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## Did the White House Help Plan the Syrian Chemical Attack?

by Yossef Bodansky

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There is a growing volume of new evidence from numerous sources in the Middle East — mostly affiliated with the Syrian opposition and its sponsors and supporters — which makes a very strong case, based on solid circumstantial evidence, that the August 21, 2013, chemical strike in the Damascus suburbs was indeed a pre-meditated provocation by the Syrian opposition.

The extent of US foreknowledge of this provocation needs further investigation because available data puts the “horror” of the Barack Obama White House in a different and disturbing light.

On August 13-14, 2013, Western-sponsored opposition forces in Turkey started advance preparations for a major and irregular military surge. Initial meetings between senior opposition military commanders and representatives of Qatari, Turkish, and US Intelligence [“Mukhabarat Amriki”] took place at the converted Turkish military garrison in Antakya, Hatay Province, used as the command center and headquarters of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and their foreign sponsors. Very senior opposition commanders who had arrived from Istanbul briefed the regional commanders of an imminent escalation in the fighting due to “a war-changing development” which would, in turn, lead to a US-led bombing of Syria.

The opposition forces had to quickly prepare their forces for exploiting the US-led bombing in order to march on Damascus and topple the Bashar al-Assad Government, the senior

commanders explained. The Qatari and Turkish intelligence officials assured the Syrian regional commanders that they would be provided with plenty of weapons for the coming offensive.

Indeed, unprecedented weapons distribution started in all opposition camps in Hatay Province on August 21-23, 2013. In the Reyhanli area alone, opposition forces received well in excess of 400 tons of weapons, mainly anti-aircraft weaponry from shoulder-fired missiles to ammunition for light-guns and machineguns. The weapons were distributed from store-houses controlled by Qatari and Turkish Intelligence under the tight supervision of US Intelligence.

These weapons were loaded on more than 20 trailer-trucks which crossed into northern Syria and distributed the weapons to several depots. Follow-up weapon shipments, also several hundred tons, took place over the weekend of August 24-25, 2013, and included mainly sophisticated anti-tank guided missiles and rockets. Opposition officials in Hatay said that these weapon shipments were “the biggest” they had received “since the beginning of the turmoil more than two years ago”. The deliveries from Hatay went to all the rebel forces operating in the Idlib-to-Aleppo area, including the al-Qaida affiliated jihadists (who constitute the largest rebel forces in the area).

Several senior officials from both the Syrian opposition and sponsoring Arab states stressed that these weapon deliveries were specifically in anticipation for exploiting the impact of imminent bombing of Syria by the US and the Western allies. The latest strategy formulation and coordination meetings took place on August 26, 2013. The political coordination meeting took place in Istanbul and was attended by US Amb. Robert Ford.

More important were the military and operational coordination meetings at the Antakya garrison. Senior Turkish, Qatari, and US Intelligence officials attended in addition to the Syrian senior (opposition) commanders. The Syrians were informed that bombing would start in a few days.

“The opposition was told in clear terms that action to deter further use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime could come as early as in the next few days,” a Syrian participant in the meeting said. Another Syrian participant said that he was convinced US bombing was scheduled to begin on Thursday, August 29, 2013. Several participants — both Syrian and Arab — stressed that the assurances of forthcoming bombing were most explicit even as formally Obama is still undecided.

The descriptions of these meetings raise the question of the extent of foreknowledge of US Intelligence, and therefore, the Obama White House. All the sources consulted — both Syrian and Arab — stressed that officials of the “Mukhabarat Amriki” actively participated in the meetings and briefings in Turkey. Therefore, at the very least, they should have known that the opposition leaders were anticipating “a war-changing development”: that is, a dramatic event which would provoke a US-led military intervention.

The mere fact that weapon storage sites under the tight supervision of US Intelligence were opened up and about a thousand tons of high-quality weapons were distributed to the opposition indicates that US Intelligence anticipated such a provocation and the opportunity for the Syrian opposition to exploit the impact of the ensuing US and allied bombing. Hence, even if the Obama White House did not know in advance of the chemical provocation, they should have concluded, or at the very least suspected, that the chemical attack was most likely the “war-changing development” anticipated by the opposition leaders as provocation of US-led bombing. Under such circumstances, the Obama White House should have refrained from rushing head-on

to accuse Assad's Damascus and threaten retaliation, thus making the Obama White House at the very least complicit after the act.

Meanwhile, additional data from Damascus about the actual chemical attack increases the doubts about Washington's version of events. Immediately after the attack, three hospitals of Doctors Without Borders (MSF: *médecins sans frontières*) in the greater Damascus area treated more than 3,600 Syrians affected by the chemical attack, and 355 of them died. MSF performed tests on the vast majority of those treated.

MSF director of operations Bart Janssens summed up the findings: "MSF can neither scientifically confirm the cause of these symptoms nor establish who is responsible for the attack. However, the reported symptoms of the patients, in addition to the epidemiological pattern of the events — characterized by the massive influx of patients in a short period of time, the origin of the patients, and the contamination of medical and first aid workers — strongly indicate mass exposure to a neurotoxic agent." Simply put, even after testing some 3,600 patients, MSF failed to confirm that sarin was the cause of the injuries. According to MSF, the cause could have been nerve agents like sarin, concentrated riot control gas, or even high-concentration pesticides. Moreover, opposition reports that there was distinct stench during the attack suggest that it could have come from the "kitchen sarin" used by jihadist groups (as distinct from the odorless military-type sarin) or improvised agents like pesticides.

Some of the evidence touted by the Obama White House is questionable at best.

A small incident in Beirut raises big questions. A day after the chemical attack, Lebanese fixers working for the "Mukhabarat Amriki" succeeded to convince a Syrian male who claimed to have been injured in the chemical attack to seek medical aid in Beirut in return for a hefty sum that would effectively settle him for life. The man was put into an ambulance and transferred overnight to the Farhat Hospital in Jib Janine, Beirut. The Obama White House immediately leaked friendly media that "the Lebanese Red Cross announced that test results found traces of sarin gas in his blood." However, this was news to Lebanese intelligence and Red Cross officials. According to senior intelligence officials, "Red Cross Operations Director George Kettaneh told [them] that the injured Syrian fled the hospital before doctors were able to test for traces of toxic gas in his blood." Apparently, the patient declared that he had recovered from his nausea and no longer needed medical treatment. The Lebanese security forces are still searching for the Syrian patient and his honorarium.

On August 24, 2013, Syrian Commando forces acted on intelligence about the possible perpetrators of the chemical attack and raided a cluster of rebel tunnels in the Damascus suburb of Jobar. Canisters of toxic material were hit in the fierce fire-fight as several Syrian soldiers suffered from suffocation and "some of the injured are in a critical condition".

The Commando eventually seized an opposition warehouse containing barrels full of chemicals required for mixing "kitchen sarin", laboratory equipment, as well as a large number of protective masks. The Syrian Commando also captured several improvised explosive devices, RPG rounds, and mortar shells. The same day, at least four HizbAllah fighters operating in Damascus near Ghouta were hit by chemical agents at the very same time the Syrian Commando unit was hit while searching a group of rebel tunnels in Jobar. Both the Syrian and the HizbAllah forces were acting on intelligence information about the real perpetrators of the chemical attack.

Damascus told Moscow the Syrian troops were hit by some form of a nerve agent and sent samples (blood, tissues, and soil) and captured equipment to Russia.

Several Syrian leaders, many of whom are not Bashar al-Assad supporters and are even his sworn enemies, are now convinced that the Syrian opposition is responsible for the August 21, 2013, chemical attack in the Damascus area in order to provoke the US and the allies into bombing Assad's Syria. Most explicit and eloquent is Saleh Muslim, the head of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) which has been fighting the Syrian Government. Muslim doubts Assad would have used chemical weapons when he was winning the civil war.

“The regime in Syria ... has chemical weapons, but they wouldn't use them around Damascus, five km from the [UN] committee which is investigating chemical weapons. Of course they are not so stupid as to do so,” Muslim told Reuters on August 27, 2013. He believes the attack was “aimed at framing Assad and provoking an international reaction”. Muslim is convinced that “some other sides who want to blame the Syrian regime, who want to show them as guilty and then see action” is responsible for the chemical attack. The US was exploiting the attack to further its own anti-Assad policies and should the UN inspectors find evidence that the rebels were behind the attack, then “everybody would forget it”, Muslim shrugged. “Who is the side who would be punished? Are they are going to punish the Emir of Qatar or the King of Saudi Arabia, or Mr Erdo?an of Turkey?”

And there remain the questions: Given the extent of the involvement of the “Mukhabarat Amriki” in opposition activities, how is that US Intelligence did not know in advance about the opposition's planned use of chemical weapons in Damascus?

It is a colossal failure.

And if they did know and warned the Obama White House, why then the sanctimonious rush to blame the Assad Administration?

Moreover, how can the Obama Administration continue to support and seek to empower the opposition which had just intentionally killed some 1,300 innocent civilians in order to provoke a US military intervention?