

UK Intelligence Spun 2013 Syria Chemical Attack, Leaked Docs Show

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US officials suppressed internal assessments that Al Qaeda's Syrian wing had an "advanced" sarin production cell even as the US publicly blamed the Assad government for a 2013 chemical weapons attack, a report reveals.

Leaked documents obtained by The Grayzone show a shadowy British intelligence contractor helped sell the story that Assad was responsible - and nearly triggered Western intervention.

On September 13, Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist Seymour Hersh [published](#) a US Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) [appraisal](#) detailing the chemical weapons arsenal possessed by the Al Qaeda-aligned Syrian armed opposition group known as Jabhat al-Nusra.

The document claims the terror group acquired the ability to produce sarin through Saudi Arabia and Turkey, both sponsors of the Syrian proxy war, and was attempting to achieve "large scale production" of the highly toxic nerve agent. The memo lamented that al-Nusra's "relative freedom of operation" in the country meant its "[chemical weapons] aspirations will be difficult to disrupt in the future."

The disclosures raise serious questions about the infamous 2013 chemical weapons attack in Ghouta, including whether the estimated [280](#) to [1700](#) people killed were in fact massacred by al-Nusra, and not Syrian loyalist forces. The revelations also cast significant doubt on claims that the government of Bashar Al-Assad was responsible for other alleged chemical attacks during the Syrian crisis.

As Hersh notes, the incident in Ghouta nearly triggered Western military intervention in Syria, which likely would have resembled the NATO operation which led to the destruction of Libya two years earlier. It would've been a war based on deceit comparable to the false

claims that precipitated the illegal US invasion of Iraq in 2003.

The role of British intelligence in attempting to escalate the conflict has been overlooked to this point. Now, never-before-seen official documents obtained by The Grayzone illustrate the crucial role UK intelligence played in the failed push to launch a NATO invasion of Syria.

‘High Confidence’ Intelligence Assessment Fails

While the Obama White House [claimed to possess](#) incontrovertible proof that the Syrian government was responsible for the attack in Ghouta, it stubbornly refused to disclose any. By contrast, [communications intercepted](#) by German spies suggested Assad neither ordered nor had any knowledge of the attack. Meanwhile, “multiple” US officials [told AP](#) that intelligence implicating Syrian forces was “not a slam dunk.”

The choice of wording was widely understood to be a deliberate reference to then-CIA Director George Tenet’s [insistence](#) that intelligence showed Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction in 2002. Apparently, American spies did not want to be blamed for triggering an invasion on false pretenses this time around.

The DIA’s internal assessment explicitly states that Al-Nusra maintained sarin production facilities, describing the “al-Nusrah Front associated sarin production cell” as “the most advanced sarin plot since al-Qaida’s pre 9/11 effort.”

According to Hersh, the report in question never reached the White House. An anonymous senior intelligence official reportedly told the journalist that in the name of “political expediency,” evidence implicating al-Nusra was deliberately withheld from President Obama, who repeatedly insisted that no such proof existed:

“We do not believe that, given the delivery systems, using rockets, that the opposition could have carried out these attacks. We have concluded that the Syrian government in fact carried these out.”

Intelligence officials in Britain struck a similar tone. On August 27 2013, London’s Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) [published an assessment](#) on Ghouta which maintained that there are “no plausible alternative scenarios” to the idea that Syrian government forces were responsible for the incident.

The assessment offered no evidence to support the charge, citing only unspecified “highly sensitive” intelligence. While the group acknowledged that a number of opposition groups were seeking chemical weapons, it insisted that “none currently has the capability to conduct [an] attack on this scale,” and that there was “no credible intelligence or other evidence to substantiate” claims that opposition groups possessed chemical weapons. But the newly-released DIA documents completely contradict that assertion.

Even less impressively, the JIC admitted that its “high confidence” in its assessment did not extend to “the regime’s precise motivation for carrying out an attack of this scale at this time.” It acknowledged the key question of why the Syrian government would conduct a chemical strike “remains a puzzle.” There was “no obvious political or military trigger” for the action, and the presence of UN weapons inspectors in Damascus when the attack took place was a clear deterrent, as was Obama making such strikes a “red line.”

One area of certainty for the JIC was the “extensive video footage attributed to the attack in

eastern Damascus,” depicting vast numbers of victims suffering from the apparent effects of “a nerve agent, such as sarin.” The Committee assessed this “would be very difficult to falsify,” which lends credence to [independent investigations](#) that attribute the bodies seen in the footage to a massacre carried out by al-Nusra.

Somewhat surprisingly — given all the pro-intervention tubthumping in which it would engage over the next decade — The Guardian newspaper published a [highly skeptical analysis](#) at the time which slammed the JIC assessment for its “striking lack of any scientific evidence.” The publication quoted chemical weapons expert Alastair Hay, who received the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons’ Hague Award in 2015, as saying: “there are no hard facts, it is more a case of ‘believe us and our experts.’”

British lawmakers were similarly unconvinced. During an August 29 vote on military intervention, then-Prime Minister David Cameron [repeatedly cited](#) the Committee’s assessment while arguing for bombing Syria. But members of Parliament ultimately voted against the proposed war. Many MPs were concerned about trusting opaque intelligence assessments after the Iraq debacle, and several expressed fears that an initial aerial attack would ultimately lead to boots on the ground and occupation.

London’s decision to buckle on intervention also took the prospect off the table for Washington as well. By that point, MI6 had been [conducting operations](#) to smuggle soil samples out of Syria for some time. A [mainstream media report](#) on these efforts published six days after the Ghouta incident quoted an anonymous “senior Western source” who made clear the objective was to generate pressure for a US intervention:

“MI6 played the leading role but the American military wants more evidence before it agrees Assad has crossed the line in the use of chemical weapons. The question is what is the West going to do now? If nobody reacts, there was not much point in conducting the tests.”

As The Grayzone has revealed, British intelligence assets were [intimately involved](#) in either staging or marketing virtually every alleged chemical weapons attack in Syria throughout the conflict. The British skullduggery only intensified after Ghouta, as did the CIA’s notorious Operation Timber Sycamore, which saw Langley spend roughly \$1 billion per year to arm and train anti-Assad insurgents. And as the CIA prosecuted its dirty war against Damascus, MI6 played a critically supportive role.

British Intel Operatives Puppeteer Syria’s Opposition

A sizable international coalition was banking on British parliamentarians greenlighting intervention, believing it would open the floodgates for regime change, and Syria being overrun by foreign forces.

[John Jenkins](#), a veteran diplomat who served as London’s special representative to Libya following NATO’s violent ouster of Muammar Gaddafi during 2011 and later became the UK’s ambassador to Saudi Arabia, said there was [serious resentment](#) in Riyadh following Western governments’ failure to take the bait.

“I remember vividly the last week of August 2013, when Assad was going to be punished for stepping over that particular ‘red line,’” wrote Jenkins, who was “in Riyadh at the time and involved in seeking, on behalf of the British government, senior

engagement by the Saudis in an international response, which they were willing to give.”

“The sense of frustration when the UK and US stepped back was palpable,” he noted.

Leaked documents reviewed by The Grayzone show Western-backed extremists in Syria were also despondent. A late 2013 submission to the British Foreign Office by a firm called ARK International recorded how “the Syrian opposition leadership was ‘shocked’ by the UK’s ‘no’ vote on the principle of intervention.”

ARK was a government contractor founded by longtime MI6 operative Alistair Harris and staffed by military and intelligence veterans. Throughout the dirty war on Syria, it was an omnipresent player.

A cursory glance at ARK’s [website](#) reveals the group partners with CIA cut-out USAID, the US State Department, and the British military. The group bills itself as a “social enterprise empowering local communities” through “the provision of agile and sustainable interventions to create greater stability, opportunity and hope for the future.”

In the leaked documents, ARK expressed anxiety that anti-government militias would now be unwilling “to work with Western advisors,” given the “inaction over both the steady state conflict and inactivity following the August 2013 chemical weapons attack.” Since it had operated in Syria since the very first days of the crisis, ARK bragged that it could rely on a team of Arabs to “gain the trust and respect” of the Free Syrian Army anew, and counter perceptions among the opposition that its leaders were “being ‘told what to do’ by foreigners.”

ARK’s clandestine meddling in Syria was massive. The group raked in millions of pounds conducting psychological warfare operations funded by London, which aimed to destabilize the government of Bashar Assad by flooding media across the world with pro-opposition propaganda in an effort to convince Syrians, international bodies and Western citizens that militant groups rampaging across the country were a “moderate” alternative.

Leaked documents show that ARK was responsible for coordinating the Syrian National Coalition’s media office. One such file notes that ARK delivered explicit “media handling advice around the chemical weapons attacks in Ghouta” to the Western-backed parallel puppet government.

Another report describes the group’s work “[facilitating] contact between the Syrian opposition and international media...to address the perception of an uncoordinated opposition by fostering the image of a united front.” The “united condemnation” of Ghouta was specifically cited as an example of their efforts.

ARK Spreads Strategy of Chemical Attack Tension

One particularly striking document explains that ARK was employed in 2013 by the British and US governments to deliver “a public safety messaging campaign,” warning residents of opposition-occupied territory about the dangers of unexploded ordnance “and other “remnants of war.” Graffiti stencils and an educational age-relevant activity booklet” targeted at children aged 6 – 10 were employed to produce a “cognitive effect” in select audiences, the document notes.

The campaign's implementation was "accelerated after the chemical weapons attack in Ghouta... to ensure the message had been disseminated before any international intervention," the file reveals. This indicated the effort was conducted in expectation of a Western military assault that seemed inevitable later that year.

Even after the intervention failed to materialize, pro-opposition content was still circulated throughout Syria by ARK's "extensive in-country network, which included stringers, media activists," and members of the White Helmets, or Syrian Civil Defence — which the company also claimed credit for creating.

ARK clearly knew its propaganda had significant real-world impacts, documents show. In submissions to the Foreign Office, the group boasted of how a documentary "on the indefatigable spirit of a struggling female protestor" it produced for broadcast for the Gulf monarchy-owned outlets Al Arabiya, Al Jazeera, and Orient TV led to "the eruption of anti-regime protests" in Idlib, where "protestors chanted her name."

The British intelligence contractor also produced documentaries promoting the White Helmets, such as "Digging for Life", which racked up hundreds of thousands of YouTube views. The White Helmets were also marketed as heroes to Syrian youth.

In a four-minute cartoon entitled "[Goal to Syria](#)," the group can be seen rescuing a child trapped in rubble. At one stage, an adult character barks: "first they bombed us with chemicals, and now barrel bombs!" ARK was conspicuously keen to promote the risk of these attacks in occupied territory, both on and offline. In one file, the group bragged that a "chemical weapons information poster" which it circulated on Twitter "reached a primary audience of 700,000."

These efforts were ostensibly intended to "educate people about the best ways to respond to chemical weapons attacks." This supposed educational campaign of course demonized the Assad government among captive populations in Syria, and created a perpetual sense of threat, which could be exploited to create hysteria for propaganda purposes, as the response to the April 2018 Douma incident amply underlined.

A suppressed [OPCW investigation](#) of the alleged chlorine attack in Douma reveals that when residents suffering from dust inhalation due to government shelling of the city were taken to a local medical facility, a nameless individual "not from the hospital" burst in shouting "Chemical! Chemical!" Immediately, "panic ensued", with patients being undressed, washed, and given "inappropriate treatment" based on the individual's false warnings.

Strikingly, the report revealed that "some medical staff who were interviewed only heard about the alleged chemical attack from videos circulating on the internet or from other people, a couple of days after the alleged attack."

"Most of the medical staff...emphasized that the symptoms of the casualties were not consistent with those expected from a chemical attack," the censored report revealed. "They also reported not having [treated] casualties of chemical weapons and some witnesses mentioned not being aware of any chemical attacks in Douma or Syria."

A 2018 New York Times [article](#) indicates such scaremongering was not restricted to the hospital in Douma. Per the outlet, once government forces attacked, "people started shouting in the streets, 'Chemicals! Chemicals!'"

The ensuing panic would no doubt be of assistance to opposition elements seeking to stage a chemical weapons attack in the city, which the OPCW's suppressed investigation into the incident suggests is precisely what happened.

Syrian Proxy War Bleeds Into Ukraine

A particularly remarkable passage in a leaked 2015 Foreign Office document establishes explicit terms of a secret operation to fund anti-Assad "grassroots media activism" by opposition figures "who share the UK's vision for a future Syria."

"Getting rid of Assad's chemical weapons" was initially one of London's key "priorities" following the conflict's outbreak, the file reveals, although the issue had been "largely been resolved since the priorities were set."

Under strict OPCW and UN supervision, all Syria's declared chemical weapons were [surrendered and destroyed](#) in 2014. The excerpt is supremely striking because it demonstrates that privately, London knew at the highest levels this objective had been legitimately completed, and there was no threat of government chemical weapon use. But in public, British officials continued [voicing grave doubts](#) that Assad had indeed handed over the country's entire arsenal.

The contradiction could be explained by the fact that chemical weapons attacks in Syria continued apace after [August 2014](#), when the OPCW determined all Syria's chemical weapons stocks had either been deactivated beyond use, or [removed from the country](#) by international monitors. As such, it was necessary to concoct a cover story for how these strikes kept happening — and why the opposition was not responsible.

The skepticism from within Western halls of power about the Syrian opposition's narrative on Ghouta was a phenomenon which would never be repeated again during the Syrian crisis. Following every purported chemical weapons attack in the country thereafter, Assad's forces were reflexively blamed, and those who cast doubt on the culpability of Damascus were viciously smeared as conspiracy theorists, war crimes deniers, or worse.

Following the April 2018 Douma incident, Sky News [prematurely terminated](#) an interview with senior British Army veteran Jonathan Shaw as soon as he questioned whether the Syrian Arab Army was responsible. After making the obvious observation that there was no motivation whatsoever for government forces to launch a chemical attack in the city, given they were "winning" with conventional weapons, Shaw's mic was cut and the host awkwardly segued to the next segment.

The credulity of mainstream journalists during the Ukraine proxy war has somehow exceeded their woeful record during the Syrian crisis. Nonsensical claims of Russian responsibility for events like the sabotage of the Nord Stream II pipeline and the destruction of the Kakhovka dam have received uncritical amplification. And when the official story collapses, the attacks conveniently tumble down the memory hole.

It is anyone's guess what Western governments and spies are suppressing this time around. But as the leaked UK files on Syria show, there is always more to the story than they are willing to reveal.

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