

SYRIA: THE ADMINISTRATION'S ATTRIBUTION FAILURE

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Reuters confirms something that I have long suggested: the government doesn't know who ordered the CW attack in Syria on August 21.

The Administration's best case tying Bashar al-Assad to the attack, through the Scientific Studies and Research Council, consists of speculation that the group may be involved and apparent specific knowledge that the head of the organization was not involved.

A declassified French intelligence report describes a unit of the SSRC, known by the code name "Branch 450", which it says is in charge of filling rockets or shells with chemical munitions in general.

U.S. and European security sources say this unit **was likely involved** in mixing chemicals for the August 21 attack and also **may have played a more extensive role** in preparing for it and carrying it out.

[snip]

U.S. officials say Amr Armanazi, a Syrian official identified as SSRC director in a State Department sanctions order a year ago, **was not directly involved**. [my emphasis]

This is what every government has used as central proof; yet even here they appear to just assume that because SSRC controls Assad's CW they probably were involved.

Remember, we've already had anonymous admissions

that the intelligence community isn't really sure who controls Assad's CW; nor do they know what happened when rebels took over a location where weapons had been stored.

Over the past six months, with shifting front lines in the 2½-year-old civil war and sketchy satellite and human intelligence coming out of Syria, **U.S. and allied spies have lost track of who controls some of the country's chemical weapons supplies**, according to the two intelligence officials and two other U.S. officials.

U.S. satellites have captured images of Syrian troops moving trucks into weapons storage areas and removing materials, but U.S. analysts have not been able to track what was moved or, in some cases, where it was relocated. **They are also not certain that when they saw what looked like Assad's forces moving chemical supplies, those forces were able to remove everything before rebels took over an area where weapons had been stored.** [my emphasis]

And months ago, the government worried a rogue officer might launch Assad's CW.

So on multiple occasions the intelligence community has raised ways – rebel capture, non-authorized capture on the Syrian side, or rogue officer – in which CW might be released against Assad's wishes. Yet their case tying this attack to Assad relies on mere assumptions that none of those things have happened, even while they know the chain of command did not operate as it normally would have.

With all that in mind, consider the implications in this Alan Grayson op-ed. He explicitly reports the Administration has provided no more than a 12-page classified summary. He suggests the summary doesn't refer to individual social media reports and, given the rules imposed by

Mike Rogers, he would be unable to take notes on which social media reports it referred and cross-check them.

Per the instructions of the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, note-taking is not allowed.

Once we leave, we are not permitted to discuss the classified summary with the public, the media, our constituents or even other members. Nor are we allowed to do anything to verify the validity of the information that has been provided.

Remember, the Administration's own map betrays some doubts that the social media reports, at least, would all hold up. If the Administration has simply decreed that no one can check their claims (remember, these are social media reports, and therefore not classified!), it suggests those doubts are now much stronger.

Then Grayson points to the same intercept that has provided the strongest proof that the attack came from within the regime, albeit launched without the authorization of the chain of command.

The danger of the administration's approach was illustrated by a widely read report last week in *The Daily Caller*, which claimed that the Obama administration had selectively used intelligence to justify military strikes in Syria, with one report "doctored so that it leads a reader to just the opposite conclusion reached by the original report."

The allegedly doctored report attributes the attack to the Syrian general staff. But according to *The Daily Caller*, "it was clear that 'the Syrian general staff were out of their minds with panic that an unauthorized strike had been launched by the 155th Brigade in express defiance of their instructions.' "

I don't know who is right, the administration or The Daily Caller. But for me to make the correct decision on whether to allow an attack, I need to know. And so does the American public.

In the House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing, Grayson asked that this intercept be declassified. There were reports the Administration would declassify select intercepts, but thus far it hasn't happened.

In short, the Administration is so sensitive about their case they're unwilling to allow members of Congress check even the open source parts of it, and any means of tying the attack to Assad relies on assumptions and an intercept that seems to undermine their case.

Which is why the Administration is invoking on a theory it would never apply to itself: that because Assad is Commander in Chief of his military, he must be held accountable for any actions taken by someone in his military, even if done without authorization.

Here's what accountability for chain of command in the US military looks like, from just yesterday.

The Marine Corps has dropped criminal charges against an officer accused in connection with a YouTube video showing Marines urinating on dead Taliban fighters, the Marine Corps Times reports.

Capt. James V. Clement, the only officer criminally charged in the case, instead will face a Board of Inquiry that will determine an administrative punishment, the website said. He's accused of "substandard performance of duty, misconduct, and moral or professional dereliction."

[snip]

Clement is not seen in the YouTube video

but faced charges of dereliction of duty, violation of a lawful general order, making false statements to an investigator and conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman for failing to supervise junior Marines, failing to stop the misconduct of junior Marines and failing to report misconduct.

We're not even willing to hold an officer accountable for making false statements about the desecration of corpses caught on tape, much less the President himself. (Remember, too, the President went to great lengths to hide a memorandum of notification that, among other things, amounted to a direct order from Bush that CIA cooperate with Syria in torturing Maher Arar and others.)

And yet, with at least some evidence that the chain of command didn't want this attack, and with an absence of any evidence directly tying Assad to it, we're still planning on starting a war over it.