

A Call for Proof on Syria-Sarin Attack

One reason why Official Washington continues to insist that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad “must go” is that he supposedly “gassed his own people” with sarin on Aug. 21, 2013, but the truth of that allegation has never been established and is in growing doubt, U.S. intelligence veterans point out.

[Updated on Dec. 23 with new signers.]

MEMORANDUM FOR: U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, and Foreign Minister of Russia Sergey Lavrov

FROM: Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS)

SUBJECT: Sarin Attack at Ghouta on Aug. 21, 2013

In a Memorandum of Oct. 1, 2013, we asked each of you to make public the intelligence upon which you based your differing conclusions on who was responsible for the sarin chemical attack at Ghouta, outside Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013. On Dec. 10, 2015, Eren Erdem, a member of parliament in Turkey, citing official documents, blamed Turkey for facilitating the delivery of sarin to rebels in Syria.

Mr. Kerry, you had blamed the Syrian government. Mr. Lavrov, you had described the sarin as “homemade” and suggested anti-government rebels were responsible. Each of you claimed to have persuasive evidence to support your conclusion.

Neither of you responded directly to our appeal to make such evidence available to the public, although, Mr. Lavrov, you came close to doing so. In a speech at the UN on Sept. 26, 2013, you made reference to the views we presented in our VIPS Memorandum, Is Syria a Trap?, sent to President Obama three weeks earlier.

Pointing to strong doubt among chemical weapons experts regarding the evidence adduced to blame the government of Syria for the sarin attack, you also referred to the “open letter sent to President Obama by former operatives of the CIA and the Pentagon,” in which we expressed similar doubt.

Mr. Kerry, on Aug. 30, 2013, you blamed the Syrian government, publicly and repeatedly, for the sarin attack. But you failed to produce the kind of “Intelligence Assessment” customarily used to back up such claims.

We believe that this odd lack of a formal “Intelligence Assessment” is explained by the fact that our former colleagues did not believe the evidence justified your charges and that, accordingly, they resisted pressure to “fix the intelligence around the policy,” as was done to “justify” the attack on Iraq.

Intelligence analysts were telling us privately (and we told the President in our Memorandum of Sept. 6, 2013) that, contrary to what you claimed, “the most reliable intelligence shows that Bashar al-Assad was **not** responsible for the chemical incident that killed and injured Syrian civilians on August 21.”

This principled dissent from these analysts apparently led the White House to create a new art form, a “Government Assessment,” to convey claims that the government in Damascus was behind the sarin attack. It was equally odd that the newly minted genre of report offered not one item of verifiable evidence.

(We note that you used this new art form “Government (not Intelligence) Assessment” a second time again apparently to circumvent intelligence analysts’ objections. On July 22, 2014, just five days after the shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, after the media asked you to come up with evidence supporting the charges you leveled against “pro-Russian separatists” on the July 20 Sunday talk shows, you came up with the second, of only two, “Government Assessment.” Like the one on the chemical attack in Syria, the assessment provided meager fare when it comes to verifiable evidence.)

Claims and Counterclaims

Speaking to the United Nations General Assembly on Sept. 24, 2013, President Obama asserted: “It’s an insult to human reason and to the legitimacy of this institution to suggest that anyone other than the [Syrian] regime carried out this attack [at Ghouta].”

Mr. Lavrov, that same day you publicly complained that U.S. officials kept claiming “‘the Syrian regime,’ as they call it, is guilty of the use of chemical weapons, without providing comprehensive proof.” Two days later you told the U.N. General Assembly you had given Mr. Kerry “the latest compilation of evidence, which was an analysis of publicly available information.” You also told the Washington Post, “This evidence is not something revolutionary. It’s available on the Internet.”

On the Internet? Mr. Kerry, if your staff avoided calling your attention to Internet reports about Turkish complicity in the sarin attack of Aug. 21, 2013, because they lacked confirmation, we believe you can now consider them largely confirmed.

Documentary Evidence

Addressing fellow members of parliament on Dec. 10, 2015, Turkish MP Eren Erdem from the Republican People’s Party (a reasonably responsible opposition group) confronted the Turkish government on this key issue. Waving a copy of “Criminal Case Number 2013/120,” Erdem referred to official reports and electronic

evidence documenting a smuggling operation with Turkish government complicity.

In an interview with RT four days later, Erdem said Turkish authorities had acquired evidence of sarin gas shipments to anti-government rebels in Syria, and did nothing to stop them.

The General Prosecutor in the Turkish city of Adana opened a criminal case, and an indictment stated “chemical weapons components” from Europe “were to be seamlessly shipped via a designated route through Turkey to militant labs in Syria.” Erdem cited evidence implicating the Turkish Minister of Justice and the Turkish Mechanical and Chemical Industry Corporation in the smuggling of sarin.

The Operation

According to Erdem, the 13 suspects arrested in raids carried out against the plotters were released just a week after they were indicted, and the case was closed – shut down by higher authority. Erdem told RT that the sarin attack at Ghouta took place shortly after the criminal case was closed and that the attack probably was carried out by jihadists with sarin gas smuggled through Turkey.

Small wonder President Erdogan has accused Erdem of “treason.” It was not Erdem’s first “offense.” Earlier, he exposed corruption by Erdogan family members, for which a government newspaper branded him an “American puppet, Israeli agent, a supporter of the terrorist PKK and the instigator of a coup.”

In our Sept. 6, 2013 Memorandum for the President, we reported that coordination meetings had taken place just weeks before the sarin attack at a Turkish military garrison in Antakya just 15 miles from the Syrian border with Syria and 55 miles from its largest city, Aleppo.

In Antakya, senior Turkish, Qatari and U.S. intelligence officials were said to be coordinating plans with Western-sponsored rebels, who were told to expect an imminent escalation in the fighting due to “a war-changing development.” This, in turn, would lead to a U.S.-led bombing of Syria, and rebel commanders were ordered to prepare their forces quickly to exploit the bombing, march into Damascus, and remove the Assad government.

A year before, the New York Times reported that the Antakya area had become a “magnet for foreign jihadis, who are flocking into Turkey to fight holy war in Syria.” The Times quoted a Syrian opposition member based in Antakya, saying the Turkish police were patrolling this border area “with their eyes closed.”

And, Mr. Lavrov, while the account given by Eren Erdem before the Turkish Parliament puts his charges on the official record, a simple Google search including “Antakya” shows that you were correct in stating the Internet contains

a wealth of contemporaneous detail supporting Erdem's disclosures.

Mr. Kerry, while in Moscow on Dec. 15, you said to a Russian interviewer that Syrian President Assad "has gassed his people I mean, gas hasn't been used in warfare formally for years for and gas is outlawed, but Assad used it."

Three days later The Washington Post dutifully repeated the charge about Assad's supposed killing "his own people with chemical weapons." U.S. media have made this the conventional wisdom. The American people are not fully informed. There has been no mainstream media reporting on Turkish MP Erdem's disclosures.

Renewed Appeal

We ask you again, Secretary Kerry and Foreign Minister Lavrov, to set the record straight on this important issue. The two of you have demonstrated an ability to work together on important matters the Iran nuclear deal, for example and have acknowledged a shared interest in defeating ISIS, which clearly is **not** Turkish President Erdogan's highest priority. Indeed, his aims are at cross-purposes to those wishing to tamp down the violence in Syria.

After the shoot-down of Russia's bomber on Nov. 24, President Vladimir Putin put Russian forces in position to retaliate the next time, and told top defense officials, "Any targets threatening our [military] group or land infrastructure must be immediately destroyed." We believe that warning should be taken seriously. What matters, though, is what Erdogan believes.

There is a good chance Erdogan will be dismissive of Putin's warning, as long as the Turkish president believes he can depend on NATO always to react in the supportive way it did after the shoot-down.

One concrete way to disabuse him of the notion that he has *carte blanche* to create incidents that could put not only Turkey, but also the U.S., on the verge of armed conflict with Russia, would be for the U.S. Secretary of State and the Russian Foreign Minister to coordinate a statement on what we believe was a classic false-flag chemical attack on Aug. 21, 2013, facilitated by the Turks and aimed at mousetrapping President Obama into a major attack on Syria.

One of our colleagues, a seasoned analyst of Turkish affairs, put it this way: "Erdogan is even more dangerous if he thinks that he now has NATO license to bait Russia, as he did with the shoot-down. I don't think NATO is willing to give him that broader license, but he is a loose cannon."

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