

# US-aligned Human Rights Watch indicts Syria for gas attack

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The US-based organization Human Rights Watch issued a report Tuesday claiming that “evidence strongly suggests” government responsibility for the use of chlorine gas as a weapon in northern Syria in mid-April.

On the same day, French Foreign Laurent Fabius made a similar claim at a press conference in Washington, while voicing his “regrets” over the failure of the Obama administration to carry through on its threats of air strikes against Syria following a chemical weapons attack on a Damascus suburb that was falsely blamed on the government.

Both the government of President Bashar al-Assad and the Western-backed “rebels” reported the use of gas last month in the town of Kfar Zeita and elsewhere near the city of Hama, about 125 miles north of Damascus.

This “evidence” that the government, and not the Islamist-dominated militias fighting against it, was responsible for these attacks is slim, to say the least. Human Rights Watch was compelled to acknowledge that it “cannot independently confirm” supposed evidence drawn largely from information provided by anti-government forces.

The French foreign minister, meanwhile, claimed that Paris had spoken to “credible witnesses” to 14 separate attacks since October 2013, but was unable to produce any concrete proof of the attacks, much less that the Assad regime was responsible.

The French government was among the strongest supporters of launching a war in the wake of the August 21 gas attack in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta. US President Barack Obama, who had declared the use of chemical weapons a “red line,” backed down from the threatened attack in the face of mass popular opposition as well as lack of support from both Washington’s key European ally, Britain, as well as within the US Congress.

It has since been exposed in a report by veteran investigative journalist Seymour Hersh, based on

interviews with current and former US security officials, that the government of Turkey, rather than the Syrian regime, was the most likely organizer of the attack, which was staged for the purpose of provoking a US military intervention. The US media sought to bury Hersh’s findings, and there was no mention of them in the reporting of the latest unsubstantiated charges.

The floating of these new chemical weapons charges takes place as the major Western powers prepare for a meeting on the situation in Syria, which, from their standpoint, has only gone from bad to worse.

The core group of the so-called “Friends of Syria” will be convening a meeting of foreign ministers in London Thursday that will be attended by US Secretary of State John Kerry along with the foreign ministers of Britain, France, Germany and Italy, as well as those of regional regimes seeking the overthrow of Assad: Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates.

The meeting is supposed to signal a stepping up of support for the so-called “rebels,” who have recently been forced to abandon their former stronghold in the old city of Homs, which is now completely under the control of government forces. This withdrawal marked a strategic defeat for the anti-Assad militias, allowing the Assad regime to secure its supply lines between the capital of Damascus and the Mediterranean coast.

Meanwhile, the fiercest fighting in Syria is continuing in the east near the Iraqi border, pitting two rival Al Qaeda-connected “rebel” factions—the Al Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)—against each other for control of the oil-rich province of Deir Ezzor.

While the Obama administration has attempted to signal renewed backing for the “rebels,” inviting Syrian Opposition Coalition president Ahmad Jarba to a series of meetings at the White House, State Department and Pentagon over the past week and granting the SOC’s

offices diplomatic status, it has shown reluctance to meet the opposition forces' main demand, which is for the supply of manpads, shoulder-fired surface to air missiles.

The problem Washington faces is that the Syrian “rebels” are dominated by Al Qaeda-linked Islamists, even on the southern front, where the CIA has been most active in backing supposed “moderates.” There is every likelihood that manpads sent into Syria will end up being used in terrorist attacks on passenger planes.

Instead of attacking Syria last year, Washington entered into a Russian-brokered deal for Syria's chemical disarmament under the supervision of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). According to the agency, 92 percent of Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles have been turned over for destruction, while the remaining 8 percent —16 containers—are stored in a suburb of Damascus that is contested by the Western-backed “rebels,” making their removal difficult and dangerous.

While Syria's chemical disarmament is unprecedented in terms of the speed with which it has been conducted, Western governments are still attempting to use the issue as a pretext for aggression against the country. This was made clear by the French foreign minister at his Washington press conference.

Fabius declared that the alleged chlorine attacks show that the Assad regime was failing to meet its obligation to hand over all its chemical weapons and that it “is still capable of producing chemical weapons, and determined to use them.” Aside from the fact that no proof has been provided that Damascus has carried out such attacks, chlorine is a common industrial chemical used in making everything from plastics to household cleaners, as well as in water purification and public sanitation. While its use as a poison gas is banned, it is not one of the chemical weapons components that Syria is required to turn over.

The role played by Human Rights Watch in drumming up a new pretext for direct military intervention is in keeping with the organization's increasingly open role as a mouthpiece for the State Department in the promotion of “human rights” imperialism.

Even as its report alleging chlorine gas attacks by the Syrian government was issued, a group of 130 scholars, including the Argentine Nobel Peace Prize laureate Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, issued a May 12 open letter to the executive director of HRW, Kenneth Roth, charging that the organization's “close ties to the US government call into question its independence.”

The letter called attention to the case of HRW's

Washington advocacy director, Tom Malinowski, who had previously worked as a special assistant to President Bill Clinton and a speechwriter for Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, and who has now been nominated to take the post of assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights and labor under John Kerry.

It likewise cites the biography posted on HRW.org for the vice chair of the organization's board of directors, Susan Manilow, who describes herself as “a longtime friend of Bill Clinton” who has “hosted dozens of events for the Democratic National Committee.”

The letter also points out that the HRW's Americas' advisory committee has included such figures as Myles Frechette, a former US ambassador to Colombia, and Miguel Diaz, a former CIA analyst who went on to serve as “an interlocutor between the intelligence community and non-government experts.” Also on the committee is Michael Shifter, the former Latin American director for the US government-funded National Endowment for Democracy, which carries out the kind of overseas political destabilization operations that had formally been handled by the CIA.

The letter points out that as HRW advocacy director Malinowski had in 2009 publicly argued that there was a “legitimate place” for CIA renditions, and that finding an alternative to abducting individuals of interest and sending them to “foreign dungeons to be tortured” was “going to take some time.”

It also noted that while HRW had condemned the Syrian regime's use of missiles in the country's ongoing civil war, it had “remained silent on the clear violation of international law constituted by the US threat of missile strikes on Syria in August.”

The letter charged that, “HRW's close relationships with the US government suffuse such instances with the appearance of a conflict of interest.”

Roth—a former US prosecutor—is himself an example of the “revolving door” between HRW and the US government. Furthermore, his deputy executive director, Michele Alexander, previously worked as a contractor for the US Agency for International Development in Pakistan.



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