

Syria, Sarin, and Casus Belli

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U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry announced that on August 21 the Assad government slaughtered 1,429 people, including 426 children, in a sarin chemical attack in Ghouta, a Damascus suburb. (Doctors Without Borders put the total at about 300.)

Secretary Kerry insisted that now the United States had no choice but to launch U.S. bombing attacks against President Bashar al-Assad, devolving into another of America's "humanitarian wars."

The Sarin Mysteries

Following Kerry, President Obama announced that the situation in Syria had changed irredeemably since August 21. The United States would have to attack. But, on second thought, Obama decided to leave the decision up to (a seemingly reluctant) Congress.

A few weeks later, Turkish prosecutors issued a lengthy court indictment charging the Syrian *rebels* with seeking to use chemical weapons. The indictment suggested that sarin gas and other "weapons for a terrorist organization" were utilized by the opposition and not by the Assad government.

The "Syrian freedom fighters" include men who are not even Syrian, much like the many mujahedeen who fought the Soviets in Afghanistan but who were not Afghani. As reported in the *Wall Street Journal* (September 19, 2013), the ISIS, an Iraqi al Qaeda outfit operating in Syria, "has become a magnet for foreign jihadists" who view the war in Syria not primarily as a means to overthrow Assad "but rather as a historic battleground for a larger Sunni holy war. According to centuries-old Islamic prophecy they espouse, they must establish an Islamic state in Syria as a step to achieving a global one."

Wrong Hands

Meanwhile, a Mint Press News story quoted residents in Ghouta who asserted that Saudi Arabia gave chemical weapons to an al Qaeda-linked group. Residents blamed this terrorist group for the deadly explosions of August 21. They claimed that some of the rebels handled the weapons improperly and thereby set off the explosions. Anti-government forces, interviewed in the article, said they had not been informed about the nature of the weapons nor how to use them. "When Saudi Prince Bandar gives such weapons to people, he must give them to those who know how to handle them," complained one rebel militant.

At the same time, the Russian government submitted a 100-page report to the United Nations in early September, regarding an attack upon the Syrian city of Aleppo in March

2013. It concludes that the rebels—not the Syrian government—used the nerve agent sarin. According to a member of the U.N. independent commission of inquiry, Carla Del Ponte, there were “strong, concrete suspicions . . . of the use of sarin gas.” Del Ponte added: “This was used on the part of the opposition, the rebels, not the government authorities.” Many of those killed by the gas attack were Syrian soldiers, according to the report.

If true, then we might wonder why are chemical weapons and other weaponry and supplies being supplied to various al Qaeda-type groups? Is not al Qaeda a secret terrorist organization that delivers death and destruction upon people everywhere? Are we Americans not locked in a global struggle with the demonic jihadists who supposedly hate us because we are rich, successful, and secular, while they are impoverished failures? That certainly is the scenario the U.S. public has been fed for over a decade.

The United States claims it provides military assistance only to “vetted” rebel groups, “free ones” that are friendly toward America and are not Islamic fanatics. (Although, as Senator Croker, Republican from Tennessee, admitted: we sometimes make “mistakes” and give weapons to the wrong rebels.) On September 17, President Obama waived a provision in the federal law that prohibits supplying arms to terrorist groups. To many of us this was an unspoken admission that Washington was giving aid to extremist Islamic groups, of which al Qaeda was only the best advertised.

Remember the Casus Belli

It is difficult for me to accept the charge that on August 21 the Syrian government waged a chemical onslaught in Ghouta against its own people in a situation that was bound to backfire in the worst possible way—by handing over to the U.S. war hawks a casus belli, a perfect excuse to wreak retaliatory “humanitarian” death and destruction upon Syria. This is the last thing the Assad government wants.

Remember how the Spaniards asked the Americans *not* to send the USS Maine to Havana Harbor in 1898. They feared that something might happen to the ship and the U.S. would use that mishap as a casus belli, putting the blame on Spain. Sure enough, the Maine blew up while sitting in the harbor, sending U.S. public opinion into a jingoistic fury against the Spaniards. But why would Spaniards perpetrate the very act that would give the Americans an excuse and an inducement to wage a war that Spain most certainly did not want and could not win?

And let us not forget the hundreds of imaginary Kuwaiti babies torn from incubators and dashed upon hospital floors by snarling, maniacal Iraqi soldiers. And remember the never-to-be-found weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) that Saddam supposedly was preparing to use but never got around to doing so. And then there’s that Serbian general—never identified or located—who purportedly told his troops (also never identified) to “go forth and rape.” And Qaddafi who reportedly handed out Viagra to his Libyan troops so they could go forth and rape with a drug-driven vigor, a story so obviously fabricated that it was dropped after two days.

Choice: Satellite or Enemy

Why do (some) U.S. leaders seek war against Syria? Like Yugoslavia, Iraq, Libya and dozens of other countries that have felt America’s terrible swift sword—Syria has been committing economic nationalism, trying to chart its own course rather than putting itself in service to

the western plutocracy. Like Iran, China, Russia and some other nations, Syria has currency controls and other restrictions on foreign investments. Like those other nations, Syria lacks the proper submissiveness. It is not a satellite to the U.S. imperium. And any nation that is not under the politico-economic sway of the U.S. global plutocracy is considered an enemy or a potential enemy.

The Assad government had social programs for its people, far from perfect services but still better than what might be found in many U.S. satellite countries. When Iraqi refugees fled to Syria to escape U.S. military destruction, the Assad government gave them full benefits. So with the Libyan refugees who crossed over a few years later. Generally Damascus presided over a multi-ethnic society, relatively free of sectarian intolerance and violence.

Syria has been ruled by the Ba'ath Party which has dominated the country's parliament and military for half a century. The party's slogan is "Unity, Freedom, Socialism." *Socialism?* Now that gets us closer to why the trigger-happy boys in Washington will continue to pursue a "humanitarian war" of attrition and a prolonged campaign of demonization against Assad and his "regime."

Weapons of Mass Destruction Redux

On September 10, the Syrian government welcomed a Russian proposal calling for Syria to place all of its chemical weapons under international control and for the weapons to be destroyed. Here was a chance to avoid false charges of mass murder by sarin. If Assad no longer had such an arsenal, no one could accuse him of using it. (In any case, the Syrian government's campaign against the rebels was going well enough using just conventional weapons.)

Instead of winning approval from the humanitarian warriors of the West, Syria's eager agreement to surrender its chemical arsenal set off a newly framed barrage of threats from U.S. and French leaders, with the irrepressible Secretary Kerry leading the charge.

Was this a ploy on Syria's part or a genuine offer? Kerry asked in a scoffing tone. How can we be certain that Assad would not sequester its enormous stock of chemical weapons? Kerry issued a whole barrage of tough-guy threats. Syria will be treated most harshly if it pursued a path of deception. French President François Hollande called for a United Nations Security resolution that would authorize the use of force if Syria failed to hand over its chemical weapons. One would think that Syria had refused to do so.

The August charge had been that Syria had *used* chemical weapons, a claim that might be refuted. Now the new charge was that Syria *possessed* such weapons—which was true. And possession itself was suddenly being treated as a crime deserving of swift and severe retaliation.

Now Assad would have to demonstrate the indemonstrable. He would have to convince the western aggressors that he has handed over his entire stockpile of chemical weapons. At the same time, he asserts that a thorough inspection must not come at the expense of disclosing Syrian military sites or causing a *threat* to its national security.

Recall how the Saddam government in Iraq, hoping to avoid war, cooperated fully with U.N. inspectors hunting for WMDs. Every facility in the country was opened to investigation. Even after all of Iraq was occupied, the hunt continued. We were told that the WMDs could be

anywhere, maybe out in some remote part of the desert. It was impossible to be sure.

I fear that the Syrian population is facing more years of painful attrition. The one faintly positive development is that the FSA and the ISIS and all the murderous, Allah-is-great grouplets continue to attack not only the government forces but each other. Dozens of rebels have been killed in clashes with each other within the last few months.

Meanwhile young Syrian children, now living in refugee camps in Lebanon, go every morning to work long days in the fields, earning the few dollars a day upon which their families depend for survival. Some are as young as 5. When asked what they miss most about Syria, the children say, "school."

Michael Parenti is an award winning, internationally known author. His two most recent books are [The Face of Imperialism](#) (2011) and [Waiting for Yesterday: Pages from a Street Kid's Life](#) (a memoir of his early life; 2013). For further information about his work, visit his website: www.michaelparenti.org.

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