

Point-By-Point Rebuttal of U.S. Case for War In Syria

By [Washington's Blog](#)

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The American War Brief Is Extremely Weak

The White House released a [4-page document](#) setting forth its case for use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government.

But as shown below, the case is extremely weak (government's claim in quotes, followed by rebuttal evidence).

"A preliminary U.S. government assessment determined that 1,429 people were killed in the chemical weapons attack, including at least 426 children, though this assessment will certainly evolve as we obtain more information."

But McClatchy [notes](#):

Neither Kerry's remarks nor the unclassified version of the U.S. intelligence he referenced explained how the U.S. reached a tally of 1,429, including 426 children. The only attribution was "a preliminary government assessment."

Anthony Cordesman, a former senior defense official who's now with the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies, took aim at the death toll discrepancies in an essay published Sunday.

He criticized Kerry as being "sandbagged into using an absurdly over-precise number" of 1,429, and noted that the number didn't agree with either the British assessment of "at least 350 fatalities" or other Syrian opposition sources, namely the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which has confirmed 502 dead, including about 100 children and "tens" of rebel fighters, and has demanded that Kerry provide the names of the victims included in the U.S. tally.

"President Obama was then forced to round off the number at 'well over 1,000 people' - creating a mix of contradictions over the most basic facts," Cordesman wrote. He added that the blunder was reminiscent of "the mistakes the U.S. made in preparing Secretary (Colin) Powell's speech to the U.N. on Iraq in 2003."

An unclassified version of a French intelligence report on Syria that was released Monday hardly cleared things up; France confirmed only 281 fatalities, though it more broadly agreed with the United States that the regime had used chemical weapons in the Aug. 21 attack.

Next, the government says:

“In addition to U.S. intelligence information, there are accounts from international and Syrian medical personnel; videos; witness accounts; thousands of social media reports from at least 12 different locations in the Damascus area; journalist accounts; and reports from highly credible nongovernmental organizations.”

Reports on the ground are contradictory, with some claiming that the *rebels* used the chemical weapons. See [this](#) and [this](#). Indeed, [government officials have admitted](#) that they’re not sure who used chemical weapons.

More importantly the U.S. government claimed it had unimpeachable sources regarding Iraq’s WMDs ... and that turned out to be *wholly fabricated*.

“We assess with high confidence that the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons on a small scale against the opposition multiple times in the last year, including in the Damascus suburbs. This assessment is based on multiple streams of information including reporting of Syrian officials planning and executing chemical weapons attacks and laboratory analysis of physiological samples obtained from a number of individuals, which revealed exposure to sarin.”

Chemical weapons experts are [still skeptical](#). The chain of custody is suspect, given that the U.S. hasn’t revealed where the samples came from, and who delivered them to the U.S. McClatchy [reports](#):

Among chemical weapons experts and other analysts who’ve closely studied the Syrian battlefield, the main reservation about the U.S. claims is that there’s no understanding of the methodology behind the intelligence-gathering. They say that the evidence presented points to the use of some type of chemical agent, but say that there are still questions as to how the evidence was collected, the integrity of the chain of custody of such samples, and which laboratories were involved.

Eliot Higgins, a British chronicler of the Syrian civil war who writes the Brown Moses blog, a widely cited repository of information on the weapons observed on the Syrian battlefield, wrote a detailed post Monday listing photographs and videos that would seem to support U.S. claims that the Assad regime has possession of munitions that could be used to deliver chemical weapons. But he wouldn’t make the leap.

On the blog, Higgins asked: “How do we know these are chemical weapons? That’s the thing, we don’t. As I’ve said all along, these are munitions linked to alleged chemical attacks, not chemical munitions used in chemical attacks. It’s ultimately up to the U.N. to confirm if chemical weapons were used.”

Moreover, [Dan Kaszeta](#) – a former Chemical Officer in the United States Army, and one of the foremost experts in chemical and biological weapons – said in a recent interview that there can be [false positives for Sarin, especially, when tests are done in the field](#) (pesticides or other chemical agents can trigger a false positive for sarin.)

The bottom line is that – even though the U.S. has [done everything it can to derail](#) a UN weapons inspection – we have to wait to see what the UN tests reveal.

“We assess that the opposition has not used chemical weapons.”

The rebels absolutely had [had access to chemical weapons](#). While the American government claims that the opposition has not used chemical weapons, many other sources – including [the United Nations, Haaretz, and Turkish state newspaper Zaman](#) – disagree.

“The Syrian regime has the types of munitions that we assess were used to carry out the attack on August 21, and has the ability to strike simultaneously in multiple locations.”

The types of munitions which were apparently used to deliver the chemical weapon attack are an odd, [do-it-yourself type](#) of rocket. The rebels could have made these.

“We assess that the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons over the last year primarily to gain the upper hand or break a stalemate in areas where it has struggled to seize and hold strategically valuable territory. In this regard, we continue to judge that the Syrian regime views chemical weapons as one of many tools in its arsenal, including air power and ballistic missiles, which they indiscriminately use against the opposition.

The Syrian regime has initiated an effort to rid the Damascus suburbs of opposition forces using the area as a base to stage attacks against regime targets in the capital. The regime has failed to clear dozens of Damascus neighborhoods of opposition elements, including neighborhoods targeted on August 21, despite employing nearly all of its conventional weapons systems. We assess that the regime’s frustration with its inability to secure large portions of Damascus may have contributed to its decision to use chemical weapons on August 21.”

This is not evidence. This is a conclusory opinion without any support. (To give an analogy, this would be like claiming Saddam was using weapons of mass destruction right before the Iraq war started because he didn’t like short people ... without refuting the actual fact that Saddam *didn’t have* any WMDs.)

“We have intelligence that leads us to assess that Syrian chemical weapons personnel – including personnel assessed to be associated with the SSRC – were preparing chemical munitions prior to the attack. In the three days prior to the attack, we collected streams of human, signals and geospatial intelligence that reveal regime activities that we assess were associated with preparations for a chemical weapons attack.

Syrian chemical weapons personnel were operating in the Damascus suburb of ‘Adra from Sunday, August 18 until early in the morning on Wednesday, August 21 near an area that the regime uses to mix chemical weapons, including sarin.”

American intelligence sources have [repeatedly been caught lying](#). During the run-up to the Iraq war, the government entirely [bypassed the normal intelligence-vetting process](#), so that bogus claims could be trumpeted without the normal checks and balances from conscientious intelligence analysts.

“On August 21, a Syrian regime element prepared for a chemical weapons attack in the Damascus area, including through the utilization of gas masks.”

This is an oddly-worded – and carefully crafted – statement. Assad has [repeatedly warned](#) that the rebels might steal chemical weapons and use them on civilians. The utilization of gas masks could have been a preventative measure because the Syrian government had received word that the rebels might carry out a chemical attack. More information is necessary.

“Multiple streams of intelligence indicate that the regime executed a rocket and artillery attack against the Damascus suburbs in the early hours of August 21. Satellite detections corroborate that attacks from a regime-controlled area struck neighborhoods where the chemical attacks reportedly occurred – including Kafr Batna, Jawbar, ‘Ayn Tarma, Darayya, and Mu’addamiyah. This includes the detection of rocket launches from regime controlled territory early in the morning, approximately 90 minutes before the first report of a chemical attack appeared in social media. The lack of flight activity or missile launches also leads us to conclude that the regime used rockets in the attack.”

The area in which attacks occurred was heavily contested by the both government and the rebels, and both sides were in and out of the area. 90 minutes before the first attack is an *eternity* when fighting a war on a heavily-contested battlefield ... and could have been plenty of time for rebels to slip in and fire off chemical weapons.

As Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting [notes](#):

It’s unclear why this is supposed to be persuasive. Do rockets take 90 minutes to reach their targets? Does nerve gas escape from rockets 90 minutes after impact, or, once released, take 90 minutes to cause symptoms?

In a conflict as conscious of the importance of communication as the Syrian Civil War, do citizen journalists wait an hour and a half before reporting an enormous development—the point at which, as Kerry put it, “all hell broke loose in the social media”? Unless there’s some reason to expect this kind of a delay, it’s very unclear why we should think there’s any connection at all between the allegedly observed rocket launches and the later reports of mass poisoning.

The government next turns to social media:

“Local social media reports of a chemical attack in the Damascus suburbs began at 2:30 a.m. local time on August 21. Within the next four hours there were thousands of social media reports on this attack from at least 12 different locations in the Damascus area. Multiple accounts described chemical-filled rockets impacting opposition-controlled areas.

Three hospitals in the Damascus area received approximately 3,600 patients displaying symptoms consistent with nerve agent exposure in less than three hours on the morning of August 21, according to a highly credible international humanitarian organization. The reported symptoms, and the epidemiological pattern of events – characterized by the massive influx of patients in a short period of time, the origin of the patients, and the contamination of medical and first aid workers – were consistent with mass exposure to a nerve agent. We also received reports from international and Syrian medical personnel on the

ground.

We have identified one hundred videos attributed to the attack, many of which show large numbers of bodies exhibiting physical signs consistent with, but not unique to, nerve agent exposure. The reported symptoms of victims included unconsciousness, foaming from the nose and mouth, constricted pupils, rapid heartbeat, and difficulty breathing. Several of the videos show what appear to be numerous fatalities with no visible injuries, which is consistent with death from chemical weapons, and inconsistent with death from small-arms, high-explosive munitions or blister agents. At least 12 locations are portrayed in the publicly available videos, and a sampling of those videos confirmed that some were shot at the general times and locations described in the footage.”

No one contests that some kind of chemical agent was used. The question is exactly what type of chemical it was and – more importantly – *who* used it.

Moreover, the rebels were [making propaganda videos](#) for years ... and they’ve gotten *more* sophisticated recently. More information is needed.

“We assess the Syrian opposition does not have the capability to fabricate all of the videos, physical symptoms verified by medical personnel and NGOs, and other information associated with this chemical attack.”

Another conclusory opinion without evidence. More importantly, it is a red herring. No one is saying that the tragic and horrific deaths were faked.

The question is when and where they occurred, and who caused them. For example, one of the world’s leading experts on chemical weapons points out that it is [difficult to know where](#) the videos were taken:

Zanders, the former EU chemical weapons expert, went even further, arguing that outsiders cannot conclude with confidence the extent or geographic location of the chemical weapons attack widely being blamed on the Assad regime.

He singled out the images of victims convulsing in agony that have circulated widely on the Web, including on YouTube.

“You do not know where they were taken,” he said. “You do not know when they were taken or even by whom they were taken. Or, whether they [are from] the same incident or from different incidents.”

Zanders added: “It doesn’t tell me who would be responsible for it. It doesn’t tell me where the films were taken. It just tells me that something has happened, somewhere, at some point.”

The government then expands on allegedly intercepted intelligence:

“We have a body of information, including past Syrian practice, that leads us to conclude that regime officials were witting of and directed the attack on August 21. We 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. On the afternoon of August 21, we have intelligence that Syrian chemical weapons personnel were directed to cease operations.”

The Washington Post [points out](#) that alleged intelligence intercepts are “the core of the Obama administration’s evidentiary case....” America’s war intelligence [has been spotty](#). For example:

- The U.S. Navy’s own historians now say that the sinking of the USS Maine — the justification for America’s entry into the Spanish-American War — was [probably caused by an internal explosion of coal, rather than an attack by the Spanish](#).
- It is also now well-accepted that the Gulf of Tonkin Incident which led to the Vietnam war was a [fiction](#) (confirmed [here](#)).

And the U.S. and Israel have [admitted](#) that they have carried out false flag deceptions (as have Muslim countries such as Indonesia; but to our knowledge, Syria has never been busted in a false flag.)

Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting [writes](#):

Recall that Powell played tapes of Iraqi officials supposedly talking about concealing evidence of banned weapons from inspectors—which turned out to show [nothing of the kind](#). But Powell at least played tapes of the intercepted communication, even as he spun and misrepresented their contents—allowing for the possibility of an independent interpretation of these messages. Perhaps “mindful of the Iraq experience,” Kerry allows for no such interpretation.

David Swanson [notes](#) that American officials mischaracterized the communications to justify the Iraq war:

Powell was writing fictional dialogue. He put those extra lines in there and pretended somebody had said them. Here’s what Bob Woodward said about this in his book “Plan of Attack.”

“[Powell] had decided to add his personal interpretation of the intercepts to rehearsed script, taking them substantially further and casting them in the most negative light. Concerning the intercept about inspecting for the possibility of ‘forbidden ammo,’ Powell took the interpretation further: ‘Clean out all of the areas. . . . Make sure there is nothing there.’ None of this was in the intercept.”

[In addition] Powell ... was presenting as facts numerous claims that his own staff had warned him were weak and indefensible.

The government then makes a throw-away argument:

“At the same time, the regime intensified the artillery barrage targeting many of the neighborhoods where chemical attacks occurred. In the 24 hour period

after the attack, we detected indications of artillery and rocket fire at a rate approximately four times higher than the ten preceding days. We continued to see indications of sustained shelling in the neighborhoods up until the morning of August 26.”

This is another red herring. If the Syrian government believed that the rebels had used chemical weapons on civilians, they may have increased artillery fire to flush out the rebels to prevent further chemical attacks. Again, further information is needed.

“To conclude, there is a substantial body of information that implicates the Syrian government’s responsibility in the chemical weapons attack that took place on August 21. As indicated, there is additional intelligence that remains classified because of sources and methods concerns that is being provided to Congress and international partners.”

This sounds impressive at first glance. But Congress members who have seen the classified information – such as Tom Harkin – are [not impressed](#).

And see these [further details refuting the government’s argument for war](#).

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