The sight of a small cylindrical-shaped object rapidly falling out of a near-blue sky trailing what appears to be smoke might on the surface merit little attention. It could have been an infra-red countermeasures’ flare that had failed to deploy correctly. There were other plausible explanations. In wartime all sorts of things are often imagined, apparently witnessed or perceived to have happened. In such a febrile atmosphere rumours can easily replace facts.

On this particular occasion on 29 April at a place called Saraqeb in Syria this apparently innocuous event was to create an increasing sense of crisis for the international community. Moments after the substance had been released several people on the ground lay convulsed, struggling for breath. Videos taken on mobile phones captured the apparent drama of the occasion. A white substance was seen to be coming out of their mouths. As is common with such events within the hour these images were being broadcast around the world. The question was, however, were they real?

For some commentators these rather grainy and poorly shot images provided just the sort of conclusive evidence they had been looking for throughout the rebellion in Syria. The regime in Damascus had deployed chemical weapons against its own people. The symptoms seemed to suggest the use of sarin gas. Others were far from convinced. The images broadcast of the small cylindrical-shaped object from which the chemicals were alleged to have been released did not look particularly convincing.

For those seeking putative action against the Syrian regime the conclusion was simple. President Obama’s August 2012 ‘red line’ had been crossed. He had after all made it clear, or so it seemed, that if chemical weapons were to be used in this way it would provide the final stimulus needed for America to become more deeply engaged in the conflict.

This was not the first time the accusation had been made that chemical weapons had been used in Syria. Other potential events had been noted in Homs, in December, Aleppo and Adra near Damascus in March and in Darayya near Damascus in April. Although on more than one occasion it was possible that the so-called chemical weapons had indeed been improvised and were based on chlorine. In Iraq in 2007 similar attacks had taken place.

The Turkish prime minister, however, was unequivocal. Speaking on 2 May ahead of a meeting...
with President Obama he had voiced what many in the international community had already concluded when he said: ‘We will discuss the use of chemical weapons during the meeting with President Obama. It is obvious the Al-Assad regime is using it.’

Such were the concerns about the allegations that the United Nations created its own inquiry team led by a Swedish chemical weapons expert, Professor Aka Sellström. His request to enter Syria to validate the competing claims was denied by Damascus. If they had nothing to hide why not grant access to the United Nations team? For the Al-Assad regime the similarities with weapons inspectors visiting Iraq ahead of the military intervention in 2003 showed that even the United Nations could not be trusted.

In their first report on the matter the United Nations commission noted in early June that there was ‘reasonable evidence’ that chemical weapons had been used on four occasions in March and April. But the report also said that due to a lack of forensic evidence from the sites that it was not possible to ‘determine the precise chemical agents used, their delivery systems or perpetrator’.

‘So what would the White House do after the images had been published from Saraqeb? The answer was, not a lot. Obfuscation accompanied the statements emerging from the Oval Office. It seemed as if the President was backing away from his past declaration. The evidence, the White House suggested, was not conclusive. More information was required before the President would take the view his ‘red line’ had been crossed.

For those on the right wing of political opinion this all smacked of evasion and weakness. The administration was living in denial. If the Syrian ‘red line’ on chemical weapons was so difficult to cross, what about the President’s assurances to Israel over the Iranian nuclear programme?

For the White House, however, there were other factors that needed to be considered. The legacy of Iraq, and the failure to find any chemical weapons after the invasion in 2003, weighs heavily on some parts of the political establishment in Washington. The ‘red line’ it would seem was not quite as clear as the President’s words had seemed to imply. Or was there more to this?

The message from the White House was clear. The President was not going to rush head long into getting involved in yet another potentially costly military campaign simply on what the White House regarded a fairly flimsy evidence of the use of chemical weapons. The subsequent debate even ventured into semantic overtones. Had chemicals been used as weapons? Or had chemical weapons been employed by the regime? It may seem subtle in the extreme but it does provide a plausible alternative explanation to what actually happened on the ground.

The scenes emerging from Syria hardly looked like those from Halabja in 1988. When the President had originally spoken of his ‘red line’ it is not difficult to imagine that those images were in the forefront of his mind. His thinking applied to the widespread use of chemical weapons. Not some isolated incident that only appeared to affect a small number of people.

On the surface if the regime were using chemical weapons they were certainly doing in it a restrained way. Where they trying to test President Obama’s ‘red line’? Or had some local commander gone rogue and decided to deploy chemical weapons without the sanction of Damascus? Their military position at the time was certainly perilous. Suffering from desertions the Syrian military was close to collapse.
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Of course there were other things the President had to consider. Whilst the helicopter attack could have been carried out only by the regime, the other reported uses of chemical weapons may have had a different source. Al Qaeda has long known how to make small quantities of sarin gas. Could they also be using chemical weapons in an attempt to lure the Americans back into another military and political quagmire?

In the immediate aftermath of the attacks on 11 September a regular contributor to the journal Scientific American placed an order with one of the United States’ largest chemical companies for the three constituent chemicals and the alcohol required to develop a quantity of sarin. The formula he used was derived from the materials used by the Japanese cult, Aum Shinrikyo, in order to carry out their attack on the Tokyo Underground in March 1995.

His box of toxic chemicals arrived the next day. It had cost $132.20 plus shipping and handling costs. With the amounts of chemicals he had ordered he could have manufactured 280 grams of sarin, enough to fill 100 teaspoons. Delivered in the right way that amount of sarin could kill several hundreds of people.

Nearly two years later a BBC journalist set out to repeat the exercise. Research on the Internet quickly revealed the materials he would need and how to mix them to create the liquid from which the gas could be evaporated. Using a credit card and a falsified piece of headed notepaper the journalist was able to order the chemicals required from within the United Kingdom. They were delivered in a matter of days. The message from their reporting was clear. The materials needed to produce sarin gas are readily available. The potential for Al Qaeda to get hold of similar chemicals, therefore, could not be ruled out.

Two other events have also occurred since the initial media coverage of the helicopter incident. In Iraq on 3 June Iraqi security forces raided two suspected terrorist hideouts in Baghdad and in one of its neighbouring provinces. At all three locations they found laboratory facilities suitable for manufacturing small amounts of sarin and mustard gas. Remote-controlled drones were also found at the workshops. They were intended to release the chemicals from a ‘safe’ range around 1.5 km away from the selected target.

Pictures emerging from the Iraqi Ministry of Defence showed the laboratories and the equipment being used. One of the five people arrested at the locations has apparently already confessed to the authorities claiming that the chemicals that had been created were destined for use at undefined locations in the West.

At almost same time Turkish authorities captured 12 members of the Al-Nusrah Front in the sprawling metropolitan city of Adana. This is 120km away from the Syrian border. It is a natural junction for people and equipment going into and out from Syria.

On searching the individuals involved two kilos of sarin were reportedly discovered. Although this was denied by the Turkish authority’s mainstream, media in the area maintained their claims of the discovery of the sarin. Five of the 12 suspects were later released from custody.

The fact that two such raids were mounted within a matter of hours of each other does throw up the possibility that this was part of a wider counter-terrorism effort being made jointly between the Turkish, Iraqi and American governments. If that is the case it may well explain President Obama’s obvious reluctance to say that the reports emanating from Syria are all in some way linked to the regime in Damascus. Given the evidence emerging the possibility that Al Qaeda might be trying to create a situation where President Obama’s ‘red line’ is crossed cannot be dismissed lightly.

With international opinion appearing to shift its stance and move towards arming the rebel forces, the suggestion that some elements have access to chemical weapons would create a huge political problem for Washington. There would also be a backlash in Paris and London where both President Hollande and Prime Minister David Cameron have both been quite clear in the need to step up measures against the regime of President Assad.

With Washington still refusing to budge, Paris and London went a step further. Using two reporters from the newspaper Le Monde as couriers they returned urine samples taken from casualties who, it was alleged, had been exposed to sarin gas. These samples were analysed by one of France’s internationally recognised laboratories. Similar tests were also conducted at Porton Down in the United Kingdom. The results provided what the French and United Kingdom governments believe to be conclusive evidence of the use of sarin. Both governments also supplied their results to the head of the United Nations inquiry.

A statement from the United Kingdom Foreign Office added weight to the argument. It confirmed that ‘physiological samples’ that had been collected in Syria had tested positive for sarin. A substance known as isopropyl methyl phosphonic acid (IMPA) had reportedly been discovered. This, according to Ralf Trapp, an independent consultant who used to work for the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in The Hague, was ‘clear proof of the use of sarin’. Many nerve agents eventually break down into methyl phosphonic acid. But only sarin leaves a residue of IMPA.

Seeking to overcome the concerns raised by the Americans over the surety of the chain of evidence, a British official said: “Are we confident in our means of collection, and are we confident that it points to the regime’s use of sarin? Yes. Can we prove it with 100% certainty? Probably not.’ That, British officials concede, would require a visit into Syria. Of course with the recent change in the military landscape after the intervention of Hezbollah on the side of the Al-Asad regime that is very unlikely. Meanwhile President Obama’s reluctance to get drawn further into the conflict in Syria is unlikely to undergo some form of Damascene conversion. It would appear that in Washington so-called ‘red lines’ do not delineate a binary form of response. In Tehran and Pyongyang this will not have gone unnoticed.