

How a Syrian White Helmets' Leader Played Western Media. "Funded Heavily by U.S. State Department and British Foreign Office"

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The White Helmets, founded to rescue victims trapped under the rubble of buildings destroyed by Syrian and Russian bombing, have become a favorite source for Western news media covering a story on Russian-Syrian bombing. Portrayed as humanitarian heroes for over the past year and even nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize last summer, the White Helmets have been accorded unquestioned credibility by journalists covering the Syrian crisis.

Yet the White Helmets are hardly a non-political organization. Funded heavily by the U.S. State Department and the British Foreign Office, the group operates only in areas in northern Syria controlled by an al Qaeda affiliate and their extremist allies—areas to which Western journalists have not had access. Given that the White Helmets work under the authority of those who hold the real power in east Aleppo and other opposition-controlled zones, the Western media's reliance on this organization for information comes with serious risks of being manipulated.

The highly political role played by the White Helmets in relation to foreign press coverage was dramatically demonstrated after the attack on a Syrian Red Crescent truck convoy in the rebel held area of Urum al-Kubra, just west of Aleppo on September 19. The assault took place immediately after a ceasefire agreed to by Russia, the U.S. and the Syrian government was shattered by a deadly U.S. air attack on Syrian army forces battling ISIS around the city of Deir Ezzor on September 17.

The Obama administration assumed the attack was an airstrike and immediately blamed it on Russian or Syrian aircraft. An unidentified U.S. official [told the New York Times](#) that there was "a very high probability" that a Russian plane was near the area just before the attack, but the administration did not make public any evidence in support of that claim. In the days following the attack, news media coverage relied heavily on accounts provided by the White Helmets. The head of the organization in Aleppo, Ammar Al-Selmo, was offering them a personal on-the-scene account.

Selmo's version of the story turned out to be riddled with falsehoods; however, many journalists approached it without an ounce of skepticism, and have continued to rely on him for information on the ongoing battles in and around Aleppo.

Changing stories while the press plays along

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.

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.”

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.

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.”

In videos the White Helmets made the night of the attack, Selmo went even further, asserting on one segment of the video that [four barrel bombs](#) had been dropped and in another, that [eight barrel bombs](#) had been dropped. The idea that barrel bombs were used in the attack was immediately picked up by self-styled “media activists” on behalf of the opposition authorities in Aleppo the following morning, as the [BBC reported](#). That theme was in line with an effort by opposition sources going back to 2012 to identify “barrel bombs” as uniquely destructive weapons, more reprehensible than conventional missiles.

Questionable evidence from partisan sources

In [a video](#) the White Helmets produced the night of the attack, Selmo addresses viewers by pointing at the indentation of the supposed bomb blast. “You see the box of the barrel bomb?” he asks. But what is shown in the video is a rectangular indentation in the gravel or rubble that appears to be about a foot deep two feet wide and a little more than three feet long. He reaches under the surface and pulls out what look like a damaged shovel blade, based on its shape.

That scene clearly proves Selmo's claim to have been completely false. Barrel bombs make very large round [craters](#) at least 25 feet wide and more than 10 feet deep, so the box-like indentation in the video bore no resemblance whatever to a barrel bomb crater.

Hussein Badawi, who is the local White Helmets director of Urum al-Kubra, is clearly lower than Selmo in the organization's hierarchy. Badawi appeared briefly next to Selmo in one segment of the video made that night but remains silent, then disappeared. Nevertheless, Badawi [directly contradicted](#) Selmo's claim that the first explosions that night were from barrel bombs. In a White Helmets [video](#) that was translated from Arabic into English, Badawi

described those first explosions not as airstrikes but as “four consecutive rockets” near the center of the Red Crescent compound at Urum al-Kubra.

No other visual evidence of a crater such as would have been created by a barrel bomb has come to light. In support of Selmo’s assertion, The Russian-based Conflict Intelligence Team, which is dedicated to refuting Russian government claims, [could only cite](#) the video frame of Selmo holding up that single piece of metal.

The Bellingcat website, whose founder Eliot Higgins is a non-resident fellow of the militantly anti-Russian, State Department-funded Atlantic Council, and has no technical expertise on munitions, [pointed](#) to the same frame. Higgins claimed that the piece of metal came from a “crater.” He also cited a second photograph that he said showed a “repaired crater” in the road next to a burnt-out truck. But the area in the photograph that appeared to be covered with fresh dirt is clearly no more than three feet long and a bit more two feet wide—again far too small to be evidence of a barrel bomb explosion.

Selmo’s White Helmet team also distributed to Bellingcat and media outlets what appeared at first glance to be visual evidence of Syrian and Russian air attacks: the crumpled tailfin of a Russian [OFAB-250 bomb](#), which can be seen under the boxes in a [photograph](#) taken inside a warehouse at the site. Bellingcat cited those [photographs](#) as clinching evidence of Russian use of that bomb in the attack on the aid convoy.

But that photographs of the OFAB tailfin is extremely problematic as evidence of an airstrike. If an OFAB-250 bomb had actually exploded at that point it would have left a crater that was much larger than the one shown in that photograph. The standard [rule of thumb](#) is that an OFAB-250, like other any other conventional bomb weighing 250kg would make a crater 24 to 36 feet wide and 10 or 12 feet deep. The magnitude of its crater is shown in a video of a Russian journalist [standing in one](#) after the battle for the Syrian city of Palmyra, which had been held by ISIS.

Furthermore, the wall in the photograph only a few feet from the supposed point of impact was clearly not affected by the bomb. That indicates that either no OFAB-250 was dropped in that spot or it was a dud. But the picture of the boxes surrounding the OFAB tailfin also reveals other evidence that there was an explosion. As one observer [discovered](#) from a close examination, the boxes display evidence of [shrapnel tears](#). A [closeup](#) of one package shows a pattern of fine shrapnel holes.

Only something much less powerful than an OFAB-250 bomb or a barrel bomb would account for those observable facts. One weapon whose shrapnel could cause the pattern seen in the photograph is the Russian S-5 rocket, [two variants](#) of which throw out either 220 or 360 small shrapnel fragments.

[In the video](#) he made the night of the attack, Selmo had already claimed that Russian aircraft fired S-5s [at the site](#), although he mistakenly called them “C-5s.” And a photograph of two S-5 missiles was also distributed to Bellingcat and to news organizations, including the Washington Post. Selmo [insisted to Time](#) magazine that the airstrikes were divided between barrel bombs and missiles fired by Russian jets.

But again Badawi, the White Helmets chief for Urum al Kubra, contradicted Selmo in a [separate video](#), stating that the initial barrage of missiles were launched from the ground. Badawi’s admission was very significant, because the Syrian opposition forces have had

supplies of [Russian S-5s](#) ever since the weapons were smuggled out of Libya to the rebels in large numbers in 2012. They have been using S-5s as ground-launched rockets like the Libyan rebels did, and have designed their own improvised launchers for them.

Badawi claimed the initial four missiles had been fired by Syrian government forces from the defense factories in southern Aleppo governorate. But the government defense plants in southern Aleppo governorate are in al-Safira—more than 25 kilometers away, whereas the S-5s have a range of only 3 to 4 kilometers.

Even more telling is that fact that, despite Selmo's insistence that airstrikes continued for hours and included as many as 20 to 25 distinct attacks, none of the members of the White Helmet team captured a single airstrike in a video, which would have provided clear audio-visual evidence of his claim.

The Atlantic Council's Bellingcat site pointed to a [video](#) posted online by opposition sources in Aleppo as providing such audio evidence of jet planes just before the nighttime explosions. But despite a voice on the video declaring that it was a Russian airstrike, the sound stops immediately after the fiery explosion, indicating that it was caused by a ground launched missile, not a missile fired from a jet plane. Thus the confirming evidence of an airstrike claimed by Bellingcat did not actually confirm it at all.

Despite a record of distortions, Selmo remains the go-to source

Whoever was responsible for the attack on the Syrian Red Crescent aid convoy, it is clear that Ammar al-Selmo, the top White Helmet official in Aleppo, lied about where he was when the attack on the aid convoy began and, at least initially, misled his audience when he said he witnessed the first stages of the attack with his own eyes. What's more, he made claims of Syrian barrel bombs and Russian OFAB-250 bombs dropped on the convoy that are not supported by any credible evidence.

In light of Selmo's readiness to embellish his account and to support the narrative of a Russian-Syrian attack, Western media should have been far more careful about relying on it as confirming the U.S. charge about the aid convoy attack. But during the weeks of heavy Russian and Syrian bombing in eastern Aleppo that followed the breakdown of the ceasefire, Selmo was frequently quoted by the news media as a source on the bombing campaign. And Selmo exploited the new situation to push the rebels' political agenda.

On September 23, the White Helmets told the news media that three of their four operating centers in east Aleppo had been hit and two of them were out of commission. National Public Radio [quoted](#) Selmo as saying he believed the group had been deliberately targeted, because he had "intercepted pilots' communications and heard them getting orders to bomb his colleagues." Curiously, NPR failed to identify Selmo as the head of the White Helmets in east Aleppo, identifying him only as a "White Helmets member."

Five days later the Washington Post reported a [similar claim](#) by Ismail Abdullah, another White Helmets official working directly under Selmo. "Sometimes we hear the pilot tell his base, 'We see a market for the terrorists, there is a bakery for the terrorists,'" said Abdullah. "Is it okay to hit them? They say, 'Okay, hit them.'" He further claimed that on September 21, the White Helmets had heard an enemy pilot refer to the "terrorist" civil defense centers. The organization sent a message to U.S. officials in New York for the U.N. General Assembly that they were being targeted, Abdullah added. These dramatic stories helped

propel the White Helmets' campaign for the Nobel Peace Prize, which was announced days later but which they ultimately did not win.

The claim that the White Helmets had overheard pilots asking for and receiving permission to hit targets while in the air is a fabrication, according to Pierre Sprey, a former Pentagon analyst on combat aircraft who played a central role in designing the F-16. "It's inconceivable that this could have been an authentic communication between an attack pilot and a controller," Sprey told AlterNet, referring to Selmo's accounts. "The only time a pilot might initiate a request to hit a target is if he sees gunfire from it. Otherwise it makes no sense."

The day after the Russian and Syrian bombing campaign on rebel-held eastern Aleppo began on September 22, Reuters turned to Selmo for an overall assessment of the bombing's impact on Aleppo. Selmo bluntly [declared](#), "What's happening now is annihilation."

Following this dramatic statement, Western media continued to cite Selmo as though he were a neutral source. On September 26, Reuters went back to the White Helmets working under him again, [citing](#) an estimate by unnamed "civil defense workers" in Aleppo — which could only mean members of the White Helmets — that 400 people had already been killed in less than five days of bombing in and around Aleppo. But after three full weeks of bombing the United Nations and other agencies [estimated](#) that 360 people had been killed in the bombing, suggesting that the White Helmets figure had been several times higher than could be documented by non-partisan sources.

It is obviously difficult for the news media to cover events such as the attack on the Syrian Red Crescent aid convoy and the bombing in Aleppo from Istanbul or Beirut. But the hunger for information from the ground should not outweigh the obligation to vet sources. Selmo and his White Helmets should have been recognized for what they are: a partisan source with an agenda reflecting the power to which the organization is accountable: the armed extremists who have controlled east Aleppo, Idlib, and other areas of northern Syria.

The uncritical reliance on claims by the White Helmets without any effort to investigate their credibility is yet another telling example of journalistic malpractice by media outlets with a long record of skewing coverage of conflicts toward an interventionist narrative.

Gareth Porter is an investigative historian and journalist specializing in U.S. national security policy. His latest book is [Manufactured Crisis: The Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare](#) (Just World Books, 2014).

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