

Syria Death Toll Beyond the Numbers: Who Died, Who Killed Them and Why

By David McIlwain Wed March 16, 2016.

Western media is using the reported number of 250,000 war dead as if they were all civilian victims of the government - which is far from truth

It is often said, both by people who know little of the Syrian conflict and by those who should know a lot, that the situation is complex and with many competing interests involved. The first group have given up trying to understand it, while the second group ensure that they won't, by prognosticating wisely on intricate and mostly irrelevant details.

A recent discussion on Syria provided an interesting insight into this question however, suggesting that these apparent complexities may be reduced to something quite simple. In an article about the misrepresentation of the Syrian conflict in Western corporate media, there was a single jarring note; the author claimed that Russian and Syrian forces were 'prolonging the war' and were responsible for 'thousands of civilian deaths' in Syria.

Despite much vigorous debate with the author, who has long been a staunch opponent of US/NATO wars in the Middle East, the disagreement was unresolved; there was no doubt in his mind that this claim of careless or even intentional atrocities committed by Syrian, and now Russian forces was true.

Such claims of course don't raise an eyebrow when aired by Western leaders, commentators and media – only denying them would do that. And there are legions of experts and agencies to call on for support and 'evidence' that 'all sides in the Syrian conflict are responsible for atrocities'. Not only that – increasingly there are claims that the Syrian government and its allies are responsible for most of the civilian deaths, and far more than Islamic State and the other terrorist groups.

In fact – disputable fact – this claim against the Syrian government, of responsibility for civilian deaths is the most crucial thread in the whole fabric of Western propaganda lies. Clearly it is disputable, as it can't be established that the Syrian Army has at no time been *responsible* for the deaths of innocent civilians, but this works both ways. All the Western claims against the Syrian Army are also disputable – and would be disputed both by that army and by the Syrians it has been protecting for the last five years, which is the large majority of the population.

But consider this; how could the ongoing war, of propaganda and of violent insurgency, be sold to the Western public if these claims were not made? And how could the current disastrous situation in Syria have developed and continued to worsen if that public had not believed that 'the rebels' were fighting a 'just war'? Would this not make all the talk of 'moderate rebels', of 'sieges' and of 'humanitarian intervention' quite irrelevant?

What applies to the Syrian Army now doubly applies to the Russian air-force; it stood accused of targeting civilians immediately it dropped bombs in Western Syria, even though it has even less reason to kill civilians than the Syrian Army. While the Western audience had to be trained and tricked into seeing the mild-mannered and sensible Syrian President as a blood-thirsty tyrant, it already knew 'what Russia was like', having been trained by years of Cold War rhetoric about Soviet Propaganda. And of course Russia's defensive claims were universally dismissed too.

In this fog of misinformation, a sensible and serious analysis of the Syrian civilian death toll is called for, and long overdue. **Put simply, who died, who killed them, and why?**

Almost every day we are told that ‘the Syrian death toll is now over 250,000’, yet hardly ever do we hear more than just the number. With context only provided by opposition ‘activist’ videos and commentary, most people would conclude that this means a quarter of a million civilians, and that they have almost all been killed by Syrian government backed forces.

The conclusion is of course entirely wrong. In fact it is so wrong that the simple act of reporting the death toll without qualification has become an act of complicity in prolonging the war and preventing a resolution of it.

Yet the most superficial analysis would expose the lies that pass behind the Syrian death toll. And it can start with the one thing on which there are verifiable records – deaths of soldiers in the Syrian Arab Army.

Even in the first year of the war on Syria these deaths numbered in the thousands, and the daily funerals shown on State TV quickly brought home the nature of that war to Syrians. To understand the effect this had on the citizenry we need only think of all the fuss that was made over deaths of US soldiers in Iraq, who weren’t even fighting to defend their own country.

So it might be a surprise for people in the West to discover that more than 60,000 regular Syrian soldiers have now died fighting the foreign-backed insurgents – have in fact *been killed by those insurgents* in many ways, both ordinary and uncommonly barbaric. But it should be more than just a surprise – it should be a shock! Such knowledge could have completely changed the way that Western audiences perceived the ‘Syrian civil war’, and made them far more sympathetic to the Syrian government viewpoint.

By contrast, and compounding the culpability of Western media in fostering and prolonging the war, is their reporting of the deaths of ‘pro-government’ militiamen. Although the Western TV audience has likely never seen a single funeral for a Syrian soldier or witnessed the tears and passion of his comrades and family, that audience has often heard about these other soldiers, portrayed falsely as covert agents – ‘Shabiha’ – whose deaths should be celebrated. Many of these ‘civil defence’ soldiers have been killed - their deaths make the toll of armed forces supporting the government up to over 100,000.

Already we can see that at least 40% of the total deaths are neither civilians nor victims of the Syrian government. And we can also see that the remainder must include both Opposition fighters and unarmed civilians. As has been observed elsewhere, the death toll of ‘rebels’ and ‘terrorists’ is obscure and highly unreliable, with many fighters called ‘civilians’ by the opposition groups that monitor their deaths. (those reporters also commonly and perversely add Syrian soldiers to the toll of ‘civilians killed by government forces’). But we might guess that the number of these militants killed by the army would at least be equivalent to the toll of Syrian Arab Army soldiers, bringing the total non-civilian death toll to at least 150,000.

Although this reduces the true civilian death toll to around 100,000, it still leaves us with the same question; who has killed these unarmed innocent people – the Syrian army and its allies, or the ‘rebels’ and their allies? Clearly both ‘sides’ deny killing or targeting civilians, so their claims shouldn’t be taken at face value. The exception would be statistics for people killed in government held areas targeted by Opposition fire, who deaths should be recorded in official registers.

While those government records seem hard to come by, the complete lack of interest from Western agencies in the number of Syrians killed by the armed militants they support speaks volumes, and actually renders the statistics irrelevant.

Since the early days of the war on Syria, armed groups have been *intentionally targeting civilian populations*. Following the exhortations of radical sheiks, and supported by the Western media narrative against the ‘Alawite President’ Bashar al Assad, they have launched an unrelenting assault on all those populations who support the Syrian State. They have used kidnapping and extortion, brutal execution and dismemberment, suicide bombers and ‘hell’s cannons’ to terrorise and kill civilians. Tens of thousands of innocent men, women and children have been killed by our ‘democracy and freedom-loving’ warriors, not because they were a mortal threat, but because they **resisted**. They wouldn’t support these violent sectarian extremists who wanted to destroy the country on behalf of some foreign states, in the name of ‘the Revolution’.

But these armed groups have also targeted soldiers, particularly when off-duty, and used their bodies in propaganda, claiming they had been shot ‘for refusing to fire on protestors’, or ‘for desertion’.

It’s worth reflecting on **our** response and treatment of people who dare to target members of our security forces, and remembering this when we rush to condemn the actions of Syrian security forces responding to such perceived attacks. Can we really deny the legitimacy of an armed response, or that it is a **response**? Perhaps then we could reassess the other claims made against the Syrian army and its allies, in terms of a **response** to a violent foreign-backed insurgency.

And here we come to the nub of it. For five years there has been one narrative in the West, and only one prism through which we are allowed to view ‘the violence’ in Syria. Simplistically it is condensed into a single idea – ‘Assad is killing his own people’. It is hard to believe that such a frankly infantile idea could still be accepted and repeated by leaders and commentators, media and NGOs across the Western world.

Kill his own people - what do they think ‘Assad’ would do this for? Surely they know that the Syrian Army is fighting against armed militants, including tens of thousands of foreigners? Wouldn’t the army be trying to kill them? Do they not know that the large majority of Syrians who have fled ‘the fighting’ have fled to areas protected by the Syrian Army?

How do they think the Syrian Army and air-force can protect civilian populations from the weapons used by these ‘rebels’ – including sniper rifles, RPGs, and home-made ‘hell’s cannons’ that fire gas bottles stuffed with explosives and shrapnel at them from neighbouring suburbs? How else other than by bombing the places where these missiles originate, even at risk of ‘collateral damage’, when ground forces are targeted by snipers, booby traps and anti-tank missiles? And how can we not call such ‘rebel’ forces ‘terrorists’, when whole populations have fled their homes and villages in fear of their lives?

Even if the Western media and their duped audiences are unaware of these realities of the ‘civil war’ in Syria, can we really believe that of the Western leaders who are helping to support and arm Syria’s sectarian insurgency, or believe their sincerity when they say that Assad must go because he has been killing his own people?

<http://russia-insider.com/en/its-not-about-assad-and-never-was/ri13368>