

The Different aspects of Western & Non-western Media on the Deadliest Bombardment of Ghouta

The point of this entire article is that whatever you read, someone is investing a lot of effort to try to influence you. The subtext for the entire debate about Ghouta— all these articles, posts and tweets — is whether the West should intervene militarily in Syria to aid “the Syrian people”, in reality, the opposition to Assad. There are *a lot* of interests supporting the answers to this question, and *a lot* of money involved for people who position themselves on the correct side. The consequences of either decision, however, can quickly spiral out of Syria into larger conflict — including extending the war in Syria to include more foreign powers all the way up to a superpower conflict between the US and Russia which would be very bad news for all of us - **Lee Mordechai***

If you haven't been following the latest news on the most recent battle in Syria, I can't blame you. New headlines and changes keep appearing for more than six years now in what seems to be a never-ending war. In fact, I'm sure most commentators have never heard of Ghouta (or remembered it) until a couple of weeks ago. And yet Ghouta, a suburb northeast of Damascus, is where things are happening now so let's contextualize things.



Two tweets about civilian casualties in Gouta today, on the government side (left) and the rebel side (right)

Remember that the Syrian rebels took over part of Damascus in 2012 in what seemed to mark the beginning of the end for Assad? Part of that area was Eastern Ghouta. Ghouta won its earlier 15 minutes of fame as the site of the [deadly chemical attack](#) in 2013 that almost pushed Obama and the US to intervene militarily in Syria, and despite some [intra-rebel fighting](#) remained a centre of rebel control until now. As of mid-February 2018, Eastern Ghouta is the last significant pocket of resistance to the Syrian government in the Damascus area.



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Google Trends for Ghouta on Feb. 20. Gray bars are the number of articles, the blue line is the number of searches. Notice the lag between articles and searches.

As the Syrian government has grown stronger and more confident, it made the reasonable move to consolidate its gains and regain control of the territories just around its capital. This has taken the form of (another) major offensive against opposition forces — depending on how you count, it's up to [the 10th](#) such offensive initiated by the government.



Southern Syria on Feb. 20. Red signifies government control, Green marks opposition control. Eastern Ghouta is the green blob just north-east of Damascus. Blue is the Israeli Golan Heights and Black is ISIS | Source: <https://syria.liveuamap.com/>

Coverage of the conflict has been full of propaganda from all sides, as is usual in the Syrian conflict. The rest of this post will reconstruct this mess. We'll see what two roughly-defined sides claim, then discuss what each side avoids mentioning to fit the broader story it tries to propagate. These stories, or narratives, are what is being packaged to us readers, in attempt to influence our opinion.

Let's start with the **Western mainstream media**, simply because it is louder and dominates most of the Western discourse. [The Guardian](#) has a photo of a wounded child on its homepage. "It's not a war, it's a massacre' / Scores killed in a Syrian enclave: Assad regime uses barrel bombs and attacks hospitals in the rebel-held territory". The article asserts that "hysterical violence" is taking place and is explicit about "warnings of a humanitarian catastrophe that could eclipse past atrocities". It cites Amnesty International which also claims that "flagrant war crimes" are happening on an "epic scale". Assad and his backers are blamed for seeking "an outright military victory instead of a negotiated political settlement", while the article accepts as a fact that "the Assad regime deployed sarin gas" in Ghouta back in 2013, and is now, using barrel bombs, fighter jets and artillery bombardment, "on top of the punishing siege".

[contentcards url="http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43127189" target="_blank"]

According to the [New York Times](#), the Syrian government is the obvious aggressor,

bombarding civilians with “dozens of airstrikes” and “hundreds of rockets”. The offensive is described as “an all-out attack on civilians and infrastructure to force a surrender”. The government, the Times asserts with some disdain, “argues alternatively that there are few civilians in eastern Ghouta and that those who remain are being held as human shields”. The story remained first on the [Washington Post’s front page](#) into the evening of Feb. 20, describing how warplanes “pounded” Ghouta and caused “many” children casualties. The [article](#) goes point out that “the sheer intensity of [government] airstrikes is levelling the city and killing civilians without any regard or mercy”, and acknowledges that, [only] one civilian on the government’s side was killed.

[contentcards

url=“<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/20/world/middleeast/syria-eastern-ghouta.html>”]

High-resolution photos of corpses, especially children, and civilians running for safety among ruins are prevalent in these reports. The Times, for example, has 8 large photos in its piece compared to less than 1100 words of text. The depressing photos reveal those horrible things are happening in Ghouta to the unfortunate citizens that are still there, regardless of their allegiance. The coverage in these outlets often refers to the number 400,000, the number of people supposedly still in Ghouta, as an attempt to draw attention to how critical the situation is.

[contentcards

url=“<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/02/senseless-human-suffering-east-ghouta-180220064101130.html>”]

Finally, we should note that a close reading of the articles shows that these mainstream media outlets rarely have anyone identifiable on the ground in Syria (other than an anonymous Times employee). The sources listed are (among others) the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, based in the UK, the Syria Civil Defense (better known as the White Helmets), and the Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations. The actual reporters are based outside of Syria (often in Istanbul and Beirut).

Non-western and some alternative media, however, reveal a different picture. This part of the media is less organized, depends more on individuals, and undoubtedly has less influence over public opinion in the West. Some parts, of it, for example, ignore Ghouta almost completely. The Russian outlet RT does not even report on Ghouta, [preferring](#) to discuss the situation in Afrin (in northern Syria) and in US-controlled southern-Syria. Elsewhere, the Russian Foreign Minister is [quoted](#) as asserting that Western powers have influence over the Syrian opposition in Ghouta, and demanding that unless the anonymous

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Western powers discipline it, it will be destroyed. The Syrian government agency SANA [reports](#) on how life in Damascus continues despite the rebel shelling. It [blames](#) what it describes as terrorists for shelling Damascus, and points to anonymous officials in the capitals of Western and Arab Gulf states as those who are supporting the terrorists.



The non-western and alternative outlets that *do* cover Ghouta name the rebel organizations — which are left anonymous in almost all Western media reports. [The main group there](#) is [Jaysh al-Islam](#) (JAI; about 10-15,000 members), which aims to replace Assad's government with a religious government based on Sharia law and purported to have received Saudi funds. [Faylaq al-Rahman](#), another important group in Ghouta, has ties to the Free Syrian Army (which [is said](#) to have ties to al-Qaeda), argues that it emphasizes revolution rather than turning Syria into an Islamic state, and has connections with the West. Other groups include Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, the rebranded name of Jabhat al-Nusra, which is itself [an offshoot of al-Qaeda](#)); [Ahrar al-Sham](#); and [al-Rahman Legion](#). These are jihadi Islamist groups rather than “moderate rebels”.

The humanitarian situation in Ghouta is sometimes acknowledged but is explained by noting that the civilians there are used by Nusra as human shields ([literally in cages](#)). Any numbers or references to civilian casualties on the anti-Syrian government side as a result of the operation are absent.

Some bloggers have been promoting alternative narratives in blogs and Twitter, further pointing out [civilian casualties on the side of the Syrian government](#) and arguing that the rebels are also using [deadlier munitions](#) in their rocket attacks [against these civilians](#). They also call out the opposition within Ghouta as jihadists, al-Qaeda, and emphasize their connections to Saudi Arabia and NATO, often the US and UK.



Several tweets from Wael Al-Hussaini, a Lebanese-Syrian. MSM is an acronym for MainStream Media.



Criticism of mainstream narrative; note the “NATO jihadists” appellation.

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The images of civilians on the Syrian government side who were killed today (Feb. 20). Note that these images are absent of the normal terror & blood | Source <https://twitter.com/VanessaBeeley/status/966108770928660481>

The images of civilians on the Syrian government side who were killed today (Feb. 20). Note that these images are absent of the normal terror & blood. Other reports point out that the pro-opposition sources refer to multiple (7, most recently) hospitals being bombed, but are [do not actually name](#) any of these. They assert that the main sources for Western media — the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights, the White Helmets, and the Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations are all funded by Western powers and are used in Western propaganda while having little to no human-right effect on the ground in Syria (and [some of them](#) are actually jihadis themselves). A quick check reveals that few to none of the individuals supposedly running these organizations are actually identified on their websites. The implications of the allegations that Western allies have also been using chemical weapons in Syria (rather than just the Syria government, if at all) [are not discussed](#) in the mainstream media.

I'll end by pointing out that the vast majority of us — myself included — have no idea what is *really* happening on the ground in Ghouta, other than knowing that it must be horrible for the innocent civilians on both sides who get caught in the fire as civilians often do. The best we can do is to read, think, and most important **question**. Don't passively read — ask questions! Be aware that there are other interpretations of the same event. Challenge the authors' whose pieces you read even if you agree with what they are saying. Consider what is left unsaid, and why. Don't let anyone get away by spewing propaganda, no matter which side they are on. Make up your own mind!



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include all concern premodern processes of large-scale change, crisis and decline.

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