

The Red Line and the Rat Line. Seymour Hersh on Obama, Erdoğan and the Syrian Rebels

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First published in April 2014, this article by Seymour Hersh is of relevance to an understanding of the evolving situation in Syria

In 2011 Barack Obama led an allied military intervention in Libya without consulting the US Congress. Last August, after the sarin attack on the Damascus suburb of Ghouta, he was ready to launch an allied air strike, this time to punish the Syrian government for allegedly crossing the 'red line' he had set in 2012 on the use of chemical weapons. Then with less than two days to go before the planned strike, he announced that he would seek congressional approval for the intervention. The strike was postponed as Congress prepared for hearings, and subsequently cancelled when Obama accepted Assad's offer to relinquish his chemical arsenal in a deal brokered by Russia. Why did Obama delay and then relent on Syria when he was not shy about rushing into Libya? The answer lies in a clash between those in the administration who were committed to enforcing the red line, and military leaders who thought that going to war was both unjustified and potentially disastrous.

Obama's change of mind had its origins at Porton Down, the defence laboratory in Wiltshire. British intelligence had obtained a sample of the sarin used in the 21 August attack and analysis demonstrated that the gas used didn't match the batches known to exist in the Syrian army's chemical weapons arsenal. The message that the case against Syria wouldn't hold up was quickly relayed to the US joint chiefs of staff. The British report heightened doubts inside the Pentagon; the joint chiefs were already preparing to warn Obama that his plans for a far-reaching bomb and missile attack on Syria's infrastructure could lead to a wider war in the Middle East. As a consequence the American officers delivered a last-minute caution to the president, which, in their view, eventually led to his cancelling the attack.

For months there had been acute concern among senior military leaders and the intelligence community about the role in the war of Syria's neighbours, especially Turkey. Prime Minister Recep Erdoğan was known to be supporting the al-Nusra Front, a jihadist faction among the rebel opposition, as well as other Islamist rebel groups. 'We knew there were some in the Turkish government,' a former senior US intelligence official, who has access to current intelligence, told me, 'who believed they could get Assad's nuts in a vice by dabbling with a sarin attack inside Syria - and forcing Obama to make good on his red line threat.'

The joint chiefs also knew that the Obama administration's public claims that only the Syrian army had access to sarin were wrong. The American and British intelligence communities

had been aware since the spring of 2013 that some rebel units in Syria were developing chemical weapons. On 20 June analysts for the US Defense Intelligence Agency issued a highly classified five-page 'talking points' briefing for the DIA's deputy director, David Shedd, which stated that al-Nusra maintained a sarin production cell: its programme, the paper said, was 'the most advanced sarin plot since al-Qaida's pre-9/11 effort'. (According to a Defense Department consultant, US intelligence has long known that al-Qaida experimented with chemical weapons, and has a video of one of its gas experiments with dogs.) The DIA paper went on: 'Previous IC [intelligence community] focus had been almost entirely on Syrian CW [chemical weapons] stockpiles; now we see ANF attempting to make its own CW ... Al-Nusrah Front's relative freedom of operation within Syria leads us to assess the group's CW aspirations will be difficult to disrupt in the future.' The paper drew on classified intelligence from numerous agencies: 'Turkey and Saudi-based chemical facilitators,' it said, 'were attempting to obtain sarin precursors in bulk, tens of kilograms, likely for the anticipated large scale production effort in Syria.' (Asked about the DIA paper, a spokesperson for the director of national intelligence said: 'No such paper was ever requested or produced by intelligence community analysts.')

Last May, more than ten members of the al-Nusra Front were arrested in southern Turkey with what local police told the press were two kilograms of sarin. In a 130-page indictment the group was accused of attempting to purchase fuses, piping for the construction of mortars, and chemical precursors for sarin. Five of those arrested were freed after a brief detention. The others, including the ringleader, Haytham Qassab, for whom the prosecutor requested a prison sentence of 25 years, were released pending trial. In the meantime the Turkish press has been rife with speculation that the Erdoğan administration has been covering up the extent of its involvement with the rebels. In a news conference last summer, Aydin Sezgin, Turkey's ambassador to Moscow, dismissed the arrests and claimed to reporters that the recovered 'sarin' was merely 'anti-freeze'.

The DIA paper took the arrests as evidence that al-Nusra was expanding its access to chemical weapons. It said Qassab had 'self-identified' as a member of al-Nusra, and that he was directly connected to Abd-al-Ghani, the 'ANF emir for military manufacturing'. Qassab and his associate Khalid Ousta worked with Halit Unalkaya, an employee of a Turkish firm called Zirve Export, who provided 'price quotes for bulk quantities of sarin precursors'. Abd-al-Ghani's plan was for two associates to 'perfect a process for making sarin, then go to Syria to train others to begin large scale production at an unidentified lab in Syria'. The DIA paper said that one of his operatives had purchased a precursor on the 'Baghdad chemical market', which 'has supported at least seven CW efforts since 2004'.

A series of chemical weapon attacks in March and April 2013 was investigated over the next few months by a special UN mission to Syria. A person with close knowledge of the UN's activity in Syria told me that there was evidence linking the Syrian opposition to the first gas attack, on 19 March in Khan Al-Assal, a village near Aleppo. In its final report in December, the mission said that at least 19 civilians and one Syrian soldier were among the fatalities, along with scores of injured. It had no mandate to assign responsibility for the attack, but the person with knowledge of the UN's activities said: 'Investigators interviewed the people who were there, including the doctors who treated the victims. It was clear that the rebels used the gas. It did not come out in public because no one wanted to know.'

In the months before the attacks began, a former senior Defense Department official told

me, the DIA was circulating a daily classified report known as SYRUP on all intelligence related to the Syrian conflict, including material on chemical weapons. But in the spring, distribution of the part of the report concerning chemical weapons was severely curtailed on the orders of Denis McDonough, the White House chief of staff. 'Something was in there that triggered a shit fit by McDonough,' the former Defense Department official said. 'One day it was a huge deal, and then, after the March and April sarin attacks' - he snapped his fingers - 'it's no longer there.' The decision to restrict distribution was made as the joint chiefs ordered intensive contingency planning for a possible ground invasion of Syria whose primary objective would be the elimination of chemical weapons.

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