

WITH ALL THESE DEFLECTIONS, HOW CAN INTELLIGENCE AGENCIES MAKE CLAIMS ABOUT CHAIN OF COMMAND?

The French, who have a long history with Syria, offered a somewhat more developed explanation for why they're so sure that Bashar al-Assad should be held responsible for the August 21 attack even while someone in his Ministry of Defense appears to have been panicked and confused about the attack. (Note: Alan Grayson asked for this intercept to be declassified in today's hearing, but Chuck Hagel seemed unenthused about that idea.)

Last Wednesday, in the hours after a horrific chemical attack east of Damascus, an official at the Syrian Ministry of Defense exchanged panicked phone calls with a leader of a chemical weapons unit, demanding answers for a nerve agent strike that killed more than 1,000 people.

In their case for war they talked about how tightly controlled Assad's Chemical Weapons are.

The Syrian chemical programme is centred around the Center of Scientific Studies and Research (CSSR), in charge among others of producing chemical warfare agents. Its Branch 450 is in charge of the filling of chemical ammunitions, as well as the security of chemical sites and stockpiles. Formed exclusively with Alawi officers, this unit is known for its high loyalty to the regime.

Bachar 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 order is then forwarded to the commanding officers within the competent branches of the CSSR. In parallel, the armed forces HQs receive the order, decide of targeting and of the choice of weapons and toxic agents to use.

While not definitive, it is a slightly more developed version of the argument that the US made.

Syrian President Bashar al-Asad is the ultimate decision maker for the chemical weapons program and members of the program are carefully vetted to ensure security and loyalty. The Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Center (SSRC) – which is subordinate to the Syrian Ministry of Defense – manages Syria's chemical weapons program.

Nevertheless, in the face of some questions about what the men in the CW unit were doing, both governments have offered simply an argument about how reliable the CW staffers are in this unit.

But that comes amidst what John Kerry claims is a big wave of defections. The most notable is that of General Habib Ali, Assad's former Minister of Defense and like him an Alawite.

"Ali Habib has managed to escape from the grip of the regime and he is now in Turkey, but this does not mean that he has joined the opposition. I was told this by a Western diplomatic official," Kamal al-Labwani said from Paris.

Syrian state television denied Habib had left Syria and said he was still at his home. Turkey's foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, said he could not at the moment confirm Habib had defected.

A Gulf source told Reuters that Habib

had defected on Tuesday evening, arriving at the Turkish frontier before midnight with two or three other people. He was then taken across the border in a convoy of vehicles.

His companions were fellow military officers who supported his defection, the source said. They were believed to have also left Syria but there was no immediate confirmation of that.

Labwani said Habib was smuggled out of Syria with the help of a Western country.

"He will be a top source of information. Habib has had a long military career. He has been effectively under house arrest since he defied Assad and opposed killing protesters," Labwani said.

An officer in the opposition Free Syrian Army, who did not want to be identified, said the Habib appeared to have coordinated his defection with the United States.

There are, admittedly, some questions about this defection.

But Kerry referenced this during today's hearing (though admitted that the Syrians claim the defection didn't happen) and also said there were 60 to 100 other defections going on right now.

That would match another large group of defections from Assad's side.

I've been saying this for a while: the rebels and Americans aren't hiding that they've got assets loyal to the rebel side throughout Assad's regime, with significant numbers at least purportedly defecting with US help.

They may be boasting falsely. But both things are unlikely to be true at once. Either the US and rebels have chipped away at the loyalty of

even some of those closest to Assad – including even some Alawites of the type that might have custody of the CW – or these defections are just bluster.

But given the large number of defections (even assuming these claims may not be reliable), it does require more than just a theoretical explanation of how Assad's CW chain of command is supposed to work.