

Chemical Weapons Attack: Treating Anti-Syria Charges as Flat Fact

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Global Research, October 24, 2013
consortiumnews.com

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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With the blessing of the New York Times, the Obama administration has succeeded in cementing a dubious conventional wisdom about the Syrian government's alleged use of chemical weapons last Aug. 21 — without presenting a shred of actual evidence.

In a [front-page story](#) co-written by Michael R. Gordon, who also co-wrote the infamous "aluminum tube" article falsely accusing Iraq of building nuclear centrifuges in 2002, the Times included the U.S. allegations about Syria's chemical weapons use into its storyline as flat fact, not a point in serious dispute.

The Times reported on October 23 that the State Department warned the White House in June that Syrian officials would see inaction on initial chemical weapons incidents — that the U.S. government was also blaming on the Syrian government — as a "green light for continued CW use." The Times then wrote that the State Department's warning "proved to be prophetic. A devastating poison gas attack on Aug. 21 killed hundreds of civilians."

The story continues in that vein, accepting as indisputable fact that the Syrian government was behind the Aug. 21 attack on a suburb of Damascus despite significant doubts among independent analysts, UN inspectors and, I'm told, U.S. intelligence analysts.

Indeed, the reported lack of consensus in the U.S. intelligence community helps explain why a four-page U.S. "Government Assessment" of the incident was released on Aug. 30 not by the Director of National Intelligence but by the White House press office and was touted not by the DNI but Secretary of State John Kerry. The U.S. government's white paper contained no evidence to support its assertions blaming the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

Though the Aug. 21 incident brought the United States to the brink of another Middle East war, the Obama administration has refused over the past two months to release any proof that it claims to possess, such as communications intercepts, images of rocket launches or even the basis for its precise count, "1,429," of those supposedly killed by Sarin gas.

The U.S. government has even denied U.S. congressman Rep. Alan Grayson, D-Florida, access to the supposed evidence under-girding President Barack Obama's request for authorization to use force against Syria, a proposal that is now in abeyance pending Syria's compliance with a Russian plan for destroying Syria's stockpile of chemical weapons.

Grayson, who has [publicly questioned](#) why the administration insists on withholding its evidence, was informed by the House Intelligence Committee that he would not be allowed to look at the intelligence because he gave an unrelated floor speech citing published charts

about National Security Agency spying that were leaked by ex-NSA contractor Edward Snowden.

The committee chairman, Rep. Mike Rogers, R-Michigan, also justified the denial, in part, because Obama's request to use force is not currently before the House. According to [an article in Politico](#), Rogers said requests to review intelligence information are weighed against "the sensitivity to the national defense or the confidential conduct of the foreign relations of the United States of the information sought ... the likelihood of its being directly or indirectly disclosed [and] the jurisdictional interest of the member making the request."

However, there remains the distinct possibility that the fluid developments in Syria could suddenly put Obama's war resolution back before Congress amid demands for an immediate up-or-down vote, while leaving no time for a careful review of the dubious casus belli.

Time for Examination

In the heat of a new war fever, there would be little patience for unwinding the conventional wisdom blaming the Aug. 21 attack on the Syrian government. That's especially true now that the New York Times and much of the mainstream U.S. news media has accepted the allegations as indisputable truth.

Ideally, the careful scrutiny that a case for war should demand would come when passions are tempered — as they are now — not at their hottest. But the Obama administration, the House Intelligence Committee and, indeed, the major U.S. news media seem to believe that the public and even members of Congress should just fall in line.

Over the past two months, I've heard repeatedly that the public shouldn't expect to see the intelligence that justifies war despite the bitter and bloody experience of the Iraq invasion (not to mention a long and sorry history of other U.S. government lies and propaganda justifying wars).

President Obama has a curious understanding of the word "transparency," by which he seems to mean: keeping the public in the dark and giving a peek at the "evidence" only to officials who won't ask any tough questions. Though he is not the first president to obsess over secrecy, some presidents have shown more respect for American and world public opinion, even if that requires sacrificing some modest intelligence advantage.

Think of President John Kennedy exposing the U-2's high-resolution-photo capabilities to show the world the Soviet missiles in Cuba in 1962; President Ronald Reagan revealing the U.S. ability to intercept Soviet air communications after the KAL-007 shoot-down in 1983; even President George W. Bush authorizing Secretary of State Colin Powell to reveal phone intercepts in support of the Iraq invasion in 2003. Granted, some of those revelations (like the KAL-007 and Iraqi intercepts) were doctored to make a propaganda case, but exposure of the intelligence capabilities was real.

It's hard to believe that the Obama administration's sources and methods regarding the Aug. 21 incident are any more sensitive than the intelligence techniques released by earlier presidents. The world surely knows that the United States can intercept phone calls and has satellites that can record both visual and infrared images with great precision.

The only logical reasons why the Obama administration would refuse to release any U.S. evidence in support of its accusations on Syria — especially after the bogus case for

invading Iraq — is that the evidence is weak to non-existent or provided by “sources,” such as Israel, Saudi Arabia or the Syrian rebels, who have a vested interest in drawing the United States into the Syrian civil war.

The UN Report

While refusing to release any of its own evidence, the Obama administration has argued that a 38-page report by UN inspectors contained indications that some non-governmental organizations and media outlets, including the New York Times, have interpreted as implicating the Syrian government.

But the UN report itself offered no findings of responsibility and actually contained information casting doubt on some U.S. claims, including finding no Sarin or other chemical weapons agents at one of two sites inspected outside Damascus. The inspectors also reported that they detected signs that people associated with the rebels had tampered with the two sites before the inspectors arrived. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “[Murky Clues from UN’s Syria Report](#).”]

In the field, Robert Fisk, a veteran reporter for London’s Independent newspaper, found a lack of consensus among UN officials and other international observers — despite the career risks that they faced by deviating from the conventional wisdom on Assad’s guilt.

“Grave doubts are being expressed by the UN and other international organisations in Damascus that the sarin gas missiles were fired by Assad’s army,” Fisk wrote. “Why, for example, would Syria wait until the UN inspectors were ensconced in Damascus on 18 August before using sarin gas little more than two days later — and only four miles from the hotel in which the UN had just checked in?... As one Western NGO put it ... ‘if Assad really wanted to use sarin gas, why for God’s sake, did he wait for two years and then when the UN was actually on the ground to investigate?’”

New evidence also has surfaced on how the U.S. government worked aggressively over the past dozen years to ensure that the leaders of key UN agencies, including the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, will present findings in ways most favorable to U.S. policies. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “[How US Pressure Bends UN Agencies](#).”]

Ideally, the role of the press corps should be to examine all such claims skeptically and to insist as much as possible that the various sides in a dispute present their evidence so the information can be carefully evaluated, especially when the issue is one of war or peace.

If a government refuses to present any evidence at all — even hiding the facts from a legislator like Grayson who isn’t just going to toe the line — that press skepticism should be ratcheted up even higher. Instead, the New York Times on Syria does what it did during the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, simply make itself available as a willing propaganda vehicle.

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