

Challenging the narrative and the narrators – Tulsi Gabbard and US in Syria

In a pub in rural New Zealand two men, one old and one young, come together to discuss world affairs, to have a drink and swap insults. They start by discussing an article, or a batch of articles, that one of them, usually the younger, has selected. During their conversation they also access other articles, the younger man via his smart phone and the older one via his venerable laptop, which also holds his database of geopolitical literature, and if rumour is to be believed, more besides. In addition there is a ghostly editor who also inserts references, often making snide remarks about the old man and correcting his lapses of memory.

Today's article is:

- Josh Rogin, "**How Tulsi Gabbard became Assad's mouthpiece in Washington**," *Washington Post*, 29 January 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/how-tulsi-gabbard-became-assads-mouthpiece-in-washington/2017/01/29/215e9c70-e4bf-11e6-a547-5fb9411d332c_story.html
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"Hi Sage, what's that you're drinking?"

"Hello Marty. Bilancia Chardonnay 2014 is topping Bill's blackboard today, so I'm trying that."¹

"I thought you didn't like chardonnay?"

"Not usually, but this is a good drop. Hawkes Bay."

Marty soon returns with the wine, and a cocktail, sits down, and grins. "did you get the article I sent you?"

"First things first Marty. How were the seals?"

"Smelly. But Ingrid thought they were cute."

"Ah, in comparison with you that might be a valid judgement."

"Sod off", Marty laughed. "I reckon you're probably smelly and certainly not cute."

"That's got the conversation off to a fine start. They should hire you to give politeness lessons to Donald Trump. Did you see what he did to Malcolm Turnbull?"²

"You think his alliance management skills need a bit of polishing?"

"They do indeed, and there's going to be all sorts of repercussions to his treatment of subordinates. Anyway, that's a subject for another day. You sent me an article about Tulsi Gabbard and her fact-finding mission to Syria."³



Rep. Tulsi Gabbard (D-Hawaii) speaks at the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia on July 26, 2016. (J. Scott Applewhite/Associated Press)

“Yeh, bit of a hatchet job, eh Sage? Doesn’t mince words, does this Josh Rogin? Calling her ‘Assad’s mouthpiece.’”

“Hmm, interesting phrase, don’t you think?”

“Well I guess using the word ‘Assad’ rather than ‘Syria’ is an example of the personalisation you’ve talked about before.”

“Indeed, and by doing so this Rogin fellow can sort of appropriate Syria. The president of Syria doesn’t speak for Syria, I do. There’s an interesting example of that from the invasion of Iraq. Let’s see if I can find it on my magic machine.” The Sage takes a sip of wine and then stabs away at the keyboard on his laptop. “Yes, here we are. From the *Guardian* back in 2004 describing a battle between US marines and Iraqi resistance:”

Captain Carrie Batson, a marine spokeswoman, said: “We estimate we’ve killed 300 anti-Iraqi forces in the past two days of fighting.” She said three US troops had been killed and 12 wounded.⁴

Marty laughed. “Good one. So the Iraqis become ‘anti-Iraqis’ and the Americans become Iraqis. So they are not really invading Iraq they are defending it against the inhabitants. “

“Yes, fine bit of chutzpah. Slightly different point, but there was some years back a joke wondering why God had put American oil under Arab sands. Back to Rogin. We have the word ‘mouthpiece’. What does that imply?”

“I guess that she is a clueless and ignorant victim of a ventriloquist.”

“That’s about it. She shouldn’t be taken seriously because she is merely spouting the words of the butcher Assad.”

“OK, but he doesn’t really get round to disproving what she is saying. He goes on about the funding for her trip but according to one of the comments he got the NGOs mixed up.”

“I don’t know that we need to fuss too much about that Marty. Whether he got the details of the funding wrong is a fairly minor matter. It seems that she was funded by ‘pro-government’ American Syrians or even the Syrian government itself. The note of indignation is a bit ironic given that the US government spends a helluva lot more, probably thousands of times more, on winning hearts and minds than the Syrian government. We can talk about all that sort of thing, stretching back at least to Senator Fulbright in the 950s sometime. Recently we had Vicky Nuland’s boast that they had ‘invested’ \$5 billion in the Ukraine – preparing them for democracy or some such.⁵ Don’t suppose Tulsi Gabbard’s cost that much.

“But funding is relevant, isn’t it?”

“Absolutely, and we need to take cognisance of it. But it is very common. Governments are constantly funding ‘fact-finding missions’ of foreign ‘influence leaders’. I remember being in Taiwan and constantly tripping over New Zealand politicians there on free trips. No doubt there’s a good argument prohibiting such things, but the US government would be first to oppose it, because they have more money to throw round than anyone else, although they’d probably have a job competing with Saudi Arabia and Qatar on that score. Curiously, or perhaps not curiously, interest in funding is very selective. For instance there doesn’t seem to have been any discussion on who paid for McCain’s trip to Syria in 2013 when he met rebels, presumably either jihadists or group slinked with them.”

“Weren’t here allegations that he had met with ISIS?”

“Yes, but who knows? Probably not. I suspect that ISIS wouldn’t want to have anything directly to do with him or any American politician. They are, after all driven by a strong, if misguided religious ethic. Anyway, it is probably irrelevant. The ‘moderate jihadist’ is arguably a bit of camouflage to hide a marriage of convenience. Given that McCain sings the Saudi song I would have guessed that it was Saudi Arabia, indirectly perhaps, that arranged and funded McCain’s trip but there is evidence that it was in fact done by Elizabeth O’Bagy who was a frontwoman for the Syrian Emergency Task Force.⁶

“Wasn’t O’Bagy the woman who was fired for falsely claiming to have a PhD?”⁷

“A scrap of paper of no value as evidence of intellectual or academic abilities, but sometimes the gullible are impressed.”

“But Sage, I thought you had a PhD?”

“Exactly”, the Sage laughed and continued, “but O’Bagy also annoyed the Wall Street Journal by writing articles for them on Syria posing as an independent expert when in fact she was working for this SETF set-up which the WSJ described in high dudgeon as an organisation ‘that subcontracts with the U.S. and British governments to provide aid to the Syrian opposition’. “⁸

“Working for the US government doesn’t seem the sort of thing that would faze the Wall Street Journal.”

“In normal circumstance no but combined with the PhD scandal, and the fact she hadn’t told them it was probably a bit much. “

“But McCain wasn’t shocked, was he? He turned around and hired her didn’t he?”⁹

“He did, and presumably she is still beaver away in his office. But back to Gabbard! Bearing funding in mind, the key question is what she said and how that stacks up with evidence from other sources.”

“Well, Rogin doesn’t say much about that. The closest he gets is:

She also asserted there are no moderate rebels in Syria and that the United States is funding and arming al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Neither is true, but both match the talking points that the Assad regime has been pushing for the entirety of the war.

But saying ‘neither is true’ is an assertion, rather than evidence.”

“Indeed it is Marty, but evidence-free assertion is the world these type of journalists live in, and that’s not something that came in with Trump. There seem to me to be two charges here. One is that she is contradicting the official US line. Moderate rebels and all that sort of thing. But she is also challenging the very basis of the role of the media, or what is often called the mainstream media.”

“Surely, Sage, saying that there ‘are no moderate rebels in Syria’ is not particularly controversial?”

“Yes, lots of people from the Syrian and Russian governments through to mainstream journalists say much the same thing, but it does contradict the official US line and that’s, in Rogin’s eyes, is a bit of a hanging offence. Actually, there are two aspects here. One is whether, in the Syrian context an armed rebel, rather than a peaceful opposition politician, can be called ‘moderate’ is one. They are, after all taking up arms, killing people, to overthrow a secular government and install a Sunni-dominated one based on Sharia law. It’s not possible, without detailed knowledge, to pontificate on that but there are lots of accusations.¹⁰ The other, which is easier to pin down is even if there are ‘moderate’ rebels they don’t really account for much. It is frequently claimed, in the mainstream media, that the main fighting force of the rebellion are jihadists like Al-Nusra, or whatever it is called now, ISIS etc. so in the event of a defeat of the Syrian government of Bashar Al-Assad it is they who will take over.”¹¹

“And things will be difficult especially for non-Sunnis?”

“There seems to be little doubt about that Marty. Coping with that reality is one of the challenges that propagandists like Rogin face. One of the curious things about Syria is what we might call the issue of the turbulent priests.”

“What the hell is a turbulent priest?”

“Sorry, Marty, you know what we old academics are like. It’s just a pedantic reference to an incident involving an early Norman king in England round about the 14th century. Can’t remember the details

but the story goes that he was annoyed with a bishop for some reason, presumably part of a power struggle between church and state, and exclaimed “who will rid me of this turbulent priest?”

Whereupon one of his knights – the CIA or Special Forces of the day – went off to the cathedral of this priest. Thomas A’Beckett I think. The knight killed A’Beckett who then became a saint, and the king got a very black mark in the history books. Look it up on Wikipedia; it’s very good at giving you the bare bones of incidents like that although you have to be very cautious about the interpretation.¹²

“OK, these English kings were a pretty violent lot, but what’s that got to do with Syria?”

“Well there are a lot of Christians in Syria and Christianity there goes right back to the beginning. In fact I seem to recall that at one stage, presumably during the Byzantium empire, it was the majority religion. Anyway there are lots of Christians, and nuns and priests and a number of those are foreign.”

“Is being foreign important?”

“Yes. It means they are probably Catholic rather than Orthodox and bearing in mind that the schism between the two goes back 1000 years – and explains I suspect some of the Western hostility towards Russia. But it also means that they can speak to Western journalists in their native language and that makes a difference. Don’t forget that most journalists don’t speak the language of the country they are dealing with.”

“Is that why waiters and taxi drivers are so frequently quoted as authorities?”

“Marty, you’re getting very cynical. But yes. Anyway these priests are very much against the jihadists and tend to support the Syrian government, and are willing to say that to a journalist brave enough to interview them.”

“Is bravery required?”

“Well by doing so they are violating the official line, and that might have consequence for their career. I guess the fact that these interviews are so infrequent and seldom get beyond the alternative media is an indication. Think of it. Syria is a big story. Catholic priests still have a substantial standing ...”

“Despite sex scandals?”

“Back to sex Marty. Yes, in a general political context they do. A Catholic priest in, say China, who criticised the government would be regarded in the West as an unimpeachable font of truth. So we might expect enterprising journalists to search out such people to get the story of what is actually happening in Syria from the horse’s mouth. No language barrier, so no problems with interpreters. A man of standing who judgement can be respected. Etc.”

“But it doesn’t happen? The *Guardian* and the *Washington Post* don’t send out their reporters to get the low down from the battlefield?”

"I haven't noticed it. I did come across an interview the other day which originated in what I understand is a mainstream Rotterdam paper that had been translated into English. The Dutch journalist talked to this Flemish priest – so no great language barrier, and the priest was very forthright.



Father Daniël Maes

<<http://www.ad.nl/nieuws/poetin-en-assad-hebben-mijn-leven-gered~add21ab7/>

"He looks a bit like you Sage."

"Not quite so saintly though. Anyway, he went much further than Tulsi Gabbard. The heading of the story captures it I think: 'Interview with Flemish priest in Syria: "Putin and Assad saved my life"'¹³

And this exchange is pretty close to the bone:

Interviewer: You say that the Syrian Army protects civilians, yet there are all sorts of reports about war crimes committed by Assad's forces, such as the bombardments with barrel bombs.

Father Daniel: "Do you not know that the media coverage on Syria is the biggest media lie of our time? They have sold pure nonsense about Assad: It was actually the rebels who plundered and killed. Do you think that the Syrian people are stupid? Do you think those people were forced to cheer for Assad and Putin? It is the Americans who have a hand in all of this, for pipelines and natural resources in this region and to thwart Putin."

Saudi Arabia and Qatar want to establish a Sunni state in Syria, without religious freedom. Therefore, Assad must go. You know, when the Syrian army was preparing for the battle in Aleppo, Muslim soldiers came to me to be blessed. Between ordinary Muslims and Christians, there is no problem. It is those radical Islamic, Western-backed rebels who want to massacre us. They are all al Qaeda and IS. There are not any moderate fighters anymore.

“Wow. That is pretty explosive stuff. No wonder the *Washington Post* prefers Josh Rogin. But you mentioned a second aspect, about the role of the media.”

“Yeh, I did. It seems to be Rogin, and by extension the mainstream media, regard reality as something that is constructed in news rooms in Washington and New York, perhaps in London , Paris or Berlin, certainly not in Moscow or Beijing. The creation process starts with officials or trusted politicians who give the bones of this construction to the trusted journalist whose function then is to flesh it out, perhaps sex it up, and then propagate to the world at large. “

“Propagate? Sounds like propaganda.”

“They’re cognate terms. Propaganda in the grammatical sense means that which is propagated and originally had no pejorative connotations. In fact the Vatican has, or had, an Office of Propaganda; they might have changed the name by now. You can’t go round in the 21 century saying that you are disseminating propaganda – that’s what the other side does.”

“But the *Washington Post* is still propagating propaganda?”

“Yes, though I think you have to be a bit careful using the term, it’s so loaded now. But yes all information is propaganda in that it reflects opinions, concepts, assumptions, prejudice, you name it. Some is more blatant and dishonest than others. And much of it is so internalised that people propagate propaganda unconsciously, regarding what they say or write as the natural order of things.”

“But things are never that simple? Nothing is value-free?”

“Indeed. But I also think there is another important aspect here and that is the feedback loop between the originators of this constructed reality and the disseminators of it. Between government and media. There is a fine story, apocryphal but it has the ring of deeper truth about it of a British minister who wanted to have some lie propagated. So he invited an influential journalist to dinner. Wined and dined him and fed him the lie. Went home contented with his machinations. Woke up next morning to see his invention blazoned across the front page of the newspaper and exclaimed, “My God, I was telling the truth after all!”

“Good one. So the false narrative bounces backwards and forwards and reinforces itself as reality? So that’s how a lot of obvious nonsense becomes established as the conventional wisdom?”

“Indeed. Things like Iran or North Korea threatening the United States for instance. A fairly quick glance at the available data shows that this is gibberish, but it is firmly believed. Constant repetition is an important component, and the suppression or de-legitimization of alternative explanations is all part of it. Something to be discussed more fully sometime. Anyway, we can see de-legitimization in the John Rogin article. Reality is something constructed in the newsroom of the *Washington Post* or other such hallowed places and it is not something that can be apprehended on the battlefield by any Tom, Dick, or Harry.”

“But Tulsi Gabbard is not any Tom, Dick, or Harry is she? She is a Member of Congress after all.”

“Indeed she is and quite a rising one. That photo of her accompanying the Rogin article I think is her proposing Sanders as Democratic presidential candidate and she is spoken of as a possible candidate herself for presidency in 2020.”¹⁴

“So she might become America’s first female president?”

“A week is a long time in politics, Marty, but yes that may be on the cards. But there is something else that is even more relevant in this context of assessing what is happening on the ground in Syria. Consider this photograph and study the lady’s breast.”



“Wow, thank you Sage! I will! With close attention.....”

“Oh, hello Ingrid.”

“What!”, Marty jumps up in consternation.

“Sorry, Marty. False alarm. Must have been the shadow of the angel of lust and guilt fluttering past the window that confused me”, laughed the Sage. “Your secret is safe with me. And you are in good company. Did you know that Jimmy Carter once scandalised bible-belt America, where a lot of his supporters came from, by confessing that he did occasionally have lustful thoughts when he saw a beautiful woman?”

“Well, she is a bit of a stunner. But the uniform? And the medals?”

“Apparently she holds the rank of Major in the US Army National Guard, has served two tours in the Middle East and is a member of the House Armed Services Committee.”¹⁵

“Josh Rogin didn’t mention any of that!”

“Are you surprised Marty? I presume he has no military experience himself, otherwise he would have used that to establish his credentials on the subject.”

“But surely she has the street cred? She must at least have some idea of what happens on battlefields in the Middle East. She has the background that should enable her to make a reasonably informed judgement of the situation. She is surely unlikely to be a gullible mouthpiece?”

“Agreed Marty, agreed.”

“But Rogin who presumably has never been in Syria, perhaps never been in the Middle East, probably never been involved in combat claims that she is misled and he knows the truth like some wise priest.”

“And not a turbulent one. But your choice of the word ‘priest’ is spot on. These journalists, or their editors and their owners, see themselves as priests with a certain monopoly of apprehending reality. I don’t know if you know but this was the big issue during the Reformation. The Catholic Church said that it alone could communicate between God and Man, whereas the Reformers, the Protestants said that Man could speak directly with God.”

“So Major Representative Gabbard can’t go to Syria, look with her eyes and speak to people because she will only be misled by the ‘bad guys’ and she should bow to the received wisdom of the Washington Post.”

“That’s about it. But there is another little facet to this story. Seymour Hersh wrote an interesting article called Military to Military about contacts between the US military with the Russian military and through them with the Syrians.¹⁶ Hersh used to get published in the New Yorker but it seems that this article was considered rather too explosive so he had to go to the London Review of Books.

“Is that the Hersh who exposed the My Lai massacre in Vietnam back in the 1960s?”¹⁷

“That’s the one Marty. So he’s been around and dug up a lot of inconvenient truths. Don’t think he offers any deep strategic analysis but given the usual state of journalism he’s stellar.”

“A different league to Josh Rogin, eh?”

“Certainly.

“It’s a long article but basically he’s saying that the US military was surreptitiously cooperating with the Russians, and the Syrians in defiance of the White House, and the CIA, because they regarded the jihadists – ISIS, Nusra and the others – as the main enemy. It is a reflection of a long schism in the US foreign policy elite. The main faction, the political side of the elite – the White House, or at least the pre-Trump one, the CIA, the think tanks, security academia, etc. basically have seen political Islam, the Salafists, the jihadists, the mujahedeen, and their various transmogrifications into Al Qaeda, Nusra, ISIS and so forth as an instrument to use against what they regard as the main enemy – Russia and China, and along the way independent secularist governments in the Middle East. That you’ll understand is a very rough and ready description and something we need to come back to some time when the wine is flowing. It is, as you might imagine, wrapped in all sorts of deception and self-deception.”

“Because it produces blowback such as 9/11, and the killing of the American ambassador in Benghazi?”

“Exactly, and of course the countless victims in the countries affected. But this is seen presumably as regrettable but acceptable collateral damage.”

“But where do Gabbard and her lot fit in? “

“Gabbard by all appearances is not anti-imperialist or anything like that. What she objects to is that this use of jihadists – what I call ‘outsourcing’ to achieve foreign policy objectives – imperils the US military on the ground. Let me find the Hersch article because there’s a particularly interesting quote which lays out some of this and links in to recent events.”

The Sage fumbles at his laptop, occasionally swearing in a low voice.

“Ah, here we are:

Lieutenant General Michael Flynn, director of the DIA between 2012 and 2014, confirmed that his agency had sent a constant stream of classified warnings to the civilian leadership about the dire consequences of toppling Assad. The jihadists, he said, were in control of the opposition. The DIA’s reporting, he said, ‘got enormous pushback’ from the Obama administration. ‘I felt that they did not want to hear the truth.’....

‘Flynn incurred the wrath of the White House by insisting on telling the truth about Syria,’ said Patrick Lang, a retired army colonel who served for nearly a decade as the chief Middle East civilian intelligence officer for the DIA. ‘He thought truth was the best thing and they shoved him out. He wouldn’t shut up.’ Flynn told me his problems went beyond Syria. ‘I was shaking things up at the DIA – and not just moving deckchairs on the Titanic. It was radical reform. I felt that the civilian leadership did not want to hear the truth. I suffered for it, but I’m OK with that.’ In a recent interview in Der Spiegel, Flynn was blunt about Russia’s entry into the Syrian war: ‘We have to work constructively with Russia. Whether we like it or not, Russia made a decision to be there and to act militarily. They are there, and this has dramatically changed the dynamic. So you can’t say Russia is bad; they have to go home. It’s not going to happen. Get real.’

Few in the US Congress share this view. One exception is Tulsi Gabbard, a Democrat from Hawaii and member of the House Armed Services Committee who, as a major in the Army National Guard, served two tours in the Middle East. In an interview on CNN in October she said: ‘The US and the CIA should stop this illegal and counterproductive war to overthrow the Syrian government of Assad and should stay focused on fighting against ... the Islamic extremist groups.’

“Bloody hell! And this is the Mike Flynn? “

“Yep, Trump’s National Security Adviser who was ousted after a few weeks by some nifty footwork by hostile elements of the deep state, led by the CIA. And of course the DIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency, is the Pentagon’s version of the CIA and I suspect there’s little love lost between the two agencies. Again an interesting story. But enough of that for now. My glass is long since empty, as is yours, and replenishment is an urgent necessity. And then you must tell me how you say ‘smell the seals’ in Swedish.

“Ah,” laughed Marty, no verbal communication either in English or Swedish was needed. Same again Sage?”

Yes, that’ll do while I get my breath back. Put it on the tab Marty.”

The GE adds

The Sage observed that

Gabbard by all appearances is not anti-imperialist or anything like that

This was confirmed, if confirmation be needed, by her rather hysterical reaction to the 'false flag' chemical warfare incident in Syria on 4th April 2017. She was reported by local Hawaiian media as saying:

U.S. Rep. Tulsi Gabbard said she would call for Bashar Al Assad's "prosecution and execution" if the Syrian president is indeed behind a chemical attack that killed scores of civilians, including many children.¹⁸

She had been under attack, as the Josh Rogin article exemplified, for not following the official line and, worse still, being 'pro-Assad' (a tactic commonly used against dissidents).

Nevertheless she did call Trump's airstrike 'short-sighted' (presumably because it would bolster the jihadists) and did call for a proper investigation of the incident:

"A successful prosecution of Assad (at the International Criminal Court) will require collection of evidence from the scene of the incident, and I support the United Nation's efforts in this regard. Without such evidence, a successful prosecution is impossible."

She did not mention that the Administration was blocking such an investigation, nor did she situate the airstrike within Trump's struggle to counter charges that he was 'pro-Putin'.

Nevertheless, a pretty adroit response from a politician and markedly different from most of the sanctimonious, dishonest grandstanding prevalent in the Western political elite and media.

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