

State Propaganda in Syria

From War Crimes to Pipelines

An INSURGE intelligence investigation

Nafeez Ahmed

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'Return to Homs', A Syrian refugee walks among severely damaged buildings in
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“O you who accept the Truth, be persistently standing firm in justice as witnesses for God, even if it be against yourselves, or parents and relatives. Whether one is rich or poor, God is more worthy of both. Follow not your desires, lest you not be just. If you distort your testimony or refuse to give it, then God is aware of what you do.”

(Qur’an 4:135)

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Nafeez Ahmed, London (July 2018)

Foreword

In this era of unbridled fake news, internet trolls and rising populism in the West, it has become increasingly challenging for experts, journalists and policymakers - let alone everyday citizens - to make sense of increasingly polarised narratives around key issues. The erosion of public trust in two key institutions - government and media - threatens the foundations of democracy. In recent years, the role of both state and private actors in and outside the West in attempting to influence the perceptions, beliefs and behaviours of mass populations has become a major subject of debate, as evidence continues to emerge of the extent to which propaganda has become a mainstay of the policies of governments, businesses, Big Data platforms and beyond.

The conflict in Syria, which has taken the lives of at least half a million people by some estimates, is one such case where public opinion is deeply divided. With calls for greater action by the West from one side, and warnings of the dangers of intervention on the other, it has become increasingly difficult to sort fact from fiction around a war whose devastation is a blight on the twenty-first century. Contradictory stories around a chemical weapons attack in Douma, and how this has played out across the spectrum of state narratives and media reporting, demonstrates how toxic and irreconcilable the public conversation on this pivotal conflict has become.

In this onerous atmosphere, I welcome this timely, well researched and insightful report by Dr Nafeez Ahmed who investigates some of the key narratives around the Syrian conflict. Combing through a range of pro-rebel and pro-Assad discourses around some of the most hotly debated issues and events during the conflict – the Douma, Ghouta and Khan Shaykhoun attacks, and allegations of the use of chemical weapons; the role of the White Helmets; the prevalence of jihadist groups; responsibility for war crimes; competing geopolitical interests, etc. – Dr Ahmed unearths flaws, lies and falsehoods on all sides of the divide. In doing so he brings to light the vast extent to which the fog of war and propaganda – both Western and Russian in particular – have refracted reality and thus influenced perceptions of the conflict, often in ways that are deeply misleading and obfuscating. As such, it will make uncomfortable reading for both supporters and critics of Western foreign policy in Syria.

Dr Ahmed's painstaking investigation also exposes the true extent to which Russian state narratives have altered our thinking on Syria in ways which are devoid of fact. A major subject of debate in recent years in the West has been the role of narratives originating from Russia in shaping perception, informing opinions and, by some accounts, influencing electoral outcomes. At a time when there is a desperate need for cross-party consensus on how to handle propaganda emanating from the Kremlin. Many well-meaning actors in civil society doubt the veracity of such claims or at the very least suspect their influence has been exaggerated and in some cases this is correct. Exaggerated fears that might inflame a new Cold War - which arguably has already begun - help no one.

And yet, Dr Ahmed's report demonstrates that in Syria, across the most contested events and incidents in the conflict, Russian intelligence psyops have demonstrably influenced some journalistic narratives that are critical of the West in insidious ways. For instance, he demonstrates that Russia's goal in Syria has not been to protect Syrian sovereignty, but simply to use the wars raging in the Levant as a key tool in its struggle with the West.

These are especially important findings given that they come from a journalist who for nearly two decades has tirelessly exposed Western state and media complicity in violence, including in Syria. In that context, Dr Ahmed underscores the extent of Russia's influence on some leftwing narratives about the conflict. When he embarked on this investigation, he at first expected that many critical narratives on Syria would be vindicated. But he concludes that many of these narratives not only consistently traced back to sources close to the Syrian and Russian governments but were riddled with incoherence. Among the most unsettling findings is regarding celebrated reporter Seymour Hersh's claims about the Ghouta and Khan Shaykhoun attacks, which as Ahmed reveals contradict key facts and fail basic journalistic standards.

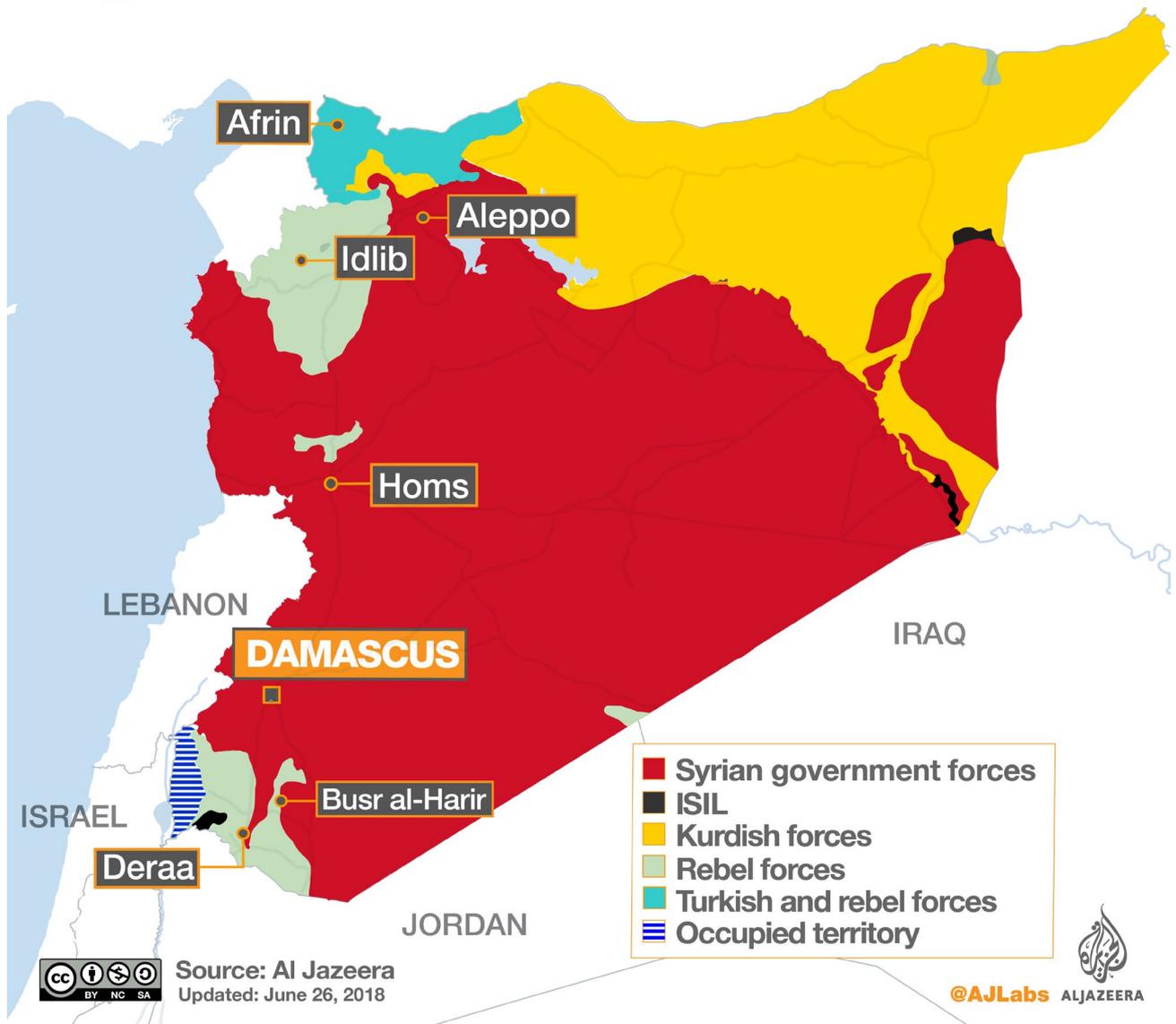
Fundamentally, there is a human cost to this. Assad is exploiting these narratives to portray himself as one of the few remaining bulwarks against terrorism and the last bastion of anti-imperialist resistance. But Ahmed's report shows that recognising crimes by the rebels should not lead to downplaying the crimes of the Syrian state.

Despite the disturbing nature of these findings, I am encouraged by the fact that this investigative report has brought these matters to light in a way that can contribute to a more informed public conversation about the dangerous role of state propaganda in influencing public perceptions. Among the many lessons of this report is that while sceptical scrutiny of Western state power remains more important than ever – and a necessary feature of a healthy democracy – progressive discourse cannot afford to become disfigured by state propaganda from Russia. I am hopeful his report will serve as a catalyst for a robust debate and lead to the adoption of a more critical approach on how to handle this increasingly malignant tendency.

This calls urgently for action on two fronts with a single goal of insulating ourselves from the insidious impact of propaganda: Western institutions need to do more to check their biases, scrutinise their own policies and address lack of accountability. But journalists, subject matter experts and policymakers also need to look carefully at Russia's efforts to instrumentalise sceptical narratives of Western power in its own interests, to advance self-serving goals which endanger democracy both at home and abroad.

Muddassar Ahmed
Chairman of the Board
Forum for Change, London (July 2018)

Syria: Who controls what?



'Syria: Who controls what?'
Source: Al Jazeera, June 2018



Destruction in Bab Dreeb area in Homs, Syria, 5 April 2012
Source: *Wikimedia Commons*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report investigates key conflict narratives around Syria based on an applied intelligence process developed by *INSURGE intelligence*. This approach is premised on examining multiple contradictory perspectives together using an interdisciplinary methodology across a range of subject-matter ‘beats’ or ‘specialisms’, with a view to determine the coherence or incoherence of narratives. The objective of the report is not to critique all media reporting in general on Syria, but specifically to interrogate the validity or invalidity of polarised narratives around key incidents and events, to determine the state of the available evidence, and on that basis to attempt to ascertain what can be reasonably determined as factual about those incidents and events. In this context, specific pro-rebel and anti-rebel narratives around these particular incidents and events are investigated.

Responses to Douma attack

The US, British and French decision to launch limited airstrikes in response to reports of a Syrian chemical weapons attack in Douma appears to have been made in haste, and without a full and independent assessment of the facts. The attacks were launched before the OPCW was able to carry out its inspection of the site, and on the basis of their own intelligence assessments whose veracity cannot be publicly verified. Public record sources suggest that while Western intelligence agencies were convinced that the evidence pointed to the complicity of Syrian military forces, complete confidence in this conclusion was not available. The apparent politicisation of the response is particularly evident from the fact that strikes were launched against the Syrian government’s Barzah facility, described by the alliance as harbouring an active chemical weapons programme despite the fact that OPCW inspectors had visited the facility just months ago and determined that there was no evidence of the facility being used for such purposes. To date, no specific evidence to justify these descriptions of the Barzah facility have been published by any of these governments.

The Syrian and Russian governments had simultaneously moved to secure the sites of the alleged Douma chemical weapons attack. Despite having requested OPCW inspectors to visit the sites, these governments repeatedly blocked OPCW inspectors from visiting the sites on the basis of security reasons. The plausibility of security being a real concern is in question given that Syrian and Russian military forces had control of the site, and no further information has been forthcoming as to what the cause of these alleged security concerns was, and what was done to resolve them. By the time OPCW inspectors were permitted to visit the Douma sites, Western governments raised concerns that Syrian and Russian forces would have had the opportunity to tamper with evidence at the sites.

Contradictory narratives around the Douma attack

This report critically assesses all the major reporting narratives around the Douma attack, including Western accounts implying the plausibility of a chemical weapons attack perpetrated by the Syrian military, as well as alternative accounts (and Syrian and Russian accounts) denying the same.

We find that these narratives essentially trace back to different eyewitness sources who have provided conflicting claims to different media sources about what happened in Douma. Close examination of all these accounts, however, unearths significant discrepancies in accounts denying Syrian military culpability. In fact, those narratives come in mutually exclusive form – some saying that there was no chemical weapons attack at all; and others saying that a chemical weapons attack did happen but was staged by the rebels.

In particular, we inspect the accounts of eyewitnesses put forward by the Russian government, including medical doctors and the well-known account of Hassan Diab and his father. Independent journalists that have taken these accounts at face value have failed to acknowledge compelling evidence of Syrian and Russian state coercion on the ground in Douma through the activities of the Russian ‘Center for Reconciliation’, which despite its name is a Russian military police agency operating as part of the Russian Ministry of Defence, which among other things vets the political affiliations of Syrian communities before authorising airstrikes. The compelling evidence of this coercion, which derives from Russian sources, throws into doubt the legitimacy of the witness accounts put forward by Russia and the complete unaccountability in the methods potentially used to obtain them.

The White Helmets

Conflicting narratives of the Douma attack, along with previous chemical weapons incidents, have consistently revolved around the role of the White Helmets in Syria. However, the role of the White Helmets in Douma has been widely misunderstood partly as a result of false claims made by various Russian state-backed media outlets such as RT, and others, to the effect that the initial videos and images of the Douma incident were filmed and propagated by the White Helmets. This is incorrect. The White Helmets were not responsible for those videos, and they arrived at the scene of the attacks hours later.

This investigation does find that the conventional narrative that the White Helmets are a completely neutral force in Syria is questionable. It is a matter of record that the group does receive prominent funding from the US and British governments; that the group is broadly supportive of the Syrian opposition and opposed to Assad; and that its leadership are supportive of a ‘no fly zone’ over Syria (which could entail limited military involvement in danger of escalation). The White Helmets have also been found to have engaged in activities for which they lack training, leading to some cases of severe incompetence in responding to complex emergencies such as building collapses and chemical weapons attacks.

However, alternative narratives claiming that the White Helmets are therefore little more than a Western propaganda construct fronting for terrorist groups and, at worst, actively engaged in the ‘staging’ of chemical weapons incidents, air strikes and other military violence, cannot be substantiated. Even critical observers concede that the White Helmets have saved tens of thousands of lives from Syrian military violence and airstrikes. While there is evidence that some White Helmets members have been found to be complicit in violence and involved with Islamist

terrorist groups, these members have consistently been expelled from the group when such information comes to light. The coordination between White Helmets volunteers and armed rebel groups is not unexpected given that armed groups are ubiquitous in the areas under their control, and does not amount to evidence that the White Helmets are a mere extension of al-Qaeda or the Islamic State (ISIS). An interview with independent boots on the ground reporter Patrick Hilsman, who has visited Syria eight times and witnessed the White Helmets firsthand, confirms that they are a genuine civilian volunteer group.

Alternative narratives which describe the White Helmets as Islamist terrorists controlled by Western intelligence largely trace back to two journalists who admit to being partisan in their support for both the Syrian and Russian governments, Vanessa Beeley and Eva Bartlett, who often work together. Apart from openly admitting that they support Bashar al-Assad and his military actions in Syria, a stance which in itself undermines their claims to be undertaking serious journalism (in much the same way that the impartiality of Western reporters who rely uncritically on rebel sources can be questioned), compelling evidence shows that when they report from Syria they do so in a context that is entirely embedded in Syrian government and military forces. A leaked private conversation between Beeley and a fellow activist illustrates that she is willing to actively conceal and deny Syrian government war crimes including torture in order to support a Syrian military victory.

A close examination of several major examples of both Beeley's and Bartlett's Syria reporting reveals fundamental inconsistencies and falsehoods in their claims. We focus on their reports on the White Helmets, their denial of the bombing of the al-Quds hospital, and their denial of Syrian military violence in Aleppo more broadly. Further, neither of them have ever interviewed the White Helmets themselves or investigated them on the ground, preferring to simply cite pro-Assad sources to portray them as terrorists. Beeley in particular has gone a step further in justifying Syrian and Russian state extrajudicial assassinations of White Helmets members, describing them as "legitimate targets" unworthy of any due process because they are "terrorists," which in short amounts to justifying war crimes. Bartlett has never disassociated herself from such statements by Beeley, despite continuing to work with her.

The White Helmets and 'chain of custody'

A frequent claim promulgated by a number of independent journalists, commentators and experts is that the White Helmets were the sole source of sarin samples obtained by the OPCW in relation to the Khan Shaykhoun attack of April 2017. The claim is that the OPCW violated its 'chain of custody' procedures, and that this potentially provided the rebels, through the White Helmets, the opportunity to manipulate samples provided to the OPCW. It is presumed then that those samples can therefore not be trusted or taken seriously, and neither can the conclusion that sarin was actually confirmed to have been used.

These claims are based on selective misrepresentation and obfuscation of the OPCW's reports on this matter. While the reports do acknowledge that for the most part the White Helmets played a major role in obtaining and supplying samples, the OPCW reports also point out that another source of the sarin samples from Khan Shaykhoun was the Syrian government itself. The reports also state that in some cases "full chain of custody" was secured by the OPCW in obtaining biomedical samples from a few bodies of victims of the attack a day after the incident.

The insistence therefore that the OPCW's conclusion regarding the determination of sarin being used in the attack is simply false, is without foundation.

Western state and media propaganda in Syria

Compelling evidence shows that the British government's Conflict Stability and Security Fund, which funds the White Helmets, has also provided millions of dollars in funding to opposition and rebel groups to produce audiovisual propaganda materials in support of military actions against both Assad and ISIS. These materials have no markers of British government involvement, but carry the logos of various rebel groups. This sort of covert propaganda activity demonstrates how blurred the lines might be between some British state narratives and rebel narratives, and makes it difficult for observers, including journalists, to distinguish between them.

Due to the arc of the conflict, Western journalists for the most part rely largely on sources in rebel and opposition held territory in a way which has systematically weakened the capacity of news and media organisations to critically scrutinise reports coming from these areas.

The dangers of this are exemplified in evidence that some Islamist militant rebel groups have been identified in UK government contractor documents relating to the CSSF funding programme, groups which have been found to have been complicit in war crimes and to have gone on to support more militant activity.

This suggests that the West's role in the conflict has often ended up supporting Islamist militant groups. To some extent, this has been acknowledged in internal documents. A Pentagon memorandum and a confidential communication from the leaked Hilary Clinton emails illustrate that Western intelligence agencies are aware that the bulk of support to armed rebel groups from the Gulf states and Turkey has gone to support Islamist militant groups, including al-Qaeda and ISIS.

The nature of this support, however, undermined the Free Syrian Army specifically, and the moderate and secular forces among the Syrian opposition more generally. Notwithstanding significant problems and limitations, these were the forces with the greatest democratic potential in Syria, and yet they were essentially marginalised by the focus of the West's covert intervention.

Seymour Hersh's reporting on the Ghouta and Khan Shaykhoun attacks

A series of articles by investigative reporter Seymour Hersh is examined with respect to the plausibility of evidence that chemical weapons attacks in Ghouta in 2013 and in Khan Shaykhoun in 2017 were not perpetrated by the Syrian military.

Unmistakable and specific narrative parallels are traced between Hersh's reporting on both these cases, and memoranda published by Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS), a group of former US military and intelligence officials, as well as separate articles and statements published by VIPS members. Through interviews and analysis, VIPS' narratives are dissected and traced back to a number of public record sources which rely uncritically on claims that, in turn, originate from Russian intelligence sources. One of the sources relied on by VIPS is F. Michael Maloof, a former Bush administration official involved in fabricating intelligence of WMD who is now a regular RT pundit, who also has ties to the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad. Hersh's reporting is closely interrogated as to whether its detailed claims stack up against contemporaneous and relevant facts that ought to corroborate his claims, in particular the case of 11 al-Nusra suspects who had been arrested in Turkey and charged with attempting to obtain precursor chemicals to manufacture sarin. Hersh essentially claimed that the US

Defense Intelligence Agency had acquired intelligence on this matter leading the government to conclude that al-Nusra rebels in Syria had an active sarin capability. However, a copy of the Turkish prosecution documents seen in the course of this investigation completely disproves Hersh's reporting.

In preparing his Khan Shaykhoun story, Hersh was guided by former UN weapons inspector and VIPS member Scott Ritter. Hersh's narrative, which he attributes to an anonymous high-level former CIA and DIA official, echoes in detail claims first made by VIPS co-founder Philip Giraldi, a former CIA and DIA official, in an interview on the Scott Horton radio show. While Ritter could not be reached for comment, Giraldi refused to respond to multiple queries about this. Subsequently, the online links to that interview were inexplicably deleted. The VIPS-Hersh narrative, which claimed that the Khan Shaykhoun attack was essentially an accident due to a Syrian or Russian strike on a rebel compound which dispersed chemicals causing the deaths at Khan Shaykhoun, completely collapsed when it was rescinded by the Syrian and Russian governments (due to evidence confirmed by international investigators). In email interviews with Hersh, he confirmed that his story was sourced to Russian intelligence which claimed to have infiltrated the Syrian opposition, and shared its alleged intelligence with the US military. The actions of the Syrian and Russian governments in moving away from this narrative demonstrated that it was little more than disinformation.

The collapse of Hersh's Syria reporting illustrates the lack of coherent evidence that any Syrian rebel groups have ever acquired the capability to use sarin. Official narratives of these chemical weapons attacks are not without problems and irregularities, but alternative narratives attributing chemical weapons attacks to the Syrian rebels are almost entirely incoherent and unsubstantiated.

Competing geopolitical interests

Chemical weapons have nevertheless been instrumentalised by both the West and Russia as a way to legitimise their overt and covert military policies in Syria. Yet the historical record shows that neither the West nor Russia are operating as benevolent or neutral forces in the conflict, but on the contrary are pursuing their geopolitical interests at the expense of the interests of the Syrian people.

In the years prior to the 2011 uprising, a wide range of documentary evidence including public statements by US officials and leaked State Department cables prove that the West actively sought a greater alignment with Assad in Syria. Covert action at this time to "destabilise" Assad's regime was explicitly aimed at inducing not regime change but "behaviour reform". The West had two core interests: pulling Syria away from the geopolitical orbit of Iran and Russia; and pushing forward Syria's potential as an energy transshipment route to supply regional oil and gas to Europe. In particular, State Department and European policy-planners were keen to see the materialisation of a pipeline that would enable Syria to transport oil from Iraq's Akkas field through to Turkey and eventually to European markets, with the explicit goal of weaning Europe away from dependence on Russian oil and gas.

After the 2011 uprising, US officials – in particular Hillary Clinton and John Kerry – were so enamoured by Assad that they continued to describe him as a "reformer" while Syrian forces shot unarmed protestors in the streets. Eventually, the escalation of the violence, along with Assad's shift toward Iranian and Russian political and military support, caused the West to disassociate from him.

It has been wrongly suspected that the Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline route subsequently agreed to in principle by Assad that year, as an alternative to the Western-backed route, has been supported by Russia. However, a study by the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) – a Moscow-based foreign affairs think-tank close to Putin which operates as a mouthpiece for the Russian foreign policy and corporate establishment – confirms that Russia has always seen Assad's favoured Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline as a threat to Gazprom. The route is described as potentially undermining Russia's oil and gas hegemony over Europe, thus confirming that among Russia's motives for intervening in Syria is to suppress Assad's energy transshipment ambitions.

Syria's pivotal role in relation to Mediterranean energy sources means that the orientation of its government will have a major impact on the future energy map of the Middle East.

Despite this, a US Marine Corps (USMC) draft strategy document from 2011 confirms that while the West was committed to supporting the Syrian opposition to counter Iranian expansion, a direct military intervention for regime change had been ruled out as potentially catastrophic. The document not only warned presciently that the enrollment of Gulf and Turkish allies in support for armed rebels would likely augment Islamist militants; it also demonstrated that US military strategists had little faith in an opposition victory; and believed that the most desirable outcome (with still potentially dangerous consequences) would be for the Alawite regime to remain in power but remove Assad.

This document goes some way to explain why US-led coordination of aid to rebel groups dripped support to the FSA while permitting the bulk of support to go Islamist groups. The overriding objective was to simply use these groups to undermine Assad's capacity to cement a deeper and more permanent Iranian encroachment on Syria. The policy played a key role in neutralising the viability of the democratic aspirations behind the original Syrian uprising.

The USMC document has been corroborated by a 2016 Joint Special Operations University study which similarly notes that Western policymakers have preferred the Alawite-dominated power structure in Syria to remain intact. Once again largely dismissing the probability or viability of regime change, the study urged policymakers to accept that Assad will remain in power, while calling for recognition of the permanent dismemberment of Syria into territories dominated by different powers.

Lessons for critical journalism

This report vindicates the importance of critical and sceptical investigative journalism on conflicts such as Syria being carried out with integrity, due concern for facts, and self-reflective awareness of the risk of biased and embedded reporting.

The dissection of certain alternative journalistic narratives does not imply that critical and sceptical reporting should stop, but that it should continue in a way that is as free from the undue influence of vested interests as possible. Vested interests include not just conflict actors such as the West and rebel groups, but also conflict actors such as the Syrian and Russian governments. The lack of discernment on all sides of how these interests can disfigure reporting on the conflict has meant that many of its core dynamics are misunderstood and consequently badly communicated in both traditional and alternative reporting and commentary.

Much critical and leftwing reporting on Syria has been badly distracted by narrative artifacts which provide a false and misleading picture of the Syrian conflict. Instead of disabling the operations of rapacious power, this has completely missed the self-serving reality of Western geopolitical strategy in Syria, while also giving succour to Russian and Syrian state-backed disinformation, fueling the violence of both.

Thus, of particular concern for those who recognise the importance of independent journalism is the fact that there are unmistakable connections between key alternative narrative-makers, and the Syrian and Russian states. This is despite the fact that the latter play a direct role in the conflict itself. These connections, and the litany of narrative incoherencies they are complicit in as exposed in this investigation, underscore the danger that without sufficient self-scrutiny, independent journalism ceases to be truly independent, and instead becomes coopted by specific geopolitical and imperial interests which simply happen to be opposed to Western policies. Adopting such a self-conscious and self-scrutinising approach does not weaken the power of critical investigative journalism, but can only enhance its capacity to shine a light on the operations of rapacious power, whatever geopolitical configuration it represents.



US Navy destroyers order strikes on Syria, 7 April 2017
Source: US Navy

1. Introduction

In April 2018, the US, UK and France bombed Syria. The precision strikes on various facilities described as harbouring an ongoing Syrian chemical weapons programme followed horrific reports of a chemical attack in Douma on 7th April. As perspectives polarise on both sides, with differing reports emerging about the attack, public discourse has rarely been as confused or divided.

Syria is, in many ways, a microcosm of the planetary crisis. A people under siege; a movement for democratic self-determination suffocated; civilians slaughtered recklessly, wantonly; a conflict precipitated by a complex convergence of ecological, economic and food crises in a context of authoritarian repression and competing geopolitical rivalries. More than that, Syria has become the focal point for the extreme polarisation of public discourse. Up is down, and down is up; each party points to the unfathomable evil of the other; people and groups with different or opposing perspectives of the conflict are incapable of engaging constructively with what each other has to say. For those outside Syria, the sea of competing narratives about the conflict have become a simulacrum, that at once purports to represent what is real, but in fact simply distances us from what is actually happening.

Amidst this escalating incoherence, all parties are incapable of acting in a manner that might bring the conflict to a resolution of benefit to the Syrian people themselves. The world is paralysed while the violence continues.

More than anything, Syria teaches us about the narrative predicament in which we now find ourselves: one in which the capacity for meaningful collective intelligence has become fundamentally degraded. So degraded that journalism itself has become weaponised as an instrument of propaganda to fight and win wars. Journalists are being told that they should consider joining the UK Army's reserve forces to get Britain's "messages across" to combat "disinformation", particularly from Russia.¹ 'Fake news' is increasingly equated with simple scepticism of conventional Western foreign policy narratives. A group of such sceptical British academics found themselves on the front-page of *The Times* described as "Assad apologists."² The story was used to condemn their criticisms of Western air strikes in Syria.³ Meanwhile, a cardiologist on Twitter claimed that a video depicting the death of Syrian children from chemical gas must have been "faked" by the White Helmets because the ECG electrodes were "completely wrong positioned".⁴ The tweet received over 13,000 likes and 12,000 retweets.⁵ He was quickly

1 Jessica Elgot, 'You country needs you to fight fake news', *Guardian* (1 May 2018) <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/may/01/your-country-needs-you-to-fight-fake-news-uk-journalists-told>

2 Georgie Keate et. al, 'Apologists for Assad working in British universities', *Times* (14 April 2018) <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/apologists-for-assad-working-in-british-universities-2f72hw29m>

3 Ben Webster, 'Academics accused of speaking for Assad condemn Syria raids', *Times* (16 April 2018) <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/academics-speaking-for-assad-question-justification-for-raids-sm6qthxkx>

forced to admit that his claim was mistaken, as he had not looked at the image properly. But instead of deleting his original tweet, he issued an apology which received just over 50 retweets and 64 likes.⁶



Fig1 – Tweet from cardiologist

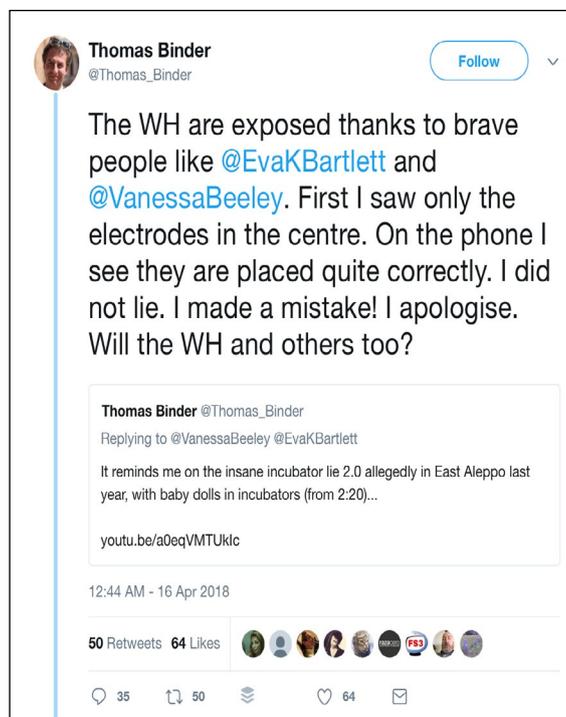


Fig2 – Tweet from cardiologist

4 Daily Sabah, 'Cardiologist 'apologizes' after falsely accusing White Helmets of staging Syria chemical attack' (18 April 2018) <https://www.dailysabah.com/syrian-crisis/2018/04/18/cardiologist-apologizes-after-falsely-accusing-white-helmets-of-staging-syria-chemical-attack>
5 https://twitter.com/Thomas_Binder/status/984934979451879424
6 https://twitter.com/Thomas_Binder/status/985665154695262211

On the one hand, critics of Western interventionism in Syria are equated with being deniers of Assad's war crimes; on the other, critics of Assad's war crimes are accused of promoting Western war and regime change in Syria. The results are palpable. On Syria, parts of the antiwar left increasingly either deny Russian and Syrian military violence, or justify it; while critics of Assad increasingly find themselves siding with reactionary Western military responses. But to what extent are these positions factually and morally tenable?

To answer this question and overcome this impasse, we need a different approach, one that cultivates collective intelligence. In this investigation, *INSURGE intelligence* draws on a number of applied investigative processes to sift through the available data to determine, how can someone outside of Syria make sense of what is happening?⁷ We adopt a *holistic* approach by navigating multiple perspectives across the conflict to derive, to the degree possible, validated facts. We critically interrogate anti-Assad and pro-Assad narratives from a range of journalistic sources to determine the degree to which they can be verified. We adopt a *systemic* approach by examining narratives from a variety of reporting beats – foreign affairs, national security, science, business and economics, energy and geopolitics: allowing us to begin developing a more integrated vision of contentious issues: chemical warfare attacks; violence against civilians; the motives of warring parties; and so on. We ground these approaches in a logic system that helps us, throughout our analysis, to separate out real insights about the conflict from unfounded assumptions rooted in questionable bias.

My understanding of the conflict has evolved in many ways as a result of this investigation. Some of my conclusions were unexpected; in particular, I have learned that the prism through which I understood the conflict was not only Eurocentric, but over-simplistic and lacking in nuance. The moral lesson brought home to me is the paramount need for humility and self-reflection in journalism. Our most unequivocal finding is that no government is telling the full truth about the war in Syria. Not just a civil war, nor even just a proxy war, Syria is a propaganda war being fought for competing geopolitical interests. The end-result of this tug of war between pro-interventionist and anti-interventionist narratives has been the victory of neither, and the entrenchment of horrendous violence from which the Syrian people on both sides, whether pro- or anti-Assad, have suffered immeasurably.

As this propaganda escalates, principled journalism has become degraded while observers find it increasingly difficult to sort fact from fiction. Thus, eclipsed from an increasingly degenerate public discourse is the reality that both the West and Russia are in the midst of an inter-imperialist war, of which the Syrian people are victims, and in which their genuine democratic aspirations are deliberately destroyed.

7 Nafeez Ahmed, 'Only "collective intelligence" can help us stave off an uninhabitable planet', *INSURGE intelligence* (4 May 2018) <https://medium.com/insurge-intelligence/only-collective-intelligence-can-help-us-stave-off-an-uninhabitable-planet-e71916a04a00>



The ruins of US missile attack on Syria, 14 April 2018
Source: Wikimedia Commons

2. Escalation

On 7th April 2018, at least 70 Syrian civilians were reportedly killed by a chemical weapons attack in Douma. It was the latest in a series of major chemical weapons attacks in Syria throughout the conflict, the ones receiving major international attention including the Khan Shaykhoun attack of April 2017, and the Ghouta attack of August 2013.

American, French and British military strikes in Syria following the incident have sparked heated, protracted and unresolved public debates on a range of issues: how much do we really know about the chemical weapons attacks in Syria? What do we really know about the conflict on the ground? What are Western and Russian motives in Syria?

More so than previous chemical weapon incidents, the Douma attack has revealed a deep polarisation in public perceptions of the conflict, and in particular highlighted entrenched levels of distrust with Western government decisions, driven largely by awareness of manipulating intelligence narratives around WMD claims in the run up to the 2003 Iraq War.

Shortly after the strikes, amidst conflicting claims about Donald Trump's intentions to stay or depart from Syria, the *Wall Street Journal* revealed Trump's plan to assemble a proxy Arab force made up of Gulf state armies to "help stabilize the northeastern part" of Syria.⁸

"Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE have all been approached with respect to financial support and more broadly to contribute," an administration official said. Egypt was asked to participate in the joint force by Trump's new national security advisor, ex-Bush war-hawk John Bolton.

Most disturbingly, Erik Prince, the founder of the notorious private military firm Blackwater – disgraced after revelations of misconduct in Iraq – confirmed that he was "contacted by Arab officials about the plan to build a force in Syria." Saudi Arabia later confirmed that it was in talks with Washington about the proposal.⁹

The Trump-Prince plan heralds the prospect of a prolonged Gulf state occupation of northeastern Syria. If it goes ahead, it would be a concerted effort to rollback Russian dominance in Syria, without the need for a US troop presence.

8 Michael R Gordon, 'US seeks Arab force and funding for Syria', Wall Street Journal (16 April 2018) <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-seeks-arab-force-and-funding-for-syria-1523927888>

9 Julian Borger, 'Syria: proposal to replace US troops with Arab force comes with grave risks', Guardian (18 April 2018) <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/apr/18/us-syria-arab-force-replace-american-troops-saudi-arabia-egypt-uae>

The development raises the question of whether the US and its Gulf partners are exploiting the crisis for geopolitical purposes. It certainly vindicated public concerns over the real motives behind the military strikes.

Yet such questions apply equally to Russia.

In the wake of the Trump strikes, Russia seized the opportunity to declare that it would renege on a longstanding understanding not to send Syria Russian-made S-300 surface-to-air missile systems. “We warned that such actions will not be left without consequences,” said Anatoly Antonov, Russian Ambassador to the United States, on 15th April 2018. “All responsibility for them rests with Washington, London and Paris.”

Observers noted that the development signaled an alarming escalation in the proxy conflict which would likely see an acceleration of more sophisticated arms supplies to both sides.¹⁰ It was only an increasingly cozy alliance between Russia and Israel which caused Putin to hold off on the S-300 sale to Assad. Netanyahu had made the request to guarantee Israel’s freedom of action in Syrian airspace. Russia, seen by some critics of Western policy as the great defender of Syrian sovereignty, had thus essentially collaborated in the violation of that sovereignty – a clue as to its own broader ends in the region which we will return to.¹¹

The decision did not lead to a de-escalation, however. Since then, tit-for-tat direct fire between Israeli and Iranian forces in Syria only confirmed that the conflict is a tinderbox at risk of exploding into a wider regional war at any time. Russia’s strategy was to allow Iran a presence in Syria while simultaneously permitting Israel to strike Iranian positions in the country. If escalation continues, it could precipitate a prolonged cross-border war dragging in the United States, Britain, France and Russia.

2.1 Obstruction

Shortly after the Douma incident, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov had been quick to deny Syrian government culpability in the attack. Russian specialists, according to the Russian state-funded news service RT, immediately visited the attack site, but having swept the area thoroughly “found no traces of the use of chemical agents.”¹³

Later Lavrov claimed that Russia had “irrefutable evidence” that the British government had “staged” the Douma attack. He was backed up by Russian Defence Ministry spokesperson Major General Igor Konashenkov, who announced the Russian military’s possession of “evidence that proves Britain was directly involved in organising this provocation.”¹⁴

10 Joseph Trevithick, ‘Russia Put Up A Smoke Screen To Hide Delivery of S-300 SAMs To Syria According To Claim’, The Drive (20 April 2018) <http://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/20273/russia-put-up-a-smoke-screen-to-hide-delivery-of-s-300-sams-to-syria-according-to-claim>

11 Anna Ahronheim, ‘Top Putin aide: No talk of delivering S-300 air defense system to Syria’, Jerusalem Post (12 May 2018) <https://m.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Top-Putin-aide-No-talk-of-delivering-S-300-air-defense-system-to-Syria-556235/amp>

12 ‘Iran-Israel-Syria explained’, Chicago Tribune (12 May 2018) <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/ct-iran-israel-syria-explained-20180512-story.html>
RT, ‘No trace of chemical weapons at alleged attack site in Douma – Russian military’ (9 April 2018) <https://www.rt.com/news/423627-russian-military-checks-chemical-douma/>

14 Kim Sengupta, ‘Russia accuses Britain of staging suspected Syria chemical weapons attack’, Independent (13 April 2018) <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/russia-syria-chemical-weapons-attack-douma-white-helmets-sergei-lavrov-a8303826.html>

At the time, no evidence was published. Later, as we will assess, Russia would put forward 17 witnesses to speak before the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), asserting that no chemical weapons attack at all had occurred. In the meantime, Russian military police had rushed to secure the Douma site.

Despite having themselves requested the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to investigate, Russian and Syrian forces on the ground in Douma at first prevented inspectors from accessing the site, ostensibly for security reasons.¹⁵

The Syrian position was that they were waiting for a UN security reconnaissance team to confirm the safety of the site before OPCW inspectors would be allowed to go there. But in an area that was already supposed to have been secured by Russian and Syrian forces, the team came under small arms fire and an explosive was detonated, forcing them to return to Damascus – and delaying OPCW inspectors from investigating what happened until 21st April, two weeks since the original attack.¹⁶

The delay prompts an obvious issue: did the Russians and Syrians block OPCW access to interfere with the site and remove evidence of the use of chemical weapons?

2.2 Jingoism

On their part, the US, UK and France were already convinced that Bashar al-Assad's regime had used toxic poisons in Douma, and were unwilling to wait for an OPCW investigation.

Anonymous US government officials revealed to NBC News that they had obtained “blood and urine samples” from the attack which, they said, tested positively for both nerve agent and chlorine.

“Typically, such samples are obtained through hospitals and collected by US or foreign intelligence assets on the ground,” stated the report.

Although the officials expressed “confidence” in the findings, they said they could not be “100 percent sure”. The lack of complete confidence in the findings raised the question of why there was room for doubt in the testing of the samples.¹⁷

The public, however, was not privy to these issues. The process by which the samples had been obtained was a mystery, and the exact nature of the findings not transparently discussed. This apparently gave the US little pause for thought. The bombing campaign was launched and completed before OPCW inspectors had even arrived in Douma.

15 AP, 'Syria and Russia ask OPCW experts to inspect alleged chemical attack site in face of US threat' (11 April 2018) <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/04/11/world/syria-russia-ask-opcw-experts-inspect-alleged-chemical-attack-site-face-u-s-threat/#.WyJiQS2ZNAZ>

16 Reuters, 'U.N. team fired upon in Syria while visiting suspected chemical sites' (18 April 2018) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria/u-n-team-fired-upon-in-syria-while-visiting-suspected-chemical-sites-idUSKBN1HPOSG>

17 NBC News, 'U.S. officials: Blood samples show nerve agent, chlorine in Syria gas attack' (12 April 2018) <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/mideast/u-s-has-blood-samples-show-nerve-agent-syria-gas-n865431>

In a Pentagon press briefing, Marine Lt. Gen. Kenneth McKenzie said the three Syrian facilities targeted were “fundamental components of the regime’s chemical weapons warfare infrastructure.” That included the Barzah research centre, described by the Pentagon as a facility for “the testing and production of chemical and biological weapons”.¹⁸

But the OPCW had already inspected the Barzah facility on 22nd November 2017 – apparently this was the “second round of inspections” at that and another facility – and found no evidence of any chemical or biological weapons production there.

In a statement of the Director-General in March 2018, the OPCW had confirmed that samples from Barzah were examined by OPCW laboratories in February. The statement said that “the inspection team did not observe any activities inconsistent with obligations under the Convention.” To date, the US, British and French governments have provided no credible evidence that the bombings had destroyed a major secret Syrian chemical weapons production facility at Barzah.¹⁹

2.3 Duplicity

And yet, the same OPCW statement proves clearly that Syria has hardly been an epitome of honesty in declaring its chemical weapons capabilities.

The OPCW quotation above has been circulated widely on social media demonstrating the lack of verification for US claims regarding the bombing. This is understandable. But sceptics have ignored the document’s confirmation that Syria has clearly retained chemical weapons facilities, including undeclared facilities that were supposed to have been destroyed in 2016:

“The Secretariat remains unable to confirm that the Syrian Arab Republic has submitted a declaration that can be considered accurate and complete in accordance with the Convention and the decisions of the Council.”

The document goes on to point out that of 27 declared chemical weapons production facilities, two have not yet been verifiably destroyed. In February 2018, inspectors had visited several declared chemical weapons sites (note: not civilian facilities) and found chlorine cylinders:

“On the subject of Syria’s chemical weapons production facilities (CWPFs), the Secretariat has verified the destruction of 25 of the 27 former CWPFs declared by the Syrian Arab Republic... With regard to the special mission conducted in response to the request of the Syrian Arab Republic, the Secretariat deployed a team of experts between 6 and 12 February. Despite some logistical and security challenges, five sites were visited... The experts observed a number of chlorine cylinders and a storage tank containing an acidic substance.”

The problem is that all these facilities should have been verifiably destroyed years ago. In January 2016, the OPCW announced its belief that it had completed “the destruction of all chemical weapons declared by the Syrian Arab Republic.” The OPCW Director-General Ahmet Uzumcu said at the time: “This process closes an important chapter in the elimination of Syria’s chemical weapon programme.”

18 CNBC, ‘Pentagon: US coalition strikes successfully hit targets in Syria as Trump declares ‘mission accomplished’ (14 April 2018) <https://www.cnn.com/2018/04/14/syrian-military-strikes-were-successful-pentagon-says.html>

19 OPCW, Note by the Director General (13 March 2018) https://www.opcw.org/fileadmin/OPCW/EC/87/en/ec87dg21_e_.pdf

So, why are we still here? Because not all Syria's chemical weapons had in fact been destroyed – only all of what had been declared, and it turned out later: not everything had been declared. That's why a month before the Douma attack, the OPCW Director-General was still speaking of efforts to verify the destruction of Syria's declared chemical weapons facilities: facilities which were supposed to have all been declared and verifiably destroyed over two years earlier.

That Syria is lying about its chemical weapons facilities is therefore undeniable. This in itself should give pause for thought. But the Syrian regime is not the only entity that has been caught engaged in propaganda during the conflict.



White Helmets responders clear rubble with heavy machinery provided by USAID following a regime attack in Maaret Nouman, Idleb, November 2014
Source: *Wikimedia Commons*

3. White Helmets

3.1 Caught in the act

It is widely believed that the video of the Douma incident was filmed by the White Helmets, a volunteer network of Syrian search and rescue workers operating in rebel-controlled areas of Syria.

On 9th April 2018, evidence emerged from a BBC journalist that some pro-rebel activists had manipulated a scene from the Douma attack – this was apparently part of a regular propaganda strategy. On Twitter, BBC foreign news producer Riam Dalati said that he was:

“Sick and tired of activists and rebels using corpses of dead children to stage emotive scenes for Western consumption. Then they wonder why some serious journos are questioning part of the narrative.”

That tweet was subsequently deleted but is archived.²⁰



Fig 3 – Tweet from Riam Dalati

20 <http://archive.is/IK0t9>

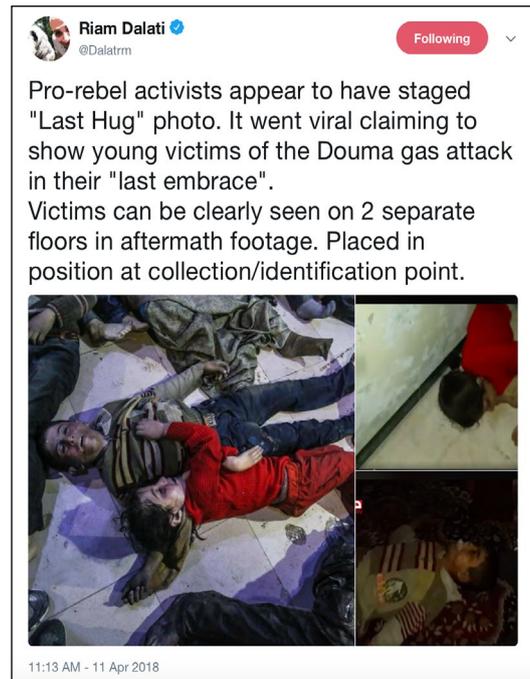


Fig 4 – Tweet from Riam Dalati

In the ensuing thread, Dalati continued to clarify that the bodies had been: “Moved outside incident scene then taken to collection point where the staging happened.”

The original tweet was deleted due to BBC rules regarding the use of emotive terminology, but Dalati put out a new tweet²¹ clarifying his position:

“Pro-rebel activists appear to have staged ‘Last Hug’ photo. It went viral claiming to show young victims of the Douma gas attack in their ‘last embrace’. Victims can be clearly seen on 2 separate floors in aftermath footage. Placed in position at collection/identification point.”

The apparent manipulation of the scene, and that this sort of ‘staging’ by some pro-rebel activists had occurred several times previously, was noted in the thread by Julian Ropcke, political editor of the German daily *Bild*, who observed:

“Absolutely idiotic by the activists, trying to catch more emotions. But not changing the overall fact, Assad gassed these children... And not the first time they do it. Remember the two killed babies, put into UNHCR bags and painted with some strangers’ blood (although they were bleeding). They discredited the AFP photographer, themselves and we didn’t use the photo on page one because of the staged situation... And it makes (some of) them rightfully called propagandists, without any need to do so as the reality on the ground speaks for itself.”

21 <https://twitter.com/Dalatrm/status/984011488938643456>

Dalati's tweet was circulated on social media justifying suspicions that the Douma incident had been "staged" and that no actual attack had taken place. But the journalists themselves had never made this suggestion – rather, Dalati had specifically alleged that *images* were staged by manipulating real dead bodies at the scene after real violence had occurred.

They also explicitly noted that this sort of manipulation for the purposes of imagery, while a despicable practice committed by some pro-rebel activists, occurred after real violence was committed against Syrian civilians by Assad's forces. Dalati's criticism was not that a chlorine attack resulting in deaths of real children hadn't happened; it was that unscrupulous pro-rebel activists had moved the dead bodies far from the building where they had originally been found and arranged them in order to create a more emotional photograph.

Yet in reality, contrary to claims made by RT, it was not the White Helmets which had filmed the original Douma footage. The photographs and videos had originally been released by a separate opposition media centre, and the White Helmets had not been present at the scene of the incident in the immediate aftermath. This horrifying initial footage revealed the dead corpses of children with froth at their mouths along with a frost-covered gas canister poking through the roof of the building. There is no evidence of the 'staging' of this particular footage. To the contrary, civilians at the scene are filmed opening the eyes of the dead bodies to check their pupils, a practice which helps provide insight into what chemicals were used as part of the collection of visual evidence.²²



Fig5 – Still image from original Douma footage

22 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OK9H8dh12uE>



Fig6 – Still image from original Douma footage

Therefore, while Dalati and Ropcke’s observations do raise legitimate questions about the accuracy of evidence at the scene of the Douma attack, and potentially at other attacks where such manipulation is detected, they do not by themselves prove that a chemical weapons attack in Douma was staged.

But if pro-rebel activists have been confirmed to, at times, manipulate physical evidence for propaganda purposes, as Dalati and Ropcke acknowledge, then to what extent can they be presumed to be a truly reliable source of information; particularly when it comes to securing evidence of contested issues such as the use of chemical weapons?

3.2 Aid convoy controversy

The importance of such questions to journalists can be seen in the controversy over the destruction of a UN-organised Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) aid convoy on 19th September 2016. A UN investigation concluded that the destruction was the result of a Syrian government air attack. But at the time, there were numerous discrepancies in all narratives of events put out by all sides: the White Helmets, who were eyewitnesses to the attack; the US government; and the Syrian and Russian governments.

According to Dr Ben Cole, head of the Tactical Decision Making Group at the University of Liverpool’s Department of Psychological Sciences – a specialist in real-time monitoring of armed conflicts through online media: “Rebel and pro-rebel sources quickly claimed that the convoy had been destroyed in airstrikes conducted by the Syrian Arab Airforce (SyAAF), the Russian Airforce (RuAF), or both. There were however, a number of significant discrepancies in the reporting of the type of aircraft and weapons that were allegedly responsible.” Such discrepancies were not exclusive to the pro-rebel sources, however. “Pro-regime/Russian sources”, while casting doubt on the pro-rebel claims, put forward their own narratives with their own discrepancies. On balance, Dr Cole argues that the discrepancies within the Syrian and Russian accounts are worse, but acknowledges the need for journalistic caution when trying to assess facts on the ground.²³

23 Ben Cole, ‘The attack on the US Aid convoy in Aleppo: Separating fact from fiction’ Tactical Decision Making Research Group (1 November 2016)
<http://www.tacticaldecisionmaking.org/2016/11/01/the-attack-on-the-us-aid-convoy-in-aleppo-separating-fact-from-fiction/>

Journalist Gareth Porter has argued that the UN investigation of the attack blaming Assad was politicised,²⁴ while challenging²⁵ the analysis of image and video evidence by online investigative site, Bellingcat.²⁶ Cataloguing the eyewitness accounts of White Helmets sources, Porter demonstrates a shifting narrative with unresolved inconsistencies on chronology and other details. Some White Helmet accounts changed, contradicted facts, and contradicted each other – but the discrepancies were largely overlooked by the UN, Porter says.

Notwithstanding the possibility that such discrepancies could occur due to the impact of trauma on those trying to recollect hard details of an incident which occurred at night, he does show that several accounts were inconsistent and unresolved. Yet Porter does not take seriously the obvious possibility that discrepancies in accounts over what was heard and seen in relation to the types of air munitions used were because the attack occurred after dark and the use of vernacular language by witnesses.

A key issue that surfaces in Porter's examination of these witness accounts can be seen in how he refers to the testimony of Ammar al-Selmo, the head of the White Helmets' Aleppo division, where contradictions emerge not in al-Selmo's quoted words, but in reporters' interpretations of them. We reproduce portions of this text here to inspect the way Porter effectively misattributes al-Selmo's quoted statements:

“The first detail on which Selmo's testimony revealed itself as dishonest is his claim about where he was located at the moment the attack began. Selmo told Time Magazine the day after the attack that he was a kilometer or more away from the warehouse where the aid convoy trucks were parked at that point—presumably at the local White Helmet center in Urm al-Kubra. But Selmo changed his story in an interview with the Washington Post published September 24, stating he was ‘making tea in a building across the street’ at that moment.”

Contrary to Porter's claim, the *Post* article does not actually quote al-Selmo making this statement – the claim is made by the *Post* itself, but with a selective quotation Porter creates the impression that these are words that came out of al-Selmo's mouth. The *Post* article reads: “That Monday was a warm fall evening. Ammar al-Selmo, a local rescue worker, was making tea in a building across the street.”²⁷

The *Post*'s assertion could be a simple, sloppy reporting error. In fact, “across the street” more accurately could be seen as a kilometre “up the road”, but the point is that the claim is made by the *Post* reporter, and it's not clear what precisely he was actually told by al-Selmo. Porter's attribution of the quote to al-Selmo himself is incorrect. Porter continues:

24 Gareth Porter, 'A flawed UN investigation on Syria', Consortium News (11 March 2017)

<https://consortiumnews.com/2017/03/11/a-flawed-un-investigation-on-syria/>

25 Porter, 'How a Syrian White Helmets leader played Western media', Alternet (28 November 2016)

<https://www.alternet.org/grayzone-project/how-syrian-white-helmets-played-western-media>

26 Eliot Higgins, 'Confirmed : Russian Bomb Remains Recovered from Syrian Red Crescent Aid Convoy Attack', Bellingcat (22 September 2016) <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2016/09/22/russian-bomb-remains-recovered-syrian-red-crescent-aid-convoy-attack/>

27 Louisa Loveluck and Thomas Gibbons-Nef, “Why did they wait to kill us?": How the attack on the aid convoy near Aleppo unfolded', Washington Post (24 September 2016)

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/09/24/why-did-they-wait-to-kill-us-how-the-attack-on-the-aid-convoy-in-aleppo-unfolded/?utm_term=.7153e497f51a

28 Jared Malsin, “A Circle of Hell': Eyewitness Accounts of the Attack That Broke the Syria Truce', Time (21 September 2016)

<http://time.com/4503600/syria-un-relief-convoy-attack/>

“Even more dramatically, Selmo claimed at first that he saw the beginning of the attack. According to the story published by Time on September 21, Selmo said he was drinking tea on the balcony when the bombing began, and ‘he could see the first barrel bombs falling from what he identified as a Syrian regime helicopter.’”

It is worth noting that Porter again misattributes the apparent extrapolations of a reporter to Selmo’s actual words. In the *Time* piece, al-Selmo is not quoted as making this statement. The *Time* article reads: “The building is around a kilometer from the aid warehouse, and he could see the first barrel bombs falling from what he identified as a Syrian regime helicopter.”²⁸ Once again, the apparent contradiction emerges not from al-Selmo’s own quoted statements, but from the way the *Time* and *Post* reporters convey that account. Porter:

“But Selmo could not have seen a barrel bomb falling from a helicopter or anything else at that moment. In a video shot early the next morning, Selmo declared that the bombing had started at about 7:30pm. In later statements, the White Helmets put the time at 7:12pm. But sunset on September 19 was at 6:31pm, and by roughly 7pm, Aleppo was shrouded in complete darkness.”

Here, the apparent contradiction is artificial. Let’s first assume the accuracy of the *Time* and *Post* assertions that Selmo claimed to have seen the helicopter and barrel bombs. In this case, Porter concludes that Selmo could not have been an eyewitness to a helicopter dropping two barrel bombs, because he was too far away and it was dark. But this conclusion ignores the somewhat obvious fact that any barrel bomb explosion would have illuminated the site of the attack, revealing the presence of the helicopter and the release of a second barrel bomb. The moment the first explosion took place, much of the scene would be visible. Porter:

“Someone evidently called Selmo’s attention to that problem after the Time story was published, because by the time he gave his account to the Washington Post, he had changed that part of the story as well. The Post reported his amended account as follows: ‘Stepping onto a balcony just after 7pm, when it was already past dusk, he said he listened to a helicopter swoop in and drop two barrel bombs on the convoy’.”

Here Porter seems to suggest that there is a contradiction between Selmo’s own statements, in which he previously claimed to see the attack, and later claimed to only hear the attack. Once again, the statement in question is the *Post* reporter’s interpretation of Selmo’s account, and not Selmo’s actual statements. However, an NPR interview with Selmo on 23rd September throws further light on what he appears to have experienced:²⁹

29 Alison Meuse, ‘Witness Recounts Deadly Attack On Aid Convoy In Syria’, NPR (23 September 2016) <https://www.npr.org/2016/09/23/495143754/witness-recounts-deadly-attack-on-aid-convoy-in-syria>

"SALAMO [Selmo]: I went to my office. It was like paradise for us because there is no aircraft in the sky, no shelling and - truce-like.

MEUSE: He'd just sat to have tea on his office balcony.

SALAMO: I hear the helicopter is coming toward us.

MEUSE: Salamo says he saw a helicopter drop two bombs then return for another round. He got into his car and drove to the scene. On his way, he says, he recognized the sound of a Sukhoi warplane, the type flown by President Bashar al-Assad's Russian allies.

SALAMO: I heard that there is a Sukhoi aircraft in the sky, so I was so slow. I heard another attack, an attack toward the warehouse."

In all three accounts of Selmo's story, the reference to Selmo's witnessing of the helicopter releasing two barrel bombs is not conveyed from his own words, but via the reporters' words. This suggests that the reporters wanted to simplify his account to make good copy. Reading the NPR interview, we can see a distinction between when Selmo first *heard* the helicopter, and then saw the attack. Selmo says that at first, in his own words, "I hear the helicopter is coming toward us." At this point, there is no visibility. According to the NPR reporter, Selmo then tells him he saw the helicopter drop two bombs. In tandem with the other articles, Selmo's story appears fairly consistent: he was about a kilometre up the street from the site of the attack in a White Helmets building. At first he did not see the helicopter, but only heard it. Minutes later he heard and saw the first explosion, then saw the second barrel bomb dropped from the helicopter in the ensuing light. Porter's assumption that this would have been impossible due to darkness is clearly nonsensical. As noted above, after an initial explosion both the helicopter and a second bomb being released would have been easily visible, meaning that Selmo's account was entirely plausible.

Porter uses his analysis of the Selmo narrative to criticise the legitimacy of the UN's dismissal of discrepancies in eyewitness accounts. This examination suggests in contrast that his inference that Selmo is a proven liar is somewhat sloppy and overblown. Porter also ignores other eyewitness evidence that came not from the White Helmets, but from members of the SARC convoy itself who survived the attack. For instance, an initial Arabic-language statement put out by SARC's Idlib branch the day after the attack referred to "airstrikes" targeting the convoy.³⁰ Other SARC officials issued similar statements. NPR reported that: "A Red Crescent spokesman on the government-held side of Aleppo wrote a grief-stricken Facebook post mourning his friend and blaming his death on Assad's Russian allies." Ali Barakat, the brother of Oman Barakat who headed up the SARC division in the town and who also works for SARC, saw his brother killed in his car when "a bomb hit the warehouse," which was followed up by a further 20 missiles.³¹ Another of Barakat's colleagues at SARC anonymously blamed the Syrian government for the attack, alleging that SARC workers feared punishment from Syrian officials if they shared what they had seen: "They want to kill humanity, but humanity will not die."³²

30 RFS Media Office (20 September 2016) <https://rfsmediaoffice.com/en/2016/09/20/the-red-crescent/>

31 My Statesman, 'The Latest: US holds Russia responsible for aid convoy hit' (20 September 2016) <https://www.mystatesman.com/news/the-latest-holds-russia-responsible-for-aid-convoy-hit/kJcVmNLjEIAxJlhbUKeaL/>

32 Guardian, 'Syria aid convoy attack: "the bombardment was continuous"' (21 September 2016) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/20/the-bombardment-was-continuous-the-rescue-teams-werent-even-able-to-work>

Porter then moved on to physical evidence. Discussing the discovery of a Russian bomb tail-fin found inside a warehouse, Porter gives credence to the lack of damage in the building, proving, he says, that it must have been planted by opposition forces. Inspecting the photographic evidence, he asks independent experts to assess the credibility of parts of the UN's analysis, such as the conclusion that bomb craters provided evidence of Syrian air bombardment. The experts concluded that the craters were too small.

Dr Cole's analysis agreed with this point, noting that "pro-rebel sources have failed to produce convincing evidence of bomb craters consistent with a sustained attack by multiple barrel bombs and OFAB-250-270 bombs." He further noted that discrepancies between the White Helmets' account first posted on Facebook and the official position of the US government had "not been adequately resolved... neither side in this particular information battle has a wholly consistent narrative... but inconsistencies between the accounts of the White Helmets and the US Administration, together with the question marks over key aspects of the physical evidence allegedly recovered from the scene give rise to doubts about its credibility."

Porter's argument, if accurate, seemed compelling. His most important reporting, however, came from an anonymous UN source who allegedly told him that the agency had internally ruled out the possibility that impact craters identified at the site could have been caused by barrel bombs or OFAB-250-270 bombs. This contradicted the published UN assessment, which found that the impact craters were consistent with "the use of air-delivered munitions", identified as "several S-5CB unguided air-to-surface anti-personnel rockets produced in the Soviet Union, at least one RBK-500 series air-delivered cluster bomb carrying hundreds of sub-munitions, and at least two OFAB 250-270 unguided aerial bombs," munitions possessed by the Syrian air force.³³ Porter also cited two further sources – an anonymous US intelligence official with "long experience in analysis of aerial photos", whose judgement we therefore cannot check – and a former Pentagon analyst, Pierre Sprey.

The expertise of the anonymous US intelligence official may not be useful in any case because, according to Porter, the official is experienced in "aerial photos" – aerial photography is distinct, however, from satellite imagery; and expertise in analysis of the former will not necessarily qualify a person to analyse the latter, particularly as high resolution satellite imagery can provide different levels of detail compared to aerial photography.

Porter's decision to rely on Sprey casts even further doubts on the integrity of his entire story. If Sprey has any meaningful experience in forensic analysis of satellite imagery, it was certainly not his speciality, nor would it be an area of expertise he has applied in decades. Sprey was a defence analyst at the Office of the Secretary of Defence specialising in weapons system analysis (which has little to do with assessing bomb impact damage via satellite imagery).³⁴ He helped design the F-16 fighter and the A-10 ground attack jet aircraft. He left the Pentagon in 1971, and continued to consult for the defence industry until 1986 on environmental research, international defence planning and weapons analysis. His career expertise was in "data-based cost effectiveness analysis for air and ground weapons", according to the Project for Government Oversight.³⁵ Since then, Sprey has worked in the music industry as a record producer. He has not worked in the defence industry for some 32 years.³⁶

33 UN Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (2 February 2017) <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/G1702663.pdf>

34 Example Pentagon document on weapons system analysis <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a111637.pdf>

35 POGO, 'Pierre Sprey' <http://www.pogo.org/about/board-staff/strauss-contributors/pierre-sprey.html>

36 Washington Post, 'Whatever happened to... Pierre Sprey?' (16 May 2006) <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/05/15/AR2006051501518.html>

Porter's choice of Sprey as his go-to expert for forensic satellite imagery analysis is deeply questionable. Sprey's opinions do not, contrary to Porter's portrayal, represent genuinely expert analysis. Porter's incorrect positioning of Sprey as an expert in this area thus raises questions about his reference to other anonymous sources whose expertise/relevance cannot be verified, especially of course his UN source. Asked about Porter's report, a UNOSAT representative denied that there was any internal conclusion about the satellite images different to the UN's final published assessment.

Porter also neglected to acknowledge contradictions and changes in the Russian government narratives. As Dr Cole pointed out: "Some of the RuMoD claims can be easily refuted. In particular, the video footage of the incident clearly shows a number of explosions, which indicates that the suggestion that the convoy simply caught fire are not credible. Similarly, there are a number of images of cars and trucks at the site showing shrapnel/fragmentation damage, which directly disproves Russian claims to the contrary." Cole also pointed out that the tail-fin issue was not as easy to dismiss: "Pro-rebel sources countered by suggesting that the bomb had exploded on the roof and just the tail fin penetrated into the warehouse. Others suggested that the bomb did not detonate at all, and the rest of it lies buried in the crater. Further examination of the site is clearly required in order to shed further light on the matter, but that has not happened."

Unfortunately, further on ground forensic analysis of the site was blocked by the Syrian government. Eleven weeks after the attack, investigators were "not allowed to visit the scene of the incident in Urem al-Kubra, the Government stating that it was unable to ensure the safety of the Board, given the ongoing military operations at that location" according to the UN summary report.³⁷

But the UN commission of inquiry report also noted (p. 18) that a "Syrian Su-24M strike aircraft and at least one and possibly two Syrian Mi-8 attack helicopters were operating in and around Orum al-Kubra at the time of the attack."

Overall, Dr Cole concluded that the discrepancies in the pro-regime narrative were overbearing: "In contrast, the pro-regime/Russian counter-narrative has no cohesion whatsoever, consisting largely of a scattergun approach to discredit as many aspects of the pro-rebel narrative as possible, without actually establishing a coherent case for what did actually happen."

On balance, the merit of Porter's critique of the UN report ultimately hinged on whether his UN source's claims about the UN's internal assessment of the impact craters were correct. If he is right, then the UN's published report would appear to be flawed – but there is no way to independently verify the claims, and Porter's other sources do not lend credibility to his judgement.

The case illustrates the difficulties of trying to discern fact from fiction in Syria, and underscores the need for journalists to check their biases. Nevertheless, Cole argues that there remains a lesson here:

37 Summary of UN Headquarters 'Board of Inquiry' Report, <https://dpa-ps.atavist.com/summary-of-un-headquarters-board-of-inquiry-report>

“The much lauded White Helmets who have provided the primary evidence of the incident, are not an impartial source. They are an institution of the Syrian revolution, and pro-regime sources have used social media to highlight previous instances of where the White Helmets have fabricated evidence and co-operated with armed groups... This does not necessarily mean that the White Helmets have fabricated evidence in respect of this incident, but it does indicate the need to critically examine whatever information they have provided.”

3.3 Chain of custody

The factual integrity of some White Helmets footage has also been questioned by Scott Ritter, a former UN inspector who led the UN team investigating Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction programme. In a scathing article in the *American Conservative*, Ritter writes:³⁸

“The White Helmets have made their reputation through the dissemination of self-made videos ostensibly showing them in action inside Syria, rescuing civilians from bombed out structures, and providing life-saving emergency medical care... To the untrained eye, these videos are a dramatic representation of heroism in action. To the trained professional (I can offer my own experience as a Hazardous Materials Specialist with New York Task Force 2 USAR team), these videos represent de facto evidence of dangerous incompetence or, worse, fraud.

The bread and butter of the White Helmet’s self-made reputation is the rescue of a victim – usually a small child – from beneath a pile of rubble, usually heavy reinforced concrete. First and foremost, as a ‘light’ USAR team, the White Helmets are not trained or equipped to conduct rescues of entrapped victims. And yet the White Helmet videos depict their rescue workers using excavation equipment and tools, such as pneumatic drills, to gain access to victims supposedly pinned under the weight of a collapsed building. The techniques used by the White Helmets are not only technically wrong, but dangerous to anyone who might actually be trapped – the introduction of excavators to move debris, or the haphazard drilling and hammering into concrete in the immediate vicinity of a trapped victim, would invariably lead to a shifting of the rubble pile, crushing the trapped victim to death. In my opinion, the videos are pure theater, either staged to impress an unwitting audience, or actually conducted with total disregard for the wellbeing of any real victims.”

In particular Ritter argues that the White Helmets’ images of their response to the 4th April 2017 chemical weapon attack on Khan Shaykhoun demonstrated that they were putting victims of any attack at further risk: “From the haphazard use of personal protective equipment (either non-existent or employed in a manner that negates protection from potential exposure) to the handling of victims and so-called decontamination efforts, everything the White Helmets did was operationally wrong and would expose themselves and the victims they were ostensibly treating to even greater harm.”

38 Scott Ritter, ‘Ex-Weapons Inspector: Trump’s Sarin Claims Built on “Lie”’, *American Conservative* (29 June 2017) <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/ex-weapons-inspector-trumps-sarin-claims-built-on-lie/>

These observations were corroborated by the joint UN-OPWC report in its Annex II (p. 28) which noted “scenes recorded just after the incident... where rescue and decontamination activities filmed shortly after 0700 hours showed rescue personnel hosing down patients with water indiscriminately for extended periods of time. Such video footage also depicted a number of patients not being attended to, and some para-medical interventions that did not seem to make medical sense, such as performing heart compression on a patient facing the ground.”³⁹

These are alarming observations, and one wonders why we have seen less acknowledgement by traditional reporters of the propensity of the White Helmets to engage in propaganda that might put survivors of attacks at risk. Of course, risk-prone behaviour is not inconsistent with the fact that the group lacks training in some of the more complex forms of rescuing that the volunteers end up having to perform. As Ritter notes, the group have only received ‘light’ training. While this would mean they are not qualified to perform many of the rescues which they undertake – who else is going to respond to the complex emergencies of the conflict?

Still, if these observations are accurate, then it is certainly not unreasonable to doubt the reliability of evidence produced by the White Helmets. While some of the group’s failures to adhere to proper procedures can be put down to incompetence, Ritter’s concerns over the ‘theatrical’ nature of some of their videos raise cautions.

On such grounds, Ritter argues that as the White Helmets provided the samples from the Khan Shaykhoun chemical weapons attack on 4th April 2017 to the OPCW, this means that the integrity of the samples cannot be trusted.

Forensic testing of the samples by the OPCW determined the use of the nerve agent sarin, or a ‘sarin-like substance’, bearing the signature of Syrian government stockpiles. But Ritter argues that the OPCW did not adhere to the proper procedures to make this determination in a way that would retain scientific integrity:

“The problem, however, is that the OPCW is in no position to make the claim it did. One of the essential aspects of the kind of forensic investigation carried out by organizations such as the OPCW – namely the application of scientific methods and techniques to the investigation of a crime – is the concept of ‘chain of custody’ of any samples that are being evaluated. This requires a seamless transition from the collection of the samples in question, the process of which must be recorded and witnessed, the sealing of the samples, the documentation of the samples, the escorted transportation of the samples to the laboratory, the confirmation and breaking of the seals under supervision, and the subsequent processing of the samples, all under supervision of the OPCW. Anything less than this means the integrity of the sample has been compromised – in short, there is no sample.

The OPCW acknowledges that its personnel did not gain access to Khan Sheikhun at any time. However, the investigating team states that it used connections with ‘parties with knowledge of and connections to the area in question,’ to gain access to samples that were collected by ‘non governmental organizations (NGOs)’ which also provided representatives to be interviewed, and videos and images for the investigating team to review. The NGO used by the OPCW was none other than the White Helmets.”

39 Seventh report of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons-United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism (26 October 2017) <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/N1734930.pdf>

Ritter goes on to argue that the OPCW, therefore, did not follow its own chain of custody procedures to verify the authenticity of the sample it used to examine the Khan Shaykhoun attack:

“The process of taking samples from a contaminated area takes into consideration a number of factors designed to help create as broad and accurate a picture of the scene of the incident itself as well as protect the safety of the person taking the sample as well as the integrity of the crime scene itself (i.e., reduce contamination). There is no evidence that the White Helmets have received this kind of specialized training required for the taking of such samples. Moreover, the White Helmets are not an extension of the OPCW – under no circumstances could any samples taken by White Helmet personnel and subsequently turned over to the OPCW be considered viable in terms of chain of custody. This likewise holds true for any biomedical samples evaluated by the OPCW – all such samples were either taken from victims who had been transported to Turkish hospitals, or provided by non-OPCW personnel in violation of chain of custody.”

The UN-OPCW report was conscious of some these issues and noted (p. 5) that the OPCW team was unable to visit the site due to security risks, along with apparent efforts to compromise the scene of the attack after samples had already been taken: “With respect to Khan Shaykhun, the crater from which the sarin emanated had been disturbed after the incident and subsequently filled with concrete. Accordingly, the integrity of the scene had been compromised. The Leadership Panel considered that the high security risk of a site visit to Khan Shaykhun, which is currently in a situation of armed conflict and under the control of a listed terrorist organization (Nusrah Front), outweighed the possible benefits for the investigation.”

In addition, it was the Syrian government who from the outset had blocked the team from accessing the site. The report said that “no permission” from the government (“including the issuance of visas”) “was in place when the team initially deployed, which would have provided the best circumstances for evidence retrieval.”

Did this, however, give opportunity for fabrication of samples? The report noted one serious inconsistency relating to “biomedical results from samples without a chain of custody.” The document noted that in sample number 133, “the blood tested negative for sarin or a sarin-like substance, while the urine sample tested positive for the sarin degradation product isopropyl methylphosphonate.” Medical experts told the investigators that “the combination of the negative result in the blood and the positive result in the urine was impossible.”

The inconsistency would seem to vindicate Ritter’s argument that the lack of chain of custody meant that samples could have been interfered with. According to the OPCW investigators, though, the discrepancy had a more mundane explanation: “This inconsistency was considered to be most probably the result of cross-contamination in the sampling process.” Indeed, Ritter himself criticised the sampling process for being in danger of cross-contamination.

The OPCW attempted to compensate for the inability to access the site by demanding rigorous photographic and video documentation of the full process of acquiring samples. Some of these videos are available online. Ritter's criticisms of the procedures used by the White Helmets in collecting the samples are certainly damning. "A cursory examination of the White Helmet videos would show that the collection activity was more theater than real." Individuals collecting samples wore "chemical protective suits suitable for training only", providing "no protection from chemical agents", while "freely mixing with persons having no protection at all." One sampler carried "a Draeger multi-gas meter, useless in the detection of chemical agents." Samples were "thrown haphazardly into a carrying case, and the samples are collected using a single scoop, meaning that there is cross-contamination throughout the process. Cars and motorcycles drive freely through the sampling area, contributing to potential cross-contamination." His conclusion about the environmental samples appears decisive: "The lack of any discernible documentation, the lack of any tamper-proof seals, and the lack of viable sampling containers, techniques and methodology likewise meant that anything collected by the White Helmets in the manner indicated on film had absolutely zero inspection utility." Once again, this haphazard sampling process could have been deliberate 'theatre', but was also consistent with the fact that the group has zero training in such specialised processes.

However, Ritter's critique of the OPCW chain of custody process overlooked two key facts: Firstly, several biomedical samples obtained from some survivors and autopsies of those killed had been done with "full chain of custody". Biomedical specimens were taken from some who still survived as well as many bodies of those killed "in the presence of the team and where chain of custody was maintained by the team" (p. 49-50). Some of these occurred one day after the attack: "Rapid mobilisation was crucial in the first instance in allowing FFM [Fact Finding Mission] team members to attend the autopsies of three victims on Wednesday, 5 April 2017, and to witness the extraction of biomedical specimens from the bodies." (p. 15) The team was also able to witness the collection of biomedical samples from ten casualties directly from hospitals where victims had turned up, and to interview a few survivors who had managed to survive exposure.

Secondly, among the samples that the OPCW used to determine the use of sarin in Khan Shaykhoun, were samples obtained by Syrian government operatives who visited the site and provided them to the OPCW, in a bid to demonstrate their cooperation. These also lacked the standard chain of custody procedures that the OPCW would normally hope to implement in better security conditions, but balanced out the fact that other environmental samples had been obtained via the White Helmets.

"The exception to this was in relation to samples provided by the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic," noted the OPCW (p. 11). "Prior to handover to the FFM, those samples were analysed by the Scientific Studies and Research Centre (SSRC) in Barzah. The FFM was also provided with an analytical report compiled by the SSRC in Barzah. Subsequently, those samples were also analysed by the OPCW Laboratory prior to being sent to OPCW DLs [Designated Laboratories]."

According to Syrian government officials, “samples relating to the alleged incident in Khan Shaykhun were provided to them by an unnamed volunteer from Khan Shaykhun.” Fractions of these samples were collected by the OPCW from the SSRC in Barzah on 18th June 2017, along with a video recording of the sample collection process. The Syrian government’s environmental samples consisted of “soil, fragments of metal, bone, and vegetation from different locations, as well as extraction samples from these fragments.”

The Syrian government performed their own analysis of these samples at the SSCR (which would later be bombed to smithereens by Western airstrikes after the Douma attack). The results consistently confirmed the presence of sarin with hexamine. Findings from all the samples – from biomedical samples with and without chain of custody; from the Syrian government; and from the White Helmets, “were all assessed as being broadly consistent.”

Ritter’s critique of the deeply unprofessional role of the White Helmets in the sample collection process is valid, but as much as it might be explained by deliberate deception, it can also be explained by total incompetence – which would be consistent with their lack of training, and coheres with the consistency of the findings across the samples. The biggest problem is that Ritter omitted that the White Helmets were not the only source of environmental samples: the Syrian government was another source. The OPCW examined all the samples, including those provided by the Syrian government and confirmed (p. 30) “the presence of sarin and some of its known degradation products” – containing key “marker chemicals” confirming a production process using hexamine, a process associated with that used by the Syrian government.

3.4 The White Helmets and propaganda: questions

Scott Ritter’s criticisms raised valid questions about the reliability of the White Helmets in responding to and ascertaining chemical weapons attacks. But he also ignored the irrelevance of some of these criticisms, by failing to acknowledge that the White Helmets were not the only source of samples for what happened at Khan Shaykhoun. His criticisms represent an important part of the jigsaw, but they were incomplete.

What of his general scepticism toward the White Helmets as an organisation?

The White Helmets describe themselves as “unarmed and neutral”, working to “save people on all sides of the conflict,” though they operate “in areas outside of government control.”⁴⁰

In a two-part investigation, journalist Max Blumenthal argued like Ritter that the White Helmets are far from neutral.⁴¹ The group, he reported, was “founded in collaboration with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)’s Office of Transitional Initiatives, an explicitly political wing of the agency that has funded efforts at political subversion in Cuba and Venezuela”:

40 <https://www.whitehelmets.org/en>

“USAID is the White Helmets’ principal funder, committing at least \$23 million to the group since 2013. This money was part of \$339.6 million budgeted by USAID for ‘supporting activities that pursue a peaceful transition to a democratic and stable Syria’ – or establishing a parallel governing structure that could fill the power vacuum once Bashar Al-Assad was removed.”

In May 2015, Blumenthal observed, “White Helmets spokesperson Raed Saleh met privately with UN and EU officials to push for a no-fly zone.”⁴² His colleague Faroug Habib similarly called for a no-fly zone a month later before the US House Committee on Foreign Affairs, citing first-hand knowledge of chemical weapons attacks by the Syrian government. “With the Obama administration having drawn its ‘red line’ at the deployment of chemical weapons, allegations like these are potential trigger points for full-scale US military intervention,” argued Blumenthal.

Blumenthal proves that the White Helmets’ leadership are opposed to Assad and supportive of, at the least, a limited US military intervention in the form of a no-fly-zone over Syria. He is clearly justified in his concern about the potential for a no-fly-zone to become a precursor to an extended aerial bombardment – as happened in Iraq and Libya.

Of course, these are not particularly surprising or controversial positions to hold for a group operating in areas controlled by the Syrian opposition.

Blumenthal went on to describe a range of instances in which various White Helmets volunteers had been captured on photo or video engaged in dubious, sometimes violent, activities – including associations with extremists such as the former al-Qaeda affiliate al-Nusra.

As Channel 4 acknowledges:⁴³

“... not all of the claims and criticism about the White Helmets are unfounded. The organisation ‘fired’ one of its members after he was filmed handling mutilated corpses, and helping armed militants to dispose of the dead bodies of pro-Assad fighters. In a statement, the White Helmets claimed this was just one rogue individual acting alone. There is also video evidence of White Helmets ‘assisting’ with a public execution, by taking a man’s body away from the scene straight after he was shot dead.”

One particular incident highlighted by Blumenthal, in which a White Helmet member was a key eyewitness source regarding a Syrian chemical weapons attack, stands out.

In the same month that White Helmets official Raed Saleh was meeting with UN and EU officials to call for no-fly-zones, “a White Helmet member named Muawiya Hassan Agha provided an extensive eyewitness account to the Violations Documentation Center in Syria on the alleged deployment of chemical weapons by Syrian government warplanes in Idlib... A year later, Agha was exposed by pro-government social media activists for filming a grotesque video depicting extremist Syrian rebels torturing two captured soldiers they later executed. EA Worldview editor-in-chief Scott Lucas reported that Agha was expelled from the White Helmets days later.”

41 Max Blumenthal, ‘Inside the Shadowy PR Firm That’s Lobbying for Regime Change in Syria’, Altnet (2 October 2016) <https://www.altnet.org/world/inside-shadowy-pr-firm-thats-driving-western-opinion-towards-regime-change-syria>

42 Blumenthal, ‘How the White Helmets Became International Heroes While Pushing U.S. Military Intervention and Regime Change in Syria’, Altnet (2 October 2016) <https://www.altnet.org/grayzone-project/how-white-helmets-became-international-heroes-while-pushing-us-military>

43 <https://www.channel4.com/news/factcheck/syria-chemical-attack-the-evidence>

These incidents demonstrate that the White Helmets at times have been vulnerable to manipulation by extremists among the rebel groups. They point directly to the possibility that extremists may attempt to use the White Helmets to propagate narratives that may be false – having said that, in many of these cases, the White Helmets have expelled the culprits when criminal activity comes to light.

All in all, these cases are under-reported in Western media – and demonstrate that the increasingly prominent role of Islamist militants among rebel groups has often compromised the work of humanitarian groups on the ground.

On top of this, there is evidence that the White Helmets are connected to a British government programme also involved in amplifying pro-opposition propaganda. Another major source of funding for the White Helmets is the British Foreign Office through its Conflict Stability and Security Fund (CSSF), to the tune of £19.7m since 2013, according to information disclosed under the Freedom of Information Act.⁴⁴

To be sure, a number of other projects publicly funded by the CSSF appear benign and focused on development issues. However, the bulk of projects funded in 40 countries around the world is secret – as was the scale of White Helmets funding which was only revealed after a FOIA request.

In Syria, other projects funded by the CSSF are aimed squarely at exerting propaganda influence. According to private military contractor documents obtained by The Guardian, the CSSF has funded communications and propaganda operations for the Syrian opposition during this same period. Once again, this funding stream is largely secret, and not formally publicised – it is also important to note that it is distinct from the White Helmets funding stream.⁴⁵

The documents “show the government appears to view the project as a way to maintain a foothold in the country until there can be greater British military involvement, offering “the capability to expand back into the strategic space as and when the opportunity arises””, wrote journalists Ian Cobain and others.

The CSSF had spent £2.4m on private contractors based in Istanbul, who deliver “strategic communications and media operations support to the Syrian moderate armed opposition.” Cobain and colleagues described the project, overseen by the Ministry of Defence, as aimed at moulding “a Syrian sense of national identity that will reject both the Assad regime and Isis.”

Material produced under these contracts, *The Guardian* noted, includes “videos, photos, military reports, radio broadcasts, print products and social media posts branded with the logos of fighting groups.” The output amounts to “day-to-day wartime propaganda, aimed at Syrian civilian and military audiences. It includes bulletins of successful military engagements, or videos of opposition fighters handing out food... Materials are circulated in the Arabic broadcast media and posted online with no indication of British government involvement.”

44 FCO response to FOIA request (11 October 2017)
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/652400/FOI_0749-17_letter.pdf

Among the groups identified in the contracting document as part of the “moderate armed opposition” are Jaysh al-Islam, a militant group originally set-up with Saudi backing, and Harakat al-Hazm, one of the first rebel groups to receive US military support.

Jaysh al-Islam, which controlled Douma before it was routed by Assad’s forces in April 2018, was fingered by Human Rights Watch for kidnapping and probably murdering four human rights activists in December 2013; and for using hundreds of imprisoned civilians, including women, as human shields by placing them in metal cages through Eastern Ghouta.⁴⁶ Even a report by the British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which is funded by the British Foreign Office and operates a network of sources in rebel-held areas, cited local sources in Douma confirming widespread resentment toward Jaysh al-Islam’s rule, in particular outrage at the extremist group’s hoarding of food.⁴⁷ The MoD denied having provided support to group, despite its name being referenced in the contractor document.

Harakat al-Hazm, which according to a source cited by *The Guardian* was provided propaganda support by the FCO/MoD programme, disbanded its units and folded them into an Islamist militia alliance, al-Shamiah Front, in December 2015.⁴⁸ The latter was among several Islamist rebel groups which received extensive criticisms from Amnesty International for “a chilling wave of abductions, torture and summary killings” in areas under their rule in Aleppo and Idlib.⁴⁹

The CSSF had also financed what a CSSF Annual Report described as “the moderate Free Syrian Police”, a civilian police force which was found to be diverting funds to extremist groups by a BBC Panorama investigation. Extremist groups that routinely extorted cash from the Free Syrian Police included Nour al-Din al-Zinki and al-Nusra. Some FSP officers also worked with courts engaged in torture and summary execution.⁵⁰

That some Islamist militant groups among the rebels likely benefited from these British propaganda operations, whether or not this has been intentional, seems incontrovertible.

The vast majority of Western journalists are reporting on the Syrian conflict from within this context of relying on information from sources in rebel-controlled areas, where Western agencies have a direct hand in moulding propaganda in support of the opposition against Assad. That doesn’t automatically mean that their reporting is wrong, but it can mean that their reporting maybe skewed, offering a biased and potentially misleading perspective of the conflict.

That, perhaps, would explain the general media failure to ask whether White Helmets members have been subjected to similar pressures as the FSP in areas controlled by Islamist rebel groups.

45 Ian Cobain et. al, ‘How Britain funds the “propaganda war” against Isis in Syria’, *Guardian* (3 May 2016)

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/03/how-britain-funds-the-propaganda-war-against-isis-in-syria>

46 HRW, ‘Syria: Armed Groups Use Caged Hostages to Deter Attacks’ (2 November 2015)

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/11/02/syria-armed-groups-use-caged-hostages-deter-attacks>

47 SOHR (9 April 2018) <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=88931>

48 Jaimee Dettmer, ‘Main U.S.-Backed Syrian Rebel Group Disbanding, Joining Islamists’, *Daily Beast* (1 March 2015)

<https://www.thedailybeast.com/main-us-backed-syrian-rebel-group-disbanding-joining-islamists>

49 AI, ‘Syria: Abductions, Torture, and Summary Killings at the Hands of Armed Groups’ (5 July 2016)

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2016/07/syria-abductions-torture-and-summary-killings-at-the-hands-of-armed-groups/>

50 Hannah Summers, ‘British aid scheme suspended amid allegations of payments to Syrian jihadis’, *Guardian* (4 December 2017)

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/dec/04/british-aid-scheme-suspended-amid-allegations-of-payments-to-syrian-jihadis>

3.5 The White Helmets and propaganda: myths

This vindicates the importance of evaluating narratives put out by the White Helmets rather than accepting them without question. Yet the widespread belief among increasing sections of the left that the White Helmets are, effectively, a terrorist organisation; and that all or even most of their reports of violence by Syrian and Russian military forces are nothing more than sophisticated Western or rebel fabrications, goes too far.

As Blumenthal acknowledges, “it would seem unfair to tar an entire group with the actions of a few scofflaws”. He notes that the White Helmets are genuinely rescuing large numbers of civilians from the impact of Syrian military aerial bombardment: “Whatever the number, there is little dispute that the White Helmets’ rank-and-file are saving lives in what seems to be an increasingly desperate situation in eastern Aleppo.” This fact – that most White Helmets rescue operations are real – is also conceded by Scott Ritter, despite his harsh scepticism of the group:⁵¹

“The danger faced by the White Helmets is not a fiction – to date, 141 first responders affiliated with the Syrian Civil Defense have been killed while performing their duty. And although their claims of having saved more than 60,000 lives are unverifiable, there can be no doubt that many lives have, in fact, been saved as a result of their work.”

Earlier this year, *The Guardian* produced a story on how the White Helmets had been falsely associated with al-Qaeda by an online campaign backed by Russia. The story was not particularly well-investigated. Its blanket dismissal of all concerns about the credibility and impartiality of the White Helmets was poor journalism. But the piece noted rightly that the two most widely-cited ‘independent’ critics of the White Helmets, who describe the network as little more than a ‘Western propaganda construct’ designed to mask Islamist terrorist activity, have direct ties with both Russia and Assad.

A vast amount of information construing the White Helmets as a ‘propaganda construct’ and front for terrorist groups, originates from Vanessa Beeley and Eva Bartlett, both of whom describe themselves as “independent” journalists, but who have consistently aligned themselves with the Syrian government.

All rebel and opposition forces in Syria, they claim, are simply Islamist terrorists – and the White Helmets serve to provide largely fake rescue operations to prove to the world that Syrians are being killed by Assad’s violence. The implication is that Assad is not in fact committing atrocities.

But Beeley and Bartlett are not independent or impartial sources of information on the Syrian conflict, but quite openly support the Assad government. *The Guardian* noted:⁵²

“In 2016, Beeley had a two-hour meeting with Assad in Damascus as part of a US Peace Council delegation, which she described on Facebook as her ‘proudest moment’. She was also invited to Moscow to report on the ‘dirty war in Syria’; there, she met senior Russian officials including the deputy foreign minister, Mikhail Bogdanov, and Maria Zakharova, director of information and press at Russia’s foreign ministry.”

51 Ritter, ‘The “White Helmets” and the Inherent Contradiction of America’s Syria Policy’, Truthdig (5 October 2016) <https://www.truthdig.com/articles/the-white-helmets-and-the-inherent-contradiction-of-americas-syria-policy/>

52 Olivia Solon, ‘How Syria’s White Helmets became victims of an online propaganda machine’, *The Guardian* (18 December 2017) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/18/syria-white-helmets-conspiracy-theories>

As for Bartlett, she is also open about her support for Assad. She became especially well-known after a YouTube clip of her talk at a UN event went viral. The event was a small press conference hosted by the Permanent Mission of the Syrian Arab Republic to the United Nations – in other words, organised by Assad’s government (at Bartlett’s request).

The Guardian article ignores other legitimate lines of inquiry about the White Helmets, but this is one sound criticism that neither Bartlett nor Beeley have satisfactorily answered. From a journalistic perspective, such ties are fundamentally unethical, and compromise their reporting.

Both Beeley and Bartlett routinely criticise traditional media outlets for reporting in contexts which are embedded with rebel groups and opposition forces, challenging their credibility and impartiality. Yet by the same standards, given that they report consistently from Syria in a context controlled by Assad’s forces, neither of them can be reasonably described as independent voices. They are vehemently pro-Assad.

Several other cases illustrate how this fundamentally compromises the integrity of their reporting. In 2016, Swedish journalist Cecilia Udden embarked on a regime-approved reporting trip to Syria. But she was subsequently thrown out of the country by Assad’s government for circulating “false information”, after she tweeted photos and witness accounts from people in besieged Eastern Aleppo because she had been denied access there.⁵³

In March 2017, popular pro-Assad journalist Reda al-Pasha was banned from working in Syria by the Ministry of Information. Al-Pasha had committed the crime of publicly criticising pro-government militia leaders for engaging in widespread looting, kidnappings and killings in areas re-taken from the rebels. The Syrian government is still preventing journalists from entering Eastern Aleppo – except when they toe a pro-Assad line.⁵⁴

Journalists that are seen to be at risk of criticising Assad tend to be excluded by his government – meaning that those who receive access are, usually, granted it under the expectation of aligning with the government and avoiding criticism.

At worst, dissident journalists are killed, as happened with the late *Sunday Times* war correspondent Marie Colvin. She had crossed over into Syria by motorcycle in February 2012 at a time when Assad was preventing access to Syria by foreign journalists. This was her eyewitness account of Syrian government bombardment from Homs: “The Syrians are not allowing civilians to leave... anyone who gets on the street is hit by a shell. If they are not hit by a shell they are hit by snipers. There are snipers all around on the high buildings. I think the sickening thing is the complete merciless nature. They are hitting the civilian buildings absolutely mercilessly and without caring and the scale of it is just shocking.”⁵⁵ She was killed along with French photographer Rémi Ochlik shortly after issuing this report. The Syrian government claimed that its autopsy of her body proved she had been killed by an IED filled with nails planted by rebel “terrorists”. But her colleague photographer Paul Conroy, who survived the attack, confirmed that they had been shelled by Syrian Army artillery fire. Syrian government files obtained by Abdel Majid Barakat, a former data manager of Assad’s war cabinet known as the ‘Central Crisis Management Cell’, show that senior military officials around the time were actively tracking journalistic activity and ordering special forces units to take “necessary measures.”⁵⁶

53 CPJ (15 December 2016) <https://cpj.org/2016/12/swedish-journalist-expelled-from-syria.php>

54 IRIN (12 April 2017) <https://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2017/04/12/eastern-aleppo-under-al-assad>

55 Roy Greenslade, ‘Marie Colvin obituary’, *Guardian* (22 February 2012) <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2012/feb/22/marie-colvin>

56 Anne Barnard, ‘Syrian forces aimed to kill journalists, US court is told’, *New York Times* (9 April 2018) <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/09/world/middleeast/syria-marie-colvin-death.html>

An even more resounding indictment of Beeley and Bartlett's journalism came from within the ranks of the 'alt-left' news scene, via *Newsbud*, run by FBI whistleblower Sibel Edmonds.⁵⁷ While there are flaws in *Newsbud's* investigation of Beeley and Bartlett, their report fleshed out their connections with Assad's government, and proved beyond any doubt that these connections meant they had misrepresented facts on the ground:

1. A number of sources in the alternative news scene who knew Beeley and Bartlett confirmed that both journalists routinely tour Syria with funding and protection from the Assad government, contrary to their denials of this. This has included being put up by Assad's government at five star hotels far from actual conflict zones. Visits to conflict zones have invariably been done with the support, presence and consent of Assad's security forces, not independently.
2. Beeley and Bartlett have made grandiose claims of fact which are demonstrably false. Bartlett was, for instance, caught out by Channel 4 for claiming falsely that the same Syrian girl was 'recycled' by the White Helmets in fake rescue videos.⁵⁸ Among the most egregious is the whitewashing and denial of the Syrian military's violence in East Aleppo. They denied, for instance, that the al-Quds hospital in East Aleppo had been bombed by government forces. This was partly helped by an initial MSF press release saying the hospital had been reduced "to rubble." As later investigations showed, the entire hospital had not in fact been totally destroyed, but key parts of the building – including the emergency ward – had indeed been reduced to rubble. *The Newsbud* report collates a range of unequivocal open source photographic, video and eyewitness evidence confirming that it was indeed bombed.⁵⁹ CBS News has posted up the video of the aftermath of the bombing.⁶⁰ The evidence of Syrian military bombing was extensively documented by Medecins San Frontiers.⁶¹ Beeley had essentially repeated the claims of the Russian Ministry of Defence, which had released a satellite image purporting to show that the hospital did not suffer any new damage on 28th April 2016, compared to as far back as October 2015. Verify Syria, a project run by Syrian journalists which debunks fake news from both pro-rebel and pro-Assad sources, examined the Russian satellite imagery along with photographs of the site, clearly demonstrating the appearance of new damage to the front and back of the building.⁶²

57 Sibel Edmonds, 'Syria under siege: guarding against wolves in sheep's clothing', *Newsbud* (21 March 2018)

<https://www.newsbud.com/2018/03/21/newsbud-exclusive-report-syria-under-siege-guarding-against-wolves-in-sheeps-clothing/>

58 Patrick Worrall, 'Eva Bartlett's claims about Syrian children', Channel 4 News (20 December 2016)

<https://www.channel4.com/news/factcheck/factcheck-eva-bartletts-claims-about-syrian-children>

59 Harriet Sinclair, 'Footage shows one of Aleppo's last paediatricians moments before deadly Al Quds air strike', *Independent* (30 April 2016) <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-conflict-footage-aleppo-paediatrician-al-quds-air-strike-a7008596.html>

60 CBS News (28 April 2016) <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/syria-airstrike-al-quds-hospital-rebel-held-aleppo-doctor-cease-fire/>

61 MSF, Review of Attack on Al Quds hospital in Aleppo City (September 2016) https://www.msf.org/sites/msf.org/files/al_quds_report.pdf

62 Verify Syria (5 May 2016) <https://www.verify-sy.com/ViewArticle/234/en>



Fig7 – Damage to al-Quds hospital (Source: Verify Syria)

An analysis by the Geospatial Technologies Project of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) examined satellite imagery of the site from the 25th and 29th April, concluding that between those dates “a large debris apron appeared in the street in front of Al-Quds Hospital... Debris aprons often indicate the presence of damage to the façade of a building that cannot be directly observed via satellite imagery. In addition, the top floors of building immediately adjacent to the hospital were severely damaged during the same time period. These findings are consistent with reports of the hospital being struck by large ordnance.”⁶³



Fig8 – Satellite imagery analysed by AAAS

63 Geospatial Technologies Project, ‘Assessing the status of medical facilities in Syria Al-Quds Hospital’, American Association for the Advancement of Science (April 2016)
https://mcmprodaaas.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/reports/Syria_Hospitals_AlQuds_05102016.pdf

3. Beeley's and Bartlett's claim that the entirety of the White Helmets rank and file are al-Qaeda operatives is unproven. While there are reprehensible cases of some particular members having direct ties with armed groups, the mere fact that the White Helmets operate in opposition areas inevitably means that they will end up associating with the rebels in those areas. This does not justify equating all White Helmets volunteers – who are in fact civilians recruited from local Syrian populations – with al-Qaeda.

Despite denying the bombing of the al-Quds hospital, Beeley and Bartlett implicitly justified Assad's indiscriminate bombing of East Aleppo and its hospitals by claiming that they had all been overrun by the former al-Qaeda affiliate, al-Nusra (now known as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham). The entirety of East Aleppo, they alleged, was controlled by al-Qaeda. The implication was that whatever bombing did occur was entirely justified as it was targeting terrorists. In reality, out of the 8,000 rebel fighters in East Aleppo at the time, there were a maximum of some 900 al-Nusra fighters in the district.⁶⁴ This particular case is worth highlighting because it demonstrates how Beeley and Bartlett selectively use photos and video footage to deny real violence by Assad's forces, and to cast suspicion on medical and rescue workers as being nothing more than extensions of al-Qaeda.

The selective nature of their politicised reporting is evident from a leaked private conversation Beeley had with a fellow pro-Assad activist, in which she is outed for covering up torture by Assad's government, because revealing it would undermine the anti-imperialist resistance. She admits that "torture happened" in Syria, but that she is "never going to say it publicly... but it happened." Her excuse is not that Assad is eliminating torture, but that "Under Bashar Al Assad it was being brought *under control*" [emphasis added]. She further admits that Assad is actively engaged in torture today, but justifies it as being perpetrated against terrorists: "... the creatures in Sdnaya were monsters, mostly hardcore Al Qaeda." She goes on to say she has "been to Syria and knows what went on. and I don't say it publicly... even Govt members dont deny it btw." When her colleague tells her that they don't "buy" the "idea of systemic torture" by the Assad government, Beeley responds with: "ok. that is your opinion, and I respect it but I don't agree with it. torture did happen... it happens globally... I don't turn a blind eye to it but at same time it is largely irrelevant to the bigger picture which is protesting against illegal intervention and supporting the Syrian Govt, Army and people."⁶⁵

64 Reuters, 'Aleppo's Jabhat Fateh al-Sham fighters far fewer than U.N. says: sources' (14 October 2016) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-nusra/aleppos-jabhat-fateh-al-sham-fighters-far-fewer-than-u-n-says-sources-idUSKBN12E0R6>

65 We Write What We Like (9 July 2017) <https://wewritewhatwelike.com/2017/09/07/beeley-admits-even-assad-doesnt-deny-torture-spy-vs-spy-a-pro-assadist-comedy/>

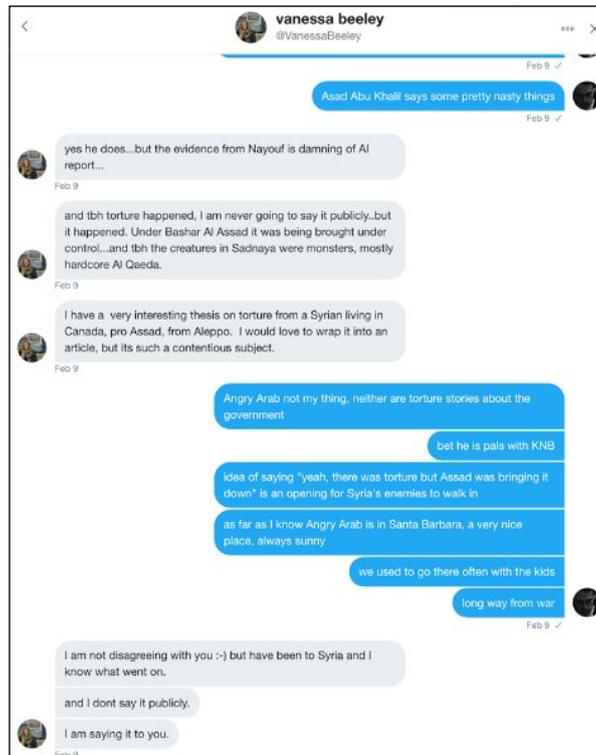


Fig 9 – Screenshot of conversation between Vanessa Beeley and Scott Gaulke (Source: WWWWL blog)

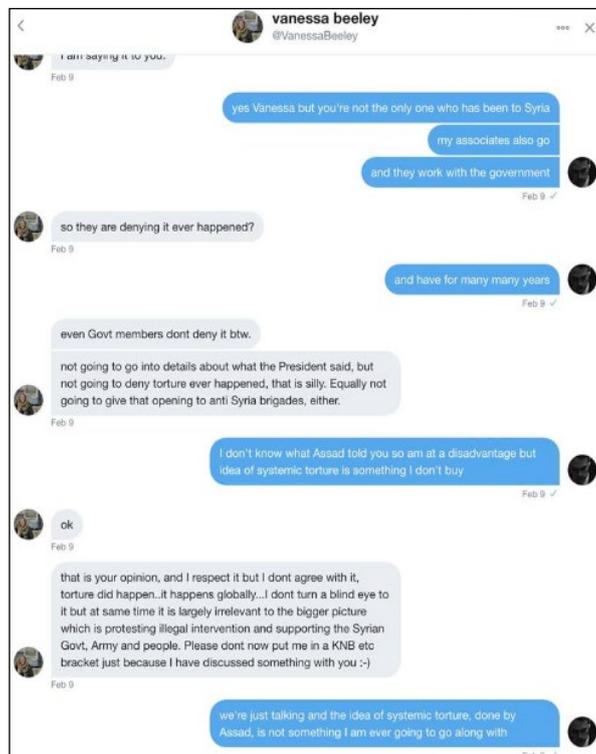


Fig 10 – Screenshot of conversation between Vanessa Beeley and Scott Gaulke (Source: WWWWL blog)

This is an extraordinary admission of willingness to lie and conceal in her reporting on Syria. These comments make absolutely clear that Beeley, and her colleague Bartlett with whom she frequently travels to Syria, have no interest in reporting impartially on the Syrian conflict, or ever acknowledging crimes and human rights violations by Assad's government.

This stance leads inevitably to systematic bias, manifested in efforts to conceal Syrian government violence while fabricating opposition violence. Two salient examples demonstrate the misleading reporting methodology they use.

In one case, Bartlett interviewed doctors from the Aleppo Medical Association who told her that claims about hospitals being bombed by the Syrian Air Force were false.⁶⁶ The problem is that the Association is an openly pro-Assad, Syrian government-funded entity that was based in an area of Aleppo controlled by Syrian government forces. Its Facebook page carries photos of the Association's members at its office, standing beside photographs of Assad and making collective 'roman salutes' in respect.⁶⁷



Fig11 – Aleppo Medical Association (AMA) members (Source: AMA Facebook page)

66 Eva Bartlett, 'Syria: Doctors in Aleppo refute Western media lies', offGuardian (8 October 2016) <https://off-guardian.org/2016/10/08/syria-doctors-in-aleppo-refute-western-media-lies/>

67 <https://www.facebook.com/Aleppodoctors.org/>



Fig12 – Aleppo Medical Association (AMA) members (Source: AMA Facebook page)

Among the absurdities of the article was Bartlett’s claim that media reports of “the last paediatrician” in Aleppo being killed in the airstrike on the al-Quds hospital were lies due the fact that 180 paediatricians were working in government-controlled Aleppo. In fact, Bartlett simply refuted a straw-man by misrepresenting mainstream stories. The BBC, for instance, reporting the tragic death of Muhammad Waseem Moaz in the al-Quds hospital bombing, described him as “one of the last remaining paediatricians in rebel-held Aleppo.”⁶⁸ Regarding Moaz, Bartlett disingenuously quotes the chairman of the Aleppo Medication Association saying, “We checked the name of the doctor and didn’t find him registered in Aleppo Medical Association records.” Of course, the murdered Moaz would not have been registered there, as the Association operated solely in government-held territory.

Similarly, Beeley claimed that the White Helmets were not a real rescue service by interviewing members of what she described as “the REAL Syrian civil defence”, a network which operates solely in government-controlled areas and headquartered in Damascus. She quotes an anonymous “Colonel” of the organisation’s Damascus HQ claiming that the White Helmets are merely “acting, performing for the camera... it is not real.” The implication that the White Helmets do not operate in government-held territory is portrayed as a major journalistic revelation: “It is therefore not surprising that the majority of Syrians living in the heavily populated areas of Syria have never heard of the White Helmets. A fact, that might shock White Helmet supporters in the UK, EU and US who have been deceived into believing that these ‘saviours of all humanity’ are omnipresent in Syria and responsible for the bulk of the humanitarian work being provided to the beleaguered Syrian population.”⁶⁹

Of course, the White Helmets have only ever claimed to operate in opposition-held territory. The Syrian government’s ‘civil defence’ service, according to Beeley herself has been withdrawn from operating in recent years from opposition areas (hence explaining the need for a service like the White Helmets in those areas). It is not surprising, though, that Beeley’s source in the “REAL

68 BBC News (29 April 2016) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-36169170>

69 Beeley, ‘The REAL Syria Civil Defence, Saving Real Syrians, NOT Oscar Winning White Helmets, Saving Al Qaeda’, 21st Century Wire (2 April 2017) <http://21stcenturywire.com/2017/04/02/the-real-syria-civil-defence-saving-real-syrians-not-oscar-winning-white-helmets-saving-al-qaeda/>

Syrian civil defence” is a “Colonel.” Contrary to Beeley’s claim that Assad’s ‘Syrian Civil Defence Force’ as it is called comprises a benignly unarmed rescue network, they are actually a network of armed militias recruited from local populations, also known as ‘self-protection squads’.⁷⁰ According to Patrick Seale in his book *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*, in Syria they are known as ‘The People’s Army’. Self-protection squads consist of volunteers who receive military and combat training “to back up the Syrian army and armed forces in fighting terrorism, and to protect the areas decontaminated from terrorists”, according to the Syrian government’s news service. The reality puts into context Beeley’s claims that the network has been attacked by rebels.⁷¹

Other independent freelance journalists who have witnessed White Helmets activities first-hand disagree with Beeley’s characterisations. Patrick Hilsman, who visited opposition-held areas eight times as an independent freelance journalist, laughed when journalist CJ Werlemen asked him about Beeley/Bartlett’s claims against the group:

“I first encountered them by simply asking my driver what the building to our right was, and he said ‘It’s civil defense.’ We then walked in unannounced and encountered people without weapons, hard at the unglamorous work of digging a well... I wasn’t helped by any think tank, no one told me what to say, no one warned the rescuers to start acting for the freelancers with their crappy cameras.”⁷²

I asked Hilsman myself about his firsthand experiences of seeing the White Helmets at work, and he was explicit that whenever he encountered the group, he had done so unprompted and unscripted, consistently finding the volunteers engaged in genuine humanitarian work, clearing wreckage from bombing raids and assisting civilians to meet their basic needs. “I have been on the ground with the White Helmets in Syria,” he told me. “They are an organisation that offers a civilian alternative in a cataclysmic war that has swept up a massive percentage of the young men into violence. I showed up to their Azaz facility unannounced. And I saw them clearing wreckage in Aleppo proper in the summer of 2014.”

On that trip, Hilsman had planned to visit the White Helmets to interview them, but his actual visit had not been expected. “Like any organisation that works without using violence in a war zone, there have been failures, which unlike any government organisation in Syria, the White Helmets have immediately fired the people who were involved in misdeeds such as disrespecting a body or attending an execution,” he said. Hilsman also refuted other memes about the group that are widely circulated online – one being that the White Helmets once beheaded a child. The false claim, he remarked, “is based on footage of Zenki fighters who once met a photographer who had once photographed a child who was rescued by Civil Defence in Aleppo. Only the Zenki fighters were aware of the killing.”

The grandiose theory put forward by Beeley and Bartlett painting the White Helmets wholesale as terrorists is therefore an unreliably biased narrative that fits neatly with Syrian and Russian war strategy. In fact, their arguments against the group suffer from a fundamental incoherence which inadvertently confirms that the White Helmets are indeed routinely targeted by Assad’s forces.

70 SANA archive tagged ‘self-protection squads’, <https://sana.sy/en/?tag=self-protection-squads>

71 SANA (27 August 2017) <http://sananews.sy/en/?p=1397>

72 CJ Werlemen, ‘Syrians explain how pro-Assad conspiracy theories are hurting them’, TRTWorld (21 February 2018) <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/syrians-explain-how-pro-assad-conspiracy-theories-are-hurting-them-15380>

The confirmation is implicit in multiple tweets where Beeley has equated the White Helmets wholesale with al-Qaeda terrorists in order to label them as “legitimate targets” of Assad’s air attacks.⁷³ She reiterated this view of White Helmets volunteers being “legitimate targets” in an interview in February 2018, demonstrating her belief in extrajudicial assassinations as long as they carried out by states opposed to the West.⁷⁴



Fig13 – Tweet by Vanessa Beeley

Yet Beeley simultaneously claims that the White Helmets routinely fabricate entire photo and video sequences depicting the violent impact of aerial bombardment. But if the White Helmets are “legitimate targets” of Assad’s air attacks, then Beeley is inadvertently confirming the veracity of the reports and video evidence they put out documenting the impacts of these very same air attacks. She can’t have it both ways. Either the violence is wholly staged, or it is real and in Beeley’s moral universe, “legitimate.” (As an aside, it also difficult to square the idea that the White Helmets are using Hollywood-style techniques with covert British state backing to ‘stage’ super-convincing footage of rescues and air attacks, while also producing footage openly displaying blatantly egregious errors in procedures for complex emergencies like certain types of building rescues and chemical sampling; one would expect a professional covert propaganda construct to have avoided such obvious errors – suggesting that a more coherent explanation is that most footage is authentic and therefore unwittingly captures real instances of dangerous incompetence).

73 <https://twitter.com/vanessabeeley/status/660159072457637888>

74 Beeley interview on The Corbett Report (8 February 2018)
<https://www.corbettreport.com/interview-1342-vanessa-beeley-exposes-the-white-helmets/>

Just weeks before the Douma incident, targeted Syrian government air strikes bombed the home of White Helmets volunteer Sobhiya Alsa'ad, just south of Idlib. The strike also reportedly killed members of her family.⁷⁵ This was among the latest incidents in a policy that had emerged some years ago whereby Syria and Russia had begun directly targeting White Helmets centres in Syria on the pretext that they “had links” to al-Qaeda.⁷⁶ In another case, seven White Helmets volunteers were executed in their operations centre by unknown gunmen – while many locals speculated that Assad’s forces must have perpetrated the crime, the possibility that the volunteers were targeted by extremists among the armed rebels cannot be ruled out.⁷⁷

Patrick Hilsman dismissed Beeley’s and Bartlett’s claims against the group based on his on-the-ground experience: “I challenge you to find a single journalist who interviewed White Helmets in the war zone who backs up the completely fake claims that they fabricate incidents. I was in Syria in 2013 right before the White Helmets were founded and somehow real people kept getting injured in real airstrikes and real shelling.” In 2013, Hilsman shot video footage of what happened when a Syrian government shell hit an apartment.⁷⁸ Notably, neither Beeley nor Bartlett have ever interviewed the White Helmets themselves.

The reality of indiscriminate Syrian military violence against civilians in opposition areas has been documented by other independent journalists. Independent blogger Christian Payne, for instance, self-financed a trip to Syria in 2013 and travelled to opposition-held areas. The series of stories he produced from this trip provide a compelling insight into the experiences of rebels and civilians in opposition areas, confirming the violence of the Syrian military, and the severe lack of medical, food, fuel and other critical resources.⁷⁹

It is ironic that Beeley and Bartlett would cheer on such violence against Syrians labelled by Assad and his backers as “terrorists” on the pretext of resisting Western imperialism, while their anti-war supporters simultaneously campaign against US drone strikes from Yemen to Pakistan. Both grotesque forms of violence that largely kill innocent civilians.

So what do these facts demonstrate? The White Helmets are clearly not ‘neutral’ – at least in the sense that they are aligned with the Syrian opposition. That alignment means that they are also aligned with Western governments who are aligned with the Syrian opposition – for reasons that are largely self-interested and short-sighted, as we will see later on. A number of observers – like Ritter, Dalati and Ropcke – are convinced that some pro-rebel activists have engaged in propaganda and theatrics. And the extent to which the White Helmets might be vulnerable to infiltration or manipulation by extremists, given the other cases that have been proven, is not an invalid concern – but equally not sufficient to justify the sweeping conclusion that the outfit is nothing more than a motley crew of al-Qaeda terrorists.

75 Rachel Burford, ‘First female White Helmets volunteer killed in aerial bombardment in Syria along with family members’, The Mirror (10 March 2018) <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/first-female-white-helmets-volunteer-12164741>

76 CBS News (23 September 2016) <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/syria-bashar-assad-airstrikes-aleppo-white-helmets-civil-defense-force-first-responders/>

77 Raf Sanchez, ‘Seven members of Syria’s White Helmets shot dead by unknown gunmen’, Telegraph (12 August 2017) <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/08/12/seven-members-syrias-white-helmets-shot-dead-unknown-gunmen/>

78 <https://youtu.be/8zUaENzxtWo>

79 Christian Payne, ‘Revisiting Syria’, Documentally blog (20 October 2013) <http://documentally.com/2013/10/20/revisiting-syria/>

These facts raise important questions that much traditional journalism has refused to engage with. They raise the possibility of unreliability in the way information from opposition areas in Syria is transmitted outside – and they show that the US and British governments have played a direct role in augmenting pro-rebel propaganda.

But they also show that the bulk of criticisms against the White Helmets are coming from openly biased sources which are not just embedded in pro-Assad contexts, but willing to lie about Assad's crimes. Hilsman told me that the most common criticisms of the White Helmets are "very much like right wing Likudnik criticism of the peaceful protestors in Gaza down to the most minute details. Yes, some of the Gaza protestors may be Hamas sympathisers; yes, many of the medics who treat wounded demonstrators are probably Hamas voters; yes, the slain Gazan journalist Yaser Murtaja was applying to receive a USAID grant, exactly the same way the White Helmets got USAID grants. Yes, one Gaza protestor flew a Nazi flag. But the moral arch of non-violence in the struggle of the Gaza land day protestors and the White Helmets is clear."



*FSA rebels cleaning their AK47s in Aleppo, Syria during the civil war, 19th October 2012
Source: Wikimedia Commons*

4. Compromised reporting

4.1 Censorship in rebel regions

The problem of embedded journalism in Syria has been acknowledged by seasoned journalists, but its implications for the veracity of traditional reporting are rarely discussed. Mostly, criticisms are directed at censorship by Bashar al-Assad's regime. As we have seen, the examples of Beeley and Bartlett – who parade themselves quite falsely as 'independent' reporters – demonstrate the problems with stories intentionally constructed within a pro-Assad framework. Yet censorship is also a serious problem in rebel-controlled areas, though far less acknowledged by Western journalists.

Peter Gelling, deputy editor for the Middle East at *The Global Post*, observed in 2015 that: "It has become nearly impossible to report accurately from inside Syria. It's too dangerous."⁸⁰

He notes that early on in the conflict, most reporters became "embedded with the Free Syrian Army, mirroring a strategy foreign reporters used in other Arab Spring-style conflicts like the one in Libya." However, this strategy became increasingly unsafe as "rebels themselves became fractured. Foreign fighters with a variety of agendas began to flood the country, and with them came the rise of competing extremist groups."

At the same time, "Assad's forces were bombing whole cities into oblivion, with little regard for civilian life. The death toll continued to soar." Unless they were willing to become fundamentally compromised, it was not safe for journalists to report either with the rebels or with pro-Assad forces. As a result, many news organisations pulled out of the country almost entirely:

"These days most reporters attempt to cover the conflict from outside the country, along its borders in Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey, relying on many sources inside that few know for sure they can trust.

There is actually no shortage of information coming from Syria — just a shortage of information that is reliable and independently verified. Numerous videos circulating online claim to show atrocities, for instance. But enough of them are fake (or from other conflicts) to throw every video into doubt. Accurate or not, this information can have a huge impact on the war."

80 Peter Gelling, 'Reporting on Syria is nearly impossible at this point', *Global Post* (18 August 2015) <https://www.pri.org/stories/2015-08-18/reporting-syria-nearly-impossible-point>

These concerns have been backed up by journalists in Syria sympathetic to the opposition. A UPI report from 2016 authored by the Syrian Independent Media Group – one of whose members is the Violation Documentation Centre which operates a network of observers in opposition-controlled areas – throws light on how journalists in “Syria’s opposition or rebel-held areas say they are being censored and violently intimidated, sometimes as badly as under the regime of Bashar al-Assad.”⁸¹

The censorship has taken place “in areas held by a wide variety of opposition and rebel groups – ranging from national and Islamic opposition factions, including ethnic Kurdish groups and Islamist groups such as the al-Qaida-affiliated al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State.”

The report provides several cases of note, one related to Jaysh al-Islam, the group that controlled Douma until April 2018. In July 2015, Jaysh al-Islam arrested citizen journalist Anas al-Khouli for planning to assassinate their leader – in reality, Khouli had been reporting on local protests against Jaysh al-Islam. In another case in January 2016, media activist Abdul Moyeen Hommse was arrested in Eastern Ghouta for producing a satirical video report contrasting Bashar al-Assad with ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. He was accused of “offending the revolution”.

Another case is worth highlighting. The report noted that al-Nusra, the ‘former’ al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, have “spread out across the country and have a presence in most areas controlled by opposition factions.” The faction routinely “bans any reports that criticise its activities or its harassment of civilians and journalists.”

But al-Nusra’s octopus-like reach did not mean that it was able to control and infiltrate the entire Syrian opposition, contrary to widely circulated claims published by Syrian and Russian media outlets. Indeed, al-Nusra’s heavy-handed intimidation has frequently put it in conflict with other rebel groups. In early 2016, al-Nusra raided the Radio Fresh building near the city of Maarat al-Numan, just south of Idlib, for “breaching Sharia etiquette”. The radio’s manager, Raed Fares, was arrested for the contents of a Facebook post and for broadcasting music. “Since holding different opinions puts journalists in danger, many pretend to have the same ideology as al-Nusra so that they can continue with their work,” the UPI report observes.

Al-Nusra also disrupted a demonstration commemorating the fifth anniversary of the Syrian revolution, before going on a few days later to attack Division 13⁸² – the core Free Syrian Army unit active in the town, and the first rebel group to receive US-made BGM-71 TOW anti-tank missiles.

The FSA have, of course, often coordinated with Islamist groups throughout the conflict in relation to their common goal of defeating Assad’s forces⁸³ – in some cases there is evidence of particular senior FSA leaders such as Col. Okaidi working closely with extremist groups.⁸⁴ here is an argument to be made, as I have done previously, that this policy has systematically empowered some of the most hardline Islamist militant groups among the rebels.⁸⁵

81 UPI, ‘In Syria’s rebel areas, journalists complain of new censorship’, (9 May 2016)

https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2016/05/09/In-Syrias-rebel-areas-journalists-complain-of-new-censorship/8761462470912/

82 Hashem Osseiran, ‘A Small Syrian Town’s Revolt Against Al-Qaida’, Syria Deeply (15 June 2017)

<https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2017/06/15/a-small-syrian-towns-revolt-against-al-qaida>

83 Reuters, ‘CIA-backed rebels fight alongside al-Qaeda in Syria’ (30 April 2015)

<http://www.newsweek.com/cia-backed-rebels-fight-alongside-al-qaeda-wing-syria-327064>

84 Tweet from Syria expert Joshua Landis (Director of Middle East Studies, University of Oklahoma),

https://twitter.com/joshua_landis/status/504610185952784384

85 Ahmed, ‘War on Islamic State: A New Cold War Fiction’, Middle East Eye (8 October 2015)

<http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/war-islamic-state-new-cold-war-fiction-1608242142>

However, such arguments are often used quite wrongly to conflate the entire opposition and all armed rebel groups in Syria as little more than extensions of al-Qaeda. They ignore the fact, for instance, that Col. Okaidi resigned from the FSA as long ago as November 2013. They also ignore the fact that since 2014, the FSA's Division 13 has faced repeated, almost continuous clashes with al-Qaeda.⁸⁶ As an in-depth report from *Syria Deeply* documents, the FSA and Division 13 were the main bulwark against al-Qaeda domination of Idlib, widely supported by the local population.⁸⁷

These cases demonstrate the dangers of overstating the claim of no distinction between moderate and extremist rebel groups, and thereby oversimplifying the dynamics of the conflict. I concede to having done this myself in some of my previous commentary on the conflict. The fact remains that *extremist* rebel groups are an insidious force of violent repression in areas under their control. Concern for the influx of funding and military support to extremists from their foreign sponsors – and how this has empowered Islamist terrorists in opposition-controlled areas – is therefore well-founded. Western journalists do the public no favours when they ignore these matters, nor when they uncritically amplify stories from opposition-controlled areas carrying a large extremist presence without verification.

But these cases also demonstrate a real distinction between extremist groups and more moderate forces among the opposition. That distinction is routinely obfuscated by Russian, Syrian and Iranian media outlets. How significant that distinction is in terms of the dynamics of the conflict is an open question – it can be argued that on the ground military coordination between these groups leads to a blurring of boundaries due to the inter-dispersal of arms and fighters. Yet it is incorrect to conflate all rebel groups as nothing more than terrorists and 'jihadists' – which is the standard practice of Syrian and Russian state media. There is evidence of a moderate force among the opposition with genuine local support. Undoubtedly, that force has been increasingly besieged and undermined by both Assad's bombing and jihadist violence.

4.2 Cherrypicking in Douma

Reporters operating on the ground in Syria often have little choice but to tell their stories from contexts which are compromised – whether they are reporting in rebel-controlled areas, or areas under Assad's control.

This has made it immensely challenging to determine the facts around the Douma attack. NPR's Ruth Sherlock highlighted these challenges, noting that the death toll figure relied on witness accounts from rescuers in the area:

"They say the bodies have been buried now, and they've not produced video or photo evidence that matches that death toll. And, you know, overall the White Helmets, which operates in rebel-held areas across Syria, has been pretty reliable. But there are some issues that have come up specifically with the credibility of the rescuers in Douma... this area was controlled by one rebel group for a long time, and they imposed quite a strong rule on this area. So one theory is they may be under more pressure to toe the rebels' party line there. I'm not saying that the attack didn't happen. But it's still very early days in establishing the facts of it."

86 Thanassis Cambanis, 'The Syrian revolution against al-Qaeda', *Foreign Policy* (29 March 2016) <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/29/the-syrian-revolution-against-al-qaeda-jabhat-al-nusra-fsa/>

87 Osseiran, *Syria Deeply*

Scepticism of official narratives of Syria, in such a context, can be healthy – but it can also be distinctively toxic when that scepticism translates into uncritical acceptance of state narratives that oppose Western policies, produced by other governments with their own agendas and well-known histories of propaganda. The problem is that observers on both sides – pro-Assad and pro-rebel – are biased, and interpret all information they receive through the frameworks of interpretation they already hold. As Dr Ben Cole puts it:

“The vast majority of social media sources who comment on the war in Syria are not disinterested observers, they are either pro-rebel or pro-regime. As a result, their observations on this incident are probably subject to confirmation bias, i.e. they interpret events/evidence in a way that is consistent with their pre-existing belief system. This potential for confirmation bias to affect a source’s analysis is exacerbated by the fact that the evidence in [these instances] is not conclusive.”

This is a sword that cuts both ways.

Robert Fisk was among the first reporters to get access to Douma after the attack. His report, which denies finding any evidence of a chemical gas attack, has been widely circulated by sceptics of the US strikes. Since then, Russia has amplified the notion that there was no gas attack at all by canvassing 17 witnesses to speak before a press briefing in the OPCW.

In Fisk’s article, he cites an interview with a Syrian doctor who ran a clinic which received some victims of the attack. Admitting that the doctor was not himself an eyewitness to the attack, Fisk relays the doctor’s account:⁸⁸

“People began to arrive here suffering from hypoxia, oxygen loss. Then someone at the door, a ‘White Helmet’, shouted ‘Gas!’, and a panic began. People started throwing water over each other. Yes, the video was filmed here, it is genuine, but what you see are people suffering from hypoxia – not gas poisoning.”

Fisk went on to say that he could find no one in Douma who would confirm that a chemical gas attack had taken place. Former *Guardian* reporter Jonathan Cook criticised the response of the media to Fisk’s story, which was to largely dismiss it, arguing that this illustrated its pro-rebel bias and unwillingness to explore information contrary to the prevailing view of the conflict.⁸⁹ In a further piece, Cook argued that the Western media’s coverage of the claims by the 17 witnesses canvassed by Russia was biased, as it uniformly dismissed the stories from the witnesses as false.⁹⁰

Among the most widely circulated of these witness accounts came from a young boy, Hassan Diab. “No one, for example, appears to be doubting that Hassan Diab, a boy who testified at the hearing, is also the boy shown in the video who was supposedly gassed with a nerve agent three weeks ago,” writes Cook. “How then do we explain that he is now looking a picture of health?”

88 Robert Fisk, ‘The search for truth in the rubble of Douma – and one doctor’s doubts over the chemical attack’, *Independent* (17 April 2018) <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/syria-chemical-attack-gas-douma-robert-fisk-ghouta-damascus-a8307726.html>

89 Jonathan Cook, ‘Fisk puts test the free-press myth in Douma’ (18 April 2018) <https://www.jonathan-cook.net/blog/2018-04-18/fisk-puts-to-test-the-free-press-myth-in-douma/>

90 Cook, ‘The West closes its ears to Douma testimony’ (28 April 2018) <https://www.jonathan-cook.net/blog/2018-04-28/the-west-closes-its-ears-to-douma-testimony/>

As a general rule, the priority given by independent journalists to critiquing official and conventional narratives is sensible and justifiable – it’s a practice I follow myself. But the conflict in Syria, perhaps more than any other, illustrates that without critical self-reflection, the act of simply promoting countervailing narratives without scrutinising them is equally bad journalism as marginalising them. Yet sceptics of the official narrative have not subjected Fisk’s report, and others like it, to the same sort of standards as they might apply to the traditional media.

Fisk said that he was unable to find anyone who would speak to him about a gas attack in Douma, but ignored the possibility that if there was such an attack, many remaining survivors or witnesses are likely to have fled Douma afterwards. As for those who did remain, they were likely to either be inclined toward support of Assad, or if critical of him, to be intimidated from speaking out – a matter we will revisit shortly.

Richard Hall, a former editor at *The Independent*, offered a pointed critique of Fisk’s reporting in a series of tweets:⁹¹

“Fisk seems perplexed why victims of the attack did not hang around in Douma when the government took over the area. And doesn’t seriously deal with the fact that those who stayed behind might not be able to speak freely.”

There is a range of evidence for the possibility that residents in government-controlled Douma are being coerced with Syrian and Russian government complicity.

Reports have emerged that doctors at the scene were intimidated by Assad’s forces to deny a chemical weapons attack. Many of these have been traced to pro-opposition sources, yet others come from independent sources, one of which is a British-based Syrian with family in Douma. Labour MP Geraint Davies told the House of Commons:⁹²

“A Syrian doctor in Swansea approached me to say that his wife’s family... were under a gas attack where their two-year-old died in front of them. He’s now telling me doctors in Douma are saying Syrians, at the point of a gun, are saying, ‘Unless you give a testimony, doctor, that there wasn’t a gas attack, we’ll be killing your children’.”

While this testimony cannot be verified, it has some corroboration. Russian sources confirmed that Russian military police interrogators had been speaking with medical staff in Douma: “Doctors and medical workers questioned by the Russian Center for Reconciliation confirmed that there had been no reports of patients suffering from chemical poisoning in Douma during the timeframe of the alleged gas attack.”⁹³

The Orwellianly-named ‘Russian Center for Reconciliation’ bills itself as a joint Russian, Iranian and Turkish ‘peace and humanitarian’ agency in Syria, but is in fact an arm of the Russian Ministry of Defence, commandeered by Lt. Gen. Vladimir Savchenko. Although the Center does deliver humanitarian aid, its principal function according to *Janes Intelligence Review* citing

91 Twitter thread by Richard Hall, https://twitter.com/RichardHall/status/986129483425107970?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=http%3A%2F%2Fworldview.com%2F2018%2F04%2Fuk-journalist-given-access-to-douma-to-deny-chemical-attacks%2F&tfw_creator=eaneewsfeed

92 Andrew Gregory, ‘Doctors ordered at gunpoint to deny Syria chemical attack or else their children will be killed’, *Mirror* (17 April 2018) <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/doctors-ordered-gunpoint-deny-syria-12381739>

93 RT, ‘After visiting Douma, western media begin to question “gas attack” narrative’ (17 April 2018) <https://www.rt.com/news/424421-western-media-douma-attack-narrative/>

Moscow media reports, is “intelligence gathering and combat operations.” Russian forward air controllers “routinely communicate with the reconciliation centre before *authorising air strikes* to check on the *political affiliation* of communities down range.” [emphasis added] In other words, one of their tasks is to vet the political affiliation of Syrian civilians before deciding whether to authorise bombing them.⁹⁴

Apart from the fact that Russian authorities have a history of institutionalised torture,⁹⁵ leaked Russian military pamphlets obtained by the Russian newspaper Novaya Gazeta provide guidance to Russian military officers in Syria on how to harass and coerce Syrian locals by threatening them with reference to Assad’s feared secret police.⁹⁶ One piece of advice says:

“If a Syrian behaves inappropriately, for example by cheating, insulting or trying to bother you, then you should say the word ‘mukhabarat’... The word means something like: state security, intelligence and police and will usually scare locals and make them leave.”

The *Novaya Gazeta* report questions the purpose of using this term, noting that it “has the most dismal reputation among the Syrian population. It was the most severe actions of the Syrian secret police in 2011 that led to the beginning of the civil war in the country”, including actions such as “illegal arrests, torture, executions, shooting civilians during demonstrations, etc.”

An example of what Assad’s mukhabarat do to Syrians who dare to question his power was delivered to the family of 13-year old Hamza Ali Al-Kateeb on 25th May 2011, in the form of his mutilated corpse.⁹⁷ The boy had participated in a protest with his family in Daraa on 29th April, but had disappeared. Six days later, his dead body was delivered back to his family by the Syrian government. The body was covered in lacerations, bruises and burn marks; his jaw was shattered and neck broken; his kneecaps were smashed; he carried three gunshot wounds; and his genitals had been severed.⁹⁸ The incident was among several which galvanised further protests. The Syrian government officially claimed, ludicrously, that the damage to the body was purely a result of decomposition.⁹⁹

Syrians of all stripes are fully cognisant of the imminent threat to life that Assad’s government can pose to them if they refuse his bidding. Given Russia’s proven willingness to use the threat of the *mukhabarat* in Syria to scare Syrians into compliance, and given their role in investigating the Douma incident, it is hardly unreasonable to view the witness testimonies organised by Russia as deeply suspect.

A stark clue as to the effectiveness of Russian military police interrogation was reported by the Russian news agency TASS which noted that even the rebels – who Russian media outlets allege to have fabricated the chemical gas claims – denied knowing anything about a gas attack by Assad when asked by the Russian ‘Center for Reconciliation’ staffers: “Also, the reconciliation center said ‘militants leaving the city have been questioned and none of them knew anything

94 Janes Intelligence Review, ‘Russia learns military lessons in Syria’,

http://www.janes.com/images/assets/758/69758/Russia_learn_military_lessons_in_Syria.pdf

95 Meduza (29 September 2015) <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2015/09/29/tortured-and-silenced-at-the-hands-of-the-police>

96 Novaya Gazette (12 January 2017)

97 AI, ‘Fears for Syrian child protestors amid fresh reports of death’ (10 June 2011)

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2011/06/fears-syrian-children-detention-amid-fresh-reports-torture-death/>

98 Andy Worthington, ‘Syria’ (5 June 2011)

<http://www.andyworthington.co.uk/2011/06/05/syria-after-the-brutal-torture-and-murder-of-13-year-old-hamza-al-khateeb-the-revolution-will-not-be-silenced/>

99 SANA (1 June 2011) archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20110604140542/http://www.sana.sy/eng/337/2011/06/01/350065.html>

about chemical weapons allegedly used against them’.”¹⁰⁰ Yet the Russians claim precisely that the militants have either fabricated the gas attack claims themselves, staged them, or perpetrated them – this report therefore amounts to an inadvertent admission that, in the face of questions from Russia’s ‘Center for Reconciliation’, interviewees will simply lie for fear of their lives.

Fisk’s account is further challenged by the fact that, although he insists he could find no one in Douma who knew about a gas attack, several other journalists found witnesses who spoke in some detail about a gas attack. These media outlets who accessed Douma as part of the same trip as Fisk interviewed people in the vicinity who said that a gas attack had indeed taken place. These testimonials were less likely to have been made under duress from rebel sources, given that they came from people inside Douma, which was now controlled by Russian forces allied with the Syrian military – not from people that might reasonably be suspected of being compromised by the rebels.

Here is an account from the Associated Press, for instance:¹⁰¹

“The Associated Press, during a government-organized visit Monday to Douma, spoke to survivors and witnesses who described being hit by gas. Several said a strange smell started spreading and people screamed, ‘It’s chlorine! It’s chlorine!’

The AP visited a two-room underground shelter where Khaled Mahmoud Nuseir said 47 people were killed, including his pregnant wife and two daughters, 18-month-old Qamar and 2 1/2-year-old Nour. A strange smell lingered, nine days after the attack.

Nuseir, 25, said he ran from the shelter to a nearby clinic and fainted. After he was revived, he returned to the shelter and found his wife and daughters dead, with foam coming from their mouths.

He and two other residents accused the rebel Army of Islam of carrying out the attack. As they spoke, government troops were not far away but out of earshot. Nuseir said a gas cylinder was found leaking the poison gas, adding that he didn’t think it was dropped from the air because it still looked intact.

Separately, the AP spoke to a medic who was among those who later were evacuated to northern Syria. Ahmed Abed al-Nafaa said helicopters were flying before the attack and when he reached the site, people were screaming ‘chlorine.’ He said he tried to enter the shelter but was overcome by a strong smell of chlorine and his comrades pulled him out.

The accounts contradict what the Syrian government and Russia have reported: that there was no gas attack in Douma.”

100 TASS Russian News Agency (9 April 2018) <http://tass.com/world/998554>

101 Bassem Mroue, ‘Chemical weapons team in Syria kept from attack site’, AP (17 April 2018) <https://apnews.com/5ef71f938d1f457f8a7768b7b6eddfb5>

CBS News and Swedish TV were also among the same group as Fisk and produced their own video reports with interviews of eyewitnesses alleging that a gas attack did occur, with one resident leading a journalist to the site of a canister from which he believed gas was dispersed.¹⁰²

What of the belief among these survivors that the rebels carried out the attack? The fact that these Syrian residents believed the rebels capable of such a crime is notable, given the speed with which this possibility is usually dismissed by Western journalists. Both Jaysh al-Islam, the group which controlled Douma at the time, and Ahrar al-Sham, were found by Amnesty International to have likely used chlorine gas in indiscriminate attacks on civilians in Sheikh Maqsoud, controlled by Kurdish forces. A member of Jaysh al-Islam admitted this at the time but said this was an “unauthorised weapon” by a field commander.¹⁰³

And yet, the accounts put forward by CBS, AP and Swedish TV show that Fisk’s inability to find any evidence of a gas attack whatsoever was based, simply, on not speaking to enough people. Equally, it is notable that most traditional media outlets chose not to publish or broadcast interviews with residents who denied knowledge of a gas attack. They clearly did exist – as the pro-Trump TV reporter Pearson Sharp found.¹⁰⁴

So we have one narrative, reported by Fisk and supported specifically by 17 witnesses canvassed by Russia, promoting the idea that there was no gas attack at all, that no one died, and that the symptoms were from dust inhalation. This narrative is consistent with Russia’s general claim that having had Russian military police and chemical experts sweep the whole area, they could find no evidence at all of any such incident.

We have a second narrative, reported by other media outlets and supported by a range of other witnesses on the ground in Syria, who said that they had witnessed a gas attack, and in some cases said that their own family members had been killed in the attack. Backing up this notion is the discovery of actual gas canisters on the scene.

There is also a third narrative, also amplified by Russia through RT.¹⁰⁵ Uli Gack, a reporter for the German broadcaster ZDF, visited a refugee camp near Damascus where “some 20,000 people from Eastern Ghouta and particularly from Douma” were living. Gack was told by people at the camp that rebels in Douma had staged a gas attack by bringing canisters containing chlorine into the area. They then “actually waited for the Syrian Air Force to bomb the place, which was of particular interest for them.” The chlorine canisters exploded when the area was bombed by the Syrian Air Force. Gack was also told that residents were exposed to chemical agents in filmed “training exercises” which were then used as “evidence” of the Douma attack. Gack admitted that he could not verify the accounts, but described them as “convincing.” The same RT story went on to note a development that contradicted Russia’s initial claim, describing the Russian military’s discovery of an alleged ‘chemical weapons laboratory’ in Douma. It was not clear what chemical weapons the lab could actually make, but the report said that the lab contained a cylinder filled with chlorine.

102 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2m_gpBch0Fs&feature=youtu.be&t=41s;
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KDey9vvPmlM&feature=youtu.be>

103 AI, ‘Syria: armed opposition group committing war crimes in Aleppo – new evidence’ (13 May 2016)
<https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/syria-armed-opposition-group-committing-war-crimes-aleppo-new-evidence>

104 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ISXwG-901yU>

105 RT, “‘Whole story was staged’: Germany’s ZDF reporter says Douma incident was false flag attack’ (22 April 2018)
<https://www.rt.com/news/424832-douma-attack-german-media/>

These narratives are contradictory and mutually exclusive – they cannot all be true. But they each trace back to sources described by the respective journalists as local eyewitness accounts. This means that some of these local sources are lying. The only question is which sources are most likely to be lying, and why?

Let's start with the Fisk narrative of 'no gas', which appears to be the one that is being pushed formally by the Russian government. He cites the account of Dr Assim Rahaibani whom he encounters at 'Point 200', an underground clinic where a number of videos of the attack were filmed. Dr Rahaibani insists that the footage was not staged, in Fisk's words: "that the 'gas' videotape which horrified the world – despite all the doubters – is perfectly genuine." His account is as follows:

"I was with my family in the basement of my home three hundred metres from here on the night but all the doctors know what happened. There was a lot of shelling [by government forces] and aircraft were always over Douma at night – but on this night, there was wind and huge dust clouds began to come into the basements and cellars where people lived. People began to arrive here suffering from hypoxia, oxygen loss. Then someone at the door, a 'White Helmet', shouted 'Gas!', and a panic began. People started throwing water over each other. Yes, the video was filmed here, it is genuine, but what you see are people suffering from hypoxia – not gas poisoning."

Dr Rahaibani thus concedes that he was not an eyewitness to the incident, but that "all the doctors know what happened." Yet earlier in his article, Fisk also reports that: "By bad luck, too, the doctors who were on duty that night on 7 April were all in Damascus giving evidence to a chemical weapons enquiry, which will be attempting to provide a definitive answer to that question in the coming weeks." Which chemical weapons enquiry? At the time of Fisk's report, OPCW investigators had still not even been able to access Douma. Meanwhile, "all" the doctors who were on duty on the night of the attack were unavailable, and had been rapidly flown out by Russian and Syrian authorities to give evidence about the attack. The Syrians and Russians had, then, moved extraordinarily fast to round up doctors at the scene before they were accessed by international investigators.

Of the testimonies canvassed by Russia in support of Fisk's narrative, the most noteworthy are from the 11-year old boy Hassan Diab and his father. Yet the first point to note here is that in the specific video footage of Diab, the boy did not display any symptoms of being gassed. Other videos put out by opposition sources, however, do show civilians apparently experiencing symptoms of a gas attack. The boy's claim, then, that he was hosed down with water, but did not in fact experience a gas attack, appears to be correct. By his account, he was with his mother in the basement before they were told to rush to the hospital, where he was doused with water. "They started pouring water on me at the hospital. I don't know why," he said.¹⁰⁶

Photographic evidence has emerged that the Russian footage of Diab's testimony was filmed at a Syrian military facility in Damascus in the presence of three Russian military police officers from the 'Center for Reconciliation'.¹⁰⁷

106 Anne Barker, 'Syrian war: The boy at the centre of conflicting tales about alleged Douma chemical attack', ABC (29 April 2018) <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-04-28/hassan-becomes-face-of-information-war-surrounding-syria-douma/9705538>

107 Robert Mackay, 'Russian TV interview with Syrian boy was secretly conducted at Army facility', Intercept (24 April 2018) <https://theintercept.com/2018/04/23/russian-tv-interview-syrian-boy-secretly-conducted-army-facility/>

But even taken at face value, Diab's account does not necessarily prove that there was no gas attack – it remains consistent with the possibility of a gas attack in which panicked residents were told, and told each other, to seek immediate help from the hospital to ensure treatment and survival. That would also appear to some extent consistent with Dr Rahaibani's statement that the footage was authentic. According to independent journalist Patrick Hilsman who has reported on the ground in Syria, the Russians' focus on selected hospital footage was suggestive of their propaganda goals: "They have hoped that people would be too stupid to realise the hospital footage is hours later and features individuals who were only mildly exposed." Neither Rahaibani's nor Diab's account, however, address the separate far more harrowing video footage at a site showing a large number of dead bodies foaming at the mouth.¹⁰⁸

The next problem is that while Russia has found an additional 15 witnesses including medical doctors to support the 'no gas' and 'no evidence of gas' account, numerous residents in Douma have independently told a range of journalists from AP, CBS News and Swedish TV (to identify just three sources cited above) that they had indeed experienced a gas attack. These accounts would appear consistent with the earlier video footage of dead bodies. Some sceptics might dismiss sources in rebel-held areas who escaped Douma due to the possibility that they are speaking under coercion. This, however, cannot explain the witness accounts coming from residents still within Douma, who have claimed that there was a chemical gas attack of some kind.

In this context, the third narrative offered by ZDF's Uli Gack, for which Russia suddenly began offering supplementary evidence by announcing the discovery of a chemical weapons lab (contradicting previous assertions of having found no such evidence), derives from Syrians described by Gack as 'witnesses' based at a refugee camp near Damascus. Apart from the mounting evidence that the alleged CW lab was incapable of producing actual weapons¹⁰⁹ and that no bombed gas canisters could be found in Douma, the problem is that most of Gack's sources could not have been actual witnesses to the Douma attack. Survivors of the Douma attack had, under an agreement with the government, been transported to refugee camps in northern Aleppo.¹¹⁰ But Gack interviewed refugees at an unidentified camp "near Damascus" – there are several camps in government-controlled areas to which Syrians from Eastern Ghouta and Douma fled, which are run by the Syrian Army.¹¹¹ Residents of these camps were not specifically survivors of the Douma incident, which raises further questions about their eyewitness testimonies regarding the attack. Gack also interviewed medical doctors denying symptoms of a chemical gas attack, but he concedes that that they were "sent" to the reporter by the Syrian government. He observes that "they describe the evening from their point of view, probably as the government expects" – a point which puts in context Russia's canvassing of medical doctors at the OPCW.

A fourth tangential narrative emerged in early May when Vanessa Beeley posted up a two minute YouTube clip of an interview with a Syrian resident in Eastern Ghouta.¹¹² The post contains a disclaimer stating that the interview was conducted "without any Syrian government officials present," except Beeley's "translator... [who] had no input in the conversation." In the

108 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OK9H8dh12uE>

109 Andrew Rawnsley, 'Anatomy of a Russian chemical weapons lab lie', Bellingcat (16 April 2018) <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2018/04/16/anatomy-russian-chemical-weapons-lab-lie/>

110 NPR, 'Survivors Of Attack On Douma Exiled To Camps In Northern Syria' (23 April 2013) <https://www.npr.org/2018/04/23/604854236/survivors-of-douma-attack-exiled-to-camps-in-northern-syria>

111 Michael Jansen, 'Inside eastern Ghouta', Irish Times (30 March 2018)

<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/middle-east/inside-eastern-ghouta-civilians-flee-from-the-hell-of-war-into-the-unknown-1.3444928>

112 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rmiEyZ9anLQ>

'interview', the gentleman is filmed describing an entirely separate incident, this time in the town of Hamouriya in Eastern Ghouta, where reports of Syrian military chemical weapons attacks circulated in March. Assad's forces were accused of air attacks involving napalm and chlorine, killing some 37 people.

The problem is that the account put forward by Beeley's interviewee is incoherent, and its context in terms of how Beeley encountered him, who he is, and what questions she asked him have all been edited out entirely from the clip. From the translated subtitles of the interview, the resident said that the White Helmets fabricated chemical weapons attacks by heating up massive tanks or barrels of diesel and plastic until they exploded, showering over residents and burning them. The White Helmets would fill "each workshop" with five tanks or barrels, which they would then "fill... with lots of plastic, and then they would put it on a strong fire, claiming they are trying to extract diesel and gas from the plastic... Those barrels/tanks would explode, I've seen many tanks exploding, with my own eyes. I still know exactly where they were located." Eastern Ghouta was, of course, under siege and suffering from shortages of fuel. Where would rebels acquire massive amounts of plastic and diesel which they could melt in giant tanks until they exploded? The interviewee then claimed that he saw "a 1000 litre tank full of (molten) plastic" explode 150 metres away from his car. "I watched it from the car window, the tank was a big fire ball." The burning plastic landed on civilians, he says, killing some and injuring others.

Yet moments earlier, he had described the tanks as being placed inside White Helmets workshops. How had he seen a single tank explode into the air if it had been placed inside a workshop alongside five other tanks? He then says: "1.5 hours later we heard on the news that the Syrian Arab Army hit Ghouta with chemical weapons, in Hamouriya." He goes on to characterise himself as an eyewitness to what really happened. "I saw that with my own eyes, and the area is still there. I can take you there and show you where it happened, those tanks that exploded are still there, until now..." The story has now shifted from describing himself as an eyewitness to a single explosion of one 1,000 litre tank, to multiple explosions of tanks which, despite exploding, still exist. Yet he describes the tanks – one of which he says he saw explode from his car from 150 meters away – "as hidden" in an "alley... on the right hand side you can find the workshops." He then shifts back to having only seen one tank explode: "He (White Helmet) almost opened fire at me when I slowed down after I saw tank explode" – the volunteer tells him to get out of the area and "mind his own business". He then says: "hours later, or the next day, you'd see them (White Helmets) on the news saying that 'Eastern Ghouta had been hit by chemical weapons.' It wasn't chemical weapons, the workshops are still there." In his final contradiction, he says again that the White Helmets fabricated the 'chemical weapons' by combining plastic and diesel fuel, then adds that the chemical weapons were produced by "western countries": "They would take plastic and diesel and make the tanks explode, to terrorise and kill people – so the western countries would believe that it was a chemical weapon hit, while they – the western countries – produce the actual chemical weapons." But how does the resident know that Western countries "produce the actual chemical weapons"?

In short, apart from the questionable science involved, the account is riddled with fundamental incoherence: the resident was at once an eyewitness to one tank exploding, but also to multiple tanks exploding; the tanks were inside hidden workshops, but one was out in the open and visible from 150m away through the car window. Despite having exploded, the tanks and workshops are still there and can be found. The exploding tanks reproduced the effects of napalm incendiary bombs by melting a thousand litres worth of plastic mixed with diesel fuel, but it is the West which produced the chemical weapons in reality. Notably, neither the Syrians or Russians have announced discovering any such plastic tank workshops in Eastern Ghouta.

These fundamental incoherencies are difficult to explain as a result of trauma, confusion or even language. Assuming that the interviewee witnessed something, it seems that the most he saw consisted of one tank, tanks or a complex of some kind exploding in a shower of flames which resulted in large numbers of people suffering burn injuries. Armed rebels or White Helmets at the scene warned him and others to get out of the area.

In this context, it seems far more likely from examining the specifics of his account, filmed with the interviewee's wife and children in the background, that it was given in fear of the potential repercussions of saying anything that might blame the Syrian Arab Army for the attack. By the time of the interview, the Russian military police aka 'Center for Reconciliation' had already announced that Syrian military forces had taken full control of Eastern Ghouta.¹¹³ In a show of confidence, Bashar al-Assad himself had visited the area in late March and met with locals.¹¹⁴

Syrian government retribution against civilians who question Assad's rule is a real fear for residents of areas retaken by Syrian military forces. In February 2017, Amnesty International published a detailed report based on interviews with former inmates, guards, judges and others from the notorious Saydnaya military prison complex, suggesting that 5-13,000 inmates had been summarily executed at the complex between 2011 and 2015, largely to crush civilian "dissent" against the government.¹¹⁵

Illustrating the kind of propaganda used to deny such violence, an article in the Russian state-backed outlet *Sputnik News* by Suliman Mulhem claimed that the prison was "known to only house terrorists, not conventional criminals or political opponents." In a further revealing irony, the article went on to say that the prison "serves a similar purpose to the US' controversial Guantanamo Bay detention camp, tackling terrorism to bolster national security."¹¹⁶ The comparison is notable, given that a 2017 criminal complaint filed with the German Federal Public Prosecutor against senior Syrian government officials for culpability in "systematic degradation, unimaginable torture and mass executions" is based on testimonials from Syrians who were never charged with terrorism, such as Mazen Darwish, a Syrian lawyer whose 'crime' was participating in anti-Assad protests in 2011.¹¹⁷

113 CNN (12 April 2018) <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/04/12/middleeast/eastern-ghouta-retaken-by-syria-intl/index.html>

114 Reuters, 'Syria's Assad visits army in eastern Ghouta as rebels in talks' (18 March 2018) <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-ghouta/syrias-assad-visits-army-in-eastern-ghouta-as-rebels-in-talks-idUKKBN1GUODR>

115 AI, 'Syria: Secret campaign of mass hangings and extermination at Saydnaya Prison' (7 February 2017) <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/02/syria-investigation-uncovers-governments-secret-campaign-of-mass-hangings-and-extermination-at-saydnaya-prison/>

116 Sputnik News (7 July 2017) <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201707071055320917-syria-saydnaya-prison-bias/>

117 ECCHR, 'Saydnaya military prison' <https://www.ecchr.eu/en/case/saydnaya-military-prison-objective-is-to-physically-and-psychologically-break-detainees/>

Saydnaya is of course the same prison complex where Vanessa Beeley admitted in private messages that Assad was torturing people, a practice she justified by describing the torture victims as al-Qaeda “monsters.”

All this demonstrates that on all sides, sources were being cherry-picked to suit preconceived biases – precisely when what was needed was an impartial analysis of all the information being made available. As pointed out by Jonathan Cook, proponents of the official narrative have often selected witness testimony that suits that narrative, while simply ignoring other testimony that contradicts it. Yet sceptics have failed to acknowledge their own selectiveness in examining evidence, and have entirely ignored the fact that Syrian and Russian state media outlets have put forward contradictory narratives of what happened: first claiming that there was no gas attack, and no evidence at all of any chemical weapons in Douma; then claiming that evidence of chemical weapons was indeed in Douma; then claiming (citing people who could not have been witnesses to the actual incident) that the rebels themselves staged chemical weapons attacks themselves.

At the very least, the initial unequivocal Russian insistence that there was no evidence of a gas attack, no eyewitnesses to such an attack, and no evidence at all of dispersal of chemicals (despite what looks like one or more chemical gas canisters on site) is clearly false.



Syria protests in Douma, 24 April 2011
Source: Flickr - syriana2011

5. The politicisation of ‘anti-imperialism’

5.1 Houla and beyond

The jury is still out. If indeed culpable, however, it would not be the first time the Syrian government has denied horrendous crimes, and exerted duress against local Syrians to orchestrate a propaganda campaign in favour of its own false narrative.

One well-known past case is that of the 25th May 2012 Houla massacre, where at least 108 people were killed by Syrian government forces, including 49 children and 34 women. At the time, reports emerged in the German national press citing Syrian “opposition sources”, claiming that the massacre was perpetrated by rebels with the Free Syrian Army (FSA).¹¹⁸ I am ashamed to say that at the time, I too was fooled, and wrote a piece in *Prospect* magazine citing these reports.¹¹⁹

It turned out that the story was entirely false. At first, the UN believed these accounts – until further investigation confirmed that Assad agents were bribing poor Syrians to spread propaganda blaming the rebels for the killings.¹²⁰ This was the sordid basis of the inaccurate German reports. Three months after the Houla massacre, a UN commission of inquiry found that Syrian government troops and militia had carried it out.¹²¹

Yet the speed at which Assad’s disinformation about the massacre had reached the international press is testament to the power of his domestic propaganda regime.

Among the original amplifiers of the story were sources from the Jacob Monastery in Qara,¹²² who told Dutch journalist Martin Janssen that armed FSA rebels had murdered “entire Alawi families” in the village of Taldo in the Houla region. The rebels, went the story, had piled up dead bodies in front of a mosque and told UN observers their own version of the massacre. Many of these stories went viral and were even picked up by some mainstream reporters, as well as being run by outlets like RT and Sputnik.

118 Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (7 June 2012)

<http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/neue-erkenntnisse-zu-getoeteten-von-houla-abermals-massaker-in-syrien-11776496.html>

119 Ahmed, *Prospect* (3 August 2012)

<https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/americas-hague-obama-syria-free-army-rebels-kofi-annan-diplomacy-failings>

120 Christoph Reuter, ‘Searching for the Truth Behind the Houla Massacre’ (23 July 2012)

<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/a-look-back-at-the-houla-massacre-in-syria-a-845854.html>

121 UN report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (15 August 2012)

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/interactive/2012/aug/15/un-inquiry-syrian-arab-republic>

122 John Rosenthal, ‘Report: Rebels Responsible for Houla Massacre’, *National Review* (9 June 2012)

<https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/report-rebels-responsible-houla-massacre-john-rosenthal/>

One main operative behind such stories was the Carmelite nun, Mother Agnès-Mariam de la Croix, a long-time open supporter of Assad who has an alarming track record. In fact, she has been “comfortable among [Assad’s] security services” according to Swiss newspaper *Le Courrier* – so close, that according to the Committee for the Protection of Journalists (CPJ), the nun was complicit in a successful regime plot to kill international journalists.¹²³ In audio recordings, the nun inadvertently admits to being in contact with Brigadier General Ali Mamlouk, one of Assad’s top security chiefs, and Jamil Hasan, the head of Syrian Air Force Intelligence.¹²⁴

She once met¹²⁵ with war criminal Mihrac Ural,¹²⁶ a leader of Assad’s paramilitary National Defense Force who committed the massacres at Baniyas and al-Bayda. Unsurprisingly, Syrian Christians for Peace have demanded that she be excommunicated from the Order of Carmelites.¹²⁸

Yet Mother Agnes was also a key and widely cited voice denying Syrian government responsibility for a chemical weapons attack in Ghouta on 21st August 2013. After a successful speaking tour in Vancouver sponsored by StopWar Vancouver, she was nearly hosted by the Stop The War Coalition in the UK, except for the objections of Owen Jones and Jeremy Scahill which aborted the invitation.

5.2 The ends justify the means

The ability of war crime apologists like Mother Agnes to infiltrate anti-war discourse is alarming. If ever there was a signifier of the moral and intellectual degradation of parts of the left, this is it. Yet some of the most prominent sceptics of the official narrative of the chemical weapons attack in Ghouta are much closer to home.

Leading the charge is Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS) – a group of former US intelligence officers led by 27-year CIA analyst Ray McGovern, who previously chaired US National Intelligence Estimates and prepared the President’s Daily Brief.

McGovern’s bravery and commitment to challenging US state crimes cannot be faulted. The way in which he was brutally assaulted by police officers earlier in 2018 for protesting at a Senate intelligence committee hearing for the CIA appointment of torture apologist Gina Haspel reveals this admirable commitment. And the VIPS series of memos on the manipulation of US intelligence to justify the 2003 invasion of Iraq were proven in hindsight to be spot on. Which is why I was astonished to discover that McGovern was resistant to reasonable questions about VIPS memos on Syria.

On 6th September 2013, VIPS released a memo asserting that the group was in contact with active US intelligence community officials who disagreed with the White House’s assessment that the Ghouta attack was carried out by Assad’s forces: “We regret to inform you that some of our former co-workers are telling us, categorically, that contrary to the claims of your administration,

123 CPJ (14 March 2012) <https://cpj.org/blog/2012/03/in-syria-killing-the-messenger-isnt-working.php>

124 NOW (4 November 2013), available at https://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2013/11/04/mother_agnes_assads_useful_idiot.html

125 https://twitter.com/omen_syria/status/395060375244124160

126 Zamanalwsl (3 July 2013) <https://en.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/552>

127 HRW (13 September 2013) <https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/09/13/no-ones-left/summary-executions-syrian-forces-al-bayda-and-baniyas>

128 inewsArabia (28 October 2013)

<http://www.inewsarabia.com/485/Syrian-Christians-for-Peace-‘Mother’-Agnus-is-an-Assad-agent-in-the-clothes-of-a-nun.htm>

the most reliable intelligence shows that Bashar al-Assad was NOT responsible for the chemical incident that killed and injured Syrian civilians on August 21.”¹²⁹

The memo, widely circulated online among sceptics of US policy, also claimed to have “numerous sources in the Middle East, mostly affiliated with the Syrian opposition and its supporters”. The memo’s basic story was that these sources had confirmed that the Ghouta attack “was a pre-planned provocation by the Syrian opposition and its Saudi and Turkish supporters... to create the kind of incident that would bring the United States into the war.”

In the public record, there was some corroboration for the idea that at the time members of the US intelligence community were distinctly uncomfortable with the White House’s published assessment of Ghouta, which was seen by many officials as a political document rushed together to justify war. A number of US intelligence officials told AP that the intelligence picture on culpability for the attack was “not a slam dunk.”¹³⁰

But the VIPS memo was deeply flawed. It went much further than what anonymous US intelligence officials had told the press around the same time about their legitimate reservations. I had investigated the memo that month and discovered that an entire core section, titled ‘The Intelligence’, was plagiarised from certain sections of an older article by Yossef Bodansky, former Director the US Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare of the US House of Representatives.¹³¹ If the memo had indeed drawn on some active intelligence officials, it seems that they were not behind some of the memo’s more specific allegations, which were lifted almost verbatim from Bodansky.

Here are some extracts from the VIPS memo’s ‘intelligence’, and the Bodansky article – published about a week before the former – which are almost exactly the same (added emphasis ours):

Bodansky:

There is a growing volume of new evidence from numerous sources in the Middle East—mostly affiliated with the Syrian opposition and its sponsors and supporters—that makes a very strong case, based on solid **circumstantial** evidence, that the August 21, 2013, chemical strike in Damascus suburbs was indeed a **pre-meditated provocation by the Syrian opposition.**

VIPS:

There is a growing body of evidence from numerous sources in the Middle East—mostly affiliated with the Syrian opposition and its supporters—providing a **strong circumstantial case** that the August 21 chemical incident was a **pre-planned provocation by the Syrian opposition** and its Saudi and Turkish supporters. The aim is reported to have been to create the kind of incident that would bring the United States into the war.

129 Consortium News, ‘Obama warned on Syria intel’ (6 September 2013)

<https://consortiumnews.com/2013/09/06/obama-warned-on-syrian-intel/>

130 AP (29 August 2013) <https://www.haaretz.com/where-are-assad-s-chemicals-anyway-1.5326806>

Bodansky:

Western-sponsored opposition forces in Turkey started advance preparations for a major and irregular military surge. Initial meetings between senior opposition military commanders and representatives of Qatari, Turkish and US intelligence took place at the converted Turkish military garrison in Antakya, Hatay Province, used as the command center and headquarters of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and their foreign sponsors. Very senior opposition commanders who had arrived from Istanbul briefed the regional commanders of an imminent escalation in the fighting due to “a war-changing development” which would, in turn, lead to a U.S.-led bombing of Syria.

VIPS:

In addition, we have learned that on August 13-14, 2013, Western-sponsored opposition forces in Turkey started advance preparations for a major, irregular military surge. Initial meetings between senior opposition military commanders and Qatari, Turkish and U.S. intelligence officials took place at the converted Turkish military garrison in Antakya, Hatay Province, now used as the command center and headquarters of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and their foreign sponsors.

Senior opposition commanders who came from Istanbul pre-briefed the regional commanders on an imminent escalation in the fighting due to “a war-changing development,” which, in turn, would lead to a U.S.-led bombing of Syria.

Bodansky:

The opposition forces had to quickly prepare their forces for exploiting the US-led bombing in order to march on Damascus and topple the Bashar al-Assad Government, the senior commanders explained. The Qatari and Turkish intelligence officials assured the Syrian regional commanders that they would be provided with plenty of weapons for the coming offensive.

Indeed, unprecedented weapons distribution started in all opposition camps in Hatay Province on August 21-23, 2013. In the Reyhanli area alone, opposition forces received well in excess of 400 tons of weapons, mainly anti-aircraft weaponry from shoulder-fired missiles to ammunition for light-guns and machine guns. The weapons were distributed from store-houses controlled by Qatari and Turkish intelligence under the tight supervision of U.S. intelligence.

VIPS:

Opposition leaders were ordered to prepare their forces quickly to exploit the U.S. bombing, march into Damascus, and remove the Bashar al-Assad government.

The Qatari and Turkish intelligence officials assured the Syrian regional commanders that they would be provided with plenty of weapons for the coming offensive. And they were. A weapons distribution operation unprecedented in scope began in all opposition camps on August 21-23. The weapons were distributed from storehouses controlled by Qatari and Turkish intelligence under the tight supervision of U.S. intelligence officers.

In other words, the entire section that VIPS had described as being ‘intelligence’ cultivated from “former co-workers” and “sources in the Middle East” was lifted, without honest attribution, from an online article by Bodansky.

I had queried several VIPS signatories regarding their alleged sources for this narrative. My hope at the time was that, in much the way that AP had managed to speak directly to active US intelligence officials concerned about the White House’s politicisation of intelligence, the VIPS team might be able to arrange for confidential interviews with their own active intelligence sources. If so, this would be a huge story – and a major scoop.

Alas, it was not to be. The more I pressed, the clearer it seemed that while VIPS may well have had intelligence contacts who doubted the integrity of the White House’s assessment, they did not have intelligence sources who would corroborate VIPS’ own specific claims about the Ghouta attack.

Ex-NSA senior executive Thomas Drake described the sources as “sensitive” but attributed primary authorship of the memo to Ray McGovern. He also sent me a link to an article by *Mint Press News* claiming the Ghouta attack was a false flag arranged by the Saudis who supplied chemical weapons to the rebels. That article had already been long disavowed by AP reporter Dale Gavlak whose byline was on the piece.¹³²

Former CIA and State Department counter-terrorism officer Larry Johnson said that he had obtained some information related to this account from one “highly reliable and trusted” source, rather than multiple sources. When asked if the source was based in the Middle East or Syrian opposition, as claimed in the memo, Johnson said he would not divulge any other information about this source.

VIPS chair Ray McGovern admitted that he did not have complete confidence in their own memo, and referred me straight away to a link to an article by the right-wing news website WorldNetDaily (WND), authored by none other than a notorious Iraq War disinformation operative: F. Michael Maloof, a former director of the Pentagon’s Technology Security Operations and intelligence analyst in the Pentagon’s Office of Special Plans under George W. Bush, who produced skewed intelligence linking Saddam Hussein to al-Qaeda.¹³³

According to George Packer in his book, *Assassins at the Gate: America in Iraq*, one of Maloof’s jobs – while working with David Wurmser (then an aide to John Bolton, who is now Trump’s National Security Advisor) – was to collect raw data from handpicked ‘defectors’ put up by the corrupt Iraqi National Congress, to prove that Saddam was ready to hand over weapons of mass destruction to terrorists.

I had not previously disclosed the details of McGovern’s explanations to me in September 2013 about this matter due to space limitations. But in the current context, they are germane.

131 Ahmed, ‘Special Report - Syria: Deciphering the propaganda war over the Ghouta massacre’, Ceasefire (20 September 2013) <https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/syria-deciphering-propaganda-war-ghouta-massacre/>

132 Antiwar.com (30 August 2013) <https://original.antiwar.com/dale-gavlak/2013/08/30/syrians-in-ghouta-claim-saudi-supplied-rebels-behind-chemical-attack/>

“We feel we are on very solid ground,” said McGovern in his email that September.

“We may as yet lack Bible-truth. But as the days go by and additional information arrives, we are feeling more confident. I’m sure you have looked at this one: <http://www.wnd.com/2013/09/u-s-military-confirms-rebels-had-sarin/>”

McGovern’s admission of lacking “Bible-truth” and seeking new information in order to feel “more confident” did not communicate the sense of certainty that he was rightly demanding from the White House. He was also explicit about his reliance on Maloof. Despite conceding that Maloof is a “shady character” whose “motivation [is] this time unclear”, he continued:

“... his report is rich in detail and the amount of detail dwarfs anything the administration has made available. Without Rumsfeld, Feith, and Wolfowitz paying him and looking over his shoulder, who knows? Maybe he is telling the truth this time around. And he certainly has the contacts and entree... An official report of this kind from NGIC is immeasurably more credible than Maloof alone... AND Maloof can be assumed to have people there still who know him and talk to him. The report appears authentic.

It should be first on your list, in my view. Maloof’s report is, again, rich with CHECKABLE detail. Not all the details are susceptible of quick confirmation (although we are, in fact, getting more and more)...”

McGovern’s response was instructive – instead of elaborating on the details of what his own active US intelligence community sources were telling him, he focused on discussing Maloof’s article and why he believed that it “appears authentic.” He accepted in full the validity of Maloof’s article based on two assumptions: firstly, that “maybe” he is telling the truth, and secondly, because he would “have people there” – in the US intelligence community – “who know him and talk to him.” McGovern provided no indication whatsoever that he had personally confirmed any of Maloof’s reporting via his own sources. It seemed that McGovern’s evidence of having active US intelligence sources was simply Maloof himself, who he assumed had received information from the US intelligence community.

As for Maloof’s article, it was, indeed, “checkable”. A fact-check at the time would have demonstrated the inaccuracy of Maloof’s information.

Maloof claimed to have access to a classified US intelligence report confirming that al-Qaeda in Iraq had developed the ability to manufacture ‘bench-scale’ sarin, some of which was acquired by al-Nusra front fighters residing in Turkey. Far from implying that Turkey had conspired with the rebels to use the sarin in an attack in Ghouta, the alleged US intelligence report, if it existed, stated the opposite – that the sarin had been discovered after arrests of “some 12 suspected members of the al-Nusra Front” by Turkish security forces in May 2013. The suspects were found, according to Maloof’s description of the US intelligence report, with a cylinder containing 2kg of sarin.

The alleged US intelligence report did not offer any further specific details. Maloof based the rest of his reporting, claiming a joint Turkish-Saudi planned provocation, on unidentified “sources” familiar with “documentation” that had been supplied to an ongoing UN investigation into a chemical weapon attack in Khan al-Assal in Aleppo: documentation supplied by Russia.

Maloof referred to “allegations in a 100-page report on an investigation turned over to the UN by Russia,” concluding that “the Syrian rebels – not the Syrian government – had used the nerve agent sarin in the March chemical weapons attack in Aleppo.” Maloof had not seen the alleged Russian 100-page report himself (which has never been made public), but simply relayed what he was told about it: “While the contents of the report have yet to be released, sources tell WND the documentation indicates that deadly sarin poison gas was manufactured in a Sunni-controlled region of Iraq and then transported to Turkey for use by the Syrian opposition, whose ranks have swelled with members of al-Qaida and affiliated groups.” Who were Maloof’s “sources”? Likely the Russians: “The documentation that the UN received from the Russians indicated specifically that the sarin gas was supplied to Sunni foreign fighters by a Saddam-era general working under the outlawed Iraqi Baath party leader, Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri.”

In short, what Maloof was being fed from unidentified “sources” was an unverified Russian government narrative – not a US intelligence community narrative.

Maloof went on to note that two European journalists who had just been released from captivity by al-Nusra, had overheard conversations in English among three people over Skype confirming rebel involvement in chemical attacks that had occurred the previous month to trigger Western military intervention. But the Italian journalist later emphasised that he did not know the rebels were responsible for the chemical attack, as he could not tell whether the overheard conversation was based on real events as opposed to speculative discussion of rumour or hearsay, and could not even confirm the exact identities of its participants.¹³⁴

The rest of Maloof’s report referred, ironically, to McGovern’s own VIPS memo – and to the secret source of that memo, Youssef Bodansky.

When I asked McGovern to clarify further whether he did, in fact, have his own direct US intelligence sources, he described them simply as: “Senior officials in the US intelligence community with access to this information.” Asked repeatedly to confirm whether the VIPS memo was really based on information directly sourced from Syrian opposition members, McGovern did not elaborate. After I then outlined the evidence of VIPS plagiarism regarding the entire section on its ‘intelligence’, McGovern did not apologise for or even acknowledge the plagiarism. Instead, he said: “Sorry if I did not make it clear. ‘Senior officials’ and Bodansky are two separate and distinct things. The former have nothing to do with the latter. Were it not for the former, we would not have written the piece.”

Here McGovern effectively conceded that the ‘intelligence’ plagiarised from Bodansky was “separate and distinct” from what “senior officials” had told VIPS. And still McGovern circled around my efforts to get confirmation of whether Bodansky’s actual claims had been verified by the intelligence community.

133 F. Michael Maloof, ‘US military confirms rebels had sarin’, WND (11 September 2013)

<http://www.wnd.com/2013/09/u-s-military-confirms-rebels-had-sarin/>

134 La Stampa (9 September 2013)

<http://www.lastampa.it/2013/09/09/esteri/quirico-e-folle-dire-che-io-sappia-che-non-stato-assad-a-usare-i-gas-D6D63hs2C8E7yMNEdINwGL/pagina.html>

I asked McGovern why VIPS needed to plagiarise Bodansky's narrative if their US sources were privy to information proving Assad's innocence, and whether they had verified Bodansky's own alleged sources, but received no further comment, except the following remark:

"I appreciate, understand - even admire - your attempt at due diligence. But I have little idea about the approach you are taking in your article, or why... or if you took the trouble to read Maloof's info.

Suffice it to say that IF, as we are told by people we trust (amid suspicions from a whole array of other circumstantial evidence) that the government is not telling the truth.... then, in essence we have (or almost had) Iraq Part II, as far as fraudulent intelligence is concerned."

These were cagey, evasive and defensive responses demonstrating that McGovern's approach was, though well-meaning, thoroughly ideological – and he could not understand why I might not want to cover a story based on misattribution and lies. After all, the deception didn't matter as much as the effort to stop a war.

And what of Bodansky himself? Although he has been right in the past, his services having been sought as a US government defence consultant, he has also been ridiculously wrong.¹³⁵ In relation to Syria, Bodansky is openly supportive of the Assad government,¹³⁶ as well as of Alawite domination of Syria.¹³⁷ He specifically supported Assad's uncle Rifaat, who led the 1982 massacre in Hama.

The VIPS memo, in short, was amplifying pro-Assad propaganda based on well-meaning eagerness to avert a war. But in doing so, when subjected to the sort of scrutiny and verifiability VIPS demanded from the White House, its story fell apart. Its 'intelligence' had been dishonestly stolen from an online source whose claims had not been verified, and lazily corroborated with reference to multiple, circular, and discredited articles in the public record as evidence of its validity – while simultaneously admitting, somewhat like the White House, that its alternative narrative could not be confirmed beyond a sense of "confidence" and "solid ground".

Further clues in regard to the origins of this particular Ghouta story emerged two years later in Turkey. By December 2015, McGovern would draft a further VIPS memo endorsing a story that, he believed, corroborated his earlier memo on Ghouta:¹³⁸

"Addressing fellow members of parliament on Dec. 10, 2015, Turkish MP Eren Erdem from the Republican People's Party (a reasonably responsible opposition group) confronted the Turkish government on this key issue. Waving a copy of 'Criminal Case Number 2013/120,' Erdem referred to official reports and electronic evidence documenting a smuggling operation with Turkish government complicity.

135 WND (29 November 2011) <http://www.wnd.com/2004/11/27774/>

136 Foreign Policy (10 September 2013)

<http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/09/10/how-assad-woed-the-american-right-and-won-the-syria-propaganda-war/>

137 ISPSW (September 2015) https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/194054/379_Bodansky.pdf

138 Consortium News, 'A call for proof on Syria-sarin attack' (22 December 2015) <https://consortiumnews.com/2015/12/22/a-call-for-proof-on-syria-sarin-attack/>

In an interview with RT four days later, Erdem said Turkish authorities had acquired evidence of sarin gas shipments to anti-government rebels in Syria, and did nothing to stop them.

The General Prosecutor in the Turkish city of Adana opened a criminal case, and an indictment stated ‘chemical weapons components’ from Europe ‘were to be seamlessly shipped via a designated route through Turkey to militant labs in Syria.’ Erdem cited evidence implicating the Turkish Minister of Justice and the Turkish Mechanical and Chemical Industry Corporation in the smuggling of sarin...

According to Erdem, the 13 suspects arrested in raids carried out against the plotters were released just a week after they were indicted, and the case was closed — shut down by higher authority. Erdem told RT that the sarin attack at Ghouta took place shortly after the criminal case was closed and that the attack probably was carried out by jihadists with sarin gas smuggled through Turkey.”

Eren Erdem’s revelations – which culminated in him being charged with ‘treason’ (he had previously accused Erdogan’s family of high-level corruption) – seemed to corroborate Maloof’s claim two years earlier that US intelligence was aware of Turkish arrests of Syrian rebels with access to sarin.

The problem is that VIPS had not bothered to verify for themselves the contents of the Turkish investigative file in this case. If they had done so, they would have confirmed that RT had sensationalised Erdem’s claims – and that Erdem himself had speculated far beyond what the actual criminal investigation documents contained.

‘Criminal Case Number 2013/120’ contained no information whatsoever about the chemical attack on Ghouta. It focused entirely on the arrest of 11 al-Nusra suspects. Contrary to the confused text of the RT piece endorsed by VIPS, the al-Nusra suspects arrested by Turkey did not in fact possess 2kg of sarin – it was 2kg of antifreeze. This had been publicly clarified by the Turks as early as July 2013, months before Maloof wrote his story claiming that US intelligence had produced an entire report on how the Turkish police had arrested rebels with sarin.¹³⁹ The clarification was reported by Russia’s own Interfax news agency, noting that Aydin Sezgin, Turkey’s ambassador to Moscow, had confirmed that “suspicious materials seized recently from Syrian militants were harmless and could not be used as chemical weapons, despite Moscow’s public suggestions to the contrary.” Sezgin told reporters in Moscow: “The substance that was intercepted was seized. As it turned out, it was antifreeze, and we informed our Russian counterparts about it.”

The claims, despite being disproven, were being used by the Russians as part of their dossier of information passed to the UN – the same dossier that Maloof’s “sources” had said proved Turkish complicity in provision of sarin to rebels.

139 NTI (5 July 2013) <http://www.nti.org/gsn/article/no-chemical-arms-seized-syrian-militants-turkish-envoy-says/>

What the Turks had actually discovered, as the investigative file for ‘Criminal Case Number 2013/120’ confirms, was that al-Nusra members had *attempted* to purchase materials for the production of sarin. Erdem also claimed that former Turkish Justice Minister, Bekir Bozdogan, had ordered the case not be prosecuted – proving Turkish government complicity.¹⁴⁰ The sarin materials were, he said, to be sent to ISIS camps in Syria. Yet Erdem provided no evidence that the prosecution had been shut down – and a copy of the investigative file seen by INSURGE provided no evidence that any materials were actually acquired and sent to opposition forces in Syria.

When I contacted Erdem directly to ask him about this, he at first did not deny the discrepancy, but said that he would rather not talk about the issue due to forthcoming elections. It turned out that the treason charges against Erdem, which VIPS had interpreted as evidence of the Turkish government trying to suppress his dangerous facts, had not been followed up, as the MP remained free to operate in Turkey and stand in the upcoming elections.

In fact, the Turkish press was already reporting on the contents of the 132 page charge sheet against the al-Nusra suspects as early as September 2013, noting that it focused on efforts to acquire chemicals necessary to produce sarin.¹⁴¹ The group planned to send these precursor chemicals to Syria. Rather than this being a professional government-backed process as one might expect if the rebels had been guided by the Turkish Mechanical and Chemical Industry Corporation, the details of the chemicals being sought were similar to publicly available materials on an amateur sarin production process available online from Wikipedia and elsewhere.

In short order, the Turkish file proved the opposite of what Maloof had reported that very month for WND: the al-Nusra suspects did not have the capability to produce sarin; they were, in amateur fashion, attempting to acquire precursor materials to produce sarin whose details they had derived from online; they had been monitored by Turkish intelligence and arrested by the police due to their efforts to do so, stopping them in their tracks; they had not succeeded by the time of their arrest in acquiring the precursor materials.

Contrary to Erdem’s claims on RT and elsewhere, there was no evidence at all in the criminal prosecution documents that the suspects had actually acquired sarin, or even any of the ingredients for sarin, let alone passed anything on to their rebel counterparts in Syria. In fact, not only had the suspects failed to successfully acquire the ingredients, the file proved that they did not themselves have any capability or expertise required to actually produce sarin – and the file offered no evidence on whether rebels in Syria had any such capability either. In my follow up inquiry with Eren Erdem, he reeled off the original story that he had told RT, attributing his claims to the Turkish prosecution documents: “Sarin gas was used by al-Qaeda. They bought raw materials of the gas from reputable institutions in Europe and after merging, they used this as a chemical weapon in Syria. The indictment is clear.” I challenged his attribution, pointing out that the indictment did not contain most of these alleged details: “But this doesn’t make sense to me as some of these details are not contained in the indictment – there is reference to efforts to buy the raw materials for sarin but no evidence in the indictment that they actually bought some? And the indictment said nothing about Ghouta – right?”

140 Cumhuriyet (23 October 2015) http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/393243/Savcidan_sarin_tarifi_.html

141 <http://www.radikal.com.tr/dunya/el-kaidenin-kimyasal-silah-sabikasi-savcilik-iddianamesinde-1150500/>

I asked Erdem in further multiple queries if he had any explanation of why the details he described were not in the indictment documents. “Do you have any further explanation of how the details you have described are not contained in the indictment at all? Your description seems like an exaggeration of what the indictment says.” He offered no further comment.

Maloof could have fact-checked all this in September 2013, given the public reporting at the time in Turkey. Instead, he went ahead and produced an article that was patently false. Either he had misreported the contents of an alleged US intelligence document about the Turkish case; the document itself was ridiculously flawed, representing ‘raw intelligence’ that was eventually rejected due to its contradicting verifiable reality; or the document did not really exist, but Maloof’s sources had told him that it did. Given his past propensity for fabricating intelligence, it is impossible to know for sure – but not surprising at all that he would be the conduit for what was, ultimately, disinformation.

The one thing that was accurate and justified in Erdem’s concerns, was that eventually all the suspects had been released by Turkish authorities. By September 2013, five of the suspects were released without charge, while six were charged. Of those, five were released on bail on the basis that they had not possessed sarin or any precursor materials. The ringleader, Hytham Qassap, originally remained in detention because the Turkish surveillance transcripts confirmed his intent to create sarin.

By October, however, Qassap had also been released. Erdem claimed in 2015 that this was because the prosecution had been ordered shut down, but according to *Hurriyet*: “The court ruled for Qassap’s release with a ban on leaving the country before adjourning the session pending the final verdict.” Qassap himself had never admitted to being an al-Nusra operative, claiming instead that he was affiliated with the Free Syrian Army (which seemed to be a lie) – and insisting that he had been given instructions to research various chemicals whose use and purpose he had no knowledge of.

While Erdem was therefore wrong in stating that the prosecution had been ordered closed, there can be little doubt that the Turkish authorities had moved to neuter the impact of the prosecution, with a view to allow the al-Nusra suspects to evade accountability and return to pro-rebel activities. In December 2015, a Turkish court belatedly sentenced Qassap in absentia to 12 years in prison. The other five were acquitted. Conveniently, none of them were present at the court.¹⁴² The prosecution was a pointless public relations exercise.

This sort of absurd laxity is in line with evidence that between 2012 and 2016, the Turkish government was directly supporting a range of Islamist militant groups in Syria in its bid to oust, or undermine, Assad. Ahmet Yayla, a former senior Turkish counterterrorism police officer, told me in a detailed interview how he had witnessed first-hand Turkish military and intelligence activities to support ISIS, al-Nusra and other extremist groups, including routinely releasing terrorist suspects to allow them to return to the field and bolster the anti-Assad effort.¹⁴³ His claims have been corroborated by former US intelligence analyst Daniel Byman.¹⁴⁴

142 Anadolu Agency (29 December 2015) <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/turkey-syrian-jailed-for-being-member-of-terror-group/498080>

143 Ahmed, ‘Whistleblower exposes how NATO’s leading ally is arming and funding ISIS’, INSURGE (16 September 2016) <https://medium.com/insurge-intelligence/former-turkish-counter-terror-chief-exposes-governments-support-for-isis-d12238698f52>

144 Ahmed, ‘ISIS was state-sponsored by US allies, says former government intelligence analyst’, INSURGE (3 November 2017) <https://medium.com/insurge-intelligence/isis-was-state-sponsored-by-us-allies-says-former-government-intelligence-analyst-exclusive-51a9e999c437>

At most, then, Turkey can be accused of having recklessly released al-Nusra suspects attempting to acquire precursor materials for sarin, via a list of ingredients self-compiled from online sources. Yet this was no al-Nusra “sarin production cell” producing sarin at “bench-scale”, as Maloof claims is alleged by a US intelligence report. Most damningly for his narrative, which alleges Turkish military intelligence complicity in supplying sarin to rebels for the Ghouta attack, the reality is that the suspects who were supposed to have supplied this sarin were in Turkish detention from May to September 2013. They would never have been able to supply the sarin for the 21st August 2013 attack in Ghouta.

Erdem’s claims at an October 2015 press conference, in which he explicitly accused the Turkish government of complicity in supplying Syrian rebels with sarin culminating in the Ghouta attack, had no basis whatsoever in the criminal case against Qassap. The very existence of the case disproved the possibility of what he was alleging. Yet VIPS, without verifying the contents of the criminal prosecution themselves, repeated an even more distorted presentation of Erdem’s inaccurate claims by RT.

Erdem’s approach is not entirely surprising. The Republican People’s Party (CHP) is staunchly pro-Assad, perhaps partly because of its immense popularity among Turkish Alawites, many of whom have an affinity with their fellow Alawites in neighbouring Syria. In March 2013, two months before the al-Nusra arrests, the CHP sent a delegation to Syria to meet with Bashar al-Assad, at his personal invitation. He reportedly told the CHP delegation that he appreciated their stance against Erdogan’s policies in Syria.¹⁴⁵

5.3 Clean Break

Why would Maloof, an arch-neocon who had played a direct role in fabricating intelligence to justify war in Iraq,¹⁴⁶ be interested in promulgating the idea that the rebels had pulled off the Ghouta attack – which would seem to vindicate shoring up Assad, rather than the rebels? The answer may lie in the strategy of Maloof’s ideological master in the George W. Bush administration, Douglas Feith.

In December 2001, Maloof severed his credibility with the US intelligence community when his connections to a Lebanese-American businessman, Imad El Haje, came to light. El Haje was under investigation in the US for a gun-running scheme to Liberia. As a consequence, Maloof had his security clearance revoked.

Another reason Maloof’s clearance was revoked is because of his efforts to challenge the wider intelligence community’s “official assessment that there were no operational terrorist links between al-Qaida and Iraq,” according to Knight-Ridder Newspapers. The same report goes on to note something quite curious: that El Haje had “approached Maloof on behalf of Syria to seek help in arranging a communications channel between Syria and the Defense Department.”¹⁴⁷

145 Hurriyet (7 March 2013) <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-opposition-chp-delegation-visits-al-assad-42531>

146 Motherjones, ‘The lie factory’ (January/February 2004) <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2004/01/lie-factory/>

147 Counterpunch (10 November 2003) <https://www.counterpunch.org/2003/11/10/edited-by-alexander-cockburn-and-jeffrey-st-clair-3/>

So apart from being a disinformation operative hyping up false connections between al-Qaeda and Iraq – through El Haje, Maloof had covert contact with Bashar al-Assad’s government. Haje expressed to Maloof the frustration the Syrian government experienced in trying to reach US officials, and so Maloof arranged a meeting between Haje, then Defence Policy Board chair Richard Perle and Jaymie Durnam, top aide to Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz.

After the revocation of his security clearance, the Knight-Ridder report continues, “several individuals close to Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld came to his defense and wrote supporting letters, officials said. They included Undersecretary of Defense Douglas Feith, the Pentagon’s No. 3 civilian, who oversees the Office of Special Plans, and Richard Perle, a top outside adviser and former chairman of the influential Defense Policy Board, a group of outsiders who advise the defense secretary.”

Douglas Feith had input into the notorious 1996 policy document authored by his colleague, Maloof’s Pentagon partner, David Wurmser, *A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm*.¹⁴⁸ Although that paper was written to advise the incoming Israeli government of Benjamin Netanyahu, the “study group” who had fed into it was made up of people who would in a few years become senior officials in the George W. Bush administration. *A Clean Break* saw a military invasion to remove the regime of Saddam Hussein as a stepping-stone for a regional effort to fundamentally reshape the Middle East with a view to debilitate Israel’s enemies.

The strategy did not, however, call for ‘regime change’ in Syria. Instead it called loudly for the “removal” of Saddam as a mechanism to “roll back” Syrian and Iranian power:

“Israel can shape its strategic environment, in cooperation with Turkey and Jordan, by weakening, containing, and even rolling back Syria. This effort can focus on removing Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq — an important Israeli strategic objective in its own right — as a means of foiling Syria’s regional ambitions.... Most important, it is understandable that Israel has an interest supporting diplomatically, militarily and operationally Turkey’s and Jordan’s actions against Syria, such as securing tribal alliances with Arab tribes that cross into Syrian territory and are hostile to the Syrian ruling elite.”

At no point does *A Clean Break* advocate the complete removal of the Assad regime from power in Syria – a war on Iraq, rather, is seen as a prelude for intensifying pressure on Syria to weaken its regional power and territorial integrity.

Implying that this intent is alive and well among the same family of neocons are Douglas Feith’s comments in 2017 to the *Jerusalem Post*, confirming that the key issue was not ‘regime change’, but a question of whether existing territorial borders defining Syria should remain. Currently Syria is already *de facto* partitioned between territories controlled by Assad and various opposition forces.¹⁴⁹

148 Brian Whitaker, ‘Playing skittles with Saddam’, *Guardian* (3 September 2002)
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/sep/03/worlddispatch.iraq>

149 *Jerusalem Post* (10 September 2017)
<https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Stop-worrying-so-much-about-putting-humpty-dumpty-Syria-back-together-again-504710>

“Asked if there is any potential positive outcome from the Syrian civil war according to the US or Israeli view or how he would deal with the myriad problematic actors in the Syrian arena, Feith demurred,” reported the *Post*.

“However, he did say that he thought that those who were stuck with the idea of maintaining Syria’s borders as they were set by colonial European powers after World War I were making a mistake... The ex-Pentagon official asked rhetorically: ‘What is the situation? What changes are in order... would make the region happier, freer, more prosperous, more peaceful going forward?’ He suggested leaders ‘break out’ of the idea that the borders should remain exactly as they were before the war’.”

Feith’s explicit suggestion was that the fragmentation of Syria ought to be accepted as a given:

“Whether Syria can hang together as a state is a serious question. People should not be focused on...that humpty dumpty has to be put back together again.”

The ideology animating Feith, Wurmser and Maloof appears to be the same one they hatched together in the Bush administration: that the biggest threat to the West comes from a confluence of Sunni and Shi’a Islamist groups operating in unison, from al-Qaeda to Hezbollah, in secret partnership with a range of secular Arab regimes. The approach to deal with this is to debilitate and destabilise them all through a range of different methods.¹⁵⁰

Maloof’s former masters – one of whom is now Trump’s National Security Advisor – represent a coterie of influencers aligned with Israel who may well see an unmitigated victory of the Syrian rebels as a major threat to Israel. While Israel has pursued a formal policy of support for several rebel groups, privately officials have explained why this support is unlikely to ever ramp up toward a full removal of Assad.

Four months after Maloof promulgated his VIPS-aligned theory about the Ghouta attack being prepared by al-Qaeda affiliated Syrian rebels, a senior Israeli intelligence official told AP that the al-Qaeda presence had mushroomed unexpectedly: “After Assad and after establishing or strengthening their foothold in Syria they are going to move and deflect their effort and attack Israel... The longer the war in Syria continues, the more jihadists and radicals are coming to this territory.”¹⁵¹

The AP report noted that the existing Israeli strategy at the time was not to align decisively with either side in the conflict, preferring to allow both sides to debilitate each other – a strategy that would seem to align with *A Clean Break*. “With the absence of any potential ally and any hope that a good resolution could come from the fighting,” the AP story said, “Israeli conventional wisdom has held that it was better off with it continuing and having the rival forces stay busy butchering each other rather than noticing Israel.” This strategy, too, might explain Maloof’s (and the Bush administration’s) partiality to direct contact with the Syrian government through El Haje.

150 James Risen, ‘How pair’s finding on terror led to clash on shaping intelligence’, New York Times (28 April 2004) <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/04/28/us/how-pair-s-finding-on-terror-led-to-clash-on-shaping-intelligence.html>

151 AP (25 January 2014) <http://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-warns-of-growing-al-qaeda-linked-jihadi-threat-from-syria/>

In this context, VIPS' Ray McGovern seems to have overlooked the possibility that the disgraced Maloof, who would hardly have serious intelligence connections after having been ejected from the US intelligence community as a politicised hack in 2001, was spouting disinformation in service to a far more insidious agenda for the Middle East – the aversion of total Syrian 'regime change', for fear that a complete overthrow of Assad would produce highly uncontrollable results, and a shift back toward cutting the rebels down to size: essentially, the protracted, mutual debilitation of both Assad and the rebels.

5.4 Enter Hersh

On 17th April 2014, the renowned investigative reporter Seymour Hersh released a lengthy analysis for the *London Review of Books* (LRB) attributing the 2013 Ghouta chemical weapon attack to Syrian rebels acquiring sarin from Turkey¹⁵² – this was in substance the story that had been put out by a spate of “former intelligence officials”: Maloof, Bodansky and VIPS, who plagiarised Bodansky while privately citing Maloof as a source.

But the vast bulk of Hersh's reporting, too, derived from one “former senior US intelligence official, who has access to current intelligence” – a similar description to how VIPS' Ray McGovern described himself and his group to me. Other intelligence sources make similarly anonymous appearances throughout Hersh's piece, none of them in a position of active employment by the services, cited either as “former” officials or “consultants”. Documents are described, but Hersh makes no claim as to having obtained or even seen them himself – simply relaying what he is told by these former officials.

Hersh demonstrates no effort to have personally verified or corroborated the claims of these sources, but merely takes for granted that they are correct in relaying the information they have – all of them, further, appear to relay information that they themselves have not verified, but which they claim to have been told by their own intelligence sources.

A close reading of Hersh's text not only reveals unnerving parallels with the tenor of VIPS' memo and Maloof's report, but a chronic lack of internal evidence as well as a conflict with other verified facts.

Hersh opens the thrust of his story with a quote from his “former intelligence official”: “We knew there were some in the Turkish government who believed they could get Assad's nuts in a vice by dabbling with a sarin attack inside Syria – and forcing Obama to make good on his red line threat.”

But as we move on, we find that Hersh fails to provide any detail on how “we” – presumably the former official and his active intelligence contacts – actually “knew” that elements of the Turkish government wanted to arrange a sarin provocation in Syria.

Hersh reported that the US Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) issued a classified paper concluding that al-Nusra had a sarin production cell which was “the most advanced sarin plot since al-Qaida's pre-9.11 effort.” But the actual details of what the DIA allegedly knew were fairly thin: “... now we see ANF [Al Nusra Front] attempting to make its own CW [chemical weapons]... Al-Nusrah Front's relative freedom of operation within Syria leads us to assess the group's CW aspirations will be difficult to disrupt in the future.”

152 Seymour M Hersh, 'The Red Line and the Rat Line', LRB (17 April 2014)
<https://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n08/seymour-m-hersh/the-red-line-and-the-rat-line>

In his WND report, Maloof also referred to a US intelligence document regarding the Turkish al-Nusra arrests in May 2013, produced by the National Ground Intelligence Center, which is part of the US Army's Intelligence and Security Command. Hersh's story refers to a DIA assessment of the same incident. The DIA has operational command over the NGIC, which can be tasked to produce analyses for the DIA.

Even in Hersh's report, the paper did not confirm that al-Nusra had acquired sarin, but that it had "aspirations" to produce it, that would be "difficult to disrupt." The paper then appeared to refer directly to the Turkish al-Nusra arrests, noting that "Turkey and Saudi-based chemical facilitators were attempting to obtain sarin precursors in bulk, tens of kilograms, likely for the anticipated large scale production effort in Syria."

This was still merely an acknowledgement that al-Nusra was "attempting" to purchase chemical precursors to create sarin. Intriguingly, this account included an additional claim not present in the actual 2013 Turkish criminal indictment about the sarin precursor purchase attempt, regarding "Saudi-based chemical facilitators."

Hersh himself then referred directly to the Turkish case: "Last May, more than ten members of the al-Nusra Front were arrested in southern Turkey with what local police told the press were two kilograms of sarin. In a 130-page indictment the group was accused of attempting to purchase fuses, piping for the construction of mortars, and chemical precursors for sarin." He dismissively noted Ambassador Sezgin's confirmation that the suspects were not discovered with sarin, or even precursors – just "antifreeze" – hinting that this implied a cover-up. He went on to refer to the DIA's alleged belief that the arrests were "evidence that al-Nusra was expanding its access to chemical weapons."

But Hersh gives no indication that he tried to check the Turkish indictment himself to see whether its contents cohered with his source's description of the alleged DIA document. If he had done, he would have discovered that the Turkish investigative file confirmed precisely that the plans of these al-Nusra operatives were *entirely* aspirational. They had not succeeded in acquiring sarin, nor precursors, and had no discernible expertise in producing chemical weapons. If this was the most advanced case of CW production that al-Qaeda had achieved since 9/11, they hadn't got very far.

The Turkish file also contained no suggestion of Saudi facilitators being involved. It made no reference to the idea that al-Qaeda had acquired chemicals from ex-Ba'athist sources in Iraq. Those two threads had been introduced by Maloof into his WND report. Though not present at all in the Turkish file, they also reappear in the description by Hersh's source of the alleged DIA document, introducing a number of errors along the way: "It said Qassab had 'self-identified' as a member of al-Nusra, and that he was directly connected to Abd-al-Ghani, the 'ANF emir for military manufacturing'."

If the DIA document is real, its claims are false. Qassap had not "self-identified" as a member of al-Nusra. Although those connections came to light from the covert surveillance transcripts that were part of the Turkish prosecution, Qassap himself adamantly denied being a member of al-Nusra. As for the figure of "Abd-al-Ghani" – the alleged al-Nusra emir for military manufacturing – there is no evidence that an al-Nusra leader by that name even exists.

Hersh goes on to describe the DIA document: “Abd-al-Ghani’s plan was for two associates to ‘perfect a process for making sarin, then go to Syria to train others to begin large scale production at an unidentified lab in Syria’. The DIA paper said that one of his operatives had purchased a precursor on the ‘Baghdad chemical market’, which ‘has supported at least seven CW efforts since 2004’.”

The latter claim is an echo of Maloof’s report, which he sourced to the Russians, alleging that “Saddam-era generals” – the same ones that Maloof once claimed on behalf of the Bush administration were about to provide chemical weapons to al-Qaeda – were now doing exactly that.

The fundamental problem is that the Turkish investigative file contradicts the alleged DIA’s belief, as described by Hersh’s source, that al-Nusra had a meaningful sarin production capability (augmented by Turkish and Saudi “facilitators”) with a real prospect of relaying “tens of kilograms” of sarin into Syria. Worse, the alleged DIA document itself provides no actual evidence whatsoever that the Turkish government itself had any role in attempting to provide sarin to Syrian rebels.

Hersh finally notes that the DIA denied ever having produced such a paper. “No such paper was ever requested or produced by intelligence community analysts,” he was told by a spokesperson. Given the incoherencies noted above, it is reasonable to conclude either that if the document does exist, the DIA is so embarrassed about its errors that they do not want to admit that US intelligence analysts produced something so flawed; or that it simply doesn’t exist. Another possibility is that some sort of flawed ‘raw data’ was produced which Hersh’s source got wind of that had been ultimately rejected by the US intelligence community – but that the source was not as close to the intelligence community as claimed, misattributed the exact nature of the document, and was unaware that it was not taken seriously.

Whatever the case, Hersh’s claim that in June the US had solid, precise intelligence from Turkey proving al-Nusra’s capacity to produce sarin is completely incoherent, and contradicted by contemporaneous facts that he ignored. Thus, the thesis he put forward in his first December 2013 article for *LRB*, ‘Whose Sarin?’¹⁵³ – that the White House specifically cherry-picked intelligence and ignored the unimpeachable intelligence on al-Nusra to justify hostility toward Assad – collapses.

Hersh’s closing flourish in that piece was to attempt to show that only rebel forces were within the range capable of perpetrating the Ghouta attack. For this, he referred to the work of Theodore Postol, professor emeritus of science, technology, and national security policy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a former scientific adviser to the Pentagon’s chief of naval operations. Having argued that US intelligence had unimpeachable intelligence proving that al-Qaeda rebels in Syria had an active sarin production cell – the next step was to show how unlikely government culpability was. Hersh quotes Postol and his co-author former UN weapons inspector Richard Lloyd demonstrating, correctly, that the range of the Volcano rockets fired in the Ghouta attack is only 2-2.5km.

153 Hersh, ‘Whose sarin?’ *LRB* (19 December 2013) <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v35/n24/seymour-m-hersh/whose-sarin>

Postol and Lloyd's work at this time demonstrated a number of important facts. They exposed fundamental flaws in the US intelligence assessment of the Ghouta attack, which had identified several positions firmly controlled by the Syrian government as the points of origination from where the rockets carrying sarin had been fired. Their analysis also demonstrated the impossibility of vector analyses by Human Rights Watch and the *New York Times*.¹⁵⁴ This lends credence to the inference that the early US 'intelligence' being promulgated as factual had indeed been politicised, and was being put forward to justify the administration's desire to justify a military strike.

On the other hand, Hersh used this to suggest that government areas were not within range, implicating rebel-held areas. But Hersh's claim has been contested: government positions on 21st August 2013 were still within this 2-2.5km range of the impact sites according to information from videos by a Russian language news organisation embedded with the Syrian military. Neither Postol nor Hersh (nor other critics) have been able to refute this evidence.¹⁵⁵

Sceptics point out that Bellingcat appears partial in its focus on dissecting Russian propaganda, with its ties to the Atlantic Council and the use of its materials by NATO. And with its eye firmly pointed at Russia, it obviously is. In May 2015, Bellingcat released a report claiming that forensic analysis of satellite imagery released by the Russian Ministry of Defence had been edited before release to deceive the public about Russia's alleged role in shooting down Flight MH17.¹⁵⁶ The report made worldwide headlines. However, a number of independent experts said that Bellingcat's analysis had offered no conclusive proof for this claim. German image forensics expert Jens Kriese told *Der Spiegel*:

*"From the perspective of forensics, the Bellingcat approach is not very robust. The core of what they are doing is based on so-called Error Level Analysis (ELA). The method is subjective and not based entirely on science... Forensic scientists use computer procedures that allow for the clearest possible conclusions: Has it been manipulated – yes or no? Contrary to what Bellingcat claims, Error Level Analysis does not provide clear results. The conclusion is always based on the perspective of humans, on their interpretation... The truth is that the indication of Photoshop in the metadata doesn't prove anything. Of course the Russians had to use some sort of program in order to process the satellite image for the presentation. They added frames and text blocks in order to explain it to the public. The artifacts which have been identified could be a product of that – or also a product of saving multiple times in JPG format... What Bellingcat is doing is nothing more than reading tea leaves. Error Level Analysis is a method used by hobbyists."*¹⁵⁷

US digital image forensic expert Professor Hany Farid of Dartmouth College, who has also consulted for the US intelligence community, was even more damning about the quality of the Bellingcat report, noting that it relied on three methods, metadata analysis, error level analysis and reference analysis. On the metadata analysis, Farid pointed out that the modification of the images could easily be explained due to "a simple crop and resizing" rather than addition or deletion to the image. The ELA approach was also "fatally flawed": "This is not a serious or reliable forensic tool

154 McClatchy (15 January 2014) <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article24761710.html>

155 Bellingcat (15 June 2014) <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2014/07/15/identifying-government-positions-during-the-august-21st-sarin-attacks/>

156 Bellingcat (31 May 2015) <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2015/05/31/mh17-forensic-analysis-of-satellite-images-released-by-the-russian-ministry-of-defence/>

157 Der Spiegel (4 June 2015) <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/expert-criticizes-allegations-of-russian-mh17-manipulation-a-1037125.html>

and any analysis based on it cannot be taken seriously.” Finally, the reference analysis was “at best, speculative and cannot be taken seriously”.¹⁵⁸

Given the gravity of these criticisms of Bellingcat’s digital forensic image analysis for this report, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that this analysis was essentially propagandistic and not grounded in genuine expertise. That is not to automatically dismiss the validity of everything in Bellingcat’s analysis – as noted by Dr Marco Langbroek, a Space Situation Awareness consultant for the Royal Dutch Air Force and Leiden Observatory, there are other grounds to infer that some of the satellite images released by Russia were manipulated.¹⁵⁹ As a general rule, therefore, Bellingcat’s open source analyses of video and images should not be simply taken at face value, but instead should be critically evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

In the case of locating Syrian government positions in relation to the Ghouta attack, the information inferred from the open source videos and images cited by Bellingcat is fairly straightforward to evaluate. Eliot Higgins cross-references the imagery to geolocate the positions, a method that does not rely on the sort of techniques criticised by Farid. In fact, Postol and Lloyd have also acknowledged that “smaller rockets likely used in areas southwest of the capital could have come from government-controlled territory.”¹⁶⁰ Overall, this suggests that Hersh’s strong conclusion of the impossibility of the Ghouta attack being carried out by Syrian government forces is not proven.

Other experts noted that the specific 330mm Volcano rockets discovered have been used frequently by the Syrian military. One analysis found that the rockets have been in service with the Russian Navy and appear to have been exported to the Syrian government.¹⁶¹ Finally, the sarin tests from the Ghouta attack revealed the presence of hexamine, which Dr Åke Sellström, head of the UN Inspection Team to Syria, confirmed was used in the Syrian military formula as an acid scavenger. In theory, this would not necessarily rule out the possibility of the rebels acquiring Syrian chemical weapons stocks or using a similar process to manufacture sarin, but no decisive evidence of either of these possibilities has materialised. In an interview with CBRNe World magazine, Sellström added that the Syrian government even confirmed that their chemical weapons stores had not been raided by rebels (despite some media speculation to the contrary), thus ruling out that possibility (which features nowhere in Hersh’s narrative):

“Several times I asked the government: can you explain – if this was the opposition – how did they get hold of the chemical weapons? They have quite poor theories: they talk about smuggling through Turkey, labs in Iraq and I asked them, pointedly, what about your own stores, have your own stores being stripped of anything, have you dropped a bomb that has been claimed, bombs that can be recovered by the opposition? They denied that. To me it is strange. If they really want to blame the opposition they should have a good story as to how they got hold of the munitions, and they didn’t take the chance to deliver that story.”¹⁶²

Scott Ritter, who would later advise Hersh on his Khan Shaykhoun story, had ironically endorsed the findings of the UN’s Ghouta inquiry led by Sellström: “The gold standard for the conduct of IAU-type inspection was set by the Joint UN-OPCW-World Health Organization (WHO)

158 Correspondence from Hany Farid with Der Spiegel (4 June 2015) <https://twitter.com/benjaminbidder/status/606421860759273472>

159 SatTrackCam Leiden (b)log, ‘MH17’ (30 January 2016) <https://sattrackcam.blogspot.com/2016/01/mh17-on-resurs-p1-image-with-buks-near.html>

160 McClatchy (15 January 2014) <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article24761710.html>

161 Open source analysis by Igor Sutyagin <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PmWjXp45sYI&list=PLFAgO2TZWpwBH9t3LB4CJscyDOo5M3dt9>

162 Text available here <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/newsandpolitics/533173-read-interview-with-head-of-cw-team-in-syria>

investigation into the use of chemical weapons in Ghouta, Syria, a suburb of Damascus. This team, led by a veteran Swedish chemical weapons inspector named Ake Sellstrom, produced a report that was virtually unassailable in terms of its scientific and technical findings.”¹⁶³

A further incoherence is Hersh’s claim in his *LRB* piece that British scientists at Porton Down were provided a sample from the site of the Ghouta attack by Russian intelligence, which they accepted, tested, and took seriously. The UN, for instance, has been supplied samples from Khan al-Assal obtained by Russian intelligence which the body ignored. Porton Down’s tests, Hersh reported, proved that the sarin sample did not match any known sarin which existed in the Syrian government’s arsenal. This then led the British to inform the Americans that justification for a strike would not hold. Hersh sources this claim to his former US intelligence official, who in turn sources it to a “reliable” source in Russian intelligence.

Hersh’s former intelligence sources are clearly partial to information supplied from their own Russian sources. Both VIPS and Maloof have repeatedly given much credence to Russian intelligence narratives. Maloof in particular cites “sources” in relation to a Russian intelligence dossier supplied to the UN in 2013.

Yet on this particular claim about Porton Down, if we apply the same standards we are expected to apply to the official narrative, the plausibility of the story breaks down: it fails the same test that Scott Ritter applies to the OPCW on Khan Shaykoun – there is no confirmation of a clean ‘chain of custody’ that has been independently verified. To quote Ritter – “there is no sample.” It seems unlikely that Porton Down and the US Joint Chiefs of Staff would base their entire decision on whether or not to go to war based on one sample handed over from Russian intelligence that was potentially falsified or contaminated.

While Hersh provides some compelling analysis of the covert weapons ‘rat line’ between Libya and Syria, his core story identifying Turkish government complicity in supplying sarin to the rebels is sourced, repeatedly, to statements by the same “former intelligence official”, whose access to current intelligence is simply taken for granted. But the former official provides no specific evidence for these claims, and how they are known. The only reference to another source of specific information is extremely vague:

“A US intelligence consultant told me that a few weeks before 21 August he saw a highly classified briefing prepared for Dempsey and the defense secretary, Chuck Hagel, which described ‘the acute anxiety’ of the Erdogan administration about the rebels’ dwindling prospects. The analysis warned that the Turkish leadership had expressed ‘the need to do something that would precipitate a US military response’.”

The problem here is that the second-hand quote of a document that Hersh himself has not seen, passed on by an anonymous consultant whose motivations we know nothing about, goes nowhere near proving the hard case that the former intelligence official makes to Hersh: it is too vague to equate it to ‘smoking gun’ proof of Erdogan’s intent to fabricate a chemical weapons attack to incite a US military intervention for regime change.

163 Ritter (5 July 2017) <https://www.truthdig.com/articles/syrias-alleged-sarin-gas-attack-questioning-a-flawed-investigation/>

In the end, the former intelligence official refers obliquely to how the bulk of actual evidence for Turkish complicity came in the form of “the Turkish post-attack joy and back-slapping in numerous intercepts.” He also said that there were no meaningful intercepts before then as: “Operations are super-secret in the planning but all that flies out the window when it comes to crowing afterwards.” But who told this former official about these intercepts, and in what detail? Hersh does not identify which intelligence service, or whose – is it American or Russian? How can we be sure that this former official’s understanding of the alleged intercepts is accurate – especially given the inaccuracies communicated over the DIA report? Hersh does not say, and neither does his source. Probing further, it’s not at all clear how this post-attack “joy and back-slapping” by “the Turkish” – the former official is not specific on who exactly in Turkey is rejoicing (Government officials? Intelligence operatives? Turkmen rebels?) – provided the US government with specific intelligence that “the sarin was supplied through Turkey – that it could only have gotten there with Turkish support. The Turks also provided the training in producing the sarin and handling it.” How could intercepts of post-attack “joy” prove specifically that prior to the attack sarin was supplied with Turkish government support and training?

Whatever the case, the bottom line is that Hersh’s main allegation linked to alleged US intelligence on an active al-Nusra sarin production cell in Turkey was false. Overall, the uncanny parallels between VIPS’ memos and Hersh’s articles suggest strongly that his recent Syria reporting originated from various members of VIPS, VIPS sources such as Maloof, and/or the same ‘intel’ sources they were drawing on, who were already putting out exactly the same story as Hersh months beforehand.

5.5 Khan Shaykoun

On 6th April 2017, VIPS co-founder Philip Girdi, a former DIA and CIA military intelligence officer, told the Scott Horton radio show that the US intelligence community did not believe that Assad was responsible for a chemical attack in Khan Shaykoun.¹⁶⁴ Girdi claimed that the official explanation of the incident by Russia was the truth – that an al-Qaeda rebel depot holding poison gas was hit by Russian airstrikes, accidentally releasing the chemicals. His key claims were quoted by the late Robert Parry in *Consortium News*:

“I’m hearing from sources on the ground in the Middle East, people who are intimately familiar with the intelligence that is available who are saying that the essential narrative that we’re all hearing about the Syrian government or the Russians using chemical weapons on innocent civilians is a sham...”

The intelligence confirms pretty much the account that the Russians have been giving... which is that they hit a warehouse where the rebels – now these are rebels that are, of course, connected with Al Qaeda – where the rebels were storing chemicals of their own and it basically caused an explosion that resulted in the casualties. Apparently the intelligence on this is very clear...”¹⁶⁵

164 Scott Horton Show (6 April 2017) <https://scotthorton.org/4617-philip-girdi-says-ic-military-doubt-assad-gas-narrative/>

165 Robert Parry, ‘Trump’s “Wag the dog” moment’, Consortium News (7 April 2017) <https://consortiumnews.com/2017/04/07/trumps-wag-the-dog-moment/>

Giraldi's claims were echoed on 7th April in an essay authored by fellow VIPS member, private intelligence analyst Colonel (ret.) Patrick Lang, a former DIA Middle East analyst.¹⁶⁶ A third VIPS member, Col. (ret.) Lawrence Wilkinson, former chief of staff to then Secretary of State Colin Powell, offered his own analysis reiterating the same claims on 10th April.¹⁶⁷

Giraldi's claims, which had been laid out in writing in the 11th April 2017 VIPS memo, reappeared two months later in more detailed form in Seymour Hersh's well-known story of the attack in the German *Welt*, which argued that Assad's forces had bombed a rebel command and control centre north of Khan Shaykhoun. The explosion released toxic gases from "medicines and chlorine-based decontaminants" and "organophosphates".¹⁶⁸

The VIPS memo, published shortly after Giraldi aired his views on radio, stated:

*"Our US Army contacts in the area have told us this is not what happened. There was no Syrian 'chemical weapons attack.' Instead, a Syrian aircraft bombed an al-Qaeda-in-Syria ammunition depot that turned out to be full of noxious chemicals and a strong wind blew the chemical-laden cloud over a nearby village where many consequently died... This is what the Russians and Syrians have been saying and – more important – what they appear to believe happened."*¹⁶⁹

In fact, we know for sure that at least one VIPS member who signed off on this memo has closely advised Hersh on the contents of his Syria reporting. In an article confirming that he is "a VIPS member", Scott Ritter (who is identified as a signatory to the April VIPS memo on Khan Skayhkoun) said:

*"I've known Sy Hersh since 1998, when he called me up to do an interview for the New Yorker about the CIA's role in Iraq... In a June 29, 2017 article in The American Conservative, I wrote 'In the interests of full disclosure, I had assisted Mr. Hersh in fact-checking certain aspects of his article; I was not a source of any information used in his piece.'... Let me be clear – I am not, nor have I ever been, part of the formal fact-checking process used by either The London Review of Books or Die Welt in vetting articles submitted by Mr. Hersh. I have, over the years, been a sounding board for questions Sy may have had about matters in which my past experience might be able to provide some insight – for instance, technical details about GPS-guided munitions, the accuracy of cruise missiles, or insights into the American Special Operations community. On several occasions, my observations have led Sy to return to his sources to seek clarity in the interest of accuracy – the hallmark of good reporting."*¹⁷⁰

166 Intel Today (7 April 2018)

<https://gosint.wordpress.com/2018/04/07/one-year-ago-khan-shaykhoun-chemical-attack-former-dia-colonel-us-strikes-on-syria-based-on-a-lie/>

167 Intel Today (10 April 2008)

<https://gosint.wordpress.com/2017/04/10/colonel-lawrence-wilkerson-the-syrian-chemical-attack-story-is-a-hoax/>

168 Hersh, 'Trump's Red Line', *Welt* (25 June 2017) <https://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/article165905578/Trump-s-Red-Line.html>

169 Antiwar.com (11 April 2017) <https://www.antiwar.com/blog/2017/04/11/intel-professionals-trump-should-rethink-syria-escalation/>

170 Ritter, 'The difference between watchers and doers', *Huffington Post* (18 July 2017)

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-difference-between-watchers-and-doers_us_596e0e0de4b0b95f893e1b02

Ritter was not, himself, the source of “information” in Hersh’s article, nor played a formal role as fact-checker for Seymour Hersh’s piece – but this VIPS member and signatory to the April memo, which had articulated the claims first made by former CIA/DIA officer Giraldi, was a “sounding board” for Hersh’s investigations into Khan Shaykhoun. There can be no doubt whatsoever, then, that in drafting this story, Hersh was guided quite directly by VIPS. Ritter could not be reached for comment.

Once again, the bulk of Hersh’s story was told to him by a former official, described as “a senior adviser to the American intelligence community, who has served in senior positions in the Defense Department and Central Intelligence Agency.” An interview with Hersh in *Alternet* reported more specifically that Hersh’s source was “a high-level adviser to the CIA and the Defense Intelligence Agency” – much like VIPS’ Giraldi, who had described the gist of Hersh’s story months beforehand. Hersh’s source also claims to have obtained reliable information from Russian intelligence, just as the VIPS memo accepted the Syrian and Russian narratives at face value.¹⁷¹

I repeatedly contacted Giraldi via his organisation, the Council for the National Interest, to ask whether he and/or VIPS were indeed among Hersh’s sources, or had guided Hersh to their sources, but received no response. Instead, I found that a short time after contacting Giraldi, the webpage on the Libertarian Institute advertising his original interview with Scott Horton had been deleted.¹⁷² The audio file of the interview on Horton’s website had also been removed.¹⁷³

I sent multiple inquiries via email to Seymour Hersh, asking him about the role of Giraldi, Ritter and VIPS more broadly – including the figure of F. Michael Maloof – in providing information and sources for his Syria reporting. The veteran reporter did not reply to any specific questions, except to say: “please stop sending me emails. smh” More on my correspondence with Hersh later.

The most glaring problem with Hersh’s Khan Shaykhoun story is that it contradicted the ‘facts’ about the incident already put out by both the Syrian and Russian governments.

Whereas Hersh and his anonymous sources claimed that the Khan Shaykhoun attack was essentially the result of an accident caused by fallout from a Syrian attack on a rebel base, Assad himself claimed that the attack was a deliberate “fabrication” orchestrated by Western governments and rebels: “Our impression is that the West, mainly the United States, is hand-in-glove with the terrorists. They fabricated the whole story in order to have a pretext for the attack” on Syria’s Sharbat airbase on 7th April, he told AFP.¹⁷⁴

Assad also lied about Syria’s chemical weapons arsenal, insisting that Syria had destroyed all its chemical weapons stockpiles in 2013: “There was no order to make any attack, we don’t have any chemical weapons, we gave up our arsenal a few years ago.” Of course, we know from the OPCW’s inspections that his chemical weapons arsenal has still not been completely destroyed.

171 Alternet (28 June 2017) <https://www.alternet.org/grayzone-project/seymour-hersh-syria-bombshell>

172 I subsequently archived the deleted page. It can be viewed via this archive of a Google cache of the original page <https://web.archive.org/web/20180615125620/https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:L28j5627XTAJ:https://www.libertarianinstitute.org/scotthortonshow/4617-philip-giraldi-says-ic-military-doubt-ass+&cd=2&hl=en&ct=cInk&gl=uk&client=safari>

173 See note 164

174 AFP (13 April 2017) <https://www.pri.org/stories/2017-04-13/interview-syrias-assad-says-us-fabricated-chemical-attack-justify-strikes>

But Assad's claim of fabrication was, itself, a change of story. In an analysis of Hersh's narrative, Eliot Higgins of Bellingcat points quite correctly to some crucial areas where Hersh's account contradicted the Syrian and Russian government official narratives about the Khan Shaykhoun strike:

“Walid Muallem, Syria's Foreign Minister, stated in a press conference two days after the attack that the first air raid was conducted at 11:30am local time, attacking ‘an arms depot belonging to al-Nusra Front chemical weapons’. It was noted by observers at the time that the time of the claimed attack was hours after the first reports of casualties came in, and both contradicts the 6:55am stated by Hersh's source... Not only that, but the Syrian Foreign Minister also described the target as a chemical weapons arm depot, not a meeting place that stored other items in the basement.”¹⁷⁵

In contrast to Hersh's story, Higgins continues, “neither Russia nor Syria mention targeting ‘a jihadist meeting site’, and described the location as a ‘large warehouse’ on the ‘eastern outskirts of Khan Shaykhun’, not a ‘two-story cinder-block building in the northern part of town’ with ‘security, weapons, communications, files and a map center.’ In fact, the only thing Hersh's account and the Russian and Syria account agrees on is it was a Syrian aircraft which conducted the attack.”

If the story was accurate, Syria or Russia would be able to end all debate about the matter by simply providing the coordinates of the precise location of the rebel compound which was allegedly bombed. Especially if – as Hersh's source claimed – Russia had monitored the site for days via drone. But instead:

“... both Syria and Russia have failed to make any imagery of the site public, nor have they provided any specific details about the location of the site. If they had, it would be possible to easily check if the location had been bombed on Terraserver, which has satellite imagery of Khan Sheikhoun before and after the date of attack. In common with Russia and Syria, Hersh's source seems unable to provide the exact location of the attack, despite his apparent in depth knowledge of the attack.”

We do not accept Bellingcat's criticisms of Hersh for the sake of it. Rather, our analysis of Hersh's and Bellingcat's arguments and counter-arguments regarding the Khan Shaykhoun attack takes into account legitimate doubts and concerns over Bellingcat's expertise and apparent anti-Russia bias. The key problem is that, when squared up against each other, neither Hersh nor those who accept his narrative as accurate have been able to resolve the descriptive, geographical and chronological anomalies to explain how Hersh's, Syria's and Russia's mutually contradictory alternative accounts of the attack can be accurate despite these contradictions.

As shown by Professor Stephen R. Shalom – a longtime critic of US foreign policy and anti-interventionist – many other elements of Hersh's story do not withstand critical scrutiny.¹⁷⁶ But Shalom's most damning critique is that Hersh's own source refutes himself. Hersh closes his piece with a final explanatory quote from his key US source which contradicts the entire preceding narrative:

175 Bellingcat (25 June 2017)

<https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2017/06/25/will-get-fooled-seymour-hersh-welt-khan-sheikhoun-chemical-attack/>

“The Salafists and jihadists got everything they wanted out of their hyped-up Syrian nerve gas ploy,’ the senior adviser to the US intelligence community told me, referring to the flare up of tensions between Syria, Russia, and America. ‘The issue is, what if there’s another false flag sarin attack credited to hated Syria?... And do not think these guys are not planning the next faked attack.’”

As Shalom remarks, this contradicts the entire preceding narrative characterising the attack as an accident: “... if this was a faked attack, then Hersh’s whole story is wrong.”

In short, Syria, Russia and Hersh’s sources have put forward incoherent alternative accounts of what happened at Khan Shaykhoun. As we will see below, Hersh’s story would later collapse entirely when Syria and Russia tacitly acknowledged that their initial claims about the incident were false.

In September 2017, Hersh received the Sam Adams Award for Integrity for his journalism, an award set up by an organisation involving a number of VIPS members, and chaired by none other than VIPS founder, Ray McGovern.¹⁷⁷

5.6 Shifting Scenarios: From Accident to Staging

When pressed about some of these anomalies in his reporting, Hersh himself referred one journalist back to Professor Ted Postol. He had been asked to clarify what he thought about the OPCW’s conclusion that sarin was indeed used at Khan Shaykhoun, and whether this undermined his reporting.¹⁷⁸ Postol’s initial analysis had actually contradicted Hersh’s story. In that analysis, Postol had written: “The only undisputable facts stated in the White House report is the claim that a chemical attack using nerve agent occurred in Khan Shaykhun, Syria” – which is precisely a claim that Hersh’s entire narrative disputes.¹⁷⁹

Postol later himself disputed that view, following it up with several other analyses of reports by the OPCW, French intelligence, and HRW. A review of these reports by Bellingcat claimed that all of his critiques were riddled with obvious errors, with each new analysis offering shifting alternative explanations. Our examination of these claims shows that these errors are real, and largely elementary.¹⁸⁰ Dr Rod Barton, a former Director of Strategic Technology in Australia’s Defence Intelligence Organisation and a former UN weapons inspector in Iraq who outed MI6 for trying “to sex up” the Iraq Survey Group report on WMD, has also documented gaps and inconsistencies in Postol’s theories of the Khan Shaykhoun attack.¹⁸¹

176 Stephen R. Shalom, ‘The chemical attack at Khan Sheikhoun’, Jacobin (24 July 2017) <https://jacobinmag.com/2017/07/syria-chemical-attack-assad-trump>

177 Ray McGovern (25 September 2017) <http://raymcgovern.com/2017/09/25/seymour-hersh-honored-with-sam-adams-award-edward-snowden-and-daniel-ellsberg-were-among-those-taking-part-remotely-in-the-celebration-that-followed-at-american-university/>

178 Twitter thread of correspondence between Hersh and Charles Davis https://twitter.com/charliearchy/status/890954121670385665/photo/1?fw_creator=brown_moses&ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.bellingcat.com%2Fnews%2Fmena%2F2017%2F07%2F28%2Fkhan-sheikhoun-seymour-hersh-learned-just-write-know-move%2F

179 Theodore Postol, ‘Assessment of White House Intelligence Report of April 11, 2017’ (17 April 2017) <https://www.scribd.com/document/344995943/Report-by-White-House-Alleging-Proof-of-Syria-as-the-Perpetrator-of-the-Nerve-Agent-Attack-in-Khan-Shaykhoun-on-April-4-2017>

180 A catalogue of these errors available via Bellingcat (28 July 2017) <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2017/07/28/khan-sheikhoun-seymour-hersh-learned-just-write-know-move/>

181 Rod Barton, ‘The chemical attack in Syria’ (9 May 2017) <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/chemical-attack-syria-sorting-truth-propaganda>

As an example of where critics of Postol appear to be on point, George Monbiot (whom I have previously criticised for his stance on Iraq War death toll calculations) observed that one of Postol's expert sources to back-up his critiques of official narratives on Syrian chemical weapons attack was "Mimi Al-Laham, also known as Maram Susli, PartisanGirl, Syrian Girl and Syrian Sister. She is a loyalist of the Assad government who has appeared on podcasts hosted by David Duke, the former grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan."¹⁸²

It was in correspondence with chemical weapons expert Dan Kaszeta, Monbiot wrote, that "Postol revealed that the 'solid scientific source' he used to support his theory about the origin of the sarin used in Syria was 'Syrian Sister'. When Postol and Susli both appeared on a podcast run by the Holocaust 'revisionist' Ryan Dawson, Postol explained why he had chosen to work with her: 'I was watching her on Twitter. I could see from her voice ... that she was a trained chemist.'"

These are legitimate criticisms. Al-Laham is merely a chemistry graduate student – that Postol needed to rely on her for research can only indicate his own lack of expertise in chemistry and chemical weapons. What ensued with the help of al-Laham, whose staunch pro-Assad bias is unmistakable, was a series of mutually contradictory narratives, the only common denominator of which was that they all absolved Assad of culpability. A useful breakdown of Postol's mutually contradictory and evolving alternative explanations of the Khan Shaykhoun attack is provided by the University of Stirling's Muhammed Idrees Ahmad:¹⁸³

"April 11: Postol claimed there was no aerial attack and that the rebels detonated a chemical weapon on the ground;

April 13: Postol claimed the 'the sarin release crater was tampered with'; the White House's 11 April Intelligence assessment, like the August 30, 2013, intelligence assessment, was a 'false report';

April 14: Postol claimed sarin could not have been used because a video(s?) of health workers 'roughly 30 hours after the alleged attack' shows them 'inside and around the same crater with no protection of any kind against sarin poisoning' (sarin is actually a non-persistent agent that disperses quickly depending on the weather condition);

April 19: Postol claimed that according to his analysis of wind direction 'the alleged attack described in WHR never occurred';

April 21: Postol says his 'estimates of plume directions [were] exactly 180 degrees off' but insists this also proves the same thing;

April 26: Postol says the Russian claim that the poisoning resulted from a rebel weapon depot being struck from air is plausible and, like Bhopal, the deaths likely occurred from the 'combustion of plastics' (he cites the shape of the plumes from the bombing on the morning of 4 April as evidence, even though Russians claimed the bombing didn't happen until five hours later);

182 George Monbiot, 'A lesson from Syria: it's crucial not to fuel far-right conspiracy theories', Guardian (15 November 2017) <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/nov/15/lesson-from-syria-chemical-weapons-conspiracy-theories-alt-right>

183 The New Arab (5 May 2017) <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2017/5/5/chomsky-and-the-syria-revisionists-regime-whitewashing>

April 27: Postol claims that the 'French Intelligence Report of April 26, 2017 directly contradicts the White House Intelligence Report of 11 April, 2017'

April 28: Postol admits that the French report does not contradict the White House report. He had confused the date and location for a different chemical attack four years earlier."

Ahmad is a vocal supporter of Western intervention in Syria whom I have personally clashed with on social media. I have no qualms in quoting him, however, when he is correct – and his fundamental point here is unequivocal: Postol has offered a shifting and self-contradictory set of narratives based on a highly partisan expert source.

A particularly damning insight into some of the egregious errors Postol makes on the Khan Shaykhoun attack came in his argument that the presence of rescue workers collecting samples at the site 30 hours after the attack without protective clothing indicated that there could not have been sarin present at the site, which therefore experienced “significant tampering”.¹⁸⁴ Apart from the fact that Postol’s new argument contradicted his own initial theory, along with the confirmation of sarin by the Syrian government itself (as documented by the OPCW), sarin according to the Center for Disease Control evaporates “quickly,” making it “an immediate but short-lived threat.”¹⁸⁵ The time-gap did not make the site completely safe, as sarin “does leave remnants in the area where it was used” according to biosecurity expert Sean Kaufman of Emory University’s Center for Public Health Preparedness and Research – but it explains why it was possible for so many people to visit the site unprotected hours afterward and not necessarily be contaminated.¹⁸⁶ It’s no surprise then that some White Helmets volunteers involved in sampling were contaminated in the effort and died from sarin exposure, providing yet further evidence that whatever unprofessionalism and theatrics occurred that day, these rescue workers had willingly put their lives at risk to take samples. “Amongst the casualties were four first responders reported as showing signs of exposure,” recorded the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission (p. 16). “The FFM interviewed one of them and witnessed the collection of a blood sample by a nurse.”¹⁸⁷

Postol’s background as an MIT scientist with a history of work with the Pentagon lends him general credibility as an expert and critic – but he has not offered a coherent alternative explanation, let alone one that is scientifically-validated.

The collapse of these alternative narratives did not necessarily bring the official narrative out of the woods. As it became clear that Hersh’s reporting could not stand up, other sceptical journalists identified new issues. In November 2017, Robert Parry highlighted anomalies in the UN-OPCW Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) report into the Khan Shaykhoun attack from Annex II of the document.¹⁸⁸ The chief anomaly was that hard video evidence puts the timing of the explosion at around 6.30 and 7am. But Annex II referred to hospital records describing large numbers of admissions beginning half an hour before the attacks at 6am. The admissions continued up to 4pm. In one case, 10 patients are recorded to have ended up at a hospital 125km away by 7am.

184 Zero Hedge (15 April 2017) <https://www.zerohedge.com/news/2017-04-15/video-tampering-evidence-syrian-chemical-weapons-attack>

185 CDC, <https://emergency.cdc.gov/agent/sarin/basics/facts.asp>

186 Reuters (27 August 2013)

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-sarin-factbox/factbox-what-is-the-chemical-weapon-sarin-idUSBRE97Q12D20130827>

187 OPCW (29 June 2017) https://www.opcw.org/fileadmin/OPCW/Fact_Finding_Mission/s-1510-2017_e_.pdf

188 Parry, ‘Did al-Qaeda dupe Trump on Syria attack?’ Consortium News (9 November 2017)

<https://consortiumnews.com/2017/11/09/did-al-qaeda-dupe-trump-on-syrian-attack/>

The report acknowledged: “The [JIM] did not investigate these discrepancies and cannot determine whether they are linked to any possible staging scenario, or to poor record-keeping in chaotic conditions.”

Parry criticised this approach: “In other words, more than 100 patients would appear to have been exposed to sarin before the alleged Syrian warplane could have dropped the alleged bomb and the victims could be evacuated, a finding that alone would have destroyed the JIM’s case against the Syrian government. But the JIM seemed more interested in burying this evidence of Al Qaeda staging the incident — and killing some expendable civilians — than in following up this timing problem.”

Parry went on to say: “The JIM also could find no conclusive evidence that a Syrian warplane was over Khan Sheikhouh at the time of the video although the report claims that a plane could have come within about 5 kilometers of the town.”

Parry had a point. But on both these counts, he did not convey the complexities which the report had worked through. When we consider those issues, Parry’s argument – that the JIM report must have been politicised to deliberately avoid implicating the rebels – seems less conclusive than he made out.

Regarding the hospital records, an OPCW statement (p. 51) in July 2017 about the Khan Shaykhouh investigation had already noted the massive difficulties facing Syrian medical workers:

*“In reviewing the records relating to those who died and those who were survivors, the **FFM** was unable to determine exact numbers of fatalities and survivors. The FFM attributed **the lack of overarching detailed records** to the ongoing conflict, the unavailability of hospitals, strained resources, the large number of internally displaced people, the broad range of supporting organisations (such as NGOs), and the prioritisation of promoting recovery amongst survivors. Based on records and testimony, the FFM identified approximately 100 fatalities and at least 200 other casualties who had survived acute exposure.” [emphasis added]*

The document describes, as would be expected, escalating chaos experienced across the hospitals receiving victims, which would be expected to be especially acute during the immediate aftermath – with hospital employees also falling victim due to exposures:

*“Once it became apparent that medical facilities were dealing with a chemical incident, particularly one related to an acetylcholinesterase inhibitor, casualties were decontaminated, as far as was practical, prior to admission to medical facilities. However, due to the delay in recognising this need in conjunction with the varied ways in which casualties were transported to hospitals and **the general confusion on the day of the alleged incident**, it would be expected that medical staff would become casualties themselves, due to secondary contamination. This secondary contamination was confirmed by some of the interviewees who were not present at the site but displayed symptoms of exposure.” [emphasis added]*

In this context, it would not be unreasonable to consider that hospital records documenting the arrival of the initial rush of victims would likely themselves have been rushed, and therefore inaccurate – with the earliest records reflecting simple rapid rounding errors due to the overwhelming rush in the arrival of victims; and the need to travel to hospitals further out as nearby hospitals became overwhelmed with victims. In particular, if the attack had occurred closer to 6.30am, well within the confirmed range for the attack’s timing, the recorded arrival of ten patients at a hospital 125km away at 7am is entirely plausible as a result of nearer hospitals becoming rapidly overwhelmed and poor record-keeping in the form of arrival records being simply rounded down (real arrival times would have been later but within the hour). As it stands, this irregularity was left unresolved, and the JIM report did not investigate the discrepancies further. In any case, it was obviously not the sole matter for consideration. Overall, the JIM report’s assessment also had to weigh up this issue in relation to the wide range of forensic, physical and eyewitness evidence that was being accumulated: including evidence provided by the Syrian government.

While Parry focused on the lack of “conclusive evidence” that a Syrian warplane was in Khan Shaykhoun at the time of the attack, he failed to report the glaring discrepancies in the Syrian government’s own account of the deployment of aircraft. As the JIM report pointed out – and as Parry ignored – the Syrian government’s position had changed:

“In a public statement, the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic stated that the SAAF [Syrian Arab Air Force] only conducted an attack in Khan Shaykhun at around noon on 4 April 2017.” (p. 19)

This was the narrative originally plugged by both Russia and Syria, roughly endorsed by VIPS, and transmitted with discrepancies to Seymour Hersh. The JIM report explicitly examined this scenario: “The third scenario concerns a reported strike by the SAAF on an ammunition depot in the eastern outskirts of Khan Shaykhun that had workshops producing chemical warfare munitions.” Notably, the investigators even examined an “alternative third scenario” of a house in the area being taken over by “a non-State armed group and used for storage of toxic chemicals”, and then bombed, “thus releasing toxic chemicals.”

By now, however, in a resounding rejection of the VIPS-Hersh narrative, both the Syrian and Russian governments had completely shifted position.

The new story, now being endorsed by Parry (in contradiction to Hersh) was that there had been no Syrian flights whatsoever over Khan Shaykhoun. The JIM report noted (p. 21) that:

“During a briefing provided by the Syrian Arab Republic to the Mechanism in Damascus, an SAAF representative stated that no SAAF aircraft had attacked Khan Shaykhun on 4 April 2017. This contradicts the public statement made by the Syrian Government, as referred to in paragraph 5 of this annex.”

The Syrians also provided flight records to the investigators, but these were potentially doctored or manipulated, especially in light of longstanding previous declarations of a Syrian jet having flown over Khan Shaykhoun. “The Mechanism observed that the documents provided by the

Syrian Arab Republic appeared to be copies of the original documents,” so they visited the airbase to verify them. There were no entries which referred to Khan Shaykhoun on 4th April 2017, but: “Two entries in the log book provide details of the ‘time of execution’ of missions that correspond with the time frame that sarin was released at Khan Shaykhun.” Those operations related to flights “logged as aerial attacks using conventional munitions” targeted at rebels near Kafr Zita and Tar Hawash. An interview with one pilot linked to these missions confirmed that the flight would have placed the aircraft about 7 to 9km away from Khan Shaykhun. The investigators were unable to interview the other pilot – “The Syrian Arab Republic informed the Mechanism that the pilot was later shot down and is currently missing in action.”

The investigators received other evidence regarding potential Syrian Air Force flight paths based on US radar data, indicating the presence of a Syrian aircraft within about 5km of the attack site:

“Both the Syrian and other accounts are consistent that SAAF aircraft were in the air at the relevant time. Where the accounts diverge is with respect to whether or not the aircraft flew over or in the immediate vicinity of Khan Shaykhun.”

The report found that the relevant distances allowed for the possibility of an aerial bomb hitting the impact site. In this context, Parry’s report – that the JIM’s findings on a Syrian plane being in the vicinity were “inconclusive” – is strictly correct, but doesn’t convey the weight of the evidence available, nor the fact that the report had concluded that all accounts confirmed that Syrian fighter jets were 5-9km away.

The UN-OPCW investigators had to further weigh this evidence to test the plausibility of a second scenario “based on a report that sarin was released from the same crater as in the first scenario caused by an explosive charge placed on the ground containing sarin, so as to stage an attack for which the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic would be blamed.”

At this point, we can see how badly the VIPS-Hersh narrative collapses. Facing the mounting evidence pointing at the reality of Syrian Air Force flights, and the lack of evidence of a rebel chemical weapons or ammunition depot which could have released toxins, Damascus (and Moscow) began focusing instead on analysis of the impact crater identified in Khan Shaykhoun as the focal point of the explosion that released sarin.

The investigators examined both a bombed house in Khan Shaykhoun and a building on the eastern outskirts of the town to test the scenarios of them being the source of explosive sarin dispersal engineered by the rebels. There was no sarin found in samples taken from the bombed house, and the other building was a White Helmets medical point which was not linked to the release of sarin (p. 23).

With those scenarios completely ruled out, the investigators assessed the impact crater itself. Notably, the Syrian government no longer denied that this was, indeed, the focal point of the explosion. Instead, it provided an analysis of the impact crater, arguing that “the shape of the crater, its characteristics and the lack of physical evidence did not indicate that it had been the result of an air strike.” The Assad government’s new story was that the crater indicated “a ground explosion using a device weighing not more than 10 kg.”

This scenario was scientifically assessed for the UN-OPCW team by “three independent, internationally recognized institutes with specialization in areas of forensics, defence and security, as well as by two individual independent experts on energetic materials.” The experts specifically assessed the ‘staging’ scenario put forward by the Syrian government, in which the rebels would have planted a ground explosive to pull off an attack that would look like an aerial bomb, and concluded the following:

“With regard to the suggestion that the crater may have been caused by an explosive charge placed on the ground, the expert noted that that was contradicted by the following: (a) the appearance of the edges of the surrounding pavement, where little fragmentation was seen; (b) the absence of an elevated rim around the crater; (c) the relatively few cracks in the pavement around the crater; and (d) the existence of objects buried deep in the crater. The expert also dismissed the suggestion that the crater may have been made by excavation and the emplacement of the objects found therein on account of the following: (a) the jagged appearance of the edges; (b) the radial cracks formed in the pavement; (c) the depth at which the objects were buried in the crater; and (d) the lack of any sign of the tools used to excavate the crater, which would have left marks on the edges. The expert concluded that it was very unlikely for the crater to have been caused by any ground-launched weapon, an explosive charge or liquid filled warhead emplaced on the ground, or an excavation and emplacement of the objects found therein.”

There are more technical details of the expert input, but here is the main summary (p. 26):

“The experts agreed that the crater was unlikely to have been caused by high explosives as there were too few visible signs of damage through fragmentation or overpressure, especially on the metal cabinet located 3 to 5m away from the crater. The expert analysis found that the characteristics of the crater were consistent with having been hit by a heavy object travelling at a high velocity, probably with a liquid fill. Any explosion from the burster charge would be small and, furthermore, the liquid surrounding the burster charge would have absorbed most of the energy from the explosion. The Mechanism notes that, based on the foregoing, the characteristics of the crater are more likely to have been caused by an aerial bomb with a small explosive charge, and that it probably contained liquid.”

This provides the context for the JIM report’s assessment of the balance of evidence. Without a compelling alternative explanation of the impact crater, the investigators seem to have concluded that the irregularities in the recording of the arrival of patients at hospitals were, in itself, not strong enough evidence of a ‘staging scenario’ that could counter the implications of all the other data. The investigators argued that some of these irregularities could have been a result of propaganda, but not direct evidence of having orchestrated the entire incident. Noting (p. 29) that “potentially important irregularities were identified throughout the rescue operation and in medical records,” the report concluded that “they may be explained by factors such as poor training or the chaotic conditions, or by attempts to inflate the gravity of the situation for depiction in the media.”

In addition, further potential corroborative evidence for a 'staging' scenario has collapsed. The most influential accounts claiming to have identified hard evidence that the rebels had acquired sarin or had developed their own ability to produce sarin – chiefly related to Seymour Hersh's stories – are unsubstantiated and incoherent.

While there has been speculation in the press over the years, usually sourced to anonymous intelligence officials, about the possibility that rebels may have attempted to acquire chemical weapons from captured Syrian military stockpiles, the Syrian government itself has flat out denied this,¹⁸⁹ and the OPCW confirmed that of the 23 CW sites originally declared by Syria, none had been compromised by rebel forces.¹⁹⁰ One might imagine that if the Syrian military had lost track of any of its own most dangerous sarin stockpiles, such highly incriminating information with respect to the rebels would have been turned over to the OPCW. With no credible evidence that the rebels had either the capacity to produce sarin or access to Syrian military sarin stockpiles, there is nowhere for these alternative narratives to go.

The same JIM report demonstrated the use of sulphur mustard agent by ISIS. This follows a range of credible public record sources confirming ISIS' use of low-level chemical weapons. But there is no decisive evidence that rebel groups were in a position to have framed Bashar al-Assad for sarin gas attacks.

Indeed, a comprehensive analysis of the available data was conducted by George Chapman of Kings College London for the journal *Perspectives on Terrorism*. He found that between 2014 and 2017, ISIS appeared to have conducted as many as 71 chemical weapon attacks. These were largely "low-level" and involved either chlorine or mustard gas, leading to low fatalities. Chapman further found that "there is a lack of evidence proving that al-Nusra have been using CW [chemical weapons]... In contrast to IS [Islamic State], where a repeated and well documented pattern of usage can be observed, there is insufficient evidence to claim that al-Nusra have been using CW."¹⁹¹

What one makes of these findings will depend on one's pre-existing cognitive biases about the conflict. But it is indisputable that the Syrian and Russian governments conceded that their original claims about the Khan Shaykhoun attack were entirely false. In other words, they lied. Being caught in such a specific lie about the attack – to the point of concocting an entire panoply of fake narrative details – is, perhaps, the most significant pointer as to whether the JIM report's assessment of the balance of evidence is correct. This, of course, is damning for Seymour Hersh and his 'fact-checkers' at VIPS. Hersh's sources, who claimed access to real intelligence from inside the US government, either lied, or were lied to. These lies repeatedly echoed previously published lies put forward by VIPS and some of its members, who made the same claim to information confirmed by active US intelligence contacts. Hersh himself echoes these lies with a series of narratives that are completely incoherent – but which contribute to an ongoing mythology of the conflict embraced across large sectors of the mainstream anti-war movement around the world. This does a massive disservice to that movement. It also did a massive disservice to the Syrian people.

189 CBRNE World (February 2014) http://www.cbrneworld.com/uploads/download_magazines/Sellstrom_Feb_2014_v2.pdf

190 OPCW (25 November 2013) https://www.opcw.org/fileadmin/OPCW/EC/M-35/ecm35dg01_e.pdf

191 Geoffrey Chapman, 'Islamic State and Al-Nusra: Exploring Determinants of Chemical Weapons Usage Patterns', *Perspectives on Terrorism* (2017) <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/660/html>

Asked whether he planned to issue retractions for the inaccuracies his stories had promoted, Hersh failed to respond to multiple specific queries about these issues. He finally offered a cryptic response in which he did not take the opportunity to deny having relied on VIPS: “you are free to assume after more than 50 yrs in the biz, with what most outsiders would conclude has been a fair amount of success, that i have no other information than what a group of retired officials and a long retired cia officer write.” He went on to admit that he was entirely unaware that the Syrian and Russian governments had changed their positions on Khan Shaykhoun, and offered a further clue as to his sources as follows:

“i have not followed official stmts [statements] re the 2017 bombing... moved on to other issues... but if there was, as i wrote, a secret gathering of opposition leaders that was penetrated initially by russian intel and covertly shared with the u.s. (u.s-russian cooperation on intel re Isis, al nusra, etc. and the remaining whackos in Idlib province goes well beyond mere deconfliction, which i hope you realize is pretty obvious), why should official spokesmen or even foreign ministry have any inkling of such?”

His comments confirmed that his former US intelligence source(s) had received the bulk of their alleged ‘intelligence’ from *Russian intelligence sources*; this ‘intelligence’ had, it was “pretty obvious” according to Hersh, been shared with US intelligence under a longstanding protocol. So Hersh’s sources had either seen this Russian intelligence directly from Russian sources, or indirectly from US sources who had access to it. But either way, by his own admission, the information Hersh had reported comprised precisely of *claims being made by Russian intelligence and passed on to their US counterparts* – a fact that he had not fully disclosed in his actual articles. Yet Hersh showed no interest at all in pursuing the fact that the Russians themselves were forced to eventually acknowledge that their original ‘intelligence’, whether or not it was shared with the Americans, *was false*.

This is the sort of grim context in which claims and counter-claims around the Douma incident must be evaluated.

It also suggests that the ‘probability analysis’ of the Khan Shaykhoun attack produced by Professor Paul McKeigue, a member of the Syria, Propaganda and Media Working Group steered from the UK – a group of academics addressing various issues around Western propaganda on Syria – appears less than convincing.¹⁹² It is the same sort of misleading ‘probability’ analysis produced by Professor Michael Spagat in his attempts to debunk high Iraq War death toll estimates based on standard epidemiological surveys, which I in turn debunked in 2015.¹⁹³ Such techniques use artificial assumptions often with little grounding in reality to calculate hypothetical probability numbers which give an appearance of science, though they are in fact statistical sleights of hands, weighted according to the bias of the tester and the assumptions s/he is applying. In McKeigue’s case, among other issues, his analysis did not calculate the core probabilities for his own scenario: the rebels being capable of developing the chemical warfare expertise to self-produce sarin entirely undetected, in order to stage a ground-based sarin explosion in such a way that it would precisely mimic the impact of an aerial bomb, while choreographing all eyewitness accounts in the aftermath including from victims who survived exposure. To wit, there was no corroboration at all from witnesses including survivors pointing to such a staging scenario.

192 Paul McKeigue, ‘Who is Responsible for Chemical Weapons Attacks in Syria?’ (31 August 2017) <https://timhayward.wordpress.com/2017/08/31/who-is-responsible-for-chemical-attacks-in-syria-guest-blog-by-professor-paul-mckeigue-part-2/>

193 Ahmed, ‘How the Pentagon is hiding the dead’, INSURGE (21 April 2015) <https://medium.com/insurge-intelligence/how-the-pentagon-is-hiding-the-dead-862a7b45ce57>

As an aside, McKeigue might have spent his time better by calculating the probabilities around Bashar al-Assad's spectacular landslide election victory in 2014. According to Professor Andrew Gelman, Director of the Applied Statistics Center at Columbia University, analysis of the Syrian government's published data regarding the vote revealed clear evidence that they were fabricated.¹⁹⁴ The results were "too accurate" – all the percentages were artificially rounded. Gelman breaks down the numbers:

“Assad: $0.887 * 11634412 = 10319723.4$

Nouri: $0.043 * 11634412 = 500279.7$

Hajjar: $0.032 * 11634412 = 372301.2$

Invalid ballots: $0.038 * 11634412 = 442107.7$

In each case, the reported vote total is a rounded version of the exact percentage (even, oddly enough, the reported number of invalid ballots). What's the probability of this happening? The exact percentages are $0.001 * 11634412 = 11634$ votes apart. Each exact percentage could come to two different reported votes (as you could round up or down), thus the chance of accidentally hitting an exact percentage is 1 in $11634/2=5817$.”¹⁹⁵

This would then have to happen three further times, independently. Gelman concluded that the probability of the vote numbers occurring as the government claimed was minuscule, “approximately $1/5817$ to the 4th power, or 5×10^{-12} .” The probability is so low that Gelman couldn't bring himself to compute it. “It's such an extreme number, it's just silly. Enough to say that the evidence is clear.”

All of which just goes to highlight the ethical dubiousness of sceptical discourses which advocate a sort of hero-worship of Bashar al-Assad.

Where does this leave us?

Anomalies in official narratives of Syrian chemical weapons incidents do exist. Rebel groups have engaged in propaganda, with Western backing. Narratives around key incidents are highly contested, and subject to 'information battles' from all sides. In these circumstances, the possibility that the findings of official investigations might be politicised should not be dismissed, and sceptical journalists who doggedly document holes in these investigations are doing an important public service.

Indeed, there is some alarming evidence of staging and theatrics by elements among the rebels, particularly among Islamist militants, of which journalists should be more discerning. And there can be no doubt that much of what Western journalists report derives from partisan pro-opposition sources. In doing so, these journalists are at risk of sanitising, concealing or simply ignoring horrifying crimes committed by various rebel groups, while effectively cheerleading Western government support for them. This is certainly propaganda.

194 SANA, <https://sana.sy/eng/393/2014/06/04/548613.htm>

195 Statistical Modeling, Causal Inference, and Social Science, 'The Syrian p-value I didn't bother to calculate' (12 June 2014) <http://andrewgelman.com/2014/06/12/syrian-p-value-didnt-bother-calculate/>

Yet sceptics situated on both the right and left of the political spectrum have often, in their efforts to scrutinise official narratives, drawn uncritically on information gleaned from sources that are also partisan: the governments of Syria and Russia. And in doing so, they too have promulgated grotesque propaganda. In some cases, this propaganda is cynically used by Assad and his Russian backers to justify horrifying war crimes.

In short, however problematic the official narrative(s) might be, the alternative narratives being put forward are incoherent in numerous ways, and often produced in alignment with sources sympathetic or connected to Assad's government. This means that the arguments of some Western foreign policy critics claiming that Syrian chemical weapons incidents are 'false flag' events are unsustainable. On balance, they appear to be even more, or at least as, unsustainable as official narratives – depending on one's preconceptions about the conflict.

Worse, arguments claiming that the 'false flag' nature of major chemical weapon attacks in Syria is unequivocally proven, have been intermingled with a range of propaganda promoted by the Syrian, Iranian and Russian governments to argue that Bashar al-Assad's authoritarian nature and indiscriminate violence against civilians is largely fabricated. The collapse into incoherence of these 'false flag' narratives throws light on the bankrupt character of these sweeping wholesale denials.

What we have seen is that the politicisation of information about the conflict is increasingly toxic. There are limitations and anomalies in official narratives and investigations of some of the most controversial chemical weapons incidents in Syria. White House assessments have often been cobbled together in haste, and rushed to judgement before firm evidence is available. The US, British and French governments appear to have lied about the destruction of a chemical weapons facility in Barzah, which was certified safe by the OPCW just months beforehand. Other problems relate to the chain of custody of samples, the reliance on pro-rebel witnesses, discrepancies in witness accounts, and anomalies in physical evidence whose implications are not always clear. These are legitimate grounds to challenge the haste with which militarised policy decisions are being made by Western governments, without needing to resort to blanket denialism of Assad's crimes, or insistence on having compelling proof of 'false flags'. Parallel with this, the real danger of Islamist militants exploiting the dynamics of the conflict to influence opposition movements and weaken moderate forces is often underplayed – and as a result, systematic war crimes and human rights abuses committed by some rebel groups against locals, including horrendous mini police-state type conditions enforcing draconian 'Shariah' rules, are underreported. The continued financing and propaganda support to rebel forces is then questionably justified on 'humanitarian' grounds, with chemical weapons incidents cynically exploited by governments to cement the necessity of continued self-serving Western involvement – including limited military action and potentially the permanent occupation of parts of Syria by the Gulf states, neither of which offer much promise of being effective in leading to an end to violence.

So far, though, there are no compelling or coherent alternative narratives of the main chemical weapons incidents in Syria (I say ‘main’ in the acknowledgement that there have been dozens which the left have ignored, with focus being only on ‘main’ incidents receiving mainstream media attention). Syrian and Russian government narratives are frequently ever shifting, riddled with contradictions, and in some cases brazenly dishonest. Both governments have demonstrably and repeatedly lied on major issues. The Syrian government has repeatedly lied about its possession and destruction of chemical weapons, and in tandem with Russia, has deliberately put forward false narratives of these incidents which it has been forced to retract as evidence later emerges. Eyewitness accounts canvassed by Syria and Russia in Douma to defend their innocence are contradictory, mutually inconsistent, and undertaken in circumstances of complete unaccountability (and with strong evidence of the routine practice of duress). Parallel with this, all opposition to Assad is routinely demonised by Syrian and Russian state media as nothing more than an extension of Islamist terror, with all rebel groups wrongly conflated as deceptive iterations of al-Qaeda. Massive war crimes and human rights abuses against civilians are denied, carpet bombing is deemed a fabrication, torture is belittled as a Western invention, and overall military violence by Syrian forces in opposition areas – no matter how likely to be destructive for civilians – is sanitised as a ‘war on terror’ for the anti-imperialist ‘liberation’ of Syria.

Death toll statistics, too, are hotly disputed. Given Assad’s superior military power, it is likely that the Russian- and Iranian-augmented Syrian military bears responsibility for the bulk of the violence.¹⁹⁶ But whatever your perspective on where the weight of culpability belongs, the grim outcome from all this is that the horrendous suffering of the Syrian people continues, with the complicity of both Assad and various rebel groups – and thus, with the complicity of Syria’s backers – Iran and Russia – as well as the West. The UN Independent Commission of Inquiry on the siege of Aleppo from July 2016 to February 2017 had set this out unequivocally, documenting that Assad’s forces and rebel groups were all responsible for systematic violence against civilians.¹⁹⁷

“Government and pro-Government forces continue to attack civilian objects including hospitals, schools and water stations... The terrorist group Jabhat Fatah al-Sham persists in carrying out summary executions including of women, and recruiting children in Idlib governorate. Coordinated attacks undertaken by the terrorist group alongside armed groups launched by indirect artillery fire resulted in dozens of civilian casualties, including many children... Armed groups launched numerous indiscriminate attacks with indirect fire artillery systems, including with unguided, locally manufactured weapons, killing and maiming civilians in Aleppo, Idlib and Dara’a governorates. Armed groups based in Idlib further exacted justice through the use of ‘shari’a courts’ which lacked fair trial standards, while other groups carried out arbitrary arrests, detentions, enforced disappearances and committed torture countrywide...”

196 Foreign Policy (13 January 2016) <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/01/13/the-war-over-syrias-war-dead/>; Megan Price and Patrick Ball, ‘Selection bias and the statistical patterns of mortality in conflict’, *Statistical Journal of the IAOS* (2015) <https://content.iospress.com/download/statistical-journal-of-the-iaos/sji899?id=statistical-journal-of-the-iaos%2Fsjj899>

197 http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/SY/A_HRC_34_CRP.3_E.docx

The arguments of critics of Western policy – that many of the groups being supported by the West are culpable in grave abuses and hardly offer a viable, democratic alternative to Assad; that the growing power of Islamist militant groups in particular has heightened abusive behaviour across a range of rebel forces; that billions of dollars in funding from the West, Gulf states and Turkey to support these groups means Western governments are culpable in their crimes, and in the propaganda that sanitises those crimes – is neither conspiratorial, nor unfounded, but fully supported by official investigations. However, by aligning with highly questionable narratives augmented by Russian state propaganda efforts, some critics of Western policy do themselves no favours. On the contrary, as we will see below, in the name of ‘anti-imperialism’, they are aligning themselves with another brutal node of Empire. They are complicit in the repression of Syrian self-determination.



*A meeting between Vladimir Putin and US President Donald Trump took place on the sidelines of the G20 summit, 7 July 2017
Source: President of Russia / Kremlin.ru*

6. Whose imperialism?

Critics of Western policy rightly highlight self-serving interests of the US, British and French in the outcome of the Syrian conflict. One of the issues that is widely misunderstood is the role of energy interests in the conflict, a matter which is either oversimplified by journalists, overemphasised by activists, or dismissed as unfounded by a number of observers with very little understanding of energy geopolitics.

Propagandists such as Beeley and Bartlett have gone even further in casting their advocacy of Syrian, Iranian and Russian government policies in the conflict as a form of principled 'anti-imperialism', a morally-obligatory 'resistance' against Western imperial machinations in Syria.

Such approaches ignore, and fail to understand, Russia's role within a global imperial system. To be sure this is a system dominated by Anglo-American power. But it is a system, with multiple centres of power competing for access to resources and wealth in strategic territories. Just as the West can be critiqued for its imperial approach to Syria, it can be demonstrated that Russia's interests in Syria represent a form of unmitigated imperialism, that is as much *against* the interests of the Syrian people – and even its government – as Western strategy.

6.1 Energy geopolitics

Russia has all but admitted the same. In 2014, a study by the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) authored by Professor Irina Ahmed Zain Aidrous of the Economics Department at the People's Friendship University of Russia, noted that Syria "has long held a particularly special place in the transit of energy resources" and underscores that Russia's interest has always been to nullify this potential:

"Back in 2009 Bashar al-Assad announced Syria's energy strategy and began taking steps to realize the country's transit-center potential. Under this strategy, Syria was to become a regional hub for hydrocarbon transportation between the Persian Gulf and the Black, Caspian and Mediterranean seas.

In September 2010, the governments of Syria and Iraq signed a memorandum of understanding for the construction of two oil pipelines and one gas pipeline to carry gas and oil from Iraq's Akkas and Kirkuk fields, respectively.

In July 2011, Syria, Iraq and Iran signed a tripartite MoU to build a pipeline that would transport gas from Iran's South Pars gas field, the world's biggest, through Iraq to the Syrian coast of the Mediterranean with a possible line to Lebanon. The commissioning of the pipeline with a design capacity of 110 million cubic meters per day and a cost of \$10 billion was scheduled for 2016."¹⁹⁸

198 RIAC, 'Future Maps of Syrian Transport Corridors' Russian International Affairs Council (24 April 2014) <http://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/future-maps-of-syrian-transport-corridors/>

The document points out that, obviously, the outbreak of conflict “makes the implementation of such projects essentially impossible”. While noting that the projects’ feasibility would require a wide range of factors to come together (depending on “the political situation in the country, geopolitical interests of the leading countries in the world, and also on the energy interests of the neighboring countries, primarily Turkey, Iraq and Iran”), the study goes on to conclude, bluntly, that Russia’s interest is to simply abort the project:

“Construction of the Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline poses a potential threat to Russia, as it would serve an alternative source of gas delivery to European markets and could undermine Gazprom’s monopoly position.”

The paper observes that “a number of European countries are totally dependent on Russian gas supplies.” If Europe succeeds in reducing this dependence, “the volume of Russian gas imports” would “fall by 45 billion cubic meters per year... Under such conditions, pushing Russia out of the European markets would be quite problematic.” The Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline is a particular threat:

“... if the above pipeline is built and commissioned, Russia’s position in the global gas market and in Europe in particular would be more vulnerable. So Europe is clearly interested in the emergence of new transport arteries that would allow it to achieve energy security.”

The paper assesses that the US is “chiefly pursuing its geopolitical interests in Syria, ones that go far beyond the control of or participation in energy transportation routes from Syria and the neighboring countries”; while Turkey’s interest is to use Syria to enable its own “energy strategy, a key direction of which is becoming a major energy transit hub... Turkey needs Syria to implement its plans to connect the Arab Gas Pipeline with its national gas system and is interested in the use of the Syrian transport infrastructure.” The Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline, on the other hand, “could potentially reduce Turkey’s importance as an energy hub.”

Russia’s presence in Syria, then, is not motivated to support the Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline as an alternative route. *It is motivated to suppress it.* The document offers unambiguous evidence that Syria’s potential as a major Middle East oil and gas transshipment hub to Europe, fundamentally contradicts Russia’s monopoly goal of maintaining Europe’s dependence. In short, Russia has carefully exploited Syria’s invitation to militarily intervene in the conflict to scupper any prospect of Assad challenging Russia’s goal of dominating regional energy markets and undermining Gazprom’s hegemony in Europe.

The RIAC was originally founded in 2010 under the order of then-President Dmitry Medvedev, with the goal of aiding Russia’s soft power efforts. Its strategic mission is to facilitate communication between government officials and the expert, business and civil society communities on foreign policy decisions. The think-tank is, essentially, a foreign policy mouthpiece for the Russian establishment. Its Corporate Members include Alfa Group, Lukoil, Severstal and other major Russian companies, and the organisation is currently headed up by Igor Ivanov, former Russian Foreign Minister from 1998 to 2004. After that, Ivanov was appointed by Vladimir Putin to the post of Secretary of the Security Council. He is also a long-time director at Lukoil. His successor, current Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, sits on the RIAC’s Board of Trustees.

As the proxy war rages on, Russia has moved rapidly to consolidate its position relative to Syria's energy potential.¹⁹⁹ In December 2013, Russian oil firm SoyuzNefteGaz signed a 25-year deal with Syria to explore for oil off the country's Mediterranean coast. In May 2016, Syria invited Lukoil, Gazprom Neft and Zarubezhneft among other Russian oil majors, to rebuild Syria's oil and gas infrastructure and kickstart pipeline construction.²⁰⁰

According to Dr Victoria Kelly Clark, a senior analyst at Global Risk Insights, this is just the beginning of a concerted effort to insert a permanent economic footprint across the region – and this is where Western interests in maintaining dominance over the global oil economy come in. Russian imperial overtures are increasingly impinging on the present Anglo-American centre of power in the world system.

“The recent agreements from oil and gas giants like Rosneft and Gazprom Neft's with Syria, Iraq and the Kurds are just the start of Russia's economic permeation of the Middle East,” writes Kelly Clark. “Rosneft alone has been estimated to have spent 4 billion on Kurdish oil and gas prospects in the past year. While companies such as Euro Polis have signed deals that will give them 25% of Syria's oil and gas revenues from recaptured fields. Private security companies like Stroytransgaz are also set to start investing large sums thanks to Russia's policy that rewards private security contractors who secure territory from the extremists.”

The danger for “both Western and NATO interests in the region”, she argues, is that Russia could become “the Middle East's, and by extension the global energy industries', power broker for the 21st century”, chiefly through the change in structure of the energy market, especially OPEC. Increasing cooperation between Russia and Saudi Arabia has forged an alliance between OPEC and non-OPEC oil-producers, creating for the first time “a coterie of likeminded MENA oil producers who can see the benefit in the creation of a global oil cartel led by an aggressive Russia.”

The addition of Syria to Russia's energy arsenal is no small matter. European gas and oil suppliers are worried because, Kelly Clark writes:

“... with the addition of the Syrian 'Tap' to Russia's pre-existing control over the Baltic and Black Seas pipelines, Nord Stream-2 and Turk Stream, Russia is now in a position to circumvent Eastern European countries and their transit fees, and place themselves firmly in control of the EU's gas imports, including those from the Middle East.”

It is no surprise, then, that US and European policymakers have articulated an interest in the outcome of competition over contested Middle East pipeline routes involving Syria. Some observers have argued that many of these pipeline routes have little feasibility and are ultimately fantastical in nature – a matter we will address below. But a range of evidence from think-tank studies, to feasibility studies, from government reports, to industry documents, shows decisively that governments around the world have eagerly tracked the progress of these potential pipelines.

199 RT (20 May 2016) <https://www.rt.com/business/343783-syria-energy-companies-infrastructure/>

200 Los Angeles Times (26 December 2013) <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/dec/26/world/la-fg-wn-russia-energy-oil-gas-syria-20131226>

201 Global Risk Insights (23 December 2017) <https://globalriskinsights.com/2017/12/russia-middle-east-endgame/>

I have brought to light some of this material in previous reporting.²⁰² In 2012, the US Department of the Interior published a US Geological Survey Minerals Yearbook, which noted that the Syrian conflict had put paid to the Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline plan:

“In the summer of 2011, Iran, Iraq and Syria signed a memorandum of understanding on laying a 5,000-kilometer pipeline, to be named the Islamic Gas Pipeline. The proposed pipeline would transport gas resources from Iran’s South Pars field and would extend through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon and to Europe under the Mediterranean Sea. Iran had suggested that the Islamic Gas Pipeline could serve as an alternative to the EU-backed Nabucco pipeline, which was set to supply Europe with gas resources by way of Turkey and Austria.”

“The war and sanctions had an adverse effect on Syrian hydrocarbon sector activity, including development, exploration, export, production, transportation, and distribution,” observed the US Geological Survey report. In an important acknowledgement of the reality of Syria’s potential as a facilitator of gas supplies to Europe, the document added: “As the war continued in the country, Syria’s prospect of becoming a significant energy transit country to Iraq, the Mediterranean area, and Europe was severely diminished.”

Another indication of a connection between the war and Western interests in Syria’s energy potential came from a 2014 report published by the US Army’s Strategic Studies Institute (SSI).²⁰³ It provided compelling evidence that American, British and Gulf defence strategists see untapped Mediterranean energy resources as an opportunity to wean Europe off dependence on Russian gas, and boost Israel’s energy independence. As part of this process, the report revealed, military action was viewed as potentially necessary to secure Syria’s untapped offshore gas resources, which overlap with the territorial waters of other Mediterranean powers, including Israel, Egypt, Lebanon, Cyprus, Greece and Turkey.

The report by Mohammed El-Katiri, an advisor to the United Arab Emirates Ministry of Defence and formerly a research director at the UK Ministry of Defence’s (MoD) Advanced Research and Assessment Group (ARAG), explicitly acknowledged that a post-conflict Syria would open up new prospects for energy exploration: “Once the Syria conflict is resolved, prospects for Syrian offshore production – provided commercial resources are found – are high,” wrote El-Katiri. Potential oil and gas resources can be developed “relatively smoothly once the political situation allows for any new exploration efforts in its offshore territories.”

The US Army SSI report noted that Syria’s offshore resources are part of a wider matrix of oil and gas deposits in the Levant basin encompassing the offshore territories of these competing states. The region is estimated to hold approximately 1.7 billion barrels of oil and 122 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, which could be just a third of the basin’s total hydrocarbons.

“US diplomatic and military support has a pivotal role to play”, the report concluded, in “managing” conflicts and tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, especially the prospect of “Syria destabilising into *de facto* civil war.” The importance of a US military role “will only grow as the value of the natural resources at stake increases,” the Army SSI report said: “US security and military support for its main allies in the case of an eruption of natural resource conflict in the East Mediterranean may prove essential in managing possible future conflict.”

202 Ahmed, ‘Western firms primed to cash in on Syria’s oil and gas “frontier”’, INSURGE (1 December 2015)

<https://medium.com/insurge-intelligence/western-firms-plan-to-cash-in-on-syria-s-oil-and-gas-frontier-6c5fa4a72a92>

203 Ahmed, Middle East Eye (1 January 2015)

<http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/us-army-report-calls-military-support-israeli-energy-grab-57185571>

Indeed, in the years prior to the 2011 uprising, international oil majors were agitating for access to Syrian oil and gas resources. A major study by the French oil services company CGG Veritas that year described Syria's offshore resources as "a truly frontier area of exploration", based on the discovery of several "flat-spots" which, if real, "will represent billion-barrel/multi-TCF [trillion cubic feet] drilling targets given the scale and volumetrics of the structures within which they occur."²⁰⁴

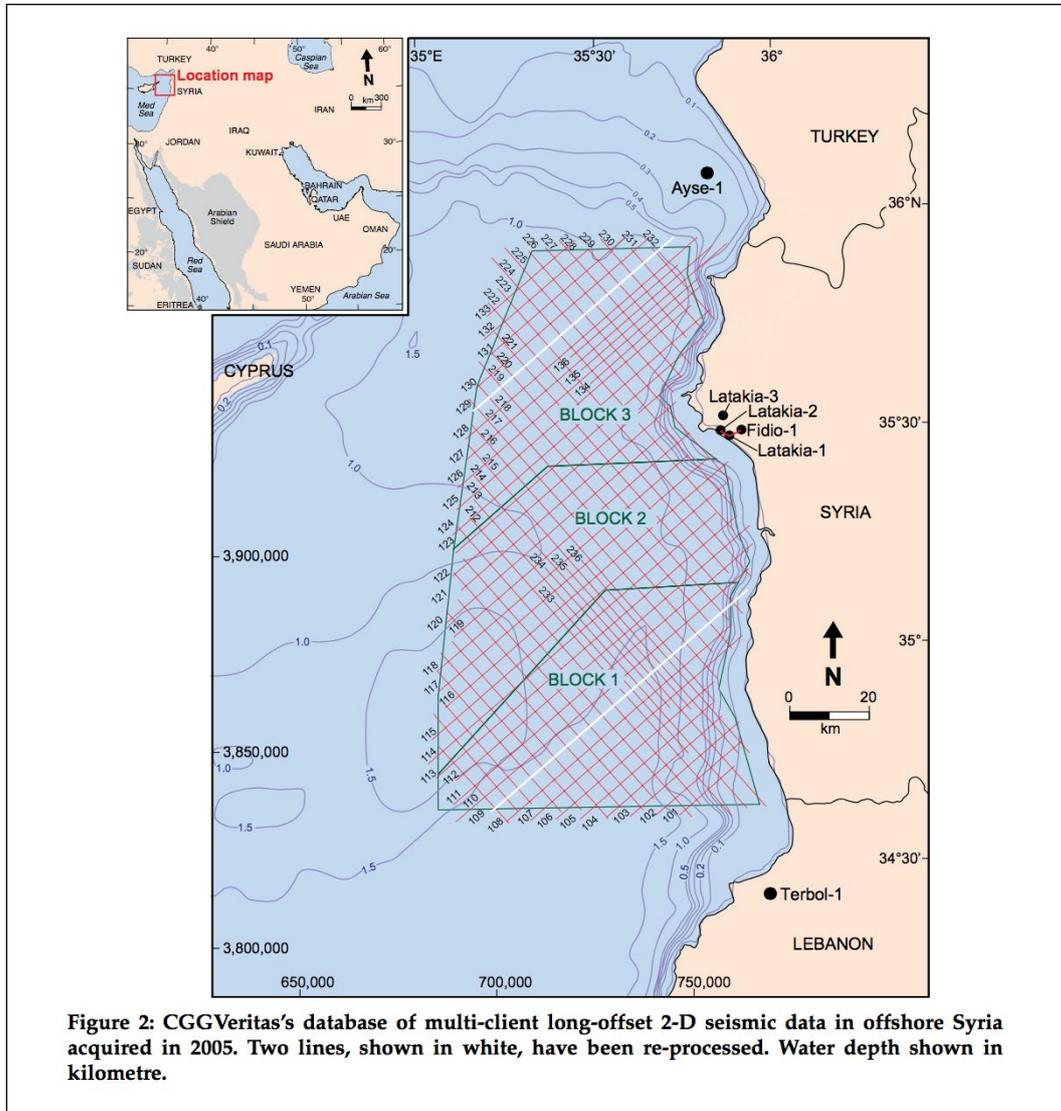


Fig14 – CGG Veritas map of seismic data on Syrian offshore fields from 2011 GeoArabia study (See note 202)

A presentation deck obtained by INSURGE produced for the Syrian Ministry of Petroleum proved that, as of October 2010, British firm Shell would take the lead in developing a grand plan for the coming Syrian oil bonanza. "Shell will devise a master plan for the development of the gas sector in Syria, following an agreement signed with the Ministry of Petroleum," said the presentation slides. "The agreement includes an assessment of the overall undiscovered gas potential in Syria, potential for upstream gas production, need for gas transmission and distribution networks..."²⁰⁵

204 See note 202

205 As above

Overview of the Gas industry

- **Natural gas production reached 18 million cubic meters/day in 2007 of which 87% was used for electric power generation and 13% for major industrial plants.**
- **The government has plans to convert power plants and heavy industries from oil to gas feedstock to make more crude oil available for export.**
- **Shell will devise a master plan for the development of the gas sector in Syria, following an agreement signed with the Ministry of Petroleum. The agreement includes an assessment of the overall undiscovered gas potential in Syria, potential for upstream gas production, need for gas transmission and distribution networks and the opportunities for small**



Fig15 - Slide from 2010 Syrian Ministry of Petroleum presentation obtained by INSURGE (mistake in final sentence is from the original)

As the RIAC paper reveals, in this context, Syria's potential as a transshipment hub to transport Middle East oil and gas to Europe was considered a major threat to Russian interests. Equally, Russia's increasing monopoly encroachment on Syria has threatened to undermine US and European goals to integrate Syria into global energy markets on their own terms, at Russia's expense.

A number of commentators have cast doubt on the pre-eminent role of energy geopolitics as one of the drivers behind the conflict. But in many ways, they miss the mark. Gareth Porter, for instance, has argued that there is no evidence that an alternative pipeline route backed by Qatar through Syria to Turkey, designed to bypass Russia (and therefore more favourable to Western interests), was rejected by Assad in 2009.²⁰⁶

As I reported for *The Guardian* in 2013, that pipeline route had been touted by Qatar and proposed to Turkey in August 2009. According to AFP, the idea was rejected by Assad that year.²⁰⁷ Porter points out that the AFP claim of Assad's rejection is not corroborated anywhere else. This, he suggests, means that if Assad didn't actually reject that pipeline, then the claimed Western motive for hostility toward him disappears.

Similarly, Robin Mills argues in *The National* that as the Qatar-Turkey pipeline was already blocked by Saudi Arabia (whose territory it was supposed to go through) in 2010 (before the 2011 uprising), then there was no need for the West to undermine Assad to promote the Qatar-Turkey pipeline because it was impossible anyway.²⁰⁸ So Porter and Mills rightly point out some basic issues with the idea that Western hostility to Assad was motivated primarily by his rejection of one hypothetical Qatari pipeline project.

²⁰⁶ Porter, 'The war against the Assad regime is not a "pipeline" war', Truthout (21 September 2016) <https://truthout.org/articles/the-war-against-the-assad-regime-is-not-a-pipeline-war/>

Paul Cochrane further argues in *Middle East Eye* along with Mills that the Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline plan, in any case, is completely infeasible and uneconomical, viewed as a fantasy by the wider industry.²⁰⁹ Mills and oil industry sources cited by Cochrane point out that Iran's export plans remain a mess due to the country's massive domestic gas consumption, which is so high that it is dramatically impinging its hopes to expand its export capacity in such a way that could make the pipeline plan feasible.

Mitchell Orenstein and George Romer in *Foreign Affairs* acknowledge the role of pipeline geopolitics while underplaying Western interests in this regard, and focusing purely on Russian interests in Syria, with Russia portrayed as the sole self-interested 'bad actor' in the conflict.²¹⁰

But these arguments miss the point, and ignore a range of evidence from the historical record, as well as major industry assessments. The key issue was never about one or two pipeline routes, but the reality of competing Western and Russian interests in Syria's potential as an energy transshipment hub. The Qatar-Turkey pipeline running through Syria was only ever one slim possibility. The most pertinent factor is that in the years before the war, the West was actively seeking to mobilise Syria's wider pipeline potential, particularly as a supplier to Europe, *through multiple routes*: an endeavour that was thwarted by the outbreak of civil unrest in 2011. It is not entirely surprising that Porter, Mills, Cochrane, Orenstein and Romer ignore this historical record, though — because until now, it has never been fully documented. We unearth that record below with reference to State Department documents which have never been reported before.

According to VOA News, the same year that Qatar put forward its pipeline proposal for Turkey, Assad had re-affirmed his own vision: "Syria's Assad, however, during a state visit to Turkey in 2009, several years before a sectarian conflict erupted and relations with Turkey soured, insisted that Syria would be an ideal transit country for a pipeline from the Gulf to the Mediterranean."²¹¹

An archived Syria country report by the US Energy Information Administration (EIA) also confirms that in 2009 Assad signed a deal with Turkey which completely ignored the Qatar proposal: "A memorandum of understanding with Turkey was signed in 2009 under which Turkey would build a 56-mile pipeline on its side of the border to link into the AGP [Arab Gas Pipeline] extension that Syria is building from Aleppo to Kilis, due to be completed by the beginning of 2012. According to the agreement, Syria would receive between 17.5 and 35 Bcf of Turkish gas annually for 5 years."²¹² The AGP route was planned to supply Egyptian gas to Jordan and Syria, and eventually to Europe, but as we see below, it was also actively planned that Iraq would be integrated into the route to offset Egyptian shortfalls (another issue fudged by Cochrane's sources).

207 Ahmed, Guardian (30 August 2013)

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/earth-insight/2013/aug/30/syria-chemical-attack-war-intervention-oil-gas-energy-pipelines>

208 Robin Mills, 'Syria's pipeline gas theory is a low-budget drama', National (25 September 2016)

<https://www.thenational.ae/business/robin-mills-syria-s-gas-pipeline-theory-is-a-low-budget-drama-1.232534>

209 Paul Cochrane, 'The 'Pipelineistan' conspiracy: The war in Syria has never been about gas', Middle East Eye (10 May 2017)

<http://www.middleeasteye.net/essays/pipelineistan-conspiracy-why-war-syria-was-never-about-gas-144022537>

210 Foreign Affairs, 'Putin's gas attack' (14 October 2015) <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2015-10-14/putins-gas-attack>

211 VOA News (25 March 2017) <https://www.voanews.com/a/energy-rivalries-exacerbate-tensions-middle-east/3781864.html>

212 EIA Country Analysis Brief, 'Syria' (August 2011) archived

<https://web.archive.org/web/20111101192439/www.eia.gov/countries/cab.cfm?fips=SY>

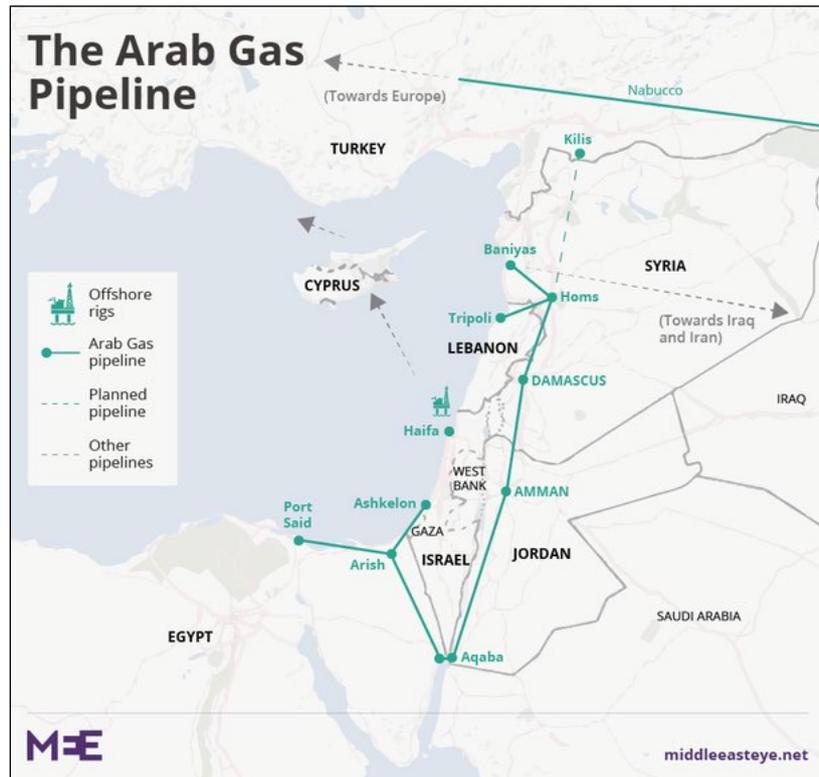


Fig 16 – The Arab Gas Pipeline (Source: Middle East Eye)

Secret US diplomatic cables reveal that Western interest in the idea had begun much earlier. In 2004, a confidential cable from the US embassy in Ankara described Turkish government plans “to become the transit hub for Caspian and Middle East natural gas to Europe.” European companies “were eager to buy gas from Iran”, but officials also said that “Turkey is looking at other longer-term options, such as gas from Iraq, Syria, Qatar and Egypt.”²¹³

A confidential cable from the US embassy in Damascus in 2005 highlighted Syria’s domestic oil production crisis, but emphasised the exciting potential to exploit the country’s unconventional resources: “Though its easy oil has already been exploited, Syria retains oil and gas resources that are of interest to international companies.” Industry sources were optimistic about “rising natural gas production” and believed that “Syria could witness significant new production coming on-line at just the right time in three to five years.” The document included an assessment from William Duey, the general manager for US oil major Conoco Phillips, who described international oil interest in Syria as “frothing”. Duey said that Syria’s oil market “is attractive to medium and small companies that are unable to get their foot in the door in other markets. Duey commented further that because of its lax environmental and regulatory policies, Syria is viewed as a good place for companies that aspire to becoming operators...” The document acknowledged that other oil majors were more pessimistic about Syrian prospects, but it is clear that a significant section of the Western oil and gas industry was closely watching Syrian developments.²¹⁴

By 2007, ongoing Syrian mismanagement of its oil industry had dampened US government conviction in its capacity to mobilise domestic production. This kickstarted concerted exploration of Syria’s energy hub potential. Noting Syria’s domestic gas deficit, the document reported the Syrian government’s ambition to bridge this gap “through increased imports via the Arab Gas Pipeline (AGP), intended to carry Egyptian natural gas to Europe via Jordan, Syria, and Turkey.”

213 State Department cable (14 May 2004) https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/O4ANKARA2721_a.html

214 State Department cable (2 November 2005) https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/O5DAMASCUS5788_a.html

The key stumbling block with that project was that “Egyptian gas alone is not enough to fill Syria’s need for natural gas” – the solution that American and European policymakers set their sights on was to bring on Iraq.²¹⁵

British-Dutch oil major Shell had already been commissioned by Assad to develop a pipeline plan to integrate Syria and Iraq in order to transport Middle East oil to Europe:

“In June 2007, the SARG [Syrian Arab Republic Government] contracted Shell to devise a master plan for developing Syria’s gas sector and its position as a regional hub linking Arab countries with gas markets in Turkey and Europe... Managers at Shell presented a plan to SARG managers, and subsequently to the Iraqis, to export natural gas from the Akkas field (which already has capped, drilled wells) through Syria to either the Arab Gas Pipeline or an LNG facility to be constructed in Syria’s oil port of Banyias.”

The document went on to argue that “collaboration with Iraq is essential for Syria to act as a conduit for gas, oil, and other commodities transiting from the Gulf and Iraq to Europe.” Syria’s energy ambitions, US officials hoped, would lead to greater Syrian-Western rapprochement. “Though economic considerations rarely, if ever, trump political interests in Syria, achieving its stated goals for developing its gas sector will require greater SARG cooperation with both Iraq and the West.”

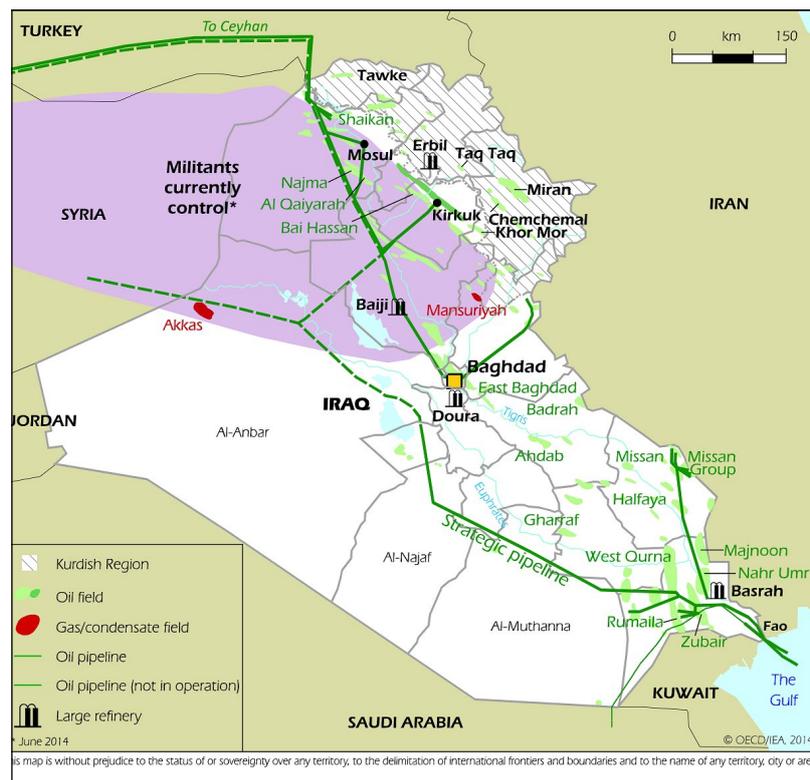


Fig17 – Pipeline map illustrating potential pipeline from Iraq’s Akkas field to Syria
(Source: International Energy Agency, 2014)

215 State Department cable (13 September 2007) https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07DAMASCUS931_a.html

Far from being dismissed as infeasible, by March the following year, these plans had made considerable progress. Iraqi officials had announced that Iraq would be able to export gas to Syria in two years. “Subsequent expansion of this gas field in western Iraq would aim at exports to Europe via Turkey and the Nabucco pipeline,” observed a State Department cable confirming that a core priority was to: “Pursue export of Akkas gas into the Arab pipeline, and onward to Turkey and Europe via the Turkey-Greece-Italy and Nabucco pipelines.”²¹⁶

The next month, Iraqi officials forecast that the Akkas field “would supply Europe with 5 billion cubic meters per year (bcm/y) of gas... by building pipeline interconnections between Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. The announcement comes as the EU is looking for ways to meet a projected shortfall in future gas supplies.” Iraq and the EU were, the US embassy in Brussels reported, “very close to signing a broad Energy Cooperation MOU that is viewed as the first step towards a more comprehensive cooperation agreement.” EU officials saw “the only viable export route for Akkas gas via Syria to Turkey” and were optimistic that “the pipeline connection between Syria and Turkey should be completed next year.” The officials noted European concerns about excessive dependence on Russian supply which was believed to be at risk of imminent decline. This motivated the desire to diversify and seek new sources from Central Asia and the Middle East.²¹⁷

By 2009, then, when Assad announced his ‘four seas’ strategy to consolidate Syria’s role as a major oil and gas transport hub to supply regional supplies to Europe, he had already garnered considerable backing from the West. At this time, the State Department cables show, the plans were being pushed forward because they were strongly believed to be feasible – with the right mix of investment and geopolitical alignment. The British-Dutch firm Shell was in the driver’s seat, crafting the “masterplan” to maximise Syria’s domestic production and identify the most promising pipeline routes.

Pipeline geopolitics is, then, only a subset of wider competition to dominate global energy markets. This was not about one specific project. It was about Syria’s unique geographical location, offering a range of potential routes to transport Mediterranean oil and gas to Europe. Whoever Syria decided to align with would determine the future energy map of the region.

It is notable that the traditional Western press has almost overwhelmingly blacked out this issue in its reporting on the events that led up to the conflict. Indeed, when I first reported the Shell ‘masterplan’ and the role of other Western oil and gas interests in Syria in 2015, I was mocked on Twitter by a *Financial Times* editor for producing “clickbait”.²¹⁸

216 State Department cable (13 March 2008) https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08ISTANBUL129_a.html

217 State Department cable (18 April 2008) https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08BRUSSELS590_a.html



Fig18 – Twitter thread between Nafeez Ahmed and David Sheppard (2 December 2015)

6.2 Covert intervention

In precisely the same period that the West was cosyng up with Assad’s government to exploit the country’s potential to wean Europe off its chronic energy dependence on Russia, we find another spate of US State Department documents obtained by Wikileaks. These cables, previously reported by INSURGE, throw light on the range of covert strategies deployed by the US government to pressure Assad into compliance.²¹⁹

These issues are under-reported because traditional media largely assumes that the West operates as a neutral, benevolent force advocating the interests of the Syrian people. A frequent trope spouted by some influential commentators about Western policy in Syria is that the US and British have done little or nothing in the country, while other actors – like Russia – are to blame for their self-serving interference. Simon Tisdall in *The Guardian* claimed that “western democracies” have been merely “hovering passively on the sidelines in Syria, restricting themselves to counter-terrorism operations and vain calls for peace”.²²⁰ Andrew Rawsley argued, also in *The Guardian*, that the West’s guilt is in “failing to act in Syria” – a “disastrous policy of doing nothing”.²²¹ These pieces reflect a widespread theme common across Western media that Western governments have essentially played the role of innocent bystanders in the Syrian conflict.

This is a convenient falsehood. It is a matter of record that US covert support to various opposition groups long preceded the 2011 uprising. But some commentators on the left, understandably traumatised by the lies that preceded the 2003 Iraq War as well as the 2011 NATO war in Libya, have frequently misconstrued the details involved in this covert activity. It was not aimed at regime change, but at forcing the Syrian government to align with Western interests (many of which, as the preceding State Department documents prove, revolve around Syria’s potential as an energy supply route to Europe).

218 Twitter thread between Ahmed and Sheppard, <https://twitter.com/NafeezAhmed/status/672002098398150656>

219 Ahmed, ‘The Syrian terror trap’, INSURGE (20 October 2015) <https://medium.com/insurge-intelligence/the-syrian-terror-trap-8626ae94d37f>

220 Simon Tisdall, ‘The epic failure of our age: how the west let down Syria’, *Guardian* (10 February 2018) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/10/epic-failure-of-our-age-how-west-failed-syria>

221 Andrew Rawsley, ‘Syria has paid a terrible price for the west’s disastrous policy of doing nothing’, *Guardian* (15 April 2018) <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/apr/15/syria-assad-doing-nothing-disastrous-policy-missile-strikes>

As US officials led European efforts to explore how to integrate Syria into a regional Mediterranean energy market dominated by Western companies, other diplomatic cables demonstrate that US officials were contemplating whether Assad would ultimately serve as a reliable partner, and using a range of covert mechanisms to pressure him to play ball. These documents reveal that regime change was put forward as a remote possibility, but not a preferable option; its main utility was as a threat to exert pressure on Assad to conform to US requirements.

One State Department cable shows that the US was working to weaken Assad's regime as early as 2006, by fomenting sectarian tensions, isolating Syria politically, and funding opposition groups. But the document made no mention of 'regime change'. Instead, the cable explained that the idea was to "directly impact regime behavior where it matters – Bashar and his inner circle." The end goal was to "disrupt his decision-making, keep him off-balance, and make him pay a premium for his mistakes."²²²

The ultimate objective was to force a major realignment of Syrian policy – to be secured through diplomatic engagement as well as the threat of force. Other cables, for instance, reveal that US officials were quite happy for Assad to believe the US was covertly preparing plans for regime change, while simultaneously engaging in diplomacy to leverage the desired change. Next year, of course, Assad contracted Shell to develop the Syrian oil and gas masterplan. From the US perspective, then, the strategy appeared to be working.

By 2009, the year that Assad announced his 'four seas' energy strategy, a secret US cable was sent to the CIA, National Security Council, the Secretary of State, the White House, Paris, and London. Once again, the document distanced US policy from the idea of 'regime change':

*"US policy may aim less at fostering 'regime change' and more toward encouraging 'behaviour reform.' If this assumption holds, then a reassessment of current US-sponsored programming that supports anti-SARG [Syrian Arab Republic Government] factions, both inside and outside Syria, may prove productive as well."*²²³

The document noted, however, that Assad's perception that the US intended to foster 'regime change' as a first option would be useful. "The SARG would undoubtedly view any US funds going to illegal political groups as tantamount to supporting regime change," acknowledged the cable. "This would inevitably include the various expatriate reform organisations operating in Europe and the US, most of which have little to no effect on civil society or human rights in Syria."

Later that year, another State Department cable from September was even clearer, outlining an extensive plan for US-Syria re-engagement. It explored how "US government and private sector contacts could dramatically expand our access and influence," but would need "concrete Syrian actions on Lebanon and Iraq for our engagement to continue."²²⁴

The cable suggested dangling "what the Syrians really want – relaxation of sanctions and visits by high ranking officials to expand our dialogue on core issues – as a payoff once Syria has demonstrated its intent to utilise these contacts." If successful, US engagement with Syria:

²²² State Department cable (13 December 2006) https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06DAMASCUS5399_a.html

²²³ State Department cable (28 April 2009) https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09DAMASCUS306_a.html

²²⁴ State Department cable (9 September 2010) <https://www.aftenposten.no/norge/i/Opwwq/10092009-RE-ENGAGING-SYRIA-TOWARD-A-SIX-MONTH-PLAN>

“... may increase our ability to persuade senior Syrian leaders that their country's interests is better served by more constructive policies that would bring even closer US-Syrian ties.”

Despite this approach, US officials believed that a breakdown of this cosy relationship would lead Syria to consolidate its ties to Iran. A classified cable from the US embassy in France drew on advice from former French Ambassador to Syria Jean-Claude Cousseran, who warned that Western efforts to “split” Syria from Iran “would never work.” While Assad’s shift toward the West had “diminished the influence of hardliners” in Assad’s inner circle, the regime’s “fundamental distrust” of its Sunni neighbours was insurmountable: “The Alawites know that even if they have good relations with the Saudis and the Lebanese, and even if they make peace with Israel, at the end of the day the Sunnis will still hate them. If it comes to violence, they know the only power that will stand with them is Iran.”²²⁵

US policy laid the groundwork of the current crisis. By pressuring Assad’s regime covertly through support to opposition groups while simultaneously courting Assad in the hope of extorting closer “government and private sector” relationships, the US essentially exacerbated the conditions of internal tension that would erupt in 2011. The US had also anticipated that a violent turn would lead Assad to cement ties with Iran.

Yet even as the Arab Spring began to cascade across the region, taking off in Syria in January 2011 when a desperate citizen set fire to himself in protest, US officials were privately celebrating the prospect of an Israel-Syria treaty. Secret Stratfor emails obtained by Wikileaks showed that Obama adviser Dennis Ross had told the White House that Assad was “ready to move away from Iran and reduce relations with Hezbollah and Hamas, and work with the United States in the fight against terrorism.”²²⁶

There is no serious evidence, then, that protests were orchestrated by the West for ‘regime change’. The outbreak of anger against Assad’s government was real, and contrary to much conventional assumptions, began as inclusive and non-sectarian with some support even from sections of the Alawite community.²²⁷ Four years after the uprising, illustrating the continued discomfort with Assad’s policies, a document released by Alawite leaders distanced them from “the crimes the regime has committed.”²²⁸ In 2015, Alawites in Latakia held mass protests after Assad’s cousin, Suleiman, killed Hassan al-Sheikh, an influential colonel in the Syria army, during a road-rage incident.²²⁹ The previous year in October 2014, Alawites protested against the Assad government after the bombing of two elementary schools in Homs, chanting “Liar, liar, the regime is a liar.”²³⁰

225 State Department cable (27 February 2009) https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09PARIS286_a.html

226 See note 211

227 Mohja Kahf, ‘One, one, one, the Syrian people are one’, Guardian (28 May 2011) <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/may/28/syrian-alawites-protests>

228 BBC (3 April 2016) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-35941679>

229 Syria Deeply (13 August 2015) <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2015/08/13/assad-support-not-enough-to-keep-alawites-in-syria>

230 Al-Arabiya English (3 October 2014) <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/10/03/For-first-time-Syria-s-Alawites-protest-against-the-regime.html>

The authenticity of the 2011 uprising has been well-explained in a 2013 study by the Syrian Center for Policy Research,²³¹ a non-partisan think-tank then based in Damascus with good relations with Assad's government.²³² "The social movement in Syria has undoubtedly been political 'par excellence'", the study found. "It has right from the beginning, upheld and consistently adhered to the value of freedom, demanded by most parties in different forms and organizations. It has come as an expression of the essence of the crisis that is marked by denial of political freedoms and lack of efficient, transparent, and representative institutions."

The SCPR study identified the core drivers of the uprising in a "pre-crisis low equilibrium development model" which had "kept a large segment of the country's economic, social and institutional potential unexploited." Although the Syrian economy featured important achievements such as "expanded public employment, sponsoring education, health, providing consumer subsidies, public services, and infrastructure", it still suffered from "the emergence of new well connected interest groups, 'crony capitalism', low productivity, large informal sector, and low accountability of formal institutions" all exacerbated in the preceding decade by "neo-liberal policies" that have "negatively affected public employment and the provision of consumer subsidies."

As the protests accelerated, along with Assad's crackdown on the demonstrators, John Kerry was nonplussed. He told an audience at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace:

"President Assad has been very generous with me in terms of the discussions we have had... So my judgment is that Syria will move; Syria will change, as it embraces a legitimate relationship with the United States and the West and economic opportunity that comes with it and the participation that comes with it."

In fact, one of the key signals that emboldened Assad in his domestic brutality was the Obama administration's assurances at the time that they would not intervene militarily in Syria. When publicly asked whether the US would respond in Syria in the same it had done in Libya, then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's reply was unequivocal:

"No... There's a different leader in Syria now. Many of the members of Congress of both parties who have gone to Syria in recent months have said they believe he's a reformer."

In other words, the Obama administration effectively gave Assad the 'green light' to crackdown. Three days after Clinton's words, Assad made a speech rescinding the regime's earlier promise to lift the 48-year old draconian state of emergency law. Five people were killed by Syrian police in ensuing protests, followed by a further 25 civilians being massacred the next day.

When Syrian authorities arrested and tortured "a group of teenagers who painted revolutionary slogans on a school wall," as Britain's leading medical journal *The Lancet* reported, US and British officials were silent: "Security forces opened fire on the pro-democracy demonstrators, killing several and as a result, more protestors took to the streets. The unrest triggered nationwide protests demanding President Bashar al-Assad's resignation."²³³

231 SCPR, 'On the Wrong Direction: The American Strike and the Scenarios of Syrian Crisis' (5 September 2013) https://www.academia.edu/11742250/1_On_the_W_rong_D_irection_The_American_Strike_and_the_Scenarios_of_Syrian_Crisis_Sept_2013

232 SCPR (28 January 2013) <http://scpr-syria.org/events/series-of-roundtable-meetings-to-launch-the-socioeconomic-roots-and-impact-of-the-syrian-crisis/>

233 The Lancet (14 March 2015) <https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736%2815%2960515-3/fulltext?rss%3Dyes>

As protests picked up, Assad's police-state violence against peaceful demonstrators escalated using live-fire ammunition, tear gas and water cannons, with activists being beaten, detained and tortured. As the cycle of violence intensified, Western governments disassociated from Assad when it became clear his rule had become completely unstable. With the outbreak of civil war, the Western-backed 'masterplan' of Shell and other oil majors to open up Syria's offshore resources and transport regional oil and gas to Europe were unexpectedly suspended.

By June 2011, as the domestic unrest picked up the pace, Assad reached out to Iran in an unprecedented move that signalled a drastic shift away from the Western-approved pipeline routes previously being explored under Shell's guidance. On 25th June 2011, an agreement was signed "by Iran, Iraq, and Syria for construction of the Islamic Gas Pipeline," according to the EIA. The memorandum proposed a 3,100 mile pipeline to transport 1.4 trillion cubic feet a year (Tcf/y) of natural gas from Iran's South Pars field "to Europe via Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. The pipeline is expected to take 3-5 years to build, at a cost of \$10 billion."²³⁴

Contrary to ill-informed claims that the Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline is little more than a fantasy due to Iran's limited export capacity, a comprehensive assessment by the global management consultancy Arthur D Little found that with significant restructuring, Iran has the potential to become the biggest gas exporter in the world: "If Iran can agree on a strategic direction and deliver on its own targets, the only question that remains is how long it will be until Iran becomes the world's largest gas exporter." The assessment further concluded that the Iraq-Iran-Syria pipeline was a viable option as long as financing for the project could be secured, and instability in the regions it would run through could be resolved – tall orders, but depending ultimately on whether the three countries involved could get their act together.²³⁵

The US was closely watching these developments. In May 2010, over a year before the Iran-Iraq-Syria agreement was signed, analysts at private intelligence firm Stratfor – who would go on to advise the US Marine Corps on strategies to support the Syrian opposition – were monitoring Iranian discussions of the pipeline route through Syria to Europe. "this could someday be feasible [sic] no?" wrote one analyst, Michael Wilson. "Iraq and Syria would both def like it, and would give iran some power over them." Reva Bhalla, currently Vice President for Global Analysis at the firm, replied: "gotta get someone to build the infrastructure first. accepting nat gas supplies from Iran would also first require a political understanding."²³⁶

Through 2011, US policy increasingly and rapidly shifted to a position of hostility toward Assad's government, when it became clear that his brutal response to the Arab Spring protests in Syria would not quell the discontent, but likely accelerate it. As the crisis escalated, the West distanced itself from Assad while throwing greater support to opposition groups. Simultaneously, Assad cemented his ties to Iran and Russia.

234 EIA Country Analysis Brief, 'Syria' (August 2011) archived

<https://web.archive.org/web/20111101192439/www.eia.gov/countries/cab.cfm?fips=SY>

235 Arthur D. Little, 'A perspective on the Iranian upstream oil & gas industry' (March 2017)

http://www.adlittle.com/sites/default/files/viewpoints/adl_iran_og_perspective-global.pdf

236 Stratfor internal email communications (10 May 2010)

https://wikileaks.org/gifiles/docs/11/1166892_re-mesa-os-iran-iran-mulling-gas-exports-to-europe-via-iraq.html

These developments meant that the Syria crisis increasingly undermined the West's foothold in Syria, opening the door to Western rivals. The stakes were tremendously high. As Iraqi energy analyst and editor of the Iraq Oil Forum, Ruba Husari, observed for the Carnegie Middle East Center in 2013, "Whatever regime emerges in Damascus after the Syrian uprising could redraw the energy map of the region. Competition for supplies and markets – and to control transit routes for energy resources – is high, and the shape of the future energy map will depend on who the regional and international winners and losers are." Correlating geopolitical tensions with energy interests, Husari pinpointed how a new Syrian regime allied with Sunni Turkey or the Gulf states would "strike a blow against strike a blow against Iraqi and Iranian ambitions to have direct access to the Mediterranean without having to rely on Turkish goodwill." On the other hand, for the Russians, a Syrian regime "allied with the West would be an obstacle to Russia's expanding presence across the emerging East Mediterranean gas basin and its ability to maneuver to protect its own share of the gas market against competing natural gas resources."²³⁷

6.3 Aborting democracy

While competing over the spoils of war in Syria, Western and Russian strategies have remained curiously aligned on one key outcome: aborting the possibility of the emergence of a genuinely nationalist, independent Syria. That there were real, powerful undercurrents for democratic revolution in Syria in 2011 through entities such as the Local Coordination Committees can be gleaned from the book *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*, by Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Shamsi. They provide an intimate exploration based on first-hand interviews with Syrian activists and protagonists in the uprising for a 'Free Syria' which erupted in 2011. They focus on the role of factional in-fighting among opposition forces, along with Russian and Iranian imperialism, in crushing the revolution.

Yet it is widely assumed by numerous Western pundits that the West had sincere intentions to democratise Syria. "What the West clearly wanted to see was a moderate, democratic, secular, pluralist successor regime," wrote Nikolaos van Dam in *Foreign Policy*.²³⁸ Lamenting Western hopes for a democracy in Syria as unrealistic, former Ambassador to Syria Sir Andrew Green opined in *The Telegraph*: "Democracy is empathically not the solution for extremely complex societies and Western meddling only makes matters immeasurably worse. The fundamental reason for our failure is that democracy, as we understand it, simply doesn't work in Middle Eastern countries" – the underlying assumption being that democracy was indeed the real aim.²³⁹ Thus, Steven Heydemann in the *Washington Post* sought to explain "Why the United hasn't intervened in Syria", asserting that despite the desire to see a democracy, plain inaction aborted that possibility.²⁴⁰

But along with Russian and Iranian actions, it was not inaction but the precise nature of the West's active response to the uprising that played a key role in extinguishing any prospect for the emergence of a democratic 'Free Syria.' While support was funnelled to opposition groups, it was done in such a way that it ended up disempowering democratic and secular forces while empowering Islamist militants financed by the Gulf states and Turkey. Support also waxed and

237 Ruba Husari, 'Syria and the changing Middle East energy map', Carnegie Middle East Center (2 January 2013) <https://carnegie-mec.org/2013/01/02/syria-and-changing-middle-east-energy-map-pub-50474>

238 Foreign Policy, 'What the west got wrong in Syria' (22 August 2017) <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/08/22/what-the-west-got-wrong-in-syria/>

239 Telegraph, 'Why Western democracy will never work in the Middle East' (16 August 2014) <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/11037173/Why-Western-democracy-can-never-work-in-the-Middle-East.html>

240 Washington Post, 'Why the United States hasn't intervened in Syria' (14 March 2016) https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/03/14/why-the-united-states-hasnt-intervened-in-syria/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.cfdc1af6d685

waned in different directions without consistency. Not only does this record belie the claim that the West did not intervene, it shows that the way in which the West intervened empowered Islamist forces and systematically decimated Syria's democratic opposition, due to fears that the sudden removal of Assad would lead to uncontrollable results.

Other leaked documents from December 2011, for instance, reveal that by the time the uprising was in full swing, US and British special forces were on the ground in Syria, working closely with the FSA. Overt military intervention was not on the cards – the *modus operandi* was covert action by arming the opposition, who were now incentivised to pick up arms after being shot at indiscriminately by Assad's forces.²⁴¹

Among the documents is an email by a senior analyst from the private US intelligence firm Stratfor describing a meeting with US, French and British military intelligence officers. The email confirmed that the idea was to train Syrian rebel groups to “commit guerrilla attacks, assassination campaigns, try to break the back of the Alawite forces, elicit collapse from within.” Although some Syrians had begun picking up arms in response to the wave of military repression unleashed by Syrian security forces, they were not doing so at the behest of the US, which had clearly been caught off guard by the scale of the uprising. One US intelligence officer conceded: “... there isn't much of a Free Syrian Army to train right now anyway, but all the operations being done now are being done out of ‘prudence.’”

This communication seemed to indicate that the US was hoping to craft the FSA into a force capable of destabilising Assad's regime – but further documents obtained by Wikileaks suggest that the US government did not settle on a determined ‘regime change’ strategy even at this point. While deciding on a strategy to funnel support for the opposition, US military analysts largely anticipated that the Assad regime would *probably survive*. The goal of covert action was to weaken Assad's hold on power as much as possible, knowing that he would likely remain, with a view to contain Iranian encroachment on Syria. At most, this would increase the probability not of ‘regime change’, but ‘regime rotation’, occurring not through direct US military intervention – which was ruled out axiomatically – but by encouraging forces within Assad's regime to remove him while maintaining the Alawite-dominated authoritarian power structure.

This can be gleaned from a series of draft documents produced by Stratfor analysts and commissioned by the US Marine Corps' (USMC) Intelligence Department, reported here for the first time. A draft of a USMC forecasting paper prepared in August 2011 by both USMC officers and Stratfor employees explains that: “The Syrian Alawite-Baathist regime led by Syrian President Bashar al Assad will weaken significantly over the next three years, but its break point is unlikely to be imminent. Fractured opposition forces in Syria are unlikely to overcome the logistical constraints preventing them from cohering into a meaningful threat against the regime within this time frame.”²⁴²

The document saw regime change as desirable in theory, but probably unattainable and potentially dangerous in practice. It warned that the long term trajectory was for Syria to experience “a violent, protracted civil conflict, one that will enflame sectarian unrest... The potential for the regime to collapse cannot be ruled out, but the road to regime change will be a long and bloody

241 Channel 4 News (28 August 2013) <https://www.channel4.com/news/by/alex-thomson/blogs/syria-spooks-wikileaks-military>

242 US Military Corps forecasting paper drafted by USMC and Strafor, https://wikileaks.org/gifiles/attach/12/12390_USMC%20draft.docx; attached to internal Strafor email communication (21 September 2011) https://wikileaks.org/gifiles/docs/41/418838_usmc-paper-regional-summary-and-related-docs-.html

one.” Ultimately, though, the document concluded that while Assad’s “security apparatus does not have the numbers to overwhelm the demonstrators and effectively stamp out the unrest... the opposition in Syria does not yet have the numbers, organization or capabilities overall to overwhelm the regime forces. Syria’s opposition is extremely fractured and is operating under enormous constraints inside the country.” Far from acknowledging that the US itself had covertly engineered the protests, the document noted merely that “the reports of protests are overblown” and highlighted the effective role of the “exiled opposition” in “developing a narrative on the Syrian opposition to disseminate to major media agencies.”

The USMC did not “anticipate that Syria’s opposition will be able to gain traction in street protests and overwhelm the regime within the next three years. The more probable threat the regime will be facing will come from within” – in the form of “an attempt by high-ranking military and business elite of the regime to mount a coup” due to fears of the Assad clan becoming too weak. Even this, though, was not seen as necessarily a desirable outcome for US interests. Instead of producing “regime stability”, it would lead to a “protracted conflict... likely consisting of coups and counter-coups akin to the dark decades Syria experienced” before the arrival of Hafiz al-Assad in the 1960s.

The next part of the USMC assessment is decisive in clarifying that external powers, while likely to be supportive of the opposition, would be wary of the potentially destabilising consequences of actually toppling Assad. Conceding that “external support for a Syrian alternative to the al-Assad regime will grow with time,” the document assesses that in the near term, “none of the major stakeholders in the region, including Israel, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the United States, appear interested in dealing with the destabilizing effects of regime change in Syria in the region.” But continued foreign interference by the US and its allies would be necessary to contain the prospect of Iranian expansion:

“However, Turkey, the United States, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and others have a common interest in trying to severely undermine Iran’s foothold in the Levant and dial back Hezbollah’s political and military influence in Lebanon. Turkey, in particular, is the country with the most leverage over Syria in the long term, and has an interest in seeing this territory return to Sunni rule.”

Particularly damning is the prescient recognition that these activities would likely empower Islamist forces among the Syrian opposition:

“Turkey does not have good options nor the capability to effect change in Syria any time soon, but it will gradually attempt to build up linkages with groups inside Syria, focusing in particular on the Islamist remnants of the Muslim Brotherhood in trying to fashion a viable Islamist political force in Syria that would operate under Ankara’s umbrella. This will take time to develop, but the geopolitical dynamic of the region points to a gradually weakening of the Alawite hold on power in Syria.”

Yet certainly at this time, the USMC assessment was that a US military intervention to enforce regime change was out of the question – better the devil you know:

“We do not anticipate the USMC militarily intervening in either Syria or Lebanon with a mission to stabilize the situation. The sectarian dynamics are far too complex for the United States to afford becoming embroiled in. Instead, this will be a regional crisis for Turkey to manage. Since Turkey is still early in its regional rise, it will need considerable backing and support from its allies, but even then, is unlikely to be able to effectively deal with such a crisis within the next three years.”

In line with this strategy, the US enrolled several regional allies in covert rebel sponsorship operations that, as predicted, empowered Islamist and jihadist groups, many with little local legitimacy in Syria. Two official documents in particular suggest that this strategy contributed directly (and foreseeably) to the emergence of the Islamic State terrorist group.

A Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) document from August 2012, released under the Freedom of Information Act, warned that rebel groups supported by the West, the Gulf States and Turkey might establish “a declared or undeclared Salafist Principality in eastern Syria... in order to isolate the Syrian regime, which is considered the strategic depth of the Shia expansion (Iraq and Iran).” This could further precipitate the parallel consolidation of al-Qaeda in parts of Iraq, leading to the declaration of “an Islamic State through its union with other terrorist organisations in Iraq and Syria.”²⁴³

Exactly two years later, a secret memo by then secretary of state Hillary Clinton in August 2014 to John Podesta, her campaign chairman, acknowledged that the Saudi and Qatari governments “are providing clandestine financial and logistic support to ISIL [Islamic State] and other radical Sunni groups in the region”.²⁴⁴ Urging the need for greater pressure on the Saudis and Qataris due to this policy, the document went on to describe the rise of ISIS as a strategic opportunity for the US to reshape the region: “With all of its tragic aspects, the advance of ISIL through Iraq gives the US Government an opportunity to change the way it deals with the chaotic security situation in North Africa and the Middle East.”²⁴⁵

A further two years on, the CIA’s Operation Timber Sycamore had racked up several billion dollars in funding to various rebel groups. Though the Gulf states and Turkey had contributed funds to Timber Sycamore, the bulk of funding came from Saudi Arabia according to US officials familiar with the operation. The funding came with an expectation of “a seat at the table” according to former CIA official Bruce Reidel.²⁴⁶

243 Ahmed, ‘Pentagon report says West, Gulf states and Turkey foresaw emergence of “IS”’, Middle East Eye (29 May 2015) <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/pentagon-confirms-west-gulf-states-and-turkey-created-islamic-state-608321312>

244 Bethan McKernan, ‘Hillary Clinton emails leak: Wikileaks documents claim Democratic nominee “thinks Saudi Arabia and Qatar fund Isis”’, Independent (11 October 2016) <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/hillary-clinton-emails-leak-wikileaks-saudi-arabia-qatar-isis-podesta-latest-a7355466.html>

245 Ben Norton, ‘Leaked Hillary Clinton emails show U.S. allies Saudi Arabia and Qatar supported ISIS’, Salon (11 October 2016) <https://www.salon.com/2016/10/11/leaked-hillary-clinton-emails-show-u-s-allies-saudi-arabia-and-qatar-supported-isis/>

246 New York Times (23 January 2016) <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/24/world/middleeast/us-relies-heavily-on-saudi-money-to-support-syrian-rebels.html>

So there can be no doubt, as Barak Barfi of the New America Foundation remarks, that what began as a populist grassroots uprising against Assad's dictatorship, was in this manner increasingly co-opted by foreign powers – Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, Kuwait, and Turkey – disproportionately empowering Islamist militant factions. He warned, presciently, that the strategy would “transform the moderate American-supported rebels from an endangered species into an extinct one.”²⁴⁷

There can also be no doubt that this put civilians in a horrifying position. While the UN has extensively documented the Assad regime's overwhelming role in mass murders, torture, rape, enforced disappearances, siege warfare and aerial bombardment, it also highlighted how Syrian Islamist rebel groups were operating draconian detention camps where they systematically kidnapped and tortured civilians.²⁴⁸

And yet for the most part, the ability of Islamist groups to increasingly extend their influence throughout the conflict was not because most rebel forces agreed with their Islamist ideological positions, but largely due to their military prowess. A study published by the Combating Terrorism Center of the US Army's West Point Military Academy found from surveys of FSA fighters that rebel defectors were generally “driven to Islamist groups not primarily due to ideological motivations, but rather for instrumental reasons.”²⁴⁹ Of course, this had dire consequences:

“... once inside the group, they are vulnerable to elite manipulation... Islamist groups appear to be having great success harnessing and exploiting Syrian anger for purposes well beyond fighting the al-Assad regime, which is why the current drive in Islamist recruitment in Syria could have important spillover consequences for conflict elsewhere.”

As a result, localised rebels comprising Syrians who oppose Assad and extremism were increasingly embattled. And having enrolled its Gulf and Turkish allies in accelerating support to their own favoured Islamist militants, the US then demanded that FSA forces mobilise against the Islamists, particularly those affiliated with al-Qaeda – many of whom had been empowered by the West's own allies. From the perspective of military strategy, the US approach was completely incoherent.²⁵⁰ The FSA was at once supposed to coordinate with Islamist rebels, who often came with greater numbers and firepower, against both ISIS and Assad, and then to fight specific Islamist groups affiliated to al-Qaeda, like al-Nusra. But as reporter Michael Pizzi observes:

“The FSA is currently the weakest force on the ground in Syria, a result not only of inadequate foreign backing compared with that of rival Islamist and extremist factions, but of its own internal divisions, byzantine leadership structure (based in Turkey) and rampant corruption.”²⁵¹

That explains the high level of FSA defections to the more militant factions, and the consistent failure of rebel training programmes to underpin a ‘moderate’ force capable of rivaling the militants already being funded by the Gulf states and Turkey.²⁵² Sceptics have pointed to these

247 National Interest (8 October 2015) <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/americas-dangerous-gamble-rebels-syria-14038>

248 DW, ‘UN accuses Syrian rebels of crimes against humanity’ (5 March 2014) <http://www.dw.com/en/un-accuses-syrian-rebels-of-crimes-against-humanity/a-17477199>

249 Combating Terrorism Center, ‘The motivations of Syrian Islamist fighters’ (October 2014) <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-motivations-of-syrian-islamist-fighters/>

250 New Politics (19 December 2017) <http://newpol.org/content/us-vs-free-syrian-army-vs-jabhat-alnusra-and-isis>

251 Al Jazeera America (2 October 2014) <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/10/2/syria-moderate-rebels1.html>

252 IB Times (14 March 2015) <http://www.ibtimes.com/four-years-later-free-syrian-army-has-collapsed-1847116>

defections as evidence of widespread ideological support for Islamist terrorism among rebels, which is a drastic oversimplification. While there are clear grounds for concern about the trend and its implications, the reality is that it was the West's own approach which undermined the 'moderate' opposition in the first place.

Essentially, Western strategy in Syria was completely preoccupied by the geopolitical threat of Iranian expansion. As such, Western policy-planners focused on mobilising the region's Sunni powers to instrumentalise the Syrian opposition against Iran. This disempowered the moderate forces of the FSA, empowered Islamist extremists – some with ties to al-Qaeda and ISIS – and culminated in the protracted liquidation of the democratic aspirations that had originally inspired the Syrian revolution in 2011. It also played into the hands of Russia, which has cynically exploited the presence of Islamist groups among the rebels to justify the Syrian military's massive indiscriminate aerial bombardment of entire civilian urban areas.

No wonder, then, that a study in the *Journal of Aggression, Conflict and Peace Research* found that the shift from nonviolent to violent action “harmed the revolution,” impeding its capacity to achieve its democratic aspirations. Using empirical data, the study concluded that “the impact of the militarisation has been destructive without fulfilling the uprising's goals.” Foreign interference thus effectively aborted the prospect of an independent nationalist democracy in Syria, and continues to do so.²⁵³

The result is that both the West and Russia have increasingly accommodated themselves to settling for the permanent dismemberment of Syria. With the revolutionary aspirations of those who were the driving forces of the 2011 uprising in tatters, competing foreign powers have taken to allocating the potential spoils of war.

Russia had already signed a \$1 billion deal for infrastructure development and other contracts with Damascus in April 2016. By November, Assad pledged to give Russia priority in awarding contracts. Russian oil, gas and mining projects have taken off in areas cleared of ISIS and rebel forces. Similarly, Iranian firms have signed deals with Syria to rebuild phone networks, mines, new power plants and an oil refinery.

Yet the prospects for enrichment have already created tensions in the Syria-Russia-Iran alliance, with Iranian officials complaining of the prospect of being “sidelined from reconstruction and investment” by Russia, which is dominating the reconstruction contracts, particularly in Syria's energy sector.²⁵⁴ In the meantime US policy-planners are exploring more piecemeal reconstruction avenues in rebel-controlled areas through donors such as the World Bank, IMF, UN and EU.²⁵⁵

In September 2015, Pentagon intelligence chief Lieutenant General Vincent Stewart admitted that he expected Syria to eventually split into “two or three parts,”²⁵⁶ echoing earlier statements by outgoing US commander in Iraq, General Ray Odierno.²⁵⁷

253 Armenak Tokmajyen, 'Militarization of the Syrian revolution: was this the wrong choice?' *Journal of Aggression, Conflict and Peace Research* (2015) <https://doi.org/10.1108/JACPR-03-2014-0011>

254 Middle East Institute (19 February 2018) <http://www.mei.edu/content/io/tehran-stands-lose-syria-s-postwar-reconstruction>

255 RAND (3 November 2017) <https://www.rand.org/blog/2017/11/how-to-help-syrians-without-helping-assad.html>

256 Military Times (10 September 2015) <https://www.militarytimes.com/2015/09/10/dia-chief-iraq-and-syria-may-not-survive-as-states/>

257 New Arab (13 August 2015) <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2015/8/13/us-chief-of-staff-iraq-may-yet-see-sunni-shia-partition>

The UN's special envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, similarly observed the following month that Syria is already experiencing a *de facto* partition, and that if the chaos continues, partition may need to be formally accepted despite it being a worst-case scenario.²⁵⁸ Russia and Iran appeared to be moving along the same lines, with a view to shore-up an Assad-ruled mini-state, leaving the rest of Syria in the hands of ISIS, other Islamist rebels, and the Kurds.²⁵⁹ The only question was how much territory could be grabbed by either side before grinding the bulk of the violence to a halt. Since then, Assad has succeeded in regaining up to 85% of Syrian territory, but he is unlikely to be able to gain more without sparking direct confrontations with US military-backed Kurdish groups in the east and northwest, Turkish troops in the northwest, and Israeli forces in relation to rebels in the southwest near the Israeli and Jordanian border. The result has been a military stalemate at constant risk of escalation which, nevertheless, cements a *de facto* Syrian territorial carve-up.

The strategic rationale for the acceptance of a permanent partition scenario was laid out in extraordinary detail in a report published by the US Army's Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) in 2016. The study, titled *The Collapse of Iraq and Syria: The End of the Colonial Construct in the Greater Levant*, was authored by Dr Roby Barrett, a senior fellow at the University where he has instructed US military officers in applied intelligence.²⁶⁰ Previously Barrett had been a Foreign Service Officer at the US State Department operating in the Middle East and North Africa, before he ran US Air Force and military programmes for a private firm, Electronic Data Systems. He was then Corporate Vice President at giant defence conglomerate and NSA intelligence contractor, SAIC. His JSOU bio states that he “also provides support to the Department of Defense, Department of State, and intelligence community.”

Blaming both “Western and indigenous forces” for shattering the old “colonial construct of 1919” that defined the national borders of Iraq and Syria, Barrett argued that this has left “a political and security vacuum to be led by others – ISIS, Shiite militias, Sunni jihadists, and sectarian ‘rump’ states in Baghdad and Damascus.”

In this context, he argues, “SOF [US Special Forces] need to understand that they cannot solve the problems of the region. They can only hope to partially contain them.” This means accepting that the old borders defining Iraq and Syria are now obsolete, and that the US has little choice but to accommodate to the new realities on the ground, which probably will involve a combination of a shrunken Alawite regime in Syria, surrounded by a patchwork of opposition groups dominated by Islamist groups that, he hopes, are a “lesser evil” than ISIS:

“The artificial nation-states of Iraq and Syria are gone – like Humpty Dumpty, they cannot be put back together again.”

The statement is almost exactly the same as the phrase used by former Bush administration official Douglas Feith in September 2017.²⁶¹ The “new reality”, explained Barrett, is one in which “the interests and autonomy of the various sectarian and ethnics groups will have to be recognized.” Barrett thus, like the USMC, plays down the effectiveness of regime change: “The

258 VOA News (12 October 2015) <https://www.voanews.com/a/un-says-partition-of-syria-possible-if-no-improvement/3002858.html>

259 New York Times (19 October 2015) https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/20/opinion/putins-partition-plan-for-syria.html?_r=0

260 Roby Barrett, *The Collapse of Iraq and Syria: The end of the colonial construct in the greater Levant*, Joint Special Operations University (JSOU Report 16-1, MacDill Air Force Base, 2016) <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/1001768.pdf>

261 Jerusalem Post (10 September 2017)

<https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Stop-worrying-so-much-about-putting-humpty-dumpty-Syria-back-together-again-504710>

solution to the chaos cannot be found in regime change in Syria (although that might help) or support for the Shi'a sectarian government in Baghdad. The old colonial paradigm of artificial states has been replaced by a new structure that reflects a time that predates the Ottoman's imperial control. Iraq and Syria no longer exist."

Barrett's argument is that, with the collapse of the old colonial borders, the US must insert itself in the process of remaking the Middle East along ethno-sectarian lines -

"a strategic as opposed to a tactical response to the current chaos in the region." Remarking that the US is forced to deal with "the reality of Sunni alienation from the Shi'a-dominated regimes in Baghdad and Damascus fueled by the scorched earth policies of the Assad regime", the US must accept that: "There is already a de facto partition of the Greater Levant into a minority enclave still controlled by the Assad regime in Syria, the increasingly independent Kurdish regions, the emergence of a Sunnistan now dominated by ISIS, and a Shi'a rump state from Baghdad to Basra. While an overall regional policy is critical, it must be integrated into specific policies that recognize that Iraq and Syria no longer exist." Western actions must involve "incremental, tactical actions aimed at restoring an equilibrium that will begin to restore order."

In one insightful paragraph, he concedes that the key reason the West avoided an all-out regime change strategy is for fear of being unable to determine its consequences:

"In short, the West and its allies wanted the Assads gone, but not the remaining government structure including the Alawite-dominated Syrian army and the security services."

Russia's actions have complicated this picture, undermining regional Western influence: "Now in joining the fray, the Russians have at the absolute least assured the survival of an Alawite-rump state in the north and potentially from Damascus to Latakia as well as the only Russian military base in the region. By siding with Alawites and Shi'a, Russia has to some degree reclaimed the old Soviet Union's special relationship with Damascus and Baghdad and an on the ground role in politics from the Mediterranean to the Gulf."

This leaves the West with few options to maintain a meaningful presence in the Mediterranean. With Assad propped up by Russia, the West has little choice except to continue thwarting the expansion of Russian and Iranian power through Assad, by funnelling support to Islamist groups in the areas still under opposition control:

"A secular state run by a group devoted to democracy and Western civil society is not going to emerge in Sunnistan. Policy needs to start discarding labels and decide which Islamist Salafi group or groups that it is going to back. Hopefully this study underscores the necessity of a new way of thinking about the region – to preserve US and Western interests it is going to be a search for the lesser evils. SOF need to start thinking about what exactly that entails in practical terms because that is where we are right now."

While Barrett's assessment cannot be taken as automatically reflective of US government policy, it appears broadly consistent with actual policy decisions – and seems to reflect the thinking of a growing number of officials across the US military and intelligence community. It certainly coheres with the general vision of the Trump-Prince plan to recruit a Gulf state military force to occupy these parts of Syria controlled by remaining rebel groups.

A preamble to the report explains that JSOU publications “advance the insights and recommendations of national security professionals and the Special Operations Forces (SOF) students and leaders for consideration by the SOF community and defense leadership.” A Foreword by Kenneth Poole, Director of JSOU's Strategic Studies Department, recommends that Barrett's findings have “value to the military and policy world” and “should be of interest to Special Operations Forces, strategists, planners, and leaders interested in the future of US policy in the region, especially in dealing with ISIS.”

Whatever the case, the document makes absolutely clear that the needs, sufferings and aspirations of the Syrian people – indeed of any peoples in the region – are of little consequence to the strategic, geopolitical, geoeconomic and energy calculations of policy-planners from any of the countries heavily involved in the conflict, including the West, Gulf states, Iran, Turkey and Russia.

While the old colonial constructs may have collapsed, the fundamental imperial dynamics of great power competition – including manipulation of ethnic and sectarian affiliations and “tactical” deployment of military violence – have become more entrenched. Despite their vehement infighting and constant propaganda against each other, the self-serving actions of both Western and Russian imperial power have systematically decimated Syrian lives, crushed the democratic aspirations of the 2011 uprising, and erased the possibility of a regional Syrian energy hub emerging in a way that might first and foremost serve the interests of Syrians themselves, as opposed to the strategic machinations of foreign interests. This is without even considering the urgent ecological imperative of transitioning away from chronic hydrocarbon dependence, which both the West and Russia are largely regressively ignoring in lieu of competing to dominate regional energy markets.



*US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russia foreign minister Sergey Lavrov, during final negotiating session over agreement to eliminate Syria's chemical weapons, 14th September 2013, Geneva Switzerland
Source: Wikimedia Commons*



Syria protests in Banyas, 6 May 2011
Source: Flickr - Syrian Freedom

7. Conclusion: You are either with us, or against us

This investigation has vindicated calls for scepticism of dominant Western narratives of the Syrian conflict which position the US, UK and France as benevolent actors who have largely watched the crisis unfold from a posture of impotent ‘inaction.’ In reality, Western covert action systematically sabotaged the democratic uprising while empowering Islamist forces supported by foreign powers. Horrendous crimes by Syrian rebel forces, particularly Islamist militias, have been extensively documented by the UN, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, among others.

Yet this investigation also reveals that conscientious objectors to the West’s deployment of rapacious power should be extremely wary of how non-Western states – in this case Syria, Russia and Iran – have co-opted critical discourse on the left to silence criticism of Russia and deflect it, solely, toward the West; with a view to intentionally whitewash real crimes.

The preoccupation with critiquing Western power becomes problematic if it is blinded from the real dynamics of Empire as a global system in which actions by Syria, Iran and Russia follow their own dangerous imperialist logics. That blindness has resulted in some otherwise serious journalists and commentators promulgating Syrian, Iranian and Russian state-backed disinformation in an almost parrot-like fashion, to the point of being incapable of subjecting narratives critical of Western policy to the same standards being rightly demanded of pro-Western policy narratives.

The documentary record proves that a number of key ‘memes’ that have become embedded in the left’s critical narratives around Syria are deeply flawed:

Meme 1: The idea that the West has always and primarily intended to effect ‘regime change’ in Syria is unsustainable, and based on sensationalised reporting on State Department files which, on deeper examination, point to a different strategy – one which cautiously welcomed the possibility of regime change if Assad did not play ball, but for the most part focused on a strategy to merely debilitate and weaken Assad’s power, while attempting to exert influence over the direction of opposition forces. The final goal of this strategy was explicitly described as closer US-Syria relations. This hardly constitutes moral absolutism. The idea of a real secular democracy emerging in Syria was always ruled out as being impossible, unlikely, or uncontrollable. Western covert interference was designed to protect Western interests, counter Russian and Iranian control, and undermine their efforts to re-make regional energy markets outside Western influence – and after 2011, covert action was pursued knowing full well that it would likely aggravate the conflict and lead to a protracted sectarian war involving foreign powers, without necessarily removing Assad. In any case, a direct military intervention for regime change was axiomatically ruled out by senior US military strategists.

Meme 2: The conviction that the West and/or its allies have been complicit in orchestrating or staging chemical weapons attacks by which to blame Assad and thus trigger a military intervention for regime change is, in this context, unfounded – firstly because the internal files reveal a deep ambivalence among US policymakers about the disappearance of Assad from the scene (along with an axiomatic opposition to the removal of the Alawite-dominated authoritarian regime structure); and secondly because every single alternative narrative of major chemical weapons incidents suffers from fundamental incoherence. We have documented problems and challenges with official narratives, but we have also detected how these have been wrongly magnified to support completely unsustainable alternative narratives. The evidence confirms that while Western government narratives of the conflict are clearly politicised and motivated to demonise Assad; Russian-backed defences of Assad are also politicised and riddled with inconsistencies that some critics of Western policy pretend do not exist. For writers like Vanessa Beeley and Eva Bartlett, such defences are justified by ‘fighting the good fight’ of resisting Western ‘regime change’ efforts.

Meme 3: There is an assumption that the West’s demonisation of Assad means that he is unworthy of being demonised, and is not guilty as charged – the tendency to resist Western propaganda results in embracing pro-Assad propaganda, an unnecessary (and truly infantile) binary logic. The claim that Assad is simply, therefore, ‘liberating’ his own people from foreign Islamist hordes comes not from the sort of reliable and impartial sources which critics rightly prove many Western reporters aren’t, but from self-confessed pro-Assad propagandists who willingly cover-up Assad’s crimes of torture on the grounds of stopping “illegal intervention” and supporting the “Syrian Arab Army.” Some critics question reports from Western-based human rights groups on grounds that these organisations are too close to establishment foreign policy imperatives (as an aside, if the same human rights groups were so irretrievably co-opted to the point that all their reports of Assad’s violence can be legitimately dismissed or ignored, why are they also able to report on abuses by armed groups?); but, inconsistently, they ignore the fact that their own favoured sources for ‘independent’ and ‘impartial’ reporting on the ground are even more blatantly co-opted on the side of the Syrian and Russian states.

But it is not so easy to simply lay the blame on RT – which has grown in popularity precisely due to a lack of meaningful critical scrutiny of Western foreign policy by dominant media outlets. Western traditional journalism has failed its public interest obligations by proving itself incapable of meaningfully investigating and critiquing the real dynamics of Western power and interest in Syria. We have seen little or no exploration of the historical and documentary record in mainstream reporting. There are few humble acknowledgements of the limitations and potential distortions of that reporting. And there have been few efforts to unearth the cold imperialist geopolitical and economic calculations that inform Western decision-making in Syria. The result has been a kneejerk hostility from a largely ill-informed punditry to anyone who questions the legitimacy of Western government policy; and a lazy repetition of banal platitudes and moralistic pronouncements by Western government press offices. The result is that Western publics have no idea how Western policies contributed directly to the destruction of Syria.

This has, in turn, led to flawed memes across much the traditional media:

Meme 4: The belief that the West did not really intervene in Syria and has remained a neutral actor, always opposed to Assad, is a convenient myth. The documentary record proves that in the years preceding the 2011 uprising, the West courted Assad diplomatically to open up geopolitical ties and closer business relations, including in relation to Western investment in Syria's energy potential. His brutal record of torture and repression of domestic political dissent was not seen as an obstacle to this process. Simultaneously, the West used covert action in support of various opposition forces to pressure Assad into complying with Western requirements. After the 2011 uprising, the US in particular gave Assad an effective 'green light' to crackdown by continuing to describe him as a 'reformer'. Even while eventually seeking to isolate Assad, the documentary record shows that it was largely accepted among US military strategists that a concerted effort to remove him would not take place; and that if Western covert actions did manage to incite his removal, the best-case scenario would be that this was done not by the rebels, but by the Alawite regime itself to maintain the existing authoritarian power structure. The rebels were seen merely as a tool of potential 'regime rotation', to be dispensed with when no longer useful for that task.

Meme 5: It is often assumed that the West has been vehemently opposed to Islamist terrorism in Syria in the form of al-Qaeda and ISIS as part of a wider 'war on terror' foreign policy framework. While this is not entirely false, it is also in many ways far from the case. In reality, after the 2011 uprising, Western covert action in support of Syrian opposition forces escalated dramatically. However, the West did not augment the most secular and democratic elements. Instead, the West played a pivotal role in coordinating the influx of financial, military and logistical assistance from the Gulf states and Turkey, which largely went to Islamist groups, some with ties to al-Qaeda and ISIS. The West continued this policy despite intelligence warnings of the grave risk of augmenting the political reach of such groups across parts of Iraq and Syria. In practice, this frequently meant that the West was, in effect, supporting Islamist militant groups and their crimes in Syria. Simultaneously, while allowing more moderate FSA forces to coordinate with such groups in the fight against Assad, the West also insisted that FSA forces should at other times combat those forces, leading to a battlefield dynamic which augmented Islamists, while undermining the democratic core of the opposition and eroding the effectiveness of the anti-Assad drive.

Meme 6: There is a prevailing sense that the West has no meaningful strategic, geopolitical or economic self-interests in Syria which may motivate its foreign policy there. In reality, it is clear that the West has a range of overlapping imperial interests in Syria: the protection of Israel, the deflection of Iranian and Russian power, and the opening up of Syria as a regional energy transshipment hub to Europe to minimise the continent's dependence on Russian oil and gas, as well as the prevention of Russia using Syria to dominate regional energy markets. These interests were instrumental in the strategic calculations of Western policymakers throughout the conflict in Syria, and explain why the West has maintained a continuous policy of covert intervention in the country for more than a decade.

As much as the traditional media has failed, parts of the alternative media have succumbed increasingly to the vortex of inter-imperialist, inter-state propaganda in the age of Big Data and social media. In this new age, information is everywhere, and the viral soundbite rules the consciousness of the understandably cynical masses. All parties to the conflict have exploited this space to their own ends. But in the understandable eagerness to question and counter prevailing narratives, some alternative outlets have found themselves consistently parroting incoherent propaganda that has been carefully crafted and disseminated by non-Western governments. In doing so, instead of upholding a true, principled 'anti-war' position, they have become party to the war itself, amplifying propaganda and participating gratuitously in its brutal dynamics.

The end result of this has been that in the name of resisting Western imperialism, parts of the left are actively whitewashing and erasing war crimes by one set of parties, the Syrian government (and its backers); and openly supporting their war aims. In doing so, they are unwittingly (or otherwise) egging on the Russian government's dual imperialist goals of dominating Middle East energy markets, and preventing Syria from exploiting its potential to become a regional gas transshipment hub that could undercut Gazprom's monopoly.

The problem here is plain to see. We are caught in false, infantile binary paradigms of our own construction. You are either with us, or against us. You are either with Assad, or with the West. You are either with the rebel terrorists, or against them. But these binaries are false choices. They are constructs of political propaganda from both sides. *They are not real.*

Citizens face an information war – a war for political and ideological allegiance. But the end goal of all these powers engaged in Syria right now is, in its moral essence, the same: maximum exploitation of available resources for self-serving power and profit. Who loses? Ordinary Syrians, whether they favour Assad, or favour the opposition. Their democratic aspirations have been crushed by Assad, hijacked by Islamists and failed by a fractured opposition.

As pro- and anti-interventionists fight among ourselves, the truth is bitter: the West has no serious interest in democracy or human rights in Syria – it previously courted Assad as a potential ally; greenlighted his violent crackdown in 2011; and it will use Assad's homicidal regime as a fig-leaf for its own interests in containing Russian and Iranian expansionism. Contrary to the propaganda of RT, Russia had no interest in Syrian self-determination either. The Russians will maintain Assad's reign at any cost as a bulwark against Western expansionism and a foothold for Russian expansionism in the Middle East; and they will compromise Syria's sovereignty to protect Israeli interests and undermine Syria's economic aspirations to maintain Gazprom's pre-eminence.

If we are serious about the crimes of power, then we need to rise above the banal politics of identity and vain nationalism that characterises the tit-for-tat moronism that passes for journalism today. And yet this speaks to the most fundamental challenge of all: Syria is a microcosm of our global predicament. The descent into incoherent, politicised 'with us, or against us' narratives by both critics and supporters of Western policy is symptomatic of a deeper malaise, one that afflicts the body politic, but even more centrally, the human mind. Our narrow, bigoted responses to the Syria conflict demonstrate a deep-seated moral and spiritual malady at the heart of how we choose to be in the world. We are wedded to being right, and making the 'Other' wrong. This mindset has caused us to dispense with all humility and critical self-reflection. Worshipping our

own biases, we gravitate like starved vampires to the stories that suit our preconceptions (which we refuse to subject to any rigorous critical analysis), while fanatically rejecting anything which might demonstrate our preconceptions to be flawed. We use those stories to construct political identities for ourselves which pay allegiance to 'this' or 'that' geopolitical configuration of imperial power. And in doing so, we play the role that those configurations want us to play as mere ideological pawns for the internal contestations of Empire.

What is it that we are really in service to?

We fail to see that by playing in a propaganda war of others' making, we propagate information that simply consolidates the fundamental, exploitative dynamics of Empire (whichever geopolitical configuration it acts through), we become mere actors in the Great Game, allied to one or another competing imperialist power – which merely operate as nodes of a wider global system premised on accelerating the relentless exploitation of planetary resources for the benefit of an ever-decreasing minority.

We become, ourselves, ideological tyrants and colonisers. Obsessed with the narrative structures we have projected into the world ourselves, we build them up using cognitive fragments we find from our favoured sources, and use them to either dominate and subjugate the wrongdoers outside of the circumference of our preferred belief-systems, or to simply excommunicate them.

This is an approach which inevitably loses all sense of real humanity. In Syria, we see how, more than anything, we are irretrievably distanced from the reality of the conflict, blinded by it through prisms of competing state-backed inter-imperialist propaganda. In such circumstances, our obligation – as journalists, as citizens, as human beings – is to ground ourselves in the humility of our known limitations, and to refuse to bow before any imperial configuration, whether Western, or Russian, or Syrian, or Arab, or Iranian, and beyond. The only emancipation is to refuse to buy into the binary political identities being made for us, to step into a new emergent identity of our own whose allegiance is not to any geopolitical configuration, but to people and planet. That requires the courage to call out injustice whoever the perpetrator, to rise against violence when those perpetrating it are among our own purported friends, allies and movements, and to stand in solidarity with the victims of such violence by revealing it without compromise, no matter how uncomfortable. If we are not willing to challenge our own assumptions and convictions before we go around casting stones, then we are no better than the tyrants and imperialists we rail against.

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