ISIS FEARMONGERING NOW FEATURES UNDECLARED SYRIAN TOXINS CHANGING HANDS

Today's New York Times wants us to be very afraid because Samantha Power tells us that Syria may have failed to declare some of its chemical weapons (all declared category 1 materials have been destroyed) and those materials just might fall into the hands of the ISIS evil monsters. This is a very interesting development because now with ISIS as the most evil operator out there, the Syrian WMD's that we have been fearmongering about now are scarier in the hands of ISIS than they are in the hands of Bashar al-Assad, whom many believe was responsible for the deadly August, 2013 sarin attack in Ghouta.

The long journey of Syrian WMD's and just who makes them scary is a case study in the process of intelligence and diplomatic sources feeding propaganda to a willing press. Recall that just after the Ghouta attack, Joby Warrick was used, in a very Judy Miller fashion, to try to develop fear of a probably non-existent Syrian bioweapons capability. Less than a month after that feeble attempt to claim bioweapons in Syria's arsenal, Warrick was dumbfounded that ricin (see below for a description of this toxin) appeared on the list of materials that Syria declared for destruction (ricin did not appear anywhere in Warrick's "documentation" of Syria's bioweapons capability just a month earlier):

> The movement of chemicals and equipment in recent days — which initially spurred fears that Syrian officials were trying to hide parts of their stockpile — suggests instead that the weapons are

> being consolidated ahead of a first visit by inspection teams that arrived in the country last week, administration officials said.
>
> The activity has contributed to a cautious optimism among U.S. officials over the prospects for quickly dismantling the chemical arsenal. Syrian officials a week ago turned over their first inventory of chemical weapons and storage sites, a list that U.S. analysts described as detailed, although incomplete.
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> The records have helped shed light on a sizable Syrian stockpile that U.S. officials say contains hundreds of tons of precursors for the nerve agents sarin and VX, as well as a surprise: ricin, a highly lethal poison derived from castor beans.

Yesterday, The Intercept finally (the document is marked as having been approved for release just before last Christmas!) liberated a cache of email conversations (pdf) taking place between a number of national security reporters and the CIA's Office of Public Affairs. The document is 574 pages long, but I want to focus on only one email to the office and the reply it generated, because it fits perfectly into this overall pattern of intelligence (and diplomatic) operatives catapulting propaganda with the eager cooperation of sychophantic reporters and because it mentions ricin. The email in question comes from Wall Street Journal reporter Siobhan Gorman and appears to be sent to at least two redacted recipients at CIA and mentions ricin in the context of Syria:

From: Gorman, Siobhan
Sent: Thursday, July 12, 2012 10:29 AM
To
Cc
Subject: New Syria query

Hi guys,

Seeking your guidance on what we have been told regarding movement of chemical weapons in Syria. This story is likely to run in tomorrow's paper.

We're told the U.S. has information that the Syrian regime has moved some of their chemical weapons, including Sarin gas. The belief by some in the USG is that it has been moved so that it could be used against Sunni enclaves or protesters in the coastal areas. Others say Assad may be consolidating to ensure they remain under his control and out of the hands of Sunni factions. They have been moved from locations for storage to places where it could be used.

Ricin, and possibly other chemical weapons, have been provided to Assad-associated militias. Some information on chemical weapons has come from the Syrian pilot who defected.

Would appreciate any guidance/context/comment you can provide. One of the elements we are still trying to get a handle on is the motivation of the movement of the chemical weapons. To the degree you can shed any light on what the motivation might be, I'd be grateful.

Thanks,
Siobhan

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Siobhan Gorman
Intelligence Correspondent
The Wall Street Journal.

Okay. So this email takes place in July of 2012, just over a year before the Ghouta attack that used sarin.

Before we get to more of this story, a bit of background on ricin is in order. Ricin is a protein that can be extracted from castor beans. It is one of the most toxic molecules known and it consists of two parts, one of which is used to target and attach to specific cells and the other which delivers the knockout blow once it is inside the cell. Cancer researchers have long held out hope to use an alternative version of the targeting part of the molecule to deliver the toxic part only to cancer cells. Bioweapons researchers instead focus on keeping the protein in active form and finding ways to deliver it into the cells of victims. Complicating matters, castor beans are also used to produce castor oil, which, in addition to its folk use as a laxative, can be used as an industrial lubricant. For the best analysis I have seen on ricin in the context of Syria, see this link and scroll down to the section labeled "Castor beans: cancer research, castor oil, or ricin?", where it seems to me the most likely thing Syria was doing with castor beans was making castor oil from a cold press process (that keeps ricin active) and agreed to switch to a hot press process, thereby inactivating the ricin. (But this doesn't fit with their claim of using it in cancer research, where they wouldn't have needed

to grow as many castor plants as they appear to have done.)

Okay, so going back to the Gorman email to CIA's public affairs folks, we see that she is saying that the Wall Street Journal has learned from the US government that the government believes materials are being moved. Interestingly, she says that "Assad-associated militias" have been given ricin. The Journal article that did indeed come out the next day (but without Gorman in the byline) failed to mention ricin, but it is clear from this email that as early as July of 2012, someone in the government was trying to push the story that Syria had ricin.

For those keeping score, the CIA response to the email was "If you need to, please report we declined to comment". The story as published groups these denials from various agencies: "The White House, the Central Intelligence Agency and the Pentagon declined to comment", so we are left to assume that Gorman (or someone else at the Journal) had similar exchanges with the White House and Pentagon.

Despite this push for Gorman and the Journal to link ricin to Syria in 2012, I see no public mentions of this sort after Warrick's surprise until an April, 2014 Reuters article:

> In interviews over the last two months with Western officials with access to intelligence about Syria, Reuters learned that topics of concern include deadly nerve agent ricin, mustard gas, precursor chemicals used to make sarin, and, more recently, the use of chlorine gas in Syria.

But just in case we were starting to relax about Syria at that time, Daily Beast came running in to fan more flames of fear about ricin just about a week later:

> Concerns are growing among Western intelligence services that Syria still has a significant and undeclared arsenal

> of chemical weapons, including crude chlorine-filled bombs, secret stockpiles of sophisticated nerve gasses or their components—and the scientific know-how to rebuild a larger-scale, higher-grade chemical weapons effort once the Bashar al-Assad regime has escaped the international spotlight.
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> “A ghost of CW [chemical weapons] program in a place riven with conflict—that’s a real concern,” one American intelligence official tells The Daily Beast.

The story eventually gets to ricin:

> The Israelis, who have obvious reasons to keep close tabs on the weapons of mass destruction next door, have raised the alarm about the Syrian biological program many times. “The biological warfare agents that are believed to have been developed by Syria include virulent pathogens, such as anthrax germs, and the lethal biological toxins botulinum and ricin,” writes Dany Shoham at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. “Western estimations suggest that Syria has significant quantities of these biological warfare agents, although the evidence for this is inconclusive.” Shoham adds without substantive evidence that “Syrian possession of the smallpox virus is likely.”
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> /snip/
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> U.S. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper said at the end of January this year: “We judge that some elements of Syria’s biological warfare (BW) program might have advanced beyond the research and development stage and might be capable of limited agent production, based on the duration of its

> longstanding program." But "to the best of our knowledge, Syria has not successfully weaponized biological agents in an effective delivery system" even thought "it possesses conventional weapon systems that could be modified for biological-agent delivery."
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> At least one U.S. intelligence official says that Clapper might have gotten just a bit ahead of his skis. While Assad made some progress on weaponizing ricin—a toxin derived from the castor bean—his scientists "never got past R&D phase for anything else." About five years ago, the official says, Syria made the switch from developing "botanicals" like ricin to "microbial" weapons like anthrax. "They still haven't settled on anything—they're researching agents, and whether they can mass-produce them. It's the very early kernel of a BW program." In part, the official said, that's because the U.S. and its allies have been able to prevent Syria from acquiring the equipment needed for mass production, like large fermenters. "I think we've blocked anything above what goes on a lab bench," the official added.

Ah, so it seems the Daily Beast folks kind of knew the debunking of ricin as a likely agent published last month (linked above in the ricin background material) was on the way. So now we are to fear anthrax from them. Except, of course, that they really can't produce it in meaningful quantities even if they did think they could weaponize it with anything better than kitty litter. But I am sure the government will find a new way to make all this scary again in the very near future.