CLEAREST INDICATION YET THAT SOME CHEMICAL WEAPON SITES IN SYRIA ARE UNDER REBEL CONTROL

One of the underlying assumptions for folks who joined the rush to claim that the UN report on the August 21 chemical weapons attack in the suburbs of Damascus proved the attack was carried out by Syrian government forces was that only government forces had access to the refined versions of chemical weapons that the Assad regime had amassed. That aspect of the story began to crumble quickly once the accidental diplomacy kicked in and it became clear that chemical weapons inspectors would need cooperation from both the Syrian government and rebel forces to gain access to all sites where chemical weapons are present. Today's New York Times presents the clearest indication yet that it isn't just access routes to chemical weapons sites that the rebels control, but that the rebels control some of the sites themselves:

> A Western diplomat in the Arab world said that though the Syrian government was legally responsible for dismantling its chemical weapons under an international agreement, its opponents should also cooperate in the process, because several chemical weapons sites were close to confrontation lines or within rebel-held territory.

Somehow, though, the Times only discusses this very important piece of information in light of the need for rebels to grant access to the sites to the OPCW without noting that the rebels had direct access to chemical weapons (or their immediate precursors) previously belonging to the Syrian government. This admission by a

“Western diplomat” completely invalidates the assumption that rebels had access only to crude, “home-made” versions of chemical weapons.

Today’s news fully underscores the need for a true ceasefire (as I have been shrilly pointing out for some time now):

> “The international community also expects full cooperation from the opposition,” the diplomat said, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss a delicate issue. “However divided the opposition might be, it would look very bad if the government was seen to be cooperating fully, while inspections were held up because of problems with the opposition.”
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> The inspection team from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, the watchdog group in charge of implementing the agreement along with the United Nations, has not publicly cited any specific instance of opposition fighters’ impeding access to chemical weapons sites. As with agencies that deliver relief aid, the inspectors face a complicated and uncertain process that requires cease-fires with multiple parties among fluid lines of combat.

Clearly, a general ceasefire by all parties would be much better than the current, piecemeal arrangement where it appears that localized agreements are put into place for individual excursions by the inspectors.

Finally, it should also be noted that however the Obama administration got to the diplomatic route involving the OPCW, we got new details over the weekend on how the Bush administration orchestrated the removal of the previous head of OPCW because he wanted to send inspectors into Iraq in 2001-2002 to verify that Iraqi chemical weapons had been destroyed in the 1990’s:

> More than a decade before the international agency that monitors chemical weapons won the Nobel Peace Prize, John R. Bolton marched into the office of its boss to inform him that he would be fired.
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> “He told me I had 24 hours to resign,” said José Bustani, who was director general of the agency, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in The Hague. “And if I didn’t I would have to face the consequences.”
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> /snip/
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> But Mr. Bustani and some senior officials, both in Brazil and the United States, say Washington acted because it believed that the organization under Mr. Bustani threatened to become an obstacle to the administration’s plans to invade Iraq. As justification, Washington was claiming that Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi leader, possessed chemical weapons, but Mr. Bustani said his own experts had told him that those weapons were destroyed in the 1990s, after the Persian Gulf war.
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> “Everybody knew there weren’t any,” he said. “An inspection would make it obvious there were no weapons to destroy. This would completely nullify the decision to invade.”

What a different place the world would be today if Bolton and his neocon buddies hadn’t held such sway during the George W. Bush presidency.