

How US Pressure Bends UN Agencies

Exclusive: Lost in the celebration over the Nobel Peace Prize to the UN agency eliminating the Syrian government's chemical weapons is the question of who was really behind the Aug. 21 poison-gas attack near Damascus. Relevant to that mystery is the recent U.S. pressure to control key UN agencies including the prize recipient, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

For at least the past dozen years, the U.S. government has aggressively sought to gain control of the leadership of key United Nations agencies, including the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) which is central to the dispute over the Syrian government's alleged use of Sarin gas on Aug. 21.

Yet, despite evidence that this U.S. manipulation can twist the findings of these UN groups in ways favored by Official Washington, the mainstream American press usually leaves out this context and treats UN findings – or at least those that side with the U.S. government – as independent and beyond reproach, including the OPCW's recent reporting on the Syrian dispute.

For instance, the background of the current OPCW director-general, Ahmet Uzumcu, is rarely if ever mentioned in American news articles about the OPCW's work in Syria. Yet, [his biography](#) raises questions about whether he and thus his organization can be truly objective about the Syrian civil war.

Uzumcu, who was chosen to take over the top OPCW job in 2010, is a career Turkish diplomat who previously served as Turkey's consul in Aleppo, Syria, now a rebel stronghold in the war to oust Syrian President Bashar al-Assad; as Turkey's ambassador to Israel, which has publicly come out [in favor of the rebels](#) ; and as Turkey's permanent representative to NATO, which is dominated by the United States and other Western powers hostile to Assad. Uzumcu's home country of Turkey also has been a principal backer of the rebel cause.

While Uzumcu's history does not necessarily mean he would pressure his staff to slant the OPCW's findings against the Syrian government, his objectivity surely could be put in question given his past diplomatic postings and the interests of his home government. Plus, even if Uzumcu were inclined to defy Turkey and its NATO allies and insist on being evenhanded in his approach toward Syria he surely would remember what happened to one of his predecessors who got on the wrong side of U.S. geopolitical interests.

That history about how the world's only superpower can influence purportedly

honest-broker UN outfits was recalled on Monday in an article by Marlise Simons of the New York Times, describing how George W. Bush's administration ousted OPCW's director-general Jose Mauricio Bustani in 2002 because he was seen as an obstacle to invading Iraq.

Bustani, who had been reelected unanimously to the post less than a year earlier, described in an interview with the Times how Bush's emissary, Under-Secretary of State John Bolton, marched into Bustani's office and announced that he (Bustani) would be fired.

"The story behind [Bustani's] ouster has been the subject of interpretation and speculation for years, and Mr. Bustani, a Brazilian diplomat, has kept a low profile since then," wrote Simons. "But with the agency thrust into the spotlight with news of the Nobel [Peace] Prize last week, Mr. Bustani agreed to discuss what he said was the real reason: the Bush administration's fear that chemical weapons inspections in Iraq would conflict with Washington's rationale for invading it. Several officials involved in the events, some speaking publicly about them for the first time, confirmed his account."

Bolton, a blunt-speaking neocon who later became Bush's Ambassador to the United Nations, continued to insist in a recent interview with the New York Times that Bustani was ousted for incompetence. But Bustani and other diplomats close to the case reported that Bustani's real offense was drawing Iraq into acceptance of the OPCW's conventions for eliminating chemical weapons, just as the Bush administration was planning to pin its propaganda campaign for invading Iraq on the country's alleged secret stockpile of WMD.

Bustani's ouster gave President Bush a clearer path to the invasion by letting him frighten the American people about the prospects of Iraq sharing its chemical weapons and possibly a nuclear bomb with al-Qaeda terrorists.

Brushing aside Iraq's insistence that it had destroyed its chemical weapons and didn't have a nuclear weapons project, Bush launched the invasion in March 2003, only for the world to discover later that the Iraqi government was telling the truth. As a result of the Iraq War, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have died, along with nearly 4,500 American soldiers, with the estimated costs to the U.S. taxpayers running into the trillions of dollars.

Bush's Bullying

But U.S. bullying of UN agencies did not start or stop with replacing the OPCW's Bustani. Prior to Bustani's ouster, the Bush administration employed similar bare-knuckled tactics against UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary C. Robinson, who had dared criticize human rights abuses committed by Israel and

Bush's "war on terror." The Bush administration lobbied hard against her reappointment. Officially, she announced she was retiring on her own accord.

The Bush administration also forced out Robert Watson, the chairman of the U.N.-sponsored Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC]. Under his leadership, the panel had reached a consensus that human activities, such as burning fossil fuels, contributed to global warming. ExxonMobil sent a memo to Bush's White House asking, "Can Watson be replaced now at the request of the U.S.?"

The ExxonMobil memo, obtained by the Natural Resources Defense Council through the Freedom of Information Act, urged the White House to "restructure U.S. attendance at the IPCC meetings to assure no Clinton/Gore proponents are involved in decisional activities." On April 19, 2002, the Bush administration succeeded in replacing Watson with Rajendra Pachauri, an Indian economist.

Commenting on his removal, Watson said, "U.S. support was, of course, an important factor. They [the IPCC] came under a lot of pressure from ExxonMobil who asked the White House to try and remove me." [For details, see Consortiumnews.com's "[Bush's Grim Vision.](#)"]

This pattern of pressure continued into the Obama administration which used its own diplomatic and economic muscle to insert a malleable Japanese diplomat, Yukiya Amano, into the leadership of the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency [IAEA], which was playing a key role in the dispute over Iran's nuclear program.

Before his appointment, Amano had portrayed himself as an independent-minded fellow who was resisting U.S.-Israeli propaganda about the Iranian nuclear program. Yet behind the scenes, he was meeting with U.S. and Israeli officials to coordinate on how to serve their interests. His professed doubts about an Iranian nuclear-bomb project was only a theatrical device to intensify the later impact if he declared that Iran indeed was building a nuke.

But this ploy was spoiled by Pvt. Bradley Manning's leaking of hundreds of thousands of pages of U.S. diplomatic cables. Among them were reports on Amano's secret collaboration with U.S. and Israeli officials.

The U.S. embassy cables revealing the truth about Amano were published by the U.K. Guardian in 2011 (although ignored by the New York Times, the Washington Post and other mainstream U.S. news outlets). Despite the silence of the major U.S. news media, Internet outlets, such as Consortiumnews.com, highlighted the Amano cables, meaning that enough Americans knew the facts not to be fooled again. [For details, see Consortiumnews.com's "[Did Manning Help Avert War with Iran?](#)"]

The Syrian Dossiers

This history is relevant now because the credibility of the UN's chemical weapons office has been central to conclusions drawn by the mainstream U.S. news media that the OPCW's report on the alleged chemical weapons attack outside Damascus on Aug. 21 pointed to the Syrian government as the responsible party.

Though the OPCW report did not formally assess blame for the attack, which purportedly killed hundreds of Syrian civilians, the report included details that the U.S. press and some non-governmental organizations, such as Human Rights Watch, used to extrapolate the guilt of Assad's government.

Yet, elements of the OPCW's official report appeared stretched to create the public impression that the Syrian government carried out the attack despite apparent doubts by OPCW field investigators whose concerns were played down or buried in tables and footnotes.

For instance, the UN inspectors found surprisingly little evidence of Sarin gas at the first neighborhood that they visited on Aug. 26, Moadamiyah, south of Damascus. Of the 13 environmental samples collected that day, none tested positive for Sarin or other chemical-warfare agents. The two laboratories used by the inspectors also had conflicting results regarding trace amounts of chemical residue that can be left behind by Sarin after being degraded by intense heat.

By contrast, tests for Sarin were more clearly positive from samples taken two and three days later on Aug. 28-29 in the eastern suburban area of Zamalka/Ein Tarma. There, Lab One found Sarin in 11 of 17 samples and Lab Two found Sarin in all 17 samples.

Though the UN report concludes that Sarin was present in Moadamiyah despite the failure to identify actual chemical-warfare agents the report does not explain why the Aug. 26 samples in Moadamiyah would test so negatively when the Aug. 28-29 samples in Zamalka/Ein Tarma would test much more positively.

One would have thought that the earlier samples would test more strongly than later samples after two or three more days of exposure to sun and other elements. An obvious explanation would be that the release of Sarin was concentrated in the eastern suburb and that the spotty residue detected in the south came from other factors, such as false positives for secondary chemicals especially from Lab Two.

If the Aug. 21 attack centered on Zamalka/Ein Tarma as the UN results suggest, that would indicate a much less expansive use of chemical weapons than a U.S. government white paper claimed. The alleged breadth of the attack served as a

primary argument for blaming the Syrian government given its greater military capabilities than the rebels.

Obama's Claims

That point was driven home by President Barack Obama in his nationally televised address on Sept. 10 when he asserted that 11 neighborhoods had come under chemical bombardment on Aug. 21. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Obama Still Withholds Syria Evidence](#)."]]

However, even the U.S. "Government Assessment" on the attack, issued on Aug. 30 explicitly blaming the Syrian government, suggested that the initial reports of about a dozen targets around Damascus may have been exaggerated. A footnote contained in a [White House-released map](#) of the supposed locations of the attack read:

"Reports of chemical attacks originating from some locations may reflect the movement of patients exposed in one neighborhood to field hospitals and medical facilities in the surrounding area. They may also reflect confusion and panic triggered by the ongoing artillery and rocket barrage, and reports of chemical use in other neighborhoods."

In other words, victims from one location could have rushed to clinics in other neighborhoods, creating the impression of a more widespread attack than actually occurred. That possibility would seem to be underscored by the divergent findings of the UN inspectors when they took soil and other environmental samples from the southern and eastern areas and got strikingly different results.

The UN inspectors also revealed how dependent they were on Syrian rebels for access to the areas of the alleged chemical attacks and to witnesses, with one rebel commander even asked to take "custody" of the UN inspection.

At the suspected attack sites, the inspectors also detected signs that evidence had been "moved" and "possibly manipulated." Regarding the Moadamiyah area, the UN report noted, "Fragments [of rockets] and other possible evidence have clearly been handled/moved prior to the arrival of the investigative team."

In the Zamalka/Ein Tarma neighborhood, where a crudely made missile apparently delivered the poison gas, the inspectors stated that "the locations have been well traveled by other individuals prior to the arrival of the Mission. During the time spent at these locations, individuals arrived carrying other suspected munitions indicating that such potential evidence is being moved and possibly manipulated."

Media's Conventional Wisdom

The UN inspectors did not draw any specific conclusion from their research as to whether Syrian government forces or the rebels were responsible for the hundreds of civilian deaths that resulted from the apparent use of Sarin gas. However, major U.S. news outlets, including the New York Times and the Washington Post, concluded that the findings implicated the Syrian government.

Those accounts cited weapons "experts" as asserting that the type of missiles used and the supposed sophistication of the Sarin were beyond the known capabilities of the rebels. The articles also said the rough calculations by the UN inspectors of the likely missile trajectories suggested that the launches occurred in government-controlled areas with the missiles landing in areas where the rebels dominate.

These mainstream U.S. news reports did not cite the cautionary comments contained in the UN report about possible tampering with evidence, nor did they take into account the conflicting lab results in Moadamiyah compared with Zamalka/Ein Tarma, nor the fact that the OPCW's director-general is a career Turkish diplomat. [For more on rebel capabilities, see Consortiumnews.com's "[Do Syrian Rebels Have Sarin?](#)"]

Reinforcing the Assad-did-it conventional wisdom, Secretary of State John Kerry and President Obama moved to assign any remaining doubters to the loony bin of conspiracy theorists. "We really don't have time today to pretend that anyone can have their own set of facts," Kerry sniffed in response to continuing Russian government's doubts.

President Obama drove home the same point in [his annual address](#) to the UN General Assembly: "It's an insult to human reason and to the legitimacy of this institution to suggest that anyone other than the regime carried out this attack."

Yet, the doubters reportedly include U.S. intelligence analysts, who I'm told have briefed Obama personally about the uncertainty of the evidence. Clearly, if the Obama administration had the entire intelligence community onboard, there would have been no need for such a [dodgy dossier](#) as the "Government Assessment" posted by the White House press office on Aug. 30, rather than a National Intelligence Estimate that would have reflected the views of the 16 intelligence agencies and been released by the Director of National Intelligence.

Doubts in the Field

And, Robert Fisk, a veteran reporter for London's Independent newspaper, found a lack of consensus among UN officials and other international observers in

Damascus despite the career risks that they faced by deviating from the conventional wisdom on Assad's guilt.

"In a country indeed a world where propaganda is more influential than truth, discovering the origin of the chemicals that suffocated so many Syrians a month ago is an investigation fraught with journalistic perils," Fisk wrote.

"Nevertheless, it also has to be said that grave doubts are being expressed by the UN and other international organisations in Damascus that the sarin gas missiles were fired by Assad's army.

"While these international employees cannot be identified, some of them were in Damascus on 21 August and asked a series of questions to which no one has yet supplied an answer. Why, for example, would Syria wait until the UN inspectors were ensconced in Damascus on 18 August before using sarin gas little more than two days later and only four miles from the hotel in which the UN had just checked in?

"Having thus presented the UN with evidence of the use of sarin which the inspectors quickly acquired at the scene the Assad regime, if guilty, would surely have realised that a military attack would be staged by Western nations.

"As it is, Syria is now due to lose its entire strategic long-term chemical defences against a nuclear-armed Israel because, if Western leaders are to be believed, it wanted to fire just seven missiles almost a half century old at a rebel suburb in which only 300 of the 1,400 victims (if the rebels themselves are to be believed) were fighters.

"As one Western NGO put it 'if Assad really wanted to use sarin gas, why for God's sake, did he wait for two years and then when the UN was actually on the ground to investigate?'"

Further adding to these doubts about the Official Story of the Aug. 21 poison-gas attack is the 11-year-old story about how the U.S. government engineered a change in the leadership of the UN's OPCW because the director-general committed the unpardonable sin of getting in the way of a U.S. geopolitical/propaganda priority – and the question about the impartiality of the Turkish diplomat now running the agency.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in print here or as an e-book (from Amazon and barnesandnoble.com). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on

[this offer, click here.](#)

What Nixon/Kissinger Got Right

Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger operated in an amoral world where they traded lives and principles for power. But their cold “realism” enabled them to function more effectively in foreign policy than many of their successors who let passions and politics color their thinking, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

Perhaps the most successful U.S. diplomacy of the past half century was the management by Richard Nixon, aided by Henry Kissinger, of relations with other major powers in the early 1970s, and in particular the triangular diplomacy involving the Soviet Union and China.

Although some of what Nixon and Kissinger did was specific to the issues and circumstances of the great power politics of their time, their performance holds some transferable lessons. We should think carefully about the major attributes of their diplomatic approach and strategy.

They were not stuck in a bipolar mold, even though the Cold War was widely perceived as a world-shaping bipolar confrontation. They did not conceptually divide the world into good guys with whom to cooperate and bad guys to be opposed or shunned.

They did not let diplomacy be limited by repugnance over someone else’s domestic policies. The U.S.S.R. of the 1970s was a sclerotic and intolerant dictatorship, and China at the time was still wracked by the volatile extremism of the Cultural Revolution. They had no particular attachments to other states that got in the way of their diplomatic maneuvering. Alliances were tools to be employed when appropriate in pursuit of U.S. interests, not impediments to that pursuit.

They used relations with each power as leverage in managing U.S. relations with other powers. The Soviets probably would have preferred that there had not been a rapprochement between the United States and China, but it was not up to the Soviets to determine that. The U.S. administration did not let any foreign state veto initiatives it made toward other foreign states.

The lessons can be applied to global great power politics of today, but the

lessons also are scalable. They can be scaled down to a single region. The great power diplomacy of Metternich, an object of Kissinger's early studies, was practiced within the confines of Europe. Moreover, the principles apply not just to triangular contexts such as the U.S.-Soviet-Chinese dynamic of the 1970s but to situations with more than three centers of power and action. Applying those principles to any region in which there are such multiple players, each of which is important to U.S. interests, is the best way to advance U.S. interests in the region in question.

The Middle East of today is such a region. It is more fractured than Metternich's Europe or Nixon's global great power world, but it has several players that each present to the United States elements of both conflict and cooperation. Each has interests that parallel those of the United States, but each also has other pursuits and practices that cause problems for the United States. The players could be counted and grouped in different ways, but the principal ones are fairly obvious.

There are, for example, the Persian Gulf monarchies and especially the most sizable and significant one, Saudi Arabia. On one hand the Saudis share with the United States interests in the physical security and stability of the Gulf region, stability in the oil trade, and checking extremist violence. On the other hand they have an agenda that diverges from that of the United States and leads to some sharp disagreements with Washington and even troublesome behavior, such as with how the Saudis' sectarian concerns shape their policy toward Syria and how their opposition to democratization (and hang-up about the Muslim Brotherhood) shapes their policy toward Egypt.

There are the Arab republics, which demonstrate a wide range of current problems and opportunities but of which Egypt is the most important by virtue of size and weight. The shared interests with the Egyptians center on stability and countering violent extremism, as well as other ones having to do with military cooperation. The divergent interests currently have mainly to do with Egypt's sharp turn away from democratization and political rights. The problem in this regard for the United States is not one of American repugnance over someone else's domestic policies but instead of the United States being associated in many other people's minds with this type of harsh authoritarianism.

There is Israel, where again there are shared interests involving counterterrorism, as well as some involving military and technical cooperation. The divergent interests have to do most of all with Israel's clinging, for religious or economic reasons the United States does not share, to occupied territory seized in war. The United States shares in the opprobrium and the costs, including ones involving the motivation of extremist violence, of this

occupation, which is widely considered in the Middle East and beyond as profoundly unjust. The Israeli proclivity for quick use of military force in surrounding territories and states also is contrary to U.S. interests, both because of similar opprobrium and because of the destabilizing effects within the region of such military action.

There is Iran, which still has some of the same basis for parallel U.S. and Iranian interests as there were at the time of Nixon and the Shah. Today there are, for example, important shared interests regarding stability in Afghanistan and Iraq. Divergent interests have mostly to do with Iran's relations with clients and allies elsewhere in the region, which have helped to shape its policies in places such as Syria.

Nixon and Kissinger worked a bit of their multipolar magic in the Middle East during and in the aftermath of the 1973 Middle East war. Their deft diplomacy managed to strengthen a security relationship with Israel while also shepherding Egypt's remarkable turnaround from a Soviet to a U.S. ally, while also keeping the Soviets out of the action in other respects.

But since the late 1970s (and since Jimmy Carter's follow-up at Camp David of Anwar Sadat's grand redirection of Egypt), U.S. policy in the Middle East has mostly been stuck in an inflexible and essentially bivalent mold. Partly this has been a reversion to Americans' traditional Manichean way of looking at the world. Partly it has been reflexive reaction to outside events. The year 1979 brought the double whammy of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, thrusting the Cold War itself back into Southwest Asia and leading to the Carter Doctrine in the Persian Gulf, and the Iranian revolution, leading to a new *blanche* for America, ready to assume that role fully once the Soviet Union collapsed.

Later we had feckless attempts to align and mobilize regional "moderates" who disagreed among themselves about matters most important to them against "extremists," and George W. Bush's reductionist for-us-or-against-us framework for thinking about Middle Eastern politics and much else.

The frozen-frame distrust and hostility between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran is certainly one of the biggest hurdles between the situation we have now and the sort of enlightened, flexible, multi-polar Middle East diplomacy that would be far better at protecting and advancing U.S. interests in the region. That in turn is one of the biggest reasons the nuclear negotiations with Iran, resumed this week under new Iranian leadership, are so important.

The nuclear issue has to be tackled now because it has assumed, for better or worse, an outsize salience. But an agreement on this issue also would help to

lead to a more normal relationship in which Washington and Tehran would deal with all of the issues that either divide them or on which they can make common cause, and in which they deal with each other as one of several relationships each has in the region rather than as a single all-consuming fixation.

A more normal relationship with Iran would provide the United States useful leverage in managing its other relationships with Middle Eastern states, whether those states are customarily counted as foes or as allies. It is this sort of liberation of American foreign policy in the Middle East that ultimately will be much more important than details about spinning centrifuges, break-out capabilities, and the like.

A second very large hurdle is closely related to the first one. It is the passionate U.S. attachment to Israel, leading to the abetting of damaging policies by the Israeli government and based on fears, habits and taboos in domestic American politics. The two hurdles are related because it is the Israeli government that is leading efforts to torpedo any U.S.-Iranian agreement and to prevent any deviation from unremitting punishment and ostracism of Iran by the United States.

With recent tentative signs of slight thawing in the frozen U.S.-Iranian relationship, the Israeli effort has intensified. Benjamin Netanyahu's language on this subject has become so strident and extreme, with unrelenting talk of apocalyptic, messianic regimes and how one state is determined to destroy the other, that he is demonstrating some of the very qualities that he attributes to the country that is the object of his calumnies.

This second hurdle is the more formidable one, greater even than the legacy of the many years of mistrust and non-communication between America and Iran. Such a legacy can be overcome, if not continually reinforced by an outsider. The United States did not even recognize the Soviet regime until 15 years after it came into power. It would take World War II to bring about cooperation with Stalin, and several more decades of Cold War before detente under Nixon. The opening to China was more than 20 years after the People's Republic was created, and full diplomatic relations were not established until several years later under Carter.

Some have argued that emulation of Nixon should go so far as the kind of presidential trip he made to Beijing. That certainly would be quite a boost toward getting U.S. Middle Eastern policy into a new and much more productive phase. It certainly would be dramatic; it would make believers of some who questioned why Barack Obama was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize, and it would provide great material to John Adams, the composer of *Nixon in China*, for a new opera.

But it is very unlikely to happen, and it shouldn't be necessary. What the United States needs is not Nixon's drama but rather observance of Nixon's strategic principles, including the principle that none of the foreign interlocutors of the United States should have a veto over the shape of relations with any of its other interlocutors. Observe those principles, and U.S. interests in the Middle East will be far better served than they have been for a long time.

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