

UK Media Lies: ‘Shades Of Grey’. Rethinking The Houla Massacre

By [Media Lens](#)

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*In our recent [alert](#), *The Houla Massacre*, we noted how virtually all UK corporate media instantly found, not just the Syrian government, but its leader Bashar Assad, wholly responsible for the brutal massacre of 108 people, including 49 children.*

While initial accounts blamed Syrian government forces for mass death by shelling the UN quickly [reported](#) that shelling was responsible for fewer than 20 of the deaths.

‘Pro-government militia’ were then blamed for the close-quarter butchery involving, we were told, the slashing of throats and point-blank gunshots to the head. Diplomatic correspondent James Robbins commented on the BBC’s News at Ten:

‘The UN now says most victims, including many children, were murdered inside their homes by President Assad’s militias.’ (BBC News At Ten, May 29, 2012)

These claims of clear responsibility for hideous crimes strongly empowered calls for overt Western military intervention (covert Western intervention appears to be [well](#) underway).

Last week, however, in what might almost be interpreted as a *mea culpa*, the BBC’s World News editor, Jon Williams, began a June 7 [blog](#) emphasising ‘the complexity of the situation on the ground in Syria, and the need to try to separate fact from fiction’.

This was a surprising emphasis – the BBC had previously communicated no sense of ‘complexity’ in blaming the Syrian government. Williams continued:

‘In the aftermath of the massacre at Houla last month, initial reports said some of the 49 children and 34 women killed had their throats cut. In Damascus, Western officials told me the subsequent investigation revealed none of those found dead had been killed in such a brutal manner. Moreover, while Syrian forces had shelled the area shortly before the massacre, the details of exactly who carried out the attacks, how and why were still unclear... In Houla, and now in Qubair, the finger has been pointed at the shabiha, pro-government militia. But tragic death toll aside, the facts are few: it’s not clear who ordered the killings – or why.’

Williams added: ‘stories are never black and white – often shades of grey. 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. A healthy scepticism is one of the essential qualities of any journalist – never more so than in reporting conflict. The stakes are high – all may not

always be as it seems.'

These comments were reinforced on the same day in a further 'shades of grey' paragraph [published](#) by the BBC's reporter Paul Danahar on the BBC website:

'There is a sense in Damascus shared by many diplomats, international officials and those opposed to President Assad that his regime may no longer have complete and direct day-to-day command and control of some of the militia groups being blamed for massacring civilians. The world has looked at the Syrian conflict in very black and white terms over the past 15 months. It now needs to acknowledge the shades of grey that are emerging.'

Danahar added:

'Members of the international community in Damascus say that, contrary to initial reports, most of the people in Houla were killed by gunfire spraying the rooms, not by execution-style killings with a gun placed to the back of the head. Also, people's throats were not cut, although one person did have an eye gouged out.'

These were crucial new claims challenging key aspects of the consensus on Houla – the media had been as one in reporting as established fact the horrific cutting of children's throats, for example. It now appears that this was a fabrication. Even more importantly, the same media had suggested there was no doubt that the Syrian government was to blame for the atrocity and that this justified military intervention.

If Williams' and Danahar's reports from Syria merited headline coverage, they did not get it. While Williams' views were confined to his blog, the BBC initially included Danahar's comments in a small analysis box to the right of a main article focusing on a different massacre in al-Qubair. The excellent [News Sniffer](#) website, which tracks changes made to online media articles, has [recorded](#) 16 versions of the article. Danahar's comments first appeared in the second version and were then moved to the very end of the long main article. Version 10, however, directly [swapped](#) the 'shades of grey' paragraph above (beginning, 'There is a sense in Damascus...') with these comments:

'The carnage at Houla, and now Qubair, has injected a dangerous new element into an explosive situation.

'The shabiha militia is almost entirely drawn from the Alawite community, the minority to which President Assad and his ruling clan belong. Most of the victims are from the majority Sunni community in which the uprising is to a large extent based.'

In other words, rare mainstream scepticism was directly replaced by the standard line suggesting Syrian government responsibility.

Regardless of the editing, this was unjustifiably low-key publishing of a major scoop starkly contradicting earlier reports on an extremely high-profile issue. Danahar's gruesome testimony on the al-Qubair massacre was later mentioned in several press articles in the Guardian and Independent. But we have been unable to find any reference outside the BBC to his claims that pro-government militia might be beyond Assad's control and that the world 'needs to acknowledge the shades of grey that are emerging'.

The Guardian – ‘The Report Appears To Be A Little Second Hand’

According to a June 7 [report](#) in Germany’s leading daily newspaper, the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ), the victims in Houla were almost exclusively from the Alawi and Shia communities, and were killed by anti-Assad Sunni militants. The National Review [commented](#):

‘The FAZ report echoes eyewitness accounts collected from refugees from the Houla region by members of the Monastery of St. James in Qara, Syria. According to monastery sources cited by the Dutch Middle East expert Martin Janssen, armed rebels murdered “entire Alawi families” in the village of Taldo in the Houla region.’

We have found no evidence of any UK newspaper covering the FAZ story. When challenged, the Guardian’s Matthew Weaver explained:

‘Thanks, but that report appears to be a little second hand and contradicts what are [sic] reporters [found](#)’ (Email posted by Gabriele Zamparini on Media Lens message board, June 11, 2012)

Middle East specialist and Guardian op-ed contributor, Patrick Seale, appears to disagree. On Middle East Online (June 12), he [gives](#) the story detailed attention, noting that FAZ is ‘a very serious newspaper’. Seale concludes: ‘An independent investigation is clearly needed to establish which of these two versions is correct.’

Curiously, the Guardian has published numerous second hand accounts from Syrian ‘opposition activists’ based in the UK. For example, on June 7, the Guardian’s Ian Black [reported](#) the al-Qubair massacre under the title, ‘Syria accused of massacring 100’:

‘The British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) said the massacre was carried out at a farm by pro-regime shabiha militiamen armed with guns and knives after regular troops had shelled the area.’

The Guardian has quoted the Syrian Observatory dozens of times. And yet, according to [Reuters](#), the organisation consists of a single individual, Rami Abdulrahman, the owner of a clothes shop, who works from his ‘two bedroom terraced home in Coventry’.

Patrick Seale again appears to contradict the Guardian on the al-Qubair massacre:

‘After monitors reached al-Qubair, a spokeswoman for the UN supervision mission, Ms Sausan Ghosheh, said, “The circumstances surrounding the incident are not clear.”’

The Guardian has also had no problem reporting the possibility of ‘false flag’ attacks in Syria. Consider the title of this Guardian [article](#):

‘Syria blames al-Qaida after two car bombs kill dozens in Damascus – Opposition activists dismiss official account, accusing Assad regime of plotting blasts that coincided with Arab League visit’

Numerous other media have entertained the possibility that the Syrian government committed atrocities in order to blame the rebels. Shashank Joshi, an associate fellow at the Royal United Services Institute in London, [wrote](#) of the same car bomb attacks in the

Independent:

'A government that has tortured and slaughtered thousands of its own citizens would have little compunction about mounting a false-flag operation to justify its crackdown.'

By contrast, to reiterate, the German report that Syrian rebels were responsible for a 'false flag' atrocity in Houla appears not to have been reported anywhere in the UK media.

Channel 4's Alex Thomson, who visited Houla immediately after the massacre, [suggests](#) that pro-government militia probably committed the atrocity, but he [cautions](#):

'The jury's out on exactly who did it - I don't think we'll ever know firmly...'

Thomson has also [claimed](#) that the Free Syrian Army lured him and other journalists into the firing line to be shot:

'I'm quite clear the rebels deliberately set us up to be shot by the Syrian Army. Dead journos are bad for Damascus.'

Thomson wrote:

'Please, do not for one moment believe that my experience with the rebels in al Qusair was a one-off. This morning I received the following tweet:

""@alexto I read your piece "set up to be shot in no mans land", I can relate as I had that same experience in Al Zabadani during our tour."

'That was from Nawaf al Thani, who is a human rights lawyer and a member of the Arab League Observer mission to Syria earlier this year. It has to make you wonder who else has had this experience when attempting to find out what is going on in rebel-held Syria.'

Thomson's claims have been reported by several major media. Writing in the Daily Mail, Peter McKay was alone in [linking](#) Thomson's experience to an earlier tragedy:

"Dead journos are bad for Damascus," [Thomson] explains, a reference to Marie Colvin of The Sunday Times who was killed in a Syrian forces bombardment. Was she, too, set up by the "Free Syria" forces?'

McKay added:

'But the so-called Arab Spring — of which the Syrian civil war is part — is a far more complex event than credulous innocents in the West imagine. It's not simply uprisings by ground-down peasants against tyrants who repress them.

'It's about a transfer of power to rival clans and/or religious groups. And about a continuation of the old, U.S.-Russia Cold War stand-off.'

Mary Dejevsky provided a tiny glimpse of [scepticism](#) in the Independent:

'At every level the picture is deceptive. Even on the smallest, most local scale things are less black and white than they have been made to look... Even the assumption that Assad forces were responsible for the carnage is not quite true. In both Houla and now Qubair, it is shabiha militias - from Assad's Alawite clan, but not regular army troops - that are identified

as the culprits.'

The Times made a suitably vague gesture in the direction of the truth:

'Verifiable information is scarce, because the Assad regime ensures that this is so.' (Leading article, 'Heart of Darkness,' The Times, June 8, 2012)

But The Times was not about to let a small problem like scarcity of information stand in its way:

'More massacres in Syria illustrate the depravity of the regime. Western diplomacy recognises the necessity of a post-Assad future, despite international division.'

'Will The World Ever Step In To Stop The Iraqi Slaughter?'

Little scepticism was apparent in a June 8 Guardian [leader](#). The killers in Houla and al-Qubair remained clear:

'There are ominous similarities: both attacks were launched after artillery barrages; women and children accounted for a large number of the deaths; pro-government militias worked hand in hand with the army...'

The logic?

'Once again, Assad's terror is tactically ahead of the game: sectarianism is the tool to dig himself further in.'

And yet, as we discussed in our previous [alert](#), the influential risk analysis group Stratfor [reported](#) that Syrian government massacres against civilians were unlikely because the 'regime has calibrated its crackdowns to avoid just such a scenario. Regime forces have been careful to avoid the high casualty numbers that could lead to an intervention based on humanitarian grounds'.

And with good reason, given what WikiLeaks has [leaked](#) of Pentagon thinking:

'They don't believe air intervention would happen unless there was enough media attention on a massacre, like the Ghaddafi move against Benghazi.'

The Guardian's lead reporter on Syria is Martin Chulov. In the aftermath of Houla, Chulov was [asked](#) on Twitter:

'Memories of the inhuman inexcusable inaction of Bosnia surfacing?'

Chulov [replied](#):

'Took a v long time to muster support for a response in Bosnia and Kosovo. Syria will be even more difficult.'

We [tweeted](#) Chulov:

'As a neutral reporter, are you actually supporting Kosovo-style Western intervention in Syria?'

Chulov [replied](#): ‘nope’.

This week, an article in the Independent by Kim Sengupta was [published](#) under the headline:

‘Will the world ever step in to stop the Syrian slaughter?’

‘As the West’s rhetoric has escalated, so has the death toll from Assad’s killers. Kim Sengupta asks whether a military response is anywhere on the horizon’

Did the Independent ever publish an article with the title: ‘Will the world ever step in to stop the Iraqi slaughter?’?

In November 2004, Sengupta [published](#) an article under this matter-of-fact title: ‘US begins its biggest urban offensive since Vietnam with long-awaited Fallujah assault.’

The Observer’s latest [editorial](#) on Syria might have been emailed from a lush armchair in some elite Gentleman’s Club: ‘Outrage is the easiest part of responding to Assad’s crimes,’ the editors opined. The difficulty lies in the fact that the world ‘is more cautious after a decade of problematic, western-led, military interventions, founded on better and worse premises’.

Thus an allegedly ‘left-leaning’ newspaper described the death of one million Iraqis, the devastation of the lives of four million refugees, and the virtual destruction of an entire country, as ‘problematic’. The editors continued:

‘The results of these interventions have been disappointing at the very least.’

For the survivors, no doubt; less so for the dead. The Observer warned that wars in the region can be hard-fought: ‘As Israel discovered during its protracted adventure in Lebanon...’

It was an ‘adventure’, and again ‘disappointing’ for Lebanese civilians, perhaps even ‘problematic’. As for Syria, the West is currently unable to indulge its natural appetite for destruction:

‘If a full-scale military intervention either to topple Assad or protect civilians with ground troops seems off the menu of options for now, a second option – the wholesale training and arming of Syria’s rebels – seems equally problematic.’

With the favoured delicacies, invasion and bombing, ‘off the menu of options’, the carnivorous West casts around helplessly for an alternative. As ever, genuine diplomacy in pursuit of a peaceful, compassionate solution is not an option when the overriding goal is regime change.

SUGGESTED ACTION

The goal of Media Lens is to promote rationality, compassion and respect for others. If you do write to journalists, we strongly urge you to maintain a polite, non-aggressive and non-abusive tone. Please write to:

Martin Chulov at the Guardian

Via Twitter: @martinchulov

Matthew Weaver at the Guardian

Email: matthew.weaver@guardian.co.uk

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