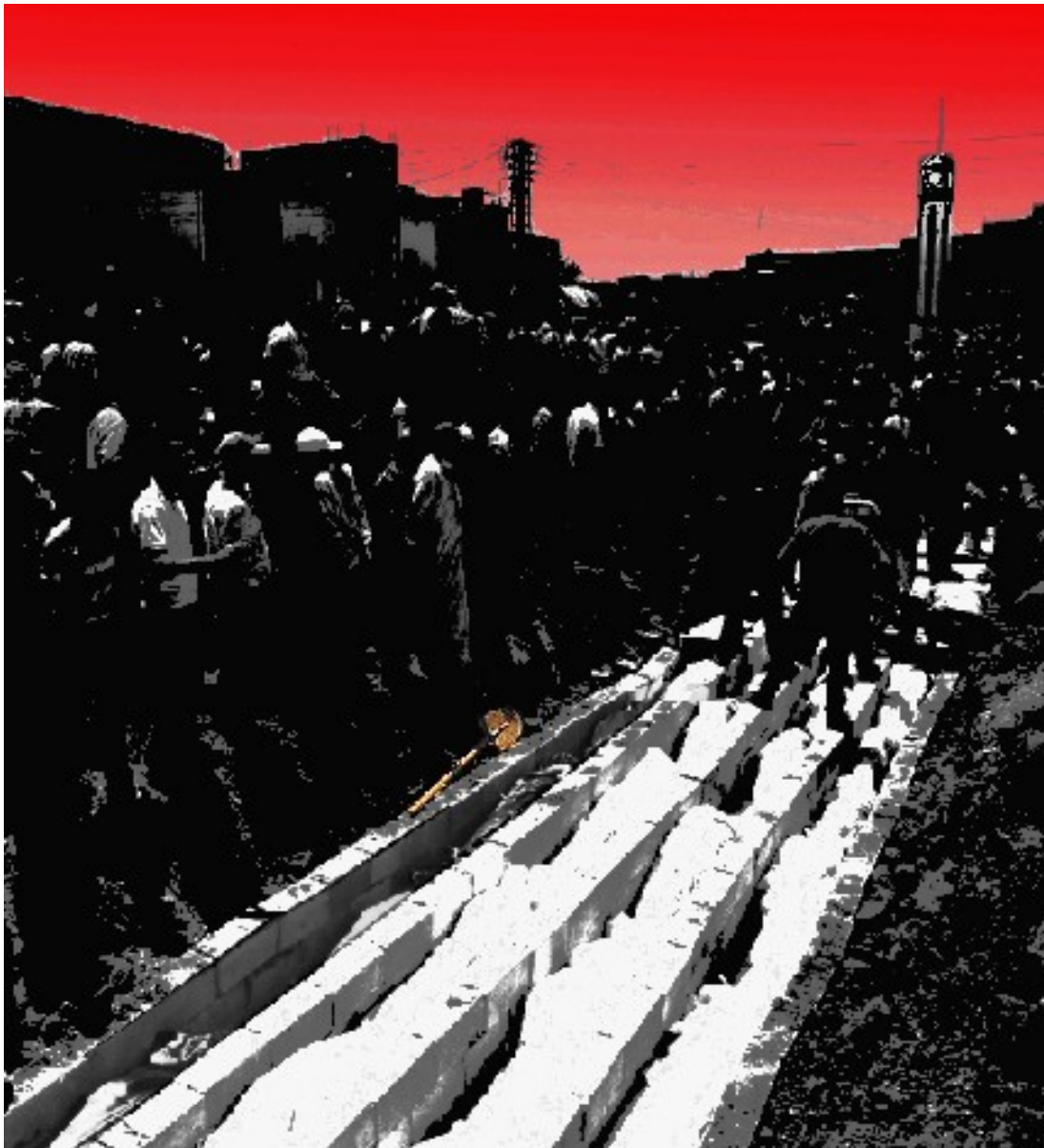


# **Official Truth, Real Truth, and Impunity for the Syrian Houla Massacre of May 2012**

Seven Essays By:  
Marinella Correggia, Alfredo Embid, Ronda Hauben, Adam Larson  
Edited by Adam Larson



**A Report of  
Citizen's Investigation Into War Crimes in Libya  
May 13, 2013**

The Citizen's Investigation into War Crimes in Libya (CIWCL) is a small, informal collective formed in 2011 to study events in Libya during the NATO military offensive. While others have signaled support by becoming signatories, or by offering limited work, the CIWCL primarily consists of two active members:

- Petri Krohn, CIWCL co-founder, Chairman Finland without Nazism, Helsinki, Finland
- Adam J. Larson, CIWCL co-founder and chief executive person, Spokane, Washington, USA

Since June, 2012, they have carried over their work, with no name change, to the study of similar events in Syria. This switch by the CIWCL happened almost one year ago, following the "Houla Massacre" this report deals with. Since then, they have worked together, with CIWCL non-member "CE," on the research wiki [A Closer Look on Syria](#) (ACLOS).

This report was created using Open Office.org.  
Cover art by Adam Larson, based on a Shaam News Network handout photo.



The PDF is available for download at :  
<http://ciwclibya.org/>

**ISBN: 978-952-5412-91-8**

About the authors in this report:

**Marinella Correggia** is an Italian Eco-peace activist with the No War network-ROMA, a journalist for *Il Manifesto*, and responsible for the site <http://www.sibialiria.org/>.

**Alfredo Embid** is the newsletters coordinator for *Armas Contra Las Guerras* (weapons against wars), and Asociación de Medicinas Complementarias, which publishes the journal of holistic medicine.

**Ronda Hauben** is editor of the Amateur Computrist newsletter, a longtime advocate for "Netizen Journalism" as a force for change, and author of numerous articles, presentations, and hard questions posed at UN meetings.

**Adam Larson** is/has been blog administrator for *The Lockerbie Divide*, *The Libyan Civil War : Critical Views*, a Justice for Megrahi campaign signatory, co-founder of Citizen's Investigation Into War Crimes in Libya, and core contributor to the research wiki *A Closer Look on Syria*.

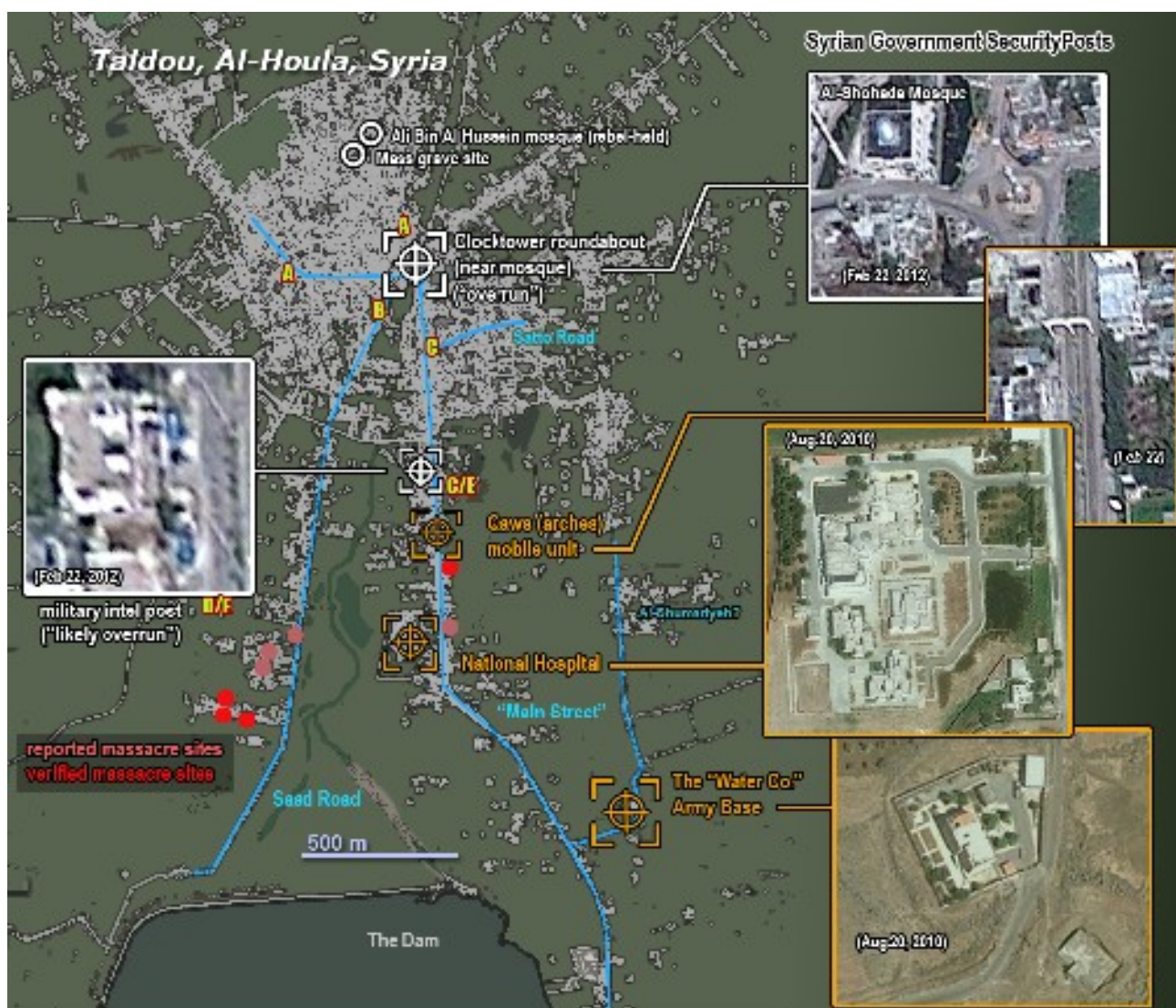
## Contents :

<b>Map 1: Syria and Al-Houla</b> .....	4
<b>Map 2: Taldou Security Scene</b> .....	5
<b>Introduction to this Report:</b>	
By Adam Larson .....	6
<b>Main Articles</b> .....	10
<b>1 - The United Nations and the Houla Massacre: The Information Battlefield</b>	
By Ronda Hauben .....	11
<b>2 - The Latest Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Syria Draws Conclusions Without Any Real Evidence, on the Basis of Testimony of a Fraction of the Syrian Population</b>	
By Marinella Correggia .....	17
<b>3 - "Fight for Us" And Other Things Ali Said: Houla Massacre Star Witness Reconsidered</b>	
By Adam Larson .....	20
<b>4 - New Evidence that Houla Slaughter was Perpetrated by the Free Syrian Army</b>	
By Alfredo Embid .....	29
<b>5 - Challenging the Dismissal of the Other Witnesses</b>	
By Adam Larson .....	37
<b>6 - Why is the UNSMIS Houla Report Missing?</b>	
By Ronda Hauben .....	42
<b>7 - The Houla Massacre and the Battle of Taldou: the Digital Witnesses Have their Say</b>	
By Adam Larson .....	52
<b>Concluding Thoughts</b> .....	63
<b>Netizen Journalism, the Houla Massacre, and the World Stage</b>	
By Ronda Hauben .....	64
<b>Syria Needs Truth and Sanity</b>	
By Adam Larson .....	71

Map: Syria and al-Houla



## Map: Taldou Security Scene



Known massacre sites (red and pink dots):  
 Saad Road sites (left): Abdulrazaq family.  
 Main Street sites (right): Al-Sayed famil(ies)

The lime-colored letters refer to locations for video exhibits A-E as listed in the article  
*The Houla Massacre and the Battle of Taldou: the Digital Witnesses Have Their Say* (page 55)

## Introduction to this Report

By Adam Larson

May 6, 2013

The Houla massacre, as most commonly called, occurred on May 25, 2012 in the central Syrian town of Taldou, one of three comprising the Al-Houla area (see map, p. 4). A record-breaking 108 civilians were reportedly executed there, 49 of them young children. And those claims are well-supported by shocking opposition videos of the victims posted online. As this report is released, the world will be reminded in various ways that it's been one year, and still we have failed to come together and effectively punish anyone for that crime, or so many others.

But underlying that is the question, answered too reflexively by most people, of *just who* should be punished when, as usual, "both sides blamed each other."

Rebels blamed Syrian Arab Army shelling that answered a peaceful protest. This was initially trumpeted as the main or only cause of civilian death, but in passing and then with prominence, home invasions by murderous gangs were mentioned. These, all agree, wiped out entire families, from babies to the elderly, in often cruel ways. Rebels blamed pro-regime "Shabiha" militia from neighboring Alawite towns, but with up-close support from the Syrian Arab Army itself. The targets were mildly anti-government or neutral, but all Sunni Muslims. They were killed mainly for that reason, it was said, in a genocidal gesture.

This was related by the Sunni rebel fighters, opposition activists, and activist-provided alleged witnesses - roughly one all-seeing miracle escapee from each stricken household. Those were sometimes wildly inconsistent, but the Western and Gulf Arab leaders, their media, and the U.N. leadership in New York sided with their story. The guardians of global truth and justice blamed the government and its allies. It was taken as a turning point in the war, clarifying the urgency of toppling the brutal Assad regime as soon as possible.

The government has of course always denied guilt, pointing out how little sense the accusation makes. They claim instead that the usual protection they offered was circumvented that day by a rebel ("terrorist") attack. The alleged operation was planned in advance and was unprecedented in size, with an estimated 600-800 men from Al-Houla, Ar-Rastan and other nearby cities, and other nations. It's said they hit different security posts in waves for the whole afternoon and evening, killing many soldiers. (Over a dozen locals also describe this - p. 37) It was after neutralizing the defenders that, Syrians said, the "terrorists" turned, with guns and "sharp tools," to their main targets: families that were Shi'ite and even Alawite (like president Assad), and those that were Sunni, but who remained loyal to the government; one annihilated Sunni family was related to the new secretary of Syria's parliament, the People's Assembly (p. 25). Women were raped, children slashed, homes and fields torched.

While the version of the massacre publicized by the government was effectively suppressed in the Western mainstream, stubborn corroboration kept emerging, even there - east of the Maginot line, anyway. One of Germany's most widely-read dailies, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) ran a piece by Rainer Hermann in early June (and another one two weeks later), drawing on unique local sources ("Syrian opposition members"). It's not

the most detailed or clear report, and some details are muddled. But it sheds light on otherwise murky aspects, like the previously unstated sectarian aspect. Hermann's FAZ reports were widely noted, and worked into dozens of articles across the political spectrum. Adding to what was already reported, mid-June was a time of unexpected challenge to this pivotal new mythology.

But in Germany this German threat was met, and powerfully refuted by FAZ competitor *Der Spiegel*. In late July, they ran an ambitious research project with multimedia-savvy packaging. "A Syrian bloodbath revisited: Searching for the truth behind the Houla massacre." Six different witnesses, only three of them rebel fighters, confirmed for *Der Spiegel* that the FSA was not responsible in any way (another of the six was Ali Al-Sayed - p.20). Despite containing various inconsistencies and signs of politicized pseudo-testimony, this report was heralded as a death blow to the Rainer Hermann version. And, in fact, the notion has not prominently re-emerged, since this - and numerous other reparative reports - buried its signal in waves of noise.

The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC)'s Commission of Inquiry on Syria (CoI), made a special study of Houla. In this and all else the CoI was called "independent," implying that it was free of truth-distorting geopolitical slant. Yet it was co-chaired by Karen Koning AbuZayd, an American diplomat and a director at the Middle East Policy Council in Washington D.C.. This think tank helps advise U.S. policy in the region, like which regimes to change (Syria's clearly being one). Likely more than anyone else, AbuZayd helped steer what the CoI found - the regime was guilty like the activists said, and should be punished or, if possible, changed.

Their findings are the closest the "world community" has to an official truth in this matter.

While the CoI acted to settle the Houla massacre controversy by banishing one narrative to the shadows, the report you are reading aims to invite it back into the light for re-consideration. The seven extremely informative main articles, and two concluding essays of a broader context, are by four authors (including myself), who have worked past the initial period of buzz in June/July, when more information and time to reflect was available. All the main articles were previously published, outside the mainstream but widely read. Here they are revised, edited or excerpted, and in two cases translated to English. My own four contributions predominate, but these are based on work done with a small team of researchers at the wiki site [A Closer Look on Syria](#) (ACLOS)

The first essay is by "Netizen" journalist Ronda Hauben: *The United Nations and the Houla Massacre: The Information Battlefield*. This appeared in June, laying out the two competing narratives of the massacre and the international division over how to resolve that conflict. These differences could not be resolved by the UN's CoI; as explained, that was not really "independent." The second essay is by Italian eco-peace activist Marinella Correggia, explaining in September how their final report of August was one-sided in favor of the opposition. She argues cogently that this slant is fatal to the truth; in the Houla massacre and much else, the CoI consistently ignored rebel crimes in favor of the prevailing narrative pointed at regime change.

Thirdly, my own essay *"Fight for us" and other things Ali said* takes a detailed look at the record of one boy, Ali Al-Sayed, the star alleged witness blaming the government for this

massacre. As I first reported in July, 2012, his numerous accounts contain ridiculous inconsistencies and signs of politicized coaching. He cannot keep the names of his family members straight, for example. First published in early July, here it's updated with more recent research, especially on the family whose slaughter Ali seems scripted-in to explain (it's the one related to the People's Assembly speaker!).

Fourth in line, Spanish-language researcher Alfredo Embid, in translated long excerpts from an October, 2012 article, explores the alleged witness situation. Two accounts describing the rebel assault are joined by notes on how the other version comes either from locals under the rebel gun, or from the rebel fighters themselves. One source is Lt. Col. Abdulrazaq Tlass of the Ar-Rastan FSA, and a cousin to high-level defector Manaf Tlass. He's seen on video leading U.N. monitors around by the hand (elsewhere), as he explained that place's "facts" to them. He may have informed the record on Houla too, despite being named as leading a large unit involved in the massacre, or at least the connected battles. (For some other details on Tlass' short and embarrassing career, see [the ACLOS page on him](#).)

The method of and reasons for the UN CoI's dismissal of the other witness set is critiqued in the fifth entry, another of mine. The given reasons are inadequate, and suggest intellectual desperation and a hidden agenda. The commission should have had access to more supporting accounts, by way of the UN Special Mission In Syria (UNSMIS) monitors, led by Major General Robert Mood. This had gathered plural accounts from "locals with one story," Mood said on June 15, and from "locals that has another story." It "still remains unclear to us" which was truthful, Mood added, but the mixed report was sent to New York. In another essay from November (p. 42), Ronda Hauben explains how shady it is that this went "missing," and had its findings effectively erased from the subsequent record.

The available video evidence offers a few opportunities to actually test the two witness sets for consistency with the "digital witnesses." The final essay, again one of mine (Feb. 2013), relates a detailed ACLOS team analysis., which managed to place numerous videos of May 25, all gleaned from opposition sources, in specific locations around Taldou, and to give each a rough time stamp. A reference map helps the reader visualize along and, if desired, to double-check. Seven aspects of the rebel attack are then explained with their video supports. Even where video is absent (the main attack) is a clue. Collectively, this is a surprisingly consistent picture of deceit from the hard-to-deny realm of direct video evidence – something unsettlingly close to **visual proof that rebels were behind the massacre after all.**

Even with no privileged access to to non-public, primary source evidence, the findings herein supersede, in detail and relevance, what has so far passed for investigation. This *independent*, citizen-led process, what Ronda Hauben calls Netizen Journalism (see page 63), has yielded results in other areas as well, exposing deceptions all around the globe, dismantling lies and championing obscured truths. In the interest of reality-based justice, as just a peace as possible for as many people as possible, such efforts should be replicated more widely and improved, and their best findings somehow made more relevant to what happens on the ground.

The image of the mad dictator slaughtering his own people morally underwrites the actions of the Western-led "world community" on Syria - the effective denial of peace until after the



"regime" is changed. An end to Assad was always to be seen as the only acceptable outcome, foreordained by first being called for during the "Arab Spring" of 2011. In the process, this denial is of course killing the people of Syria - and of some 2-3 dozen other nations - in the tens of thousands.

There is much brave talk of a solution, but little coherent discourse on the underlying question of *just how* we decide on the basic direction of it. The physical truth - plus basic morality - is clearly the best basis for *any* action aiming for resolution of the violence. It is hoped that this report will spur renewed and more open-minded interest in this important slice of that truth, and that this will cast new light on the broader perceived reasons to hold out for regime change at whatever cost.

And so, in the interest of the swiftest and sanest return of peace that the world can manage, please read on with an open mind.

## Main Articles



*Rebel fighters celebrate a victory at sunset, overlooking a smoldering Taldou. The date given for the video is July 14, but it might well be from May 25 (see p. 53).*

## The United Nations and the Houla Massacre: The Information Battlefield

By Ronda Hauben

12 June, 2012

Original url: <http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-united-nations-and-the-houla-massacre-the-information-battlefield/31390> (slight edits and picture added for this publication)



*China's Ambassador to the UN,  
Li Baodong, speaks on June 4.  
(Xinhua/Shen Hong - [source](#))*

At a press conference held on June 4 marking the beginning of China's presidency of the UN Security Council for the month of June, Li Baodong, China's Ambassador to the UN, observed that there are different versions of the facts of the Houla Massacre. "Now we have different stories from different angles," he noted. "Now we have the story from the Syrian government, and from the opposition parties, and from different sources."

Since the Security Council has "a team...on the ground," he said, "We want to see first-hand information from our own people." He hoped this would make it possible to put the different pieces of information together and to come "to our own conclusion with our own judgment."<sup>(1)</sup>

The expectation was that Joint UN-Arab League Envoy Kofi Annan would be able to provide further information from the UNSMIS Observer mission when he came to speak with the Security Council on Thursday, June 7. It was anticipated that Annan's presentation would help to clarify the facts of the massacre. (2)

On June 7, however, instead of providing new information from such an investigation, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and several of the other speakers at the Informal General Assembly (GA) meeting put the responsibility for the Houla Massacre on the Assad government. This was also the dominant response of the nations that spoke at the Informal GA meeting even though there had not yet been any adequate investigation into facts of the situation. (3) Also, there were claims of a new massacre.

Some of the member nations that spoke at the Informal GA meeting, however, objected to coming to such a conclusion, especially, in the absence of an adequate investigation.

In his comments referring to the massacres in Houla and on the outskirts of Hama, the Russian Ambassador to the UN, Vitaly Churkin, said, "Clearly these are the most serious crimes that require a reliable detailed investigation."

Other nations including Venezuela, India, Cuba and Nicaragua expressed similar views. The Venezuelan Representative told the Informal GA meeting, "We suspect the fact that these criminal acts happen to coincide with these debates at the UN. We have to wonder to whom does this benefit at this time?" He urged that, "an independent and transparent investigation into these massacres must take place and we must find convincing clarity."

India's Ambassador to the UN, Hardeep Singh Puri, noted that the attacks against civilians

and security forces in Syria “have intensified over the last few weeks and have taken a significant toll.” Also he drew attention to the sharp increase in the number of terrorist attacks in different parts of the country.” He “condemned all violence, irrespective of who the perpetrators are,” and called for the “cessation of all outside support for armed groups and serious action against the terrorist groups in Syria.” And he asked that the crimes, “including the recent incident in El Houleh, are fully investigated and their perpetrators brought to justice.”

After comparing what has happened in Syria with what had happened in Libya, the Nicaraguan Representative called for “an exhaustive investigation of these crimes and to bring the guilty to justice.”

The Cuban Ambassador noted that the “information is fragmented, imprecise and the object of frequent manipulation.” He denounced what he saw as the “complicity of the major broadcast media which are used to confusing reality and not accepting the responsibility for their acts.”

During his comments, which were twice cut off by the UN video transmission system, Ambassador Bashir Ja’afari, the Syrian Ambassador, asked how the Secretary General of the League of Arab States could render a judgment about who is responsible for the Houla massacre when such a judgment contradicts the report of the United Nations observers on the ground, and investigations of that atrocious massacre have not yet been completed. The massacre, he emphasized, had been condemned by the Syrian government.

Ambassador Ja’afari announced that, “Syria is ready to receive a commission of inquiry of states known for their independence and for their respect for the UN charter and for their refusal to interfere in Syrian internal affairs.”

Later in the afternoon, after the Security Council’s informal briefing with Kofi Annan, there was a media stakeout at the Security Council. One journalist asked Ban Ki moon, “Mr. Secretary General, what steps have you taken to comply with the request of the Security Council on 27th of May through the press statement to investigate fully, independently and transparently the killing in El Houleh?” The UN Secretary General did not answer the question. (4)

It is notable that as Ambassador Li Baodong had recognized during his press conference on June 4, several different narratives have been used to describe the Houla massacre. These offer different explanations of the circumstances under which it happened and therefore what the implications are for the future of the Kofi Annan 6 point peace plan.

Those nations encouraging an investigation into the details of the Houla massacre want to determine the lessons from it toward solving the crisis in Syria. Those who were quick to jump to conclusions based on superficial information are helping to fan the flames of the conflict.

What are these major competing narratives?

## **Western and Arab Media Narrative**

The narrative that is being spread by much of the mainstream western and Arab satellite media is a narrative that blames the Assad government for the Houla massacre. At first that media claimed that the people killed, including the women and children, had been killed by shelling from Syrian troops attacking the town.

In examining the videos and photos put online or provided by the opposition making these claims, however, it became evident that many of the victims, particularly the women and children, had been killed at close range by bullets and knives and not by the shelling of heavy weapons by the Syrian military.

It soon became obvious that only 20 of the 108 who were killed may have been killed in combat fighting over the checkpoint and that the circumstances of these deaths were not yet determined.

The opposition and the western and Arab media supporting the opposition, like BBC and Aljazeera, etc. had to quickly change their narrative. They invented a new force allegedly used by the Syrian government, the shabbiya, which they claimed is a pro government militia. (5) The shabbiya allegedly came into the homes of people and killed them at close range.

## **Russian News Team Narrative**

A Russian news team interviewed people after the massacre. The explanation compiled from these interviews represents a very different narrative.

Their account noted that Houla is an administrative area, made up of three villages. It is not the name of a town. Some of this area had been under control of armed insurgents for a number of weeks. The Syrian army maintained certain checkpoints. This account explains that on the evening of May 25, the Free Syrian Army launched an operation to take control of the checkpoints, bringing 600-800 armed insurgents from different areas.

At the same time that there was the fight over the checkpoints, several armed insurgents went into certain homes and massacred the members of several families. Among the families targeted was a family related to a recently elected People's Assembly representative. This family and another family that were killed were said to be families that supported the Syrian government. "Other victims included the family of two journalists for Top News and New Orient Express, press agencies associated with Voltaire Network," reports the news and analysis site Voltairenet.(6)

## **Template for Media Warfare**

At a press conference held in Damascus shortly after the Houla massacre by Joint UN-Arab League envoy Kofi Annan, a question was asked which provides an important context to keep in mind when trying to determine what happened in Houla. The journalist asked:

*I am a Russian living in Syria and reporting for various Russian online sites. What is happening in Syria reminds me of what happened in Yugoslavia that led to its division. We have sources that tell us that the Pentagon is preparing for war. If that happens, what do we*

*do? What do Syrians do and what does the Government do? (7)*

Annan's response was that he had no information of the Pentagon "preparing for war." Nor did he have any indication that what was happening in Syria would be a repeat of "what happened in Yugoslavia." Despite the fact that Annan dismissed the journalist's question, the question provides an important perspective toward understanding what is happening in Syria.

Looking back at the form of media warfare used to prepare public opinion for the NATO aggression against the former Yugoslavia, a template emerges that reflects a pattern in these events.

In this media warfare, the mainstream western media was used to spread stories about the alleged "responsibility for" massacres in order to demonize certain forces. This demonization served to justify the NATO bombing of their country. Hence the Russian journalist's question to Kofi Annan raised an important and serious concern.

In his book "Liar's Poker", which analyzes the role of the media in the Yugoslav war, Michel Collon writes "Information is already a battlefield, which is part of war." He writes that in 1991 the Slovenian government created a "media center which unleashed a flood of disinformation to international correspondents." (8) This disinformation created a false narrative about what was happening and about who was responsible for the violent acts that killed many innocent people. The false narrative was then used to provide the justification for foreign intervention on one side of the conflict.

Also Collon documents the use of US public relations agencies to help mold public opinion in favor of the Croatian and Muslim nationalists and as media warfare against the Serbs. In a striking way, Collon shows how "a massacre happens unexpectedly each time certain Western powers plan to escalate measures against the Serbs." (9) He proposes what could be considered as the template used to create the climate of public opinion justifying the escalation of the attack on Yugoslavia.

Here are the components of the template he presents(10):

- Step 1: Preparation of a more or less hidden agenda
- Step 2: Images that shock Public Opinion
- Step 3: Groundless and Wild Media Accusations Without Investigation
- Step 4: Western Objectives are Achieved
- Step 5: Corrections to Erroneous News Reporting: Too Late and No Impact

Collon argues that shocking events were "staged" for the international media so as to make possible a planned escalation of the attack on Serbia. The Houla massacre bears a striking resemblance to the incidents that Collon refers to in the 1990s that set a basis for the escalation of the aggression against the Serbian government.

Is this current rush to judgment, both at the UN, and in the mainstream western and Arab media but another example of support and encouragement for armed aggression against a sovereign nation, as in the Yugoslavian situation? Is it but a signal to the armed insurgents willing to carry out horrific deeds to achieve their goal of foreign intervention, that they

should go ahead with their cruel agenda? These are questions that need to be asked as they may help to explain the underlying motives of one of the narratives.

The failure of mainstream western and Arab satellite media and of a number of nations at the UN to acknowledge that there are different views of the underlying cause and implementation of the Houla massacre impedes the urgency with which the needed investigation and analysis are to be organized.(11) Such an investigation is critical to identify the actual problems and to understand what is needed to solve them.

It is important to acknowledge that there are two major narratives about the events of the Houla massacre. Such an acknowledgment recognizes, as Ambassador Li Baodong did, the need for evidence to determine what is an accurate narrative of the Houla Massacre. There are a number of blogs and news sites on the Internet where netizens contribute articles and comments that are helpful toward analyzing what is happening in Syria and at the UN and whether the actions at the UN are helpful or harmful for resolving the crisis in a way that is in line with the principles of the UN charter. There are examples of a substantial new netizen journalism developing on the Internet which is taking up the needed work to investigate the facts of the Syrian conflict so as to understand what is needed to contribute to a peaceful resolution.(12)

## Notes

(1) Video of Press Conference marking the beginning of the Chinese presidency of the Security Council for the month of June.

<http://webtv.un.org/meetings-events/security-council/watch/li-baodong-china-president-of-the-security-council-on-the-programme-of-work-for-the-month-of-june-2012-press-conference/1672822951001>

(2) The press statement issued by the UN Security Council on May 27 called for the Secretary General and UNSMIS “to continue to investigate these attacks and report the findings to the Security Council.”

(3) See for example the summary by Moon of Alabama, <http://www.moonofalabama.org/2012/06/the-syria-discussion-at-the-un-general-assembly.html>

(4) “Joint press encounter with UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, Kofi A. Annan, Joint UN-Arab League Special Envoy on Syria and Nabil El-Araby, Secretary General of the League of Arab States.”

(5) See for example the account by AP: “The assault came nearly a week after 108 people, many of them women and children, were killed in the area. Activists said government forces first shelled the area on Friday, then pro-regime fighters known as shabiha stormed the villages. The Syrian government denied its troops were behind the killings and blamed ‘armed terrorists’.”

<http://calgary.ctv.ca/servlet/an/local/CTVNews/20120531/UN-chief-warns-syria-houla-120531/20120531/?hub=CalgaryHome>

(6) See for example: Thierry Meyssan, “The Houla Affair Highlights Western Intelligence Gap in Syria”, <http://www.voltairenet.org/The-Houla-affair-highlights>

See also: Wassim Raad, “The Set Up Massacre and the American Fingerprint”

<http://www.voltairenet.org/The-set-up-massacre-and-the>

In German see for example Mathias Broeckers, “Der Hula-Hoax”

<http://www.broeckers.com/2012/06/05/der-hula-hoax/>

and Rainer Hermann, “Abermals Massaker in Syrien” in Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, June 7, 2012.

<http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/neue-erkenntnisse-zu-getoeteten-von-hula-abermals-massaker-in-syrien-11776496.html>

(An English translation FAZ is available at Moon of Alabama blog: <http://www.moonofalabama.org/2012/06/prime-german-paper-syrian-rebels-committed-houla-massacre.html> )

(7) Transcript of JSE Press Conference in Damascus, 29 May 2012, p. 4. For video see: <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/unsmis/>

(8) Michel Collon, *Liar's Poker*, International Action Center, New York, 2002 p. 45. (This is an English translation of the book which was originally published in French.)

(9) *Ibid.*, p. 28

(10) *Ibid.*, p. 26.

(11) The Human Rights Council has passed a resolution calling for an investigation into the Houla Massacre. Several sources, however, document that the Human Rights Council only considers information supplied by activists in support of the armed opposition. See for example “UN Commissions report on Houla? But they only talk to Syrian opposition – by phone”, May 31, 2012 “Anti-war campaigner Marinella Corregia worries the HR commissioner talks only to its sources: the opposition.”

<http://www.rt.com/news/houla-massacre-un-syria-635/>

(12) A few of the English language web sites providing news and analysis of the Syrian conflict toward a directed peaceful resolution include:

Moon of Alabama <http://www.moonofalabama.org/>

Centre for Research on Globalization <http://www.globalresearch.ca/>

VoltaireNet <http://www.voltairenet.org/en>

Syria News <http://www.syrianews.cc/>

Syria360 <http://syria360.wordpress.com/>

The 4th Media <http://www.4thmedia.org/>



## **The Latest Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Syria Draws Conclusions Without Any Real Evidence, on the Basis of Testimony of a Fraction of the Syrian Population**

By Marinella Correggia

September 13, 2012

(from the Italian original: <http://www.sibialiria.org/wordpress/?p=772>)

(translated to English with slight edits and picture added for this report)

A negotiated solution to the Syrian tragedy, beginning with a ceasefire, is necessary for an end to the bloodshed, and to allow the Syrian population to create its future in peace and without interference. But the peace plans were boycotted by indirect military involvement in the conflict by external powers. This came in the form of support - in weapons, money, and military advisers - to the opposition armed fighters in their struggle for power.

This interference that fuels violence is justified - by governments and the mainstream media - by the need to "help the armed opposition groups to stop the massacres by the regime and to protect civilians." The reality of a year and a half of fighting, however, is very far from this simplification of putting all the responsibility on one of the parties in the armed conflict, thus legitimizing the support of the other. For this story to hold, it's required to systematically deny the international right to speak and bear witness to a large portion of the population, that would launch different or contrary accusations. And so it is discriminated against by the media, NGOs and UN experts.



*UN Commission of Inquiry (CoI) members:  
Chairperson Paulo Sergio Pinheiro (left) and  
Karen Koning AbuZayd. UN Photo/Jean-Marc  
Ferré ([source](#))*

Unfortunately, the report (released August 15) of the "Independent" International Commission of Inquiry on Syria (CoI) under mandate from the Geneva UN Council for Human Rights seems flawed in this respect.

The report concludes that there are "reasonable grounds" to believe that the government forces and shabbiha, based on a state policy, have committed crimes against humanity, war crimes and serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law.

The study also reveals the contradictions, bias in sources, and attributions of responsibility, are not supported by evidence. Here is a summary of some critical observations. (The full observations are also available [in PDF](#), in the original Italian)

The report is a political judgment, and dubious as to evidence and assignation of responsibility, for the following reasons:

- 1) The report also recalls other reports of UN committees and NGOs that are equally

partial, and often without further challenge.

2) The lack of access to the country (the government has given the green light as it had done with the observers), as the Commission acknowledges, "significantly hampered the ability to finish the job." So "access" (euphemism) to victims allowed by the opposition "was limited," "access to the army and members of the government has been almost non-existent," and "victims and witnesses in the country could not be interviewed in person." However, the Commission could also interview witnesses and victims identified by research groups such as the Syrian SOVVT (Syrian Observatory for Victims of Violence and Terrorism) or Vox Clamantis. They did not.

3) The hundreds of interviews which formed the main source for the investigation - as mentioned – were among refugees (deserters and their families) in neighboring countries, or Geneva, or inside Syria by phone or via Skype. Based on previous reports of the Commission itself and this geographic feature in the selection of the evidence, it is to be expected that the main references for the CoI were members of the opposition. (Before the establishment of the Commission of three experts, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights office in which the Commission refers, published a report (Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the situation of human rights in the Syrian Arab Republic - A/HRC/18/53, September 15, 2011), which explicitly drew from the "data" of the Local Coordinating Committees (LCC), an organ of the opposition, although it was not possible to "independently verify").

4) As so often happens, the CoI seem to have given voice to the testimony of one of the parties, only a section of the Syrian people. If they had felt citizens of the other party, the allocation of responsibility for these serious violations would have been different. There are many examples of narratives that are quite different depending on the "witness." This is not always due to fraud, but also because it is difficult to identify those responsible in situations like this.

5) The CoI also refers to reports of NGOs, and on the basis of the above it is clear that there are between these groups a bias in favor of the opposition groups in Syria, rather than independence from the parties.

6) As for the other "evidence" gathered by the Commission, other than the testimony (video, reports, reporting), it seems to be contested throughout the whole Syrian affair, and is endlessly challenged, with mutual attributions of responsibility.

7) For many of the crimes that the CoI report, on the basis of witnesses interviewed, attributed to pro-government forces, there are other versions of witnesses who claim the opposite, blaming the other party (or both). This applies to:

- The massacres of civilians, including that of Houla: other versions have not been heard, and it is also difficult, even on the part of witnesses and survivors, to identify the affiliation of perpetrators; victims can be confused by symbols or uniforms; also the Commission does not dwell on the timing of many massacres that occurred or were at least reported (by the opposition) on the eve of important international meetings on Syria;

- Indiscriminate attacks in civilian areas: Many witnesses who were not heard by the

Commission have reported time and again that the armed opponents are hiding in civilian areas, actually taking them hostage, and attacking the residents. Yet the Commission does not record this crime. In addition, the civilian victims often fall in the context of clashes between opposing sides, with shared guilt. No witness heard by the Commission accuses the armed groups of holding them as human shields, or sniping, bombings, and attacks by mortars, rocket launchers, etc., on civilian areas. In short, they blame the army for exactly what was attributed to the regime by the media choir.

- The use of human shields in many contexts: other evidence - not heard by the Commission - blame their opponents, while some episodes identified by the Commission are improbable;

- The cold-blooded killing and violence against civilians, men, women and children, including snipers and attacks on unarmed people, as well as extra-judicial killings of armed men;

- The looting and destruction. The CoI ignores the recurring sabotage of civilian infrastructure.

8) The report uses the confusion between civilians and armed fighters.

9) It is unlawful, the lack of separation between the actions of the army or government officials, and those irregular forces or pro-government parties as so-called shabbiha, a dark entity for the Commission itself.

10) It seems forced and "politically biased," attributing to the regime (as principal or conspirator) all the cruelties of gangs or militias, even if those are favorable to the government. The same is not done for the crimes of the opposition.

11) The long list of terrorist attacks that have killed dozens of civilians, meanwhile, is relegated to "lack of access to sites" in the category of "domestic crimes."

- The massacre of Houla was attributed to "forces aligned with the government" on the basis of dubious considerations. A first version of the CoI report argued that it could not decide whether the perpetrators were pro-government, anti-government or "third external actors." One wonders what would be the motive or the reason for a crime so heinous and precise, separated from the fighting. The CoI ignores the fact that no opposition activists nor fighters claim that this was a terrible revenge between families or villages, as opposed to an act "from the center."

12) Always on the massacre of Houla: who has chosen respondents and witnesses or alleged witnesses? It is not impossible that the witnesses interviewed in Houla, which is under the control of the FSA, have been intimidated. Others belong directly to the opposition. One wonders also at the reason for targeting two families who were distinguished for anti-regime activism.

13) In allocating the responsibility of the various shabiha massacres, those interviewed by the Commission seem to ignore the possibility of a "third actor", real death squads.

# "Fight for Us" And Other Things Ali Said : Houla Massacre Star Witness Reconsidered

By Adam Larson

July 3, 2012

This is a revised and updated version of an article originally posted July 3, 2012 as *Houla Massacre Star Witness Reconsidered* [at SyriaNews.cc](#). [After that site's closure, it was also carried by Arabi Souri](#) at Wordpress.com).

## 1. Adored, Not Ignored



*Ali Al-Sayed in his famous  
Youtube video*

Ali Al-Sayed has been heralded as the most important survivor of and witness to the Houla massacre of May 25, 2012. Just over one hundred people, nearly half of them children, were cruelly butchered in the collected villages called Al-Houla, in Syria's Homs province (the killings were in the southernmost town of Taldou). But this boy survived, a miracle and a ray of hope. And most importantly, by living to tell, he was a window for the world onto what happened, and what should be done about it. (Or, alternately, a window onto what someone wanted us to think and do).

As related by the news, the victims of the massacre were members of Sunni families being punished for aiding the protests against Assad's regime, or just on suspicion, or just for being Sunni. Ali's is no exception; the eleven-year-old says he was shot at but unharmed as his entire family was massacred around him. He dramatically smeared himself with his brother's blood, after seeing that Nader's spirit had left his body, and played dead. He then escaped unharmed into the night to tell the world. Or so he says.

Ali wasn't alone in surviving to blame the government and its allied shadow militia, the Alawite "Shabiha" (roughly "ghost") armies. [1] Perhaps two dozen others who say they escaped from various targeted homes, most by playing dead, are known so far. [2] Like Ali, they all blame soldiers, Shabiha, or "Alawite pigs," and ask for outside protection. Ali actually puts it best, if not most subtly, conveying his strong personal feelings about the world's responsibilities, considering what he says he saw.

*"I demand that the international community stop the killing in Syria & in Houla ... We're being killed in our homes. The international community is sitting, just talking and not doing anything. The people must fight for us, do what they say, and protect us."*  
(3:09-3:38) [3]

The world is now dimly aware of a whole other set of alleged witnesses with an opposite story. These have said rebel-affiliated terrorists, including known local families and unknown foreign helpers, carried out an attack on loyalist families remaining in this rebel-dominated area. This witness set contain less miracle escapees who saw the killings, and their accounts are thus more distant, more vague, and more realistic. But somehow these others were ignored while Ali, above all, was adored.

Little Ali is so cute with his baby face and "supergame" t-shirt that he barely even looks

eleven. In fact he doesn't; by the video Ali looks about eight or nine. Perhaps he is younger than stated, maybe after someone decided that the sophisticated plea for foreign help just looked preposterous coming from an 8-year-old.

## 2. Contacts and Suggestion

Later in 2012, Ali was interviewed by German news Der Spiegel [4] and gave a lip-chewing Skype interview for a documentary by France 2 [5], as well as being featured in an Arabic-language opposition video re-enacting his ordeal. [6] But it was in the days after the massacre that Ali made such big waves in English and worldwide, initially speaking out at least four times, all apparently via a Skype video connection. The first was a video of the boy interviewed, in Arabic, by an unknown man. [3] He also spoke to Martin Chulov of the UK Guardian via Skype, first un-named but with plenty of detail. [7] Both of those occurred on or before the 28th, but he also spoke to the Associated Press the same way on the 30th. [8]

Chulov noted that, with all his family allegedly dead, the boy was living with “a town elder who is a member of the Syrian Revolutionary Council and is now caring for him,” as well as arranging the discussion. The AP contacted him “through anti-regime activists in Houla who arranged for an interview.” [8]

The UN Commission of Inquiry's initial report, released June 27, shared their investigators' doubts about a boy that's clearly Ali. They spoke to him via Skype, making a fourth known interview, but with no details shared. They also reviewed the previous video, but not apparently the Guardian or AP interviews. “In both interviews he blamed the killings on Shabbiha and soldiers of the Syrian army,” they found. “In one interview the survivor stated that the perpetrators arrived together in tanks. The CoI took note of the age of the boy and **duly considered his suggestibility.**” [9]

The bolded part is something the corporate media and world leaders apparently never did. Considering Ali's guardian and handler and his network, it's quite clear who would be doing the suggesting and what basic form it would take. That geo-politically useful form is likely the reason it was accepted with no question.

Suggestibility is a type of unreliability, but only a potential one. New research shows that active story break-down is a more immediate problem with this alleged witness and survivor. Between only three publicly available accounts, the kid has managed to contradict himself to the point of absurdity, as explained below.

## 3. “That is True” – The Attack

In the video, Ali says the attackers entered his home after emerging from “the tank” that pulled up out front. To Chulov, he said “they came in armoured vehicles and there were some tanks.” To the AP, he said they arrived “in a military armored vehicle and a bus.” To Der Spiegel, Ali described, by sound, a “BMB” personnel carrier. [4] Later in the video (around 4:00), he says in Arabic: “they wanted to burn the house, and then they left in cars.” That sentence was bypassed in the translated captions. [10]

In general, Ali describes the attackers as eleven in number, primarily military in appearance,

with some in uniforms and some in civilian clothes, sporting big beards and shaved heads. Some commentators, like Martin Janssen and by him Rainer Hermann, have noted the hair and beard style could describe anti-government Sunni fanatics. [11] However, in various details Ali clearly describes them as Alawites and Assad loyalists. At 2:07 in the video, he's asked "how did you know it was the army, not armed gangs?" He answered "the tank was outside, they came out of it." Further, they "were dressed as military," and were "Shabiha." [3] Chulov noted the boy's calm delivery relating his family's massacre, but how he then grew argumentative when asked how he knew who the attackers were. "Why are you asking me who they were? I know who they were. We all know it. They were the regime army and people who fight with them. That is true." [7] Later, he was quoted by Chulov as saying the attackers "spoke with an Alawite accent," and "said they were from Foulah (a neighboring Alawite town). They were Shabiha. And they were proud of it." [12]

He agrees in all accounts his mother was killed after shouting at the soldiers. In the video, he says "my mom screamed at them as they were arresting (brother) Shaoqi and my uncle(s)," who were taken alive but killed before the next day. [3] AP reported back "the men led Ali's father and oldest brother outside" and killed them there, and then she screamed "Why did you take them? Why did you take them?" before being shot down. [8]

But in the version told to Chulov, Ali's mother and the young children were shot dead while the sought men stayed hidden nearby in the house. "My mum yelled at them ... 'What do you want from my husband and son?'" They gunned her down, tried to kill Ali, and murdered Nader and Rasha, then started looting. After all of this, "on the way out of the house, the boy said the gunmen found the three men they had been looking for. "They shot my father and uncle. And then they found Aref, my oldest brother, near the door. They shot him dead too." [7]

In general, Ali claims he escaped only after the attackers left, having played dead until that point. They had found him and shot right at him, he's said, but managed to miss, and then he dramatically smeared himself with someone else's blood as a disguise. Some sources say it was his mother's blood he used, but no primary sources seem to support that. Martin Chulov reported in the Guardian "he smeared himself in the blood of his slain brother." To the AP, he specified it was Nader's blood, a point played up in the cited New York Post publication (the photo is captioned "blood brother").

However, in the video interview, he doesn't mention anyone's blood. He does however say that when they shot and missed, he was actually "hit," or grazed on the back of his right hand. He shows this to the camera, which can make out what seems like three faint scratches, less than three days after the massacre. It seems it was his own (bloodied?) hand that he used to hide under; "after they killed us, I went like this (right hand covering the side of his face), acting like I was shot."

There are other points he was more consistent on between his Guardian and video interviews. For example, the number of bullets (five) fired through the front door lock. The stolen items are consistent; on video, he lists three televisions, a computer, and an item translated once as a vacuum cleaner, another time as a broom. [3] (2:36) The Guardian's Martin Chulov listed only "three televisions and a computer." Later speaking to Der Spiegel, however, the vacuum cleaner had been explicitly replaced; they stole "two TV sets, our washing machine and the computer." [4] This seems to refer to the usual, bulky and

low-value, domestic clothes-washing machine, but to be fair, it could be just another translation issue.

From his attack chronology conflicts alone, the boy's account is highly questionable. Traumatic reality has a way of driving facts home better than attempts at memorization, and these alleged facts are pretty loose.

#### 4. A Fungible Family

Considering Ali as a questionable witness, it might well follow that he was never a member of the massacred Al-Sayed family. And if that were so, his alleged facts of this family might be as loose as his attack narrative, seeming to be sloppily memorized rather than driven into place by a short lifetime of shared history.

And in fact Ali seems unable to keep his family members straight. A certain pool of names remains constant, but these shift freely from one member to another between accounts. The effect, distilled below, is bizarre.

To *Der Spiegel*, Ali recalled his unnamed father fondly; he took his son "to many demonstrations," always having "kebabs and cola first!" But an arrest in November left Mr. Al-Sayed "afraid to go." [4] Rendered harmless, he was killed anyway.

As for the father's name, Ali gives that as identical to his own – Ali Alsayed - in the video interview. But to the Guardian, he's *apparently* named Aref: "They said they wanted Aref and Shawki, my father and my brother." Then it turns out Aref was "my oldest brother," and Shawki apparently his father. [7] In the video, Shaoqi (Shawki) is his killed older brother. [3] So perhaps Aref is the father after all? No – the video is where it's specified he was named Ali.

On video he names two uncles, Oqba and Arif/Aref. Though the interviewer repeatedly reminds him both uncles were taken, Ali keeps using the singular form, apparently referring to Oqba, and insists the third male killed was his own brother, not his father's. [3] But to Martin Fletcher, he said the killed uncle was named Abu Haider. [13] (MF) To Martin Chulov, the killed uncle isn't named, but the gunmen initially "asked about my uncle, Abu Haidar. They also knew his name." [7]

Ali's mother is always dead and never named, and his younger siblings are a bit more stable. Rasha, 5, and Nader, 6, both killed before his eyes, both mentioned in the video and in both early interviews. To the AP he also adds another brother, Aden, age 8. That's seven murders minimum, eight if there were two uncles taken. But when he saw the soldiers later "they were describing six people dead in my house. They included me. They thought I was dead." [7] By this he thinks there were only five people killed, forgetting at least two.

The one known victims list, from the Damascus Center for Human Rights Study (DCHRS), comprehended with Google translate, doesn't even contain the family names Al-Sayed or anything close. There is a family name "Mr. Arif" or Aref, the first name of Ali's brother/uncle as given, and the father of the family by other sources (see below). This appears for entries 30, 31, 48, and 93, with matching first names Nader (#30) and Rasha (#48). But there are only the four entries when 7-8 family members are said to have been killed. [14]

The other two Arifs given on that list as dying are Mohammed and Adel. [14] Adel is similar to Aden, the brother who was mentioned by Ali only in his later interviews with AP and Spiegel. And it's Ali's middle name too; "*A baby*, Ali Adel al-Sayyed, miraculously survived," anti-government activist Maysara al-Hilawi told Reuters. [15] To Der Spiegel, the witness spoke *as* "Ali Adil Sayyid." [4] Further, when the interviewer in the video repeats back Ali's father's name, he seems to add, and even emphasize, an "Adel," repeating "Ali Adel Sayed." [3]

The Adel link might also help explain why the DCHRS victim list also contains one "Mr. Adel Shawki," perhaps meaning "Mr. Aref Shawki," meaning Shaoqi Al-Sayed, the brother/father that Ali cited. [13] Thus it seems possible these related entries were gathered from Ali himself, who managed to confuse things again to create the mess recorded here. (DCHRS is a member of the International Federation for Human Rights, FIDH/IFHR. [16])

## 5. The Physical Family

A partial family identification, pieced together by A Closer Look On Syria (ACLOS) after this article's first publication, draws on several sources. The first appeared only in September, when Ali made a video with opposition Houla Media Office and a couple of rebel fighters, taking a long walk together south across the fields just east of Main Street. At a certain home, they stop so he can re-enact the massacre as he allegedly saw there (this is still not fully scrutinized for details). [6]

The home in question is the same one shown by SANA news on May 26 and filmed by UN monitors as well. As both showed it, the home featured in situ bodies matching the family Ali describes; two dead boys (aged app. 6-9), a girl (app. 5), and an adult woman inside, and three men executed just outside the door. [17]

Further, the identities SANA specified are head of household Aref Mohammad al-Sayyid, killed alongside "his two brothers Imad and Ouqba, his wife Izdihar Ali al-Daher," and the three children, unnamed. (The mother is seen in a room apart from the others - laid across a bed - in a UNSMIS video. Though fully clothed, it's said in a France 2 documentary that she was raped before her murder, conflicting with Ali's claim she was simply shot right in front of him). No survivor is mentioned. [17]

The father's name, Aref, is a common one in Ali's narratives, used for his uncle or his older brother, but never for his father. All three were, he said in most versions, taken outside and shot. Uncle Oqba is a fit, but the third man is in contention: Ali cites his older brother Aref/Shaoqi, while SANA said it was his alleged uncle Imad.

At this point, it's more than reasonable to put the name "Ali Al-Sayed" in quotes, on suspicion of being a fake witness who, lucky for him, was nowhere near the massacre sites that day. His winding up under protection of opposition people could be from being born there.



*From SANA TV, May 26, the men killed just outside Ali's alleged home. SANA cites Aref Al-Sayyid and his brothers Imad and Ouqba. Ali cites his brother Shaoqi / Aref, their father Ali / Shaoqi, and uncle Ouqba / Aref / Abu Haidar.*



Perhaps the “town elder who is a member of the Syrian Revolutionary Council” is his uncle.

His story then would be untrue, but it does seem crafted to fit with, and explain, the very real demise of this one particular family.

## 6. A Government Family?

Abdelmutti Al-Mashlab is a name that doesn't appear in Ali's early narratives. He was in the Syrian parliament, the Peoples' Assembly. This had just been chosen on May 7 in an election the rebellion insisted was a regime ploy no one should participate in. [18] (Rebels managed to block polling in many areas, but about 52% of eligible voters managed anyway, according to official sources). The winners – this time including many pre-rebellion opposition members, and working with a brand-new constitution – were sworn in on May 24 and voted into positions within the parliament. [19]

SANA reported that “Abdel Mou'ti Mashlab” was elected as one of two secretaries that day in Damascus. (A previous version of this article said that he was elected the parliament's *speaker*, but SANA says that went to one Mohammad Jihad al-Laham.) [20] The next day, as the new assembly set to its first day of work, it's strongly alleged that part of Secretary Mashlab's family back in Al-Houla was one of those slaughtered. As with all the others, that was blamed on the government, right along with its “reforms” and “democracy.”

One of the ignored local witnesses explained the man she called *Abdullah* Al-Mashlab “was elected on May 24th, and the next day they killed his wife and three kids and his brother and his big family as well.” [21] She may have the name wrong and the victims too closely related. SANA reported, as do other witnesses, that the family with Oqba in it was only somehow “related to a People's Assembly member.” The link was distant enough to have a different actual family name, but close enough, SANA implies, to matter here. They say the election raised the ire of “one Haitham al-Housan,” (aka Hassan, Hallak) a local bandit who already hated the Al-Sayeds, and oversaw their murders on May 25. [22]

This parliament connection to the Houla massacre is acknowledged, if vaguely, by the other side. American NPR reported on the testimony of a possible alleged relative of Ali's, 17-year-old Maryam Sayid. “The Syrian government says [the attackers] were out to punish one family that had a relative in the Syrian parliament,” NPR reported. But Maryam, a self-described member of that family, “said the government's version is simply untrue.” She wouldn't “hide with anti-government rebels,” as she did, if that's who she was running from. [23] But it could be, as it could be with Ali, that she was *always* with the rebels, and only *pretending* to have first been a survivor of a government massacre.

The killed family Maryam describes was headed by retired police officer Muawiya Al-Sayed, who, as SANA reported, “didn't defect (to the rebels) and was always in danger (from them).” [22] Maryam says he never defected, but was killed by the government anyway, along with some portion of his family. This included his grown son, Maryam said in a more detailed interview with Der Spiegel - an army soldier on leave with a broken leg. [4] Innocent of rebellion and seemingly almost on the government's side, they were apparently hit for their sectarian credentials alone, in her provocative and propagandistic narrative. “They killed us because we are Sunni,” NPR quoted Maryam as saying; the

killers were “Alawite thugs wearing all black and chanting sectarian slogans.” [23]

While they share a common name and lived close to each other on Main Street, the available information is not decisive on whether the Muawiya Al-Sayed family and the Aref-Oqba Al-Sayed family were directly related. But Maryam says - to NPR, if not to Der Spiegel – that she was related to the People’s Assembly secretary. And the latter heard that Ali from down the street was “a *distant* relative of Abdulmuti Mashlab, a member of the Syrian parliament.” [4] In fact, Ali says, he “was merely the uncle of his uncle's wife,” probably too distant to hurt like the authorities suggested, or to be related at all. [4]

The article further says this tenuous kinship “prompted UN observers to make the assumption” that’s why the family was killed. [4] No source was given for that claim, and no such statement is readily available. It would be encouraging to learn that the UN’s investigators had become open-minded when presented with a clue like that. But in the end, such things didn’t seem to matter much to them.

## 7. The Unnamed Evil Uncle

Despite the amazing confusion over his alleged immediate family and their names, two of Ali’s accounts consistently suggest another, closer relative, described as an uncle – unnamed but living nearby – was complicit in the killings.

To the Guardian, he reported running to this uncle’s house for safety, but strangely, the soldiers who had attacked his own home then arrived right after him. Unseen, apparently by everyone, he overheard the Shabiha talking to his uncle as if on good terms. They mentioned the six killings that were only five, and then he recalled them “asking his uncle if he knew who lived in the house that they just rampaged through,” as if he had been the one to send them. [7]

Furthermore, in the video, Ali says his father, uncle, and brother were taken away, rather than killed there. He said he only knew they had been killed because “the next day I saw them dead on the government TV channel.” [3] This 8-11 year-old from an ostensibly rebel family apparently makes sure to keep up on what SANA is saying, perhaps while eating a bowl of cereal back at his uncle’s house. After that, “my uncle came on saying that armed gangs killed *his* children.” (emphasis added) But Ali knew this wasn’t true – he caught the lie on both ends, at his own home and his uncle’s, in his fanciful story.

The name of this evil uncle is unspecified in both cases, which is noteworthy. Relation Abdelmutti Al-Mashlab, the Peoples’ Assembly secretary, is likely to be featured on state TV following the murder of his family. Was Ali accusing him of celebrating his election victory by running back to Al-Houla and overseeing the massacre of his own traitorous or too-Sunni family? Maybe that was the idea at first, but there’s no indication Mr. Mashlab lived in Taldou, and Ali’s Spiegel interview all but rules him out even if he did, as too distant to be called “uncle.”

These stories could refer to Muawiya Al-Sayed, the possibly related police officer up the street. But he was killed that night, Maryam and the Syrian authorities say. SANA has specified an uncle Imad, but Ali never has, so that’s probably not it. He too was killed. Ali might also refer to his uncle Abu Haidar, whom the soldiers asked after before gunning

down uncle Oqba. Unless Abu Haidar was the uncle killed along with Ali's father and brother, as he once said. [13] Then, maybe it was Oqba he ran to, but he too is reported dead, and more reliably so.

None of these works very well, and none of them seems to be the intended match. So it must have been some other uncle yet to whom Ali ran, only to find he'd sent the killers himself and lied about it on national TV. And still, this villain allowed Ali himself to see it all and survive, apparently escaping again to his new anti-government friends and their world audience.

Perhaps this convenient uncle was more of a literary device than a real person. That would explain it.

## **8. Conclusion: Abilities and Disabilities**

The case for a Syrian government-ordered massacre at Al-Houla was taken as obvious fact from day one by the Western powers and all those kept on the same page with them. The blamed government had its ambassadors expelled over the blame, along with harsh condemnations of the blamed government, and increased talk of arming the rebels to help stop the killing.

But the blame comes down to a handful of alleged miracle escapees and the "activists" they now live and roll with, divorced from all consideration of the non-rebel witnesses. The believed batch is anchored by this juvenile star witness, but we can now assess his abilities and disabilities.

He's not able to remember the names of his own father and older brother, nor of his cluster of named uncles simmered down to a dead one vs. an evil one. He apparently cannot count past six or know when he should try. He cannot remember consistently whether the men of the house were killed first, were taken away and killed later, or covered by the door in silence as the youngest and their mother were mowed down one by one. He cannot well explain how he escaped with those faint scratches on his hand standing in for the slightest actual injury. He reports gunfire only, no stabbing, throat-slitting, eye-gouging, or any such thing. We know these things happened in the Houla massacre, but not to Ali or any of his kin, he reports.

Ali's abilities more than make up for his shortcomings. Like a video camera he consistently recalls minor details, like the five bullets in the lock and that everyone knows it was the regime, and those who fight with them, who did it. He can expose his scheming uncle's wicked plots, detect an "Alawite accent," from the Foulah "Shabiha" a mile away, who don't seem to exist. [24] He's incapable, apparently, of telling us what really, realistically, might have happened. But as we've seen, he's been fully able to move a world that badly wants to believe the poor little guy anyway.

## References:

- [1] [http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/The\\_Shabiha:\\_Ghost\\_Stories%3F](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/The_Shabiha:_Ghost_Stories%3F)
- [2] [http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Houla:Alleged\\_witnesses\\_for\\_a\\_government/Shabiha\\_attack](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Houla:Alleged_witnesses_for_a_government/Shabiha_attack)
- [3] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X9KnjNxU8nI> (account deleted, said vacuum cleaner) or <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o6yVbOBbO6I> (says broom)
- [4] Christoph Reuter and Abd al-Kadher Adhun for DER SPIEGEL, "Searching for the Truth Behind the Houla Massacre", published July 23, 2012 <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/a-look-back-at-the-houla-massacre-in-syria-a-845854.html>
- [5] Houla, autopsie d'un massacre, France2 documentary aired September 20, 2012 <http://envoye-special.france2.fr/les-reportages-en-video/houla-autopsie-d-un-massacre--20-septembre-2012-4605.html>
- [6] [http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Talk:Ali\\_Al-Sayed#Field\\_expedition\\_with\\_Ali](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Talk:Ali_Al-Sayed#Field_expedition_with_Ali)
- [7] Houla massacre survivor tells how his family were slaughtered. Martin Chulov, the Guardian, May 28, 2012. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/may/28/houla-massacre-survivor-boy-syria>
- [8] Syrian boy says he survived military massacre of his family by smearing himself with his brother's blood and playing dead. Associated Press, via New York Post, June 1, 2012. [http://www.nypost.com/p/news/international/syria\\_slaughter\\_miracle\\_boy\\_awn8GLCUh0o8Qp3kRcVVLO](http://www.nypost.com/p/news/international/syria_slaughter_miracle_boy_awn8GLCUh0o8Qp3kRcVVLO)
- [9] UN Human Rights Commission, Oral Update, June, 2011 A/HRC/20 [http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session20/COI\\_OralUpdate\\_A.HRC.20.CRP.1.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session20/COI_OralUpdate_A.HRC.20.CRP.1.pdf)
- [10] Comment by "Shaamnews" on posted original version of this article <http://arabisiouri.wordpress.com/2012/07/04/houla-massacre-star-witness-reconsidered/>
- [11] Janssen: <http://opinie.deredactie.be/2012/06/02/de-verschrikkingen-van-houla/> Hermann: <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/neue-erkenntnisse-zu-getoeteten-von-houla-abermals-massaker-in-syrien-11776496.html> (translation from German) <http://www.moonofalabama.org/2012/06/prime-german-paper-syrian-rebels-committed-houla-massacre.html>
- [12] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jun/01/houla-massacre-reconstructing-25-may>
- [13] [http://www.telegraphindia.com/1120602/jsp/frontpage/story\\_15560453.jsp#.UWIHaUbTQ98](http://www.telegraphindia.com/1120602/jsp/frontpage/story_15560453.jsp#.UWIHaUbTQ98)
- [14] DCHRS victims list, Arabic original cache pulled, Google translation hosted at ACLOS: [http://acloserlookonsyria.wikinet.org/w/images/acloserlookonsyria/uploads/9/97/Al-Houleh\\_Massacre\\_En.pdf](http://acloserlookonsyria.wikinet.org/w/images/acloserlookonsyria/uploads/9/97/Al-Houleh_Massacre_En.pdf)
- [15] "Families herded "Like Sheep" to die in Houla massacre" By Khaled Yacoub Oweis, Reuters (Amman), May 30, 2012. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/30/us-syria-crisis-houla-idUSBRE84T1BH20120530>
- [16] Damascus Center for Human Rights Study. <http://www.dchrs.org/news.php>
- [17] "The Household Ali Explains," A Closer Look on Syria: [http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Ali\\_Al-Sayed#The\\_Household\\_Ali\\_Explains](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Ali_Al-Sayed#The_Household_Ali_Explains)
- [18] SANA, May 15: <http://sana.sy/eng/21/2012/05/15/419139.htm>
- [19] <http://english.cntv.cn/program/asiatoday/20120524/122858.shtml>
- [20] SANA, May 24. <http://sana.sy/eng/21/2012/05/24/421043.htm>
- [21] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JD0PA0BxNAQ>
- [22] Witnesses to al-Houla Massacre: Massacres Were Carried Out Against Specific Families That Support the Government. Syrian Arab News Agency, English. Jun 02, 2012 <http://www.sana.sy/eng/337/2012/06/02/422915.htm> <http://nbc.com/2012/06/02/witnesses-to-al-houla-massacre-massacres-were-carried-out-against-specific-families-that-support-the-government/>
- [23] "Sectarian Syrian Group Blamed In Houla Massacre" by Kelly McEvers, NPR Morning Edition, June 05, 2012 <http://www.npr.org/2012/06/05/154335032/sectarian-syrian-group-blamed-in-houla-massacre>
- [24] Alex Thompson's blog, Sunday June 3, 2012. <http://blogs.channel4.com/alex-thomsons-view/search-houla-killers/1811>

## **New Evidence that the Houla Massacre was Perpetrated by the Free Syrian Army**

By Alfredo Embid

19 October, 2012

(excerpts from “La mierda sigue acumulándose sobre la Comisión de Investigación “independiente” del Consejo de Derechos Humanos de la ONU sobre Siria” - Boletín Armas Contra Las Guerras, 19 October, 2012  
([http://ciaramc.org/ciar/boletines/cr\\_bol456.htm](http://ciaramc.org/ciar/boletines/cr_bol456.htm))

(translated to English, with slight edits, for this report)

### **New evidence that Hula slaughter was perpetrated by the Free Syrian Army**

(In blaming the pro-government forces for the Houla massacre) the document of the "Independent" Commission of the Human Rights Council of the UN ignores the numerous reports, based on field interviews, to the contrary. Only in the footnote [1] does it mention German journalist reports (Rainer Herman) and Russian researchers (Marat Musin), which are discarded because they are based primarily on two witnesses to the government-reported version. This is false because it is not based "on only two witnesses" as already documented when informed versions of both surveys in Bulletin No. 435. [2]

Next add further evidence to substantiate that the "independent" commission of the UN Human Rights Commission lies.

Here is an example: portions of an interview done on-location, unlike the commission, by Marat Musin, of one eyewitnesses out of the dozen interviewed. [3] What happened in the neighboring village of Houla's Taldou is important because there were some of the most horrific massacres in cold blood, entire families executed, including children.



*Marat Musin his first witness interview*

*Marat Musin: what happened on 25 and 26 May in your village, Taldou? What did you see?*

*A: "I am a citizen of Taldou, always lived in Taldou even now. Until then, (the bandits) would shoot at the army checkpoints every Friday after prayers. They shot for two hours and then things would return to normal."*

Even as the English translation speaks of "armed men," the Russian translation insists on rendering this as "bandits."

*A: "Two days before the May 25 attack by bandits, attendees told us that X time is approaching. We heard this from local bandits ; they always said they should create an uproar. But I did not expect that everything would happen like this."*

This clearly suggests that the murders were already pre-programmed, as part of an operation by the so-called Free Syrian Army.

A: *"On Friday the "bandits" attacked army checkpoints on the outskirts of the city with a mortar. The army responded and wounded the man who fired the mortar in the foot. The bandits took him to the hospital and is now alive and well. His name is Talha Alksh Favez, his family lives in Taldo.*

Notice that this man was known to the population.

A: *"On Friday, at 2:00 PM, after prayer, "bandits" shot an army checkpoint and the army responded to this attack. This group was led by Nidal Bakkour. Another armed group joined them to attack the checkpoint located on the mountain. This second group comes from the Al-Hallak clan, also known locally as Al-Hassan."*

Note that according to his account there are two groups of attackers, and some local bandits chiefs are also mentioned by name.

A: *"The plan was to seize the checkpoint located on the mountain because they wanted an elevated position to let them easily control the checkpoint located in the village. When beginning the attack Nidal Bakkour called someone and asked them to send him to an armed group outside. When the bandits attacked the checkpoint, 25 were eliminated."*

Note that this attack was not a simple exchange of fire as the previous days, there were two coordinated attacks and further reinforcements were brought out.

A: *"At 15:30 they took the high checkpoint. They cut the throat of a soldier and threw him from the third floor. Before he died, he said he was from the town of Kfar Batna, a town near Damascus, and was Sunni like them. They replied, "do you now remember that you are Sunni?"*

*"Then they kidnapped two soldiers ; one, named Abdullah, was a Bedouin (the exact word here is Shawy) of Deir Azzour and burned him alive. I did not see him burned, but I could hear them howling they burned a soldier. It was around 18:00. As for the other soldier, I have no idea what happened, but I heard a bandit named Akram Al-Saleh said, "we will show we did not kill him, and that he defected."*

An example of how "free" Syrian army terrorists act supposedly intended to liberate the country and how to coerce the population and even the captured soldiers to make statements on their behalf. Faced with the dilemma of being burned alive as his partner just was, or let it be said you had deserted, what would you have done?

Such statements are like those that the members of the observers mission and reporters of the Western media list, to intoxicate with their propaganda articles. Do they seem reliable?

A : *"Shortly after (the bandits) secured the army checkpoint and the police department of the city. In front of the police department are the homes of the families killed, you killed all the children. They killed all the children of the clan Al-Sayed: were three families and 20 children. Also killed Abdulrazaq family members, 10 people were killed because they were relatives of authorities. Clan Al-Sayed's family killed brother Abdullah Al-Mashlab, the third person in the Syrian Parliament. He was elected on May 24, the day after they killed the family of his brother, his brother's wife and three children.*

That the militia would have perpetrated some of the horrible massacres of children belies the version of the Commission. How would they do it during combat or immediately after they had taken army posts in the village? Also contrasts with the June report of the Commission on Human Rights which states that they "could not establish whether families killed were pro-regime or pro-opposition."

At 7 pm the Al-Farouq brigade arrived, led by Abdul Razak Tlass, of the so-called "Free Syrian Army." He brought with him more than 250 bandits from the town of Rastan, he came with two other groups, one of the village of Al-Qabo, led by Yehya Al-Yusef, and another from the village of Falla."



*Abdul Razak Tlass (center) identified as in command of the group in Rastan*

This means that only in the attack on the people of Taldo, where the crimes took place, at least five free Syrian army groups converged. This confirms that it was a military operation well planned in advance ... as was the killing of children. As for Abdul Razak Tlass commanding the Rastan group, below you can see him in another photo accompanying members of the observer mission of the UN within hours.



*Tlass in "Free Syrian Army" uniform*

*A: "During the attack, Nidal Bakkour asked a villain to be located in the mosque and from there fire with machine guns toward the army to bring a response: the army fired on the mosque, and the army response damaged the mosque. Some farms and houses were burned to accuse the army of bombing the area."*

"The bandits got into the house and told the people that leave because it was now a military zone ... When the bandits came observers were

shown the empty houses and took them to the place where the inhabitants had moved and said they were refugees."

Again this is the environment in which was collected some of the testimony of people accusing the government. Put yourself in his place: Viewing the murders just perpetrated next to you and considering your children are still alive would you have dared to contradict them?

We have translated from Russian and subtitled this full interview you can see in the video included in the bulletin Bulletin No. 452 [4]. Do you think it is unreliable because it is an interview with a Russian agency?

No. The chronology of events and the authors are clear and well documented by many witnesses and coincides with other reports made on the ground.

[...]

The witness called Jibril (obviously name changed) is a man in his thirties, who witnessed atrocities, and even personally knew some of the victims, informing the monastery on the same day. Alfred Hackensberger said:

*"Behind the walls of the monastery of St Jaques, he feels safe and dares to speak openly about what would mean death outside the monastery ... Jibril's nervousness is visible. If some of this information to suggest their identity comes out, would be a dead man, but yet he gives, with slow deliberate words, his version of what happened on May 25 in Taldo ".* [44]

Jibril: "The fight began around noon, when the rebels, from Ar-Rastan and Saan, attacked army checkpoints around Hula.'s Position at the entrance near the hospital was the first they made.

The soldiers fled and the rebels entered the hospital and killed patients Why, I do not know, nor why so many people died. Then, several groups selected some houses and started shooting all its inhabitants. But they did nothing to the other neighbors, "said Jibril.

This contradicts the claims of several UN report which states that checkpoints were in the army when the slaughter occurred. Confirms the testimony of the residents interviewed by Marat Musim whereby when the massacre occurred in families, the regular army had been evicted.

Any idiot could refute the argument used in the report of the Commission that the survivors didn't seek help from the government-controlled hospital as proof that it was the government who had perpetrated the crime. Besides this not being a test, how would they go to the hospital where they were killing people? As described in detail clamantis Vox website: "Hula hospital was burned and people who had taken refuge in it were systematically massacred closely by death squads, not by the government." [45]

Jibril also makes clear that the killing was selective and directed only against some families.

Jibril: Of the two families who lost their lives, family personally knew Sajid (Al-Sayed). "They were Sunni Muslims, like all of us," he continues. "They were killed because they refused to join the revolution."

This also removed another argument the commission document objects to, that the dead were Shia, claiming that some were Sunnis. Recall that the Shiite faith includes the Alawites, such as President Assad.

[...]

On the question of whether the military regime, the Shabiha, was to blame for the slaughter of the people, Jibril said:

*"It is a nonsense issue. Anyone who has seen Taldo, have doubts about the reports that several hundred soldiers and Assad supporters were able to reach the town without any resistance.*



*Houla is held by the rebels since December 2011. Taldo is in an open area where there are few opportunities to seek refuge. The town is easily defended with machine guns and bazookas. The Army wanted to get Taldo, but had not done so. "*

Again this contradicts the Commission's argument that Syrian regular army members or their militias were able to enter the town during the attacks launched by the rebels and committing massacres. This has also been challenged by other reports already published. The area was controlled then and after by the Free Syrian Army.

Jibril also said: "Of course, many people know what really happened in Houla". But all fear for their lives. "One who is there and speaks can only repeat the version of the rebels. All else is certain death."

This statement reveals once again how easy it is to obtain false testimony to accuse the government. As pointed out in the Red No War criticism, "We can not rule out that witnesses interviewed in Houla, FSA-controlled area, have been intimidated."

Not only can that not be excluded, but it is the rule and strategy to continually threaten the people who do not support this version. This is especially true for all who accompanied the "free" army in its interviews as was the case in Syrian Houla. Nobody is going to testify in its presence that its version is false because it would mean signing their own death warrant.

[...]

### **Media Amplify the Disinformation**

Dr. Webster Griffin Tarpley, author and historian Washington quotes John Williams of the BBC saying that coverage of the slaughter of Houla was completely ill-founded and which was based on the propaganda of the opposition groups [57].

From the beginning, Alex Thomson, Channel 4 News and CNN tried to present the official history of consistently but within days it became clear that the narrative did not correspond to the facts and was inconsistent. In his video for Channel 4 during the interview in the street Houla residents can be clearly seen as a one man band and singing protests. The interview of a witness "who speaks for all" while there were UN observers surrounded by members of the "Free" Syrian Army who had perpetrated the massacre yesterday, completely lacks reliability. Besides this unique course identified witness interviewed said that the militias of the regime "because they wore ribbons with Shi'ite inscriptions on their heads." A perfectly incoherent argument with the fact that they would commit murder of civilians identified. With the aggravation that they did in the midst of a battle where the regular army colleagues were decimated by the army coordinated attack "free" Syrian next door.

On May 27 Alex Thomson tried propping the story, writing in the blog of Channel 4 that Martin Griffiths, British deputy head of mission of the UN Monitoring in Syria (UNSMIS) corroborated the story from two different sources [58].



*Abdul Razak Tlass, one of the group leaders and Taldo Houla attackers.*

This seems very convincing, but even in the same article, Griffiths admits that one of these sources was the "free" army command in the neighboring Syrian city of Rastan. That is, although not expressly stated, it is probably of Abdul Razak Tlass, well identified for having led one of the "free" army groups that invaded Syrian Taldo. The same as before in a photo wearing "guiding" hand to a member of the observers.

Their version cannot be other since they were among the perpetrators of the attack on Taldo, as Marat Musin witnessed being denounced. The brigade of more than 200 men who came from this city was commanded by Abdul Razak Tlass precisely. Obviously lacking the slightest credibility.

The other source cited by Griffiths is what some Houla residents said. Only here is the same problem with his previous witness whose statements were issued by Channel 4: the city was still controlled by the "free" Syrian. When they arrived the next day, the UN observers were accompanied at all times by its members. Nobody in their right mind would have dared to contradict its version of what happened on pain of joining those who had just been murdered in cold blood. These statements therefore are obviously not credible.

Finally note that Martin Griffiths, interestingly, was the British deputy head of mission of the UN Monitoring in Syria (UNSMIS), ie probably a spy sent by his government. The reliability of the statements of this British delegate is the same as that of his witnesses and matched only by his impudence. England is one of the main promoters of the war, while his prime minister David Cameron declares hypocritically: "The blood of these children is a terrible stain on the reputation of the United Nations" [59].

The initial statements of Martin Griffiths are the same as that made his boss Hervé Ladsous, Assistant Secretary General for peacekeeping Operations, said on May 29: "Some of the victims were killed by artillery fire, which clearly demonstrates government responsibility" and accusing Assad's militia, the Shabiha, of being "probably" the perpetrators of individual executions.

These statements were met with enthusiasm by almost all media, amplified and distorted, confirming once again that instead of seeking the truth of what happened, they only served as war propagandists. This confirmed the suspicions already begun when the commission was established that it was a Trojan horse to promote NATO bombing, as with its predecessor in Kosovo. But the plan failed because the evidence did not match the target, as discussed in Bulletin No. 448 [60].

It is surprising that when after two reports were presented to the Commission on Human Rights on the Houla massacre, media pounce on them not with equal enthusiasm, to disseminate them to the four winds, as they had done with the previous statements.

You may wonder why?

Quite simply, the reports of the committee on the massacre of Houla recognized the

impossibility of attributing responsibility for the events to only one of the parties to the conflict. This somewhat contradicts the version that the media had been carrying for weeks; taking advantage of ways to continue their script: accusing the "Assad regime" for the massacre and therefore of having lost all legitimacy. A strategy certainly established before, as suggested by the fact that immediately France, Spain, Germany, Japan, Canada, Belgium, Holland, Japan, Switzerland, Bulgaria and the UK, together announced the expulsion of ambassadors from Syria, and Australia and Turkey even completely expelled all Syrian diplomatic missions from its territory. [61]

But some media tried to "fix". The UK Independent lied in an editorial, stating about the attack on Syrian TV station Al-Ikhbariya that "the government described the killings as a "massacre," just as the UN was blaming state forces for the Houla massacre." [62]. Please note that the editorial is all that many people read. Yet at the end of another article they acknowledges that the report "does not name the Alawite militia – the Shabiha – as being responsible, as has been widely reported, but said they had easiest access to Houla." [63]

This is not a slip, but a news agency strategy.

The Associated Press in Geneva issued a note played in many media emphasizing that the report of the UN "military or pro-government force Shabiha had better access to the place of slaughter in Houla, Homs May 24-25 [sic]." [64]

Citing this, the Independent and the Guardian highlighted a section of the UN report that contradicts the facts, as you just saw in the testimony of numerous witnesses.

The reality is that the area was held by the rebels for months, continuing as the slaughter occurred. When the next day came the UN observers were welcomed and accompanied by members of the "free" Syrian army, and the images broadcast by all TV channels as proof for the world. So how could government militias enter as alleged to perpetrate the massacres? Precisely when the massacres were perpetrated, regular army checkpoints were attacked simultaneously by several massive and groups in a clearly planned military operation.



*Photo of Houla, occupied by the Syrian Free Army, in February 2012*

## Notes:

- [1] note on page 65-66
- [2] Boletín nº435 Lo que no te cuentan sobre Siria. Repetición del mismo guión que en Libia. 20ª parte. Acusar a las víctimas de la masacre de Hula, Siria. Alfredo Embid [http://ciaramc.org/ciar/boletines/cr\\_bol435.htm](http://ciaramc.org/ciar/boletines/cr_bol435.htm)
- [3] VIDEO: <http://video.yandex.ru/users/news-anna2012/view/23>
- [4] Boletín nº452. Marat Musin de ANNA noticias en Siria: Informe sobre la situación en torno al Hula. Testimonio de una testigo de la masacre [VIDEO: Español] Nombres de los responsables de la masacre. [http://ciaramc.org/ciar/boletines/cr\\_bol452.htm](http://ciaramc.org/ciar/boletines/cr_bol452.htm)
- [44] In Syrien gibt es mehr als nur eine Wahrheit. Morgenpost 23.06.12 <http://www.morgenpost.de/politik/ausland/article107255456/In-Syrien-gibt-es-mehr-als-nur-eine-Wahrheit.html>
- [45] Entrevista con Webster G. Tarpley, Ph.D. PressTV PressTV. 29 de mayo 2012. <http://tarpley.net/2012/05/30/the-Hula-massacre/>
- [57] Charlie Skelton de The Guardian expone las Redes de Difusión de la OTAN grandes mentiras contra Siria 18 de julio 2012. <http://corporatemediaindexposed.com/charlie-skelton-of-the-guardian-exposes-the-nato-networks-spreading-big-lies-against-syria/>
- [58] Chanel 4 Sunday 27 Mayo 2012 Alex thomson 's view Piecing together the bloody truth in Hula <http://blogs.channel4.com/alex-thomsons-view/piecing-bloody-truth-Hula/1687>
- [59] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9570853/Only-a-no-fly-zone-brokered-with-Russia-can-bring-peace-to-Syria.html>
- [60] Boletín nº448. ¿Fracaso, asesinato o coartada del plan de paz en Siria? Alfredo Embid. [http://ciaramc.org/ciar/boletines/cr\\_bol448.htm](http://ciaramc.org/ciar/boletines/cr_bol448.htm)
- [61] Los enemigos de Asad ya tienen el argumento para una intervención militar en Siria. Armando Pérez RIA Novosti. Sergei Kirkach. 16:41 31/05/2012. [http://sp.rian.ru/opinion\\_analysis/20120531/153911565.html](http://sp.rian.ru/opinion_analysis/20120531/153911565.html)
- [62] [http://www.medialens.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=687:hoola-massacre-update-the-un-report&catid=25:alerts-2012&Itemid=69](http://www.medialens.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=687:hoola-massacre-update-the-un-report&catid=25:alerts-2012&Itemid=69)
- [63] Building stormed hours after President Assad warns that Syria is now 'in a real state of war'. Patrick Cockburn. 28 Junio 2012. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syrian-rebels-accused-of-massacre-after-seven-die-in-attack-on-tv-station-7893588.html>
- [64] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jun/27/syria-loyalists-hoola-massacre-un>

## Challenging the Dismissal of the Other Witnesses

By Adam Larson

April 21, 2013

(Modified from a letter to the UN Office of High Commissioner  
for Human Rights, September 25, 2012)

original url : <http://ciwclibya.org/lettersandpressreleases/apleaforrealitysyriaun.html>

### Updated Introduction, April 2013:

The final report of the UNHRC “Independent” Commission of Inquiry (CoI) mischaracterized the number of non-rebel witnesses with an untrue statement in its paragraph 44: “apart from the two witnesses in the Government report, no other account supported the Government’s version of events.” In contrast to only the two they decided on, our research wiki (A Closer Look On Syria - ACLOS) has listed at least **17 identified local witnesses** in the public record, most of which were not hard to find. (At least 11 of these are direct witnesses to the rebel attack, at least two are indirect witnesses, and two give uncertain details). For reference, these are [listed by ACLOS](#) and summarized below with a quick quote.

#### From ANNA (Abkhazian News)

- “Arifah” *“On the second day we heard them talking to each other on walkie talkies that some of the armed men should wear the Syrian Arab Army’s uniform before the observers arrive so that they claim they’ve defected ...”*
- “The Rebel Defector” *“...three days before the massacre, the gunmen had been discussing something that would happen on Friday, saying that it was something "special and big." ... The witness said that the gunmen's intention was to liquidate a specific family over membership in the People's Assembly ...”*
- Al Khosam, law enforcement officer *“...our checkpoint was attacked by a large group of militants. There were thousands. ... They burned houses and killed people by the families, because they were loyal to the government. Raped the women and killed the children.”*
- Ahmed Mahmoud Al-Khali, wounded soldier: *“I come from a support group that came to the aid of our comrades, who were stationed at the checkpoint. Militants destroyed two infantry fighting vehicles and one BRDM standing at our checkpoint.”*
- Resident on roof of police station: *“Hearing the shots, I came out to watch what was happening and saw that the fire came from the north side, towards the location of the army checkpoint.”*

#### From German/Dutch Media

- Anonymous, from Kafr Laha: *“They attacked the police barricades around the National hospital and killed and injured nearly 35 members of the police, then entered the government hospital...”*
- "Jibril" (possibly the same person as anonymous) *“The soldiers fled and the rebels went to the hospital and killed patients there.”*
- "Ahmed" *“Friends from the neighboring villages, with whom Ahmed had recently demonstrated against Assad, invaded into his house to kill him and his family. They*

*accused him of converting to the Shiite faith..."*

- Rainer Hermann's "Opposition members," indirectly sourced, with number and possible overlap unclear, details general and consistent with the rest, a few errors (eg: a member of parliament was killed, rather than relatives of his). Shi'ite and Alawite victims are mentioned for the first time, the latter erroneously as the family Shomaliya, rather than [a couple of families in the village of Al-Shumariyeh.](#))

### **Early interviewees (10 – apparently SANA, perhaps with ANNA)**

- Old woman *"Thousands of militants from Al-Rastan attacked the town, killed all the soldiers at checkpoints, and burned the city hospital."*
- Woman *"May God burn them as they burned my house."*
- Robed Man *"Nobody believes that the army did that, because we saw with our own eyes."*
- Old Man *"Those terrorists set fire to my house. They terrorized us."*
- Old Woman *"They come from Ar-Rastan."*
- Man in White (unclear)
- Man with Mustache (unclear)
- Woman in Al-Gur: *"The bandits set fire to our houses ... we have a martyr, who was burned alive."*
- Hospital (Indirect) Witness 1: *"They made those holes in order to enter the houses. After this, they killed the people in the house and mutilated their bodies."*
- Hospital (Indirect) Witness 2 *"A man, his brother, and nephew were killed in front of my sister's (home)."*

### **UNSMIS Interviewees**

Number, overlap, details, all else unknown. Monitors with UNSMIS gathered plural accounts from "locals that has another story," submitted in a report to New York, this report was never heard from again (see p. 42).

The deletion of Maj. Gen. Mood's report could be explained by either an oversight or by a hidden motive to shape the record towards absolving the rebels. The same two options exist for how it came to be that the UN's CoI decided only the first two of the 17 witnesses listed above existed. Either the UN's own field report was completely withheld from them, or they had it but chose not to address those discrepant witnesses. Both options are troubling.

Even if it's dishonest to pretend they're the only presumed liars "Assad" could scrounge up, "Arifah" and "the Rebel Defector," as ACLOS has dubbed them for reference, were the stars of the early June SANA broadcasts detailing the rebel attack on Taldou. They are the most important alleged witnesses yet, from a detail perspective, and clearly their credibility matters, even if it's not as scapegoats for the whole roster above. Therefore, as I helpfully wrote to the people overseeing this "investigation" ...

### **(From the Sept. 25 Letter)**

... Annex IV of the final report explained the dismissal of this shrunken witness set:

*"The commission, nevertheless, carefully reviewed their testimony as set out in the Government report and interviews they gave to other sources, and **deemed their accounts to be unreliable** as they contained a number of inconsistencies."*

The supposed inconsistencies, most of which we can double-check, were almost exclusively regarding the female witness, nicknamed by us “Arifah.” While they acknowledge the other one, they all but ignore his testimony. Dubbed “the Rebel Defector” by ACLOS, he claimed to be one of the attackers who somehow wound up spilling the beans on an event he was clearly unhappy with. Describing the attack from the inside, and naming commanders spoken of by those around him, his account is fairly strong, and barely addressed.

“As noted, the commission’s request to interview those two witnesses was not fulfilled,” not the best sign for their credibility, and that meant “that those inconsistencies could not be further explored” or, for that matter, cleared up. However, some of the supposed discrepancies could be explained by paying closer attention to what’s said (see point 2 below, for example).

Following are the six examples laid out by the CoI in their annex IV, presumably the stronger arguments, to explain their disdain for these two “unreliable” alleged witnesses, and my own six informed rebuttals:

*1. They failed to describe the location of the main incident, specifically the Abdulrazzak family home [sic];*

Collectively, the non-rebel witnesses describe a city-wide attack on Taldou by different waves of rebel attackers over the day. Neither of these two specifies they were at any of the *numerous* attacked homes of the Abdulrazaq family. “Arifah” never specifies her locale, to our knowledge. The rebel defector claims to have been on “Tripoli Road,” which apparently leads to the site, but it seems likely his unit wasn’t involved in the massacre at the end of the road. So why either of them *should* have described it is not clear.

*2. The witness purported to know that in the northern part of the town “terrorists” were distributing ammunition to each other, but elsewhere the witness described her presence as being in the centre near the clock tower or further south during the same time frame;*

The publicly available sources do not specify “Arifah’s” location. If, however, the commission had access to a fuller interview or a better transcript, this would be just something we missed. However, the weapons distribution cited was in *the south of town*, where she never claimed to be, near the hospital, following the 3:30 pm conquest of that army post.

*"After taking over the checkpoint they stole the weapons and ammo which was in it and began distributing them among themselves, then immediately set fire to the checkpoint along with the nearby hospital and the woods behind it."*

If the commission reviewed her video testimony, they should have caught that, as well as this clever way around the distance problem(s) that she offered up-front. “Some men carried radio telephones (walkie-talkies) and **we heard their conversations from inside our houses.**” It could be she’s altering details to obscure her identity; by “houses” she might mean security posts. It seems possible that “Arifah” was, or was related to, soldiers and/or police, describing in detail various deadly attacks on them in different areas, most or all of it learned either from radio traffic or later discussions with witnesses she knew.

*3-. The witness also stated that the “terrorists” included “strangers who don’t belong to our village,” and was able to remember their names individually while the village has 30,000 people, and the whole area of Al-Houla’s population is more than 100,000. It is unclear how she could be so certain of terrorist individual identities\names in the described context;*

“Arifah” mentions strangers, names unknown, as well as some locals (most of them not townsfolk) who were notorious regional crime lords. Especially if she was a police officer, hearing reports from the field, she could easily pick up a visual ID of scum-buckets like Haytham Al-Hallak/Al-Hassan, Nidal Bakkour, and Abdulrazaq Tlass. In fact, given the crimes of these thugs, as she describes them in her testimony, just why those names should suddenly be so forgettable is not made clear by the CoI in their report.

*4. The witness said she saw the burning at the hospital area “when we passed by.” The area around the hospital was in government hands throughout, so it is unclear when and how she was able to reach the given location given the circumstances of the day;*

First, we’re aware of nothing in the publicly available accounts saying she passed the hospital. Again, however, yielding the point, the discrepancy itself is not clear. The CoI seem to have no good guess just what kind of witness she was, or how she got her information. Yet they feel she's some class of person that can't set foot in or pass through an area under “government control,” without withering up and blowing away. And besides, “Arifah” says it went out of control. “Jibril” and/or Anonymous also says the hospital was attacked and burned.

*5. She suggested that the armed groups were in fact mentioning the real first names of the groups’ leaders over their radio communications. The commission finds this lacking credibility;*

There is a certain amount of logic against that, as it risks exposure. Using code names would clearly be a safer choice. On the other hand, they might have been arrogant and sloppy. They may have felt even if they were overheard and that was revealed, that no one who mattered would believe the messenger. The CoI chose not to believe the claim, suggesting that any such calculation would have been correct.

*6. The witness described the Al-Sayed family as having been shot from across the street when all other evidence, including by UNSMIS visiting the scene, indicate the victims died from gunshots at close range.*

I’m not sure where the “across the street” part came from. There were at least two, probably three Al-Sayed households allegedly attacked (Muawiya, Abdelmutti/Mashlab, Oqba, and Ali have been named as heads), so which one is meant is not clear. The non-rebel side has no witnesses on the inside of that portion of the massacre, and even “Arifah” has no details from these late-night attacks. Perhaps the attackers were on radio silence.

In summary, the reasons for dismissing one whole version of events are:

1) An underlying impression that the anti-government witness set is broad, deep, and



completely honest.

2) Falsely simmering down the opposing camp to only two recycled witnesses.

3) Focusing on the details of only one of those two, the one with more possible inconsistencies.

4) Using those alleged flaws to make a plausible-looking case for dismissing the two witnesses standing in for all of them.

5) Relying on a lack of direct access as an excuse why, unfortunately and/or conveniently, “those inconsistencies could not be further explored” and/or resolved.

## Why is the UNSMIS Houla Report Missing?

By Ronda Hauben

November 28, 2012

original url: <http://blogs.taz.de/netizenblog/2012/11/28/why-is-unsmis-report-missing/>

### I - Conflicting Views on the Human Rights Council September 28 Resolution

On September 28, the UN's Human Rights Council asked for a consensus vote on a resolution holding the Syrian government responsible for the violence in Syria. The resolution particularly referred to the Houla Massacre that took place in Syria on May 25-26, 2012. The resolution said it (1):

“Condemns in the strongest terms the massacre of the village of AL-Houla near Homs, where the forces of the government of the Syrian Arab Republic and members of the Shabbiha were found by the commission of inquiry to be the perpetrators of outrageous and heinous crimes and stresses the need to hold those responsible to account.”

Opposing the call that the resolution be passed by acclamation, Maria Khodynskaya-Golenischv, the Representative of the Russian Federation, explained why her country would vote against the resolution. Among the several reasons she gave was the objection that the resolution was inaccurate and biased in blaming the Syrian government for the massacre. She explained, “In particular we cannot agree with the one sided conclusion put out in the resolution concerning the Commission on the Houla tragedy.” She noted, “We believe that the question for the attribution of guilt is still open. An investigation should be carried out thoroughly. One should not accuse the government if one does not have sufficient evidence therefore.” (2)

The Russian Federation Representative also pointed out the harmful consequences such a resolution would have in deepening the conflict. “Unfortunately,” she said, “some states are in de facto encouraging terrorism in Syria. Therefore we have no doubt that the episode in Houla is definitely being whipped up in the media and being used to carry out force against this country.”

China's Representative said that his nation would also vote against the resolution. He explained that putting pressure on only one party to the conflict would not help to resolve the conflict.

The Cuban delegate also announced that his country would vote against the resolution. Among the reasons he gave was the objection that the goal of some co-sponsors of the resolution was to impose regime change on the Syrian people through a decision arrived at by those outside the country. Such a goal, the Cuban Representative maintained, threatened to send Syria back to the Stone Age.

When the vote was taken, there were 41 votes in favor of the resolution, three votes against (China, Cuba and the Russian Federation), and three abstentions (Philippines, India and Uganda). The India Representative, explaining why his country had abstained, said that the obligation of the Human Rights Council was to act with impartiality and for its resolutions

to be balanced and impartial. The implication of India's remarks was that the resolution against Syria was not balanced or impartial.

Though Syria is not a member of the Human Rights Council, the Representative of Syria, Faysal Khabbaz Hamoui, was given permission to speak. Among the objections to the resolution that he raised was that the resolution did not take into account the report of the Syrian government's Commission of Inquiry into the Houla tragedy. He also pointed to the closed process used by those drawing up the resolution. It was a process, he said, that did not accept any proposals to amend the resolution.

This interaction in the Human Rights Council takes on added significance when it is viewed in the context of the earlier Security Council request that UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, with the involvement of UNSMIS (United Nations Supervisory Mission In Syria), do an investigation of the Houla massacre and report its findings to the Security Council.(3) This request was made in a press statement issued by the Security Council on May 27, 2012. By a rather mysterious process, the Security Council's request that an investigation of the Houla massacre, which was to be carried out with the involvement of UNSMIS, was shifted to a significantly different process that was carried out by the Human Rights Council and the Commission of Inquiry it created, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (hereafter CoI). How this shift happened and the significance of this change, merit serious consideration by those who are concerned about the role the UN is playing in the conflict in Syria.

## **II-What Happened to the UNSMIS Report on Houla Investigation?**

It will be helpful to review the Security Council's request that there be an investigation of the Houla massacre with the involvement of UNSMIS. On May 27, shortly after the Houla Massacre took place, the UN Security Council issued a press statement. In the statement it said(4):

“The members of the Security Council requested the Secretary General with the involvement of UNSMIS (United Nations Supervision Mission In Syria) to continue to investigate these attacks and report the findings to the Security Council.”

Note that the Secretary General was to present the results of the UNSMIS investigation to the Security Council.

Similarly relevant is an article by Reuters on May 29, two days after the Security Council issued its press statement. In the article, Karen AbuZayd, a Commissioner on the CoI created by the Human Rights Council, is quoted saying (5), “We are discussing with UNSMIS over the next few days to see whether we can also have a look and maybe corroborate with information we get from outside the country.” Such a statement can be considered as an acknowledgment that UNSMIS was to conduct an on the ground investigation and the CoI would add what it could from its sources outside the country. The role assigned to UNSMIS by the Security Council to be involved in conducting the investigation was at the time recognized by AbuZayd.

At a press conference with journalists in Damascus on June 15, Major-General Robert Mood, head of UNSMIS, explained the progress of UNSMIS in carrying out its investigation of the Houla tragedy.(6) He said that UNSMIS had been to Houla with an investigating team. They did interviews. They interviewed locals who told one story. They interviewed locals who told another story. But the circumstances leading up to Houla, the detailed circumstances, the facts related to the incident still remained unclear to the UNSMIS investigators. This led General Mood to say that if there was a decision to support a more extensive on the ground investigation, UNSMIS could help to facilitate it.



*Major-General Mood speaks of the two versions, June 15, 2012*

As a result of its work, he said, UNSMIS put together the facts it could establish by what the team saw on the ground, together with the conflicting statements and witness interviews. UNSMIS sent that as a report to UN Headquarters in New York. (7)

Given this set of events one could logically expect that the Secretary General would present the conflicting results of the UNSMIS investigation to the Security Council, and the Security Council would consider whether to ask the Secretary General to establish a more extensive on the ground investigation of the circumstances leading to and occurring during the Houla massacre. This more extensive on the ground investigation would be one with access facilitated by UNSMIS as General Mood indicated was possible. As part of this more extensive investigation, the Human Right's Council's CoI might corroborate, as AbuZayd had proposed in her comments in the Reuters article on May 29, by providing information from those outside of Syria if that was relevant.

But this is not what happened.

Instead there was silence at UN Headquarters about what the Secretary General's intentions were with respect to transmitting the findings of the UNSMIS investigation to the Security Council.

Only when journalists raised the question, did the Spokesperson for the Secretary General give any indication that the Report had been received.

On June 21, responding to a question from a journalist, the UN Spokesperson acknowledged the Secretary General had received the UNSMIS Houla Report. The Spokesperson for the Secretary General explained(8):

“Spokesperson: Well, the Mission has sent its observations on the al-Houla killings to the Secretary-General for his consideration. The Secretary-General is in turn sending these observations to the relevant UN bodies monitoring human rights in Syria. And once these bodies complete their work, the findings on what I think everybody agrees was a terrible incident will be presented by the Secretary General to the Security Council,”

This statement raises the question of why the findings of UNSMIS were to be diverted to

what he referred to as “UN bodies monitoring human rights” rather than presented directly to the Security Council as the Security Council had requested in their May 27 press statement.

The Spokesperson’s statement, however, acknowledges the UNSMIS Report on Houla was received by the Secretary General and that the Secretary General had the obligation to present it to the Security Council. Nevertheless, even several months later, members of the Security Council said that the conflicting information gathered from the on the ground investigatory process by UNSMIS still had not been presented to Security Council members.

When a question about the missing UNSMIS Report on Houla was raised again at the Secretary General’s Spokesperson’s briefing on September 14, the Deputy Spokesperson promised she would get a response to the journalist’s question.(9) In an email a few days later, on September 17, the Deputy Spokesperson wrote (10): “(J)ust to follow up on your question from Friday, the report by UNSMIS (i.e. Mood’s report) went to the Human Rights Council and the Security Council. Any further follow-up is in their hands.”

Yet when the President of the Security Council for the month of October, Guatemala’s Ambassador Gert Rosenthal, held a press conference on October 2, he was asked whether the Security Council had received General Mood’s Report. His response was (11): “To the best of my knowledge, the answer is No.”

“I personally (as) a member of the council have not seen that report,” he said.

Apparently, according to the Guatemalan Ambassador, the Security Council members had not seen the UNSMIS Report on Houla, despite the Deputy Spokesperson’s email stating that the UNSMIS Report had gone to the Security Council.

And an email to the Spokesperson for the Human Rights Council about whether the Human Rights Council had seen the UNSMIS Report on the Houla massacre received no response.

Then on October 16, two members of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria (CoI) appointed by the Human Rights Council held a press conference at UN Headquarters.(12) At the press conference, Karen AbuZayd, a Commissioner and Paulo Pinheiro, Chairman of the Commission, were asked if they had seen the UNSMIS Report on Houla submitted by General Mood to UN Headquarters. AbuZayd responded that she had been given a briefing on the Report but had not seen the Report itself. There was no means to ask another question about this issue during the press conference. After the press conference ended, AbuZug was asked if she could say what was presented in the briefing on General Mood’s report. She responded that the briefing was confidential.

### **III – CoI Report as a One Sided Document**

The CoI produced both a preliminary report on Houla of 20 pages on June 26, titled “Oral Update of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic” (A/HRC/20/CRP.1) (hereafter Oral Update Report) and a final Report in August titled “Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic”. (A/HRC/21/50) (hereafter August Report). The August Report is 107 pages but

the part about the Houla massacre is approximately 7 pages (pages 10-12 and 64-67).

These reports by the CoI appear to serve not as a corroboration of the on the ground investigation by the UNSMIS team, as AbuZug originally proposed, but rather as the substitute for the UNSMIS Report. The UNSMIS Report of conflicting statements and interviews from locals in Houla, which General Mood described to journalists on June 15, appears to have vanished. Instead of the UNSMIS Report of the two conflicting versions of the stories by locals in Houla indicating the need for a more substantial on the ground investigation, the CoI, with no actual evidence presented, declared that the Syrian government was to blame for the Houla massacre.

In contrast to General Mood's statement to journalists that UNSMIS had been on the site of the Houla massacre with an investigating team, the CoI made no visits to the site of the Houla massacre. When asked why the CoI did not include information from the UNSMIS Report in their CoI Report, Pinheiro answered that the report only includes the information the Commission gets from its own investigators. Such a statement is contradicted in its own August Report, which does include references to information from UNSMIS, just not with regard to the Houla massacre.

In his June 15 press briefing, General Mood said the UNSMIS Report on Houla included statements and interviews with locals with one story and statements and interviews with locals with another story. The August Report of the CoI tells only one story and claims that they either do not have other information or that any other information they know of is inconsistent, so that they have accepted that there is only one story. The Reports that the CoI produced had no onsite interviews or statements, but only telephone or Skype interviews with insurgents or those supporting the account of Houla presented by the armed insurgents.

General Mood said the scope of the information needed was, "the circumstances leading up to el Houla and the detailed circumstances, the facts related to the incident itself." He explained that these still remained unclear to UNSMIS. This information is needed to set a basis for a report on the Houla tragedy that is impartial and balanced, based on an understanding of the facts of not only what happened at Houla, but also what led up to this tragedy.

While the scope of the question raised by General Mood and UNSMIS for the Houla investigation was a question which puts what happened in Houla into a broader context, the CoI Reports, instead, narrow down the question raised so that the broader context is obscured.

The August Report from the CoI poses as its critical question, whether the Syrian government had the ability to have access to the area where the massacre occurred. The August Report speculates that the Syrian government maintained control over one of the checkpoints in the area of a site of a massacre. Based on this speculation, the August Report claims that the Syrian government must be responsible for the massacre.

In general, however, accounts of the events of the tragedy differ about whether or not the Syrian military lost control of the checkpoints around the area where the massacre occurred. Also, there seems general agreement that the area in question was under the control of the

armed insurgents and had been for a period of time.

The widely held agreement or claim that the armed insurgents had control of the area where the massacre took place was even referred to in a letter to the Security Council by Ban Ki moon shortly after the massacre occurred. In his letter to the UN Security Council, Ban Ki-moon wrote

“The villages in question have been outside of the Government control, but surrounded by heavy military presence.” (The Secretary General, 27 May, 2012) The CoI Reports dismiss the fact that the area was under the control of the armed insurgents.

Similarly, in the CoI Reports, there is no motive given for why the Syrian government would want to massacre these civilians.

This information is needed to set a basis for a report on the Houla tragedy that is impartial and balanced, based on an understanding of the facts of not only what happened at Houla, but also what led up to this tragedy.

General Mood also explained that there was a need to understand the facts related to the incident itself that were unclear even after the UNSMIS investigation.

The August Report, instead, treats its speculative conclusions as facts, rather than acknowledging that there are significant facts related to the incident itself which remain unclear, but which need to be resolved in order to determine who is responsible.

It is also important to remember that the UNSMIS investigation came up with conflicting stories, and conflicting interviews. There remain conflicting stories and conflicting interviews about what happened at Houla. Yet the August Report shows little recognition that this is true or that there is a need to not only recognize these conflicting accounts, but also to propose the need to have a more extensive investigation that can resolve the unsettled issues.

The CoI Reports complain that their investigators did not have access to people on the ground in Syria, and so had to rely on interviews by phone or Skype. But the failure of the CoI investigators to do a balanced and impartial investigation explains why the Syrian government would not be willing to give them permission to carry out an investigation in Syria.

The question needs to be raised as to why the CoI investigators did not identify or contact people who could present a range of conflicting statements or interviews as UNSMIS had gathered and presented to UN headquarters. In addition, there are a number of potential witnesses that have been identified by alternative media or NGO sources whose accounts of the events differ from the conclusion of the August Report. Some of these alternative media or NGO sources report that when they tried to offer information to the CoI, their offers were refused.<sup>(14)</sup> It is hard to understand how the CoI could claim it could accomplish an impartial and balanced investigation without accepting such offers and seeking such contacts.

Instead, the CoI Reports, particularly the August Report, are based mainly on the views of the armed insurgents. The August Report even misrepresents what the CoI said in the earlier

Oral Update Report. The Oral Update Report allowed for three alternative possibilities as to who was responsible for the massacre of civilians.

The Oral Update Report of the CoI says (See for example, A/HRC/20/CRP.1, para 48-49,54-55 p. 10-11):

*“First, that the perpetrators were ‘Shabbiha’ or other local militia from neighbouring villages, possibly operating together with, or with the acquiescence of, the Government security forces; second that the perpetrators were anti-Government forces seeking to escalate the conflict while punishing those that failed to support – or who actively opposed – the rebellion; or third, foreign groups with unknown affiliation.”*

*“With the available evidence,” the Oral Update Report said, ‘the CoI could not rule out any of these possibilities.’*

A few paragraphs later it added:

*“The CoI could not rule out the possibility of the involvement of foreign groups with unknown affiliation. The CoI received information that the anti-Government armed groups in Taldou on that day received ‘support from other groups from neighboring areas.’ Testimony was also collected that described the perpetrators as having shaved heads and long beards – descriptions which have been applied both to foreign groups and the Shabbiha in other contexts. This information could not be corroborated by the Commission.”*

Based on this statement, the Oral Update Report stated:

*“The CoI is unable to determine the identity of the perpetrators at this time....”*

Without providing any substantial new evidence, the August Report, instead, states that there is “no doubt the Syrian government was responsible for the Houla massacre.” (A/HRC/21/50, para 49, p. 10)

The August Report even misrepresents that the earlier Oral Update Report offers three alternative views of who was responsible for the deaths of civilians in Houla. (See A/HRC/21/50, para 41, p. 10)

Somehow between the time of the Oral Update Report of June 26, and the August Report, the CoI found a means to trivialize what criteria would determine who to blame for the massacre. Also the CoI dismissed the broader issues, the questions and the obligation to provide a more substantial consideration of the background to the events that had occurred in Houla.

And with no explanation offered, the UNSMIS Report that Mood said was submitted to UN Headquarters, has effectively disappeared. Subsequently, the UNSMIS mission itself was ended. And the Security Council request to Ban Ki-moon to report to it on the findings of the UNSMIS investigation in Houla has never been fulfilled.

If the Security Council had heard the details of the conflicting nature of the statements and



interviews in the UNSMIS Report and had this Report been available to the media and the public, this could have provided public pressure for the continuation of the UNSMIS mission and for the establishment of an impartial, competent team to conduct an on the ground investigation facilitated by UNSMIS. But this did not happen. With the disappearance of the UNSMIS Report on Houla, the Security Council allowed UNSMIS to be terminated.

Subsequently, the CoI appointed by the Human Rights Council was allowed to substitute a biased report lacking any direct knowledge of the details of what happened in Houla or any face to face interviews with witnesses with direct knowledge of the events to be investigated.

One may ask why such a switch was made from the UNSMIS Report on Houla with information from an on the ground investigation gathering conflicting statements and interviews as requested by the Security Council, to the substitution of the Human Rights Council's CoI Report presenting no actual evidence, but putting the blame for the Houla massacre on the Syrian government.

This is a question which needs further investigation and analysis. An important clue to an answer, however, is suggested by the June 21 UN Spokesman's response to the question from the journalist who asked what happened to the UNSMIS Report.

Instead of sending the report directly to the Security Council as could be expected, the Spokesman said that the Secretary General was "sending these observations to the relevant UN bodies monitoring human rights in Syria."

But the Security Council's May 27 press statement asked the Secretary General with the involvement of UNSMIS to do an investigation of the Houla massacre, and report the findings to the Security Council. There was no Security Council request that the UNSMIS Report on Houla first be sent to UN bodies monitoring human rights.

Considering the subsequent developments the reason for this diversion becomes more apparent. UNSMIS took as its obligation to maintain a neutrality (See for example General Mood's July 5 press conference in Damascus, where he describes how he worked to maintain an impartiality in the actions of UNSMIS). (15) The CoI, on the contrary, did not act to maintain an impartiality in its investigation, but instead took a side in gathering the information it considered for its investigation and the people it contacted.

The consequence of such a bias in the CoI investigation resulted in the August Report that has been justly criticized as presenting one sided conclusions and attributing blame for the Houla massacre without sufficient evidence.

Furthermore, if one asks UN related officials about the UNSMIS report on Houla, one is likely instead to be pointed to the August Report of the CoI. (16)

Thus it appears that by the time the UNSMIS Report on Houla was submitted to UN Headquarters, some decision had been made that it would not be presented to the Security Council, but instead the CoI would create a substitute report, despite the fact that this body had no direct access to the facts or to witnesses to the massacre.

And it appears that this substitution of the Human Rights appointed CoI Reports for the UNSMIS Houla Report has received only rare media attention, though the CoI Reports have been critiqued by some of the alternative media. (17)

For example, Marinella Correggia is an activist with the Italian No War network-ROMA which critiqued the CoI Reports. She concludes that given the Commission's international mandate, the partiality and one-sidedness of the August Report is both flabbergasting and disconcerting. She asks, "Has the UN no internal assessment mechanism to prevent such abuses in the 'documentation' of events upon which the UN is then required to act?" (18)

At the present time, the answer to her question appears to be that the UN does not have any internal mechanism to prevent such abuse, except for the few statements by member nations that are willing to speak out and make their criticisms, as did the nations that voted against or abstained in the vote at the Human Rights Council on September 28 Resolution condemning Syria.

Unfortunately, though, the result of the decision to substitute a biased CoI Report based on one sided reasoning and speculative conclusions, for the UNSMIS Report based on an impartial on the ground investigation, has significant consequences for the UN. The obligation of the UN is to be impartial, so as to be able to help resolve conflicts that threaten international peace and security. If instead the UN acts as the political proponent of certain powerful member states intervening in domestic conflicts of other states to bring about regime change, then the very essence of the UN is impaired and put in jeopardy.

## Notes

1) A/HCR/21/L.32A. This resolution was passed by the Human Rights Council Resolution on September 28 2012 condemning Syria for the Houla Massacre based on the biased and one sided Reports of the COI. <http://www.voltairenet.org/article176162.html>

2) The proceedings of the September 28 2012 meeting of the Human Rights Council are online at the UN website. The url for the video is:

<http://webtv.un.org/meetings-events/human-rights-council/watch/132-vote-item:4-38th-meeting-21st-regular-session-of-human-rights-council/1865712813001>

The Russian Federation's Representation spoke from min. 4:42 -8:10 The Chinese Delegate spoke from min. 13:09-15:50 The Cuban Representative spoke from min. 16:10-18:50

The Syrian Representative can be heard in the video from min. 24:34-35:30

3) Ronda Hauben, "The UN and General Mood's Missing Report on Conflicting Accounts of the Houla Massacre", September 10, 2012, <http://blogs.taz.de/netizenblog/2012/09/10/unsmis-report-houla-massacre/>

4) See the wording in the UN Security Council Press Statement on Houla May 27, 2012 "Those responsible for acts of violence must be held accountable. The members of the Security Council requested the Secretary-General, with the involvement of UNSMIS [United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria], to continue to investigate these attacks and report the findings to the Security Council." The url is: <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2012/sc10658.doc.htm>

5) Stephanie Nebehay, "Most Houla victims killed in summary executions: UN", Tuesday, May 29, 2012. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/29/us-syria-un-idUSBRE84S10020120529>

6) Press Conference with Major General Robert Mood in Damascus, June 15, 2012, Video Part 2. The section where General Mood describes the Report on Houla starts at min: 3:10 to 4:17 . The url is:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UOTJdHTloLg>

7) Describing the investigation by UNSMIS into the Houla massacre and the report UNSMIS submitted to UN headquarters, General Mood tells journalists, as transcribed from the video: "The statement we issued after el Houla is still valid. Which means we have been there with an investigating team.

We have interviews, interviewed locals with one story, and we have interviewed locals that has another story. The circumstances leading up to el Houla and the detailed circumstances, the facts related to the incident

itself, still remains unclear to us. We have put this together, the facts that we (can) could establish by what we saw on the ground. We have put together the statements, the witness interviews and we have sent that as a report to UN headquarters, New York. And then the assessment on what's the way forward. Will there be a different investigation? (This-ed) is a matter for headquarters in this context. But if we are asked, obviously we are on the ground, and could help facilitate that.”

(8) Press Briefing with UN Spokesperson on June 21, 2012.

<http://www.un.org/News/briefings/docs/2012/db120621.doc.htm>

(9) Press Briefing with UN Spokesperson on Sept 14, 2012.

<http://www.un.org/News/briefings/docs/2012/db120914.doc.htm>

(10) Email received from the Deputy Spokesperson on September 17, 2012.

(11) Video at the UN website of 2 Oct 2012 – H. E. Mr. Gert Rosenthal, Permanent Representative of Guatemala to the United Nations and President of the Security Council for the month of October 2012 on the programme of work of the Security Council in October. The url for the video is:

<http://webtv.un.org/meetings-events/security-council/watch/gert-rosenthal-guatemala-president-of-the-security-council-on-the-programme-of-work-for-the-month-of-october-2012-press-conference/1873411152001>

(12) Press Conference on 16 Oct 2012 – Paulo Pinheiro, Chair and member of the Independent Commission of Inquiry on Syria and Karen AbuZayd. The url of the video on the UN website is:

<http://webtv.un.org/watch/the-latest-findings-on-the-human-rights-situation-in-syria-press-conference/1904479973001>

(13)S/2012/368. Letter dated 27 May 2012 from the Secretary-General to the President of the Security Council. The url is:

<http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Syria%20S2012%20368.pdf>

(14) See for example: “Anti-war campaigner Marinella Correggia worries the HR commissioner talks only to its sources: the opposition.”

<http://www.rt.com/news/houla-massacre-un-syria-635/>

Thursday, May 31 2012, “UN report on Houla massacre? But they only talk to Syrian opposition – by phone, “Uprooted Palestinians”.

<http://uprootedpalestinians.blogspot.com/2012/05/river-to-sea-uprooted-palestinian-views.html>

(15) General Mood Meets the Press, Damascus, July 5, 2012.

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6tVM\\_3OWDiQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6tVM_3OWDiQ)

See for example from min. 17:25-19:00 General Mood describes how UNSMIS has established an impartial system with “exactly the mechanism that addresses both sides in the same way”.

(16) I have had two experiences when I asked either present or former UN officials connected for the UNSMIS Report.. In both cases I was referred to the CoI Reports with no indication about what happened to the UNSMIS Report on Houla.

(17) See for example: Marinella Correggia, “THE RECENT REPORT ON SYRIA BY THE “INDIPENDENT INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY” (CoI) mandated by the Human Rights Council is one-sided and lacks evidences” The url is <http://www.sibialiria.org/wordpress/?p=777>

See also, in Italian Marinella Correggia. DOCUMENTO. Le fonti parziali e le prove mancanti nel rapporto della “Commissione internazionale indipendente di inchiesta” (COI) nominata dall’Onu. The url is

<http://www.sibialiria.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/CONTRODOCUMENTO.LEFONTIELEACCUSEDELLACOMMISSIONEINTERNAZIONALEDIINCHIESTAONU.pdf>

Another site that has taken on to examine the issues involved in the conflict in Syria “A Closer Look On Syria”.

[http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Main_Page)

(18) Marinella Correggia, “THE RECENT REPORT ON SYRIA BY THE “INDIPENDENT INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY” (CoI) mandated by the Human Rights Council is one-sided and lacks evidences” The url is <http://www.sibialiria.org/wordpress/?p=777> See also Christof Lehmann, “Italian Peace Movement Criticizes Report of International Commission on Syria, Sept 9 2012, NSNBC.

<http://nsnbc.wordpress.com/tag/marinella-correggia/>

## **The Houla Massacre and the Battle of Taldou : The Digital Witnesses Have Their Say**

By Adam Larson

February 4, 2013

This is an edited version of an article posted at Dissident Voice. Original url : <http://dissidentvoice.org/2013/02/the-houla-massacre-and-the-battle-of-taldou/> Added here: new map with exhibit letters and in-text references, added images, links turned to endnotes

[...]

What the world community thinks it knows about the events in Al-Houla comes from people claiming to be witnesses, and there is a set supporting each of the two main versions. [...] Both sides absolve those they are loyal to, and demonize the other side. But red flag that this is, whoever committed the Houla massacre is about as close to demonic as human beings can get. The “whoever” part is key, and the sheer gravity of this crime requires greater than usual patience with setting the blame. The rush to accuse the government while the story was hot and confused was not suited for the occasion. Neither side’s guilt has really been ruled out, and all these finger-pointing people should be considered as *alleged* witnesses, since it can’t be known for certain which of the two sets lied to us.

### **The Digital Witnesses**

It’s long-past time for a third force in the witness battle – cameras, the digital witnesses – to publicly have their say. Video evidence is prone to shakiness and poor resolution, and possibly to fakery and deceptive editing, as well as being misattributed to the wrong time or place. But with a bit of visual confirmation, these problems can be identified and neutralized, and the digital witnesses can show their strength – the lack of an agenda in passing on just what they saw, and letting us see as well.

The video record has been cited before by the media, but in a vague manner: passing on the rebel description of what it shows, describing the scene a little, and capping it with the claim that they can’t possibly confirm it. Further, almost everything cited is from after the key events, when all that can be seen are corpses in rebel possession. That fighters swiftly recovered the bodies and took them to their mosque in the north of Taldou is not contested, and does only so much to prove what happened before the victims died. The shooting and shelling of May 25 is what set that up, and it’s on videos of that that we must focus.

To really tell what a video shows requires analysis, as carried out by the author and others at the wiki site *A Closer Look on Syria* (hereafter ACLOS). This includes deciding where in town a scene was filmed, by comparing footage to satellite maps. With a location, the time of day can be set fairly accurately by measuring sunlight angles and using a solar calculator. These timed and placed events are then considered in relation to the other known and reported details. This has been done for tens of videos, with the work gathered and shown on the page Houla, May 25: Who Was in Control? [1]

### **The Video Record: General Patterns**

Digital witnesses can only tell us anything when available. For the availability here, we have rebels and opposition to thank. The overall record from Taldou is mostly theirs, and

for the events of May 25, we have exclusively their videos to call on.

One class of things we can learn from a broad study of rebel video offerings is what is missing from the record. They filmed themselves in action on May 25, but took no video whatsoever of the Army and Alawite invaders. The reader might take a moment to ponder the significance of that curious and rather massive blank spot.



*Horizontal “shelling” damage to a home, from ANNA News, May 26*

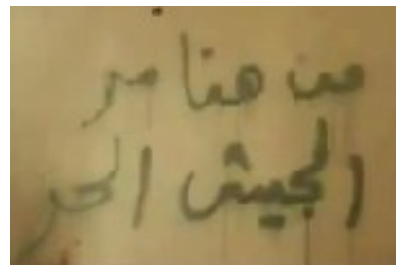
The damage shown in support of the crucial government shelling is nearly all horizontal in nature, effecting the walls - and only a very few roofs - of buildings right along Main Street in particular. Strangely enough, much of the damage is to government security posts. Some of this might pre-date the massacre, but much of it seems to be from fighting on May 25. The holes seem more likely to have been punched by light weapons, from street-level and up-close, than by artillery shells lobbed from the ridge south of town as alleged. [2]

The UN’s Commission of Inquiry (CoI), in its “oral update” report of June 26 noted “much of the damage appeared to be caused by mortars, including **large caliber mortars, heavy machine guns or light artillery.**” [3] (emphasis added) Implicitly, none of it could be explained only by artillery, which the rebels lacked, while they had plenty of truck-based heavy guns and mortars of all calibers by then. Some of the damage also looks like the work of rockets or rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), which rebels also had no shortage of, thanks to Turkey, Rebel-held Libya, and others.

Neither are there any great videos of the shelling occurring. Two of the best supposed scenes of it are discussed in part two (exhibits A and B). One of the videos could show government artillery hits, but it could also be rebel-fired RPGs, and the other is clear in showing nothing but a rebel firing RPGs. [4]

This absence of direct evidence doesn’t mean there was no government shelling or Shabiha attack. Nor does it prove there was an FSA operation instead. It does, however, leave both of those distinct possibilities at the outset.

Syrian state TV on the 26<sup>th</sup> showed at least three massacred families left behind in Taldou. One family with young children was gunned down while seated in their living room **On the bullet-pocked wall is scrawled an Arabic rebel slogan translating “from here on out, Free (Syrian) Army.”** (see inset) [5] This prima facie evidence for a rebel crime could, in fact, have been written by either side. So once again, nothing is proven.



Looking through the lens in such general terms, what we see is not remotely conclusive, but already intriguingly different from what rebels initially told the world, and what the “world

community” has tried to continue believing. What happens when we get more specific yet with the video record should be downright startling to most.

### **The Security Scene: At Least 40% Overrun**

To understand what the videos examined in part two show, it’s useful to have a feel for Taldou’s security scene and the bases the government/Alawite villains would have operated from as they launched their massacre on May 25.

Most of Al-Houla and its three towns was apparently open by then to rebel fighters, who had formed into brigades. Syrian official sources at least record an escalating string of militant attacks in the area from the uprising’s start, including attacks on security posts, on a fuel pipeline, and on the electrical grid. [6] Abductions and killings are mentioned sporadically, while the rebels were often able to show actual bodies to prove whole brutal massacres the official sources didn’t mention. One, on April 5, 2012, was of allegedly defected army officer Mohammed Sawaf, killed with his wife and son. That Sawaf defected is countered by his young son still wearing the Syrian national colors (red, white, black) on his wrist, visible in at least two opposition videos. [7]



To increase the scope of their freedom, Houla rebels increasingly brought their attention to bear on the secured remainder; Taldou was apparently the front-line in their struggle from the summer of 2011 forward. The center and south of town hosted the strongest government presence in Houla, with five relevant posts (see targets on the map, next page). Nearly all rebel videos of protests, fighting, and dead civilians - including the Sawaf family - are from Taldou.

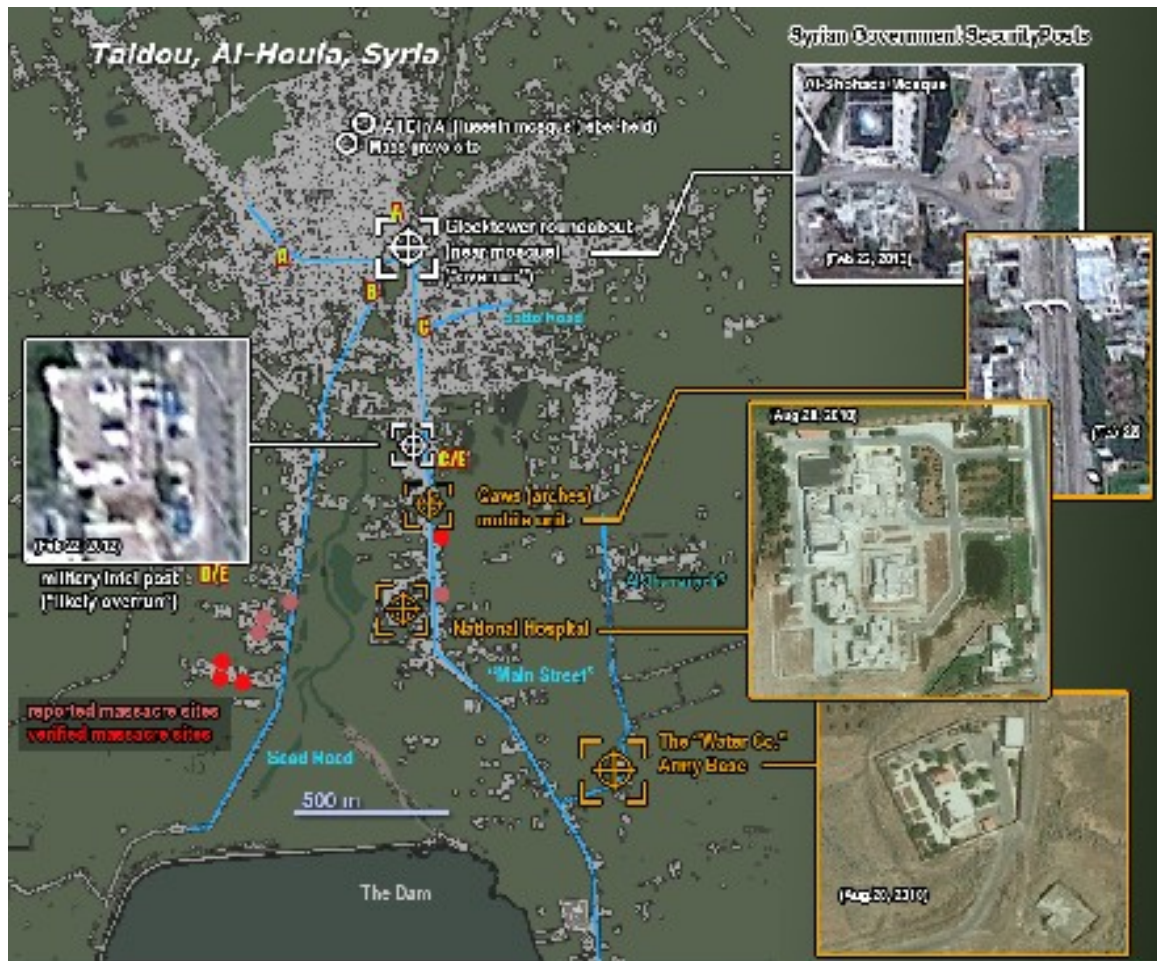
The northernmost base was in the center of town, marked by a traffic roundabout, the central clock tower, the city’s main mosque, Baath party HQ, and a general military presence with armored vehicles and sandbagged embattlements. Rebels call this area “Freedom Circle,” at least after its “liberation.” This is a distinct area from the mosque-based square rebels already held in the north of town, complete with a fake clock tower, that would host the famous mass grave on May 26.

660 meters south down Main Street was the local headquarters of military intelligence, guarded by two permanently parked blue armored vehicles. Just south of that was a mobile army post, usually stationed at the arches over Main Street (“the Qaws,” the old city gate), or nearby.

Further south, the army’s presence was anchored by the “water company,” (water authority, etc.). This was a proper, if very small, Army base on the southeast ridge overlooking Taldou (“the mountain” in some accounts), near the highly visible water tower. Tanks or artillery were likely positioned there, and it’s the origin of the reported shelling on the massacre day.

Between the ridge and the arches on Main Street was the National Hospital, with a security detachment present, constituting the fifth main point of control. These five posts and the forces stationed at them, the Syrian government would tell us, normally offered protection

for the citizens. On May 25 they didn't do that job correctly. Either they went murderous then as widely presumed, or they were overpowered by someone else who did.



The UN's Commission of Inquiry (CoI) showed little interest in clearing the Syrian government of blame, but were forced by the evidence to concede that **the northernmost "one or two" security posts were taken over by rebels in what might have been a "premeditated attack."** (p 7). The clock tower post was acknowledged as overrun (p 10), and various videos show an area vacated and abandoned in the days after.

The intelligence HQ further south was given by the CoI as "likely overrun by anti-gov't forces" (map, p 21). Charred APCs guarding a charred building, seen that way on videos from May 26 forward, makes it more than just "likely." An Associated Press article noted this with what proves to be an understatement; a day-after video released by the U.N. monitors "showed two destroyed armored personnel carriers – suggesting that **local rebels put up more of a fight than the activists acknowledged.**" [8]

The non-rebel alleged witnesses imply that four, or even all five, of these posts were taken. But the CoI decided the three posts surrounding the massacre sites in the south of Taldou (those marked in orange on the map) remained in government hands.

That continuity started, they felt, with the mobile unit at the Qaws. It was quite near a better-fortified site that fell to rebels, and was the only post capable of driving away. So

why it should hold that position makes little sense, and the given reasoning is slim (army trucks were at the arches – still or again - the following morning).



*From a rebel video of June, 2012, posing at military intel HQ [9]*

The reasoning for the two posts further south holding seems to follow on that; the attackers came from the north, and never got south of the arches. Plus, they said, “there was no indication or evidence” that either post fell (p. 10). There were witnesses who said so, but the CoI decided those were “unreliable” and thus not generators even of the faintest evidence. Clearly, that reasoning is inadequate.

### **The Rebel Assault: Video Exhibits**

Shortcomings aside, the CoI’s decision is worthy of some deference. However, the amount due is nowhere near enough to overcome strong video evidence to the contrary. The following seven exhibits, most comprising two or more videos, form a broad sampling of May 25 fighting videos. All the clues they have to offer have not yet been exhausted; the investigation is ongoing.

#### **Exhibit A: Early Movement / Attacking The Clock Tower Post (app. 12:30-1:30 PM)**

One astute alleged witness - dubbed “Arifah” by ACLOS - says she gleaned information by listening in on rebel communications with a radio scanner, with details filled in later. [10] This is a little fishy-sounding in itself, but possible. As translated, she said “the groups attacked checkpoints in the area simultaneously at around 1:30. ” A mortar was fired, and then they “opened heavy fire on the checkpoint, ” in what the chatter suggested was a distraction.

The post isn’t clearly stated, but another witness dubbed “the rebel defector,” [11] who says he was part of the attack (although not that part), says it was the clock tower post - hit first, as a distraction. [12] (“Arifah” said it was attacked again and actually conquered later, around 7 PM). “The rebel defector” said:

“Gunmen showed up near the Clock Roundabout, while a large group headed down the road to al-Saad area [Saad Road?] which is known as Tripoli road, with the first group beginning to shoot their guns in the air to keep the checkpoint at the roundabout busy and give the impression that they intend to attack it.” [13]



He had that attack starting “after noon prayers,” when a rebel unit gathered “in the northern district of the village, which is located beyond the checkpoint, next to the place with the clock.” An activist video shows rebel fighters with machine guns and RPG launchers run around alleys, firing a bit east down a street, and otherwise seeming to be preparing more than fighting. From the short shadows, the time is near solar noon, 12:30 PM +/- 15 minutes. Perhaps two dozen lightly-armed men are shown in different groups, seeming cheerful and exuberant. The location is most likely in the center of town or further north, but the spot is not set. [14]

Perhaps close by, we can see several explosive attacks on houses filmed in the west-center of town at about 12:40-12:50 PM (left A on the map). The stationary cameraman was seemingly expecting the hits at the spot he was filming, just northwest of the roundabout and the mosque. It’s not clear what the targets are, what they’re being hit with, and who’s firing (although one gunner might be on the roof of the building this activist filmed from – possible shell casings are seen falling). It’s branded as government shelling. [15]



From the north, the defector says, the rebels fired on the security post “with the clock.” Three videos show just such an attack, with a few men taking turns firing automatic rifles around the corner (see inset). They’re in a certain spot (upper A on the map) 110 meters NNW of the detachment, and firing right along that line. One of them with many rounds prepared (see inset image) is hit by return fire almost instantly, a bullet clear

through the abdomen, and he’s carried away. The shadows, read approximately, suggest a time of 1:25, +/- 15 minutes, or just about the 1:30 that “Arifah” cited for the roundabout attack. [12]

### **Exhibit B - RPG Firing near City Center**

One of the more famous activist videos, cited widely in support of government shelling, contains a powerful and little-noted contradictory clue. Filmed on north Saad Road, just southwest of the mosque at city center (roughly the B on the map), it’s said to show rebel men laboring “to rescue the women, children and elderly men who were trapped in their homes, some of which were being splintered by artillery and tank shells” that were “crashing down.” [16]

But following the one nearby blast and billow of smoke that makes the video so dramatic, we can see no damage, and one man alone falling down a second after the blast. His white headscarf falls off, but he stands right back up unharmed. The Jihadist was the victim of recoil; he walks straight towards the camera, holding his RPG launcher loosely at his right side. [17]



He seems to be ignored in embarrassment by the activists loading some bodies (perhaps his victims) into a van. He walks south, and then two more similar explosions are heard - to the south, it seems - before he seemingly disappears in a puff of exhaust smoke. Four rocket blasts at least from one guy, and that is among the best available raw video of the “shelling” of Taldou.

### **Exhibit C - Main St. Fighting/Intel HQ**



“The rebel defector” describes a unit attacking from Satto Road which, by the spot he points to on the map, connects to Main Street from the east, south of city center. One video from "the battle to liberate freedom circle" shows a group firing guns and rockets west from a barricade on Satto Road minutes before sunset. They run towards Main Street and, from the corner (northern C on the map), stage an attack. One of the rebels, covered by automatic gunfire, runs out and **fires a rocket-**

**propelled grenade south**, towards the military intel HQ and/or the Qaws, then returns cheering a successful hit. [18]

Another video of May 25, perhaps as early as 6:45 PM but once again near sunset, is filmed from a great distance to the northwest. It looks southeast clear across Taldou, to the giant water tower by the elevated "water company" post. In between, huge plumes of smoke rise from the south span of main street, very near or at the intel HQ. [19] Since no one contests that that post was overrun and torched, the discovery is not earth-shattering, but gives us a rough no-later-than time stamp.

Defenses were overcome again, and the way was opened further south (C/E on the map), where more fighting right at sunset was seen just below the HQ. A small group fired machine guns around the corner, south towards the Qaws, as smoke rises to the south and another building right across the street started belching smoke. [20]

### **Exhibit D - Firing on the "Water Company"**

Twice, it seems, and again near sunset, we can see a presumed rebel militant firing an RPG towards the “Water company” army base that was the backbone of Taldou’s defenses. Again, just before sunset, the long-distance video shows (at 0:43) a flash and smoke on the hillside a ways north of the base. [19] Another sunset video (timed at 7:31 +/- 3 minutes) is shot nearer (D/E on the map), and shows another flash and a smoke trail originating further north, but with its direction more clear – south towards the base. [21]

Continued attacks suggest this elevated position at least remained government-held at that time. Syrian official sources seem to have it holding out through the night and later helping reclaim Main Street. [22] However, they say it was incapable of an offensive for a time, pinned down by a rebel attack. The video record is entirely consistent with that.

## Exhibit E: Burning The Hospital?

“Arifah” heard that in the mid-afternoon (3-4 PM), rebels took over some check-point (unclear), then set fire to it, along with “the nearby hospital and the woods behind it, completely burning down the trees.” Syrian official sources and at least one other witness agree the National Hospital was burned by rebels, although later video proves the trees remained. [23]



Rebel sources never mention the hospital either way, aside from one activist, Monther Hrfosh, who posted a **video of the hospital apparently burning**, wanting to accuse the Army of shelling it. [24] The time is not certain, but just before sunset, 7:30 +/- 8 minutes. The hospital’s distinctive trees and outer wall are seen from across the fields, with a giant cloud of whitish smoke rising above (see inset). The bulk drifts north over the seconds with no more rising to join it. So it may be smoke from a single event, a few RPG firings or some other

explosion, now dissipating. There are not, however, any other sounds suggesting an ongoing battle there.

However, two other videos show smoke rising on different lines of sight matching the hospital. One is from the same activist, a bit south (still, around the D/E on the map) and perhaps earlier, with faint whitish smoke seen at 0:10.[21] Another view (C/E on the map) just seconds before full sunset (app. 7:36) captures it from the north up Main Street (C/E) at 0:40. [20] Here the smoke appears fairly dark and genuinely billowing. This video would seem to be later than the others; apparently, **the National Hospital started burning at about sunset, following at least one explosion.** In context, it’s fairly clear who’s responsible.

## Exhibit F: The Six-Hour Blank Spot

Some facets of the alleged rebel attack do not come through in these available videos. The use of mortars or truck-based heavy machine guns isn’t shown. No security post is shown up-close. Neither is the capture or execution of any soldiers shown, nor obviously the reported rebel massacres themselves.

In fact, **the whole relevant period from about 1:30-7:30 seems to be almost completely un-documented.** At least from the wide portion ACLOS has studied, there is a general gap of about six hours after the few shared videos of the early afternoon (ex A). There is the Saad Street RPG video around 6:15 PM (ex B), but nothing else until minutes before sunset, when activists all across town were suddenly able to film again. For reference, the fighting started at 1-2 PM, all sides agree. The first bases fell around 3-4 PM, and the early massacres seem to have run from roughly 5-7 PM (others *reportedly* ran from 10/11 PM until 3/4 AM).

What could cause the activists filming of such a dramatic event to pause for six hours? They might say they all had to retreat, and all returned just before sunset. But it could also

be an order from local rebel command to avoid filming the heart of their victory-studded battle that apparently did occur.

### **Exhibit G: Celebration Videos**

Finally, some different recorded moods of the opposition might be instructive. Those activists seen on video wailing over the bodies of women and children clearly seem upset, cursing both Assad and UN peace envoy Kofi Annan. Contrast that with the activists who filmed themselves reviewing those videos, now up on Youtube, and watching the news; smiles and victory signs abound. [25] This could just be the euphoria of getting out the horrible truth, or something more ugly than that.

Potentially more troubling is a video of about two dozen armed rebels standing atop Taldou at sunset, pouring heavy smoke from at least two spots that are difficult to identify at this resolution. The fighters are smiling, raising their guns, and cheering “Allahu Akbar,” as if the devastation below were something good. [26]



*Rebel fighters celebrate on July 14 or May 25, depending. [26]*

Filmed somewhere on the ridge near the “Water Company,” this video is dated July 14, 2012, the attack given as a response to the Tremseh “massacre” two days earlier. But an ACLOS analysis finds this and other videos in the same batch show signs of the May 25 battle (like fighters from Rastan arriving from the northeast, also around sunset). [27] Furthermore, there is no news of any actual violence in Al-Houla on July 13 or 14 (see above link), and it’s difficult to imagine a smoldering city going unreported as “regime” shelling, a rebel victory, or both. That makes it all too likely this is a laundered video of May 25, when violence of course was reported. If so, they’re celebrating the destruction – and perhaps the massacre that rode in with it - as if it was their own job well done.

### **Video Recap**

In summary, we see in opposition videos actions that illustrate the alleged rebel attack on Taldou, almost as if it actually happened. The early afternoon attacks from the north are eerily consistent with the dismissed witness set’s description. The sunset end is also a match with their “blatant lies,” showing rebels firing on the last holdout posts, and smoke rising from the military intel HQ and the hospital, both of which they say were hit. And the missing six hours between these glimpsed periods is itself a clue, especially the synchronized-seeming resumption of shared videos in the minutes before sunset.

Conversely, opposition sources are less consistent with their own video record. The multi-front offensive we can see becomes, in their accounts, a single passing skirmish at a checkpoint, either before or after a protest. After this victory-free fluke, the unhindered security forces unleashed their fiercest shelling yet, forcing the rebels to retreat and stay away. One of them told The Guardian “the places that were being hit were impossible to reach,” especially by him and his fighters. [16]

Again for emphasis, they made no video of the Shabiha or army invaders, their tanks or buses, or any such thing, even from a safe distance. In short, the videos offer no support for what rebels say, and do show things they didn't say.

The rebel story was of course successfully sold to the world at large, and this and all other contradictory evidence has been kept from interfering with the planned sale. Apparently, it's quite a seller's market for this particular type of bogus product.

### References:

- [1] Houla, May 25: Who Was in Control? A Closer Look on Syria.  
[http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Houla,\\_May\\_25:\\_Who\\_Was\\_in\\_Control](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Houla,_May_25:_Who_Was_in_Control)
- [2] "Horizontal Shelling, ACLOS  
[http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Houla,\\_May\\_25:\\_Who\\_Was\\_in\\_Control\\_%3F#Horizontal\\_22Shelling.22](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Houla,_May_25:_Who_Was_in_Control_%3F#Horizontal_22Shelling.22)
- [3] CoI oral update
- [4] [http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Houla:\\_Saad\\_Street\\_RPG\\_Incident](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Houla:_Saad_Street_RPG_Incident)
- [5] [http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Houla,\\_May\\_25:\\_Who\\_Was\\_in\\_Control\\_%3F#Massacre\\_Sites](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Houla,_May_25:_Who_Was_in_Control_%3F#Massacre_Sites)
- [6] [http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Al-Houla\\_Before\\_and\\_After\\_the\\_Massacre#Violence\\_Prior\\_to\\_22the\\_Massacre.22](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Al-Houla_Before_and_After_the_Massacre#Violence_Prior_to_22the_Massacre.22)
- [7] [http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Al-Houla\\_Before\\_and\\_After\\_the\\_Massacre#April\\_5\\_Houla\\_Massacre\\_28a\\_military\\_family.29](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Al-Houla_Before_and_After_the_Massacre#April_5_Houla_Massacre_28a_military_family.29)
- [8] <http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/mobile/54192261-68/syria-houla-syrian-forces.html.csp>
- [9] Video published June 23, 2012: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uFR-mQZMhsg>
- [10] "Arifah"  
[http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Houla:Alleged\\_witnesses\\_for\\_a\\_rebel\\_attack#.22Arifah.22\\_28A\\_Knowledgeable\\_Woman.29](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Houla:Alleged_witnesses_for_a_rebel_attack#.22Arifah.22_28A_Knowledgeable_Woman.29)
- [11] "the Rebel Defector"  
[http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Houla:Alleged\\_witnesses\\_for\\_a\\_rebel\\_attack#The\\_Rebel\\_Defector](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Houla:Alleged_witnesses_for_a_rebel_attack#The_Rebel_Defector)
- [12] videos and analysis:  
[http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Houla,\\_May\\_25:\\_Who\\_Was\\_in\\_Control\\_%3F#The\\_Roundabout\\_Post\\_and\\_Baath\\_Party\\_HQ](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Houla,_May_25:_Who_Was_in_Control_%3F#The_Roundabout_Post_and_Baath_Party_HQ)
- [13] <http://www.sana.sy/eng/337/2012/06/02/422915.htm>
- [14] video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CXg3Sg9vfso> analysis:  
[http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Talk:Houla,\\_May\\_25:\\_Who\\_Was\\_in\\_Control\\_%3F#Abu\\_Usama\\_videos](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Talk:Houla,_May_25:_Who_Was_in_Control_%3F#Abu_Usama_videos)
- [15] videos and analysis:  
[http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Talk:Houla,\\_May\\_25:\\_Who\\_Was\\_in\\_Control\\_%3F#Video\\_Analysis](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Talk:Houla,_May_25:_Who_Was_in_Control_%3F#Video_Analysis)
- [16] The Guardian, June 1 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jun/01/houla-massacre-reconstructing-25-may>
- [17] [http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Houla:\\_Saad\\_Street\\_RPG\\_Incident](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Houla:_Saad_Street_RPG_Incident)
- [18] [http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Houla,\\_May\\_25:\\_Who\\_Was\\_in\\_Control\\_%3F#Military\\_Intelligence\\_HQ](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Houla,_May_25:_Who_Was_in_Control_%3F#Military_Intelligence_HQ)
- [19] video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LUIZzFNfo9w> Field-of-view analysis:  
[http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Talk:Houla,\\_May\\_25:\\_Who\\_Was\\_in\\_Control\\_%3F#A\\_Better\\_Perspective.3F](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Talk:Houla,_May_25:_Who_Was_in_Control_%3F#A_Better_Perspective.3F)
- [20] video: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=83YDxAI\\_yq4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=83YDxAI_yq4) Analysis:  
[http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Houla,\\_May\\_25:\\_Who\\_Was\\_in\\_Control\\_%3F#Videos\\_of\\_the\\_Hospital\\_Burning](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Houla,_May_25:_Who_Was_in_Control_%3F#Videos_of_the_Hospital_Burning)
- [21] [http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Houla,\\_May\\_25:\\_Who\\_Was\\_in\\_Control?#The\\_Water\\_Company](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Houla,_May_25:_Who_Was_in_Control?#The_Water_Company)
- [22] [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q\\_I\\_h-Hcpzo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q_I_h-Hcpzo) SANA video, 4:17
- [23] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j5FEDTzvii8>
- [24] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lgIza3WG6mo>
- [25] [http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Talk:The\\_Houla\\_massacre#Rebel\\_Propaganda\\_Party](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Talk:The_Houla_massacre#Rebel_Propaganda_Party)

[26] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D136vZcu7ms>

[27] [http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Talk:Houla,\\_May\\_25:\\_Who\\_Was\\_in\\_Control%3F#May\\_25th\\_videos.3F](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Talk:Houla,_May_25:_Who_Was_in_Control%3F#May_25th_videos.3F)

## Concluding Thoughts



*An opposition man sits on the bloodied porch of a verified massacre site, perhaps of the Mustafa Abdulrazaq family, during a rebel-led tour by UN monitors, May 27, 2012.*

*Consider: A story physically played out here, and a story was told to the world.  
How can we be sure the two stories are really the same?*

# **Netizen Journalism, the Houla Massacre, and the World Stage**

By Ronda Hauben

Excerpts from "The Role of Netizen Journalism in the Media War at the United Nations," a speech delivered in Beijing, July, 2012, published in *The Amateur Computerist* Fall 2012, Volume 22 No. 2

url: <http://www.ais.org/~jrh/acn/ACn22-2.pdf>

## **Preface**

The history of journalism includes many different forms of publication and many different methods of organization of those publications. Journalism scholars like Chris Atton and Tony Harcup of the U.K. point to a wide continuum of how the news is produced and who are the journalists who produce it.

These scholars argue that it is too narrow to restrict the definition and consideration of journalism to commercially or government produced media. Instead these scholars propose that the many forms of alternative journalism should be considered as part of the spectrum of journalism and those who produce for these publications are to be considered in any study of journalists.

Traditionally, alternative journalism provides for a broader set of issues to be raised than is common in commercially produced mainstream media. Often, too, alternative publications allow for a broader set of sources to be utilized. Such a media often reflects not only a criticism of the limitations of the mainstream commercial media, but also a demonstration that another form and practice of journalism is viable. With the creation and the spread of the Internet, the emergence of a new form of citizenship, know as netizenship, has developed. Also a critical and vibrant form of online journalism has begun to develop. I call this journalism, netizen journalism. A more detailed exploration of this phenomenon is beyond the scope of this paper as the paper is for a panel on questions related to the United Nations. As such, the paper will focus on the impact of netizen journalism on the United Nations and on issues related to the United Nations. But an awareness of the emerging phenomenon of netizen journalism can help to provide a context for issues investigated in this paper.

## **I Medvedev and the Challenge of Media**

### **Manipulation to International Relations**

In a recent speech, Dmitry Medvedev, Prime Minister of the Russian Federation, spoke about what he called "the new security dimensions" in international relations. (1)

"Today," he said, "we are witness to persistent attempts to make mass manipulation of public opinion a tool in international relations."

He offered as an example what he calls the media campaign against Syria.

"Syria's case is illustrative in this respect," Medvedev said. "A very active media campaign unfolded with respect to Syria." He explained, "What is clear is that this media campaign



had little to do with ending the violence as rapidly as possible and facilitating the national dialogue that we all want to see there."

He attributed this media campaign to the nature of what is considered the politics of certain countries. Describing this politics, he explained, "This sees a country or group of countries instill their own aims and objectives in the consciousness of others...with other points of view rejected." (2)

What I propose is important about his talk for our panel on "The UN is a Dilemma" is that Medvedev argues that media manipulation by certain political actors presents a serious problem for the field of international relations. He argues that such a media campaign against Syria interferes with the goal of international relations "to concentrate on professional and serious discussion rather than propaganda efforts," so as to be able to work out "a common approach to settling this conflict."

While he does not see journalism as able to help solve this problem, I want to propose that there is development of an alternative form of journalism that is taking on the problem. This is the journalism I call netizen journalism. Netizen journalism seeks to challenge the misrepresentations and distortions of mainstream Western journalism that Medvedev presents as a serious challenge to international relations. Netizen journalism encourages not only the exposure of the distortions in the mainstream media, but research and writing to provide the background and information needed to determine how to settle a conflict. By challenging the media campaign fomenting a conflict, netizen journalism becomes a participant in the media war at the UN.

[...]

#### **IV The Syrian Crisis and the UN: Critique of the Reporting on Syria**

Similar to the mainstream media war against Libya, there is a set of false narratives in the mainstream Western and Arab satellite media related to what has been happening in Syria. While such media essentially frames its news about Syria to demonize the Syrian government and its President Bashar Assad, its news stories support the armed opposition, and its journalists rely on opposition sources for the news that is to be reported.

In this situation, netizen journalism presents a critique of the mainstream media support for what is an armed insurrection against Syria. The forms this netizen journalism takes include articles, interviews, commentary, historical background, analysis and discussion. Critical articles about the mainstream media reports and misrepresentations are also common.

##### **The Houla Massacre**

The original mainstream media account of what has come to be known as the Houla massacre was that an opposition demonstration was suppressed by Syrian government shelling.

Criticism of this claim soon emerged pointing to the fact that the majority of those murdered were killed at close range, not by shelling. In response, the mainstream Western media produced a new element, a so called pro government militia that they claimed had gone into the homes of those killed and carried out the massacre. Why an alleged pro

government militia, the so called 'Shabiha' would go into the homes of people was not explained. Whether the people massacred were pro or anti government is an issue still in contention.

When Alex Thomson, a British Channel 4 reporter, went to the village that the opposition in Houla had said had produced the so called Shabiha accused of the attack in Houla, he found no evidence of any such militia. He writes, "Beyond a few languid soldiers and the odd policeman no sign of militias. No trace of heavy weapons. No tank tracks on the roads.... Well these Alawites insist there are not, nor have ever been, Shabiha in these villages." (35)

Neither do the mainstream Western media wonder why the Syrian government would carry out a massacre of civilians at the very time that the United Nations General Assembly and the United Nations Security Council are planning to discuss Syria.

In his book *Liar's Poker* which analyzes the disinformation used to justify the NATO bombing of Serbia, the Belgian journalist Michel Collon observes that "Information is already a battlefield which is part of war." (36)

### **Seeking Facts About the Houla Massacre**

Shortly after the news spread about the Houla massacre, netizen media sites included articles which revealed that the area where the massacre was carried out was under the control of the Free Syrian Army, not of the Syrian government. A Russian news team had gained access to the site the day following the massacre and did interviews to determine what had happened. Their report was originally published in Russia but soon was translated into English.

Their account noted that Houla is an administrative area, made up of three villages. Houla is not the name of a town. Some of this area had been under control of armed insurgents for a number of weeks. The Syrian army maintained certain checkpoints. The Russian journalists' account explains that on the evening of May 25, the Free Syrian Army launched an operation to take control of the checkpoints, bringing 600-800 armed insurgents from different areas.

At the same time that there was the fight over the checkpoints, several armed insurgents went into certain homes and massacred the members of several families. Among the families targeted was a family related to a recently elected People's Assembly representative. This family and another family that were killed were said by some local people to be families that supported the Syrian government. "Other victims included the family of two journalists for Top News and New Orient Express, press agencies associated with Voltaire Network," reports the news and analysis site Voltairenet. (37)

Soon after the news of the massacre appeared, there were articles challenging the claims that it was the work of the Syrian government. In his article "Death Squads Ravage Syrian Town – West Calls for 'Action'," Tony Cartalucci of the Land Destroyer Report blog, writes "'Cui Bono?' To whose benefit does it serve to massacre very publicly entire families in close quarters and broadcast the images of their handiwork worldwide?" (38) He argues that this is in no way in the Syrian government's interest.

In another article he points to a U.K. government official blaming the deaths on "artillery

fire” by the government. Claiming to be responding to such reports, several governments including the U.K. government expelled Syrian diplomats. Even though these claims were soon demonstrated to be false, Cartalucci points out that there was no retraction from the U.K. government or reversal of the expulsion of Syrian diplomats. Cartalucci writes: "U.K. Foreign Office Minister Alistair Burt peddling what is now a confirmed fabrication, told for days to the public as the West maneuvered to leverage it against the Syrian government. The UN has now confirmed that artillery fired by government troops were not responsible for the massacre, and instead carried out by unidentified militants. Despite this, the U.K. has failed to retract earlier accusations and has instead expelled Syrian diplomats in an increasingly dangerous, irrational, aggressive posture." (39)

Others online recognized that a photo BBC posted which was allegedly of the corpses from the Houla Massacre, was actually a photo that had been taken in 2003 of deaths in Iraq. Describing how the misrepresentation was detected, Sy Walker explains on his blog "The information on which it's based comes from a pro-Syrian tweeter called Hey Joud, whom I've found to be well informed and savvy."

"A friend of this tweeter discovered the misrepresentation and tweeted about it: '@BBCWorld propaganda: showing a pic of bodies from Iraq claiming it's the ? #HoulaMassacre? ?#Syria?'" (40)

BBC changed the photo, Walker explains, adding: "This is not the first time I've reported on image fakery with regard to Syria. The Western media's sustained attack on that beleaguered nation has now been underway for more than a year. A comprehensive account of all its deceptions and misreporting over that period would fill many volumes."

In a blog post titled "Hula Hoax," Mathias Broeckers also comments on the BBC presenting the 2003 Iraq photo as a photo of Houla. Broeckers writes: "It is the forbidden geopolitical agenda, the big Picture that isn't talked about, as opposed to the horrors by which the wars are legitimized." (41)

Other online journalists comment on the bias of the United Nations Human Rights Council and its inability to do an objective investigation of the facts of the Houla Massacre. Reporting about an interaction between an anti-war activist from the "No War Network", Marinella Corregia, and Rupert Colville, spokesman for the Human Rights Council, an article on the Uprooted Palestinians blog is titled "UN report on Houla massacre? But they only talk to Syrian opposition – by phone." Colville explains to Corregia that the Human Rights Council will do its investigation by speaking with the local network of opposition members they have contact with in Syria by phone, with opposition members they have met in Turkey and with opposition members they have met in Geneva. (42)

Martin Janssen, a Dutch Middle East expert and journalist who reports from Damascus and whose articles appear online is also concerned that there are other important sources of information that have information about what happened, but that the Human Relations Council investigators will not speak with them because the investigators are only interested in hearing from opposition sources. (43)

Janssen said that he was in contact with a Catholic organization in the area of Houla, a monastery in Qara in the Homs-Hana region, and the two Russian journalists, Marat Musin

and Olga Kulygina, who were able to visit Houla the day after the massacre, on May 26 with a TV crew. Janssen reported that Musin and Kulygina tried to offer their findings to the UN Special Commission on Human Rights doing the investigation, but that the Commission was not interested in hearing from them. Coville indicated that the sources the investigators had were adequate because all their other sources had already informed them that the ‘shabiha’ were responsible for the massacre. The Commission was not interested in hearing from anyone with different views or with information different from that given to them by the opposition.

The online discussion in response to Janssen’s article was a serious discussion critiquing the mainstream media and putting forward the criteria of what a media should do. The discussion is an important one as it sets out both the failings of the current mainstream media and the needed objectives for a more competent media.

### **Netizen Journalism Coverage of Houla Massacre**

Along with the account of what happened in the al Houla region, were articles proposing a broader perspective. This included historical background describing where the U.S. and NATO utilized death squads in prior conflicts. One article “Syria Under Attack by Globalist Death Squads,” by Brandon Turbeville presents background on how certain U.S. officials including Robert S. Ford, the former U.S. Ambassador to Syria, and John Negroponte who was U.S. Ambassador to Honduras in 1981-1985 and later in Iraq, supported death squads first in Nicaragua (known as the “Salvador Option”) and later in Iraq. (44)

Turbeville’s article and articles by others like the article titled, “The Salvadorian Option for Syria: U.S.-NATO Sponsored Death Squads Integrate ‘Opposition Forces’” by Michel Chossudovsky, put the death squads functioning in Syria in this historical context. Along with the articles I am describing that are available in English, there are also a wide range of similar articles online in French, German, and other languages. There are also online discussions and comments about the Syria conflict. A collection of articles, *The Houla Massacre: The Disinformation Campaign*, available at Global Research website, lists a number of the articles recently published on the media war over the Syrian conflict. (45)

There are various forms of online discussions. One such discussion on an online forum was initiated with the post, “Houla Massacre, Syria: What If?” The discussion considered whether the Syrian government claims that it was not responsible for the massacre was or wasn’t a lie. Online sources referred to in discussions like this could be either mainstream media or alternative media sources. Through discussion, referring to various articles and details, netizens in this online forum concluded that armed insurgents were to blame, not the Syrian government. (46)

### **The Media and Syrian Sovereignty**

Since it is rare at the current time that the mainstream Western media deviates from a hostility toward the Syrian government and a sympathy with the armed insurgents, it seems significant that in Germany one of the mainstream national newspapers, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* has printed a significant story documenting the role of the Free Syrian Army in the Houla massacre. The journalist, Rainer Hermann, speaks Arabic. He has been reporting from the Middle East for over 22 years and he did his thesis on modern Syrian social history. His article “Abermals Massaker in Syrien” appeared in the *Frankfurter*

*Allgemeine Zeitung* on June 7. [47]

His article has been welcomed by many netizens and has been reprinted at various online news sites. Several online sites featured the article and offered an English translation of it. The story corroborated the report of the Russian journalists that the Free Syrian Army insurgents were behind the Houla massacre. Similarly there was an anonymous criticism of Rainer's article on the Houla massacre from opposition forces, and Rainer wrote a second article "The Extermination" responding to the criticism. [48] His article appears to be his response to sources troubled over the attacks and discrimination that the armed insurgents have been introducing into the Syrian struggle. But perhaps it is also an indication that netizen journalism is having some effect in the current media war over Syria.

Similarly, there is a report by the British media criticism site, Media Lens on the low key recognition by a BBC journalist that it is not adequate to blame the Houla massacre on Syria's President Assad, as several of the media are doing, without more knowledge of what actually happened, and with an approach which includes more shades of gray rather than just treating it as a stark black or white issue.

### **Netizen Journalism and the UN**

Since the Houla massacre, the Syrian conflict, some say, appears to be at a turning point. Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has a recent article arguing that there are lessons that have been learnt from what happened with Libya and that the UN has to take into account these lessons. In his op-ed, "On the Right Side of History," Lavrov writes:

*When deciding to support UN Security Council Resolution 1970 and making no objection to Resolution 1973 on Libya, we believed that these decisions would help limit the excessive use of force and pave the way for a political settlement. Unfortunately, the actions undertaken by NATO countries under these resolutions led to their grave violation and support for one of the parties to the civil war, with the goal of ousting the existing regime - damaging in the process the authority of the Security Council....*

*It is clear that after what had happened in Libya it was impossible to go along with the UN Security Council taking decisions that would not be adequately explicit and would allow those responsible for their implementation to act at their own discretion. Any mandate given on behalf of the entire international community should be as clear and precise as possible in order to avoid ambiguity. It is therefore important to understand what is really happening in Syria and how to help that country to pass through this painful stage of its history. [49]*

Along with such comments from diplomats, netizens are covering and discussing what the UN is doing about the Syrian conflict. A summary on the Moon of Alabama blog of the General Assembly meeting discussing the Houla Massacre described how the UN Secretary General, the Secretary General of the League of Arab States and other officials, along with many of the representatives of the nations at the UN, blamed the massacre on the Syrian government, even though there were few facts available as to what had happened and who was behind the events. [50]

## Notes:

1. "Conference organized by the Russian Council for International Affairs," 23 March 2012, Moscow. <http://eng.news.kremlin.ru/transcripts/3582>
2. He refers to how Libya and more recently Syria have been the victim of this politics. "How are we to see the mantras repeated by particular countries that consider themselves the main exporters of democracy if, say in the Libyan and now the Syrian cases, countries whose internal political lives are governed by completely different norms are chosen as models to follow for democratic development?"
- (3) [35] Alex Thompson's blog, Sunday June 3, 2012. <http://blogs.channel4.com/alex-thomsons-view/search-houla-killers/1811>
4. 36. Michel Collon, *Liar's Poker*, International Action Center, New York, 2002, p. 45. (This is an English translation. The book is originally published in French.)
5. 37. Marat Musin, "The Houla Massacre: Opposition Terrorists Killed Families Loyal to the Government," Detailed Investigation, Global Research, June 1, 2012, *Anna News* (Original Russian) and syrianews.cc, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=31184> See for example, Thierry Meyssan, "The Houla Affair Highlights Western Intelligence Gap in Syria," <http://www.voltairenet.org/The-Houla-affair-highlights>.
- Investigators from Vesti24: Marat Musin, Olga Kulygina (Al-Houla, Syria)
38. May 26, 2012 "Death Squad's Ravage Syrian Town – West Calls for Action," May 27, 2012. <http://landdestroyer.blogspot.com/2012/05/death-squads-ravage-syrian-town-west.html>
39. <http://www.infowars.com/wests-houla-syria-narrative-crumble-s-expels-syrian-diplomats-anyway/>
40. <http://sydwalker.info/blog/2012/05/27/houla-horror-truth-is-elusive-lies-are-easier-to-spot/>
41. Mathias Broeckers, "Der Hula-Hoax" <http://www.broeckers.com/2012/06/05/der-hula-hoax/>
42. <http://www.rt.com/news/houla-massacre-un-syria-635/>
43. June 2, 2012, The Horrors of Houla (The blog is in Dutch De verschrikkingen van Houla) <http://opinie.deredactie.be/2012/06/02/de-verschrikkingen-van-houla/>
44. Brandon Turbeville, "Syria under Attack by Globalist Death Squads," May 27, 2012, Syria360 blog: <http://syria360.wordpress.com/the-syrian-uprising-in-context/>
- "The Salvador Option for Syria": U.S.-NATO Sponsored Death Squads Integrate "Opposition Forces" - by Prof. Michel Chossudovsky - 2012-05-28 <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=31359>
45. The collection of articles, *The Houla Massacre: The Disinformation Campaign*, at Global Research <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=31399>
46. Forum with discussion, "Houla Massacre, Syria: What If?" <http://forums.randi.org/showthread.php?t=237195>
47. "Abermals Massaker in Syrien" *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 6-7-2012 <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/neue-erkenntnisse-zu-getoeteten-von-houla-aber-mals-massaker-in-syrien-11776496.html> Partial English translation, "Prime German Paper: Syrian Rebels Committed Houla Massacre," Moon of Alabama, 6-9-2012 <http://www.moonofalabama.org/2012/06/prime-german-papersyrian-rebels-committed-houla-massacre.html> Another article appears on the National Review website, 6-9-2012 by John Rosenthal <http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/302261/report-rebels-responsible-houla-massacre-john-rosenthal#>
48. "New FAZ Piece On Houla Massacre: 'The Extermination,'" Moon of Alabama, 6-15-2012 <http://www.moonofalabama.org/2012/06/new-faz-piece-on-houla-massacre-the-extirpation.html>
49. Lavrov, "On the Right Side of History," [http://www.mid.ru/bdomb/brp\\_4.nsf/0/D54B1EB2726D75F544257A1E003935A8](http://www.mid.ru/bdomb/brp_4.nsf/0/D54B1EB2726D75F544257A1E003935A8)
50. See for example, the summary on the Moon of Alabama blog, <http://www.moonofalabama.org/2012/06/the-syria-discussion-at-the-un-general-assembly.html> See also "The UN and the Houla Massacre: The Information battlefield" <http://blogs.taz.de/netizenblog/2012/06/12/un-and-houla-massacre/>

## Syria Needs Truth and Sanity

By Adam Larson

April 25, 2013

Allow me to start by quoting myself, from a September, 2012 e-mail to the UN Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Navi Pillay. The letter was called "A Plea for Reality as the Basis for Investigating Syrian Massacres," and is available online. [1] This segment cuts to the core of the message:

*The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights is all about Rights, which are supposedly bestowed on Human Beings. These are physical organisms that live within a world governed by set rules of causation, which, in Al-Houla, led to the physical and brutal deaths of around 108 people.*

*The best ways to determine the exact crime, its causes, and the wisest solution to prevent more of the same, are the time-tested methods of truth divination supposedly followed to this day: collecting and assessing physical (photographic) evidence, gathering purported eyewitness evidence, looking for patterns, applying logic. Truth is of course the best basis for justice, and as UNHRC President Lasserre said in Geneva on September 10 truth and justice are first among four things (the others being "reparation and guarantees of non-repetition") which are "central in combatting impunity and consolidating a democratic society." [2]*

Yet these methods of finding the physical truth seem to be poorly employed in the UN's investigations thus far, at least in Syria and, before that, in Libya.

### **The Lies of Libya**

The record from Libya's 2011 uprising and regime-change war features many cases of reported government crimes that were deemed false, sometime *after* being taken as true and acted on. This is an area of previous interest to me, with some research available at the blog site *The Libyan Civil War: Critical Views*. [3] Reports of the Gaddafi government's aerial bombardment against protesters, for example, were recognized early on as erroneous. But at the same time they were hyped to start the process for a "no-fly zone" that would better be called a "fly around and bomb Libya zone." [4]

Three months into that bombing, in June, the UK *Independent* published an article by Patrick Cockburn, citing an investigation by Amnesty International's senior crisis response adviser Donatella Rovera. This was into the alleged abuses of human rights that had justified the bombing – with Amnesty's help, it should be noted. "On several occasions," Cockburn heard, "the rebels in Benghazi appeared to have knowingly made false claims or manufactured evidence." The report centered on discrediting the emotive charges of systematic rape; various allegations, with and without Viagra-type drugs, were based on virtually no credible evidence. Rovera said "we have not found any evidence or a single victim of rape or a doctor who knew about somebody being raped." [5]

The ever-present "African Mercenaries" of rebel stories were also considered and found to be generally non-existent. "Those shown to journalists as foreign mercenaries were later

quietly released," Rovera said. "Most were sub-Saharan migrants working in Libya without documents." "The politicians kept talking about mercenaries," she added, "which inflamed public opinion and the myth has continued because they were released without publicity." [5] Uncounted thousands of "Gaddafi's Africans mercenaries" – many of them fully Libyan - were lynched instead of released during the war, with relatively little complaint from "the world community," as Libya's role as a leader for a unifying Africa was destroyed. [6]

Cockburn also noted "a recent report by the authoritative International Crisis Group," who had noted "much Western media coverage has from the outset presented a very one-sided view of the logic of events, portraying the protest movement as entirely peaceful" and those killed as "unarmed demonstrators who presented no security challenge" [5] The fact of the matter is that the role of armed militants was sanitized from opposition reports of the military killing "protesters," as opposed to them dying in the process of overrunning army posts, killing soldiers, and stealing weapons. The dead soldiers found piled inside these bases were executed (by mercenaries, usually) for refusing to kill protesters, those who were spared reported. [7]

But the "thousands of protesters" reported as killed were taken as factual and had decisions of war and peace based on them. With NATO air support, anti-government militias took more bases and then city after city across Libya. Eventually they conquered Tripoli in August and Sirte in October with such help and with deceptive and criminal maneuvers like turning off the water supplies in both and blaming Gaddafi. [8] The brutal massacres of Tripoli [9] and Sirte [10] ensued; the few of these specifically reported were blamed - by rebel-supplied alleged witnesses - squarely on the fleeing Libyan army and their African mercenaries.

But on closest inspection of all available clues, these all seem more likely to be rebel crimes, with a depressing percentage of black-skinned victims, for example. It seems the blame was simply shifted by sloppy, lazy conspiracies of false witnesses and doctored evidence. This has been especially well established with the "Khamis Brigade shed massacre" of about August 23, in the overrun or abandoned Yarmouk military base south of Tripoli. In a detailed report by myself, for the Citizen's Investigation Into War Crimes in Libya, dozens of witness accounts are compared with each other, with photos and videos from the site, early Twitter messages, and various logic considerations. The clear conclusion is that the opposition story of massacred political prisoners is pure fiction, to cover for another of their own crimes. [11]

Since the deception-based intervention there, Libya has of course been a failed state run by a government with little perceived authority, plagued by un-checked militias, Islamist radicals, frequent attacks on Western and other interests, and so on.

### **Massacre Marketing Flops and Close Calls in Syria**

Human rights crusaders continued, as if nothing was learned from the "mistakes" of Libya, right into denouncing regime crimes in Syria and adding to the case for forced change there. Unable or unwilling to see the most obvious conspiracy to launder the facts, mainstream interventionists chronically accept opposition claims at roughly face value; although unverified, the activist's word is usually passed on as probably true, and that color sets the mood for all future reporting, in a vicious cycle of confirmation bias.



Another pattern is that the more heinous the crime, the more sternly it must be ascribed to the proper side. Who really damaged a mosque's minaret is less important than who carried out, say, the Houla massacre. That takes more certainty, or more show of having it.

But what's interesting is the few exceptions to these interlocking rules; reported large-scale massacres, reaching for the notoriety of Houla, that had to be re-written by the media helpers to some degree.

The so-called Tremseh Massacre occurred on July 12, 2012 in Hama province, exactly during a UN Security Council meeting over a new resolution against Syria. The first word was that the Sunni village of Tremseh was attacked out of nowhere by the military and Shabiha, executing as many as 250 or 300 innocent people, who were left shot, stabbed, and burnt in "ethnic cleansing." The Syrian government insisted there was a mid-scale massacre by rebel "terrorists" who had based themselves there, followed by the Army's arrival and a battle the terrorists lost. Captured local fighters were made to talk on TV about their recruitment by Syrians acting with Turks and Libyans. Some foreign fighters had their passports shown (mostly Tunisian). [12]

As more information emerged, the death toll started looking smaller and more militant than reported. While FSA founder Col. Riad al-Assad insisted there were no rebel fighters in Tremseh at all, even the *New York Times* acknowledged by the 14<sup>th</sup> that "the evidence available suggested that events on Thursday more closely followed the Syrian government account." As such, the briefly exciting event became boring and was downplayed. The other part of the government's account – the actual massacre of innocents - was ignored in the rush to quietly blame the opposition for nothing worse than a bit of exaggeration. [12]

Late August, 2012 witnessed huge reported massacres in Daraya (a Damascus suburb) [13] and Harak (a Deraa suburb) [14], with as many as 500 dead alleged in Harak and perhaps 600 or more in Daraya. Both "massacres" occurred over the span of days, which were also days of decisive military battles to "cleanse" the towns. As with Tremseh, the death tolls here seem padded with lost battles, and much larger ones. The more famous massacre, in Daraya, was also marred by accusations of **mass hostage-taking by rebel forces, and mass killing of those as the captors died and fled**. This was reported by Robert Fisk in the UK *Independent*, from on-site interviews with locals not supplied by opposition networks. [13] This collective picture did not, however, gel in the Western public mind; Harak and Daraya remain credited as regime crimes, listed that way in the UN CoI report of February 2013. [15]

Into 2013, the patterns continue with the story of a pro-government militia and/or the army killing 106 Sunni civilians at Busatin Al-Haswiyeh, on the north edge of Homs, on January 15. [16] This "Haswiyeh massacre" story fell apart quickly. Bill Neely of British *ITV News* skipped the "can't be verified" act and just went there and talked to locals. These consistently said Jabhat Al-Nusra, or people dressed like them in black, killed at least 30 civilians who refused to cooperate with them. Then the army answered their calls, and "many" rebels died in the following battle. [17] This information was publicized and the incident was subsequently ignored. A look at the satellite imagery, compared with both versions, shows that what the locals describe makes far more sense than what the activists say. [16]

One alleged Army/Shabiha massacre that was free of confusing rebel losses happened on December 10/11 in Aqrab, about a mile north of Al-Houla's Tal Dahab. At least 125 and up to 235 civilians were the victims - this time not Sunni but Alawi (Alawite). The news came with a detailed and bizarre opposition story, in which a few Alawi Shabiha militiamen held these men, women, and children as human shields, in a building the FSA was also besieging. The Shabiha refused to let the civilians be rescued and blew them up with grenades or some explosion, escaped or committed suicide, and then had the army and air force each blow the house up as well, while the Sunni rebels did nothing but get framed. [18]

This stupid story was quietly put down with next-day news video from Channel 4's Alex Thomson, the master of going to the scene in Syria and verifying what so many others insist they cannot. He spoke to Alawi prisoners who were released in exchanges; they described the rebel attack of December 2 and the week of captivity, some 500 locals crammed into a Sunni businessman's house and treated as expendable bargaining chips. From just outside Aqrab, Thomson's crew filmed the house the witnesses say they were held in, its upper floor painted red. It was **completely intact**, which is odd considering the multiple explosive destructions reported. [19]

The house was, however **pouring smoke from its upper floor** (this is visible in the imagery, but not mentioned in the report). One released woman told a Lebanese TV crew the Alawi families were being intentionally smoked out there: "**they're burning tires inside the building to suffocate them**. There's no water, no food. Perhaps 3/4 of the people there are already dead by now." [20] This was apparently to force acceptance of the rebel ultimatum - surrender the men ("Shabiha") to die, and the women and children could live for now, as human shields among the rebels in Al-Houla. Alex Thomson heard about one batch of around 70 prisoners who were released, and driven out in four trucks. Three made it to the safe village next door, but "a fourth truck ... went to rebel-held al-Houla instead and there, an unnamed woman and boy, apparently speaking under duress, told rebels that pro-government militias, not rebels, took them prisoner." [19] There were more than the two witnesses, and their video testimony was the original proof that had so many willing to believe the stupid opposition story. One old woman confirming it on video looks exhausted and has **smoke stained nostrils**. [20]

These same Al-Houla rebels, whose prior antics this report has explored, last described their remaining Alawi captives (125-235) - incorrectly, it seems - as blown up. They have given no word or sign either way since then as to what *actually* happened. And yet still they evade any rebuke for what fits at least a few definitions of genocide, even absent a massacre. This is well worth reflecting on.

Whether it be a small rebel massacre, large rebel genocide operation, a battle lost by rebels, or any combination of these, it's usually presented - and easily accepted - as another crime of an unaccountable regime. Not every offering is purchased, but explicit returns are unheard of. Some crimes are deemed defective - all but impossible to pin it on the "regime," but still too hard to blame on the only remaining alternative. At worst, such items are labeled "murky" and left unclaimed in the parking lot, like the 100+ lost people of Aqrab.

## Houla as the Model

The responses to these murky massacres was always disappointing, compared to the heyday of sales success following the May 25/26 events in Al-Houla right next to Aqrab. Yet in that instance it's even more obvious than usual, at least on inspection of the finer details, that the product is bogus.

The digital video evidence, carefully read, supports the witness set that describe a rebel attack opening the way for the massacre. What they describe is an attack starting in the north and center of town around 1:00 PM, and raging over all security posts during the afternoon up to sunset, with in-home massacres happening at various sites in the second half of that span. As the final essay explains, we see the first parts of that up to 1:30 PM, then six hours of video silence, before sunset videos of smoldering security posts, rebels enjoying free reign somehow, firing machine guns and RPGs all over, and scooping up the bodies that would soon make such useful propaganda videos. Further, we can see the timing of these specific actions matches with the narrative of the witnesses who actually explain that whole sequence.

The best evidence says rebels clobbered Taldou before the slaughter, but they were able to paint right over that victory, with nothing but alleged witnesses talking on the phone and on Youtube. Their whitewash was accepted instantly as clarifying the morality of this struggle; many governments at this point expelled Syria's diplomats and otherwise moved to isolate Syria in the kill box. It was a "tipping point" or a "turning point," depending, where it became clear that the "wheels were coming off" of Kofi Annan's peace plan. Aid to the rebels and talk of increasing it increased.

In other words, **after their homicidal rampage through Shi'ite bedrooms, Syria's rebels garnered an outpouring of support.** That works by no magic of their own; it's all on loan. It's their golden shovel (see this report's cover).

Even after May 25, direct "no-fly zone" intervention was still nowhere near imminent, so long as Syria's tight air defenses remained intact (or, as stated, so long as Russia opposed it). But some type of intervention would become increasingly likely, said UK Foreign Office minister Alistair Burt, "if massacres like this are to continue." [21]

The bait was taken by someone. A similar Army/Shabiha killing of 78 Sunni civilians was reported at MazraatAl-Qubeir two weeks after Burt's statement. [22] Tremseh, Daraya, and the rest followed on a monthly basis. It's only natural the beneficiaries of the Houla killings would seek to emulate such a successful sale, but the model is different in a few ways from the ones to follow. For example, Houla featured less dead rebels, with only a few falling at the beginning of a successful offensive. After that day, it seems, authorities would prove more responsive; lightning reinforcements quickly turned massacres into battles, causing the shift in who wound up dead when the dust settles.

And as we've seen, the media and the UN's investigators already rejected the alleged witness set supported by the best combination of logic, consistency, and video corroboration. This possible error may be generally acknowledged someday, but as with Libya, it will likely be too little, and too late to help stop the mistaken actions they contributed to. Already it's been delayed for about a year, in which the killing and

destruction has continued as well as accelerated.

### **Impunity in Action In Aleppo**

Events in Syria's largest city and commercial hub Aleppo could show the danger of unchecked impunity, where one side at least feels enabled to commit horrendous crimes of escalating scale. As a powerful cross-section, four extremely prominent cases from the first three months of 2013, which ACLOS has studied, might show the kinds of crimes rebel forces feel entitled to there.

The government-run campus of Aleppo University was hit, by two explosive strikes from the air, on the afternoon of January 15, killing at least 87 people and injuring hundreds. [23] Anti-government activists were clear in reporting they saw and heard a fighter jet delivering the two missiles, and this was the basis for swift condemnation of the "regime". But videos and experts are clear there was probably no jet, not low enough to see or hear, anyway, and surface missiles or powerful rockets were probably responsible. The Syrian government was framed as citing a car bomb, which it never did; they always blamed two rebel rockets, fired from nearby to the north. [23]

The targets killed where both rockets landed were partly people driving in traffic and young adults taking their final exams. But even more so by numbers, they were less-occupied citizens, whole families of them, who had been displaced in the fighting in and around Aleppo. Some 60,000 of these were packed into re-purposed dormitory buildings and a surrounding tent city, into which both rockets plowed. [23] Some of these people who took the worst of it would be ones the rebels never liked, who fled their conquest or were evicted following it, for example. In contrast, the government accused of bombing them had previously taken these people in, and then tried desperately to save their blasted lives after the terrorist attack.

On January 29/30, a rebel-tallied 110 bodies of freshly executed men and boys were pulled from Aleppo's Queiq River, the sluggish stretch flanking the rebel-held Bustan al-Qasr district. Adding daily finds after this, a reported total of over 200 bodies were found in "Martyrs' River" by mid-March. [24]

Alleged witnesses and/or alleged family members from both sides have gone on record accusing the other side of the kidnap-killings. However, the witnesses the Western media have reported on were provided by rebels only. They say the victims crossed into government-held districts, but they also all lived in rebel-held Bustan al-Qasr. [24] And of course, the bodies all wound up in the rebel stretch of the Queiq, 3-4 km downstream from the alleged execution site – the government-run central park of Aleppo. They could hardly have floated that far for a number of reasons [25], suggesting they were dumped about where found. Also supporting that is how the Bustan al-Qasr rebels seemingly remembered just how many they'd dumped there. After 78-80 corpses were recovered by the end of the 29th, at least three rebel fighters knew just how many more were under the murky water and too far off to see – 30, at least 30, or more than 100 total - to a final given tally of 110. [26]

Interestingly, the second large batch of over 50 bodies at once appeared in that same area on March 10, the same exact day the UK *Guardian* first ran Martin Chulov's "Syria: the story

behind one of the most shocking images of the war." This was the most detailed and damning report yet, a multimedia presentation on "Martyrs' River," based on numerous interviews with alleged witnesses and family of victims. That a new glut of bodies appeared jut then almost feels like a publicity stunt for the "investigation" that in turn feels more like an extended FSA recruitment commercial. [27]

A week after those new bodies appeared, the western Aleppo district of Khan Al-Assal famously suffered some class of chemical gas attack. On the morning of March 19, 2013 a missile/rocket strike that emitted a caustic gas smelling of chlorine killed up to 31 people, most or many of them soldiers, in an area the government just re-conquered. They blamed "terrorists" with a homemade rocket with a chlorine and saline warhead.

As for the rebel arsenal in Aleppo, the warheads are not known, but possible. The staging areas are ample, and the ranges they offer should work for their well-known improvised rockets, some with ranges into the tens of kilometers. As for the chemicals, Jabhat Al-Nusra last year stole some 400 tons of chlorine gas, plus Syria's only factory for making more, right next to Aleppo. From this material, it's hard to make a case against the government; rebels suggested "the regime" did it to make it look like rebels did it. Or put another way, it looks like rebels did it. [28]

Syria demanded an investigation by the United Nations, and everyone publicly agreed that was warranted and urgent. But it seems that the Western powers, especially Britain and France, worked to sabotage the effort from day one. What finally worked was weighing the demand down with dilution, delay, and conditions they somehow had Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon sign off on; within the span of three weeks, Damascus was refusing the probe. As I recently explained in the article *Was the Syria Chemical Weapons Probe "Torpedoed" by the West?*, it was their request's transformation into an invasive and threatening Iraq-style inspections regime, as another tool against Syria, that Damascus deemed unacceptable. [29] But now they're blamed for scuttling their own investigation and thus, we're to presume, hiding something – like being behind the attack after all. Otherwise, Khan al-Assal – which marked the start of these efforts to avoid investigating - still looks like a rebel attack. [29]

It was April 8 that Damascus formally barred the U.N.'s expanded mission. On April 13, some enabled party apparently gassed more civilians in the Kurdish-majority Sheikh Maqsoud district of Aleppo, just "liberated" by rebels. An unknown substance in a plastic grenade reportedly killed a woman or two and two babies, while poisoning several others. A video shows two male victims "foaming at the mouth," claimed as a sign of sarin poisoning, which it apparently isn't – especially when they seem to be faking it badly. Besides that, rebel-supplied details are thin, other than to specify that a regime helicopter dropped the gas grenade. Even though rebels can only benefit from a crossing of Obama's red line, they ruled themselves out again, in favor of the suicidal and mythical "regime" that's behind everything in these past two years. [30]

### **Lessons From the Calamities: Hard to Digest**

To summarize, it seems pretty likely that foreign-backed opposition forces, Jabhat al-Nusra or whoever exactly among them, are gassing the people of Aleppo with impunity and terrorizing them in various ways, spinning ridiculous lies, and committing genocide. And

they're still getting away with the Houla massacre, along with and whatever else is actually their work in this extended horror show of Syria's two-year "Arab Spring."

It's clearly past time for the world to say something, to review again the evidence for what's happening in Syria more clearly and specifically than before, and to act based on the truest reading. Every relevant mind - within the United Nations, human rights groups, world governments, mainstream and alternative media, and the global public - will need mental courage to get this right. In fact, it will take courage to even admit one needs courage, when we're supposed to be living on the free and open side of the world.

It's the possible mistakes by the official guardians of truth - in New York, mainly - that must now be challenged. So far these seem to be self-perpetuating, flowing freely in a system co-opted by certain member states and interest blocs, with no effective checks or balances. If so, it may well be beyond any hope of self-correction, and these corrupt and worse-than-useless institutions are fit only to be torn down from their pedestals, stripped of authority, and cast to the winds.

Ideally, they would be replaced by some new and saner forces on this information battlefield, a new class of guardians that actually keep reality, the Humans who live in it, and their Rights foremost in mind - not trailing far behind the geopolitical ambitions of some. But until then, the world might be better off with nothing to fill that slot. Whatever their positive works, **"Human Rights" groups and U.N. bodies probably do more harm than good by letting themselves be used as war propaganda outlets. War, after all, is about the worst thing there is for their purported cause.**

Do please note that in the decades of Assad family tyranny so many fret about, the massive suffering we see now - 70,000+ dead, largely civilian, largely children, millions displaced, endless torture and cruelty, massive destruction of infrastructure and social fabrics - has occurred over the last two years only. This is the same time frame in which armed militants also roamed the land striving for air support, and regime change, by surrender or by war, was insisted on for Syria. "Human Rights" crusaders helped greatly in this process, effectively corralling the people of Syria like sheep into an ever-tightening chute towards a very bad place.

And still the Syrian government refuses to surrender to the "terrorists," and the majority of the Syrian people who support them still refuse to crack. It's not too late, but it is urgent that everyone insist on the truth, finally, and on the sanity that Syria needs.

## Notes:

- [1] A Plea for Reality As the Basis for Investigating Syrian Massacres. E-mail letter, sent Sept. 25 to OHCHR <http://ciwclibya.org/lettersandpressreleases/apleaforrealitysyriaun.html>
- [2] Statement of the President of the Human Rights Council at Council side event "Bearing Witness: Human Rights and accountability in Syria" Geneva, 10 September 2012 <http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=12492&LangID=e>
- [3] The Libyan Civil War: Critical Views. <http://libyancivilwar.blogspot.com/>
- [4] "Bombing His Own People." Really? The Libyan Civil War: Critical Views. August 1, 2011. <http://libyancivilwar.blogspot.com/2011/08/bombing-his-own-people-really.html>
- [5] "Amnesty questions claim that Gaddafi ordered rape as weapon of war ." Patrick Cockburn, The Independent, June 24, 2011. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/amnesty-questions-claim-that-gaddafi-ordered-rape-as-weapon-of-war-2302037.html>
- [6] ] NATO's War on Libya and Africa By Maximilian Forte, Global Research, March 07, 2013 <http://www.globalresearch.ca/slouching-towards-sirte-natos-war-on-libya-and-africa/5325699> See also, Slouching Towards Sirte: NATO's War on Libya and Africa Maximilian Forte Paperback and E-book: 352 pages Publisher: Baraka Books (November 28, 2012) - entire book
- [7] Massacring Protesters: Really? The Libyan Civil War: Critical Views. Sept. 10, 2011 <http://libyancivilwar.blogspot.com/2011/09/massacring-protesters-really.html>
- [8] How Tripoli, and Sirte, Lost Their Water. The Libyan Civil War: Critical Views. August 3, 2012. <http://libyancivilwar.blogspot.com/2012/08/how-tripoli-and-sirte-lost-their-water.html>
- [9] The Tripoli Massacres {masterlist}. <http://libyancivilwar.blogspot.com/2011/08/tripoli-massacres.html>
- [10] The Sirte Massacres {masterlist}. <http://libyancivilwar.blogspot.com/2011/10/sirte-massacres-masterlist.html>
- [11] A Question Mark Over Yarmouk: Re-Thinking the Khamis Brigade Shed Massacre, June 13, 2012. [http://ciwclibya.org/images/QMOY\\_Final.pdf](http://ciwclibya.org/images/QMOY_Final.pdf)
- [12] ACLOS: Tremseh Massacre [http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Tremseh\\_massacre](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Tremseh_massacre)
- [13] ACLOS, Daraya: [http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Daraya\\_massacre](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Daraya_massacre)
- [14] ACLOS, Harak: [http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Harak\\_Massacre](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Harak_Massacre)
- [15] ACLOS: [http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/UNHRC\\_Report\\_February\\_2013](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/UNHRC_Report_February_2013)
- [16] ACLOS, Haswiyeh: [http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Haswiyeh\\_Massacre](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Haswiyeh_Massacre)
- [17] Claim and counter-claim surrounds latest Syria 'massacre' Bill Neely, ITV, January 17, 2013 <http://www.itv.com/news/2013-01-17/locals-say-new-black-uniformed-fighters-responsible-for-huwaisa-killings/>
- [18] ACLOS, Aqrab: [http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Aqrab\\_Massacre](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Aqrab_Massacre)
- [19] "Was there a massacre in the Syrian town of Aqrab?" Alex Thomson, Alex Thomson's view, Dec. 14, 2012 <http://blogs.channel4.com/alex-thomsons-view/happened-syrian-town-aqrab/3426> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ciua\\_3Rin4I](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ciua_3Rin4I)
- [20] ACLOS: [http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Aqrab\\_Massacre#The\\_Hostage\\_House\\_and\\_Smoke\\_Clues](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Aqrab_Massacre#The_Hostage_House_and_Smoke_Clues)
- [21] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9293151/UK-condemns-pure-naked-savagery-of-Houla-killings.html>
- [22] ACLOS, Qubeir: [http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Mazraat\\_al-Qubeir\\_massacre](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Mazraat_al-Qubeir_massacre)
- [23] ACLOS, Aleppo University: [http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Aleppo\\_University\\_Attack](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Aleppo_University_Attack)
- [24] ACLOS: Queiq River Massacre [http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Queiq\\_River\\_Massacre](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Queiq_River_Massacre)
- [25] The reasons, briefly, why bodies are not likely to have floated far enough: low water level as seen = weak current, non-bloated bodies (heavier than water) = slow-moving, and then there's likelihood of some kind of screen/barrier(s) along the 3-4 km stretch that could stop them entirely. For details, see: [http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Queiq\\_River\\_Massacre#Physical\\_Considerations:\\_Body\\_Mobility](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Queiq_River_Massacre#Physical_Considerations:_Body_Mobility)
- [26] ACLOS: [http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Queiq\\_River\\_Massacre#Early\\_Knowledge\\_of\\_Death\\_Toll](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Queiq_River_Massacre#Early_Knowledge_of_Death_Toll)
- [27] ACLOS: [http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Queiq\\_River\\_Massacre#The\\_March\\_10\\_Reminder](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Queiq_River_Massacre#The_March_10_Reminder)
- [28] ACLOS, March 19: [http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Alleged\\_chemical\\_attack\\_March\\_19\\_2013](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Alleged_chemical_attack_March_19_2013)
- [29] "Was the Syria Chemical Weapons Probe "Torpedoed" by the West?" By Adam Larson, Global Research, May 2, 2013. <http://www.globalresearch.ca/was-the-syria-chemical-weapons-probe-torpedoed-by-the-west/5333671>
- [30] ACLOS, April 13: [http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Alleged\\_Chemical\\_Attack\\_April\\_13\\_2013](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Alleged_Chemical_Attack_April_13_2013)