A Dubious Report by the Human Rights Watch

On September 10, 2013, in New York, the independent organization Human Rights Watch published an article titled "Attacks on Ghouta: Analysis of Alleged Use of Chemical Weapons in Syria". Certainly, it appeared, the writers of the report would examine the consequences of this tragedy and would offer the resources of their organization to assist the victims, as this is the direct purpose of any rights protection organization. However, another, very ambitious, goal was chosen instead: to convincingly demonstrate that it was the Syrian army that used chemical weapons against civilians on August 21 on the outskirts of Damascus (simply put, even the UN chemical weapon inspectors who have a lot more experience in this field abstained from resolving this issue). We will further examine the main facts presented by the report.

The investigation examines the August 21 chemical weapon missile strikes carried out against Western and Eastern Ghouta, located 16 km. apart from one another. At that moment, this territory was controlled by the armed opposition. The report states that the attacks were “using a surface-to-surface rocket system of approximately 330mm in diameter—likely Syrian-produced—and a Soviet-era 140mm surface-to-surface rocket system to deliver a nerve agent.”

Further, the report states that the opposition does not possess these types of rockets and launchers. However, the Syrian army does not possess them either, as they only have the 122mm Soviet BM-21 Grad multiple rocket launcher system (MRLS) and the Chinese 107mm Type 63 multiple rocket launcher (MRL), as well as, possibly, the 220mm Soviet 9P140 Uragan MRLS.

It is true that between 1967 and 1969, 200 Soviet 140mm BM-14-17 MRLS with a range of up to 9.8km were delivered to Syria. However, according to the authoritative investigation from Military Balance 2010, these systems were decommissioned. Nevertheless, MRLS of this type are still being used in Algeria, Afghanistan, Vietnam, Egypt, Yemen, Cambodia, Congo, North Korea and Cuba. Is it possible that, for the sake of this conspiracy, a few BM-14-17 systems were delivered to the opposition from one of these countries?

The issue regarding the 330mm rockets deserves further inspection. The Iranian artillery rocket Fajr-5 has a similar caliber (333mm), its warhead weighs 90kg and the rocket has a maximum range of 70-80km. Some sources say that it was used by Hezbollah against Israel in July of 2006. We cannot eliminate the possibility that this rocket was delivered to Syria. However, there has so far been no documented instances of this rocket being used together with a chemical agent.

Until there are conclusive facts, it is too early to speak of the possibility that the Fajr-5 rockets are being constructed on Syrian territory. It is also quite doubtful that Syrian specialists would develop their own warheads for an Iranian ballistic missile. It would be much easier to use their own chemical weapon delivery system in the form of planes (helicopters), ballistic missiles or artillery.

The Fajr-5 short-range ballistic missiles could only be launched from a considerable distance away from Ghouta, due to the rocket’s minimum firing range requirements. However, a logical question arises, and that is why did the American Space Surveillance Network fail to pick up the launching of eight rockets of this type (the number of rockets stated in the report)? Further evidence also needs to be provided to confirm the previous use of the 330mm
rockets, outfitted with chemical weapons, by the national army against Syrian opposition.

It should also be noted that beginning in the late 1990s, there has been development of the Chinese 302mm WS-1 solid fuel rockets (Turkish T-300) on Turkish territory, which have a range of up to 70km and a warhead weighing in at 150kg. The Turkish company Roketsan was able to modernize these older Chinese rockets with the newer model receiving the name TR-300. The range of this newer rocket was increased to 80-100km.

A few other nations also possess short-range ballistic missiles, such as Saudi Arabia. However, before we can claim that they were used together with chemical agents against Syrian civilians, it is necessary to have much more compelling evidence than simply a few witness’ accounts.

The Human Rights Watch report points out the alleged location of the Syrian rocket launcher systems before the attack on Ghouta. However, this location is outside the perimeters of the closest military base, which belongs to the Republican Guard’s 4th armoured division. What was the point of bringing the MRLS to an unprotected area at night, where there was a high chance not only that it would get attacked by the armed opposition, but also that the opposition would be able to seize the chemical weapons in the process? Moreover, it should be taken into consideration that the elite troops within the Republican Guard carry the best weapons, not morally and physically obsolete ones.

It needs to be emphasized that Human Rights Watch representatives did not have access to Eastern and Western Ghouta. Their conclusions rest on interviews given by only 10 witnesses and 3 doctors who use Skype (the total number of injured was a few thousand people), which is clearly not enough to make a representative sample. The rest of the information in the report was circumstantial. Only one fact can be agreed upon — there was a chemical weapons attack in the region of Ghouta, but this was so obvious that it was hardly necessary to prove it to anyone.

The 140mm missiles could be fitted with chemical agents such as sarin, but the Soviet Union did not export chemical weapons to anyone. Such weapons were produced independently by a few nations on their own territories. The infrastructure for this type of development was created in Syria as late as the 1990s. However, by this time, they were already using the 122mm Soviet BM-21 Grad Multiple Rocket Launcher System. What would be the point of making chemical weapon warheads for the soon to be decommissioned MRLS BM-14-17, and then to place these warheads onto missiles from 1967? The remnants of precisely these types of missiles were found at the location of the chemical weapon attack. The powder charge in the rocket engine expires after 40 years, which is why launching the rocket in August of 2013 could have resulted in a deadly situation right at the launch installation. It is highly unlikely that the Syrian military would use these missiles in such close proximity to Damascus.

Furthermore, Syrian chemical weapons were manufactured only as a response to Israel’s nuclear potential, which arose only in the 1970s-1980s.

Of particular concern is the fact that in the Spring of 2004, Libya declared 4 tonnes of components to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) which could have been utilized to make a chemical agent such as sarin. At the time that Colonel Gadhafi was overthrown in 2011, Libyan chemical weapons were not completely destroyed. A portion of the abovementioned components could have easily crossed over into Syria, considering Qatar’s active role both in the Libyan and the Syrian conflicts. According to Russian sources, radical Syrian opposition attempted to obtain chemical weapon components from abroad very recently.

The final assembly of the chemical warhead (its fragments could not be found at the site of the tragedy) and its placing onto a missile could have been carried out both within Syria and somewhere abroad. Considering the financial expenditures that Riyadh and Doha have already sustained with the goal of overthrowing the Assad government, the expenses that would be necessary to organize such an operation, as well as the entire conspiracy, would pale in comparison.

It is very disappointing to see that the well-known organization Human Rights Watch has started to partake in activities so unlike itself. As an investigation, their report, overall, simply repeats the information that was presented within the UN inspector’s chemical weapons report. Any further information is either questionable or very incomplete.

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