

# Murdoch's Times witch-hunts academics for questioning UK government's Syria lies

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19 April 2018

The *Times* newspaper has mounted a scurrilous campaign to smear academics questioning the official narrative around the US, British and French military attack on Syria.

Under a front-page headline Saturday, Rupert Murdoch's right-wing, pro-war propaganda sheet targeted Professor Tim Hayward (University of Edinburgh—environmental political theory), Professor Piers Robinson (University of Sheffield—politics, society and political journalism) and Lecturer Tara McCormack (Leicester University—international relations) as “Apologists for Assad working in British universities.”

All have written on themes of propaganda at times of war, and their work has been cited academically and by research institutions as well as by major media from the *Guardian* to the BBC.

They have come under attack by the *Times* because they are founders and/or members of the Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media (SPM), set up recently to “facilitate research and debate with respect to the 2011-present war in Syria and the role of both media and propaganda.”

“In all wars, truth and reality are profoundly contested,” the SPM states. The Syrian war therefore presents “an urgent need for rigorous academic analysis of media reporting of this war, the role that propaganda has played in terms of shaping perceptions of the conflict and how these relate to broader geo-strategic processes within the ME [Middle East] region and beyond.”

“We also aim to provide a source of reliable, informed and timely analysis for journalists, publics and policymakers.”

So recent is the group that its International Advisory Board, currently consisting of nine academics, is still under development. Its members have, however, written articles and have been involved in social media posts questioning the US/UK government's claim that the Assad regime was behind the chemical attack in Douma, which was used to justify Saturday's military strikes.

They have called into question the bona fides of the White Helmets, which is the source of the gas attack charge against

the Syrian government. The *Times* accuses SPM of spreading the “slur” that the White Helmets “fabricated video evidence” of the gas attack as a pretext for Western intervention, singling out Hayward for using the hashtag #syriaHoax and for tweeting that “Witness statements from civilians and officials in Ghouta raise very disturbing questions.”

The *Times* does not pretend to engage with Hayward's questions. Substituting smears and hyperbole for evidence and facts, it published an inside splash, complete with photographs and bios of the academics, who are accused of “pushing” a Russian line and trying to “intimidate” other academics.

The slanderous editorial brands the academics “Assad's Useful Idiots.” Asserting that “it would take an extraordinary degree of credulity, sophistry and ignorance to exculpate” Assad of responsibility for the Douma attack, it continues, “Exactly those characteristics are exemplified by a small group of academics... at respectable institutions that include the universities of Sheffield and Edinburgh.”

The *Times* claims that those identified “disseminate material that is wrong, unscholarly and morally odious,” using “pseudoscience and misdirection” in the manner of Kremlin “conspiracy theories.”

Without presenting any scientific or scholarly sources to back up its charges, the *Times* denounces the academics' research as a “stain on the reputation of the institutions which host its authors.”

“A society founded on Enlightenment principles of liberal rights and free expression treats untrammelled academic inquiry as sacrosanct,” it intones before insisting that these “principles” do not apply for “Assad apologists.” They are, we are told, not involved in “inquiry at all,” just “dogmatic assertions of the unpalatable and indefensible” and a “violation of the ethos of academic research.”

The sinister implications of this statement are clear. Free speech and “liberal rights” must be suspended if Murdoch deems those exercising them to be expounding views that are “unpalatable.” This is the language of dictatorship.

To reinforce its demand that the academics should be sacked forthwith, the *Times* makes a disgraceful parallel between the SPM academics and fascists. “No reputable university would employ a Holocaust denier in a department of history,” it states. “The universities who unwittingly provide cover for these agents of disinformation and cheerleaders for despotism have a case to answer.”

The academics concerned have nothing to retract. The White Helmets, founded by former British Army officer and intelligence operative-turned mercenary, James Le Mesurier, work as an arm of the anti-Assad and Islamist-dominated rebel militias.

Funded by the UK government’s Conflict, Stability and Security Fund and the US government’s USAID—Office of Transition Initiatives programme, they are among a network of jihadi forces supported by the West to engineer regime-change.

In December, UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) officials were forced to suspend a multi-million-pound project ostensibly aimed at training a civilian police force in rebel-held Aleppo, Idlib and Daraa provinces. A BBC *Panorama* investigation, *The Jihadis You Pay For*, showed how the Free Syrian Police (FSP) comprised al-Qaeda forces complicit in extra-judicial killings and torture.

Hayward et al are not the only ones querying the White Helmets.

On Monday, veteran Middle East journalist Robert Fisk, in an on-the-spot report from Douma, described the White Helmets as “partly funded by the Foreign Office.”

He wrote that with the Syrian regime nearing victory in Douma prior to the Western strikes, they abandoned the area to travel “to the rebel province of Idlib with the armed groups when the final truce [with the government] was agreed.” Fisk’s report has received barely any coverage in the official media.

The academics have rejected the claim that they are “pro-Assad.” Hayward stated, “speaking for myself, I am simply ‘pro-’ getting at the truth.”

“A question thoughtful readers will likely be asking,” he wrote on his blog, “is why *The Times* has gone to the trouble it has to give such prominence to a small group of critical academics. In the early hours of this morning, as I looked at the front page prepared by *The Times*, news was coming in of the military attack taking place in Syria. That attack—whose legality under international law, I believe, stands to be clarified—was ‘justified’ on the basis of exactly the kind of claims that the academic working group is subjecting to critical assessment.”

Robinson said the *Times* was seeking to “discredit and stop us from researching what are very important issues.”

“As academics in a democracy, in a free country, it is our

job to ask critical questions... to encourage people to read and think about critical opinions and to evaluate.”

Under conditions where the major imperialist powers—wracked by crisis—are dragging humanity inexorably towards a third world war, the powers-that-be are no longer prepared to countenance “critical opinion.”

All the official media—from the *Guardian* to the *Times*—are parroting government pro-war propaganda. Under the guise of combating “fake news” and “Kremlin trolls,” social media is being censored and closed down. The *Times* article indicates that this censorship and intimidation are now to be extended to academic research and the campuses.

The SPM first came to attention because of material it had posted questioning the official line on the poisoning of double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in Salisbury last month. The SPM’s briefing paper, “Doubts about ‘Novichoks,’” raised questions as to the provenance of the nerve agent supposedly involved and its origins, and was widely cited. Cornell University Professor of Organic Chemistry David B. Collum described it as “the most definitive work” on the novichok nerve agent scandal.

Such critical research is considered beyond the pale. Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, however, can go on German television and lie through his teeth without fear of censure.

Workers and youth must reject the effort of a billionaire oligarch to dictate what can be said at universities and in academic research. Such authoritarian moves are bound up with efforts to militarise the campuses and turn them into centres for government propaganda and adjuncts of Britain’s war machine. Fundamentally, the assault on free academic inquiry is directed against the anti-war sentiment that exists widely amongst students and youth.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality is dedicated to the fight against militarism and censorship and the defence of democratic rights. This necessitates a political struggle against the capitalist profit system that is the source of war and state repression through the building of a socialist and internationalist mass movement of workers and youth.



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