

The Syria Chemical Weapons Attack: How US Pressure Bends UN Agencies into Compliance

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Lost in the celebration over the Nobel Peace Prize to the UN agency eliminating the Syrian government's chemical weapons is the question of who was really behind the Aug. 21 poison-gas attack near Damascus. Relevant to that mystery is the recent U.S. pressure to control key UN agencies including the prize recipient, reports Robert Parry.

For at least the past dozen years, the U.S. government has aggressively sought to gain control of the leadership of key United Nations agencies, including the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) which is central to the dispute over the Syrian government's alleged use of Sarin gas on Aug. 21.

Yet, despite evidence that this U.S. manipulation can twist the findings of these UN groups in ways favored by Official Washington, the mainstream American press usually leaves out this context and treats UN findings — or at least those that side with the U.S. government — as independent and beyond reproach, including the OPCW's recent reporting on the Syrian dispute.



For instance, the background of the current OPCW director-general, Ahmet Uzumcu, is rarely if ever mentioned in American news articles about the OPCW's work in Syria. Yet, [his biography](#) raises questions about whether he and thus his organization can be truly objective about the Syrian civil war.

Uzumcu, who was chosen to take over the top OPCW job in 2010, is a career Turkish diplomat who previously served as Turkey's consul in Aleppo, Syria, now a rebel stronghold in the war to oust Syrian President Bashar al-Assad; as Turkey's ambassador to Israel, which has publicly come out [in favor of the rebels](#); and as Turkey's permanent representative to NATO, which is dominated by the United States and other Western powers hostile to Assad. Uzumcu's home country of Turkey also has been a principal backer of the rebel cause.

While Uzumcu's history does not necessarily mean he would pressure his staff to slant the OPCW's findings against the Syrian government, his objectivity surely could be put in question given his past diplomatic postings and the interests of his home government. Plus, even if Uzumcu were inclined to defy Turkey and its NATO allies — and insist on

being evenhanded in his approach toward Syria – he surely would remember what happened to one of his predecessors who got on the wrong side of U.S. geopolitical interests.

That history about how the world's only superpower can influence purportedly honest-broker UN outfits was recalled on Monday in [an article](#) by Marlise Simons of the New York Times, describing how George W. Bush's administration ousted OPCW's director-general Jose Mauricio Bustani in 2002 because he was seen as an obstacle to invading Iraq.

Bustani, who had been reelected unanimously to the post less than a year earlier, described in an interview with the Times how Bush's emissary, Under-Secretary of State John Bolton, marched into Bustani's office and announced that he (Bustani) would be fired.

"The story behind [Bustani's] ouster has been the subject of interpretation and speculation for years, and Mr. Bustani, a Brazilian diplomat, has kept a low profile since then," wrote Simons. "But with the agency thrust into the spotlight with news of the Nobel [Peace] Prize last week, Mr. Bustani agreed to discuss what he said was the real reason: the Bush administration's fear that chemical weapons inspections in Iraq would conflict with Washington's rationale for invading it. Several officials involved in the events, some speaking publicly about them for the first time, confirmed his account."

Bolton, a blunt-speaking neocon who later became Bush's Ambassador to the United Nations, continued to insist in a recent interview with the New York Times that Bustani was ousted for incompetence. But Bustani and other diplomats close to the case reported that Bustani's real offense was drawing Iraq into acceptance of the OPCW's conventions for eliminating chemical weapons, just as the Bush administration was planning to pin its propaganda campaign for invading Iraq on the country's alleged secret stockpile of WMD.

Bustani's ouster gave President Bush a clearer path to the invasion by letting him frighten the American people about the prospects of Iraq sharing its chemical weapons and possibly a nuclear bomb with al-Qaeda terrorists.

Brushing aside Iraq's insistence that it had destroyed its chemical weapons and didn't have a nuclear weapons project, Bush launched the invasion in March 2003, only for the world to discover later that the Iraqi government was telling the truth. As a result of the Iraq War, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have died, along with nearly 4,500 American soldiers, with the estimated costs to the U.S. taxpayers running into the trillions of dollars.

Bush's Bullying

But U.S. bullying of UN agencies did not start or stop with replacing the OPCW's Bustani. Prior to Bustani's ouster, the Bush administration employed similar bare-knuckled tactics against UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary C. Robinson, who had dared criticize human rights abuses committed by Israel and Bush's "war on terror." The Bush administration lobbied hard against her reappointment. Officially, she announced she was retiring on her own accord.

The Bush administration also forced out Robert Watson, the chairman of the U.N.-sponsored Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC]. Under his leadership, the panel had reached a consensus that human activities, such as burning fossil fuels, contributed to global warming. ExxonMobil sent a memo to Bush's White House asking, "Can Watson be replaced now at the request of the U.S.?"

The ExxonMobil memo, obtained by the Natural Resources Defense Council through the Freedom of Information Act, urged the White House to “restructure U.S. attendance at the IPCC meetings to assure no Clinton/Gore proponents are involved in decisional activities.” On April 19, 2002, the Bush administration succeeded in replacing Watson with Rajendra Pachauri, an Indian economist.

Commenting on his removal, Watson said, “U.S. support was, of course, an important factor. They [the IPCC] came under a lot of pressure from ExxonMobil who asked the White House to try and remove me.” [For details, see Consortiumnews.com’s “[Bush’s Grim Vision](#).”]

This pattern of pressure continued into the Obama administration which used its own diplomatic and economic muscle to insert a malleable Japanese diplomat, Yukiya Amano, into the leadership of the UN’s International Atomic Energy Agency [IAEA], which was playing a key role in the dispute over Iran’s nuclear program.

Before his appointment, Amano had portrayed himself as an independent-minded fellow who was resisting U.S.-Israeli propaganda about the Iranian nuclear program. Yet behind the scenes, he was meeting with U.S. and Israeli officials to coordinate on how to serve their interests. His professed doubts about an Iranian nuclear-bomb project was only a theatrical device to intensify the later impact if he declared that Iran indeed was building a nuke.

But this play was spoiled by Pvt. Bradley Manning’s leaking of hundreds of thousands of pages of U.S. diplomatic cables. Among them were reports on Amano’s secret collaboration with U.S. and Israeli officials.

The U.S. embassy cables revealing the truth about Amano were [published](#) by the U.K. Guardian in 2011 (although ignored by the New York Times, the Washington Post and other mainstream U.S. news outlets). Despite the silence of the major U.S. news media, Internet outlets, such as Consortiumnews.com, highlighted the Amano cables, meaning that enough Americans knew the facts not to be fooled again. [For details, see Consortiumnews.com’s “[Did Manning Help Avert War with Iran?](#)”]

The Syrian Dossiers

This history is relevant now because the credibility of the UN’s chemical weapons office has been central to conclusions drawn by the mainstream U.S. news media that the OPCW’s report on the alleged chemical weapons attack outside Damascus on Aug. 21 pointed to the Syrian government as the responsible party.

Though the OPCW report did not formally assess blame for the attack, which purportedly killed hundreds of Syrian civilians, the report included details that the U.S. press and some non-governmental organizations, such as Human Rights Watch, used to extrapolate the guilt of Assad’s government.

Yet, elements of the OPCW’s official report appeared stretched to create the public impression that the Syrian government carried out the attack despite apparent doubts by OPCW field investigators whose concerns were played down or buried in tables and footnotes.

For instance, the UN inspectors found surprisingly little evidence of Sarin gas at the first neighborhood that they visited on Aug. 26, Moadamiyah, south of Damascus. Of the 13

environmental samples collected that day, none tested positive for Sarin or other chemical-warfare agents. The two laboratories used by the inspectors also had conflicting results regarding trace amounts of chemical residue that can be left behind by Sarin after being degraded by intense heat.

By contrast, tests for Sarin were more clearly positive from samples taken two and three days later – on Aug. 28-29 – in the eastern suburban area of Zamalka/Ein Tarma. There, Lab One found Sarin in 11 of 17 samples and Lab Two found Sarin in all 17 samples.

Though the UN report concludes that Sarin was present in Moadamiyah – despite the failure to identify actual chemical-warfare agents – the report does not explain why the Aug. 26 samples in Moadamiyah would test so negatively when the Aug. 28-29 samples in Zamalka/Ein Tarma would test much more positively.

One would have thought that the earlier samples would test more strongly than later samples after two or three more days of exposure to sun and other elements. An obvious explanation would be that the release of Sarin was concentrated in the eastern suburb and that the spotty residue detected in the south came from other factors, such as false positives for secondary chemicals especially from Lab Two.

If the Aug. 21 attack centered on Zamalka/Ein Tarma as the UN results suggest, that would indicate a much less expansive use of chemical weapons than a U.S. government white paper claimed. The alleged breadth of the attack served as a primary argument for blaming the Syrian government given its greater military capabilities than the rebels.

Obama's Claims

That point was driven home by President Barack Obama in his nationally televised address on Sept. 10 when he asserted that 11 neighborhoods had come under chemical bombardment on Aug. 21. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Obama Still Withholds Syria Evidence](#)."]]

However, even the U.S. "Government Assessment" on the attack, issued on Aug. 30 explicitly blaming the Syrian government, suggested that the initial reports of about a dozen targets around Damascus may have been exaggerated. A footnote contained in [a White House-released map](#) of the supposed locations of the attack read:

"Reports of chemical attacks originating from some locations may reflect the movement of patients exposed in one neighborhood to field hospitals and medical facilities in the surrounding area. They may also reflect confusion and panic triggered by the ongoing artillery and rocket barrage, and reports of chemical use in other neighborhoods."

In other words, victims from one location could have rushed to clinics in other neighborhoods, creating the impression of a more widespread attack than actually occurred. That possibility would seem to be underscored by the divergent findings of the UN inspectors when they took soil and other environmental samples from the southern and eastern areas and got strikingly different results.

The UN inspectors also revealed how dependent they were on Syrian rebels for access to the areas of the alleged chemical attacks and to witnesses, with one rebel commander even

asked to take “custody” of the UN inspection.

At the suspected attack sites, the inspectors also detected signs that evidence had been “moved” and “possibly manipulated.” Regarding the Moadamiyah area, the UN report noted, “Fragments [of rockets] and other possible evidence have clearly been handled/moved prior to the arrival of the investigative team.”

In the Zamalka/Ein Tarma neighborhood, where a crudely made missile apparently delivered the poison gas, the inspectors stated that “the locations have been well traveled by other individuals prior to the arrival of the Mission. ... During the time spent at these locations, individuals arrived carrying other suspected munitions indicating that such potential evidence is being moved and possibly manipulated.”

Media’s Conventional Wisdom

The UN inspectors did not draw any specific conclusion from their research as to whether Syrian government forces or the rebels were responsible for the hundreds of civilian deaths that resulted from the apparent use of Sarin gas. However, major U.S. news outlets, including the New York Times and the Washington Post, concluded that the findings implicated the Syrian government.

Those accounts cited weapons “experts” as asserting that the type of missiles used and the supposed sophistication of the Sarin were beyond the known capabilities of the rebels. The articles also said the rough calculations by the UN inspectors of the likely missile trajectories suggested that the launches occurred in government-controlled areas with the missiles landing in areas where the rebels dominate.

These mainstream U.S. news reports did not cite the cautionary comments contained in the UN report about possible tampering with evidence, nor did they take into account the conflicting lab results in Moadamiyah compared with Zamalka/Ein Tarma, nor the fact that the OPCW’s director-general is a career Turkish diplomat. [For more on rebel capabilities, see Consortiumnews.com’s [“Do Syrian Rebels Have Sarin?”](#)]

Reinforcing the Assad-did-it conventional wisdom, Secretary of State John Kerry and President Obama moved to assign any remaining doubters to the loony bin of conspiracy theorists. “We really don’t have time today to pretend that anyone can have their own set of facts,” Kerry sniffed in response to continuing Russian government’s doubts.

President Obama drove home the same point in [his annual address](#) to the UN General Assembly: “It’s an insult to human reason and to the legitimacy of this institution to suggest that anyone other than the regime carried out this attack.”

Yet, the doubters reportedly include U.S. intelligence analysts, who I’m told have briefed Obama personally about the uncertainty of the evidence. Clearly, if the Obama administration had the entire intelligence community onboard, there would have been no need for such [a dodgy dossier](#) as the “Government Assessment” posted by the White House press office on Aug. 30, rather than a National Intelligence Estimate that would have reflected the views of the 16 intelligence agencies and been released by the Director of National Intelligence.

Doubts in the Field

And, Robert Fisk, a veteran reporter for London's Independent newspaper, found a lack of consensus among UN officials and other international observers in Damascus – despite the career risks that they faced by deviating from the conventional wisdom on Assad's guilt.

"In a country – indeed a world – where propaganda is more influential than truth, discovering the origin of the chemicals that suffocated so many Syrians a month ago is an investigation fraught with journalistic perils," [Fisk wrote](#). "Nevertheless, it also has to be said that grave doubts are being expressed by the UN and other international organisations in Damascus that the sarin gas missiles were fired by Assad's army.

"While these international employees cannot be identified, some of them were in Damascus on 21 August and asked a series of questions to which no one has yet supplied an answer. Why, for example, would Syria wait until the UN inspectors were ensconced in Damascus on 18 August before using sarin gas little more than two days later – and only four miles from the hotel in which the UN had just checked in?

"Having thus presented the UN with evidence of the use of sarin – which the inspectors quickly acquired at the scene – the Assad regime, if guilty, would surely have realised that a military attack would be staged by Western nations.

"As it is, Syria is now due to lose its entire strategic long-term chemical defences against a nuclear-armed Israel – because, if Western leaders are to be believed, it wanted to fire just seven missiles almost a half century old at a rebel suburb in which only 300 of the 1,400 victims (if the rebels themselves are to be believed) were fighters.

"As one Western NGO put it ... 'if Assad really wanted to use sarin gas, why for God's sake, did he wait for two years and then when the UN was actually on the ground to investigate?'"

Further adding to these doubts about the Official Story of the Aug. 21 poison-gas attack is the 11-year-old story about how the U.S. government engineered a change in the leadership of the UN's OPCW because the director-general committed the unpardonable sin of getting in the way of a U.S. geopolitical/propaganda priority — and the question about the impartiality of the Turkish diplomat now running the agency.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, America's Stolen Narrative, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes America's Stolen Narrative. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

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