

NYT Backs Off Its Syria-Sarin Analysis

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For months, the “slam-dunk” evidence “proving” Syrian government guilt in the Aug. 21 Sarin attack near Damascus was a “vector analysis” pushed by the New York Times showing where the rockets supposedly were launched. But the Times now grudgingly admits its analysis was flawed.

The New York Times has, kind of, admitted that it messed up its big front-page story that used a “vector analysis” to pin the blame for the Aug. 21 Sarin attack on the Syrian government, an assertion that was treated by Official Washington as the slam-dunk proof that President Bashar al-Assad gassed his own people.

But you’d be forgiven if you missed the Times’ embarrassing confession, since it was buried on page 8, below the fold, 18 paragraphs into a story under the not-so-eye-catching title, “New Study Refines View Of Sarin Attack in Syria.”



Photo (right): Secretary of State John Kerry (center) testifies on the Syrian crisis before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Sept. 3, 2013. At the left of the photo is Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. and on the right is Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel. No senior U.S. intelligence official joined in the testimony. U.S. State Department photo)

But this [Times article](#) at least acknowledges what has been widely reported on the Internet, including at Consortiumnews.com, that the Times’ “vector analysis” – showing the reverse flight paths of two missiles intersecting at a Syrian military base – has collapsed, in part, because the range of the rockets was much too limited.

There were other problems with the “vector analysis” that was pushed by the Times and Human Rights Watch, which has long wanted the U.S. military to intervene in the Syrian civil war against the Syrian government.

The analytical flaws included the fact that one of the two missiles – the one landing in Moadamiya, south of Damascus – had clipped a building during its descent making a precise calculation of its flight path impossible, plus the discovery that the Moadamiya missile contained no Sarin, making its use in the vectoring of two Sarin-laden rockets nonsensical.

But the Times' analysis ultimately fell apart amid a consensus among missile experts that the rockets would have had a maximum range of only around three kilometers when the supposed launch site is about 9.5 kilometers from the impact zones in Moadamiya and Zamalka/Ein Tarma, east of Damascus.

The Times' front-page "vectoring" [article](#) of Sept. 17 had declared: "One annex to the report [by UN inspectors] identified azimuths, or angular measurements, from where rockets had struck, back to their points of origin. When plotted and marked independently on maps by analysts from Human Rights Watch and by The New York Times, the United Nations data from two widely scattered impact sites pointed directly to a Syrian military complex."

An accompanying map on the Times' front page revealed the flight-path lines intersecting at an elite Syrian military unit, the 104th Brigade of the Republican Guard, based northwest of Damascus, near the Presidential Palace. This "evidence" was then cited by U.S. politicians and pundits as the in-your-face proof of the Syrian government's guilt.

The Times/HRW analysis was especially important because the Obama administration, in making its case against the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad, had refused to release any evidence that could be independently evaluated. So, the "vector analysis" was almost the only visible nail in Assad's coffin of guilt.

Short-Range Rockets

In Sunday's article – the one below the fold on page 8 – the Times reported that a new analysis by two military experts concluded that the Aug. 21 rockets had a range of about three kilometers, or less than one-third the distance needed to intersect at the Syrian military base northwest of Damascus.

The report's authors were Theodore A. Postol, a professor of science, technology and national security policy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Richard M. Lloyd, an analyst at the military contractor Tesla Laboratories.

The Times noted that "the authors said that their findings could help pinpoint accountability for the most lethal chemical warfare attack in decades, but that they also raised questions about the American government's claims about the locations of launching points, and the technical intelligence behind them. ... The analysis could also lead to calls for more transparency from the White House, as Dr. Postol said it undermined the Obama administration's assertions about the rockets' launch points."

Finally, in the article's 18th paragraph, the Times acknowledged its own role in misleading the public, noting that the rockets' estimated maximum range of three kilometers "would be less than the ranges of more than nine kilometers calculated separately by The New York Times and Human Rights Watch in mid-September. ... Those estimates had been based in part on connecting reported compass headings for two rockets cited in the United Nations' initial [report](#) on the attacks."

In other words, the much-ballyhooed "vector analysis" had collapsed under scrutiny, knocking the legs out from under Official Washington's certainty that the Syrian government carried out the Aug. 21 attack which may have killed several hundred civilians including many children.

The Times article on Sunday was authored by C.J. Chivers, who along with Rick Gladstone, was a principal writer on the now-discredited Sept. 17 article.

The erosion of that “vector analysis” article has been underway for several months – through reporting at Web sites such as WhoGhouta and Consortiumnews.com – but few Americans knew about these challenges to the Official Story because the mainstream U.S. news media had essentially blacked them out.

When renowned investigative reporter Seymour Hersh composed a major [article](#) citing skepticism within the U.S. intelligence community regarding the Syrian government’s guilt, he had to go to the London Review of Books to get the story published. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “[Deceiving the US Public on Syria](#).”]

Even Ake Sellstrom, the head of the United Nations mission investigating chemical weapons use in Syria, challenged the vector analysis during a Dec. 13 [UN press conference](#), citing expert estimates of the missiles’ range at about two kilometers, but his remarks were almost entirely ignored. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “[UN Inspector Undercuts NYT on Syria](#).”]

A Replay of Iraqi WMD

Besides the deaths from the Sarin itself, perhaps the most troubling aspect of this episode has been how close the U.S. government came to going to war with Syria based on such flimsy and dubious evidence. It seems as if Official Washington and the U.S. mainstream news media have learned nothing from the disastrous rush to war in Iraq a decade ago.

Just as false assumptions about Iraq’s WMD set off a stampede over that cliff in 2003, a similar rush to judgment regarding Syria brought the U.S. government to the edge of another precipice of war in 2013.

The New York Times and other major U.S. news outlets propelled the rush to judgment in both cases, rather than questioning the official stories and demanding better evidence from U.S. government officials. In September 2002, the Times famously fronted an article linking Iraq’s purchase of some aluminum tubes to a secret nuclear weapons program, which — as Americans and Iraqis painfully learned later – didn’t exist.

In the case of Syria, another potential catastrophe was averted only by a strong opposition to war among the American public, as registered in opinion polls, and President Barack Obama’s last-minute decision to seek congressional approval for military action and then his openness to a diplomatic settlement brokered by Russia.

To defuse the crisis, the Syrian government agreed to destroy all its chemical weapons, while still denying any role in the Aug. 21 attack, which it blamed on Syrian rebels apparently trying to create *casus belli* that would precipitate a U.S. intervention.

With very few exceptions, U.S. news outlets and think tanks mocked the notion of rebel responsibility and joined the Obama administration in expressing virtual certainty that the Assad regime was guilty.

There was almost no U.S. media skepticism on Aug. 30 when the White House stoked the war fever by posting on its Web site what was called a “Government Assessment,” a four-page white paper that blamed the Syrian government for the Sarin attack but presented

zero evidence to support the conclusion.

Americans had to go to Internet sites to see questions raised about the peculiar presentation, since normally a decision on war would be supported by a National Intelligence Estimate containing the judgments of the 16 intelligence agencies. But an NIE would also include footnotes citing dissents from analysts who disputed the conclusion, of which I was told there were a number.

The Dogs Not Barking

As the war frenzy built in late August and early September, there was a striking absence of U.S. intelligence officials at administration briefings and congressional hearings. The dog-not-barking reason was that someone might have asked a question about whether the U.S. intelligence community was in agreement with the “Government Assessment.”

But these strange aspects of the Obama administration’s case were not noted by the major U.S. news media. Then, on Sept. 17 came the New York Times front-page article citing the “vector analysis.” It was the Perry Mason moment. The evidence literally pointed right at the “guilty” party, an elite unit of the Syrian military.

Whatever few doubts there were about the Syrian government’s guilt disappeared. From the triumphant view of Official Washington, those of us who had expressed skepticism about the U.S. government’s case could only hang our heads in shame and engage in some Maoist-style self-criticism.

For me, it was like a replay of Iraq-2003. Whenever the U.S. invading force discovered a barrel of chemicals, trumpeted on Fox News as proof of WMD, I’d get e-mails calling me a Saddam Hussein apologist and demanding that I admit that I had been wrong to question President George W. Bush’s WMD claims. Now, there were ugly accusations that I had been carrying water for Bashar al-Assad.

But – as John Adams once said – “facts are stubborn things.” And the smug certainty of Official Washington regarding the Syrian Sarin case gradually eroded much as a similar arrogance crumbled a decade ago when Iraq’s alleged WMD stockpiles never materialized.

While it’s still not clear who was responsible for the Aug. 21 deaths outside Damascus – whether a unit of the Syrian military, some radical rebel group or someone mishandling a dangerous payload – the facts should be followed objectively, not simply arranged to achieve a desired political outcome.

Now, with the New York Times’ grudging admission that its “vector analysis” has collapsed, the pressure should build on the Obama administration to finally put whatever evidence it has before the world’s public.

[For more details on this issue, see Consortiumnews.com’s [“NYT Replays Its Iraq Fiasco in Syria.”](#) For more of our early reporting on the Syrian chemical weapons attack, see: [“A Dodgy Dossier on Syrian War”](#); [“Murky Clues From UN’s Syria Report”](#); [“Obama Still Withholds Syria Evidence”](#); [“How US Pressure Bends UN Agencies”](#); [“Fixing Intel Around the Syria Policy.”](#)]

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, America’s Stolen

Narrative, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes America's Stolen Narrative. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

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