

The Chemistry of Syrian Lies and U.S. Credulity Revealed

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E-Notes

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Vladimir Putin and Bashar al Assad (Source: kremlin.ru)

There are times when a person has to pinch himself to make sure he's not dreaming. This happens when one's sense of reality fails to jive with that of seemingly everyone else. I pinched hard back in September/October 2013 during the denouement to the Syrian "Red Line" fiasco—specifically, the part that involved the Russian-induced deal that supposedly removed and destroyed all of Syria's chemical weapons. I knew the Syrian declaration was false and that some chemical munitions would remain—probably more recent and usable stocks and some munitions already weaponized.

As the days and then the weeks and months passed, I was certain that many others would go into English- or Western-language print, or otherwise join me, in supporting my view. To the best of my knowledge, at the time and since, not a single U.S. news source did so. On October 3, 2013, *The Economist* expressed some doubts about the veracity of the Syrian regime's declaration. Both Amy Smithson and Gwyn Winfield, chemical weapons experts, reasoned at the time that the Syrian regime had incentives to distort its declaration, but neither charged

the regime with lying once the disclosure was handed over. Days later, when a belated Syrian revelation of four additional sites raised concern about the veracity of the declaration among government experts, the press was mainly mute.

Only in the Israeli press at the time were doubts expressed.^[1] And only in the Israeli press was Ambassador Samantha Power's early October [tweet reported](#): "Must keep pressure on regime so it doesn't hide CW capability."

There followed in January 2014 [Ambassador Robert Mikulak's comment](#) to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Executive Council that the October phase of facilities destruction was incomplete, reversible, and did not meet agreed requirements. Mikulak's comment rated a brief CBS News report, but no major U.S. newspaper mentioned it. May 2014 brought forth a belated and muted expression of doubt on the part of British Ambassador Mark Lyall Grant; it disappeared as a whisper in the ether. Throughout the period from September 2013 to January 2015, when the process supposedly ended successfully, there was not so much as a peep from any U.S. mainstream media source that things might not be as the Obama Administration made them seem. Contrarily, when in October 2013 Secretary of State [John Kerry pronounced](#) himself "very pleased" at Syrian compliance, the press spread that bubbly remark far and wide. Who says the press isn't interested in good news, even when it's not accurate?

I warned about Syrian dissimulation several times in this period (details below), but it was like yelling down a well and hearing no echo come back. I even [later warned](#) about the implications for the P5+1 negotiations with Iran: If the Syrians could get away with lying to the U.S. government, would not the Iranian regime perhaps conclude that it could do the same? Thanks to David Samuels' [revelational interview](#) with Ben Rhodes, we get the distinct sense that the Iranians tried and the Obama White House let them slide in its own dissimulating desperation to get a deal.

I pinched hard: What was the matter with everyone? On what basis did supposedly serious American journalists—to take just one class of observers—give a regime that had lied to every U.S. administration since that of Dwight Eisenhower a free pass on this count? I just couldn't understand it.

Things got worse when the [media began claiming](#) in June 2014 that all Syrian chemical weapons were now out of the country and awaiting destruction. After the passage of a few more months, when the cleansing-and-destruction process was supposedly complete, [Obama Administration spokesmen](#), senior and otherwise, began claiming in August 2014 that *all* chemical weapons stocks—some 1,300 tons—had been removed from Syria and destroyed. No one (except me, it seemed,) in this entire beautiful and expansive country of ours bothered to publicly express doubt.

There was not a disparaging word even from responsible Republicans who had a good partisan reason to speak up, as other less-responsible Republicans obsessed over their idiotic partisan witch-hunt of "Benghazi." The Syria chemical weapons stuff was low-hanging fruit; why didn't anyone on the GOP side think to pick it? (Of course, now I realize that a party that let Donald Trump become its presidential nominee was even then capable of almost any screw-up.) I pinched so hard it left a mark.

The Long-Awaited Admission

The mainstream press began to figure this stuff out in May 2015, thanks to an intel operation and its subsequent leak, first via a Reuters dispatch and then in front page stories in the [New York Times](#) and the [Times \(of London\)](#). [The American Interest](#) ran a short post on the news on May 11 quoting my analysis from September 30, 2013. Two days later, I beat the drum again, summarizing as follows: "The Syrians lied; the deal therefore held zero military significance; we would end up as hazmat collectors for the Syrians; and we would stupidly foot the bill."

But now, finally, real proof is at hand—irrefutable proof detailed in spades, so that no reasonable person can continue to remain deluded.

On July 4, 2016, the Declarations Assessment Team of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical

Weapons reported to the treaty's day-to-day governing body, the 41-member Executive Council, that it had considerable evidence challenging the veracity of Syria's declaration about its chemical-weapons facilities. We, the (attentive) public, only learned of this report, however, a week or two ago. As Amy Smithson puts it in [The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists](#):

The treaty's inspectors classified the July report as "highly protected," but details went public when the organization's director, Ahmet Uzumcu, sent a two-page summary and a redacted version of the report to the UN Security Council over the protests of Russia's Executive Council representative. Among other things, the report stated that inspectors have quietly met with Syrian officials and inspected Syrian facilities numerous times since April 2014, taking 122 samples that often directly refute Syria's declaration.

Of course the Russian government would protest any information going public: As the Assad regime's lawyer, it was a full partner to the original lie.

This was perhaps not so easy for Uzumcu to do, for, after all, he is the one who previously declared [all Syrian stocks destroyed on January 4, 2015](#). How does one say "eat crow" in Turkish?

Smithson continues:

In the 1990s, Saddam Hussein used inaccurate and incomplete declarations about his nuclear, chemical, biological, and missile programs to try to dupe UN inspectors and the international community into believing he was relinquishing his unconventional capabilities. Fortunately, the UN inspectors [did not fall for this ploy](#); with dogged perseverance they dug out facts contradicting those declarations and eliminated the weapons capabilities Hussein was trying to hide. In a move right out of Saddam's hide-and-seek playbook, the Syrians told inspectors from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons that they had destroyed all records of their program, purportedly fearing the documents would fall into the wrong hands. The absence of records makes it much more difficult for inspectors to verify what they are told about a weapons program but Assad's government further complicated matters by refusing to let inspectors speak with senior officials in Syria's chemical-weapons program. . . . [M]uch of Syria's declaration was hogwash, though the organization's chief put it in more technical terms. Uzumcu characterized Syria's misleading and conflicting explanations for the detection of several undeclared warfare agents as "not scientifically or technically plausible." With missing chemical munitions and the majority of 122 samples from several undeclared sites pointing to falsehoods in Syria's declaration, evidence indicates Syria, a serial violator of the chemical convention, may still harbor a chemical-weapons program.

That's exactly right, and stocks too, which is why overrun depots have furnished some material for ISIS to use chemical weapons now and again on its large array of foes in Syria. When evidence surfaced of ISIS chemical use, an array of theories sprang forth as to how they came by such materials. Some said they were smart and technologically facile enough to fabricate them *de novo*. Not likely. Some say they bought them, from somewhere. Not likely. Some say they found what amounted to a small rounding error from the mammoth volume of old Syrian stocks, the result of an honest oversight on the part of the Russian personnel who oversaw the transportation (but not the destruction^[2]) of the old toxic slime. Perhaps; this seems to be the most popular explanation within the U.S. intelligence community. Vastly more likely is the simplest explanation: ISIS overran some regime stocks, and perhaps loaded, weaponized canisters, because the stocks and canisters were still there to be overrun.

If this is the simplest explanation, then why the struggle to violate Occam's Razor to concoct some alternative? Pinch, pinch, pinch.

Some other usable stocks and weapons no doubt remain in regime possession, to be used *en extremis* if the Alawi regime elite should be threatened ultimately in its Latakia redoubts. If that ever happens, you'd think that a lot of seemingly smart people would be very embarrassed. They won't be. Pretty much no one remembers esoteric stuff that's more than a few days old anymore; there's no time or facility to connect dots amid the mainstream media's 24/7 swirl of fragmented, evanescent images. That's the font of our post-factual world, besides which who wants to embarrass colleagues if it can be avoided, lest one day the truth sets a rival free to embarrass you?

Will the Obama Administration in its waning days admit that it believed too much, claimed too much, and fawned over its supposed success just a little too much? Not a chance.

A Friendly Reminder

Now, it is time to remind you, dear reader, what I wrote about abject fraud, and when I wrote it. I'll keep this brief, since the I-told-you-so tense grates on some people. Besides, you always have the option of skipping the three excerpts that follow to attend to other matters.

Here is what I wrote on September 30, 2013:

The Syrian regime needs only a small fraction of its chemical arsenal for any imaginable military purposes. Most of its stocks are old and of questionable potency; the only reason they're still there is because it's very expensive and dangerous to get rid of them. (We're still getting rid of buried World War I-era stocks in Washington, DC, after all!) So even if (and it's a very big "if") the UN manages to get rid of 90 percent of Syria's chemical stocks, the military significance of so doing will be zero. Note, too, that Syria's cooperation with the OPCW so far is probably designed to give Syria the right to veto inspections of any site the regime has not "declared" in its manifest. The regime can declare 90 percent or more of the relevant sites and lose nothing in military terms. It even gains financially: Others will now pay to dispose of stuff that's useless and dangerous, and the bill will be quite large—in the billions of dollars, very likely, if it ever comes to that.

Here's what I wrote *inter alia* on January 14, 2014:

There is nothing wrong with eliminating Syria's chemical weapons in the face of a possibly crumbling Syrian state, but the deal does not eliminate all of Syria's chemical weapons. It may end up eliminating only those the regime itself declared—and we have no reliable means of verifying the existence of what was not declared. Very likely, the most up-to-date and lethal munitions were not declared, leaving the so-called international community—mainly the United States, as it predictably turned out—to play the role of [hazmat garbage collector](#), and to foot the bill to boot.

And here from May 13, 2014:

...the Syrians never declared, from the start, all their stockpiles and fabrication sites. They declared 26. There are at least thirty, and according to Israeli estimates there were around 50, although some were in isolated areas and have since been consolidated or moved during the civil war. As I wrote when this whole thing started, the Syrian government has lied to every U.S. administration since that of Dwight Eisenhower, and it is lying now to the Obama Administration.

A little background may make what has been happening a bit clearer. Syria's chemical weapons

program goes back to the mid-1970s, and really got going with Soviet help in the 1980s. The Soviets taught the Syrians the know-how, and Russians have continued to do so because the Syrians have been unable to institutionalize the technical knowledge among themselves. Precursors for nerve gas, which are industrial chemicals made in often large amounts and available commercially, are, like Sarin itself, moderately unstable and deteriorate over time, and so must be restocked. (One of them, for example, is a chemical used to leach bauxite ore to produce alumina.) Over a more than 40-year period, most of Syria's old chemical stocks of precursors became worthless for military purposes, but still toxic. The Syrians never bothered to invest in capabilities to denature the toxins, so they just piled up. We essentially have played the role of hazmat garbage collectors, paying out of our own pocket to get rid of all this useless stuff—hundreds of tons of it—but leaving the newer and better materials off the books and in regime hands (possibly now in Latakia province). The result is that while the effort marginally reduces the danger of Islamist crazies getting their hands on the precursors, it has absolutely zero effect on the Syrian chemical war order of battle.

Could it be that the U.S. government has not known this all along? I find it hard to believe. . . . Yet, as best I can tell, it was only three days ago that the very first statement by a U.S. government official about this problem emerged. Jen Psaki, the State Department spokeswoman, let loose on May 9 that “we remain skeptical” as to whether the Syrian government “has revealed the full extent of its stockpiles.” This statement was reported in the May 10 *Khaleej Times*, but not in any American newspaper that I saw. Just a day later, in a *Washington Post* interview, French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said: “It is true and positive that step by step, they got rid of them. Today the work is about 90 percent done. Provided that they did not hide anything from us.” Unfortunately, the interviewer, the estimable Lally Weymouth, failed to understand the significance of Fabius's afterthought or to follow up on it.

Certainly the President has never raised the inconvenient possibility. He said at the end of April that 87 percent of Syria's chemical weapons had been removed, and “the fact that we didn't have to fire a missile to get that accomplished is not a failure to uphold international norms, it's a success.” Really, do tell.

Yes, there is more, but I'll spare you.

So back to the original question: Why did the U.S. mainstream media behave so credulously toward the Syrian regime, the officialdom of OPCW, and the Obama Administration? Why and how did their sense of history and reality abandon them, along with the responsibility to use their critical investigative talents to write a truthful first draft of history? You tell me, please, and so let the pinching stop. It hurts.

[1] The abbreviated English-language material is: Dan Williams, “Israeli Officials: Syria Hid Chemical Weapons After Giving Up Raw Materials,” *Ha'aretz*, September 18, 2014, and Amos Harel, “Israeli Intelligence: Syria Retains Small WMD Capacity,” *Ha'aretz*, October 1, 2014.

[2] In an otherwise excellent analysis, Anna Borshchevskaya and Jeremy Vaughan state that Putin volunteered to have Russia “oversee the destruction of Assad's chemical weapons arsenal in 2013.” Not so; he volunteered to transport it out of Syria, not to destroy it. Most of the obsolete, denatured stocks that were destroyed were destroyed abroad the *MV Cape Ray* off the coast of Italy. It took 42 days to destroy about 581 metric tons of Syria's accumulated toxic materials. U.S. taxpayers did indeed foot the bill. The British took care of most of the rest as the effluents from the *Cape Ray* made their way to Finland and Germany for burial or disposal. Neither the Syrians nor the Russians forked over a cent. Borshchevskaya and Vaughan, “How the Russian Military Reestablished Itself in the Middle East,” WINEP policy Watch 2709, October 17, 2016.