

LOCAL

# Tevlin: If Syria story is true, why is Minnesota news site hiding?

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**JON TEVLIN**  
@JONTEVLIN

Not long after a story alleging that Syrian rebels — not the government — were responsible for chemical attacks that killed hundreds ran on a Minnesota-published website, MintPress News, I wrote to one of the authors with questions.

The story, with the headline: “Syrians In Ghouta Claim Saudi-Supplied Rebels Behind Chemical Attack” was not only sensational, but it ran counter to just about every other report in the world. It was being hailed as an international “exclusive” from a little-known

local website.

The article claimed that interviews with rebels and others on the scene in a Damascus suburb showed that chemical weapons were provided to rebels by Saudi officials and were detonated by mistake. As the U.S. prepared to attack Syria over the chemicals, it was a potentially huge story — if it had merit. Surely the journalist and editor responsible would be happy to promote such a scoop.

But I never heard back from one of the people with bylines on the story, Dale Gavlak, a longtime contributor to the Associated Press from the Middle East. Now I know why.

In the past weeks, the “exclusive” has been challenged by skeptics. Gavlak has said she had very little role in reporting or writing the story, and in fact demanded numerous times that her byline be removed. She said all the reporting was done by a colleague in Syria and was not verified.

Gavlak issued statements to the media saying she had been suspended by the AP over the story, which was never followed up and never picked up by the mainstream press. It was, however, cited by Russian President Vladimir Putin as possible evidence that the Syrian government was not behind the attacks.

The editor of MintPress, meanwhile, said in a release that “Gavlak wrote the article in its entirety as well as conducted the research.”

The strange tale has pulled two Minnesotans into the spotlight, which included a piece on a New York Times blog and a story circulated by McClatchy newspapers.

One is MintPress editor Mnar Muhawesh, a 26-year-old who started the online publication in February 2013 after graduating from St. Cloud State in journalism. She said she could not discuss the story due to “legal considerations.”

The other is her father-in-law, businessman and University of St. Thomas adjunct Prof. Odeh Muhawesh, assumed by the Times and others to be the main funder of MintPress. Mnar once called Odeh “a key adviser.”

In an interview Monday, however, Muhawesh said he had “zero involvement financially” or editorially in MintPress. Reports on the controversy have focused on statements at websites formerly run by Odeh Muhawesh that are staunchly anti-Saudi, causing speculation that the chemical weapons story might have been driven by his ideological views rather than the facts.

The theories “are plausible but not factual,” Muhawesh said. “They incorrectly made the connection” between his personal views and the MintPress story, he said.

“The truth is, I’m too conservative to agree with a lot of what they print,” said Muhawesh. He said Mnar is the sole owner of MintPress.

He did acknowledge, however, that representations of his views against a potential war with Syria, and his views of Saudi Arabia, are correct.

"I personally believe our involvements with the Saudis have been nothing but disastrous," said Muhawesh, a Shiite scholar who teaches modern Middle Eastern history at St. Thomas.

Those views had no influence on the MintPress story, Muhawesh said, but nevertheless he believes the story to be accurate.

"It's a story that challenged the status quo," said Muhawesh, who said he believes Gavlak tried to back out because the narrative didn't square with the rest of the media, and could cost her work. "Again, I am not speaking for MintPress, but in my personal opinion it is a very viable story."

Jane Kirtley, a University of Minnesota professor who specializes in media ethics and law, calls the evolving story of MintPress "beyond bizarre."

"If it's true, this [Syria] story is gold," said Kirtley. Because the reporter and editor disagree so dramatically on how the "scoop" was obtained, it's hard to figure out which is right.

"I don't know, but I suspect it's somewhere in the middle," said Kirtley.

On its website, MintPress boasts that it offers "context and insight into issues and stories often overlooked by the current establishment media."

What's less certain is whether they exhibit the same standards for the truth. Star Tribune editor Nancy Barnes said a story as sensational as the Syria piece would demand alternative sources, hopefully a photographer or security personnel accompanying the reporter. If a reporter wanted her byline removed, it would "certainly raise red flags," said Barnes.

In my experience, if a publication had a scoop this large with the potential to alter international events and stop a war, and was confident in the story, it wouldn't drop the story and go into hiding.

It would be promoting itself for a Pulitzer.

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@jontevlin