

'A Political Ploy'? The Guardian Editors Swallow US Claims On Syrian WMD

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[Media Lens](#)

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

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Last week, we [reviewed](#) the questions and doubts surrounding claims that the chemical weapon sarin has been used in Syria.

The Obama administration has since [claimed](#) that its 'red line' has indeed been crossed - it now has firm evidence that Syrian government forces have used chemical weapons. As a result, the US will begin supplying Syrian insurgents with small arms and ammunition. White House foreign policy adviser Benjamin Rhodes gave dates and locations for alleged sarin attacks but no details of the fighting or numbers of people killed.

In a subsequent article for McClatchy Washington Bureau, Matthew Schofield noted that chemical weapons experts remain 'skeptical of U.S. claim that Syria used sarin'. Jean Pascal Zanders, a leading expert on chemical weapons, until recently a senior research fellow at the European Union's Institute for Security Studies, [commented](#):

'It's not just that we can't prove a sarin attack; it's that we're not seeing what we would expect to see from a sarin attack. In a world where even the secret execution of Saddam Hussein was taped by someone, it doesn't make sense that we don't see videos, that we don't see photos, showing bodies of the dead, and the reddened faces and the bluish extremities of the affected.'

Greg Thielmann, a senior fellow at the Washington-based Arms Control Association, said that 'my guess is they [US officials] have it right'. But Thielmann noted that the White House statement on the crossing of the 'red line' in Syria was 'carefully and prudentially worded' and acknowledged the lack of a 'continuous chain of custody for the physiological samples from those exposed to sarin'.

As we [discussed](#) last month, a secure chain of custody is vital for ensuring samples have not been contaminated. Alastair Hay, a toxicologist at the University of Leeds, commented:

'To make a legal case - whether it's against the Syrian government or opposition group - you need an ironclad chain of custody.'

Philip Coyle, a senior scientist at the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation in Washington, said that the lack of hard, public evidence made it difficult for experts to assess the validity of the administration's claims. What happened 'doesn't look like a series of sarin attacks to him', Schofield reports of Coyle, who also commented: 'Without blood samples, it's hard to know. It does not eliminate all doubt in my mind.'

Anthony Cordesman, a security expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, [argues](#) that ‘the “discovery” that Syria used chemical weapons might be a political ploy... The real reasons [for US intervention] are the broader humanitarian issues involved and far more urgent U.S. strategic interests’.

Yuri Ushakov, Vladimir Putin’s top foreign policy adviser, [said](#):

‘What was presented to us by the Americans does not look convincing. It would be hard to even call them facts.’

The Independent’s Robert Fisk again poured [scorn](#) on the claims:

‘Washington’s excuse for its new Middle East adventure – that it must arm Assad’s enemies because the Damascus regime has used sarin gas against them – convinces no-one in the Middle East. Final proof of the use of gas by either side in Syria remains almost as nebulous as President George W. Bush’s claim that Saddam’s Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction.’

Despite all of this, a Guardian editorial offered a strikingly different judgement. Noting that Obama had decided to authorise military aid on the basis ‘that Bashar al-Assad had used chemical weapons against the opposition’, the editors [commented](#):

‘That use is an outrage and is against international agreements. It adds to the charge sheet against the Assad regime.’

These are among the most shocking comments we have ever seen in the Guardian. Despite the indisputable fraudulence of US-UK claims regarding Iraqi WMD, an equally staggering litany of lies on Libya, and despite the existence of gaps and doubts so reminiscent of Iraq 2002-2003, the Guardian is willing to quietly endorse the latest claims on Syria – ‘Assad’ clearly *has* used chemical weapons and that use should be added to the charge sheet against him.

Once again, when it really matters, the Guardian editors are on-message, on-side and boosting war propaganda.

Unfortunately, the Guardian has form. On January 24, 2003, at a crucial time, leading Guardian reporter Martin Woollacott wrote of Saddam Hussein:

‘Among those knowledgeable about Iraq there are few, if any, who believe he is not hiding such weapons. It is a given.’ (Woollacott, ‘This drive to war is one of the mysteries of our time – We know Saddam is hiding weapons. That isn’t the argument,’ The Guardian, January 24, 2003)

In fact, this was not only false, it was a near-exact reversal of the truth. Hans Blix, former head of UNMOVIC arms inspections in Iraq (November 2002-March 2003), said in June 2003:

‘If anyone had cared... to study what UNSCOM [UN arms inspection team in Iraq, 1991-1998] was saying for quite a number of years, and what we were saying, they should not have assumed that they would stumble on weapons.’ (Miles Pomper and Paul Kerr, ‘An Interview With Hans Blix,’ Arms Control Today, June 16, 2003)

Ironically, in a leading article on the Chilcot inquiry into the Iraq disaster, the Guardian later

observed:

'What is already clear from the first week alone is that the decisions, secret or otherwise, that led to war were the product of systemic failure. Intelligence analysts, diplomats, in fact the entire machinery of the British government, proved supine against Washington's will. Under that pressure, almost everyone buckled.' (Leading Article: 'Iraq inquiry: Dancing to American drums,' The Guardian, November 28, 2009)

The press included!

Supposedly at the other end of the media 'spectrum', a leading article in The Times echoed the Guardian's view:

'Assad's chemical attacks are a barbarous form of warfare intended to spread terror. Arming the rebels is a temperate response to try to force a political settlement.' (Leading article, 'Syria's Red Line,' The Times, June 15, 2013)

Suggested Action

The goal of Media Lens is to promote rationality, compassion and respect for others. If you do write to journalists, we strongly urge you to maintain a polite, non-aggressive and non-abusive tone.

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