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Syria and Neo-McCarthyism

A group of academics in England dedicated to the Herculean task of clearing Bashar al-Assad's name has been stung by a couple of articles in Rupert Murdoch's London Times. Since the articles are both behind a paywall and germane to the analysis I will be putting forward in this article, I have used my retiree benefits from Columbia University to penetrate the paywall and make them available to the [general public](#).

University of Edinburgh professor Tim Hayward launched the [Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media](#) to “to facilitate research and debate with respect to the 2011-present war in Syria and the role of both media and propaganda.” Like many who write about Syria, the focus of the group is exclusively geopolitical. The unit of analysis is not social class but the state. For them, the narrative is all about how the CIA, reactionary Middle Eastern states, Israel et al decided to destabilize Syria using proxy forces in 2011 as part of a general strategy against the “axis of resistance”. Interest in questions such as the role of neoliberalism, elite kleptocracy symbolized by Assad's cousin Rami Makhoul sheltering billions in Panama banks, the misery of farmers during a period of drought and declining state investment in the countryside are really beside the point. All you need to know is what side Nicholas Kristof or George Soros took. Where they put a plus, it was necessary to put a minus and vice versa. While it is certainly important not to neglect the geopolitical side of the conflict, if it becomes the exclusive focus, there is always the tendency to descend into conspiracy theory where history is determined not by class struggle but by back-room cabals. When referring to 9/11 Truthism, a belief held by one

of Hayward's board members Mark Crispin Miller, Alexander Cockburn identified its origins in a retreat from [class analysis](#):

These days a dwindling number of leftists learn their political economy from Marx via the small, mostly Trotskyist groupuscules. Into the theoretical and strategic void has crept a diffuse, peripatetic conspiracist view of the world that tends to locate ruling class devilry not in the crises of capital accumulation, or the falling rate of profit, or inter-imperial competition, but in locale (the Bohemian Grove, Bilderberg, Ditchley, Davos) or supposedly "rogue" agencies, with the CIA still at the head of the list.

In my view, a lot more thought has to be devoted to capital accumulation rather than "false flags" to understand both 9/11 and the war in Syria.

One of the two London Times articles is devoted mostly to a conflict that arose over a complaint lodged by Professor Piers Robinson, a co-founder of Hayward's group, with Stirling University against Idrees Ahmed, a lecturer there in Digital Journalism. I am a long-time colleague and friend of Idrees and will defer to him on this matter. I will only mention that the letter complained that Idrees had "started intimidating a group which included some younger academics" through tweets that called Hayward's articles "illiterate Islamophobic drivel" and describing him as "an eccentric best known for his disgraceful conspiracy theories aimed at exonerating Syria's murderous regime". I can only say that these youthful academics can thank their lucky stars that I never got a job at a British university.

The other article is focused more on the pro-Assad "research" of Hayward and company and can arguably be described as a hatchet job even if it is entirely true. This is called being hung on your own petard:

Professor Hayward has used the hashtag #SyriaHoax when discussing chemical attacks in the country. The hashtag went viral after being used by alt-right figures in the US, including Mike Cernovich, a main proponent of the "Pizzagate" conspiracy theory, which alleged that Hillary Clinton supporters were involved with a child-abuse ring. The hashtag was said to have been promoted by a Russian cyberoperation. The professor also linked to a video that appeared to show chemical attack victims that, it was suggested, was staged. A rescuer removed a headscarf from an apparent victim. Professor Hayward wrote: "White Helmets' mission: 'To save one headscarf is to save all' #SyriaHoax". After being contacted by The Times, he deleted the tweet.

The American academic Mark Crispin Miller, who was said to have called the US government's account of the 9/11 attacks a "conspiracy theory", is on the SPM's advisory

board. Another board member is David Blackall, an Australian academic who tweeted “CIA stages gas attack pretext for Syria escalation” with a link to a blog article. Professor Hayward has written for the alternative news website 21st Century Wire, whose associate editor is Vanessa Beeley, daughter of the late British diplomat Sir Harold Beeley. She claims that the White Helmets are al-Qaeda-affiliated and, as “terrorists”, are a “legit target” for Assad’s forces.

It is no secret that the London Times hates the left. Its purpose in publishing such an article is to make us look like fools, especially by bringing up Miller. It is hard to say why Miller has become a believer in “controlled demolitions” and all the rest. His 1986 “[Boxed In: The Culture of Television](#)” was a favorite of mine. Miller was profiled by Vice Magazine in an article about a 9/11 Truther meeting at Cooper Union in New York, where he would serve as MC. He told the audience that the media’s attitude toward 9/11 Truth is a form of neo-McCarthyism.

Interestingly enough, Tim Hayward used exactly the same term when long-time Guardian reporter and editor Brian Whitaker published an article on Medium titled “[The Syrian conflict’s anti-propaganda propagandists](#)”. For Hayward, articles like this “indulge the neo-McCarthyite knee jerking towards escalated belligerence.”

This is a frequent complaint by those who have been attacked for their views on Syria. For example, Rania Khalek who works on the Grayzone Project with Max Blumenthal and Ben Norton in promoting views identical to Hayward’s group, resigned from the Electronic Intifada in 2016 after people began complaining about her articles that tilted toward Assad. This led Freddie DeBoer to write a defense titled “[1953—2002—2016: Syria and the Reemergence of McCarthyism](#)” in Current Affairs, a journal belonging to the new hipster/Marxist left. With the same passion Emile Zola used in defending Captain Dreyfus, DeBoer compared the attacks on Khalek and Blumenthal to what was happening in the 1950s. There was an attempt “to silence dissent through guilt by association, unsubstantiated accusations, and the insistence that some positions are too dangerous to be permissible.”

Ironically, the best corrective to this fear of neo-McCarthyism comes from Tim Hayward himself. On his [blog](#), he denounced the London Times articles and reminded them that his views on Syria were pretty mainstream. After all, senior British military figures agree with him that Trump’s missile strikes were uncalled for. Indeed, a virtual who’s who of powerful media figures and politicians express views identical to his research group and Blumenthal’s Grayzone. He even took the trouble to [name them](#):

Major-General Jonathan David Shaw CBE is interrupted by Sky News interviewer as he begins to articulate scepticism (13 April)

Former First Sea Lord of the Royal Navy, Lord Alan West, articulates deep scepticism about allegations (13 April) – see interview from minute 06:40

Tucker Carlson agreeing with Peter Ford that alleged chemical attack has been “intelligence fiasco” (18 April)

US Senator Rand Paul, on CNN, suggests there is as yet no evidence of Syrian government responsibility for alleged chemical attack (17 April)

Chris Williamson, UK Labour parliamentarian, insists on need for proper evidence rather than the hearsay relied on by government (17 April)

Virginia State Senator, Richard Black: Syria Chemical Weapons attack was a rigged “false flag” (17 April)

Perhaps all these complaints about neo-McCarthyism reflect an unfamiliarity with the Red Scare that I am old enough to remember. Back then, you could be fired not only for being a Communist but signing a petition circulated by a Communist 20 years earlier. In my little village in the Catskills, being a Communist was tantamount to being seen as a traitor. It was something you kept secret. There was a group of Reds who ended up running poultry farms in my village, only because they got fired from public school teaching jobs in New York. Even in a village that was once described as a socialist Utopia in the Catskills, you had to keep your political associations a secret. To be labeled a Communist was like being outed as a homosexual. Just ask Allen Young, who grew up both gay and Red in my hometown.

Today, you not only see major politicians, journalists and talk show hosts making the same points as Hayward and company, it will even get you space in prestigious journals like the New York Review of Books (Charles Glass) or the London Review of Books (David Bromwich). In fact, I would argue that instead of being like the 1950s, it is much more like the 1930s when cocktail parties in New York would inevitably turn to discussions about how great the USSR was. If you were serious about making it today as a politician or a journalist, I'd advise you to cultivate the “false flag” expertise. It will open doors everywhere.