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Russia Challenges UN Report on Syrian Gas Attack

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In-depth Report: SYRIA

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov yesterday countered a barrage of claims by the US and its allies that the UN report into the August 21 chemical weapon attack in Syria proved that the government of President Bashar al-Assad was responsible.

Lavrov described the report as one-sided and biased, claiming that ample evidence pointed to the involvement of anti-Assad forces in chemical attacks. He said he would provide evidence to the UN Security Council demonstrating that Syrian opposition militias had carried out the attack in Ghouta on the outskirts of Damascus.

Sergei Ryabkov, Russia's deputy foreign minister, who met with President Assad in Damascus on Tuesday, also criticised the UN report as distorted, adding that investigators all but ignored evidence presented by the Syrian government. "The basis of the information upon which it is built is not sufficient, and in any case we would need to learn and know more on what happened beyond and above that incident of August 21," he said.

While the UN report did not assign blame, the US and its allies have seized on aspects of its technical appendices to again accuse the Assad regime of carrying out the Ghouta attack. The US, Britain and France all claim that the types of weapons used and their trajectories point to government military forces.

Samantha Power, US ambassador to the UN, declared that "technical details make clear that only the regime could have carried out this large-scale chemical weapons attack." Unnamed US officials alleged in the media that the report pinpoints elite Syrian government forces as the origin of the rockets fired.

The UN report does nothing of the sort. It indicates that a general East/Southeast trajectory could be determined for two of the five impact sites examined. It did not name a geographical location from where the rockets were launched. Ryabkov commented: "We are amazed by the way some far-reaching analysis has been produced on the basis of what we believe is a rather deficient amount of information."

For the Assad regime to use chemical weapons on August 21, when its forces were on the offensive and UN inspectors were in Syria, makes neither political nor military sense. As a growing body of evidence indicates, far more likely is that anti-Assad forces, dominated by reactionary al-Qaeda linked Islamist forces, staged the attack to provide the pretext for a US-led military intervention. (See: "*New York Times* on Syria: All the propaganda fit to print")

Writing yesterday in the *Independent*, veteran Middle East journalist Robert Fisk cited the comments of a Syrian journalist who was embedded with government forces as they carried out an offensive on the night of August 21. Fisk said his friend was in the suburb of Moadamiyeh, the site of one of the chemical attacks, and saw no evidence of gas being used. “What he does remember is the concern of government troops when they saw the first images of gas victims on television—fearing that they themselves would have to fight amid poisonous fumes,” Fisk wrote.

Western officials have seized on the UN report’s finding of rocket fragments with Cyrillic script at the sites examined to conclude that Russia supplied the weapons. But as the Syrian journalist told Fisk: “The problem is that after Libya there are so many Russian weapons and artillery pieces smuggled into Syria that you don’t know what anybody’s got any more. The Libyans can’t produce enough of their oil, but they sure can export all Gaddafi’s weapons.”

The comments point to another possible source for anti-Assad militias to obtain chemical weapons. Last May, Carla Del Ponte, a senior member of the UN commission investigating human rights violations in Syria, reported that the panel’s investigation indicated that opposition militias had used nerve gas. In July, the Russian foreign ministry filed a 100-page report with the UN, detailing evidence that a sarin gas attack in the city of Aleppo last March was carried out by anti-Assad forces.

Russia’s criticisms of the UN chemical weapons report came as the permanent members of the UN Security Council—the US, Britain, France, Russia and China—continued to negotiate over a resolution to formalise the deal struck between Moscow and Washington last weekend to dismantle the Syrian military’s chemical weapons.

Moscow is insisting that the resolution has no loophole that could be used to provide the US with a legal cover for attacking Syria. The Russian and Chinese governments are both acutely conscious of the way in which the Obama regime used a UN resolution for a no-fly zone over Libya to launch a full-blown air war in support of its efforts to oust Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi.

The US, however, is prepared to attack Syria—with or without a legal fig leaf from the UN Security Council. While Obama has temporarily stepped back from the brink amid overwhelming public opposition, a US attack on Syria remains on the agenda. The Pentagon is not withdrawing the four missile-armed destroyers from the eastern Mediterranean that would be used to bombard Syrian targets.

US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel declared yesterday: “We should keep the military option exactly where it is. We have assured the president that our assets and force posture remain the same.” At the same press conference, Hagel said that the administration was considering whether the Pentagon would take over from the CIA in arming the anti-Assad forces—a prelude to supplying more sophisticated weaponry.

Any number of pretexts could be used or manufactured to justify a US attack. The Obama administration could easily exploit the US-Russian chemical weapons deal to allege that the Assad government had failed to meet its obligations. The first deadline—for Damascus to account for all its chemical weapons—is just days away on Saturday.

The downing of a Syrian helicopter by Turkish warplanes on Monday highlights the provocative character of US allies in the Middle East. The Syrian government acknowledged

that the helicopter had strayed into Turkish airspace, but accused Turkey of deliberately heightening tensions by shooting it down as it turned back to Syria. The helicopter crashed in Syrian territory.

The reckless character of the Obama administration's war plans was underlined by the remarks yesterday of Robert Gates, former defence secretary to George W. Bush and Obama. Criticizing Obama's Syria policy, Gates declared: "My bottom line is that I believe that to blow [up] a bunch of stuff over a couple of days, to underscore or validate a point or a principle, is not a strategy."

Pointing to the highly volatile situation in the region, Gates declared that US missile strikes on Syria "would be throwing gasoline on a very complex fire in the Middle East... Haven't Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya taught us something about the unintended consequences of military action once launched?"

Yet, the Obama administration has ultimately made the same strategic choice as the Bush administration before it—attempting to offset American imperialism's historic decline through the aggressive use of military force. A decade after the invasion of Iraq, the US is preparing a criminal new war that threatens to trigger a devastating regional conflict, with the potential to drag in Iran, Russia and China.

This was underscored by the remarks of former defence secretary Leon Panetta, who spoke alongside Gates, insisting that Obama should have gone to war in Syria. "When the president of the United States draws a red line, the credibility of this country is dependent on him backing up his word," Panetta said.
