

# Inspectors arrive amid revelations of Syrian opposition atrocities

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Explosive revelations of sectarian atrocities by opposition forces and escalating fighting within their ranks have marked the arrival of international inspectors in Syria.

Yesterday, the *Guardian* reported of an August massacre of Alawites, the Shia-related sect from which President Bashar al-Assad comes. Jihadists including the Al-Qaeda linked Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) took control of five Alawite villages in what was called, “Operation Liberation of the Coast” during the summer.

Some 25,000 Alawite villagers fled to Latakia, as the opposition seized more Alawite villages and reached Aramo, near Qardaha, the Assads’ home town where Hafez al-Assad, the former president, is buried.

The villages were all recaptured by August 19, with little reported by the state media. The *Guardian* has now interviewed separately military personnel and others in Latakia who have reported bloody massacres and atrocities carried out by the jihadists. Among the reported atrocities, women were raped, babies beheaded and one woman was “sliced in half from head to toe” and hung from a tree. One soldier, Ali, said, “We found two mass graves with 140 bodies. They were not shot. They had their throats slit.”

A list obtained by the *Guardian* names 62 people killed, 60 kidnapped and 139 people missing, the vast majority women, children and the elderly.

Under the recent agreement between the United States and Russia, inspection teams are to begin overseeing the destruction of President Bashar al-Assad’s chemical weapons programme, dismantling and destroying an estimated 1,000-ton chemical arsenal.

However, tensions between Moscow and Washington continue with accusations made that the Obama

administration is backing Islamist groups that are vehemently opposed to the negotiated settlement.

The US and Russia agreed to a UN Security Council resolution stipulating that Syria’s chemical stockpile will be eliminated by mid-2014—in itself an extraordinarily problematic undertaking to be carried out by just 100 people in a war zone. But the compromise resolution was only agreed after Russia succeeded in opposing US, French and British plans to include the threat of force if Assad was deemed failing to comply.

On Monday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov gave an interview with *Kommersant* in which he made public continued disagreements with Washington. “It’s no secret that our partners in the US kept trying to reverse the situation and return to Chapter 7 [which authorises military force] of the Charter of the United Nations” he said, “So we had to spend a little more time negotiating.”

Lavrov complained that Washington, London and Paris were not serious about starting the Geneva 2 peace negotiations due in mid-November, given their backing for Jihadist groups.

“Until recently we have been relying on our Western partners, who pledged to push the opposition to the negotiations table, and we hoped they would manage it quickly. But so far they have not succeeded. And I am not sure they will by mid-November,” Lavrov told a news conference in Moscow Tuesday.

“The goal now is to waste no more time and seat those reasonable opposition members at the discussion table with the government,” said Lavrov. “Those who aren’t thinking about founding a caliphate on Syrian territory, who aren’t thinking only about how to seize power and then use it at their own discretion.”

Sergei Markov, an adviser to President Vladimir

Putin, told the *Christian Science Monitor*, “The US and others are still backing militant Syrian oppositionists with arms and diplomatic support, even though Western public opinion more and more recognizes that these rebels are not democrats, but violent radicals aligned with Al Qaeda.”

Russia also continues to assert its opposition to US, French and British claims that the Assad regime used chemical weapons against Syrian civilians in the Damascus suburb of Ghoutta on August, 21. This was to be used as a pretext for military intervention until the extent of public opposition derailed the plans and pushed the Obama administration into accepting the inspections/negotiations option offered by Russia.

The US is seeking to turn this situation to its advantage, pushing for Assad to step down and for shifts in the Iranian regime that would tighten Washington’s grip on the Middle East. But whereas Russia is amenable to such a compromise, it cannot face total exclusion from its remaining bases in the oil rich region. To this end it wants to have some say in shaping a replacement for Assad in Syria.

Last week Lavrov also restated that Russia had filed a 100-page report with the UN detailing the use of sarin gas by opposition forces in Aleppo last March, stating that an investigation had been blocked by the US.

“We have information that the tragic incident on Aug. 21, where chemical weapons were used according to confirmed reports, involved sarin of the same origin as the chemical toxin fired on March 19 [in Aleppo], although it was far stronger,” he added.

A summary of the Russian report said, “It is obvious that any objective investigation of the incident on August 21 in East Ghouta is impossible without considering the circumstances of the March attack.”

The Russian report was dismissed by the US and then overshadowed for some time by the defeat of the vote for war in Britain’s parliament on August 29 and the shift to negotiations by Obama. But it is still a weapon in Russia’s diplomatic arsenal.

On Monday, at the General Assembly of the United Nations, Syria’s Deputy Prime Minister, Walid al-Moualem also accused western-backed terrorist groups of carrying out the Ghoutta attack. He denounced “well-known” countries for backing “terrorists” and threatening “blatant military aggression outside the mandate of the Security Council.”

Washington is facing major difficulties due to the breakup of the Syrian opposition into warring camps and the clearly dominant role being played by Islamist groups.

The US-backed Syrian National Coalition (SNC) has been reduced to a husk by the public break of its Islamist components following the US retreat from direct military intervention and the conditional agreement of the SNC to talks with the Assad regime.

The Islamist block of 13 groups includes Jabhat al-Nusra and key military forces previously operating within the Free Syrian Army. This has severely undermined the Turkish-based SNC leadership with the Islamists refusing to recognise any future government formed outside Syria and even excluding the SNC from the country through their control of the border areas.

The other Al-Qaeda-linked group, ISIS, is alone in being left outside the new Islamist formation. ISIS is directly linked to the main Al-Qaida group in Iraq and was formed as a breakaway from Syria’s Jabhat al-Nusra. Its exclusion could yet be used as a screen in order to facilitate some future diplomatic dealings by the Islamists with the US and/or Russia.

Turkey’s Justice and Development Party government (AKP) cannot reconcile itself to such a setback to its own regional ambitions. Prime Minister Rəcəp Erdoğan and others have repeatedly denounced the US for backing off from taking military action.

Today parliament is expected to extend by a year a mandate authorising sending troops to Syria if the government deems there to be a threat to Turkey. “Developments show that the Syrian regime has reached a point where it is ready to use any methods or weapons against international law,” the motion declares. Turkey is obliged to take necessary measures against any kind of action from Syria which presents an “open and near threat.”



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