

# Russian Media: Conspiracy Theories and Reading Comprehension Issues

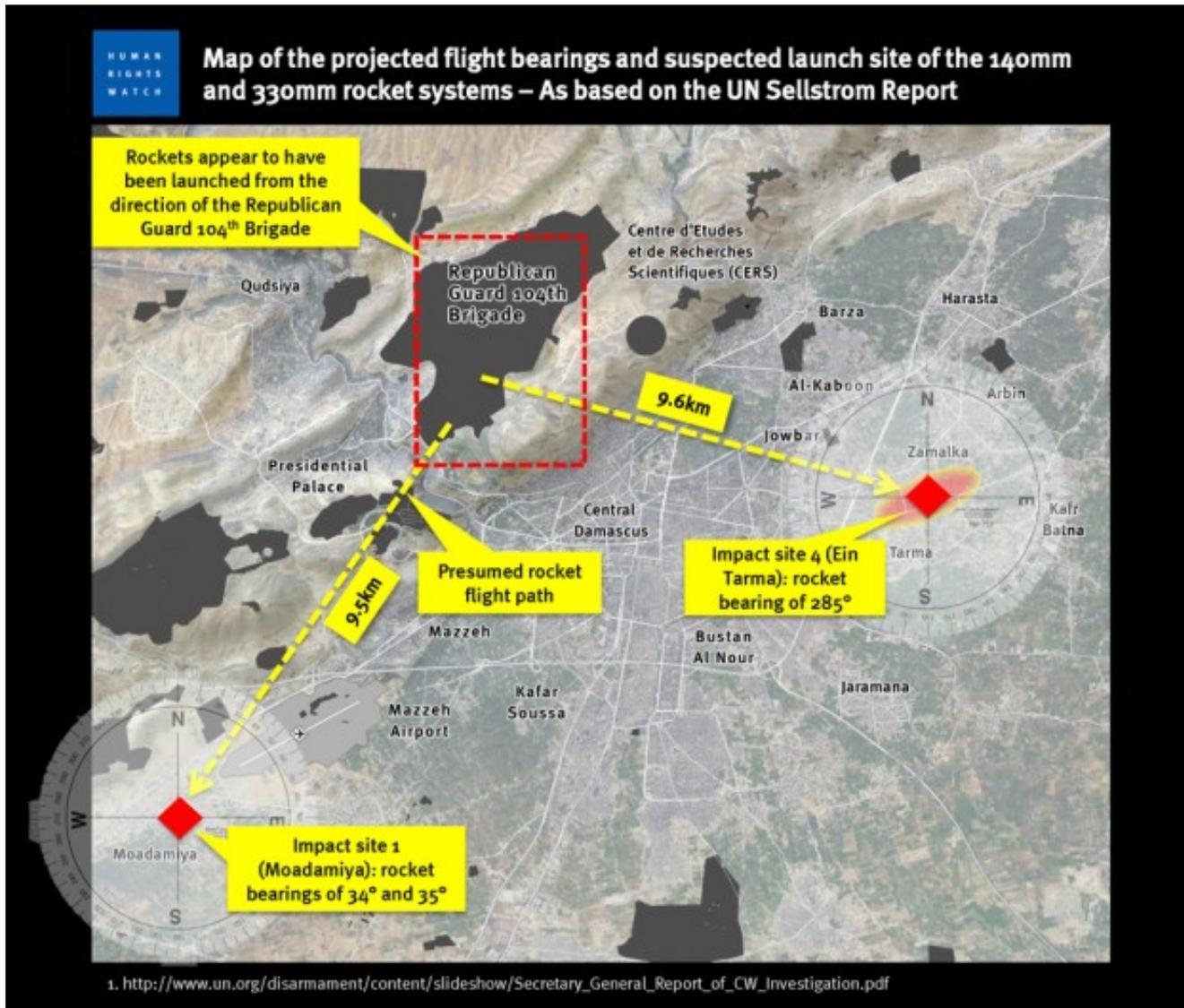
HRW report suggests the regime launched the 08/21 chemical weapons attack in Damascus.

## How RT spun Brown Moses

The Russian government, and the Russian state media, have had a tough few weeks.

The United Nations released their report on the August 21st chemical weapons attack in Damascus, Syria. While the UN mission in Syria did not allow the investigators to say *who* used chemical weapons, the team investigating the incident was able to unearth many other important clues. For instance, the UN report ([read it here](#)) determined that Sarin, and possibly other organophosphates, were used. They were able to identify some of the rockets that delivered the chemicals – one of which was Russian made, the other a unique design found only in Syria. The weapons were professionally made, and the attack was complex and sophisticated, only affecting opposition controlled areas. Reading between the lines, the UN report strongly suggests that the Syrian government, and not the rebels, were behind this attack, though the report never points the finger at the Assad regime.

Or did it? Though the UN report did not state who was responsible for launching the attack, it included detailed ballistic evidence, including the trajectory of the weapons based on where they impacted. Human Rights Watch then took that trajectory information and did what the UN was unwilling to do – place it on a map. The result? The area where the rockets came from is not only controlled by the regime, it is one of Assad's key bases, a Republican Guard base with strong ties to both artillery and rocket launches, and to chemical weapons:



The conclusion? **The government is the likely culprit.** Furthermore, in an interview last night with NPR, HRW's Peter Bouckaert said that there was not a single shred of credible evidence that the Syrian rebels were responsible.

If you're the Russian government, or the state-owned media which serves as its mouthpiece, this looks bad.

But this morning, things were looking up for the Kremlin. According to RT (formerly Russia Today), the blogger Brown Moses had produced evidence that the Syrian rebels, not the regime, had launched the August 21st attack. As RT explains, Brown Moses, who has become famous for analyzing Youtube videos from Syria, had discovered the literal

smoking gun, a video showing a Syrian rebel group, [Liwa al-Islam](#), launching chemical rockets from a D-30 howitzer.

Here's a partial transcript from the videos:

*Thabang Motsei (RT's host) – “.....Meanwhile a prominent Syrian blogger known as Black Moses has posted footage allegedly showing chemical weapons being used by rebels. Let's get the details from our correspondent Paul Scott here in the studio.”*

*Paul Scott (RT correspondent) – “The blogger is a staunch critic of Damascus and a staunch critic of President Bashar al Assad's regime and in the past he has monitored all sorts of news sources and claims and counter claims emerging from the Syrian Civil War to use it as a stick to beat the Assad Government with and implicate Assad in all sorts of atrocities. But it is interesting now that he has posted a video on this blog that suggests that it actually could be the Syrian Opposition that had been using these chemical weapons. It represent a slight shift in focus from what the narrative that the blog has been taking in recent weeks.”*



If Brown Moses thinks the rebels have used chemical weapons, then RT was right all along, right? RT did describe this as “game changing stuff” after all.

Too bad RT doesn’t seem to have actually read what Brown Moses (whose real name is Eliot Higgins) wrote about the videos.

Higgins analyzed the videos because they had been sent to him by skeptics of his work. However, upon careful inspection of the videos, he discovered that there were significant reasons to think that they may have been faked. His [entire report can be found here](#), but these are just a few of the bullet points:

- The video was shot on a moonless night and no city lights are visible. This differs greatly from other videos posted on August 21st.
- The weapon used, the D-30 howitzer, does not match the weapons that have been linked to the attack.
- The “rebels” in the video continuously advertise their identities in this video, both by stating the name of their brigade, Liwa al Islam, and by printing it on flags that are conspicuously displayed in multiple locations in the video. Not only does this

look like the criminals are trying hard to broadcast their identities, it also doesn't match other videos uploaded by Liwa al Islam.

In other words, Eliot's conclusion is that this appears like someone is trying hard to fake these videos. None of this, of course, was mentioned by RT.

There are other reasons to be skeptical. For starters, Liwa al Islam doesn't really operate in this area of Syria. So the narrative here is far fetched. The story goes that the brigade filmed this attack (complete with them bragging about their name) only to never post the video. The video was then posted by Kurds who killed some Liwa al Islam fighters and found the video. So these Liwa al Islam fighters marched their chemical weapons through hundreds of miles of war-torn country just to launch the attack and travel all the way back north, just to be killed by Kurds?

What's ultimately ironic is that it was [Storiful's Open Newsroom](#) (of which Eliot and I are both original members) and the Brown Moses blog that originally demonstrated that the ballistic evidence suggests that the [rockets came from a regime base](#). It was also Higgins who found video suggesting that the [Syrian Republican Guard was using these rockets](#). Even more ironically, it was the Human Rights Watch team, which Higgins is often cited by, which mapped the UN's data to discover that the regime, not the rebels, likely launched these sarin rockets.

I decided to ask Eliot Higgins what he thought of this RT video:

### **Let's Ask Brown Moses (Eliot Higgins)**

**JM – Eliot, what about these videos you've posted that do claim to show Syrian rebels firing Sarin gas on August 21st? Your article, published on your blogspot, seemed to indicate that you were highly skeptical of the videos which is why you were analyzing them. How do you feel about how RT represented your work?**

BM - Russia Today has clearly decided to use the credibility of my own blog to prop up

highly dubious videos. Anyone who is familiar with the way in which social media is used in the conflict by groups like Liwa al-Islam would immediately be aware the videos are questionable, something I highlight in my post on the videos, and which Russia Today decides to ignore entirely.

### **JM – What do you think is the probability that the Syrian rebels conducted the August 21st chemical weapons attack?**

BM - Considering the open source evidence and what's contained in the UN report, in particular the evidence of the rockets being fired from the direction of government controlled territory, I think any scenario where the opposition were involved would require a serious disconnect from the reality of the situation.

### **Can't Find an Expert? Fake One!**

The RT segment goes on to speculate, without citing sources, that the Syrian rebels must have gotten the sarin from Iraq. Then they speak to a man who used to work at the Pentagon, F. Michael Maloof, who claims that sources inside the American government have told him that the U.S. military knew that the sarin came from Iraq, via Turkey, where it is still being produced.

But who is Maloof? According to a Mother Jones investigation, he's a man with a [dubious past](#) who helped spread misinformation about Iraq in 2003, misinformation that ultimately helped make the case to go to war:

*Maloof, a former aide to (Richard Perle) in the 1980s Pentagon, was twice stripped of his high-level security clearances, — once in late 2001 and, again,[in the spring of 2003], for various infractions. Maloof was also reportedly involved in a bizarre scheme to broker contacts between Iraqi officials and the Pentagon, channeled through Perle, in what one report called a “rogue [intelligence] operation” outside official CIA and Defense Intelligence Agency channels.*

It seems that Maloof is still pushing similar lies about Iraq WMD.

So at the end of the day, RT has misrepresented their main source, Brown Moses, and brought on a disavowed conspiracy theorist in order to push information that also runs counter to the UN report.

But RT is just following the direction of Russia's Foreign Minister, who has been [inventing lies and fake experts](#) for a long time. Let's just look at Lavrov's newest efforts. The New York Times reports:

*Mr. Lavrov has previously had cause to regret endorsing Internet speculation. Last month, he cited [the inaccurate claim](#) by pro-Hezbollah bloggers that video of the attack's victims had been posted online the day before the event, which was subsequently debunked. On Tuesday, though, he again pointed to what he called information published online, "including evidence provided by nuns at a nearby convent" to bolster his argument that rebel forces had carried out the Aug. 21 attack on the outskirts of Damascus.*

*As the Human Rights Watch emergencies director Peter Bouckaert suggests, it seems likely that Mr. Lavrov intended to highlight the arguments of [Mother Agnes Mariam de la Croix](#), a Carmelite nun born in Lebanon who is frequently quoted in the Russian media, and by American critics of Islam, defending the Assad government.*

*Despite Mr. Lavrov's endorsement, however, Mother Agnes has not presented any concrete evidence on the attack and was not nearby when it was carried out. (Her monastery is [north of Damascus](#), not near the site of the attack.) Instead, she has written [a rambling, 50-page analysis](#) of the video posted on opposition YouTube channels that contains nothing but speculation that some or all of it was staged.*

RT has also [elevated pro-regime Youtube celebrities](#) to the rank of Syrian experts. For

instance, just last week RT's Abby Martin interviewed Mimi al-Laham (Syria Girl) about the latest news. Martin, a "journalist," giggles and rolls her eyes when quoting Barack Obama or presenting narratives that conflict with the Kremlin's spin. She continuously leads the witness, and the two of them have a nice little laugh every time Martin is forced, by fake objectivity, to mention the ideas of those who think that Assad is a war criminal.

Am I being too hard on Mimi al-Laham? Perhaps she is an expert. After all, she argues that Saddam Hussein gave up his chemical weapons, which is why the American imperialists jumped at the chance to invade his country. And I have never heard anyone make that argument before.

Saddam gave up his chemical weapons stockpile? Well, he appears to have given some of his stockpiles to the [Kurds in Halabja](#), but I'm sure that the Baathist apologist is not referencing THAT incident.

## **A History of Distortion**

The Russian government has lied to protect Bashar al Assad for nearly three years. Russia claimed to have evidence that the Syrian rebels used sarin against the town of Khan al Assal in March. Not only is their [explanation full of holes](#), they have still failed to disclose any of their "definitive" evidence. The Kremlin appears to have invented a diplomatic breakthrough, "The Russian-American Initiative," that [simply does not exist](#). After the August 21st chemical weapons attack, Lavrov doubled down on his support for Assad. He also conveniently forgot how time zones work when he lied by saying that videos were posted by rebel groups a day before the attack that showed the attack taking place (and **The Interpreter** was the [first to publish a debunking of this lie](#)).

In fact, [Russia has never attempted to solve the Syrian crisis](#) because it has been too busy trying to prop up the Assad regime. RT, loved by many Westerners who oppose military intervention in Syria, is simply spreading lies and misinformation in order to bolster the Kremlin's attempts to distract the world from Assad's crimes. Now that the

Syrian government has been directly implicated in the august 21st attack, by a tremendous (and growing) amount of evidence, the Kremlin, and its “journalistic” lackeys, will only increase their spin.

The question is, how many Westerners will it fool?