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The Guardian of What?: The Media and War Propaganda

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'Behind the mask of asinine geniality Hague is a warmonger.'

By **Jeremy Salt** – Ankara

If there is any comfort in how the Guardian has been reporting the Middle East, especially Libya and Syria, it is that many of its readers, judging from their remarks in 'Comment is Free', do not appear to believe or trust it.

The Guardian sells itself as the global beacon of liberal opinion. It is liberal on social issues and alongside the chatterers, it has some excellent political correspondents and commentators, notably Gary Younge and Seamas Milne. As liberals themselves, its readers around the world must think they are on safe ground when quoting from the Guardian but if so, where the Middle East is concerned, they are deluding themselves.

Throughout the crisis in Syria the Guardian has been not so much reporting the conflict as running a propaganda campaign against the government in Damascus, to the benefit of the armed Islamist groups and the outside governments sponsoring them. The wellsprings of its 'reporting' have been the unsubstantiated claims of 'activists' no matter how wild and improbable. Without any evidence it is now accusing the Syrian government of being responsible for the alleged nerve gas/chemical weapons attack in the Ghouta district around Damascus. The far greater likelihood that the armed groups were responsible for this atrocity scarcely rates a mention. Building on the unsubstantiated claim that it was the Syrian military, Martin Chulov argues in favor of another one, that it was Bashir's brother Maher who was personally responsible (the same accusation is being made by the Israeli intelligence propaganda outlet Debkafile, from which Chulov may well have taken his lead). This is how propaganda works. Once set in motion it just needs a push to keep it rolling.

Buttressing its editorial and reports, Fawaz Gerges is given space to claim that it is up to the Syrian government to prove that it was not responsible for this atrocity. This is nonsense: if the Syrian government was not responsible for this atrocity, how can it prove what it did not do, especially when anything it says will be dismissed out of hand by the mainstream media and the governments arming, financing and training the 'rebels'? The onus of proof lies on those making the accusations, and so far neither the Guardian nor the anti-Assad campaigning Kim Sengupta of the Independent (where Robert Fisk has provided balance with some reports giving the perspective of the Syrian government) nor William Hague nor anyone else making this accusation has produced a scrap of evidence that this attack was carried out by the Syrian military.

Probability points in the direction of the armed groups. The 'rebels' are known to have acquired stocks of sarin. They used a chemical weapons compound in their home-made missile attack on a military outpost at Khan al Assal in March that killed dozens of soldiers and civilians. (1) In May this year Carla del Ponte, a member of the UN Independent Commission of Inquiry on Syria said investigators had evidence that the 'rebels' had used sarin gas. (2) In May also Turkish police seized sarin gas along with hand guns, grenades, ammunition and unspecified 'documents' from apartments where Jabhat al Nusra members were living in Adana and Mersin. (3) Early in June the Syrian military seized two barrels of sarin gas from a 'rebel' hideout in Hama. (4)

On top of all this the armed groups have filmed themselves experimenting with chemical weapons on rabbits. As they have slaughtered thousands of civilians in the most barbaric fashion there is no argument that moral considerations would prevent them from taking this further atrocious step – and it is they who have every reason to take it. They are being ground down across the country and at this stage only direct military intervention is going to save them and save the project to destroy the Syrian government. It is a measure of the desperation of their outside sponsors that Bandar bin Sultan, Saudi Arabia's intelligence chief, was recently in Moscow with an offer from his government to buy \$15 billion worth of Russian arms if Russia would just allow the passage of a UN Security Council resolution authorizing a military attack on Syria. Putin said no, and what a coincidence it is that a short time later there is a mass atrocity that gives the western-led collective the pretext it wants to attack Syria without a UNSC resolution behind them.

Clearing positions held by the armed groups a few days after the apparent nerve gas/chemical weapons attack, Syrian soldiers found stocks of chemicals, gas masks, syringes and anti-neurotoxin drugs in tunnels at Jobar, one of the three districts on the outskirts of Damascus, along with Ain Tarma and Zamalka, targeted in the attack. Several soldiers were taken to hospital in critical condition. The official Syrian news agency English-language news site (SANA) ran photos of cylinders of chemicals and other material, including syringes, produced by the 'Qatar-German Company for Pharmaceutical Industries'. There is no company of this name but there is a company called Qatar-German Medical Devices whose QG logo can be seen on a box found in the tunnel marked 'Flow I.V. Cannula'. The army also found a basement stocked with quantities of chemical agents manufactured in Saudi Arabia and a number of European countries. The material included equipment for making chemical weapons and anti-neurotoxins in case the armed men poisoned themselves.

The discovery of this material was followed by the Medecins Sans Frontieres statement that three of the hospitals it supports in the Damascus governorate had received 3600 patients displaying neuro-toxic symptoms in three hours on the morning of August 21, of which number 355 had died. While MSF cannot say who was responsible for this atrocity, its statement highlights the complete improbability of the Syrian government carrying out a mass chemical weapons/nerve gas attack on civilians in suburbs only a few kilometers from the center of Damascus, shortly after the arrival of UN chemical weapons inspectors and indeed only several kilometers from where they were staying, killing or wounding thousands and filling its own hospitals with the victims. At face value the accusation is ludicrous, yet such is the propaganda whipped up against the Syrian government over the past three years that some people will believe it to be capable of anything.

Not only do the armed groups, their backers and the media salesmen of their pitch, including the Guardian, want the world to believe that the Syrian government was responsible for this atrocity, they want the world to believe that Bashar is stupid, indeed so stupid that he would have ordered this attack within three days of the arrival of the UN chemical weapons inspectors. This canard is reminiscent of the accusation that the Syrian government arranged the assassination of Rafiq Hariri in 2005. The killing was a master stroke used as a lever to get the remaining Syrian troops out of Lebanon, and to blacken Syria's name internationally. By the time all the four suspects had been freed and Syria cleared by the UN tribunal of any responsibility the media had moved on. It is a long time since it has shown any interest in who killed Hariri. Like the Hariri killing the first question to be asked in the wake of this latest atrocity is 'who benefits?' In both cases the answers are clear: in the first, Israel, the US and their proxies in Lebanon; in the second, the armed groups and the outside governments supporting them, including, of course, Israel, which is now leading the charge for a direct military attack on Syria.

By disseminating the deceit and lies put out by Libyan and then Syrian 'rebels' and 'activists', Al Jazeera ruined its reputation. The Guardian has run the same line as this mouthpiece of the government of Qatar yet remains protected by its mystique as a beacon of liberal opinion. Many of its readers are clearly confused when all they have to do is see that the emperor has no clothes: far from being the guardian of liberal opinion, this newspaper is the guardian of western, gulf and Israeli interests in the Middle East against Iran, Syria and Hezbollah. Its correspondents are still writing seriously and positively about a Palestinian 'peace process' that is a grotesque sham. Israel is playing with the Palestinians, as a cat plays with a mouse. It has Abbas in its pocket and by abandoning Syria and embracing Muhammad Morsi and the deposed ruler of Qatar, Ismail Haniyeh and Khalid Misha'al have found themselves without any backers. Not since its foundation has Israel enjoyed such a good run. If only the governments in Tehran and Damascus could be destroyed and Hezbollah extinguished life would be perfect.

The Guardian has never even attempted to provide balanced coverage of what is going on in Syria. There has been no counterweight – no antidote – to the anti-Assad and pro-rebel reporting and comment of Ian Black and Martin Chulov. The techniques will be familiar to all but the most inert readers. The paper runs headlines which are not justified in the text. The claims of 'activists' are given prominence and the claims of the Syrian government minimized, without there ever being any doubt about what the Guardian wants its readers to believe. It has downplayed or ignored the evidence of terrible atrocities by the armed groups (such as the massacres this August of hundreds of villagers in the Lattakia governorate (5), of more than 100 people in Khan al Assal (6) and the massacre by Jabhat al Nusra of an estimated 450 Kurdish women and children around the Syrian-Turkish border town of Tal Abyad). (7) It has printed the wildest claims without any attempt to substantiate them, such as the allegation by a London-based 'activist' that the Syrian government was packing detainees into shipping containers and dumping them at sea. It has allowed 'activists' to shift the blame for car and suicide bombings on to the government even when it is government institutions that have been bombed and government employees who have been the victims. It has expected its readers to believe that the Syrian government is exploding bombs in densely populated residential areas in the middle of its own cities. It relies on the so-called Syrian Observatory for Human Rights when it must know that it is a completely tainted source. The only explanation for this can be that this one-man band is saying what the Guardian wants to hear and what it wants its readers to believe.

The strategy of the armed groups has been to destroy infrastructure and terrorize the civilian population. This they have largely succeeded in doing. Syrians are pouring out of the country to get away from them. In the name of a twisted pseudo-revolution these armed men are supported by a collective of foreign governments. The line of the moment following the alleged chemical weapon/nerve gas attack is that 'all red lines have

been crossed' when these governments crossed all red lines in international law long ago by financing and arming groups such as the brigades of the Free Syrian Army and Jabhat al Nusra. International law prohibits armed intervention in other countries and the use of mercenaries. International law forbids the application of economic sanctions against member states of the UN yet in all these categories the collective bent on the destruction of the Syrian government has shown complete contempt for international law. Of course this is merely standard procedure. International law is for other people, not the 'international community' as represented by the UK, France and the US and nowhere have they treated international law with more contempt than in the Middle East.

These governments are making the most strenuous effort in the history of the modern Middle East to destroy an Arab government. The reason has been clear from the beginning: Syria is Iran's strongest regional ally and is being targeted as a second best option to targeting Iran itself. The takfiris inside Syria, demeaning Islam with their shouts of 'Allahu Akbar' every time they cut a throat, are doing the work of governments that have done nothing but damage to the Middle East for the past century. The prime losers are the Syrian people. About 100,000 have been killed in this conflict and much of their country's infrastructure has been deliberately torn to shreds. The chief regional beneficiaries are Israel and Saudi Arabia, holding hands under the table. The destruction of the Syrian government would be an unparalleled strategic triumph for Israel and the 'west', which is why Russia and China have not budged in their position that it is the Syrian people who must decide their own future and not outside governments and armed gangs and why Russia in particular will be planning its riposte should Barack Obama be talked into launching a Cruise missile strike.

The Guardian's propaganda cover for the Syrian 'rebels' follows its support for the Libyan 'rebels' against another dictator. The protest movement in Benghazi was seized upon by Britain, France and the US as the opportunity to intervene and destroy the government in Tripoli. There was no countrywide movement against Muammar al Qadhafi and the 'rebels' could not have advanced a yard beyond the city limits of Benghazi without the cover of NATO missiles. Qadhafi was brought down after a seven month blitz by the air forces of three of the most powerful militaries in the world and eventually murdered after several previous attempts to murder him by missile strike had failed, while killing members of his family. Thousands of innocent Libyans were killed during this prolonged aerial assault. This neo-imperialist adventure was fully underwritten by the mainstream media. None of the war crimes committed by NATO forces or 'rebels' on the ground had the same impact on editorials and 'reporting' as the claims that the Libyan leader was bombing his own people from the air, using black mercenaries and distributing Viagra to his troops. These sensational allegations were later shown to be lies, but by this time they had served their purpose in setting up Qadhafi as someone who deserved to be killed (rather than put on trial, embarrassing in the process Blair, Sarkozy and others who benefitted from Libyan money and oil concessions). With Libya out of the way the same western governments and the same mainstream media flapped on like vultures to Syria and another supposed dictator, leaving the Libyans to clean up the mess they had created as best as they could.

Having shed the shackles of balanced journalism in Libya and Syria, the Guardian is now defending media ethics and responsibility in the Edward Snowden- Glenn Greenwald affair. Greenwald has been revealing secrets from Snowden's store of official documents. David Miranda, his partner, was detained for nine hours by British intelligence while in transit through London. If the purpose was to shut Greenwald up by putting pressure on his relationship, his scarcely repressed fury is an indication that it will not work. Alan Rusbridger, the Guardian's editor-in-chief, had been having private conversations with British intelligence and only decided to take action, by destroying material the Guardian had on hard drives, when threatened with legal action. This was a significant exercise of the power of the surveillance state which had to be challenged, but how much more significant is media support for mass death and destruction delivered to Syria by groups of men financed, armed and trained by outside governments?

The Guardian does not actually call for war. It leaves that to other people. It merely sets the stage. It runs an editorial based on the assumption that this chemical weapons attack was the work of the Syrian government. The possibility that the armed groups might have done it is not even taken into account. It observes that 'choosing between bad options is even more complex [supporting armed groups responsible for one atrocity after another is obviously not considered a bad option] ... this paper has resisted the calls for military intervention in Syria [as if there is not already military intervention in Syria] ... but we do appear to be coming ever closer to a tipping point with difficult judgments ahead.' Without calling for war itself, this beacon of liberal opinion then quotes with approval the arch conservative William Hague, who talks of civilized values while pushing for a war that would bury them in further great mounds of bodies.

Behind the mask of asinine geniality Hague is a warmonger. He has wanted 'intervention' in Syria – a war kicked off with the declaration of a no-fly zone and now possibly a Cruise missile strike – for years and now sees it in his grasp. The Guardian should have been on to his smiling duplicity and double-speak like a terrier on to a rat. Instead it is joining the chorus line for war. That is the reality behind its own double-speak. The Syrian government agreed to allow UN inspectors into the districts targeted in this apparent nerve gas/chemical weapons attack but as soon they approached these districts, they were shot at by snipers. If it can be proven that it is the armed groups that carried out this attack it is a safe bet that we will hear no more talk of red lines being crossed. Obama said he would not take a decision until he had proof but now we are being told by an unnamed US official that the on the spot inquiry is too little and, not even a week after the event, too late. The British media is talking of a military attack being launched within days.

The US media is much more reserved: after all, their country is being pushed into the front line by governments that would never have the guts to attack by themselves but will only run in from behind once the US takes the lead. Obama is still holding back and has the intelligence and sense not to fall for this if, unfortunately, not necessarily the strength of character to resist the pressure being applied to him. Britain, France and Israel want to strike now, while the propaganda is running hot and strong and before the UN inspectors ruin their rush to war by concluding that this attack around Damascus either was or might have been the work of the armed groups.

This will not be Libya. This never was Libya. This will not begin and end with a few Cruise missiles fired at Syria from warships in the eastern Mediterranean. This may well spark a major war involving Turkey, Iran, Israel, Hezbollah and Russia for which those pushing for war must be held responsible right now and not just afterwards. If the decision is taken the Guardian will wring its hands about the horrors of war but it will still justify it on humanitarian grounds and the 'responsibility to protect'. Amidst the smoke and carnage, the question of who fired the chemical weapons around Damascus will soon be forgotten.

- *Jeremy Salt is an associate professor of Middle Eastern history and politics at Bilkent University in Ankara, Turkey. He contributed this article*

Notes:

1. See 'Russia's UN envoy says Syria rebels used chemical weapons', *Los Angeles Times*, July 9, 2013, reporting the statement by Russian UN ambassador Vitaly Churkin that armed groups had used sarin gas in the attack at Khan Assal on March 15, killing 26 people, including 16 military personnel, and wounding 86.
2. See 'UN's Del Ponte says evidence Syrian rebels 'used sarin'. *BBC News Middle East*, May 6, 2013.
3. See 'Adana'da El Kaide operasyonu: 12 gozalti (Al Qaida operation at Adana: 12 arrested), *Zaman*, May 28, 2013.
4. 'Syrian army seized sarin cylinders from militants in Hama', *Press TV*, June 2, 2013.
5. See 'Massacre in Latakia, August 2013. A documentary report on Al Nusra massacre in Lattakia', *Sham Times*, August 8, 2013. Translated by Australians for Reconciliation in Syria.
6. See 'UN rights chief calls for investigation into Syrian massacre', *Reuters.com.*, reporting on the 'apparent' massacre 'carried out by Syrian opposition forces in the town'.
7. See 'Defend the Kurds in Syria from massacre and ethnic cleansing', *Kurdistan Times*, August 8, 2013, reporting the massacre of 120 children and 330 women by Jabhat al Nusra at Tal Abyad on August 5. While the numbers have not been independently verified, the massacre triggered off an exodus of tens of thousands of Syrian Kurds into northern Iraq. Syrian Kurds have given details of massacres of Kurds carried out by Jabhat al Nusra across northern Syria.

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1. *jon taleb*

[August 28, 2013 - 3:49 pm](#)

I am so confused about what is really going on in Syria...thank you for this article...it has helped clarify some things which made no sense at all...one must have the facts to make sense of things...simple fact based information is impossible to come by using "news" sources, those have all turned to points of view or worse pure propaganda...I don't know how much of what you have shared is fact but it has certainly caused some of the puzzle pieces fall into place...I will reread your article thoughtfully....I do know this with certainty that the "Western" intervention which seems to be coming has nothing to do with anything "humanitarian"

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2. *Rayhan*

[August 28, 2013 - 4:29 pm](#)

Where would we be without writers like Jeremy Salt and online newspapers like The Palestinian Chronicle?
We would be dependent on the likes of The Guardian and Al Jazeera. Shame on them.
Thank you PC !

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3. *Amin Shafie*

[August 28, 2013 - 5:25 pm](#)

A very informative and very well-written article about the sad events in Syria. The writer is very well-informed and it is very nice of the Palestine Chronicle to make his writings available to its subscribers and readers. Thank you.

[Reply](#)

4. *Kypros*

[August 29, 2013 - 1:39 pm](#)

William Hague should stick to colouring in the history books he has never read. A useless, lightweight puppet.

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