

US Now Admits Syrian “Rebels” Have Used Chemical Weapons

By Tylor Durden 22 October 2017

From the first moment chemical weapons were used on the Syrian battlefield, the American public was led to believe that only one side could possibly be responsible. The constant refrain in the echo chamber of US government officials and the mainstream media was that only the Assad government possessed chemical stockpiles and the technological capability of deploying such heinous weapons, therefore blame for each and every chemical attack from Ghouta to Khan Sheikhoun was laid at the feet of Assad and the Syrian military.

And yet last Wednesday, for the first time, the US State Department casually dropped an important admission into its official [Syria travel warning for American citizens](#): that the core rebel group currently operating in northwest Syria **not only possesses but has used chemical weapons** - to the point that the State Department considers it a major enough threat to publicly warn citizens about.

The armed opposition group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), is referenced early in the document: "Terrorist and other violent extremist groups including ISIS and Al-Qaeda linked Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham [dominated by Al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat Al-Nusra, a designated Foreign Terrorist Organization], operate in Syria." HTS is the group now holding Idlib province, which it captured in 2015 as part of a coalition of armed groups given direct support from a [US-led operations room in southern Turkey](#) - this according to prominent pro-opposition analyst Charles Lister.

The new [State Department travel warning](#) has this to say about the tactics of HTS and other anti-Assad groups: Tactics of ISIS, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, and other violent extremist groups include the use of suicide bombers, kidnapping, small and heavy arms, improvised explosive devices, **and chemical weapons**.

They have targeted major city centers, road checkpoints, border crossings, government buildings, shopping areas, and open spaces, in Damascus, Aleppo, Hamah, Dara, Homs, Idlib, and Dayr al-Zawr provinces.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham along with other Salafi-Jihadi terror groups such as Ahrar al-Sham, were in control of the Idlib province town of Khan Sheikhoun when the group alleged that Syrian jets launched a massive Sarin gas attack on civilians last April. Relying chiefly on YouTube videos uploaded by "activists" associated with the al-Qaeda linked groups, media and government officials in the West immediately blamed Syria and Russia for the incident which possibly resulted in up to 74 civilian deaths. The White House's own [four page assessment](#) released in the wake of the incident relied heavily on, in its words, "a wide body of open-source material" and "social media accounts" to find the Syrian government "guilty" - which means that essentially YouTube videos were used as justification for Trump's subsequent punitive strike on Shayrat military airfield in Syria (a strike which turned out to be largely symbolic for the sake of "doing something").

Meanwhile, HTS and their affiliates **prevented any and all international monitoring groups from entering Idlib to access the site of the alleged attack - a reality which continues to this day**. The OPCW Fact-Finding Mission (Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons), for example, [acknowledged](#) that, "**For security reasons, the FFM [Fact-Finding Mission] was unable to visit Khan Shaykhun.**"

For this reason, while Western media accused the Syrian government of attacking civilians with Sarin a mere **hours after the attack was said to have taken place**, OPCW officials urged caution. One prominent official who publicly insisted that Western media cease prematurely blaming Assad for Khan Sheikhoun because they couldn't possibly possess empirical data with objective chain of custody (as no observers had accessed the site) was Jerry Smith.

Smith was the lead field investigator for the UN-backed operation to remove Syria's chemical weapons in 2013 after a US-Russia-Syria deal was struck to decommission Syria's declared Sarin stockpiles. In two major UK media interviews, the former OPCW deputy head of Syria field operations said that he considered it **entirely plausible that Assad was not responsible**, even after the visibly surprised anchors attempted to pressure him into saying Assad did it.

Former OPCW head field investigator Jerry Smith to Sky News' Sophy Ridge in the week after the Khan Sheikhoun attack:

Ridge: "Is there any way that Assad might not have been responsible for those [chemical attacks]?"

Smith: "The fact of the matter is that there is... We need to listen to every story and then start to pick it apart. Some of the stories that come out are not true. And the stakeholders that are saying them are having a line because of their own narrative. If we start to pick this apart effectively their stories will fall away."

A BBC article which initially quoted Smith's expert analysis from the TV interviews [subsequently deleted his comments](#) as he expressed views which ran directly contrary to the mainstream media's consensus. The narrative of the Syrian government's guilt became entrenched so early, based so little "evidence" (primarily social media videos), that **even contrary analysis by high level OPCW experts was censored**.

Similarly, this is further what currently has Russia [angrily calling foul](#) - the idea that the UN's Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) appears bias toward finding the Syrian government responsible from afar based on assumptions concerning guilt which became entrenched in the West from the beginning. A fresh and

contentious [vote is expected at the UN](#) on Monday as to whether or not the JIM mandate will be extended for another year.

And Russia is now pointing to the State Department's updated [Syria travel advisory](#) as constituting a US intelligence admission that it is not only entirely plausible that al-Qaeda (HTS) committed the Khan Sheikhoun attack but even likely, considering HTS' chief area of operation for the past year has been in Idlib province (the travel document purports to be an update of the last six months). On Friday, Russian Defense Ministry Spokesman Major General Igor Konashenkov [issued a statement, saying](#):

I would like to point out that the Department of State has for the first time officially acknowledged that terrorists from Jabhat al-Nusra not only have but also - I would like to stress that - use chemical weapons in this part of Syria in order to carry out terrorist attacks - **a thing that we have many times many times warned against and talked about at various levels.**

The State Department in a [response given to the Washington Examiner](#) over the weekend, accused the Russians of "cherry-picking language to suit their false narrative that they have been peddling for years about the use of chemical weapons in Syria and those responsible."

However, the UN's own extensive 2013 investigation into the first reported uses of chemical weapons in Syria **support the consistently stated Russian position that the armed opposition in Syria have long possessed and have repeatedly used chemical weapons.** When the UN undertook its first on the ground inquiry in Syria, it admitted in its [82-page December 2013 report](#) (initiated after the August 2013 Ghouta attack), that it considered both sides of the war to be in possession of mass casualty producing chemical weapons. This is important, given that at the time the US position was that only the Syrian government could have possibly launched chemical attacks. According to [the UN report](#):

The United Nations Mission remains deeply concerned that **chemical weapons were used in the ongoing conflict between the parties** in the Syrian Arab Republic, which has added yet another dimension to the continued suffering of the Syrian people. The report stated that chemical weapons were "probably used" at five sites in Syria during the conflict up to that point (2013). Most significant is that **among the five sites the UN could not find a single instance where members of the armed rebels opposition were victims**, but instead found that at two sites, the victims were Syrian government soldiers, and at a third, the victims were [Syrian Army personnel and civilians](#).

While the purpose of the investigation was not to establish the culprit in each attack, **the report identified the victims in three out of the five incidents as government soldiers.** This was the first tacit UN admission that the rebels possess and have used chemical weapons - an admission made all the way back in 2013. And even the generally pro-rebel New York Times had to admit [the following when the 2013 report came out](#):

Chemical weapons were used repeatedly in the Syria conflict this year, not only in a well-documented Aug. 21 attack near Damascus but also in four other instances, including two subsequent attacks **that targeted soldiers**, the United Nations said in a report released Thursday.

And concerning the first reported usage of chemical weapons in the entirety of the Syrian conflict, the [NYT further admitted](#) at the time that Syrian soldiers had been on the receiving end (though the NYT buried the information far away from the front page):

The report said the panel had corroborated "credible allegations" that chemical weapons were used in the **first reported attack — a March 19 episode involving soldiers and civilians [as victims] in Khan al-Assal** in the country's north. But even prior to the UN's December 2013 findings, credible allegations of rebel chemical weapons were nothing new. In May of 2013, [Carla Del Ponte](#), a top UN human rights investigator and former UN Chief Prosecutor and veteran International Criminal Court attorney - was the first to accuse the rebels of using Sarin gas against government forces and civilians (also see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)).

Del Ponte's assertions, based upon her information gathering team on the ground, caused a row in Europe at the time, but the only major American outlet to cover the story when it happened was the [LA Times](#). During a Swiss-Italian TV [interview](#), she was convinced enough to be very blunt in her assessment, saying, **"I was a little bit stupefied by the first indication of the use of nerve gas by the opposition."**

So in reality, a number of top experts (as well as documentation) have come forward over the past few years to offer analysis contrary to the West's open and shut "Assad did it" narrative, yet the Western public has for the most part been carefully shielded from such voices (to say nothing of [Seymour Hersh's excellent investigative reporting](#), or MIT rocket scientist [Theodore Postol's analysis](#)). With this latest US State Department admission that groups like HTS in Syria possess and have used chemical weapons, it appears that the US government could slowly and reluctantly be catching up to what other experts have long understood.

<http://www.zerohedge.com/news/2017-10-22/us-now-admits-syrian-rebels-have-used-chemical-weapons>