

New York Times on Syria: All the Propaganda Fit to Print

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In a front-page article Tuesday, the *New York Times* reported that a United Nations report released the day before on the August 21 chemical weapons attack in the suburbs of Damascus “strongly implicated the Syrian government.”

In fact, the report did no such thing. The story’s headline, “UN implicates Syria in using chemical weapons,” is a cynical distortion of reality tailored to meet the needs of the US government for war propaganda.

While the UN inspectors reported “clear and convincing evidence” that surface-to-surface rockets carrying sarin gas were used in the attack, the report provided no indication as to whether it was government forces that fired these rockets, or the Al Qaeda-led “rebels” that are backed by Washington and its allies. As the report states, “The conclusion is that chemical weapons have been used in the ongoing conflict between the parties in the Syrian Arab Republic.”

These inspectors were invited into Syria by the government of President Bashar al-Assad and were set to investigate three separate sites of reported chemical weapons attack, which the Assad regime has blamed on the Islamist anti-government militias. In one of these, which took place on March 19 on the village of Khan al Assal outside Aleppo, the majority of the victims were government soldiers.

Neither the *Times* nor anyone else charging the Assad regime with ordering the August 21 attack have presented any explanation for why it would do so on the very day that the weapons inspectors that it had invited into Syria were beginning their work just a 15-minute walk away from the site of the attack. On the other hand, the motive for the “rebels” to stage such an attack and blame it on the government is obvious: to provoke Western military intervention in support of their flagging insurgency.

The *Times* article does not concern itself with such questions. Rather, it deduces from the report’s findings that only the government could have been responsible. This is based fundamentally on the assertion that the “rebel forces ... are not known to possess such weapons.” It similarly quotes US ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Powers as claiming that there is “no evidence that the opposition possesses sarin.”

In fact, there is ample evidence that the rebels have both sarin and the means to deliver it with artillery and surface-to-surface missiles. Last May, Carla Del Ponte, the former UN war crimes tribunal prosecutor who is a senior member of the UN commission investigating

human rights violations in Syria, reported that the panel's investigation had indicated that "nerve gas was used by the opponents, by the rebels, and we have no indication at all that the government, that the Syrian government used chemical weapons."

In Turkey, meanwhile, prosecutors handed down an indictment last week against a Syrian member of the Al Qaeda-affiliated Al Nusra Front and five Turkish accomplices based on charges that they had set up an operation to procure chemical components for the manufacturing of sarin gas. Videos placed on the Internet by the so-called "rebels" have shown them using gas to kill rabbits and bragging that they had such weapons and were prepared to use them.

Also last week, there was the testimony of the Belgian teacher Pierre Piccinin and Italian journalist Domenico Quirico who were released after being held hostage for five months by Islamists and the so-called Free Syrian Army (FSA). They both reported that during captivity they overheard a Skype conversation between two FSA commanders claiming responsibility for the attack for the "rebels."

"In this conversation, they said that the gas attack on two neighborhoods of Damascus was launched by the rebels as a provocation to lead the West to intervene militarily," Quirico, a war correspondent for the Italian daily *La Stampa*, told the newspaper.

As for means to deliver such weapons, Reuters news agency reported last month that "the Free Syrian Army—as well as the Al Qaeda affiliated al Nusra Front and other groups—have also been using increasingly potent captured artillery. This has included Grad surface-to-surface rockets ..."

Of course none of this finds its way into the reporting of the *Times*, whose motto "All the news that's fit to print" would be rendered more accurately as "All the news that fits the government's propaganda line."

The article distorting the findings of the UN inspectors is of a piece with the overall reporting on the Syria chemical weapons issue, which has treated US government assertions as fact while dismissing evidence to the contrary. Its byline was shared by C.J. Chivers, "senior writer" at the *New York Times*, where he has enjoyed a meteoric rise since coming on as a New York police reporter in 1999.

A former captain in the US Marine Corps and graduate of the Army Ranger school, Chivers was in the first Gulf War and participated in "peacekeeping operations" in Los Angeles during the 1992 riots. In a 2005 interview with *mediabistro.com*, Chivers spoke of sharing "a common understanding, a set of common memories, a group of ideals" with the military. He said this helped him "immensely" in his journalistic career that took him to the US interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria, as well as to Russia, where as Moscow bureau chief he covered fighting in Chechnya, the Beslan school massacre and the Andijan massacre in Uzbekistan.

Such shared "ideals" no doubt made for intimate connections with the US military-intelligence complex, but would hardly foster a critical attitude toward Washington's war propaganda.

Similar shared "ideals" existed between the *Times* former correspondent Judith Miller and the US military and intelligence agencies, contributing to the newspaper's indispensable role

in promoting the lies about weapons of mass destruction that were used to drag the American people into the war of aggression against Iraq.

Meanwhile, some of the same columnists—including former *Times* editor and ex-Moscow bureau chief Bill Keller—who wrote in support of the Iraq war are playing the same role in relation to Syria.

Among the most persistent of these is Nicholas Kristof, who expressed deep disappointment over the deal between the US and Russia on destroying Syria's chemical weapons having postponed what he portrays as a necessary "humanitarian intervention," i.e., the bombardment of Damascus with Tomahawk missiles.

The *Times* readership, sick of Kristof's unending Mother Teresa act, bombarded the paper with comments expressing their opposition to war and revulsion with the columnist's liberal war propaganda. Acknowledging that he had "obviously offended many readers by supporting missile strikes on Syria," he was forced to devote an entire column to defending himself and the proposed war, including by promising that it would cheap.

He added that it was "Syrians, led by the Syrian government in exile who are pleading for American airstrikes." This is hardly surprising. A bunch of hand-picked US collaborators, residing far from where any missile will strike, are in favor of a military intervention that they hope will put them in power.

Of course none of these reporters or columnists even hint that US imperialism could have any other motive for intervening in Syria than humanitarianism and abhorrence for chemical weapons, or that the present intervention has anything to do with the previous wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya or with wars Washington is preparing against Iran or Russia.

The Syria coverage is only the most glaring and consequential example of how the *Times* massages the news to fit the interests of the American ruling establishment.

This has emerged clearly in relation to the revelation of state crimes and wholesale domestic spying by WikiLeaks and Edward Snowden, in which the paper has combined character assassination with effective censorship.

On Monday, the *Times* public editor Margaret Sullivan was compelled to respond to a barrage of emails from readers demanding to know why the newspaper had failed to write one line about the secret NSA documents released by Snowden showing that the agency was funneling raw data, including the telephone calls, emails and other online communications of American citizens, to Israeli intelligence.

"Friends of mine who never before believed that newspapers suppressed the truth are shocked by the evidence before them," wrote one reader.

Sullivan reports a discussion on the matter with managing editor Dean Baquet, who told her that the story wasn't "significant or surprising" and that the paper had more important things to do, such as "cover the turmoil in Syria."

In other words, the NSA-Israel story was news that didn't "fit" the *Times* overarching propaganda line in favor of a war in Syria that is intimately bound up with Israeli interests.

In more than 10 years, the stench from the journalistic crimes carried out by Judith Miller

and Bill Keller in promoting the lies used to justify the Iraq war to the public has still not left the offices and newsroom of the *New York Times*. Now it is at it again in Syria, functioning today as an even more open and direct propaganda arm of the US government.

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