



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on September 5, 2013

# Obama's Case for Syrian Nerve Gas Attack Doesn't Hold Up

In the run-up to the United States' 2003 invasion of Iraq, Sir Richard Dearlove, then the head of Great Britain's Secret Intelligence Service, [wrote](#) that in Washington, "the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy" of regime change in Iraq. Today, many observers believe they are witnessing a replay of this approach as the Obama administration seeks to justify war with Syria.



[McClatchy Washington Bureau](#), for instance, declared that the "administration's public case for attacking Syria is riddled with inconsistencies and hinges mainly on circumstantial evidence" — evidence that the administration has been notably reluctant to share with the public or foreign governments.

According to an [unclassified summary](#) of an intelligence assessment released by the White House, U.S. intelligence "collected streams of human, signals and geospatial intelligence" showing the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad preparing to deploy chemical weapons in its ongoing civil war three days before it allegedly did so on August 21.

"That claim," observed McClatchy, "raises two questions: Why didn't the U.S. warn rebels about the impending attack and save hundreds of lives? And why did the administration keep mum about the suspicious activity when on at least one previous occasion U.S. officials have raised an international fuss when they observed similar actions?"

The simplest explanation is that the administration doesn't believe its own spin. Unlike many in the press who have uncritically repeated White House claims, administration officials know full well that the evidence of a chemical attack by the Assad regime is dubious at best.

"A careful examination of [the administration's] claims reveals a series of convolutedly worded characterizations of the intelligence that don't really mean what they appear to say at first glance," wrote Truthout's [Gareth Porter](#).

"The document displays multiple indications that the integrity of the assessment process was seriously compromised by using language that distorted the intelligence in ways that would justify an attack on Syria."

For starters, the summary says, "We intercepted communications involving a senior official intimately familiar with the offensive who confirmed that chemical weapons were used by the regime on August 21 and was concerned with the U.N. inspectors obtaining evidence."

Porter, however, found that U.S. intelligence did not intercept the communications but merely received a purported intercept from Israeli intelligence, which he said "raises a major question about the integrity of the entire document. The Israelis have an interest in promoting a U.S. attack on Syria, and the authenticity of the alleged intercept cannot be assumed."



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Furthermore, although the summary says that the official “confirmed” the regime’s use of chemical weapons, [The Cable](#) reported (based on a leaked version of the intercept) that “an official at the Syrian Ministry of Defense exchanged panicked phone calls with a leader of a chemical weapons unit, demanding answers for a nerve agent strike,” suggesting that the attack was not ordered by the Syrian government, if indeed it was [carried out by Syrian forces at all](#).

In addition, the summary implies that the official wanted to prevent UN inspectors from finding evidence of a nerve gas strike, but the assertion that he was “concerned with the U.N. inspectors obtaining evidence” could just as well mean that he wanted inspectors to obtain all the available evidence because it would exonerate his government. This is a highly likely scenario given that after the alleged nerve gas attack the Assad regime almost immediately agreed to allow UN inspectors, some of whom were already in Damascus at the government’s request, to have what Porter calls “unimpeded access” to the location of the claimed attack.

As it happens, the Obama administration, not the Assad regime, has been the government opposed to UN inspections. U.S. officials have dismissed the regime’s willingness to allow inspections as a political tactic and claimed that inspections taking place several days after the attack would be meaningless — an assertion McClatchy exposed as patently false, noting that traces of sarin and mustard gas had been detected in Iraq in 1992, four years after they were deployed.

The U.S. government, meanwhile, has relied on evidence “smuggled out of Syria by opposition activists,” penned Porter. The reliability of such evidence, of course, is highly suspect since the chain of custody is unknown and the suppliers have a strong motive for trying to pin chemical attacks on the Syrian government.

“Syrian chemical weapons personnel were operating in the Damascus suburb of ‘Adra from Sunday, August 18 until early in the morning on Wednesday, August 21 near an area that the regime uses to mix chemical weapons, including sarin,” reads the intelligence summary. “On August 21, a Syrian regime element prepared for a chemical weapons attack in the Damascus area, including through the utilization of gas masks.”

Again one must parse these words carefully. “Despite the use of the term ‘operating,’ the US intelligence had no information about the actual activities of the individual or individuals being tracked through geospatial and signals intelligence,” Porter wrote. In fact, he pointed out, at the time the information was obtained, officials said it was viewed as “nothing out of the ordinary.” Moreover, the supposed preparation for a chemical weapons attack with gas masks could just as easily indicate that the regime was expecting to be attacked rather than to launch an attack. The intelligence summary is deliberately ambiguous on these matters, allowing the administration to imply that the regime was preparing to mount a nerve gas offensive without actually saying so.

The peculiar phrasing of other parts of the summary indicates that intelligence analysts are not at all confident that nerve gas was even deployed on August 21, much less that it was used by the Assad regime, Porter argued. A former senior U.S. intelligence official told him that “the choice of wording actually means the intelligence analysts ‘do not know’ if nerve gas was used.”

What’s more, the summary’s implication that online videos of supposed victims prove that a nerve gas attack occurred is simply untrue, according to Porter: “Most of the alleged victims being shown in the videos posted online do not show symptoms associated with exposure to nerve agents.” Furthermore, those treating them, while not wearing protective clothing, did not exhibit any symptoms; and, wrote



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Porter, “the number of those treated who survived far outnumbered the dead, contrary to what would be expected in a nerve gas attack.”

There is also the matter of the number of alleged victims. The summary flatly states that the United States has “determined that 1,429 people ... including at least 426 children” were killed in the attack but gives no explanation as to how the government arrived at these numbers and does not offer a range of estimates from different sources, as is the usual practice.

In short, practically everything the administration has said — or, in large measure, cleverly implied — regarding the supposed chemical weapons attack cannot withstand scrutiny. But the same is true of White House pronouncements on a host of other matters, including Obama’s last major foreign offensive and its aftermath, so why would anyone expect the administration to have a sudden fit of honesty while trying to stampede Americans into a war that [the vast majority of them opposes](#)?



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