

Syria: Media Lies, Hidden Agendas and Strange Alliances

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Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)
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[War Agenda](#)
In-depth Report: [SYRIA](#)

Much has been written about the barbarous massacre in the Syrian administrative area of Al-Houla on 25 May 2012, in which 108 persons are known to have died including 49 children. Absent a definitive report from the UN observer mission we are left with media and cyber speculation, much of which does not stand scrutiny.

The *BBC* is arguably the worst offender, having published a photograph submitted by an anonymous source which it was claimed depicted the bodies from the massacre. The photograph was in fact taken by Marco Di Lauro in Iraq in 2003. [1] The *BBC* claims to have followed its checking process on the photograph which yielded some information pointing to its veracity. This is simply not tenable. The bodies are all numbered and in the bottom of the picture can be seen consecutive numbering in Arab numerals from 382 to 386. The death toll at Houla was only 108, so that anyone with a limited knowledge of Arabic and a remote understanding of the story would be able to appreciate that there is something wrong with the claim made for this picture. Journalist Keith Harmon Snow rebuts any suggestion that the misinformation happened by accident:

"The BBC just doesn't do that. They don't pull down photos from an activist and post them without everything they do is fact checked. This is propaganda, no mistake, no accident."
[2]



BBC propaganda stunt in relation to the Houla massacre.

The photo on the left shows a BBC screen-cap of an image "believed to be" corpses of the children which died in Houla.

This morning, the photographer, Marco Di Lauro posted saying "someone is using illegally one of my image for anti syrian propaganda on the BBC website front page."

It was a photo he took in 2003, in IRAQ.

Syria massacre in Houla condemned as outrage grows



This image - which cannot be independently verified - is believed to show the bodies of children in Houla, western Syria.

Western nations are pressing for a response to the massacre in the Syrian town of Houla, with the US calling for an end to what it called President Bashar al-Assad's "rule by murder".

UK Foreign Secretary William Hague has called for an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council this week.



Marco Di Lauro | Photographer



In apologizing for this monumental 'error' Chris Hamilton wrote on the *BBC Editor's blog* that "such mistakes are very rare". [3] But even this claim was refuted only two days later when gross negligence gave way to farce and *BBC News*, intending to post the logo of the UN Security Council as background filler, filmed instead a logo of the fictional UN Space Command that originated in a commercial video game set in the 22nd century. [4]

Much of the mainstream media favoured the *BBC's* slant. Nine days after the massacre a report in the *Telegraph* claimed that the crime had been perpetrated by the "pro-Assad thugs" of the Shabiha who had "slit the throats of anyone they came across". The report written in London and Beirut said that a survivor identified the Shabiha because they were wearing white trainers. [5] Two points in this story later discredited the fabrication. White trainers of course are standard youth culture the world over, and video footage published on 10 June by the *Telegraph* itself, shows they are widely used by Syrian rebels. [6] The throat slitting is now generally rejected as an embellishment to the story and the allegation was refuted later in the week by Mary Dejevsky in the *Independent* and Jon Williams on the *BBC blog*. (Dejevsky said the victims had been killed when gunmen sprayed indiscriminately into homes, [7] while Williams said that Western officials had refuted the story to him while in Damascus. [8]) The calumny appears to have been started by Hervé Ladsous, the United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, who according to *Reuters*, on 29 May accused the Shabihis of killing "the victims from knife wounds". [9] On 8 June *Reuters'* correspondent Erika Solomon again reported him saying that government troops or militia were probably responsible, [10] despite the fact that UN observers under his authority have still not been able to ascertain the truth. Head of the UN observer mission (UNSMIS) Major-General Robert Mood was more circumspect than his superior when he said "Whatever I learned on the ground in Syria ... is that I should not jump to conclusions."

Without a definitive assessment of the crime a cautionary comment from the *Sunday Telegraph* provided a timely warning to the unwary

"Damascus has long accused activist groups of exaggerating and falsifying accounts to draw international attention to their plight, a charge that independent observers say has

sometimes been justified." [Quotation taken from Media Lens. [11]]

The BBC's use of the Iraqi photograph vindicates this allegation. *BBC World News* editor Jon Williams acknowledged the problem

"Those opposed to President Assad have an agenda. One senior Western official went as far as to describe their YouTube communications strategy as "brilliant". But he also likened it to so-called "psy-ops", brainwashing techniques used by the US and other military to convince people of things that may not necessarily be true." [12]

This is not to suppose that government reports can be considered any more reliable. In the complexities and deceits of the Syrian conflict an old adage serves well: do not believe anything you hear and only half of what you see. Jon Williams went on to point out that it is also important that journalists report what they don't know, not merely what they do. This sound advice does not appear to have been widely followed.

One of the few reporters actually at Houla was Alex Thomson, reporting for both *Channel 4 News* and *CNN*. His attempts to piece together a coherent story were inconsistent. On 27 May he wrote on the *Channel 4 blog* that Martin Griffiths from the UN Mission had a corroborated story from two different sources that the Friday prayers were followed by a sustained artillery barrage for two hours, after which Shabiha attacks began, with the killings occurring between 15.00 Friday and 01.00 - 02.00 Saturday. [13]

On the following day, while filming with *CNN*, he asserted that it was *"impossible to verify what happened in this town"* since there were no eye witnesses and no civilians. Filming the army, who at times were under fire, he said they were *"very scared"* and not in complete control. One soldier was hit while the film crew was present. Speculating on why this area was, as he called it, *"a ghost town"*, and comparing this to a nearby rebel-held area where the civilians had remained he asked *"Why do people flee the area held by the army but remain in the rebel held zone?"* The answer which eluded him may simply have been that the area the civilians had fled was an active combat zone. As his footage clearly showed, the area filmed could not correctly be described as *"held by the army"*. [14]

[On 7 June Thomson himself nearly became cannon fodder when four men he identified as belonging to the Free Syrian Army lured him into a free-fire zone in the hope that the government forces would collect some bad publicity by killing him. A human rights lawyer who had been with the Arab League Observer mission nearly suffered a similar fate in Syria earlier in the year. Thomson observed that *"bad journos are bad for Damascus"*. [15] Gen Mood told journalists that there are many agendas at work in Syria, both stated and unstated. [16] In such an environment when unarmed UN observers are now also coming under attack, it may be appropriate to consider how *"bad for Damascus"* (and good for someone else's agenda) a dead UN observer might be.]

Despite the fact that a journalist in Houla was unable to clarify who had committed the massacres, Amnesty International had no compunction on 28 May in blaming *"Syrian forces"* for the atrocity (without providing any justification). [17] Amnesty's investigators at the time were working 100 Km away in Idlib and Aleppo, but the NGO confidently made its claim only three days after the event, and has stuck with this story since. In contrast UNSMIS, whose mission is to verify and report facts on the ground, had immediately sent investigators to the area to gather facts and interview local people, from whom it received

conflicting accounts. On June 15, three weeks after the event, Gen Mood could still only tell journalists that the circumstances remained unclear. [18] Unlike the general, Amnesty is not averse to jumping to conclusions.

Amnesty's report of June, 'Deadly Reprisals', also blames the Syrian government forces for the massacre. [19] This cites a *Reuters*' report as its source; however the news agency is not accurately referenced. *Reuters* quote UN monitors as saying that the evidence "appears" to contradict the government's denial of responsibility, while UN human rights spokesman Rupert Colville is not quoted as attributing responsibility. [20]

[According to Amnesty, their Senior Crisis Advisor, Donatella Rovera, spent several weeks in northern Syria without permission, investigating human rights violations. [21] Jerry Dandridge (a pseudonym) writing in *SyriaNews* on 16 June questioned how she was able to do this for so long without attracting the attention of the Syrian Secret Service, and alleged that UN staff reported that she never left her room to conduct field work. [22]]

But Amnesty was not alone in rushing to judgement. The US State Department took the same line the following day. Spokeswoman Victoria Nuland told reporters

This morning we called in the Syrian chargé d'affaires Zuheir Jabbour, and informed him that he is no longer welcome in the US and gave him 72 hours to depart. We took this action in response to the massacre in the village of Houla; absolutely indefensible, vile despicable massacre against innocent children, woman. Shot at point blank range by regime thugs, the shabiha, aided and abetted by the Iranians who were actually bragging about it over the weekend. [23]

In what *Reuters* described as a "coordinated move" France, Britain, Canada, Germany, Italy, Spain, Australia and Bulgaria also expelled Syria's envoys on 29 May. [24] At least six of the countries taking diplomatic action had also been involved in the bombing of Libya, which had been conducted outside the UN Security Council mandate.

The involvement of France is particularly ironic. President Hollande had only recently taken office and one of his first actions was to announce the withdrawal of French forces from NATO operations in Afghanistan by October 2012. (France would still provide finance and equipment towards those operations in that country.) Yet on 29 May he also announced that France would host the next meeting of the Friends of Syria (previously known as the Friends of Democratic Syria, until the absurdity of Saudi Arabia and Qatar being the main funders of a democratic movement was realised [25]). France, it appears, has a revolving door policy on military interventions. It also has a shady colonial history in Syria which is not forgotten in that country. At Maysaloun in July 1920 French mechanised armour and aircraft annihilated Syrian cavalymen fighting for self-determination, and left their bodies to rot. An eye witness recalled "It was all over in hours and the French killed almost everyone they found". The Syrian minister of defence, who had led the cavalry, was tied up and executed by Senegalese troops, after French Algerians had refused to shoot a fellow Muslim. Few people in France are talking about that legacy at the present time. [Maysaloun is familiar to war. In 1967 it was shelled by Israeli tanks, and shelled again by the battleship *USS New Jersey* in 1982. [26]]

Amnesty International is joining with unsavoury bedfellows in making wild allegations which could have disastrous repercussions for ordinary civilians in Syria. Perhaps because little has

changed since 2002 when Dr. Francis A. Boyle, professor of International Law and former board member of Amnesty International USA, said that the organization had been penetrated by British and possibly American intelligence agents. [27]

In consequence it is relevant to consider here the recent appointment of Suzanne Nossel as Executive Director of Amnesty International USA. As Jerry Dandridge reported, Ms Nossel had previously been employed at the US State Department where she had been Deputy Assistant Secretary for International Organizations and had been, as Dandridge puts it, *“involved in a leading role at the subversive U.S. foreign policy regarding Libya, Iran, [Syria](#) and the Ivory Coast.”* [28]

Amnesty’s complicity continued with a press release on 14 June [29] referring to the UN Secretary General’s report on children and armed conflict, [30] which began by correctly quoting the declaration that

“...government forces were responsible for ‘killing and maiming, arbitrary arrest, detention, torture and ill-treatment’ of children as young as nine years old.”

However the NGO chose not to reveal that in paragraph 124 of the same report the Secretary General had written

“The United Nations has received some credible allegations of the recruitment and use of children by armed opposition, including FSA and other armed groups...”

On p 62 of its ‘Deadly Reprisals’ report Amnesty calls on the UN Security Council to impose an immediate arms embargo on the Syrian government, but in line with US administration policy it makes no such call for an embargo on arms shipments to rebel forces.

A further undated call for action by Amnesty UK was released sometime after the Houla massacre. This criticised Russia for supplying arms to the Syrian government after it had supported UN Security Council resolution 2042 calling for the full implementation of Kofi Annan’s plan. [31] On 12 June Hillary Clinton enlarged upon this call in a speech at the Brookings Institute saying

“We have confronted the Russians about stopping their continued arms shipments to Syria.[...] [W]e are concerned about the latest information we have that there are attack helicopters on the way from Russia to Syria, which will escalate the conflict quite dramatically.[32]

The following day the *New York Times* reported that the US administration officials had admitted that these were probably helicopters Syria had sent to Russia for routine repairs some months previously. A senior Defense Department official admitted that the Secretary of State had *“put a little spin on it to put the Russians in a difficult position.”* In fact it seems that Mrs Clinton was actually hinting that Kofi Annan’s mission may be *“difficult to extend”*, when its mandate becomes due at the Security Council in mid-July. This would give the US and its coordinating allies greater opportunities to manoeuvre for military intervention in Syria.

A spokesman for Rosoboronexport, the state-owned monopoly which handles virtually all Russian weapons exports, said the contracts do not violate United Nations sanctions. He added that the company was sending *“no extraordinary supplies, not speeding up contracts,*

and sending no additional shipments.”

In the same *NYT* article Andrew J. Tabler of the pro-Israeli think-tank the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP) accused the Syrian regime of using air power against its own civilians. This unsubstantiated allegation was used to raise the spectre of foreign intervention and ‘no-fly zones’ in Syria. The article had previously referred to an unauthenticated video filmed near Aleppo in May showing a helicopter and what may have been missile smoke. Apart from this tenuous evidence there is nothing to back up Mr Tabler’s reckless assertion. [33]

WINEP’s executive director also wrote an analysis of the Syrian conflict on 8 June. This considered a range of scenarios entirely from the perspective of the US interests, and to a certain extent those of Israel. At no stage did the article consider what might be the best outcome for the Syrian nation and its people, who apparently are merely pawns in the great game of American foreign policy. [34]

Joshua Landis wrote in *Foreign Policy* the previous day that the US should stay out of Syria, citing the huge financial cost of sorting out the mess afterwards and America’s poor track record of improving nations by conquest. This article too only saw policies through the blinkers of US interests. At no time was the UN mentioned and the possibility was never considered that the US might lean on Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the two Arab countries doing most to destabilise Syria, in order to slow down or even eliminate malignant outside influences. [35] Nor was it mentioned that the CIA and the State Department are already working with these two countries and others, including Turkey, to further the activities of the Free Syrian Army. [36]

On 15 June *BBC News* cited unnamed “foreign policy analysts” for its claim that the Syrian government had placed orders worth \$3.5bn for “hardware” (which presumably means armaments) with Russia.[37] No time frame was given to this statement, which contrasts with SIPRI’s data for 2011 showing that Syria’s total military expenditure for the year was \$2.4bn. To put this into better perspective one should note that for the same year other regional military expenditures included Saudi Arabia (\$48.5bn), Turkey (\$17.8bn), Israel (\$16.4bn), Iraq (\$5.8bn), Kuwait (\$5.6bn), Oman and Egypt (both slightly less than \$4.3bn). Figures are not available for Iran, Qatar, UAE and Yemen. Syria’s total expenditure was a mere 2.8% of SIPRI’s estimate for the entire Middle East region (which does not include Turkey). In contrast Saudi Arabia, which is supplying arms and finance to Syrian rebels, accounts for almost 40% of all Middle East military expenditures, although this attracts very little concern from Western media. [38]

There is also little concern (and no complaints from either Mrs Clinton or Amnesty International) about weaponry being supplied to the rebels. Jordanian Professor Ibrahim Alloush told *RT* in February that arms shipments were crossing borders from Lebanon and Turkey. He considered the eventual goal of the suppliers was to install a puppet regime in Damascus that would be subservient to Washington and NATO. [39] Confirmation of arms smuggling appears to have come on April 27 when the Lebanese Navy intercepted the *MV Lutfallah II* and impounded three containers allegedly carrying machine guns and heavy weapons which were thought to be destined for Syrian rebels groups. [40]

There are conflicting reports concerning an impending supply of heavy weapons, which would represent a significant escalation to the conflict. On 13 June Nermeen Shaikh had said

on *Democracy Now!* that Turkey had supplied anti-tank weapons and surface-to-air missiles with the approval of the US which “*did not take part directly in the weapons transfer*”. [41] Two days later the *Telegraph* reported that the FSA had denied the claims, although their representatives had prepared a “targeted list” of heavy weaponry which they intended to present to US officials in the coming two weeks. The weapons would be supplied by Libya and paid for by Saudi Arabia and Qatari government funds along with private donations. [42] It appears that the US has control over this shipment, and therefore considerable control over the conflict in Syria, even though it is not supplying or financing the deal.

The civil war in Syria is portrayed by many reports as a fight of good against evil, and a straightforward struggle for democracy and freedom against tyranny. That indeed is how it started in Deraa in March 2011, and the tyrannical excesses of the regime are well documented. A report by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights was published on 24 May 2012. The list of abuses by government forces is long and varied. The report mentions lethal force against anti-government demonstrations; collective punishment; unlawful killings; precise shelling and indiscriminate shelling of civilian areas; sniping from rooftops; house-to-house searches, often associated with extra-judicial killings; prisoners and wounded killed after capture; entire families executed in their homes; arbitrary arrest and torture; children killed, often by snipers; detention of children of the age of ten years; wilful denial of medical care to children injured under torture; schools attacked and burnt down; summary executions. The struggle for freedom and human rights in Syria is without doubt a just one.

Regrettably, anti-government armed groups are also cited in the same report for acts of criminal violence and terror. These groups are being supplied and equipped by external agents such as the Friends of Syria, while there is collusion by much of the Western media to ignore their crimes, and in the case of Amnesty International, to cover them up. Although nowhere near as extensive as the government abuses mentioned by UNHCHR, the list of activities cited in the same publication is long and horrific. The report mentions extra-judicial executions of members of the army and security forces, suspected informers and/or collaborators captured by anti-government armed groups; military tribunals, makeshift prisons; the use of improvised explosive devices including nail bombs; landmines; torture, including breaking bones, which in some cases has led to death; abduction of civilians and members of the government forces; use of children as medical porters, messengers, cooks and cross-border smuggling activities (there were four instances of child smugglers being injured by sniper fire). [43]

The armed opposition is also characterised by fundamentalist elements with links to Al-Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood. The Muslim Brotherhood is the best funded and best organised element in the opposition, and it has been opposed to the secularist Ba’ath party since it came to power in 1963.

In the late ‘70s some of the Brothers took up arms and mounted a terrorist campaign against the Syrian regime. [44] In an uprising in 1982 they took Hama, where they murdered the families of government workers and policemen, and beheaded schoolteachers who taught secular education. The government crushed the uprising with “great savagery” (according to Robert Fisk, who was an eye witness to some of the events). After their defeat the Brotherhood was banned, and membership was punishable by death. A government employee explained to Robert Fisk that the regime had tried to negotiate with the Brothers

but they would not compromise. Had they not crushed the rebellion by these fanatics the state would have turned to Islamic fundamentalism on the lines of Algeria. Syria has been the only country in the Middle East (and note well, this includes Israel) to have totally suppressed fundamentalism. [45] Patrick Seale explained how the Syrian revolution has now been joined by large numbers of armed Islamic extremists and jihadis from neighbouring countries, and also countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tunisia. Some from Iraq have been replicating the gross acts of terror that they committed there. And he asked “Does the US want to be on the side of Al-Qaeda?” [46] To which the answer appears to be an emphatic ‘yes’; since there is no reason to suppose that after Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya the power brokers in Washington are not fully aware of exactly who they are dealing with.

Alexei Pushkov, Chairman of the Duma’s International Affairs Committee told the *Voice of Russia* on 15 June that he could hardly see a situation where democracy could be established in Syria with the help of Saudi Arabia and Qatar. However if Syria explodes there could be 100,000 victims. [47] (Patrick Seale recalled on *Democracy Now!* that the US-led invasion of Iraq had resulted in 100,000s killed and millions displaced. [48]) Russia was ready to influence the Assad regime, and he appealed to the West to influence the insurgents in order to prevent this bloodbath. He added that the Russian interest was not about business since Syria did not play a huge role in Russian foreign trade. Syria was rather a very serious example of the Russian desire to fight for international law which is universally accepted.

To facilitate an all-inclusive political process in Syria, Russia along with Iraq, was trying to organize an international conference of all key players in late June. It proposes that this should include all permanent members of the Security Council, Syria’s neighbours (although Israel was not mentioned on the list), other key regional players with political clout including Iran, along with the League of Arab States and the European Union. [49] The US is objecting to the inclusion of Iran at the conference, [50] so that already the spectre of political expediency is threatening to derail this important attempt to find the road to peace.

As fanatics, neo-colonialists and their conspirators manoeuvre towards armed intervention in Syria we should consider carefully the words of Patrick Seale. “*The United States*”, he told us, “*is playing a high risk strategy and it doesn’t matter how we classify it, it is an extremely dangerous situation for everyone*”. If we remember to take into account those countries which could be affected by disrupted oil supplies following war with Iran, the list of affected states is a long one, including, Iran, Lebanon, Jordan, the Gulf States, the US, Europe, Israel and China. But above all it is the people of Syria who face the prospect of a horrible fate in order to satisfy the callous self-interest of outside actors. With so much at stake international political leaders should feel compelled to find a peaceful solution to this crisis.

For ordinary people it may seem that Syria’s misery is irredeemable, and that control and responsibility in this great game are far beyond us. So they might be. But that does not absolve us from placidly accepting the lies and deceptions that we are fed by friend and foe alike. Knowledge is power, and it is our responsibility to seek the truth and not believe the lies so that at least we are not complicit by approving the evil designs that feed the egos of our political leaders.

Notes

[1]

<http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10150999096543125&set=a.1015099909653312.5.482292.632908124&type=3&theater>

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[12] *ibid.*

[13] Alex Thomson, 27 May 2012; *Piecing together the bloody truth in Houla*; Channel 4 News blog; <http://blogs.channel4.com/alex-thomsons-view/piecing-bloody-truth-houla/1687>

[14] Afsaneh pakroo, 28 May 2012; *what really happened in Syria,houla.flv*; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xRkmTkP-bMw&feature=related>

[15] Alex Thomson, 8 June 2012; *Set up to be shot in Syria's no man's land?*; Channel 4 News blog; <http://blogs.channel4.com/alex-thomsons-view/hostile-territory/1863>

[16] UNSMIS, 15 June 2012; *Q&A General Mood to the Press PT3 June 15,2012*; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ESpxPZZD2SE>

[17] Anon, 28 May 2012; *Swift UN action needed on Syria after Houla assault*; Amnesty International; <http://www.amnesty.org/zh-hant/node/32322>

[18] UNSMIS, 15 June 2012; *Q&A General Mood to the Press PT2 (June 15,2012).mov*; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UOTjdHTloLg&feature=relmfu>

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