

Top Chemical Weapons Expert Says We Don't Know Who - Or Even What - Caused Syrian Deaths

By [Washington's Blog](#)

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Western Samples Were Selectively Chosen Without a Verifiable Chain of Custody ... We Must Wait for UN Report Before Reaching Any Conclusions

Jean Pascal Zanders is widely acknowledged as one of the world's top chemical weapons experts, having been quoted in the last two weeks about Syrian chemical weapons by [McClatchy](#), [Time](#), the [Los Angeles Times](#), [Post-Gazette](#), [Huffington Post](#), [Der Spiegel](#), [Agence France-Presse](#), [Global Post](#), the [Telegraph](#), and many other publications.

We interviewed Zanders by phone.

Q: You were quoted in the Huffington Post on August 30th as saying that the Youtube videos cited by the American government were not conclusive, as you couldn't tell where or when the videos were taken ... or even whether they were from the same incident or different incidences.

Do you still hold that view, or have you seen other videos that change your mind?

Zanders: No, I have not changed my mind. The general observation still stands, and it *will* stand until we have the actual report from the U.N. investigation.

I do not deny that a chemical with toxic chemicals has taken place. But I am just as concerned about how people are interpreting things in terms of a particular goal ... which in this case is military intervention.

Living in a democracy we have the rule of law, and we collect and analyze a variety of evidence collected at certain scenes before passing any kind of final judgment.

One of the concerns I have is if we look over the periods starting in March 19th with the major allegation of chemical weapons use near Aleppo, Syria, everything is being *reinterpreted* as sarin.

When I look at video images that have been going around, what I see is a large number of people suffering from asphyxia, but only a *minority* (if the photos are representative of the total picture) display symptoms that would correspond to exposures to neurotoxicants.

John Kerry used the term "signatures of sarin". But signatures of sarin are things one can have from other organophosphorus compounds.

Q: You're talking about the fact that pesticides or other nerve agents can give "false

positives” for sarin? [[Background](#)]

Zanders: Yes, but not just that.

Somebody could have been – and this is purely hypothetical – exposed to an organophosphorus compound neurotoxicant which is produced in large volumes in industry. For example, for agricultural purposes.

On the low end of the spectrum, we have insecticide sprays which we can buy in the supermarkets. On the middle of the spectrum, we have organophosphorus compounds which are intermediaries of other products, or that are used in agriculture for pest and rodent control. I know specifically that the use of such compounds for pest and rodent control is common in the Middle East.

So, if someone were exposed to that in the right volume, there would be clear signatures of neurotoxicant exposure.

So it’s not just a question of false signatures in the sense of chemical tests giving a false positive, but also physiological symptoms that someone might show due to exposure to these commonly-used chemicals.

[The area where the chemical incident occurred was in a heavily-contested battle zone and had been heavily bombed. So that could have released industrial or agricultural chemicals.]

Q: Do you have any knowledge about whether the chain of custody of alleged U.S. tests which Kerry talked about are proper?

Zanders: No, and that’s part of my criticism that Western governments have overstated their case.

We do not know where the samples come from. And we do not know how representative they are for a certain area.

Certain samples could have been *selectively* given to Western sources for analysis. Assume that you do not know where a sample comes from ... your whole chain of custody is compromised.

That’s why UN inspectors can only use samples they have collected themselves.

There was an article in the Wall Street Journal a couple of days ago saying that Prince Bandar got one alleged victim of chemical warfare out of the country, sent him to the UK, and that person is the basis of which the British made their claims about Syrian chemical weapons use. [[Article.](#)]

That goes to a *single* person. This is quite remarkable, if true.

Q: What other indications weaken the American, British and French argument that the Syrian government carried out a chemical weapons attack?

Zanders: The extreme focus on sarin – as if *only* government forces would be able to have sarin – doesn’t make sense. If the UN team were to come up with evidence that toxic chemicals *other* than sarin were used, does that prove that it was *not* the Syrian

government which is responsible?

I personally don't think that we have all the facts in right now to be absolutely certain. And I think this is reflected in the U.S. document with the terminology "high confidence" and David Cameron saying it's his "judgment" or the government's "judgment", which reflects an *interpretation* of the facts.

In the U.S. document, there is not a single reference to physiological samples.

Postscript: Zanders says we must wait for the results from the U.N. weapons inspection before reaching any conclusions. [[Background.](#)]

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