

Obama's Case for Syria: Chemical Weapons Intelligence Summary did not represent an "Intelligence Community Assessment"

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Contrary to the general impression in Congress and the news media, the Syria chemical warfare intelligence summary released by the Barack Obama administration Aug. 30 did not represent an intelligence community assessment, an IPS analysis and interviews with former intelligence officials reveals.

The evidence indicates that Director of National Intelligence James Clapper culled intelligence analyses from various agencies and by the White House itself, but that the White House itself had the final say in the contents of the document.

Leading members of Congress to believe that the document was an intelligence community assessment and thus represents a credible picture of the intelligence on the alleged chemical attack of Aug. 21 has been a central element in the Obama administration's case for war in Syria.

That part of the strategy, at least, has been successful. Despite strong opposition in Congress to the proposed military strike in Syria, no one in either chamber has yet challenged the administration's characterisation of the intelligence. But the administration is vulnerable to the charge that it has put out an intelligence document that does not fully and accurately reflect the views of intelligence analysts.

Former intelligence officials told IPS that that the paper does not represent a genuine intelligence community assessment but rather one reflecting a predominantly Obama administration influence.

In essence, the White House selected those elements of the intelligence community assessments that supported the administration's policy of planning a strike against the Syrian government force and omitted those that didn't.

In a radical departure from normal practice involving summaries or excerpts of intelligence documents that are made public, the Syria chemical weapons intelligence summary document was not released by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence but by the White House Office of the Press Secretary.

It was titled "Government Assessment of the Syrian Government's Use of Chemical Weapons on August 21, 2013." The first sentence begins, "The United States government assesses," and the second sentence begins, "We assess".

The introductory paragraph refers to the main body of the text as a summary of “the intelligence community’s analysis” of the issue, rather than as an “intelligence community assessment”, which would have been used had the entire intelligence community endorsed the document.

A former senior intelligence official who asked not to be identified told IPS in an e-mail Friday that the language used by the White House “means that this is not an intelligence community document”.

The former senior official, who held dozens of security classifications over a decades-long intelligence career, said he had “never seen a document about an international crisis at any classification described/slugged as a U.S. government assessment.”

The document further indicates that the administration “decided on a position and cherry-picked the intelligence to fit it,” he said. “The result is not a balanced assessment of the intelligence.”

Greg Thielmann, whose last position before retiring from the State Department was director of the Strategic, Proliferation and Military Affairs Office in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, told IPS he has never seen a government document labeled “Government Assessment” either.

“If it’s an intelligence assessment,” Thielmann said, “why didn’t they label it as such?”

Former National Intelligence Officer Paul Pillar, who has participated in drafting national intelligence estimates, said the intelligence assessment summary released by the White House “is evidently an administration document, and the working master copy may have been in someone’s computer at the White House or National Security Council.”

Pillar suggested that senior intelligence officials might have signed off on the administration paper, but that the White House may have drafted its own paper to “avoid attention to analytic differences within the intelligence community.”

Comparable intelligence community assessments in the past, he observed – including the 2002 Iraq WMD estimate – include indications of differences in assessment among elements of the community.

An unnamed “senior administration official” briefing the news media on the intelligence paper on Aug. 30 said that the paper was “fully vetted within the intelligence community,” and that, “All members of the intelligence community participated in its development.”

But that statement fell far short of asserting that all the elements of the intelligence community had approved the paper in question, or even that it had gone through anything resembling consultations between the primary drafters and other analysts, and opportunities for agencies to register dissent that typically accompany intelligence community assessments.

The same “senior administration official” indicated that DNI Clapper had “approved” submissions from various agencies for what the official called “the process”. The anonymous speaker did not explain further to journalists what that process preceding the issuance of the White House paper had involved.

However, an Associated Press story on Aug. 29 referred to “a report by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence outlining the evidence against Syria”, citing two intelligence officials and two other administration officials as sources.

That article suggests that the administration had originally planned for the report on intelligence to be issued by Clapper rather than the White House, apparently after reaching agreement with the White House on the contents of the paper.

But Clapper’s name was not on the final document issued by the White House, and the document is nowhere to be found on the ODNI website. All previous intelligence community assessments were posted on that site.

The issuance of the document by the White House rather than by Clapper, as had been apparently planned, points to a refusal by Clapper to put his name on the document as revised by the White House.

Clapper’s refusal to endorse it – presumably because it was too obviously an exercise in “cherry picking” intelligence to support a decision for war – would explain why the document had to be issued by the White House.

Efforts by IPS to get a comment from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence suggest strongly that Clapper is embarrassed by the way the Obama White House misrepresented the Aug. 30 document.

An e-mail query by IPS to the media relations staff of ODNI requesting clarification of the status of the Aug. 30 document in relation to the intelligence community was never answered.

In follow-up phone calls, ODNI personnel said someone would respond to the query. After failing to respond for two days, despite promising that someone would call back, however, ODNI’s media relations office apparently decided to refuse any further contact with IPS on the subject.

A clear indication that the White House, rather than Clapper, had the final say on the content of the document is that it includes a statement that a “preliminary U.S. government assessment determined that 1,429 people were killed in the chemical weapons attack, including at least 426 children.”

That figure, for which no source was indicated, was several times larger than the estimates given by British and French intelligence.

The document issued by the White House cites intelligence that is either obviously ambiguous at best or is of doubtful authenticity, or both, as firm evidence that the Syrian government carried out a chemical weapons attack.

It claims that Syrian chemical weapons specialists were preparing for such an attack merely on the basis of signals intelligence indicating the presence of one or more individuals in a particular location. The same intelligence had been regarded prior to Aug. 21 as indicating nothing out of the ordinary, as was reported by CBS news Aug. 23.

The paper also cites a purported intercept by U.S intelligence of conversations between Syrian officials in which a “senior official” supposedly “confirmed” that the government had

carried out the chemical weapons attack.

But the evidence appears to indicate that the alleged intercept was actually passed on to the United States by Israeli intelligence. U.S. intelligence officials have long been doubtful about intelligence from Israeli sources that is clearly in line with Israeli interests.

Opponents of the proposed U.S. strike against Syria could argue that the Obama administration's presentation of the intelligence supporting war is far more politicised than the flawed 2002 Iraq WMD estimate that the George W. Bush administration cited as part of the justification for the invasion of Iraq.

Gareth Porter, an investigative historian and journalist specialising in U.S. national security policy, received the UK-based Gellhorn Prize for journalism for 2011 for articles on the U.S. war in Afghanistan.

The story moved on Sep. 9, 2013, incorrectly attributed the pull quote to Greg Thielmann, when in fact it is attributable to the unnamed former senior intelligence official cited earlier in the story.

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