

'War-Wise' Skepticism Prevailed on Syria

Though nearly going to war with Syria last year over a chemical attack, the Obama administration has still not presented a shred of verifiable proof against the Syrian government. And, interest is waning now that suspicions have shifted to Syrian rebels aided by U.S. allies, Nat Parry reports.

By Nat Parry

Last summer, following a sarin nerve gas attack that left hundreds dead in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta on Aug. 21, it seemed that U.S. intervention in Syria was a foregone conclusion. Having witnessed the scenario play out time and again in recent years as the United States has prepared for military action against various countries, it was clear in late August and early September 2013 that all signs were pointing to a looming attack, that the decision had been made to commit the U.S. on a path of military action, and that there was likely little that could be done to stop it.

A list of possible targets for a military strike was reportedly circulating in the White House and the Pentagon was moving warships into place in the eastern Mediterranean, following the general pattern of U.S. preparations before a strike. Reminiscent of George W. Bush's push for war with Iraq a decade earlier, President Barack Obama even gave a speech at the United Nations unequivocally blaming the Bashar al-Assad regime for the attack, which Obama said would undermine the international norm against chemical weapons if left unchecked.

"If we fail to act," Obama told the UN, "the Assad regime will see no reason to stop using chemical weapons. As the ban against these weapons erodes, other tyrants will have no reason to think twice about acquiring poison gas, and using them."

Yet, while pushing hard for military action, officials were also attempting to assure a war-weary American public that the U.S. intervention in Syria was necessary and right, and perhaps more importantly, that it would be limited in scope. The attack would primarily serve as punishment for Syria's alleged use of chemical weapons and as a deterrent, according to a report in the Washington Post citing administration officials, seeking to keep the U.S. from deeper involvement in the Syrian civil war.

But there were a couple major problems for the U.S. war planners, one of which being the widespread opposition to a military strike among the American people, with only nine percent supporting an attack and 60 percent saying Congress should vote against authorizing President Obama's war plans. Another dilemma was the considerable doubt surrounding the main *casus belli* for the war the fact

that there was no hard evidence to implicate the Bashar al-Assad regime in the Aug. 21 chemical attack.

It was this chemical attack that Obama claimed must be responded to, having crossed a proverbial “red line” that the President had earlier stated would compel the United States to intervene in the conflict. A senior Obama administration official said on Aug. 25 that “based on the reported number of victims, reported symptoms of those who were killed or injured, witness accounts and other facts gathered by open sources, the U.S. intelligence community, and international partners, there is very little doubt at this point that a chemical weapon was used by the Syrian regime against civilians in this incident.”

Independent experts, however, pointed out that there was no way to be able to decisively assign blame simply based on the visual evidence provided by YouTube videos without forensic data. “It’s very difficult from a visual context to ascertain what’s going on,” said Federation of American Scientists fellow Charles Blair.

“In fact, it’s impossible to draw any sort of definitive conclusion,” he continued. “Some governments have relied entirely on visual confirmation to assert that the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons but essentially what you need to do is you need to get people from the UN, for the prohibition of chemical weapons to go to these sites and conduct highly rigorous scientific investigations.”

But the U.S. government seemed reluctant to even give that investigation a chance to succeed, with an Obama administration official saying that a Syrian promise to allow United Nations inspectors access to the site of the attack was “too late to be credible.” Essentially, the U.S. was itself undermining the credibility of the UN investigation and pre-empting its findings with its own “assessments” relying on appeals to “conscience” and “common sense.”

As Secretary of State John Kerry stated on Aug. 26, “while investigators are gathering additional evidence on the ground, our understanding of what has already happened in Syria is grounded in facts informed by conscience and guided by common sense.” Pointing out that the victims’ symptoms “strongly indicate[d] that chemical weapons were used in Syria,” Kerry noted that “the Syrian regime maintains custody of these chemical weapons.”

“We know that the Syrian regime has the capacity to do this with rockets. We know that the regime has been determined to clear the opposition from those very places where the attacks took place. And with our own eyes, we have all of us become witnesses,” he said.

But while the United States was insisting that the regime in Damascus was responsible, based on dubious reasoning and inconclusive evidence, Assad denied any involvement, and Russia publicly raised the possibility of a “false flag” operation by the Syrian anti-government rebels.

“No one doubts that poison gas was used in Syria,” wrote Russian President Vladimir Putin in a New York Times op-ed. “But there is every reason to believe it was used not by the Syrian Army, but by opposition forces, to provoke intervention by their powerful foreign patrons, who would be siding with the fundamentalists.”

As Russia’s Ambassador to the UN Vitaly Churkin asked, “Why would the Syrian government use chemical weapons on August 21? To cross the red line drawn by Washington and invite a missile strike upon itself? Why would the opposition use chemical weapons? Exactly because of the red line. To provoke foreign military intervention in the Syrian conflict.”

Indeed, it was this logic that seemed to make the most sense, not the narrative being promoted by Official Washington. “Firstly, the timing is odd, bordering on suspicious,” wrote BBC correspondent Frank Gardner. “Why would the Assad government, which has recently been retaking ground from the rebels, carry out a chemical attack while UN weapons inspectors are in the country?”

Former UN weapons inspector Rolf Ekeus agreed, telling Reuters, “It would be very peculiar if it was the government to do this at the exact moment the international inspectors come into the country. At the least, it wouldn’t be very clever.”

Several other commentators, including former Rep. Ron Paul, R-Texas, and Col. Lawrence Wilkerson, the former chief of staff to Secretary of State Colin Powell, openly discussed whether the attack was in fact a “false flag” operation intended to drag the United States into the conflict.

Wilkerson speculated on Current TV that it was an “Israeli false flag operation” claiming that the evidence tying the attack to the Syrian regime was “really flaky.” Congressman Paul said on Fox News, “I think it’s a false flag,” noting that it could have been perpetrated by al-Qaeda.

Moscow argued that the attack was a provocation by the Syrian anti-government rebels, with an official Russian analysis concluding that “home-made” sarin had been used in Syria. The sarin was likely delivered by a crudely made missile, most likely belonging to the rebels.

This version of events was also backed up by German intelligence, which concluded based on intercepted phone calls that Assad did not personally order

the chemical weapons attack, that he was not involved either in the August attack or in other instances when government forces had allegedly used chemical weapons.

Western media and leading human organizations, however, rallied to the cause of U.S. military intervention, producing spurious investigative reports that purportedly proved the claim that Assad's forces had carried out the attack.

A report published by Human Rights Watch based primarily on interviews with survivors, video footage and GPS data concluded that the "evidence strongly suggests that Syrian government forces were responsible for chemical weapons attacks on two Damascus suburbs on August 21, 2013."

HRW's 22-page report purportedly retraced the flight paths of two recovered rockets to a Syrian military base. This analysis received front-page coverage in the New York Times, and was touted as incontrovertible evidence of Assad's guilt, providing the U.S. with the pretext it needed to intervene.

But questions soon arose regarding this analysis, including the fact that leading scientists concluded that one of the recovered devices had a maximum range of about 2 to 3 kilometers, and thus could not have originated from the area HRW claimed. Further, U.S. intelligence experts, such as former CIA analyst Larry Johnson, noted that the recovered rockets were not part of the Syrian military's arsenal.

The New York Times then grudgingly backed off its earlier embrace of the HRW analysis.

Now, following a new report by veteran journalist Seymour Hersh, we have even stronger evidence that the entire U.S. case for war last summer was likely based on false pretenses. Citing U.S. and UK government sources, Hersh claims that British intelligence findings were sent to the Pentagon's Joint Chiefs of Staff in early September intended to send the Americans a message that "We're being set up," in order to drag the West into the conflict in Syria.

According to Hersh, "This account made sense of a terse message a senior official in the CIA sent in late August: 'It was not the result of the current regime. UK & US know this.')" Hersh reported that in fact, the sarin that was recovered from Ghouta was not the kind of sarin that exists in the Syrian arsenal, speculating instead that it was obtained from Turkey and carried out by the Syrian rebel group al-Nusra.

Hersh reported that the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency issued a classified memorandum two months before the Aug. 21 attack which stated that al-Nusra was operating a sarin production cell. According to the DIA, it was "the most

advanced sarin plot since al-Qaida's pre-9/11 effort." Further, "Turkey and Saudi-based chemical facilitators were attempting to obtain sarin precursors in bulk, tens of kilograms, likely for the anticipated large scale production effort in Syria."

The new revelations, laid out by Hersh in a 5,700-word article in the London Review of Books, provide fairly solid substantiation for the earlier skepticism shown by governments such as Russia. All of this leads to a number of important lessons that are especially important to consider as we lurch forward into another crisis, this time about a thousand miles northwest of Syria, in Ukraine.

Lesson number one is that Russia is sometimes right. Despite the fact that President Putin has been thoroughly vilified in the U.S. political establishment and western media, it appears that at least when it came to the sarin attack in Syria, he may in fact have been on to something when he claimed that the gas "was used not by the Syrian Army, but by opposition forces."

If he was right about that, who knows, perhaps he is also right when he claims that the people who recently took power in Kiev are "nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russophobes and anti-Semites" who "resorted to terror, murder and riots" in order "to seize power and would stop short of nothing" in order to do so.

Another lesson is that leading human rights organizations are sometimes not to be trusted. Although groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch often produce high-quality independent reporting on important issues, including hard-hitting analyses of U.S. human rights violations, too often their reporting is colored by an agenda that advocates military intervention based on the relatively new international doctrine of "responsibility to protect," or R2P.

Also, the Syrian case study teaches us that the United States is sometimes more interested in finding a justification for intervention than it is in finding the truth about war crimes. While the U.S. government was more than willing to seize on any and every possible piece of circumstantial evidence tying the sarin attack to the Assad regime, now that considerable evidence is pointing to a different culprit, suddenly the moral outrage over the tragic deaths of hundreds of civilians is nowhere to be found.

As John Kerry said last August, after watching the videos of the chemical attack, he found it "really hard to express in words the human suffering that they lay out before us."

"As a father," he said, "I can't get the image out of my head of a man who held up his dead child, wailing while chaos swirled around him; the images of entire families dead in their beds without a drop of blood or even a visible wound;

bodies contorting in spasms; human suffering that we can never ignore or forget.”

But now that the actual evidence about the horrendous war crime doesn't fit into the narrative that had been promoted by Washington, the silence is deafening and the evidence is duly ignored, all of which leads to a climate of impunity for the war criminals who were most likely responsible for the Aug. 21 attack.

The greatest lesson though might be that the initial reaction of the American people to the Obama administration's push for war against Syria was the correct reaction. Regardless of political stripes, Americans were overwhelmingly against U.S. military intervention, which many pundits ascribed to being “war-weary,” but what antiwar activist Medea Benjamin called instead being “war-wise.”

Perhaps Americans are just weary of being manipulated into unnecessary, costly and potentially disastrous interventions based on lies, obfuscations, selective intelligence and shameless, manipulative appeals to conscience and morality.

Nat Parry is the co-author of *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush.* [This story is cross-posted at Essential Opinion.]
