

Doing good, and why it is 'good' to do it

London, October 2015



Last summer, as part of my work with an international aid organization, I discussed the situation in Syria with a young Syrian man who was working to deliver aid to the people of Aleppo.

We spoke via Skype on a Thursday afternoon, concluding our conversation at 5.30pm UK time, (7.30pm Syrian time), and promising to speak again on Saturday (*the Syrian 'weekend' being Friday, the day on which people attend Mosque*).

We had talked about the organisation he worked for (*a small operation which ran projects for the benefit, primarily, of widows, orphans and the children of fathers who had been killed, including library openings, literacy training and a superb programme in which the organisation bought flour from local farmers, and employed widows to bake and distribute bread to those who needed it in Aleppo. The organisation can be found at: <https://www.facebook.com/MasarratEst>*), about his plans for the future – he had a place to study Marine Biology at university in Paris – and about the concerns of his family:

'My mother cries, sometimes,' he said. 'And tells me it is too dangerous, that I should leave. But I cannot. I have to help my people.'

On the Saturday, we failed to connect. Such is Skype. On the Sunday, we were also unable to connect.

On Monday, I arrived at work to an e-mail explaining that the previous day, the man had been working in the organisation's Aleppo office when the building was struck by a barrel bomb, killing him instantly.

In this context (*I genuinely would not normally do this*), I wanted to post this video so we can understand what a barrel bomb is, and what it does. <https://www.facebook.com/TheSyriaCampaign/videos/913373662087981/>

Please be aware that the bombs detailed in this video are launched not by IS, or by the Free Syria Army (*both of which, for balance, have many faults of their own*) but by the military of Bashar Al-Assad, President of Syria.

That is, the government of Syria is deliberately loading thousands of bombs with glass, screws, nails and other pieces of sharp, hard material, to ensure injuries and deaths for the greatest possible number of people – not just those caught in the blast.

I have, in the course of my career, been privileged to meet a number of people who have performed heroic acts. I know, too, that some of them are now dead. It is one of the reasons I wrote the book [*The Toss of a Coin: voices from a modern crisis*](#).

And I intend to make the heroic story of this young Syrian man – killed by an explosive packed with screws, nails and glass, dropped on his workplace by his own government and designed to kill him and those like him who have done nothing more than help people in need whose families (*may*) have opposed Assad – a part of my next book.

I am aware that this is something of a deviation from my normal practice on this site, and under normal circumstances, I wouldn't do it, but given current international 'debate', I feel I have little alternative.

At the UN General Assembly meeting in New York earlier this week (*27th and 28th September*), Syria and its ongoing conflict was high on the agenda. In itself, this should be little cause for comment: the Syrian civil war, a bitter, multi-sided battle now in its fifth year, has included a number of potential war crimes, caused hundreds of thousands of deaths, displaced 11m people, endangered the lives of 17m and created more than four million refugees. If that is not the UN's business, then it is hard to understand what is.

Of course, the major thing currently standing in the way of the UN responding correctly to the Syrian crisis (*which would include a full peace-keeping force with international mandate to act, rather than stand on the sidelines, a full, all-encompassing no-fly zone, the exit of all non-Syrian forces from the state, and the arrest and trial of Assad and IS leaders – we may come back to this at a later date*) is Russia (*Syria's other allies are Iran – which does not have a veto on the UN Security Council – and China, which does have a veto, but has consistently abstained in votes on the issue over the last couple of years*).

And so it is not even particularly remarkable that Russian President Vladimir Putin made a case for the world uniting with Assad to oppose IS: Syria is an important Russian ally, and if the

choice is between him, IS, or a largely Western-friendly FSA-led government, it is obvious that Putin would lean towards the former.

But what has become increasingly clear is that Assad himself may be beginning to succeed in a wider – and to him, far more important – debate: should we support Assad as the ‘only man who can stop IS’?

I have been working in and around the Syrian crisis – in a variety of roles – for the last 24 months or so.

While international aid agencies have worked extremely hard to deliver vital supplies to people whose lives are literally in constant danger (*though some mistakes have been made thanks to some agencies’ desperation to gain access to difficult regions*), the political understanding of the situation in Syria has been sorely lacking – not amongst aid agencies, most of which know exactly what they need to in order to help people stay alive – but among politicians and commentators; those who shape opinion and who are supposed to act in people’s best interests.

As an example, this week, a number of commentators have begun to call for assistance to be granted to Assad ‘so he can stop IS’. This is not just from the usual suspects, but from newspapers including *The Guardian (UK)*. Even US President Barack Obama appears to have agreed to let Russia assist Assad, as long as it does not interfere with ongoing US airstrikes on IS positions.

This website is not here so I can rail against the output of other journalists. It would be pointless, and in any case we each have a job to do.

But given the rising tide of ‘pro-Assadism’ (*or at least of ‘let’s give Assad some help as the best of a very bad bunch’*) I feel it’s important on this occasion to ensure there is some expression of why this is a very bad idea. Even if this is only read by a small number of people, the point of journalism is to give people the information they need to make a decision about the world around them, and I would not be doing my job if I did not attempt to counter some of the wilder ideas about ‘what to do about Syria’ aired over the last week.

Because no-one in their right mind could support IS. It is a brutal, immoral, crazed terrorist organisation. It is not even honest about itself – presenting itself as a Muslim group, but having so far killed more than 98 times as many Muslims as people of all other faiths (*and none*) put together.

And IS is pretty terrifying; though far more so if you happen to be Yemeni, Iraqi, Syrian, Libyan, Nigerian, Somali, Kurdish, Kuwaiti or Turkish (*the states where IS has a presence and/or has carried out bombings and murders*) than if you are in the EU where it effectively does not exist.

Equally, Assad has been working extremely hard to present himself as the sole viable opponent to IS, which is basically vital to him remaining alive.

Assad is a poor and incapable politician, ill-suited (*at best*) to leading a state, but he is neither militarily nor tactically stupid, and has certainly by now realised (*because I have realised, and it is impossible that he is behind me on the curve regarding his own survival chances*) that even if he wins the Syrian Civil War, the international enmity he has built up in the last five years means he will be either in jail for life, or dead, within 12 months of the war's end: his only chance of freedom and survival is being 'useful' to the international community.

And so, IS. The threat of IS – and the pretence he is the only man capable of resisting and overcoming it – presents literally the only chance Assad has of avoiding lifetime imprisonment for war crimes or assassination by agents of the US, Saudi Arabia, or even Russia, should a viable (*in the eyes of the Russians*) alternative to him arise.

This may be a sensible moment to address a related, but opposing argument: that Assad actually *supports* IS.

The basis of this argument goes that Assad's forces seldom directly attack IS, preferring instead to chase and harry the Free Syrian Army and other small resistance militias. Though there is evidence of this – and it could, at a stretch, fit with the idea that the continued threat of IS is of direct benefit to Assad himself – I am afraid the conclusion that Assad supports IS is a step too far.

As noted above, Assad is not tactically or militarily incapable.

He realises that IS, with a seemingly unlimited supply of money, as well as access to the weapons the US left behind when leaving Iraq, poses the single greatest threat to his continued rule in Syria. It makes sense for him to fight only those weaker than his government – smaller militias, innocent civilians – and hope that IS' activities in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen and elsewhere begin to exhaust its funds, weapons supply and/or members, giving him an increased opportunity to defeat it.

But that in itself touches on the main point; the reason why we should not – and in fact must not – support Assad.

Because we oppose IS because it is a vicious, unreasonable, unreasoning, violent and murderous gang. We oppose it because it deliberately spreads misery, torture, terror, mayhem and death in its attempt to grasp and retain power, whether in Iraq, Sirte, or Syria itself.

But Assad is now five years into hammering civilians, bombing them relentlessly, murdering them by the thousand, (*the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights estimates more than 330,000*

have now been killed on Syrian soil – a figure which of course discounts those who have died attempting to find new places to live, the 11m who are alive, but now own nothing and have no permanent home, and the 15-or-so million who face death and terror every day) and there are extremely credible claims that when his forces do take prisoners, they are no less likely than IS to torture them.

For balance – and because it is important to note – we should pause here to consider that the ‘others’ in this war: the FSA and several smaller militias, some of whom have received backing and weapons from Western governments, are little, if any better. And there are a significant number of Syrians who have genuine reason to fear for their own futures, should the Western-backed forces take control after the war.

But when it comes to ‘aiding’ Assad ‘against IS’, there is really only one consideration we must bear in mind: if we oppose IS as a vicious criminal gang of murderous maniacs, how can we possibly even consider supporting a man who has, in the last five years, maniacally and without mercy, murdered civilians, and broken international law on countless occasions?

It’s an unjustifiable suggestion, and should be regarded as what it is – the increasingly desperate howl of those who lack imagination and commitment. Such people deserve a voice, but they should not be guiding – far less leading – our international activity.