Skeptical of media reports about Syria, small groups of Westerners are heading to Damascus to see for themselves. Are they truth-seekers—or pawns of the regime?

A British priest, an American student and a Scottish baroness, among others, were stuck at a border crossing. But the border in question is no joking matter; it’s the one that divides Lebanon from Syria. Skeptical of what they’d seen and heard in the Western media, these men and women had arrived here to learn the “truth” about the then-six-year-old Syrian Civil War.

This was last year, and the group was one of hundreds of tourist delegations that have tried to come to Syria, many with permission from the regime. Its organizer? Andrew Ashdown, an Anglican vicar from Winchester, a small town in southern England. Since 2014, he’s visited Syria at least nine times on similar tours. His personal highlight came about two years ago when he unexpectedly met President Bashar al-Assad. Many in the West consider Assad a monster, but Ashdown feels differently. Stuck at the border crossing, he was excitedly telling his companions about his encounter. “He was standing there surrounded by all this grandeur, yet completely alone,” Ashdown said. “I felt very privileged. It’s terrible how the media twist things.”

Since the Syrian Civil War began in 2011, it has morphed from a peaceful uprising against the government into a devastating struggle in which both the regime and its enemies have sanctioned rape and torture, according to the United Nations. The carnage has led half the country’s citizens to flee.
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with more than 5 million refugees living outside of Syria.

Human rights groups say Assad and his Russian allies have killed the largest number of civilians, dropping barrel bombs indiscriminately, targeting hospitals and medical centers, using chemical weapons and carrying out a series of sieges to starve the opposition into submission. Its most recent offensive, in Eastern Ghouta near Damascus, has killed more than 1,100 civilians since mid-February, as the Syrian president continues to win back control over his battered country.

It has never been easy for the press to cover the conflict, but over time, it has become even more difficult. Syria was ranked as the fourth-most-repressive country for media in the world last year, according to Reporters Without Borders, which placed it ahead of only Turkmenistan, Eritrea and North Korea.

For Western journalists, it’s hard to even get in. Certain outlets—including Al Jazeera and the National Geographic Channel—seem to be completely blacklisted. Reporters who do get a visa are assigned government minders, and they operate with the understanding they won’t be allowed back if they write anything negative.

The lack of reporters on the ground has led to an even more fervent propaganda war—in Russian, Iranian and other press outlets and on social media—in which pro-regime pundits call humanitarian groups like the White Helmets “terrorists,” and dismiss children killed by chemical attacks as “actors.”

Western tour groups are increasingly playing a role in this battle over information. Most seem to believe that Assad should be allowed to deal with the opposition as he sees fit. They pay their own way, but members of the Syrian government often organize visas, coordinate schedules and make themselves available for meetings.

The phenomenon of Westerners traveling to support repressive regimes is not new. Alberto Fernandez, a former American diplomat stationed in Syria in 1990, says it goes back to the 1930s, when Westerners traveled to the Soviet Union for similar reasons. “People...getting information from regimes or going on trips and allowing themselves to be used by tyrants, that has happened with every movement,” he says. “That is true of Syria.”

While these trips draw together a disparate collection of people with varying motivations and levels of knowledge of the region, all those interviewed by Newsweek expressed strong distrust of Western media. And their access has made them increasingly influential online.

Take Miguel Valenzuela, a muscular, 29-year-old American living in Australia. He decided to come to Syria in early 2017 because he felt he was getting only one side of the story. Two years before, he visited Iran and says the trip forced him to question many of his preconceptions about the country—from how welcoming civilians were to how they felt about their leadership. As Valenzuela started learning more about Syria—both the war and the nation’s history—he wondered if Assad was simply misunderstood.

“I started...trying to find alternative media, which is really difficult,” he says. “I think I first started by looking at TripAdvisor.” On the travel site, he saw postings saying “how beautiful the country was and how free people...which contradicted the idea of a brutal dictator.”

Next, he searched Twitter and Facebook for people who had visited the country. He came across self-styled activists and citizen journalists who post frequently and conduct interviews on alternative or Russian state-controlled media sites. Valenzuela found them convincing but still wanted to see for himself.

He tried getting a visa from the Syrian consulate in Sydney, but it kept canceling his appointments. So he searched for another way. After Googling “Syria tours,” Valenzuela came across Jamal Daoud, a Palestinian-Australian activist who...
traveled to the country as early as 2013 with a group from Australia’s short-lived WikiLeaks Party that included John Shipton, Julian Assange’s father. Three years later, Daoud began organizing tours to Syria under a group called the Australian Social Justice Network. Prices ran to $850 for a single room, Valenzuela learned, flights not included. But he found it reassuring that the money wasn’t due until Syria approved his visa.

The next trip was advertised as “celebrating Easter, celebrating Syrian Independence Day and celebrating the victory of Aleppo”—a Syrian regime victory that ended a brutal siege with a forced evacuation that the United Nations considers a war crime. Valenzuela signed up.

His visit was odd, he says. The tour’s organizers gave him a government-issued press card saying he worked for Daoud’s media company, even though he wasn’t a journalist (he runs a supplements company). The group was often joined by SANA, Syrian state media, which filmed them making visits to Aleppo and Damascus and regularly encouraged attendees to provide interviews about what they heard and witnessed, including civilians’ concerns about rising food prices that were fueled by U.S. sanctions. “I was blown away by the strength of the Syrian people,” Valenzuela says. “And also how real the war was.”

Among the tour groups that have made it inside Syria, some show a strong desire to help local people. They donate money to charitable causes in the country, and one cryptocurrency enthusiast even suggested using bitcoin to get around U.S. sanctions. In October, a visiting Irishman paid for a young girl’s heart operation, while some have talked about going back to Syria to volunteer as English teachers, though whether they can get a longer-term visa is another matter.

However, most of the Syrian refugees Newsweek spoke to have already been forced to flee their home country, and they reacted with confusion and resignation when learning about these trips. “I think they don’t know it, but it’s propaganda,” said a Syrian who fled Damascus with his entire family and asked to remain anonymous because he’s still worried about retaliation. “These people who go there, I think they would like to help, to support the people, and they want to see Syria…[but] the regime killed half a million Syrians and 80 percent of Syria is destroyed.”

 Jalal Mando, a young actor from Homs who was imprisoned for two years for filming protests, said the Syrian regime has always been good at lying to people. “When I was in prison, a lot of prisoners wanted reconciliation with the Syrian regime. I saw many of them, and they were killed under torture,” he said. “Bashar al-Assad wants to deceive people by creating an illusion for them.”

Syrian government employees acknowledge a propaganda war is going on, and they’re working hard to help their side win. The government’s Ministry of Information is a critical player in this battle. Hassan Chahine, a Damascus with 40 years of experience in the Syria tour-guide business, praised the ministry for making his job easier. Sitting in a courtyard in a boutique hotel in Damascus’s party district, Bab Touma, in October, surrounded by guests visiting with another Western delegation, he said he was lucky to have access to an “official voice” for his country. He speculated that tour guides elsewhere must struggle without that guidance.

Before the war, 12 percent of Syria’s gross domestic product came from tourism. Damascus is one of the oldest cities on Earth and features one of the largest mosques in the world. The capital is also home to a bevy of former tour guides struggling, like everyone else, to comprehend what has happened to their country. So Chahine is pleased that business is starting up again; in fact, he says, a new delegation arrives every day. “They want to see what happened,” he explains, adding that it gives the government and its supporters in Syria “a way to get our information out.”

Social media are a major channel for pro-Syrian propaganda, and many Westerners who go on these guided tours post photos and commentary about their trip on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Several repeat visitors have built up significant followings: Ashdown has more than 2,500 Facebook followers. British-born Vanessa Beeley, a self-proclaimed “independent journalist,” has 25,000 followers on Twitter. Canadian Eva Bartlett, who blogs for Russia Today, a Kremlin mouthpiece, has more than 75,000 followers across both platforms. All three focus on similar topics, including discrediting the White Helmets. They occasionally give talks across the U.K. or U.S. and repeatedly say their access inside Syria gives them more credibility than reporters from more mainstream groups, such as The Guardian or the BBC.

Most reporters would disagree,
and analysts say these Western visitor accounts are being amplified by bots as well as some Christian groups, which believe the narrative that Assad supports religious minorities. “The space has become a fascinating, often frustrating one where you’re seeing all these actors—good and indifferent—attempting to use these means to shape reality or misshape reality,” says Fernandez, the former American diplomat.

Back at the Syrian border, the members of Ashdown’s contingent were getting to know one another. Most attendees were Christian. Some have never been to the Middle East before; others have no experience in a war zone. One woman, a divorced mother who learned of the trip through Ashdown’s Facebook page, used student loan money to fund the $1,900 expected cost of the journey (flights not included). At least two had written letters to family members to be opened if they are killed while away.

But it seemed that Ashdown’s contact—a high-level official in the Syrian government—had mysteriously disappeared, along with the group’s already issued visas. “Is it a cock-up or conspiracy?” John Howard, a Methodist presbyter based in the West Bank, quipped as he strolled through the ruined Roman temples at Hezbollah-controlled Baalbeck, in east Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley. “That’s the question, isn’t it?”

By noon on the fourth day of waiting, Ashdown was passing around whiskey while making plans to return west to Beirut. People were becoming frustrated. A few people began to express quiet doubts: Maybe the mainstream media reports were actually correct? Maybe Assad was exercising extreme control over information while brutalizing his own people.

A week passed, but the senior Syrian official never re-emerged to distribute the final permissions, and the attendees—who had flown from as far as South America—were left disappointed. In the end, a string of speakers, all government supporters, traveled to Lebanon to meet with them.

Among them was Mother Agnes Mariam de la Croix. A Syria-based Lebanese nun, she is best known for conducting her own report into the 2013 East Ghouta chemical attack, claiming the footage of it was fabricated and the children had been anesthetized to create it. (De la Croix had no prior investigative experience.)

She also spoke about how the opposition had always been “terrorists,” the “Mafia-like” nature of the media and her theory that Saudi Arabia—rather than Assad—was behind the departure of Syrian refugees to Europe because it longs for the Islamization of the West. Then she attacked the BBC, which she said lied about conditions inside the country.

Most of those listening nodded sympathetically, promising to spread her message when they returned home.