

★ WEAPON OF MASS DETECTION ★





# INSIDE THE ONE-MAN INTELLIGENCE UNIT THAT EXPOSED THE ATROCITIES OF SYRIA'S WAR

BY BIANCA BOSKER

THERE WAS SOMETHING strange about the rockets that landed on Zamalka, a town south of Syria's capital, just after two in the morning on Aug. 21. They didn't explode. Yet even lodged into walls of homes or injected into the dirt fully intact, they proved lethal. Hundreds of people sleeping near the landing sites were killed instantly and bloodlessly, as if choked by invisible hands. A cloud of death spread quietly, ending hundreds of other lives.

Just after dawn the following day, Muhammed al-Jazaeri, a 27-year-old engineer who had joined a coalition of activists fighting to take down the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, felt an urge to document what had occurred. He found one of the rockets protruding from a patch of orange dirt behind a mosque a mile from his home. Recalling later

that he was determined to reveal to the world the "real picture" of life in Syria, he used a handheld Sony camera to capture a short video of its twisted remains. That same day, he uploaded his clip to a site that has become an intelligence hub for war-watchers and a time-killing venue for bored teenagers: He sent it to YouTube.

Several hours later and 2,300 miles to the northwest in Leicester, England, a shaggy-haired blogger named Eliot Higgins peered at his laptop and clicked play on **al-Jazaeri's video**. It was one of scores Higgins turned up that day as he trawled Twitter, Google+ and the more than 600 Syrian YouTube accounts he monitors daily. From his living room, Higgins was racing to solve the same whodunit confronting world leaders amid claims that Assad had unleashed chemical weapons against rebel sympathizers in the suburbs of Damascus. Was Zamalka a victim of such an attack? If so, who was

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is pictured in large banner, in Damascus, Syria, in December 2011.





responsible for the deed?

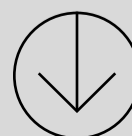
On paper, Higgins — a 34-year-old with a 2-year-old daughter — brought no credentials for the job. He had no formal intelligence training or security clearance that gave him access to classified documents. He could not speak or read Arabic. He had never set foot in the Middle East, unless you count the time he changed planes in Dubai en route to Manila, or his trip to visit his in-laws in Turkey.

Yet in the 18 months since Higgins had begun blogging about Syria, his barebones site, Brown Moses, had become the foremost

source of information on the weapons used in Syria's deadly war. Using nothing more sophisticated than an Asus laptop, he had uncovered evidence of weapons imported into Syria from Iran. He had been the first person to identify widely-banned cluster bombs deployed by Syrian forces. By *The New York Times'* own admission, his findings had offered a key tip that helped the newspaper prove that Saudi Arabia had funneled arms to opposition fighters in Syria.

His work unraveling the mystery of the rocket strikes of Aug. 21 played a key role in bringing much of the world to the conclusion that it was indeed a chemical weapons attack, one unleashed by

Eliot Higgins, right, is interviewed by Channel 4 News' Paraic O'Brien in March 2013.



Assad's forces. That conclusion led to a diplomatic deal under which the Syrian government submitted to international inspections and pledged to destroy its stocks of chemical weapons.

"I saw the U.N. got the Nobel Prize for Syria," says one weapons expert, referring to the United Nations-backed Organization for the Prohibition of Chemi-

analysts have honed a novel set of sleuthing skills that fuse old-fashioned detective work with new sources of intelligence generated by cell phone cameras and spread by social networks. Syria's war, widely considered the most documented conflict in history, has turned social media into a weapon of mass detection — critical both for fighters on the ground and for

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cal Weapons, who declined to be named on account of his own work with the international body. "I think Eliot has done a lot more for Syria than the U.N."

Higgins belongs to an obsessive coterie of self-appointed military intelligence experts who use social media to piece together critical details of faraway conflicts, often well ahead of seasoned professionals. Frequently self-taught and operating far outside the military-industrial complex, these amateur

faraway observers trying to make sense of the conflict.

"All parties to the conflict in Syria realize that social media is an important front in this war," says Peter Bouckaert, an expert in humanitarian crises and the emergencies director for Human Rights Watch. "There is a war for the truth as much as for territory."

Many government agencies, private research groups and newsrooms are still wary of analyses based on the Facebook status updates or viral videos of Syria's opposition groups. Such "open source intelligence" — so-called





by the U.S. military — is deeply biased and difficult to verify, its critics say, often amounting to meaningless chatter.

“I personally don’t really have the time to go through the social media in Syria so as to start knowing which sources, which sites, which media, which individuals are credible or not,” said Yezid Sayigh, a senior associate at

the Carnegie Middle East Center. “All that takes time and continuous follow up. “

But in an age in which social media produces seemingly limitless streams of information, some people are proving obsessive enough to go rooting through it all in search of small nuggets of undiscovered reality. People like Higgins.

After a temporary job reviewing orders at a ladies’ lingerie maker came to an end in February, he dispensed with looking for

This file image provided by Shaam News Network on Aug. 22, 2013, purports to show dead bodies after an attack on Ghouta, Syria.



another so that he could devote himself to blogging full-time. His wife admits she does not read his blog and yearns for a time that he will return to “a real job.” But as Higgins sees it, he is consumed with the realest job of all, sifting through a digital goldmine disdained by those who lack the patience for the work.

“If you’re in intelligence and you want to know what your enemies are armed with, just watch their YouTube channels and see what weapons they’re waving around,” he advises. “You’ll find out all sorts of information — and not necessarily the stuff they intend to show you.”

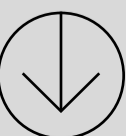
HIGGINS OPERATES from his command center in a narrow, two-story home just down the street from a Salvation Army and a community center, in a town about 100 miles north of London. His “office” alternates between a cream leather couch in the living room and an Ikea chair with a lap desk in an upstairs bedroom. His standard uniform is jeans and white T-shirts layered with dark-colored V-necks.

Born in 1979 to a Royal Air Force engineer and a caterer, Hig-

gins describes himself as an avid gardener and budding cook, but his core passions have always centered on a fascination with screens: During his schooling years, he engaged in marathon sessions playing video games and argued ceaselessly on Internet forums. These two pursuits trumped his attention to schoolwork, filling his report cards with Cs.

Throughout his life, Higgins has taken hobbies to illogical extremes. After his brother introduced him to the iconoclastic rockstar Frank Zappa, Higgins rushed out to buy all of his four-dozen albums. As a video gamer, Higgins pressed well past casual bouts of *World of Warcraft*, staying up late to lead teams of 40 players in complex online raids. Even now, he feels compelled to systematically beat each new video game before he can start another, in this fashion gradually making his way through strategy and role-playing games like *Fallout*, *Baldur’s Gate*, *Total War: Rome II* and *Command and Conquer*. Before getting married, he was known to game for 36 hours at a stretch.

“It’s like he’s got tunnel vision,” says Higgins’ brother, Ross. “He latches onto something and gets kind of obsessed about it. Most people don’t think like my





brother does.”

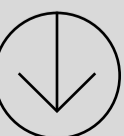
After dropping out of university midway through a media studies degree, Higgins moved through a series of jobs with no relation to munitions, Syria or blogging. He worked as a data entry clerk at Barclays bank and then managed invoices for a process management firm. When that task was outsourced overseas, he helped asylum seekers find housing. His next, and most recent, job was working on women’s undergarments.

Yet in his off hours, Higgins morphed into “Brown Moses,” a fastidious online commenter who challenged strangers to heated debates over protests in Egypt or the veracity of videos showing civilians shot down in Libya. He took his alias from a Zappa song and his avatar from a portrait by Francis Bacon of the howling Pope Innocent X flanked by animal carcasses.

“I was always interested in that sort of counterculture stuff,” Higgins says. He lists as his favorite authors Naomi Klein, Noam Chomsky and Nick Davies.

Higgins also brought a long-

A Syrian youth stands next to a rebel waving a pre-Baath Syrian flag used by the opposition during an anti-regime protest in the northern city of Aleppo on March 22, 2013.



standing interest in media and American policy in the Middle East. He attacked this interest, like every other, with a fanatic intensity. In 2011, “Brown Moses” became an active voice in the online comments section of the British newspaper *The Guardian*. Almost

“I just got obsessed with it,” Higgins says.

But what drove this obsession — Idealism? Politics?

“Boredom at work more than anything,” Higgins says. “And I guess I’m a bit argumentative.”

It was an online argument that

**“IF YOU’RE IN INTELLIGENCE AND YOU WANT TO KNOW WHAT YOUR ENEMIES ARE ARMED WITH, JUST WATCH THEIR YOUTUBE CHANNELS AND SEE WHAT WEAPONS THEY’RE WAVING AROUND.”**

as soon as *The Guardian* would publish a new story on its website touching on the Middle East, “Brown Moses” would be the first to leave a comment. Initially, this was purely by chance; later, as Higgins confesses, he would get there first just to annoy people irked by his obsessiveness. By latest count, Higgins has left a total of 4,700 comments on *The Guardian*’s site. That’s just a fraction of his activity on Something Awful, one of the oldest forums on the web and a favorite of Higgins’ for more than a decade. In just over two years, he posted 10,000 times to a live-blog chronicling the twists and turns of Libya’s revolution.

got Higgins mulling over the idea of a blog. A *Guardian* commenter challenged him to prove that a certain protest had actually been filmed in Libya. In piecing together evidence from satellite images and social media, Higgins experienced a series of epiphanies.

When viewed in isolation, the micro-dispatches posted to Twitter, Facebook and YouTube tended to confuse and overwhelm anyone trying to make sense of events. But if you viewed such posts together, Higgins realized, the photos and videos could yield detailed accounts of events across the globe. The posts could be used to fact check claims, providing clues far beyond what cameramen had intended to show. Arguments could be won, myths disproved, rival







AFP PHOTO/LOUAI BESHARA

Syrian men inspect an alley packed with debris in the aftermath of a car bomb explosion in Jaramana, a mainly Christian and Druze suburb of Damascus, on Nov. 28, 2012.



commenters put in their place.

Most people were failing to scrutinize such material in a systematic fashion. The answers to big questions were out there — such as which rebel groups were working together, what guns they carried, and how much force they could rally against Assad. Yet confronted with so many thousands of videos and contrasting depictions, observers threw up their hands. Too much information became no information. Journalists and analysts lacked time to dissect YouTube clips, or figured there was nothing to gain there. Higgins came to recognize a form of “snobbery” and “dismissiveness” toward social media, which meant that crucial evidence was disappearing into a morass of “likes,” tweets, shares, uploads and updates.

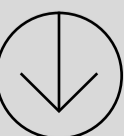
In the spring of 2012, Higgins created a small site, Brown Moses, where he could save some of this digital material for his own future reference. A pet project, nothing more.

He fell into a routine of writing about weapons purely out of convenience. His early blogs were less focused, ranging from analyses of the Murdoch phone hacking

scandal to a critique of a tasteless tweet. Drawn to the action in the Middle East but unable to speak Arabic, Higgins was attracted to analyzing munitions videos, which transcended all languages.

Higgins also craved daily fodder for his blog, and it seemed every day he delivered a newsworthy video about rocket launchers or warheads in Syria, a country then becoming more volatile. In the course of just three days in July 2012, for example, Higgins’ blog posts included the following: evidence of an increasingly well-armed Free Syrian Army packing heavy assault rifles and truck-mounted Soviet machine guns; videos of al-Farouq Brigades rebels showing off tanks captured from the Syrian Army; and documentation that Syrians were being hit with cluster bombs, controversial and widely-outlawed munitions that pose high risks to civilians.

Higgins got a rush from being the first to spot things that no one — outside, perhaps, Assad’s army — knew existed. And it helped that with each month, more and more powerful people were taking their talking points from his blog. Even before the attacks this past August, Higgins’ audience had grown to include members of the Defense Department, the State Department, the United Nations, the U.K.



Foreign Commonwealth Office, Turkey's National Intelligence Organization, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, as well as countless think tanks and Russia's state-run news channel.

"Brown Moses has been carrying a lot of hod in the coverage of the Syrian war," CJ Chivers, a *New York Times* reporter covering

used as he raised funds — about \$17,000 — so he could support his family while devoting himself to the blog full-time. He raised the sum quickly. Half came from the crowdfunding site Indiegogo, and the other half from an anonymous donor. Higgins also began picking up occasional contract work doing social media forensics for groups that track weapons use overseas,

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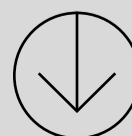
Syria, wrote on his personal website in the summer of 2012. "So c'mon, let's say it: Many people (whether they admit it or not) have been relying on that blog's daily labor to cull the uncountable videos that circulate from the conflict." (Chivers himself had based a story for *The Times* in part on Higgins' work tracking Yugoslav weapons in Syria.)

In April 2013, Chivers delivered another endorsement, providing a promotional blurb that Higgins

like Human Rights Watch and Action on Armed Violence.

Still, six months after his fundraising campaign, Higgins was having doubts he could pay his mortgage analyzing YouTube videos. He figured he had just a few months of finance left before he once again needed to find the steady income of a full-time job.

Yet in the course of Brown Moses' lifetime, Higgins has created an indispensable news source by doing what no news organization can: devoting virtually unlimited time to digging through the endless detritus of YouTube in the



hopes of possibly coming up with something interesting to say on some or another niche topic. And he shares his loot. Unlike journalists, who guard their scoops, Higgins works like an open source Sherlock Holmes, asking questions, bouncing ideas off other people, soliciting tips and generally thinking out loud.

The obsessiveness that has framed much of his life has a new channel. He spends his days on seemingly arcane minutiae — analyzing the welding on the lip of a rocket, reconstructing how metal folds over the edge of a warhead's column, compiling endless YouTube playlists, or clicking play-pause-play-rewind-play in rapid succession on numerous videos to freeze the precise moment when a blurry rocket appears for just a few seconds in Syria's sky.

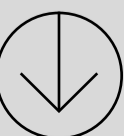
"I love it when there's a new bomb used in the combat," Higgins says. "Well, not love. But I see a new bomb and I'm like, 'Oh! Great! There's something new to look at.'"

THE MORNING OF AUG. 21 delivered something new to look at. Something so new, no one knew what it was.

Like most mornings, this one began with Higgins reaching for his Nexus 4 smartphone while still in bed so he could check Twitter before getting up to care for his daughter. His Twitter stream was full of frantic dispatches claiming that a chemical weapons attack had been directed at several suburbs of Damascus, killing what seemed an impossibly large number of people — more than 1,000. After Higgins had downed a black coffee, changed and fed his daughter, his wife, Nuray, took over. Nuray, who is Turkish and works part-time at a post office, happened to be home that day, and she tended to their daughter so Higgins could watch YouTube videos in peace.

While his daughter played, Higgins settled on the couch in his living room and quickly assembled nearly 200 videos of the victims into a YouTube playlist. He sent his findings to chemical weapons experts he'd come to know in the course of writing his blog, asking them to opine on whether these clips were consistent with a nerve gas strike. Probably so, the experts agreed, but they could not say definitively. The world would have to wait for the United Nations to test samples collected from Syria.

Waiting was the last thing Hig-



Syrian rebels celebrate on top of the remains of a Syrian government fighter jet, which was shot down at Daret Ezza on



gins planned to do. As he saw it, a “ridiculously huge” number of people had been killed, and no one knew how, or by whom. Waiting seemed tantamount to letting a criminal get a head start. There was also the issue of nerve gas. If chemical weapons had been used in the attack, the party responsible had violated nothing less than an international

— more in depth than any newspaper article, but more open than any think tank or government agency. The world needed answers, and he was singularly able to help find them. “I can’t imagine there are many people in the world who know more about this than I do,” he says matter-of-factly. “It became my mission to find out everything about these things

**HIGGINS GOT A RUSH FROM BEING THE FIRST TO SPOT THINGS THAT NO ONE... KNEW EXISTED. AND IT HELPED THAT WITH EACH MONTH, MORE AND MORE POWERFUL PEOPLE WERE TAKING THEIR TALKING POINTS FROM HIS BLOG.**

ban on munitions “justly condemned by the general opinion of the civilized world,” in the words of the Geneva Protocol. And the stakes could not have been higher. President Barack Obama had declared that chemical weapons usage constituted a red line that, if crossed, could trigger American military intervention. That moment was potentially at hand.

Higgins sees his one-man intelligence unit as a vital source of information for the general public

because no one knew anything.”

That day and into the next, his research surfaced hundreds more videos, including Muhammed al-Jazaeri’s video clip from Zamalka.

The photos and videos Higgins tracks down online are posted by scores of different sources in Syria: armed rebel groups, like the Environs of the Holy House Battalions, Ahrar al-Sham and Liwa al-Islam; local news outlets run by the opposition, like “Darya Revolution,” “Erbin City,” “Ugarit News” and the “Adra News Network”; and individual activists, like al-Jazaeri. Thanks to this





near-real-time feed, Higgins can describe activity in Syria as if he'd seen it from his own window. "Today there's been a lot of mid-29s flying around Damascus," he observed recently from the security of his kitchen table.

The proliferation of this material attests to how Syria's opposition has embraced social media as a PR tool, a form of subterfuge, a propaganda apparatus and a crucial fundraising mechanism. Activists and armed battalions have assembled a sophisticated media

arsenal, having long ago realized that their online presence can affect their offline success in forging alliances, raising funds and securing weapons. Their press offices carry out online brand-building campaigns complete with up-to-the-minute press releases and carefully edited highlight reels of successful attacks. The social media guru is the newest recruit in the fighting army.

"It's sort of like a social media arms race," said Nate Rosenblatt, an analyst for Caerus Associates, a research and advisory firm. "They continuously try to innovate and improve on the uses and

This file image provided by Shaam News Network, authenticated based on its contents and AP reporting, purports to show several bodies being buried in a suburb of Damascus, Syria, during a funeral on Aug. 21, 2013.



purposes of social media to stay ahead of their opponents and gain an advantage.”

The Free Syrian Army unit Suqur al-Sham, for example, boasts a media staff of eight. In addition to keeping up a steady stream of posts on YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, it maintains three dedicated websites and last year added training in social net-

rebels have used these videos as a kind of resume-booster intended to show off their strength and brand them as heir-apparent to the Assad regime. Brigades also hope their highlight reels — often meticulously edited with Instagram-style filters and custom animation — will convince wealthy, sympathetic donors to part with their cash. For Higgins and other

**UNLIKE JOURNALISTS, WHO GUARD THEIR SCOOPS, HIGGINS WORKS LIKE AN OPEN SOURCE SHERLOCK HOLMES, ASKING QUESTIONS, BOUNCING IDEAS OFF OTHER PEOPLE, SOLICITING TIPS AND GENERALLY THINKING OUT LOUD.**

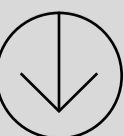
working for Suqur al-Sham press staff. Its YouTube channel — like those of many other rebel groups — features clips of soldiers leading attacks on enemy outposts. Most follow a predictable formula. There’s a close-up of men firing machine guns or loading warheads into rocket launchers, then a cut to the target being destroyed with off-camera voices shouting “Al-lahu Akbar” (“God is great”).

With so many Syrian opposition groups vying for dominance,

armchair analysts like him, these videos serve a very different purpose: They can offer valuable glimpses at what weapons are being used in battle, or who’s leading the charge.

Professional analysts often discount this kind of footage because so much of it can be faked. One opposition group’s footage of a Syrian Army helicopter shot down mid-air, for example, turned out to be a video of a Russian craft that had been filmed in the Chechen conflict.

But Higgins is undeterred, having refined his skill in separating





the real from the bogus. He has determined that not all social media is created equally. Tweets and Facebook posts are no good because text is far easier to fake than photos. He distrusts footage of casualties or bombed-out buildings.

“People will say, ‘Oh well that person just wrapped bandage around their head, they’re faking it,’” Higgins says. “And, you know,

hung everywhere, also atypical for the group’s videos. Then there was the issue of the T-shirts. Liquid sarin can kill through contact with skin, Higgins knew. Would these rebels really be hanging around a deadly toxin in short sleeves?

Higgins credits this attention to detail to the many years he’s spent arguing with Internet commenters — the harshest, most meticulous

## **HIGGINS BELONGS TO AN OBSESSIVE COTERIE OF SELF-APPOINTED MILITARY INTELLIGENCE EXPERTS WHO USE SOCIAL MEDIA TO PIECE TOGETHER CRITICAL DETAILS OF FARAWAY CONFLICTS, OFTEN WELL AHEAD OF SEASONED PROFESSIONALS.**

fair enough. But when you’ve got an unexploded bomb stuck inside of someone’s house, that’s a lot harder to fake.”

He was immediately suspicious when an anonymous tipster sent videos purporting to show Liwa al-Islam, an opposition group, firing chemical weapons on Aug. 21. Liwa al-Islam produces high-quality videos, but these had been filmed on a blurry cell phone camera, Higgins said. Flags with the Liwa al-Islam emblem had been

and most relentless critics on the planet. In martialing evidence for analysis on Brown Moses, Higgins tries to imagine every disagreement from some ticked-off stranger online, and preemptively strengthen his argument’s weaknesses.

“If you want someone to really question your work, just post it on the Internet,” he says. “There are plenty of people who’ll want to tell you you’re an idiot and you’re wrong.”

AS HIGGINS TRAWLED through videos the day after the attacks, he saw, over and over again, long,



cylindrical rockets with fins on one end and a round plate on the other, and red numbers stenciled in between.

Hello, I know I've seen these before, Higgins thought. He did a mental inventory of the thousands of YouTube videos he'd watched over the preceding eight months, trying to remember where else he'd come across these hunks of metal.

Alleged Chemical Attacks, and began a hunt to rebuild them using everything that had been shared about them online.

His methodology recalls the card game "Memory," in which players overturn two cards at a time trying to find a pair. But instead of finding clubs or hearts, he'll try to match a mystery object — a blurry warhead, a kind

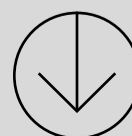
**"I LOVE IT WHEN THERE'S A NEW BOMB USED IN THE COMBAT. WELL, NOT LOVE. BUT I SEE A NEW BOMB AND I'M LIKE, 'OH! GREAT! THERE'S SOMETHING NEW TO LOOK AT.'"**

Daraya, Adra, Homs, Higgins realized. He quickly pulled up videos filmed in three other cities, on four different dates between January and August, and embedded them in a blog post. The rocket he'd seen after the strike the day before had also been spotted after four separate attacks, two of which were suspected to have involved chemical weapons, he wrote.

Higgins still had no idea what it was. And neither did the arms experts he consulted. He christened the weapons UMLACAs, short for Unidentified Munitions Linked to

of rocket launcher — to an image of something that's known. Earlier that month, Higgins had debunked a rumor that pouches of glass tubes, widely documented online, were proof that chemical weapons had been used in Syria. He did so by matching the vials captured in videos to photos of a Cold War-era chemical weapons testing kit for sale on eBay.

In the week following the bombing outside Damascus, Higgins spent hours a day at his computer, breaking only to feed his daughter and perhaps catch an episode of *Columbo*, the detective TV series, with his wife. (Higgins says he feels like he and the TV





detective are “kindred spirits in some ways.”)

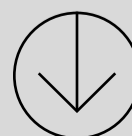
One crucial challenge was figuring out exactly where the rockets had landed. If Higgins could determine where a weapon had crashed, he’d have a better chance of finding where it was shot from. And, in turn, who fired it.

He zeroed in on one well-documented rocket labeled “197” that he knew, from a Twitter follower’s tip, had fallen somewhere approximately between the towns of

Zamalka and Ein Tarma.

To narrow that down further, he began studying images of “197” to see what landmarks he could make out in the background. He tried to sketch a rough map of the area beyond the twisted metal. A building here, an apartment there, an empty plot of land just in front. Next, he compared his makeshift diagram to satellite imagery of the Damascus suburb on Google Maps and its open-source equivalent, Wikimapia, hoping he’d find an area that matched it. It was like “finding a key and matching it to a lock,” Higgins

A Free Syrian Army soldier poses holding a rifle and a Syrian flag at the Bab al-Salam border crossing to Turkey on July 22, 2012.



says. Imagine being given a snapshot taken at a backyard barbecue somewhere in Tacoma, and being asked to match it to a house on a map in Washington state — an area roughly the size of Syria.

He couldn't find an exact likeness. Yet there were five images that corresponded well enough. After some back-and-forth with

the north, Higgins concluded. He didn't fail to point out what was located just 6 to 8 kilometers in that direction: a missile base belonging to the Syrian Army's 155th Brigade.

ON AUG. 31, 10 DAYS after the attacks in Damascus, President Obama convened reporters in

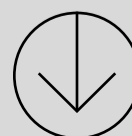
## **SYRIA'S OPPOSITION HAS EMBRACED SOCIAL MEDIA AS A PR TOOL, A FORM OF SUBTERFUGE, A PROPAGANDA APPARATUS AND A CRUCIAL FUNDRAISING MECHANISM.**

Syria-watchers and journalists on Google+, where Higgins often turns to ask for help and second opinions, Higgins wrote a blog post that walked through his best guess of where "197" had crashed. He presented five composite images, each juxtaposing a still taken from an activist's video with a screenshot of satellite imagery. To each, he added red lines and small numbers meant to indicate which spots matched up, along with a brief explanation.

Based on the maps and the way the rocket buckled on impact, the weapon must have been fired from

the White House Rose Garden. The United States had evidence Assad's army had fired chemical weapons on opposition groups outside the country's capital, he announced. He was calling for a military strike against Syria.

By then, Higgins had published nine stories on the attacks. He had identified not only where one of the rockets had landed, but had also shared proof that they resembled munitions used in prior suspected chemical attacks. He'd argued that the Syrian opposition's "Hell Cannon" couldn't have been used to fire rockets like those in the Aug. 21 strike; that Assad forces had been using "DIY weapons," previously linked





to chemical weapons; and that United Nations inspectors in Syria had examined an artillery rocket, collected after the strikes, that could be used as a chemical warhead and loaded with more than 4 pounds of sarin gas.

He shared high-resolution photographs of activists holding a tape measure over a rocket recovered in Damascus after the attacks — the first time anyone had offered clear measurements of the weapons. And Higgins also posted a video that showed Assad's Republican Guard — recognizable from its red berets — had loaded and fired munitions similar to

those linked to chemical attacks.

Visitors to the Brown Moses blog had reached an all-time high, growing eightfold in the days and weeks following the attacks, from about 3,000 daily readers to more than 25,000. News networks were regularly airing videos Higgins had featured on his blog and Human Rights Watch had tapped Higgins to help compile its report on the alleged nerve gas attacks outside Damascus. The group was drawing liberally from the YouTube footage and Facebook photos he'd gathered.

What made his analysis so compelling, even to those in government or with security clearance, was its detail. While the White House's case for a chemi-

Higgins at work in his home in Leicester, England.



cal weapons attack had included vague references to “independent sources” and “thousands of social media reports” in the four-page document it released to the public, Higgins had pointed people directly to the sources them-

“The U.S., U.K. and France produce a one-page report saying, ‘We have this evidence, we can’t show you it,’” he says. “That’s frustrating in this modern era where we have access to all this open source information.

**VISITORS TO THE BROWN MOSES BLOG HAD REACHED AN ALL-TIME HIGH, GROWING EIGHTFOLD IN THE DAYS AND WEEKS FOLLOWING THE ATTACKS, FROM ABOUT 3,000 DAILY READERS TO MORE THAN 25,000.**

selves. His readers didn’t have to believe rockets were fired. They could look at them in dozens of videos and photographs Higgins had compiled. The White House asked the public to trust them. Higgins’ instructions? “Go see for yourself.”

Higgins sympathizes with the pressures that prevent journalists from scouring social media the way he does. But he says he has little patience for political leaders and their tendency to offer vague assurances that they have proof of weapons of mass destruction — in Iraq, in Syria, wherever — while refusing to make the goods public.

People don’t just want reassurances that the evidence is there. They want to see it.”

Higgins plans to keep revealing it.

Even months after Obama’s showdown with Syria, and after Syria’s chemical weapons have largely faded from headlines, Higgins is still scouring social media to expose dark secrets and cruel acts.

“No one cares anymore because the chemical attack was two-and-a-half months ago,” he says. “But I’m still looking into it. You do get the feeling there are people who have this obsessive nature. And then there are the normal people.”

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