

More Puzzles about BBC's "Saving Syria's Children" Documentary

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*This is our second look at the work of [Robert Stuart](#), concerning the BBC Panorama documentary *Saving Syria's Children*. (go [here](#) for our first instalment). When did the alleged chemical attacks actually occur? Why do accounts of the timing differ so widely? And why did producer Darren Conway become defensive and incoherent when asked one simple question?*

The BBC Panorama documentary [Saving Syria's Children](#) began as quite low key coverage of the work of two British doctors ([Rola Hallam](#) and Saleyha Ahsan) visiting the Atareb hospital in Aleppo on August 26 2013. But then - the story goes - completely by chance, while they were filming, there was an incendiary attack (originally described as a "chemical attack"), supposedly by the Syrian government, on the Urem Al-Kubra school 8 or 9 miles away, fortuitously permitting the film crew to get dramatic footage of the victims arriving at the hospital for treatment.

This footage was first aired on BBC's ten o'clock news on August 29 2013, just as the UK parliament were [debating possible military intervention in Syria](#). As it happens the motion for intervention was unexpectedly defeated by a narrow majority. If this had not happened the BBC's footage would unquestionably have served as very timely and useful PR in support of the coming war against Assad.

On September 30 2013 the Panorama program *Saving Syria's Children* was aired. It included the footage of the alleged chemical/incendiary attack shown a month earlier, though [the audio had been altered](#) in slightly curious ways, which we have [discussed on OffG](#) earlier. Explanations for why the changes were made have been less than satisfactory at deflecting the suspicion of deliberate attempts at war propaganda.

However, the puzzle of the altered audio is - for Robert Stuart - only one small part of the numerous problems this documentary presents. His website discloses multiple inconsistencies, anomalies and puzzles which combine to imply there is something very seriously not right about the incident as reported, and the footage taken of alleged victims at the scene. We'll certainly be returning to this important question again and again in coming months, and as always we urge everyone to read Stuart's own [detailed analyses](#), but here we'll look at just one small but crucial aspect. The chronology of the alleged chemical attack on the school.

All agree it took place on August 26, but Stuart points out the alleged time of day varies by nearly six hours [depending on what source you consult](#). Human Rights Watch [gives the time as "around midday"](#). The Violations Documentation Centre in Syria [put the time of the](#)

[attack at around 2pm](#). However Ian Pannell, the reporter on *Saving Syria's Children*, has stated the incident happened “around 5.30, at the end of the school day.” While his colleague on the program, director and cameraman [Darren Conway](#), estimated the time to have been “between 3 and 5 o'clock”. Another [alleged eyewitness](#) has put the time even later, at around 6pm.

This is a little odd. Particularly curious that the two BBC crew present don't seem to agree on the timing of the events they not only witnessed but filmed. Can it be explained simply by the confusion inherent in such a catastrophic event? It's hard to entirely rule out that possibility of course. The alleged victims would have to be transported from the school to the hospital, could this account for the apparent inconsistency? It doesn't seem probable. The school in Urem al Kubra is [less than nine miles](#) from the Atareb hospital, so it seems unlikely the first victims would be arriving three to six hours after the attack.

More curious still, however, is the subsequent response and reactions of the BBC crew to questions on the subject. In October 2014, during an interview at the Frontline Club, Stuart had the opportunity to ask cameraman Darren Conway, from the audience, to clarify his own timeline and explain the apparent anomalies. This is the transcript of that brief exchange:



'Saving Syria's Children' cameraman, director and producer Darren Conway at the Frontline club on
15 October 2014

Stuart: Just one small point of fact about the Panorama programme, because there's been some variation in what time it actually happened, this playground bomb, the BBC say 5.30 at the end of the school day, Human Rights Watch in their report say it was midday and Violations Documentation Centre in Syria say 2pm and one of their correspondents said they heard about it at 3pm, so what time of day did this actually happen?

Conway: It was the end of the day, yeah, I mean I don't remember the exact time but we were there, we only arrived in the afternoon, we were at that hospital on our way out of the country for about I don't know, 20, 30 minutes before it happened and then it became dark not long after, so I would say it was around, I don't know, between three and five, something like that.

Stuart: But you can't... give any reason why there's so much discrepancy in the various...

Conway: I don't... there's lots of discrepancy about that I mean, ah, you know I, you, it, er we could get into that for hours, I mean it kind of makes me sick to my stomach to think [people?] believe that, er, that happens, but that do not happen, but I mean there's a, there's a, there's a big machine that works, erm, that works for the sort of regime as well that tries to sort of er, you know, discredit this sort of stuff so you know I don't want to really talk about that.

As we can see, Stuart did not make even the smallest suggestion that the time anomalies called the reality of the event into doubt, yet Conway reacts with defensiveness and a certain amount of confusion. He even begins an incoherent form or rebuttal of an accusation no one had made....

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This is a very strange response by Conway, who [received an OBE](#) a few months after *Saving Syria's Children* aired, and whose reputation has never been called into question over the matter. Why didn't he just say "I don't know why HRW said it happened at midday, I was there, so I know when it happened. Period." His anticipatory defensiveness seems very hard to explain, if indeed events happened as he and his documentary claim.

More oddnesses followed quickly on. Stuart's brief Q&A took place at the end of an extensive interview with Conway as part of a series called [Reflections](#), run jointly by Frontline and the BBC, in which senior figures in journalism are celebrated. The series has featured such notables as [John Pilger](#) and [Jon Snow](#). The event is live streamed on the internet and the video is usually uploaded to Youtube and to the Frontline website shortly afterwards.

But so far, a year after the event, Conway's interview has not been uploaded. In late 2014 Stuart emailed Frontline's Programme Editor, Millicent Teasdale to enquire when/if the video would appear. He was told:

A few edits have had to be made to the video for security reasons and I hope to have it online early next year.

But apparently those "few edits" were just impossible to achieve, because in March 2015 the following note appeared on [the Frontline website](#):

The video from Darren Conway's Reflections has not been put on the Frontline Club site to protect those colleagues whose names were mentioned that work in extremely dangerous locations. Everyone is aware of the extreme risk that journalists are facing today in places such as Syria and DC wants to do everything possible to prevent them from being put at further risk, something that we at the Frontline Club of course support. This is the only reason why DC's Frontline Club session is being held back and, as soon as it is deemed safe for the individuals concerned, it will be made available on our site.

Given the event was *live streamed on the internet*, this seems like rather belated and useless caution. Stuart claims he can only recall two colleagues being mentioned by Conway: Ian Pannell, who presented the Panorama documentary, and whose name is therefore already out there and no secret, and "Saving Syria's Children's credited "Fixer/Translator" Mughira Al Sharif, whom Conway very briefly referred to, calling him only "Mughi"." Is he the colleague so desperately in need of protection? If so, how can it have taken Frontline 12 months and counting to bleep out that one syllable before uploading the interview?

Thank goodness Frontline tells us protecting Conway's colleagues is "the only reason why DC's Frontline Club session is being held back", because otherwise this might have been one of those situations where attempts to conceal, evade or obfuscate only succeed in

making those involved look as if they bear some kind of consciousness of wrongdoing.

Until Frontline decide their interview with Darren Conway OBE is finally safe enough to upload, the only record we have of any part of it is the [cellphone vid](#) of Stuart's brief Q&A with Conway. Short as it is, it's worth watching.

Meanwhile we are left to wonder why a seemingly innocuous question about timing anomalies a) caused Conway to instantly become both defensive and incoherent, and b) seems to have resulted in the entire video of his Reflections interview being pulled from the web for over a year.

For more detailed information please read Stuart's own [analysis](#) of these events, and the entire interconnecting mesh of lies, confusions and curiosities underpinning this controversial documentary.

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