

Statement by Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes on Syrian Chemical Weapons Use

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At the President's direction, the United States Government has been closely monitoring the potential use of chemical weapons within Syria. 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. Today, we are providing an updated version of our assessment to Congress and to the public.

The Syrian government's refusal to grant access to the United Nations to investigate any and all credible allegations of chemical weapons use has prevented a comprehensive investigation as called for by the international community. The Assad regime could prove that its request for an investigation was not just a diversionary tactic by granting the UN fact finding mission immediate and unfettered access to conduct on-site investigations to help reveal the truth about chemical weapons use in Syria. While pushing for a UN investigation, the United States has also been working urgently with our partners and allies as well as individuals inside Syria, including the Syrian opposition, to procure, share, and evaluate information associated with reports of chemical weapons use so that we can establish the facts and determine what took place.

Following a deliberative review, 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. Our intelligence community has high confidence in that assessment given multiple, independent streams of information. The intelligence community estimates that 100 to 150 people have died from detected chemical weapons attacks in Syria to date; however, casualty data is likely incomplete. While the lethality of these attacks make up only a small portion of the catastrophic loss of life in Syria, which now stands at more than 90,000 deaths, the use of chemical weapons violates international norms and crosses clear red lines that have existed within the international community for decades. We believe that the Assad regime maintains control of these weapons. We have no reliable, corroborated reporting to indicate that the opposition in Syria has acquired or used chemical weapons.

The body of information used to make this intelligence assessment includes reporting regarding Syrian officials planning and executing regime chemical weapons attacks; reporting that includes descriptions of the time, location, and means of attack; and descriptions of physiological symptoms that are consistent with exposure to a chemical weapons agent. Some open source reports from social media outlets from Syrian opposition groups and other media sources are consistent with the information we have obtained regarding chemical weapons use and exposure. 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.

We are working with allies to present a credible, evidentiary case to share with the international community and the public. Since the creation of the UN fact finding mission, we have provided two briefings to Dr. Åke Sellström, the head of the mission. We will also be providing a letter to UN Secretary General Ban, calling the UN's attention to our updated intelligence assessment and specific incidents of alleged chemical weapons use. We request that the UN mission include these incidents in its ongoing investigation and report, as appropriate, on its findings. We will present additional information and continue to update Dr. Sellström as new developments emerge.

The President has been clear that the use of chemical weapons – or the transfer of chemical weapons to terrorist groups – is a red line for the United States, as there has long been an established norm within the international community against the use of chemical weapons. Our intelligence community now has a high confidence assessment that chemical weapons have been used on a small scale by the Assad regime in Syria. The President has said that the use of chemical weapons would change his calculus, and it has. Our decision making has already been guided by the April intelligence assessment and by the regime's escalation of horrific violence against its citizens. Following on the credible evidence that the regime has used chemical weapons against the Syrian people, the President has augmented the provision of non-lethal assistance to the civilian opposition, and also authorized the expansion of our assistance to the Supreme Military Council (SMC), and we will be consulting with Congress on these matters in the coming weeks. This effort is aimed at strengthening the effectiveness of the SMC, and helping to coordinate the provision of assistance by the United States and other partners and allies. Put simply, the Assad regime should know that its actions have led us to increase the scope and scale of assistance that we provide to the opposition, including direct support to the SMC. These efforts will increase going forward.

The United States and the international community have a number of other legal, financial, diplomatic, and military responses available. We are prepared for all contingencies, and we will make decisions on our own timeline. Any future action we take will be consistent with our national interest, and must advance our objectives, which include achieving a negotiated political settlement to establish an authority that can

provide basic stability and administer state institutions; protecting the rights of all Syrians; securing unconventional and advanced conventional weapons; and countering terrorist activity.