

On Syria, Intelligence and Evidence

By [FAIR](#)

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by Peter Hart

One would hope that the lessons of Iraq might inform more of the coverage of Syria. But that's not always the case. Over the course of the past week, the White House and various officials have been adamant that they have evidence that shows the Syrian government was responsible for the horrific attack last week that likely killed hundreds, and very well could have been a chemical or gas attack of some sort.

But too many journalists were treating what the government said it knew as if it was already actual evidence. On NBC Nightly News (8/27/13), Andrea Mitchell reported that "officials tell NBC News they have intelligence intercepts tying the attack to the regime, plus physical evidence."

And on NPR's All Things Considered ([8/27/13](#)), Mara Liasson reported:

We now hear that U.S. intelligence officials are getting ready to release some intercepted communications that they believe will be even more evidence that it was Syrian President Bashar al-Assad who ordered this chemical attack.

 What Liasson is "hearing" is so convincing that she apparently considers it "even more evidence" that Assad is responsible—though no evidence had been made public.

On NBC Nightly News (8/29/13), Chuck Todd explained:

The White House believes the case against Assad is clear-cut. And here's why. NBC News has learned one of the key pieces of evidence that the U.S. has to prove Assad's regime was behind the chemical attack is an intercepted communication that says Assad's brother—a commander of the Syrian Republican guard—personally ordered the attack. That's why, Lester, the president is so confident about where he stands on this.

This is curious when compared to more critical takes, like a report from the New York Times the same day ([8/29/13](#)):

American officials said Wednesday there was no "smoking gun" that directly links President Bashar al-Assad to the attack, and they tried to lower expectations about the public intelligence presentation. They said it will not

contain specific electronic intercepts of communications between Syrian commanders or detailed reporting from spies and sources on the ground.

The Times went on to characterize the intelligence that would be made public as more like a “modest news release.” This proved to be an accurate description of the [sketchy supporting document](#) that accompanied Secretary of State John Kerry’s presentation on Friday.

An Associated Press story that day ([8/29/13](#)) reported:

So while Secretary of State John Kerry said Monday that it was “undeniable” a chemical weapons attack had occurred and that it was carried out by the Syrian military, U.S. intelligence officials are not so certain that the suspected chemical attack was carried out on Assad’s orders. Some have even talked about the possibility that rebels could have carried out the attack in a callous and calculated attempt to draw the West into the war. That suspicion was not included in the official intelligence report, according to the official who described the report.

But so much of the coverage treats the case as basically closed. Here’s how ABC anchor Diane Sawyer opened her World News broadcast on August 27:

The clock is ticking on US military action in Syria. The White House says a decision is near and US warships are in position. And the rest of the world is also joining the debate about what kind of action and exactly when. The goal, to stop a man using brutal chemical weapons 5,000 miles away.

It is, of course, entirely possible that the Syrian regime carried out these horrific attacks. But journalism should stick to the facts that are known, and refrain from treating government claims as if they are facts.

[Ten years ago](#), the intelligence shared by the Bush administration convinced many in the media that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. It was based on intercepted phone calls, satellite imagery and the like. It turned out to be completely wrong.

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