

Was the Syria Chemical Weapons Probe “Torpedoed” by the West?

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Since the perplexing conflict in Syria first broke out two years ago, the Western powers' assistance to the anti-government side has been consistent, but relatively indirect. The Americans and Europeans lay the mental, legal, diplomatic, and financial groundwork for regime change in Syria. Meanwhile, Arab/Muslim allies in Turkey and the Persian Gulf are left with the heavy lifting of directly supporting Syrian rebels, and getting weapons and supplementary fighters in place.

The involvement of the United States in particular has been extremely lackluster, at least in comparison to its aggressive stance on a similar crisis in Libya not long ago. Hopes of securing major American and allied force, preferably a Libya-style “no-fly zone,” always leaned most on U.S. president Obama’s announcement of December 3, 2012, that any use of chemical weapons (CW) by the Assad regime – or perhaps their simple transfer – will cross a “red line.” And that, he implied, would trigger direct U.S. intervention. This was followed by vague allegations by the Syrian opposition – on December 6, 8, and 23 – of government CW attacks. [1] Nothing changed, and the allegations stopped for a while.

However, as the war entered its third year in mid-March, 2013, a slew of new allegations came flying in. This started with a March 19 attack on Khan Al-Assal, a contested western district of Aleppo, killing a reported 25-31 people. Dramatic imagery run by state news agency SANA and from a Reuters photographer showed people – including children – suffering breathing problems, some already deceased. The Syrian government and related sources were the first to report it, blaming “terrorists” as usual. In an equally predictable answer, rebels accused the Syrian military of launching the attack. [2]

Syria demanded an investigation into the event by the United Nations, and everyone else agreed. A team was assembled, but then in early April Syria blocked them, for reasons that come across as mysterious. Soon, the world was hearing unprecedented recognition that perhaps Obama’s “red line” had been crossed – not by “terrorists” but by the Assad regime – somewhere, at some times since December. The deadly nerve agent sarin is increasingly specified for reasons that aren’t entirely clear.

All this has kicked off a renewed drive for intervention based on intelligence assessments of WMD dangers, evoking widely-noted memories of the bogus U.S. case for war on Syria’s ally Iraq one decade ago. Although the latest developments cast doubt on the imminence of outright military involvement – yet again – the danger persists, and the purported reasons deserve scrutiny.

It's only been six weeks since this saga began, but they were weeks of the whirlwind sort. Considering where all the twirling has left us – horribly confused, if not on the brink of war – I offer this article towards unspinning the record to discover just what happened in that time.

Three Highlighted Chemical Weapons Allegations

At the start of the six weeks was the March 19 incident in Khan al-Assal, Aleppo and Syria's dramatic charges over it. But before considering that or the investigation saga, it might be useful to briefly outline the three reported attacks forced now into question, as they are confused. The investigation model now prevailing, first proposed by the British and French governments on March 21, involved three incidents singled out; Khan al-Assal and a same-day incident in the Damascus area, as well as another one in the city of Homs, on December 23, 2012. [3]

The opposition Local Coordination Committees (LCC), drawing on front-line fighters, reported the incident at Otaybah (Ateiba) near Damascus, in their daily summary of March 19. (interestingly, this mentions two CW incidents, while failing to mention the Aleppo incident. In its place they mentioned a possible gas attack in Baba Amr, Homs, which no one else has repeated since). [4] The LCC said "fierce shelling with chemical rockets targeted Ateibeh town today," causing "a large number" of people to suffer breathing problems, nausea, and "hysteria," as well as causing the death of some "martyrs." [4] The number of fatalities is not stated, here or anywhere easily found. Otaybah is reported to have been a rebel-held area, but very near Syrian military positions, adding plausibility to the report. Also of interest is that SANA and the Syrian government had nothing immediately to say on the incident there.

There would be further CW allegations in the east Damascus suburbs: Aadra March 24, Jobar April 6, and Otaybah again April 9, at least. All came with some evidence but slim details, and are sure to increase interest in investigating there. One or more of these sites would allegedly yield soil samples with possible traces of sarin gas (see below).

The December Homs Attack listed in the Anglo-French letter was talked about at the time, in many dramatic news reports. A handful of videos from a clinic in the Al-Bayada district show patients gasping horribly for breath. All victims seem to be rebel fighters in civilian dress. The death toll was said to be six, with as many as 100 people exposed. People took this charge seriously, but it was dismissed by mid-January as not a CW attack. [5] CNN reported then on a State Department investigation that found it was probably a riot-control gas used in the wrong concentration. Further, CNN hear that Turkey also looked into this case "but found the claims to be unsubstantiated." [6] The methodology was not explained, and the dismissal is not certain. Now the incident is back in the limelight, thought by the British and French to require urgent scrutiny.

Khan Al-Assal

But however important those other cases are, all this investigation drama began immediately after the well-documented incident in Aleppo. Little about the event is agreed on by both sides, but where the strike happened is one commonality. Khan al-Assal has been in rebel hands, but almost everyone agrees to consider it government-held by the 19th (aside from a rebel-occupied police academy). Channel 4's Alex Thomson heard that authorities only re-established full control two days before the attack (he also heard it was a predominately Shi'ite district.) [7] Rebels say the regime hit its own area either on accident,

or to make it look like rebels did it.

That Syrians were killed in moderate numbers is not contested. The early reports specified 25-26 fatalities, with some rebel estimates lower, and the government tally later adjusted to 31. In the images publicized, some victims are civilians, including women and children, and some are fighting age males in Syrian army uniforms. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), an opposition group but with a variety of sources, reported a "rocket" (no mention of gas) causing 26 fatalities – ten civilians, 16 soldiers. [8] SANA said the rocket hit "in a region populated by civilians," but only 300 meters from a Syrian Arab Army post. [9]

No one disputes the date. This itself is a clue, coming as it does after several events that invited a crossing of Obama's "red line." From March 15-18, the rebellion's second anniversary passed, the U.S. treasury freed citizens to finance Syria's opposition, NATO reminded everyone they were prepared for war, and a U.S. citizen from Texas was elected prime minister of the Syrian National Coalition. When Ghassan Hitto was chosen on March 18, the Syrian-American Council "said the decision should assuage the Obama administration's concerns about who would lead Syria should President Bashar al-Assad be deposed." [10] Why Damascus would decided to test Obama's chemical ultimatum on the morning of the 19th, of all times, is difficult to understand.

Further, the approximate time of that test is one more undisputed point: around 7:30-8:00 am by all accounts. But just about everything else is disagreed.

Various chemical agents have been suggested by rebels and their supporters, but sarin is not one of them; the later talk of that seems to surround soil from one of the Damascus area attacks. However, an industrial accident has been suggested, along with "super strength tear gas" and something with "traces of cyanide." Israeli DEBKA file heard from "Western military sources" an educated guess that chlorine, phosphorous, and a nerve agent (BZ or Agent 15) were used in "the Scud B rocket which exploded in the Aleppo neighborhood of Khan al-Assal." [11] Perhaps most intriguingly, the U.S.-based Syrian Support Group intriguingly cited "echothiophate" for both March 19 attacks, Damascus and Aleppo. [12] Widely used as a treatment for the eye ailment glaucoma, this could be a clue that president Bashar Al-Assad, a former eye doctor, personally made the poison choice.

Besides these, there seem to be no other concrete guesses as to what hit Khan al-Assal.

The way the gas was delivered comes across in opposition reports, vaguely, as something rebels don't have. At least two alleged witnesses cite fighter jets, one specifying that they missed their target by about 5 km. [13] The more widely accepted explanation is a surface-to-surface missile, probably a Scud. But this too has problems; CNN spoke to "a senior State Department official" who said there was no radar or satellite data to "indicate there was a launch of a missile at the time Syrians say the alleged attack occurred." [14] That's the same time rebels say an alleged Scud was launched, so whether he meant to or not, the official contradicted the rebel claim here.

In contrast, the government claims a smaller homemade rocket, armed with a chlorine and saline warhead, was fired on their forces. [7] Supporting the chemical claim, the first reports had noted that residents said they could smell chlorine in the area following the attack. [15] And consider that the launch of a smaller projectile like this should probably not show up in the data CNN referred to, meaning that clue (if it's even true) does not conflict with the

government version, the way it does the rebel one.

One issue working against the Damascus version is the two firing locations specified. First SANA reported the rocket came from Kafr Dael (Kafr Taal on Wikimapia, 13 km west of Khan al-Assal). [9] Later Alex Thomson heard that al-Bab, 47 km northeast, was the suspected origin. [7] While no more than one of those can be correct, either is entirely plausible. Rockets that could reach from al-Bab are rare, but one improvised model launched on video, near Damascus in February, was said by its handlers to have a range of 60 kilometers. [16] This, or some equivalent weapon, could work from either specified locale the following month.

As for the chlorine, it's known to be held by rebels in large amounts. [17] CNN's Aryn Baker related how the reported smell of the attack stood out to "the owner of Syria's only chlorine-gas manufacturing plant," Mohammad Sabbagh. He had fled to Lebanon, and spoke to Baker in Beirut. He says the plant, just east of Aleppo, was taken over by Jabhat al-Nusra (Al Qaeda in Syria) in August 2012. "There is no other factory in Syria that can make this gas, and now it is under opposition control," he says." He hears that the plant is not operating now, but Sabbagh "has no idea what has happened, if anything," to the one-ton tanks of chlorine gas, roughly 400 of which once stored there. Sabbagh is supported in his account by a head of the Aleppo Chamber of Industry. Passing through Beirut, he told Baker "we warned back then that chemical components were in the hands of terrorists, but no one listened." [18]

At play then are: plenty of chlorine, rockets with range, expertise obtainable to serious terrorist networks, and many basing areas within range of loyalist-held Khan al-Assal. Given all that, it's little comfort to hear as a denial, from opposition spokesman Louay Meqdad, "we have neither long-range missiles nor chemical weapons. And if we did, we wouldn't use them against a rebel target." [19] Syria, in contrast, swears if they had CW, they would never use them against their own people at all.

As we examine the battle over an investigation, it should be noted from the start that the case for a rebel attack in Aleppo is stronger and clearer than most realize. In fact it seems clearer by a healthy margin than the version rebels have so far offered. Yet that narrative and that attack in general have been effectively sidelined, in favor of whole other alleged attacks.

Conflicting Urgencies at the U.N.: The Battle Over Scope

Both initial versions of the gas attack on Khan Al-Assal, reported by the warring Syrian parties, came with moral denunciation of the perpetrators on the other side, and these were echoed by outside supporters along unsurprising lines. Russia's foreign ministry, for example, said

"the use of chemical weapons by the armed opposition ... (is) a new and extremely alarming and dangerous turn." They added "we are extremely, seriously concerned by the fact that weapons of mass destruction have gotten into militants' hands." [20]

The demand for an investigation began with Syria's government, the day after the attack. Their representative at the U.N., Dr. Bashar Al-Ja'afari, on the 20th requested the Secretary-General to form a "mission to investigate the use by the terrorist groups operating in Syria of chemical weapons yesterday against civilians." He specified that the effort should be

“technical” “independent,” and “neutral.” [21] Russia supported that, with deputy foreign minister Gennady Gatilov saying “we expect that the UN secretary general will promptly react to Syria’s request.” Iran backed the call, and continued pressing various nations and leaders, with little success, to condemn the attack as an opposition one. [22]

Western powers always publicly doubted rebels were behind the incident, but agreed it was worthy of investigation; every party was clear that they wanted the truth. Both sides agreed on using terms like “impartial” and “urgent” to describe their solutions, yet the best approach was consistently disagreed on.

Both Russia and Syria complained on the 20th, the same day Syria first asked for a probe, that the UK and France had blocked it, in a “stalling” measure. [21] The Western powers used the stall to explain, in a letter from France and the UK on the 21st, why the U.N. should instead “launch an urgent investigation into all allegations.” [23] In particular, they added the Otaybah attack, Reuters heard, “and one in Homs in December.” [24] On hearing a demand to investigate the Otaybah incident, representative al-Ja’afari said he’d never heard of it, proposing that it “was set up on purpose to torpedo the investigation on the real use of chemical weapons which took place in Aleppo.” [21] Russia’s U.N. envoy Vitaly Churkin voiced suspicion that “this was really a way to delay the need for immediate, urgent investigation of allegations pertaining to March 19 by raising all sorts of issues.” [21] This “unjustified step” of widening the probe, Russia’s foreign ministry warned (perhaps with some hyperbole) “wrecks the investigation of concrete information.” [25]

U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki Moon first seemed favorable to Syria’s position; he announced on March 21 that “I am of course aware that there are other allegations of similar cases involving the reported use of chemical weapons,” but the probe would focus on “the specific incident brought to my attention by the Syrian government.” [3] However, he announced on the 25th that it might be broadened, and asked for more information from everyone. [3]

Reuters was given letters between U.N. Disarmament director Angela Kane and Syria’s Ja’afari, discussing the investigation’s terms. In one, Kane said Aleppo would be the main focus, but “we must remain mindful of the other allegations that chemical weapons were used elsewhere in the country.” [26] It was apparently the U.N. end that leaked the conversation; an April 6 letter had Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moualem complaining to Secretary-General Ban that the leaks “left the impression of a lack of seriousness on the part of the (U.N.) secretariat on cooperation in good faith.” That too was shared with Reuters. [27]

Syria’s stern and narrow insistence on its initial request is clearly part of the impasse that resulted. Given the risks of war, it would seem unwise to refuse cooperation, and the exact reasons they didn’t are not widely or clearly understood. There is the pride issue, and other considerations, like signs of bad faith (leaking letters), and of deeper duplicity. For example, it was promised that the Khan al-Assal portion of the probe would be handled “initially” and/or “primarily.” But a Western diplomat told Reuters on March 27 that the U.N. team would be based in Beirut, Lebanon. [28] That’s clear across Syria from Aleppo, but quite near the sites around Damascus and Homs, which were the “primary” interests, it seems.

Rather than blocking the investigation they requested, Damascus held open the door to Khan Al-Assal this whole time. Foreign minister Moualem even modified the offer on April 6,

as a Reuters reported summed it up, “the inspectors should go first to Aleppo and if they are seen to be impartial, the possibility of visiting Homs could be discussed.” [27] The Jerusalem Post reported that “Western delegations” didn’t like this; they “said the Syrian response of April 6 was unacceptable and that the chemical weapons team must have assurances now that it can visit both Aleppo and Homs.” [29] (And also the Damascus area, presumably.)

Whatever suspicion about what would happen afterwards, one site could be agreed to by all and investigated without delay. As the U.S. representative to the U.N., Susan Rice, said on the 21st, as Aleppo seemed to be the priority: “the United States supports an investigation that pursues any and all credible allegations ... as swiftly as possible.” [30] But Secretary-General Ban re-affirmed in a public statement of April 9 that it could wait. He said:

“It is a matter of principle that when there is an allegation, whether it is one or two or multiple allegations, all these allegations should be investigated. Only then will we be sure that there was or there were uses of chemical weapons. Without that nobody can be sure.” [31]

He does not explain why investigators needed to know what happened at x number of other sites in order to know what happened in Aleppo. But without bending to that inexplicably holistic philosophy, and its growing list of interlocking allegations, Syria would get no U.N. investigation at all. Perhaps for dramatic effect, as Ban noted,

“an advance team was in Cyprus, ready to go to Syria within 24 hours. ... All we are waiting for is the go-ahead from the Syrian government ... to determine whether any chemicals weapons were used, in any location.” [32]

It was quite an impasse. Syria’s request, it could be argued, had been torpedoed.

Rejecting Regime Change Maneuvers

Besides the issue of which incidents to study, the Russian foreign ministry felt there was a shift from Syria’s request for help to increasingly invasive demands on the government. They stated that the shift came “under pressure from Western members of the (security) council,” and might represent “attempts to drag this issue out and turn an investigation under the aegis of the United Nations ... into an additional element of pressure for regime change.” [25]

Russia said that for geopolitical balance, all permanent five (P5) members of the Security Council (US, UK, France, Russia, China) should send experts for the probe. [24] Secretary-General Ban answered by banning scientists from all P5 members, as well as from other involved parties, like Gulf Arab states and Turkey. [33] Syria thought they should have a say in staffing the investigation, but the U.N.’s Ban reserved the right. [26] However, Ban decided the probe would instead be staffed by varied scientists from elsewhere, selected by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). [28]

As nice as that sounds, the OPCW’s director-general is Ahmet Üzümcü, a Turkish career diplomat with possibly compromising links to his belligerent nation. According to his Wikipedia entry, Üzümcü was previously Turkey’s consul in Aleppo, as well as ambassador in Israel and the permanent representative of Turkey to NATO. [34] This could hardly help Syria to feel anything other than threatened; the selected scientists would be, in effect, deciding if they could turn up justification for the US/NATO to openly join in the war against

Syria, waged most fiercely so far from Mr. Üzümcü's home nation.

From the outset, there were signs that the West and the U.N.'s leadership intended the requested investigation(s) to lead into Iraq-style inspections of Syria's closely-watched CW stockpiles. Ban Ki Moon insisted that the investigation would require "unfettered access" to locales not clearly defined, and cryptically noted

"It is my hope that the mission would contribute to ensuring the safety and security of chemical weapons stockpiles in Syria." [35]

He didn't specify how a narrow, blame-free, technical mission to investigate what happened in one or even three locations would help make Syria's alleged CW more secure. That it would become a sneak inspections regime in the Iraq vein, however, might explain that strange hope.

Syria's decision-makers can hardly have missed these further clues that this was the plan:

1) The investigation, staff, mandate, etc. was to be negotiated between Syria and, specifically, the U.N.'s office for Disarmament Affairs.

2) Swedish scientist Åke Sellström was put in charge. He had previously been a chief inspector for UNSCOM, the U.N. inspection team of the 1990s, and worked with UNMOVIC in 2002, which found no basis for the claims on which the war on Iraq was launched anyway. [3]

3) The "investigators" as originally tasked were increasingly referred to as "inspectors."

More important yet were signs of invasive intent. Ban specified, publicly even, that the U.N. would have to investigate "in any location." [32] Russia's foreign ministry announced on April 6, as a Reuters report summed up, that the U.N. "was seeking overly broad access for investigators to facilities and individuals (note: not crime scenes) in Syria and wanted to use aircraft for transportation. "This approach brings to mind the line taken over an investigation into the presence of chemical weapons in Iraq, which was based on deliberately false data and led to well-known consequences," it said, ... "We consider such actions unacceptable and inadmissible by any party and moreover by the leadership of the U.N. Secretariat."" [36]

While the full details remain unclear, Russia's accusations in this area remained dramatic and troubling. Foreign ministry spokesman Aleksandr Lukashevich told RT on April 27 that:

"The management of the UN Secretariat demanded that Damascus agree to the establishment of a permanent mechanism for inspection throughout Syrian territory with unlimited access to everywhere. ... The proposed scheme of inspections is similar to those used at the end of the last century in Iraq, which, unlike Syria, was under UN sanctions." [37]

Syria's information minister, Omran al-Zouabi, told RT that one of the goals of the investigation as configured "is to repeat Iraq's scenario, to pave the way for other investigation inspections. To provide, based on their results, maps, photos of rockets and other fabricated materials to the UN, which as we know, opened the way to the occupation of Iraq." [37]

It was just after all of this was established that access was explicitly denied. Just as Ban and the West made it most clear by April 8/9 that the inspection must be all-or-nothing, Damascus announced, essentially, that it would have to be nothing. Syria's foreign ministry on April 8th said Ban has "suggested a supplementary mission to deploy throughout Syrian territory" and placed "additional tasks" that would constitute a "violation of Syrian sovereignty." He did so, they said, under "pressure exercised by states known for their support for the shedding of Syrian blood," and which intended to kill the investigation. And so, they announced, "Syria cannot accept these maneuvers from the UN's Secretariat-General, taking into account the truth of the negative role it played in Iraq." [38]

Most Western media reports blame the impasse on Syria. They did in fact block the U.N. team's entry into Syria. However, as this article shows, there were several questionable actions (and alleged actions) by the other side determining what the "no" came in response to. And most reports cite the scope of attacks to investigate as the only dispute. But these inexplicably invasive aspects seems to be the straws that broke the camel's back, and were laid more quietly, right before the audible snap. Therefore, they deserve more scrutiny and explanation.

Consider this: if the government had been demanded to surrender and disband before any inspection, no one could blame them for refusing. That extreme example set one end of the scale on which Damascus' decision was made.

On one end is a design to force Syria to reject its own investigation in a way that can be easily blamed on them alone. On the other end is a regime so desperate to conceal its patterns of abuse that it blocked the most reasonable of demands. U.S. State Department spokesman Patrick Ventrell took this view, saying "if the regime has nothing to hide they should let the UN investigators in immediately so we can get to the bottom of this." After strongly suggesting they did have something to hide, Ventrell threatened that all options - including military ones - remained open. [39]

Sarin After the Failure: Confusion Yields to "Confidence"

To be clear, the investigation was not quite fatally sabotaged. In lieu of in-country investigation, the U.N. says Sellström's team was working on Cyprus, investigating what they could from there. Spokesman Martin Nesirky told a press briefing "you need to be able to go into Syria to be able to do that investigation properly on site, but in the meantime ... information is available without actually visiting Syria." [39] Hypothetically, this could still expand into something more substantial, but past events leave little room to suspect it will.

For more on-the-ground work, independent alleged investigations took over. British intelligence MI6 secured soil samples from Aleppo, the Sunday Times reported, and gave it to analysts at Porton Down military research institute. They dismissed the incident there as from "super strength tear gas," after looking at videos but before studying the dirt. [40] This cursory guess effectively played the incident down, while Syria was pursuing an investigation. After the 8th, the mood of the science changed. The Times of Israel reported on the 13th that other soil MI6 collected, from "a neighborhood on the outskirts of Damascus," shows signs of "some kind of chemical weapon." The scientists wouldn't say which, but specified "it can't definitively be said to be Sarin nerve agent," suggesting perhaps that it was. [41] Perhaps based on this, Britain and France wrote separately to the UN on or before April 18, more sure than ever that the Syrians were using chemical weapons, repeatedly, since December. [42]

Rebels have offered help quite publicly, with Free Syrian Army spokesman Louay Mekdad, offering to collect “testimony” and physical samples. [43] The Americans might be trying get their own samples in the more clandestine manner of MI6, according to rebel commander “Majid,” from the eastern Damascus suburbs where four recent CW attacks have been reported. He told the New York Times that the CIA wanted him to collect soil samples there, but he was actually in Jordan, and said it would take a while before he could get back on his home turf to help. [43]

In Israel, numerous actors in the military and intelligence arenas made a coordinated surprise push on April 23, recorded in a detailed report by the New York Times. This included information sent to Washington, “briefings earlier on Tuesday,” where “the Israelis said they believed that the attacks March 19 involved the use of sarin gas,” and dramatics dropped on Defense Secretary Hagel during his visit. Brig. Gen. Itai Brun, Israel’s senior military intelligence analyst, said that Syria “has increasingly used chemical weapons. ... without any appropriate reaction,” which “might signal that this is legitimate.” General Brun cited “different signs” of this, including photographs of people “foaming at the mouth.” An anonymous Israeli military official also told the Times’ David E. Sanger that the Israeli opinion was based “mainly on what he described as publicly available photographs of victims, but said there was also corroborating “direct evidence” that he would not detail.” [43]

Israel’s intent here was clearly to influence the US into action (or at least into greater threat of it); the unnamed official said “if somebody would take any reaction” against Syria, maybe it would deter them from using it again.” [43] And the ominous inverse is that a failure to act would all-but guarantee a repetition. American officials refused to be instantly convinced, and made a few good points in explaining why. [44] With British-French-Israeli collusion to attack a resistant Arab nation, and the U.S. holding back, President Obama almost seemed to be channeling Eisenhower in the Suez crisis. But it was apparently short-lived.

On the 25th, CNN reported, the White House and Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel said that U.S. analysts now felt, “with varying degrees of confidence,” that Syria has used chemical weapons including at least sarin, “on a small scale.” The report noted there was still caution, especially over “chain of custody” issues, but this is the closest the Obama administration has come to saying its red line is crossed. [45]

Questioning the “Confidence”

As we hover at this dangerous juncture, questions emerge. An informative April 25 report from McClatchy news service heard from unnamed but authoritative sources that the U.S. intelligence findings for sarin “were of “low or moderate” confidence,” and that investigators “found trace amounts of a byproduct in soil, but there are also fertilizers that give out the same byproduct,” the person said. “It’s far from conclusive.” [46] This is especially so, as the chain of custody is far from certain and that the opposition forces likely involved in collection are notoriously dishonest.

The Telegraph reported on senior members of UK parliament saying better evidence will be needed to escalate, and noted that the Ministry of Defence “said it would not publish details of the tests, an indication that it did not have full confidence in what it had found, analysts said.” [47]

On the basic logic front, Max Fisher helpfully pointed out for a Washington Post blog “three important caveats” as we speak of red lines. One was on the danger of intervention Syria would face, noting “it’s hard to imagine that using a “small amount” of chemical weapons would do the regime forces enough good to merit the risk.” He also cited chemical weapons expert Ralf Trapp asking “why would the regime just put it on a grenade here or a rocket launcher there? It’s just not the way you’d expect a military force to act.” [48] The picture of does fit, however, with a false flag provocateur.

Let’s consider again those who suffer little to no such risk – unknown opposition brigades who may have been behind the last Aleppo gas attack – alongside a mid-April repeat in Aleppo’s sprawling Sheikh Maqsoud district. This time it looks better in that rebels had just conquered Sheikh Maqsoud for the first time, and were absorbing some attacks. Rebel sources blame a regime helicopter, not one of their own mortars, for dropping the unidentified gas early on the morning of April 13. The attack reportedly poisoned 16 people non-fatally, and killed two women and two young children. [49]

The CW victims “foaming at the mouth,” as cited by Israel’s General Brun [43], might refer to a horrible photo from this incident, released by the SOHR, of an apparently dead woman with mucous bubbling out of her mouth and nose. [50] Brun said that image was consistent with sarin exposure, and the Centers for Disease Control (U.S.) cites runny nose, drooling, and more as signs of low-level exposure. [51] But Mohammad Sabbagh’s stolen chlorine should have effects at least as consistent, as it did in World War I: “a profuse exudation of a thin, light yellow, albuminous fluid by the bronchial mucous membrane.” [52] It would seem some enabled party was again gassing people in Aleppo, perhaps with regime “tear gas” again, just as the threat of discovering the truth there evaporated like the morning fog.

The U.S. embrace of sarin use was apparently based on the “intelligence” Israel had sent – opinions, public images, and something secret – plus tests of unreliable samples yielding traces that could be fertilizer byproducts. This possibly fake “best guess” thrives in the climate of ignorance following the all-but fatal sabotage of the U.N. investigation. (That this unsound approach is applied to issues of war and national sovereignty – at the United Nations, even – is a related problem with its own complex causes we shall not try to address here.)

Growing “confidence” is troubling; that word is the origin of the “con” part of a “con job,” where the confidence of the lie tricks the victim into giving away something unwarranted (belief, first and foremost). Perhaps this war drive is not so dissimilar from the deceit-greased build-up to war in Iraq ten years ago. Added here is the twist, perhaps a charade, of the U.S. being dragged into it reluctantly by allies. But that a mighty nation allows itself to be dragged into echoing the sarin rumors suggests, as does so much else, that they are not truly averse to this endeavor.

The moral load of any possible war against Syria will also have to include the potential disgrace of punishing the victims of real-life, deployed and used weapons of mass destruction. Much credible evidence suggests the documented chemical warfare so far has been by the rebels, against soldiers and supporters of the same government slated to be blamed. Then it’s slated to be attacked by what might well be the real criminals, enabled with air support, with the intent of total victory. To borrow Israeli general Brun’s statement, it’s not hard to see how this rewarding of terrorism “might signal that this is legitimate” and encourage more of the same – at least, so long as it suits Western interests.

Postscript

Syria's Information Minister Omran al-Zoubi seems at least reasonably justified in saying, as SANA reported on April 26, "the Western sides ... want now to hide behind this "fabricated and false" talk ["that chemical weapons were used by the Syrian army in other areas"] to justify their silence on failing the investigation mission requested by Syria and to exonerate the terrorists." [53] Al-Zoubi was speaking to RT, who quoted him as saying the West's aims include, first, "to cover those who are really behind use of chemical weapons in Khan al-Assal," where many or most of the dead were government soldiers. [37]

And on that same day, there was an unconfirmed report from the Bazreh neighborhood of Damascus, that entrenched rebels gassed attacking army soldiers. Breaking News (Syria) reports medical sources for an unstated number of "martyrs, who have died due to inhalation of chemical gases," which causes an exudation of "white substance from their noses and mouths." [54]

References / Notes :

(ACLOS = A Closer Look on Syria, the site at which the author shares most of his research)

[1] ACLOS, Chemical Weapons

http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Category:Chemical_Weapons

[2] ACLOS, Alleged chemical attack, March 19 – Organized but incomplete main page:

http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Alleged_chemical_attack,_March_19,_2013

Detailed but sloppy talk page :

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ACLOS:

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