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US Hawks Use UN Report to Call for Wider War in Syria

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A new report by the UN's Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) has been touted by neoconservative advocacy groups like Bill Kristol's Foreign Policy Initiative as well as mainstream media outlets as proof positive that Bashar al-Assad continued to deploy chemical weapons against the Gulf State-backed Syrian opposition even after agreeing to destroy Syria's chemical weapons stockpile at the behest of the United States and Russia in 2013.

The report accuses the Syrian air force of dropping chemical weapons—in this case chlorine—on two different villages in April 2014 and March 2015. Following the release of the report, the White House was quick to condemn Assad. The NSC released a statement which read, in part: "It is now impossible to deny that the Syrian regime has repeatedly used industrial chlorine as a weapon against its own people in violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention and UN Security Council Resolution 2118."

Meanwhile in New York, the United States, British, and French representatives to the UN called for the imposition of more sanctions on Syria. UN Ambassador Samantha Power vowed that those responsible should "pay a price" and that "it

is incumbent on the council to act swiftly to show that when we put that Joint Investigative Mechanism in place we were serious about there being meaningful accountability.” Not surprisingly, Russia’s representative to the UN, Vitaly Churkin, cast doubt on utility of the report in determining who was exactly to blame, noting that “it contains no names, no specifics, no fingerprints.”

The widespread coverage of this latest report of the OPCW is in stark contrast to the muted reaction which greeted its November 2013 report which noted that Syria had “completed the functional destruction of critical equipment for all of its declared chemical weapons production facilities and mixing/filling plants, rendering them inoperable.” The reason for this is not terribly hard to divine: The new accusations of chemical weapons use by Assad provide the war party in the United States with the perfect cudgel with which to beat the administration for backing off of its “red line” policy which the President spelled out in 2011.

The OPCW report seemingly backs the narrative crafted by those who wish to intervene in Syria on a “humanitarian” basis. This narrative asserts that the widespread suffering of the Syrian people could have been averted if only the administration had intervened in the Syrian conflict sooner; if only President Obama simply had not reneged on his “red line” pledge and unleashed a full scale, Iraq-style intervention, surely the situation would be better than it is today.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Hillary Clinton, given her track record as Secretary of State, would seem to agree with this line of criticism. In July, her campaign released a statement promising a “full review” of US policy regarding Syria, raising the hopes of Beltway hawks that, in the words of one former high ranking Pentagon official, “A Clinton administration will not shrink from making clear to the world exactly what the Assad regime is.” Clinton and her running mate, Virginia Senator Tim Kaine have repeatedly endorsed the idea of implementing a no-fly zone over northern Syria. Experience should tell us that no-fly zones serve as a prelude to wider war, as they did in Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq and Libya.

One aspect of the new OPCW report, little noted by war party partisans: It also found evidence that Islamic State militants have “used sulfur mustard gas” during the course of the conflict. This is in keeping with their strategy to minimize, at every turn, the crimes of the so-called “moderate opposition,” which is aided and funded by the United States in conjunction with our Gulf State “allies.”

Meanwhile, hawkish critics of the administration’s policy remain unable to answer the question: What better alternative was available to Mr. Obama in 2013? Those who bemoan the president’s alleged lack of resolve can hardly deny that even the administration’s limited intervention—in the form of the ill-fated “train and equip” programs run out of the CIA and Pentagon—have made things demonstrably worse. Furthermore, while Assad may indeed have

committed a horrendous crime in deploying chemical weapons, is it unclear how the war party's preferred policy response—American military action—would dissuade him from doing so again.

And so the United States, by tacitly joining forces with exporters of radical Salafist ideology like Saudi Arabia and Qatar, in seeking to overthrow a secular (and yes, brutal) dictator has only prolonged the disaster that is the Syrian conflict, which has left hundreds of thousands dead and has immiserated millions.