



Heretic's Musings on the Chemical Strike in Damascus

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September 2013

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ANALYSIS

In August 1995, Western governments, and particularly the Bill Clinton White House, were in great quandary. The negotiations with the Serbs were going well as president Slobodan Milosevic was demonstrating unprecedented flexibility and accepting virtually all the demands put forward by the West. Hence, it was becoming politically and legally impossible for the US-led West to launch the NATO military intervention Clinton promised Izetbegovic the US would launch in order to quickly win the war for the Bosnian-Muslims.

Then, on 28 August 1995, around 11:00 am, a mortar shell hit the Markale in Sarajevo – killing 38 people and wounding another. Russian colonel Andrei Demurenko, then the commander of UN Forces in Sarajevo, immediately rushed with an UNPROFOR team to the supposed Bosnian-Serb mortar positions and ascertained that neither could have been used to fire the shells. Demurenko's report stated that the Bosnian-Serb forces were falsely blamed for the attack on the Markale.

Nevertheless, ostensibly in response to the massacre, NATO launched the air campaign against Bosnian-Serb forces and shortly afterwards decided the war in favor of the Bosnian-Muslims.

On 31 August 1995, Jean Daniel, then Editor of the magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur*, wrote an article titled "No more lies about Bosnia." In the article, Daniel recounted an exchange he had just had with French Prime Minister Eduard Balladur about the NATO air campaign and the motivations for it. "They [the Muslims] have committed this carnage on their own people?" Daniel asked. "Yes," confirmed Balladur without hesitation, "but at least they forced NATO to intervene."

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The August 21, 2013, chemical attack in Ghouta, a suburb in eastern Damascus, might become the Markale of the Syrian war.

On August 19, an UN expert delegation arrived in Damascus to study reports and evidence of earlier use of chemical weapons. The next day, they were presented with detailed scientific, technical and military data about the alleged chemical attacks, soil contamination and why the Syrian Armed Forces could not have carried out these attacks. Russian and other foreign experts who studied the data separately found it compelling. The Syrian military also presented the UN team with detailed intelligence evidence about Chemical Weapons and production labs affiliated with the opposition discovered in Syria, Turkey and Iraq.

On August 21, the Syrian opposition announced a massive chemical attack in Ghouta that inflicted about 1,300 fatalities including hundreds of children. As in previous chemical attacks blamed on the Assad administration – the attackers used the ubiquitous Sarin. Immediately, the opposition flooded Western media with pictures of the dead – but provided no conclusive evidence about the attack and the perpetrators. Moreover, initial opposition reports claimed the attack was conducted by a barrage of rockets. Subsequently, in the context of renewed outcries for a No Fly Zone, the opposition claimed that the chemical attack was a part of a massive bombing by the Syrian Air Force. Yet, the opposition's picture show no casualties suffering shrapnel wounds associated with either rocket barrages or aerial bombing. Stern denials by the Syrian Government of any involvement in the attack were largely ignored by the West.



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 – that makes a very strong case – albeit based on solid circumstantial evidence – that the August 21, 2013, chemical strike in the Damascus suburbs was 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 Obama White House in a different and disturbing light.

It is amazing how little is really known about the actual attack. There is still no agreed upon number of fatalities – with claims ranging from the US assertion of 1,429 fatalities to the French assertion that only 281 were killed. In other words, the French Intelligence number is about 20% of the American. Most Syrian opposition sources now put the number of fatalities at between 335 and 355, as does the MSF. This is about 25% of the US number. Either way, this is too huge a gap not to be explained and substantiated.

Immediately after the attack, three hospitals of Doctors Without Borders (MSF) in the greater Damascus area treated over 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,” said Mr. Janssens. “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.

At the time of writing, 9 September 2013, it is still not clear what type of agent killed the victims. The US position in documents submitted to Congress is that the victims died as a result of “nerve agent exposure”. In several TV interviews, however, Secretary Kerry claimed the US has proofs it was Sarin. The French intelligence report attributes the deaths to “chemical agents” without further identification. The most explicit finding to-date comes from the UK’s Defence Science Technology Laboratory. Soil and cloth samples “tested positive for the nerve gas Sarin”. The Sarin in the cloth was in liquid form that soaked into the cloth. As discussed below, this finding reinforces the conclusion that “kitchen Sarin” was used. Hence, so much will depend on the UN’s findings when their tests are completed.

The claim that the agent used was a “military Sarin” is problematic because military Sarin accumulates (like a gaseous crystal) around the victims’ hair and loose threads in clothes. Since these molecules are detached and released anew by any movement – they would have thus killed or injured the first responders who touched the victims’ bodies without protective clothes, gloves and masks. However, opposition videos show the first responders move corpses around without any ill effect. This strongly indicates that the agent in question was the slow acting “kitchen Sarin”. Indeed, other descriptions of injuries treated by MSF – suffocation, foaming, vomiting and diarrhea – agree with the effects of diluted, late-action drops of liquefied Sarin. The overall descriptions of the injuries and fatalities treated by MSF closely resemble the injuries treated by the Tokyo emergency authorities back on March 20, 1995. The Tokyo subway attack was committed with liquefied “kitchen Sarin”. The knowhow for this type of Sarin came from North Korean Intelligence, and is known to have



been transferred, along with samples, to Osama bin Laden in 1998. That the Jihadist movement has these technologies was confirmed in Jihadist labs captured in both Turkey and Iraq, as well as from the wealth of data recovered from al-Qaida in Afghanistan in 2001/2.

As well, it is not yet clear what weapons were used to disperse the chemical agent. The specifics of the weapon will provide the crucial evidence whether this was military type agent of the kind available in the Syrian arsenal, or improvised, kitchen-style agent of the type known to be within the technical capabilities of the Jihadist opposition.

The mangled projectiles shown by the opposition, and which were tested by the UN inspectors, are not standard weapons of the Syrian Armed Forces. These projectiles have a very distinct ribbed-ring fins that are similar to projectiles used by the opposition in Aleppo, Damascus and other fronts with both high-explosives and undefined materials. The Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) retrieved a video claiming to be of the attack – but is most likely of a daylight testing of the launcher. The truck-mounted launcher included a chemical sleeve that is supposed to absorb leaks from the improvised warheads and not harm the launch crew – hardly the precaution taken with a military weapon.

Moreover, the warheads used in Damascus were cylindrical tanks that cracked and permitted Tokyo-style mixture of liquids – rather than pressurized mix and vaporization at the molecular level by the force of core explosion in a standard Soviet-style chemical warhead. Had Syrian militarily-trained experts built these warheads – they would have used the upper pipe for the core-charge the explosion of which would have created a significantly more lethal vaporized cloud of the toxic agent. The mere fact that the pipeline remained empty suggests the work of amateurs found in the ranks of the improvised weapon makers of the Jihadist opposition.

As well, the opposition also pointed out to cracked plastic pieces that resemble shreds from large blue plastic tanks/bottles (like water cooler's huge bottles) fired by chemical launchers the opposition had bragged about in the past. These weapons are in agreement with the multitude of images of victims publicized by the opposition which did not show any injury due to shrapnel that would come from Soviet-style chemical munitions of the type known to be in the Syrian military arsenal.

Taken together, the accumulating forensic evidence regarding the August 21 chemical attack in Ghouta points increasingly toward the conclusion that the attack was indeed self-inflicted by the opposition in order to provoke a US and Western military intervention. Ultimately, it will take the detailed chemical analysis by the UN of the agents used to provide the guidelines as to who's the guilty party.

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Equally, the strategic-military context of the attack is of great significance for it provides the answer to the most important question "Who done it?" or "Who could have done it?" given the available data. Significantly, evidence collected by numerous Arab sources on the ground in the greater Damascus area and recently smuggled out of Syria narrows the scope of potential perpetrators and the reason for the attack. This evidence points to specific commanders of Liwaa al-Islam and Jabhat al-Nusra known to be cooperating in the eastern Damascus theater.

Back on 13-14 August, 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 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” that would 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 Assad regime, 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. On August 19, relying on first-hand information from their sources in Turkey, Egyptian military intelligence warned of the outcome of the Antakya meeting. The Egyptians reported that one of the participants explicitly predicted that “there will be a game changing event on August 21st” that would “bring the US into a bombing campaign” against Assad’s Syria.

Indeed, unprecedented weapons distribution started in all opposition camps in Hatay Province on 21-23 August. In the Reyhanli area alone, opposition forces received well over 400 tons of weapons – mainly anti-aircraft weaponry from shoulder-fired missiles to ammunition for light-guns and machine-guns. 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 twenty trailer trucks that 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 24-25 August 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 26 August. 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 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. Several participants – both Syrian and Arab – stressed that the assurances of forthcoming bombing were most explicit even as formally Obama was 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 that 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 develop-



ment” 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, starting 17 and 18 August, nominally FSA units – in reality a separate Syrian and Arab army trained and equipped by the CIA as well as Jordanian, Saudi Arabian and other intelligence services – attempted to penetrate southern Syria from northern Jordan and start a march on Damascus. The US-sponsored war plan is based on the autumn 2011 march on Tripoli, Libya, by CIA-sponsored army from Tunisia that decided the Libyan war and empowered the Islamists. Two units, one 250 strong and one 300 strong crossed, into Syria and began advancing parallel to the Golan Heights border from the Saudi-Jordanian-US intelligence base near Ramtha, Jordan. Their aim was to break east and reach Daraa quickly in order to prepare the ground for the declaration of Daraa as the capital of a “Free Syria”. However, the CIA’s FSA forces met fierce resistance from the unlikely coalition of the Syrian army, local Jihadist forces (mainly the locally-raised Yarmuk Brigades), and even Beduin and Druze units who fear the encroachment by outside forces on their domain. By 19 and 20 August, the FSA units were surrounded in three villages not far from the Israeli border. An attempt to use an Indian UNDOF patrol as human shield failed. The FSA commanders started pleading for massive reinforcements and an air campaign to prevent their decimation. Within a few days, most of the survivors withdrew hastily back to Jordan, leaving behind large quantities of weapons and supplies.

Events in eastern Damascus were also escalating. Back on 19 August, in Ghouta, over 50 local opposition fighters and their commanders laid down their arms and switched sides. A few prominent local leaders widely associated with the opposition went on Syrian TV. They denounced the Jihadists and their crimes against the local population, and stressed that the Assad administration was the real guardian of the people and their interests. More than a dozen ex-rebels joined the Syrian government forces. This change of sides came on the eve of a major development in the regional fighting. Hence, the last thing the Assad administration would do at this stage was to commit atrocities against the Ghouta area and the local population that had just changed sides so dramatically.

On the night of 20/21 August and the early morning of August 21 – a day before the chemical attack – the Jihadists’ Liberating the Capital Front led by Jabhat al-Nusra suffered a major defeat during Operation Shield of the Capital. Operation Shield of the Capital is the largest military operation of the Syrian Army in the Damascus region since the beginning of the conflict. The Jihadists also amassed a huge force of over 25,000 fighters for their Front from 13 armed Kitaeb [battalion-groupings]. The main units belonged to Jabhat al-Nusra and Liwaa al-Islam. The other Kitaeb were Harun al-Rashid, Syouf al-Haqq, al-Mohajereen, al-Ansar, Abu Zhar al-Ghaffari, Issa Bin Mariam, Sultan Muhammad al-Fatih, Daraa al-Sham, the Jobar Martyrs, and Glory of the Caliphate. They included both Syrian and foreign volunteers. (The mere gathering of so many Kitaeb for the battle of eastern Damascus refutes the assertion in the US and French intelligence reports that the opposition is incapable of conducting coordinated large-scale operations and therefore the chemical attack must have been launched by Assad’s forces.)

Around dawn on August 21, the Liberating the Capital Front suffered a strategic defeat in the Jobar entrance area. The Jobar entrance was the opposition’s last staging areas with access to the heart of Damascus from where they could launch car-bombs and raids. The Jobar entrance is also the sole route for reinforcements and supplies coming from the Saudi-Jordanian-US intelligence base near Jordan’s major airbase and military facilities in al-Mafraq (from where the eastern route to Damascus starts) and distributed via the Ghouta area to the



outlying eastern suburbs of Damascus. The eastern route is so important that the efforts is supervised personally by Princes Bandar and Salman bin Sultan, and overseen by Col. Ahmad al-Naimeh, the commander of the opposition's Military Council of the Southern Region and Horan. The Jihadists' defeat on August 21 effectively sealed any hope of a future surge from Jordan by CIA-sponsored forces because the rebels who starting 17/18 August had been attempting to use the western route to Damascus from the base in Ramtha, Jordan, had by now been encircled and defeated not far from the Golan border with Israel.

As the Jihadist forces were collapsing, the Front commanders deployed an elite force to block at all cost the Syrian military's access to the Jobar entrance area. The majority of the Jihadists in this force were from Liwaa al-Islam and the rest from Jabhat al-Nusra. The commander of the force was a Saudi Jihadist going by the nom-de-guerre Abu-Ayesha. (Abu-Ayesha was identified by a Ghouta resident called Abu Abdul-Moneim as the Jihadist commander who had stored in a tunnel in Ghouta weapons some of which had "tube-like structure" and others looked like "huge gas bottles". Abdul-Moneim's son and twelve other fighters were killed inside the tunnel by a chemical leak from one of these weapons.)

According to military and strategic analyst Brigadier Ali Maqsood, the Liwaa al-Islam forces arrayed in Jobar 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-Qaida in Iraq to Jobar, in the vicinity of Damascus." 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 US military strike that would deliver a strategic victory for the Jihadists. The chemical agents were then loaded on what Russian intelligence defined as "rockets [that] were manufactured domestically to carry chemicals. They were launched from an area controlled by Liwaa al-Islam." 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 US] escalatory rhetoric aims to achieve two things. The first is strengthening [the US] position as leader of the opposition and imposing conditions in preparation for the negotiating table. The second is changing the [power balance on the] ground and stopping the Syrian army's advance," Maqsood told *al-Safir* of Lebanon.

On August 24, Syrian Commando 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 other captured equipment to Russia.

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. Zahran Alloush is the son of a Saudi-based religious scholar named Sheikh Abdullah Muhammad Alloush. During the 1980s, he worked for then Saudi Intelligence Chief Prince Turki al-Faisal in both Afghanistan and Yemen. Zahran Alloush was involved with the neo-Salafi/Wahabi underground in



Syria since the 1990s, was jailed by Syrian Mukhabarat, and released in mid-2011 as part of Bashar al-Assad's amnesty aimed to placate Riyadh. Zahran Alloush immediately received funds and weapons from Saudi intelligence that enabled him to establish and run Liwaa al-Islam as a major Jihadist force.

On 18 July 2012, Liwaa al-Islam conducted the major bombing of the headquarters of Syria's national security council in Rawda Square, Damascus, assassinating, among others, Assaf Shawkat, Bashar's brother-in-law and nominally the deputy Minister of Defense, Dawoud Rajiha, the Defense Minister, and Hassan Turkmani, former Defense Minister now military adviser to then Vice President Farouk al-Sharaa. In spring 2013, Zahran Alloush helped the Saudis weaken the Qatari-sponsored Jihadist forces in the Damascus area. In June, he suddenly withdrew his forces in the middle of a major battle with the Syrian army, leaving the Qatari-sponsored First Brigade and Liwaa Jaish al-Muslimeen to be defeated and mauled down.

Significantly, in late August 2013, the opposition insisted on having Zahran Alloush and Liwaa al-Islam secure and escort the international experts team when they collected evidence in the opposition-controlled parts of eastern Damascus. Zahran Alloush entrusted the task of actually controlling and monitoring the UN team to his close allied Katiba – the Liwaa al-Baraa from Zamalka. Thus, the international experts' team operated while in effective custody of the Jihadists most likely responsible for the chemical attack.

According to several Jihadist commanders, "Zahran Alloush receives his orders directly from the Saudi Intelligence Chief Prince Bandar bin Sultan" and Liwaa al-Islam is Saudi Arabia's private army in Syria.

The Bandar aspect is important to understanding strategic-political aspects of the chemical strike. Significantly, no independent evidence ties Bandar to the actual chemical attack. Presently, there is no independence evidence connecting Bandar, or any other Saudi official, to the supply and use of chemical weapons in Damascus. There exist, though, the long-time connections between the various Jihadist commanders and both Saudi intelligence and Bandar himself. However, Bandar's threats in the meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin cast a shadow on the question of Riyadh's foreknowledge, and, given the uniquely close relations between Bandar and CIA Chief John Brennan, Washington's foreknowledge as well.

On August 2, 2013, Prince Bandar had an unprecedented meeting with Pres. Putin at the Kremlin. Their meeting covered a host of issues ranging from future energy economy to the situation in Egypt to what to do about Syria. Throughout, Bandar made a huge mistake – believing that Putin is just like the successive US senior officials Bandar has dealt with in the past – namely, that like the Americans, Putin would also be easy to bribe with flattery, weapons acquisition, and oil-related cash. Putin was not.

Of significance to the issue of the chemical strike in Damascus is the exchange between Bandar and Putin regarding the future of Bashar al-Assad. Bandar wanted Putin to support the toppling of the Assad administration and their replacement with a Saudi-sponsored opposition regime. Bandar promised that Russia's interests in Syria would be preserved by the Saudi-sponsored post-Assad regime. In this context Bandar sought to both allay Putin's concerns regarding Jihadist terrorism and deliver a veiled threat. "As an example," Bandar stated, "I can give you a guarantee to protect the Winter Olympics in the city of Sochi on the Black Sea next year. The Chechen groups that threaten the security of the games are controlled by us, and they will not move [also] in the direction of the Syrian territory without coordinating with us. These groups do not scare us. We use them in the face of the Syrian regime but they will have no role or influence in Syria's political future." Putin responded quietly. "We know that you have supported the Chechen terrorist groups for a decade. And that support, which you have frankly talked about just now, is completely incompatible with the common objectives



of fighting global terrorism that you mentioned.”

Toward the end of the meeting, Bandar again discussed the Syrian issue at length. He stressed that as far as Riyadh was concerned, there was no future for the Assad administration. “The Syrian regime is finished as far as we and the majority of the Syrian people are concerned,” Bandar said, and they, the Syrian people, “will not allow President Bashar al-Assad to remain at the helm.” Putin responded that Moscow’s “stance on Assad will never change. We believe that the Syrian regime is the best speaker on behalf of the Syrian people, and not those liver eaters.” Again, Bandar resorted to threats. He warned Putin that their dispute over the future of Syria led him, Bandar, to conclude that “there is no escape from the [US-led] military option, because it is the only currently available choice given that the political settlement ended in stalemate.” Bandar added that Riyadh saw no future for the negotiated process.

Bandar expected such a military intervention to soon commence. Did he have any foreknowledge of a provocation to come? Significantly, Bandar insisted throughout his visit to Moscow that his initiative and message were coordinated with the highest authorities in Obama’s Washington. “I have spoken with the Americans before the visit, and they pledged to commit to any understandings that we may reach, especially if we agree on the approach to the Syrian issue,” Bandar assured Putin. Did the Obama White House know in advance about the Saudi claim to controlling Jihadist terrorism in both Russia and Syria? Did the Obama White House know about Bandar’s anticipation of an US-led military intervention?

Several Arab leaders, as well as senior intelligence and defense officials, from the Arabian Peninsula are now convinced that the chemical strike was aimed to provoke a US-led military intervention that would in turn lead to the toppling of Bashar al-Assad and the empowerment of an Islamist government in Damascus. They are furious that the US hasn’t struck as so widely anticipated in the Arab World. These notables point out that back in late spring, the top leaders of the Syrian opposition and its regional sponsors impressed on the highest authorities in Washington and other Western capitals the gravity of the situation. The opposition and sponsors warned that unless there was a major military intervention during the summer – the struggle for Syria would be lost comes autumn. The leaders of the opposition and their sponsors now insist that they were assured in these discussions that the US and key West European powers were eager to provide such help and intervene in order to topple the Assad administration and empower the opposition in Damascus.

Given the political climate in the US and the West, the Arab leaders say they were told, it was imperative for US and Western leaders to have a clear casus belli of absolute humanitarian character. Recently (but before the Chemical attack), the opposition and sponsors were asked for lists of targets to be hit by US-led Western bombing should there be a Western intervention. The opposition provided such target lists – convinced that their bombing was imminent. The leaders of the opposition and their sponsors now feel cheated for there had just been a humanitarian catastrophe in Damascus that has all the characteristics of the sought after casus belli – and yet, there are no US and Western bombers in the skies over Damascus!

Significantly, most of these Arab leaders and officials are not in the know. They don’t pretend to have any specific knowledge of what happened in Damascus beyond the coverage in the Arab media. They complain so bitterly on the basis of their comprehension of how things should have been done given the overall strategic circumstances. And for them, such a self-inflicted carnage is the most obvious thing to do if that is what Washington and other Western capitals need in order to have a viable casus belli for an intervention.

Ultimately, 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 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) that has been fighting the Syrian government. Muslim doubts Assad would have used chemical weapons when he is winning the civil war. "The regime in Syria ... has chemical weapons, but they wouldn't use them around Damascus, 5 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. 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 is cynically exploiting the attack to further its own anti-Assad policies and should the UN inspectors find evidence that the rebels were behind the attack – "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 Erdogan of Turkey?"

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Meanwhile, the US case against the Assad administration continues to crumble. "No direct link to President Bashar al-Assad or his inner-circle has been publicly demonstrated, and some US sources say intelligence experts are not sure whether the Syrian leader knew of the attack before it was launched or was only informed about it afterward," observed Reuters' Mark Hosenball. Obama's own inner-most circle remains committed to humanitarian interventionism of the kind exercised in Bosnia, Kosovo and Libya. Absent legitimate interests, a US-led intervention must be based on humanitarian reasons such in retaliation to atrocities and chemical attacks. However, the evidence provided by the Obama White house to justify an attack cannot be substantiated.

A closer study of the much touted intercepts proves that Assad and his inner-circle were stunned by the news of the chemical attack. When the first reports of the chemical attack surfaced, a very senior Syrian military officer called in panic the artillery commander of the 155th Brigade of the 4th Armored Division of the Syrian Army that is under the direct command of Maher al-Assad. The senior officer wanted to know if the brigade fired any chemical munitions in contradiction with the explicit orders of the top leadership not to do so. The artillery commander flatly denied firing any rocket, missile or artillery. He added that he had already checked and confirmed that all his munitions were accounted for, and invited the general staff to send officers to verify on their own that all the brigade's munitions were in safe storage. The senior officer took the commander to task, and he was interrogated for three days as a thorough inventory of the munitions was carried out. This artillery officer is back on duty as it was confirmed beyond doubt that no munitions were missing. (Since there was no other chemical-capable unit in the area – the claim of rogue officers should identify from where and how they had obtained chemical munitions.)

The reaction of the Assad inner-circle was in agreement with earlier observations by German Intelligence. The BND reported that since the beginning of spring 2013, Syrian brigade and division commanders had repeatedly asked the Presidency for permission to use chemical weapons against Jihadist forces besieging them. The Presidency has always denied permission in strong and uncompromising terms. The BND has no indication, let alone proof, that this consistent policy changed on or before August 21. This is also the opinion of a very senior Iranian official in Beirut. When the news of the chemical attack first broke, a very senior HizbAllah official called the Iranian for advice. The BND intercepted the call. The HizbAllah official wondered whether "Assad had lost his temper and committed a huge mistake by giving the order for the poison gas use." The Iranian senior offi-



cial assured his HizbAllah counterpart that there was no change to Assad's "long-standing steadfast policy of not using these [chemical] weapons."

Some of the forensic 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 guy 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.

One of the main reasons for Washington's pointing the accusatory finger at the Syrian military was the assertion that the chemical attack took place in the context of a Syrian military effort to recapture this part of the Damascus area. Having met stiff resistance and under immense pressure to decide the battle swiftly, Washington's explanation goes, the Syrian military used chemical weapons in order to break the opposition. However, the Syrian Armed Forces have a long history of training by the Soviet Armed Forces and access to Soviet-era weaponry – both chemical agents and means of dispersal. Among these are huge quantities of the vastly more lethal VX and grenade-size aerosols optimized for dense urban environment. Syrian commando was supplied with, and trained on, these systems starting the late-1970s when preparing to fight the Jihadist insurrection in some of Syria's main cities. Hence, had the Syrian military wanted to clear the said areas with the use of chemical weapons – they would have used VX in aerosols with greater efficiency and lethality. And why not use the same VX-filled aerosols in other key urban battle-fronts like Aleppo or Homs to expedite victory? Why use "kitchen Sarin" and wide-area-effect munitions that will only hinder military advance into contaminated areas?

Hence, what is the basis for the Obama administration's confidence that "Assad did it" to the point of threatening military action that in all likelihood will evolve into US involvement in Syria's bloody civil war? The most honest answer was provided on 8 September by White House Chief of Staff Denis McDonough on CNN's State of the Union program. McDonough admitted on CNN that the case against Assad is essentially "a quite strong common sense test, irrespective of the intelligence, that suggests that the regime carried this out." Nobody pressed McDonough on this point.

The US has long taken sides in the Syrian civil war and all the regional wars and strife integrated into it. The US placed itself as the self-anointed manager and decider of the outcome of this fateful dynamics. Nobody in the region believes the Obama White House's assurances about a limited strike and no intent of "regime change". After all this was the exact assurances given by the Obama administration on the eve of the UNSC's vote on Libya solely in order to convince Russia and China to abstain and let the resolution pass (which they did).



Now, should the US strike Syria, alone or at the head of a makeshift coalition, the US will have crossed the threshold of active participation and leadership. Pressure will mount on the US to complete the job – to invade and get involved directly in the fighting, to secure the strategic weapon arsenals (which will take 75,000-100,000 troops by the Pentagon's latest estimates), and to overthrow Assad and empower what Bandar calls "moderate" Islamists. Arab leaders and their Islamist protégés are now convinced that only the US can, and should, defeat the Assad administration and empower the Islamists for them. Should the US shirk or dither, there will be more and worse provocations, and more innocent Syrians will die in the hands of their brethren and saviors until the US delivers Damascus to the Islamists-Jihadists and their sponsors. After the catastrophe that Libya is today – does Washington really want to try again in Syria? Wouldn't confronting reality and the Islamists-Jihadists be a more expedient (and honest) way of doing things?

And there remain the questions: Given the extent of the involvement of the "Mukhabarat Amriki" in opposition activities – how come 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 the sanctimonious rush to blame the Assad administration? Moreover, how can the Obama Administration continue to support and seek to empower the opposition that had just intentionally killed, according to Washington's own calculations, over 1,400 innocent civilians in order to provoke a US military intervention?

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.