



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on August 21, 2013

Syrian Opposition Accuses Assad of Chemical Attack

President Assad's regime is being accused of [launching](#) a chemical attack on the Syrian opposition. But impartial experts are casting doubt on the veracity of those claims.

According to Syrian activists, President Bashar al-Assad's forces have killed hundreds of people in an August 21 attack, said to be the deadliest to date, on the towns of Zamalka and Ein Tarma as UN inspectors visited the nearby city of Damascus. Opposition forces claim that poison gas was used in the attack.



Some are pointing to the attack as a reason for the United States to commence military engagement in Syria, recalling President Obama's assertions that a chemical weapons attack by the Assad regime would serve as a "red line." Skeptics, however, are questioning the validity of these claims.

"Firstly, the timing is odd, bordering on suspicious," writes BBC security correspondent Frank Gardner. "Why would the Assad government, which has recently been retaking ground from the rebels, carry out a chemical attack while UN weapons inspectors are in the country?"

Similarly, Swedish diplomat and former UN weapons inspector Rolf Ekeus [told](#) Reuters, "It would be very peculiar if it was the government to do this at the exact moment the international inspectors come into the country ... at the least, it wouldn't be very clever."

Charles Lister, an analyst at HIS Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Center also questioned the timing of the attack. Lister [told](#) the *Jerusalem Post*, "Logically, it would make little sense for the Syrian government to employ chemical agents at such a time, particularly given the relatively close proximity of the targeted towns to the UN team."

And chemical weapons expert Ake Sellstrom, who is currently leading the current UN inspection in Syria, told Swedish broadcaster SVT that the high number of victims alleged in the attack seem "suspicious."

Past chemical weapons attacks Syria's Aleppo province last March that were initially blamed on the Assad regime had been later proven to be caused by the Syrian rebels. For example, UN human rights investigator Carla del Ponte said in May that evidence gathered by her team showed that it was in fact the rebels who had been using chemical weapons.

This would not be the first time the rebel forces used violence against civilians. Two years ago, the rebel forces were responsible for four suicide bombings in Aleppo that killed approximately 40 civilians and wounded many more.

Additionally, the rebels were also responsible for the massacre of over 90 people in Houla last year. Immediately following that event, the United States, France, Great Britain, and Germany blamed al-Assad for the killings and expelled Syria's ambassadors from their countries in protest. Later reports, however, pointed to evidence that the massacre was in fact carried out by anti-al-Assad rebel forces.



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Evidence pointing to the rebels notwithstanding, Western leaders and politicians began to advocate more fiercely for the overthrow of the Assad regime after news of the chemical attacks last March.

And the recent allegations of a chemical attack by Assad's regime have some debating whether the United States should officially take military action. According to U.S. General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, however, the United States is not in the right position to take a stance just yet.

"Syria today is not about choosing between two sides, but rather about choosing one among many sides," Dempsey said in a letter Aug. 19 to Rep. Eliot Engel, D-N.Y. "It is my belief that the side we choose must be ready to promote their interests and ours when the balance shifts in their favor. Today, they are not."

Engel said he is "deeply unsatisfied" with the current strategy, saying we "stand on the sidelines when the turmoil in that country continues to claim thousands of lives and sow instability throughout the region."

"I reject the notion that our involvement in Syria would simply constitute 'choosing sides' between one armed group and another," he said in a statement. "Rather, our involvement represents a choice between hastening the end of the Assad regime or continuing to allow the cycle of violence, displacement, and terror to continue unabated."

While Dempsey asserts that the administration is awaiting the right moment to fully intervene, White House spokesman Josh Earnest reiterates the administration's position that Assad should cede his power.

"I think that there is no doubt that there is pretty broad international consensus about Mr. Assad and his regime and his need to leave power," Earnest said.

Photo of Syrian man mourning over victims of chemical attack in Damascus: AP Images



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