

British journalist “set up to be shot” by Syrian rebels

Richard Tyler
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The mass media rarely questions the official version of events in Syria. It functions as a propaganda tool for the major imperialist powers to justify their policy of regime change in Syria and the region more broadly.

The role of the United States and the UK in deliberately stoking up sectarian conflict in Syria to this end, with the aid of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, is airbrushed entirely from media accounts.

An account filed last week by Alex Thomson, chief correspondent for Britain’s Channel 4 News, marked a rare and revealing breach in official propaganda. It gave an indication of what is really taking place on the ground and the filthy role being played by the Western-backed opposition.

On his blog, Thomson explained that during a trip to Syria he and his news team were deliberately set up by opposition forces to be killed by the Syrian Army.

The blog, dated Friday, June 3, begins by describing Thomson and his news team getting ready to depart the Safir Hotel in Homs, the scene of fierce fighting earlier in the year where the Free Syrian Army took over half the city.

The team is accompanying a United Nations observer team travelling to Al-Qusayr, about three miles southwest. The United Nations representatives are there to conduct a meeting with the local civilian and military leaders.

Thomson recounts being told by Mark Reynolds, the officer responsible, “Usual rules Alex OK? We’re not responsible for you guys. If you get into trouble we’ll leave you, yes? You’re on your own.”

After leaving the area around Homs controlled by Syrian state forces, the convoy of two UN vehicles, plus a local police patrol car marked “Protocol” as escort, move into territory controlled by the FSA.

In Al-Qusayr Thomson tells how, when he begins

filming nearby, “Shell fragments are produced to be filmed. They explain how the shelling will begin again as soon as we leave—a claim which, by its nature, must remain untested, though there is certainly extensive shell damage in some parts of town here.”

His news crew waits for the UN team to finish their talks, so they can travel with them back to Homs as “they’re the only way across the lines with any degree of safety.”

As they wait, and with his deadline approaching, Thomson and his team become the focus of attention from a man claiming to be from “rebel intelligence”:

“He and his mates are making things difficult for our driver and translator too—their Damascus IDs and our Damascus van reg[istration] are not helping. This is new. Different. Hostile. This is not like Homs or Houla and still the UN meeting drags on in the hot afternoon.”

Thomson eventually decides to ask for an escort back to Homs the way they came in, “Both sides, both checkpoints will remember our vehicle”.

“Suddenly four men in a black car beckon us to follow. We move out behind. We are led another route. Led in fact, straight into a free-fire zone. Told by the Free Syrian Army to follow a road that was blocked off in the middle of no-man’s-land.”

Their vehicle comes under fire and they take evasive action, seeking cover in the nearest side street, but it turns out to be a dead end. Thomson writes that there was “no option but to drive back out onto the sniping ground and floor it back to the road we’d been led in on.”

As they turn back onto the main road, they see the black car again that had led them into the trap, but it roars off as soon as they re-appear.

Thirty minutes later, the same black car appears out of a side street. Thomson’s vehicle is surrounded by

shouting militia and blocked from joining the UN convoy as it leaves Al-Qusayr.

“Eventually we got out too and on the right route, back to Damascus.”

Thomson is emphatic about who is responsible for the lethal predicament he and his news crew faced: “I’m quite clear the rebels deliberately set us up to be shot by the Syrian Army”.

A veteran of reporting on 20 wars, Thomson is well experienced working in conflict areas and answers the question of why the rebels would want to kill him. “Dead journos [journalists] are bad for Damascus”, he writes.

Why they are “bad for Damascus”, Thomson does not spell out. But his explanation is certainly the most plausible, following the maxim *cui bono*—who benefits. In this instance, the FSA deliberately set up the news crew so they could use their deaths to provide a further pretext for Western-backed military intervention into Syria.

Thomson is also clear that this was not an isolated incident. He concludes his blog by reporting a tweet he received: “I read your piece ‘set up to be shot in no man’s land’, I can relate as I had that same experience in Al Zabadani during our tour.”

The message was from Nawaf al Thani, a human rights lawyer and a member of the Arab League Observer mission to Syria earlier this year.

The attempted killing of Thompson came the same week the US administration indicated that it is prepared to invoke Chapter VII of the UN charter, justifying military intervention, in relation to Syria. A spokesperson for Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said, “The secretary made clear Chapter VII remains on the table at the appropriate time”.

Thomson’s account received barely any coverage in the British media, let alone internationally. Except for the blog, Channel 4 appears not to have run an item on the near-death experience of its own news crew.

This same media has no problem running largely unsubstantiated accounts and photographs of the latest atrocities in Syria, all of which are attributed without evidence to the Assad regime. And there is no doubt that, had the FSA achieved its aim, the assault on the news crew would have been given prime coverage.



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