

# The Syrian-Sarin ‘False Flag’ Lesson

**Exclusive:** Amid Official Washington’s desire to censor non-official news on the Internet, it’s worth remembering how the lack of mainstream skepticism almost led the U.S. into a war on Syria, says ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

A review of events leading to the very edge of full-blown U.S. shock-and-awe on Syria three years ago provides a case study with important lessons for new policymakers as they begin to arrive in Washington.

It is high time to expose the whys and wherefores of the almost-successful attempt to mousetrap President Barack Obama into an open attack on Syria three years ago. Little-known and still less appreciated is the last-minute intervention of Russian President Vladimir Putin as *deus ex machina* rescuing Obama from the corner into which he had let himself be painted.

Accumulating evidence offers persuasive proof that Syrian rebels supported by Turkish intelligence – not Syrian Army troops – bear responsibility for the infamous sarin nerve-gas attack killing hundreds of people on Aug. 21, 2013 in Ghouta, a suburb of Damascus. The incident bears all the earmarks of a false-flag attack.

But U.S. and other “rebel-friendly” media outlets wasted no time in offering “compelling” evidence from “social media” – which Secretary of State John Kerry described as an “extraordinary tool” – to place the onus on the Syrian government.

However, as the war juggernaut started rolling toward war, enter Putin from stage right with an offer difficult for Obama to refuse – guaranteed destruction of Syria’s chemical weapons on a U.S. ship outfitted for such purpose. This cheated Washington’s neocon mousetrap-setters out of their war on Syria. They would get back at Putin six months later by orchestrating an anti-Russian coup in Kiev.

But the play-by-play in U.S.-Russian relations in summer 2013 arguably surpasses in importance even the avoidance of an overt U.S. assault on Syria. Thus, it is important to appreciate the lessons drawn by Russian leaders from the entire experience.

## Putting Cheese in the Mousetrap

So, let us recall that on Dec. 10, 2015, just over one year ago, Turkish Member

of Parliament Eren Erdem testified about how Turkey's intelligence service helped deliver sarin precursors to rebels in Syria.

The Official Story blaming Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was already collapsing – largely discredited by reports in independent media and by investigative journalist Seymour Hersh – though it remained widely accepted in the U.S. mainstream media which repeatedly cited the case as the moment when Assad crossed Obama's "red line" against using chemical weapons and Obama had failed to back up his threat.

But Erdem took the debunking of the "official" tale to a public and official level. Based on government documents from a Turkish court, which he waved before his MP colleagues, Erdem poured ice water on the West's long-running excited belief that Assad had "gassed his own people."

But, alas, if you do not understand Turkish, or if you missed this story in the *Belfast Telegraph* of Dec. 14 or if you don't read some independent Web sites or if you believe that RT publishes only Russian "propaganda," this development may still come as a huge surprise, for Erdem's revelations appeared in no other English-language newspaper.

So, those malnourished by "mainstream media" may be clueless about the scary reality that Obama came within inches of letting himself be mousetrapped into ordering U.S. armed forces to mount a shock-and-awe-type attack on Syria in late summer 2013.

### **Turkish MP Testimony**

Addressing fellow members of the Turkish Parliament, Turkish MP Erdem from the opposition Republican People's Party directly confronted his government on this key issue. Waving a copy of "Criminal Case Number 2013/120," Erdem described official Turkish 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 evidence of sarin gas-related 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. Small

wonder that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan immediately accused Erdem of “treason.”

Erdem testified that the 13 suspects, who had been arrested in police raids on the plotters, were released just a week after they were indicted. The case was shut down abruptly 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.

Erdem’s disclosures were not entirely new. More than two years before Erdem’s brave actions, in a Memorandum for the President by the Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity of Sept. 6, 2013, we had reported that coordination meetings had taken place just weeks before the sarin attack at a Turkish military garrison in Antakya, some 15 miles from the border with Syria.

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 earlier, 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.”

### **Kerry Dancing**

It is a safe bet that Secretary of State John Kerry’s aides briefed him in timely fashion on Erdem’s revelations. This may account for why, on a visit to Moscow on Dec. 15, 2015 (four days after Erdem’s testimony), Kerry chose to repeat the meme that Assad “gassed his people; I mean, gas hasn’t been used in warfare formally for years and gas is outlawed, but Assad used it.”

Three days later, The Washington Post dutifully echoed Kerry, charging that Assad had killed “his own people with chemical weapons.” And this charge remains a staple in U.S. corporate media, where Erdem’s testimony is still nowhere to be found.

Kerry also didn’t want to admit that he had grossly misled the American people on an issue of war and peace. Just days after the Aug. 21, 2013 sarin attack at Ghouta, Kerry and his neocon allies displayed their acumen in following George

W. Bush's dictum: "You got to keep repeating things over and over and over again for the truth to sink in, to kind of catapult the propaganda."

On Aug. 30, Kerry solemnly claimed, no fewer than 35 times, "We know" the Assad government was responsible for the sarin deaths, finally giving Kerry and the neocons their *casus belli*.

But on Aug. 31, with U.S. intelligence analysts expressing their own doubts that Assad's forces were responsible, Obama put the brakes on the juggernaut toward war, saying he would first seek approval from Congress. Kerry, undaunted, wasted no time in lobbying Congress for war.

On Sept. 1, Kerry told ABC's George Stephanopoulos that briefings in Congress had already begun and that "we are not going to lose this vote." On Sept. 3, Kerry was back at it with a bravura performance before the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, whose leaders showed in their own remarks the degree to which they were lusting for an attack on Syria.

The following offers a taste for Kerry's "protest-too-much" testimony: "the Assad regime, and only, undeniably, the Assad regime, unleashed an outrageous chemical attack against its own citizens. ... In their lust to hold on to power, [they] were willing to infect the air of Damascus with a poison that killed innocent mothers and fathers and hundreds of their children, their lives all snuffed out by gas in the early morning of August 21st.

"Now, some people here and there, amazingly, have questioned the evidence of this assault on conscience. I repeat here again today that only the most willful desire to avoid reality can assert that this did not occur as described or that the regime did not do it. It did happen, and the Assad regime did it.

"Within minutes of the attack, the social media exploded with horrific images of men and women, the elderly, and children sprawled on a hospital floor with no wounds, no blood, but all dead. Those scenes of human chaos and desperation were not contrived. They were real. No one could contrive such a scene. ...

"And as we debate, the world wonders, not whether Assad's regime executed the worst chemical weapons attack of the 21st century – that fact I think is now beyond question – the world wonders whether the United States of America will consent through silence to standing aside while this kind of brutality is allowed to happen without consequence."

Kerry's added a credulity-stretching attempt to play down the role and effectiveness of Al Qaeda in Syria, and exaggerated the strength of the "moderate" rebels there. This drew unusually prompt and personal criticism from Russian President Vladimir Putin.

## Putin: "Kerry Lies"

Rarely does it happen that a president of a major country calls the head diplomat of a rival state a "liar," but that is the label Russian President Putin chose for Kerry on the day after his congressional testimony. Referring to Kerry during a televised meeting of the Russian Presidential Human Rights Council on Sept. 4, Putin addressed the sarin issue in these words:

"It is simply absurd to imagine that Assad used chemical weapons, given that he is gaining ground. After all, this is a weapon of last resort." Putin claimed, correctly, that Assad had "encircled his adversaries in some places and was finishing them off."

Putin continued: "I watched the congressional debates. A congressman asked Mr. Kerry, 'Is Al Qaeda present there? I've heard they have gained momentum.' He replied, 'No. I can tell you earnestly, they are not.'"

Putin continued, "The main combat unit, the so-called Al-Nusra, is an Al-Qaeda subdivision. They [the Americans] know about this. This was very unpleasant and surprising for me. After all ... we talk with them, and we assume they are decent people. But he is lying, and he knows he is lying. That is sad. ...

"We are currently focused on the fact that the U.S. Congress and Senate are discussing authorization for use of force. ... As you know, Syria is not attacking the U.S., so there is no question of self-defense; and anything else, lacking U.N. authorization, is an act of aggression. ... we are all glued to our televisions, waiting to see if they will get the approval of Congress."

On the following day, Sept. 5, Obama arrived in St. Petersburg for a G-20 summit, with ample reason to suspect that Putin was right about Kerry lying about the sarin attack – the President having been warned the previous week by National Intelligence Director James Clapper that there was no "slam-dunk" evidence against the Assad regime. So, Obama agreed to Putin's offer to get Syria to surrender its chemical weapons for destruction, and the war fever began to abate.

Curiously, Kerry himself was kept in the dark about the Putin-Obama agreement and was still making the case for war on Sept. 9. At the very end of a press conference that day in London, Kerry was asked whether there was anything Assad could do to prevent a U.S. attack. Kerry answered that Assad could give up every one of his chemical weapons, but "he isn't about to do that; it can't be done."

Still later on Sept. 9, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and his Syrian counterpart announced that Syria had agreed to allow all its chemical weapons to be removed and destroyed. As soon as Kerry arrived back in Washington, he was

sent off to Geneva to sign the deal that Obama had cut directly with Putin. (All Syria's chemical weapons have now been destroyed.)

Yet, two weeks later, Obama was still reading from the neocon teleprompter. In his formal address to the UN General Assembly on Sept. 24, 2013, he declared, "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 [sarin] attack."

### **More Candor With Goldberg**

Earlier this year, though, Obama was bragging to his informal biographer, Jeffrey Goldberg of *The Atlantic*, about having thwarted planning for open war on Syria, even though that required disregarding the advice of virtually all his foreign-policy advisers.

One gem fished out by Goldberg was Obama's admission that DNI Clapper had warned him in late August (a week before he went to St. Petersburg and a month before his U.N. speech) that the evidence pinning blame on Damascus for the sarin attack was hardly airtight.

Goldberg wrote that Clapper interrupted the President's morning intelligence briefing "to make clear that the intelligence on Syria's use of sarin gas, while robust, was not a 'slam dunk.'" Clapper chose his words carefully, echoing the language that CIA Director George Tenet used to falsely assure President George W. Bush that the case could be made to convince the American people that Iraq was hiding WMDs.

Even though Obama continued to dissemble and the mainstream U.S. news media has continued to treat Syria's "guilt" in the sarin attack as "flat fact," the neocons did not get their war on Syria. I describe an unusually up-front-and-personal experience of their chagrin under the subtitle "Morose at CNN" in "How War on Syria Lost Its Way."

Nor did neocon disappointment subside in subsequent years. Sen. Bob Corker, R-Tennessee, Chair of the Foreign Relations Committee, has remained among the most outspoken critics of Obama's decision to cancel the attack on Syria in 2013.

On Dec. 3, 2014, Corker complained that, while the U.S. military was poised to launch a "very targeted, very brief" operation against the Syrian government for using chemical weapons, Obama called off the attack at the last minute.

Corker's criticism was scathing: "I think the worst moment in U.S. foreign policy since I've been here, as far as signaling to the world where we were as a nation, was August a year ago when we had a 10-hour operation that was getting

ready to take place in Syria but it didn't happen. ... In essence and – I'm sorry to be slightly rhetorical – we jumped in Putin's lap.”

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