

The War on Truth, Dissent and Free Speech

Syria, the OPCW Douma Investigation and the Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media

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In-depth Report: [SYRIA](#)

On Saturday 13 June 2020 the Times newspaper published its third attack on academics associated with researching British government propaganda and the war in Syria. This time the attack focused on smearing myself and Professor David Miller with the objective of discrediting an academic organization we established, the [Organisation for Propaganda Studies](#) (OPS), designed to foster research and writing on propaganda.

The article contained multiple falsehoods and distortions and was similar in style to previous attacks aimed at character assassination mainly through employment of the 'conspiracy theorist' smear. Most prominently the hatchet pieces misleadingly conflated work by members of the [Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media](#) (WGSPM), of which myself and Miller are also members, with the OPS. [Formal complaints from the OPS are in process](#) and the Times has already been forced to issue a number of corrections.

Of course, character assassination as a propaganda tactic is widespread and there is even a Routledge academic handbook on the subject, the '[Routledge Handbook of Character Assassination and Reputation Management](#)', which was published in 2019 and contains 30 odd chapters. The attacks by the Times have been amplified [by similar pieces written](#) by Chris York for the Huffington Post.

In total, approximately 20 articles have been produced attacking those of us who are working on the war in Syria and questioning important aspects of UK propaganda operations. The bulk of these articles have been written by just two journalists, [Dominic Kennedy](#) for the Times newspaper and [Chris York](#) for the Huffington Post. This represents an extraordinarily intensive and sustained campaign against us.

Why on earth have we gotten into so much trouble?

A history of the attacks is instructive. Attention first started to be paid by former Guardian journalist Brian Whitaker in February 2018 when he penned a series of crude hatchet pieces on his blog smearing academics associated with the then newly established WGSPM. At that point Huffington Post journalist Chris York had already been attempting for several months to make contact with me, Professor Tim Hayward and journalist Vanessa Beeley.

But it was several weeks after Whitaker's smears that the attacks started in earnest.

Following the now controversial alleged chemical weapon attack in Douma, Syria, on 7th April 2018, the US UK and France bombed Syrian government targets claiming Syria was

responsible for the attack. At the same moment these air attacks were underway, [the Times of London published four articles](#) which included one on the Front page, photographs of some of us from WGSPM and an editorial.

These articles smeared the academics as ‘conspiracy theorists’ for questioning official narratives regarding chemical weapon attacks in Syria, as ‘Assadists’ and also implied the existence of nefarious links with Russia. Chris York of the Huffington Post then followed the Times attack with [multiple articles attacking us](#). The articles followed a similar pattern to the Times’ hatchet pieces involving allegations of ‘conspiracism’, ‘war crimes denial’, being pro Assad and pro Putin etc. More than two years later, attack pieces are still being published.

The vast bulk of the output of WGSPM has concerned the issues of alleged chemical weapon attacks in Syria and, in particular, the Douma event. The working group’s [briefing notes](#) documented serious anomalies and issues regarding these attacks and, in particular, critically analysed both the OPCW investigations of these alleged attacks and also identified the involvement of UK-linked actors, including the late James Le Mesurier (founder of the White Helmets) and Hamish de Bretton-Gordon.

The evidence, as the working group [briefing notes set out](#), is that the OPCW Douma investigation was manipulated in order to ensure the finger was pointed at Syrian government responsibility for the alleged chemical weapon attack. In reality, the evidence did not demonstrate an attack had occurred and, in fact, pointed toward the attack having been staged.

Our findings have been presented at an event at the [UK House of Commons](#) and at the [Harvard-Sussex Program on Chemical and Biological Weapons](#).

The WGSPM has not been alone in raising questions and a wide body of material now corroborates its work. For example, even at the time of the Douma attack credible individuals voiced doubt about the likelihood of the Syrian government launching a chemical weapon attack in Douma just as its forces were on the brink of retaking the enclave.

For example, both retired [Major General Jonathan Shaw](#) and [Admiral Lord West](#) questioned the tactical logic of any such an attack and the latter raised the possibility the event was carried out by opposition groups.

Following the publication of the final OPCW report on Douma in March 2019, an engineering report was leaked to WGSPM and which concluded that the chlorine gas cylinders had likely been manually placed at the alleged attack scenes rather than having been dropped from a Syrian air force helicopter. This engineering report, it subsequently transpired, had been rejected by [OPCW management](#) on spurious grounds.

During the Autumn of 2019 the Courage Foundation [hosted a panel at](#) which a former OPCW official briefed a panel of trusted and authoritative individuals, including José Bustani the first Director General of the OPCW, about significant procedural and scientific flaws regarding chemistry, ballistics, toxicology and witness statements.

An [open letter](#) addressed to OPCW states parties from the Courage Foundation followed and was signed by eminent voices such as Professor Noam Chomsky, Hans von Sponeck (former UN Assistant Secretary-General), GCHQ whistleblower Katharine Gun, former UNSCOM weapons inspector Scott Ritter, film director and producer Oliver Stone and John Pilger.

Since then, [multiple documents](#) have been published by Wikileaks evidencing irregularities with respect to the Douma FFM investigation whilst journalists such as [Peter Hitchens](#) (Mail on Sunday), [Stefania Maurizi](#) (formerly of La Repubblica) and [Robert Fisk](#) (The Independent) have reported on the issue.

Peter Hitchens has been a particularly vociferous voice [defending the reputations](#) of two OPCW staff who have been subjected to a malicious internal investigation aimed at smearing their reputations. In 2020, further leaks have been published by The Grayzone in the United States including statements from further [OPCW persons](#) and, most recently, [Aaron Maté published](#) an article in the leading US current affairs magazine *The Nation*.

Finally, and by no means least, former OPCW inspector Ian Henderson [addressed an Arria Formula](#) meeting of the UN Security Council at which he detailed the irregularities and misconduct he had experienced with respect to the FFM Douma investigation. In September 2020, a [second Arria Formula meeting](#) was held at which OPCW Syria FFMs and the Douma investigation were again debated and which included, again, the former OPCW Inspector Ian Henderson. And, this week at a UN Security Council meeting, a [statement from OPCW First Director-General José Bustani was read](#) out in which yet again raised concerns about the conduct of the OPCW Douma investigation.

To any casual observer it should be abundantly clear that the activities and output of the WGSPM is entirely legitimate. Our work has been at the forefront of an issue that has been discussed by mainstream media journalist and has been corroborated by information from people within the OPCW itself.

Why then has the Times of London and the Huffington Post published approximately 20 articles (including three Times leaders) in 2 years targeting us?

In general, the behaviour of both the Times and the Huffington Post is disturbing and suggestive of a deliberate campaign aimed at suppressing public debate regarding both the war in Syria and the involvement of the UK government in supporting activities aimed at the overthrow of the Syrian government.

UK involvement in the Syrian war has included [direct support for opposition groups](#) as well as [potentially criminal activity relating to the OPCW](#) and [connection with the staging of alleged chemical weapon attacks](#).

In the last few weeks, a [large volume of FCO documents](#) have been leaked which document a vast 'strategic communication' operation aimed at supporting the war against Syria. According to [Ben Norton from the Grayzone](#):

[V]irtually every major Western corporate media outlet was influenced by the UK government-funded disinformation campaign exposed in the trove of leaked documents, from the New York Times to the Washington Post, CNN to The Guardian, the BBC to BuzzFeed.

In fact, there are some indications that the media attacks might be the direct result of deliberate media alignment with the UK government position on Syria and its well-established policy seeking to overthrow the existing Syrian government. Specifically, two of the authors of the original Times attack on the academics, Dominic Kennedy and Deborah Haynes, are identified in leaked documents as being associated with the UK government-

funded propaganda operation known as the [Integrity Initiative](#).

The Integrity Initiative leaks provided powerful insights on how propaganda operations were being built around “clusters” of journalists. Haynes has subsequently denied involvement with the article whilst Kennedy has [repeatedly refused to answer questions](#) regarding the relationship between his articles and the Integrity Initiative.

Most notably, Times columnist Oliver Kamm has [stated in public that](#) the late James Le Mesurier ‘had reached out to this newspaper to urge us to keep on their [the academics] case’.

Regarding Huffington Post, Chris York’s line manager, [Jess Brammar](#), is a member of the [Defence and Security Media Advisory Committee](#) which works with the UK government on influencing and controlling media reporting of defence and security related issues. Further information regarding the organizational details and scale of media-related activities aimed at suppressing criticism of UK Syria policy is still being investigated and information will be published in due course by WGSPM.

However, even if it is, as of yet, unclear whether the attacks are at the behest of those involved in UK government/FCO strategic communication operations related to Syria, it is certainly the case that they have a deleterious impact on open public debate and academic research. People might reasonably expect mainstream media to uphold, defend and encourage research and debate, as opposed to smear honest academics who are simply doing their jobs.

Even more seriously, the available evidence indicates that the alleged attack in Douma involved the [murder of captive civilians](#). That means the event surrounding Douma likely involve an extremely serious, and indeed horrific, war crime. Those seeking to hinder those in pursuit of the truth run the risk of complicity, whether knowing or unknowingly, in a war crime and run legal jeopardy as a result.

A final note. The [late Julian Perry Robinson](#), one of the world’s leading experts on chemical and biological weapons, was in communication with the Working Group. In an earlier era, Robinson played a key role challenging the [false claim made by the US government that](#) Soviet-backed forces in Laos and Cambodia were deploying toxins.

At the time of his death, he was completing a chronology regarding chemical weapons and the war in Syria. Writing about the events surrounding alleged chemical weapon attacks in Syria and the vicious attacks against WGSPM, he noted that:

It is not immediately clear from their pronouncements that the critics of the WGSPM just quoted have in fact adequately studied the Group’s publications. They certainly seem not to have done their reading with the care that might have been expected ahead of such vicious denigrations.

So is the Group simply becoming a victim of the fake news and other acts of information warfare it has itself been seeking to counter? Is the WGSPM being maliciously targeted by enemies that its principled research and outreach seem to have created?

PART 8: THE CHEMICAL WARFARE REPORTED FROM SYRIA: A DOCUMENTED CHRONOLOGY DETAILING REPORTS OF EVENTS IN SYRIA SINCE 1982 SAID TO HAVE INVOLVED USE OF CHEMICAL WEAPONS, BY

It was Julian Perry Robinson who subsequently invited WGSPM member Professor Paul McKeigue to [present at the](#) Harvard-Sussex Program on Chemical and Biological Weapons roundtable meeting in March 2020.

If a figure of such standing and brilliance wished for his colleagues to hear our analysis, where does this leave the Times and the Huffington Post who have so relentlessly sought to silence us through character assassination and smears?

Not, I would suggest, in a very good place.

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