

# Syria: Controversy surrounding MintPress Chemical Weapons Ghouta Report

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Region: [USA](#)

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

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In-depth Report: [SYRIA](#)

*On Friday 20th September, the corporate media's favourite "YouTube Syria analyst" and self-proclaimed "weapons expert" Eliot Higgins – aka "Brown Moses" – released a [statement](#) on his blog from the Associated Press correspondent Dale Gavlak; in response to his queries regarding the [MintPress article](#) that included her byline.*

*The MintPress article, published on 29th August, through interviews with rebels, family members, and villagers in Eastern Ghouta, alleges that elements within the opposition were responsible for the alleged chemical weapons attack on 21st August, and that those chemical munitions had been supplied through Saudi intelligence chief, Prince Bandar bin Sultan.*

Below is the statement as published on Higgins' blog in full: (emphasis added)

Mint Press News incorrectly used my byline for an article it published on August 29, 2013 alleging chemical weapons usage by Syrian rebels. Despite my repeated requests, made directly and through legal counsel, they have not been willing to issue a retraction stating that I was not the author. Yahya Ababneh is the sole reporter and author of the Mint Press News piece. To date, Mint Press News has refused to act professionally or honestly in regards to disclosing the actual authorship and sources for this story.

I did not travel to Syria, have any discussions with Syrian rebels, or do any other reporting on which the article is based. The article is not based on my personal observations and should not be given credence based on my journalistic reputation. Also, it is false and misleading to attribute comments made in the story as if they were my own statements.

Following the release of this statement a flurry of questions arose, and Gavlak's lawyer proceeded to send a [second statement](#) to Higgins' blog to clarify Gavlak's position and answer his queries: (emphasis added)

Dale Gavlak has sought to make a public statement from the beginning of this incident and now is able to do so. Email correspondence between Ms. Gavlak and Mint Press News that began on August 29 and ended on September 2 clearly show that from the beginning Ms. Gavlak identified the author of the story as Yahya Ababneh, a Jordanian journalist. She also made clear that only his name should appear on the byline and the story was submitted only in his name. She served as an editor of Ababneh's material in English as he normally writes in Arabic. She did not travel to Syria and could not corroborate his

account.

Dale Gavlak specifically stated in an email dated August 29 “Pls find the Syria story I mentioned uploaded on Google Docs. This should go under Yahya Ababneh’s byline. I helped him write up his story but he should get all the credit for this.” Ms. Gavlak supplied the requested bio information on Mr. Ababneh later that day and had further communications with Mint Press News’ Mnar Muhawesh about the author’s background. There was no communication by Mint Press News to Ms. Gavlak that it intended to use her byline. Ms. Muhawesh took this action unilaterally and without Ms. Gavlak’s permission. After seeing that her name was attached to the article, Dale Gavlak demanded her name be removed. However, Ms. Muhawesh stated: “We will not be removing your name from the byline as this is an existential issue for MintPress and an issue of credibility as this will appear as though we are lying.” Mint Press News rejected further demands by Dale Gavlak and her legal counsel to have her name removed. Her public statement explains her position.

Following this statement, even more questions and contradictions arose, as it had previously been inferred Gavlak had little to no involvement in the article by Higgins’ and several of his corporate media colleagues. Gavlaks’ line had now changed to include in her statement that she “helped write-up” Ababneh’s story. Not only this, but Gavlak was responsible for pitching the story to MintPress News under her own volition. Gavlak received the report from her colleague, Yahya Ababneh, whom she has worked with before. Gavlak then proceeded to translate, edit, add background research, and crucially: pitch the story to MintPress News. Following MintPress receipt of the report, Gavlak then made further communications to verify her colleague Yahya Ababneh and to vouch for his reporting. MintPress news published the report on the same day, and it almost instantly went viral.

Since the reports release, much speculation has been focused on the veracity of the reporters involved and the substance of the report itself, yet it has taken Gavlak three weeks to publicly respond – at which point she chose Higgins’ blog to release the statement while adding comments under several other blogs that carried the story. Following Gavlak’s statement release, and after several attempts by myself and many others to contact MintPress News, MintPress editor Mnar Muhawesh in turn released a [lengthy statement](#) that defines their position in no uncertain terms: (emphasis added)

Thank you for reaching out to me in regards to statements made by Dale Gavlak alleging MintPress for incorrectly attributing our exclusive report titled: “Syrians in Goutha claim Saudi-supplied rebels behind chemical attacks.” Gavlak pitched this story to MintPress on August 28th and informed her editors and myself that her colleague Yahya Ababneh was on the ground in Syria. She said Ababneh conducted interviews with rebels, their family members, Ghouta residents and doctors that informed him through various interviews that the Saudis had supplied the rebels with chemical weapons and that rebel fighters handled the weapons improperly setting off the explosions.

When Yahya had returned and shared the information with her, she stated that she confirmed with several colleagues and Jordanian government officials that the Saudis have been supplying rebels with chemical weapons, but as her email states, she says they refused to go on the record.

Gavlak wrote the article in it’s entirety as well as conducted the research. She filed her article on August 29th and was published on the same day.

Dale is under mounting pressure for writing this article by third parties. She

notified MintPress editors and myself on August 30th and 31st via email and phone call, that third parties were placing immense amounts of pressure on her over the article and were threatening to end her career over it. She went on to tell us that she believes this third party was under pressure from the head of the Saudi Intelligence Prince Bandar himself, who is alleged in the article of supplying the rebels with chemical weapons.

On August 30th, Dale asked MintPress to remove her name completely from the byline because she stated that her career and reputation was at risk. She continued to say that these third parties were demanding her to disassociate herself from the article or these parties would end her career. On August 31st, I notified Dale through email that I would add a clarification that she was the writer and researcher for the article and that Yahya was the reporter on the ground, but did let Gavlak know that we would not remove her name as this would violate the ethics of journalism.

We are aware of the tremendous pressure that Dale and some of our other journalists are facing as a result of this story, and we are under the same pressure as a result to discredit the story. We are unwilling to succumb to those pressures for MintPress holds itself to the highest journalistic ethics and reporting standards. Yahya has recently notified me that the Saudi embassy contacted him and threatened to end his career if he did a follow up story on who carried out the most recent chemical weapons attack and demanded that he stop doing media interviews in regards to the subject.

We hold Dale Gavlak in the highest esteem and sympathize with her for the pressure she is receiving, but removing her name from the story would not be honest journalism and therefore, as stated before, we are not willing to remove her name from the article. We are prepared and may release all emails and communications made between MintPress and Dale Gavlak, and even Yahya to provide further evidence of what was provided to you in this statement.

At the time of writing, Gavlak, or her lawyer, have not responded to the above statement.

Several key questions regarding this affair still remain, and will hopefully be answered in due course if and when MintPress release the emails between Gavlak and themselves, or, if Gavlak releases a clear and specific statement regarding her actual input into the report and her vouching for Ababneh. Regardless of whether those emails are released, a key indicator as to the credibility of Gavlaks dissociation attempts will come from her and her lawyers next course of action. If the alleged emails prove MintPress' case that Gavlak did indeed author and vouch for the report, then it seems anathema for the supposed "third parties" pressuring Gavlak to want these emails out in the open - further exposing Gavlak's attempts to disassociate under duress.

The major questions that remain unanswered:

1) MintPress claim that Gavlak did not merely translate Ababneh's article, but also edited; "wrote up" in its entirety; researched; and then pitched the article to Mintpress. Not only this, MintPress also claim that Gavlak had "further communications" with them post-pitch regarding Ababneh's bio - in essence, to vouch for his credibility. Considering this; why has Gavlak waited three weeks to make a statement on the issue, and in effect discredit the story, if she ever thought it was dubious? Surely Gavlaks' alleged statement to MintPress that she had confirmed the story with *"colleagues and several Jordanian government officials"* belies any claim to her now trying to distance herself from it.

2) Where is Yahya Ababneh? From the above MintPress statement it becomes clear why both Ababneh and Gavlak may have kept out of the spotlight until now. And also why Gavlak seems to be communicating through a lawyer and only to corporate-media-friendly sources. Yahya Ababneh has apparently been contacted since the reports release by [journalists](#) who have in turn claimed that a) he exists, b) he stands by the substance of the story, the claim that Gavlak wrote it and contributed to it, and c) has confirmed that he has recieved threats via actors attempting to force him to abandon the report and any follow ups or interviews regarding its substance. But Ababneh is yet to release a public statement regarding the issue. Considering the alleged threats coming directly from the House of Saud, and supposed “third parties”, Ababneh’s absence from the spotlight is hardly surprising.

3) Who are the “Third Parties” that are allegedly pressuring Gavlak to disassociate herself from the article? One can readily assume that these people are her employers at the Associated Press. Who have apparently now suspended Gavlak “indefinitely”. If this is the case, there are again several scenarios as to why the AP is pressuring her. It may be a simple case of AP not wanting a reference to them on such a controversial – and as yet unproven – report. But it may be something entirely more sinister, the actions against Ms. Gavlak seem to suggest the latter, and that there is a considerable amount of top-level pressure being applied to her, if the report is merely bogus propaganda; why is so much effort being put into discrediting it?

4) Considering Gavlaks’ tacit admission that she “wrote up” Ababneh’s report in her second statement; MintPress are well within their rights to uphold the byline they added. Gavlak pitched the story to MintPress presumably knowing the editors valued her credibility and experience. So the question remains: why would Gavlak willingly translate and edit; then attempt to pitch the report but keep her name off it; then vouch for the report and its author through “further communications” if she knew it was dubious or would bring scorn from her other employers? Why take that risk with a small independent outlet?

5) Why the haphazard attempt to disassociate from the story now, three weeks later? It has only given the report an added impetus – highlighted by the fact that a plethora of establishment media pundits and commentators (who originally dismissed and subverted the report) are now going to great lengths to discredit it. There is almost an air of desperation coming from several pundits, going [as far as to insinuate](#) that MintPress holds a bias simply because the editors father in-law happens to be a Shi’ite Muslim. The [NYT lede blog even ran a story](#) on the issue late last night – totally omitting any reference to the crucial pieces of information relayed in the MintPress statement. This is even more perplexing when you consider the fact that outlets such as the New York Times completely ignored [recent revelations](#) that the Washington Post’s new Jerusalem correspondent is the wife of a Zionist PR tycoon that regularly lobbies for the Jewish state.

Regardless of the veracity of the original report from Ghouta, and the allegations against the Saud regime held within; MintPress News are undoubtedly within their rights to uphold the Gavlak byline and in turn deem her accountable for its credibility.

If one were to offer a hypothetical, it seems likely that Gavlak has received this report from a trusted colleague (Ababneh) and wanted to run it through a smaller outlet anonymously to avoid possible recriminations from her corporate media employers; at which point MintPress have realised the controversial nature of the report and added Gavlak’s byline to bolster its credibility (which is well within their rights). As Gavlak rightly foresaw, she is now being pressured to retract her name from the story and subsequently discredit it. Whether the

report itself is true or not is an entirely different matter, which will hopefully be explored as more details emerge. The current furor, and alleged efforts made by powerful interests to discredit and suppress it, suggests that this report is perceived by those powerful interests as more damaging than a mere piece of unverifiable propaganda.

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