GlobalResearch
Center for Research on Globalization

Syria Chemical Warfare Claims Aim to Provoke Western Intervention

By Bill Van Auken
Global Research, August 22, 2013
World Socialist Web Site

Region: Middle East & North Africa
Theme: US NATO War Agenda
In-depth Report: SYRIA

The unsubstantiated charges that the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad carried out a chemical weapons attack outside Damascus killing large numbers of civilians have all the hallmarks of a staged provocation aimed at provoking Western intervention.

Reports of the attack were made by Western-backed opponents of the Assad regime early Wednesday, just as a United Nations chemical weapons inspection team, admitted to Syria by the government just 72 hours earlier, began its work.

Indeed, according to the opposition sources reporting the chemical weapons attacks, they took place in Eastern Ghouta in the eastern suburbs of Damascus, just a few miles from where the UN inspection team is headquartered.

Initial contradictory reports of the alleged attack put the number of victims at as few as 20 and as many as 1,300.

Why the Assad regime should choose such a moment to launch large-scale chemical attacks—under the noses of the UN inspectors—and what motive he would have for doing so, under conditions in which his military has been inflicting a series of defeats on the US-backed "rebels," has not been explained in any of the extensive media coverage of these unverified allegations.

Nonetheless, the US and its NATO allies, the principal supporters of the bloody war for regime change in Syria, lost no time in issuing condemnations and demanding an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council, which convened behind closed doors in New York Wednesday afternoon.

The White House issued a statement declaring itself "deeply concerned by reports that hundreds of Syrian civilians have been killed in an attack by Syrian government forces, including by the use of chemical weapons." Together with its allies in London and Paris, it called for both the Security Council session and for the UN team on the ground in Syria to immediately investigate the report.

Proponents of direct US intervention in the Syrian civil war went further. The*Washington Post* rushed an editorial statement onto its web site declaring: "If the allegations of a massive new attack are confirmed, the weak measure adopted by President Obama in June—supplying small weapons to rebel forces—will have proved utterly inadequate."

The newspaper concluded that Obama must respond to the alleged chemical attacks by "ordering direct US retaliation against the Syrian military forces responsible and by adopting

a plan to protect civilians in southern Syria with a no-fly zone."

The Syrian government and its military, which have repeatedly insisted that they would not use chemical weapons against the population, denied the charges made by such US-backed outfits as the Syrian Opposition Center.

The Syrian Foreign Ministry issued a statement charging that the cooperation between Damascus and the UN inspection team "didn't please the terrorists and the countries supporting them, which is why they came up with new false allegations that the Armed Forces used toxic gas in Damascus countryside."

Syria's ambassador to Moscow, Riyad Haddad, told the Russian news agency ITAR-TASS that the charges were false and were designed to reproduce the "Iraqi scenario," i.e., a direct US military intervention in Syria.

"Our Armed Forces have never used chemical weapons and all fabricated concoctions in this respect aim to disorient international observers and defocus their efforts in achieving the set goals," said Haddad.

"It is no secret for anyone that all these falsifications that appear from time to time about the use of chemical weapons are nothing but an attempt to repeat the scenario that was used in the past with regard to weapons of mass destruction in Iraq," the ambassador added.

The Russian Foreign Ministry called the charges of a government chemical weapons attack a "premeditated provocation."

Citing unnamed sources in Syria, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Aleksander Lukashevich charged that the chemical weapons attack east of Damascus was the work of the US-backed "rebels" themselves.

"A homemade rocket with a poisonous substance that has not been identified yet—one similar to the rocket used by terrorists on March 19 in Khan al-Assal—was fired early on August 21 from a position occupied by the insurgents," he said.

Last March's attack in Khan al-Assal, near Aleppo, is one of the incidents that the UN inspection team has come to Syria to investigate. The government has charged that this attack, which killed 26 people, including 16 government soldiers, was the work of the armed Western-backed militias fighting for regime change.

These forces have publicly boasted that they have access to chemical weapons and are prepared to use them. At the end of last May, the Turkish media reported that members of the Al Nusra Front, the Al-Qaeda-affiliated militia that has spearheaded the attack on the government, had been arrested with a quantity of sarin in their possession.

If one were to ask who benefits from such a crime, it is clearly not the Assad regime, but the Islamist-led forces fighting to overthrow it. Accusations of war crimes by the Syrian government come as these forces are confronted with growing crisis and a series of military defeats.

The coup in Egypt has forced the Syrian National Council to flee that country for Turkey as

the Egyptian military junta withdrew the backing previously provided by ousted Islamist President Mohammed Mursi.

The forces of Al Nusra, the dominant fighting force particularly in northern Syria, have found themselves plunged into a bitter armed conflict with Kurdish militias resisting the encroachment of the Islamist sectarian fighters into their villages. The emergence of Kurds as a major combatant in the Syrian civil war and their demand for autonomy, along with the flow of tens of thousands of Kurdish refugees from the fighting into neighboring Iraq, has also given pause to the government of Turkey, which fears a spill-over effect into its own Kurdish population.

The last international outcry over Syrian chemical weapons came last June following the defeat of the Western-backed forces in the strategic city of Qusayr near the Lebanese border, cutting a key supply line for the anti-regime militias. It was in direct response to these reversals that the Obama administration issued its baseless finding that the Assad government had used chemical weapons. Having previously declared the use of such weapons a "red line" that would lead to a change in US policy on Syria, the Obama administration announced that its intention was to begin directly arming the "rebels."

While the latest allegations have predictably led to calls for direct US military intervention, the Pentagon command appears less than enthusiastic about such a prospect.

The Associated Press reported Wednesday on a letter sent by Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Gen. Martin Dempsey to a Democratic congressman advocating such an intervention, which warned that it would be counterproductive as the so-called rebels would not further US interests if they were to succeed in overthrowing Assad.

"It is my belief that the side we choose must be ready to promote their interests and ours when the balance shifts in their favor. Today, they are not," Dempsey wrote to Congressman Eliot Engel of New York.

"We can destroy the Syrian air force," the general said. "The loss of Assad's air force would negate his ability to attack opposition forces from the air, but it would also escalate and potentially further commit the United States to the conflict. Stated another way, it would not be militarily decisive, but it would commit us decisively to the conflict."

The US commander concluded: "The use of US military force can change the military balance, but it cannot resolve the underlying and historic ethnic, religious and tribal issues that are fueling this conflict."

Here the general is disingenuous; the bitter sectarian conflict in Syria is not merely the product of "underlying and historic" issues, but rather the direct outcome of US imperialism and its regional allies fomenting armed conflict and funneling tens of thousands of foreign Islamist fighters into the country. The crisis confronting these forces today is not a matter of inadequate armaments, but rather the growing hostility of the population to the sectarian bloodbath being unleashed in Syria.

Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page

Become a Member of Global Research

Articles by: Bill Van Auken