

The Collapsing Syria-Sarin Case

Exclusive: Defenders of the old conventional wisdom blaming the Syrian government for the Aug. 21 Sarin attack are going after investigative journalist Seymour Hersh, who implicates Syrian jihadists and Turkish intelligence. But the defenders are relying on long-discredited claims, says Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

One shouldn't be surprised, I guess, that some wannabe-journalist bloggers are auditioning before possible mainstream employers by attacking investigative journalist Seymour M. Hersh for writing a groundbreaking article implicating Syrian jihadist rebels and Turkish intelligence in the lethal use of Sarin on Aug. 21 outside Damascus.

From a sampling of these defenses of Official Washington's old conventional wisdom blaming the Syrian government the chief attack line against Hersh is to repeat the initial U.S. government claim of a widespread strike involving multiple rockets.

The thinking then was that only the Syrian government had the capability to launch such a widespread assault. But this claim is outdated. The United Nations inspectors who fanned out across the Ghouta suburb of Damascus recovered only two suspicious rockets and one was found to be clean of Sarin or any other chemical agent.

The one Sarin-laden rocket, which struck in the Zamalka/Ein Tarma neighborhood, was found to be crudely made and had a maximum range of about 2 to 3 kilometers, meaning that it would have been launched from rebel-controlled areas, not from a government zone.

But conventional wisdom is a difficult thing to shake once many "very important people" have embraced its certainties. Such VIPs don't like to admit that they were suckered and there are always some aspiring operatives who hope to earn some brownie points by attacking anyone who deviates from the "group think."

That's what we're seeing now as the Obama administration's case against the Syrian government collapses, not that it was ever very sturdy. There is desperation across Official Washington to try to prop the old narrative back up.

The flimsiness of the administration's indictment was always apparent. The U.S. "Government Assessment" of the attack, published Aug. 30, was a four-page white paper making unsubstantiated allegations against the Syrian government. No verifiable evidence was presented either then or since then.

The point of the "Government Assessment" itself was to avoid the standard requirement of a National Intelligence Estimate preceding a U.S. military assault on a sovereign country. NIEs represent the consensus view of the 16 intelligence agencies. NIEs also require inclusion of footnotes revealing any dissents.

I was told at the time that there was substantial concern within the U.S. intelligence community that we were witnessing another rush to judgment. Yet, to keep those doubts secret, the Obama administration cobbled together this new creation, a "Government Assessment," that left out the dissents.

The small package of material released on Aug. 30 did, however, include one significant footnote attached to a map and offering an explanation for why there may have been an initial belief of a more widespread attack.

The footnote 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, even the White House's white-washing white paper offered a contradictory explanation to what the administration was claiming about the number of neighborhoods struck by the chemical attack of Aug. 21, i.e., victims from one location may have rushed to clinics in other neighborhoods, creating the false impression of a more widespread attack.

More significantly, however, the four-page "Government Assessment" of the case against the Syrian government contained not a single piece of evidence that could be checked independently. It was filled with "we assess" this and "we assess" that. To this day, the Obama administration has not released a shred of evidence that could be examined and evaluated.

Instead, the propaganda approach has been the old tactic of repeating an unproven assertion again and again, knowing that if a charge is declared with sufficient certitude often enough, the weak-minded will simply begin treating it as accepted wisdom. That's especially easy when the target of the accusations has been thoroughly demonized as is the case with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The 'Vector Analysis'

The only publicly available evidence implicating the Syrian government was a "vector analysis" produced by Human Rights Watch and the New York Times retracing the flight paths of the two recovered rockets to where their azimuths

intersected 9.5 kilometers away at a Syrian military base.

When this analysis was touted last September including a front-page story in the Times it was considered the “slam-dunk” proof of the Syrian government’s guilt. Pretty much everyone in the U.S. news media, including many ambitious bloggers, climbed onto the bandwagon and laughed at anyone who wasn’t onboard.

However, the “vector analysis” soon fell apart. First, the rocket that struck Moadamiya, south of Damascus, had clipped a building on the way down so the UN calculation of its azimuth was highly unreliable. Plus, the rocket was found to contain no Sarin, making its inclusion in the vectoring of two Sarin-laden rockets nonsensical.

Even more devastating to the HRW-NYT analysis was the fact that when leading rocket scientists analyzed the capabilities of the home-made device that landed in Zamalka, they concluded that it had a maximum range of about 2 to 3 kilometers, less than one-third the required distance. U.S. intelligence experts, such as former CIA analyst Larry Johnson, also noted that the two recovered rockets were not part of the Syrian military’s Order of Battle.

With the “vector analysis” discredited, the New York Times then waited until the Christmas holidays to grudgingly acknowledge deep in a story, deep inside the paper that it had been snookered again, an embarrassing replay of its infamous “mushroom cloud” report in 2002 on Iraq’s “aluminum tubes” supposedly showing that Saddam Hussein was building nuclear centrifuges. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“NYT Backs Off its Syria-Sarin Analysis.”](#)]

Junk Heap of Bad Evidence

So, with the “slam-dunk evidence” of the “vector analysis” consigned to the giant junk heap of false claims used to justify wars, what was left to support the U.S. government’s indictment of the Syrian regime? Nothing that could be checked out and verified. That, in turn, has left the bloggers defending the Assad-did-it charge recycling old claims that have previously been discarded, such as the notion of multiple rockets carrying Sarin.

Despite the glaring weaknesses of the U.S. government’s case, these blogosphere defenders of the old conventional wisdom are dissecting Hersh’s exposé looking for tiny points to criticize rather than joining in a demand that the Obama administration finally lay whatever evidence it thinks it has on the table.

Nearly 4,500 U.S. soldiers and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis died because of false and fabricated intelligence disseminated about Iraqi WMD in 2002-03. Yet, almost no one in Official Washington was held accountable.

A decade later, the process came very close to repeating itself. The United States nearly went to war again on what was highly dubious information. If the U.S. political/media establishment is so inept at dealing with reality in such life-or-death situations, a major overhaul of the system is desperately needed.

There are other dangerous implications from Hersh's article, including the possibility that Syrian jihadists in the Nusra Front with close ties to al-Qaeda have developed the capability to manufacture and deploy Sarin, a powerful chemical weapon that can kill hundreds of people in a matter of minutes.

If that is the case, President Barack Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry owe it to the public to recant their rush to judgment of last summer and refocus U.S. intelligence on this clear and present danger. Sure, it's not what Obama and Kerry want to do admit they misled the people about the certainty of the U.S. government's case against Assad but they have a responsibility to put their egos aside and assess what is possibly an actual terrorist threat.

Despite his role in deceiving the world, President Obama does deserve some credit for veering away from another catastrophe at the last moment. Obama accepted Russian President Vladimir Putin's plan to have Syria's government surrender all its chemical weapons, even as Assad continued to deny a role in the Aug. 21 attack.

But the mystery of who gassed the Ghouta suburb of Damascus killing hundreds of people is one that deserves a serious examination. If as Sy Hersh reports the U.S. government has evidence revealing collaboration between radical jihadists in Syria and Turkish intelligence, that should be revealed regardless of the political discomfort it might cause.

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](#).
