

Structural Inclinations - The Leaning Tower of Propaganda: Chemical Weapons Attacks In Ghouta, Syria

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A UN [report](#) this month found that, 'Torture and brutality are rife in Libyan prisons two years after the overthrow of leader Muammar Gaddafi.' Around 8,000 prisoners are currently being held without trial in government jails on suspicion of having fought for Gaddafi.

But then, in the aftermath of Nato's 'humanitarian intervention', torture, bombings and assassinations are now [par for the course](#) in Libya, as described [here](#) by the excellent Interventions Watch.

In similar vein, late [last month](#), thirteen bombs were detonated on a single day in Baghdad killing at least 47 people. More than 5,000 people have been killed so far this year, according to the UN.

Despite all of this - after years of unmissable, terrible carnage in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya - the Pew Research Journalism Project [finds](#) that 'the No. 1 message' on CNN, MSNBC and Fox News, and Al Jazeera, was 'that the U.S. should get involved in the conflict' in Syria.

It seems that no level of suffering and chaos are sufficient to impede the structural 'mainstream' inclination to support state violence.

No surprise, then, that much of UK journalism had decided that the current Official Enemy was responsible for the August 21 attacks in Damascus long before the UN published the evidence in its [report](#) on 'the alleged use of chemical weapons in the Ghouta area' on September 16.

Just one day after the attacks, a Guardian leader [claimed](#) there was not 'much doubt' who was to blame, as it simultaneously [assailed](#) its readers with commentary on the West's 'responsibility to protect'. An Independent front page headline one week later read like a sigh of relief: 'Syria: air attacks loom as West finally acts' (Independent, August 26, 2013).

This was a close copy of the media [response](#) to the May 2012 massacre in Houla, which was also instantly and personally blamed on Syrian president Assad.

Fog Of War

The rapid media conclusion on Ghouta was particularly striking because the issues are complex - literally, rocket science - and evidence has again been gathered under live fire in the middle of a notoriously ferocious civil, proxy and propaganda war. Earlier [claims](#) relating

to use of chemical weapons had been [adjudged](#) 'a load of old cobblers' by veteran journalist Robert Fisk. It was also clear that instantly declaring Assad's guilt a 'slam-dunk' fed directly into a rapidly escalating US-UK propaganda blitz intended to justify a massive, illegal attack on Syria without UN approval.

With Qatar [reportedly](#) supplying 'rebels' to the tune of \$3 billion [and](#) Saudi Arabia \$1 billion, and with Russia [supplying](#) the Syrian government with \$1 billion in weapons, the stakes are high indeed. The fog of both the propaganda and conventional war obstructs and falsifies the facts at every turn. Who to trust? How can we know the lengths to which different agencies might be willing to go to secure outcomes of vast geopolitical significance?

For example, it is not clear how many people were killed in the August 21 attacks. A preliminary US government [estimate](#), commonly cited by the media, claimed that 1,429 people had been killed, including 426 children. But as investigative journalist Gareth Porter [noted](#):

'That figure, for which no source was indicated, was *several times larger* than the estimates given by British and French intelligence.' (Our emphasis)

The day before the US estimate was released, British intelligence [reported](#) just 350 dead. A couple of days later, a French [report](#) concluded that at least 281 people had died. These discrepancies, particularly when contrasted with the precision of the US figures, naturally raise suspicions.

On September 13, three days before the UN report on the Ghouta attacks was published, an incredulous David Aaronovitch of The Times, [asked](#) Mehdi Hasan, Huffington Post UK's political director:

'I ask again. Do you seriously doubt Syrian government used chemical weapons two weeks ago?'

Hasan [replied](#):

'Gun to my head, I think he probably did. But... I want to wait & see what inspectors say & hear more about our "intel".'

A few days earlier, Hasan had [written](#):

'I want Assad gone and I believe him to be a brutal and corrupt dictator. I wouldn't be surprised either if it turns out that his troops did use sarin against civilians in Ghouta.'

On August 29, one week after the attacks, the Guardian's George Monbiot [commented](#):

'Where we are: 1. Strong evidence that Assad used CWs [chemical weapons] on civilians. 2. But v hard to see airstrikes producing any improvement. Agree?'

We certainly agreed with Monbiot's second point, but we simply had not seen the evidence justifying his first. We [wrote](#) to him quoting chemical weapons expert Jean Pascal Zanders, who worked for the European Union Institute for Security Studies from 2008 to 2013:

'No, where's the "strong evidence"? CW expert Zanders: "In fact, we - the public - know

very little".<http://tinyurl.com/q4np9qn>'

Monbiot [replied](#):

'Perhaps I shd've said strong balance of prob. Rebels wld need a lot of hardware to have done it. Either way, case 4 interv v weak'

In a Guardian article two weeks later, Monbiot [wrote](#):

'None of this is to exonerate Bashar al-Assad's government - or its opponents - of a long series of hideous crimes, including the use of chemical weapons.'

Thus, 'strong evidence', walked back to a 'strong balance of prob', had become an assertion that the Syrian government *had* committed hideous crimes with chemical weapons.

The comments above pretty much sum up the 'mainstream' view on Syrian government guilt, perceived as ranging from certain to probable. We cite Hasan and Monbiot because they are two of the most vocal and respected anti-war voices working in the corporate media.

The point is not that Aaronovitch, Hasan and Monbiot are wrong. But these and numerous similar media claims were not rooted in any evidence we had seen at the time they were made. In other words, UK journalists appeared yet again to be succumbing to the influence of state propaganda demonising an Official Enemy, exactly as happened with Iraq and Libya.

Predicting The UN Report

On September 7, Reuters [reported](#) a key point rarely even mentioned by journalists considering the merits of a Western attack on Syria:

'No direct link to President Bashar al-Assad or his inner circle has been publicly demonstrated, and some U.S. sources say intelligence experts are not sure whether the Syrian leader knew of the attack before it was launched or was only informed about it afterward.

'While U.S. officials say Assad is responsible for the chemical weapons strike even if he did not directly order it, they have not been able to fully describe a chain of command for the August 21 attack in the Ghouta area east of the Syrian capital.'

On August 30, the Independent [reported](#):

'The report by Britain's Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) on the Syrian attacks... failed to make a case for war. There was no evidence directly linking President Assad and his coterie to the attack, the blame attached to the regime was by default, inasmuch it was held the opposition did not have the wherewithal to mount such an operation.'

Gareth Porter [exposed](#) how the initial US government response to the attacks, released prior to the UN report, was based on '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'.

Porter added, disturbingly, that 'the Obama administration's presentation of the intelligence

supporting war' was arguably 'far more politicized than the flawed 2002 Iraq WMD estimate that the George W. Bush administration cited as part of the justification for the invasion of Iraq'.

Brushing these reservations aside, many media predicted that the UN report would go beyond its remit and blame the Syrian government, and even Assad personally. Thus, the Observer: 'some officials [are] claiming it will point the finger at the Assad regime'. (Peter Beaumont, 'US and Russia seal deal over end to Syria chemical arms,' Observer, September 15, 2013)

The Telegraph headlined the same prediction:

'UN report will point to Syrian regime's responsibility for sarin attack' (Ruth Sherlock, Telegraph, September 12, 2013)

And the Daily Mail:

'UN report will point the finger at Assad regime for huge chemical attack... but insiders admit there is only circumstantial evidence' (Simon Tomlinson, Daily Mail, September 12, 2013)

The fiercely pro-war Times [headline](#) for September 13, 2013 went further still:

'Assad is to blame for chemical strike — UN'

After publication of the report, the Independent claimed that 'UN weapons inspectors find "clear and convincing" evidence of regime gas attack.' (David Osborne and Kim Sengupta, i-Independent, September 17, 2013)

Despite these numerous predictions and affirmations of blame, the Guardian's Simon Tisdall [wrote](#) that the report had been 'shamefacedly cautious'. Why?

'It also seems clear that those responsible for the Ghouta attack, from Assad downwards, are unlikely to face justice soon, or at all. The UN report *declined to blame the regime*, let alone to name those behind the atrocity.' (Our emphasis)

Commentators, indeed, were wrong to suggest that the UN report had blamed Assad.

If the UN was disgracefully cautious on September 16, Human Rights Watch (HRW) had been bold in [blaming](#) the Syrian government one week earlier:

"Rocket debris and symptoms of the victims from the August 21 attacks on Ghouta provide telltale evidence about the weapon systems used," said Peter Bouckaert, emergencies director at Human Rights Watch. "This evidence strongly suggests that Syrian government troops launched rockets carrying chemical warheads into the Damascus suburbs that terrible morning."

HRW presents itself as a neutral, dispassionate observer of events in Syria. But HRW director Ken Roth has openly [supported](#), not just a US attack on Syrian government forces, but one that is more than symbolic:

'If Obama decides to strike #Syria, will he settle for symbolism or do something that will

help protect civilians?’

John Tirman, Executive Director and Principal Research Scientist at the MIT Center for International Studies, [replied](#) to Roth on Twitter that this was:

‘Possibly the most ignorant & irresponsible statement ever by a major human-rights advocate. #Syria Escalating war ≠ civ protect’

‘Grave Doubts’ Expressed By UN Officials

Serious doubts remain about exactly what happened on August 21 in Damascus. Nafeez Ahmed, who writes for the Guardian on the geopolitics of environmental, energy and economic crises, provided a reasonable assessment of the evidence on September 20, [here](#). Ahmed later [commented](#) on responsibility for the attacks:

‘I remain open-minded about the CW issue and as the article above shows, have drawn no specific conclusions either way.’

Much has been made of the trajectory of rockets that landed in Ghouta calculated by the UN. But the UN report stated:

‘The time necessary to conduct a detailed survey ... as well as take samples was very limited. The sites [had] been well travelled by other individuals both before and during the investigation. Fragments and other possible evidence [had] clearly been handled/moved prior to the arrival of the investigation team.’

Robert Fisk [noted](#) that he could not recall seeing these words in any media analysis. He [commented](#):

‘...it also has to be said that grave doubts are being expressed by the UN and other international organisations in Damascus that the sarin gas missiles were fired by Assad’s army. While these international employees cannot be identified, some of them were in Damascus on 21 August and asked a series of questions to which no one has yet supplied an answer. Why, for example, would Syria wait until the UN inspectors were ensconced in Damascus on 18 August before using sarin gas little more than two days later – and only four miles from the hotel in which the UN had just checked in? Having thus presented the UN with evidence of the use of sarin – which the inspectors quickly acquired at the scene – the Assad regime, if guilty, would surely have realised that a military attack would be staged by Western nations’.

Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS), including Thomas Drake, Ray McGovern, Matthew Hoh, Philip Giraldi and others, sent a [memorandum](#) to Barack Obama on September 6:

‘We regret to inform you that some of our former co-workers are telling us, categorically, that contrary to the claims of your administration, the most reliable intelligence shows that Bashar al-Assad was NOT responsible for the chemical incident that killed and injured Syrian civilians on August 21, and that British intelligence officials also know this.’

Ben Caspit, a contributing writer for Al-Monitor’s Israel Pulse, has also [commented](#):

'This week I met with an unofficial Israeli source with a background in IDF's [Israeli Defence Force] intelligence branch, though that was quite some time ago... He is a high-tech person with many achievements and great experience in that field. He developed methods for comparing and cross-checking information, methods that have mainly proven themselves when hundreds, thousands and tens of thousands of sources are involved. He wrote a document that rebuts one by one the claims and evidences by which the Assad regime is held responsible for the use of chemical weapons on Aug. 21 in Syria.'

Caspit concluded:

'It's not that I am now convinced that Assad is innocent. It's that now I am a little less convinced that the hands of the Syria president were involved in the chemical attack on Aug. 21.'

Again, none of this means that the Syrian government, and indeed Assad himself, was *not* to blame for the August 21 attacks. The point is that the corporate media's staggering lack of scepticism again indicates that it is structurally inclined to favour the view of US-UK state power. As former Guardian journalist, Jonathan Cook, has [written](#):

'We should expect the corporations that own our media to be promoting the same agendas as the political elites they own too. It's a self-sustaining and self-reinforcing system.'

Genuinely independent 'mainstream' journalists would of course be energetically exploring and debating the uncertainties surrounding US-UK claims, particularly in light of the catastrophic Iraq deception and the clear difficulty of assessing the quality of *all* information coming out of Syria.

But in fact almost all detailed discussion of the UN report and the different claims surrounding it has appeared outside the 'mainstream', on small websites and specialist blogs. As ever, corporate media employees have been content to give a lazy nod to US-UK claims so that, as Fisk [comments](#), 'now the world has convinced itself that the Assad regime fired the sarin gas shells on 21 August'.

And as the lesson of Iraq makes clear, with Syria very much in US crosshairs, that conviction may yet result in great calamities in the near future.

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