

How *Le Monde* fed pro-war propaganda over chemical weapons in Syria

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Just before the European Union (EU) decided to remove its embargo on weapons deliveries to the Syrian opposition, *Le Monde* published a series of articles claiming the Syrian regime had used chemical weapons against the opposition in April.

By publishing these articles, *Le Monde* is participating in a political provocation directed against the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad. The declared aim of the articles, prepared with the backing of the state and without definitive proof of its assertions, is to encourage the leaders of the imperialist powers to accuse Syria of using chemical weapons.

Le Monde's decision to launch such accusations, which have been repeatedly exposed as lies, is sinister and politically criminal. By publishing them, the newspaper knew it was providing a pretext not only for removing the EU embargo, but for war. US President Barack Obama, supported by the French and British governments, has declared the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime to be "a red line" that would trigger an attack by Washington.

Le Monde bases its editorial on the reports of its journalist Jean-Philippe Rémy and photographer Laurent Van der Stockt. According to *Le Monde*, they stayed clandestinely with opposition forces for two months in Syria, near Damascus. *Le Monde* says nothing about how they organized such a stay and does not identify which military or intelligence agencies in Europe put them in contact with the Syrian opposition forces.

In its editorial entitled "Demand the truth about chemical weapons," *Le Monde* praises the charges brought by Rémy and Van der Stockt against Assad for their supposed authenticity and level of detail. It writes, "What they report comes from neither videos posted on the internet by the Syrian opposition nor from refugee accounts, which are the usual sources of witnesses to chemical weapons attacks in Syria over recent months. For the first time, chemical attacks are described by Western journalists, direct witnesses to the events."

Le Monde itself recognizes, however, that it has no probative evidence to substantiate its explosive accusations, writing: "*Le Monde* does not possess irrefutable proof of chemical weapons use in Syria."

That is, the details of Rémy and Van der Stockt, based on reports and interviews supplied by the Syrian opposition militias, whose claims have often proven to be false, have no

real value. The arguments concocted by *Le Monde* to conclude that Damascus uses chemical weapons are based on the manipulation and lies.

In the article "Chemical war in Syria – on the Damascus front," Rémy claims: "On the day of a chemical attack in a zone of the Jobar front on April 13, the *Le Monde* photographer saw the combatants, who fight in the ruined houses, begin to cough and then put on gas masks without any apparent haste, but in reality already exposed. Men crouched down, suffocating, vomiting."

This does not constitute proof of recourse to chemical weapons in Syria, for these symptoms resemble those which an exposure to tear gas would provoke. Trying to convince the reader that the gas in question was in fact a deadly chemical weapon, the article adds: "the seriousness of these events, their multiplication, the tactic of using such weapons shows that it does not concern simple tear gas used at the front, but products of another class, a lot more toxic."

This argument is absurd: the simple fact that large quantities of gas were used does not in itself demonstrate that it is not tear gas. The police forces in France and elsewhere spread tear gas in large quantities over protestors. *Le Monde* has not yet proposed air strikes against the French police to stop chemical warfare against the French population.

In fact, the article does not demonstrate that the gas which was used on the Damascus front was highly toxic. *Le Monde*'s journalist does not cite any deaths resulting from this gas—even though, according to him, only a "handful" of gas masks were distributed to the opposition fighters around Damascus. The fact that the latter put on their masks "without haste" furthermore suggests that they did not fear lethal effects.

Le Monde's procedure to determine whether its journalists in reality witnessed the use of chemical weapons against the opposition is a mockery. *Le Monde* claims to possess samples "taken on the spot by Syrian doctors from victims intoxicated by toxic gases used during combat. These samples were handed over to French authorities—the only scientifically certified centre in France able to carry out analyses being located at the Ministry of Defence—which is committed to providing *Le Monde* with the complete results of this study."

Le Monde thus received material furnished by Syrian

opposition personnel and asked the French army to say whether or not they were chemical weapons. Such a procedure, which has no independence from the state and its proxies in the Western-backed Syrian opposition, goes against basic principles of journalistic method.

Sections of the opposition tied to Al Qaeda possess chemical weapons, and the French state and Al Qaeda are both looking to intensify the conflict with Assad. Nevertheless, *Le Monde* does not propose any independent verification of the samples furnished by the opposition, nor an examination of their origin or the scientific analyses of the French army.

The newspaper knowingly offers itself up as a media platform for the most diverse manipulations, by criminal forces or government agencies, which aim to provoke a war.

Le Monde avoids raising a fact of critical importance to evaluate its journalists' reports: the declarations of the United Nations which refute them. Rémy and Van der Stockt investigated the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime during April. Carla Del Ponte, who sits on the UN enquiry commission, was charged with investigating chemical weapons use in Syria during the very same period. She drew conclusions diametrically opposed to those of *Le Monde*.

On May 5, Carla Del Ponte told the BBC: "We have gathered evidence which implies that chemical weapons were used, in particular poison gas. What has emerged from our enquiry is that it was used by the opposition, by the rebels. We have no, absolutely no indication that the government, the Syrian government authorities have used chemical weapons."

Dishonestly seeking to give greater weight to its accusations, *Le Monde* cites allegations already discredited by the UN, without quoting the remarks of Del Ponte.

In the article "Chemical war in Syria," Rémy writes: "Several countries: the United States, Turkey and Israel, have declared that they possess material elements indicating the use of weapons of this type, but have not communicated the exact nature of their evidence, nor decided if, as President Obama promised in August 2012, that the recourse to such weapons by the Damascus government would constitute the crossing of the 'red line' susceptible of involving a foreign intervention in Syria against the regime."

The silence of Washington, Ankara and Tel Aviv on Del Ponte's comment is the most convincing demonstration that the accusations of *Le Monde* are unfounded. If these countries have not produced the evidence until now of the use of chemical weapons by Assad, it is because they simply do not have any.

As for *Le Monde*, it continues its pro-war propaganda. Its editorial ends by demanding that the NATO governments provide further accusations against Assad: "It is urgent that Western leaders clearly state what they know about chemicals in Syria, that they stop equivocating about the 'red line'. They must stop the ambiguity before it's too late."

This comment leaves no ambiguity about the position of *Le Monde*'s editorial board. They want the provocations against

Syria to redouble, and NATO to prepare sufficient charges against Assad to provoke a war. If the war is launched without the agreement of the UN Security Council, where Russia and China have already used their veto against other belligerent measures against Syria, the intervention would be doubly illegal, according to international law.

The criminal character of such an intervention, led by allies like the far-right Islamists tied to Al Qaeda, aims to extend imperialist domination over the strategic resources and oil of the Middle East. If it involves a direct NATO intervention in Syria, it will end with losses comparable to those inflicted by the American occupation of Iraq, which left over a million dead. This does not include the fact that a war in Syria would likely provoke another in Lebanon, indeed with Iran or even Russia.

The call to war against Syria marks an important step in the putrefaction of the French ruling class. The official press and the petty-bourgeois "left" layers historically close to *Le Monde*, such as the New Anti-capitalist Party, have placed themselves in the service of the basest geo-strategic manoeuvres of the state.

New York Times reporter Judith Miller forever discredited herself by publishing a decade ago the unfounded allegations on the supposed arms of mass destruction to justify the American war in Iraq. Following the scorn provoked by her role of a lying propagandist for a bloody criminal war, Miller had to abandon the *Times* and journalism. She afterwards took a seat on the Council of Foreign Relations, a think tank for the Pentagon and the American intelligence services.

By copying Miller's method in Syria, in a much more explosive international situation, the editorial board of the French press' "newspaper of reference" has lowered itself to the same politically criminal level.



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