

Fresh Doubts about Syria's Sarin Guilt

Exclusive: A new analysis, buried in a UN report, reveals that one of the two missiles at the center of the Syrian chemical weapons crisis, which nearly led to a U.S. military attack, showed no evidence of Sarin, further undermining Official Washington's certainty that the Syrian government was to blame, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

A United Nations analysis of samples taken from one of the two sites of the alleged Sarin attack outside Damascus, Syria, on Aug. 21 found zero chemical weapons agents, and one UN laboratory backed off its earlier claim to have found a residue that can result from degraded Sarin on the remnants of the missile, according to revisions in a new UN report.

This failure to find Sarin anywhere in Moadamiyah, a suburb south of Damascus, undercuts analyses by Human Rights Watch and the New York Times that relied on a vectoring of the two attack sites the other in Zamalka/Ein Tarma to the east where Sarin was detected to conclude that an elite unit of the Syrian military must have been responsible for the attacks that brought the United States close to war in Syria.

There were already problems with the analyses by HRW, which has long pushed for a U.S. military intervention in Syria, and the New York Times because of doubts about the flight paths of the missiles and their maximum range. UN inspectors only had a rough idea of the trajectories because at least one of the projectiles appears to have deflected off a building as it crash-landed.

Also, if the two missiles had been fired from the elite military base of the 104th Brigade of the Republican Guard northwest of Damascus, they would have had to fly about nine kilometers though independent experts have suggested that the improvised missiles probably could go no more than three kilometers.

Plus, the Moadamiyah missile with its supposedly lethal payload of Sarin would have had to pass over the presidential palace and other sensitive government sites, a highly risky undertaking if the alleged vectoring were correct.

But the revised UN analysis, attached to a new report on several other alleged chemical weapons incidents in Syria, punched a new hole in the notion that the Republican Guard fired a Sarin-laden missile into Moadamiyah. The UN inspectors found no chemical weapons agents on the remnants of the crudely made missile that landed in Moadamiyah (or for that matter no Sarin anywhere else in the area).

In the earlier UN report about the Aug. 21 incident, one of two UN labs had detected on a metal fragment what the lab thought was a chemical residue that can be left behind by degraded Sarin. But the new analysis withdraws that finding, an indication of how fragile the chemistry can be in getting false positives on derivative chemical residue.

The two UN laboratories are now in agreement that there was neither Sarin nor possible derivatives of Sarin on the metal fragments from the Moadamiyah missile. Yet, by comparison, clear evidence of Sarin was found at the Zamalka site which was examined two or three days later, a time sequence that further undercuts the possibility that Sarin struck Moadamiyah (and then somehow disappeared) while it remained prevalent at Zamalka.

In other words, if the only Sarin attack on Aug. 21 was in the Zamalka area, the certainty that the Syrian military carried out the assault has been seriously undermined. The vectoring cited by the New York Times and Human Rights Watch would become meaningless since there would be only one flight path of a Sarin-bearing missile, the one landing in Zamalka.

Despite these doubts and the refusal of the Obama administration to release any verifiable evidence supporting its contention that the Syrian government was responsible the New York Times continued on Friday to cite the vectoring from the preliminary UN report to blame President Bashar al-Assad's regime.

Though the UN inspectors pointed no fingers at who was responsible for the Aug. 21 incident in either report, the Times wrote: "In the preliminary report on the Aug. 21 attack, findings implicated Mr. Assad's military by documenting the shape of the munitions and the precise direction from which two had been fired."

The Times ignored the absence of Sarin in the samples from Moadamiyah as well as the fact that the UN inspectors noted in the first report that evidence at the sites had been "moved" or "possibly manipulated."

Regarding Moadamiyah, the UN reported 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 did deliver 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."

The inspectors also said their visits were in the "custody" of rebel forces who

guided them to the sites and to alleged witnesses.

Obama's Deception

Other new problems have cropped up with Official Washington's conventional wisdom that the Assad regime launched the Aug. 21 attack.

In a December article for the London Review of Books, investigative reporter Seymour Hersh confirmed that President Barack Obama misled the American people over the Aug. 21 Syrian chemical attack by cherry-picking evidence about the Syrian government's presumed guilt and excluding suspicions about the rebels' capability to produce their own Sarin gas.

Hersh also reported that he discovered a deep schism within the U.S. intelligence community over how the case was sold to pin the blame on President Assad. Hersh wrote that he encountered "intense concern, and on occasion anger" when he interviewed American intelligence and military experts "over what was repeatedly seen as the deliberate manipulation of intelligence."

According to Hersh, "One high-level intelligence officer, in an email to a colleague, called the administration's assurances of Assad's responsibility a 'ruse'. The attack 'was not the result of the current regime', he wrote."

Prior to Hersh's story, much of the skepticism about the Obama administration's case on the Syrian poison gas attack had been confined to the Internet, including our own Consortiumnews.com. Indeed, Hersh's article dovetailed with much of what we reported in August and September as we questioned the administration's certainty that Assad's regime was responsible.

Our skepticism flew in the face of a solid consensus among prominent opinion leaders who joined in the stampede toward war with Syria much as they did in Iraq a decade earlier. As with those who questioned George W. Bush's claims about Iraq's WMD, the dissenters against the certainty of Syria's culpability often faced hostility for deviating from Official Washington's "group think."

Beyond questioning the fragility of the Aug. 21 "evidence," our articles at Consortiumnews.com cited a split within the U.S. intelligence community, a division that the administration sought to conceal by avoiding a National Intelligence Estimate, which would have included footnotes about why many analysts were skeptical of the Assad-did-it scenario.

Instead of an NIE, the White House issued something called a "Government Assessment," which dumped all the doubts about Syria's guilt and pumped up the certainty. Once the White House press office posted the "Government Assessment" on Aug. 30, Secretary of State John Kerry was put forward to present

the case for launching a military strike against Syria.

U.S. intelligence officials were nowhere to be seen, not wanting to play the 2003 role of CIA Director George Tenet who sat behind Secretary of State Colin Powell as he delivered a bogus case to the UN regarding Iraq's WMD.

War with Syria was only averted because President Obama abruptly decided to seek congressional approval for a military strike and then reached a diplomatic accord, with the help of the Russian government, in which the Syrian government agreed to dispose of its chemical weapons arsenal (while still denying that it was responsible for the Aug. 21 attack).

Obama's last-minute reversal spared the United States another war in the Middle East, a conflict that could have easily spread into a regional conflagration. Many thousands of people could have died and the possible disruption of oil supplies could have thrown the world into an economic depression.

The "happy" outcome of a diplomatic solution was welcome news. But it obscured a troubling reality that Official Washington and the mainstream U.S. news media have learned little from the Iraq War debacle. Timely skepticism on matters of war or peace remains marginalized in small-circulation Web sites with very few financial resources.

Other Chemical Attacks

The new UN report, released Thursday, also assessed other cases of possible chemical weapons use in Syria, including claims by the government that rebels have used Sarin and other chemical agents to inflict casualties on government soldiers and civilians.

UN inspectors said they "collected credible information that corroborates the allegations that chemical weapons were used in Khan Al Asal (near the northern city of Aleppo) on 19 March 2013 against soldiers and civilians," but the inspectors said they were unable to undertake a complete study because of time delays and security concerns.

The UN inspectors also examined a few incidents in the days after the Aug. 21 attack in which the Syrian government claimed its soldiers were targeted with chemical weapons, including an Aug. 25 incident at Ashrafiah Sahnaya, a town southwest of Damascus. The UN inspectors said they found evidence suggesting a small-scale attack was made against soldiers but were unable to establish the facts definitively.

Similarly, the UN mission found evidence of some small-scale use of chemical weapons that rebels and their Western allies have blamed on government forces.

But, again, the UN inspectors said gaps in the evidence prevented them from reaching hard-and-fast conclusions.

Still, the totality of the new UN report suggests that Syrian rebels have developed a capability to produce at least crude chemical weapons and delivery systems, further adding to the possibility that the Aug. 21 attack east of Damascus could have resulted from a botched rebel launch of a makeshift missile aimed at government targets or as an accident.

There have been other reasons to doubt the U.S. conventional wisdom of Syrian government guilt in the Aug. 21 attack, including why would the Syrian regime having invited UN inspectors in on Aug. 18 to inspect chemical attacks that the government blamed on the rebels then launch a major chemical-weapons attack around Damascus, knowing that such an assault would divert the UN's attention and invite U.S. military intervention, something sought by the rebels, not the government.

The refusal of the U.S. government to release any verifiable evidence to establish the Syrian regime's guilt has been another curious element of this mystery. If the U.S. evidence supposedly including intercepts of Syrian government communications was conclusive enough to justify war, why couldn't at least some of it be shared with the American people?

There's also the bizarre technique that the U.S. government reportedly employed for reaching its curiously precise death toll of 1,429 from the Aug. 21 attack. The Wall Street Journal reported that the tally was derived by counting the bodies displayed in YouTube videos and applying facial recognition software to avoid double counting and also subtracting bodies in bloody shrouds.

The various uncertainties in such a methodology including the possibility that some YouTube videos were posted from other incidents and the fact that the absence of a bloody shroud is not proof of death by Sarin gas makes a mockery of how the mainstream U.S. media has adopted this tally as credible, especially since other casualty estimates from doctors on the scene were much lower.

So, although the Syrian chemical weapons standoff didn't ultimately lead to another U.S. war, it doesn't exactly inspire confidence in either the statements of the U.S. government or the performance of the mainstream U.S. news media. Nor do we yet have a conclusive answer to who was responsible for the Aug. 21 attack.

[Here is some of our earlier reporting on the Syrian crisis: ["A Dodgy Dossier on Syrian War"](#); ["Murky Clues From UN's Syria Report"](#); ["Obama Still Withholds Syria Evidence"](#); ["How US Pressure Bends UN Agencies"](#); ["Fixing Intel Around the Syria](#)

Policy.”]

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.
