

ANONYMOUS “INTELLIGENCE OFFICIALS” CONTEMPLATED A ROGUE CW ATTACK 8 MONTHS AGO

In my Syria post last night, I expressed vague feelings that the alleged preparations of chemical weapons back in December might offer some insight into last week's attack.

Here's one way they might.

CIA beat reporter Joby Warrick did a story explaining that incident. We learned of that incident through one of the same kinds of intelligence – according to WSJ – we learned of last week's attack, surveillance images.

Soldiers at one Syrian base were monitored mixing precursors for chemical weapons and taking other steps to ready the lethal munitions for battlefield use, the officials said. It was the first hard evidence that Syria was moving toward possible activation of its vast arsenal of chemical weapons, which includes nerve gas and other poisons.

Surveillance photos confirmed that at least one army unit began loading special military vehicles that transport bombs and artillery shells carrying chemical warheads, according to the officials. The moves followed specific orders to elite troops to begin preparations for the use of the weapons against advancing rebel fighters, the officials said.

But in spite of the fact that someone (the Israelis again?) captured these photos, analysts

had the same questions about that incident they do now: who ordered the mobilization of the CW?

Intelligence analysts said the orders to prepare the weapons were issued about two weeks ago. They said it was not clear whether the decision came from senior Syrian leaders, possibly including President Bashar al-Assad, or from a field commander acting on his own, the officials said.

“Orders were issued.” That same passive voice.

In response to the incident, “intelligence officials” raised the possibility that an individual commander might release the CW without orders from Assad.

Still, the discovery that steps had been taken to activate weapons at at least one military base alarmed intelligence officials, because of fears that a single commander could unleash the deadly poisons without orders from higher up the chain of command.

[snip]

Although Assad is aware of the dire consequences of using chemical weapons, individual commanders could take matters into their own hands if their positions are being overrun, said a Middle Eastern intelligence official briefed on the latest intelligence findings.

“Once you’ve used the weapons, you know the world is coming after you,” the official said. “But if you’re a general and you think you’re not going to survive this, you might not care.”

Of course, back then, amid predictions Assad’s imminent fall might lead to such desperation, Warrick’s sources suggested using CW against an insurgency doesn’t make much sense.

Chemical weapons such as sarin are designed for use against massed concentrations of troops and are not regarded as particularly effective against insurgencies in close-combat situations. Yet, a large-scale use of such munitions could devastate the rebels by causing panic and, potentially, thousands of casualties.

It also talked about the lingering effects of sarin, which no one seems to have worried about here.

Depending on the type and quantity of weapons used, the attackers could deny access to large swaths of territory because of the long-lasting effects of the poisons. Nerve agents such as sarin are so deadly that a small drop on the skin can kill a person. Even the task of removing or treating victims of a chemical attack can prove deadly for rescue workers and physicians, weapons experts say.

Obviously, circumstances in Syria last week were dramatically different than those imagined in December: notably, Assad is in much stronger position against the rebels than he was then. That of course makes it even stranger than either Assad or a rogue field commander would unleash the CW.

Most of all, though, I find it interesting that intelligence sources contemplated a rogue commander back in December. Why are sources not doing so here, even in spite of evidence that Syrian officials made panicked calls demanding answers?

That doesn't explain who is responsible for the attack, at all.

But I do find it notable.

Update: Rather than considering the theory

intelligence officials floated back in December, they're apparently now working on a new one. Nevermind what that is. What's interesting is this.

Salim Idris, commander of the Free Syrian Army, said sources in Assad's inner circle tell him that's exactly what happened.

[snip]

Idris also indicated that pressure also has been growing on Assad to respond to a series of rebel advances.

At least in my opinion, the fact that we're developing theories on what happened from Idris' sources in Assad's inner circle – which of course means there are people in Assad's inner circle who are not loyal to Assad and are in communication with Idris – is bigger news than whatever crazyass theory he's advancing.