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State Dept Admits It Doesn't Know Who Ordered Syria's Chemical Strike

Posted By Elias Groll

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With the United States barreling toward a strike on Syria, U.S. officials say they are completely certain that Bashar al-Assad's government is responsible for last week's chemical weapons attack. They just don't know who in the Syrian government is to blame.

On Wednesday, State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf **admitted** as much. "The commander-in-chief of any military is ultimately responsible for decisions made under their leadership, even if ... he's not the one that pushes the button or said, 'Go,' on this," Harf said. "I don't know what the facts are here. I'm just, broadly speaking, saying that he is responsible for the actions of his regime. I'm not intimately familiar with the command and control structure of the Syrian military. I'm just not. But again, he is responsible ultimately for the decisions that are made."

On Tuesday, *The Cable* **reported** that U.S. officials are basing their assessment that the Assad regime bears responsibility for the strike largely on an intercepted phone call between a panicked Ministry of Defense official and a commander of a Syrian chemical weapons unit. But that

intelligence does not resolve the question of who in the government ordered the strike or what kind of command and control structures are in place for the use of such weapons. "It's unclear where control lies," one U.S. intelligence official told *The Cable* Tuesday. "Is there just some sort of general blessing to use these things? Or are there explicit orders for each attack?"

Because of that lack of clarity, Harf took a beating on Wednesday. In a testy exchange during her daily briefing, Harf very nearly admitted that it makes no difference who in the Syrian government ordered the attack, a reflection of the lack of certainty that still shrouds U.S. understanding of the chemical attack that may have left as many as 1,000 people dead.

In effect, Harf was left arguing that because no one else could have carried out the attack, it must have been the Syrian government. "The world doesn't need a classified U.S. intelligence assessment to see the photos and the videos of these people and to know that the only possible entity in Syria that could do this to their own people is the regime," she said.

Given that U.N. inspectors with a mandate to investigate chemical weapons use were on the ground when the attack happened, the decision to deploy what appears to have been a nerve agent in a suburb east of Damascus has puzzled many observers. Why would Syria do such a thing when it is fully aware that the mass use of chemical weapons is the one thing that might require the United States to take military action against it? That's a question U.S. intelligence analysts are puzzling over as well. "We don't know exactly why it happened," the intelligence official **said**. "We just know it was pretty fucking stupid."

Pressed on whether the United States would still consider itself justified in launching a punitive strike if the chemical weapons were deployed by a "rogue officer," Harf said, "yes," before quickly adding a caveat: "But that's also a wildly conjecturous question."