

Belgian academic blames Syrian poison gas attacks on US-backed opposition

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After US-backed Syrian opposition forces released Italian journalist Domenico Quirico and Belgian academic Pierre Piccinin from captivity Sunday, Piccinin told Belgium's RTL television Monday that the opposition had carried out the chemical attacks in Ghouta.

This is yet another indication that the US-European drive to war against Syria—based on claims that the Syrian regime carried out the August 21 Ghouta attack—is a provocation and a lie. (See also: Report links US-backed Syrian opposition to Ghouta gas attack .)

Piccinin and Quirico, a journalist for *La Stampa*, were detained in April and tortured by the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the Farouq Brigades, a group inside the FSA whose commander, Abu Sakkar, is infamous for cannibalizing Syrian soldiers. (See: Video shows US-backed opposition fighter cannibalizing Syrian soldier.) Piccinin's statement incriminating the Syrian opposition is all the more powerful as evidence, in that until recently he vocally supported the opposition.

Speaking to Luc Gilson of Belgium's RTL television, Piccinin said: "It is a moral obligation to say this. It is not the government of Bashar al-Assad who used sarin or other military gases in the Damascus suburbs of Ghouta. We are sure of that, after having listened to a conversation that we overheard. I say it even though, since May 2012, I have ferociously defended the Free Syrian Army in its just struggle for democracy."

Piccinin said he and Quirico overheard a Skype conversation, in which a Farouq Brigade commander and an FSA general took part from the facility where they were being detained. He explained, "According to the statements of officers of the opposition, it is not the regime of Bashar al-Assad that is responsible."

Piccinin added that he and Quirico had "our heads

spinning" after hearing this, as they knew that Washington would blame the attack on Assad and use it as a pretext to start a war.

Quirico, who still faces hearings with Italian legal officials, criticized Piccinin's statement as "madness." However, his account of events largely confirmed that of Piccinin.

He told *La Stampa*, "One day, from the room where we were being detained, through a half-open door, we heard a Skype conversation in English between three men. During this conversation, the men said that the gas attack in the two neighborhoods of Damascus had been committed by the opposition as a provocation, to push the West to act."

Quirico explained his criticisms of Piccinin's statement by stating: "I am not used to giving conversations overheard through doors the value of truth."

Asked about Quirico's statements on RTL television, Piccinin said he was "surprised." He added, "We were together when we heard this conversation. I will call him in a little while, and we will discuss it."

Significantly, Quirico also warned against a US-European war to support the Syrian opposition. He said, "The Americans have made many errors over the last years. But to carry out an action like this would only strengthen the jihadist forces ... it would be a serious error. Our captors were happy at the idea of an American bombardment."

This confirms that opposition forces had a motive for carrying out the type of provocation to start a US war that the opposition officials overheard by Quirico and Piccinin described.

Both Piccinin and Quirico reported that they were abused by their captors. "There were 152 days of imprisonment, small dark rooms where we were

fighting against time, fear, humiliation, hunger, lack of pity, two mock executions, two failed escape attempts, the silence of God, family, of others, of life,” Quirico told *La Stampa*. Both also sharply criticized the Syrian opposition. Quirico said that it “has become fanaticism and the work of bandits.”

Piccinin said the opposition was based on “deep-going banditry on the one hand, and on the other these Islamist fighters who also come increasingly from abroad, from Afghanistan or Central Asia. I believe it would be insane and suicidal for the West to support such forces.”



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