

# Syrian Chemical Attack: More Evidence Only Leads to More Questions

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*The paucity of revealed facts highlights the reality that little is really known about the actual attack. There is still no agreed upon number of fatalities, with unverified claims ranging from the US assertion of 1,429 fatalities to the French assertion that only 281 were killed. In other words, the French Intelligence number is about 20 percent that of the US assertion. Most Syrian opposition sources now put the number of fatalities at between 335 and 355, as does the non-governmental organization, Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). This is about 25 percent of the US number. Either way, this is too huge a gap not to be explained and substantiated.*

It is still not clear what type of agent killed the victims.

To-date, the US position in documents submitted to Congress is that the victims died as a result of “nerve agent exposure”. Orally, however, Secretary Kerry claimed the US has proof it was sarin. The French intelligence report also attributes the deaths to “chemical agents” without further identification. The most explicit finding to-date comes from the UK’s Defence Science Technology Laboratory. Soil and cloth samples “tested positive for the nerve gas sarin”. The sarin in the cloth was in liquid form that soaked into the cloth. As discussed below, **this finding reinforces the conclusion that “kitchen sarin” was used.** Hence, so much will depend on the UN’s findings when their tests are completed.

The claim that the agent used was a “military sarin” is problematic because military sarin accumulates (like a gaseous crystal) around the victims’ hair and loose threads in clothes. Since these molecules are detached and released anew by any movement, they would have thus killed or injured the first responders who touched the victims’ bodies without protective clothes, gloves and masks. However, opposition videos show the first responders moving corpses around without any ill effects. This strongly indicates that the agent in question was the slow acting “kitchen sarin”. Indeed, other descriptions of injuries treated by MSF – suffocation, foaming, vomiting and diarrhoea – agree with the effects of diluted, late-action drops of liquified sarin. The overall descriptions of the injuries and fatalities treated by MSF closely resemble the injuries treated by the Tokyo emergency authorities back on March 20, 1995. The Tokyo subway attack was committed with liquified “kitchen sarin”. The know how for this type of sarin came from North Korean Intelligence, and is known to have been transferred, along with samples, to Osama bin Laden in 1998. That the jihadist movement has these technologies was confirmed in jihadist labs captured in both Turkey and Iraq, as well as from the wealth of data recovered from al-Qaida in Afghanistan in 2001/2.

As well, it is not yet clear what weapons were used to disperse the chemical agent. The specifics of the weapon will provide the crucial evidence whether this was a military type

agent of the kind available in the Syrian arsenal, or improvised, kitchen-style agent of the type known to be within the technical capabilities of the jihadist opposition.

Meanwhile, the mangled projectiles shown by the opposition, and which were tested by the UN inspectors, are not standard weapons of the Syrian Armed Forces. These projectiles have a very distinct ribbed-ring fins which are similar to projectiles used by the opposition in Aleppo, Damascus, and other fronts with both high-explosives and undefined materials. The Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) retrieved a video claiming to be of the attack, but is most likely of a daylight testing of the launcher. The truck-mounted launcher included a chemical sleeve that was supposed to absorb leaks from the improvised warheads and not harm the launch crew; hardly the precaution taken with a military weapon.

Moreover, the warheads used in Damascus were cylindrical tanks which cracked and permitted a Tokyo-style mixture of liquids, rather than the pressurized mix and vaporization at the molecular level by the force of core explosion in a standard Soviet-style chemical warhead. Had Syrian militarily-trained experts built these warheads, they would have used the upper pipe for the core-charge the explosion of which would have created a significantly more lethal vaporized cloud of the toxic agent. The mere fact that the pipeline remained empty suggests the work of amateurs found in the ranks of the improvised weapon makers of the jihadist opposition.

As well, the opposition also pointed to cracked plastic pieces which resembled shreds from large blue plastic tanks/bottles (like a water cooler's huge bottles) fired by chemical launchers the opposition had bragged about in the past. These weapons are in agreement with the multitude of images of victims publicized by the opposition which did not show any injury due to shrapnel which would have come from Soviet-style chemical munitions of the type known to be in the Syrian military arsenal.

Most important, of course, is the question "Who could have done it?" given the available data. Significantly, evidence collected by numerous Arab sources on the ground in the greater Damascus area and recently smuggled out of Syria narrows the scope of potential perpetrators and the reason for the attack. This evidence points to specific commanders of Liwaa al-Islam and Jabhat al-Nusra known to be cooperating in the eastern Damascus theater.

On the night of August 20/21, 2013, and the early morning of August 21, 2013 - a day before the chemical attack - the jihadists' Liberating the Capital Front, led by Jabhat al-Nusra, suffered a major defeat during Operation Shield of the Capital. Operation Shield of the Capital is the largest military operation of the Syrian Army in the Damascus region since the beginning of the conflict. The jihadists also amassed a huge force of over 25,000 fighters for their Front from 13 armed kitaeb [battalion-groupings].

The main units belonged to Jabhat al-Nusra and Liwaa al-Islam. The other kitaeb were Harun al-Rashid, Syouf al-Haqq, al-Mohajereen, al-Ansar, Abu Zhar al-Ghaffari, Issa Bin Mariam, Sultan Mohammad al-Fatih, Daraa al-Sham, the Jobar Martyrs, and Glory of the Caliphate. They included both Syrian and foreign volunteers. (The mere gathering of so many kitaeb for the battle of eastern Damascus refutes the assertion in the US and French intelligence reports that the opposition was incapable of conducting coordinated large-scale operations and therefore the chemical attack must have been launched by Assad's forces.)

Around dawn on August 21, 2013, the Liberating the Capital Front suffered a strategic

defeat in the Jobar entrance area.

The Jobar entrance was the opposition's last staging areas with access to the heart of Damascus from where they could launch car-bombs and raids. The Jobar entrance is also the sole route for reinforcements and supplies coming from the Saudi-Jordanian-US intelligence base near Jordan's major airbase and military facilities in al-Mafraq (from where the eastern route to Damascus starts) and distributed via the Ghouta area to the outlying eastern suburbs of Damascus. The eastern route is so important that the efforts are supervised personally by Saudi Princes Bandar and Salman bin Sultan, and overseen by Col. Ahmad al-Naimeh, the commander of the opposition's Military Council of the Southern Region and Horan.

The jihadists' defeat on August 21 effectively sealed any hope of a future surge from Jordan by CIA-sponsored jihadist forces because the jihadists who, starting August 17/18, 2013, were attempting to use the western route to Damascus from the base in Ramtha, Jordan, had by now been encircled and defeated not far from the Golan border with Israel.

As the jihadist forces were collapsing, the Front commanders deployed an élite force to block at all cost the Syrian military's access to the Jobar entrance area. The majority of the jihadists in this force were from Liwaa al-Islam and the rest from Jabhat al-Nusra. The commander of the force was a Saudi jihadist going by the nom de guerre Abu-Ayesha. (Abu-Ayesha was identified by a Ghouta resident called Abu Abdul-Moneim as the jihadist commander who had stored in a tunnel in Ghouta weapons some of which had "tube-like structure" and others looked like "huge gas bottles". Abdul-Moneim's son and 12 other fighters were killed inside the tunnel by a chemical leak from one of these weapons.)

According to military and strategic analyst Brig. Ali Maqsoud, the Liwaa al-Islam forces arrayed in Jobar included "the so-called 'Chemical Weapons Front' led by Zahran Alloush [the supreme leader of Liwaa al-Islam]. That group possesses primitive chemical weapons smuggled from al-Qaida in Iraq to Jobar, in the vicinity of Damascus."

When the jihadist Front collapsed, the jihadist leaders decided that only a chemical strike could both stop the advance of the Syrian army and provoke a US military strike that would deliver a strategic victory for the jihadists. The chemical agents were then loaded on what Russian intelligence defined as "rockets [which] were manufactured domestically to carry chemicals. They were launched from an area controlled by Liwaa al-Islam."

Maqsoud is convinced the chemical weapons strike was launched at the behest of Washington and on Washington's orders. "In the end, we can say that this [post-strike US] escalatory rhetoric aims to achieve two things. The first is strengthening [the US] position as leader of the opposition and imposing conditions in preparation for the negotiating table. The second is changing the [power balance on the] ground and stopping the Syrian army's advance," Maqsoud told al-Safir of Lebanon.

The identification of Liwaa al-Islam under Zahran Alloush as the jihadist force most likely to have conducted the chemical attack raises major questions regarding the Saudi involvement and particularly that of Intelligence Chief Prince Bandar bin Sultan. Zahran Alloush is the son of a Saudi-based religious scholar named Sheikh Abdullah Muhammad Alloush. During the 1980s, he worked for then Saudi Intelligence Chief Prince Turki al-Faisal in both Afghanistan and Yemen.

Zahran Alloush was involved with the neo-salafi/Wahhabi underground in Syria since the 1990s, was jailed by Syrian Mukhabarat, and released in mid-2011 as part of Bashar al-Assad's amnesty aimed to placate Riyadh. Zahran Alloush immediately received funds and weapons from Saudi intelligence which enabled him to establish and run Liwaa al-Islam as a major jihadist force.

On July 18, 2012, Liwaa al-Islam conducted the major bombing of the headquarters of Syria's national security council in Rawda Square, Damascus, assassinating, among others, Assaf Shawkat, Bashar's brother-in-law and nominally the deputy Minister of Defense, Dawoud Rajiha, the Defense Minister, and Hassan Turkmani, former Defense Minister who was military adviser to then-Vice-President Farouk al-Sharaa. In Spring 2013, Zahran Alloush helped the Saudis weaken the Qatari-sponsored jihadist forces in the Damascus area. In June 2013, he suddenly withdrew his forces in the middle of a major battle with the Syrian army, leaving the Qatari-sponsored First Brigade and Liwaa Jaish al-Muslimeen to be defeated and mauled.

Significantly, in late August 2013, the opposition insisted on having Zahran Alloush and Liwaa al-Islam secure and escort the international experts team when they collected evidence in the opposition-controlled parts of eastern Damascus. Zahran Alloush entrusted the task of actually controlling and monitoring the UN team to his close allied katiba, the Liwaa al-Baraa from Zamalka. Thus, the international experts' team operated while in effective custody of those jihadists most likely responsible for the chemical attack.

According to several jihadist commanders, "Zahran Alloush receives his orders directly from the Saudi Intelligence Chief Prince Bandar bin Sultan" and Liwaa al-Islam is Saudi Arabia's private army in Syria.

The Bandar aspect is important to understanding strategic-political aspects of the chemical strike.

No independent evidence ties Bandar to the actual chemical attack.

Presently, there is no independent evidence connecting Bandar, or any other Saudi official, to the supply and use of chemical weapons in Damascus. There exist, though, the long-time connections between the various jihadist commanders and both Saudi intelligence and Bandar himself. However, Bandar's threats in the meeting with Russian Pres. Vladimir Putin cast a shadow on the question of Riyadh's foreknowledge, and, given the uniquely close relations between Bandar and CIA Chief John Brennan, Washington's foreknowledge as well.

On August 2, 2013, Prince Bandar had an unprecedented meeting with Pres. Putin at the Kremlin.

Their meeting covered a host of issues ranging from future energy economy to the situation in Egypt to what to do about Syria. Throughout, Bandar made a huge mistake - believing that Putin was just like the successive US senior officials Bandar has dealt with in the past - namely, that like the Americans, Putin would also be easy to bribe with flattery, weapons acquisition, and oil-related cash.

Putin was not.

Of significance to the issue of the chemical strike in Damascus was the exchange between Bandar and Putin regarding the future of Bashar al-Assad. Bandar wanted Putin to support

the toppling of the Assad Administration and its replacement with a Saudi-sponsored opposition administration. Bandar promised that Russia's interests in Syria would be preserved by the proposed Saudi-sponsored post-Assad government.

In this context Bandar sought to both allay Putin's concerns regarding jihadist terrorism and to deliver a veiled threat. "As an example," Bandar stated, "I can give you a guarantee to protect the Winter Olympics in the city of Sochi on the Black Sea next year. The Chechen groups that threaten the security of the games are controlled by us, and they will not move [also] in the direction of the Syrian territory without coordinating with us. These groups do not scare us. We use them in the face of the Syrian regime but they will have no role or influence in Syria's political future."

Putin responded quietly. "We know that you have supported the Chechen terrorist groups for a decade. And that support, which you have frankly talked about just now, is completely incompatible with the common objectives of fighting global terrorism that you mentioned."

Toward the end of the meeting, Bandar again discussed the Syrian issue at length. He stressed that as far as Riyadh was concerned, there was no future for the Assad Administration. "The Syrian regime is finished as far as we and the majority of the Syrian people are concerned," Bandar said, and they, the Syrian people, "will not allow President Bashar al-Assad to remain at the helm."

Putin responded that Moscow's "stance on Assad will never change. We believe that the Syrian regime is the best speaker on behalf of the Syrian people, and not those liver eaters." Again, Bandar resorted to threats. He warned Putin that their dispute over the future of Syria led him, Bandar, to conclude that "there is no escape from the [US-led] military option, because it is the only currently available choice given that the political settlement ended in stalemate". Bandar added that Riyadh saw no future for the negotiating process.

Bandar expected such a military intervention to soon commence.

Did he have any foreknowledge of a provocation to come? Significantly, Bandar insisted throughout his visit to Moscow that his initiative and message were coordinated with the highest authorities in Obama's Washington. "I have spoken with the Americans before the visit, and they pledged to commit to any understandings that we may reach, especially if we agree on the approach to the Syrian issue," Bandar assured Putin.

Did the Obama White House know in advance about the Saudi claim to controlling jihadist terrorism in both Russia and Syria? Did the Obama White House know about Bandar's anticipation of an US-led military intervention?

Several Arab leaders, as well as senior intelligence and defense officials from the Arabian Peninsula are now convinced that the chemical strike was aimed to provoke a US-led military intervention which would in turn lead to the toppling of Bashar al-Assad and the empowerment of an Islamist government in Damascus.

These senior intelligence and defense officials have privately expressed anger that the US has not [yet] struck at Syria, as was so widely anticipated in the Arab world. These notables point out that in late Spring, the top leaders of the Syrian opposition and its regional sponsors impressed on the highest authorities in Washington and other Western capitals the gravity of the situation. The opposition and sponsors warned that unless there was a major

military intervention during the Summer, the struggle for Syria would be lost come Autumn. The leaders of the opposition and their sponsors now insist that they were assured in these discussions that the US and key West European powers were eager to provide such help and intervene in order to topple the Assad Administration and empower the opposition in Damascus.

Given the political climate in the US and the West, the Arab leaders say that they were told, it was imperative for US and Western leaders to have a clear casus belli of an absolute humanitarian character. Recently (but before the chemical attack), the opposition and sponsors were asked for lists of targets to be hit by US-led Western bombing should there be a Western intervention. The opposition provided such target lists, convinced that their bombing was imminent. The leaders of the opposition and their sponsors now feel cheated, for there had just been an humanitarian catastrophe in Damascus with all the characteristics of the sought-after casus belli, and yet, there were no US and Western bombers in the skies over Damascus!

Significantly, most of these Arab leaders and officials are not in the know. They do o't pretend to have any specific knowledge of what happened in Damascus beyond the coverage in the Arab media. They complain so bitterly on the basis of their comprehension of how things should have been done given the overall strategic circumstances. And for them, such a self-inflicted carnage is the most obvious thing to do if that was what Washington and other Western capitals needed in order to have a viable casus belli for an intervention.

Meanwhile, the US case against the Assad Administration continued to crumble.

“No direct link to Pres. Bashar al-Assad or his inner-circle has been publicly demonstrated, and some US 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,” observed Reuters' Mark Hosenball.

A closer study of the much-touted electronic intercepts proves that Assad and his inner-circle were stunned by the news of the chemical attack. When the first reports of the chemical attack surfaced, a very senior Syrian military officer called in panic the artillery commander of the 155th Brigade of the 4th Armored Division of the Syrian Army which is under the direct command of Maher al-Assad.

The senior officer wanted to know if the brigade had fired any chemical munitions in contravention of the explicit orders of the top leadership not to do so. The artillery commander flatly denied firing any rocket, missile, or artillery. He added that he had already checked and confirmed that all his munitions were accounted for, and invited the general staff to send officers to verify on their own that all brigade's munitions were in safe storage. The senior officers took the commander to task and he was interrogated for three days as a thorough inventory of the munitions was carried out. This artillery officer was returned to duty as it was confirmed beyond doubt that no munitions were missing. (Since there was no other chemical-capable unit in the area, the claim of rogue officers should identify from where and how they had obtained chemical munitions.)

The reaction of the Assad inner-circle was in agreement with earlier observations by German Federal Intelligence Service, the Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND).

The BND reported that since the beginning of Spring 2013, Syrian brigade and division commanders had repeatedly asked the Presidency for permission to use chemical weapons against jihadist forces besieging them. The Presidency had always denied permission in strong and uncompromising terms. The BND has no indication, let alone proof, that this consistent policy changed on or before August 21, 2013.

This is also the opinion of a very senior Iranian official in Beirut. When the news of the chemical attack first broke, a very senior HizbAllah official called the Iranian for advice. The BND intercepted the call. The HizbAllah official wondered whether "Assad had lost his temper and committed a huge mistake by giving the order for the poison gas use". The Iranian senior official assured his HizbAllah counterpart that there was no change to Assad's "long-standing steadfast policy of not using these [chemical] weapons".

One of the main reasons for Washington's accusatory finger at the Syrian military was the assertion that the chemical attack took place in the context of a Syrian military effort to recapture this part of the Damascus area. Having met stiff resistance and under immense pressure to decide the battle swiftly, Washington's explanation goes, the Syrian military used chemical weapons in order to break the opposition.

However, the Syrian Armed Forces have a long history of training by the Soviet Armed Forces and access to Soviet-era weaponry, both chemical agents and means of dispersal. Among these are huge quantities of the vastly more lethal VX and grenade-size aerosols optimized for dense urban environment. Syrian commando was supplied with, and trained on, these systems starting the late-1970s when preparing to fight the jihadist insurrection in some of Syria's main cities. Hence, had the Syrian military wanted to clear the said areas with the use of chemical weapons, they would have used VX in aerosols with greater efficiency and lethality. And why not use the same VX-filled aerosols in other key urban battle-fronts like Aleppo or Homs to expedite victory? Why use "kitchen sarin" and wide-area-effect munitions that will only hinder military advance into contaminated areas?

Hence, what is the basis for the Obama Administration's confidence that "Assad did it" to the point of threatening military action which in all likelihood would evolve into US involvement in Syria's bloody civil war? The most honest answer was provided on September 8, 2013, by White House Chief of Staff Denis McDonough on CNN's State of the Union program. McDonough asserted it was "common sense" that the Syrian Government carried out the chemical attack, and provided no further evidence to back his statement. Nobody pressed McDonough on this point.

The US has long taken sides in the Syrian civil war and all the regional wars and strife integrated into it.

The US placed itself as the self-anointed manager and arbiter of the outcome of this fateful dynamic. Nobody in the region believes the Obama White House's assurances about a limited strike with no intent of "regime change". After all this was the exact assurances given by the Obama Administration on the eve of the UNSC's vote on Libya solely in order to convince Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC) to abstain and let the resolution pass (which they did). Now, should the US strike Syria, alone or at the head of a makeshift coalition, the US would have crossed the threshold of active participation and leadership. Pressure would mount on the US to complete the job: to invade and get involved directly in the fighting, to secure the strategic weapon arsenals (which will take 75,000-100,000 troops by the Pentagon's latest estimates), and to overthrow Assad and empower what Bandar

calls “moderate” Islamists.

Arab leaders and their Islamist protégés are now convinced that only the US can, and should, defeat the Assad Administration and empower the Islamists for them. Should the US shirk or dither, there would be more and worse provocations, and more innocent Syrians would die in the hands of their brethren and saviors until the US delivered Damascus to the Islamists-jihadists and their sponsors.

After the catastrophe that Libya is today, does Washington really want to try again in Syria?

Wouldn't confronting reality and the Islamists-jihadists be a more expedient (and honest) way of doing things?

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