

The Guardian's George Monbiot joins “fake news” campaign

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Week after week, the world's media has bombarded its viewers and readers with denunciations and warnings of the dangers of “fake news.”

The vast bulk of these articles uncritically regurgitate the unsubstantiated claims emanating from Washington, London and other capitals that President Vladimir Putin has set up an army of internet trolls operating fake accounts to subvert the democratic process in furtherance of Russia's interests.

An article by George Monbiot in Britain's *Guardian* newspaper has the unintended benefit of making clear that the ultimate political goal of the anti-Russia campaign is to silence all voices of opposition to the ruling elite's agenda of stepped-up militarism, war and social reaction.

Aligning himself openly with the political and military-intelligence apparatus in the US and Britain, Monbiot focuses on legitimising the intervention of the imperialist powers in Syria—both direct and using Islamist proxies—aimed at replacing the government of Bashar al-Assad with a client regime. He brands reputable and high-profile journalists and political commentators as the purveyors of fake news.

His article, “A lesson from Syria: it's crucial not to fuel far-right conspiracy theories, or How a chemical weapons attack in Syria spawned a shameful series of conspiracy theories,” sees Monbiot posture as the defender of democracy and informed choice. It is a thoroughly lazy and dishonest piece.

Monbiot accuses veteran investigative journalist Seymour Hersh, who comprehensively debunked Washington's false claims of a Syrian government chemical weapons attacks in August 2013 and again on April 4, 2017, of fuelling right-wing conspiracy theorists.

He levels the same charge at journalist John Pilger and Professor Noam Chomsky for citing Theodore Postol, Professor Emeritus of Science, Technology and International Security at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a critic of the US government's analysis of the 2013 Ghouta chemical attack in Syria.

Postol had suggested that the Syrian government could not have carried out the 2017 attack at Khan Sheikhoun because the Syrian government had got rid of its stock of chemical weapons under United Nations supervision, as the UN Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) had confirmed in January 2016. He said jihadists had been using nerve gases and sarin for some years and suggested an explosive device laid on the ground had set fire to a weapons depot belonging to the rebels.

Monbiot accuses Pilger, Chomsky and Postol of creating “a toxic atmosphere” around the issue. He makes great play of the fact that several right-wing US politicians, including former representative Ron Paul and Representative Thomas Massie, have also questioned why Assad would have launched a chemical attack on his own people that would give him no benefit at all.

In this way, Monbiot makes an amalgam between voices on the right and left in order to prevent those sceptical of the traditional news outlets from searching and finding honest, progressive and socialist sources of information.

He makes no investigation himself of the incident on which he focuses his readers' attention.

The explosion in rebel-held Khan Sheikhoun, in Syria's northwestern Idlib province, killed at least 83 people and injured many more. The victims appeared to have suffered from a chemical attack, possibly sarin, a colourless, odourless liquid or gas capable of causing respiratory arrest and death and banned under international law.

The US used the attack to justify ratcheting up its war effort against Assad. Before any of the facts had been established, the US launched 59 Tomahawk missiles air strikes at the Shayrat air base, from which it said the sarin attack was staged, killing five Syrian soldiers and nine civilians.

The chemical attack had all the hallmarks of a false flag operation designed to justify precisely such an intervention.

Monbiot is an environmental and political activist who has made his reputation as an investigative journalist and an advocate of truth and openness. But the methods he uses in his article are a travesty of the honesty and thoroughness one might reasonably expect.

He accepts uncritically the official line promoted by the US and its allies about the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons, and the very limited conclusions of the OPCW's report, based on its Fact-Finding Mission (FFM), without carefully scrutinising its evidence. Indeed, it seems doubtful whether he even bothered to read it.

He says that the OPCW concluded in its report in October “that the atrocity was caused by a bomb filled with sarin, dropped by the government of Syria,” but says nothing about the FFM's actual investigation.

The FFM's stated brief, in its own words, was “to establish the facts surrounding allegations of the use of toxic chemicals for hostile purposes in the country, it is not mandated to reach

conclusions about attributing responsibility for chemical weapons use.”

The FFM based its report on interviews, bio-medical samples from victims, open-source research, documents and other records, and the characteristics of the samples including those provided by the Syrian Government, which it said “engaged constructively” with its investigation.

Crucially, it states explicitly that it did not visit Khan Sheikhoun because it was, and still is, held by Islamist rebels, including Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham and their affiliates, making it too dangerous. No international monitoring groups were able to enter Idlib to access the site of the alleged attack.

Jerry Smith, the lead field investigator for the UN-backed operation to remove Syria’s chemical weapons in 2013, warned that without access to the site it was *impossible* to collect empirical data with an objective chain of custody (emphasis added).

Monbiot cites a journalist from the *Guardian* who apparently accessed the site and concluded there was no weapons depot near the scene of the contamination that could have caused the sarin gas explosion. The newspaper is “the only news organisation in the world to do so,” Monbiot states. How was this possible—outside of collusion with rebels in control of the area? We are not informed.

The FFM concluded that a large number of people, some of whom had died, “had been exposed to sarin or a sarin-like substance, and that such a release could only be determined to have been the use of sarin as a chemical weapon.”

It *did not* say who it thought was responsible for the dissemination of the substance. But it also noted that the various hospitals appeared to have begun admitting some 57 casualties of the attack between 0640 and 0645 hours, that is *before* the alleged attack, with 10 of the patients admitted to a hospital 125 kilometres away from Khan Sheikhoun, and another 42 patients to a hospital 30 kilometres away.

The OPCW also reported the use of sarin in a separate “incident” in the village of al-Lataminah, 25 kilometres south of Khan Sheikhoun, five days before the main attack, which the mainstream media has ignored. It did not consider the implications of this for its Khan Sheikhoun investigation. It had previously been thought that the Khan Sheikhoun attack was the first sarin attack since the August 2013 attack on Ghouta, near Damascus.

Monbiot simply dismisses the possibility of a false flag attack, writing, “I have found no credible evidence that Syrian jihadists have access to sarin.” Yet even the UN’s own mission stated in its report after the August 2013 sarin attack on Ghouta that both sides of the war possessed chemical weapons in a quantity capable of producing mass casualties. Furthermore, it noted that in five sites where chemical weapons were used up until then, none of the victims were members of the armed rebel opposition, while in three sites the victims were Syrian army soldiers and army personnel and civilians. Thus, it was highly improbable that the attacks had been launched by the Syrian government.

The report thus confirmed the suspicions of Carla Del Ponte, a leading member of a UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, who had been one of the first, in May 2013, to raise the possibility that rebels have used the nerve agent, sarin. She had said there were “strong, concrete suspicions but not yet

incontrovertible proof.”

As the Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist Seymour Hersh explained in the article “Whose sarin?” in the *London Review of Books* in December 2013, “In the months before the attack, the American intelligence agencies produced a series of highly classified reports, culminating in a formal Operations Order—a planning document that precedes a ground invasion—citing evidence that the al-Nusra Front, a jihadi group affiliated with al-Qaeda, had mastered the mechanics of creating sarin and was capable of manufacturing it in quantity.

“When the attack occurred, al-Nusra should have been a suspect, but the [Obama] administration cherry-picked intelligence to justify a strike against Assad.”

Only recently, the US State Department issued a warning to travellers to Syria admitting that the core rebel groups in northwest Syria, whom it directs from Turkey, not only possess but had used chemical weapons—the very crimes it has accused the Syrian government of committing. It states, “Tactics of ISIS, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, and other violent extremist groups [al-Nusra successors and split-offs] include the use of suicide bombers, kidnapping, small and heavy arms, improvised explosive devices, and chemical weapons.”

The OPCW stated that it had formally received 15 allegations related to rebel groups’ acquisition, possession or transfer of, or intent to use, chemical weapons or toxic chemicals, two of which referred to ISIS and seven to al-Nusra, since last June. If Monbiot “found no credible evidence that Syrian jihadists have access to sarin,” then it is because he chose to ignore it.

To portray the entirely valid criticisms of the official line on the Khan Sheikhoun attack as fuelling far-right conspiracy theories is politically criminal. It is a transparent attempt by the *Guardian* to block any challenge to the military operations, overt and covert, carried out by US and British imperialism and their regional allies in the Middle East under cover of “humanitarian” concerns and the “responsibility to protect.”

The *Guardian* speaks for the nominally liberal bourgeoisie. While it claims to stand for progressive opinion, its real role is to police public discourse and support the strategic imperatives of imperialism. That is why it has come out and attacked “some of the world’s most famous crusaders against propaganda,” thereby declaring that any criticism of US and British war plans is beyond the pale and cannot be tolerated. The *Guardian*’s role is to help create the necessary political climate to further an agenda of war, censorship and domestic repression.



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