

Syria : One Year After the Houla Massacre. New Report on Official vs. Real Truth

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A week from now it will be one year since the world first heard about the horrors of a place in Syria called "Houla." On the afternoon and evening of Friday, May 25, 2012, a reported 108 civilians were massacred there. They were executed inside their homes, with guns and "sharp tools," and maybe a little bit from shelling as well. As the reader might recall, most of the victims were entire families, included some 49 younger children and even babies.

Anyone who had to watch the video results might recall having the bottom drop from their stomach with dread, and the lingering depression after. Many people, naturally, wanted revenge for that.

According to activists, all of the victim families were Sunni Muslim. It was of course blamed on the Syrian Arab Army - the only ones with artillery, if blades aren't so clear - and their allied "Shabiha," militias from surrounding villages, of the same Alawite faith of president Assad. None of these features was completely new, but this was by many measures the worst, most massive, most unambiguous massacres of innocents to date.

Western and Gulf Arab states took the events in Houla as clarifying the urgency of toppling the perpetrators; they expelled Damascus' diplomats and otherwise moved to isolate Syria in the kill box. U.S. ambassador to the U.N. Susan Rice said it had become clear that the "wheels were coming off" of Kofi Annan's peace plan. The same point was made more aggressively by rebels shaking dead babies on video - no compromise was possible after this. Military aid to the rebels and talk of increasing it increased.

The opposition wanted a no-fly zone and a swift enforced victory, Libya-style. But the war has continued for a year after that "turning point," stumbling along with no decisive aid yet delivered, and the widely-supported government seems to be winning. There will now be anniversary lamentations about how this massacre failed to move the world adequately. And quite possibly "the regime" will surprise us with a similar slaughter to remind the world how evil they remain. It might be wise, therefore, to brush up on what happened in Taldou last year, to get a clearer idea of how to best approach whatever its anniversary brings.

While official Western and U.N. investigations easily decided to blame Damascus, a more independent, de-centralized, citizen-led investigation (of sorts) was underway from the start. This has by and large reached much different conclusions, with public work that can be verified. Some of the sharper findings from that have been compiled into a report released on Wednesday by the Citizen's Investigation into War Crimes in Libya (since mid-2012, they

have turned their attention to Syria, but without a name change). Official Truth, Real Truth, and Impunity for the Syrian Houla Massacre of May 2012 (PDF, 79 pages - [CIWCL download page](#)) compiles seven previously published essays by four authors in three countries, edited, updated, and in two cases translated for the first time to English. Together, they cast unusually harsh light across the murky details of this pivotal event.

As usual, both sides initially blamed each other for the killings in Houla. More precisely, they happened in and around the southern half of Taldou, the southernmost town of the Al-Houla area, which was otherwise under rebel control by mid-2012. Damascus accused “terrorists,” their usual phrase for people who would slaughter little kids just to blame someone else. In the version lodged by the Syrian government (and at least a dozen local witnesses on record), rebels moved on May 25 to secure total control. In a pre-planned, multi-front attack, 600-800 armed fighters from the region and overseas hit all five security posts around Taldou. They came in waves with mid-heavy weapons, pinning the soldiers down in defensive mode or completely overrunning their posts. Over the afternoon and early evening, many Syrians say, the rebels took over the town.

Some evidence in the report suggests this is just what happened. The damage to buildings given as from distant regime artillery shelling, seems instead to be from RPGs and heavy machine guns, on Taldou’s main street itself. Instead of holes in roofs, we see primarily walls holed and peppered with horizontal fire. Among the most heavily “shelled” places are all the government security posts along main street. The U.N.’s investigators acknowledged that the northernmost “one or two” posts were overrun by rebels in what might have been a “premeditated attack.” (p. 55) However, they somehow managed to play this down as irrelevant.

In this version with at least some evidence behind it, the opposition simply lied about the victims of the ensuing massacre. Rather than neutral-to-anti-government Sunnis, they were Shi’ites, perhaps Alawites, and Sunnis who rejected the rebellion and remained loyal to the “Alawite regime.” One of the Sunni families was said to be related to the new speaker of the Syrian parliament, the People’s Assembly - selected the day before the massacre of his kin. (see p. 25)

A compromised UN “investigation” (Commission of Inquiry, Col) arrived at their blame target by listening carefully to some alleged witnesses and experts (usually via Skype) and scoffing at others behind their backs. Led by Karen Koning AbuZayd, an American Middle East think tank director, the Col established with its reports the closest thing there is to the world’s official truth. The mainstream media delivered the context for receptive audiences, world leaders led, groups for good things concurred, and little surprise, the world public and the public record came out blaming the rogue regime that needed to be changed like a dirty diaper.

In case it matters, deeper investigation shows that the alleged witnesses this mythology is based on are grossly unreliable, or reliable at delivering lies. An essay by Alfredo Embid explores the disparate voices and the psychology of speaking up in post-massacre Taldou. (see p. 29) For whom is telling the truth going to mean “certain death”? Certainly not for rebel fighters, who were a prime source of evidence used to exonerate the rebels. One of these is FSA Farouk Brigade commander Abdul Razzaq Tlass of nearby ar-Rastan; he’s been seen leading U.N./Arab League monitors around by the hand (p. 34) and, Embid argues convincingly, probably informed them on the Houla events. On the other hand, Tlass was reported as himself leading a large unit of fighters involved in the massacre, or at least the

connected battle of Taldou (p. 31).

An essay by myself scrutinizes the 11-(or 8?)-year-old boy survivor Ali al-Sayed. (p. 20) He has striking consistency in blaming the Shabiha with “Alawite accents” for killing his family, and in demanding foreign intervention, compared to his bizarre confusion over everything else between different accounts. For example, Ali is not sure whether the men were killed right away, or only after they were found hiding, without a peep, while everyone else (except Ali) was killed. Also, the names of these men shift all over in a strange manner. The alleged father of this family is Aref Mohammed al-Sayed, but Ali says his dad is named Ali Adel or Shaoqi. It’s his brother, Ali says, that’s named Aref – or Shaoqi – while his uncle is Aref, Abu Haider, or Oqba. It’s worth noting that the family he refers to so inconsistently is the one said to be related to the People’s Assembly secretary, although Ali insists the relation is too distant to matter.

The U.N.’s Col spoke to Ali via Skype and found, without comparing accounts like I have, that all child witnesses “remained consistent ... despite the fact that [interviews] were conducted over an extended period of time” and with “different investigators.” This is just plain false.

The other alleged witnesses, saying they faced a death sentence for doing so, spoke up and blamed the rebels. In contrast to Ali and those with similar stories, these were simply ignored by most media reports, and unfairly minimized and sidelined by the U.N.’s Col. This decided there were only two such witnesses on record, both aired by Syrian state broadcaster SANA. In fact, there are somewhere over a dozen, from a variety of sources. (p. 37) They identified a few possible “inconsistencies” and, citing a lack of direct access to Syria, said “those inconsistencies could not be further explored.” Why it couldn’t be done remotely by Skype, like with the witnesses they wanted to hear from, is not explained. They dismissed the two witnesses, standing in for all of them, as “unreliable.”

In another essay (p. 44), Ronda Hauben explains how other witnesses of this class also spoke to monitors with UNSMIS (U.N. Special Mission in Syria), and so should have been on file. Unlike the Col, UNSMIS had people on the ground, led by Major-General Robert Mood. Cryptically, he told the press on June 15 that UNSMIS had been to Houla and interviewed locals, some of whom “told one story” and some of whom told “another story.” Comparing them, he said, it “still remains unclear to us” which was truthful. He offered to support a deeper investigation, but instead, the mission was shut down at the end of July. The UNSMIS report with conflicting accounts, Mood said, was handed to headquarters in New York. It’s acknowledged as existing but has never had its contents mentioned, referenced, or seen anywhere.

In the absence of U.N. info they would cite, the two SANA witnesses alone were easy for the Col to dismiss. As Marinella Correggia rightly points out (p.17)

“This interference that fuels violence is justified – by governments and the mainstream media – by the need to “help the armed opposition groups to stop the massacres by the regime and to protect civilians.” [...] For this story to hold, it’s required to systematically deny the international right to speak and bear witness to a large portion of the population, that would launch different or contrary accusations. And so it is discriminated against by the media, NGOs and UN experts.”

Even if their process was distorted, it’s possible the Col happened to slant things towards

the truer witnesses. This doesn't appear to be the case, however.

The available video evidence offers a few opportunities to actually test the two witness sets for consistency with the more reliable "digital witnesses." The final essay summarizes a detailed analysis which managed to place numerous videos of May 25, all gleaned from opposition sources, in specific locations around Taldou, and to give each a rough time stamp. Seven aspects of the alleged rebel attack are then explained with their video supports, with select stills and a detailed reference map helps the reader visualize along. For example, where a witness cited rebels shooting at the central security post from the northwest at about 1:30 PM, two rebel videos show ... exactly that (p. 57).

Even where video is absent - the main six hours of the attack and the massacres - is a clue of something afoot on the side practicing video silence that ended precisely just before sunset. Collectively, this is a surprisingly consistent picture of deceit from the hard-to-deny realm of direct video evidence. There is nothing in it to support the rebel version of flight from shelling (nor any footage of the attackers, from any distance). In its place there is something unsettlingly close to visual proof that they stuck around though their own barrage and were thus best placed to be behind the killings after all.

U.S. ambassador Robert Ford, who knows a few things about death squads and such, said a few days after the massacre that it was "the most unambiguous indictment of the regime to date," based on the alleged use of heavy artillery, which the rebels did not have. In fact, even before the detailed exposition began, it was never a particularly clear event. It was, however, the "big one" they really wanted to make very sure was perceived a regime crime. After more analysis, this desire seems ill-founded, and Mr. Ford's statement sounds incredibly sad. Houla has been shown beyond a doubt to be extremely ambiguous at best, and at worst a fairly obvious crime of the U.S.-supported Syrian Contras.

The best evidence says rebels clobbered Taldou before the slaughter, but they were able to whitewash right over that victory, with nothing but alleged witnesses talking on the phone and on Youtube. And so after their homicidal rampage through Shi'ite bedrooms, Syria's Sunni rebel extremists garnered an outpouring of support. That works by no magic of their own; it's all on loan. It's their golden shovel. Any corpse that rebels bury with it carries just the lessons they attribute to it.

In recent months, moral confusion has grown with increasing awareness of extremely heinous rebel actions. The more massive crimes of total cruelty, like the Houla massacre, ensure that at best people will perceive two sides no better than each other. How much less confusing it would be if it became clear Houla, if not other crimes like it, were also from the rebel side. Houla is far from the only such incident," some might protest. "It's unfair to pick on just one example." But of course worthwhile answers can never appear until one gets this specific, and with this example, many thinkers have picked the fairest one. It was, after all, pre-highlighted by the blame-Assad crowd. The research done quietly to date arguably takes this high ground, and inverts the example it sets. Consider the other huge and shocking massacres vying for the notoriety of Houla - Qubeir, Daraya, Aqrab, Jdeidat al-Fadl, al-Bayda and Baniyas, etc. - most of them, like Houla, coming just before U.N. security Council meetings on Syria and the like. It's worth asking honestly which of those happened as reported by the opposition, and which was, instead, more like the famous Houla massacre they apparently lied to us about?

As one portion of the report explains (p. 73-75), many of these others feature rebel battle

deaths passed off as innocents, to massively pad the numbers into the triple digits. But at least one shocking December, 2012 event without such ambiguity seems to be Houla rebels getting one-sided revenge on neighboring “Shabiha” – and their families – in Aqrab. At least 125 Alawite men, women, and children, gone missing and apparently snuffed out, were passed off by rebels as more victims of “Shabiha” and the Army. This was done with nowhere near the success they had back in May, thanks to on-site report by Alex Thomson for UK Channel 4. (p. 74) But neither was anyone punished or called out for it, nor were the missing Alawites – or answers – asked after. The story of [what happened in Aqrab](#) got “murky” and then really quiet as soon as it looked like a rebel crime. That it was by some of the same criminals credibly blamed for the battle and massacre that gave them Taldou, is worth pondering on.

Those who believe in the golden shovel, and those under the sway of powerful people who do, are apparently bound to recognize what its holder says. However, as this report again reaffirms, that’s magic doesn’t work on everyone. The leadership of a majority of the world’s people were never convinced about what happened at Houla (see pages 11-12) Besides China and Russia, for example, India’s Ambassador to the UN, Hardeep Singh Puri, asked that atrocities, “including the recent incident in El Houleh, are fully investigated and their perpetrators brought to justice.” This is nothing unusual, but he didn’t blame the government and, for context, as Ronda Hauben points out,

“[Puri] noted that the attacks against civilians and security forces in Syria “have intensified over the last few weeks and have taken a significant toll.” Also he drew attention to the sharp increase in the number of terrorist attacks in different parts of the country.” He “condemned all violence, irrespective of who the perpetrators are,” and called for the “cessation of all outside support for armed groups and serious action against the terrorist groups in Syria.”

The questions recognized as standing on May 26, 2012 can and should be revisited a year later, because a year later is now, and it seems that the questions weren’t answered right the first time. This report will hopefully add to the effort to end the magic spell that’s spilled so much blood, and let truth finally get its chance to be the basis upon which the world acts.

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