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A.C.Doyle *September 9, 2018 at 09:49*

Skripal. 09.09.2018

On the face of it, the police investigation into the Skripal affair is exemplary and well worthy of the ample praise heaped upon it:

Identification of the poison, discovery of the murder weapon, identification of the sponsor, identification of the suspects with ample photographic evidence, protection of the 'victims' etc. etc. All this leading to charges being laid with the clear implication that it is indeed a Russian state sponsored assassination attempt with proscribed chemical weapon.

Viewed critically and in the wider political context, however, the whole story stinks:

1. The timing of the affair when Russia was riding high with the World Cup at Sochi and apparent success in Syria, and Putin was generally strutting about on the international stage, while PM May was (and still is) in desperate need of a distraction from the whole Brexit mess and the need to establish some sort of role to keep the UK relevant in the post-Brexit era.
2. The nature of the murder attempt, including the poison alleged to have been used with a distinctly Russian signature to it, which anyway, as events have shown, was hardly the appropriate choice of weapon for such an assassination.
3. The amateurish nature of the whole thing: getting seen, not killing the victim, allowing the murder weapon to be found etc. This is certainly not on a par with the Israeli "Dubai" model where allegedly a team of 33 assassins was sent to murder one hapless Palestinian, a Mr. Mahmoud Al-Mabhouh. In this, incidentally, forged British passports were used and Germany had one of the alleged perpetrators in its hands, all without serious repercussions.
4. The obvious opprobrium that Russia would bring upon itself for being seen to be involved in this and all for no apparent benefit.
5. The timing of information release to media and allies at politically opportune moments synchronized to coincide with Russia-centric with world events.
6. The strength and consistency of the Russian denials.

Summarised, and from the UK perspective and the objective of the demonisation of Russia, it is all "too good to be true".

Because it is all "too good to be true" there is the possibility that a more plausible explanation is to be found, and indeed there is.

To understand this, take a step back and look at another well known project of a similar gravity and dimension to this demonisation of Russia using the Skripal affair. Namely, the project to undermine Trump using bogus accusations of collusion with Russia in what is now known as the infamous "Trump-Russia" dossier.

The Modus Operandi is very similar between these two projects and include absurd scenarios such as the Golden Showers episode or the Russian state sponsored poisoning theory, Also meetings being set up on bogus pretexts to lure parties unbeknown to each other together to furnish “evidence” to support retrospective claims of collusion would be similar to ordering patsies to appear near cameras at critical locations.

Neither project would appear to be founded well in fact and appear to have been based on the principle that the more absurd the allegations, the greater the financial rewards for the authors.

So, at the same time as Christopher Steele was hawking his “Trump-Russia” project round the various US security services (and anyone who would listen to him), it is possible he was at the same time hawking round the “Russia demonisation” project, both projects maybe even commissioned at the same time by the same original sponsor.

The playbook of the “Russia demonisation” project would have been something like this, and would be a classic false flag operation:

1. Choose victims with a Russian connection.
2. Choose distinctly Russian weapon calculated to demonstrate Russian contempt for chemical weapons treaties and show recklessness in its administration.
3. Acquire the chosen weapon (support of security services probably required here)
4. Choose a couple of patsies with an alleageable Russian connection to pose in front of security cameras in the vicinity of the murder scene and at UK entry points. Maybe also pose for photographers in the doorway the Russia GRU headquarters. Who knows yet what “evidence” is yet planned emerge at the next opportune moment ?
5. Choose separate assassin(s) to administer the poison.
6. Choose another patsy to ‘discover’ the murder weapon. (This may also have been added later to quell possible public hysteria after the dangers of Novichok were hyped up, amid reports of unrelated people much later exhibiting symptoms which risked being attributed to Novichok).
7. Optionally later send the two “Russian” patsies on a one way errand.
8. Execute script.
9. Russia did it Q.E.D.

Well, it does rather look like all that could have happened and has so far had the desired effect, if the UN meeting of 06.09.2018 (and the supporting information released in advance of it) is anything to go by.

Naturally, there are a number of questions outstanding.

1. Who would have lead such a project and who would have been the main actors ?
2. Was it mainly a private venture as in the case of the Steele Trump dossier, maybe with some discrete state support or a full blown (maybe allied) state operation ?

3. Could the UK political establishment distance itself sufficiently so that if the whole thing were to blow up, it could maintain ‘plausible deniability’?

4. What are the risks and consequences if the project is rumbled (i.e. exposed as a hoax) ?

To answer some of these questions:

Such conspiracies become more complicated, the greater the number of agencies that are involved and the deeper they are involved in it. Such agencies could include:

- Security Service (allied),
- Security Services (domestic)
- Domestic political establishment
- Domestic police force
- Courts
- Visa issuer (consulate abroad)
- Media organisations
- State laboratories (e.g. Porton Down)
- Medical agencies – Hospital. etc. etc.

However, in the simplest scenario, where the project is lead as private enterprise, with the relatively modest funding needs covered, probably only the Russia-specific poison would present an issue. The rest would automatically follow standard procedures without otherwise the necessity for corruption of the agencies listed above.

If this were to be seen later as an obvious hoax, it is difficult to imagine that UK political establishment would emerge unscathed. The members could attempt to present themselves as simply having exploited an existing affair as politicians would be expected to do, but without knowing the extent to which they were misled, or of its fundamentally bogus nature. Exploited in this context means of course milking it for all it’s worth which they have certainly done, however the extreme gullibility necessary to swallow that lot whole would certainly damage their credibility.

Allies who have exposed themselves by supporting the UK position would clearly want to openly distance themselves from the whole misadventure and be extremely wary in the future and may feel obliged to make amends to the aggrieved party, namely Russia.

As for the risk of exposure, the more actors that are involved, the greater the risk of disclosure of the plot. Now that there have been deaths, possibly 3 if the Russian “GRU officers” don’t appear again, the risks of repercussions on the actors could be serious.

Here are some of those disclosure risks.

Human actors have human fallibilities.

They get to want to write their memoirs, they want to smooth over their interview at the pearly gates with St. Peter. They get religion and want to unload. Or they fear the breakdown of protection of “just doing my job” (the classic but unsuccessful defence at the Nuremburg trials) and collect evidence to cover their own backs, maybe pointing the blame in other directions, and anyway which could leak out.

Certainly it would be unwise to rely on any “30 year information moratorium rule” or similar which could be lifted by future political regimes for purposes such as embarrassing their predecessors etc., or suffer a general breakdown such as the case with the Stasi information trove.

Other possibilities are allied security services, suspicious of the “too good to be true” nature of the plot and not wanting to appear to be completely inept, commission their own back-covering reports of the whole affair, maintaining a skeptical view with supporting evidence, and these reports leak out.

There is also the personal vendetta exposure risk.

What would happen, say, if BJ’s jilted wife decides to do an RT interview maintaining that her husband was involved in a secret project to discredit Russia using a chemical weapon? “Hell has no fury like a woman scorned” and all that. Others may simply want to sell their story.

Granted, it all sounds fantastic, but then again, no less fantastic than the official view as presented from the official UK perspective.

An intriguing twist to all this would be the possible involvement of Sergei Skripal himself somehow in the whole plot. Then the deal would have been that he and his daughter are to be furnished with new identities, an income, and given a safe house maybe outside the UK. Although this is more difficult to imagine because the personal risks to him and his daughter would be much higher as would be the degree of collusion needed between the agencies previously mentioned to pull it off successfully.

Or better put, it would have been more difficult to imagine, were it not for the fact that the main elements appear, de facto, to have happened.

A conclusion about how all this will end is difficult to reach. There may be more tales to be told when the moment is opportune. It may even be, although unlikely, that Russia sues for peace and admits the whole thing in some form. However, the risks of the whole venture cannot be overstated. The reaction of Russia to the participants of an elaborate conspiracy with a transparently bogus pretext, possibly calculated to pose it an existential threat, could trigger a mutually damaging reaction.

Dungroanin [September 13, 2018 at 12:45](#)

Should I post or should I not? I thought long and decided now is the time to share my thoughts on our gentlemen soldiers/conniving thugs. Enjoy.

If it was a plot by Putin to influence his vote in the election then the UK government, like a ignorant sucker, gave him what he wanted on a silver platter, by making a great song and dance about it before a full police investigation.

Since the better informed world hasn’t been taken in by the Syrian escapade and refuses to go with the long planned phased take over of the ME – using the isil false flag – the perpetrators were looking to find another causus belli.

I mean who is ‘chemical weapons expert, Hamish de Bretton-Gordon’ apparently reported as working in Syria? Is he a White Helmetter like Le Mesurier? All these posh old aristo named spooky types with their private companies – i trust they don’t have offshore tax avoidance schemes and aren’t colluding in adventurism.

Now that The Syrian regime change/resource grab has failed

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/15/eastern-ghouta-syrian-regime-forces-break-into-key-town>

The PR campaigners are refocusing their target. The Potty Bell numbties,

The (ex?) MI people, being creative in trying to target the runaway Labour popularity. The Obsessive Groaniad is all over along with the BBC and the MSM who have redoubled their attacks in recent days

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/mar/14/corbynite-tribes-labour-leader-left>

Hamish de Bretton-Gordon is a director of Doctors Under Fire and an adviser to the Union of Medical Care and Relief Organisations. A former soldier, he was commanding officer of the UK Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) Regiment and Nato’s Rapid Reaction CBRN Battalion.(Guardian)

<https://www.theguardian.com/profile/hamish-de-bretton-gordon>

The Guardian fails to add in its description that he is also

‘Hamish de Bretton-Gordon is Chief Operating Office of SecureBio Ltd a commercial company offering CBRN Resilience, consultancy and deployable capabilities. Hamish set up SecureBio in 2011 after 23 years’ service in the British Army.

SecureBio have an impressive list of blue chip clients globally and look after 90% of the World's media operating in Syria from a CBRN resilience perspective. They are also response consultants for the CATLIN CBRN Insurance policy and run the unique Biological Immediate Action Service to mitigate biological threats and hoaxes. Hamish is helping and advising civilians in Syria on Chemical weapons matters on behalf of a number of NGOs and has deployed to the Region a number of times since the current conflict began.'

<http://www.militaryspeakers.co.uk/speakers/hamish-de-bretton-gordon-obe/>

Or is he 'Hamish de Bretton-Gordon is Managing Director CBRN at Avon Protection, the recognized global market leader in respiratory protection system technology specializing primarily in Military, Law Enforcement, Firefighting, and Industrial. He is also a director of the NGO 'Doctors Under Fire'.'

<https://www.dsei.co.uk/speakers/hamish-de-bretton-gordon#/>

'Published on 22 Feb 2018 For the links in the video and much, much more, go to <https://www.christianvoice.org.uk/ind...> BBC television news ran a piece bemoaning the bombardment of the rebel-held East Ghouta area of Damascus on Tuesday morning 20/02/2018. They interviewed Hamish de Bretton-Gordon, supposedly representing 'Doctors Under Fire'. What he said could have been scripted by the UK's Foreign Office. We investigate.'

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=Sqg34Bj4ZKY>

Co's house records the first company as dissolved.

Other directors were a

[https://companycheck.co.uk/director/912851348/DR-ALLAN-JOHN-](https://companycheck.co.uk/director/912851348/DR-ALLAN-JOHN-SYMS)

[SYMS](https://companycheck.co.uk/director/913796400/MR-ANDREW-JOHN-DUCKWORTH) & <https://companycheck.co.uk/director/913796400/MR-ANDREW-JOHN-DUCKWORTH>

Back in 2016 he was telling us it was Isil who had chemical weapons and he could sell them the gas masks

<http://www.itv.com/news/2016-05-16/islamic-state-have-limitless-amount-of-chemical-weapons/>

Published May 16th 2016

"IS, over the last two years, seem to be developing a chemical weapons capability.

In the last few months, the Peshmerga say they have been attacked over 20 times by Islamic State using mustard agent, which they appear to be making themselves, and chlorine, from probably the largest chlorine factory in the Middle East in Mosul.

So they have almost limitless amounts of this stuff and they appear to be very keen to use it.

Chemical weapons are the ultimate terror weapon even though bullets and bombs cause more damage."

– CHEMICAL WEAPON EXPERT HAMISH DE BRETTON-GORDON

He became MD of <https://www.avon-rubber.com/Avon-news/New-strategic-partnership-announced-as-chemical-and-biological-counter-terrorism-and-warfare-expert-Hamish-de-Bretton-Gordon-OBE-joins-Avon-Protection.htm>

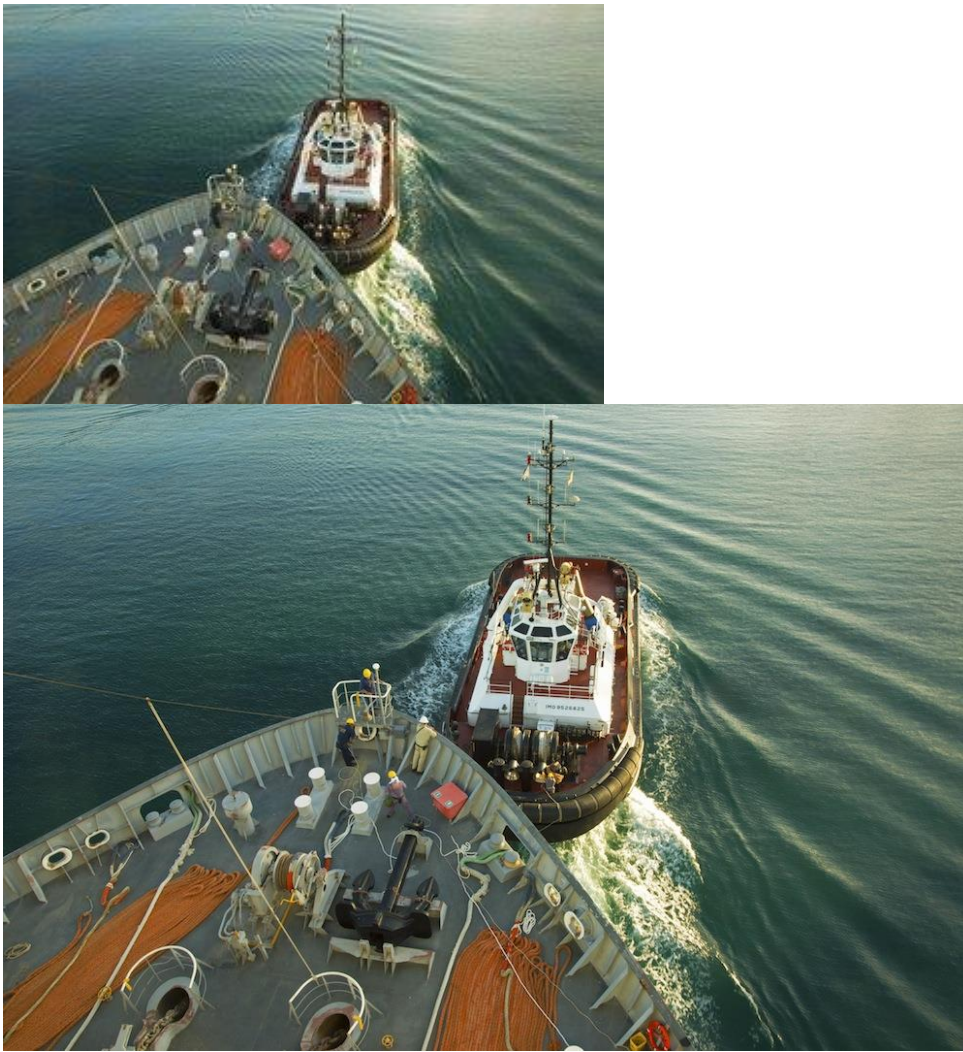
Busy busy boy and now all these products get high profile TV advertising – kerrching.

He certainly had access to plenty of chems from Syria for making safe aboard a ship! U.S. cargo ship, the MV Cape Ray,

<https://www.google.co.uk/amp/s/amp.livescience.com/46970-destroying-syria-chemical-weapons.html>

<https://www.livescience.com/46970-destroying-syria-chemical-weapons.html>

By Elizabeth Palermo, Staff Writer | July 23, 2014 05:33pm ET



An Italian tugboat helps moor the MV Cape Ray, as the ship docks at Medcenter Container Terminal in Italy on July 1, 2014. Aboard the Cape Ray, experts will neutralize chemical materials from Syria in accordance with guidelines from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

Credit: U.S. Navy photo by Seaman Desmond Parks

Somewhere in the Mediterranean Sea, military and civilian experts aboard a U.S. cargo ship, the MV Cape Ray, are disposing of Syria's arsenal of deadly chemical weapons. Some of these chemicals — including those needed to produce the nerve agent sarin — were reportedly used by the Syrian government in attacks last year that killed nearly 1,500 Syrian civilians.

Much of [Syria's chemical weapons](#) stockpile has already made its way to Finland, the United Kingdom and the United States, where government contractors have been working for months to destroy roughly 1,300 tons of chemicals. The arsenal is being destroyed in accordance with regulations set forth by the [Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons](#) (OPCW).

In September 2013, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad agreed to join the OPCW's Chemical Weapons Convention, which required him to forfeit Syria's chemical weapons and destroy chemical production and storage facilities around the country. [[5 Lethal Chemical Warfare Agents](#)]

But getting Syria to put an end to its chemical weapons program was only half the battle, said Hamish de Bretton-Gordon, a chemical weapons expert with SecureBio, a chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) security firm based in the United Kingdom. In the midst of the [nation's civil war](#), the OPCW was tasked with creating a plan to safely remove chemical weapons from Syria. There was also the somewhat daunting task of disposing of 1,300 tons of deadly chemicals.

"Nobody would accept this stuff," de Bretton-Gordon told Live Science. Germany and Albania, for instance, refused to let the most lethal of Syria's chemical weapons cross their borders, he said.

The United States eventually stepped forward with a plan for disposing of what de Bretton-Gordon calls the "nastiest" of Syria's chemicals, which include [mustard gas](#) and DF compound, a component of the [nerve agent sarin](#). Rather than ship these chemicals to a particular nation, the U.S. outfitted a marine vessel with the necessary equipment to destroy the chemicals at sea.

Hydrolysis at sea

The MV Cape Ray, currently anchored in international waters in an "unspecified" location in the Mediterranean, is a first-of-its kind vessel equipped with two so-called field deployable hydrolysis systems (FDHS) that are used to neutralize toxic chemicals.

Hydrolysis systems aren't a new technology, said de Bretton-Gordon, who worked as a CBRN specialist in the British Army for 23 years. These systems have been used for decades to neutralize the chemical stockpiles of nations like the U.S. and the U.K. But putting these systems aboard a marine vessel is a unique way to deal with chemical weapons.

The Cape Ray contains two FDHS units, contained within an "environmentally sealed" tent, according to the U.S. Department of Defense. Each unit is equipped with a titanium-lined reactor in which corrosive materials can be processed safely. The units also have built-in redundant systems that protect them from unanticipated glitches.

The hydrolysis units mix about 100 gallons (380 liters) of toxic chemicals with thousands of gallons of seawater, as well as another neutralizing chemical, or reagent, de Bretton-Gordon said.

In some cases, a mix of reagents — base compounds such as potassium or sodium hydroxide — are used for this purpose, said Dennis Reutter, a retired U.S. Army scientist who was not involved in the OPCW program for Syria's chemical weapons. For the mustard agent, which isn't soluble in water, Reutter said that a co-solvent, like monomethylamine, is typically used in the hydrolysis process.

In total, the Cape Ray will process approximately 772 tons of chemicals, including all of Syria's declared mustard agent and more than 600 tons of "Priority 1" chemicals, which are the most dangerous chemicals declared by the Syrian government.

Safely destroying chemicals

The resulting mixture of acid chemicals and base reagents are then vigorously mixed, making the deadly chemicals much less harmful, Reutter said. These safer chemicals, known as effluent, can then be disposed of in a variety of ways, including through incineration or other [waste management processes](#).

In the incineration process, nonlethal chemicals and the containers that hold them are burned inside of a commercial incinerator, Reutter said. De Bretton-Gordon said that weapons that once contained chemicals, like empty missile shells, could also be disposed of in this way. The smoke produced as a result of this process typically passes through a series of filters and condensers that render it nontoxic, he said.

In the United States and other countries, incineration is commonly used to [dispose of chemical waste](#), according to de Bretton-Gordon, who said that the effluent produced by the Cape Ray, as well as Syria's store of "Priority 2" chemicals, will likely be disposed of in this way. Priority 2 chemicals are toxic, but not as deadly as the Priority 1 chemicals being destroyed aboard the Cape Ray, according to de Bretton-Gordon.

"['Priority 2' chemicals] are [toxic chemicals](#) that are burned in the U.K. and virtually every other country all the time. Some of the things that are in there are hydrochloric acid and hydrofluoride— strong acids," de Bretton-Gordon said.

The nearly 1.5 million gallons (5.7 million liters) of effluent produced by the Cape Ray will be stored onboard the ship until it can be transported to one of several countries, where it will be destroyed for good. According to the OPCW, Germany will receive all of the effluent that results from the neutralization of Syria's mustard gas. Finland will also receive nearly 1,200 gallons (4,500 liters) of effluent from the Cape Ray.

The OPCW has specified that Priority 2 chemicals processed in the United States will be disposed of via incineration. The organization has not detailed how Finland and Germany will be disposing of their share of the chemicals from Syria and the effluent produced by the Cape Ray.

[My interjection here: anybody remember this?] from Hervé - Joe Quinn [Sott.net](#) Sat, 14 Apr 2018 17:32 UTC



So what is his game? Here is a bit of a critical assessment

<https://www.google.co.uk/amp/s/interventionswatch.wordpress.com/2015/04/28/hamish-de-bretton-gordon-calls-for-syria-no-fly-zone-in-the-guardian/amp/>

← A complicating factor in Libya: Libyans.

Reuters on how U.S. backed rebel groups in Syria are fighting alongside 'Al Qaeda'. →

Hamish de Bretton Gordon calls for Syria 'no-fly zone' in The Guardian.

Posted on April 28, 2015 by [afghanistanwatch](#)

Hamish de Bretton Gordon is currently Chief Operating Officer of SecureBio Ltd.

According to his blurb on the website MilitarySpeakers.co.uk, he was previously ‘Commanding Officer of the UK CBRN Regiment and NATO’s Rapid Reaction CBRN Battalion’, whose ‘operational deployments have included 1st Gulf War, Cyprus, Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan’. The Guardian have today [published an article](#) of his calling for a ‘limited no-fly zone’ over northern Syria, in response to alleged chemical weapon attacks being carried out by the Syrian regime. I just want to take a quick look at some of the specific claims made by de Bretton Gordon, and the conclusion he draws from them. So here goes.

De Bretton Gordon opens by saying that:

Chemical weapons first appeared in the Syrian conflict at [Sheikh Maqsoud](#) in March 2013
Here, de Bretton Gordon links to a BBC article from September 2013. The article states that ‘UN chemical weapons inspectors are expected to return to Syria on Wednesday’, and that they would ‘investigate alleged chemical weapons attacks at Khan al-Assal, Sheikh Maqsoud and Saraqeb’.

But nowhere does the article actually say that chemical weapons were deployed in Sheik Maqsoud – the word ‘alleged’ is clearly used – let alone specify who was responsible for their use. So the article simply doesn’t back up the claim that de Bretton Gordon is making.

And indeed, the final report of the U.N. team who investigated the alleged attack in Sheik Maqsoud, released in December 2013, concluded that:

In the absence of any further information and with no prospect of finding further information, the United Nations Mission was, therefore, unable to finalize the investigation of this allegation and to draw any conclusions pertaining to this alleged incident.

<https://unoda-web.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/report.pdf> – p.79

So their conclusion was that they couldn’t draw any firm conclusions, and the ‘incident’ remained merely ‘alleged’.

In the next paragraph, de Bretton Gordon then claims that:

Samples from Sheikh Maqsoud and [Saraqeb](#) in May 2013 did eventually find their way to French and UK government laboratories and tested positive for the nerve agent sarin, with [David Cameron saying as much in the summer of 2013](#).

Again he links to an article from the BBC, published in September 2013, to back his claim up. But nowhere in the article is ‘Sheik Maqsoud’, or any variation thereof, even mentioned.

Indeed, it’s clear from the opening sentence – ‘The UK has fresh evidence of the use of chemical weapons **in Damascus**’ – that the article is talking about the attack in Ghouta on August 21st, and not the ‘alleged’ attack in Sheik Maqsoud.

Nor does David Cameron speak about the alleged attack in Sheik Maqsoud in the video interview that is embedded in the article, let alone say that samples from the town had tested positive for Sarin. He doesn’t even say anything that could be interpreted as suggesting that. It simply isn’t a subject that comes up in the interview.

So de Bretton’s use of sources here is sloppy at best, and downright dishonest at worst. None of the material he links to even comes close to establishing that there was a chemical weapon attack in Sheik Maqsoud in March 2013, and the U.N. themselves later said they were unable to come to any firm conclusions about it.

Perhaps de Bretton Gordon was simply assuming that people wouldn’t check the articles he has linked to, but anyone who does will see for themselves that they don’t support his assertion.

de Bretton Gordon then moves onto the attacks in Ghouta themselves, and states that:

A major chemical attack occurred at [Ghouta in Damascus on 21 August 2013](#), when 1,000kg of sarin were dropped, killing up to 1,500 people, mainly women and children. Many believe that Assad was on the point of defeat after fighting the rebels there for 18 months, and that he used chemical weapons as a last-ditch measure.

It's true that 'many believe' the Assad regime was responsible for this attack. But it's also true that many believe elements of it remain contested.

The Pulitzer prize winning investigative journalist Seymour Hersh, for example, has written a [couple of articles](#) alleging that some people within the U.S. Intelligence community believe that the attack was a rebel provocation, designed to elicit an international military response against the Assad regime.

Hersh's claims are backed up by other credible reports. On August 29th 2013, the Associated Press published an article reporting, among others things, that:

U.S. intelligence officials are not so certain that the suspected chemical attack was carried out on Assad's orders. Some have even talked about the possibility that rebels could have carried out the attack in a callous and calculated attempt to draw the West into the war.

And that:

A report by the Office of the Director for National Intelligence outlining that evidence against Syria includes a few key caveats – including acknowledging that the U.S. intelligence community no longer has the certainty it did six months ago of where the regime's chemical weapons are stored, nor does it have proof Assad ordered chemical weapons use, according to two intelligence officials and two more U.S. officials.

<http://bigstory.ap.org/article/ap-sources-intelligence-weapons-no-slam-dunk>

To be clear, neither Hersh nor the Associated Press report are saying that a rebel faction or factions carried out the attack.

Just that this was being considered as a possibility by U.S. Intelligence, at a time when – publically at least – the Obama administration and its closest allies were saying that the attacks could only have been the work of the Assad regime. Essentially, and as with the run up to the invasion of Iraq, they misrepresented the raw intelligence to try and create a casus belli for war.

Senior U.N. Officials like [Carla De Ponte](#) and [Lakhdar Brahimi](#) have also suggested rebel culpability for at least some of the chemical weapon attacks in Syria.

Nowhere does de Bretton Gordon even acknowledge any of this.

He does, however, go on to lament the fact that the U.S. et al didn't go through with their plans to bomb Syria in September 2013, apparently believing that such a bombing campaign might've facilitated the fall of the Assad regime, and stopped ISIS in their tracks.

Although how that would've worked, he doesn't explain. And it sounds like magical thinking to me, quite frankly, with the strategy being along the lines of:

1. Bomb Syria.
2. ??????
3. Assad falls and ISIS are defeated.

And it's the kind of magical thinking – that Western bombs are some kind of panacea – that has left Libya, Iraq and Afghanistan in varying states of civil war and disintegration.

De Bretton Gordon then writes that:

After Ghouta and the removal of the regime's declared stockpile by the OPCW, it used chemical weapons again [in Talmenes and Kafr Zita in April 2014](#).

Once again, the article de Bretton Gordon links to to back his claim up doesn't say what he suggests it does. The article, published in April 2014, reports that the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) is to 'investigate fresh claims that a less dangerous – but still lethal – chlorine gas has been used in recent attacks on opposition areas'.

It doesn't actually say they have been used, let alone who by. And once again, neither Talmenes nor Kafr Zita are even mentioned in the main body of the article.

To be fair to de Bretton Gordon, a [later report](#) by the OPCW, released in December 2014, did conclude 'with a high degree of confidence that chlorine has been used as a weapon' in Talmenes and Kafr Zita (why he didn't just link to the *actual OPCW report*, I don't know).

But in the very next sentence, the report then states:

The work of the Mission has remained consistent with its mandate, which did not include the question of attributing responsibility for the alleged use.

So the report, unlike de Bretton Gordon, doesn't blame the regime (or anyone else for that matter) for these attacks.

Those who do allege regime responsibility are arguing that, because these chlorine bombs were reported to have been dropped from helicopters, and only the regime has access to helicopters, then only the regime could have been responsible. And it's a plausible and credible theory, on the surface of it (although are helicopters really that difficult to come by?).

But that's all it is at the moment: a theory, and not the cast iron certainty that de Bretton Gordon presents it as.

The article then moves onto de Bretton Gordon's solution for stopping the 'alleged use' (the OPCW's phrase, rather than mine) of chlorine bombs in Syria:

A limited no-fly zone over Idlib province, just for helicopters, which deliver the barrel bombs, would be of great help. There is no IS activity in this area, so the regime could not claim it would affect the battle against them, a fact which could convince Russians to abstain rather than veto the proposal. And in military terms, with the coalition command and control structure in place over Syria and Iraq to prosecute the air campaign against IS, this limited no-fly zone should be achievable.

First at all, while ISIS themselves may not have much of a presence in Idlib province, Jabhat al-Nusra – which is the official 'Al Qaeda' franchise in Syria – most certainly do.

It was Jabhat-al Nusra, working with U.S. armed 'moderate' rebel groups, who [recently captured](#) the city of Jisr al Shugur, according to a report from McClatchy.

My main bone of contention with de Bretton Gordon's proposal isn't that it could 'inadvertently' benefit 'Al Qaeda', though.

It's this:

Even if we take it as a given that the regime is indeed launching these chlorine attacks, the attacks are only responsible for a very small number of the deaths occurring in Syria. I mean, don't get me wrong. One is still far too many, but a 'no-fly zone' limited to helicopters flying over Idlib isn't going to make a great deal of difference in terms of saving lives.

What it may well do though – and what it may well be designed to do – is set a precedent for the enforcement of a 'no-fly zone' within Syria. It starts with helicopters in Idlib province, and then there are calls for it to be broadened to all aircraft over all of northern Syria. And then beyond. Perhaps to be accompanied by a 'buffer zone/safe zone' on the ground.

This is the plan that Turkey in particular have long been pushing hard for, and it's one that the U.S. State Department [is said](#) to have 'largely endorsed'.

And far from it being a measure designed to protect civilians from the depredations of the regime, it is actually a measure designed – as Turkish officials [admit in private](#) – to create 'a place where moderate rebels would be trained to fight Mr. Assad's government; in other words, a fledgling rebel state'.

That would likely entail an escalation of the war, the further fracturing of Syria as a coherent political entity, and by extension a deepening of the humanitarian crisis.

It would also entail the potential take over of large parts of Syria by groups who have been armed and trained by – are in hoc to, basically – some of the most vicious, reactionary and anti-democratic states in the region. Which, if the ultimate objective in Syria is political freedom, justice and self-determination, doesn't bode well at all.

So, based on a series of real or alleged chemical weapon attacks, for none of which culpability has been determined *conclusively*, de Bretton Gordon is proposing a measure whose major utility – in my opinion – would be as a trojan horse via which certain reactionary regional and global powers can make their formal entry into northern Syria, and perhaps beyond.

And I don't think anyone should be naive about their intentions, nor the ramifications if they get their way.

He was just a major of a tank regiment in 1998

http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/12296817.Battle_to_control_2000_years_of_hatred/

Then a Colonel

Then a 'contractor'

Start here – the MoD and FO outsourcing StratComm

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/03/how-britain-funds-the-propaganda-war-against-isis-in-syria>

Here is the half open can of worms

http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/British_involvement_in_Syria

British operation of Syrian opposition media

Tilley's operation: InCoStrat aka In2-Comms

[The Guardian reported in May 2016](#) that the UK government was outsourcing the running of media operations for the Syrian opposition. The contract documents seen by the Guardian were reported to be dated November 2014, but an earlier contract is mentioned. The Guardian states that the effort to manage Syrian opposition media dates back to the aftermath of the failure to get the House of Commons to vote for war in August 2013.

Through its Conflict and Stability Fund the government is spending £2.4m on private contractors working from Istanbul to deliver "strategic communications and media operations support to the Syrian moderate armed opposition"

Contractors hired by the Foreign Office but overseen by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) produce videos, photos, military reports, radio broadcasts, print products and social media posts branded with the logos of fighting groups, and effectively run a press office for opposition fighters.

The contract to support the moderate armed opposition was briefly held by Regester Larkin, an international communications consultancy, where it was headed up by a former lieutenant colonel in the British army who had also worked as a strategic communications specialist at the MoD. He set up a company called Innovative Communications & Strategies, or InCoStrat, which took over the contract from November 2014, a Regester Larkin spokeswoman told the Guardian.

In a [Parliamentary report on the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund](#) published on 7 February 2017, the National Security Adviser revealed the total annual sum allocated to operations in Syria:-

Some of the countries in which we operate have substantial allocations. For example, Afghanistan has £90 million, Syria has £60 million and Somalia has £32 million

No more detailed breakdown of the £60 million allocation to operations in Syria is available, but implies that the 2.4 million allocated to the InCoStrat contract is only a small proportion of total UK government spending on Syria. [Pmr9 \(talk\)](#) 20:43, 11 March 2017 (UTC)

[A report by Rania Khalek in December 2016](#) described how an unnamed reporter had been offered \$17000/month to work for this operation. The redacted emails are dated June 2016, and the contractor offering the job states that they are one of "three partners" of the UK government on "media surrounding the Syrian conflict". This implies that InCoStrat is not the only contractor.

Regester Larkin was [acquired by Deloitte](#) in December 2016. It was described as a "crisis, issues and reputation management consultancy", so running information warfare ops isn't exactly its core business. None of the six current partners have a military background. It's surprising that a consultancy specializing in "reputation management" would get involved in something so obviously disreputable and likely to blow up in their faces. It's not surprising that they divested themselves of the contract after a short time.

InCoStrat isn't registered at UK Companies House. The "former lieutenant-colonel" has been identified as Paul Tilley in a series of [tweets](#) on the account EmpireExposed on 6 Oct 2016. Tilley's Linked-In page gives his base as Istanbul, and lists his most recent achievements:-

January 2017 - current. Refining the work developed in InCostrat to provide a more tailored product to both the public and private sector. July 2013-December 2016- Founder and COO of InCoStrat. Developed and managed the company for over two years building to a peak of over 80 staff working in five countries providing strategic communications and local insight in hard to reach areas that are in conflict or emerging from it. • 2012-current. Developed and Project managed several multi-million dollar media and communications projects that are at the leading edge of UK and US foreign and security policy objectives in the Middle East"

The dates "2012-current" suggest that UK government operation of Syrian opposition media dates back further than the outsourcing contract described in the Guardian article. An operation with "over 80 staff" implies a much larger annual turnover than the £2.4 million mentioned in the Guardian, so the Conflict and Stability Fund is probably not the only source of funding.

Tilley's Linked-in page states that he is founder and COO of Innovative Communication and Strategies LLC. A Linked-in page for Michael Flood lists him as co-founder, based in Washington DC. InCoStrat is described [on a company listings site](#) as

a small, fairly new organization in the business consulting services industry located in Washington, DC. It opened its doors in 2014 and now has an estimated \$72,000 in yearly revenue and 1 employee.

Incostrat's website describes its activities as follows:-

We are a communications and media consultancy that provides a customised end-to-end service for government and private clients: we specialise in strategic campaign planning, narrative development, message distribution and feedback generation in support of policymaking

We operate in challenging environments, communicating with hard-to-reach populations, including in Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Libya, Yemen and Pakistan. We also have extensive experience in North and West Africa

We work with a range of issues including: political and military strategic communications, counter-extremism, counter-terrorism, post-conflict recovery, conflict mitigation, stabilisation, reconstruction and development

The UK government contract of £2.4 million and the 80 staff described by Tilley don't match the description of this business as having one employee and annual turnover of \$72000. Wikipedia describes an LLC as a "business structure that combines the pass-through taxation of a partnership or sole proprietorship with the limited liability of a corporation." Incostrat's address is given as 106 Quincy PI NE, Washington, District of Columbia 20002-2145. This terraced house in a residential street is also the address of a local air-conditioning contractor.

Tilley's Linked-In page states that he is also the founder of Innovation and Insight FZE (iN2- Comms), based in Istanbul. The activities of iN2-Comms are described with in words identical to the description on InCoStrat's website. An [article behind a paywall](#) is headlined "Syrian rebels' British flack bounces back with In2-Comms". From their Linked-In pages, another UK national at In2-Comms is Kate Henson (Director of Leadership Consulting and Innovation).

The EmpireExposed tweets note the parallels between the Paul Tilley / InCoStrat operation and the James Le Mesurier / White Helmets operation: "Both men attended Sandhurst, received Royal 'honours' and formed offshoot companies in late 2014 (InCoStrat & Mayday Rescue)." To this we can add the Hamish de Bretton-Gordon / Secure Bio operation, described below. [Pmr9 \(talk\)](#) 16:16, 19 February 2017 (UTC)

The manager (till 2015): Kevin Stratford-Wright

Kevin Stratford-Wright was a Lt-Colonel in the British Army till 2012, where his last position was as Head of Information Operations for the regional HQ in Afghanistan. His next job was in the Ministry of Defence as a civilian.

From his Linked-in page:

UK Ministry Of Defence - Strategic Communications Programme Manager

June 2012 – June 2015 (3 years 1 month) London, United Kingdom

• Established a Strategic Communications programme to support UK government policy in a conflict zone. • Developed strategy and plans. • Engaged across the UK government (and internationally) to win support and approvals and to secure funding. • Developed Statements of Requirement in partnership with selected enabling-contractors. • Monitored and coordinated multiple project strands and reported on their activities and impact across UK government and to international partners. • Generated year on year efficiency savings through constructive engagement with enabling contractors. • The programme has been recognised as the UK's largest of its kind since the Cold War. Its approach has also recently become a template for activity elsewhere (accepted by both UK government and international partners).

Clearly the StratCom programme that he was running is the UK's operation in support of the Syrian rebels. He tells us that it was the UK's largest programme of this kind since the Cold War.

This flyer for a conference on "Information Operations" in 2012 has both Stratford-Wright and Tilley as speakers.

<https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/23501767/register-now-wwwinformationoperationseventcom-iqpc.com>

It's probable that Tilley and Stratford-Wright know each other well. Most likely the arrangement by which the contract for Tilley was passed through Register Larkin was to work around the conflict of interest arising from this. [Pmr9 \(talk\)](#) 23:03, 20 December 2017 (UTC)

SOHR and SNHR

Small addition: the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, maybe containing the seeds of the current one and the SNHR, was founded in the UK in 2009. IIRC. --[Caustic Logic \(talk\)](#) 13:13, 20 February 2017 (UTC)

Syrian Network for Human Rights Ltd was incorporated as a company in the UK in May 2015 with Dr Wael Aleji as sole director and an address near Reading. He is also sole director of another company Syrian Centre for Foreign Relations founded in July 2013. Both companies appear to be dormant - that is they never went live. Dr Aleji has written a [Guardian article](#) in 2015 which states that he "works for" the Syrian Network for Human Rights. If he has sole control of the company, it's perhaps not correct to describe it as a "network" and it's also not clear why the company was set up if no money was ever passed through it. Is someone else paying for the website? SOHR is not listed on Companies House, so presumably wasn't incorporated. [Pmr9 \(talk\)](#) 01:44, 21 February 2017 (UTC)

This [interesting post](#) by Helena Glass in October 2013 shows that SOHR and SNHR are entangled:

The founder [of SNHR], Mousab Azzawi, and the onemanshow of the Syrian Observatory, AbdulRahman (alias for Osama Ali Suleiman), have exchanged fierce barbs each claiming the other is a sham. Abdulrahman, originally of Finnish nationality, was on the board of UK Consulting Centre, LTD for a little over one month in 2008, while Mr. Azzawi is currently listed as this company's Director. In addition, Azzawi was listed as a Trustee of the Syrian Observatory in 2012, a tangled web indeed!

"The UK Consulting Centre LTD. is listed as an adult education and training center with about 12k pounds in assets.

It's not clear what this company is used for - maybe it's just a way to pass earnings through a limited company, with some kind of understanding between the directors that whatever you put in you can take out. [Pmr9 \(talk\)](#) 20:02, 3 September 2017 (UTC)

British MI6 operation

moved from [Category talk:Chemical Weapons#British MI6 operation](#) --[CE \(talk\)](#) 01:40, 9 January 2017 (UTC)

Brief comments: what I'm trying to do here is to lay out and organize the information that is available, with a few comments to help make sense of it. When the story breaks in the MSM, as I think it will, this page will be a useful reference source. I think it's now clear that the leaks to the British press about collecting samples for Porton Down, the UK government's letters to the UN and official announcements about alleged chemical attacks in Syria, and HBG's role both as coordinator of sample collection and as independent commentator all belong under the main heading of "British MI6 operation". [Pmr9 \(talk\)](#) 20:32, 30 January 2017 (UTC)

Some details of how the operation supposedly began were given in [a WSJ article](#) on 23 August 2013.

When reports began to surface last year of chemical-weapons attacks, the Saudis, who have close ties to rebel factions, played an important early role in collecting evidence, Arab diplomats said. This past winter, the Saudis flew to the U.K. a Syrian who was suspected of having been exposed to a chemical agent, Arab and European diplomats said. Tests performed in Britain showed the Syrian had been exposed to sarin gas. French and British intelligence agents saw the evidence as credible and stepped up efforts to track other exposures in the chaotic war zone. A spokeswoman for Britain's foreign office declined to comment. U.S. intelligence analysts, particularly those at the Pentagon, were skeptical of those initial results, officials said. Officials said they couldn't rule out the possibility that the rebels might be planting evidence to try to draw the West into the conflict.

A turning point in U.K. views on weapons use in Syria came this spring. Physiological samples collected in Syria -- including from Utaybah on March 19 and Sheikh Maqsood on April 13 -- were brought to the U.K. laboratory [Porton Down] for testing. The material tested positive for sarin, Arab and European diplomats said.

There's at least a hint in this article that efforts to collect CW samples from Syria were already in place by late 2012, as they were "stepped up". The soil samples from Khan-al-Assal have become physiological samples from Oteybah, following the official line of the UK government maintained from 20 May onwards. The exposure of a Syrian in winter 2012-13 was presumably used as evidence for the use of sarin in the alleged CW incident on 23 December 2012 in Homs. It's odd that this incident wasn't publicized at the time - maybe it was an accident to people handling the sarin.

Collection of samples from alleged CW incidents in March/April 2013

- [MI6 tests smuggled Syria soil for nerve agent](#) This report by Tom Coghlan and Michael Evans is the first press report of the MI6 operation to collect CW samples.

Government scientists at Porton Down are examining a soil sample smuggled out of Syria after a suspected nerve gas attack on rebels in the country's civil war. The sample was obtained in a covert mission involving MI6, the Secret Intelligence Service. Experts at the Ministry of Defence's chemical research establishment in Wiltshire are testing the soil for traces of sarin nerve agent. Syrian rebels claim that they have been attacked with chemical weapons by the Assad regime's forces but have failed to produce any proof. US defence officials are trying to gather evidence and the UN has announced its own investigation into the alleged chemical attack near Aleppo on Tuesday.

Note that this report, and the accompanying photo, imply that the samples are from the Khan-al-Assal attack on 19 March. Later press reports and government statements imply that the samples are from Oteybah near Damascus, where (after the first reports from Khan-al-Assal attack indicated a rebel attack on a Syrian army post) the

opposition alleged a CW attack on rebel positions on the same day as the Khan-al-Assal attack [Pmr9 \(talk\)](#) 21:19, 9 January 2017 (UTC)

First report of test results: chemical weapon but not definitely sarin

- [Chemical weapons used in Syria: the first evidence](#) – Michael Evans, The Times, April 13 2013
Forensic evidence of chemical weapons use in Syria has been found for the first time in a soil sample smuggled out of the country in a secret British operation.
Defence sources, who declined to be named, said yesterday that conclusive proof that “some kind of chemical weapon” had been fired in Syria had been established by scientists at the Ministry of Defence’s chemical and biological research establishment at Porton Down in Wiltshire.
The discovery, which had not been made public, will put pressure on the United States to consider punitive action against President Assad. The White House warned in December that any use of chemical weapons would be viewed in Washington as a “red-line” issue.
The soil sample is thought to have been taken from an area close to Damascus, where there had been fierce fighting between pro-regime forces and rebels.
The Porton Down experts established beyond doubt that the traces related to chemical weapons rather than, for example, substances used to control riots. They could not tell whether Mr Assad's forces, or rebels, had fired them. The scientists were unable to ascertain whether the findings indicated widespread use. “There have been some reports that it was just a strong riot-control agent but this is not the case — it's something else, although it can't definitively be said to be sarin nerve agent,” one source said.
The British mission to smuggle out the soil sample was revealed by The Times last month. The Ministry of Defence would not confirm the Porton Down finding.

Additional text added so the above quote is now the complete text of the first six paragraphs. Note that although this is reported to be the same sample as that obtained in March, the location is now “near Damascus” i.e. Oteybah rather than Khan-al-Assal. [Pmr9 \(talk\)](#) 17:35, 22 January 2017 (UTC)

- [British scientists 'find evidence of Syrian chemical attack'](#) – The Telegraph, April 12 2013 11.45 BST

The tests at Porton Down reportedly concluded that the chemical traces were from a weapon rather than gas sometimes used by the Syrian security forces to put down protests.
The sample was reportedly smuggled out of Syria in a mission involving MI6 last month...
It was not clear whether the sample was from Aleppo, Syria's largest city, where more than 20 people were alleged to have been killed in a chemical attack last month.

The Telegraph report quotes a report dated 12 April by Michael Evans in the Times. The online version of the Evans article is dated 13 April, so this must be an updated version. The Telegraph version, which must have been copied from the original 12 April version of the Times article states that it was “not clear” whether the sample was from Khan-al-Assal. The other reports below, dated 13 to 14 April, and presumably copied from the updated version, give the site as near Damascus i.e. Oteybah. This suggests that the original Times report on 12 April was altered on 13 April to replace Aleppo with Damascus. But at this stage they all agree at this stage that the sample was soil, not physiological. An article in the Jerusalem post, presumably also copied from the original version of Evan's report, states that

- *However, The Times report quoted a source who said the soil analyzed by Porton Down “did not point the finger definitively at the Assad regime.”*

This quote is not present in the revised 13 April version of Evans's report

- [UK 'confirms' use of chemical weapons in Syria after secret MI6 op – report](#) – RT, April 13, 2013
The UK Ministry of Defense has claimed that chemical weapons were used in the Syrian conflict. Forensic evidence was collected after scientists analyzed soil smuggled out of the country in a secret British operation, the Times reported.
The sample was reportedly extracted from a neighborhood on the outskirts of Damascus in March by MI6 agents operating within Syria, the Australian reported at the time.

- [Arutz Sheva, 4/14/2013 UK Finds Proof of Use of Chemical Weapons in Syria](#) – Arutz Sheva, 4/14/2013

UK says that chemical weapons were used in the Syrian conflict, after scientists analyzed soil smuggled out of the country.

- [‘Soil sample proves chemical weapons used in Syria’](#)

The sample, said to be taken from a neighborhood on the outskirts of Damascus, was delivered to the UK Ministry of Defense’s chemical and biological research establishment at Porton Down in Wiltshire, where it was identified as containing traces of “some kind of chemical weapon.”

-- [Petri Krohn \(talk\)](#) 04:42, 14 April 2013 (UTC)

Later reports confirm sarin

[Syria chemical weapons: US accuses Bashar al-Assad's regime of using sarin](#) Telegraph, 25 April 2013

The Foreign Office insisted today that tests at Porton Down, the defence research laboratory, had found “limited but persuasive” evidence of sarin use, which it described as a war crime. “The material from inside Syria tested positive,” a spokesman said.

[U.S. believes Syria may have used chemical weapons; experts offer caution](#) McClatchy DC, Jonathan S. Landay, Matthew Schofield and Anita Kumar, 25 April 2013

White House officials set off a fervor on Capitol Hill when they acknowledged for the first time that the United States had received some evidence that Syrian President Bashar Assad had used chemical weapons, the lethal nerve agent sarin in particular.

Another person familiar with the issue, who asked not to be further identified because of its sensitivity, said that only a minuscule trace of a “byproduct”— a toxic residue left behind after use of a nerve agent, and which he did not identify – had been found in a soil sample. “They found trace amounts of a byproduct in soil, but there are also fertilizers that give out the same byproduct,” the person said. “It’s far from conclusive.”

This is presumably the soil sample analysed at Porton Down. It's possible that the "byproduct" is a reference to DFP (later reported by the Russian lab) or its breakdown product diisopropyl phosphate, though this is an insecticide rather than a fertilizer, and not a "byproduct" of sarin even when synthesized under cottage industry conditions. All sources agree that there is something not quite right about the evidence - it clearly isn't military-grade sarin. [Pmr9 \(talk\)](#) 21:54, 4 March 2017 (UTC)

- [Syria chemical weapons: MPs demand evidence of sarin use by Assad](#) - The Telegraph, 28 April 2013
Central to the claims of chemical weapons use are positive tests for sarin both by the Pentagon and Ministry of Defence scientists at Porton Down. The American tests are understood to have been carried out on samples of hair and blood from those affected, while those at Porton Down were on soil samples. However, while scientists are said to have confidence in the findings, the quantities involved are "microscopic".

[Syria IS using poison gas Sarin: British tests 'prove' chemical attack on rebels](#) Chris Hughes, Mirror 17 May 2013

- *Secret British tests on an exploded bomb are thought to prove Syrian troops have launched at least one chemical attack on rebels there. Samples from the army mortar bomb were smuggled out of the warzone by agents working for MI6. Spies then flew the cargo back to the UK, where it tested positive for deadly nerve agent Sarin.*
- *A senior Western source said last night: “The British believe they have conclusive evidence, but this is a very delicate situation.” It comes after photos emerged of one victim foaming from the mouth in hospital after an apparent chemical attack and reports people suffered breathing problems and vomiting in a bombing last month. The latest results, taken five weeks ago at the military’s Porton Down research centre, in Wiltshire, have been passed to the British government, the US and France.*
- *The source said: “MI6 played the leading role but the American military wants more evidence before it agrees Assad has crossed the line in the use of chemical weapons.*

From the date, and the mention of "foaming at the mouth" this appears to be the Sheikh Maqsood incident.

British government's letters to the UN Secretary-General

The first letter was apparently sent on 25 March [1]

The NYT had a copy of this letter and [reported its contents](#) on 25 April:-

In a letter to the United Nations secretary general, Ban Ki-moon, several weeks ago calling for a United Nations investigation, Britain laid out evidence of the attacks in Aleppo and near Damascus as well as an earlier one in Homs. The letter, a copy of which was obtained by The New York Times, reported that dozens of victims were treated at hospitals for shortness of breath, convulsions and dilation of the pupils, common symptoms of exposure to chemical warfare agents. Doctors reported eye irritation and fatigue after close exposure to the patients. Citing its links to contacts in the Syrian opposition, Britain said there were reports of 15 deaths in the suburban Damascus attack and up to 10 in Aleppo, where the government and rebels have each accused the other of using chemical weapons.

"15 deaths in the suburban Damascus attack is far more than any other source reported for either Otaybah (19 March) or Adra (23 March). From this report it appears that this first letter on 25 March did not mention results on soil samples. On 18 April the Washington post reported that this information had been provided to the UN. Most likely this was around 13 April, when the Times was briefed that the results showed "some kind of chemical weapon", but before 25 April, when Downing St/FCO briefed that the results had given "limited but persuasive" evidence for sarin.

Britain, France claim Syria used chemical weapons - Washington Post, 18 April 2013

Britain and France have informed the United Nations that there is credible evidence that Syria has used chemical weapons on more than one occasion since December, according to senior diplomats and officials briefed on the accounts. In letters to U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, the two European powers said soil samples, witness interviews and opposition sources support charges that nerve agents were used in and around the cities of Aleppo, Homs and possibly Damascus, said the officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the matter.

At this stage it's still soil samples and still Aleppo ("and possibly Damascus")

An unusually sceptical [2] article in the Guardian by Peter Beaumont on 27 April stated that the Damascus incident had occurred on 23 March.

New questions have emerged over the source of the soil and other samples from Syria which, it is claimed, have tested positive for the nerve agent sarin, amid apparent inconsistencies between eyewitness accounts describing one of the attacks and textbook descriptions of the weapon. As questions from arms control experts grow over evidence that the Assad regime has used chemical weapons on a limited scale on several occasions, one incident in particular has come under scrutiny. While the French, UK and US governments have tried to avoid saying where the positive sarin samples came from, comments by officials have narrowed down the locations to Aleppo and Homs.

A letter from the British government to the UN demanding an investigation said that it had seen "limited but persuasive evidence" of chemical attacks, citing incidents on 19 and 23 March in Aleppo and Damascus and an attack in Homs in December, suggesting strongly that samples were taken at these locations.

The suggestion that one of the sarin-positive samples may have originated in Homs has added to the growing confusion surrounding the claims made with different degrees of caution by the Israeli, French, UK and US governments in recent days. According to the US and UK governments, "miniscule" samples recovered by opposition sources and passed on to western intelligence agencies have shown traces of sarin. No other agents have been mentioned.

Syria crisis: UN to study soil samples for proof of sarin gas 24 April 2013, Guardian

It is understood that as well as visiting refugee camps and potentially taking hair and other biological samples from survivors of alleged chemical attacks, UN investigators will also analyse soil samples in the possession of British and French intelligence agencies

British officials are adamant that the source of the sarin was the government and that the exposure of Syrian army troops in the town of Khan al-Asal on March 19, as claimed by Damascus, was the result of "friendly fire", a government shell that had gone astray, rather than a rebel attack.

This article also gives more detail of the reluctance of Obama and Chuck Hagel to be drawn in, and their scepticism about the UK "evidence". It looks as if the MI6 operation was directed primarily at drawing the US government into an attack on Syria. This contrasts with the situation in the run-up to the Iraq war, where the US government had already decided to attack and MI6's role was to provide the "evidence" (Niger uranium hoax) that the Bush administration wanted but couldn't get its own intelligence agencies to sign off on.

The environmental samples become physiological samples

- The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr William Hague) Hansard, 20 May 2013

There is a growing body of limited but persuasive information showing that the regime used—and continues to use—chemical weapons. We have physiological samples from inside Syria that have shown the use of sarin, although they do not indicate the scale of that use. Our assessment is that the use of chemical weapons in Syria is very likely to have been by the regime. We have no evidence to date of opposition use.

So by 20 May the soil samples have become "physiological samples", like the ones obtained by the Americans. An FCO spokesman confirms this to the Guardian on 4 June.

- *The Foreign Office confirmed that "physiological samples" collected inside the country had tested positive for sarin after the Guardian learned of the results from other sources. "We have obtained physiological samples from inside Syria which have been tested at the Porton Down facility, and they tested positive for sarin," an FCO spokesman said.*
- *The FCO would not confirm where or when the samples were collected, but British evidence of chemical attacks passed to the UN cites incidents in Homs in December, Aleppo and Adra, near Damascus, in March, and in Darayya, also near Damascus, and Saraqib, near Aleppo, in April.*

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/04/syria-nerve-agent-sarin-uk-france>

(March incident in Adra perhaps should refer to the [March 19 incident in Otaybah](#). But there was a separate [Alleged chemical attack, March 24, 2013](#) in Adra this might refer to (2 rebels killed, thought to be phosphorous at the time and little-noted). It could be just a minor mix-up.

see section on letters to the UN - it looks as if they did mean Adra, but dated the alleged attack to 23 March, and said it killed 15 people, but the samples didn't test positive for sarin.

On 14 June 2013 Cameron gave a press conference from which the transcript was published [\[3\]](#)

There is credible evidence of multiple attacks using chemical weapons in Syria, including the use of the abhorrent agent Sarin. We have tested physiological samples at Porton Down. These include samples from Utaybah on the 19th March, and from Sheikh Maqsood on 13th April. We believe that the scale of use is sanctioned and ordered by the Assad regime. We haven't seen any credible reporting of chemical weapons use by the Syrian opposition. However we assess that elements affiliated to Al Qaeda in the region have attempted to acquire chemical weapons for probable use in Syria. That is the picture as described to me by the Joint Intelligence Committee and I always choose my words on this subject very carefully because of the issues there have been in the past, but I think it is right that the Americans have said what they have said and I wanted to back that up with the information and the involvement that we've had in that assessment.

So now it's definitely Oteybah, and physiological samples. But they had told the UN in April that it was Aleppo, and soil samples. As the Oteybah emergency room videos were uploaded not much more than an hour after the Khan-al-Assal attack, the two incidents must have been coordinated. So it wasn't logical to blame the regime for Oteybah without a plausible explanation for how the regime could have been responsible for Khan-al-Assal. [Pmr9 \(talk\)](#) 19:07, 22 January 2017 (UTC) [Pmr9 \(talk\)](#) 09:02, 9 February 2017 (UTC)

Porton Down's [annual report](#) for 2013 confirms that they analysed clothing and soil samples, and appears to confirm that these were from incidents before the Ghouta attack. There is no mention of the "physiological samples" referred to by Cameron and Hague

- *In summer 2013, it was suspected that chemical weapons had been used in Syria. DSTL's world-class Chemical, Biological and Radiological (CBR) capability helped to provide evidence to UK and international Governments of the first use of chemical weapons in 25 years. Our scientists analysed clothing and soil samples from affected areas, and worked closely with the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to provide S&T advice on CBR materials ahead of the OPCW inspections.*

Collection of samples from Ghouta

- [Syria crisis: UK had secret sarin samples before MPs voted](#) - *The Telegraph*, September 6, 2013

British scientists were examining material tainted with sarin from the site of the Damascus Sources close to the government efforts to establish the use of chemical weapons in Syria said the contaminated clothing and other material collected in the east Ghouta suburb proved that sarin had been responsible for the deaths of hundreds in the area. The method of collection was described as "robust" with the collection of the samples being recorded with devices that registered the global positioning satellite (GPS) coordinates of the site and other "metadata" on the circumstances of the operation. The material is believed to have passed directly to British territory on Cyprus from where it was transported to the Defence

Science Technology Laboratory government at Porton Down. David Cameron, the prime minister, revealed the samples had tested positive at the G20 summit and Downing St officials said the samples were obtained separately from the US and France, which have also said that sarin weapons were used in the August 21 attack.

"There is a strong chain of evidence that brought this information to the UK but unfortunately the results came too late for the Prime Minister to strengthen the intelligence case," the source said.

The source quoted is likely to be Hamish de Bretton-Gordon who is quoted by name later in the article commenting on the rockets. The emphasis on collection method and chain of custody suggests that the samples were collected by HBG's network. This operation, from which results came "too late", appears to be separate from the operation reported by Hersh, in which he stated that samples from Ghouta obtained by the Russians were provided "very early" to Porton Down.

The [report](#) of the UN Human Rights council on 12 Feb 2014 asserted that

The evidence available concerning the nature, quality and quantity of the agents used on 21 August indicated that the perpetrators likely had access to the chemical weapons stockpile of the Syrian military, as well as the expertise and equipment necessary to manipulate safely large amount of chemical agents. Concerning the incident in Khan Al-Assal on 19 March, the chemical agents used in that attack bore the same unique hallmarks as those used in Al-Ghouta.

Only two labs had environmental samples from both incidents and could have determined that the chemical profiles of the sarin used in Khan-al-Assal and Ghouta matched: Porton Down and the Military Science Centre of the Russian Ministry of Defence. The UNHRC's source is likely to be the UK government, as a Russian government source would have emphasized that the sarin was low quality and not military grade.

Hamish de Bretton-Gordon's role in collecting samples for MI6

In a [comment](#) on the SicSemperTyrannis blog, David Habakkuk, a retired television producer and historian of intelligence services, reveals an interesting discovery:-

"Also of interest are contributions to the 'Brown Moses Blog' by a former British Army CBRN expert called Colonel Hamish de Bretton-Gordon. From his entry on the 'Military Speakers' website, and other material, it seems likely that he was instrumental in providing 'environmental' samples from incidents prior to Ghouta in which sarin was used to Porton Down. This has quite large implications. (See <http://www.militaryspeakers.co.uk/speakers/hamish-de-bretton-gordon-obe/>)"

It's clear that Bretton-Gordon (HBG) had a key role in the MI6 operation to collect samples for Porton Down that was reported in the Times and Telegraph during April 2013.

Another comment in the same thread by Martin Jerrett is of interest:-

"H de B Gordon, you mentioned, is more open and has been funded by UK government since 2012 at least to develop a network of people in Syria to work on collecting samples among other tasks. "

Jerrett is an Arabic speaker who has had a string of short-term jobs with UK NGOs working in the Arab world. In 2012 he was coordinator of the Syria Development Network funded by the Asfari Foundation (also funds the Syria Campaign), so he's likely to know HBG professionally and to be simply repeating in good faith what HBG has told him. The accounts filed at UK Companies House by HBG's now defunct start-up companies (SecureBio founded in 2011, SecureBio Forensics founded in 2012) support Jerrett's statement that some entity was funding HBG "since 2012 at least", but indicate that the source of this funding was concealed behind nominee directors who made "loans" that were never repaid. If this was MI6, they were remarkably prescient in anticipating before any reports of alleged CW use in Syria that they would need to "develop a network of people in Syria to work on collecting samples".

The first reports in the media suggesting that the Syrian government might use chemical weapons in the civil war appeared in July 2012. These reports are summarized at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/syria-1.htm>

On 12 July 2012, news reports suggested that Syrian authorities might be in the process of moving elements of their chemical weapons stockpile away from conflict areas to improve their security. This also raised fears that the weapons might be being deployed. On 13 July 2012, Pentagon Press Secretary George Little told reporters there were no indications that Syrian chemical weapons stockpiles have become less secure and that the US assessment, that the Syrian government continued to exercise control over the arsenal, remained unchanged.

On 18 July 2012, former Syrian Ambassador Nawaf Fares told the BBC that he believed that Assad regime could be pushed to use chemical weapons and that there were unconfirmed reports that such weapons had already been used in Homs.

On 23 July 2012, Syria offered a tacit admission of their chemical weapon capability, when they said that they would not use such weapons "would never be used against civilians or against the Syrian people" during the crisis for any reason. However, the government spokesman did say that Syria reserved the right to use the weapons against foreign aggressors. Given that Syria continued to maintain that opposition fighters were "terrorist gangs" and full of foreigners, Western powers and the UN warned Syria of grave consequences if they decided to use their chemical weapons stockpile to suppress the rebellion.

As discussed below, the funding mechanism for HBG to collect samples appears to have been set up in April 2012, when Secure Bio went live with a split of equity that presumably corresponded to an injection of capital, and Secure Bio Forensics was incorporated as a separate company.

It's clear from the press reports and HBG's statements that he provided Porton Down with environmental samples within a few days of the Khan-al-Assal sarin attack on 19 March 2013. These were at first described as being from Khan-al-Assal, but later as being from the alleged attack in Oteybah on the same day. Some time around mid-May 2013 someone seems to have realized that the chemical profile of the environmental samples (which the Russians reported as kitchen sarin with no stabilizers) would give the game away. Subsequent government statements refer to physiological samples (which can establish sarin exposure but don't reveal anything about how it was made). [Pmr9 \(talk\)](#) 00:30, 9 January 2017 (UTC)

More information about HBG's network is in [this report](#) by Ruth Sherlock in the Telegraph on 29 April 2014

- *"Dr Ahmad", whose proper name The Telegraph will not reveal for his own protection, was responsible for collecting the samples.*
- *A first response medic working in rebel-held Aleppo, often treating the victims of air strikes and barrel bombs loaded with TNT explosive that fall on the city day and night, Dr Ahmad first took an interest in chemical weapons during an attack on the city's Khan al-Assal district in March last year. "There was chaos the hospitals. Doctors became contaminated treating the wounded. People were so afraid and didn't know what to do," he said. "I studied the process of decontamination and medical treatments on the internet." Later in the year, the doctor was part of a group of Syrian medics trained by western chemical weapons experts, including Hamish De Bretton-Gordon from Secure Bio, a UK-based consultancy, in how to react in a chemical attack and the procedure for collecting samples in the aftermath.*
- *Receiving the samples from his former pupil, Mr de Bretton-Gordon said: "Dr Ahmad's was a perfectly executed collection of this sort of material. The samples were kept along the rules that the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, the international body, require and they were presented in perfect condition that we may test them." Once in Turkey, the testing process began. Mr de Bretton-Gordon analysed the material out of doors, staying upwind as it was likely to still be toxic. Dressed in a chemical suit, with a protective respiratory hood nearby should the wind change and blow gasses from the samples into his face, he set up the experiment.*
- *The sample from the April 11 attack in Kafr Zita yielded the strongest results. It tested strongly positive for both chlorine and ammonia. The mini-WARN detector gave a reading of 0.3 parts per million (ppm) for chlorine and 178 ppm for ammonia. As Iain Thomson, a technical expert from the UK company Secure Bio, explained, 0.5ppm is the maximum that a human can withstand for short term exposure to chlorine and 300ppm is a lethal dose of ammonia.*

This last statement is on the video of a [later report](#) (and I think the voice is HBG, not Thomson), so it's not just a journalist getting numbers mixed up. They're clearly winging it: 1 ppm is the maximum allowable occupational exposure to chlorine, and 300 ppm of ammonia for half an hour would cause mild chest symptoms.

There is more evidence of HBG's ignorance of basic chemistry comes from [this report in The Times](#) on 25 April 2015:-

Colonel Hamish de Bretton-Gordon, one of the country's leading experts on chemical warfare, has urged ministers to tighten controls on the sale of chlorine. "As more jihadists return to this country there is a growing chance [of a chlorine bomb attack]," he said. The chlorine that is often used in bombs in Iraq comes from the cylinders on the back of household fridges. Militants strip off the steel bottle and attach an explosive charge to make a simple improvised chlorine device — something that could be repeated in Britain. "Somebody could go to a waste site where people chuck away fridges [in Britain] and get a whole bunch of these things and blow them up," Colonel de Bretton-Gordon said.

Chlorine of course is not used as a refrigerant.

HBG implies that he is collecting the samples to meet OPCW requirements, so it's possible that this was the route by which samples were provided to OPCW for its investigations of alleged chlorine attacks in 2014 and 2015. His comments about refrigerant cylinders containing chlorine suggest that he may have had something to do with the

reports by OPCW that refrigerant cylinders were being packed with plastic bottles of potassium permanganate to make chlorine barrel bombs that were dropped from helicopters.

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"H de B Gordon, you mentioned, is more open and has been funded by UK government since 2012 at least to develop a network of people in Syria to work on collecting samples among other tasks."

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Much like the other UK Military Intelligence players of the game

'The EmpireExposed tweets note the parallels between the Paul Tilley / InCoStrat operation and the James Le Mesurier / White Helmets operation: "Both men attended Sandhurst, received Royal 'honours' and formed offshoot companies in late 2014 (InCoStrat & Mayday Rescue)." To this we can add the Hamish de Bretton-Gordon / Secure Bio operation, described below. Pmr9 (talk) 16:16, 19 February 2017 (UTC)

While obviously not authoritative, I've researched possible chemical paths involving KMnO₄ and various refrigerants. There is one chemical pathway for some refrigerants (Freon) to be partially converted to the poison gas phosgene e.g. [See Acute Phosgene Poisoning](#) This requires intense heat and results in quite small quantities of phosgene. KMnO₄ is not involved at all. The alleged HBG product chlorine has no chemical pathways to produce it. I can't see any way for someone to blow up refrigerant and mix with KMnO₄ to produce anything other than trace amounts of phosgene. Phosgene can decompose to produce chlorine under UV light but not in any significant quantity. In practical terms, phosgene is a better poison gas than chlorine. However, it will be produced in infinitesimal quantities by blowing up Freon refrigerant, and there is no obvious way KMnO₄ will assist that process, nor even to produce the inferior chlorine. --[Charles Wood \(talk\)](#) 10:21, 8 March 2017 (UTC)

Hm! Fridge canisters and chlorine did wind up going together, in the 2015 style chlorine barrel bombs. They were stripped out, lined with plastic, filled with hydrochloric acid, and mixed with p.permananganate upon impact, it was alleged... and not "militants" in the allegation.

Indeed, the numbers given for chlorine anyway, are far, far off. "The mini-WARN detector gave a reading of 0.3 ppm ... As Iain Thomson, a technical expert from the UK company Secure Bio, explained, 0.5ppm is the maximum that a human can withstand for short term exposure to chlorine... As explained at [Wikipedia](#), with good sources, "Chlorine is *detectable with measuring devices in concentrations as low as 0.2 parts per million (ppm)*, and by smell at 3 ppm." His threshold is almost the lowest that can be measured, and far too weak to even smell. "Coughing and vomiting may occur at 30 ppm and lung damage at 60 ppm. About 1000 ppm can be fatal after a few deep breaths of the gas. The IDLH (immediately dangerous to life and health) concentration is 10 ppm." His reading is only 1/30th of that. A weak sensor topped out at 1.5 ppm in [a 2015 incident](#) where nine people died from concentration much higher than that. De Breton Gordon's readings here are only 1/5 of what that sensor could read. --[Caustic Logic \(talk\)](#) 12:20, 8 March 2017 (UTC)

What's interesting here is the parallels between HBG's suggestion that refrigerants (which are usually chlorine compounds like CFC) could somehow be used to produce chlorine and the similar suggestion in the OPCW report (which didn't say that the R22 refrigerant cylinders in the barrel bomb drawing contained chlorine but rather that they contained a "chlorine compound") As Charles notes above, you can't use

refrigerants instead of hydrogen chloride with KMNO₄ to make chlorine. As noted below, HBG appears to have been a source for the OPCW investigations and this is a possible explanation for how the preposterous barrel bomb drawing and accompanying text, which appears to have been prepared by someone clueless about chemistry, was included in the OPCW preliminary report on the alleged chlorine attacks [Pmr9 \(talk\)](#) 21:55, 8 March 2017 (UTC)

On 19 September 2014 [another Telegraph report](#) has "Dr Ahmad" collecting samples for HBG. Could be Dr Ahmad al-Dbis of Aleppo, now associated with UOSSM and reporting an alleged chemical attack in ISIS-controlled territory on 16 December 2016 [Pmr9 \(talk\)](#) 09:11, 26 January 2017 (UTC)

It is my understanding that the SyAAF does not operate at night. Night bombing only started with the RuAF. This means the reference to 'barrel bombs day and night' by Dr Ahmad is clearly an exaggeration if not a downright lie. Also, the number of barrel bombs claimed dropped - hundreds per day - exceeds the SyAAF capability to deliver them by one or two orders of magnitude.

As an aside, it's also my understanding the SyAAF pilot cadre is exclusively Sunni career pilots - mostly in their 40s and 50s. This has created significant problems replacing ones that have been killed as there is no upcoming stream of trained pilots to replace them. --[Charles Wood \(talk\)](#) 04:51, 10 February 2017 (UTC)

HBG's comments on the Sheikh Maqsood incident

In this [podcast](#) dated 1 July 2014 from Wilton Park (an NGO funded by the UK Foreign Office), HBG states (starting about 7'20") that "in March last year there was a reported sarin attack in Sheikh al-Maqsood and I helped the Times - chap called Anthony Loyd who very sadly got shot two weeks ago - to cover this story and tried to get samples to the UK for analysis." He also confirms that he was present later with Ian Pannell in Saraqeb and says "we tried to get samples from that and couldn't - that subsequently proved positive for sarin".

Several interesting points:

1. As in his Guardian article in April 2015, HBG has incorrectly given the date of the Sheikh Maqsood attack as March 2013 and does not mention the collection of samples from the 19 March attacks. The mention of Loyd makes it clear that he's not simply saying "Sheikh al-Maqsood" when he means "Khan al-Assal". Loyd's [report](#) in the Times on (updated 26 April, but may have been posted earlier) was based on an interview with someone purporting to be Yasser Yunis, on whose home the sarin-filled riot control grenade had allegedly been dropped on 13 April killing his wife and two sons. However the VDC reported that Yasser had been killed in the attack. An examination of Loyd's bylines shows that at this time he was a full-time propagandist for the Syrian opposition, though he appears to have had a change of heart after they kidnapped him in 2014 and shot him in the leg to prevent him escaping.
2. He states that the munition used in both Sheikh Maqsood and Saraqeb was a barrel dropped from a helicopter, though on 27 July 2013 he had taken part in a detailed discussion on Brown Moses of the riot control canisters that were alleged to have been the munitions used at these sites (see below).
3. He contradicts his earlier statements that environmental samples were obtained from Saraqeb, and appears to refer to the positive blood test obtained in the French lab.

[Article on opposition website dated 17 April.](#)

- *"Atropine is the antidote to nerve agent poisoning, so it's used widely [to treat poisoning] in the UK and the US. It's the recognized antidote," said Hamish de Bretton-Gordon OBE, a chemical weapons expert and the founder and COO of London-based SecureBio. The British Foreign Security William Hague mentioned in the House of Commons on Monday that they had very strong evidence that chemical weapons were being used in Syria. On Sunday, we saw a number of reports that those three people were killed in Aleppo. We were sent a load of photos, a load of stuff. The symptoms that were described would be similar to nerve agent poisoning, and the use of atropine would have been an effective method to treat these people."*
- *He said that though certainty was impossible, the likely answer was that improvised chemical weapons had been used, and that they are possibly being used by both sides — "by the regime to show that the opposition are using chemical weapons, and by the opposition to show that the regime is using them. Obviously if the regime is using them, then a red line is crossed and things are changed."*
- *Improvised chemical weapons are a term for chemical phosphates, a key component to pesticides that have the same biological structure as nerve agents. "I think that a lot of these events have been organic phosphates or pesticides which have been blown up," de Bretton-Gordon said, adding that "thousands" of people die around the world from these each year.*

Why is he talking about organophosphate pesticides? This was four days after Michael Evans had been briefed that the samples supplied to Porton Down from the 19 March incidents showed "something else although it can't definitively be said to be sarin nerve agent". As HBG supplied these samples, he's presumably been told something of the results. The Russians were later to report that their analyses of what was presumably the same batch of sarin, obtained from the impact site at Khan-al-Assal, showed low concentrations of sarin produced under "cottage industry" conditions and containing DIFP (diisopropyl fluorophosphate). DIFP is an organophosphate much less toxic than sarin, widely used as a pesticide. It sounds as if Porton Down found this also. HBG isn't sure how to spin this - he even suggests a possible opposition false flag.

So at this stage I think we can infer that Porton Down had obtained similar findings to the Russian lab, and that HBG had been told some of these findings. The only difference is that at this stage Porton Down is still not reporting a positive test for sarin: they might have reasons for withholding such a result if they don't trust MI6 or HBG.

HBG's reference to a statement by William Hague in the Commons "on Monday" (i.e. 15 April 2013) is incorrect - no record of this in Hansard. He may be referring to a letter sent to the UNSG about this time [4] Pmr9 (talk) 21:38, 22 January 2017 (UTC)

HBG interview with PRI on 14 June 2013

In this interview, which from the context appears to be on 14 June 2013, HBG indicates that the only samples that he has "seen" are environmental samples, and that the sites from which these were collected include Saraqeb, where he has told us that he was present with Ian Pannell. Pmr9 (talk) 22:09, 22 January 2017 (UTC)

<http://www.pri.org/node/42516/popout>

Werman: And talk about the samples. What kind of samples are you referring to?

Bretton-Gordon: Well certainly the ones I've seen have been soil samples and masonry collected from the likes of Aleppo and Saraqib and Damascus. I think there have also been some clothing samples. And it's also been widely reported that blood and hair samples have been taken off refugees and people that have escaped from those areas.

HBG interview on Brown Moses on 27 July 2013

In an interview on discussing the Saraqeb attack [posted on the BrownMoses blog](#) HBG again suggests that the sarin was low quality.

- *Sarin would normally be delivered by air dropped munitions or artillery shells, causing mass casualties i.e. Halabja. However, it is pretty clear that samples from Saraqeb have tested positive for Sarin, so there would appear to be very small amounts of Sarin contained in the canisters, probably of a low quality. This would account for the relatively few casualties. It is certainly not textbook delivery but has presumably achieved the effect which the perpetrator wanted – confusion and derision amongst the International Community.*

HBG appears to suggest that the use in Sheikh Maqsood and Assad of riot control grenade canisters as chemical munitions was a devilish plot by Assad to confuse and discredit Eliot Higgins, who had been posting about them. But more interestingly, HBG appears to be trying to construct an explanation for why the regime is using low-quality sarin. Pmr9 (talk) 01:21, 24 January 2017 (UTC)

HBG's comments on 21 August 2013

On 21 August 2013 HBG gave what appears to be a fair and balanced opinion [to CBS News](#)

*Hamish de Bretton-Gordon, a British expert in chemical and biological weapons, told CBSNews.com on Wednesday that, based on the reported death tolls and the available video evidence -- which he stressed he could not authenticate independently -- it appeared that a weapon of mass destruction like Sarin gas was probably involved. **In many of the smaller-scale attacks across Syria, de Bretton-Gordon has said small quantities of Sarin, or far weaker organophosphate compounds, could have been to blame, and it is feasible that poorly-trained rebel forces could have been behind such attacks.** "Sarin is 4,000-times more powerful than organophosphates," he explained, suggesting that if the toxic gas was used Wednesday on a large scale, it was "very unlikely" that opposition fighters could have been behind the attacks, as they "just don't have access to that level of chemical weapons and the delivery means" needed to disperse them so widely.*

Of course we know now that sarin need not have been used on a large scale, given the evidence that most of the deaths were massacred captives, but HBG's opinion that the rebels couldn't have been behind Ghouta was reasonable given the information available at the time. However he again gives his opinion that the rebels could have been behind the earlier small-scale attacks.

HBG's comments on the UN report on 14 December 2013

http://brown-moses.blogspot.co.uk/2013/12/responses-to-final-un-report-into-use_14.html

The Khan al-Assal attack is different to the others, as it could be concluded that the Opposition is responsible. UN/OPCW conclude that Sarin was used mainly from evidence provided by the Russians and that the victims were Syrian soldiers. It could be the Opposition – AQ certain claim to be in the CW market – they [Opposition] could have acquired small amounts of Sarin, the Regime recently stated that they had lost some [Sarin] from Aleppo Airport and the Syrian Army soldiers were victims. It could also have been the Regime, who are probably not beyond killing their own people to gain a tactical advantage. It could have been fratricide, which is always possible, and likely; experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan bear this up, and the highly complex battlefield of the Syrian conflict make this also a possible explanation.

HBG repeats the suggestion he first made on 17 April that the opposition may have been the perpetrators of some of the earliest incidents, specifically in Khan-al-Assal was an opposition attack, and reiterates this at the end of the article:-

It's import because we know the Regime is responsible for Ghouta, and those responsible must face justice in time, and if the Opposition is responsible for Khan al-Assal then we all need to be on our guard; because if the Opposition have Sarin, so does AQ and ISIS and this would now be a global threat which we all need to be resilient against.

HBG article on 28 April 2015

Only a no-fly zone can curb chemical attacks in Syria

Chemical weapons first appeared in the Syrian conflict at Sheikh Maqsoud in March 2013, and that was when I first became involved in trying to collect evidence of their use. There are still some people who dispute that chemical weapons were or are used in Syria, and more who do not believe Assad is to blame. However, as an expert with 27 years' experience in this field, having been to Syria a number of times and analysed samples from these attacks, I have no doubt that chemical weapons are being used, and that the Assad regime is responsible. Samples from Sheikh Maqsoud and Saraqeb in May 2013 did eventually find their way to French and UK government laboratories and tested positive for the nerve agent sarin, with David Cameron saying as much in the summer of 2013.

So by 2015 HBG has forgotten the incidents in Khan-al-Assal and Uteybah on 19 March 2013 and his role in collecting samples that were reported to be from one of them. Instead he states that Sheikh Maqsood, wrongly dated as March, was the first incident.

We can reasonably conclude that the results on the soil samples supplied to Porton Down around 20 March, purportedly from Khan-al-Assal or Uteybah, were awkward enough that HBG and whoever he was working for wanted to erase them from the record. [Pmr9 \(talk\)](#) 00:59, 24 January 2017 (UTC)

I'll suggest that by March he might have meant Khan al-Assal, and just got the names mixed up. And forgot Ateibah. Then he puts the same attack (or name) in May, along with Saraqeb (which was almost in May). Here he might refer to the one in Sheikh Maqsoud on April 13, but then, wouldn't he notice he just used the same name for two different places? Sort of a mess - is he being hard to understand on purpose, so as to be hard to clearly debunk? Anyway, it would be a somewhat suspect omission, in line with erasing/fuzzing away the actual events and findings from March 19. --[Caustic Logic \(talk\)](#) 09:46, 24 January 2017 (UTC)

I don't think it's plausible that HBG could have forgotten that the first CW attacks were in Khan-al-Assal and Oteybah (we'd better standardize the spelling sometime) after his key role in collecting the samples, and the detailed comments he made during 2013 in his other role as an independent expert. He's not just another journalist, but has made multiple visits to opposition-controlled areas of Syria. A point that no one made at the time was that the timing of Khan-al-Assal attack and the video uploads from Uteybah incident indicate that both operations were coordinated to within a few minutes. [Pmr9 \(talk\)](#) 22:17, 24 January 2017 (UTC)

I agree - if he really fails to mention it, that's a sign of glossing over more than hazy memory (although it does seem a bit hazy anyway). I meant maybe he did mention it, the Aleppo part, just mixing up the name with another area of Aleppo with K and S sounds in the name, and calls Khan al-Assal Sheikh Maqsoud, attack in March. But then, he doesn't mention Ateibah. But then he mentions Sheikh Maqsoud again in May, suggesting maybe he meant to name two different places. So to me it's unclear that he's really glossing over or forgetting it, other than the Damascus portion, for some reason. (translit, I'll revisit on the page) --[Caustic Logic \(talk\)](#) 09:20, 25 January 2017 (UTC)

In 2013 HBG was even prepared to consider the possibility of an opposition false flag in Khan-al-Assal, and to warn that opposition possession of sarin was a "global threat". In 2015 the incident and the global threat has disappeared down the memory hole, even though the threat of jihadi attacks in Europe causing mass casualties has materialized. The reason may be that Hersh's reports have made clear to those behind the CW operation that a solid trail of forensic evidence exists that links Ghouta to Khan-al-Assal and establishes at the very least their collusion with the Ghouta massacre.

Was HBG working for MI6?

HBG entries are under British MI6; I don't think we should be claiming that. (For one thing, we do not know; there are also slander laws which may apply). HBG has an official biography, for example [here](#). This biography appears plausible, and his work may well be done in the public domain. It's noted that the private company mentioned, is under [liquidation](#) in 2015. --[Resup](#) ([talk](#)) 02:18, 25 January 2017 (UTC)

"Under British MI6?" Not sure what you mean. Pmr9 says above it's clear he had a role in collecting samples for MI6, suggesting he works with them (or is arguably an "agent of"). I suppose that's contestable, but saying it's clear is a subjective thing, and it seems most likely anyway. Agreed we should be careful about these things, for intellectual rigor besides legal reasons. If we are, cool. If not, then I agree we should. --[Caustic Logic](#) ([talk](#)) 09:15, 25 January 2017 (UTC)

HBG's official biography on the Military Speakers site states that he worked "to smuggle chemical samples out of Syria for verification in UK and France." HBG's comments on many occasions confirm that he was collecting CW samples in Syria for Porton Down during 2013. British media reported in 2013 that samples for Porton Down were being smuggled out of Syria in an MI6 operation. It's reasonable to infer that the MI6 operation and HBG's activities were one and the same. This is consistent with evidence of covert funding of HBG's companies through nominee directors, which I'll cover in detail later. There's nothing libellous about suggesting this: HBG was well qualified to undertake this task on behalf of his country, it was an appropriate activity for MI6 to undertake, and in travelling through rebel-held areas HBG was taking considerable personal risk. What I've done above is to compare all the available reports, including HBG's own comments, and UK government reports to the UN and to Parliament. This comparison suggests that they had something to hide: specifically that the reports from Porton Down in April 2013 showed low-quality sarin consistent with an opposition false flag. We note that HBG on at least two occasions suggests this in relation to the Khan-al-Assal attack. [Pmr9](#) ([talk](#)) 09:41, 25 January 2017 (UTC)

HBG working with BBC's Ian Pannell

This is a key part of the jigsaw because it links two information operations: the HBG operation to collect samples for MI6 and simultaneously provide comments to the media as an independent expert; and a BBC journalist who appears to have been part of an operation to fabricate a case for war on Syria.

Readers of Robert Stuart's [blog](#) will be familiar with the evidence of fabrication in Ian Pannell's reporting of the alleged napalm attack in Urm-al-Kabra on 26 August for the BBC. His report was first broadcast on 29 August during the House of Commons debate, but too late to shift the vote.

In HBG's comments on the Brown Moses site on the final OPCW report on Ghouta, released in December 2013, HBG [makes clear](#) that he was present with Ian Pannell at the site of the alleged chemical attack in Saraqeb (29 April), reported on the BBC on 16 May.

The UN/OPCW also looked at Khan al-Assal and Saraqeb and concluded that Sarin was used in both events. I covered the Sarin attack with the BBC's Ian Pannell and concluded without doubt, that the Regime was responsible, and we didn't have any detailed chemical analysis kit with us. But the CW was tipped out of a helicopter, without doubt, and the Opposition certainly did not possess helos and the Regime did. It was apparent to me from the symptoms I saw and talking to those around that this was a Sarin attack. The UN/OPCW had the same and better evidence, and could, mandate aside, also have attributed blame. I covered the Sarin attack with the BBC's Ian Pannell and concluded without doubt, that the Regime was responsible, and we didn't have any detailed chemical analysis kit with us.

But the BBC report presented HBG as an independent expert who was not at the scene.

Hamish de Bretton-Gordon is a former commanding officer of the British Army's Chemical Counter Terrorist Regiment who now runs a firm that specialises in the study of chemical weapons. He has not visited the site, nor has he been able to test any of the alleged evidence. But he has studied previous claims and videos and was given full access to all the footage, transcripts and the interviews we gathered to give his assessment. He describes the "virtually identical events" that have taken place in Otaybeh, Adra and the Sheikh Massoud district of Aleppo in recent weeks. He says that taken together, "[you] start to come to the conclusion that you have strong evidence, albeit incomplete, that sarin or a nerve agent has been used in Syria recently over the last four to five weeks". Samples of soil, blood, urine and hair have been taken. They hold the best clue as to what happened in Saraqeb. What it will not do is determine who is responsible and for Mohammed Khatib it is all too late.

Pannell could reasonably defend concealing HBG's presence on the basis that HBG was on a secret MI6 operation: but then of course he should not have misled BBC viewers by stating that HBG "has not visited the site" and presenting him as an independent expert.

A question not yet asked on Robert Stuart's blog is how far in advance the fabrication of the napalm playground incident was planned. It's hard to imagine that a crew including professional make-up artists, two UK doctors, and a Dutch-Armenian woman could have been in place on 26 August without at least a week's advance planning. This suggests that whoever planned the fabrication knew in advance that a pivotal incident to make the case for war would happen on 21 August. We might also wonder how such a crew could have been assured that they would be safe in Nusra-controlled territory.

Some other interesting points in the quote from HBG

- He mentions Otaybah, Adra and Sheikh Massoud, but not Khan-al-Assal where the story is not so convenient.
- "Samples of soil" unlike physiological samples of course reveal a great deal about how the sarin was produced and who was likely to have produced it. If HBG had been briefed on the results from the environmental samples he provided to Porton Down from the 19 March attacks, he would have been aware of this.
- As he notes, the Sheikh Maqsood and Saraqeb incidents are "virtually identical events". In each case, the story is that a munition (later shown to be a riot control grenade canister) has been dropped from a helicopter on to a family house. There are videos of the alleged victims in hospital. A British journalist (Loyd, Pannell) visits the scene with HBG (whose presence is concealed) and is shown an empty house and interviews a purported survivor from the family. HBG is quoted in the report as an independent expert. The main difference is that in Saraqeb a dead body, with a lethal dose of sarin, was delivered to a Turkish hospital for tissue samples to be taken. [Pmr9 \(talk\)](#) 20:05, 9 March 2017 (UTC)

HBG working "on behalf of" OPCW

On 15 March 2016 HBG gave a seminar at University College London from which a [brief description](#) was posted online.

This seminar was given by former Army officer, Mr. Hamish de Bretton-Gordon. Hamish is currently a chemical weapons expert to NGOs working in Syria and Iraq. His seminar topic was the use of chemical weapons by ISIL and Assad.

Since the Syrian conflict started, Hamish has been deployed to the conflict area a number of times, where on behalf of OPCW (Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapon) he has helped set up a CBRNE task force. Additionally, he helps run 32 hospitals and clinics across Syria, where he has trained doctors how to treat chlorine casualties and how to collect evidence that can be further used in a court of justice. His efforts in Syria also include training civilians how to protect themselves against chemical weapons.

Hamish shared his experience on sampling and analysis of chemical warfare agents in Syria. He explained that sampling in war zones can be a challenging task due to various factors such as a violent environment, limited amount of time that can be spent on the scene, uncontrolled scene and limited equipment available. Finally, Hamish covered different chemical weapons that he has encountered in the Syrian conflict zone, such as chlorine and sulfur mustard. Chlorine, a "choking agent" that has been used for the first time on a large scale in WW1, has been used in Syria in a series of attacks in April 2014. Sulfur mustard, a "blistering" agent, has been used in eight attacks on Kurdish forces from Northern Iraq just in the last two weeks of February 2016, causing more than 200 casualties.

From this we learn that HBG was setting up a task force "on behalf of" OPCW at the same time that he was apparently working for MI6 and his companies were receiving covert funding. We can reasonably infer that he and his network were a key source of the "evidence" provided to the OPCW and JIM reports on the alleged chlorine attacks in 2014. This is consistent with what he told the Telegraph about his role in training "Dr Ahmad" (quoted above). The implications are obvious.

If HBG, or his companies, had some kind of contract or collaboration with OPCW, even if it was just a consultancy, why wasn't this publicized at the time by Secure Bio, to impress investors and customers? This suggests that the companies weren't real businesses but just a front to make HBG appear as an independent consultant. [Pmr9 \(talk\)](#) 12:31, 29 January 2017 (UTC)

In [this talk](#) to the All-Party Parliamentary Group Friends of Syria, HDBG states clearly that he collected CW evidence for OPCW from the alleged chlorine attacks. This confirms what we suspected: the OPCW reports relied on "evidence" provided by an MI6 agent.

I have covertly been in Syria collecting evidence of chemical weapons attacks and have been giving it to the OPCW and the UN. They cannot get to the places the chemical weapons attacks have happened because they're in rebel held areas. When I present evidence with our teams from UOSSM, we are not an international body etcetera etcetera. We provided the evidence of the chemical weapons attack in a town called Talmenes in April 2014, on the 29th of April 2014, three weeks after the attack; two weeks ago, two years later, the UN Security Council announced to the world that they had conclusive evidence that the regime had attacked Talmenes in April 2014 with chemical weapons.

He also mentions that he is working with Saleyha Ahsan, whose role in the fabricated BBC story on the napalm playground attack has been examined in detail by Robert Stuart.

With David Nott, and also international human rights lawyer Toby Cadman, and the A&E doctor and BBC doctor Saleyha Ahsan, we set up an NGO called Doctors Under Fire to try and make sure, or to try and point out to the world, that targeting hospitals and doctors seems to have become the norm in modern warfare, as have things like the use of chemical weapons and things like napalm.

He emphasizes his role with UOSSM and interestingly states that it is a "predominantly British" charity

My involvement in Syria is very much with UOSSM which is an international medical charity, a British, French, Canadian charity, and US charity, and we run a number of hospitals across Syria.

Without wanting to cry tears or anything, but UOSSM is an amazing predominantly British charity that goes with virtually no funding here, maybe from the US, we're talking to the US Department of State at the moment.

He doesn't tell us who is paying for him to do this - is it his current employer Avon Protection, and if so who is paying them to second him to UOSSM? [Pmr9 \(talk\)](#) 07:46, 13 April 2017 (UTC)

Update: though HDBG states that UOSSM is a predominantly British charity, I can't find it on the UK Charities Register [Pmr9 \(talk\)](#) 08:27, 13 April 2017 (UTC)

[From this article](#) we learn that HBG is now an adviser to the French-based UOSSM, which has recently [alleged a chemical attack](#) by Russian jets in an ISIS-held area. [Pmr9 \(talk\)](#) 19:04, 8 February 2017 (UTC)

HBG's companies: Secure Bio and Secure Bio Forensics

<https://beta.companieshouse.gov.uk/company/07687281/filing-history>

Secure Bio was incorporated on 29 June 2011 in Manchester, three months before HBG retired from the army. It looks as if the first injection of capital into the company was on 10 April 2012, when shares were allotted. Further allotment of shares, presumably corresponding to injections of capital, were made in April 2013 and April 2014. The other director (apart from HBG) was Andrew Duckworth who appears to be just a nominee director (45 other directorships) with no relevant expertise (chartered surveyor). Nominee directors are typically used to hide the real control and funding of a company. Company formation agents will usually have a list of such people who can be trusted to do what they're told with other people's money, even when there is no formal contract between the nominee director and whoever is really behind the company. "Loans" that are never repaid are commonly used to hide funding.

There are no accounts for Secure Bio made up to later than end of December 2013. These are "total exemption small company accounts" so very little information is given. The accounts from 2012 to 2013 show a progressive increase in unsecured debt, ending with £730k of unsecured debt and £15k of assets when liquidation began in June 2015. Most of this debt was £358k of "Directors' Loans": Andrew Duckworth was owed £305k and HBG was owed £58k. It appears that HBG moved to Avon Protection in October 2014. "Trade and Expense" creditors were owed £275k: this includes £108k of debt to John Townsend, an accountant. It's not clear how such a small company could have run up £108k of unpaid bills from an accountant: maybe there were some complicated arrangements to be made.

Secure Bio Forensics was incorporated on 27 April 2012, and the only other director was Andrew Duckworth who was sole shareholder. The address was Griffin Court, 201 Chapel Street, Manchester, M3 5EQ which looks like a placeholder address for dummy/shell companies (about 300 at this address). It never had any other address. The balance sheet showed liabilities of just £1 at winding-up. It looks as if this company never did anything.

Summary comments: It looks as if these companies didn't really go live until April 2012, when there was an injection of capital and a split of shares in Secure Bio, and Secure Bio Forensics was set up as a separate entity. It's possible that Secure Bio Forensics was intended as the vehicle for funding the collection of samples in Syria, but later it was decided to provide this funding some other way. Stories in the media that Assad had used or was about to use CW began in July 2012, leading to Obama's "red line" declaration in August 2012. It appears that the whole operation was transferred to Avon in October 2014, but the company wasn't put into liquidation until eight months later.

HBG had only 25% of the equity in Secure Bio, so most of the funding must have been provided by others. The administration of the company appears to have been chaotic - accounts were filed late leading to notice of intention to strike off the register, and the final collapse left traders and tax authorities unpaid. This can't have been a happy outcome for the directors: it's surprising that they weren't disqualified for trading while insolvent. My impression of all this is that the company never did anything much apart from running a twitter feed and producing a few reports, and that the [impressive](#)

[list of global blue chip clients](#)" never existed. I don't think it's plausible that the setup of a network to collect samples in Syria could have been channelled through the company, and it's more likely that the company was just to provide cover for HBG as an independent commentator while the activities in Syria were funded by some other means. [Pmr9 \(talk\)](#) 13:48, 31 January 2017 (UTC)

[Pmr9 \(talk\)](#) 21:07, 30 January 2017 (UTC)

The pushback: the scientists and the generals

To be continued [Pmr9 \(talk\)](#) 22:42, 22 January 2017 (UTC)

Yes, please! :) --[Caustic Logic \(talk\)](#) 03:40, 23 January 2017 (UTC)

When I created this on your behalf, I wasn't aware of how specific it would get. So if you want a more specific page just for this stuff, go to a URL in your browser

like [http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/\[the name of your preferred subpage\]](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/[the name of your preferred subpage]) and create the page, copy over the stuff, clean up (or ask for it to be done). Thanks for your input. --[CE \(talk\)](#) 23:47, 24 January 2017 (UTC)

Brief note on the science

Since the 1990s analytical chemistry has been transformed by wide use of mass spectrometry, in which chemical compounds are converted to ions and the mass/charge ratio of these ions is measured. Mass spectrometry is usually combined with gas chromatography, which separates compounds by their retention time when passed through a column filled with polymer. The combination of retention time and mass/charge ratio gives each compound a unique "signature". When GC/MS is used to detect CW agents in environmental samples, it gives a complete chemical profile of the sample, including impurities. The most sensitive methods can detect these impurities at concentrations of less than one part per billion. In physiological samples, GC/MS is used to detect adducts of sarin or its breakdown products with blood proteins, usually albumin or butyrylcholinesterase (BChE). These tests can detect sarin several weeks after exposure, but don't reveal anything about the chemical profile of the sarin.

The TNO study on using environmental samples for attribution studies

Annex 2 of the [report of the OPCW Scientific Advisory Board meeting in September 2012](#) includes the report of the Temporary Working Group on Sampling and Analysis chaired by Dr Robin Black, head of the detection lab at Porton Down.



Robin Black

Pages 22-23 describe a study in the TNO lab that demonstrated the feasibility of using environmental samples for attribution studies. Sarin was one of the three CW agents studied. A summary was presented to the full Scientific Advisory Board. The reference to "an improvised laboratory" makes it clear that they have non-state actors in mind. So everyone on the SAB was aware that the environmental samples collected in Syria in 2013 would provide a forensic trail to how the sarin had been produced and who had produced it.

AGENDA ITEM EIGHT – Chemical forensics (attribution) Chemical profiling of chemical warfare agents for forensic purposes.

25. Daan Noort of the TNO Health, Security and Safety Laboratory, Rijswijk, Netherlands, presented on a collaborative project, between TNO and The Netherlands Forensic Institute (NFI), on attribution studies of chemical warfare agents. The goal of this project is to assist forensic investigations in attributing an agent found at the scene of an incident to a particular source. Key questions are: (a) can the synthetic route be deduced from the composition of the by-products in the CW sample? (b) can a correlation be made between chemical profiles of crude samples, found in an improvised laboratory and at the site of the crime? (c) what is the stability of the chemical profile, over time, on various matrices and under various conditions?

26. *Studies with VX were reported. VX was synthesised according to three different methods, but with no purification of intermediates or end-products. Analysis was performed with GC-MS and DART. The conclusions were: (a) Chemical profiles of crude VX samples remain more or less intact upon prolonged storage, and after spiking in/on various matrices. (b) Correlation of chemical composition of specific batches (crime scene vs laboratory) should be feasible. (c) Chemical profiles of crude VX samples are indicative for a particular synthetic route. Similar results were obtained for sulfur mustard and sarin. It was noted that small changes in the synthesis protocol might have a large impact on the chemical profile of the end product.*

Pmr9 (talk) 16:28, 26 January 2017 (UTC)

The Russian lab

Russia's OPCW-designated lab for detection of CW agents is the Laboratory for Chemical and Analytical Control in the Military Research Centre of the Russian Ministry of Defence. The lead scientist at the lab was Professor Igor Rybalchenko, who had served on the OPCW Scientific Advisory Board with Robin Black since 2008. Rybalchenko and his colleagues clearly have high regard for Robin Black: in a 2009 paper they cited his "pioneering work", perhaps hoping that he would be the reviewer of their manuscript. In a 2009 article Rybalchenko is described as a senior scientific adviser to the Russian government, in connection with the destruction of the former Soviet chemical arsenal in specially-built facilities for which the US government provided most of the funding under the Nunn-Lugar program.

Press statement by Churkin on 10 July 2013

- *The results of the analysis clearly indicate that the ordnance used in Khan al-Assal was not industrially manufactured and was filled with sarin. The sarin technical specifications prove that it was not industrially manufactured either. The absence of chemical stabilizers in the samples of the detected toxic agents indicates their relatively recent production.*
- Churkin made further comments on video answering questions, including those on Western investigations. Churkin says that the results of US, UK and French analyses of earlier incidents were shared with Russia but "our experts were not impressed" - the concentrations were very low [though that could not apply to the result reported by Le Monde from the Saraqeb incident]. It sounds as if the only test results shared with the Russians were on physiological samples: so there was no chance for the Russians to report on whether Porton Down's results from the 19 March incidents matched their own. If Black and Rybalchenko had already communicated, this would have had to be kept secret to protect Black. Pmr9 (talk) 19:06, 10 February 2017 (UTC)

Statement from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 4 September 2013:-

- *shell and soil samples contained nerve agents – sarin gas and diisopropylfluorophosphate – not synthesized in an industrial environment, which was used by Western states for producing chemical weapons during World War II.*
- *We highlight that the Russian report is extremely specific. It is a scientific and technical document containing about 100 pages with many tables and diagrams of spectral analysis of the samples.*

Interview with Sergei Lavrov reported on RT on 29 Sep 2013

- *Our report on the Aleppo incident of March 19 is available to all the members of the UN Security Council, and I think it is even available to the general public. It is a very professional report, and we have no doubt that the sarin gas used in the March 19 attack near Aleppo was homemade. Also, we have intelligence that the chemical weapon used in the infamous August 21 incident was sarin gas of roughly the same origin as the chemical used on March 19, only in a higher concentration. We sent this data to our US partners and the UN Secretariat.*

Transcript of Churkin's remarks on 16 December 2013 at the UN

- *the Syrian government asked Russia to conduct an investigation [into the Khan-al-Assal attack] by Russian experts. They arrived on the spot, gathered samples and examined them in Russia, in an OPCW-certified laboratory. A comprehensive report was prepared and submitted to the UN SG and our P-5 Security Council colleagues. Sellstrom got acquainted with this report and even traveled to Moscow to discuss it with Russian experts. In his report of December 12 Sellstrom does not refute our conclusions which are the following: on March 19 "home-made" sarin was used near Aleppo, the projectile that was used for sarin delivery was also a cottage industry product.*

- Besides, as our experts concluded, sarin used on August 21 was of approximately the same type as the one used on March 19, though of a slightly better quality. It means that over a few months opposition chemists somewhat improved the quality of their product.

The Russian report appears to be suggesting that diisopropyl fluorophosphate (DFP) might have been intentionally synthesized as an alternative to sarin.

Robin Black's 2016 review of the history of CW agents provides a possible explanation for this: *UK and US chemists were less successful in developing a nerve agent during WWII. The primary candidate was DFP, studied by Saunders and colleagues at Cambridge University. DFP had toxicity approximately one fifth to one tenth that of sarin, with volatility closer to soman. Its only advantage over sarin was ease of synthesis.*

If a "cottage industry" operation could only manage to synthesize sarin at something like 5% concentration but could easily synthesize DFP at tenfold higher concentration, and the objective was to generate something that would test positive for sarin but also cause casualties, it might make sense to add DFP to a very low-quality sarin preparation. This appears to have been the Russian lab's interpretation of what they found. However the material would have had to contain at least some sarin, or it wouldn't implicate the regime.

[Note: from asking an organic chemist, I understand that DFP can be produced from the same raw ingredients as sarin, but only if the ingredients are added in reverse order. Unlikely that this would happen through simple incompetence: if DFP wasn't synthesized deliberately one possible explanation is that Nusra's chemist was a captive working under duress who deliberately sabotaged the synthesis to send a message that something odd was going on.]

The Russian report into Khan-al-Assal was apparently widely shared. Lavrov seemed to think it was freely available. It would be really helpful to have this as a basis for further enquiries into the cover-up of Porton Down's results on the same batch. I can't find it in an English-language search, but maybe it's somewhere on a Russian server. Maybe someone who knows Russian can search government websites, or ask the Ministry of Defence's press office. [Pmr9 \(talk\)](#) 18:57, 8 February 2017 (UTC)

Can see Churkin [announcing](#) report but not the report itself; will look further later (lots of work at the moment). It may be not placed in public domain or else will be in English by now; RU MOD [site](#) does not seem to have things that technical. Will look further late... To communicate with RU MOD/gov, one needs to be a physical-domain journalist/person oneself (with contact details etc); not that much issue with language... This issue probably had some resolution before they were getting desperate to go public; if so, won't be public...--[Resup \(talk\)](#) 19:40, 8 February 2017 (UTC)

Igor Rybalchenko



Igor Rybalchenko

- Bio [Rybalchenko 1,2, 3](#);
- Some publications & affiliation [1,2](#)
 - One of affiliations, 27 Научный центр МО РФ--27th scientific centre RU MOD, possibly [this](#), but not explicitly to do with chemistry.
 - [2012 publication](#) lists US and Canadian-made mass spectroscopy equipment: [Ultimate 3000 - Dionex](#); [QTrap 3200-Sciex](#) and US software Analyst 5.0 (link & purpose, unsure; maybe data visualization if it's [this](#)). And cites Black again, 4 on the citation list ...
- Publications are related to detection of chems in general, but unable to find directly relevant publication on Syrian chems ...
 - [Resup \(talk\)](#) 00:47, 11 February 2017 (UTC)

Hersh's story: the generals

Hersh's original story in the LRB has been updated in subsequent interviews with DemocracyNow and Telesur. It's clear that one of his sources is Dempsey or someone very close to him. Another is a "senior defense intelligence official" now retired, and another is a UN official likely to be Mokhtar Lamani.

- [The Red Line and the Rat Line: Erdoğan and the Syrian rebels](#) - Seymour M. Hersh, *London Review of Books*, April 17, 2014
- [Sy Hersh Reveals Potential Turkish Role in Syria Chemical Strike That Almost Sparked U.S. Bombing](#) - *DemocracyNow*, April 7, 2014
- [Seymour Hersh, in an interview with Diken, claims that Turkish intelligence and military were behind the sarin gas attack in Syria](#) - *Diken*, April 10, 2014
- [Exclusive Interview: Seymour Hersh Dishes on Saudi Oil Money Bribes and the Killing of Osama Bin Laden](#) - Ken Klippenstein, *AlterNet*, April 20, 2016
- [Global Empire - The World According to Seymour Hersh \(Part Two\)](#) - TeleSUR English, August 10, 2016 (video)
- The most recent version of Hersh's story is as follows.



- Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff U.S. Army Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, right, talks with U.K. Chief of General Staff Army Gen. Sir Peter Wall in London, June 10, 2014
- From April 2013 onwards, the DIA had information from multiple sources indicating that the Syrian opposition has CW agents, and specifically that the Nusra Front was producing sarin from precursors procured in Turkey. A five-page briefing note was produced on 20 June 2013 for David Shedd, the DIA Deputy Director, with the title "Al-Nusra Front-associated sarin production cell is the most advanced sarin plot since Al Qaida's pre-9/11 efforts". A collaboration was established between three generals who had supposedly got to know each other professionally as tank commanders in Germany during the Cold War: Martin Dempsey, then the CJCS, Sir Peter Wall, then the head of the British army, and a Russian who can only be Valery Gerasimov, chief of staff of the Russian Armed Forces. Russian military intelligence obtained environmental samples of the sarin used in the Ghouta incident. Some of this material was supplied to Wall, who took it to Porton Down for analysis. Wall communicated the results of this analysis to Dempsey. The results showed that the sarin was "kitchen sarin" without stabilizers, and did not match what was known of Syrian military stocks. Dempsey then visited Obama to inform him of this, and to warn him that he would testify to Congress on what he had told Obama. This forced Obama to call off the attack that had been planned to start on 2 September, the official line being that he had decided to seek Congressional approval. Subsequently, when Syria's sarin binaries were destroyed on board the MV Cape Ray, a ship fitted out by US Army engineers for destruction of CW agents, the US was able to confirm that the chemical profile of the sarin binaries in Syrian military stocks did not match that used in Ghouta.
- Several points of interest:-

1. In the original article, Porton Down's role is represented as not much more than that of lab technicians: it was supposedly US defence intelligence who deduced that the chemical profile did not match Syrian military stocks.

- *After the first reported uses of chemical weapons in Syria last year, American and allied intelligence agencies 'made an effort to find the answer as to what if anything, was used – and its source', the former intelligence official said. 'We use data exchanged as part of the Chemical Weapons Convention. The DIA's baseline consisted of knowing the composition of each batch of Soviet-manufactured chemical weapons. But we didn't know which batches the Assad government currently had in its arsenal. Within days of the Damascus incident we asked a source in the Syrian government to give us a list of the batches the government currently had. This is why we could confirm the difference so quickly.'*

This version isn't plausible: the scientists at Porton Down would have been much better qualified than the DIA to interpret the results of the analysis. Any information they required about the synthetic pathway and stabilizers used in the Syrian military programme could have been supplied by the Russians, who could have obtained it from the Syrian government. Some of this information, crucially the Syrian governments efforts to procure trimethyl phosphite during the 1980s, was already in the public domain. In a later interview, Hersh gives a more plausible version of the story in which "the Brits" already knew that the sarin was not military-grade

- *And so, the Brits came to us with samples of sarin, and they were very clear there was a real problem with these samples, because they did not reflect what the Brits know and we know, the Russians knew, everybody knew, is inside the Syrian arsenal. They have—professionals armies have additives to sarin that make it more persistent, easier to use. The amateur stuff, they call it kitchen sarin, sort of a cold phrase. You can make sarin very easily with a couple of inert chemicals, but the sarin you make isn't very—isn't as lethal as a professional military-grade sarin and doesn't have certain additives. So, you can actually calibrate what's in it. They came to us, very early, within six, eight days, 10 days, of the August 21, last year's terrible incident*

2. The story about how the Russian samples reached Porton Down changes between versions. In the original article, Wall is not mentioned and the samples were passed to "British military intelligence". In the Telesur interview, Hersh says "he" gave the samples to Peter Wall (then corrects "he" to "they") and that Wall took the samples to Porton Down. This implies that Wall took a considerable personal risk: he would have had to meet with a Russian diplomat to collect the samples and take them in his car.

3. The only reference to analysis of samples from earlier alleged CW attacks is this passage:-

- *The process hadn't worked as smoothly in the spring, the former intelligence official said, because the studies done by Western intelligence 'were inconclusive as to the type of gas it was. The word "sarin" didn't come up. There was a great deal of discussion about this, but since no one could conclude what gas it was, you could not say that Assad had crossed the president's red line.'*

This is clearly false. This, taken together with the earlier version in which it is the DIA who work out that the results do not show Syrian military-grade sarin, suggests that Hersh's sources are trying to cover up the role of Porton Down, most likely to protect them from retribution.

4. For the samples to have been collected from Ghouta by the Russians and passed to Porton Down in time for the results to be used to stop a US-led attack, a plan including Gerasimov, Dempsey, Wall and probably Porton Down must have been drawn up before the incident, most likely earlier in the summer when it would have been obvious to them that a new false flag incident was likely. [Pmr9 \(talk\)](#) 19:53, 9 February 2017 (UTC)

Corroboration



US Army Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, talks with Russian Army Col. Gen. Valery Gerasimov, chief of the General Staff, at the NATO Chiefs of Defense meeting in Brussels, Jan. 16, 2013

The relationship between Gerasimov and Dempsey was confirmed by Dempsey himself in an [address to Irish officers](#) in 2015.

The continent is in a period of high risk, the chairman said, because of the potential for miscalculation. He said he tries to keep in touch with his Russian counterpart Army Col. Gen. Valery Gerasimov. "I've actually suggested to him that we not end our careers as we began them," Dempsey said. As a young armored cavalry officer, the chairman served in West Germany at the same time Gerasimov was a tank commander in East Germany.

It's clear that something unexpected happened on the afternoon on Friday 30 August that caused Obama to call off the attack less than 24 hours before it was planned to start <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/12/18/hagel-the-white-house-tried-to-destroy-me/>

The Wall Street Journal reported: *Five Navy destroyers were in the eastern Mediterranean, four poised to launch scores of Tomahawk cruise missiles into Syria, according to military officials. Officers said they expected launch orders from the president at between 3 p.m. and 4 p.m. Eastern Time on Saturday.*

All press accounts agree on the following timeline for 30 August:-

- 5 pm (some accounts say 6 pm) Obama walks in Rose Garden for 45 min with McDonough
- 7 pm: Obama calls meeting of White House national security staff in his office (Hagel and Kerry not present) to tell them the attack is off.
- 9 pm Obama phones Hagel and Kerry separately, to tell them the attack is off.
- The following morning a meeting of the full National Security Council, with Kerry and Dempsey present, was held followed by a press conference to announce the decision to postpone the attack.
- A [report posted by Wayne Madsen](#) on 1 September stated that Dempsey had made a secret visit to the White House to force Obama to call off the attack. This was [reported to be independently confirmed](#) two days later by Andrew Kreig, an attorney and investigative journalist, who appears to be a more reliable source.
- Wayne Madsen's reporting record indicates that he is often a conduit for stories originating with Russian intelligence: though these stories may be disinformation, they frequently include accurate side information. So the content and the source of this story corroborate not only the assertion that Dempsey forced Obama to call off the attack, but also confirm that the Russians knew what Dempsey was doing.
- On Tuesday 2 September Dempsey, together with Kerry and Hagel, testified at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on Syria. [The NYT reported](#): *As for General Dempsey, who has made clear his skepticism about military action in lengthy letters to Congress, he appeared to want to disappear behind his medals and ribbons. Looking down, offering monosyllabic answers, and dispensing with an opening statement, the general left little doubt that he was simply carrying out orders.*
- In a [PBS documentary](#) broadcast in May 2015, the story has changed, and the walk in the Rose Garden with McDonough is moved to the following morning. Dempsey is quoted as part of this altered version: *It was a Friday night, and I got a call from the president of the United States. And he said to me, "I am considering an alternative course of action." And he wanted me overnight to consider whether a delay would in any way affect our ability to be effective with our military options.*
- Hersh's story that the chemical profile of the Ghouta sarin showed it to be kitchen sarin without stabilizers is corroborated by the limited information available in the OPCW reports and assembled by sasa wawa on the [WhoGhouta blog](#): the sarin contained no stabilizers, contained ethyl groups indicating impure low-quality reagents, and contained hexafluorophosphate indicating that the synthesis started with elemental phosphorus or phosphorus trichloride and that intermediate reaction products were not purified at each step. Syria's sarin synthesis is known to have started from trimethyl phosphite. Syria procured hundreds of tonnes of trimethyl phosphite from the UK and India in the 1980s, and still held 60 tonnes in stock in November 2013, when they [declared their stockpile](#) to OPCW.
- Hersh's story that a forensic team on board the MV Cape Ray undertook chemical profiling of Syrian military stocks of sarin precursor before they were destroyed is corroborated by this [report in Chemistry World](#):
- *There is an analytical laboratory on board the Cape Ray containing GC-MS instruments. Before the hydrolysis begins 'analytical chemists in this laboratory will verify the identity of the neat agent, ensuring the chain of custody at the point of destruction,' explains Forman [Science Policy Adviser to OPCW].*
- As the ship was equipped and crewed by the US Army's Edgewood Chemical Biological Center, and the analyses were carried out under OPCW supervision, both the US government and OPCW must have the results of the chemical profiling [Pmr9 \(talk\)](#) 14:42, 21 May 2017 (UTC)

Attempted rebuttal

Attempts at rebuttal were summarized by Eliot Higgins in a post on 9 April

<http://brown-moses.blogspot.co.uk/2014/04/the-knowledge-gap-seymours-hersh-of.html>

One criticism was that it was implausible that Porton Down and the US/UK military would have trusted the integrity of samples provided by the Russians. This is not hard to explain. If the Russian lab report on Khan-al-Assal made available to permanent UNSC members in June had been passed to Porton Down for expert review, Porton Down would have been able to compare their own results on the sample from the 19 March attacks with the Russian findings. If their results agreed, this would have confirmed the integrity of the Russian samples.

A more interesting question, not asked by Hersh's critics, is: why did the Russians trust Porton Down to report their findings accurately?

Higgins also points to Dan Kaszeta's attempted rebuttal of WhoGhouta, in which he argued that Syria could have been producing low-quality sarin without stabilizers for battlefield use, and to Coghlin's tweet described below that "MOD sources; no doubts expressed by Porton Down on quality of sarin found in the soil sample". Of course these two propositions contradict each other.

Coghlan's tweets

On 8 April 2014 Tom Coghlan, the Times journalist who had first reported the "MI6 operation" to collect samples on 22 March 2013, attempted to rebut Hersh by reporting an official denial from Porton Down. David Habakkuk has [summarized](#) the subsequent exchange of tweets:

'The initial 'tweet' from Coghlan was sent on the morning of 8 April 2014, the day following the interview on 'Democracy Now!' in which Hersh made this claim. It read: '@michaeldweiss @Brown_Moses Hersh's claim that Porton Down found it to be "Kitchen Sarin" is completely untrue. We've just checked.'

Then the journalist Ilhan Tanir – who had recently interviewed Hersh, and used the 'Twitter' name '@WashingtonPoint' asked Coghlan whether Porton Down had 'sent any statement'. Coghlan responded: '@WashingtonPoint @michaeldweiss @Brown_Moses We think the S. Hersh story is a non-story. For now that's about it from us.'

However, not long after, Coghlan had second thoughts, and attempted to produce some evidence for his claim in a new 'tweet': '@WashingtonPoint @michaeldweiss @Brown_Moses MOD sources: no doubts expressed by Porton Down on quality of sarin found in the soil sample'. This was followed up by the claim that 'MoD's Defence Science and Technology Laboratory spokesman said absolute confidence that the sarin analysed was from Syrian regime stocks.'

The following day, Gareth Porter responded: 'The press office of MoD's DSTL says it did NOT say sarin samples came from Syrian regime stocks – only that many tested positive.'

Obviously – to adapt Patrick Armstrong's 'QED' – if Hersh had been wrong about the Porton Down tests, Coghlan could have found a spokesman from the laboratory to say so. Moreover, if they had in fact decisively established the guilt of the Syrian Government, the MSM on both sides of the Atlantic – with the 'Times' in the lead – would have been trumpeting the fact to the skies. So, inadvertently, Coghlan provided confirmation that one of Hersh's most significant – and in some ways puzzling – claims was true.

The sequence of tweets can be seen at [1](#), [2](#), [3](#)

A [review of the history of chemical warfare](#) by Robin Black in 2016 stated simply: "the use of sarin was confirmed in the internal conflict in Syria, although the UN investigative mission did not identify the perpetrators".

Letter from the Joint Intelligence Committee to the Prime Minister on 29 August 2013

Just before the House of Commons met to debate the motion on war with Syria, the JIC issued a letter to the Prime Minister to set out the case that the regime was to blame for Ghouta and for earlier alleged chemical attacks.

We have assessed previously that the Syrian regime used lethal CW on 14 occasions from 2012. This judgement was made with the highest possible level of certainty following an exhaustive review by the Joint Intelligence Organisation of intelligence reports plus diplomatic and open sources.

This assertion that "judgement was made with the highest possible level of certainty" that the regime was behind the earlier CW attacks directly contradicts HBG, their agent on the ground, who had repeatedly stated that that rebels could have been responsible for Khan-al-Assal and other attacks. Of course the JIC knew that their case for war would have collapsed if there were any suggestion that the rebels could have been behind earlier attacks using sarin.

The JIC letter also stated that there was "no evidence of an opposition CW capability" and therefore "no alternative to a regime attack scenario". The evidence available to them at this time must have included:

(1) test results from Porton Down showing that the sarin used in the 19 March attacks was not military grade;

(2) Porton Down's expert evaluation of the report from the Russian Military Science Lab. The level of technical detail in this report was enough for an expert to review.

(2) [the report](#) from the UN Special Representative in Damascus Mokhtar Lamani, which we know was passed to the UNSG, that Nusra had brought some kind of nerve agent into Syria from Turkey around the time of these attacks;

(3) the DIA report dated 20 June quoted by Hersh which reported the existence of a Nusra sarin production cell.

There is therefore a strong case that the JIC misled the House of Commons to make the case for war. This is contempt of Parliament, a crime against the constitution.

http://turcopolier.typepad.com/sic_semper_tyrannis/2017/04/sentence-first-verdict-afterwards-a-revision-by-david-habakkuk-14-april-2017.html/

REVISITING THE STORY OF THE 'FALSE FLAG' AT GHOUTA ON 21 AUGUST 2013, HOW IT WAS EXPOSED, AND HOW IT WAS CREATED.^[1]

The decision by President Trump to accept without further investigation claims that the Syrian government was responsible for the recent chemical weapons incident in Idlib province, and to respond by immediate cruise missile strikes, makes an ironic contrast with the behaviour of his predecessor.

Following the sarin atrocity in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta on 21 August 2013, there was a similar rush to judgement by Western leaders and the mainstream Western media – hereafter MSM. However, in the end President Obama decided to follow the example of the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, and seek the approval of Congress for air strikes. As a result of the deal to eliminate the Syrian chemical weapons arsenal mediated by the Russians, the possibility of such strikes then quite rapidly became moot.

This history is clearly relevant to current events, and in particular to the apparent dramatic volte-face in President Trump's approach to Syria, in a whole range of different ways. For one thing, Ghouta has repeatedly been presented, by advocates of 'régime change' in Syria, as a moment when a golden opportunity to topple Assad without empowering jihadists was missed, and the way cleared for a reemergence of Russia as a Middle Eastern, and some extent global, power. (For a British statement along these lines, see [a 'Guardian' report of an interview given to the BBC](#) last October by Sir John Sawers, who headed MI6 at the time of Ghouta.)

Equally important, a central premise of the 'rush to judgement' over the recent incident is that the Syrian government was in bad faith when it professed to accept the destruction of its chemical weapons arsenal, held back significant capabilities, and has continued to use such weapons.

In what follows, I want to build on the work of two very different figures who have argued that Ghouta was a 'false flag' – the veteran American investigative journalist Seymour Hersh, and a blogger using the name 'sasa wawa' who started a 'crowdsourced' investigation on [the Who 'Attacked Ghouta?' site](#) on 19 September 2013.

A critical point about Hersh's accounts is that they point to a British angle to the story of how the Ghouta 'false flag' was exposed, and the attempt to use it to inveigle the United States and Britain into another disastrous war in the Middle East frustrated. Further exploration of this angle puts a whole range of matters in a new light.

Puzzles about Porton Down.

It is important, at the outset, to note the sheer strangeness of parts of the story Hersh is telling, as well as its radical implications. According to [the article entitled 'The Red Line and the Rat Line'](#) he published in the 'London Review of Books' in April 2014, it was the opposition of the then Chairman

of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, that was decisive in preventing President Obama from launching air strikes in response to Ghouta.

What however made it possible for General Dempsey to stop the rush to war in its tracks, according to Hersh, was the fact that he was able to present Obama with incontrovertible forensic evidence demonstrating that the incident was a 'false flag.' This, supposedly, came from Britain, in the form of results of tests carried out on samples from the site at the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory at Porton Down in Wiltshire.

And – making an already remarkable story even more remarkable – it is suggested that the samples in question were supplied by Russian military intelligence. So already we have a puzzle. For Hersh's claims to be credible, it is necessary that one can see convincing reasons why not simply the scientists at Porton Down, but also General Dempsey, and indeed President Obama, could have been convinced, by 30 August 2013, of the reliability of tests carried out on samples provided by the GRU.

Unsurprisingly, this aspect of the 'Red Line and Rat Line' account has been used by MSM journalists as grounds for dismissing or simply ignoring it – one consequence of which is that interesting elaborations in subsequent interviews given by Hersh have also been generally ignored. However, as I hope to show, if one looks for possible reasons why tests on Russian samples should have been regarded as credible in the open record, they are not so difficult to find.

In so doing, the 'Who Attacked Ghouta?' material is an invaluable resource. As far as I can see, this also has been almost universally ignored by the MSM. This is particularly unfortunate, given that at critical points its conclusions – which rest entirely on an analysis of 'open source' material – corroborate those of Hersh. Again, there have been interesting recent developments – in particular evidence suggesting that 'sasa wawa' is likely to be a former employee of Unit 8200, the Israeli equivalent of the American NSA and the British GCHQ.

Further exploration of the British angle to the Ghouta story opened up by Hersh, I hope to show, is not only of importance for us here in the United Kingdom, but casts a great deal of light on what was happening in the United States.

At the outset, it is important to clarify some simple facts about tests on samples, which are fundamental to making sense of arguments about chemical weapons use. The extent to which they are not understood can be illustrated by two recent pieces from what was once a great liberal newspaper, the 'Guardian'.

Of 'signatures' of sarin – in blood and in soil.

One critical fact is the difference between 'physiological' and 'environmental' samples – the former including such things as blood, urine, and hair, while among the latter are soil, fragments of weapons, and clothing.

If what is at issue is the question of whether chemical weapons – and specifically sarin – have been used, tests on either may do. If however the problem is to ascertain facts about how the toxin has been produced, which may make it possible to establish who has used it, what are required are 'environmental' samples.

Here, [a report in the 'Guardian'](#) by Martin Chulov on 5 April, entitled 'Soil samples from Syria chemical attack sent to western agencies; Samples will help intelligence agencies establish whether

nerve gas came from store Assad was supposed to surrender' is worth quoting at length. Concluding his report, Chulov writes:

Samples taken from the scene in Khan Sheikhun, as well as biological specimens taken from survivors and casualties, will be compared with samples taken by intelligence officials from the Syrian military stockpile when it was withdrawn from the country in late 2013. Syria's stores of sarin are known to have particular properties, which experts say can be forensically matched to samples taken in the field.

If the samples match, this would offer strong evidence that not all the country's sarin was disclosed or surrendered, as was demanded under an agreement brokered by Russia, which the US president at the time, Barack Obama, said averted the need for US-led airstrikes designed to punish Assad for the 2013 attack in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta.

At its outset, Chulov writes:

Rescue workers have gathered soil samples from the scene of a chemical weapons attack in northern Syria and sent them to western intelligence officials, who are seeking to determine precisely what nerve agent was used in one of the worst atrocities of the country's six-year war.

As Chulov really ought to have learnt by now, comparing the results of tests on 'biological' – more normally called 'physiological' – samples with analyses of samples from the Syrian chemical weapons arsenal would be redundant. What would be relevant in such a comparison would be 'soil' samples.

Here, a brief digression on some relevant science is necessary. The key points can be illustrated if one looks at [the discussion which 'sasa wawa' posted on 19 September 2013](#) of the initial report of the joint team which the United Nations and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) had sent to Syria, and the [fuller analysis](#) he produced shortly afterwards. (There is also further material relevant to these issues in subsequent discussions on the site.)

The mandate of the UN/OPCW team, which had arrived in Syria three days before Ghouta, was to establish whether chemical weapons had been used in earlier, much smaller-scale incidents. It did not include assigning responsibility.

However, the tests used to determine what chemical weapons had been used would naturally also provide evidence from which key facts about how the materials had been produced could be established. The method, or combination of methods, used to do these tests is Gas Chromatography/Mass Spectrometry – GC/MS for short. Any compound will have a unique 'signature', comprising its readings in both forms of analysis.

Particularly where low concentrations are at issue, because sarin is not itself stable, but compounds it forms with blood proteins are, a GC/MS analysis looking for the 'signatures' of such compounds in blood samples may be a particularly effective way of identifying the substance.

So if the question is establishing whether sarin was the toxin from which victims died in the Idlib incident – as distinct from the other 'organic phosphates' which 'Publius Tacitus' suggested were being stored by insurgents in [his SST post on 7 April](#) – tests on such samples would indeed be useful. But comparison with samples taken from Syrian government stockpiles is not at issue here. In relation to tracing the 'particular properties' of sarin used in an incident where the substance has been used, however, what are of particular importance are the compounds listed in the tables in Appendix 7 of [the UN Report](#) as 'Degradation Products', 'by-Products' and 'Other interesting

chemicals.’ As is evident from the results, these are found in ‘environmental’ samples – not ‘physiological’.

The first category comprises products into which sarin breaks down. Sometimes, GC/MS analysis will identify actual sarin in samples. However, at other times, what are identified are only ‘Degradation Products’. In some situations available samples might only contain these. This could happen when only small quantities of sarin had been used, and/or the substance was highly impure. It could also happen where a covert action operation had only managed to snatch a limited number of samples, or perhaps even a single one, or there had been a significant time lapse before collection.

An initial problem, in such a situation, might be to ascertain whether sarin had actually been used – whether the ‘Degradation Products’ originated from it, from other ‘organic phosphates’, or a combination.

In relation to assessing who might have used sarin, once its use has been established, a critical fact is that, given that it is produced from basic chemicals as the result of a complex succession of ‘syntheses’, in which ‘by-Products’ are created, sarin can be expected to be, to a greater or lesser extent, impure. As different ‘synthetic pathways’ will generate both different impurities, and very greatly different quantities of them, analyses of these can provide critical evidence as to who manufactured the substance, and thus who is likely to have used it.

As an explanation of the technicalities on [the discussion of ‘British involvement in Syria’](#) on the ‘A Closer Look On Syria’ (ACLOS) site makes clear, the ‘most sensitive’ GC/MS analysis can now detect relevant ‘by-Products’ – otherwise ‘impurities’ – at concentrations of less than one part per billion.

Among the ‘Other interesting chemicals’ may be so-called ‘stabilisers’, used to retard the process of breakdown and make either sarin, or its ‘precursor’ methylphosphonyl difluoride (known as DF), as long-lasting as possible. The ‘samples taken by intelligence officials’ referred to by Chulov were from the 581 metric tonnes of DF whose destruction aboard the U.S. vessel MV ‘Cape Ray’ [was reported by the OPCW](#) in August 2014. To make actual sarin, this substance would have been mixed with isopropanol.

While ‘stabilisers’ may be used to prolong the life of intact sarin, it also appears that they were used in the case of the Syrian arsenal – intended as a ‘poor man’s deterrent’ against Israel – to maximise the life of the DF.

A further absolutely basic issue with forensic analysis in chemical weapons cases, of which Chulov appears at the least inadequately aware, has to do with ‘chain of custody’ – the ability to prove beyond reasonable doubt that there is no possibility whatsoever that samples have been planted, or doctored.

With samples collected by ‘rescue workers’ and sent to ‘western intelligence officials’, there is no conceivable way such possibilities could be excluded, something Chulov should know.

Ironically, part of the reason why one can be reasonably confident about the integrity of the result of tests from samples of the materials destroyed aboard the ‘Cape Ray’ lies precisely in the fact that these were *not* taken by ‘intelligence officials’.

As [a report from May 2014 in ‘Chemistry World’](#) makes clear, there were staff on board the vessel from the Edgewood Chemical Biological Center in Maryland, ‘the main US Army facility for chemical and biological defence R&D’, as well as the OPCW. The Edgewood Centre is one of the two American institutions which, like Porton Down, are certified for competence in chemical weapons

analysis by the OPCW, so its expertise is not in doubt. It had been instrumental in creating the systems used on the 'Cape Ray' to destroy the Syrian arsenal. (For fascinating descriptions of this process, see the [accounts on the Department of Defense website](#).)

The 'Chemistry World' report confirms what one would expect – that there was 'an analytical laboratory on board the Cape Ray containing GC-MS instruments', and the OPCW inspectors were involved in 'performing GC-MS analysis on chemical samples.' So detailed reports on the composition of the stocks from the Syrian arsenal are clearly available both to the top leadership of the American military, and to the OPCW and UN.

What would obviously be desirable is for these test results to be compared with those on 'environmental' samples from the new incident collected by OPCW inspectors – and it would be enormously helpful if experts from that organisation could visit the site as soon as possible and obtain the kind of samples that were retrieved from Ghouta.

Undermining the UN?

While however the integrity of the reports which must exist both from the Edgewood scientists and the OPCW inspectors on the samples from the materials taken on board the 'Cape Ray' is unlikely to be at issue, serious questions have emerged as to whether reports produced by the latter and the UN in conjunction are necessarily reliable.

In arguments about the kind of investigation which is appropriate, the Russian side have suggested that the Security Council approve the make-up of the team doing it.

This may look like a stalling tactic, but there could be very good grounds for Russian caution. As I shall discuss in greater detail later, an important conclusion of the analysis of Appendix 7 by 'sasa wawa' is that the results were deliberately presented in the UN/OPCW report in a manner which encouraged journalists to conclude, wrongly, that they pointed to Syrian government responsibility.

What this strongly suggests is that pressure was put on the team by Western governments, undermining the claims to independence alike of the UN and the OPCW.

And there are here further puzzles – relating both to the behaviour of the Western and Russian sides. In August 2015, [Resolution 2235, unanimously adopted by the Security Council](#), appeared to lift the restriction imposed on the original UN/OPCW mission, setting up a Joint Investigative Mechanism tasked with identifying those behind chemical weapons attacks in Syria.

Reports by the Joint Investigative Mechanism endorsing claims that Syrian government forces used chlorine against opposition-controlled towns in April 2014 and March 2015 were [met with scepticism from the Russian side](#) – in part on the grounds that the experts producing them had not visited the sites.

What is of particular interest, however, is that the Resolution does not appear to have time limits. So it would appear to make possible the kind of explicit comparison between the test results listed in Appendix 7 of the UN/OPCW report, and the results of the tests we know to have been carried out by OPCW inspectors on the samples from the materials destroyed on the 'Cape Ray'.

As to the reasons why the Western powers might not want to publicise the results of the tests on samples from the stocks destroyed on the 'Cape Ray', Hersh provided a possible explanation in [an interview on the 'AlterNet' site](#) in April 2016. He suggested that the results from the Edgewood scientists and the OPCW inspectors 'didn't match' those of the tests on the samples from Ghouta.

Commonly, the need to protect 'sources and methods' is given as a reason why sensitive material cannot be disclosed. In relation to the results of the tests carried out by the OPCW and the Edgewood Center, the sources have been abundantly discussed in the media, and there is nothing whatsoever secret about the methods. It is very hard to see any good reason why the reports from both organisations cannot be made public.

If claims are subsequently made that their results matched those on samples supplied by 'rescue workers' to 'western intelligence officials' from the recent incident, without all the relevant test results being published, there would be the strongest possible reason to suspect that a cover-up was at issue. If samples of sarin, purporting to from the recent incident, did match those test results, without a credible 'chain of custody' being established, there would also be reason to suspect a cover-up.

A puzzle, obviously, is why the Russians have not pressed for the UN/OPCW team to reopen the Ghouta investigation, and produce a comparative analysis of the results of their tests on the 'environmental' samples from Ghouta and from those taken from the stocks destroyed on the 'Cape Ray'.

That said, Chulov's article and the issues that arise from it lead us naturally on to a critical question. In the recent incident, it seems that provision is being made for 'western intelligence agencies' to secure their own samples. It would seem rather surprising if, in relation both to Ghouta and earlier incidents where chemical weapons use was at issue in Syria, such agencies had made no attempt to secure their own samples.

So it seems sensible to see look back at the 'open source' record, to see whether it casts any light on the question of whether efforts were made by Western intelligence agencies to obtain samples.

Smuggling samples from Syria – sometimes rather slowly.

As it happens, there is a mass of 'open source' material demonstrating that such efforts were made – and here, the British role was clearly central.

There are no reports I can trace of 'environmental' samples being tested at the Edgewood Centre, or indeed the other American laboratory with high-level chemical weapons expertise, the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. (Between February 2011 and February 2013, that laboratory had lost its OPCW certification – its [description of the test it failed](#) provides an interesting picture of how difficult this kind of analysis can be.)

There are ample reports of samples being tested at Porton Down, and a key figure in their retrieval has described his role in public.

On the same day as the 'Guardian' report by Martin Chulov I have discussed, 5 April, [a BBC report](#) headlined 'Syria chemical "attack": Russia faces fury at UN Security Council' cited a chemical weapons expert who has been regularly quoted by the MSM, Colonel Hamish de Bretton-Gordon. The Russian counter-claims, he argued, were 'pretty fanciful'. (These, incidentally, are essentially the claims which in his 7 April post 'Publius Tacitus' has suggested are vindicated by intelligence available to the United States.)

Currently, the top 'hit' for Colonel de Bretton-Gordon on Google is [his entry on the 'Military Speakers' website](#). From this we learn that he is 'Previously Commanding Officer of the UK CBRN Regiment and NATO's Rapid Reaction CBRN Battalion'.

The collection of samples from incidents where sarin use is at issue is a complicated and also often very dangerous business, given the extreme toxicity of the substance – and all the more so, if it has to be done covertly. From what the ‘Military Speakers’ entry tells us about Colonel de Bretton-Gordon’s experience with CBRN – chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear materials – it does indeed seem he would be a natural choice, if British or indeed American intelligence agencies wanted to see the retrieval of samples from Syria efficiently organised.

The ‘Military Speakers’ entry makes it clear that he has been actively engaged in such retrieval in Syria. However, it is in itself a deeply disturbing document, in that it suggests that one and the same individual has been employed in a critical ‘intelligence’ function – ensuring the safe recovery of adequate samples with a proper ‘chain of custody’ – and what might be called a ‘strategic communications’ (‘StratCom’) or ‘perception management’ role.

For one thing, his company, ‘Secure Bio’, which according to the ‘Military Speakers’ entry has ‘an impressive list of blue chip clients globally and look after 90% of the World’s media operating in Syria from a CBRN resilience perspective’, is shown by [Companies House records](#) as having gone into voluntary liquidation in June 2015. The documentation, moreover, raises real questions as to whether it was ever very much more than a front to create an impression of independence, obscuring the links between de Bretton-Gordon and the British government.

Moreover, the provision of ‘CBRN resilience’ to the MSM in Syria turns out to have been involved with a dual role, where media organisations collaborated with him in the retrieval of samples, while he was a kind of ‘go-to’ consultant very actively involved in shaping what in ‘StratCom’ terms is called the ‘narrative’.

Among other things, we learn that de Bretton-Gordon has ‘reported with the BBC on some of the very high profile chemical attacks.’ And we further learn that he has ‘worked with US networks and British newspapers to smuggle chemical samples out of Syria for verification in UK and France.’

So, it seems, we have a world of cosy collusion. Formerly one of the most senior CBRN experts in NATO, and probably still acting on behalf of the British government, de Bretton-Gordon is now treated as an independent expert by the MSM, while collaborating with parts of it in the exciting business of retrieving samples from Syria.

And we have Colonel de Bretton-Gordon’s own word for it that British scientists – who would necessarily have been those at Porton Down – tested samples from various incidents in Syria.

What de Bretton-Gordon has had to say about two incidents in which he acknowledges having been involved in the retrieval of samples is of a great interest, not least for the light it shows on his collaboration with the BBC – and I will return to this in a subsequent post. In evaluating and developing Hersh’s accounts, however, what are most interesting are reports of tests carried out at Porton Down on two sets of samples for which de Bretton-Gordon has not acknowledged responsibility.

Of particular significance is [a report on 22 March 2013 in the ‘Times’](#), by Tom Coghlan and Michael Evans, headlined ‘MI6 tests smuggled Syria soil for nerve agent.’

It opened ‘Government scientists at Porton Down are examining a soil sample smuggled out of Syria after a suspected nerve gas attack on rebels in the country’s civil war.’ The ‘suspected nerve gas attack’ had occurred three days earlier at Khan Al-Asal, near Aleppo – and the victims were, indisputably, on the government side.

The sample was said to have been obtained in a ‘covert mission involving MI6.’ This would, obviously, be an appropriate description if in fact Colonel de Bretton-Gordon had organised its retrieval on behalf of that organisation. A critical point, however, is that the then head of MI6, Sir John Sawers, whose view of Ghouta as a missed opportunity I quoted at the start of this post, must have been familiar with the test results on the ‘soil’ sample from Khan Al-Asal and samples from later incidents.

Also easy to track down, and crucially important, is unambiguous evidence that the British obtained their own ‘environmental’ samples from Ghouta. On 6 September 2013, a [report in the ‘Telegraph’](#) appeared, headlined ‘Syria crisis: UK had secret sarin samples before MPs voted’, which explained that:

British scientists were examining material tainted with sarin from the site of the Damascus attack but had not completed results when MPs voted to stay out of a strike on Syria, the Telegraph has learned.

That ‘environmental’ samples had been obtained from Ghouta and tested positive for sarin had in fact been loudly proclaimed by David Cameron when he arrived in St. Petersburg for the G20 summit the previous day. The samples had, according to the ‘Telegraph’, been obtained by the British themselves – and had been transported through Cyprus.

To ‘ “blast” Assad off the planet’ ...

Among the places where de Bretton-Gordon regularly aired his views was the ‘Brown Moses Blog’, run by Eliot Higgins, before he opened ‘Bellingcat.’ Some remarks from [a December 2013 post](#) entitled ‘A Chemical Weapons Specialist on Syria’s Chemical Weapons Transport Issues’ are of very great interest:

Some see Assad’s use of Sarin in Ghouta on 21 Aug 13 as a brilliant ‘ruse of war’. Initially it was believed, [and by the Opposition, most of them] that the US was going to ‘blast’ Assad off the planet with Cruise Missiles around the 27 Aug 13; but we are now in a position where the International Community is being held to ransom by the Assad’s Chemical Weapons. And this is a position which I expect the Regime would like to proliferate, and this request for ‘undeliverable’ military hardware appears to be just that – A stalling tactic.

In the event, as I noted earlier, the completion of the destruction of the Syrian stocks of sarin ‘precursor’ was announced by the OPCW in mid-August 2014. As the original target date had been 30 June, and there were genuine problems in transporting the arsenal through a country engaged in civil war, there appears to be no reason whatsoever to suppose that a ‘stalling tactic’ was responsible for what turned out to be a quite minor delay.

So, simply by doing some ‘open source’ searches, we can establish a number of critical points, which bear on the claims made by Hersh. One is that – irrespective of whether or not he is accurate in claiming that Porton Down tested samples from Ghouta supplied by the Russians – they certainly tested samples provided by the British. Another is that they also tested samples from earlier small-scale incidents, and, crucially, a sample from that at Khan Al-Asal.

If however you read the reports I have quoted in the light of a basic awareness of the differences between ‘physiological’ and ‘environmental’ samples, it becomes clear that very odd things were happening.

It is suggested in the 22 March 'Times' report that if tests on the sample from Khan Al-Asal established that sarin had been used, that would in itself incriminate the Syrian government and justify action against it. Likewise, it is suggested in the 6 September 'Telegraph' report, and all other MSM reports of the testing of 'environmental' samples from Ghouta by Porton Down I have seen, that the fact it had been established that sarin had been used in itself incriminated the Syrian government.

On 1 September 2013, the [BBC had reported](#) the U.S. Secretary of State, John Kerry, explaining that 'hair and blood' samples obtained by the U.S. had 'tested positive for signatures of sarin'. And he continued by saying: 'So this case is building and this case will build.'

But this is a 'StratCom' device which is so ludicrous that it can only work because the MSM is totally uncritical. The fact that GC/MS testing shows the 'signature' of sarin in 'blood' samples is utterly irrelevant to the central point at issue, which is establishing who used the sarin. As the analysis of Appendix 7 of the UN/OPCW report by 'sasa wawa' brings out, ascertaining what compounds had and had not left their GC/MS 'signatures' in the 'environmental' samples could establish what Chulov describes as the 'particular properties' of the sarin, making it possible to assess who had used it.

In the light of what can be easily ascertained from 'open source' material about the testing of 'environmental' samples at Porton Down, however, the performance of Kerry, and others, looks even odder. It has long been clear that he and indeed everyone else interested had reason to know that, although the UN/OPCW team was not going to attribute responsibility, their test results would be available in short order and make it possible for this to be done.

What also now seems clear is that by the time Kerry made his statement, Sir John Sawers and others key figures in British intelligence must have known that 'environmental' samples collected by the British were already being tested at Porton Down, or if not would be tested shortly. Moreover, the testing at issue, according to the claims that were made by Cameron and others, was simply the basic GC/MS analysis required to identify the 'signature' of sarin in the samples, which could be done very quickly.

Precisely because substantial quantities of sarin had clearly been used in the incident, it is unlikely that there were no samples where intact sarin was present, as it was in many of those collected by the UN/OPCW team. This would not have been a case where the presence of the toxin had to be established by working back from 'Degradation Products.'

And further, if Sir John Sawers and his colleagues knew what was going on at Porton Down, it is overwhelmingly likely that their American colleagues also did. And one would have expected that such critically importance evidence would have been provided to political leaders on both sides of the Atlantic, including as well as David Cameron, John Kerry and, one would have thought, President Obama.

So hysterical accusations were being levelled at the Syrian government, in an attempt to engineer immediate air strikes, on the basis of irrelevant evidence, at a time when the people doing this really ought to have known that relevant evidence – tests on 'environmental' samples – would shortly become available.

When however it was acknowledged that this evidence had become available, the only use to which it was put was to vindicate the – irrelevant – conclusion that sarin had been used: nothing was said about what it had established, or might establish, about who had used it.

Moreover, while today Martin Chulov is taking an interest in the ‘peculiar properties’ of the sarin used at Ghouta as revealed in the tests on the ‘Cape Ray’, at the time it does not seem to have occurred to anybody in the MSM to ask what the tests carried out at Porton Down had or might establish about these. And then, the fact that the laboratory had tested ‘environmental’ samples then promptly vanished down an Orwellian ‘memory hole.’

The picture gets even more alarming if we look further at the chronology. The date when MPs ‘voted to stay out of a strike on Syria’ – when David Cameron, tried and failed to secure Commons support for British participation in air strikes – was 29 August. By this time, according to the ‘Telegraph’, even the analysis required to establish the presence of sarin in the samples had not been completed – and the fact that tests were being done was not announced until over a week later.

If the chronology given by de Bretton-Gordon to Eliot Higgins was right, according to the original expectations – apparently shared not simply by the ‘Opposition’ but by himself – the plans to “blast” Assad off the planet with Cruise missiles’ would have been put into operation a couple of days before.

Results from Porton Down exonerating him would have been of no more relevance to practical decision-making than a forensic report exonerating a murder suspect after he or she had been hanged or the lethal injection administered.

In relation to Khan Al-Asal, however, if Coghlan and Evans are to be believed, ‘environmental’ samples were already being tested by Porton Down a mere three days after the incident took place – although, precisely because the victims were on the government side, a ‘covert operation’ was needed to obtain them. An obvious question arises as to why the retrieval of samples from Ghouta, a site controlled by the insurgents, was so much slower than that from the earlier incident.

We have here, I suggest, part of a possible explanation of why there might have been collusion by General Dempsey and Porton Down scientists with the Russians, to ensure that tests on ‘environmental’ samples had a reasonable chance of being concluded before anyone had a chance to “blast” Assad off the planet.’

Before going on to look further at how Hersh developed his argument, it is worth noting that the protection of ‘sources and methods’ cannot be used to justify the failure to publish the results of the tests by Porton Down on the ‘environmental’ samples from Ghouta and earlier incidents, in particular Khan Al-Asal. As with the results of tests on the sarin ‘precursor’ destroyed on the ‘Cape Ray’, it has already been made public that the British obtained such samples, and the methods are common practice.

Moreover, the explanation which Hersh suggests for why the results of tests carried out on the Syrian arsenal have not been made public would also seem a plausible explanation for why those carried out at Porton Down have vanished down a kind of Orwellian ‘memory hole’. The most economical hypothesis is that they corroborated the conclusion that ‘kitchen sarin’ had been used. If they had not done, it seems likely that the results would have been trumpeted to the skies.

So the situation of Kerry, Cameron and others is really analogous to that of judges who wanted to have a murder suspect executed, when they not only knew, or ought to have known, that key forensic evidence was in the pipeline, but either knew, or ought to have known, that the forensic evidence already available suggested that he was innocent.

Holding the Commons in contempt.

This brings us to a central reason why, in the British context, the claims by Hersh are particularly explosive. In support of the unsuccessful attempt to secure the support of the Commons for air strikes in Syria already referred to David Cameron was able to present [an 'assessment' from the Joint Intelligence Committee](#), then chaired by Jon – now Sir Jon – Day.

According to the JIC there were 'no plausible alternative scenarios to regime responsibility' for Ghouta. Concluding his letter to Cameron, Day wrote:

There has been the closest possible cooperation with the Agencies in producing the JIC's assessment. We have also worked in concert with the US intelligence community and agree with the conclusions they have reached.

On 31 August, the 'Associated Press' [published a report](#) entitled 'Obama Changed Mind at 11th Hour on Syria, Overriding Top National Security Advisers (UPDATE: Obama About-Face Happened on Fri. Evening Walk).' It made crystal clear following David Cameron's example and seeking approval from Congress for air strikes 'wasn't even an option on the table' at first.

After his dramatic volte-face, announced to the generally deeply resistant 'top national security advisers' on the evening of 30 August, most of these appear to have been at pains to make clear that it had been against their wishes. On 15 September, the 'Wall Street Journal' [would publish a report](#) entitled 'Inside White House, a Head-Spinning Reversal on Chemical Weapons.' In this, as [a 'Washington Post' commentary](#) aptly noted, 'senior officials leak how they desperately tried to talk Obama out of his "head spinning reversal" on airstrikes and his decision to go to Congress.' What Hersh's account suggests is that Obama's decision to abruptly change course, against the wishes of most of his 'top national security advisers', resulted from General Dempsey presenting him with the test results from Porton Down. This would need to have been done by the afternoon of 30 August at the latest. So it is difficult to construct a chronology which does not generate a strong 'prima facie' case that, if the results from Porton Down existed, they would, and most certainly should, have been available to Jon Day and his colleagues by the time they produced their 'assessment'.

If this was so, then there would also be a strong 'prima facie' case that the document was, to use plain English, a bunch of lies intended to deceive the Commons and the British people. In the British system of government, this would constitute contempt of Parliament – something which used to be regarded as a very grave offence.

What would also be raised would be questions about the role of British politicians – then and now. Of particular interest here are [comments on the recent incident](#) by the Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson, including the statement that 'although we cannot yet be certain about what has happened, this bears all the hallmarks of an attack by the regime which has repeatedly used chemical weapons.'

As it happens, a key part of the grounds given in the 29 August 2013 JIC 'assessment' for concluding that Assad was responsible for Ghouta was that the committee had 'assessed previously that the Syrian regime used lethal CW on 14 occasions from 2012', so that a 'clear pattern of regime use has therefore been established.' And it further claimed that there was no 'credible evidence' to substantiate 'possession of CW by the opposition.'

If in fact the JIC were mendacious, an obvious question would arise as to the role of David Cameron. According to one possible interpretation, he might simply have been a gullible victim of a conspiracy by corrupt intelligence leaders, a puppet dancing on strings pulled by figures like Sir Jon Day and Sir John Sawers. Alternatively, of course, he could have been a co-conspirator with them. And, last but

hardly least, he could have been some bizarre combination of both. Moreover, it might well be the case that precisely the same questions would arise today about Boris Johnson.

What gives these questions more general relevance is that what Hersh's account suggests – and what can be shown from other evidence – is that Day was simply unjustified in claiming that the JIC were agreeing with the conclusions some kind of cohesive 'US intelligence community' had reached. The picture that emerges of the situation on the American side is of very deep divisions within the intelligence apparatus and military. What would follow, in essence, was that the leaders of its British counterpart were taking sides in very bitter arguments going on across the Atlantic.

Compounding the questions which need to be asked about the JIC 'assessment' is further evidence which emerged last year about the way in which the then Director National Intelligence, James Clapper, was hedging his bets. In [the long article entitled 'The Obama Doctrine'](#) which Jeffrey Goldberg published in the April 2016 edition of 'The Atlantic', it is explained that, some days before Obama's 'head-spinning reversal', Clapper specifically visited him to explain that the case against the Syrian government was not a 'slam dunk'.

The allusion to his predecessor George Tenet's notorious December 2002 assurance about the intelligence on Saddam's WMD had an obvious significance. Without wanting to go out on a limb in any way, Clapper was hedging his bets, in a manner that meant that if it came to light that the case against Assad was as dubious as that against Saddam had turned out to be, he would have an alibi. Large questions are obviously raised as to how, if Clapper had reservations, Day was prepared to assure Cameron and the Commons that the case against Assad was a 'slam dunk'.

And here, the way in which in which, following the 'Red Line and Rat Line' article, Hersh elaborated his picture of what he portrays as being in essence a revolt by elements in the intelligence and military apparatus of various countries against the prospect of a re-run of the Iraq fiasco is also extremely interesting. In [an article entitled 'Military to Military'](#) he published in January 2016, it was suggested that, starting in the autumn of 2013 – that is, shortly after Ghouta – a covert collaboration began, involving elements in the American, German, Israeli and Russian military apparatus. Its objective, according to Hersh, was to prevent the toppling of Assad by supplying intelligence to his army, to be 'used against the common enemy, Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamic State.'

There was no mention of any British role in this. However already in [an interview with Ilhan Tanir of the Turkish online news site 'Diken'](#) following the publication of the 'Red Line and Rat Line' article Hersh had stated, addressing the objection that the supposed Russian provenance of the samples meant that the test results could not have been trusted, that they had been looked at by a 'senior general' in Britain.

And then, [in an interview with Tariq Ali on the 'TeleSUR' site in August last year](#), Hersh named this figure as General Sir Peter Wall, then Chief of the General Staff.

What Hersh also suggested was that there had been a really top level 'Military to Military' collaboration behind the supplying of the results from Porton Down to Obama, in which Generals Dempsey and Wall had been partnered, at the Russian end, by a figure whom he describes as the 'chief general of the Russian Army.' If one puts the interview in the context of what he says in the 'Military to Military' article, it is clear that this can only be General Valery Gerasimov, whose title, like that of Sir Peter Wall, is Chief of the General Staff.

There is a difference here, in that in Britain the title means head of the Army, and there is a separate Chief of the Defence Staff, a position then occupied by General Sir David Richards, now Lord Richards. In Russia, by contrast, the Chief of the General Staff is the overall head of the Armed

Forces – including the GRU. But, at the least, this claim by Hersh would suggest that General Dempsey's reservations about the wisdom of the strategy being pursued in Syria by the American and British governments were shared by people right at the top of the British military.

It is, of course, a problem with such claims that they cannot be directly verified from the 'open source' evidence. And in itself the question of whether British intelligence chiefs and their political masters may have been in contempt of Parliament is of parochial British interest.

Some very suspect 'SIGINT'.

But, as often, a transnational comparison shows what happens in different countries in a new light. If one compares the JIC 'assessment' of 29 August 2013 with [the U.S. 'Government Assessment'](#) issued the following day, there are a several salient contrasts.

One – which was stressed in [the memorandum to Obama entitled 'Is Syria a Trap?'](#) issued on 6 September by the 'Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity' group, is that precisely what the American document is not is a formal presentation of a consensus reached by the U.S. 'intelligence community.' How far this reflected Clapper's desire to avoid committing himself, how far the fact that he might have faced a serious 'peasants' revolt' had he done what Day did, is not clear. Be that as it may, the end result is that the 'Government Assessment' was issued from the Office of the Press Secretary at the White House, not by Clapper.

And there is a further very sharp contrast. While the British document asserts that the intelligence establishes that Syrian government responsibility for Ghouta is a 'slam dunk', or something very close to it, it provides minimal details. In particular, it contains no mention whatsoever either of 'SIGINT' evidence or that Porton Down either had or were going to test samples from the site. By contrast, the 'Government Assessment' discusses both kinds of evidence.

However, a close inspection of the ways in which it does this illustrates very clearly that this is a 'StratCom' exercise, designed for 'perception management' – not a serious intelligence analysis.

Here again the 'Who Attacked Ghouta?' investigation provides an invaluable complement to Hersh's work. And the possibility that 'sasa wawa' is actually a former employee of Unit 8200 is of great interest, in a number of ways. This possibility emerged with the appearance, late last year, of what is clearly [a systematised version](#) of material accumulated on the 'Who Attacked Ghouta?' investigation on a site entitled 'Rootclaim', launched by an Israeli technology entrepreneur called Saar Wilf. The declared purpose of this site is to investigate 'issues that interest society', by combining 'openly crowdsourced evidence and claims' with 'proven Bayesian inference models.' Such a model, the site explains 'breaks down highly complex issues into small questions that are each answerable by humans, and then uses these answers to reach mathematically indisputable conclusions.'

As it happens, one can easily establish from 'open source' evidence – see for example a [2009 piece by Amity Shlaes](#) on the 'Council on Foreign Relations' site – that Saar Wilf is a veteran of Unit 8200, the Israeli equivalent of the American NSA and the British GCHQ.

Obviously, the coincidence of initials does not establish that 'sasa wawa' and 'Saar Wilf' are one and the same. In one sense, moreover, the identity of its architect is of secondary relevance to assessing the 'Who Attacked Ghouta?' material. It is of course perfectly possible that 'sasa wawa' was in possession of 'secret intelligence', but the whole exercise was constructed so as to rely purely on

'open source' evidence, and not only the materials used but the reasoning based on them are set out in great detail, so that anyone can attempt to refute them.

However, the fact that 'sasa wawa' clearly writes in the manner of someone who was trained in the methodologies of 'SIGINT' is relevant to [another of the opening posts on his site](#) – which was in effect a demolition of the 'Government Assessment' and contained devastating criticisms of its use of 'SIGINT'.

As it happens, Bayesian inference is a technique which would have a clear place in making it possible to analyse – sometimes in real time – the mass of evidence produced by 'SIGINT', and integrate it with other material. And this is relevant to the ways in which the investigations of 'sasa wawa' and Hersh are complementary.

In his [initial article on 'Ghouta'](#), published in the 'LRB' under the title 'Whose sarin?' in December 2013, Hersh spent a good deal of time arguing that the claims about 'SIGINT' in the 'Assessment' were fatally flawed.

Because they have ignored the 'Who Attacked Ghouta?' material, critics of his arguments have missed the fact that his these had already been corroborated, weeks before he published the article, by the demonstration that the approach used was not that which would be followed by serious analysts interested in finding the truth. As this bears upon issues to do with the integrity of the NSA and GCHQ which are been brought to the fore by current claims about their role in assisting the opponents of President Trump, they are of great intrinsic interest – and I will return to them in a subsequent post.

For the moment, however, I want to return to the crucial question of the results of tests on samples.

In the discussion on the ACLOS site to which I have linked, there is a summary of the conclusions of the analysis of Appendix 7 of the UN/OPCW report which 'sasa wawa' produced right at the start of his investigation, and then refined. This explains precisely why it 'meshes' with Hersh's claim that the test results from Porton Down showed 'kitchen sarin' had been used. In relation to the GC/MS analysis, the critical points have to do with the presence of 'by-Products', and the absence, among the 'Other interesting chemicals', of 'stabilisers':

Hersh's story that the chemical profile of the Ghouta sarin showed it to be kitchen sarin without stabilizers is corroborated by the limited information available in the OPCW reports and assembled by sasa wawa on the [WhoGhouta blog](#): the sarin contained no stabilizers, contained ethyl groups indicating impure low-quality reagents, and contained hexafluorophosphate indicating that the synthesis started with elemental phosphorus or phosphorus trichloride and that intermediate reaction products were not purified at each step. Syria's sarin synthesis is known to have started from trimethyl phosphite. Syria procured hundreds of tonnes of trimethyl phosphite from the UK and India in the 1980s, and still held 60 tonnes in stock in November 2013, when they declared their stockpile to OPCW.

The precise details here become very relevant, when one comes to look at the 'StratCom' operations designed to counter the argument that the low quality of the sarin established that it could not have come from Syrian government arsenals – which as I shall show in a later post, were an incoherent mess.

A central point however is that, for a 'poor man's deterrent' it is critical to maximise both toxicity and durability. Buying trimethyl phosphite, in which the early stages of the synthesis from basic chemicals have already been done, and the 'by-Products' purified, is a natural means of achieving this.

So also is the use of ‘binary munitions’, in which the methylphosphonyl difluoride would actually be mixed with isopropanol, to form sarin, in flight. In some of the analysis by ‘sasa wawa’, it appears as though these were presented as an alternative to ‘stabilisers’ – which seems to be wrong.

Obviously, matters would be definitively clarified, if the test results on the samples from the materials destroyed on the ‘Cape Ray’ were released. However, a highly disturbing feature of the UN/OPCW report is that its authors appear to have wanted to create the impressions that ‘stabilisers’ had been found, when they had not been.

On 16 September, [a report appeared in the ‘Washington Post’](#) entitled ‘The U.N. chemical weapons report is pretty damning for Assad.’ Commenting on this in his discussion of the UN report, ‘sasa wawa’ wrote:

I noticed some reporters are stating that the UN report includes evidence that the sarin was of military-grade. Since I read the report numerous times and had no recollection of that, I tried to figure out the source and tracked it to the following sentence (Page 4):

“In addition, other relevant chemicals, such as stabilizers are indicated and discussed in Appendix 7”

This was then quoted as:

The U.N. investigators analyzed 30 samples, which they found contained not just sarin but also “relevant chemicals, such as stabilizers.”

Which seems like a clear distortion of the original meaning.

Furthermore, a detailed analysis of Appendix 7 indicates there were no stabilizers found, and that the sarin was not manufactured professionally.

So, in the view of ‘sasa wawa’, although the journalists had misread the report, they had been encouraged to do so – and indeed, an MSM correspondent could not be expected to know what chemicals are used as ‘stabilisers’, and check whether they appear in the ‘Other interesting chemicals’ listed. What this suggests is that DF in the Syrian arsenals did contain ‘stabilisers’, and that the UN/OPCW team were trying to obscure the very telling evidence provided by the absence of any traces of these in the samples they tested.

Moreover, this was only one part of the indictment against both the UN, and the OPCW, which ‘sasa wawa’ ended up making. In [an interview in November 2013](#), describing the evolution of his view of Ghouta, he remarked:

A big disappointment was when I found the huge mistake in the UN’s calculation of the Zamalka rocket trajectory (Impact site 1 [here](#)), which later turned out to be only one of many mistakes (more [here](#)). If the UN can’t be relied on to provide reliable information, we’re in bad shape.

So it would seem that, if the Russians are not prepared to accept that a UN/OPCW team will necessarily give an accurate and unbiased assessment of the evidence in relation to the recent incident, they have very good grounds.

Missing – the ‘gold standard’ of proof.

What however neither Hersh nor ‘sasa wawa’ have explored is the evidence that Porton Down had tested ‘environmental’ samples from incidents prior to Ghouta. If however one looks back at the MSM coverage from the time, in the light both of the discussions of the ‘SIGINT’ by Hersh and ‘sasa wawa’, and the materials I have produced about tests carried out at Porton Down, a very alarming picture emerges.

As 'sasa wawa' notes, the claims about 'SIGINT' had featured prominently in an article by Noah Schachtman in 'Foreign Policy' magazine on 27 August 2013, entitled '[Exclusive: Intercepted Calls Prove Syrian Army Used Nerve Gas, U.S. Spies Say.](#)' This opened:

Last Wednesday, in the hours after a horrific chemical attack east of Damascus, an official at the Syrian Ministry of Defense exchanged panicked phone calls with a leader of a chemical weapons unit, demanding answers for a nerve agent strike that killed more than 1,000 people. Those conversations were overheard by U.S. intelligence services, The Cable has learned.

Later in the article, Schachtman wrote that:

U.S. spy services still have not acquired the evidence traditionally considered to be the gold standard in chemical weapons cases: soil, blood, and other environmental samples that test positive for reactions with nerve agent. That's the kind of proof that America and its allies processed from earlier, small-scale attacks that the White House described in equivocal tones, and declined to muster a military response to in retaliation.

There is an ongoing debate within the Obama administration about whether to strike Assad immediately – or whether to allow United Nations inspectors to try and collect that proof before the bombing begins. On Tuesday, White House Press Secretary Jay Carney called the work of that team “redundant ... because it is clearly established already that chemical weapons have been used on a significant scale.”

This is clearly a 'StratCom' operation. Claims about 'SIGINT' which are actually highly dubious are being used to obscure the fact that the relevant forensic evidence is not available. Moreover, just as much as Martin Chulov, Noah Schachtman appears unaware of the crucial distinction between 'physiological' and 'environmental' samples – apparently suggesting that 'blood' belongs in the latter category.

What however happens, if one looks back at the earlier report to which Schachtman links? It turns out to be [one he himself co-authored on 14 June](#), the day following [an announcement](#) by Benjamin Rhodes, the Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications.

According to this, 'our intelligence community assesses that the Assad regime has used chemical weapons, including the nerve agent sarin, on a small scale against the opposition multiple times in the last year.' And it also explained that: 'We have no reliable, corroborated reporting to indicate that the opposition in Syria has acquired or used chemical weapons.' Subsequently, Rhodes explains that:

The assessment is further supported by laboratory analysis of physiological samples obtained from a number of individuals, which revealed exposure to sarin. Each positive result indicates that an individual was exposed to sarin, but it does not tell us how or where the individuals were exposed or who was responsible for the dissemination.

As I have noted, a bizarre feature of the claims made by John Kerry, and others, about the significance of tests on 'physiological' samples is that they are patently intended to suggest that establishing the present of 'signatures' of sarin by GC/MS analysis establishes a 'slam dunk' case against the Syrian government. The point of the earlier report co-authored by Schachtman is quite patently to produce reasons why, despite the acknowledgement that tests on 'physiological' samples cannot establish who was responsible, they can be taken as doing just that.

At the start of his account, Rhodes explained that: 'Following the assessment made by our intelligence community in April, the President directed the intelligence community to seek credible and corroborated information to build on that assessment and establish the facts with some degree of certainty.'

That earlier 'assessment' came in the form of [a letter](#) dated 25 April from Miguel E. Rodriguez, Director, Office of Legislative Affairs, to Carl Levin, Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee. It had also referred to sarin use and 'physiological' samples.

This however followed pressure from 'allies' of the United States to do more to support the Syrian insurgents, which was discussed in [an 18 April report in the Washington Post](#). According to this: *In letters to U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, the two European powers said **soil samples**, [my emphasis] witness interviews and opposition sources support charges that nerve agents were used in and around the cities of Aleppo, Homs and possibly Damascus, said the officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the matter.*

The European reports are in part aimed at countering accusations by the Syrian government that opposition forces had used chemical weapons during fighting in the town of Khan al-Asal near Aleppo on March 19, killing 26 people, including regime troops. Syrian rebels have said that government forces used chemical weapons in the incident.

So here, rather than the 'physiological' samples referred to in the all three 'assessments' produced in Washington, there is a clear and unambiguous claim about 'soil' samples. As we know, Porton Down had tested samples from the Khan Al-Asal incident – with the results having, apparently, fallen down an Orwellian 'memory hole'. This reinforces the urgent imperative to see them produced publicly.

In reconstructing what was happening at this time, it is interesting to look at the coverage in the Israeli press. From [a report in the 'Times of Israel'](#), we learn that, speaking at a security conference on 23 April, Brigadier-General Itai Brun, head of the Research and Analysis Division at the IDF Military Intelligence Directorate, had claimed that the Syrian government had used sarin 'on more than one occasion, including a specific attack on March 19.'

In that report – published on the same day as the initial U.S. 'assessment' – 'an expert on Syrian chemical weapons', Dr Dany Shoham of the 'Begin Sadat Center for Strategic Studies', was quoted suggesting that chemical weapons might have been used at two incidents on 19 March, near Damascus and Aleppo. And the article continued: 'Soil samples, Shoham said, which have reportedly been obtained by [Britain and France](#), could provide somewhere between 60-100 percent indication of a nerve agent.'

Whether it was claimed that France had obtained 'soil' samples is not actually made clear by the 18 April 'Washington Post' report already quoted, to which the link takes one. However, by contrast to the JIC 'assessment' and the U.S. 'Government Assessment', the [corresponding French document](#), published on 2 September 2013, does mention 'environmental' samples. From the translation to which 'sasa wawa' links – see his [9 November 2013 post](#) 'Response to Dan Kaszeta's Chemical Analysis':

French competent services have obtained samples either biomedical (blood, urine), environmental (ground) or material (munitions debris), taken on victims or on the sites during the attacks in Saraqeb (April 29, 2013) and Jobar (mid-April 2013). Our analyses have confirmed the use of sarin.

As it happens, there is strong reason to suppose that the 'environmental' samples in question were retrieved by Colonel de Bretton-Gordon, working in collaboration with the BBC. (As a start, on this 'can of worms', to which I will return, read the account given of his activities in retrieving samples

in [an article of his](#) entitled 'Only a no-fly zone can curb chemical attacks in Syria', which the 'Guardian' published in April 2015.)

And this brings us back to the critical point. We now have clear reason to believe that Porton Down tested 'environmental' samples from Khan Al-Asal, Ghouta, and Saraqeb, a probability that they tested samples from Sheikh Maqsoud, and also a possibility that they did so at the incident near Damascus on 19 March to which Dr Shoham referred, which was at Uteibah.

But the history is of absolutely all of these tests vanishing down the 'memory hole'. Moreover, given that there are so many easily accessible accounts of these in the MSM, one has to say that this whole sorry history provides a spectacular display of the capacity for 'crimestop' of journalists working for it. There is no reason as far as I can see to think that Martin Chulov, for instance, has the least curiosity about what samples were tested from these incidents or what the tests established.

In the early stages, moreover, it was simply taken for granted that if the 'environmental' samples tested positive for sarin, that in itself established that the Syrian government must be responsible. Subsequently, they were no longer mentioned, and by the time of the 'assessments' on Ghouta, the American approach was to focus on 'physiological' samples, while the British simply forgot about samples altogether, and the French did mention 'environmental' samples. It appears that the 'StratCom' operations in different countries were imperfectly coordinated.

The natural conclusion is that the evidence from the 'environmental' samples did not fit the 'narrative'. In this case, the claim – whether made in the JIC 'assessment' or by Boris Johnson, or in the repeated claims on the other side of the Atlantic – that there was clear evidence of repeated use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government would stink of disinformation.

The men from the (Russian) Ministry.

There is then one further set of tests we know to have been done, of which the results are not in the public domain – but a summary is. And this bears upon the question I raised at the outset about 'chain of custody.'

Considerations of 'chain of custody' would become irrelevant, in one specific set of circumstances. If laboratory A had tested 'environmental' samples from a given incident, and they were confident of the 'chain of custody', and they were supplied with results from laboratory B, and these tallied, without that laboratory having had any advance knowledge of those from laboratory A, 'chain of custody' considerations could not matter.

As it happens, a rapid scrutiny of 'open source' material suggests that precisely this may well have happened. The counterpart in Russia of Porton Down in Britain and the Edgewood Center and Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in the US – the laboratory certified by the OPCW for competence in chemical weapons matters – is the Military Science Centre of the Ministry of Defence in Moscow. Part of this is the 'Laboratory for Chemical and Analytical Control', which at the time was headed by Professor Igor Rybalchenko.

Unsurprisingly, the Russian government sent the UN an analysis from this laboratory of what purported to be 'environmental' samples from Khan Al-Asal. These, it was claimed, showed that the toxin used was 'cottage industry' sarin. The then Russian Ambassador to the U.N., the late Vitaly Churkin, gave [a press conference announcing this](#) on 9 July. An update of the supposed results was posted by the Russian Foreign Ministry on 4 September, and [appeared on the London Embassy website](#) the following day.

The complete document would certainly have been passed to Porton Down for assessment, and indeed the results might well have been familiar to the scientists there substantially before. Unsurprisingly, dealing with a field where knowledge and techniques are constantly developing, the OPCW has an ongoing programme of meetings which senior staff from the laboratories it certifies regularly attend.

At a meeting of its Temporary Working Group on the Convergence of Chemistry and Biology of the OPCW Scientific Advisory Board on 3-4 April 2013, both Dr Robin Black, head of the 'Detection Laboratory' at Porton Down, and Professor Rybalchenko, are [listed among the participants](#).

In the current neo-McCarthyite climate in the United States and Britain, any contact with Russians appears to be regarded as a matter for horror and for shock. One does not however need to suppose any compromising action whatsoever on the part of Dr Black, if one contemplates the possibility that, as it were, Professor Rybalchenko could have given him an envelope containing a report on the results of the tests from Khan Al-Asal.

At this point, however, one comes back to the nature of GC/MS analysis. If the kind of analytical task one faces depends upon identifying the 'signatures' of compounds of whose existence one is not aware in advance, it may both require great skill and ingenuity, and take a long time, particularly if a lot of other puzzling compounds are present. (For a graphic description of the kind of problems analysts may face, look at the apologia of the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory for the temporary loss of their OPCW certification.)

If however the analysts know in advance what 'signatures' ought to be present, and which absent, it need take very little time. This is why it is surprising that it took so long for the fact that Porton Down had identified sarin in the samples retrieved by the British from Ghouta to be made public.

It is also why, at whatever point they were provided with results from the Military Science Centre tests, it might have been easy for the Porton Down analysts to check whether the Russian claims were corroborated by their analysis of their own tests. Even if it had taken the analysis of samples is difficult and time-consuming, once the 'signatures' of relevant compounds have been identified, checking whether they are present in other samples need take very little.

As it happens, an article by Michael Evans in the 'Times' on 13 April – cited and analysed in the ACLOS discussion already referred to – suggests that by this time Porton Down had identified that a chemical weapon had been used, but was not clear whether it was sarin.

It may be relevant here that the Russians claimed that their analysis of the samples from Khan Al-Asal identified both sarin and a related, but much weaker, toxic 'organic phosphate' called diisopropyl fluorophosphate, or DFP.

The 22 March 'Times' report appears to suggest that a single sample had been retrieved from Khan Al-Asal. Even however if they had more, given that the soil they were testing had been retrieved by a 'covert operation' from a site in government hands, it would be eminently possible that it would have been far less satisfactory than what the Russians had obtained, and contained no intact sarin. So Porton Down could have had difficulties working back from the 'by-Products' to the precise 'organic phosphates' used.

It would also be possible that, as the analysis had shown that the sarin identified could only be of the 'cottage industry' variety, scientists at Porton Down were reluctant to see their identification of it used

in a patently disingenuous 'StratCom' operation designed to produce a 'casus belli' against the Syrian government.

What however seems very likely, given the extraordinarily minute quantities of compounds which GC/MS analysis can now identify, is that Porton Down would have been able to ascertain whether there was a sufficient match between their results and those from the Russian laboratory to know whether the latter were accurate. If the results did not match, there would have been reason to suspect fraud.

If they did, then they would have had every reason to say that the claims made at Churkin's press conference were accurate.

With this in mind, we are I think in a position to hazard a reconstruction of why Porton Down, General Dempsey, and President Obama might have been prepared to accept as accurate the results of tests on sample provided by the GRU. And we may also be in a position to propose a solution to a puzzle about Hersh's accounts.

A key section of the 'Red Line and Rat Line' article, in which the source is a 'former intelligence official' reads as follows:

The former intelligence official said the Russian who delivered the sample to the UK was 'a good source – someone with access, knowledge and a record of being trustworthy'. After the first reported uses of chemical weapons in Syria last year, American and allied intelligence agencies 'made an effort to find the answer as to what if anything, was used – and its source', the former intelligence official said. 'We use data exchanged as part of the Chemical Weapons Convention. The DIA's baseline consisted of knowing the composition of each batch of Soviet-manufactured chemical weapons. But we didn't know which batches the Assad government currently had in its arsenal. Within days of the Damascus incident we asked a source in the Syrian government to give us a list of the batches the government currently had. This is why we could confirm the difference so quickly.'

The process hadn't worked as smoothly in the spring, the former intelligence official said, because the studies done by Western intelligence 'were inconclusive as to the type of gas it was. The word "sarin" didn't come up ...'

In [an interview given to the 'Democracy Now!' site](#) shortly following the publication of the article, however, Hersh suggested that the tests suggested that what was at issue was 'kitchen sarin' – and also pointed specifically to the lack of 'stabilisers'. In [his discussion of the 'Red Line and Rat Line' article](#), 'sasa wawa' explained the change by suggesting that the information about the tests had, at the outset, 'got distorted on its way to Hersh's source.'

But, as we have seen, the word 'sarin' had come up in the spring. A more plausible explanation, I suggest, is that Hersh's sources – very likely in part to protect those at Porton Down who had played such a crucial, and also honourable, role in the whole operation – wanted to suggest that the collaboration with the Russians had developed spontaneously, after Ghouta.

And when, in the 'TeleSUR' interview, Hersh brings in both General Wall and General Gerasimov, he portrays their collaboration as the result of three people who had first met as young subalterns across the Cold War divide in Germany in the dying days of that conflict renewing contact years later.

A more plausible explanation of what happened, I think, comes if one develops Hersh's claims. In the weeks leading up to Ghouta, the Defense Intelligence Agency did not merely possess the ample

evidence he suggests they had acquired about the efforts of Al-Nusra to acquire chemical weapons and their success in so doing.

In addition to this, there were test results from Porton Down, which established that both at Khan Al-Asal and other incidents the sarin used had the characteristics identified in the Military Science Centre report. But this was evidence which other elements in the 'intelligence communities', both in the United States and Britain, were determined to ignore.

Accordingly, General Dempsey, and others, had every reason to anticipate a fresh 'false flag'. And they also had every reason to suspect that, unless drastic steps were taken, the forensic evidence required to expose it would not arrive until too late.

So a natural hypothesis is that the only possible way of frustrating this act of gross injustice – and also, as I shall argue in a moment, gross criminal lunacy – was to ensure that 'environmental' samples could be brought from a different source. And the only possible source, obviously, was the GRU.

Contingency planning, obviously, could well have been based on the possibility that in a new 'false flag', there would be a dramatic upward move in quality. In that event, something like the more sophisticated analytical process that Hersh originally suggested had taken place might have been required. In the event, all that was required was to confirm that the sarin used at Ghouta was simply a somewhat improved version of the 'kitchen sarin' used in earlier incidents, a process which could be done very rapidly indeed. Again, the 'signatures' of stabilisers would have been absent, and those of a range of 'by-Products' present.

What however Hersh's sources may have wanted to obscure was quite precisely the fact that essentially Porton Down was doing was redoing earlier analyses, because this would have let the cat out of the bag, in relation to the fact that the collaboration with the Russians had started much earlier.

Some serious sanity, from sometime spooks.

One can now come back full circle, to the events of the days immediately following Ghouta. As some of us who were part of the SST 'committee of correspondence' at the time will well remember, central claims made by Hersh were actually anticipated in the memorandum addressed to President Obama entitled 'Is Syria a Trap?' which was produced by the 'Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity' group on 6 September 2013, to which I linked earlier.

Over the years, the signatories of the VIPS memoranda have varied, but on this occasion they included, as well as Philip Giraldi and Larry Johnson, Colonel Lang.

That its authors were acting as a conduit for currently serving members of the intelligence services was made explicit at the outset. It explained that 'some of our former co-workers' were telling its authors that 'the most reliable intelligence' showed that Assad was not responsible for Ghouta, and that 'British intelligence officials also know this.'

Having noted that their sources confirmed that there had been a chemical incident causing fatalities at Ghouta, the VIPS authors continued:

They insist, however, that the incident was not the result of an attack by the Syrian Army using military-grade chemical weapons from its arsenal. That is the most salient fact, according to CIA officers working on the Syria issue. They tell us that CIA Director John Brennan is perpetrating a pre-Iraq-War-type fraud on members of Congress, the media, the public and perhaps even you.

The phrase 'military-grade', which we have seen surfacing already, is in itself very much a 'salient fact'. So the memorandum provided a public indication that evidence that the material used at Ghouta was 'kitchen sarin' had already been supplied to American intelligence. If Hersh is right, this would have been on the basis of the tests on samples supplied by the GRU done at Porton Down.

The VIPS memorandum also claimed that there was 'a growing body of evidence from numerous sources in the Middle East, mostly affiliated with the Syrian opposition and its supporters, providing a strong circumstantial case that the August 21 chemical incident was a pre-planned provocation by the Syrian opposition and its Saudi and Turkish supporters. The aim is reported to have been to create the kind of incident that would bring the United States into the war.'

Among the information they claimed to have received, were clear indication of the involvement of sections of American intelligence in this 'pre-planned provocation':

At operations coordinating meetings at Antakya, attended by senior Turkish, Qatari and U.S. intelligence officials as well as senior commanders of the Syrian opposition, the Syrians were told that the bombing would start in a few days. Opposition leaders were ordered to prepare their forces quickly to exploit the U.S. bombing, march into Damascus, and remove the Bashar al-Assad government.

This, it may be noted, 'meshes' neatly with the apparent anticipation of most of the 'Opposition,' and apparently himself that the United States was going to "blast" Assad off the planet with Cruise Missiles around the 27 Aug' described by Colonel de Bretton-Gordon.

Of course, the question as to there was collusion in exploiting a 'pre-planned provocation' after the event on the part of leading figures in American – and one can assume British – intelligence is distinct from that of whether there was collusion in preparing such an event. However, large questions are clearly raised about the possibility of earlier collusion that need answering. And if indeed the 'false flag' was prepared with involvement of at the least the Saudis, Qataris, and Turks, one can also understand how the possibility of a dramatic increase in the quality of the sarin could have seemed a real one.

What makes the questions involved so serious is that any acquisition of chemical weapons capabilities by jihadists clearly poses longer term dangers to all kinds of people – including ourselves. In relation Syria, in addition to a real question as to whether key figures in the West had an extraordinarily complacent view of the risks involved in tolerating the production of chemical weapons by jihadists, there is an even more glaring problem relating to the risks involved in attempting to 'blast' Assad off the planet with Cruise missiles'.

This may have been an outcome to which Colonel de Bretton-Gordon looked forward with eager anticipation. However, in Hersh's discussions, there are graphic descriptions of how preoccupied General Dempsey was with these risks.

But, in a case we seem to be overly dependent upon the views of sceptics within the American intelligence and military apparatus, it seems sensible to turn to a leading American academic expert on Syria, Joshua Landis. In an interview published on the 'TPM' site in January, Landis noted that, by the time of Ghouta, the 'radical militias were the dominant militias', and went on to paint a graphic picture of the chaos that might have been unleashed, had those who wanted air strikes against the Syrian government had their way:

You would've had 1000 different militias grabbing chemical weapons from the various places they were hidden and stored around Syria. The whole Middle East would be a giant silo for sarin gas and nerve agents of every kind! It would've been a disaster.

What might have happened, had only a small fraction of the 581 metric tonnes of sarin 'precursor' destroyed on board the 'Cape Ray' become available to jihadists who wanting to strike at, say, London, Paris, St. Petersburg, or Washington – and also Tel Aviv – is not a pleasant thought.

The notion that a collaboration with the Russians which produced a peaceful destruction of the arsenal was worse than the likely alternative does seem quite extraordinary. It may also be part of the explanation of why a former employee of Unit 8200 may have had reservations about the enthusiasm of many of his compatriots for 'air strikes' on Syria in response to Ghouta.

Not simply from Hersh's 'Military to Military' article, but from other evidence, it is clear that there are elements within the Israeli intelligence and military apparatus who think that the kind of approach taken by Brigadier-General Brun is really not very bright.

One bright moment in the generally dispiriting coverage of Syria, and Russia, in the 'Guardian' is a December 2015 article by the former head of the Israeli National Security Council, Giora Eiland. Its argument is well summarised in the headline: 'Russia is right: fighting Isis is the priority for us all; Moscow foresaw the threat posed by Isis and knows that only a united front can defeat it. Turkey's motives are murkier, however.'

At the court of the Queen of Hearts

Unfortunately, in the wake of the recent incident in Idlib province, and the response to it of President Trump, hopes for the kind of cooperation advocated by Eiland have very sharply faded.

To understand arguments both about that incident, and the President's response to it, I am suggesting, it is first necessary to grasp the way in which Western élites and the MSM which now forms an uncritical part of them have become co-conspirators in 'StratCom' operations.

It is particularly ironic that Martin Chulov, with whose reporting I began this post, won the 2015 'Orwell Prize' for journalism. It is even more ironic to see a report in the 'Guardian' of the erection outside New Broadcasting House of a statue to Orwell, with the quotation on the wall behind: 'If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear.' If Orwell was alive today, he would clearly have to recognise that some central premises of the nightmare vision of 'Ingsoc' he produced in '1984' were simply wrong. To ensure slavish conformity, it is not necessary that people be kept in a state of grinding poverty.

And to ensure that nobody – or hardly anybody – in the 'Ministry of Truth' is tempted by 'thoughtcrime', the 'memory hole', down which previous versions of the 'Times' are regularly dropped, to be burnt, is not necessary. Equally superfluous are the terrors of 'Room 101'.

Such crude measures are not required to prevent journalists like Chulov – or contemporary 'Times' reporters like Tom Coghlan – paying any attention to what people like Hersh, or 'sasa wawa', have to say. And it does not matter that Google searches can easily turn up reports from only weeks ago that contradict what is being claimed today – they simply pass unnoticed. In the case of Coghlan and his colleague Michael Evans, indeed, it seems that there is little prospect of their remembering what even they themselves wrote a few months ago.

As I hope I have successfully brought out, the days when either the BBC or the 'Guardian' told power-holders in Western society 'what they do not want to hear' are long gone. And indeed, if there were awards for 'crimestop', Chulov and many other 'Guardian' and BBC journalists, along with many figures in the Murdoch papers and indeed practically any MSM outlet one cares to mention, on both sides of the Atlantic, would be good candidates.

In a perfected state of 'Ingsoc', what is required to maintain conformity is not violence – merely the sense that to listen to dissenting views would be a kind of social solecism.

The origins of the bizarre state of mind which has taken over both very large sections of Western élites and almost all the MSM is, obviously, too large a subject to go into here.

However, some remarks at the end of a study by Joshua Levine of Operation Fortitude, the deception operation by which the British to seize the Germans into thinking that the D-Day invasion would come in the Pas de Calais, seem to the point. Having described how the 'underground world of fakery and artifice' created by British intelligence duped their German counterparts, Levine harks back to Lewis Carroll's 'Alice in Wonderland':

It was a world in which the Germans wanted to believe. They came down the rabbit hole eagerly enough. Once inside, they rarely questioned the curious surroundings. And even when they did, they showed little desire to wake from their dream.

A bizarre feature of our current situation is that Western élites seem to have taken themselves down a 'rabbit hole' into a very curious kind of 'Wonderland'.

While the fantasy world created by Lewis Carroll is in part whimsical, it is also characterised by by apparently random and brutal violence. Describing the reactions of the King and Queen of Hearts to the Cheshire Cat, in 'Alice in Wonderland', he writes: 'The Queen had only one way of settling all difficulties, great or small. "Off with his head!" she said, without even looking round.' In the trial of the Knave of Hearts, with which the fantasy culminates, the Queen memorably remarks 'Sentence first – verdict afterwards!'

In the aftermath of Ghouta, the behaviour of Western leaders, and the MSM, actually seemed rather more to be based on the principle of 'Execution first – evidence afterwards.'

Equally resonant is the way in which the King of Hearts conducts the trial – first telling the jury to produce their verdict before any evidence has been presented, and then interpreting evidence with a relentlessly tendentious circularity. And indeed, some parallels are alarmingly precise.

The absence of a signature on the nonsense verses which produced as key evidence is treated as proving that the Knave wanted to disguise his authorship, while the fact that they are not in his handwriting is interpreted as indicating that he imitated somebody else's. In the case of Ghouta, rather similar strategies of evasion are used to evade the mass of evidence suggesting that the 'signatures' of the compounds found in tests carried out at Porton Down established that the sarin used there had been produced using basic chemicals.

There is, however, one very salient difference. Faith in the 'Off with his head' principle – the notion that getting rid of 'authoritarian' leaders would somehow lead to some kind of nirvana, be it in the Middle East or the post-Soviet space – has turned out, time and again, to be simply wrong. Be with Milosevic in the former Yugoslavia, Saddam or Gaddafi in Iraq and Libya, or indeed Yanukovich in

Ukraine, the problems of these areas not reducible to the malign influence of rulers who, supposedly, hate 'freedom'.

Moreover, these delusions are bad news, not simply for the peoples on whom we inflict 'régime change', but for ourselves. In the world of 'Alice and Wonderland', there are no indications that, if the Queen of Hearts goes around beheading all and sundry, this will have negative consequences for her.

In the case of Western élites, however, this is patently not the case, in more than one way. It is not simply that as a result of their follies, problems of jihadist terrorism, and mass migration, have been greatly exacerbated. The – hardly unpredictable – result of these has been populist revolts, which the élites who have done so much to create them cannot understand, so that they have little prospect of producing sensible responses.

What these élites have been remarkably successful at is ensuring they have paid no penalties for failure. As a result, they have lurched from catastrophe to catastrophe. It was the toppling of Saddam, on the basis of completely bogus claims that there was a 'slam dunk' case that he continued to possess WMD and was likely to use them, which empowered Islamist Shia close to Tehran in Iraq. At the same time, the intervention in Iraq, and subsequent interventions in Libya and Syria, did an enormous amount to turn jihadist terrorism from a minor and containable threat to a very significant one.

An unsurprising result of all this bungling was a covert alliance between elements in Israel and its supporters in the United States and Britain, and Sunni Arab governments in Saudia Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey, to attempt to break the 'Shia Crescent' by striking at its supposed weak link in Syria. And, in so doing, once again it was assumed that jihadists could be used as an instrument for attacking our enemies, without risks of catastrophic 'blowback'.

What will come out of the suggestions that 'environmental' samples from the new incident will be tested is, as of this writing, a moot point. A further matter which is worth taking into account is that the people who have suggested that GCHQ may have colluded with elements in the United States seeking to undermine Trump include some of the same figures who signed the 6 September 2013 memorandum: notably Philip Giraldi, Larry Johnson, and Colonel Lang.

Not long ago Robert Parry, like Hersh a veteran American investigative journalist, posted on his 'Consortium News' website a piece entitled 'How Trump Could Be a Truth-Teller.' What he suggested was that it might serve President Trump well, in countering the accusations that he was uncaring about facts, if he released intelligence evidence about key incidents which his predecessor had kept from public view.

However, if indeed Trump has thrown in his lot with the 'neocons' and 'humanitarian interventionists', hopes of anything of the kind happening may be fantasy. Others, however, may think it is high time that the 'omerta' which has been successfully maintained by American and British élites is broken wide open.

David Habakkuk 12.04.2017

[1] [1] My thanks are due to 'pmr9' for invaluable help in the preparation of this piece and those that will follow. In response to a suggestion in passing of mine on SST that the account of Ghouta given by Seymour Hersh, if correct, raised fundamental questions about the behaviour of the British Joint Intelligence Committee, he pointed out to me that as the possibility of a very serious contempt of Parliament was raised these questions really needed to be pursued further. He alerted me to the

'Who Attacked Ghouta?' investigation, to which he contributed, and his patient explanations of some relevant science put a mass of evidence in a wholly new light. Beyond that, 'pmr9' has pointed me towards a great deal of important material I would otherwise have missed, and exchanges with him have clarified a whole range of matters of interpretation. Some of the evidence he and I have unearthed has been posted by him on [a thread entitled 'Talk: British involvement in Syria'](#) on the 'A Closer Look On Syria' (ACLOS) site. Remaining errors in my own posts are likely to be my own. However, particularly given the current neo-McCarthyite climate in Britain and the United States, it seems appropriate to point that he cannot be held responsible for my views, or I for his.

Yup it is a deceitful web, a privatised war, using UK defence funds.