

YOU ARE HERE: [HOME](#) [ALERTS](#) [ALERT ARCHIVE](#) 2013 'LIMITED BUT PERSUASIVE' EVIDENCE - SYRIA, SARIN, LIBYA, LIES

'Limited But Persuasive' Evidence - Syria, Sarin, Libya, Lies

 IN [ALERTS 2013](#) · POST 13 JUNE 2013 · LAST UPDATED ON 21 JUNE 2013 · BY [EDITOR](#) ·


By David Edwards

 Last month, a [ComRes poll](#) supported by Media Lens interviewed 2,021 British adults, asking:

'How many Iraqis, both combatants and civilians, do you think have died as a consequence of the war that began in Iraq in 2003?'

 An astonishing 44% of respondents estimated that less than 5,000 Iraqis had died since 2003. 59% believed that fewer than 10,000 had died. Just 2% put the toll in excess of one million, the likely correct [estimate](#).

 In October 2006, just three years into the war, the *Lancet* medical journal [reported](#) 'about 655,000 Iraqis have died above the number that would be expected in a non-conflict situation, which is equivalent to about 2.5% of the population in the study area'.

 In 2007, an *Associated Press* [poll](#) also asked the US public to estimate the Iraqi civilian death toll from the war. 52% of respondents believed that fewer than 10,000 Iraqis had died.

Noam Chomsky commented on the latest findings:

 'Pretty shocking. I'm sure you've seen Sut Jhally's study of estimates of Vietnam war deaths at the elite university where he teaches. Median 100,000, about 5% of the official figure, probably 2% of the actual figure. Astonishing – unless one bears in mind that for the US at least, many people don't even have a clue where France is. Noam!' (Email to Media Lens, June 1, 2013. See Sut Jhally, Justin Lewis, & Michael Morgan, *The Gulf War: A Study of the Media, Public Opinion, & Public Knowledge*, Department of Communications, U. Mass. Amherst, 1991)

 Alex Thomson, chief correspondent at Channel 4 News, has so far provided the only corporate media [discussion](#) of the poll. He perceived 'questions for us on the media that after so much time, effort and money, the public perception of bloodshed remains stubbornly, wildly, wrong'.

In fact the poll was simply ignored by both print and broadcast media. Our search of the Lexis media database found no mention in any UK newspaper, despite the fact that ComRes polls are deemed highly credible and frequently reported in the press.

Although we gave Thomson the chance to scoop the poll, he chose to publish it on his blog viewed by a small number of people on the Channel 4 website. Findings which Thomson found 'so staggeringly, mind-blowingly at odds with reality' that they left him 'speechless' apparently did not merit a TV audience.

 Les Roberts, lead author of the 2004 *Lancet* study and co-author of the 2006 study, also responded:

 'This March, a [review](#) of death toll estimates by Burkle and Garfield was published in the *Lancet* in an issue commemorating the 10th anniversary of the invasion. They reviewed 11 studies of data sources ranging from passive tallies of government and newspaper reports to careful randomized household surveys, and concluded that something in the ballpark of half a million Iraqi civilians have died. The various sources include a wide variation of current estimates, from one-hundred thousand plus to a million.'

Roberts said of the latest poll:

'It may be that most British people do not care what results arise from the actions of their leaders and the work of their tax money. Alternatively, it also could be that the British and US Governments have actively and aggressively worked to discredit sources and confuse death toll estimates in hopes of keeping the public from unifying and galvanizing around a common narrative.'

 (Email to Media Lens, June 12, 2013. You can see Roberts' comments in [full here](#))


DESIGN BY MELANIE PATRICK

 Indeed, the public's ignorance of the cost paid by the people of Iraq is no accident. Despite privately [considering](#) the 2006 *Lancet* study 'close to best practice' and 'robust' the British government immediately set about destroying the credibility of the findings of both the 2004 and 2006 *Lancet* studies. Professor Brian Rappert of the University of Exeter [reported](#) that government 'deliberations were geared in a particular direction – towards finding grounds for rejecting the [2004] *Lancet* study without any evidence of countervailing efforts by government officials to produce or endorse alternative other studies or data'.

 Unsurprisingly, the same political executives who had fabricated the case for war on Iraq sought to fabricate reasons for ignoring peer-reviewed science exposing the costs of their great crime. More surprising, one might think, is the long-standing media enthusiasm for these fabrications. The corporate media were happy to swallow the UK government's alleged 'grounds for rejecting' the *Lancet* studies to the extent that a recent *Guardian* news piece [claimed](#) that the invasion had led to the deaths of 'tens of thousands of Iraqis'.

Syria – Dropping Del Ponte

A natural counterpart to the burying of evidence of 'our' embarrassing crimes is the hyping of the crimes of official enemies.

 Thus, the media would have us believe that as many, or more, people have died in Syria during two years of war than have died in ten years of mass killing in Iraq (the favoured media figure is around 100,000 Iraqis killed). The *Times* reports 'as many as 94,000 deaths' in Syria. (Anthony Loyd, 'War in Syria has plumbed new depths of barbarity, says UN', *The Times*, June 5, 2013)

 Reuters [reports](#):

'The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights [SOHR], an opposition group, said on Tuesday that at least 94,000 people have been killed but the death toll is likely to be as high as 120,000.'

 Figures supplied by SOHR, an organisation [openly biased](#) in favour of the Syrian 'rebels' and Western intervention is presented as [sober fact](#) by one of the world's leading news agencies. No concerns here about methodology, sample sizes, 'main street bias' and other alleged concerns thrown at the *Lancet* studies by critics. According to Reuters itself, SOHR [consists](#) of a single individual, Rami Abdulrahman, the owner of a clothes shop, who works from his 'two bedroom terraced home in Coventry'.

 As we [noted](#) last month, clearly inspired by the example of Iraq, Western governments and media have bombarded the public with claims of Syrian government use of chemical weapons. In April, the independent's Robert Fisk [judged](#) the claims 'a load of old cobblers'.

 The state-media propaganda campaign was rudely interrupted on May 6 by former Swiss attorney-general Carla Del Ponte, speaking for the United Nations independent commission of inquiry on Syria. Del Ponte [said](#), 'there are strong, concrete suspicions but not yet incontrovertible proof of the use of sarin gas, from the way the victims were treated. This was use on the part of the opposition, the rebels, not by the government authorities'.

 She [added](#):

'We have no, no indication at all that the Syrian government have used chemical weapons.'

Lexis finds 15 national UK newspaper articles mentioning Del Ponte's claims since May 6. There has been one mention since the initial coverage (May 6-8) on May 11, more than one month ago. In other words, this is a good example of the way an unwelcome event is covered by the media but not retained as an integral part of the story.

 On May 30, local Turkish media and RT News also [reported](#) that Syrian 'rebels' had been caught in a sarin gas bomb plot:

'Turkish security forces found a 2kg cylinder with sarin gas after searching the homes of Syrian militants from the Al-Qaeda linked Al-Nusra Front who were previously detained, Turkish media reports. The gas was reportedly going to be used in a bomb.'

This was another badly 'off-message' story that was again given minimal coverage, not pursued and instantly buried. Lexis records no UK newspaper mentions. A senior journalist told us privately that he and his colleagues felt the story was 'right' but that the 'Turks are closing [it] down.' (Email to Media Lens, June 7, 2013)

 Last week, yet more unsubstantiated claims of possible Syrian government use of sarin generated a front page BBC report with the remarkable [headline](#):

'World 'must act' Over Syria Weapons'

And yet a BBC article indicated the lack of certainty:

'There is no doubt Syria's government has used sarin during the country's crisis, says France's foreign minister... But he did not specify where or when the agent had been deployed; the White House has said more proof was needed.'

 A UK government statement [observed](#) merely: 'There is a growing body of limited but persuasive information showing that the regime used - and continues to use - chemical weapons.'

Readers will recall that intelligence indicating the existence of Iraqi WMD was also said to have been 'limited but persuasive'.

 As Peter Hitchens [notes](#) in the *Daily Mail*, UK government policy is being 'disgracefully egged on by a BBC that has lost all sense of impartiality'.

 The *Guardian* [quoted](#) 'a senior British official':

'Are we confident in our means of collection, and are we confident that it points to the regime's use of sarin? Yes.'

Is the case closed, then? The official added: 'Can we prove it with 100% certainty? Probably not.'

 The *Guardian* also quoted 'A senior UK official' who said it 'appeared possible that Syrian army commanders had been given the green light by the regime to use sarin in small quantities'. 'Possible', maybe, but the *Guardian* failed to explain why anyone would trust 'a senior UK official' to comment honestly on Syria, or why anyone would trust an *anonymous* UK official after Iraq.

 Adding to the confusion, the *Guardian* quoted Paulo Pinheiro, who chairs a UN commission on human rights abuses in Syria. According to Pinheiro it had 'not been possible, on the evidence available, to determine the precise chemical agents used, their delivery systems or the perpetrator'.

Jonathan Marcus, BBC diplomatic correspondent, wrote:

'This is potentially a game changer: The French government now believes not only that the nerve agent sarin has been used in Syria, but that it was deployed by "the regime and its accomplices".'

 In a recent interview, *Guardian* journalist Glenn Greenwald [commented](#):

'I approach my journalism as a litigator: People say things, you assume they are lying, and dig for documents to prove it.'

 Perhaps the BBC's Marcus could take a leaf from Greenwald's book of journalism and dig for evidence to show that the French government is *lying* when it says it 'believes' that sarin has been used by the Syrian enemy. After all, the US, UK and French governments also [believed](#) Iraq was a 'serious and current' threat to the world.

 Far less gung-ho than the relentlessly warmongering BBC, a *Telegraph* headline [read](#): 'US unmoved by French evidence of sarin use in Syria.'

Chuck Hagel, the US defence secretary, said: 'I have not seen that evidence that they said that they had and I have not talked to any of our intelligence people about it.'

 The US officials' comments 'appeared to expose a growing widening gap between the US and France over how to respond to Syria's two-year civil war', the *Telegraph* noted.

Libya – Slouching Towards Truth

If the record of government and media lying on Iraq fails to inspire scepticism in regard to claims made about Syria, then we might also consider the example of the Western war on Libya from March-October, 2011.

 In his excellent book, *Slouching Towards Sirte*, Maximilian Forte of Concordia University, Montreal, recalls President Obama's March 28, 2011 justification for Nato's military intervention in Libya that had begun on March 19:

 'If we waited one more day, Benghazi... could suffer a massacre that would have reverberated across the region and stained the conscience of the world.' (Forte, *Slouching Towards Sirte – NATO's War on Libya and Africa*, Baraka Books, digital version, 2012, p.661)

But when French jets bombed Libyan government forces retreating from Benghazi, they attacked a column of 14 tanks, 20 armoured personnel carriers, some trucks and ambulances. Forte comments:

'That column clearly could have neither destroyed nor occupied Benghazi, a city of nearly 700,000 people... To date no evidence has been furnished that shows Benghazi would have witnessed the loss of "tens of thousands of lives".' (Forte, pp.662-663)

 Professor Alan J. Kuperman, professor of public affairs at the University of Texas, [observed](#):

'The best evidence that Khadafy did not plan genocide in Benghazi is that he did not perpetrate it in the other cities he had recaptured either fully or partially — including Zawiya, Misurata, and Ajdabiya, which together have a population greater than Benghazi.

'Libya forces did kill hundreds as they regained control of cities. Collateral damage is inevitable in counter-insurgency. And strict laws of war may have been exceeded.

'But Khadafy's acts were a far cry from Rwanda, Darfur, Congo, Bosnia, and other killing fields. Libya's air force, prior to imposition of a UN-authorized no-fly zone, targeted rebel positions, not civilian concentrations. Despite ubiquitous cellphones equipped with cameras and video, there is no graphic evidence of deliberate massacre. Images abound of victims killed or wounded in crossfire — each one a tragedy — but that is urban warfare, not genocide.

'Nor did Khadafy ever threaten civilian massacre in Benghazi, as Obama alleged. The "no mercy" warning, of March 17, targeted rebels only, as reported by The New York Times, which noted that Libya's leader promised amnesty for those "who throw their weapons away." Khadafy even offered the rebels an escape route and open border to Egypt, to avoid a fight "to the bitter end."

On February 23, 2011, just days into the Libyan uprising, Amnesty International sparked a media frenzy when it began condemning Libyan government actions, noting 'persistent reports of mercenaries being brought in from African countries by the Libyan leader to violently suppress the protests against him'.

 A few days later, Human Rights Watch [reported](#) that they had 'seen no evidence of mercenaries being used in eastern Libya. This contradicts widespread earlier reports in the international media that African soldiers had been flown in to fight rebels in the region as Muammar Gaddafi sought to keep control'.

Genevieve Garrigos, president of Amnesty International France, later commented:

'Today we have to admit that we have no evidence that Gaddafi employed mercenary forces... we have no sign nor evidence to corroborate these rumours.' (Forte, p.685)

Garrigos repeated that Amnesty's investigators never found any 'mercenaries', agreeing that their existence was a 'legend' spread by the mass media.

Forte describes 'the revolving door between Amnesty International-USA and the US State department'. In November 2011, Amnesty International-USA appointed Suzanne Nossel as its executive director. From August 2009 to November 2011, Nossel had been the US State Department Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of International Organisation Affairs.

 Luis Moreno-Ocampo, Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, caused more outrage when he [told](#) the world's media that there was 'evidence' that Gaddafi had distributed Viagra to his troops in order 'to enhance the possibility to rape' and that Gaddafi had ordered mass rape. Moreno-Ocampo insisted:

'We are getting information that Qaddafi himself decided to rape' and that 'we have information that there was a policy to rape in Libya those who were against the government'.

 US Ambassador Susan Rice also [asserted](#) that Gaddafi was supplying his troops with Viagra to encourage mass rape. No evidence was supplied.

 Forte notes that US military and intelligence sources quickly [contradicted](#) Rice, telling NBC News that 'there is no evidence that Libyan military forces are being given Viagra and engaging in systematic rape against women in rebel areas'.

 Cherif Bassiouni, who led a UN human rights inquiry into the situation in Libya, [suggested](#) that the Viagra and mass rape claim was the product of 'massive hysteria'. Bassiouni's team 'uncovered only four alleged cases' of rape and sexual abuse.

As Forte writes with bitter irony, the propaganda surrounding the Libyan war demands 'vigilance and scepticism in the face of the heeey claims of our own inherent goodness which can only find its highest expression in the form of aerial bombardment'. (Forte, pp.69-70)

Alias, vigilance and scepticism are in short supply within the corporate media.

 < [Prev](#) [Next](#) >

SHARE THIS PAGE...

LIKE, TWEET AND SHARE...

Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike license

Alerts: The Latest Alert, Subscribe to the Alerts, A Complete List

About Media Lens: What is Media Lens?, What is Our Objective?, Who Are We?

Footer: Joomla!, GNU General Public License.