

THE SMOKING GUN

Anthony Tucker-Jones assesses the intelligence implicating Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in the use of chemical weapons against his own people

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government is languishing under the international shame of having deployed Sarin nerve agent against its own people. To date there is no denying that some sort of chemical agent has caused a growing death toll amongst the civilian population caught in the crossfire. Nonetheless, it has taken six long months of continual chemical attacks in Syria for the international community to finally take concrete action against Assad's stocks of chemical weapons. The Free Syrian Army and the other opposition groups cannot comprehend why, if Assad has crossed Washington's CW "red line", the international community has taken so long to do anything about it. Frankly, however, sending a UN CW inspection team to Syria invokes memories of Iraq where inspectors were led a merry dance by Saddam Hussein.

Clearly though there is an escalating pattern to the chemical weapons attacks across the country. The question remains at what level are they being authorised and by whom. Just how far are President Assad's supporters prepared to go to keep him in power? If it is all the way, they have a plethora of weapons that can heap yet more death and destruction onto the people of Syria. But what has been used is just the tip of the iceberg. President Assad has an arsenal that breaks every rule in the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) – though this mattered little to his generals as they are not party to the CWC.

During March this year Khan al-Assal, Al-Qtaybeh and Adra were subjected to chemical attack. The following month Sheikh Masquod, Saraqeb and Jobar received the same treatment. These attacks culminated in the gassing of Ghouta in eastern Damascus on 21 August. According to US intelligence at least a dozen different locations in the suburbs of eastern and south-eastern Damascus were subjected to simultaneous chemical weapon attack. Throughout the year there has been much smoke and mirrors, as both sides in the conflict blamed each other for the use of CW.

According to the British Joint Intelligence Committee, "A chemical attack occurred in Damascus on the morning of 21 August, resulting in at least 350 fatalities [other sources put the figure as high as 1,500]. It is not possible for the opposition to have carried out a CW attack on this scale. The regime has

used CW on a smaller scale on at least 14 occasions in the past. There is some intelligence to suggest regime culpability in this attack."

Russia, one of Assad's few remaining international allies, was adamant that the Sarin used against Khan al-Assal had been launched by the opposition. The Russian Ambassador, Vitaly Churkin, went as far as to claim that, following a visit by Russian experts, they had concluded the chemical agent had been launched by the Bashir al-Nasr Brigade, a rebel group affiliated with the Free Syrian Army, using a Bashir-3 unguided projectile. Churkin stated, "The results of



the analysis clearly indicate that the ordnance used in Khan al-Assal was not industrially manufactured and was filled with Sarin."

Britain, France and the US had little doubt the Syrian government conducted the attacks, however. Unfortunately, lack of access to Syria meant that it was all but impossible to prove this publicly – that is until Ghouta and the plethora of mobile phone footage uploaded onto YouTube. This showed casualties with symptoms consistent with the effects of nerve gas. Nevertheless, the Syrian government continued to maintain that it was the victim of chemical attacks and not the perpetrator.

Just eight days after the attack in Ghouta, British intelligence stepped into the fray by pointing the finger at Assad's regime. In a letter to British Prime Minister David Cameron, Chairman of the JIC Jon Day stated categorically, "There is no credible intelligence or other evidence to substantiate the claims or the possession of CW [Chemical Weapons] by the opposition. The JIC has therefore concluded that there are no plausible alternative scenarios to regime responsibility."

The JIC assessment of 27 August, although it highlighted 14 separate attacks, failed to identify

any of them. So it was unclear if this included Khan al-Assal. Nor did the JIC have any ready explanation as to why President Assad would launch such a large-scale chemical weapons attack at a time when UN inspectors seeking to investigate the earlier attacks were in a hotel not far from Ghouta.

Indeed, the JIC confessed, "There is no obvious political or military trigger for the regime use of CW on an apparently larger scale now, particularly given the current presence in Syria of the UN investigation team. Permission to authorise CW has probably been delegated by President Assad to senior commanders..."

Assad's chemical arsenal

Chemical Weapons currently held by the Assad regime include the following:

Mustard gas

This is harmful as both a liquid and a vapour and destroys skin tissue, attacks the eyes, respiratory tract and moist areas of the body. Horrific blistering of the skin can resemble first-degree burns. Reportedly a Syrian chemical weapons plant suffered an accident in 2007 which caused 15 fatalities and 50 injured. This happened during tests to weaponise a Scud missile with mustard gas.

G Agents

These are derived from phosphorous and are deadly to man and wildlife as they fatally block then paralyse respiratory and voluntary muscular action. They are all viscous liquids and Tabun (GA), is colourless to brown giving off an almond like smell. Assad's weapon of choice, Sarin, known as GB, is a phosphonyl fluoride that is more toxic and volatile than Tabun. Depending on its purity it is colourless to black. Both were first produced by Germany during the Second World War.

V Agent

The V agents were discovered by the British chemical industry in the 1950s while researching organophosphorus insecticides. The Syrian VX formula is based on the Russian "Vx", which is a colourless liquid with no obvious smell. It is much more effective through contact with the skin than by vapour absorption. Russian Vx is believed to be ten times more volatile than American-produced VX.

Clearly this poses the question of who was the delegated commander or indeed whether he had simply gone rogue? The latter scenario is unlikely, and the most probable culprit is Maher Assad, the President's brother, whose 155th Brigade, 4th Mechanised Division has been accused of firing chemical artillery rounds.



THE SMOKING GUN



©Getty Images

Shortly after the French Government issued its National executive summary of declassified intelligence assessing the 21 August attack. According to this, "intelligence confirms that the regime feared a wider attack from the opposition on Damascus at that moment. Our assessment is that the regime was trying by this attack to loosen the grip and secure sites strategic to control of the capital. For example, the area of Moadamiyé is located close to the Mezzeh military airfield, which houses the barracks of [Syrian] Air Force intelligence."

The French concluded that Assad's regime was responsible, stating, "Bashar al-Assad and some of the most influential members of his clan are the only ones empowered to order the use of chemical weapons". The report went on to point out that the orders would flow through the Centre of Scientific Studies and Research, which oversees the production of chemical warfare agents, and Branch 450, which is in charge of filling chemical munitions. The French authorities obtained samples from Saraqeb and Jobar both of which reported suffered CW attacks in April and confirmed the use of Sarin gas.

Following 21 August, for a moment the world held its breath as military intervention seemed imminent. But the presence of UN weapon inspectors now overseeing the stockpiling and destruction of Assad's chemical weapons undermined the UK grounds for military intervention. The UK Government's legal position is that, "The use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime is a serious crime of international concern, as a breach of the customary international law prohibition on the use of chemical weapons, and amounts to a war crime and crime against humanity. However, the legal basis for military action would be humanitarian intervention; the aim is to relieve humanitarian suffering by deterring or disrupting

the further use of chemical weapons." With the latter achieved, Assad and his generals have cleverly brought themselves more time and staved off direct international intervention.

What of the future? Helping the opposition remains highly problematic. Currently the European Union's position is that arms exports should be considered on a case-by-case basis. The UK announced in mid-May an additional £10m in non-lethal support to strengthen the Syrian opposition. While the UK recognised the opposition Syrian National Coalition founded last year, this does not include the National Co-ordination Committee, which encompasses Sunni Islamist jihadist groups such as the al-Nusra Front. The latter are considered a very real threat to British interests and the future of Syria.

The British Intelligence and Security Committee said earlier in the year that the prospect of Syria's chemical weapons falling into the hands of al-Qaeda constituted the UK's "most worrying emerging terrorist threat". The ISC did not mince words in its annual report stating, "There is a risk of extremists in Syria taking advantage of the permissive environment to develop external attack plans, including against Western targets." Assad, by complying with the UN in handing over his CW, has sought to head off this fear.

While Amnesty International is firmly of the view that the vast majority of war crimes and other gross human rights violations continue to be committed by the Syrian government, its sources indicate "an escalation in abuses by armed opposition groups". As a result, Amnesty International believes that arms transfers to the opposition groups should be withheld until the removal of any substantial risk of violations of human rights. This is a stipulation that is all but impossible to achieve unless it means just chemical weapons. In the meantime, Assad stands accused of being a war criminal.

Russian roulette: the UN Security Council backed a Moscow-sponsored resolution calling on Assad to relinquish his chemical weapons stockpile

Anthony Tucker-Jones is intersec's terrorism and security correspondent. He is a former defence intelligence officer and is now a widely published defence commentator specialising in regional conflicts and counter terrorism.