

“Saving Syria’s Children”: The Sequel

By [Robert Stuart](#)

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[Fabrication in BBC Panorama 'Saving Syria's Children'](#) 4 May 2021

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [SYRIA](#)

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BBC Panorama has produced a follow-up report to 2013’s [Saving Syria’s Children](#) (SSC).

The new documentary, entitled [Syria’s Schools Under Attack](#) (SSUA) (YouTube copy [here](#)), is produced, filmed and narrated by SSC director and cameraman, Darren Conway. [1]

SSUA was screened several times over the weekend of 20/21 March 2021 on BBC World News and BBC News Channel. An [extended version](#) was broadcast solely on BBC World News on 24 and 25 April. As far as I am aware this is the first time an edition of Panorama, the BBC’s flagship current affairs series, has not been broadcast on BBC1.

The programme contains interviews with several of the alleged victims and relatives from SSC. The new footage is compelling [2], however the programme contains several inconsistencies with the original documentary as well as fresh incongruities which raise new questions.

The observations below are discussed as they arise in SSUA. (BBC iPlayer copy [here](#), YouTube copy [here](#)). [3]

02:30 – “We heard sound of a warplane like in the air”. (Abu Taim, teacher) [4]. “There were more than 75 children at school that day. Abu Taim started to evacuate his students from the classrooms immediately after the bomb struck the school’s courtyard”. (Conway)

This account suggests that the first intimation of anything unusual that day was the sound of a warplane above the school and that the students only began to leave their classrooms after a bomb hit the school’s courtyard. [5]

However accounts by [Dr Saleyha Ahsan](#), [Dr Rola Hallam](#), [another purported teacher](#) at the Iqra school and journalist [Paul Adrian Raymond](#) [6] all refer to an initial attack on a nearby apartment building shortly prior to the attack on the school. The first attack was also confirmed by the BBC in correspondence [7].

In a November 2020 [Human Rights Watch report](#) victim Muhammed Assi [8] recounts how, after the initial attack on a three-storey building 100 metres away [9], he and other students hurried outside to see what had happened:

““We saw a plane in the sky. It was very far away so we thought, ‘OK, it won’t hit us,’” Muhammed told Human Rights Watch and IHRC. Teachers urged the students to return inside where it was safer. Muhammed and five classmates, however, stayed in the courtyard with a playground talking about the attack and what they would study the following year. The group suddenly heard a faint, “unfamiliar” sound, and “[t]here were large fires, and choking fumes.” An incendiary bomb had landed in the middle of the six students, immediately killing the other five”.

Dr Rola Hallam has claimed on at least two occasions that the playground was full of children when the attack occurred:

“a schoolyard full of children was aerielly bombarded with an incendiary weapon”. [10]

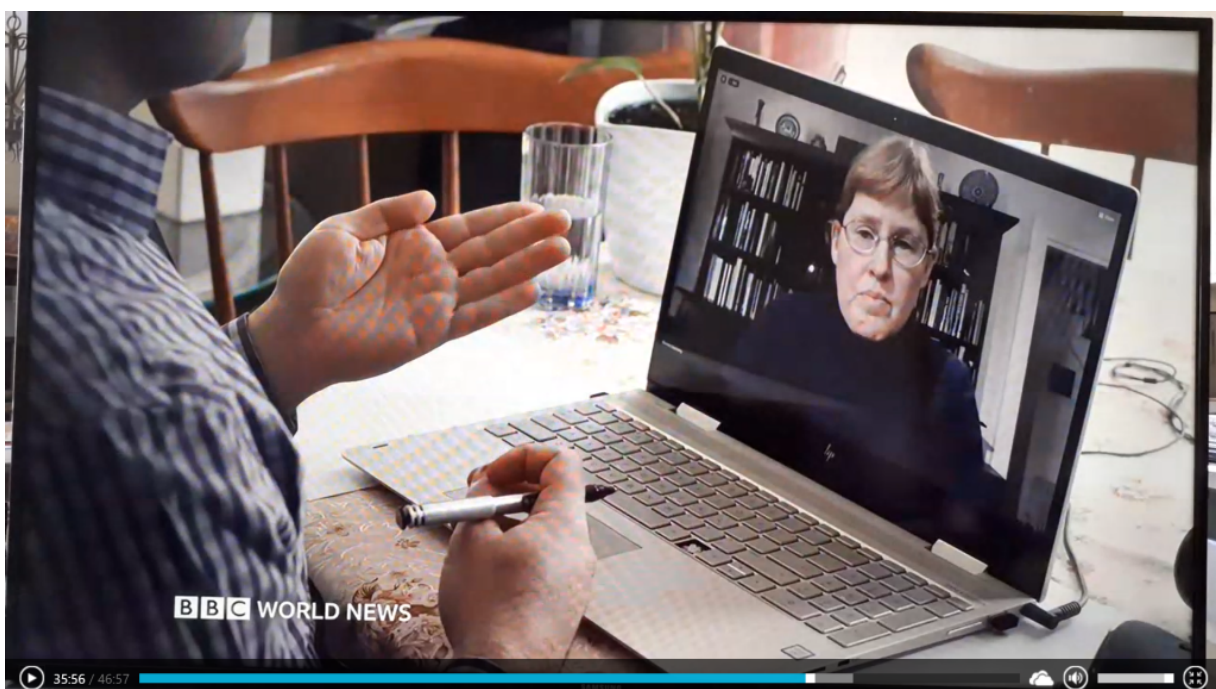
“a big incendiary weapon which is basically a big ball of fire that was dropped from the aeroplane. Onto a, umm, a school yard where ten to sixteen year-olds were waiting after school to be picked up by their children, by their parents”. [11]

This plainly contradicts Conway’s statement that Abu Taim began to evacuate students only after the bomb had hit the school and Assi’s testimony that just he and five classmates were outside when the bomb struck the playground.

Adding to the contradictions Dr Saleyha Ahsan [has claimed](#) that parents and family members had rushed to the school after the initial bombing of the nearby residential building and consequently were also present when the second bomb struck:

“The first bomb had hit a nearby building penetrating three floors and injuring my first patient, the baby. Everyone ran to help. Parents had rushed to the school on the first hit to take their children home. Anas had come for his 14-year-old sister – a student. She was saved but he was so terribly burnt”. [12]

Hallam’s and Ahsan’s accounts are starkly inconsistent with the picture painted in SSUA of students sitting in their classroom oblivious to the possibility of an impending attack. [13] [14]



Abu Taim giving testimony to Bonnie Docherty of Human Rights Watch in the [extended version](#) of SSUA

03:40 – “It was a children’s hospital run by a local charity called Hand in hand for Syria”.

[Hand in Hand for Syria](#) was a UK registered charity, not a local Syrian charity. Three of its [executive team](#) are now trustees of another UK charity [Hand in Hand for Aid and Development](#).

A [June 2014 article](#) on Hand in Hand for Syria’s website makes it clear that Atareb was a general, not a children’s, hospital:

“When we first opened the hospital in May 2013, it was just a small A&E unit. We’ve grown it very successfully since then, and it now offers 68 beds and a wide range of services – from maternity and neo-natal facilities to many outpatient departments, three excellent operating theatres and a laboratory. It cares not only for those injured in the conflict but also non-conflict-related conditions such as cancer, heart disease, asthma and diabetes. It even has a dialysis unit. It provides FREE healthcare to anyone, regardless of political or faith affiliation”. [15] [16]

03:46 – 04:00 – This scene features the Hand in Hand for Syria nurse who was later photographed at the same hospital [“treating” a child fighter](#). [17]



L-R: Dr Rola Hallam, Hand in Hand for Syria nurse, father and baby (the first victims of the attack in some accounts), Dr Saleyha Ahsan (03:50, SSUA).



Hand in Hand for Syria nurse (logo visible on tunic) at Atareb Hospital, in what appears to be a staged scenario [glorifying the exploits](#) of a 15 year old fighter. Image from a web article dated June 2014.

The sequence also features the [“burnt” father and baby](#).

Contradictory accounts of baby’s alleged burns



“Then an eight-month-old baby came in with **nasty scolds [sic] on his legs.**”

Dr Saleyha Ahsan, Romford Recorder, 11 October 2013



“We were working in the emergency department when a baby, a seven month old, came in with **80% burns**”

Dr Rola Hallam, Save the Children event, 27 November 2013

<http://bbcpanoramasavingsyriaschildren.wordpress.com>



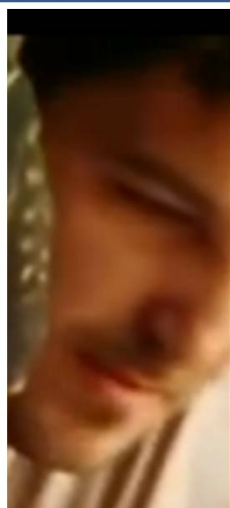
Accounts of the baby's supposed burns range from "nasty scolds on his legs" to "80% burns". Full references [here](#).

Ian Pannell: apparent discrepancies between description of baby's father and screened footage



"A seven-month old baby boy arrived, his pink face was blistered and raw. **His father was also burnt and sat helplessly on a stretcher clutching his son** as the staff rushed to help."
Ian Pannell, BBC News website, 30 September 2013.

In the BBC's reports the baby's alleged father appears **vigorous, animated, highly vocal and entirely unscathed**



<http://bbcpanoramasavingsyriaschildren.wordpress.com>

The baby's purported father appears entirely unscathed. Full references [here](#).

04:23 – A girl's scream is patched into the soundtrack here and again at 05:38. The same scream was also woven into the soundtrack of [SSC](#) at 33:26 and 34:41.

04:25 – An ISIS insignia is visible in the rear window of the ambulance filmed by Conway as it enters Atarab Hospital's courtyard. As discussed [here](#), the Panorama team was embedded with then ISIS partners Ahrar al-Sham during the production of SSC, enabling them to [pass unmolested](#) through an ISIS checkpoint. Were the occupants of the ambulance, at least one of whom was armed, members of ISIS? [18]



Ambulance pulls into Atareb Hospital courtyard on 26/08/2013, filmed by Darren Conway. An ISIS insignia is displayed in the rear window and two militarily attired figures emerge (4:27, SSUA)



YouTube footage of the ambulance at the commencement of its journey plainly shows the ISIS insignia. This information was [forwarded](#) to then Shadow Foreign Secretary Emily Thornberry in 2017.

07:55 – “This is Ahmed Darwish, he was 16 years old”.

In SSC a younger child is named as [Ahmed Darwish](#) – the small boy shaking in a chair in the corridor.

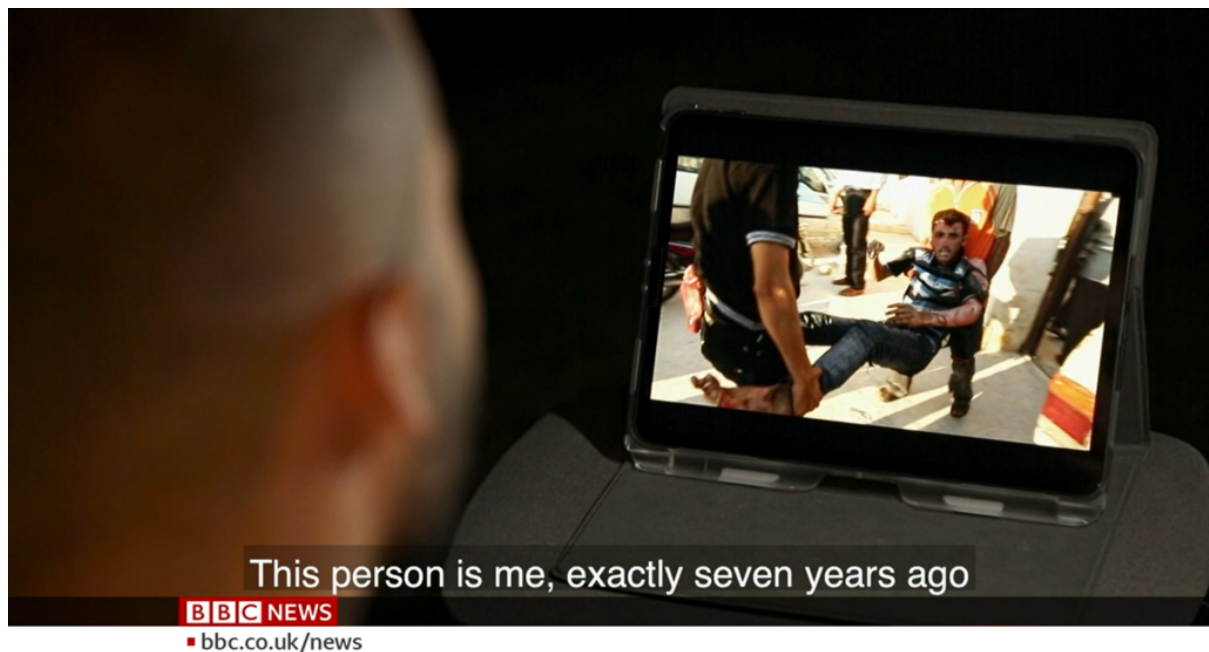


Ahmed Darwish, Atareb Hospital, 26/8/2013 (SSC)

The person now referred to as Ahmed Darwish in SSUA did also appear in SSC but was unnamed.



The person now also named by the BBC as Ahmed Darwish, Atareb Hospital, 26/8/2013 (sequence originally shown in SSC and repeated in SSUA)



The person now named Ahmed Darwish watching the above footage of himself being carried into Atareb Hospital on 26/08/2013 (SSUA)



The person now named Ahmed Darwish (SSUA)

If there were only one person named Ahmed Darwish involved in the events of 26/8/2013 and the misattribution of the name by the BBC, either now or in 2013, were simply an error, it would be an odd one to make. The [“original” Ahmed Darwish](#) was one of the focal points of SSC, appearing in the Atareb Hospital sequences and towards the end of the programme, where he is seen in a different hospital recovering from his alleged injuries. [19]. In 2014 SSC reporter Ian Pannell [claimed](#) he and Conway had “sporadic contact” with Ahmed’s father. Panorama used an image of the “original” Ahmed Darwish in its promotion for SSUA in April 2021.



The “original” Ahmed Darwish, SSC 44:04

PANORAMA
SYRIA'S SCHOOLS
UNDER ATTACK

BBC WORLD NEWS

Saturday	24 April	07:10, 21:10	GMT
Sunday	25 April	02:10, 15:10	GMT

Produced, Directed & Filmed: **DARREN CONWAY**

Producers: **DEBBIE RANDLE, MUGHIRA AL-SHARIF, FERAS AHMED**

Executive Producer: **DAN KELLY**

The “original” Ahmed Darwish in a promotional image for SSUA

As discussed in [this recent post](#), the Violations Documentation Centre in Syria (VDCS) compiled a [list of 41 fatalities of the alleged attack](#). [20] The list contains several names plainly recognisable from SSC, albeit transliterated slightly differently in some cases (for instance the BBC refers to one of the victims as [Lutfi Arsi](#) while the VDCS lists a [Loutfee Asee](#)). The VDCS list contains a single victim named “[Ahmad Darwish](#)”.

A peculiar point about the VDCS list is that it gives the date of death of all those on it as 26/8/2013, the day of the alleged attack. However some of those listed are claimed by the BBC to have either died some time later (e.g. [Anas Sayyed Ali](#), listed by the VDCS as [Anas al-Sayed Ali](#)) or to still be alive (e.g. [Muhammed Assi](#), listed by the VDCS as [Muhammad Assi](#)).

In 2014 Ian Pannell [stated](#) that the “original” Ahmed Darwish – the small boy shaking in the corridor – “is alive and living back in Syria”. Evidently the “new” Ahmed Darwish – the balding, bearded man seen in SSUA – survived the events of 26/8/2013.

10:09 – *“This is Ahmed’s classmate Omar Misto. He also managed to escape Syria and lives in Turkey now”.*

Omar Misto had not previously been named by the BBC.

According to the VDCS two children, [Omar Mestow](#) and [Muhammad Mestow](#) were among those who died in the attack on 26/8/2013. Bearing in mind the [very close correlation](#) between other names ascribed to victims by the BBC and names on the VDCS list, plus the fact that according to SSUA Omar’s brother was named Mohammed (see below), it is safe to assume that the names Omar Misto and Omar Mestow refer to one individual.

10:52 – *“he [Omar] has had 25 operations”.*

How did a student from a rural Aleppo town pay for 25 operations? Where and when did they take place? If his treatment involved leaving and returning to Urm al-Kubra, how was he able to move in and out of territory controlled by jihadist groups? [21]

11:20 – *“And this is his younger brother Mohammed. He’s 15”.*

Mohammed Misto had also not previously been named by the BBC.



Mohammed Misto, Atareb Hospital, 26/8/2013, SSUA

[Read the full article here.](#)

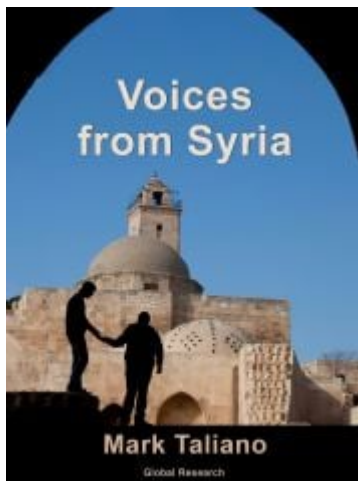
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Featured image: Promotional image for BBC Panorama Syria’s Schools Under Attack, March 2021

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