

Culture & Media

# Attacks on Academic Freedom, The Times of London, and MI6



by DR PIERS ROBINSON

Sunday, 22nd September 2024

Once again, *The Times* newspaper is attacking academics who speak truth to power, with a new [hit-piece](#). What the latest article does not tell the reader anything about is the history of attacks on academic freedom and, in particular, the campaign against members of the [Working Group on Syria, Media and Propaganda](#), their investigation of propaganda and the war in Syria, and the international controversy regarding whistleblowers from the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) who revealed the corruption of a chemical weapons attack investigation. I shall provide some of that all important context here.

Back in 2017, a number of us had been discussing various aspects of the war in Syria including the allegations of chemical weapons use. Some of us had also appeared at the [Media on Trial](#) events alongside [Vanessa Beeley](#) and Peter Ford (former British Ambassador to Syria). These conversations led to the formation of the [Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media](#) in January 2018. I

assume it is very likely that, at this point, someone involved with UK government propaganda operations in Syria became alarmed with the fact that a group of credible academics were getting together in order to research and investigate their activities. What ensued during the following weeks was extraordinary.

On April 7th 2018, an alleged chemical weapons attacks was reported in the Damascus suburb of Douma. The event was international news and shocking images of dead women and children in an apartment block, coupled with hospital scenes involving panicked civilians, were broadcast around the world. Almost immediately the US, British and French governments were accusing the Syrian government of being responsible for the alleged attack and calls to carry out military strikes against Syria became ubiquitous. A taste of this war fever can be seen during this *Sky News* interview, during which I debated with Alan Mendoza from the Henry Jackson Society neocon think-tank:

### Dr Alan Mendoza speaks to Sky News about the Syrian Conflict



Then, on Friday 14th April—at the same time as US, UK and French missiles were being launched against targets in Syria—the *Times* of London published four articles attacking the working group. We were on the front page, our pictures shown on the inside pages, and an editorial strongly implied that we should be removed from our positions as professors at leading (Russell Group) British universities.



# Apologists for Assad working in universities

Top academics claim chemical attacks were fake

## TIMES INVESTIGATION

George Kasin, Dominic Kennedy, Krystina Shvedt, Deborah Hayes

Senior British academics are spreading pro-Assad disinformation and conspiracy theories promoted by Russia. The Times can reveal.

They are members of a self-styled Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media (WSPM) and hold posts at universities, including Edinburgh, Sheffield and Loughborough.

Members of the group, which includes academics, have been spreading the story, promoted by the Russian ambassador in Britain, Vladimir Dmitriyev, that the White Helmets, a Syrian volunteer force, has fabricated video evidence of attacks by the Russian-backed President Assad.

WSPM advisers include an American who has challenged the US version of 9/11 as a conspiracy theory and an Australian who suggested that the CIA was behind last week's chemical attack in Syria.

The group, pro-Assad, appears to be based in Syria, given its use of East-West military showdowns after the use of chemical weapons in Douma.

In other developments yesterday: It emerged that British armed forces were ready last night to attack Syria with US and French jets, warships and submarines if given the order. Any offensive would come as early as today. Britain disclosed that Russia had

been recruiting Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Yulia, for five years before they were attacked with a sarin-like nerve agent in Salisbury.

Alexander Yakovlev, the Russian ambassador in London, said that the British-led White Helmets were "known for staging attacks" in Syria. Diane Ghannouchy, the Syrian peace secretary, stated only the second week this year when reportedly asked to set out the circumstances in which Britain would support a Syrian intervention.

The editors backed White Helmets in a defence column. Some has attacked Russia's role in the chemical attack on Khan Sheikhoun in April last year, which killed 81 people, a third of them children. Last September a UN report found that "there are reasonable grounds to believe serious human rights abuses are being committed in Syria".

Yesterday an WSPM member, Ian Hayward, professor of environmental political theory at the University of Loughborough, refuted a claim that the "White Helmets and terrorist groups staged false flag events and kidnapped doctors' children to use as pawns in events".

Professor Hayward has published a blog article for his colleague Paul McKerrall, a professor of genetic epidemiology and statistical genetics, which claimed that there was almost



Winslet in red A ragswain yesterday at Ascot, where three women will compete in the Grand National's Turf. Kate Winslet is better known on Blue Sky Day. Pages 13-15, subject

50 best plays  
The greatest dramas ever

Saturday review



Posh, white and privileged  
My problem with Oxbridge

Letters, Sarahs, Magazine



Eat! The easy recipe guide

Magazine



We had done little or nothing to deserve such a ferocious and arguably unprecedented attack. Indeed, we had not, at that point, even published our [first briefing note on chemical weapons allegations](#). Clearly, someone, somewhere, wanted to warn us off from researching Syria and, in particular, analysing the alleged chemical weapons attacks.

Our first briefing, in fact, was published months later and addressed the OPCW's interim Fact Finding Mission report into Douma. We pointed out various aspects of the events in question and concluded



that it was likely to have been a staged event, or so-called 'false flag'.

Then, in early 2019, after the OPCW's final report on Douma was published, evidence of dissent from within the OPCW emerged. The working group was leaked an [engineering study](#) and, later in the year, an OPCW official gave testimony at a [panel in Brussels](#), whilst Wikileaks published a series of internal [OPCW documents](#). It became clear that the OPCW investigation into Douma had been manipulated in order to reach a "pre-ordained conclusion", and one that blamed the Syrian Government. The controversy continues to this day with two reports now submitted to the European Union Parliament in [2023](#) and [2024](#).



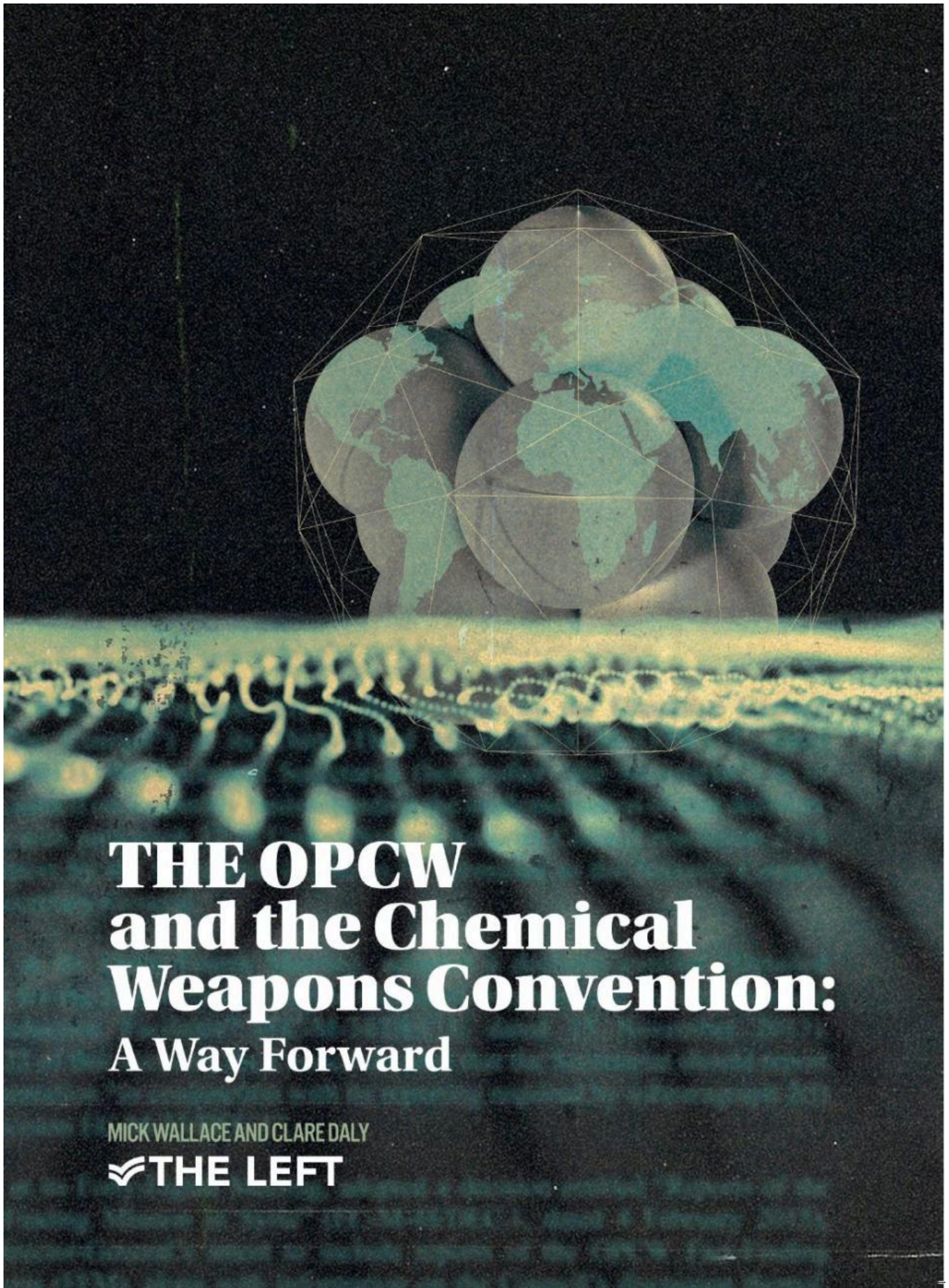
**A REVIEW OF THE ORGANISATION  
FOR THE PROHIBITION OF CHEMICAL  
WEAPONS FACT-FINDING MISSION  
REPORT INTO THE ALLEGED USE OF  
CHEMICAL WEAPONS IN DOUMA,  
SYRIA, IN APRIL 2018: *EVIDENCE  
OF MANIPULATION, BIAS AND  
CENSORSHIP***

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By Berlin Group 21

Submitted to Mick Wallace and Clare Daly MEPs, Independents 4  
Change as a contribution to the discussions around the OPCW and  
the alleged chemical weapons attack in Douma, Syria, April 7 2018





If the *Times* of London was committed to objective and accurate journalism, one might reasonably expect that, once OPCW scientists and officials had emerged and essentially vindicated the academics' curiosity and questioning, that they would perhaps adjust their position. Perhaps the journalists might even have acknowledged that the academics were justified, and then covered the



story of the OPCW scientists. Far from it, the newspaper kept up its attacks whilst ignoring entirely the OPCW scientists, Brendan Whelan and Ian Henderson, who had challenged the corruption of the Douma investigation.

What then is driving the coverage by the the *Times* on this issue? And why might Leask be carrying on the whole lamentable smear campaign against the academics? One possibility is that the *Times* of London is not as independent and as objective as it presents itself to be. Since coming into their line of fire, we have learned a number of things about the British newspaper of record. They are as follows:

**First**, in 2013, the *Times* was involved with an MI6 sample-gathering operation in a town called Sheik Maqsood. We know this because Hamish de Bretton-Gordon (former British military) explained in a Wilton Park podcast (hosted by an arm of the British Foreign Office) that he had worked alongside *Times* journalist Anthony Lloyd in Sheikh Maqsood. The *Times* reported on the incident and the samples were sent off to the British Government's Porton Down base. The then British Prime Minister David Cameron described this as confirmation of sarin use in Syria:

Hamish de Bretton-Gordon states he became involved in gathering samples in 2013, prior to the Ghouta mass casualty sarin attack. During this period two British newspapers reported the existence of

an MI6 sample-gathering operation in Syria<sup>30</sup> whilst de Bretton-Gordon states he was involved with a Times newspaper journalist, Anthony Lloyd, in gathering samples from the 13 April 2013 incident at Sheik Maqsood.<sup>31</sup> The British Prime Minister later, it is reported, referred to these alleged incidents noting that samples had been tested at the UK's Porton Down laboratory from Sheikh Maqsood and that '[w]e believe the scale of the use is sanctioned by the Assad regime, ...[t]hat is the picture described to me by the joint intelligence committee'.<sup>32</sup>

Excerpts from Berlin Group 21 Review of the Douma Controversy

When a UN-OPCW investigation examined these claims, however, it made clear the evidence was insufficient to conclude that the alleged attack had occurred.

**Second**, the then *Times* columnist Oliver Kamm let it be known that James Le Mesurier, a former British military officer (now deceased) who headed up the so-called [White Helmets](#) in Syria and who also oversaw the supply of alleged witnesses to OPCW fact-finding missions, had asked that his newspaper keep up its attacks on the working group. We know this because Kamm said this himself:





# Thread



**Oliver Kamm**

@OliverKamm



"Last year The Times identified a group of academics at UK universities spreading pro-Assad conspiracy theories. [Le Mesurier] reached out to this newspaper to urge us to keep on their case. A fine humanitarian & heroic friend of Syria's people will be remembered & honoured."

17:55 · 13 Nov 19 · [Twitter Web App](#)

**4** Retweets **16** Likes



**Third**, le Mesurier's wife Emma Le Mesurier (née Winberg), and head of 'strategic communications' for the White Helmets operation in Syria, is described as having worked for MI6 in this *Politico Europe* article, written by a journalist who had been commissioned to document their story. Although Emma le Mesurier had sought legal action to prevent the story from being published, *Politico* went ahead and included the claim that she had previously worked for MI6.



## DEATH IN ISTANBUL

### The untold story behind Syria's White Helmets

A tale of love, war and Russian disinformation.

By SHANNON VAN SANT

Illustrations by Zé Otavio for POLITICO

I began drafting outlines for the book and film and sifted through hours of recorded conversations with Emma. She told me of her love for James, and the years before she met him when she worked for the British government in Damascus, Syria. She said several times she had worked for MI6.



(Asked to comment on the details included in this article, Emma through a law firm sent a series of letters to POLITICO seeking to stop its publication. She did not confirm or deny she had worked for MI6 but said she had been formerly employed by the U.K. Foreign & Commonwealth Office. MI6 works with the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, as the department is currently known. She said she had been advised by her agent that my requests for compensation were not proportionate to the role I had played).

Excerpts from Van Sant's *Politico* article

Also of note is that Emma Winberg appeared at an event organised by DFR Lab, part of the NATO-sponsored Atlantic Council think tank, during which she discussed the role of the White Helmets in terms of documenting alleged atrocities and supplying information to the OPCW. This occurred on 22nd June 2018—i.e. right in the middle of the OPCW's Fact Finding Mission in Douma—and included Eliot Higgins from Bellingcat (another [British state-linked operation](#)) and discussed the challenge being posed by an alleged 'sustained' and 'vicious' 'disinformation' campaign against the White Helmets. The event can be viewed here:



**Fourth**, later in 2018, documents were leaked showing that a covert UK Government propaganda operation, called the [Integrity Initiative](#), had been established in order to co-ordinate clusters of journalists and academics and, ostensibly, to counter Russian propaganda. As it transpired, two of the journalists whose names appeared on the byline of the *Times* attack on the academics, Dominic Kennedy and Deborah Haynes (see front page image above), were also named as cluster members in the Integrity Initiative documents. When contacted by me, Haynes stated that her name had been added to the *Times* article by mistake. Dominic Kennedy, however, refused to answer whether or not he was involved with the Integrity Initiative, or if it had anything to do with the attack on the academics:

On 27 Dec 2018, at 16:34, Piers G Robinson <[piers.robinson@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:piers.robinson@sheffield.ac.uk)> wrote:

Dear Dominic,

Was there involvement, of any kind, between the Integrity Initiative and/or the Institute for Statecraft, and your co-authored articles attacking British academics back in April 2018?

best,

Piers

Professor of Politics, Society and Political Journalism,  
PhD Director

Department Web page: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/journalism/staff/piers-robinson>

**Dominic Kennedy** <[dominic.kennedy@thetimes.co.uk](mailto:dominic.kennedy@thetimes.co.uk)>  
To: Piers G Robinson <[piers.robinson@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:piers.robinson@sheffield.ac.uk)>

31 December 2018 at 20:18

Dear Piers  
The articles speak for themselves.  
Yours very truly  
Dominic

Sent from my iPhone

He was asked the question several times, but never gave an answer. I gave up asking.

Drawing all of this together, succinctly, the *Times* of London has continued a sustained campaign attacking academics who investigated the issue of alleged chemical weapons attacks in Syria, even when people from within the organisation (the OPCW) tasked with investigating the incidents revealed to the world that one of them, into the alleged Douma chemical weapons attack, had been corrupted. But it has never chosen to reveal to its readers the fact that it has itself been involved with British intelligence-linked actors—Hamish de Bretton-Gordon and James Le Mesurier (via his relationship with Emma Winberg)—and a UK Government propaganda operation (the Integrity Initiative). And it has never chosen to pay any attention to the two courageous scientists—Brendan Whelan and Ian Henderson—who had challenged the corruption of the Douma investigation.

I contend that all of this points clearly to the *Times* being compromised, effectively serving the interests of the British government.

But there is much more at stake here than the injustice of a respected British newspaper targeting academics who were, and still are, simply doing their job. The Douma incident involved the killing of 43 civilians, many of them women and children. One of the facts to have emerged from the leaked OPCW documents is that the original toxicology report, authored by NATO chemical weapons experts, was systematically suppressed. It had concluded the civilians had not been killed by chlorine gas. And if they were not killed by chlorine gas, how was it their had bodies turned up, gathered in piles, in an apartment block in Douma?





The witnesses, many of whom were White Helmets, who claimed to the OPCW investigators that civilians had perished in a chlorine gas attack, had been organised under the supervision of James Le Mesurier himself.

Meanwhile, other witnesses stated categorically that the hospital scenes aired to the world had been staged by the White Helmets. These claims were corroborated by the BBC's Riam Dalati, who stated, in winter 2019, that six months of research and interviews had confirmed the scenes were indeed staged.



The reasonable conclusion to draw from this is that the Douma alleged chemical weapons attack was staged with the involvement of the White Helmets, that 43 civilians were killed by something other than the alleged chlorine gas attack, and that James Le Mesurier played a role in the events. How much he knew about how the 43 civilians had been killed has gone to the grave with him. Whichever way one looks at this, we have a war crime of significant proportions and an accompanying character assassination campaign carried out by *Times* journalists which has prevented the full truth from being known.

Of course, it is not clear that journalists caught up with smearing the academics fully understand what it is they are helping to cover up. Dominic Kennedy, Deborah Haynes, Georgie Keate, Krystina Shveda, and now David Leask, might simply have been following their editorial instructions to discredit the academics. It is not too late, however, for them to start asking the right questions.



## Dr Piers Robinson

Dr Piers Robinson is co-Director of the Organisation for Propaganda Studies, convenor of the Working Group on Syria, Media and Propaganda and associated researcher with the Working Group on Propaganda and the 9/11 'Global War on Terror', member of Panda and BerlinGroup21.