



BULLETIN

No. 96 (549), 18 September 2013 © PISM

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The 8/21 Chemical Attack in Damascus in Light of the Ambitions and Capabilities of Al Qaeda

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The sarin-gas attack in Damascus changed the international situation of the conflict in Syria. A plan for the elimination of Syria's chemical arsenal was agreed by the U.S. and Russia, and a report by UN inspectors found that sarin had been used. However, these documents are silent on the issue of responsibility. The UN will discuss the issue sooner or later, and in this context it should be stressed that the current understanding of the capabilities of Al Qaeda almost excludes terrorists from participation in this attack.

Estimates of the Attack in Damascus. The sarin gas attack in Damascus on 21 August 2013 has been the subject of international disagreement. The governments of the U.S., UK and France published summaries of their intelligence estimates with a common conclusion that an attack on this scale could have been conducted only by Syrian government forces. The main difference in these assessments has been in estimates of possible fatalities, with France citing 281 and the U.S. finding 1,429 deaths among civilians.

The attack in Damascus quickly became a priority for the UN, which sent inspectors to Syria to take samples and interview witnesses. The UN has been on a mission since March 2013 to investigate 14 previous reports of small-scale chemical attacks in Syria. The head of the mission, Prof. Ake Sellstrom, presented a report about the most recent attacks to the UN Secretary General on 16 September, but in it, the inspectors did not determine whether it was the responsibility of the Syrian government. However, they documented the widespread presence of sarin residue in the area, particularly on rockets used in the attack and suggested their possible trajectories. The Sellstrom report also indicated the requisite level of know-how involved in the chemical attack pertaining to specific weather conditions. Even these limited conclusions by the UN inspector have lent support to the Western intelligence estimates and observations by non-governmental experts.

The Western estimates were disputed by the Syrian government, which blames the opposition for the chemical attack in Damascus. The regime is also claiming that the chemical attack is only a pretext for U.S. military action in the country. However, even Iran, the closest ally of Syria, has held a rather cautious position on the issue. The Western estimates were openly criticised by Russia, which claims that it recently sent the UN a comprehensive and confidential report about the Syrian opposition's responsibility not only for the attack in Damascus but also for a limited sarin-gas attack in Khan al-Assal (on 19 March 2013). Moreover, the framework plan for the elimination of the Syrian chemical arsenal, agreed by the U.S. and Russia on 14 September, is also silent on the internationally politically controversial issue of investigating responsibility for the attack in Damascus. This issue was intentionally left aside, but it is clear that the Western powers and the UN Secretary General will come back to it in a more favourable moment. The investigation into the 8/21 attack also will be very important to Syrians and international public opinion.

Al Qaeda and Weapons of Mass Destruction. Many commentators opposing military intervention adopted the narrative of the Syrian and Russian governments, that supposes the direct responsibility of Al Qaeda in the attack. The global terrorist network's ambitions to acquire and use weapons of mass destruction against the U.S. and Europe are well known. Al Qaeda's leaders pursuit of a chemical arsenal date back to 1994, when they were in Sudan. Osama bin

Laden and Al Qaeda's current leader, Ayman Zawahiri, in public statements after 1998 approved the use of weapons of mass destruction against the U.S. Debates among Al Qaeda leaders, ideologues and sympathisers intensified after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington and after the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Recognised Al Qaeda theoretician and strategist, Syrian-born Mustafa Setmariam Nasar (Abu Mussab al-Suri), was captured in 2005 and is no longer guiding or supervising the network's weapons of mass destruction programmes. Information about some of the practical aspects of chemical weapons use are included in publications popular amongst Al Qaeda sympathisers, especially the *Encyclopaedia of Jihad*, which is available on the internet. These jihadist manuals discuss weapons of mass destruction of every kind, but they are very poor in technical know-how when it comes to actually assembling and using chemical, biological, nuclear or radiological weapons. Instead, these publications focus on simple poisons and the possibilities of terrorist attacks on industrial infrastructure that may result in chemical or radiological contamination.

The Real Capabilities of Al Qaeda. Religiously motivated terrorists would have no moral or ethical brake on the use of chemical weapons against their enemies if they acquired them. The sarin-gas attack by the doomsday cult Aum Shinriyko on the Tokyo subway in 1995 (resulting in 13 dead and 6,000 wounded) showed that terrorists with enough funding and research are capable within a few years of building their chemical arsenal. Before the military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, there was speculation about the capabilities of Al Qaeda and its affiliates. However, with the passage of time, it has been confirmed that there is huge gap between their ambitions and their capabilities, not only to acquire but also to use chemical weapons.

It is also assumed that in 1994-1998 Al Qaeda tried to use its contacts with the Islamist regime in Khartoum and with the managers of a Sudanese pharmaceutical factory to produce VX nerve gas. The al-Shifa Chemical factory in Sudan was destroyed in U.S. preventive strikes in August 1998. Also, in a few Al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan before 9/11 there were laboratories for experiments with crude poisons based on cyanide, chlorine and pesticides, as well as anthrax and a botulinum toxin. These places never became suitable facilities for chemical weapons production. Moreover, there was no close cooperation between Al Qaeda and the government of Iraq, which until 1991 worked on developing sarin and VX arsenals. This is confirmed by the lack of Saddam Hussein's support for an Al Qaeda camp in Iraq in Kurdistan, in which terrorists had since 2002 continued the experiments and training in poisons they had previously conducted in the Afghan camps. Because of ideological and mutual hostility, there also has been no cooperation between Al Qaeda or its sympathisers with the governments of Libya and Iran, which also worked on chemical arsenals. The anti-terrorist actions following 9/11 cut off Al Qaeda from contact with radical scientists in Pakistan, and the group's attempts to procure weapons of mass destruction from post-Soviet countries were stopped.

The main barriers to Al Qaeda's ambitions to acquire weapons of mass destruction has been its lack of scientific expertise and industrial infrastructure for the production of a combat-ready stockpile, i.e., weaponised warheads with sarin, a mustard agent or VX. These kinds of weapons are binary, i.e., composed of two non-lethal agents that when mixed create a deadly gas. The process, however, requires a technological backbone. Further, warheads produced for this purpose need to be adapted to an effective means of delivery, such as heavy artillery, rockets or aerial bombs (dropped or launched via aircraft). The training and equipment necessary for preparing rudimentary poisons are less sophisticated than using or even producing chemical weapons and remain the only plausible option for a terrorist willing to use non-classical weapons. Another factor limiting the opportunities for Al Qaeda's ambitions is its decentralised network, which complicates the effective coordination of its leaders' and members' efforts towards acquiring chemical weapons. Also, successes by U.S. and EU security services should be noted, especially in the arrests of terrorists trained in the use of poisons by Al Qaeda in Iraq.

Conclusion. The scale of the sarin-gas attack in Damascus compared with the capabilities possessed by the Syrian opposition or Al Qaeda likely exclude somebody outside the government of Syria from responsibility for the attack. Russia's accusations against the Syrian opposition have been openly expressed, but the evidence it gave the UN has not been shown to public. The declarations made by Syria's government and its credibility are also doubtful. In this context, the UN report by Sellstrom has become an important addition to the estimates presented by the governments of the U.S, UK and France. Despite its ambitions, Al Qaeda's limited capabilities in the area of weapons of mass destruction means assigning responsibility for the Damascus attack to terrorists is unlikely. There is also low probability that the carefully selected regime personnel of the unit that controls chemical weapons for Syria, the Centre for Studies and Research (SSCR) of the Syrian Ministry of Defence, would have armed the opposition with sarin-based weapons.

It should be noted that the plan now in discussion by the UN Security Council for the control and elimination of the Syrian chemical arsenal is not even touching the issue of responsibility for attack in Damascus. The plan's priorities are technical and move away from the diplomatic impasse on Syria. If this framework is implemented in Syria, the investigation of political and criminal responsibility for the attack will return. The tragedy in Damascus and the internal conflict in Syria has meant worst-case scenarios involving weapons of mass destruction ceased being fiction and must be included in contingency planning by NATO. There is also a need for further cooperation between NATO and EU countries and their partners in combating WMDs and crisis-management in the event of a terrorist attack with them. Al Qaeda's presence among the Syrian opposition should not be used as a veil to prevent the political influence of the West (including Poland) over all the parties in the civil war.