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**‘GOOD’ BATTLES AND ‘BAD’ BATTLES:
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF WESTERN MEDIA COVERAGE
OF THE BATTLES OF MOSUL AND ALEPPO**

Gregory Simons

¹⁾ Uppsala University

²⁾ Swedish Defence University

Four hostile newspapers are more to be feared than a thousand bayonets.

Napoleon Bonaparte

Abstract. The author examines the coverage of two simultaneously occurring battles, Mosul and Aleppo, in the Western media. Although both battles are intended to be key moments in defeating terrorist organisations, there is a stark contrast in the Western media’s framing of these events. In order to analyse the vast gaps in the coverage of these battles, the lens of news management, which is a means to influence public perception and opinion, is employed to view these two distinct events in Iraq and Syria. The author concludes that news management is applied to the information flows in these events in order to shape public opinion and perception of the battles Mosul and Aleppo—one ‘good’ and the other ‘bad.’

Keywords: media, news management, battle of Mosul, battle of Aleppo.

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Correspondence to: Gregory Simons, Uppsala Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Uppsala University. Box 514, SE 75120 Uppsala, Sweden. E-mail: greg.simons[at]ucrs.uu.se

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**«ХОРОШИЕ» И «ПЛОХИЕ» СРАЖЕНИЯ: СРАВНИТЕЛЬНЫЙ АНАЛИЗ
ОСВЕЩЕНИЯ ЗАПАДНЫМИ СМИ БИТВ ЗА МОСУЛ И АЛЕППО**

Аннотация. Автор анализирует освещение западными средствами массовой информации двух происходящих одновременно сражений – за Мосул и за Алеппо. Несмотря на то, что оба сражения задуманы как

знаковые события в борьбе с террористическими организациями, наблюдается значительный контраст в их подаче западными СМИ. Исследование специфики принципиальных различий в освещении данных сражений в Ираке и Сирии проводится с точки зрения применения технологий менеджмента новостей, который предполагает использование инструментов воздействия на общественные восприятие и мнение. Автор приходит к выводу о том, что менеджмент новостей применяется для регулирования новостного потока о данных событиях для того, чтобы формировать общественные восприятие и мнение об одном из них как о «хорошем», а о другом – как о «плохом».

Ключевые слова: средства массовой информации, менеджмент новостей, сражение за Мосул, сражение за Алеппо.

Introduction

Media content related to the topic of war is political in nature and in its ability to influence political outcomes. Therefore, modern armed conflicts and mass media become intertwined. “Indeed, the nature of contemporary conflict, coupled with the character of contemporary communications, means that the image [...] has become the key weapon in modern war” (Michalski & Gow 2007, 222). As noted historically by the likes of Sun Tzu and von Clausewitz, war is politics by another means. It affects the tangible (physical) and intangible (psychological) elements of war (Simons 2012).

Wars have been portrayed and projected as being good or bad at certain points in time, and this may even change in terms of the ethical judgement as space and time progresses. Information spaces help to shape the perception and the opinion of an audience, but this is contingent upon a number of different factors that are present in the human and informational environment.

This paper works from the premise that media is an instrument of war, which was asserted by Kenneth Payne. Such an assertion runs counter to the popular mantra that media is a fourth estate. The political connection to war makes public perception and opinion either a useful ally or a problematic complication. As media are the supposed eyes and ears of the public to remote events, it is the ideal environment to manipulate information flows in order to shape a political agenda (Simons 2016). Two simultaneously occurring battles, Aleppo and Mosul, and their coverage in the Western media are examined and analysed.

The lens to view these two distinct events in Iraq and Syria shall be news management, which is a means to influence public perception and opinion. This will be done with the question in mind, why are there such vast gaps in the framing of these two events when both of the battles are intended to be key moments in defeating terrorist organisations? Each of

the battles shall be taken in turn after the basic theoretical arguments and foundations of this paper have been established.

Media, War and Politics

Media have a complicated history and relationship with war. Three key narratives of the role of mainstream media in communicating conflict have been identified: “as critical observer, publicist, and most recently, as battleground, the surface upon which war is imagined and executed” (Thussu & Freedman 2003, 4). Their fourth estate function should compel them to be critical of the government message and to serve public interest, yet pressures, such as the demand for public unity and patriotism, reduce such opportunities during periods of armed conflict. BBC producer Kenneth Payne outlines the function of the media succinctly: “The media, in the modern era, are indisputably an instrument of war. This is because winning modern wars is as much dependent on carrying domestic and international public opinion as it is on defeating the enemy on the battlefield (Payne 2005, 81).”

The above mentioned situation creates a problem for society as media and journalists create a situation in which little or no debate exists and in which professional ethics of the profession are readily abandoned as part of the wider war effort. This situation has been observed by others: “In a period where diversity of opinion was possible, the newspapers’ editorials mirrored the official policy, even when this was undermined. A pattern that has expanded as the conflicts escalated” (Willcox 2005, 90). To argue for absolute objectivity is a utopian dream, but there does need to be a greater debate and level of awareness of the pros and cons of a situation, especially when moving towards military conflict:

Rather than playing a critical role in questioning American engagement in foreign wars, the mass media has traditionally promoted an image of the U.S. as committed to promoting democracy and human rights. While the promotion of pro-war views is not a problem in-and-of-itself, the systematic denial of alternative interpretations for American motives does constitute a serious impediment to efforts in achieving more balanced reporting and informed public debate (DiMaggio 2009, 77).

A number of trends have been observed above in how media set about reporting on armed conflict, which confirms Payne’s assertion that media are an instrument of war. Carruthers notes the “news organisations’ tendency to allow political elites to set the agenda; the potency of patriotism to muffle dissent and curb debate; the willingness of media to discipline one another; and professional norms of objectivity and balance that appear to institutionalise, rather than eliminate, certain forms of bias”

(Carruthers 2011, 43). Other trends have been noted too. The greater mediatisation of conflict has brought about a number of dynamics, namely: amplification, framing and performative agency, and co-structuring (Hjarvard et al. 2015, 4). These have led to an evolution in armed conflicts and the following aspects were noted and categorised as being influential on public perception and reception. Conduits refers to how “media may expand and amplify conflicts across time and space, that is, increase the speed, geographical reach, and level of involvement in armed conflicts.” In terms of languages, “media may be used to frame conflicts, allowing diverse social actors to perform in particular ways and resulting in a particular dramaturgy of the conflict in question.” Environment is also a factor: “media are an integral to various social institutions and at the same time constitute a public sphere” (Ibid., 9). Therefore, the means of sending a message, the nature of the message’s content, and the wider social and political environment in which the acts of communication take place all contribute to the relative success of the act (in which success is measured in terms of influence over the opinions and actions of a target audience in the desired manner of the message communicator). It is a difficult balance that is dependent upon timing and circumstance occurring within the environment of the intended target audience. Sometimes this is conducted under the conditions of deception and falsehood. The ability to successfully wage war is based upon the ability to control the information environment, and consequently the information, perceptions, and opinions of the public to create a façade of ethical and political legitimacy:

A veritable vacuum of responsibility arises from the hierarchical structure of the military: fallible leaders wage wars based upon false premises (above all, that there is no alternative), and the people support and soldiers execute military missions on the basis of ommissive descriptions of what war entails (Calhoun 2013, 165).

This creates what some refer to as the fog of war: “Today, however, the battlefield is superimposed upon civilian societies, generating a thick fog in which the guilty and the innocent, combatants and non-combatants are jumbled together chaotically” (Calhoun 2013, 165). Complexity goes against the human desire to break situations down into “understandable” news bites, which simplifies complex situations, often in an intentionally subjective manner that can benefit the political agenda of an actor.

In an effort to make a complex event more “understandable,” the role of the conduit and language are of critical importance in conveying an intended (as opposed to a random or unintended) meaning that shapes perception and opinion in the target audience. The combined effect of image and text in media content on the media consumer are important,

but require something more in order to generate the desired meaning: "It is the narrative underpinning a news outlet's understanding of a specific situation that ultimately matters, independent of the language that is used to produce that narration, be it verbal or visual" (De Franco 2012, 170). Given the current 24/7 news cycle, an actor must continually engage in the public information sphere to stand a chance of retaining any possible political advantage.

In order to maintain the initiative and retain the narrative and therefore the ability to influence public opinion and perception, those seeking a certain policy line need to be proactive in shaping information and content in the public information space. If they do not, any advantage can be potentially lost:

More importantly, the mere fact that this may happen pushes politicians to produce as much information as they can with a two-fold objective: 1) to saturate the media and lead journalists to use news which is already available instead of searching for that which is not; and 2) to keep the public quiet with an illusion of transparency (De Franco 2012, 174).

There are long tested means and methods of achieving this state in the public information sphere. *News Management* is defined as being "the strategic communication of messages, via the media, in order to further political goals. It is concerned with the control of information, and the way in which political information is reported, by political organisations" (Lilleker 2011, 131). A political actor can seek an advantage through managing information and disclosure through news. The end of the manipulation of the news is linked to a "game" of persuasion, which can provide a competitive edge over rival interests (Shin 1994). As noted in a historical context, such practices can present certain challenges and issues. A situation can arise when "the media become a docile conduit for the flow of supposedly neutral information to the public, thereby serving the 'national interest'" (Tulloch 1993, 382). Some researchers have established a link between news management and the practice of foreign policy, in particular strategic public diplomacy: "As the campaigns to mobilize support for both US-led wars [the 1991 Gulf War and 2003 Iraq War] made clear, strategic public diplomacy is most effective in settings in which the level of information held by the public is low and in which the operations of strategic communication can be kept out of the public eye" (Esser 2009, 731). In addition to laying the groundwork and conditions for establishing a "good" or popular war, these very methods could also be used to create the requisite intangible conditions for a "bad" or unpopular war through a similar campaign, but with the use of negative messaging. A

true test of skill and excellence in news management would be to run two campaigns simultaneously—one positive and one negative—to characterise two different battles being waged at the same time in which one is ‘good’ and the other is ‘bad.’

News Management in War

Two different battles were chosen to test the above idea, whether it is possible to engage effectively in news management of two simultaneous battles in the same geographical region. Limiting it to ongoing conflicts and the need to find one “good” and one “bad” battle greatly reduced the number of potential choices. Given the highly political nature of war, the “best” and most likely location to find this situation was in the Middle East. The current level of geopolitical competition and conflict in the region (Saudi Arabia versus Iran, Turkey versus Kurds, US versus Russia) meant that there are many ongoing conflicts, but there are few places where there are key or iconic battles being fought simultaneously. This excluded many of the conflicts, such as Yemen and Afghanistan. Both of these battles needed a high profile in terms of news coverage in Western media.

However, there are two battles that have begun and are being narrated as key moments, the success of which could have a decisive effect on the outcome of the war. One of these is the Battle of Mosul in Iraq in 2016, which has been ongoing for some time. The capture of this town is being trumpeted as a path to success against the Islamic State. This has been framed as the “good” war, one in which human values predominate. The other battle is the Battle for Aleppo in Syria in 2016, which is framed as a “bad” war, one in which the oppression of human values predominates. Both of the battles are being framed as against terrorist forces (Al Qaeda in Aleppo and ISIS in Mosul) by those conducting the military operations. Yet the framing in Western media differs greatly in its ethical judgement of the two events, even though both of these groups are considered terrorist organisations in the West.

Material for the two events was drawn from news articles received from headlines emailed to the author, such as *Space War* (a news aggregate), *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*, and from the news feed on Facebook. In addition, the author conducted basic internet searches for the terms “Russian attack on Aleppo 2016” and “Attack on Mosul 2016” using the search engine Google. The results were manually checked to make sure they met the criteria (Western media news outlets, relevance to the individual events). The first ten pages of results for each search were examined and analysed. More than 200 news stories were read and analysed in the course of the research. The following represents a representative sample of the common sets of descriptions and narratives of the two battles in question.

Aleppo—the 'Bad' Battle

From the very start of the conflict in Syria, the US-led West has consistently demanded and worked towards regime change in Syria (Simons 2016). This same message continues until now. For example, Hillary Clinton stated that “removing President Bashar al-Assad is the top priority in Syria.”¹ The war in Syria came to Aleppo in July 2012. Given the location of the city near the Turkish border on the main land transport route, it is a strategic point. In June 2016 Hassan Nasrallah (Hezbollah chief) declared that Syria’s “real, strategic, greatest battle is in Aleppo and the surrounding area.” In addition, the significance of the battle is also stressed by the author of the article: “The stage is prepared for the Syrian endgame—a game the rebels look doomed to lose, along with the entire anti-Assad revolution.”² This event is projected by the different sides of this conflict as a key and decisive event that shall shape the future of the entire conflict for the worse should the Syrian government and Russian military forces prevail.

There are black and white characterisations of the different sides in the conflict, the “good rebel” underdogs and the “bad” and oppressive Syrian government and Russian forces. Now it is necessary to offer a brief and concrete example to illustrate the characterisation of the main actors of the conflict in an ethical frame. The movement of Syrian or Russian military hardware is projected as sinister and “ominous” with harmful and malicious intent.³ As the villains, the Syrian government and Russians are suitably cast as ruthless and without mercy or compassion:

Many of the 300,000 plus unfortunates trapped inside face the prospect of slowly starving as extortionately-priced food, medicine and fuel supplies are systematically blocked. Some will die before then from Syrian and Russian government barrel-bombing. Latterly supplemented by incendiary cluster munitions burning to 2500 C, the bombers are steadily eradicating schools, hospitals and markets from above with impunity.⁴

¹ “Presidential Candidate Clinton Says Removing Assad in Syria is No. 1 Priority.” 2016. *Reuters*, October 5. Accessed October 10, 2016. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-clinton-syria-idUSKCNORZ1C020151005>

² Darke, D. 2016. “Aleppo: Is Besieged Syrian City Facing Last Grasp?” *BBC*, July 22. Accessed October 25, 2016. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36853689>

³ Borger, J. 2016. “Ominous News for Aleppo as Russian Frigate Reaches Syrian Coast.” *The Guardian*, November 4. Accessed November 7, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/04/russia-further-bolsters-naval-presence-in-mediterranean>

⁴ Darke, D. 2016. “Aleppo: Is Besieged Syrian City Facing Last Grasp?” *BBC*, July 22. Accessed October 25, 2016. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36853689>

A lot of assertions and statements are made without any necessary support or actual evidence provided by the journalist. The intention, or at least the effect, is to paint as negative a picture as possible of the Syrian government and their allies in spite of the struggle against terrorist groups, such as Al Nusra (now rebranded as Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham), an Al Qaeda affiliate operating in the city and which Western media paint in a positive light: “Syria’s moderate opposition groups have suffered years of broken promises of support from the international community.”⁵ Another important point is the use of deceptive labelling, such as “moderate forces” or “rebels.” This is a vague, yet reasonably positive term, which has included such forces as Al Nursa in the past. These groups are pictured as being a heroic underdog that needs and deserves support to bring about regime change.

From these brief initial observations, it is possible to note clusters of frames, events and processes through which news stories further propagate a moral and ethical projection of the war, which has a tendency to favour the “rebels” and the policy goal of regime change in Syria. Military action conducted by the Syrian government and its allies is one of the themes, and the “diplomatic” actions of the United States and its allies are another central theme. The primary messages in the Western media narrative of the Battle for Aleppo are of indiscriminate bombings by the Syrian government and Russia, a long suffering civilian population, and heroic “rebel” resistance.

Many of these news stories are based upon the testimony of unnamed Syrian “activists,” without divulging the name of the person or group or declaring their goals or aims. This seems to be a deliberate strategy of hiding the true nature of those people and groups, whilst giving the superficial impression of their “objectivity.” One such article, which appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, provides numerous examples of inconsistent logic as the result of news management of two simultaneous battles in which one is declared good and the other bad: “At the start of that meeting the UN’s top envoy to Syria accused the government of unleashing unprecedented military violence against civilians in Aleppo.” The term unprecedented remains unqualified and is an unsubstantiated assertion, but it sounds menacing. Quotes from political figures are not challenged or questioned, but simply reported as being ‘facts’, even though opposing views are usually critically challenged in mainstream mass media reporting. The offensive is painted as one that is doomed to fail as there is no solely “military solution” possible. Western hype is increased through accusations of Syrian and Russian war crimes and the possibility of bringing individuals in both countries to trial: “France’s Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault said Russia and Iran will be guilty of war crimes if they

⁵ Darke, D. 2016. “Aleppo: Is Besieged Syrian City Facing Last Grasp?” *BBC*, July 22. Accessed October 25, 2016. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36853689>

don't pressure Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad to stop escalating violence." There were even demands made for "mercy" to be shown to the so-called rebels: "The statement released by 33 factions called upon the government and Russian forces to halt airstrikes and lift sieges on opposition areas."⁶ The thirty-three factions remain unnamed, along with their political and military agenda. The demands are directed at so-called opposition areas and not at areas under siege by jihadist forces. The sources in this article were only those who opposed the Syrian government and the Russian military involvement.

The picture of the Syrian conflict is far from consistent, especially in terms of the quality of journalism. An impression that can be deduced by the reporting is of great suffering, although most of the references relate to events in the eastern part of the city that is held by Jihadist forces, and not the government-held western parts of the city. In one of the rare articles that told the other side of the story in Western mainstream media, this omission becomes clear. A thirty-year-old student from Western Aleppo was interviewed (the identity, age and profession are given): "The policy of these Western countries is to destroy the Syrian government, or the 'regime' as they call it, so they don't mention what happens in government territory ... because they don't want their people to know the truth of what is happening in the country." He notes further: "Western channels don't send their correspondents to government-controlled areas because that would be an acknowledgement of the Syrian state." As noted in this article, although the government controls the skies, the jihadist forces regularly fire mortars into civilian areas of western Aleppo.⁷ Another article appeared in the *New York Times*. Although the article tried to paint a more normal and better life for people in the government-controlled Western Aleppo, it could not completely ignore the human suffering there either. The report even gave the official figure of 11,000 civilian deaths in Western Aleppo as the result of indiscriminate shelling by anti-Assad forces that included a mixture of Al Qaeda and US-backed groups.⁸ These particular news articles hint at the perception of an existing media dichotomy between those whose misery is worthy of publicising and others who are unworthy, which hints at the possibility of a political agenda in which media are being used according to Payne as an instrument of war.

⁶ Associated Press. "Bombing Campaign Leaves Aleppo Hospitals Overwhelmed as UN Meets Over Syria." 2016. *Los Angeles Times*, September 25. Accessed September 26, 2016. www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-syrian-rebels-aleppo-government-20160925-snap-story.html

⁷ Bulos, N. 2016. "In Coverage of Syrian War, Residents of Government-Held West Aleppo Feel the World Has Forgotten Them." *Los Angeles Times*, September 1. Accessed September 2, 2016. www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-syria-aleppo-media-war-20160830-snap-htmlstory.html

⁸ Barnard, A. 2016. "I Saw My Father Dying': A View From Aleppo's Government Held Side." *The New York Times*, November 4. Accessed November 7, 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/05/world/middleeast/aleppo-syria.html>

From news article headlines, it is clear that an offensive began by the Syrian government to take Aleppo back from the jihadist forces. Some of the headlines can be somewhat neutral in their tone, such as “Syrian Government Troops Launch Ground Assault to Retake Aleppo” and “Moscow Sends More Warplanes into Syria as Aleppo Fighting Rages.”⁹ Other news headlines do little to mask their political partisanship through value and ethically laden suggestive rhetoric: “Russia’s Brutal Bombing of Aleppo May be Calculated, and it May be Working.” This article notes that “the effects of Russia’s bombing campaign in the Syrian city of Aleppo—destroying hospitals and schools, choking off basic supplies, and killing aid workers and hundreds of civilians over just days—raise a question: what could possibly motivate such brutality?”¹⁰ The type of rhetoric is heavily laden in pathos and reliant on assertion rather than evidence, or based on sources that have a distinct bias and political interest in the conflict, such as the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. Other emotionally laden headlines include, “As Aleppo Burns, Assad’s Henchmen Live a Life of Luxury in the West: Godfathers of the Syrian Regime Flit Between Paris, Marbella and Mayfair as Their Country is Locked in a Bloody Civil War”,¹¹ “In Push on Aleppo, Syria and Russia Seem Ready to Further Scorch its Earth”,¹² “His Grip Still Secure, Bashar al-Assad Smiles as Syria Burns”,¹³ “Worse Than Hell: Russia, Syrian Regime Stepping up

⁹ Bulos, N. 2016. “Syrian Government Troops Launch Ground Assault to Retake Aleppo.” *Los Angeles Times*, September 27. Accessed September 28, 2016. www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-syria-ground-assault-20160927-snap-story.html, 27 September 2016; “Warplanes into Syria as Aleppo Fighting Rages.” 2016. *Deutsche Welle*, October 1. Accessed October 20, 2016. <http://www.dw.com/en/moscow-to-send-more-warplanes-into-syria-as-aleppo-fighting-rages/a-35937653>

¹⁰ Fisher, M. 2016. “Russia’s Brutal Bombing of Aleppo May be Calculated, and it May be Working.” *The New York Times*, September 28. Accessed October 20, 2016. www.nytimes.com/2016/09/29/world/middleeast/russias-brutal-bombing-of-aleppo-may-be-calculated-and-it-may-be-working.html

¹¹ Robertson, A. 2016. “As Aleppo Burns, Assad’s Henchmen Live a Life of Luxury in the West: Godfathers of the Syrian Regime Flit Between Paris, Marbella and Mayfair as Their Country is Locked in a Bloody Civil War.” *Daily Mail*, October 16. Accessed October 20, 2016. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3840978/As-Aleppo-burns-Assad-s-henchmen-live-life-luxury-West-Godfathers-Syrian-regime-flit-Paris-Marbella-Mayfair-country-locked-bloody-civil-war.html>

¹² Barnard, A., and S. Sengupta. 2016. “In Push on Aleppo, Syria and Russia Seem Ready to Further Scorch its Earth.” *The New York Times*, September 25. Accessed September 26, 2016. www.nytimes.com/2016/09/26/world/middleeast/syria-un-security-council.html

¹³ Hubbard, B. 2016. “His Grip Still Secure, Bashar al-Assad Smiles as Syria Burns.” *The New York Times*, September 17. Accessed September 19, 2016. www.nytimes.com/2016/09/18/world/middleeast/his-position-still-secure-bashar-al-assad-smiles-as-syria-burns.html

Aleppo Fight,”¹⁴ “Russia Accused of Supporting ‘Barbarism’ Over Syrian Conflict,”¹⁵ and “Aleppo Battered as Russia Slams ‘Unacceptable’ Rhetoric.”¹⁶ There is also little balance in the content of these articles, which give only one subjective side of the story without any context and with various assertions and accusations to back the emotional rhetoric. Russia and the Syrian government are clearly projected as the villains of this story. There is also an attempt to project the “rebels” as fighting for freedom and the US-led West as objective brokers for the sake of humanity.

An iconic moment that was created to perpetuate these images and projected reality can be found in the reporting and rhetoric around ceasefires. The end of the ceasefire in October 2016 created an atmosphere of value-based lobbying through media reporting on the issue. Russia and Syria were already projected as being inhumane aggressors and the reporting reflected this narrative. One such blatant example appeared in the *Daily Mail*: “As a Gesture of Goodwill We Won’t Bomb You (Today): Russia and Syria Announce Temporary Ceasefire Over Aleppo That will Last Eight Hours,”¹⁷ which occurred after heavy criticism by Western media that the Syrian government never allowed ceasefires.¹⁷ The ceasefire was also projected as being a lost opportunity, such as the evacuation of civilians from eastern Aleppo held by the jihadist forces.¹⁸ Many media articles placed the blame for the failure of the ceasefire solely on Russia and Syria, with at least one notable exception: “The Syrian military called off a ceasefire agreement that began last week, a decision it blamed on rebel groups, but was likely affected by a US bombing mission that killed

¹⁴ Shinkman, P. 2016. “Worse Than Hell: Russia, Syrian Regime Stepping Up Aleppo Fight.” *US News*, September 26. Accessed September 27, 2016. <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2016-09-26/worse-than-hell-russia-syrian-regime-stepping-up-aleppo-fight>

¹⁵ Solomon, E., and G. Dyer. 2016. “Russia Accused of Supporting ‘Barbarism’ Over Syrian Conflict.” *Financial Times*, September 25. Accessed September 26, 2016. <https://www.ft.com/content/cdd5f09c-831d-11e6-a29c-6e7d9515ad15>

¹⁶ Al-Masri, K., and L. A. Rahal. 2016. “Aleppo Battered as Russia Slams ‘Unacceptable’ Rhetoric.” *Space War*, September 27. Accessed September 28, 2016. http://www.spacewar.com/reports/Aleppo_battered_as_Russia_slams_unacceptable_rhetoric_999.html

¹⁷ Robinson, J. 2016. “As a Gesture of Goodwill We Won’t Bomb You (Today): Russia and Syria Announce Temporary Ceasefire Over Aleppo That will Last Eight Hours.” *Daily Mail*, October 19. Accessed October 20, 2016. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3843022/Air-raids-kill-12-civilians-Syrias-Aleppo-monitor.html>

¹⁸ Al-Masri, K. 2016. “Fighting Shakes Aleppo as Ceasefire Expires.” *Space War*, October 23. Accessed October 24, 2016. http://www.spacewar.com/reports/Fighting_shakes_Aleppo_as_ceasefire_expires_999.html; “Fresh Fighting in Aleppo as Ceasefire Ends Without Evacuations.” 2016. *Deutsche Welle*, October 23. Accessed October 24, 2016. <http://www.dw.com/en/fresh-fighting-in-aleppo-as-ceasefire-ends-without-evacuations/a-36124611>

Syrian government forces over the weekend.”¹⁹ The author makes clear reference to the US airstrike that was responsible for the deaths of numerous Syrian soldiers and that enabled ISIS to capture a Syrian military base that was bombed during the ceasefire.

Western media reporting takes significant time and effort to project the West as a humanitarian force in the conflict. Various media reports make mention of the concern expressed by Western political leaders, and Russian aggression in the face of Western humanism.²⁰ However, some contradictions in the narrative exist. Whilst the West projects itself as the saviour and Russia and Syria as the villains, this façade gets challenged in some of the solutions to the violence that are offered to the public. This ranges from threats by the US government to unilaterally stop diplomatic efforts with Russia, to talk of direct and overt military intervention in Syria against Russia and the Syrian government to stop the killing.²¹ There seems to be little consideration given in these political statements to the effects on the ground of foreign political and military interference on the civilians living within the government-controlled areas.

¹⁹ Phippen, J. W. 2016. “The End of the Syrian Ceasefire.” *The Atlantic*, September 19. Accessed September 26, 2016. <http://www.theatlantic.com/news/archive/2016/09/syria-cease-fire-bombing/500543/>

²⁰ “Kerry Expresses Concern to Lavrov About Renewed Assault on Aleppo.” 2016. *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, October 25. Accessed October 25, 2016. <http://www.rferl.org/a/kerry-concerned-lavrov-renewed-russian-assault-aleppo/28073276.html>; “Syrian War: Russia to Continue Bombing Aleppo Despite US Threats to Suspend Engagement.” 2016. *ABC News*, September 29. Accessed October 31, 2016. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-09-29/us-threatens-end-cooperation-unless-russia-stops-aleppo-assault/7886990>; “Syrian War: Russia Rejects US Calls to Halt Bombing in Eastern Aleppo.” 2016. *BBC News*, September 29. Accessed October 20, 2016. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-37508085>; Sculthorpe, T., and L. Brown. 2016. “Russia Must Show ‘Mercy’ to Aleppo, Boris Johnson Warns as he Joins John Kerry to Threaten New Sanctions but Admits There is no Support for Western Action to End Bombing in Syria.” *Daily Mail*, October 16. Accessed October 20, 2016. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3840652/Diplomats-forge-new-track-end-Syria-violence-no-truce.html>; Nichols, M., and T. Perry. 2016. “Kerry Demands Russia, Syria Ground Warplanes to Save Truce.” *Reuters*, September 21. Accessed September 26, 2016. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-idUSKCN11R1CN>

²¹ Dyer, G. 2016. “US-Russia Deal on Syria Hangs in the Balance.” *Financial Times*, September 18. Accessed September 19, 2016. <https://www.ft.com/content/b4d824d2-7db1-11e6-bc52-0c7211ef3198>; Gordon, M. R., and A. E. Kramer. 2016. “Tension With Russia Rises as US Halts Syria Negotiations.” *The New York Times*, October 3. Accessed October 4, 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/04/world/middleeast/us-suspends-talks-with-russia-on-syria.html>; Watts, J. 2016. “UK and US Both Consider Military Options Amid Warnings Russia Will ‘Flatten’ Aleppo.” *The Independent*, October 13. Accessed October 20, 2016. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/us-uk-military-action-russia-syria-bombing-aleppo-a7360226.html>; Rogin, J. 2016. “Obama Administration Considering Strikes on Assad, Again.” *The Washington Post*, October 4. Accessed October 5, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/josh-rogin/wp/2016/10/04/obama-administration-considering-strikes-on-assad-again/?utm_term=.aeaa366825d8

Some signs of critical reflection periodically surface in Western media reporting concerning aspects of the Syrian conflict. One of the articles noted was from the *Los Angeles Times* and dealt with the challenges and the dilemmas the US faced in getting involved in the Syrian war in a more open and direct form, including how to deal with the growth of the jihadist group Fateh al-Sham: "In recent weeks, US intelligence has detected signs that al Qaeda operatives in Syria are plotting attacks against the West, raising concerns that the hard-line Islamist group has escaped scrutiny for too long, according to two US intelligence officials who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive information"²². This fits with the US's short-term vision for Syria that seemingly is focused narrowly on regime change. This point has been noted by others: "Yet the horrific tragedy now unfolding in Syria is partially the result of the West's tacit and overt support for the overthrow of Syria's secular government by radical Sunni fundamentalists. This has been, in effect, US policy in Syria, and it runs directly counter to US national-security interests."²³

Mosul—the 'Good' Battle

In June 2014, ISIS captured the Iraqi city of Mosul and soon afterwards declared a caliphate²⁴. A number of military offensives have been attempted by Iraqi and Kurdish forces in 2015 and 2016. The most recent began on October 16, 2016, with the operational name "We Are Coming, Nineveh" (named after the governorate that surrounds Mosul).²⁵ Coalition forces opposing ISIS maintain a 10:1 numerical advantage.²⁶ The

²² Bennett, B., W. J. Hennigan and N. Bulos. 2016. "Al Qaeda Founded Rebel Group's Growth Underscores US Challenges in Syria." *Los Angeles Times*, October 6. Accessed October 10, 2016. www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-nursa-syria-20161005-snap-story.html; Robert Fisk noted that "Nusra—which changed its name to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, the 'Support Front for the People of Levant', in the hope of escaping its al Qaeda roots—is increasingly referred to by both Western politicians and journalists as 'the rebels', along with a plethora of other militia outfits fighting the Syrian regime." Fisk, R. 2016. "When Mosul Falls, ISIS Will Flee to the Safety of Syria. But What Then?" *The Independent*, October 17. Accessed October 19, 2016. <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/mosul-offensive-isis-flee-iraq-syria-raqqa-bashar-al-assad-what-then-robert-fisk-a7365776.html>

²³ Carden, J. 2016. "War Hawks Are Sensing an Opening in Syria." *The Nation*, October 6. Accessed October 7, 2016. <https://www.thenation.com/article/war-hawks-are-sensing-an-opening-in-syria/>

²⁴ Beauchamp, Z. 2016. "The Battle for Mosul, Explained." *Vox*, October 18. Accessed November 8, 2016. <http://www.vox.com/world/2016/10/18/13305564/mosul-iraq-isis-battle>

²⁵ Winter, C. 2016. "How the Islamic State is Spinning the Mosul Battle." *The Atlantic*, October 20. Accessed November 8, 2016. <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/10/isis-mosul-propaganda-iraq-kurds-peshmerga/504854/>

²⁶ "What is the battle for Mosul? Everything you need to know about the fight to liberate Isil's last bastion of power in Iraq." 2016. *The Telegraph*, October 17. Accessed November 8, 2016.

Battle for Mosul is projected as a key event that can turn the tide against ISIS and its caliphate. Mosul is often described as the jewel in the Islamic State's crown.²⁷ US air support in this battle is characterised in very different terms to Russian air support in Aleppo: "They're like a skilful surgeon removing a cancer."²⁸ First and foremost, this is characterised and narrated by politicians, military officials, and the mass media as a battle for the liberation of the local population. It is done rhetorically with a certain sense of inevitability in the eventual outcome: "After losing several key cities in Iraq and also in Syria, the jihadists' 'state' is already looking threadbare and the loss of Mosul would all but seal its disintegration."²⁹ The general tone of Western media about this military offensive is that it is a good battle, which is expressed in a number of emphasized aspects, such as the local population, the nature and weakness of ISIS, and the strength and skill of allied forces with their "humanitarian" approach.

One of the lines of reporting in the Battle for Mosul is that this is done for the good of the local population in order to liberate them from an oppressive occupier. At times this is done with a tinge of caution: "The reality is more complex than many assume. Without a peace plan and counter-narrative that involves all the peoples of Iraq, victory will be partial and short-lived."³⁰ One of the images painted is that of a military offensive that is taking all steps possible to minimise civilian casualties, for example, stories of the evacuation of civilians from villages in the path of the offensive.³¹ There is a picture of life returning to a sense of normality and a sense of relief by residents freed from ISIS rule.³² The humanity of the coalition forces is contrasted with the inhumanity of ISIS.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/10/17/what-is-the-battle-for-mosul-isis-last-bastion-of-power-in-iraq/>

²⁷ Bulos, N. 2016. "The Battle in Iraq that Could Turn the Tide Against Islamic State: The Fight for Mosul is About to Begin." *Los Angeles Times*, October 2. Accessed October 3, 2016. <http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-iraq-mosul-20161002-snap-story.html>

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Mojon, J. M. 2016. "For IS Jihadists, Losing Mosul Spells Caliphate Doom." *Space War*, October 18. Accessed October 19, 2016. http://www.spacewar.com/reports/For_IS_jihadists_losing_Mosul_spells_caliphate_doom_999.html

³⁰ Shaw, J. 2016. "The Battle for Mosul is not Just Coalition (Good) v ISIS (Bad)." *The Guardian*, October 18. Accessed October 19, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/oct/18/battle-for-mosul-isis-iraq>

³¹ Benhaida, S. 2016. "Iraqi Special Forces Evacuate Villages Close to Mosul." *Space War*, October 25. Accessed October 26, 2016. http://www.spacewar.com/reports/Iraqi_special_forces_evacuate_villages_close_to_Mosul_999.html

³² Arango, T. 2016. "Mosul Neighbours Wake Up to a Day Without ISIS." *The New York Times*, November 2. Accessed November 4, 2016.

One of the humanitarian dilemmas was raised in the *Los Angeles Times*. This concerns the question of how to win the Battle of Mosul and to free more than one million trapped residents without killing them.³³ This apparently humane approach to fighting the battle is contrasted against a ruthless and merciless enemy. The Pentagon stated that “Islamic State jihadists are trapping Mosul’s residents to use as human shields. [...] IS had for weeks kept Mosul’s estimated population of 1.5 million from escaping, with the start of the offensive offering them no respite.”³⁴ However, this contrasted significantly from news that was published just days earlier. Coalition forces had dropped four-page leaflets over Mosul and the ISIS-occupied territories warning of an impending military offensive to liberate them: “Residents are asked to stay away from certain parts of the city, avoid ISIS positions, remain in their homes and seal their windows and doors.”³⁵ Thus it seems that the Pentagon statement that residents were being forced to stay as human shields as residents had in fact been advised to stay in their homes by the coalition forces arrayed against ISIS in the Mosul area. With such discrepancies in the message, such contradictions can erode the sense of public trust in the messenger. Not everyone was convinced that the best interests of Iraqi civilians were being considered: “Usually in war, the real losers are the civilians. While the Battle for Mosul has begun, the fight for normality is not on the horizon. In these types of operations, enemy targets are always drawn up, but we hear less and less about the civilians that need saving.”³⁶ The enemy, ISIS, is depicted in a symbolic and simplistic manner as evil villains and at times as cowards.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/03/world/middleeast/mosul-neighbors-wake-up-to-a-day-without-isis-but-a-long-path-to-peace.html>

³³ Hennessy-Fiske, M., and N. Bulos. 2016. “The Battle for Mosul: How to Free 1 Million Residents Without Killing Them.” *Los Angeles Times*, October 19. Accessed Octpber 20, 2016. <http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-iraq-mosul-civilians-20161019-snap-story.html>

³⁴ Watkins, T. 2016. “IS Traps Mosul Civilians as Human Shields, Pentagon Says.” *Space War*, October 18. Accessed October 19, 2016. http://www.spacewar.com/reports/IS_traps_Mosul_civilians_as_human_shields_Pentagon_says_999.html; Shaheen, K. 2016. “ISIS Attacks Kirkuk as Concerns Mount Over Fate of Civilians in Mosul.” *The Guardian*, October 21. Accessed October 25, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/21/kirkuk-police-compound-under-attack-militants-iraq-isis-mosul>

³⁵ Capelouto, S., and H. Alkhshali. 2016. “Iraq Air Force Drops Leaflets Warning of Mosul’s Liberation from ISIS.” *CNN*, October 16. Accessed November 1, 2016. <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/10/15/middleeast/mosul-isis-battle-preparations/>

³⁶ Meir, R. 2016. “Is the Battle to Liberate Mosul Good for its Residents?” *The Clarion Project*, October 19. Accessed October 20, 2016. <http://www.clarionproject.org/analysis/battle-liberate-mosul-good-its-residents>

ISIS fighters are shown as oppressive and ruthless terrorists and the “bad guy” in the Western mass media. This image is reinforced with stories of atrocities against civilians and the use of suicide attacks to ensure the message of a highly motivated fanatical and ideological opponent is communicated effectively.³⁷ In spite of this emphasized trait of ruthlessness and fanaticism, they are also labelled as cowards in their defence of Mosul. News headlines directly point to the cowardice displayed by ISIS and especially its leaders. A selection of those headlines illustrates this point: “Islamic State Leaders are Fleeing Mosul, Says US General.”³⁸ “ISIS Leaders Abandon Mosul as Iraqi Military Presses Attack,”³⁹ and “This War is a drag! Cowardly ISIS Fighters Flee Mosul Dressed in Women’s Clothes After Leader Orders Wives and Girlfriends to Evacuate the City.”⁴⁰ These headlines seemingly contradict the narrative of the battle-hardened and fanatical enemy. One headline even promised a bigger prize in Mosul: “ISIS Leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi ‘Hiding in Mosul’ as Iraqi Forces Reach City.”⁴¹ Cowardice and hiding by ISIS fighters are highlighted in these particular types of news stories.

In terms of how the Western mainstream media characterise the intentions and effects of the coalition’s military actions against ISIS in Mosul, it is a vastly different message to that used to describe the military offensive in Aleppo. The assessment is upbeat and positive in its communicated mood. It reports positive milestones, such as “Reaching Mosul Caps a Turnaround for Iraq Forces.”⁴² In other words, the Iraqi

³⁷ Ensor, J. 2016. “ISIL ‘Launches Suicide Attacks’ On Kurdish Forces in Mosul as Bloody Battle to Retake Terror Group’s Iraq Stronghold Begins.” *The Telegraph*, October 17. Accessed October 20, 2016. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/10/17/bloody-battle-to-retake-mosul-begins-as-iraqi-forces-move-to-wip2/>

³⁸ Borger, J., F. Hawramy and K. Shaheen. 2016. “Islamic State Leaders are Fleeing Mosul, Says US General.” *The Guardian*, October 19. Accessed October 25, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/19/mosul-thousands-flee-syrian-refugee-camps-iraqi-forces-close-city>

³⁹ “ISIS Leaders Abandon Mosul as Iraqi Military Presses Attack.” 2016. *Public Radio International*, October 19. Accessed October 20, 2016. <http://www.pri.org/stories/2016-10-19/isis-leaders-abandon-mosul-iraqi-military-presses-attack>

⁴⁰ Davies, G. 2016. “This War is a Drag! Cowardly ISIS Fighters Flee Mosul Dressed in Women’s Clothes After Leader Orders Wives and Girlfriends to Evacuate the City.” *Daily Mail*, October 20. Accessed October 21, 2016. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3855882/This-war-drag-Cowardly-ISIS-fighters-flee-Mosul-dressed-women-s-clothes-leader-orders-wives-girlfriends-evacuate-city.html>

⁴¹ Cockburn, P. 2016. “ISIS Leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi ‘Hiding in Mosul’ as Iraqi Forces Reach City.” *The Independent*, November 2. Accessed November 4, 2016. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-mosul-latest-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-leader-hiding-defeat-iraqi-offensive-assault-a7392016.html>

⁴² Dunlop, W. G. 2016. “Reaching Mosul Caps a Turnaround for Iraq Forces.” *Space War*, November 2. Accessed November 7, 2016. http://www.spacewar.com/reports/Reaching_Mosul_caps_turnaround_for_Iraq_forces_999.html

forces have shaken off the ghosts of the past and are becoming an effective fighting force. This message is reinforced by stories that emphasize military gains, such as “Iraqi PM: Operation to drive ISIS out of Mosul is Imminent.”⁴³ These headlines are intended to assure the war-weary Western public of an Iraqi military taking over the fight and its attendant risks, freeing Western soldiers from the dangers involved.⁴⁴ They manage the expectations of the Western publics concerning the conflict. Another example of expectation management is found in trying to push the idea of victory, but with a caveat: “Iraqi Forces Fear Tough Battles Ahead After Quick Gains.”⁴⁵

The supporting role of the United States in training Iraqi forces⁴⁶ and in preparing for the Mosul offensive⁴⁷ is mentioned. Successes of the offensive are trumpeted: “In Wake of Mosul Offensive, a Tale of Two Villages.”⁴⁸ It is a story of hardship and triumph, from oppression to freedom, by the local people and the military coalition against ISIS. The slow and steady military progress against ISIS is also emphasized: “Coalition Huddles as Forces Inch Towards Mosul.”⁴⁹ This story is intended to emphasize unity and resolve in the fight. When the coalition forces engage in military operations they are characterised as “moving,”⁵⁰ these

⁴³ Alkhshali, H., A. Dewan and S. Capelouto. 2016. “Iraqi PM: Operation to drive ISIS out of Mosul is imminent.” *CNN*, October 16. Accessed October 20, 2016. <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/10/16/middleeast/mosul-isis-battle-preparations/>

⁴⁴ Landler, M., and E. Schmitt. 2016. “Battle for Mosul Tests Obama Strategy to Shift Fight’s Burden From US.” *The New York Times*, October 17. Accessed October 18, 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/18/us/politics/mosul-iraq-obama-strategy.html>

⁴⁵ Solomon, E. 2016. “Iraqi Forces Fear Tough Battles Ahead After Quick Gains.” *Financial Times*, October 31. Accessed November 4, 2016. <https://www.ft.com/content/cc68fe6a-9f57-11e6-891e-abe238dee8e2>

⁴⁶ Morris, L., and K. Fahim 2016. “Iraq’s US-Trained Counterterrorism Troops Join the Attack on Mosul.” *The Washington Post*, October 20. Accessed October 21, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/new-kurdish-offensive-opens-on-mosul-north-as-iraqi-forces-push-from-the-east/2016/10/20/19092040-9645-11e6-9cae-2a3574e296a6_story.html

⁴⁷ Hennigan, W. J. 2016. “Pentagon to Increase US Troops in Iraq to Help Prepare Assault on Mosul.” *Los Angeles Times*, July 11. Accessed July 18, 2016. <http://www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-us-troops-iraq-20160711-snap-story.html>

⁴⁸ Malterre, T., and S. Majeed. 2016. “In Wake of Mosul Offensive, a Tale of Two Villages.” *Space War*, October 30. Accessed November 1, 2016. http://www.spacewar.com/reports/In_wake_of_Mosul_offensive_a_tale_of_two_villages_999.html

⁴⁹ Benhaida, S., and A. Karim. 2016. “Coalition Huddles as Forces Inch Towards Mosul.” *Space War*, October 25. Accessed October 26, 2016. http://www.spacewar.com/reports/Coalition_huddles_as_forces_inch_towards_Mosul_999.html

⁵⁰ Dunlop, W. G., C. Bertier, A. al-Rubaye. 2016. “Iraqi Forces Move to Retake Christian Town on Way to Mosul.” *Space War*, October 19. Accessed October 20, 2016.

forces “push toward”⁵¹ an objective or “launch an offensive.”⁵² The rhetoric and deliberate wording of these military actions is either neutral or put in a positive context and light. The main point is that this is a good battle concerning the liberation and salvation of the local people.

The outcome of the Battle of Mosul is critically reflected upon by a minority of journalists in the sample of news stories that were read and analysed. Robert Fisk asks if Mosul falls, will ISIS flee to the relative safety of Syria and if so, what then? He concludes: “the entire ISIS caliphate army could be directed against the Assad government and its allies—a scenario which might cause some satisfaction in Washington.”⁵³ This possible scenario gives a good overview of the short-term geopolitical considerations and tactics in the Middle East. The issue of geopolitical influence in the wake of the liberation of Mosul has appeared in other articles:

The offensive to liberate Mosul, which began in the early hours of October 17, is far more delicate and challenging than that of any previous Islamic State-held cities because of its size and because Nineveh province—of which Mosul is the capital—consists of the most diverse and ancient ethnic and religious communities in Iraq. Moreover, a dug-in Islamic State looks set to fight to the death there unlike in Fallujah where over 1000 fighters and members retreated from the town. Making it even more contentious, the geopolitical significance of Mosul has created competition between the federal government, pro-Iranian Shia militias, the Kurdistan Regional Government, Iraqi Arab Sunni factions, and regional powers to carve out future influence in the city.⁵⁴

http://www.spacewar.com/reports/Iraq_forces_move_to_retake_Christian_town_on_way_to_Mosul_999.html

⁵¹ Fahim, K., and L. Norris. 2016. “Iraqi Forces Push Toward Mosul Despite Sometimes Fierce Islamic State Resistance.” *The Washington Post*, October 17. Accessed October 18, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/iraqi-attack-on-mosul-begins-with-kurdish-forces-moving-in-from-the-east/2016/10/17/6c6df7d8-93ed-11e6-9cae-2a3574e296a6_story.html

⁵² “Mosul Battle: Kurds Launch ‘Large-Scale’ Offensive.” 2016. *BBC*, October 20. Accessed October 20, 2016. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-37709970>; Dehghanpisheh, B., and A. Rasheed. 2016. “Iraq Launches Mosul Offensive to Drive Out Islamic State.” *Reuters*, October 17. Accessed October 20, 2016. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-mosul-idUSKBN12G0Z1>

⁵³ Fisk, R. 2016. “When Mosul Falls, ISIS Will Flee to the Safety of Syria. But What Then?” *The Independent*, October 17. Accessed October 19, 2016. <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/mosul-offensive-isis-flee-iraq-syria-raqqa-bashar-al-assad-what-then-robert-fisk-a7365776.html>

⁵⁴ Gulmohamad, Z. 2016. “Unseating the Caliphate: Contrasting the Challenges of Liberating Fallujah and Mosul.” *Combating Terrorism Centre*, October 17. Accessed October 24, 2016.

Thus the challenge of the Battle for Mosul is not the actual physical fighting that has begun to determine who occupies the territory, but the long-term political challenges and threats that shall emerge after this particular phase has finished. The current public relations campaign that is being waged in front of and with the mass media, especially given the disparity of military strength, is likely to be decided soon. The political and geopolitical challenges that emerge after this fight will likely ensure continued instability for some time to come. This task of recovery is made even more difficult owing to weak Iraqi state institutions.⁵⁵ In this regard, the media narrative is a possible tool to realise these geopolitical goals by shaping public perception and opinion of these events.

Analysis—Why Good and Bad?

Although there is a clear and gaping discrepancy in Western media reporting on the Battles of Aleppo and Mosul, in which Aleppo is the bad and Mosul is the good battle, it has not gone unnoticed by astute observers. There are many similarities between the two battles: both concern the taking back of territory from antigovernment terrorist forces, both are key battles that may have a significant impact on the future course of the war against terrorist forces, and both involve a military siege of an area with a significant civilian population. The Russian or Syrian government's message is seldom seen in mainstream media content, and even more rarely without some form of added interpretation. It does on rare occasion occur, as for example, "Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov says Western outrage over a Russian bombing campaign in the Syrian city of Aleppo is hypocritical because Western governments are carrying out a similar operation in the Iraqi city of Mosul."⁵⁶ The Coalition Forces in Iraq, on the other hand, are often quoted verbatim without being challenged or interpreted for the reader.

Russian and Syrian government air strikes have been focused on as cruel and deliberate acts of barbarity and a form of collective punishment against the civilian population in spite of indications that Jabhat Fateh al-Sham are preventing civilians from leaving and using them as human shields.⁵⁷ This is the narrative used to describe what is happening in

<https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/unseating-the-caliphate-contrasting-the-challenges-of-liberating-fallujah-and-mosul>

⁵⁵ Malsin, J. 2016. "The Next War For Iraq." *Time*, June 23. Accessed October 20, 2016. <http://time.com/isis-mosul/>

⁵⁶ "Russia: West Hypocritical on Aleppo, Doing Similar in Mosul." 2016. *Fox News*, October 25. Accessed October 27, 2016. <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2016/10/25/russia-west-hypocritical-on-aleppo-doing-similar-in-mosul.html>

⁵⁷ "Zakharova: Fatah Al-Sham Using Civilians in Aleppo as 'Human Shield'." 2016. Fars News Agency, October 6. Accessed November 8, 2016. <http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13950715000846>

Mosul, creating different interpretations of the same act in order to support the idea of good and bad actors in the two battles. Civilian deaths as the result of coalition and especially US-led air strikes have been played down to an extent. For example, the US government put the civilian death toll as the result of air strikes in Iraq and Syria at 42, while the London-based group *Airwars* counted at least 1323 civilians killed and significant destruction.⁵⁸ Amnesty International has been extremely critical of coalition air strikes, including in Syria, arguing that the US needs to be more open and honest about the civilian death toll.⁵⁹ Accusations have also been levelled that the Pentagon goes as far as to ignore civilian casualties that result from air strikes directed against ISIS.⁶⁰ Amnesty International produced a twenty-six-page memorandum that details the deaths and destruction of civilian infrastructure in minute detail (Amnesty International 2016). This is far from the praise that US air strikes were surgically precise and effective that appeared in some mainstream media news reports.

A number of Western media stories have been debunked, which has revealed the methods used to plant information through news to manipulate public opinion. Scholars have demonstrated the role and value of penetrating news with emotional propaganda in order to sway public opinion towards a desired policy direction (Calhoun 2013; Carruthers 2011; De Franco 2012; DiMaggio 2009; Eskjaer et al. 2015; Simons 2016; Willcox 2005). One article noted that there are two enemies of governments at war: “British wars abroad have two enemies. First, the official enemy portrayed as a monster whom we always battle with noble intentions. But second is the enemy within—us, the public. The danger posed by the public is that we may stop the elites doing what they want, hence we are subject to state ‘information operations’ to convey messages and obscure facts, usually via compliant media organisations.”⁶¹ One of these fed stories has been the alleged bombing of hospitals by Russia in Eastern Aleppo. This was given as a fact by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, but not one that could be confirmed by a briefing at the State

⁵⁸ Malsin, J. 2016. “The Next War For Iraq.” *Time*, June 23. Accessed October 20, 2016. <http://time.com/isis-mosul/>

⁵⁹ “USA Must Come Clean About Civilian Deaths Caused by Coalition Air Strikes in Syria.” 2016. *Amnesty International*, October 26. Accessed October 27, 2016. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/10/usa-must-come-clean-about-civilian-deaths-caused-by-coalition-air-strikes-in-syria/>

⁶⁰ Devereaux, R. 2016. “Pentagon Ignored Evidence of Civilian Casualties in ISIS Air Strikes, Human Rights Group Says.” *The Intercept*, October 26. Accessed October 27, 2016. <https://theintercept.com/2016/10/25/pentagon-ignored-evidence-of-civilian-casualties-in-isis-strikes-human-rights-group-says/>

⁶¹ Curtis, M. 2016. “We Know About the Lies Over Iraq But What About Syria?” *Huffpost Politics* United Kingdom, August 22. Accessed August 22, 2016. http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/mark-curtis/syria-war-iraq-war_b_11625902.html

Department in response to questions by journalist Matt Lee.⁶² The bombings were also refuted by a group of Syrian doctors in Aleppo.⁶³ This is more than a naturally occurring fog of war, but rather a deliberate and systematic attempt to shape public perception and opinion through news management.

The situation implies that there is an attempt at propaganda to rally public opinion around the military operation, in which media are being used as an instrument of war to affect the opinion and perception of these two events that impact upon the political and military considerations in each of the conflicts as laid out by Payne (2005). This is due to the nature of the tangible and intangible (such as the desire and will to fight, the level of trust in the political and military leadership) elements of war (see Simons 2012) that can restrict an opponent whilst freeing one's own hands if a war is successfully communicated as being just as opposed to unjust. This is what John Pilger describes as "invisible government" through the use of propaganda:

Imagine two cities. Both are under siege by the forces of the government of that country. Both cities are occupied by fanatics, who commit terrible atrocities, such as beheading people. But there is a vital difference. In one siege, the government soldiers are described as liberators by Western reporters embedded with them, who enthusiastically report their battles and air strikes. There are front pages of these heroic soldiers giving a V-sign for victory. There is scant mention of civilian casualties. In the second city—in another country nearby—almost exactly the same is happening. Government forces are laying siege to a city controlled by the same breed of fanatics. The difference is that these fanatics are supported, supplied and armed by "us"—by the United States and Britain. They even have a media centre that is funded by Britain and America. Another difference is that the government soldiers laying siege to this city are bad guys, condemned for assaulting and bombing

⁶² "Moon of Alabama, A Desperate Obama Administration Resorts to Lying and Maybe More." 2016. *Ron Paul Institute*, October 8. Accessed October 10, 2016. <http://www.ronpaulinstitute.org/archives/peace-and-prosperity/2016/october/08/a-desperate-obama-administration-resorts-to-lying-and-maybe-more/>. This is a deeply problematic source of evidence.

⁶³ Bartlett, E. 2016. "Syria Doctors in Aleppo Refute Western Media Lies." *Off Guardian*, October 8. Accessed October 10, 2016. <https://off-guardian.org/2016/10/08/syria-doctors-in-aleppo-refute-western-media-lies/>

the city—which is exactly what the good soldiers do in the first city.⁶⁴

Others have also noted the increasing gap between what is reported in the corporate media and reality. A somewhat Orwellian twist has been noted in Western media reporting: “The corporate media’s ‘coverage’ of Syria adds a twist to Orwell’s dictum—inconvenient reports and facts do occasionally appear in respected newspapers and on popular news programmes but they are invariably ignored, decontextualized or not followed up on.”⁶⁵ This does account for some limited diversity that appears in Western mainstream news reporting on these two events, and the fact that these rare reports remain somewhat isolated cases that are not followed up on. There have been some articles that have noted the similarities between the two offensives. One of these appears in the *Los Angeles Times*, “Russia Portrays its Aleppo Bombing as a Mosul-Style Offensive,”⁶⁶ in which much more time is given to uncritical coverage of the response by US officials than to refuting the claim found in headline. Therefore, with an appearance of offering opposing views, it gives a subjective preference to one interpretation. Patrick Cockburn has noted the evident propaganda in the news of the two battles. He points to the mistakes of the past, such as in the lead-up to the Iraq War in 2003, that continue to be repeated in the present. He reflects on the lessons: “It is a salutary story because later in the same year in Libya and Syria opposition activists were able to gain control of the media narrative and exclude all other interpretations of what was happening.”⁶⁷ The end result is to try and create a reality in which the reader is led to understand that good deaths occur in Mosul whereas bad deaths happen in Aleppo.⁶⁸ This is, in

⁶⁴ Pilger, J. 2016. “Inside the Invisible Government: War, Propaganda, Clinton & Trump.” *John Pilger.com*, October 27. Accessed November 1, 2016. <http://johnpilger.com/articles/inside-the-invisible-government-war-propaganda-clinton-trump>

⁶⁵ Sinclair, I. 2016. “The West & Syria: The Corporate Media vs. Reality.” *Stop the War Coalition*, August 23. Accessed October 20, 2016. <http://stopwar.org.uk/index.php/news-comment/2133-the-west-syria-the-corporate-media-vs-reality>

⁶⁶ Wilkinson, T. 2016. “Russia Portrays its Aleppo Bombing as a Mosul-Style Offensive.” *Los Angeles Times*, November 2. Accessed November 4, 2016. <http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-fg-russia-us-aleppo-mosul-20161102-story.html>

⁶⁷ Cockburn, P. 2016. “Compare the Coverage of Mosul and East Aleppo and it Tells You a lot About the Propaganda We Consume.” *The Independent*, October 21. Accessed October 24, 2016. <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/iraq-syria-aleppo-mosul-patrick-cockburn-propaganda-we-consume-a7373951.html>

⁶⁸ Parry, R. 2016. “Good Deaths in Mosul, Bad Deaths in Aleppo.” *Consortium News*, October 17. Accessed October 19, 2016. <https://consortiumnews.com/2016/10/17/good-deaths-in-mosul-bad-deaths-in-aleppo/>

effect, political lobbying with emotionally laden and politically subjective information to give one side an advantage in the waging of war.

Conclusions

According to the research presented in this particular article, mass media has acted as an instrument of war as described by Payne (2005), which is driven by the highly politicised nature of this conflict. It is intended to alter and affect the balance of the intangible elements of war, which in turn affects the tangible elements in terms of selection and application of military operational choices available. It can be used to both constrict one actor's ability to act and engage, whilst simultaneously freeing another actor. War, after all, can be considered as politics by other means, and this requires carrying public opinion through managing popular perceptions.

This situation has driven a greater mediatisation of war (Hjarvard et al. 2015) as a means of communicating one's cause and influencing the public (Calhoun 2013; Willcox 2005). This creates a situation in which the battlefield moves into mass media content in an informational sense (Thussu & Freedman 2003). News moves from an informing function to a propaganda function by priming and mobilising media audiences (DiMaggio 2009). What has been witnessed in the media content of mainstream Western news does fulfil the definition of news management: "The strategic communication of messages, via the media, in order to further political goals" (Lilleker 2011, 131). This is a game against geopolitical rivals with the goal of persuasion in order to gain a competitive political advantage over the rival's interests.

There is a distinct flavour of scripting and narrating characters into the story by assigning them roles to simplify a complex situation and make it more understandable to the audience in a manner that suits the political goals and objectives of the messenger. In the case of Aleppo, the Syrian government and its allies have been assigned the bad guy role. They do what villains do, and the Russian government plays the role of a spoiler supervillain who seeks to uphold the oppressively unjust and unfair system of the bad guy. The good guy role goes to the groups of jihadists and anti-Assad forces, who are the good and pure underdogs seeking a fair and just social and political system. There are also victims, namely the local population, although in this particular case, it refers specifically to those in the jihadist-controlled Eastern Aleppo. Last and not least in this particular story is the saviour, the United States and its various allies, which are supporting the good guys of the story in the best interests of the good guys and the victims.

When applied to the situation in Mosul, the characters change somewhat and new ones appear in spite of the similarities concerning the two battles. The good guys are now the Coalition Forces that are aligned against the ISIS forces. Theirs is a story of liberation and freedom and

selfless sacrifice done in the name of the victims, the local civilian population. The bad guy role goes to the Islamic State and its destructive and oppressive presence in the area, whose fighters are depicted as hardened and callous oppressors, but also as cowards when confronted. Once more, the saviour role is awarded to the United States and its international allies, who are there to support the good guys to see that they prevail against the bad guys.

The news management process witnesses some news as promoted to support these defined character roles in this geopolitical game. Other news that is harmful or contradicts this story is squeezed out or marginalised in order to achieve information dominance in the global information space. The likely intended outcome is to support regime change in Syria and to reestablish political and military influence in Iraq. It is a process that requires some measure of political legitimacy and support, which is garnered by managing the information flows in these events in order to shape public opinion and perception of the two battles, one “good” and the other “bad.”

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About the author

Gregory Simons is researcher at the Uppsala Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies (Uppsala University), Associate Professor at the Uppsala University and analyst at the Centre for Asymmetric Threat Studies at the Swedish Defence University.