BBC world news editor: Houla massacre coverage based on opposition propaganda

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As quietly as possible, BBC world news editor Jon Williams has admitted that the coverage of last month's Houla massacre in Syria by the world's media and his own employers was a compendium of lies.

Datelined 16:23, June 7, Williams chose a personal blog to make a series of fairly frank statements explaining that there was no evidence whatsoever to identify either the Syrian Army or Alawite militias as the perpetrators of the May 25 massacre of 100 people.

By implication, Williams also suggests strongly that such allegations are the product of the propaganda department of the Sunni insurgents seeking to overthrow Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

After preparatory statements of self-justification noting the "complexity of the situation on the ground in Syria, and the need to try to separate fact from fiction," and Syria's long "history of rumours passing for fact," Williams writes:

"In the aftermath of the massacre at Houla last month, initial reports said some of the 49 children and 34 women killed had their throats cut. In Damascus, Western officials told me the subsequent investigation revealed none of those found dead had been killed in such a brutal manner. Moreover, while Syrian forces had shelled the area shortly before the massacre, the details of exactly who carried out the attacks, how and why were still unclear."

For this reason, he concludes somewhat belatedly, "In such circumstances, it's more important than ever that we report what we don't know, not merely what we do."

"In Houla, and now in Qubair, the finger has been pointed at the Shabiha, pro-government militia. But tragic death toll aside, the facts are few: it's not clear who ordered the killings—or why."

No trace of such a restrained approach could be found at the time on the BBC, or most anywhere else.

Instead the BBC offered itself as a sounding board for the statements of feigned outrage emanating from London, Washington and the United Nations headquarters—all blaming the atrocity on either the Syrian Army or Shabiha militias acting under its protection.

Typical was the May 28 report, "Syria Houla massacre: Survivors recount horror", in which unidentified "Survivors of the massacre ... have told the BBC of their shock and fear as regime forces entered their homes and killed their families." Nowhere was the question even posed that in such a conflict these alleged witnesses could be politically aligned with the opposition and acting under its instruction.

Only now does Williams state:

"Given the difficulties of reporting inside Syria, video filed by the opposition on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube may provide some insight into the story on the ground. But stories are never black and white—often shades of grey. Those opposed to President Assad have an agenda. One senior Western official went as far as to describe their YouTube communications strategy as 'brilliant'. But he also likened it to so-called 'psy-ops', brainwashing techniques used by the US and other military to convince people of things that may not necessarily be true."

Williams is in a position to know wherof he speaks.

On May 27, the BBC ran a report on Houla under a photo purporting to show "the bodies of children in Houla awaiting burial."

In reality, this was an example of opposition propaganda that was anything but "brilliant". The photograph of dozens of shrouded corpses was actually taken by Marco di Lauro in Iraq on March 27, 2003 and was of white body bags containing skeletons found in a

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desert south of Baghdad.

Di Lauro commented, “What I am really astonished by is that a news organization like the BBC doesn’t check the sources and it’s willing to publish any picture sent it by anyone: activist, citizen journalist or whatever… Someone is using someone else’s picture for propaganda on purpose.”

The BBC again acted as a vehicle for such propaganda, despite knowing that the photo had been supplied by an “activist” and that it could not be independently verified.

Williams concludes with the advice to his colleagues: “A healthy scepticism is one of the essential qualities of any journalist—never more so than in reporting conflict. The stakes are high—all may not always be as it seems.”

Given its track record, the appeal to exercise a healthy skepticism should more correctly be directed towards the BBC’s readers and viewers—in relation to the entire official media apparatus.

It may well be the case that Williams’ mea culpa is motivated by a personal concern at the role he and his colleagues are being asked to play as mouthpieces for the campaign for regime change in Syria. But with his comments buried away on his blog, elsewhere on the BBC everything proceeds according to script.

The BBC’s coverage of the alleged June 6 massacre in the village of Qubair once again features uncritical reporting of allegations by the opposition that it was the work of Shabiha militias that were being protected by Syrian troops. BBC correspondent Paul Danahar, accompanying UN monitors, writes of buildings gutted and burnt and states that it is “unclear” what happened to the bodies of dozens of reported victims. He writes of a house “gutted by fire,” the “smell of burnt flesh,” blood and pieces of flesh. He writes that “butchering the people did not satisfy the blood lust of the attackers. They shot the livestock too.”

This is accompanied by a picture of a dead donkey, but aside from this there is absolutely nothing of substance to indicate what happened in the village.

And at one point, Danahar tweets: “A man called Ahmed has come up from the village who says he witnessed the killings. He has says dozens were killed… He has a badly bruised face *but his story is conflicted & the UN say they are not sure he’s honest as they think he followed the convoy*” (emphasis added).

This does not stop Danahar from concluding, from tracks supposedly made by military vehicles, that “attempts to cover up the details of the atrocity are calculated & clear.”

So much for healthy scepticism!

It must also be pointed out that the BBC has not written a word regarding the June 7 report by the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* that the Free Syrian Army carried out the Houla massacre, according to interviews with local residents by opposition forces opposed to the Western-backed militia.

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