

GENERAL IDRIS' CLOSE WATCH ON ASSAD'S CW

In a piece summarizing the current state of intelligence, the AP reveals how uncertain US intelligence is about chain of control over Bashar al-Assad's chemical weapons.

Intelligence officials say **they could not pinpoint the exact locations of Assad's supplies of chemical weapons**, and Assad could have moved them in recent days as U.S. rhetoric builds. That lack of certainty means a possible series of U.S. cruise missile strikes aimed at crippling Assad's military infrastructure could hit newly hidden supplies of chemical weapons, accidentally triggering a deadly chemical attack.

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 one senior U.S. intelligence official and three other U.S. officials briefed on the intelligence shared by the White House as reason to strike Syria's military complex. All spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the Syrian issue publicly.

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]

8 days after an attack they say they're certain came from Assad loyalists, the intelligence community says it doesn't know where all the CW are, doesn't know who controls it all, and has questions about whether rebels seized (or took) CW after they were moved into place by Syrian forces.

With that in mind, I want to return to the stunning report from NBC last night that casually quotes General Salim Idris, head of the Free Syrian Army, claiming he has "sources" in Assad's inner circle.

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.

Not only does the report show Idris claiming – effectively – that people in Assad's inner circle are so disloyal that they not only continue to communicate with him, but provide key intelligence about how much pressure Assad is under.

Let's take a step back.

Idris defected – at least publicly – from Assad's army last July, around the same time as then CIA Director David Petraeus and then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton unsuccessfully lobbied to start arming the rebels, and the month before Obama laid out chemical weapon use as his "red line."

Idris was elected – thanks to a lot of arm twisting by US and its allies – to command the

Free Syrian Army in December, just weeks after a chemical weapons incident I've been obsessing on. Shortly after his election, Idris gave a number of interviews in which he emphasized two things: that his people had an eye on Assad's CW, and that Assad would use them if he got cornered.

The new Syrian rebel commander has told The Associated Press that his fighters are monitoring the regime's chemical weapons sites, but don't have the means to seize and secure them.

Gen. Salim Idris, who defected from the Syrian army in July, says he is "very afraid" a cornered regime will use chemical weapons in Syria's civil war. Syria is said to have one of the world's largest chemical arsenals.

Effectively, Idris was repeating the line intelligence analysts had given just weeks earlier (or they had been repeating what he told them), even while suggesting his men were the ones watching over the CW.

Since that time, Idris' authority has been in question, largely because his value to the rebels lay in his purported ability to work with America's allies to supply them. In March, he wrote up the complaints he had been making – that the US wasn't giving rebels the arms they needed.

[T]here is only so much that can be done without the determined support of the United States. What Syrians need today to bring an end to the conflict are anti-aircraft weapons systems, not more words.

[snip]

The United States' hands-off approach in Syria is only exacerbating the conflict by allowing anti-American and extremist elements to gain a stronger foothold in

the country.

Shortly thereafter – at a time when even Idris admitted the rebels’ own weakness – he issued a call for Syrian military personnel to defect immediately or be held responsible. Within days, a top General did so, but his defection had been in the works for some time.

The new defector, Brig. Gen. Mohammed Nour Ezzedeen Khallouf, the army’s chief of supplies and logistics, appeared briefly on Saturday in a broadcast on Al Arabiya.

“Arrangements for the defection from the current Assad regime started a while ago,” he said. “There was coordination with several sides from various factions of the Syrian revolution.”

Then in June, the rebels claimed to have hit Assad’s motorcade as part of an assassination attempt – a claim that may have been overblown, but appears to have worried Assad.

And that is what Idris now claims – and American analyst are now considering for potential motive – led Assad to retaliate with a big CW attack.

Nevermind that story doesn’t explain why Assad would retaliate with CW rather than conventional weapons. Nor does it explain why Assad would respond to evidence (the assassination attempt) that rebel sources might have inside information on his location by launching the CW that would give outside forces the excuse to get involved.

8 months after claiming his men had close watch over Assad’s CW, Idris is now admitting that he’s got people very close to Assad. Even as the IC admits it doesn’t know who actually has Assad’s CW.