

The Mistaken Guns of Last August

Exclusive: After hundreds of Syrians died from Sarin gas last summer, Secretary of State Kerry insisted the U.S. had solid intelligence on the locations of the Syrian government's launch sites used in the attack, thus justifying a U.S. military retaliation which was only narrowly averted. Now, those U.S. government's claims have collapsed, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Secretary of State John Kerry misled the American people last summer when he assured them that the U.S. government knew for a fact that the Syrian government was responsible for the Aug. 21 Sarin gas attack outside Damascus, an incident that killed several hundred people and nearly prompted a U.S. military assault.

A new report by two American weapons specialists, entitled "Possible Implications of Faulty US Technical Intelligence in the Damascus Nerve Agent Attack," makes clear that the case presented by Kerry and the Obama administration was scientifically impossible because the range of the key rocket carrying Sarin was less than a third of what the U.S. government was claiming.

The two rocket specialists Richard Lloyd, a former United Nations weapons inspector who is now associated with Tesla Laboratories, and Theodore A. Postol, professor of science, technology and national security policy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology concluded that the rocket's limited range meant that it couldn't have come from Syrian government-controlled areas as delineated by a map released by the Obama administration last August.

Yet, in a State Department speech on Aug. 30, Kerry declared – with what can now be called false confidence – that the U.S. government knew that the attack was launched by the Syrian government from its territory. He also implied inaccurately that the U.S. intelligence community was in accord with these claims, and he dissembled when he asserted that the Obama administration had declassified evidence to let the public make up its own mind. No such evidence was ever released.

With the U.S. military poised to bombard Syrian government targets, Kerry declared, "Our intelligence community has carefully reviewed and re-reviewed information regarding this attack and I will tell you it has done so more than mindful of the Iraq experience. We will not repeat that moment. Accordingly, we have taken unprecedented steps to declassify and make facts available to people who can judge for themselves."

However, while Kerry made reference to alleged phone intercepts and other alleged evidence of Syrian government guilt, none of it was ever released for independent analysis. Instead, the U.S. government put out a map showing where rockets carrying nerve gas supposedly had landed in parts of Damascus controlled by the rebels and contending that the launch sites had been in government-controlled areas.

“We know where the rockets were launched from and at what time,” Kerry said. “We know where they landed and when. We know rockets came only from regime-controlled areas and went only to opposition-controlled or contested neighborhoods.”

Kerry also hyped the emotional case for war by presenting claims about casualty totals that now appear to have been wildly exaggerated and based on more dubious intelligence.

“The United States government now knows that at least 1,429 Syrians were killed in this attack, including at least 426 children,” Kerry said, citing a number that the Wall Street Journal later reported was derived from applying facial recognition software to videos of bodies posted on YouTube by the Syrian opposition and then subtracting bodies in bloody shrouds. This bizarre methodology produced the number 1,429, which was about four times higher than numbers provided by doctors on the scene.

But Kerry pitched the story to the American people as lacking any doubt regarding the guilt of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. “This is what Assad did to his own people,” Kerry declared. Then, in what was clearly a call to war, Kerry added, “So now that we know what we know, the question we must all be asking is: What will we do?”

Though President Barack Obama avoided some of the specific falsehoods contained in Kerry’s Aug. 30 speech, he pronounced the same conclusion about the attack coming from a government-controlled area and mocked skeptics of his administration’s case as essentially irrational.

“The evidence is overwhelming that the Assad regime used such weapons on August 21st,” Obama said during his Sept. 24, 2013 [speech](#) to the UN General Assembly. “These rockets were fired from a regime-controlled neighborhood, and landed in opposition neighborhoods. It’s an insult to human reason – and to the legitimacy of this institution – to suggest that anyone other than the regime carried out this attack.”

The Crucial Maps

It was this proclaimed certainty from Kerry and the White House that persuaded

some Americans, especially those in Official Washington, that the Assad regime was responsible for the Sarin gas attack. Other possibilities, such as an intentional provocation by radical Islamist rebels or a tragic accident, were shunted outside the borders of respectable debate.

The conventional wisdom was solidified in September when Human Rights Watch, which had been advocating for U.S. military intervention in Syria, and the New York Times produced another map supposedly tracing the flight paths of two rockets recovered by UN inspectors back to alleged launch sites, 9.5 kilometers away at a Syrian military base.

But holes in that analysis quickly appeared – at least at a few Internet sites – since only one of the rockets was found to contain Sarin and the other rocket not only was clean of chemical weapons but also clipped a building in its descent making any precise calculation of its point of origin impossible.

The HRW/NYT “vector analysis” ultimately collapsed when independent analyses were performed on the one recovered rocket that did carry Sarin and had landed east of Damascus in the Zamalka neighborhood. Munitions experts calculated that its range was probably about two kilometers, not even a third of the distance needed to have originated at the Syrian military base northwest of Damascus.

In the latest analysis dated Jan. 14, rocket specialists Lloyd and Postol concluded that the rocket also could not have come from anywhere in what the Obama administration’s original map had delineated as regime-controlled areas. The scientists noted that an independent UN assessment reached the same conclusion on the missile’s range.

“This indicates that these munitions could not possibly have been fired at east Ghouta (the suburb that includes Zamalka) from the ‘heart,’ or from the eastern edge, of the Syrian government controlled area shown in the (U.S.) intelligence map published by the White House on August 30, 2013.”

Lloyd and Postol then noted the serious policy implications of their findings: “This mistaken intelligence could have led to an unjustified US military action based on false intelligence. Whatever the reasons for the egregious errors in the intelligence, the source of these errors needs to be explained. If the source of these errors is not identified, the procedures that led to this intelligence failure will go uncorrected, and the chances of a future policy disaster will grow with certainty.”

Failed Checks and Balances

Yet, also troubling was how Official Washington, including the mainstream news media, again rushed to judgment on an issue of war or peace without responsibly

and skeptically assessing the government's evidence.

While Kerry and Obama in speeches on Syria both referenced the painful experience of the Iraq War launched in 2003 based on bogus intelligence about Iraqi WMD and Saddam Hussein's ties to al-Qaeda the only lesson that Kerry and Obama seemed to have learned was to withhold as much of the supposed "evidence" as possible from the public.

Instead of actually declassifying evidence and making it available so people could judge for themselves, the administration released a "Government Assessment," which contained not a shred of proof regarding the Syrian government's guilt that could be independently reviewed by the public. Kerry also left the misleading impression that there was a consensus in the U.S. intelligence community regarding Syrian government guilt.

But I was told that a number of U.S. analysts held strong doubts about who was responsible, which was why the Obama administration didn't release a National Intelligence Estimate, which would have listed various dissents. Rather, the White House put out what amounted to a "white paper" filled with assertions but lacking any actual evidence and concealing the degree of disagreement among U.S. intelligence analysts.

Now, it turns out that Kerry and Obama were simply wrong in their certitude about where the Sarin-laden rocket originated, since the missile lacked the range to fly from government-controlled areas to the impact site in Zamalka.

There is the other unsettling reality that a decade after the Iraq War when the New York Times and other major publications published false stories about Iraq's WMD Official Washington's institutional checks and balances again failed to expose the government lies and distortions on Syria in a timely fashion.

Indeed, a prominent non-governmental organization (Human Rights Watch) and a leading news outlet (the New York Times) compounded the Obama administration's deceptions by extrapolating on the false information and thus solidifying a misguided conventional wisdom. Skepticism about the U.S. government's claims regarding the Syrian Sarin attack was largely marginalized to Internet sites, such as WhoGhouta and our own Consortiumnews.com.

More than three months after nearly contributing to another U.S. military strike based on false intelligence, the New York Times grudgingly admitted its error albeit buried 18 paragraphs into an inside-the-paper story (compared to the front-page treatment of its high-profile allegation of the Syrian government's guilt).

The only positives from this Syria replay of the Iraq lies are that the

conflict-weary American people were not stampeded into another rush to war; some in Congress did voice restraint rather than bombast, although some of the Republican criticism may have come from their knee-jerk partisan reaction to oppose whatever President Obama was proposing; and ultimately Obama did seek a diplomatic solution in which the Russian government brokered a deal in which Assad agreed to surrender his chemical weapons (while still denying responsibility for the Aug. 21 attack).

Yet, if Secretary Kerry and other war hawks in the Obama administration had had their way, the United States would have launched military attacks on another Mideast country based on what now appears to have been false intelligence, if not outright lies.

[For more details on this issue, see Consortiumnews.com's "[NYT Replays Its Iraq Fiasco in Syria](#)." For our early reporting on the Syrian chemical weapons attack, see: "[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](#).
