

Murky Clues from UN's Syria Report

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The focus of the Syrian crisis has shifted to diplomatic moves for eliminating the government's chemical weapons stockpile, but the whodunit over the Aug. 21 gas attack outside Damascus remains to be solved after a UN report offered a murky account of what happened.

A United Nations field report about the Aug. 21 chemical weapons assault in Syria suggests a more limited area of attack than an earlier U.S. government report claimed and reveals that some inspected sites showed signs of possible manipulation of evidence.

Though the mainstream U.S. news media and some non-governmental organizations highlighted the UN findings that tended to bolster the U.S. government's case against the Syrian government, a close reading of [the 38-page report](#) reveals contradictions to that conclusion.

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 chemical weapons and the two laboratories used by the inspectors had conflicting results regarding chemical residue that can be left behind by degraded Sarin.

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 could 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.

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, 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.

Reliant on Rebels

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.

"An elaborate information exchange took place between UNOJSR [the UN team] and key representatives of the opposition. The information gathered through these exchanges would be used to formulate an action plan for the upcoming visit, which became very critical to the success of the mission," the UN report said.

"A leader of the local opposition forces who was deemed prominent in the area to be visited by the Mission, was identified and requested to take 'custody' of the Mission. The point of contact within the opposition was used to ensure the security and movement of the Mission, to facilitate the access to the most critical cases/witnesses to be interviewed and sampled by the Mission and to control patients and crowd in order for the Mission to focus on its main activities."

While at the suspected attack sites, the inspectors also detected signs that evidence had apparently been "moved" and "possibly manipulated." Regarding the Moadamiyah area, the UN reported 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."

The UN inspectors did not draw any 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. [For more on rebel capabilities, see Consortiumnews.com’s [“Do Syrian Rebels Have Sarin?”](#)]

Conventional Wisdom

Though the U.S. conventional wisdom seems to be solidifying around Syrian government guilt, there still remain troubling questions.

One is why would the Syrian regime – having invited UN inspectors in on Aug. 18 to inspect suspected chemical attack sites elsewhere in Syria, cases that the government blamed on the rebels – then launch a major chemical-weapons attack around Damascus, knowing that such an assault would divert the UN’s attention and invite U.S. military intervention, something sought by the rebels, not the government.

Granted, during bitter warfare, military units can undertake outrageous actions without consideration of the consequences. Think, for example, of U.S. soldiers abusing Iraqi detainees at the Abu Ghraib prison or U.S. soldiers desecrating Korans in Afghanistan. But the Syrian government would seem to have had a lot to lose and little to gain by ordering a widespread chemical-weapons attack just as UN inspectors were arriving.

The refusal of the U.S. government to release any verifiable evidence to establish the Syrian regime’s guilt is another curious element of this mystery. If the U.S. evidence – supposedly including intercepts of Syrian government communications – was conclusive enough to justify military strikes, why couldn’t at least some of it be shared with the American people?

Why did President Obama leave out one of the key pieces of supposed proof from the Aug. 30 “Government Assessment” when he gave his Sept. 10 speech, the claim that a “senior” Syrian official had been overheard admitting guilt? Instead, Obama simply stated, with unaccustomed vagueness, that Syrian officials had “reviewed results of the attack,” phrasing that suggests neither innocence nor guilt?

In past cases like this, the decision to drop high-profile allegations from later presentations has been an indication that they are no longer trusted. For instance, in a 2003 speech to the UN Security Council, Secretary of State Colin Powell refused to repeat President George W. Bush’s assertion about Iraq trying to obtain uranium from Africa because U.S. intelligence had repudiated the claim, though that retreat was not spelled out to the American people.

And, where does the U.S. intelligence community stand on these allegations? It’s curious that the Aug. 30 white paper was issued by the White House press office as a “Government

Assessment,” when such a report would normally come from the Director of National Intelligence and be labeled an assessment of the U.S. intelligence agencies. A traditional assessment would also include footnotes indicating where there were differences of opinion about the data.

I was told by one intelligence source on Monday night that there continues to be skepticism among intelligence analysts about the White House claims and conclusions being drawn from the UN report. So, as U.S. pundits and pols cite the UN report as confirming Syrian government guilt, the remaining skeptics might still want to press the Obama administration to release the evidence that it claims to possess – if it really wants to solve the mystery.

*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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