

# **Fabrication in BBC Panorama 'Saving Syria's Children'**

**By Robert Stuart**

Source: [Complaint Against BBC Panorama](#)

**Correspondence with the BBC over allegations that the Panorama documentary 'Saving Syria's Children' broadcast on 30 September 2013 included staged sequences purporting to show the aftermath of an incendiary bomb attack on an Aleppo school on 26 August 2013**

Complaint: Dr Saleyha Ahsan – The Truth About Fat, BBC One, 2 April 2015

Dear Sir / Madam

**BBC One, The Truth About Fat, 2 April 2015**

I wish to complain that the BBC's employment of Dr Saleyha Ahsan as presenter of the above programme breaches Section 15.4.5 of the BBC's Editorial Guidelines, which states:

The external activities of BBC editorial staff, reporters and presenters should not undermine the public's perception of the impartiality, integrity or independence of BBC output. External activities should not bring the BBC into disrepute. It is also important that off-air activities do not undermine the on-air role of regular presenters.

Breaches of international humanitarian law by Dr Saleyha Ahsan.

The publication on Facebook by Dr Ahsan of photographs taken in Libya in October 2011 plainly breach Geneva Convention provisions protecting prisoners of war and others caught up in conflicts against insults and public curiosity.

I have obscured the relevant individual's identity in the two

photographs below. The full images are presently viewable on Dr Ahsan's Facebook page. [1]

Former BBC legal correspondent Joshua Rozenberg observes:

The Fourth Geneva Convention, signed in 1949, protects civilians in time of war. But its application is much broader, covering people who, "in any manner whatsoever, find themselves, in the case of a conflict or occupation, in the hands of a party to the conflict or occupying power of which they are not nationals".

It applies not only to "cases of declared war" but also "any other armed conflict". This seems to cover the situation of foreign troops captured at gunpoint.

Article 27 says that people protected by the Fourth Convention "are entitled, in all circumstances, to respect for their persons" and be protected from violence, threats, insults and public curiosity.

A similar provision under the Third Convention protects prisoners of war against "insults and public curiosity". Although this was probably intended to ban prisoners being paraded through the streets, it must apply equally to prisoners being forced to appear on television.

The US Government used this to justify its decision in 2004 not to allow photographs to be published of detainees at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. The detainees, it said, were either prisoners of war or protected persons under the Fourth Convention.

Releasing their photographs, military lawyers said, "would be inconsistent with the obligation of the United States to treat the individuals humanely and would pose a great risk of subjecting these individuals to public insult and curiosity".

Article 3, common to all the conventions, provides protection

during civil wars and non-international armed conflicts. That says that people taking no active part in the hostilities, including members of the armed forces who have laid down their arms for any reason, “shall in all circumstances be treated humanely”.

Ethics and integrity of Dr Saleyha Ahsan

### **Children and armed groups**

Dr Ahsan’s Facebook page contains a number of images from Libya in which she poses with armed groups which include children. The adolescent in the grey top at the right of the first two images below would appear to be an active member of such a group. [2] The third image features a younger child surrounded by men brandishing automatic weapons. Unsurprisingly, this child appears uncomfortable. In the final two images a group of armed revellers is joined by Dr Ahsan and another young boy. In all the photographs in which she appears Dr Ahsan’s pleasure is apparent.

Dr Ahsan’s chilling attitude towards children and armed conflict is further evidenced in her dramatised account of her experiences in Libya, ‘The Road to Bani Walid’ (copy here), broadcast on BBC Radio 4 on 27 February 2015: [3]

“a seventeen year old boy who’s been separated from his brigade and is desperate to get back to them. You can tell he’s seen action, the way he holds himself, his eyes always focussing somewhere else – he needs his unit”. (The Road to Bani Walid, 24:30)

Notably, Dr Ahsan’s instinct is that this child’s most urgent need is to be reunited with a military fighting unit rather than with his family, or indeed to be offered the services of a counsellor in order to address the effects of trauma which Dr Ahsan observes.

In her approving attitude towards the participation of children in armed fighting units and her nonchalance towards

the presence of children among armed groups Dr Ahsan demonstrates a clear lack of concern for the physical and psychological wellbeing of minors. [4]

### **Association with Hand in Hand for Syria**

In the 2013 BBC Panorama special 'Saving Syria's Children' Dr Ahsan is seen volunteering with the UK registered charity Hand in Hand for Syria.

As noted here, until July 2014 the Facebook banner of Hand in Hand for Syria's co-founder Faddy Sahloul read WE WILL BRING ASSAD TO JUSTICE; NO MATTER WHAT LIVES IT TAKES, NO MATTER HOW MUCH CATASTROPHE IT MAKES. Such shocking and bloodthirsty sentiments, utterly divergent from what one would expect of a humanitarian charity, are in stark contrast to Hand in Hand for Syria's declared purpose on the Charity Commission website of "the advancement of health or saving lives". The image was removed shortly after this comment was made on the Guardian newspaper's website.

A nurse who appears at 31:17 in 'Saving Syria's Children' is pictured on this website wearing a Hand in Hand for Syria tunic and apparently treating a child combatant. The site names the child as fifteen year old Mujahid Omar and claims he has spent three years in the "revolutionary movement service". The image allegedly depicts him being treated following an injury sustained in battle.

Hand in Hand for Syria is the subject of detailed and highly disturbing research by peace activist Dr Declan Hayes. Dr Hayes' research has been submitted to the police and Charity Commission.

Dr Hayes notes (p13) the partnership between Hand in Hand for Syria and ShelterBox International, whose founder and former chief executive is currently facing fraud charges and whose governance is scrutinised in this report. In an email of 19 December 2014 Sam Hewett, Operations Coordinator of ShelterBox

International, wrote:

We look forward to the results of the investigations of the Charity Commission. Special Branch have also been in contact with ShelterBox, and we have no doubt that they will also have been making investigations with Hand in Hand for Syria.

Yours faithfully

Robert Stuart

Notes

[1] All of Dr Ahsan's photographs from Libya which are reproduced here were published on her Facebook page at the time of writing. Screenshot demonstrating this are here.

[2] The images of the adolescent in grey recall this scene from 'Saving Syria's Children', a 2013 BBC Panorama special in which Dr Ahsan participated. The still is from 11:30 in the programme, after reporter Ian Pannell and his team have just passed through an ISIS checkpoint. As Susan Dirgham, National Coordinator of Australians for Mussalaha (Reconciliation) in Syria, notes in a complaint to the BBC the startling presence of young boys in a militia group at this point is strangely unremarked upon, a peculiar omission in a programme purporting to focus on the impact of the Syrian crisis on children.

Dr Ahsan's relaxed attitude to children and weaponry further recalls the photo album of another BBC employee, 'Saving Syria's Children' "Fixer/Translator" Mughira Al Sharif. As noted here (search for "Sharif") the second image below was published on Mr Al Sharif's Instagram account on Tuesday 27 August 2013, the day after he had purportedly witnessed dozens of injured and dying children at Atareb Hospital, Aleppo.

[3] Billed as "the story of her journey to confront the reality of revolution – and of her own reasons for being there" Dr Ahsan's play contains a number of shocking passages,

including:

“every time we stop more vehicles join the convoy, revolutionary songs playing from stereos – it’s more like going to a party than going to a war!” (23:00)

“a woman in hijab driving herself to war singing Andrew Lloyd Webber – how cool is that!” [Dr Ahsan is here referring to herself] (24:00)

“it looks like an arms fair out here – armoured vehicles, artillery, tanks, all lined up like a showroom – instant adrenaline surge! This war’s for real!” (26:50)

[4] The irony of Dr Ahsan’s participation in the 2013 BBC Panorama special ‘Saving Syria’s Children’ is marked.

The BBC Trust Unit has judged that complaints alleging fabrication in some of the scenes in ‘Saving Syria’s Children’ should not be put before the Trust. However, in addition to a number of errors in the Trust Unit’s two separate decisions on this matter (such as its frequent appeal to an “independent investigation” of the alleged “playground napalm bomb” by Human Rights Watch when HRW has in fact clearly stated that it has “not investigated this incident”), a number of potentially crucial evidence points remain entirely unaddressed.

The Trust Unit also neglected to investigate the role that medical simulation techniques may have played in fabricating the alleged injuries presented in ‘Saving Syria’s Children’, taking account of the personal relationship which exists between Brigadier Kevin Beaton who, as demonstrated in this Newsnight report, is involved in leading HOSPEX medical simulation exercises, and Dr Saleyha Ahsan (“he was my squadron commander in Bosnia and inspired me to study medicine”).

A summary of the issues surrounding ‘Saving Syria’s Children’ identified by the complainants is [Here](#)