

Iraq Then, Syria Now? The New York Times, Sarin and Skepticism

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During the run-up to the Iraq War, *the* New York Times amplified erroneous official claims about weapons of mass destruction (FAIR Action Alert, [9/8/06](#)). Looking at the paper's coverage of allegations of chemical weapons use by Syria, some of the same patterns are clear: an over-reliance on official sources and the downplaying of critical or skeptical analysis of the available intelligence.

In "Syria Faces New Claim on Chemical Arms" ([4/19/13](#)), the paper told readers that, according to anonymous diplomats, Britain and France had sent letters to the United Nations about "credible evidence" against Syria regarding chemical weapon use. On April 24, the Times [reported](#) that Israel had "evidence that the Syrian government repeatedly used chemical weapons last month."

The next day ([4/25/13](#)), the Times reported that, according to an unnamed "senior official," the White House "shares the suspicions of several of its allies that the Syrian government has used chemical weapons." The article spoke of the "mounting pressure to act against Syria," adding, "Some analysts say they worry that if the United States waits too long, it will embolden President Bashar al-Assad."

And then on April 26, under the headline "White House Says Syria Has Used Chemical Arms," the Times [reported](#):

The White House, in a letter to congressional leaders, said the nation's intelligence agencies assessed "with varying degrees of confidence" that the government of President Bashar al-Assad had used the chemical agent sarin on a small scale.

The story included a source, Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D.-Calif.), who presented the intelligence as more definitive: She "said the agencies actually expressed more certainty about the use of these weapons than the White House indicated in its letter."

An [April 27 Times report](#) warned that there were dangers in waiting too long to respond to the charges that Syria has used chemical weapons:

If the president waits for courtroom levels of proof, what has been a few dozen deaths from chemical weapons—in a war that has claimed more than 70,000 lives—could multiply.

In following days, the accusations of chemical weapons use were presented uncritically as

the premise for political stories: pondering how the White House would “respond to growing evidence that Syrian officials have used chemical weapons” ([4/28/13](#)) or noting Republican attacks on the White House following “revelations last week that the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, is believed to have used chemical weapons against his own people” ([4/29/13](#)).

On May 5, the Times was again [weighing in](#) on the political ramifications:

Confronted with evidence that chemical weapons have been used in Syria, President Obama now finds himself in a geopolitical box, his credibility at stake with frustratingly few good options.

Then, on May 5 came an unusual shift: Carla Del Ponte, a member of a United Nations team investigating human rights abuses in the Syrian civil war, claimed that the UN had collected evidence that chemical weapons had been used in Syria—but by the rebels, not by the government.

After running a Reuters dispatch on May 6, the Times published its own piece on May 7, a [report](#) that talked about “new questions about the use of chemical weapons.” But the emphasis was clearly on rebutting the charges: The paper reported that the White House had “cast doubt on an assertion by a United Nations official that the Syrian rebels...had used the nerve agent sarin.” The piece included three U.S. sources—one named, two unnamed—who questioned the Del Ponte claims.

The article went on to reiterate that the White House was weighing other options based on “its conclusion that there was a strong likelihood that the Assad government has used chemical weapons on its citizens.”

Outside the New York Times, though, doubts about the evidence pointing to Syrian use of poison gas were evident from the very start. McClatchy’s Jonathan Landay ([4/26/13](#)) reported that one source characterized the U.S. intelligence as “tiny little data points” that were of “low to moderate” confidence.

An April 30 [report](#) from GlobalPost noted that a “spent canister” at the scene of one attack “and the symptoms displayed by the victims are inconsistent with a chemical weapon such as sarin gas.” A subsequent GlobalPost dispatch ([5/5/13](#)) reported that blood samples tested in Turkey were not turning up evidence of sarin exposure.

NBC reporter Richard Engel ([5/8/13](#)) traveled to Syria with rebel forces to examine evidence they had collected. He seemed to concur with the GlobalPost reports that the chemical exposure could very well have been from a type of tear gas.

By May 7, McClatchy was [reporting](#) that the case was looking weaker, noting that no concrete proof has emerged, and some headline-grabbing claims have been discredited or contested. Officials worldwide now admit that no allegations rise to the level of certainty.... Existing evidence casts more doubt on claims of chemical weapons use than it does to help build a case that one or both sides of the conflict have employed them.

It is clear that the Times has promoted a storyline that treats the chemical weapons claims as more definitive than they are, and has given scant attention to subsequent revelations about the evidence.

In a recent column ([5/5/13](#)), Times public editor Margaret Sullivan argued that the paper still faces problems with its credibility based on its reporting about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction over 10 years ago. The Times "pledged more skeptical and rigorous reporting" going forward, and Sullivan argues that the Times "has taken important steps" in that direction.

But does the paper's handling of the Syria chemical weapons stories demonstrate that the paper has learned lessons? Or is it repeating the same mistakes?

ACTION:

Ask the New York Times public editor to evaluate the paper's reporting on Syria and chemical weapons.

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