

Evidence Indicates that Syrian Government Did Not Launch a Chemical Weapon Attack Against Its People

By [Washington's Blog](#)

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CBS News reports that the U.S. is [finalizing plans](#) for [war](#) against Syria – and [positioning ships](#) to launch [cruise missiles](#) against the Syrian government – based on the claim that the Syrian government used chemical weapons against its people.

The last time the U.S. blamed the Syrian government for a chemical weapons attack, that claim was [was debunked](#).

But is the claim that the Syrian government used chemical weapons against its people true [this time](#)?

It's not surprising that Syria's close ally – Russia – is [expressing doubt](#). Agence France-Presse (AFP) [notes](#):

Russia, which has previously said it has proof of chemical weapons use by the rebels, expressed deep scepticism about the opposition's claims.

The foreign ministry said the timing of the allegations as UN inspectors began their work "makes us think that we are once again dealing with a premeditated provocation."

But Russia isn't the only doubter.

AFP [reports](#):

"At the moment, I am not totally convinced because the people that are helping them are without any protective clothing and without any respirators," said Paula Vanninen, director of Verifin, the Finnish Institute for Verification of the Chemical Weapons Convention.

"In a real case, they would also be contaminated and would also be having symptoms."

John Hart, head of the Chemical and Biological Security Project at Stockholm International Peace Research Institute said he had not seen the telltale evidence in the eyes of the victims that would be compelling evidence of chemical weapons use.

"Of the videos that I've seen for the last few hours, none of them show pinpoint pupils... this would indicate exposure to organophosphorus nerve agents," he said.

Gwyn Winfield, editor of CBRNe World magazine, which specialises in chemical weapons issues, said the evidence did not suggest that the chemicals used were of the weapons-grade that the Syrian army possesses in its stockpiles.

"We're not seeing reports that doctors and nurses... are becoming fatalities, so that would suggest that the toxicity of it isn't what we would consider military sarin. It may well be that it is a lower-grade," Winfield told AFP.

Haaretz [reports](#):

Western experts on chemical warfare who have examined at least part of the footage are skeptical that weapons-grade chemical substances were used, although they all emphasize that serious conclusions cannot be reached without thorough on-site examination.

Dan Kaszeta, a former officer of the U.S. Army's Chemical Corps and a leading private consultant, pointed out a number of details absent from the footage so far: "None of the people treating the casualties or photographing them are wearing any sort of chemical-warfare protective gear," he says, "and despite that, none of them seem to be harmed." This would seem to rule out most types of military-grade chemical weapons, including the vast majority of nerve gases, since these substances would not evaporate immediately, especially if they were used in sufficient quantities to kill hundreds of people, but rather leave a level of contamination on clothes and bodies which would harm anyone coming in unprotected contact with them in the hours after an attack. In addition, he says that "there are none of the other signs you would expect to see in the aftermath of a chemical attack, such as intermediate levels of casualties, severe visual problems, vomiting and loss of bowel control."

Steve Johnson, a leading researcher on the effects of hazardous material exposure at England's Cranfield University who has worked with Britain's Ministry of Defense on chemical warfare issues, agrees that "from the details we have seen so far, a large number of casualties over a wide area would mean quite a pervasive dispersal. With that level of chemical agent, you would expect to see a lot of contamination on the casualties coming in, and it would affect those treating them who are not properly protected. We are not seeing that here."

Additional questions also remain unanswered, especially regarding the timing of the attack, being that it occurred on the exact same day that a team of UN inspectors was in Damascus to investigate earlier claims of chemical weapons use. It is also unclear what tactical goal the Syrian army would have been trying to achieve, when over the last few weeks it has managed to push back the rebels who were encroaching on central areas of the capital. But if this was not a chemical weapons attack, what then caused the deaths of so many people without any external signs of trauma?

The Syrian rebels (and perhaps other players in the region) have a clear interest in presenting this as the largest chemical attack by the army loyal to Syrian President Bashar Assad to date, even if the cause was otherwise, especially while the UN inspectors are in the country. It is also in their interest to do so whilst U.S. President Barack Obama remains reluctant to commit any military support to the rebels, when only the crossing of a "red line" could

convince him to change his policy.

The rebels and the doctors on the scene may indeed believe that chemical weapons were used, since they fear such an attack, but they may not have the necessary knowledge and means to make such a diagnosis. The European Union demanded Wednesday that the UN inspectors be granted access to the new sites of alleged chemical attacks, but since this is not within the team's mandate, it is unlikely that the Syrian government will do so.

Stephen Johnson, an expert in weapons and chemical explosives at Cranfield Forensic Institute, said that the video footage [looked suspect](#):

There are, within some of the videos, examples which seem a little hyper-real, and almost as if they've been set up. Which is not to say that they are fake but it does cause some concern. Some of the people with foaming, the foam seems to be too white, too pure, and not consistent with the sort of internal injury you might expect to see, which you'd expect to be bloodier or yellower.

Chemical and biological weapons researcher Jean Pascal Zanders said that the footage appears to show victims of asphyxiation, which is [not consistent with the use of mustard gas or the nerve agents VX or sarin](#):

I'm deliberately not using the term chemical weapons here," he said, adding that the use of "industrial toxicants" was a more likely explanation.

Michael Rivero [asks](#):

1. Why would Syria's Assad invite United Nations chemical weapons inspectors to Syria, then launch a chemical weapons attack against women and children on the very day they arrive, just miles from where they are staying?

2. If Assad were going to use chemical weapons, wouldn't he use them against the hired mercenary army trying to oust him? What does he gain attacking women and children? Nothing! The gain is all on the side of the US Government desperate to get the war agenda going again.

As I type these words, US trained and equipped forces are already across the border into Syria, and US naval forces are sailing into position to launch a massive cruise missile attack into Syria that will surely kill more Syrians than were claimed to have died in the chemical attack.

Last time there was a chemical weapon attack in Syria, Bush administration office Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson said that he thought [Israel might have given chemical weapons to the Syrian rebels to frame the government](#).

British MP George Galloway just [floated the same theory](#) in regards to the new chemical weapon attack.

Of course, we don't know who carried out the attack, or what weapon was used.

But given the well-documented fact that the U.S. has been planning regime change in Syria for [20 years straight](#) - and planned to use false ploys for [50 years](#) - it is worth being

skeptical until all of the evidence is in.

Indeed, many are asking whether this is Iraq War 2.0. For example, the Independent [writes](#):

Pictures showing that the Syrian army used chemical weapons against rebel-held Eastern Ghouta just east of Damascus are ... likely to be viewed sceptically because the claims so much resemble those made about Saddam Hussein's possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) before the US and British invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Like the Iraqi opposition to Saddam, who provided most of the evidence of WMDs, the Syrian opposition has every incentive to show the Syrian government deploying chemical weapons in order to trigger foreign intervention.

But the obvious fact that for the Syrian government to use chemical weapons would be much against their own interests does not prove it did not happen. Governments and armies do stupid things. But it is difficult to imagine any compelling reason why they should do so since they have plenty of other means of killing people in Eastern Ghouta, such as heavy artillery or small arms, which they regularly use.

The evidence so far for the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian army is second-hand and comes from a biased source.

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