

Won't Get Fooled Again? Hyping Syria's WMD 'Threat'

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[Media Lens](#)

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Reading about crimes of state over many years, it is tempting to try to fathom the mind-set of political leaders. What actually is going on in their heads when they order sanctions that kill hundreds of thousands of children? What is in their hearts when they wage needless wars that shatter literally millions of lives?

Are they desperately cruel, mindlessly stupid? Do they imagine they are living in a kind of hell where monstrous acts have to be committed to avoid even worse outcomes? Are they indifferent, focused on what will bring them short-term political and economic gain? Are they morally resigned, perceiving themselves as essentially powerless in the face of invincible political and economic forces ('If I didn't do it, someone else would.')

Similar questions come to mind as the US and UK governments once again raise the spectre of 'weapons of mass destruction' to demonise a target for 'regime change', this time in Syria. What is actually going on in the minds of people who know that exactly the same ploy was exposed as a cynical deception just a few years ago? Do they view the public with contempt? Are they laughing at us? Are they playing the only card they perceive to be available to them; one that they know will work imperfectly, but will have to do?

In the US, NBC [commented](#):

'U.S. officials tell us that the Syrian military is poised tonight to use chemical weapons against its own people. And all it would take is the final order from Syrian President Assad.'

US media watch dog Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting [asked](#): 'So where did all of this new information come from?' The familiar, ominous answer: 'Anonymous government officials talking to outlets like the New York Times.' [This](#), for example:

'Western intelligence officials say they are picking up new signs of activity at sites in Syria that are used to store chemical weapons. The officials are uncertain whether Syrian forces might be preparing to use the weapons in a last-ditch effort to save the government, or simply sending a warning to the West about the implications of providing more help to the Syrian rebels.'

"It's in some ways similar to what they've done before," a senior American official said, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss intelligence matters. "But they're doing some things that suggest they intend to use the weapons. It's not just moving

stuff around. These are different kind of activities.” (Michael Gordon, Eric Schmitt, Tim Arango, ‘Flow of arms to Syria through Iraq persists, to US dismay,’ New York Times, December 1, 2012)

FAIR commented:

‘Absent any further details, that would seem to be a strange standard for confirmation... But the theatrics – satellite images, anonymous sources speaking about weapons of mass destruction and so on – are obviously reminiscent of the lead up to the Iraq War.’

They are indeed. On May 26, 2004, the New York Times published a humbling mea culpa titled, ‘The Times and Iraq.’ The editors [commented](#):

‘Editors at several levels who should have been challenging reporters and pressing for more skepticism were perhaps too intent on rushing scoops into the paper.’

As a result, the paper [published](#) a ‘Confidential News Sources Policy’, which included:

‘In any situation when we cite anonymous sources, at least some readers may suspect that the newspaper is being used to convey tainted information or special pleading. If the impetus for anonymity has originated with the source, further reporting is essential to satisfy the reporter and the reader that the paper has sought the whole story.’ (Confidential News Sources, New York Times, February 25, 2004)

Clearly this has all been forgotten.

The same claims about Syrian WMD have of course also poured out of the UK media. A December 5 leading article in The Times was titled: ‘Assad’s Arsenal.’ The first line of the editorial:

‘The embattled Syrian regime may be preparing to use chemical weapons. That would be a catastrophe; it must be averted, whatever it takes.’

As ever, Rupert Murdoch’s editors – and, no doubt, the boss, standing just over their shoulders – regretfully declared that Western military ‘intervention’ might turn out to be the only answer: ‘we must also hope that the US and its allies would take any action that was deemed necessary to prevent the human and moral disaster that would be caused by the Syrian regime attempting its final exit in a cloud of mustard gas’.

War, for the West, is now as normal as the air we breathe. Obviously it is the job of the West, with its blood-soaked track record, to save the peoples of the world from tyrannies that just happen to obstruct its geostrategic goals.

In November 2002, as war loomed on Iraq, The Times reported:

‘President Saddam Hussein has been trying to buy from Turkish suppliers up to 1.25 million doses of atropine, a derivative of deadly nightshade.

‘It has wide-ranging medical uses but also protects the body from nerve agents that can paralyse their victims and kill in as little as two minutes.’ (Elaine Monaghan, ‘Iraq move increases chemical war fear,’ The Times, November 13, 2002)

In 2010, The Times published [the claim](#) that Iran intended to develop a 'trigger' for a nuclear weapon. Investigative journalist Gareth Porter [reported](#):

'U.S. intelligence has concluded that the document published recently by the Times of London... is a fabrication, according to a former Central Intelligence Agency official.'

The counterterrorism specialist Porter had in mind, Philip Giraldi, commented:

'The Rupert Murdoch chain has been used extensively to publish false intelligence from the Israelis and occasionally from the British government.'

In April 2011, The Times reported of Libya:

'There are increasing fears that Colonel Gaddafi could use suspected stocks of chemical weapons against [Misrata]... There are also fears that Colonel Gaddafi has stocks of nerve gas in the southern desert city of Sabha.' (James Hider, 'Amid rigged corpses and chemical weapon threat, city fears for its life,' The Times, April 27, 2011)

No matter, The Times might yet see a Libya-style 'intervention' in Syria. The Guardian [reports](#) this week:

'Britain's military chiefs have drawn up contingency plans to provide Syrian rebels with maritime, and possibly air, power in response to a request from David Cameron, senior defence sources said on Monday night.'

The UK government is planning to fight with 'rebels' despite clear evidence of [war crimes](#) and the involvement of numerous foreign [mercenaries](#) armed and funded by regional tyrants. The Syrian government also stands accused of appalling [crimes](#).

Rusting Bins Of Mass Destruction - The Fantasy Specialists In the Guardian, Matt Williams and Martin Chulov used dramatic language to [report](#) claims 'that the [Syrian] regime is considering unleashing chemical weapons on opposition forces'.

The Guardian article cited CNN, which in turn cited 'an unnamed US official as the source of its report'. Williams and Chulov expressed not a word of scepticism in their piece, adding a two-sentence denial from the much-demonised Syrian 'regime' as 'balance'.

A BBC [article](#) managed this reference to scepticism:

'Pressed in the interview by the BBC's Frank Gardner, he said he could understand why the public might be sceptical after the blunders made over Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction 10 years ago.'

To his credit, the BBC's Jonathan Marcus [did](#) rather better:

'Was there an element of political spin here to accompany Nato's decision to deploy patriot missiles in Turkey?

'Sources contacted by the BBC say that there are indications of activity at certain chemical weapons storage sites.

'However it is of course impossible to determine if this is a preliminary to the weapons' use or, as some analysts believe, much more likely, the movement of munitions to

ensure their security. Indeed such movement has been noted in the past.'

Despite the caution, Marcus promoted the idea that Syrian WMD might fall into the 'wrong' hands and that the US might need to intervene to prevent that happening.

In the Independent, Robert Fisk went much further, [pouring](#) scorn on the claims:

'The bigger the lie the more people will believe it. We all know who said that - but it still works. Bashar al-Assad has chemical weapons. He may use them against his own Syrian people. If he does, the West will respond. We heard all this stuff last year - and Assad's regime repeatedly said that if - if - it had chemical weapons, it would never use them against Syrians.

'But now Washington is playing the same gas-chanty all over again. Bashar has chemical weapons. He may use them against his own people. And if he does...'

Fisk added: 'over the past week, all the usual pseudo-experts who couldn't find Syria on a map have been warning us again of the mustard gas, chemical agents, biological agents that Syria might possess - and might use. And the sources? The same fantasy specialists who didn't warn us about 9/11 but insisted that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction in 2003: "unnamed military intelligence sources"... And yes, Bashar probably does have some chemicals in rusting bins somewhere in Syria'.

If accurate, Fisk's 'rusting bins' make a nonsense of the 'considerable pressure' on 'the US to come up with plans to secure the Syrian weapons in the event of the collapse of the regime' described by Marcus.

Alex Thomson of Channel 4 News wrote an excellent [piece](#) titled: 'Syria, a weapon of mass deception?':

'Without wishing to delve too far into The Who's back catalogue... we need to remind ourselves in the UK that we won't get fooled again.'

Thomson offered a rare 'mainstream media' example of rational thinking on the issue:

'But just to be old fashioned: what's the evidence of any threat? What's the basis for all this? What, in short, are they all talking about? Yes, by all accounts Syria has nerve and chemical agents. But possession does not mean threat of use. Israel is not credibly threatening to use nuclear weapons against Iran, despite possessing them.'

He noted that 'the story built upon nothing [has been] accepted as global fact when it's nothing of the kind' and made the obvious point:

'After Iraq and WMD, if the CIA or MI6 say it's cold at the north pole, any sensible person would seek at least a couple more sources or would fly there and check.'

Amid the standard channelling of propaganda, then, a small number of journalists have learned from the past and are willing to challenge official claims. But we should also not be fooled by these admirable but rare examples of dissent. The overwhelming majority of corporate media reports - notably the TV broadcasts reaching millions of people - echo the claims of government 'impartially'; that is, without the least sign of independent thought or critical comment. The best journalists reject such an obviously compromised version of

'professionalism' - but they are few and far between.

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