

US Mainstream Media Delivers Fact-Resistant 'Group Think' on Syria

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On Sunday evening, CBS's "60 Minutes" presented what was pitched as a thorough examination of the infamous sarin gas attack outside Damascus, Syria, on Aug. 21, 2013, with anchor Scott Pelley asserting that "none of what we found will be omitted here." But [the segment](#) - while filled with emotional scenes of dead and dying Syrians - made little effort to determine who was responsible.

Pelley's team stuck to the conventional wisdom from the rush-to-judgment "white paper" that the White House issued on Aug. 30, 2013, just nine days after the incident, blaming the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad. But Pelley ignored contrary evidence that has emerged in the 20 months since the attack, including what I've been told are dissenting views among U.S. intelligence analysts.

The segment also played games with the chronology of the United Nations inspectors who had been invited to Damascus by Assad to investigate what he claimed were earlier chemical attacks carried out by Syrian rebels, a force dominated by Islamic extremists, including Al-Qaeda's Nusra Front and the even more brutal Islamic State.

Though Pelley starts the segment by interviewing a Syrian who claimed he witnessed a sarin attack in Moadamiya, a suburb south of Damascus, Pelley leaves out the fact that Moadimiya was the first area examined by the UN inspectors and that their field tests found no evidence of sarin. Nor does Pelley note that UN laboratories also found no sarin or other chemical agents on the one missile that the inspectors recovered from Moadamiya.



Scott Pelley, anchor of CBS Evening News

The two labs did have a dispute over whether trace elements of some chemicals found in

Moadamiya might have been degraded sarin. But those disputed positives made no sense because when the UN inspectors went to the eastern suburb of Zamalka two and three days later, their field equipment immediately registered positive for sarin and the two labs confirmed the presence of actual sarin.

So, if the sarin had not degraded in Zamalka, why would it have degraded sooner in Moadamiya? The logical explanation is that there was no sarin associated with the Moadamiya rocket but the UN laboratories were under intense pressure from the United States to come up with something incriminating that would bolster the initial U.S. rush to judgment.

The absence of actual sarin from the rocket that struck Moadamiya also raises questions about the credibility of Pelley's first witness. Or possibly a conventional rocket assault on the area ruptured some kind of chemical containers that led panicked victims to believe they too were under a chemical attack.

That seemed to be a working hypothesis among some U.S. intelligence analysts even as early as the Aug. 30, 2013 "white paper," which was called a U.S. "Government Assessment," an unusual document that seemed to ape the form of a "National Intelligence Estimate," which would reflect the consensus view of the 16 U.S. intelligence agencies and include analytical dissents.

By going with this new creation – a "Government Assessment," which was released by the White House press office, not the Office of Director of National Intelligence – the State Department, which was then itching for war with Syria, got to exclude any dissents to the hasty conclusions. But the intelligence analysts managed to embed one dissent as a cutline to a map which was included with the "white paper."

The cutline 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, some U.S. intelligence analysts were already questioning the assumption of a widespread chemical rocket assault on the Damascus suburbs – and the strongest argument for the State Department's finger-pointing at Assad's military was the supposedly large number of rockets carrying sarin.

Possible 'False Flag'

However, if there had been only one sarin-laden rocket, i.e., the one that landed in Zamalka, then the suspicion could shift to a provocation – or "false-flag" attack – carried out by Islamic extremists with the goal of tricking the U.S. military into destroying Assad's army and essentially opening the gates of Damascus to a victory by Al-Qaeda or the Islamic State.

That was what investigative journalist Seymour Hersh concluded in ground-breaking articles describing the alleged role of Turkish intelligence in assisting these Islamic extremists in securing the necessary materials and expertise to produce a crude form of sarin.

In December 2013, Hersh reported that he found a deep schism within the U.S. intelligence community over how the case was sold to pin the blame on Assad. Hersh [wrote](#) that he encountered “intense concern, and on occasion anger” when he interviewed American intelligence and military experts “over what was repeatedly seen as the deliberate manipulation of intelligence.”

According to Hersh, “One high-level intelligence officer, in an email to a colleague, called the administration’s assurances of Assad’s responsibility a ‘ruse’. The attack ‘was not the result of the current regime’, he wrote.

“A former senior intelligence official told me that the Obama administration had altered the available information – in terms of its timing and sequence – to enable the president and his advisers to make intelligence retrieved days after the attack look as if it had been picked up and analysed in real time, as the attack was happening.

“The distortion, he said, reminded him of the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident, when the Johnson administration reversed the sequence of National Security Agency intercepts to justify one of the early bombings of North Vietnam. The same official said there was immense frustration inside the military and intelligence bureaucracy.”

Despite Hersh’s legendary reputation dating back to the My Lai massacre story during the Vietnam War and revelations about CIA abuses in the 1970s, his first 5,500-word article — as well as a second article — appeared in the London Review of Books, a placement that suggests the American media’s “group think” blaming the Assad regime remained hostile to any serious dissent on this topic.

Much of the skepticism about the Obama administration’s case on the Syrian sarin attack has been confined to the Internet, including our own Consortiumnews.com. Indeed, Hersh’s article dovetailed with much of what we had reported in August and September of 2013 as we questioned the administration’s certainty that Assad’s regime was responsible.

Our skepticism flew in the face of a “group think” among prominent opinion leaders who joined in the stampede toward war with Syria much as they did in Iraq a decade earlier. War was averted only because President Barack Obama was informed about the intelligence doubts and because Russian President Vladimir Putin helped arrange a compromise in which Assad agreed to surrender his entire chemical weapons arsenal, while still denying any role in the sarin attack.

A Short-Range Rocket

Later, when rocket scientists — Theodore A. Postol, a professor of science, technology and national security policy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Richard M. Lloyd, an analyst at the military contractor Tesla Laboratories — analyzed the one home-made, sarin-laden rocket that landed in Zamalka, they concluded that it could have traveled only about two to three kilometers, meaning that it would have been fired from an area controlled by the rebels, not the government.

That finding destroyed a conclusion reached by Human Rights Watch and the New York Times, which vectored the suspected paths of the two rockets — one from Moadamiya and one from Zamalka — to where the two lines intersected at a Syrian military base about 9.5

kilometers from the points of impact. Not only did the vectoring make no sense because only the Zamalka rocket was found to contain sarin but the rocket experts concluded that it couldn't even fly a third of the way from the military base to where it landed.

After touting its original Assad-did-it claim on the front page on Sept. 17, 2013, the Times snuck [its retraction](#) below the fold on page 8 in an article published on Dec. 29, 2013, between the Christmas and New Year's holidays.

But none of these doubts were examined in any way in Pelley's "60 Minutes" presentation. Instead, Pelley simply pointed the finger at the Syrian government, citing U.S. intelligence. Pelley said:

"The rockets were types used by the Syrian army and they were launched from land held by the dictatorship. U.S. intelligence believes the Syrian army used sarin in frustration after years of shelling and hunger failed to break the rebels."

Pelley did note one anomaly to the conventional wisdom: Why would Assad have ordered a chemical attack outside Damascus after inviting in a team of UN inspectors to examine another site? Pelley then shrugs off that contradiction while offering no alternative scenario and leaving the clear impression that the attack was carried out by the Syrian government.

When I asked the Office of Director of National Intelligence about the "60 Minutes" segment, spokesperson Kathleen C. Butler responded with this e-mailed response:

"The intelligence community assess[es] with high confidence that the Syrian government carried out the chemical weapons attack against opposition elements in the Damascus suburbs on August 21, 2013. The intelligence community assesses that the scenario in which the opposition executed the attack on August 21 is highly unlikely."

In a subsequent e-mail, she added that there was "full consensus on the assessment." [For more details on the sarin incident, see Consortiumnews.com's "[The Collapsing Syria-Sarin Case.](#)"]

Clueless over Iraq

Pelley has built a highly successful CBS career by always parroting the official line of the U.S. government no matter how obviously false it is. For instance, in 2008, he conducted an interview with FBI interrogator George Piro who had questioned Iraq's Saddam Hussein before his execution.

Pelley wondered why Hussein had kept pretending that he had weapons of mass destruction when a simple acknowledgement that they had been destroyed would have spared his country the U.S.-led invasion in 2003.

"For a man who drew America into two wars and countless military engagements, we never knew what Saddam Hussein was thinking," Pelley said in introducing [the segment on the interrogation of Hussein about his WMD stockpiles](#). "Why did he choose war with the United States?"

The segment never mentioned the fact that Hussein's government did disclose that it had eliminated its WMD, including a 12,000-page submission to the UN on Dec. 7, 2002, explaining how its WMD stockpiles had been destroyed. In fall 2002, Hussein's government also allowed teams of UN inspectors into Iraq and gave them free rein to examine any site of their choosing.

Those inspections only ended in March 2003 when President George W. Bush decided to press ahead with war despite the UN Security Council's refusal to authorize the invasion and its desire to give the UN inspectors time to finish their work.

But none of that reality was part of the faux history that Pelley delivered to the American public. He preferred the officially sanctioned U.S. account, as embraced by Bush in speech after speech, that Saddam Hussein "chose war" by defying the UN over the WMD issue and by misleading the world into believing that he still possessed these weapons.

In line with Bush's made-up version of history, Pelley pressed Piro on the question of why Hussein was hiding the fact that Iraq no longer had WMD. Piro said Hussein explained to him that "most of the WMD had been destroyed by the UN inspectors in the '90s, and those that hadn't been destroyed by the inspectors were unilaterally destroyed by Iraq."

"So," Pelley asked, "why keep the secret? Why put your nation at risk, why put your own life at risk to maintain this charade?"

After Piro mentioned Hussein's lingering fear of neighboring Iran, Pelley felt he was close to an answer to the mystery: "He believed that he couldn't survive without the perception that he had weapons of mass destruction?"

But, still, Pelley puzzled over why Hussein's continued in his miscalculation. Pelley asked:

"As the U.S. marched toward war and we began massing troops on his border, why didn't he stop it then? And say, 'Look, I have no weapons of mass destruction,' I mean, how could he have wanted his country to be invaded?"

On Sunday, Pelley was reprising that role as the ingénue foreign correspondent trying to decipher the mysterious ways of the Orient.

Just as Pelley couldn't figure why Hussein had "wanted his country to be invaded" — when no one at "60 Minutes" thought to mention that Hussein and his government had fully disclosed their lack of WMD to save their country from being invaded — Pelley couldn't fully comprehend why the Assad regime would have launched a sarin gas attack with UN inspectors sitting in Damascus.

The possibility that the attack actually was a provocation by Al-Qaeda or Islamic State extremists — who have demonstrated their lack of compassion for innocents and who had a clear motive for getting the U.S. military to bomb Assad's army — was something that Pelley couldn't process. The calculation was too much for him even after [last week's disclosure](#) that Syrian rebels had staged a 2013 kidnapping/rescue of NBC's correspondent Richard Engel, whose abduction was falsely blamed on Assad' allies.

Inviting a Massacre

Besides being an example of shallow reporting and shoddy journalism – using highly emotional scenes while failing to seriously investigate who was responsible – the “60 Minutes” episode could also be a prelude to a far worse human rights crime, which could follow the defeat of the Syrian army and a victory by Al-Qaeda or its spin-off, the Islamic State.

Right now, the only effective fighting force holding off that victory – and the very real possibility of a massacre of Christians, Alawites, Shiites and other religious minorities – is the Syrian army. Some of those Syrian Christians, now allied with Assad, are ethnic Armenians whose ancestors fled the Turkish genocide a century ago.

The recent high-profile comment by Pope Francis about the Armenian genocide can be understood in the context of the impending danger to the survivors’ descendants if the head-chopping Islamic State prevails in the Syrian civil war, the possibility that these Sunni extremists backed by Turkey and Saudi Arabia might finish the job that the Ottoman Empire began a century ago.

Yet, Saudi Arabia, Israel and the American neocons [are still set on the overthrow](#) of the Assad government and continue to pretend that Obama could have averted the Syrian crisis if he had only bombed or invaded Syria several years ago.

The Washington Post’s neocon editorial page editor Fred Hiatt recited that theme in [an op-ed](#) on Monday that made a major point out of the Assad government’s alleged use of something called “barrel bombs” — as if some crude explosive device is somehow less humane than the more sophisticated weapons that were used to slaughter countless innocents by the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan, Israel in Gaza and Lebanon and now Saudi Arabia in Yemen.

“Obama could have destroyed Assad’s helicopters or given the resistance the weapons to do so,” Hiatt said, arguing the neocon assertion that to have intervened earlier would have somehow prevented the rise of Al-Qaeda’s Nusra Front and the Islamic State. But that is another simplistic argument since there were terrorist elements in the Syrian civil war from the beginning and many of the so-called “moderates” who were trained and armed by the United States have since joined forces with the extremists. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Syrian Rebels Embrace Al-Qaeda.”](#)]

The key question for Syria’s future is how can a realistic political settlement be reached between Assad’s government and whatever reasonable opposition remains. But such a complex and difficult solution is not advanced by irresponsible journalism at CBS and the Washington Post.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, America’s Stolen Narrative, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). 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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