "come and rape their women, slaughter their children, and kill their elderly".

Monajed [turned up, just a few days ago, as a blogger on Huffington Post UK](#), where he explained, at length: "Why the World Must Intervene in Syria" – calling for "direct military assistance" and "foreign military aid". So, again, a fair question might be: who is this spokesman calling for military intervention?

Monajed is a member of the SNC, adviser to its president, and according to his [SNC biography](#), "the Founder and Director of Barada Television", a pro-opposition satellite channel based in Vauxhall, south London. In 2008, a few months after attending Syria In-Transition conference, Monajed was back in Washington, invited to lunch with George W Bush, along with a handful of other favoured dissidents ([you can see Monajed in the souvenir photo](#), third from the right, in the red tie, near Condoleezza Rice – up the other end from Garry Kasparov).

At this time, in 2008, the [US state department knew Monajed as](#) "director of public relations for the Movement for Justice and Development (MJD), which leads the struggle for peaceful and democratic change in Syria".

Let's look closer at the MJD. Last year, [the Washington Post picked up a story from WikiLeaks](#), which had published a mass of leaked diplomatic cables. [These cables appear to show a remarkable flow of money](#) from the US state department to the British-based Movement for Justice and Development. According to the Washington Post's report: "Barada TV is closely affiliated with the Movement for Justice and Development, a London-based network of Syrian exiles. Classified US diplomatic cables show that the state department has funnelled as much as \$6m to the group since 2006 to operate the satellite channel and finance other activities inside Syria."

A state department spokesman responded to this story by saying: "Trying to promote a transformation to a more democratic process in this society is not undermining necessarily the existing government." And they're right, it's not "necessarily" that.

When asked about the state department money, Monajed himself said that he "could not confirm" US state department funding for Barada TV, but said: "I didn't receive a penny myself." Malik al-Abdeh, until very recently Barada TV's editor-in-chief insisted: "we have had no direct dealings with the US state department". The meaning of the sentence turns on that word "direct". It is worth noting that Malik al Abdeh also happens to be one of the founders of the Movement for Justice and Development (the recipient of the state department \$6m, according to the leaked cable). And he's the brother of the chairman, Anas Al-Abdah. He's also the [co-holder of the MJD trademark](#): What [Malik al Abdeh does admit](#) is that Barada TV gets a large chunk of its funding from an American non-profit organisation: the Democracy Council. One of the co-sponsors (with the MJD) of Syria In-Transition mini-conference. So what we see, in 2008, at the same meeting, are the leaders of precisely those organisations identified in the WikiLeaks cables as the conduit (the Democracy Council) and recipient (the MJD) of large amounts of state department money.

[The Democracy Council](#) (a US-based grant distributor) lists the state department as one of its sources of funding. How it works is this: the Democracy Council serves as a grant-administering intermediary between the state department's "Middle East Partnership Initiative" and "local partners" (such as Barada TV). As the [Washington Post](#) reports:

"Several US diplomatic cables from the embassy in Damascus reveal that the Syrian exiles received money from a State Department program called the Middle East Partnership Initiative. According to the cables, the State Department funnelled money to the exile group via the Democracy Council, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit."

The same report highlights a 2009 cable from the US Embassy in Syria that says that the Democracy Council received \$6.3m from the state department to run a Syria-related programme, the "Civil Society Strengthening Initiative". The cable describes this as "a discrete collaborative effort between the Democracy Council and local partners" aimed at producing, amongst other things, "various broadcast concepts." According to the Washington Post: "Other cables make clear that one of those concepts was Barada TV."

Until a few months ago, the state department's Middle East Partnership Initiative was overseen by [Tamara Cofman Wittes](#) (she's now at the [Brookings Institution – an influential Washington thinktank](#)). Of MEPI, she said that it "[created a positive 'brand' for US democracy promotion efforts](#)". While working there she declared: "There are a lot of organizations in Syria and other countries that are seeking changes from their government ... That's an agenda that we believe in and we're going to support." And by support, she means bankroll.

The money

This is nothing new. Go back a while to early 2006, and you have the state department announcing a new "funding opportunity" called the "[Syria Democracy Program](#)". On offer, grants worth "\$5m in Federal Fiscal Year 2006". The aim of the grants? "To accelerate the work of reformers in Syria."

These days, the cash is flowing in faster than ever. At the beginning of June 2012, the [Syrian Business Forum was launched in Doha](#) by opposition leaders including Wael Merza (SNC secretary general). "This fund has been established to support all components of the revolution in Syria," said Merza. The size of the fund? Some \$300m. It's by no means clear where the money has come from, although Merza "hinted at strong financial support from Gulf Arab states for the new fund" (Al Jazeera). At the launch, Merza said that about \$150m had already been spent, in part on the Free Syrian Army.

Merza's group of Syrian businessmen made an appearance at a World Economic Forum conference titled the "[Platform for International Co-operation](#)" held in Istanbul in November 2011. All part of the process whereby the SNC has grown in reputation, to become, in the words of William Hague, "a legitimate representative of the Syrian people" – and able, openly, to handle this much funding.

Building legitimacy – of opposition, of representation, of intervention – is the essential propaganda battle.

In a USA Today op-ed written in February this year, Ambassador Dennis Ross declared: "It is time to raise the status of the Syrian National Council". What he wanted, urgently, is "to create an aura of inevitability about the SNC as the alternative to Assad." The aura of inevitability. Winning the battle in advance.

A key combatant in this battle for hearts and minds is the American journalist and Daily Telegraph blogger, Michael Weiss.

Michael Weiss

One of the most widely quoted western experts on Syria – and an enthusiast for western intervention – Michael Weiss echoes Ambassador Ross when [he says](#): "Military intervention in Syria isn't so much a matter of preference as an inevitability."

Some of Weiss's interventionist writings can be found on a Beirut-based, Washington-friendly website called "NOW Lebanon" – whose "NOW Syria" section is an important source of Syrian updates. NOW Lebanon was set up in 2007 by Saatchi & Saatchi executive [Eli Khoury](#). Khoury has been described by the advertising industry as a "strategic communications specialist, specialising in corporate and government image and brand development".

Weiss told [NOW Lebanon](#), back in May, that thanks to the influx of weapons to Syrian rebels "[we've already begun to see some results](#)." He showed a similar approval of military developments a few months earlier, in [a piece for the New Republic](#): "In the past several weeks, the Free Syrian Army and other independent rebel brigades have made great strides" – whereupon, as any blogger might, he laid out his "Blueprint for a Military Intervention in Syria".

But Weiss is not only a blogger. He's also the director of communications and public relations at the [Henry Jackson Society](#), an ultra-ultra-hawkish foreign policy thinktank.

The Henry Jackson Society's [international patrons](#) include: James "ex-CIA boss" Woolsey, Michael "homeland security" Chertoff, William "PNAC" Kristol, Robert "PNAC" Kagan, Joshua "Bomb Iran" Muravchick, and Richard "Prince of Darkness" Perle. The Society is run by Alan Mendoza, [chief adviser to the all-party parliamentary group on transatlantic and international security](#).

The Henry Jackson Society is uncompromising in its "forward strategy" towards democracy. And Weiss is in charge of the message. The Henry Jackson Society is proud of its PR chief's far-reaching influence: "[He is the author of the influential report "Intervention in Syria? An Assessment of Legality, Logistics and Hazards", which was repurposed and endorsed by the Syrian National Council.](#)"

Weiss's original [report](#) was re-named "Safe Area for Syria" – and ended up on the official syriancouncil.org website, as part of their military bureau's [strategic literature](#). The repurposing of the HJS report was undertaken by the founder and executive director of the [Strategic Research and Communication Centre](#) (SRCC) – one Ausama Monajed.

So, the founder of Barada TV, Ausama Monajed, edited Weiss's report, published it through his own organisation (the SRCC) and passed it on to the Syrian National Council, with the support of the Henry Jackson Society.

The relationship couldn't be closer. Monajed even ends up handling inquiries for "[press interviews with Michael Weiss](#)". Weiss is not the only strategist to have sketched out the roadmap to this war (many thinktanks have thought it out, many hawks have talked it up), but some of the sharpest detailing is his.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights

The justification for the "inevitable" military intervention is the savagery of President Assad's regime: the atrocities, the shelling, the human rights abuses. Information is crucial here, and one source above all has been providing us with data about Syria. It is quoted at every turn: "The head of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights [told VOA \[Voice of America\]](#) that fighting and shelling killed at least 12 people in Homs province."

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights is commonly used as a standalone source for news and statistics. Just this week, news agency AFP [carried this story](#): "Syrian forces pounded Aleppo and Deir Ezzor provinces as at least 35 people were killed on Sunday across the country, among them 17 civilians, a watchdog reported." Various atrocities and casualty numbers are listed, all from a single source: "Observatory director Rami Abdel Rahman told AFP by phone."

Statistic after horrific statistic pours from "the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights" (AP). It's hard to find a news report about Syria that doesn't cite them. But who are they? "They" are Rami Abdulrahman (or Rami Abdel Rahman), who lives in Coventry.

According to [a Reuters report](#) in December of last year: "When he isn't fielding calls from international media, Abdulrahman is a few minutes down the road at his clothes shop, which he runs with his wife."

When the Guardian's [Middle East live blog](#) cited "Rami Abdul-Rahman of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights" it also linked to [a sceptical article](#) in the Modern Tokyo Times – an article which suggested news outlets could be a bit "more objective about their sources" when quoting "this so-called entity", the SOHR.

That name, the "Syrian Observatory of Human Rights", sound so grand, so unimpeachable, so objective. And yet when Abdulrahman and his "Britain-based NGO" (AFP/NOW Lebanon) are the sole source for so many news stories about such an important subject, it would seem reasonable to submit this body to a little more scrutiny than it's had to date.

The Observatory is by no means the only Syrian news source to be quoted freely with little or no scrutiny ...

Hamza Fakher

The relationship between Ausama Monajed, the SNC, the Henry Jackson hawks and an unquestioning media can be seen in the case of Hamza Fakher. On 1 January, [Nick Cohen wrote in the Observer](#): "To grasp the scale of the barbarism, listen to Hamza Fakher, a pro-democracy activist, who is one of the most reliable sources on the crimes the regime's news blackout hides."

He goes on to recount Fakher's horrific tales of torture and mass murder. Fakher tells Cohen of a new hot-plate torture technique that he's heard about: "imagine all the melting flesh reaching the bone before the detainee falls on the plate". The following day, Shamik Das, writing on "evidence-based" progressive blog Left Foot Forward, quotes the same source: ["Hamza Fakher, a pro-democracy activist, describes the sickening reality ..."](#) – and the account of atrocities given to Cohen is repeated.

So, who exactly is this "pro-democracy activist", Hamza Fakher?

Fakher, it turns out, is the co-author of [Revolution in Danger](#), a "Henry Jackson Society Strategic Briefing", published in February of this year. He co-wrote this briefing paper with the Henry Jackson Society's communications director, Michael Weiss. And when he's not co-writing Henry Jackson Society strategic briefings, Fakher is the communication manager of the London-based [Strategic Research and Communication Centre](#) (SRCC). According to their website, "He joined the centre in 2011 and has been in charge of the centre's communication strategy and products."

As you may recall, the SRCC is run by one Ausama Monajed: "Mr Monajed founded the centre in 2010. He is widely quoted and interviewed in international press and media outlets. He previously worked as communication consultant in Europe and the US and formerly served as the director of Barada Television ...".

Monajed is Fakher's boss.

If this wasn't enough, for a final Washington twist, on the board of the Strategic Research and Communication Centre sits Murhaf Jouejati, [a professor at the National Defence University in DC](#) – "the premier center for Joint Professional Military Education (JPME)" which is "under the direction of the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff."

If you happen to be planning a trip to Monajed's "Strategic Research and Communication Centre", you'll find it here: Strategic Research & Communication Centre, Office 36, 88-90 Hatton Garden, Holborn, London EC1N 8PN.

Office 36 at 88-90 Hatton Garden is also where you'll find the London headquarters of The Fake Tan Company, Supercar 4 U Limited, Moola loans (a "trusted loans company"), Ultimate Screeding (for all your screeding needs), and The London School of Attraction – "a London-based training company which helps men develop the skills and confidence to meet and attract women." And about a hundred other businesses besides. [It's a virtual office](#). There's something oddly appropriate about this. A "communication centre" that doesn't even have a centre – a grand name but no physical substance.

That's the reality of Hamza Fakher. On 27 May, Shamik Das of Left Foot Forward [quotes again](#) from Fakher's account of atrocities, which he now describes as an "eyewitness account" (which Cohen never said it was) and which by now has hardened into "the record of the Assad regime".

So, a report of atrocities given by a Henry Jackson Society strategist, who is the communications manager of Mosafed's PR department, has acquired the gravitas of a historical "record".

This is not to suggest that the account of atrocities must be untrue, but how many of those who give it currency are scrutinising its origins?

And let's not forget, whatever destabilisation has been done in the realm of news and public opinion is [being carried out twofold on the ground](#). We already know that (at the very least) ["the Central Intelligence Agency and State Department ... are helping the opposition Free Syrian Army develop logistical routes for moving supplies into Syria and providing communications training."](#)

The bombs doors are open. [The plans have been drawn up](#).

This has been brewing for a time. The sheer energy and meticulous planning that's gone into this change of regime – it's breathtaking. The soft power and political reach of the big foundations and policy bodies is vast, but scrutiny is no respecter of fancy titles and fellowships and "strategy briefings". Executive director of what, it asks. Having "democracy" or "human rights" in your job title doesn't give you a free pass.

And if you're a "communications director" it means your words should be weighed extra carefully. Weiss and Fakher, both communications directors – PR professionals. At the Chatham House event in June 2011, Monajed is listed as: "Ausama Monajed, director of communications, National Initiative for Change" and he was head of PR for the MJD. The creator of the news website NOW Lebanon, Eli Khoury, is a Saatchi advertising executive. These communications directors are working hard to create what Tamara Wittes called a "positive brand".

They're selling the idea of military intervention and regime change, and the mainstream news is hungry to buy. Many of the "activists" and spokespeople representing the Syrian opposition are closely (and in many cases financially) interlinked with the US and London – the very people who would be doing the intervening. Which means information and statistics from these sources isn't necessarily pure news – it's a sales pitch, a PR campaign.

But it's never too late to ask questions, to scrutinise sources. Asking questions doesn't make you a cheerleader for Assad – that's a false argument. It just makes you less susceptible to spin. The good news is, there's a sceptic born every minute.