

Evidence of Syrian Rebel Use of Chemical Weapons Is Widespread

by William F. Wertz, Jr. and Nancy Spannaus

Sept. 16—The release of the United Nations Inspectors' report today on the results of their investigation of the chemical weapons attack in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta on Aug. 21, will not end the discussion of who has been responsible for such assaults on the Syrian population, no matter what spin is put on that report by news media and others. The inspectors were not tasked with assigning responsibility, but the evidence reported on delivery systems is already being "interpreted" by others as showing government responsibility.

That assertion remains highly doubtful, not only for reasons asserted by the Russian government (e.g., why should a government that's winning militarily use weapons it knows will trigger international retaliation?), but for others as well. Notably, a set of German intercepts of Syrian military communications indicate—as emphasized to *EIR* by informed Washington intelligence sources—a definite *no* from President Assad to an apparent field commander's request to use chemical weapons.

Abundant evidence continues to accumulate that, in fact, it was the Syrian rebels who were responsible. What follows are reports on rebel access to, and/or use of, chemical weapons from media sources, from March through Sept. 9, 2013. For the sake of completeness, we are recapitulating our itemization from the Sept. 6 issue.

March 19: Syrian rebels reportedly used chemical weapons

in the village of Khan al-Assal, near Aleppo. Syrian Information Minister Omran al-Zoubi said that this use of chemical weapons by the militants was the "first act" of the so-called opposition interim government. He also said that Turkey and Qatar bore "legal, moral, and political responsibility" for the deaths of 25 and injury of more than 80 others, when militants fired rockets containing "poisonous gases."

The Russian Foreign Ministry said: "According to reports from Damascus, the use of chemical weapons was registered in the Aleppo province early in the morning of March 19," killing 16 and injuring about 100 others.

March 20: The Assad government asked UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to form an international mission to investigate the use of chemical weapons by terrorists in Syria.

March 23: The *London Telegraph* reported that a "trusted and hitherto reliable" senior Syrian Army source had given British Channel 4 reporter Alex Thompson all the circumstances of the al-Nusra's group's apparent firing of a chlorine-carrying rocket against a Syrian Army checkpoint near Khan al-Assal the week before.

April 27: Syrian Information Minister al-Zoubi accused Turkey of allowing rebels to transport chemical weapons across its border into Syria.

May 6: Swiss Judge Carla Del Ponte, a member of the UN Commission of Investigation on Syria, charged that the Syrian rebels used the nerve



UN Photo/Jean-Marc Ferré

Carla Del Ponte of the UN Commission of Investigation on Syria: Sarin gas "was used on the part of the opposition, the rebels, not by the government authorities."

agent sarin gas, adding that there was no evidence of the Syrian government using chemical weapons. “According to the testimonies we have gathered, the rebels have used chemical weapons, making use of sarin gas,” Del Ponte, former chief prosecutor for two UN tribunals, for the former Yugoslavia and for Rwanda, said in an interview with Swiss radio. “Our investigators have been in neighboring countries interviewing victims, doctors, and field hospitals and, according to their report of last week, which I have seen, there are strong, concrete suspicions, but not yet incontrovertible proof, of the use of sarin gas, from the way the victims were treated,” Del Ponte said in an interview with Swiss-Italian television. “This was used on the part of the opposition, the rebels, not by the government authorities,” she said.

May 24: Farhan Haq, a spokesman for the UN Secretary General, said that Anastasia Popova, correspondent of the Russian State Television and Broadcasting Company, had presented evidence to the UN proving that chemical weapons were used by “armed terrorist groups” (i.e., the rebels) in the Khan al-Assal area last March. The materials included videotapes taken from the site, and testimonies of eyewitnesses, doctors who treated the patients, and experts from Aleppo University.

May 29: Seven members of the Syrian al-Nusra group were detained in Turkey, after police found sarin gas, which was reportedly going to be used in a bomb attack, during a search of the their homes, according to Turkish media. A 2-kg cylinder with sarin gas was found in the home of suspects detained in the southern provinces of Adana and Mersin.

The reports said that the al-Nusra members had been planning a bomb attack for May 30 in Adana. Along with the sarin gas, the police seized handguns, grenades, bullets, and documents during their search. U.S.-trained, retired Lebanese Gen. Hisham Jaber said



Russian Presidential Press Office
Prince Bandar bin Sultan, Chief of Saudi General Intelligence, in Moscow July 31, 2013. He reportedly provided chemical weapons to Syrian rebel groups.

that this is “not the first time” that the deadly chemical weapons were found in the possession of the insurgents. “When we are talking about two kilograms of sarin,” General Jaber stated, “we have to remember that one single gram can kill a person and 2 kg can contaminate and kill a lot of people if they are used in a closed area and against civilians or even the Army.”

June 2: The Syrian Army seized two cylinders of sarin during an operation in the city of Hama, according to Syrian and foreign media reports. The operation was carried out against a militant hideout.

June 2: Iraq’s Defense Ministry said that it had broken up a five-person al-Qaeda cell that was working to produce poison gas for attacks in Iraq and nearby countries, as well as in Europe and North America. The group had built two facilities in Baghdad to produce sarin and mustard gas, using instructions from another al-Qaeda group, government spokesman Mohammed al-Askari said. The Iraqi operation was reportedly carried out in cooperation with an unnamed foreign intelligence service.

BBC quoted Askari as saying that remote-controlled toy planes were also seized at the workshops, which were to have been used to release the chemical agents over the target from a “safe” distance of 1.5 kilometers.

On-the-Scene Interviews

Aug. 29: The online Mint Press News in an article entitled “Syrians: Saudi-supplied rebels behind Chemical Attack,” by Dale Gavlak and Yahya Ababneh reported that many Syrians they interviewed believe that the rebels received chemical weapons via the Saudi intelligence chief, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, and were responsible for the chemical attack in Syria.

Gavlak is a Middle East correspondent for Mint Press News, who has reported from Amman, Jordan, for the Associated Press, NPR, and BBC; Yahya Ababneh is a Jordanian freelance journalist whose articles

have appeared on Amman Net, Saraya News, Gerasa News, and elsewhere

“My son came to me two weeks ago asking what I thought the weapons were that he had been asked to carry,” said Abu Abdel-Moneim of Ghouta, the father of a rebel fighting to unseat Assad. Abdel-Moneim said his son and 12 other rebels were killed inside a tunnel used to store weapons provided by a Saudi militant, known as Abu Ayesha, who was leading a fighting battalion. The father described some of the weapons as having a “tube-like structure,” while others were like huge gas bottles.

Ghouta townspeople said the rebels were using mosques and private houses to sleep, while storing their weapons in tunnels. Abdel-Moneim said his son and the others died during the chemical weapons attack. That same day, the militant group Jabhat al-Nusra, which is linked to al-Qaeda, announced that it would attack civilians in the Assad regime’s heartland of Latakia on Syria’s western coast, in purported retaliation.

“They didn’t tell us what these arms were or how to use them,” complained a female fighter named K. “We didn’t know they were chemical weapons. We never imagined they were chemical weapons.”

“When Saudi Prince Bandar gives such weapons to people, he must give them to those who know how to handle and use them,” she warned. She, like other Syrians, did not want to use their full names for fear of retribution. A well-known rebel leader in Ghouta named J agreed. “Jabhat al-Nusra militants do not cooperate with other rebels, except with fighting on the ground. They do not share secret information. They merely used some ordinary rebels to carry and operate this material,” he said.

“We were very curious about these arms. And unfortunately, some of the fighters handled the weapons improperly and set off the explosions,” J said.

More than a dozen rebels interviewed reported that their salaries came from the Saudi government.

Russian Investigation

Sept. 5: The McClatchy Washington News Bureau posted an article which reported that Russia had investigated the Aleppo sarin gas attack of March 19, and delivered a 100-page report to the UN in July, blaming the Syrian rebels. A statement posted by the Russian Foreign Ministry Sept. 4 said the report included detailed scientific analysis of samples that Russian techni-

cians collected at the site of Khan al-Asal.

Russia said its investigation of the incident was conducted under strict protocols established by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), the international agency that governs adherence to treaties prohibiting the use of chemical weapons. It said samples that Russian technicians had collected had been sent to OPCW-certified laboratories in Russia.

The Russian report is a scientific and technical document, the statement said.

The Foreign Ministry posted the statement shortly after Russian President Vladimir Putin had asked a Russian interviewer what the American reaction would be if evidence showed that Syrian rebels, not the Assad regime, had been behind a chemical weapons attack.

The Khan al-Asal incident was the one that the UN team now probing the Aug. 21 attack was originally assigned to investigate. The Russian statement noted that the investigation had been sidetracked by the sudden focus on the later incident.

The statement’s summary of the report said that neither the munitions nor the poison gas in the Khan al-Asal attack appeared to fit what is possessed by the Syrian government. The report said the shell was not regular Syrian Army ammunition, but was an artisan-type, similar to unguided rocket projectiles produced in the north of Syria by the Bashair Al-Nasr gang.

The Russian analysis found soil and shell samples contained sarin gas not synthesized in an industrial environment, the statement said. The report said the chemical mix did not appear to be a modern version of the deadly agent, but was closer to those used by Western states for producing chemical weapons during World War II.

U.S. Intelligence Professionals

Sept. 6: A memorandum was sent to President Obama by Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS) entitled “Is Syria a Trap?”

Members of the VIPS Steering Group include the following individuals: Thomas Drake, Senior Executive, NSA (former); Philip Giraldi, CIA, Operations Officer (ret.); Matthew Hoh, former Capt., USMC, Iraq & Foreign Service Officer, Afghanistan; Larry Johnson, CIA and State Department (ret.); W. Patrick Lang, Senior Executive and Defense Intelligence Officer, DIA (ret.); David MacMichael, National Intelligence



UN Photo/Evan Schneider

Iranian Ambassador to the UN Javad Zarif said that Syrian “extremist groups” are in possession of chemical weapons.

Council (ret.); Ray McGovern, former US Army infantry/intelligence officer & CIA analyst (ret.); Elizabeth Murray, Deputy National Intelligence Officer for Middle East (ret.); Todd Pierce, US Army Judge Advocate General (ret.); Sam Provance, former Sgt., US Army, Iraq; Coleen Rowley, Division Council & Special Agent, FBI (ret.); and Col. Ann Wright, US Army (ret), Foreign Service Officer (ret.).

In the statement, they reveal the following:

“There is a growing body of evidence from sources in the Middle East—mostly affiliated with the Syrian opposition and its supporters—providing strong circumstantial case that the August 21 chemical incident was a pre-planned provocation by the Syrian opposition and its Saudi and Turkish supporters. The aim is reported to have been to create the kind of incident that would bring the United States into the war.

“We are unaware of any reliable evidence that a Syrian military rocket capable of carrying a chemical agent was fired into the area, the analysts said. In fact, we are aware of no reliable physical evidence to support the claim that this was a result of a strike by a Syrian military unit with expertise in chemical weapons.

“In addition, we have learned that on August 13-14, 2013, Western-sponsored opposition forces in Turkey started advance preparations for a major, irregular mili-

tary surge. Initial meetings between senior opposition military commanders and Qatari, Turkish and U.S. intelligence officials took place at the converted Turkish military garrison in Antakya, Hatay Province, now used as the command center and headquarters of the Free Syrian Army and their foreign sponsors.

“Senior opposition commanders who came from Istanbul pre-briefed the regional commanders on an imminent escalation in the fighting due to a war-changing development, which, in turn, would lead to a U.S.-led bombing of Syria. At operations coordinating meetings at Antakya, attended by senior Turkish, Qatari and U.S. intelligence officials as well as senior commanders of the Syrian opposition, the Syrians were told that the bombing would start in a few days. Opposition leaders were ordered to prepare their forces quickly to exploit the U.S. bombing, march into Damascus, and remove the Bashar al-Assad government.”

Diplomatic Correspondence

Sept. 9: The *Christian Science Monitor* reported that according to leaked diplomatic correspondence acquired by the newspaper, Iran has been warning Washington since July 2012 that Sunni rebels in Syria have acquired chemical weapons, and called on the U.S. to send an immediate and serious warning to rebel groups not to use them. In a letter that was sent sometime in the Spring, Tehran told American officials that, as a “supporter” of the rebels, the U.S. would be held responsible for any rebel use of chemical weapons.

Iran amplified those year-old warnings on Sept. 8. “There is ample intelligence that *takfiri* [apostate] groups are in possession of chemical arms,” Iran’s Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said during a visit to Iraq, according to state-run Press-TV. “Extremists and *takfiris* are a threat to the whole region.” The semi-official Fars News Agency headlined its story: “Iranian FM refutes US claims on Syria’s use of chemical weapons.”

The letter acquired by the *Monitor* references Iranian messages from July 18 and Dec. 1, 2012. According to the translation that accompanies the one-page Farsi document, the letter reads: “Alerting [worrying] news has been published about the preparations of insurgent forces in Syria for using chemical weapons/elements.”

Zarif first revealed that Iran had sent direct warnings to the U.S. via the Swiss Embassy in Tehran, in an interview published Sept. 1 by *Aseman* weekly in Tehran. He said the U.S. never responded to the letter.

Saudi Intelligence

Sept. 9: In a detailed article posted on the World Tribune website, Yosef Bodansky, Senior Editor, *GIS/Defense & Foreign Affairs*, wrote: “On the night of Aug. 20/21, 2013, and the early morning of Aug. 21, 2013—a day before the alleged chemical attack in Ghouta—the jihadists’ Liberating the Capital Front, led by Jabhat al-Nusra, suffered a major defeat during Operation Shield of the Capital.” The main units that suffered the defeat were Jabhat al-Nusra and Liwaa al-Islam.

“When the jihadist Front collapsed, the jihadist leaders decided that only a chemical strike could both stop the advance of the Syrian army and provoke a U.S. military strike that would deliver a strategic victory for the jihadists.... The identification of Liwaa al-Islam under Zahran Alloush as the jihadist force most likely to have conducted the chemical attack raises major questions regarding the Saudi involvement, and particularly that of Intelligence Chief Prince Bandar bin Sultan.”

Bodansky, an Israeli-American political scientist who served as director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare of the U.S. House of Representatives, from 1988 to 2004, cited military and strategic analyst Brig. Ali Maqsood, who told him that the Liwaa al-Islam forces included the so-called Chemical Weapons Front led by Zahran Alloush—the supreme leader of Liwaa al-Islam. That group possesses primitive chemical weapons smuggled from al-Qaeda in Iraq to Jobar, in the vicinity of Damascus. After the al-Nusra and al-Islam groups suffered that defeat, chemical agents were loaded on what Russian intelligence defined as rockets, which were manufactured domestically to carry chemicals. They were launched from an area controlled by Liwaa al-Islam.

“Bodansky says Maqsood is convinced the chemical weapons strike was launched at the behest of Washington and on Washington’s orders. ‘In the end, we can say that this [post-strike U.S.] escalatory rhetoric aims to achieve two things. The first is strengthening [the U.S.] position as leader of the opposition and imposing conditions in preparation for the negotiating table. The



Israeli-American political scientist Yosef Bodansky wrote that the jihadist force most likely to have conducted the chemical attack is Liwaa al-Islam.

second is changing the [power balance on the] ground and stopping the Syrian army’s advance,’ Maqsood told *al-Safir* of Lebanon.”

Zahran Alloush, Bodansky documents, is Saudi intelligence chief Bandar bin Sultan’s man. He is the son of a Saudi-based religious scholar, Sheikh Abdullah Muhammad Alloush, who during the 1980s, worked for then-Saudi intelligence chief Prince Turki al-Faisal in both Afghanistan and Yemen. Zahran Alloush, who was involved with the neo-Salafi/Wahhabi underground in Syria since the 1990s, was jailed, but released in mid-2011 as part of Bashar al-Assad’s amnesty. He then received funds and weapons from Saudi intelligence, allowing him to establish and run Liwaa al-Islam as a major jihadist force.

Sept. 9: Belgian journalist Pierre Piccinin da Prata gave an interview to Italy’s RTL radio, after being released by Syrian al-Nusra rebels after five months in captivity. “This is my moral duty to tell about this. It is not the al-Assad government who has used sarin or any other gas. We are sure about this after we accidentally heard a conversation between rebels. It costs me to say so, because I have supported the Free Syrian Army passionately.”

Fabricated Evidence

Sept. 9: Mother Agnes Mariam el-Salib, Mother Superior of St. James Monastery in Qara, Syria, told *Russia Today* that she has proof that the footage of the



Mother Agnes Mariam el-Sahib, Mother Superior of St. James Monastery in Qara, Syria, said that “the whole affair was a frame-up,” staged and prepared in advance.

alleged chemical attack in Syria was fabricated, and that she will submit her findings to the UN:

“I have carefully studied the footage, and I will present a written analysis on it a bit later. I maintain that the whole affair was a frame-up. It had been staged and prepared in advance with the goal of framing the Syrian government as the perpetrator.

“The key evidence is that Reuters made these files public at 6:05 in the morning. The chemical attack is said to have been launched between 3 and 5 o’clock in the morning in Guta. How is it even possible to collect a dozen different pieces of footage, get more than 200 kids and 300 young people together in one place, give them first aid and interview them on camera, and all that in less than three hours? Is that realistic at all? As someone who works in the news industry, you know how long all of it would take. The bodies of children and teenagers we see in that footage—who were they? What happened to them? Were they killed for real? And how could that happen ahead of the gas attack? Or, if they were not killed, where did they come from? Where are their parents? How come we don’t see any female bodies among all those supposedly dead children?”

“I am not saying that no chemical agent was used in the area—it certainly was. But I insist that the footage that is now being peddled as evidence had been fabricated in advance. I have studied it meticulously, and I will submit my report to the UN Human Rights Commission based in Geneva.”

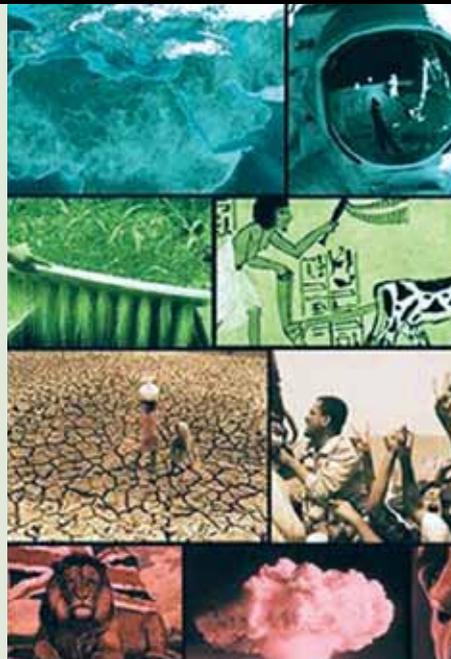
Edward Spannaus contributed to this report.

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