

## Dealing with fake news



Rashmee Roshan Lall

The imam of Mecca's Grand Mosque, no less, has taken it upon himself to warn against a relatively piffling non-spiritual human concern that he termed "false news". Syrian President Bashar Assad recently took refuge in a similar label to explain an inconvenient human rights organisation's report that his administration executed up to 13,000 people at a military prison near Damascus. "You can forge anything these days," Assad said. "We are living in a fake news era."

He is not entirely wrong. An Algerian newspaper reprinted, in all seriousness, a satirical piece from a French publication that suggested the far-right National Front presidential candidate Marine Le Pen intended to build a wall between France and Algeria.

One might ask whether fake news really is blurring the facts fit to print and tweet. Can nothing be done about it other than, as the Meccan imam suggested, practising forgetfulness of "incidents that would have been better forgotten"?

It is a fair bet that the imam, Abdul Rahman al-Sudais, who is in his mid-50s, has had to deal with the usual amount of rumours, base canard and all manner of unpleasant things in the course of his life.

Sudais could even be said to have done his bit in that department. As Robert Lacey noted in

his 2009 book *Inside the Kingdom: Kings, Clerics, Modernists, Terrorists, and the Struggle for Saudi Arabia*, Sudais once made a somewhat dubious correlation between the 2006 Saudi winter drought and women's behaviour. He said it was at least partly caused by their sins, which included "unveiling, mingling with men and being indifferent to the *hijab*".

Before anyone shouts out "fake news", it is worth noting that this was Sudais's opinion, not fact. It was a contentious point of view and those who disagree must be prepared to argue with the help of facts. For maximum effect, those facts should be easily conveyed and understood.

Which brings us to the slightly doleful case made by a British newspaper about the way to deal with fake news. Making a key, if obvious point, the paper suggested the mainstream media can fight back but only if they give people narratives they can understand.

But of course. What else is journalism – as well as the vastly more precise statistical sciences, carefully analysed political theory and deeply thought philosophy – meant to do? They have to be accessible if they are to provide a base upon which the general public can rest its collective chin, which is to say its opinion.

The media, data collection and theorising about natural, political, ethical or social phenomena were always meant to be part of the broader attempt to examine

and explain the world. They were never meant to create high towers at which the lowly public would gaze up in awe and incomprehension.

One of the more notable recent practitioners of accessible information dissemination was Hans Rosling, a professor of global health at Sweden's Karolinska Institute. Rosling, who died February 7th, was known for his ability to break down complex data and ideas into simple concepts that even a 12-year-old could understand.

But one of the greatest examples of the transmission of truths simply and clearly was Socrates. He was not the archetypal remote Greek philosopher; he never wrote anything or at least not anything that anyone has ever found. What we know of his work chiefly comes from his student Plato. Socrates has been dead more than 2,400 years and is chiefly known because, as the Roman author Cicero, put it, he "brought philosophy down from the skies".

We could do with a bit of that right now, if only we knew how Socrates did it. So how did he do it? Those who have studied his life say he was a man of the streets, always arguing with the unwashed and listening to the uninformed in pursuit of his mission, which was to ascertain the best way to live on Earth. To that end, Socrates felt the collective pulse, took the popular temperature and considered the best way to be happy.

What does that have to do with fake news, one might ask. A lot. First, it reinforces the importance of the human connection in the pursuit and dissemination of information and knowledge. Second, it reiterates the need to go out to spread the word.

In this context, the Canadian government's response to the January 29th Quebec mosque attack is worth recalling. When misreporting about the perpetrator – fake news that it was a Moroccan Muslim – spread far and wide, the Canadian government stepped in and patiently stated the facts. It used its authority and its sizeable megaphone to get the word out.

It is a model other governments and public figures concerned about fake news might do well to consider. Especially in the Middle East and North Africa region, with its overwhelmingly youthful population – those aged 15-24 are projected to increase from 46 million in 2010 to 58 million in 2025. The young will consume social media and, naturally, fake news, too.

We can imagine what Socrates would have done had he been confronted with fake news and its mass consumption. He would have hit the streets and started talking, after spending time listening.

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## Arab Maghreb Union: A disappointing dream



Riadh Bouazza

Anyone examining the reality of the 28-year-old Arab Maghreb Union is going to be hugely disappointed: The union of Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia is at a standstill and signed agreements are not going anywhere.

Moroccan King Mohammed VI correctly and succinctly described the state of the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) when he said the Maghreb is the least integrated in Africa, if not the world. He predicted the dissolution of the union because of its perennial inability to respond to the ambitious objectives set by the 1989 Marrakech agreement centred on trade.

There are many indications that the union had a stillbirth. Relations among its members have had so many ups and downs that each one created its own set of international

relations outside the framework of the union, which has had a summit since 1994.

Instead of working together towards the common objectives of a union, AMU members have opted for separate agreements and pacts among themselves. Tunisia and Libya did it in 1974; Tunisia, Algeria and Mauritania in 1983; Morocco and Libya in 1984. They all failed, of course, and trust among AMU countries is low.

From the start, the main purpose of the union was to create opportunities for economic development, in addition to having a common political, security and military front, similar to what is found in Europe or among the Gulf countries.

It is ironic to note, considering the union's dysfunction, that certain material needs of one member can be satisfied by another. Libya, for example, sits on huge oil reserves and Algeria has enormous

amounts of natural gas. Tunisia and Morocco have large phosphate deposits and Mauritania overflows with minerals.

Studies have pointed out that the lull in economic relations among AMU members represents a loss of 3% yearly in each one's gross domestic product. The United Nations said these relations represent just 5% of each country's foreign trade, a measly figure when compared to trade ties between the members of the European Union.

The reasons for the Arab Maghreb Union's lack of success are many. Some relate to political tensions and others are due to different economic systems, cultures, ideologies, histories and institutions.

The crisis in Libya is in its sixth year and the need for a united front within the Arab Maghreb Union is stronger than ever. Alas, the union's institutions remain frozen.

Despite Tunisia's success in its democratic transition amid a stormy regional context, the option for an improved union among Maghreb countries remains far removed. The conflict over the Sahara in Morocco is one of the major impediments. Efforts by regional and international partners to bridge the gap between Algeria and Morocco regarding this issue have failed.

The Marrakech deal stipulated that all decisions must be made by agreement of all members. This makes building the union almost impossible because deep disagreements and differences exist among the members. Add to that the absence of a shared vision of the desired model of economic integration and the union remains stillborn.

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The need for a united front within the Arab Maghreb Union is stronger than ever.

## Taking sides in Yemen



Hamadan al-Alliei

Many Yemeni citizens are aware that some international organisations head to the country with political agendas. Often these aims make life more miserable for Yemenis, particularly when the organisations buy the discourse of armed groups that are guilty of the worst crimes against human rights in the country.

By their behaviour, such organisations, unfortunately, give a concrete example of how to betray the principles of neutrality and independence in humanitarian work.

The British organisation Oxfam, for instance, has taken it upon itself to be a defender of the armed Houthi militias. Oxfam's latest questionable move was supporting Andrew Mitchell, former British secretary of state for International Development and a Conservative member of parliament, on a trip to Yemen. Mitchell tried to polish the Houthis' politi-

cal image in Europe. The issue of the Houthis' crimes against the Yemeni people obviously was never brought up.

I worked with Transparency International in Yemen and I believe the corruption exercised by the Houthi militias since they took control of Sana'a in September 2014 was unprecedented in Yemen's modern history. Yemen ranked 170th out of 176 countries and territories in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index for 2016.

The Houthis' actions brought the central bank to the brink of bankruptcy and, UN reports said, 80% of the population became distressed. The Houthis plundered humanitarian aid and used the resources of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health to buy weapons. They went as far as enrolling children in their militias. And yet, Mitchell declared that the Houthis improved the situation in regards to corruption.

Even Houthi supporters would not dare say something like that.

They know quite well that corruption worsened under the Houthis.

Mitchell also declared that "the Houthi rebels should not be seen negatively or as agents of Iran" and that "Britain and the international community should avoid demonising the Houthis and refrain from referring to them as Iranian agents". This goes against international and UN reports that have documented Iran's political, military and financial support of the Houthis. Mitchell bashed Britain's military support to Saudi Arabia and its allies and accused the latter of laying siege to "a sovereign state".

The honourable member of parliament working for Oxfam could have consulted UN reports about foreign humanitarian aid to Yemen. The reports detail the number of ships allowed inside Yemeni ports after being searched by the Arab coalition forces. Mitchell would have been right if he had decried the slow speed with which search operations were conducted but to call that "a tight blockade" is

distorting reality.

Mitchell has called for a replacement for UN Security Council Resolution 2216. Ignoring this resolution means that the armed militias would thrive in Yemeni towns and institutions and that the plundered weapons would not be returned to the Yemeni Army. A new UN resolution would legitimise crimes committed by these militias and guarantee more violence.

The Yemeni government and its allies must launch media and diplomacy campaigns to counteract Oxfam's defamation campaign. Already, there are signs of Oxfam's pernicious influence on UN institutions in Yemen. The latter's leadership has begun to deal directly with the rebels in clear violation of Resolution 2216.

By going along with Oxfam's biased agenda and providing official cover for Mitchell's visit, UN organisations in Yemen are jeopardising their own neutrality.

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