

Rebel Capabilities and the Damascus Chemical Attacks

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Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

In-depth Report: [SYRIA](#)

The Ghouta Gas Attack: Cui Bono (Who Benefits)?

Despite recent maneuvers to ease the danger, the world stands entirely too close to a disastrous conflict to remove the sovereign government of Syria (aka Bashar al-Assad). Like the campaign against Iraq (aka Saddam Hussein) a decade ago, this Western-driven program is over WMD allegations.

The charges of course are that “Assad” killed perhaps 1,300 of his citizens with Sarin gas, in several contested cities of the Ghouta region surrounding Damascus, on August 21. Hundreds of civilian victims, including dozens of children and babies, were shown dead on videos; they were not shot or stabbed like usual for that medium, visually appearing to be killed by poison or perhaps suffocation. Activists describe the gas differently but agree it was delivered a series of pre-dawn rocket attacks from government-held areas.

This was done, allegedly, to finally drive the rebels out of Ghouta, but it's not usually explained why that method and time were chosen. Because of this alleged crime, the increasingly harassed, demonized, and isolated nation is threatened with Cruise missiles and perhaps months or years of deadly force to follow.

As if to make a point, whoever chose the time made it exactly* one year after U.S. President Barack Obama (aka not Bush) first promised that an event like this – even remotely like or hinting at this – would cross a “red line,” which would force him and the U.S. military to respond somehow.* (Aug. 20, 2012 compared to around 2-3 AM Aug. 21, 2013: adjusted for time zones, that's one year and a few hours – the exact times are unsure) [1]

Oddly, this also came not three days after the elusive United Nations CW investigation team finally arrived in Damascus. [2] They were first invited by the Syrian government in March after a rebel gas attack on their forces in Khan al-Assal, Aleppo (an incident we will return to), and so for the first time in the conflict, they were on hand to find and expose any signs of this alleged Sarin deployment the other way. (The attacks in areas all around them would also, obviously, distract the team, who never did get to Aleppo as hoped)

From this vantage point, it's not hard to see who stood to lose and to benefit from the chemical attack. Everyone can see the government had to be stupid or suicidal to willingly do just that, just there, and at that time. Explanations bandied about include that it was a rogue officer issuing the insane order, or it was approved but someone miscalculated – on a massive scale. An unnamed analyst said to Foreign Policy magazine's The Cable “we don't know exactly why it happened ... we just know it was pretty fucking stupid” and, presuming

imminent air strikes, “they get what they deserve.” [3]

Conversely, it would be to the utmost benefit for the extremist rebel cause in Syria and the region to have “Assad” do – or be blamed for – such a thing. As Russia’s Foreign ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich suggested, it might be a “pre-planned provocation” timed with the arrival of the UN team. [4]

Each breathtaking massacre of civilians over the years of this horrible conflict has been sold, by opposition “activists,” as a reason to finally be given a Libya-style NATO Air Force. But Syria’s air defenses remain and so the lobbying efforts continue, dead baby videos and all. This chemical massacre, with an alleged 400+ children killed, is the largest in a long line. Seeming tailor made to be the champion crime all the others failed to be, it’s either the perfect gift from the regime to its hostile opponents, or a custom sewn false flag event of great audacity.

Claim: Rebels Wouldn’t be Capable

So motive argues for the Russian/Syrian theory, but the opposition’s powerful supporters have found little problem so far overriding this obvious problem.

Absent that lever, those seeking to blame the government could try convincing us with smoking-gun evidence. But so far only vague descriptions of alleged intercepted calls have been presented, and even if genuine, these best-sounding signs they could find might be taken out of context. [5]

They could try arguing that compared to “Assad” the butcher of children, the freedom fighters are morally incapable of poisoning innocents (or even Alawites, people of Assad’s religion). But that wouldn’t be convincing anymore, with the brutal and deceptive al Qaeda and their Takfiri ilk so firmly and famously in place, and such a clear motive set up for them to try such a thing.

Instead, Western leaders have preferred to dash across those gaps in the case and mainly argue that – however much they might like to – rebels simply could not have done something on this scale. The US intelligence assessment called the rebel attack scenario “highly unlikely,” based partly on “the differences between the capabilities of the regime and the opposition.” [6] Its British sister report said “it is not possible for the opposition to have carried out a CW attack on this scale.” [7] It’s a simple process of deduction for the Anglo-American elites; rebels couldn’t possibly have done it, so the Syrian government must be guilty. As William Hague, UK Foreign Secretary, said “I think the chances of [a rebel attack] are vanishingly small and so we do believe that this is a chemical attack by the Assad regime.” [8] That irrefutable logic plus the alleged proofs and, again, shows of “confidence,” do have some portion of the public unduly swayed to the less logical option. A confidence job (short: a con) is designed to deceive in just this way.

The problem that must now be clearly stated is that we, the global public, really do not know what happened and thus what capabilities are required to have done it. We can’t be sure of the true scale, the agent(s) or delivery system, where it even happened, or who the dead really are. It was opposition claims that described the event as something beyond their capabilities, with reports of rockets fired en masse from a government held missile base. But the opposition has always been active on the deception front as well as overrunning government missile bases. And the picture they’ve left us with here is not only less than

clear, but less clear than normal by the murky standards of this information war.

First, it must be noted that if it's ever proven that these chemicals were delivered by actual rockets, that would be general opposition capabilities. Rebels have been firing countless short and mid-range rockets all over Syria for over a year. Many of them are smuggled in or stolen from military stores. Others are custom-built inside Syria, with unusual specifications and ranges sometimes in the tens of kilometers. There are strong and credible allegations that at least one of these carrying a toxic gas payload was the weapon used on Khan al-Assal, Aleppo. [9]

But even that basic is open to question while the evidence remains unclear. Some impact sites were shown, of an improvised rocket that almost looks rebel but apparently is used by the Syrian military. [10] But these strikes could be weeks old and unrelated to any chemical weapon, for all we can really tell (the U.N. investigators took samples from at least one site, and we shall see what they say about that).

Questions – some cogent and some confused – have been widely raised already in the public sphere about the alleged death toll and various gaps in the record. For example, there very, very few on site videos of where victims were found; they mostly just appear at hospitals and morgues out of nowhere. Relatively few of the visible dead show clear signs of anything, and some signs – like strangely-white foam from the mouth only – are all too easy to fake.

Pathologist Dennis O'Brien raised some of these questions while alerting the U.S. congress, in an open letter of Sept. 9, about his close study of the victims. Challenging the White House claim that Sarin was the agent used, he pointed out that while myosis (pinpoint pupils, easy to replicate with light or other drugs) does appear, other symptoms – like cyanosis (blue extremities) and mass defecation and vomiting – appear little if at all, when they should be widely seen among the hundreds of bodies shown. [11] Therefore, the video record works against the Sarin claim; generally anyway, it must have been something else, perhaps mixed with some ratio of fakery.

The huge and emotive death tolls being pushed – 1,429, as the United States belligerently decided – still haven't been explained. Even at a more plausible 5-700 and spread over ten cities, these are dramatic results, when previous attacks with the standard Syrian CW (unknown but allegedly Sarin, usually) have killed between zero and 30 people each. For comparison, the Tokyo subway Sarin attack, in an enclosed space, killed about 30. Here in towns (not enclosed), Hamouriya is reported to have collected about 300 victims, and Zamalka 400 (with other suburbs adding 100 or less each). [12]

This almost seems, in spots, like gas chamber efficiency. And there's a chilling thought worth freezing on: confinement, captivity, war. There are Syrian people the multinational rebel forces hate, and an unknown number are held across Syria at any given time.

That number would have been much higher than usual in late August. On August 1 and after a reported 200 Kurdish civilians were taken around the Turkish border-crossing town of Tal Abyad and the Aleppo area, with further abductions following and an unclear number simply massacred, as part of a renewed rebel offensive there (after Kurds closed their previous crossing from Turkey, in Ras al-Ain. [13] Further, some 105-150 or 200+ Alawi (Alawite) women and children were abducted from a dozen towns conquered in central Latakia. That was on August 4 and after, in a much-heralded thrust which also saw at least

some 200 locals massacred on sectarian grounds by largely-foreign Islamists. [14] Some or all of these hostages were taken, rebels said, to exchange for other prisoners. But an attempted exchange for a NATO Air Force might also seem well worth a try.

The larger the death toll, the higher the chance this was a mass-culling of hostages; those mentioned, other non-Sunnis or government loyalists of any sect, gassed in some basement holding cell. Dozens could be killed in a single room, hundreds between a few rooms collaborating. There's nothing disproving such a possibility, and some evidence in support, to which I now turn.

Established Capabilities: Basements, Captives, and Smoke

Consider one possible clue from the impassioned and possibly fake testimony of a rebel doctor in the Damascus suburb of Jobar, at dawn after the attack. Strangely, he placed the attack with "massive" deaths (at least 50 children he personally handled) only there and Ein Tarma downwind; reports right after that don't even mention Jobar among the many areas hit. [15] He also stated that enclosed spaces were a big part of the high death toll there; without specifying which heavier-than-air gas was involved, he says it spread out and sunk down into basements, where foolish citizens had tried to hide (see 3:45).

Others have said the same thing, but he adds that they also voluntarily started fires inside on a wide scale, in August, leading to "undesired consequences." Even worse were those who just had to burn tires in their scant air; "burning tires ... added insult to injury." He suggests an education campaign to counter "the ignorance of some people." [15]

It's not certain why the Jobar doctor chose to publish these alleged details, but it could be a fact he hoped to explain away, one that would actually suggest someone else was setting up the victims' deadly living conditions. At the risk of reading too much into that modified allegation, please consider these related capabilities previously illustrated, in research done by the author and collaborators at the research wiki A Closer Look On Syria (ACLOS).

The Damascus suburb of Daraya was spared alleged gassing on the 21st (being nearly a ghost town by now), but had a record-breaking massacre reported one year earlier. It was claimed that over 600 civilians were killed between August 24 and 27, 2012, in the days of a government re-conquest of the rebel-held city. Civilians spoke afterwards of mass hostage-taking by the rebels during their reign, and some freed from various improvised prisons, some in basements, claimed they had been forced there – to protect them from a government massacre, rebels told them. Over the following days, opposition-filmed videos leaked out showing people massacred in basements, as if by the conquering soldiers, but with rebel cameras close behind. It made little sense as explained, but more if the videos were taken before the rebel withdrawal, and simply delayed in their release. [16]

What made even less sense was the initial opposition story meant to start an Alawi uprising, as "regime" forces captured and killed 125-235 Alawi civilians – including children, women, and the elderly – in Aqrab, Hama, on December 10, 2012. In fact, the best evidence shows the exact story the Sunni extremist rebels told is impossible, and that only they were placed to kill the captives, after seizing them – about 500 at one point – from their homes in a pogrom of December 2 and after. It's not clear how many were killed, but one probable victim among a few glimpsed is a six-year-old girl with her skull hacked open and brain missing. [17] That young victim and some who survived in rebel custody (they blamed "Shabiha" on rebel video) had faces and hands covered in smoke stains. Survivors on their

own spoke of rebels denying food and water and burning tires inside the house they were stuffed into. When survivors pointed to the house for Channel 4's cameras, smoke was coming out of it, and seemingly had been for a while. [18]

And in Jobar and East Ghouta, we hear that people wound up breathing rubber smoke in basements when the regime killed them with heavy gas. Smoke stains do not seem to appear on the visible victims of Ghouta, but unlike the Aqrab captives, these generally were washed down before shown. Ostensibly this was to clear the Sarin residue, but perhaps it was to clean the smoke off, knowing that it was noticed before and is being watched for.

Established Capabilities: Chemicals

As for weaponized chemicals, there are numerous allegations of anti-government groups holding and using them. Many of these charges are credible, and it's hard to imagine all of them are incorrect, even if some of them surely are.

The al-Qaeda offshoot Al-Nusra Front stole 400 tons of liquid chlorine from an Aleppo-area factory in 2012, for example. [19] They and others have been receiving different toxic chemicals from Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and elsewhere. Hundreds of barrels were uncovered on a rebel-held farm near Baniyas in July. [20] Some were found in the maybe-gassed Jobar on August 24, three days after the attacks under study. [21]

As for the proper and fully illegal chemical weapons like Sarin, a dozen Al-Nusra members were famously busted in Turkey in late May with, reportedly, a substantial 2 kg of the stuff. [22] The exact chemical was since denied by rebel-supporting Turkish authorities, but an alleged U.S. military intelligence report, obtained by World Net Daily, claims that it was "bench-scale" Sarin, produced in Iraq by AQI and shipped via Turkey to its affiliates. [23] Iraqi authorities claimed on June 2 to have busted the makers of the Sarin, for export and for domestic use against Shia (Shi'ites). They showed the equipment and five men they seized. Hardly anyone noticed. [24]

Both chlorine and Sarin appear in the reported evidence of the Khan al-Assal rocket attack mentioned above. Locals at the time reported a chlorine smell and Syrian authorities suspected chlorine and saline, while Russian scientists later said there was a small amount of Sarin present. Full details remain unclear at the moment.

But chemical-equipped projectiles are still widely thought outside rebel skill sets, and it's likely irrelevant here anyway. To eliminate human beings considered less than that, crammed into a house-prison, more close-quarters delivery systems would be needed.

An unusual white plastic grenade has been fascinatingly traced by blogger Eliot Higgins (aka Brown Moses) after it turned up as a culprit at two April chemical attacks in the north (that is, near Turkey). Both attacks were blamed on regime helicopters, but hand-sized grenades (gas-emitting, not explosive) were shown. These were unidentifiable to all experts consulted, but one other sample was found – at about the same time and place, on the chest of an al-Nusra Front member [25] Usually a device like that would contain a riot control agent and sold to police forces (notably in Turkey), but it might be misused to deadly effect or modified to deliver chlorine vapor or worse.

Even simpler methods like a hand-held sprayer and plastic jug might do the trick for some fatal potions. None of this seems out of the reach of a dedicated and well-supplied terrorist

organization like the hundreds that now plague Syria as they have Iraq before. The key innovations would be hate, will, and shelter/enclosure. Note that the opposition activists have shown few if any of the Ghouta attack sites/crime scenes, before or after the dead were just found there. There must be some reason they consistently left out that part; perhaps they know how bad a squalid, smoke-stained basement would look.

In Closing: Room for Questions

Obama and his fellow confidence artists assure us there's no room for doubt over the fact of regime guilt for the Sarin attack, but they have to confidently speak this into existence partly because it's not true. There is as much room for doubt as there actually is. It might be a smoke-stained room big enough to hold all the victims of these unsolved murders. The questions are not all answered – rather, virtually none of them are.

Neutral and scientific study might be worth a try here, but it seems unlikely. Unknown hundreds of bodies are buried wherever, with no certainty which ones are which. In a system run by the possible murderers, the names provided for victims could be fake for all we know. Any few victims might have been tainted with Sarin and used as stand-ins for the rest (the one who can be seen on video to not be Sarin victims). The list of relevant unknowns could go on for pages.

However, some specific case-by-case assessment is possible already. One batch of at least nine bodies showing extreme signs of chemical exposure, mostly young children, were collected in a morgue said to be in Kafr Batna. From high-resolution photos, they clearly exude real mucous from their noses and mouths, with skin extremely reddened like horrible sunburn. Neither of those is consistent with Sarin, but all could be explained by, for example, a heavy spray of liquid chlorine in a closed room. The skin burning is consistently from the victims' backsides – it hit them from behind. [26]

Observing this, it's not hard to visualize those people turning their backs and curling up into the futile position, as the gas-masked jihadist with rubber gloves and a sprayer stepped into the room. It's hard to get that image out of your mind once it's there and you've seen those victims. And this is good – it's probably closer to the truth than the painting that's propelled us towards war on behalf of those jihadists.

There are growing but unsupported claims that Alawi hostages, mostly children, were the real victims of the chemical massacre, some of them having been recognized by family members in activist videos. [27] In this narrative, the victims were those mentioned above from Latakia. They would presumably have been gassed in the north, the videos just laundered (stamped and uploaded) by Damascus brigade allies.

This theory was repeated on UK Sky News by Bouthaina Shaaban, an advisor of president Assad's, who doesn't sound like she has any deeper direct knowledge. [28] This specific theory or allegation remains possible, but rather questionable; it hasn't yet been explained with any details, but perhaps for good reason. There are problems with the presumptions of those arguing for it, like the absence of parents for the dead children. Something like that is not clear without careful study and correlation of numerous visual sources, if then; children especially are often shown together apart from the rest for certain displays. It's never proof that the other portions of these families aren't in the next room. The crucial claim is that identifications have been made, but these can be simply rumored or fabricated, real but erred (based on low-quality video and emotion) or real and true. Time may tell which it is

here.

Syria's government, media, and public launched a notable media offensive within a week of the May 2012 "Houla massacre" of 108, including 49 children. Even with some notable support by credible voices outside Syria, that was overruled by the "world community" in favor of the rebel story, as usual. But by now the most detailed research, by the author and ACLOS, has confirmed what many alleged witnesses said – rebel brigades overran the town and then committed the massacres themselves. The rebels' own video record, read carefully, is one of the stronger supports for that. [29]

Nearly a month after Ghouta, the information counter-offensive by Syria itself is markedly lacking. Perhaps they're straining to keep up and make sense of it all, and this may change at any time with some release of information. But even then and as it stands, there are too many standing questions.

Many people on all levels around the world are working on that based on what they know and can see, and this is encouraging. Those interested in furthering the public investigation should join ACLOS or something comparable – that is, team up – and add their voices to the under-tapped power of collective sanity. [30]

Notes

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[30] ACLOS: Alleged Chemical Attack, Aug 21 – Talk Page: Sign up and join the discussion.

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