

Dubious Intelligence and Iran Blackmail: How Israel is driving the US to War in Syria

By [Max Blumenthal](#)

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President Barack Obama's August 31 announcement that he would seek congressional authorization to strike Syria has complicated an aggressive Israeli campaign to render a US attack inevitable. While the Israelis are far from the only force in bringing the US to the brink of war - obviously Assad's own actions are the driving factor - their dubious intelligence assessments have proven pivotal.

On April 25, the head of the Israeli army's Military Intelligence research and analysis division, Brig. Gen. Itai Brun, delivered a high profile [lecture](#) at the military-linked Institute for National Security Studies. "To the best of our professional understanding, the [Syrian] regime has used lethal chemical weapons," Brun declared, referring to March 19 attacks near Damascus and Aleppo.

"The very fact that they have used chemical weapons without any appropriate reaction," Brun said, "is a very worrying development, because it might signal that this is legitimate."

The stunning statement by the Israeli army's top intelligence analyst was significantly stronger than suspicions expressed days before by the UK and France about the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons. It was clearly aimed at Obama, who had declared in the summer of 2012 that chemical weapons attacks on civilian targets would transgress a "red line" and trigger US military action. But the White House pushed back against the Israeli ploy, dispatching Secretary of State John Kerry to demand Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu supply more conclusive evidence.

"I don't know yet what the facts are," Kerry said after a phone call with Netanyahu, "I don't think anybody knows what they are."

Specious intelligence brightens the red line

Flash forward to the August 21 Ghouta massacre, where over 1000 Syrian civilians died without any sign of external wounds in a series of attacks. As in April, Israel has come forward with intelligence supposedly proving that the victims of the attacks died from nerve gas deployed by units from Assad's Syrian Arab Army (SAA).

On August 24, Israel's Channel 2 broadcast a [report](#) claiming that the 155th Brigade of the 4th Armored Division of Assad's SAA fired the nerve gas shells on Ghouta. Channel 2 added that Israel was relaying its concerns to Washington, suggesting an urgent demand for US action. The report was echoed by an August 30 [article](#) in Germany's Focus magazine claiming that Israeli army's Unit 8200 — a cyber-warfare division that functions much like

the American NSA — had intercepted communications of top Syrian officials ordering the chemical attack.

Oddly, neither outlet was able to reproduce audio or any quotes of the conversation between the Syrian officials. Channel 2 did not appear to cite any source at all – it referred only to “the assessment in Israel” – while Focus relied on an unnamed former Mossad official for its supposed bombshell. The definitive nature of the Israeli intelligence on Ghouta stood in stark contrast to the kind introduced by other US allies, which was entirely [circumstantial in nature](#). At the same time, it relied on murky sources and consisted of vague assertions.

Israel’s military-intelligence apparatus does not exactly have a reputation for trustworthiness. (Consider, for example, the Israeli army’s shameless attempt to link the Gaza Freedom Flotilla to Al Qaeda by [plastering Israeli media](#) with crude and easily discredited propaganda, always sourced to anonymous national security officials.) Yet in his determination to see the US attack the country he recently [referred to as](#) “Iran’s testing ground,” Netanyahu appeared to be succeeding in his campaign to bring Obama’s red line back into focus.

The rush to war, interrupted

On August 26, an Israeli delegation containing Netanyahu’s National Security Advisor Yaakov Amidror and a collection of Shin Bet and top army officials [arrived in Washington](#) for a series of meetings coordinated by US National Security Advisor Susan Rice. The agenda was to plan for the aftermath of a US strike on Syria that was already inevitable, at least from the perspective of the meeting’s participants.

The following day, Vice President Joseph Biden became the highest level US official to blame Assad for Ghouta, declaring, “There is no doubt who is responsible for this heinous use of chemical weapons in Syria: The Syrian regime.” The Obama administration supported Biden’s claim by [citing classified communications](#) intercepted from Syrian officials – intelligence that appeared to have been supplied by the Israelis.

Giora Inbar, a former Israeli intelligence officer, [told Channel 2](#) that the US was not only “aware of” Israel’s intelligence gathering efforts in Syria, it “relies upon it.”

With Kerry and Rice joining Biden in the spotlight to make the case for bombing Syria, the White House released an [intelligence report](#) “assess[ing] with high confidence that the Syrian government carried out the chemical weapons attack against opposition elements in the Damascus suburbs on August 21.”

The content of the report was extremely general in nature, containing a caveat that some intelligence had been omitted “to protect sources and methods.” One of the report’s strongest passages referred to “intercepted communications involving a senior official intimately familiar with the offensive who confirmed that chemical weapons were used by the regime on August 21 and was concerned with the U.N. inspectors obtaining evidence.” Though no source was named, the language tracks almost exactly with the Israeli intelligence leaked to Channel 2 and Focus magazine.

It was August 30 when the report appeared. By this point, the question was not whether the US would bomb Syria, but how soon.

And then Obama blinked.

Iran blackmail, the coming campaign

Now that Obama has turned to Congress to authorize force against Syria, he is under relentless attack in Israel, with a chorus of pundits and politicians hammering him for his act of betrayal and cowardice in the face of evil. Amidst the din of condemnation, a talking point has emerged that will likely figure at the heart of Israel's case to Congress and the American public this week.

The message was neatly summarized in the [headline](#) of a piece by the Likud-friendly correspondent Herb Keinon in the Jerusalem Post: "Weak world response on Syria boosts chance of strong Israeli action on Iran." Referring to Obama's decision and the British' parliament's vote against participating in a strike on Syria, Keinon wrote, "That kind of international dallying is not the type of behavior that will instill confidence in Israeli leaders that they can count on the world when it comes to Iran."

At Haaretz, Amos Harel reinforced the talking point in a [piece of analysis](#) that claimed "Arabs perceive Obama as weak" - but which cited absolutely zero Arabs. Running through a litany of examples of supposed American weakness, Harel concluded, "it's no wonder that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is becoming increasingly persuaded that no one will come to his aid if Iran suddenly announces that it is beginning to enrich uranium to 90 percent."

The threat of a unilateral Israeli strike on Iran if the US does not act on Syria is slowly [seeping into American media](#), and will almost certainly grow more pronounced this week as pro-Israel pundits and [members of the Obama administration](#) unite on their message. AIPAC may also [join the push](#) for congressional authorization, a move the night flower-style lobby managed to avoid during the run-up to invading Iraq. If the Israel lobby is forced into the open, it could hold the prospect of an attack on Iran like a gun to the heads of members of Congress, warning them that the price of inaction is a regional conflagration.

Though Congress will be under unrelenting pressure from powerful forces to authorize force, the vote provides an unprecedented opportunity for opponents of US military intervention in the Middle East to mobilize.

Anti-war forces may not be able to match the financial muscle or public relations power of pro-war elements, but they have opinion firmly [on their side](#). And a direct conflict with the American public may be the one fight Netanyahu does not want to pick.

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Articles by: **Max Blumenthal**

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