

26 May 2015

Dear Mark,

Thank you for your time on the phone yesterday and thank you also for agreeing to pass on our letter to your colleagues at BBC Newsnight. As discussed on the phone, we have some feedback regarding the clip on Aleppo which was aired on Newsnight on 24 May. Specifically, we felt that the manner by which the issue was dealt with could have left viewers with a distorted perception of what is happening inside Syria.

We hope that, for this reason, you will accept this letter as a source of constructive feedback from UK-based Syrian groups which felt that the Newsnight coverage of the situation in Aleppo on 24 May did not adequately capture the situation on the ground.

We understand of course your dedication to ensuring a balance in your news coverage, however please rest assured that this is not the issue here. You will know more than we do that a series of objective statements can nevertheless leave viewers with certain impressions, and that the same facts, when presented in different ways, can yield dramatically different messaging.

For this reason, we would like to outline some of the issues that could arise from the introductory remarks to the programme's segment:

"The people of Aleppo are preparing themselves for siege, those living in the middle of town fear it won't be long until supplies in are cut off. Russia's defence ministry believes up to 6,000 insurgent fighters are gathering in preparation of a major offensive to claim back the town."

From this opening quote (which sets the tone for the entire segment, and hence frames the issue for viewers):

- We are told that 'people of Aleppo are preparing themselves for siege', although we do not know who will be besieging them?
- The subsequent sentence which speaks of the 6,000 insurgent fighters implies that it is these fighters who will be besieging Aleppo.
- We have not been told who these insurgent fighters are. Are they Daesh? Al-Nusra? Free Syrian army? Bear in mind that Russia classifies all opposition groups as terrorists, including those of the Free Syrian Army.
- By quoting the Russian defence ministry in the opening statement of the programme, this implies that Russia is an authoritative source on the issue. Is this the best place to put the quote?

"The fragile ceasefire brokered between Russia and the US in the last couple of months has come under renewed threat as terrorist factions like Islamic State and al-Nusra continue their efforts to regain ground."

- According to this passage, the threat to the ceasefire is under threat because of Daesh and al-Nusra. However, Bebars mentioned in his interview the non-stop bombing that was being conducted by the Assad regime? Is this not threatening the ceasefire as well? Even further, wouldn't this be viewed as the primary threat to the success of the ceasefire, especially taking into account Assad's breaches (particularly in Aleppo) since the ceasefire's commencement on 28 February?

- This passage is now talking about terrorist factions. Are these the same insurgent fighters which were referred to in the previous statement? It certainly seems so from the passages.

“Aleppo, once a major stronghold of terrorists, remains a key strategic hotspot of their group focus.”

- The notion that Aleppo was ‘once a major stronghold of terrorists’ has been flatly rejected by activists both inside and outside of Syria. Daesh has never been in full control of Aleppo.
- When Aleppo is described as a terrorist stronghold, it also implicitly legitimises the military action of other groups undertaken in Aleppo (i.e. Assad and Russia). Viewers will obviously be less sympathetic to the plight of civilians if their city is described as a ‘stronghold of terrorists’.

Because of this initial context by which the programme segment began:

- The voice of the moderate opposition is lost. Rather, it seems that there are only two factions in Aleppo, namely the Assad regime and Daesh/al-Nusra.
- It seems that Daesh is in control of Aleppo and that the Assad regime is trying to wrest control from this group. For example, when Diplomatic Editor Mark Urban was explaining from the map:

“They’re now fighting here and here to sever that tongue of land held by the rebels that goes into the middle of the town.”

Because there was no context as to who these rebels are, it seems that it is Daesh/al-Nusra which are being referred to here.

As you can see, our concerns are not pertaining to the facts which were presented within the Newsnight segment, but rather in the confusing and potentially misleading manner and context by which this was done. It is important that viewers understand what is happening on the ground in Syria because this affects the nature of the political pressure which they will exert on policy makers, which will in turn affect decision making on how the UK reacts to the Syrian conflict.

We do hope that you will take our feedback on board and we are happy to keep the discussion open. **Particularly, we would be very happy to come in and meet the team to deliver a short talk or an interactive presentation on Syria, depending on time constraints.** We can cater to your schedule. Is this something that we can arrange in the near future?

Signed:

Yasmine Nahlawi, Rethink Rebuild Society
 Dr. Mohammad Alhadj Ali, Syrian Welsh Society
 Dr. Sharif Kaf Al-Ghazal, Syrian Association of Yorkshire
 Dr. Abdullah Hanoun, Syrian Community of the South West
 Reem Assil, Syrian Platform for Peace
 Kellie Storm and Heba Ajami, Syria Solidarity UK
 Dr. Fadel Moghrabi, Peace and Justice for Syria
 Dr. Bachar Hakim, Syrian Society in Nottinghamshire
 Mazen Ejbaei, Help 4Syria
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