

THE CASE FOR WAR: SINCE WHEN IS MÉDECINS SANS FRONTIÈRES A SECRET INTELLIGENCE SOURCE?

There are a couple of new developments in the case for war. Most notably, a Syrian – whose former position has been described variously as head of forensic evidence in Aleppo and some medical role in Bashar al-Assad's CW group – defected, carrying documents proving that a March attack in Aleppo was CW. Of course, that's the March attack, not the August 21 one. And it's not yet clear that it answers the attribution question behind all reports of CW in Syria. (I'd also repeat that every defection – particularly one that happens at such a convenient time 6 months after the atrocity that might explain it – ought to raise questions about the loyalty of the insiders in positions of authority in Assad's government.)

Meanwhile, Walter Pincus – who wrote some of the best pieces questioning the Iraq intelligence but has been rather credulous on the NSA of late – argues that the US won't get away with hiding its case behind a sources and methods case.

The Obama administration has to declassify more detailed intelligence on Syria's chemical weapons usage to bolster support in Congress for using U.S. armed forces to deter any future Syrian government use of those weapons.

More evidence is also needed to maintain the administration's integrity at home and abroad.

President Obama's critics question the legitimacy of the administration's intelligence assessment of "high confidence" that the Syrian regime

carried out the Aug. 21 attacks. Some point to the George W. Bush administration's cherry-picked intelligence during its four-month campaign in late 2002 to promote the invasion of Iraq.

There is a key difference. U.S. intelligence in 2002 was used to show by inference that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction and might use them. Bashar al-Assad has chemical weapons, and U.S. intelligence apparently proves that his forces used them.

[snip]

Today is a time of great mistrust of government at home and abroad, and that has to be recognized. The old claim about holding back evidence to protect U.S. intelligence's "sources and methods" no longer works.

And McClatchy (which purchased Knight Ridder along with a bunch of journalists who had also debunked the Iraq intelligence before the war) has a piece pointing out public information that challenges some of this same information.

I've mentioned this previously, but I'm especially curious about the Administration's potentially inflated claims about the number of dead. Here's how McClatchy lays that out.

Another point of dispute is the death toll from the alleged attacks on Aug. 21. Neither Kerry's remarks nor the unclassified version of the U.S. intelligence he referenced explained how the U.S. reached a tally of 1,429, including 426 children. The only attribution was "a preliminary government assessment."

Anthony Cordesman, a former senior defense official who's now with the

Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies, took aim at the death toll discrepancies in an essay published Sunday.

He criticized Kerry as being “sandbagged into using an absurdly over-precise number” of 1,429, and noted that the number didn’t agree with either the British assessment of “at least 350 fatalities” or other Syrian opposition sources, namely the **Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which has confirmed 502 dead, including about 100 children and “tens” of rebel fighters, and has demanded that Kerry provide the names of the victims included in the U.S. tally.**

“President Obama was then forced to round off the number at ‘well over 1,000 people’ – creating a mix of contradictions over the most basic facts,” Cordesman wrote. He added that the blunder was reminiscent of “the mistakes the U.S. made in preparing Secretary (Colin) Powell’s speech to the U.N. on Iraq in 2003.”

An unclassified version of a French intelligence report on Syria that was released Monday hardly cleared things up; France confirmed only 281 fatalities, though it more broadly agreed with the United States that the regime had used chemical weapons in the Aug. 21 attack.

Another eyebrow-raising administration claim was that U.S. intelligence had “collected streams of human, signals and geospatial intelligence” that showed the regime preparing for an attack three days before the event. The U.S. assessment says regime personnel were in an area known to be used to “mix chemical weapons, including sarin,” and that regime forces prepared for the Aug. 21 attack by putting on gas masks. [my

emphasis]

I'm especially interested by the potentially inflated number given the way the White House case introduced it.

In addition to U.S. intelligence information, there are accounts from international and Syrian medical personnel; videos; witness accounts; thousands of social media reports from at least 12 different locations in the Damascus area; journalist accounts; and **reports from highly credible nongovernmental organizations.**

A preliminary U.S. government assessment determined that 1,429 people were killed in the chemical weapons attack, including at least 426 children, though this assessment will certainly evolve as we obtain more information.

I confess, when I first read this and followed its presentation on Twitter, I believed the casualty numbers were attributed to the “highly credible nongovernmental organizations” referenced in the previous sentence, not “a preliminary US government assessment.” That had me perplexed because there are two potential organizations that might comment on casualties: the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which, as the bolded language in McClatchy’s account makes clear, says there have been 502 dead (at the time the White House presented their case, I don’t think they had yet come up with an estimate). Or Médecins Sans Frontières, which had reported the number of 355 by that point, but emphasized they couldn’t confirm the cause of death in these cases.

Three hospitals in Syria’s Damascus governorate that are supported by the international medical humanitarian organisation Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) have reported to MSF that they

received approximately 3,600 patients displaying neurotoxic symptoms in less than three hours on the morning of Wednesday, August 21, 2013. Of those patients, 355 reportedly died.

[snip]

“Medical staff working in these facilities provided detailed information to MSF doctors regarding large numbers of patients arriving with symptoms including convulsions, excess saliva, pinpoint pupils, blurred vision and respiratory distress,” said Dr Bart Janssens, MSF director of operations.

Patients were treated using MSF-supplied atropine, a drug used to treat neurotoxic symptoms. MSF is now trying to replenish the facilities’ empty stocks and provide additional medical supplies and guidance.

“MSF can neither scientifically confirm the cause of these symptoms nor establish who is responsible for the attack,” said Dr Janssens. “However, the reported symptoms of the patients, in addition to the epidemiological pattern of the events—characterised by the massive influx of patients in a short period of time, the origin of the patients, and the contamination of medical and first aid workers—strongly indicate mass exposure to a neurotoxic agent. This would constitute a violation of international humanitarian law, which absolutely prohibits the use of chemical and biological weapons.” [my emphasis]

And that’s significant because the only piece of intelligence from an NGO specifically mentioned (though not by name) in the White House case was MSF.

Three hospitals in the Damascus area received approximately 3,600 patients

displaying symptoms consistent with nerve agent exposure in less than three hours on the morning of August 21, according to a highly credible international humanitarian organization.

The only other mention of NGOs I see is this one, which again seems to include MSF.

We assess the Syrian opposition does not have the capability to fabricate all of the videos, physical symptoms verified by medical personnel and NGOs, and other information associated with this chemical attack.

The MSF 3,600 number was almost always reported with the 355 number. And the White House case quotes the MSF release, almost verbatim. If the 3,600 is credible, then the 355 number should be treated as credible too.

But the Administration used the 1,429 number, several times the casualties either the Brits or the French or either of the two highly credible NGOs cite.

Just as important, though, is the Administration's treatment of the MSF number. **There was nothing secret about MSF's hospital admissions number** – the release with almost the same language as that used in the White House case is right there on its website.

And yet the Administration treated it – a public fact – with the same vagueness as it treated its purportedly sensitive source and method intelligence. This may be, in part, an effort to avoid angering MSF, which I think said explicitly its numbers shouldn't be used to make the case for war. In addition, if the US had cited MSF, it might have had to cite a lot of the social media accounts, some of which even the Administration seems aware may not be credible. (The French, by contrast, simply picked 6 social media accounts to post with its intelligence case.) Hiding the source for the

3,600 number also hides what is an implicit Administration admission that a highly credible NGO says there were just 355 deaths among those three hospitals.

More importantly, though, the Administration's treatment of MSF reflects badly on both the decision to hide its sources and methods (because we know that it is hiding sources for reasons other than to protect intelligence) and the portrayal of credibility laid out in its report. MSF is one of the only sources cited as "highly credible" in the Administration case. I agree it is highly credible, but the Administration had no reason to hide that it was MSF (except in case MSF asked it not to use their numbers, but if so, it used one of their numbers anyway). Not only didn't the Administration not tell us what that highly credible public source was, but it obscured that that highly credible source also offered dramatically different numbers on number of dead.

But, along with other hidden known sources, it appears to be an attempt to seed credibility in obscurity, in the Administration's performed access to have much better intelligence than we have. It's as if the Administration hides even public sources to accord its case a kind of magic.

Ultimately, the dispute over the number of dead is moot as to the seriousness of the attack (unless we have reason to believe the numbers got inflated through rebel propaganda and the US used it in their case).

It was a serious attack.

But it does demonstrate several fundamental credibility problems with the government's case as presented.

Update: Thanks to TheMomCat for posting MSF's follow-up comment which insists its numbers should not be used to justify war.

■ Last Saturday, MSF said that three

hospitals it supports in Syria's Damascus governorate had reportedly received 3,600 patients displaying neurotoxic symptoms, of which 355 died. Although our information indicates mass exposure to a neurotoxic agent, MSF clearly stated that scientific confirmation of the toxic agent was required and therefore an independent investigation was needed to shed light on what would constitute, if confirmed, a massive and unacceptable violation of international humanitarian law. MSF also stated that in its role as a medical humanitarian organisation, it was not in a position to determine responsibility for the event.

Now that an investigation is underway by UN inspectors, MSF rejects that our statement be used as a substitute for the investigation or as a justification for military action. As an independent medical humanitarian organisation, MSF's sole purpose is to save lives, alleviate the suffering of populations torn by Syrian conflict, and bear witness when confronted with a critical event, in strict compliance with the principles of neutrality and impartiality.