

Media Theatrics and the Syria Chemical Weapons Saga

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[Media Lens](#)

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Last August, Barack Obama [told](#) reporters at the White House:

‘We have been very clear to the Assad regime... that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilised.

‘That would change my calculus; that would change my equation.’

This was a clear threat to repeat the 2011 Nato assault which resulted in the overthrow and murder of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi.

So what is the evidence that Assad recently chose to do the one thing most likely to trigger a Western attack and similar fate?

On April 25, the White House [claimed](#) that US intelligence assessed ‘with varying degrees of confidence’ that ‘the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons on a small scale in Syria, specifically the chemical agent sarin’.

Having offered this caveated assertion, US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel [added](#):

‘We cannot confirm the origin of these weapons... but we do believe that any use of chemical weapons in Syria would very likely have originated with the Assad regime.’

He concluded:

‘As I’ve said, this is serious business – we need all the facts.’

A sceptical Alex Thomson, chief correspondent at Channel 4 News, [commented](#):

‘WMD, the Middle East, and here we go again... Already a British prime minister is talking about a “war crime” whilst offering the British people no detailed evidence.’

Evidence included video [footage](#) said to show victims of chemical weapons foaming at the mouth.

Thomson offered a link to a detailed report of the 1995 sarin attack in Tokyo, [noting](#): ‘am advised there’s no mention of any prominent bright, white foam at mouths’.

Thomson also asked, reasonably: ‘Why doesn’t any medic in the film wipe away the white foam on patients’ mouths – the basic paramedic fundamental to preserve an airway?’

On GlobalPost, Tracey Shelton and Peter Gelling [questioned](#) whether the filmed symptoms matched claims that sarin had been used:

‘In recent years, in other countries in the Middle East where security forces used tear gas on protesters, witnesses reported seeing victims foam at the mouth, convulse and twitch — the same symptoms seen in the Syrian victims.

‘The tell-tale sign of a sarin gas attack is myosis, or constricting of the pupils, and... tremors. While GlobalPost confirmed that some of the victims in the April 13 attack suffered from tremors, it was unable to confirm any of them had myosis.

‘Moreover, experts say an attack by sarin gas would cause virtually anyone who had come into contact with the toxin to immediately feel its effects. Exposure to even a very small amount of sarin could be lethal. While there were casualties in the Aleppo attack, most of the victims survived, which would not likely be the outcome of a sarin attack in a confined environment.’

Crucially, the White House accepted that: ‘The chain of custody is not clear.’ Middle East analyst Sharmine Narwani [commented](#):

‘That is the single most important phrase in this whole exercise. It is the only phrase that journalists need consider – everything else is conjecture of WMDs-in-Iraq proportions.

‘I asked a State Department spokesperson the following: “Does it mean you don’t know who has had access to the sample before it reached you? Or that the sample has not been contaminated along the way?”

‘He responded: “It could mean both.”’

Alastair Hay, a toxicologist at the University of Leeds, [cautioned](#):

‘To make a legal case – whether it’s against the Syrian government or opposition group – you need an ironclad chain of custody.

‘You need to be able to have somebody swear, if you like, that the material was in their custody at all times, whoever it is with before it gets to a laboratory.’

Narwani also questioned the claim that only the Syrian government has access to sarin:

‘In 2004, an IED roadside bomb – a common insurgent tactic – containing the nerve agent was detonated in Iraq. There are no guarantees whatsoever that chemical munitions have not found their way into the hands of rogue elements – or in fact that they are not producing them in small quantities themselves.’

A report in the Los Angeles Times [offered](#) other explanations:

‘Releases of poison gas could have occurred when soldiers loyal to the regime, which has been trying to secure and consolidate its dozens of chemical weapons sites, moved part of its stockpile, a U.S. Defense official said. Another possibility is that disloyal Syrian weapons scientists supplied chemicals to rebel fighters.

“The intel folks are taking a hard look at this, and they’re not certain,” the Defense official said, speaking anonymously to discuss intelligence matters. “There’s no definite indication this was used against the opposition.”

Alex Thomson asked another sensible question:

‘Why did just a few people die – surely a large number of people would have died in a chemical attack, as in Halabja and Iran/Iraq war?’

In fact the quantities of chemicals said to be involved have been [described](#) as ‘microscopic’.

Dr. Jeffrey Lewis of the Monterey Institute of International Studies, also founder of Arms Control Wonk, a nuclear arms control and non-proliferation blog, [wrote](#):

[T]he constant references to the “small scale” use becomes more clear — we don’t have multiple victims in a single use, as might be expected if the Syrians gassed a military unit or a local community. At most, we have two events in which only one person was exposed.

‘For all we know, these two poor souls stumbled into sarin canisters while ransacking a liberated Syrian military sites. I don’t say that to be callous, but rather because strange things happen on the battlefield. Remember, in 1991, U.S. troops detonated a pit of munitions at Khamisiyah in Iraq only to discover that the munitions contained sarin.’

Two events in which only one person was exposed! This reminds strongly of the moment when 11 empty artillery shells were found in an Iraqi bunker in January 2003. An ITN expert [declared](#):

‘The real smoking gun of course would be if one of those shells was still found to contain a chemical mixture.’ (ITV Lunchtime News, January 17, 2003)

The remarkable suggestion, in 2003, was that a massive attack by 200,000 troops would be justified by the discovery of a single 122mm artillery shell with a range of four miles.

Other questions arise. Why would the Syrian government use the one weapon likely to trigger Western intervention when its use of highly destructive conventional weaponry appears to be reversing rebel gains, as indicated [here](#) and [here](#)? Writing for Foreign Policy in December, Charles Blair [commented](#):

‘The regime would risk losing Russian and Chinese support, legitimising foreign military intervention, and, ultimately, hastening its own end. As one Syrian official said, “We would not commit suicide.”’

It is easy to appreciate Robert Fisk’s [view](#) in the Independent that the claims are ‘theatre’, ‘a retold drama riddled with plot-holes’. If the media stage managers appeared to be offering some kind of informed consensus, it was for a reason:

‘Walk into a TV studio and they’re all reading newspapers. Walk into a newspaper office and they’re all watching television. It’s osmotic. And the headlines are all the same: Syria uses chemical weapons. That’s how the theatre works.’

Fisk added:

'In two Canadian TV studios, I am approached by producers brandishing the same headline. I tell them that on air I shall trash the "evidence" - and suddenly the story is deleted from both programmes. Not because they don't want to use it - they will later - but because they don't want anyone suggesting it might be a load of old cobblers.'

Stop Him!

The scepticism from Thomson, Fisk and others has been welcome indeed. Wider scepticism has doubtless been encouraged by the mixed messages from US officials. Corporate media performance has nevertheless been shocking.

In a leading article, 'Stop him,' the Sun told its readers on April 27:

'After the carnage and slaughter in war-torn Syria comes a chilling new tactic from bloodthirsty tyrant Bashar al-Assad.

'Chemical weapon attacks on his own people.

'Evidence smuggled out of the divided nation confirms monster Assad's regime has used nerve gas sarin.

'Horrorifying footage shows victims frothing at the mouth after the barbaric attacks.

'Now, after months of rhetoric from statesmen and diplomats, momentum is growing for tough action.' (Leading article, the Sun, April 27, 2013)

The Sun's opinion does matter; its monthly combined [reach](#) in print and online is nearly 18 million. Its editors also quoted Cameron:

'This should form for the international community a red line for us to do more.'

The tabloid responded:

'Quite right, Prime Minister. Do nothing and the world is letting savage Assad evade justice - and condemning countless innocent Syrians to death.

'This madman must be stopped.'

We can dismiss this as right-wing raving, if we like. But at what is supposed to be the opposite end of the media 'spectrum', the Guardian's Ian Black [wrote](#):

'Syria illustrates a sort of Middle Eastern Murphy's law - anything that can make things worse invariably happens: massacres, refugees fleeing to Jordan, tensions in Lebanon and Iraq, the use of chemical weapons...'

Black noted 'the flurry over chemical weapons, leaving the impression that US "red lines" can be surprisingly flexible'.

As discussed, Obama's 'red line' warning was of course directed at Assad. The Guardian's Middle East editor was thus asserting that the Syrian government *had* used chemical weapons based on evidence which, as we have seen, is frankly risible.

In considering this same evidence, a Guardian leader [observed](#):

'Yet this week has also been marked by further claims that Syria's Bashar al-Assad has been doing precisely the thing that Mr Bush said so confidently, but so wrongly, was at imminent risk of being done by Saddam Hussein 10 years ago.'

In fact, no-one had warned that the Iraq government might use chemical weapons against its own people. The alleged threat was of an attack on the West 'within 45 minutes of the order being given', or via Iraq's al Qaeda contacts which, like the WMD, did not exist. The Guardian continued:

'The use of chemical weapons is a war crime. It is a war crime even if it is committed by a state which, like Syria (or North Korea), is not a signatory to the international chemical weapons convention. The evidence for the use of chemical weapons is clearly suggestive, if the recent reports are reliable and substantiated, but it is also patchy and not yet fully contextualised.'

This weasel wording managed to point a finger of blame while simultaneously recognising the paucity of evidence.

How readily the Guardian referred to a possible Syrian 'war crime', while referring in the same editorial to Bush and Blair's merely 'mismanaged and hugely damaging invasion of Iraq in 2003'.

Criminals are usually not criticised for 'mismanaging' their crimes. Would the Guardian refer to al Qaeda's 'mismanaged' attacks of September 11, 2001, or to Iraq's 'mismanaged' 1990 invasion of Kuwait? The reference to a 'mismanaged' invasion implies that the Guardian does not view the war of 2003 as the supreme war crime it very clearly was.

The Guardian's Dan Roberts [noted](#) that 'initial samples and evidence trails have degraded'. The result:

'Britain and the US are likely to have to wait for fresh evidence from further attacks before deciding whether to take a military response against the Assad government.'

This again affirmed that the Syrian government had probably used chemical weapons. Obviously it is for Britain and the US - the world's designated police force by virtue of their spotless legal and moral records - to decide whether to attack yet one more nation. Bombing other countries is as normal as the air we breathe.

On May 2, the BBC [commented](#):

'The pressure to act has intensified in recent days after emerging evidence that Syria has used chemical weapons such as the nerve gas sarin.'

This, even though 'existing evidence of alleged chemical weapon was not sufficient to trigger an international response'.

The Times, of course, had no doubts:

'Reports of chemical attacks suggest a new terror against a captive people. Since protests against his rule erupted more than two years ago, President Assad has created

a desert and called it peace...

'There are now credible claims that the regime has used chemical weapons against civilians. Western nations ought much earlier in this crisis to have provided heavy weaponry for Syrian rebels to defend themselves. They should do so now.' (Leader, 'Assad's Victims Need Arming,' The Times, April 24, 2003)

The Times described the evidence as 'harrowing and highly plausible', particularly 'photographs of victims foaming at the mouth. The symptoms would be consistent with poisoning by sarin.' Not quite.

Returning to the other end of the media 'spectrum' (a short trip), an Independent leader [commented](#):

'Recent days have provided persuasive evidence that chemical weapons are being used in Syria... A widespread conclusion is that the regime of President Bashar al-Assad is resorting to the use of such weapons against its own people.'

As we have seen, the 'widespread conclusion' is anything but.

Hopping back to the hard-right, the Daily Telegraph's deputy editor, Benedict Brogan, [responded](#) to the sarin story with an article entitled, 'A wary, weary West is leaving Syria in the butchers' hands; Obama may talk of red lines, but the US and its allies simply don't have the will to intervene.'

If that was not clear enough, Brogan added: 'the CIA has endorsed the conclusions of MI6 and other intelligence agencies that chemical weapons probably were used'. (Brogan, Daily Telegraph, April 30, 2013)

That, of course, does not remotely justify the title. Nor does the next sentence:

'Quite how, and by whom, remains a point of argument. Whether Assad himself ordered their deployment, or whether they were being tested in improvised form by a local commander, is unclear.'

These were the thinkable options. Other possibilities - that some agency other than the Syrian government might have used chemical weapons, or that they weren't used at all - were presumably too outlandish to mention.

The Telegraph's own [analysis](#) made a nonsense of Brogan's response, noting that Senator John McCain, the leading American proponent of intervention, had 'admitted that the chemical weapons evidence "may not be airtight".' It also quoted Hamish de Bretton Gordon, a former commanding officer of the Army's chemical weapons unit who now runs consultancy SecureBio: 'even if any sarin found was from a regime shell - the nerve agent could have been deployed accidentally or by a rogue squad'.

The Telegraph's editors had previously [commented](#):

'President Bashar al-Assad's use of nerve gas presents the British and Americans with an agonising dilemma.'

The editors sighed:

'it was perhaps inevitable that, one day, credible evidence would implicate this amoral dictator in gassing his enemies'.

And, again, compare this damning verdict with the immediately following observation that the evidence is 'persuasive but not conclusive' and is not 'as compelling as it might seem'.

This really is astonishing, in the strange world of media propaganda, news reports contradict editorials and headlines contradict content. The guiding ethic: 'I want to believe!' It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that media performance is shaped by state-corporate forces that are deeply invested in decades of war and the spoils that go with it.

The absurdity of the media rush to the required conclusion was emphasised 10 days later. On May 6, former Swiss attorney-general Carla Del Ponte, speaking for the United Nations independent commission of inquiry on Syria, ruffled many feathers when she [said](#), 'there are strong, concrete suspicions but not yet incontrovertible proof of the use of sarin gas, from the way the victims were treated. This was use on the part of the opposition, the rebels, not by the government authorities'.

Del Ponte [added](#):

'We have no indication *at all* that the Syrian government have used chemical weapons.'

Although the UN quickly [rowed back](#) and the US [demurred](#), this was impossible to ignore. Even the BBC, after a delay, posted the story half-way, then at the top, of its news homepage. This made a jarring contrast to the BBC's usual propaganda performance on Syria. As Craig Murray, formerly Britain's Ambassador to Uzbekistan, [noted](#), corporate media are supplying 'an extraordinary barrage of distorted propaganda to fool western populations over the course and meaning of events'.

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