

# War Propaganda: As With Iraq, U.S. Media Disseminates Lies and Fabrications on Syria's WMDs

The Role of the New York Times

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Region: [USA](#)

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A [headline](#) in the New York Times (September 7, 2013) stated as fact that “With the World Watching, Syria Amassed Nerve Gas”. The lead paragraph asserted that “Syria’s top leaders amassed one of the world’s largest stockpiles of chemical weapons with help from the Soviet Union and Iran, as well as Western European suppliers and even a handful of American companies, according to American diplomatic cables and declassified intelligence records.”

But as with its propagandistic reporting about Saddam Hussein’s possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in the run-up to the Iraq war, the Times provided no evidence to support its claim, and an examination of publicly available documents the Times cited for this story illustrates how the newspaper is demonstrably lying.

After asserting as fact that the documents show that Syria “amassed one of the world’s largest stockpiles of chemical weapons”, the Times stated that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his father before him, “were greatly helped in their chemical weapons ambitions by a basic underlying fact: often innocuous, legally exportable materials are also the precursors to manufacturing deadly chemical weapons.”

To support its claim that “innocuous, legally exportable materials” were used by Syria to manufacture chemical weapons, the Times cited a 2009 State Department cable released by WikiLeaks in 2010. The cable, the Times stated, “instructed diplomats to ‘emphasize that failure to halt the flow’ of chemicals and equipment into Syria, Iran and North Korea could render irrelevant a group of antiproliferation countries that organized to stop that flow.”

But on its face, this only indicates that Syria imported materials considered “dual-use”, meaning that it could have both civilian and military applications. It does not constitute evidence that Syria actually used such “chemicals and equipment” to manufacture chemical weapons.

The cable [states](#) that “Syria, Iran and North Korea have continued to acquire goods useful to their chemical and/or biological weapons programs”, but offers no evidence that dual-use materials it acquired were used for that purpose.

The Times report continued: “Another leaked State Department cable on the Syrians asserted that ‘part of their modus operandi is to hide procurement under the guise of legitimate pharmaceutical or other transactions.’”

Once again, no evidence from the cable is offered that materials that admittedly have “legitimate pharmaceutical” uses were actually used to manufacture chemical weapons.

The sentence just prior to the one quoted by the Times [in the cable](#) stated, “We remain extremely concerned that Iran and Syria are using companies in the UAE to evade U.S. trade prohibitions as well as the export control regulations of other countries to acquire chemical and biological warfare (CBW)-useful equipment and technology.”

The cable itself, however, reveals that there was no knowledge that such materials were actually directed towards any military program. The State Department, it noted, did “not have additional information” that materials that could be “useful” for manufacturing chemical or biological weapons were actually used for that purpose.

The Times nevertheless continued to falsely assert that “The diplomatic cables and other intelligence documents show that, over time, the two generations of Assads built up a huge stockpile by creating companies with the appearance of legitimacy, importing chemicals that had many legitimate uses”.

As already illustrated, the claim that the cables released by WikiLeaks “show” that Syria “built up a huge stockpile” of chemical weapons is an outright lie.

The Times then turned to one of the “intelligence documents” it cited as proof, stating that “As early as 1991, under the first Bush presidency, a now declassified National Intelligence Estimate concluded that ‘both Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union provided the chemical agents, delivery systems and training that flowed to Syria.’”

But that quote does not date to a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) from 1991, but rather from 30 years ago. The NIE from which it originated, titled “Implications of Soviet Use of Chemical and Toxin Weapons for U.S. Security Interests”, was issued on September 15, 1983 and [stated](#) that Syria “probably has the most advanced chemical warfare capability in the Arab world, with the possible exception of Egypt” (p. 11).

What was deemed “probably” true three decades ago may or may not be true today, and it is useful to point out that the U.S. has backed the military dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak, who took power in 1981, with [billions in military “aid”](#). Egypt has been second only to Israel as the largest recipient of U.S. foreign assistance since the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, which provided for this money to flow from the American taxpayers to the regime in Egypt.

By 1983, it had also become evident that Iraq was using chemical weapons in its war with Iran, but the U.S. nevertheless removed the country from its list of state sponsors of terrorism in order to step up support for its war effort. In December of that year, President Ronald Reagan dispatched Donald Rumsfeld, who was later Secretary of Defense under the Bush administration, for a second time to Iraq to reassure Saddam Hussein that [the U.S. would continue to back him](#) despite his use of chemical weapons.

The 1983 NIE also noted that with its foreign suppliers, “there is no need for Syria to develop an indigenous capability to produce CW agents or material, and none has been identified.” The purpose of that Cold War-era NIE was to build the case that the Soviet Union was violating the 1975 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention.

The rest of the Times article similarly provided no substantiation for the headline's claim. It cited again "precursor ingredients that can also be used for medicine", with no supporting evidence that such ingredients were used for anything other than civilian applications.

Perhaps the most egregious example of manipulation with the attempt to deceive the public came towards the end of the article, where the Times quoted from a March 2006 State Department cable: "'Syrian businessmen regularly report on the ease with which their fellow businessmen illegally import U.S. commodities with seeming impunity, as well as express concerns that the USG's [United States Government's] lack of enforcement of the economic sanctions' are 'hurting those that choose to play by the rules.'"

"Those transactions presumably included chemicals that could be precursors for chemical warfare", the Times added.

Yet the "commodities" described [in that cable](#) were mostly related to legitimate civilian uses—particularly for use in hospitals.

The cable relayed the "constant refrain heard from the business community" in Syria that U.S. sanctions were "ineffective" and did not impact the Syrian government, "but rather are most directly impacting legitimate business transactions."

Among the "commodities" mentioned are "x-ray tubes, personal computers, defibrillators, and consumable supplies".

"One source told us", the cable states, providing an example of how sanctions are bypassed, "that he can easily purchase U.S. commodities, specifically medical spare parts, from the Internet and have them shipped to Syria through a third country."

The cable does note that some of the materials imported are "dual-use"; for example, "a Varian linear accelerator" tendered for a military hospital—a device used for the [treatment of cancer](#).

Other items mentioned include "two MRI systems, at least one of which would be used by a military hospital in Aleppo."

The cable discusses how the U.S. sanctions regime harms businesses seeking to import such items legally because their competitors are able to do so at a lower cost by obtaining them through other channels. It cites one example where a "competitor was able to offer the products at a substantially cheaper price because he did not invest the necessary time and money into pursuing an export license."

In another example of a "dual-use" item, the cable mentions the importation of "a consumable product, potassium cyanide, shipped to a public pediatric hospital in October 2003." The cable states that the regulatory agency intended to verify the end use of imported materials "was unable to verify that it had been used legitimately"—which is also to say that neither was there any evidence that the potassium cyanide was redirected for the purpose of manufacturing chemical weapons.

The cable adds that the supplier in this case also sold potassium cyanide "to other end-users not permitted in his export license", with no further indication as to who the end users were or for what purpose it was acquired.

And once again, contrary to the Times' willful lie that cables such as this one prove Syria manufactured and stockpiled chemical weapons, the cable itself implicitly acknowledges the lack of evidence for this claim, noting that the a "trained" team of "criminal investigators" in the Bureau of Industry and Security, operating under the U.S. Department of Commerce, "have not traveled to Syria to assess whether the end-use of allowable commodities is legitimate, evaluate whether commodities have been diverted to other end-users, or collect evidence of potential sanctions violations."

The cable closes by urging that the investigative team be dispatched to "follow-up on some of the anecdotal evidence that we have received" of sanctions violations.

"The Americans were not the only ones concerned", the Times report continued. "According to another leaked cable, the Netherlands discussed how monoethylene glycol, an important raw material used to manufacture urethane and antifreeze, was shipped by a Dutch concern to the Syrian Ministry of Industry, considered a front for the Syrian military. The Dutch outlined how the chemical could also be used as a precursor for sulfur mustard, and possibly for VX and sarin."

Yet again we see how the Times took a cable merely noting that Syria had acquired "dual-use" materials that could possibly be used to manufacture sarin gas, the chemical weapon the U.S. is alleging that the Assad regime used in a Damascus suburb last month as a pretext to launch military strikes against Syria, and dishonestly reported this in its headline and lead paragraph as proof that this was indeed the end use of the material.

This is the same kind of propagandistic reporting that the Times engaged in prior to the U.S. war on Iraq. Once again, it is evident that America's "newspaper of record" is serving as a mouthpiece for the U.S. government, not only uncritically parroting claims of government officials for which there is no evidence, but going out of its way to propagate its own deliberate lies in such a way as to manufacture consent for U.S. foreign policy.

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