

Truth, lies and taking sides

This is the first in four articles on the recent organophosphate attacks in Syria in August. This one is an overview and forecast of what it might mean. Steve Johnson reviews the UN Report, Dan Kaszeta, MD of Strongpoint Security, looks at the casualty figures and the blogger Brown Moses (also known as Eliot Higgins) considers the munitions involved.

An overview of the incident is perhaps the hardest to write. The reports of the attack are open to a certain amount of interpretation, while the report and

munitions have less controversy attached to them. A clear-eyed version of the events would be that two days after the UN Inspectors landed in Damascus, sometime early in the morning of 21 August, first reports of something happening came in at approximately 02.45 in a village to the East of Damascus, Ein Tarma, and then in Zamalka, both in the Ghouta district. These reports were made via various Twitter/blog accounts. About two hours later more incidents were reported in Muadhmiya, a district to the West of Ghouta.

The world press started picking up on the activity after the Muadhmiya attack, but initial reports were very sketchy. The first videos were of streets in Muadhmiya, Ein Tarma and Zamalka. They showed a preponderance of children. Poorly lit, and with videos taken by locals with (understandably) no idea what they were looking at, it was difficult to state with any certainty what had happened. Many of the cameramen focussed on the dead, and all that was obvious was that they had no signs of physical injury. But without



At one point it looked like it was going to be 'Make way for the Paveway!' ©DoD

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clear signs and symptoms, it was difficult to state with any certainty whether these were products of blast wave, asphyxiation or some kind of toxic chemical. There were a number of signifiers of chemical agents, shortage of breath for example, but equally there were some things that should have been there but were missing. A number of the victims showed no sign of miosis (and with a Ct_{50} of 3mg this should have been prevalent in a lot of the survivors). There seemed to be a shortage of casualties to fatalities; survivors talked about smelling and seeing the agent (sarin is colourless and odourless) and there was a shortage of secondary casualties (people were 'decontaminating' the expectant with water with no gloves, and some people were walking around in the ER room without any socks or shoes). Certainly for the next 24 hours or so a great deal of uncertainty prevailed about what might have happened, while the rebels were claiming that there had been a CWA attack, and Assad forces were claiming that there definitely was not. All international observers had to go on was video footage. Video footage in Syria has been guilty of "Crying 'Wolf'" so often that it rarely got a look in by 21 August, and with question marks over the symptoms it was released to a sceptically outraged world media ("I'm not sure what happened, but it was clearly a massacre").

It was also difficult to work out the motive – and this still proves elusive – as it seemed that the very worst time to use chemical weapons would be when the inspectors had landed. While no-one knew what action international partners would launch it did seem that a turning point had been reached, and that the advantage was going to be with the rebels. Assad had previously made statements that the agent was all under central control, so if that were the case then it seemed unlikely that any had got into the hands of the FSA. With the FSA being a shifting tide of allegiances it would be no surprise if it had been a blue on blue (as the conventional attacks in Azaz nearly a month later showed), and that Assad had been right. This placed those with the means

without the motive, and those with the motive without the means.

The picture remained unclear in terms of agent, means and motive until 24 August, when at least one of the pieces of the puzzle seemed to become clearer. Médecins Sans Frontières announced that they had treated some 3,600 patients (10% fatalities), who had shown signs of some neurotoxin exposure. After this, the agent of choice became (and remained) sarin. More data started to appear: French and British intelligence claimed 281 and 350, which climbed up to 1,429 and 1,729 reported by the US and FSA (respectively).

Belatedly, the pro-Assad regime PR machine started to lurch into action. More stories started to appear in the press, most pernicious was a *Mintpress* article that stated that it was sarin brought into the area by Saudis (!) and destroyed by an artillery bombardment. This was a bizarre accusation (which unravelled further later when the two reporters turned on each other and the story lost all credibility), but one that seemed to cut the Gordian knot of weapon/no motive vs motive/no weapon, and was taken up by some news agencies. With no outside media allowed into the region, the whole story was dependent on highly biased reporting from the front lines. Balancing the increasingly strident rhetoric from Washington was some poorly managed PR from Moscow, which sought at first to deny that there had been an attack at all (by showing a complete ignorance of how YouTube files its videos) and then providing some videos that didn't persuade any of the media (who listened with half an ear because they still couldn't work out motive).

Meanwhile the UN was busy trying to get access to the site. As reports built up, the need for an inspection became clear, and a large number of member states requested that the UN team, led by Ake Sellstrom, enter the site and make a report. Fighting continued despite Ban Ki Moon's request on 22 August for UN Inspectors to enter the site immediately. With experts stating that a 48-hour window existed for quality samples to be taken, before sarin started degrading, there was bated

breath as to whether the shelling would stop, and Inspectors allowed in. The intensity of the attacks by the Assad forces, who had puzzlingly not followed up the advantage of the chemical attack (regardless of which side launched it), suggested that their strategy was to turn the ground over, destroying the evidence and complicating the chemical sample. Further delays happened when mortars fell near the Inspectors' hotel and later, when they had received permission to visit the site, a 'sniper' shot at their vehicle – allowing the evidence, and site, to degrade further.

The story of what the Inspectors found, and the report that followed, can be found in Steve Johnson's article (see page 26). It is worth looking at the winners and losers in the episode and examining whether this is a template for future attacks in Syria and beyond.

Winners

OPCW. We have not been a fan of the OPCW in the past, not because of what they do, but rather what they do not – ie they are a verification regime (chemical weapon auditors) rather than an investigation regime. Prior to Syria, with nearly the entire world signed up to the CWC, the OPCW indulged in navel-gazing as to 'Which way now?' While this will inevitably continue it will do so within a re-invigorated agency, and one that is able to prove that it still has a role. The OPCW is a multinational agency (and one which has had Russian military CBRN officers join it recently) and a strongly legal entity. This crisis is what it was set up to deal with and it has handled it admirably. In six to twelve months, as Assad moves towards destruction, there will undoubtedly be some criticism, but currently they should be feeling particularly justified.

Russian diplomacy. Whether you agree with their opinions or not (and I largely fall in the 'not' camp) they have achieved a diplomatic masterstroke, pulling the US teeth and running American military activity into the sand for the short term. It would have been hard to see a scenario whereby US action in Syria would take a step back eight weeks ago, but the Russians have now



It might not have been Cuba, but at one stage it looked like US and Russian forces might have clashed over Syria ©DoD

managed to seem pillars of diplomatic good sense and restraint in a highly charged environment. Admittedly they then go and spoil a lot of it with various bits of misinformation and nonsense (the dating of the YouTube videos being the most obvious), but on the strategic level they have proved themselves to be a trusted diplomatic partner to dictators everywhere. Paraphrasing FDR/Hull/Thaddeus Stevens, Assad might be a ‘son of a bitch, but he is [Moscow’s] son of a bitch’ and the loyalty they have shown him in the teeth of Western opposition will secure them a lot of credibility in the Middle East and Asia.

Losers

Syrian People. This is not the first chemical attack the Syrian people have suffered, and many civilians will have long-term health effects from exposure to sarin/organophosphates. I hope this will be the last chemical attack, but personally I cannot see that being the case. Whether it is from fuel-air explosives, release of toxic industrial chemicals or from conventional CWA the stakes are so high in the region, and the conflict so dirty between all

participants (Assad, Western FSA and fundamentalist FSA [ISIS etc]), that common decency and morality has long since departed. Much like the accusations of use that preceded 21 August, in Khan Al Assel etc, scale is important. Small attacks against combatants will generate small amounts of protest, large amounts against civilians will change the conflict. Whether real or not, accusations of CW use will dog this conflict, and that will probably overshadow the tide of human misery and death that conventional munitions are causing.

US Diplomacy. Admittedly this could be re-titled as “Democracy” and put in the “Winners” column, but there is no doubt that the Obama administration has been out-flanked. The recent acquiescence to the Russian rhetoric on the UN resolution again left the Americans seeming bellicose but ineffectual – a pub drunk. Their lack of desire to get involved with a FSA that they see as compromised with Al Qaeda-esque fighters left them with strong rhetoric but poor options. They have wanted to be seen to be strong, but even in their talk of air strikes they have

equivocated and looked weak. Much like as in the Balkans they have been given a choice of grey hats, rather than black or white, and have not known what to do to sell it to the American people. A success has been keeping Israel out of a hot conflict, but in terms of allies in the Middle East and Asia they have not come out of this well. The red line has been crossed and all it has led to is more diplomacy – not a clear signal for those nations that might want to create CBRN weapons.

Syrian Chemical Weapons. Syria signing up to the CWC and providing a list of what they possess and moving towards destruction is clearly a good thing, but it is hard to get excited about. Syrian stockpiles have been well guarded against most intelligence agencies (I would suggest The Mossad being the one exception), and there is likely to be some fuzzy logic between what Assad regime claims they have and what intelligence sources think they have. Even if the two should tally he has now dispersed his CWA, to protect them from the strikes, from the three sites that we think they were in, to what the *Wall Street Journal* stated was 50. The

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best military in the world is likely to temporarily lose 10% of their inventory moving between such locations, and re-finding these assets in a war-torn country is not an easy task even if you genuinely wanted to do it. I am now preparing myself for some to be “lost” or “captured”, allowing for a tactical stockpile while the rest are destroyed. Assad claimed that he needed a billion dollars and a year to set up his disposal plant. This is the probably the “back-of-the-fag-packet” estimate, the true cost and time is likely to be larger and dependent on how well he is doing in a conventional conflict. The recent report in the *Washington Post* that many of the agents were stored in their precursors is likely to hold true for sarin, but not for mustard, and there is still the abiding suspicion that Assad might hold some NTAs, that he would hide away from the OPCW.

Score draw

CBRN Troops. There is no doubt that politicians have been looking hopefully into their inventory to see whether they can protect their own forces against CWA. They are not likely to have liked what they have seen. The cupboard is bare. CBRN defence, across Nato, is not what it was three years ago thanks to extensive funding cuts. It might take 6-12 months, but there is likely to be an uptick in budgets for PPE, filters and chemical detectors as the knee-jerk reaction kicks in. Unfortunately, this is likely to be to the cost of other elements of the force structure, unless they take the unpopular step of increasing defence budgets, which means that it will be a short-term fix rapidly undone once Ghouta becomes a thing of the past.

So how much of what we have seen is unique to Syria, how much unique to the region and how much universal? The quantity of Syrian chemical weapons is close to unique. While there are other suspected possessors, few of them have felt the need to build up a strategic chemical stockpile to counterbalance the strategic deterrence of a nuclear neighbour. Currently, therefore, outside of North Korea, there are unlikely to be many nations

that have such a demilitarisation challenge as Syria poses. Equally the current need for a large-scale mobile demil capability has caught both Russia and the US unawares, and this is likely to happen only the once. The purblind soup of accusation and counter accusation, all seen through the uploaded videos of people on the ground, is likely to be a regional issue. One of the lines that Assad has pressed home, with some justification, from the start, is that any fire lit in Syria has the potential to spread to other countries in the region. So this could well be the start of the “Arab Fall” – the second stage after regimes fall, are replaced “Morsi-esque”, with another, only to be replaced by the counter-revolution: all watched and analysed via Youtube rather than CNN or BBC.

Assad claimed that sarin is a “kitchen gas” – easy to manufacture. The truth of that might not be as far away as first thought once chemical weapons scientists start to proliferate. Ten years ago the prospect of home-made explosives seemed futuristic; the same proliferation is possible in CWA (mustard especially) and this is before the issue of TICs is revived.

Finally, whatever the result in Syria, the chickens will come home to roost. Those Europeans or North Americans who have travelled to fight in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Syria, will come back with their lessons learned. As the recent Westgate Mall massacre in Kenya showed, this doesn't have to be high-tech solution: what it needs is people with the motivation to not come out of it alive.



US diplomacy did not come out of Syria well ©DoD