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Syria: US secretary of state John Kerry says chemical attack 'undeniable' - live

- LIVE • UN inspectors take samples from attack site
- Inspectors unable to visit six key sites, doctor says
 - UN convoy comes under sniper fire en route to site
 - Russian foreign minister: 'They cannot produce evidence'

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Peter Walker and **Tom McCarthy**
theguardian.com, Monday 26 August 2013 19.41 BST
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LIVE **Sort by:** Latest first Oldest first **Auto update:** On Off

8.15pm BST

In his statement, Kerry said watching **video footage of the aftermath of the attacks** had angered and saddened him:

I went back and watched video... the video that anyone can watch on social media. It is very hard to express in words the human suffering...

As a father, I can't get the image out of my head, of a father who held up his dead child, wailing...

Kerry calls the attack "human suffering that we can never ignore or forget." Furthermore, he makes the case that the Assad regime carried

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out the attack, and anyone who argues that they did not happen "needs to check their conscience and their own moral compass."

The Assad regime maintains custody of chemical weapons material and has the capacity "to do this with rockets."

"Our sense of basic humanity is offended, not only by this cowardly crime, but also by the cynical attempt to cover it up," Kerry said.

He said the Assad offer of inspectors' access to the site was "too late, and it's too late to be credible."

Kerry says the US is organizing itself and allies for military action:

At President Obama's direction I've spent many hours on the phone [with foreign leaders]... The administration is actively consulting with members of Congress.

Updated at 8.15pm BST

8.10pm BST

More of what Kerry said, based on our notes:

"What we saw in Syria last week should **shock the conscience of the world**," Kerry said:

The meaning of this attack goes beyond [Syria] itself.

This is about the large-scale, indiscriminate use of weapons that the civilized world, long ago, decided must never be used at all.

There is a clear reason that the world had banned entirely the use of chemical weapons. There's a reason that the world has set a clear standard.

[...]

8.06pm BST

The US secretary of state was **plain on several key points**.

He says that chemical weapons were used; he said the crime was historically terrible; he said the Assad regime was uniquely equipped to carry out the attack; he said the US would respond.

8.02pm BST

Kerry: chemical attack undeniable, 'there must be accountability'

Kerry's remarks are unambiguous as to what the US believes has occurred and he says the "**cowardly crime**" cannot be allowed to let pass.

"The use of chemical weapons is a moral obscenity," he says. Kerry says evidence of chemical weapons use "is undeniable."

After extensive remarks which we'll excerpt in a moment, Kerry said the US would act.

"The president will be making an informed decision about how to respond to this indiscriminate use of chemical weapons," Kerry says.

"There must be accountability."

7.56pm BST

Kerry begins. He says that the use of chemical weapons in Syria is "**undeniable**" and "**morally obscene**." He says that the use of the weapons violates a historic ban.

He sounds like a leader ready to act.

"I want to provide an update on our efforts as we consider our response to the use of chemical weapons," Kerry says. "What we saw in Syria last week should shock the conscience of the world," he says.

Updated at 7.57pm BST

7.41pm BST

Micah Zenko, a Council on Foreign Relations fellow, notices a **familiar uptick in excitement over a foreign policy debate** as the question of military action grows:

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MPs set to return to debate Syrian intervention
Parliament likely to be recalled, while David Cameron cuts short holiday and Nick Clegg calls off Afghanistan trip

Obama likely to resist Syria military intervention regardless of UN findings

Warplanes spotted in Cyprus as tensions rise in Damascus

UN says 'no impunity' if chemical attack proven

Comment & debate



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Syrian offer on UN team 'too little, too late'

Nato members could act against Syria without UN mandate

Syria agrees to let UN inspect site of alleged chemical weapons attack

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Syria: west weighs up military options at meeting of top generals in Jordan

Syria crisis: 'very little doubt' chemical weapon was used, US official says

Did Assad's ruthless brother mastermind alleged Syria gas attack?

Syrian hospitals treated thousands for poison gas symptoms, says charity

Syria: Chuck Hagel suggests US is marshalling military forces

Syrian victims of alleged gas attack smuggled to Jordan for blood tests

Assad regime responsible for Syrian chemical attack, says UK government

Chemical attacks in Syria: reports mapped

Editorial: chemical weapons with impunity

7.09pm BST

The statement on the Syrian crisis by US secretary of state John Kerry has been published [here](#).
 **Micah Zenko** @MicahZenko [Follow](#)

7.07pm BST

Expression of concern in the West over chemical attacks in Syria is being met with some healthy skepticism.
 Many of officials and policy makers focus it as a ploy to use it as a pretext on FP issues that don't involve bombing



Budour Hassan - بدور
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Don't pretend to care for Syrian civilians NOW when you remained silent about massacres in Syria for over two years.

7:34 PM - 26 Aug 2013

10 RETWEETS 4 FAVORITES

Operations DMOs achieved all of their military objectives just over half of



Dima Khatib أنا ديمة
 @Dima_Khatib [Follow](#)

U mean to tell me the US administration and its allies suddenly care about Syrian lives? Lol !

#chuckle

8:00 PM - 26 Aug 2013

17 RETWEETS 5 FAVORITES

incorrectly programmed; unsuitable weapons systems can be selected; precision-guided munitions can veer off course, or be pushed by high winds; and cloud cover, smog, or dust storms can obscure targets that require visual acquisition at the last minute.

7.00pm BST

UK prime minister **David Cameron has called Russian president Vladimir Putin** to discuss the international response to the suspected chemical attack, a Cameron spokesman tells the Guardian's Nick Watt:

For these reasons, as well as countless other problems that they both reiterated the position agreed by all leaders at the G8 in June: no-one should use chemical weapons and any use would merit a serious response from the international community.

The PM made clear that there was little doubt that this was an attack carried out by the Syrian regime. There was no evidence to suggest that the opposition had the capability to carry out such a significant attack and the regime had launched a heavy offensive in the area in the days before and after the incident. The regime had also prevented UN access in the immediate aftermath, suggesting they had something to hide.

President Putin said that they did not have evidence of whether a chemical weapons attack had taken place or who was responsible.

Cameron is scheduled to convene a meeting of the National Security Council on Wednesday.

6.56pm BST

The [US state department web site](#) will stream the **Kerry statement**, scheduled to begin in four minutes.

6.36pm BST

[Earlier](#) we linked to Brown Moses' collection of **YouTube videos documenting the visit of UN inspectors** to the site of the suspected chemical attack. Footage of the visit continues to appear. The collection is [here](#).

Here's a short video of a UN inspector conducting hospital interviews:



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 M T W T F S S

6.25pm BST

Summary

Here's a summary of where things stand:

- A convoy of UN inspectors came under fire as it made its way to east Damascus to take samples from the site of a suspected chemical weapons attack. The inspectors were able to reach the site and collect samples and interview witnesses.
- UN inspectors only were able to stay at the attack site for an hour and a half and were unable to visit six sites where "chemical rockets" fell, a doctor who met with the inspectors told the Guardian. The doctor said he saw bullet holes in at least one UN vehicle.
- The Obama administration announced that US secretary of state John Kerry would make a special statement on the Syrian crisis at 2pm ET. The White House pushed back its daily briefing to fall after the Kerry statement.
- The United Nations, UK, US, Germany, France and Turkey and others strongly condemned the apparent chemical attack by the Assad regime on the Ghouta suburb in east Damascus. The Russian foreign minister suggested the attack was the work of opposition forces trying to trigger a broader foreign military intervention.
- An unprecedented roster of senior officials among the Western powers and the United Nations began to speak of urgent action in Syria. "And every hour counts. We cannot afford any more delays," the UN secretary general said. "All the options are open," France's foreign minister said. "We have called for a strong response," the British foreign secretary said.

Updated at 6.26pm BST

6.08pm BST

The passage of nearly a week since the suspected Ghouta chemical attack, and the reportedly extensive shelling of the area meanwhile, would not prevent UN inspectors from finding any evidence of chemical weapons use, a spokesperson for secretary general Ban Ki-moon told Reuters:

"Despite the passage of a number of days, the Secretary-General (Ban Ki-moon) is confident that the team will be able to obtain and analyze evidence relevant for its investigation of the 21 August incident," U.N. spokesman Farhan Haq told reporters.

5.58pm BST

UN inspectors were not able to visit at least a half-dozen key sites in the area of the suspected chemical weapons attack in Ghouta, according to a doctor who met the group.

Dr. Abu Akram, who runs a makeshift hospital at Mua'adamiyat Al-Sham, told the Guardian's Mona Mahmood (@monamood) that the arrival of the inspectors was delayed by four hours because of the gunfire attack on their convoy. He said he saw bullet holes in a UN vehicle or vehicles.

The inspectors "were supposed to stay for six hours but they stayed for an hour and a half only," Akram told Mona:

They visited the makeshift hospital in Mau'adamiyia and talked to more than 20 victim.

They were doctors with the committee and they took samples from the victims in the hospital. They took urine and blood samples as well as pieces of hair. All the victims were documented by videos.

Akram told Mona the group went to the site of a chemical rocket strike:

They took samples of the soil and some affected animals. They took a chicken. They refused to take the chemical rocket. It seems they are not allowed to take the rocket with them.

After an hour and a half, they got an order from the regime to leave ASAP. The security force told the committee if they did not leave now, they could not guarantee their security. They could not visit the main six sites where the chemical rockets had fallen and lots of people were killed.

Aug 2013						
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Akram said the inspectors were in four cars and numbered 12 men total. Some of them were doctors. They included Canadian, Egyptians and Sudanese:

"I spoke to the committee about the symptoms of affected people, the situation inside the makeshift hospital, how we received the victims and how we treated them. I also told them where we found the bodies.

The committee spoke to the victims and asked them whether they were civilians or military. Most of the victims were civilians. They asked the victims were they were when the chemical rocket was fired. Most of the people were sleeping at their homes. The committee asked the victims about the symptoms and they told them they were suffering of suffocation and coma. Even the people who tried to help the victims like medical staff were suffering of the same symptoms.

Akram told Mona he accepted "around 2,000" victims at his modest facility. "500 of them were in a critical situation," he said, 80 people were pronounced dead at the hospital and 20 victims are still in intensive care:

The committee did not visit any house in the district. We asked the committee to exhume the bodies for checking them. But they refused. They say that there was no need to do that.

We had prepared samples for the committee from some bodies and video documentation. There were urine and blood samples as well as clothes. But they refused to take them.

We asked them if they could supply us with medical aid but they said that they do not have the authority to do so.

We are worried that the regime intelligence would play with the samples and change them. The hotel is under the control of the regime.

Some of the Arab members of the committee were not in support with us. We do not want their support but we want them to be objective.

Updated at 6.56pm BST

5.33pm BST

The US secretary of state will make a **special statement today on Syria**, Guardian Washington correspondent Paul Lewis reports:



Paul Lewis
@PaulLewis

Follow

US secretary of state, John Kerry, will make a statement on [#Syria](#) in 90 minutes.

6:26 PM - 26 Aug 2013

24 RETWEETS

Also of note in terms of Obama administration communications on Syria: The daily White House briefing has been pushed back to 3pm ET today.

Updated at 5.42pm BST

5.31pm BST

Deputy prime minister Nick Clegg has **canceled a trip to Afghanistan** in order to focus on the Syria crisis, a spokesman told the Guardian's Nick Watt:

He has made the decision due to the need to remain in the UK because of the ongoing situation in Syria.

He will also, therefore, be in London to take part in the scheduled NSC on the subject, of which he is Deputy Chair.

5.27pm BST

Americans don't want to get involved in a military adventure in Syria, according to every poll including a Reuters/Ipsos survey published Sunday that found **only 9% support action**:

5.14pm BST About 60 percent of Americans surveyed said the United States should not intervene in Syria's civil war, while 18 percent thought Mr. Obama should act, Reuters reported. Members of the Syrian opposition announced Monday that they were **canceling their planned participation in Geneva peace talks**, on account of the suspected chemical attack in Gouta, Reuters reports.

That majority opposition holds even in the face of evidence A senior member of Syria's opposition coalition referred to president Bashar Assad as "The Chemist":

Members of the Syrian National Coalition met representatives of the "Friends of Syria", a group of Western and Arab nations opposed to President Bashar al-Assad, in Istanbul on Monday in a meeting originally meant to discuss plans for the conference.

"It (the meeting) was for Geneva but we refused to speak about Geneva after what's happened ... We must punish this dictator, Bashar the Chemist we call him, and then we can discuss Geneva," coalition Secretary General Badr Jamous told Reuters after the meeting.

Earlier today, Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov **touted** the talks as a way to avoid a wider military conflict.

5.06pm BST UN inspectors at the site of the alleged chemical weapons attack **visited two hospitals, collected samples and interviewed witnesses**, survivors and doctors, according to a **statement** by secretary general Ban Ki-moon.

The United Nations has also complained to Damascus about the gunfire on the convey, Ban said:

I have instructed Angela Kane to register a strong complaint to the Syrian government and authorities of opposition forces so that this will never happen and the safety and security of the investigation teams will be secured from tomorrow.

(h/t: [AJE](#))

4.54pm BST Lara Setrakian is founder of **Syria Deeply**, one of the best English-language sources for news from Syria:



Lara Setrakian Follow
@Lara

A powerful tidbit: UN inspectors were already on the ground in **#Syria** to investigate more than a dozen chemical weapons allegations.

5:35 PM - 26 Aug 2013

10 RETWEETS 1 FAVORITE

4.47pm BST In the highest-profile **Israeli call yet for intervention in Syria**, President Shimon Peres on Monday urged the UN to set up a temporary government in Damascus with the help of the Arab League.

Peres also said all chemical weapons must be removed from Syria so they cannot be used again. The AP reports:

Peres said "foreigners will not understand what is going on in Syria" so the U.N. should give task the Arab League with setting up a government.

It's unclear how any of Peres' suggestions would begin to be implemented.

Israel has largely stayed silent in public on the course of the Syrian conflict. A US-led attack on Assad could increase the likelihood of an attack on Israel by Assad or the regime's ally, Hezbollah. But if Assad falls he could be replaced by a leader or leaders who turn out to be more hostile toward Israel than Assad has been.

4.36pm BST Eliot Higgins, whose Brown Moses blog has emerged as an English-language information clearinghouse on the Syrian conflict, has created a **YouTube playlist of videos of UN inspectors** visiting the site in Ghouta of the suspected chemical weapons attacks. The [playlist of 5 videos is](#)

4.28pm BST [here](#). The first video is below. Syria's deputy foreign minister said Monday that his country will **defend itself against any international attack** and will not be an easy target, the AP reports:

... معضمة الشام القذافي الأول لدخول بعثة التحفة،

In an interview with The Associated Press in Damascus, Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mikdad said airstrikes or other action against Syria would also trigger "chaos" and threaten worldwide peace and security.

"There will be no international military intervention," Mikdad said in the interview at his office. "If individual countries want to pursue aggressive and adventurous policies, the natural answer ... would be that Syria, which has been fighting against terrorism for almost three years, will also defend itself against any international attack."

"They will bear the responsibility for such an attack, which will result in killing thousands of innocent people, as happened in Libya, and committing criminal actions against a sovereign country," Mikdad added. "Syria will not be an easy target."

Mikdad did not elaborate on how Syria might defend itself, but he said such an attack would trigger "chaos in the entire world."

4.14pm BST **The most likely US military action** against Syria comprises "targeted attacks against Syrian military units associated with chemical-weapons capacity and infrastructure," predicts Aaron David Miller of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in a [piece published in Politico](#) under the misleading headline "Obama will bomb Syria" (nowhere does Miller mention bombs; he's talking about cruise missile strikes).

Such an attack by the United States goes beyond the current program to help arm and support the opposition but stops far short of an air war that would require the destruction of Syria's anti-aircraft capabilities and even farther short of a ground conflict.

Miller describes why he thinks Obama will decide soon to undertake some kind of military attack, arguing that in doing so the United States would seek to save face after having threatened to do so in the event of chemical weapons use; to prevent future chemical attacks and to demonstrate to Iran a willingness to fight.

Read the [full piece here](#).

3.52pm BST Hardening rhetoric from the White House on Syria over the weekend represents a **significant policy departure**, Georgetown professor Daniel Byman, a senior fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, tells the Guardian's Paul Lewis:

"The United States has almost openly been extremely sceptical of significant intervention in Syria. There has been a sense in the administration that there is almost no public enthusiasm in the United States for this. There is frankly little eagerness among allies to take the lead. There is scepticism about who the United States would be helping in Syria, whether it would be jihadists, or whether it is just too chaotic a situation in general. People have criticised the Obama administration for not having a policy. I actually think they've had a very clear policy: which is stay out. They're reluctant to openly say that - but that to me was a very clear policy."

Byman said that recent rhetoric over the use of chemical weapons last week "could have been done a year ago", pointing out the US has resisted taking such a strong stance, despite as many as 100,000 deaths. A "cautious supporter" of intervention in Syria, Byman believes the change in stance has a much to do with concern the conflict will spill over into neighbouring states – and a sense in the White House that Assad is winning Syria's civil war.

If there are military strikes in the days or weeks ahead, Byman tells Paul that the question would be whether they are "sustained military strikes designed to alter the balance on the ground" or a more of a symbolic

gesture of displeasure by the US and its allies.

Updated at 4.00pm BST

3.46pm BST That's it from me today, but the live updates continue. I'm handing over to **Tom McCarthy** in the US. Many thanks for reading.

3.45pm BST The UN inspection team has returned to their Damascus hotel after completing their visit to the suburb of Mouadamiya, where the alleged chemical attack took place, Reuters reports.

According to other reports from the scene, the investigation involved the team taking samples and meeting people injured last Wednesday.

There will, of course, be no immediate word on whether a chemical attack can be confirmed. It's not part of the UN team's mission to say who might be responsible.

3.31pm BST An interesting note from **Virginia Lopez** in Caracas, where Syria's ambassador to Venezuela has been expounding the view that chemical weapons were used by US-funded mercenaries to justify a foreign intervention:

In the interview on government-run TV channel VTV, Ghassan Abbas said there were more than 100,000 mercenaries "of Islamic profile, and working jointly" in Syria to further US interests.

Abbas went on to detail some 1,200 "terrorist groups" who worked "with three intelligence headquarters, in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan".

According to Abbas, chemical weapons are being used, along with Washington-led media attacks, "to create the opinion the Assad is attacking his own people".

He also warned this was a great risk because it could not be proven the Syrian government had chemical weapons.

Venezuela has supported Assad throughout. It has sent three shipments of fuel. Both the president, Nicolás Maduro, and his late predecessor, Hugo Chávez, voiced staunch support for Assad's rule.

3.14pm BST **Nick Watt** has this on British MPs seeking a voice before any decisions are made about Syria:

Pressure is growing on David Cameron to recall parliament. Graham Allen, the Labour chairman of the commons political and constitutional reform select committee, has circulated this email to all MPs calling on them to sign an Early Day Motion:

Dear Parliamentarian , in view of recent developments, I would be grateful if you would consider adding your name to an EDM tabled this morning by Select Committee Chairs of all parties, please just reply "Yes" and I will add your name.

This House believes that Parliament should hold a full debate before any British commitment to military action in Syria"

Tabled in the names of David Davies, Hywel Francis, Malcolm Bruce, Graham Allen, and other Select Committee Chairs.

2.57pm BST The EU's foreign policy supremo, Catherine Ashton, has been speaking about Syria during a visit to Estonia's capital Tallinn. In a difference of at least emphasis from her compatriot, William Hague, Ashton said the support of the UN Security Council would be "extremely important."

The world would "need to find a political solution" for the situation in Syria, she added, according to AP.

2.41pm BST Here's a representative sample of fuller quotes from Sergei Lavrov's

2.36pm BST

earlier press conference, courtesy of AP and Reuters: Amid the current seeming consensus that the US, UK and their allies will take some form of direct action against Syria, it is probably the British voice that has been the most vocal, and the most certain. It's actually [being](#) [log](#) on that paper's website by Peter Hitchens, who ridicules the sudden certainty about what has happened and what needs to be done: The use of force without the approval of the United Nations Security Council is a very grave violation of international law. How does one quantify doubt? How much doubt does there have to be, when a quite possibly unlimited war is in question? If there is doubt of any kind, surely we shouldn't be broadcasting or writing as if there were no doubt, let alone talking about embroiling ourselves in a vast and probably endless sectarian war between Shia and Sunni, now rapidly catching fire in the region? ...

In a criminal trial, doubt simply has to be reasonable to prevent conviction. But where has reason gone in this episode? The ridiculous William Hague, who seems to have become sabre-rattler in chief just as this country has sunk to the level of a third-rate military power, talks and acts as if the matter is settled.

2.03pm BST

And now the latest from Jerusalem, from my colleague **Harriet Sherwood**:

Israel is prepared to "act decisively" to protect itself in the event of the Syrian regime launching an attack on the Jewish state in response to any US military intervention, the Israeli minister for intelligence and strategic affairs said on Monday.

"If we are under attack, we will protect ourselves and we will act decisively," Yuval Steinitz told reporters. However, he added: "It would be insane for somebody to try to provoke Israel. But of course we are prepared for any scenario whatsoever... This is the most unpredictable neighbourhood in the region."

Israel had two red lines, said Steinitz. One was the delivery of chemical or strategic weapons to militant or jihadist organisations, including Hezbollah; the other was "if someone tries to attack Israel or threaten our citizens".

The minister's comments were delivered amid concern that US military intervention in Syria could lead to retaliatory action against Israel. But despite the potential escalation of the conflict across Israel's northern border, "the world cannot allow Assad's use of chemical weapons against civilians to happen," he said.

Public disquiet about possible retaliatory reaction from Syria was [indicated by a significant increase in demand for gas masks](#). Requests for civil protection kits at distribution centres quadrupled on Sunday, according to the Israeli Postal Authority. Six in 10 Israelis are already in possession of gas masks.

Speaking at the weekly cabinet meeting on Sunday, Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu said the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons must not be allowed to continue. Israel's "finger must always be on the pulse.... If necessary, it will also be on the trigger. We will always know to defend our people and our state against whoever attacks us, tries to attack us or has attacked us."

US military intervention in Syria was almost inevitable, said Israeli analysts. But, most added, although Syrian retaliation against Israel was possible, it was not inevitable.

Alex Fishman, military analyst for Yedioth Ahronoth, wrote: "While the likelihood of Syria taking action against Israel if attacked by the United States is not high, in the Middle East... logic isn't always the governing principle. If Syria's national honour is tarnished as a result of an American attack, the Syrians' reaction is liable to be irrational."

He added: "We can only hope that if the Americans decide

2.00pm BST

to attack that they will give us a few hours' advance notice

Lavrov on #Syria intervention: "huge mistake which will not lead to any peace and any calm situation. this will only lead to more bloodshed"

— Kirit Radia (@KiritRadia_ABC) August 26, 2013

may launch Syria in response to the use of chemical...

So far not much new from Lavrov. Reiterates #Russia doubts chem weapon videos & opposes Western intervention. Warns of regional consequences

— Kirit Radia (@KiritRadia_ABC) August 26, 2013

Judging from the tweets of those there, Lavrov is making broadly the same points during his continuing press conference.

1.56pm BST

Summary

It's been a busy morning (in UK time), so now for a slightly overdue summary:

- **A UN inspection team came under sniper fire as it approached the site of a suspected chemical weapons attack near Damascus.** The convoy retreated after its first vehicle was shot at multiple times. There were no injuries and the team managed later to reach the affected area. [According to people in the rebel-held location](#) the UN team is now speaking to injured people and taking samples.
- **The UN secretary general, Ban Ki-Moon, has called for urgent action on Syria, saying "every hour counts".**
- **There is a growing mood in the governments of the UK, US and some other allies towards military intervention in Syria.** The [British foreign secretary, William Hague, has said diplomatic efforts have failed.](#) Support for action has come so far from [France](#), [Turkey](#) and, to a more cautious extent, [Germany](#).
- **David Cameron has cut short a holiday to return to London and coordinate the British response.**
- **Russia remains opposed to military action.** The country's foreign minister, [Sergei Lavrov, said Moscow did not believe Bashar al-Assad's forces were responsible for the chemical attack](#) and warned that any action could destabilise the region.
- **Assad himself has given an interview to a Russian newspaper in which he denied his troops were behind the attack, and warned that any foreign intervention would fail.**

1.42pm BST

Lavrov warns that the use of force in Syria without mandate of UN Security Council would be "blatant violation of international law"

— Steve Rosenberg (@BBCSteveR) August 26, 2013

Another Lavrov point, via another BBC correspondent at the press conference.

1.41pm BST

The news channels I'm watching have cut away from the Lavrov press conference, but the foreign minister's message was already clear: Moscow does not believe Assad's forces were responsible for a chemical attack, has grave worries about any international intervention, and almost certainly would not support such action. Much as we knew before, but expressed pretty forcefully.

1.39pm BST

Lavrov: "u cant fight regime only bc you dont personally like the dictator leading it & not fight some regimes where you like the dictator"

— Kirit Radia (@KiritRadia_ABC) August 26, 2013

<p>1.37pm BST</p>	<p>ABC News's Moscow correspondent has this neat precis of another of Lavrov's just-made points. Reuters has some quotes from the doctor quoted below (1.28pm), who used the name Abu Karem:</p> <p>I am with the team now. We are in the Rawda mosque and they are meeting with the wounded. Our medics and the inspectors are talking to the patients and taking samples from the victims now.</p>
<p>1.35pm BST</p>	<p>Lavrov seems mainly concerned at pushing the claims of another round of Russian-US talks on Syria, the so-called Geneva II process.</p> <p>The next question, from Reuters, asks if Russia would back military action, or at least not oppose it in the UN security council, if the inspection team found definitive evidence of a chemical weapon attack by Syrian government forces.</p> <p>Lavrov replies that this is not only speculative but unrealistic, given that the mandate of the inspection team is only to decide if chemical weapons were used, and if so which ones, not who used them.</p>
<p>1.28pm BST</p>	<p>As Lavrov begins to answer questions – he's still answering the very first one – Reuters is quoting a doctor in a rebel-held area who says the UN inspectors are now meeting those injured in the suspected chemical attack and taking samples.</p>
<p>1.25pm BST</p>	<p>Still making his opening comments, Lavrov says he spoke yesterday to the US secretary of state, John Kerry, and told him that all nations should make it clear "that there is no alternative to a political settlement".</p> <p>He says foreign intervention in Iraq in Libya did not improve people's lives or provide stability, adding:</p> <p>On the contrary, the region has been destabilised in an unprecedented way.</p>
<p>1.21pm BST</p>	<p>Lavrov says there was no logical reason for the Assad government to launch such an attack, and again condemns the current "hysteria" which he says is aimed only at removing Assad and to "subvert" international diplomacy over the issue.</p>
<p>1.18pm BST</p>	<hr/> <p>Lavrov says "hysteria is growing"...but says Washington, Paris and London have produced no evidence</p> <p>— Daniel Sandford (@BBCDanielS) August 26, 2013</p> <p>Russia's foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, has just begun a press conference in Moscow. He is currently talking of alleged evidence that some footage of the suspected chemical weapons attack could have been falsified. The BBC's correspondent in Moscow is among those tweeting from the event.</p> <p>Updated at 1.18pm BST</p>
<p>1.15pm BST</p>	<p>Reuters has some fuller quotes from Chuck Hagel in Jakarta:</p> <p>The United States is looking at all options regarding the situation in Syria. We're working with our allies and the international community.</p> <p>We are analysing the intelligence. And we will get the facts. And if there is any action taken, it will be concert with the international community and within the framework of legal justification.</p>
<p>1.12pm BST</p>	<p>And now to Germany, where my colleague Kate Connolly in Berlin explains the current thinking there:</p> <p>German politicians across the political spectrum are urging extreme caution over proposals by the US and Britain to launch a military offensive in Syria.</p> <p>The governing Christian Democrats (CDU) of chancellor Angela Merkel insisted that Germany was pressing on in pursuit of a diplomatic solution, but suggested for the first</p>

time that it might support an international military response if it is proved that Syrian government troops used chemical weapons to attack its opponents. Merkel's spokesman, Steffen Seibert, said that if UN inspectors confirmed the use of chemical weapons, Syria "must be punished".

He confirmed for the first time the government's belief that there is a "very high probability of a poison gas attack" and while he would not rule out the use of force, he would not speculate on what sort of response might be appropriate. Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle said that if the attack was confirmed, "Germany would be among those who consider consequences to be appropriate."

The statements indicate a shift away from the government's hitherto insistence on a political solution to the conflict, with defence minister Thomas de Maiziere declaring just this weekend that: "Outside military intervention in this terrible civil war in Syria is just not something I envisage," while Philipp Missfelder, head foreign policy expert of the CDU insisted: "Germany is rightly continuing to work on a political remedy."

The government's shift could yet turn the Syrian issue into a hotly debated election theme that could even influence the outcome of the poll in a month's time.

Most Germans are against military intervention and the current debate recalls the fallout in 2002 when Germany was divided over the looming intervention in Iraq ahead of that year's general election. Making the war his central election issue, and successfully presenting his party as the party of peace in opposition to the conservatives' candidate Edmund Stoiber and the CDU head Angela Merkel, the SPD's candidate Gerhard Schröder, while accused of opportunism, managed to secure his reelection.

Until now, the issue of war had not featured as an election issue at all with all parties in solid agreement – cementing their pacifist alliance in a Bundestag vote a month ago – that intervention by the west in Syria was to be avoided at all costs. The sense of solidarity is in contrast to the situation in 2011 when German politicians were divided over the UN security council's resolution over intervention in Libya.

But with the German population skeptical about military intervention and weary of its armed forces' less than triumphant experiences in Afghanistan, any party that pushes the call for western involvement, most especially anything which would involve German participation, risks losing voters. Despite widespread predictions that her reelection is a shoo-in, a decision by Merkel to support military intervention could have serious consequences for her future.

Meanwhile, Claudia Roth, the head of the opposition Greens and the strongest political voice of the pacifist movement in the Bundestag, has continued to stress the urgency of coming up with a non-military remedy. "All parties need to come to a political solution as soon as possible," she said. She stressed that China and Russia "have to put pressure on the Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad and to stop delivering weapons to Syria immediately".

The Social Democrats' (SPD) candidate for next month's general election, Peer Steinbrück, urged "restraint regarding the discussions about military intervention".

Most politicians have welcomed the decision by Assad to allow entry to UN weapon inspectors even if only to secure more time in which a political solution might be reached. "This is an important agreement in a dramatic situation," said Westerwelle.

Dirk Niebel of the liberal Free Democrats (FDP) said that Germany should focus its energies on helping the civilian population. "There are more than 100,000 dead and two

million refugees and they're the ones we need to help

1.06pm BST



The US defence secretary, Chuck Hagel, and Indonesia's president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, pose before a meeting in Jakarta. Photograph: Adek Berry/AFP/Getty Images

Further to the 12.590pm update, here's a photo of Chuck Hagel in Indonesia.

1.02pm BST

Here's some more about Turkey's current position, from my colleague **Constanze Letsch** in Istanbul:

Turkey threw its weight on Monday behind the gathering western consensus on military intervention in Syria.

Speaking to the Turkish daily newspaper Milliyet, the foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, said that Turkey would consider taking part in an international coalition against the Syrian regime, even if the UN Security Council failed to endorse military action.

He said: "We always make it a priority to act in accord with the United Nations and the international community. If the Security Council does not reach a decision [to take action], we will address other possible options. These alternatives are currently being discussed by 36 to 37 countries. If a coalition emerges from these discussions, Turkey will be a part of it."

Ever since the crisis began early in 2011, Turkey has been a staunch critic of its former ally, the regime of Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad. Despite widespread criticism by opposition parties and many Turks, the AK Party government has also provided open logistical support to and shelter for armed rebels fighting in Syria, making it the first Turkish government ever to get involved in active regime change in a third country.

"Turkey has argued from the very beginning that the international community must not stand by in the face of the massacres committed by the Assad regime," Davutoglu told Milliyet. "Those who commit war crimes and crimes against humanity must definitely be punished."

Updated at 1.13pm BST

12.59pm BST

There's been some very brief words on the US view about the fast-moving situation from the defense secretary, Chuck Hagel, who is in Jakarta. He told reporters that "if there is any action taken" the US will take it in concert with international partners. Washington, he said, was "looking at all options" over Syria, declining to outline any of these.

12.55pm BST

Nick Watt has sent in this about Cameron's curtailed holiday:

David Cameron is cutting short his holiday in Cornwall to deal with the Syrian crisis. The prime minister, who has held a series of telephone conversations with world leaders from Cornwall, will be back at work in Downing Street by tomorrow. He may even return tonight. The prime minister will chair a meeting of the National Security Council on Wednesday.

Updated at 1.13pm BST

12.53pm BST

Alec Luhn in Moscow has sent this very comprehensive summary of the Russian position as it stands today. Essentially, Russia does not believe the Syrian government was to blame for the chemical weapons attack and opposes any military intervention:

Russia has continued to ramp up its warnings against military intervention in Syria, arguing that the recent gas attack in a Damascus suburb was likely perpetrated by rebel forces.

Foreign minister Sergei Lavrov cautioned the US secretary of state, John Kerry, against military intervention in a phone call, the foreign ministry said in a statement on Monday. Lavrov called a rare press conference on Syria for later that day.

The Kremlin has continued to argue that the chemical attack was likely a ploy by rebels to provoke international intervention.

"The references by different representatives of the administration to the supposed involvement of the Syrian government in the incident allegedly using chemical weapons in Eastern Ghouta last week are especially perplexing," the foreign ministry statement said. The ministry has previously said calls for the UN Security Council to authorise use of force in Syria were "unacceptable".

Russian officials on Twitter have been criticized the toughening of the US and British position on Syria, comparing it to the lead-up to the Iraq war.

"We ALREADY SAW this in Iraq!" Senator Ruslan Gattarov tweeted in reaction to Obama and Cameron's call for a response to the chemical attack in Damascus. "They're spoiling for a fight, and who are they after...IRAQ?!" he wrote in another tweet.

Aleksei Pushkov, head of the Russian parliament's foreign affairs committee, said that Obama was on the verge of repeating George W. Bush's mistake of invading Iraq.

"Obama is moving unstopably toward war in Syria, just like Bush moved toward war in Iraq. Like in Iraq, this war will not be legitimate, and Obama will become a clone of Bush," Pushkov wrote.

Sergei Markov, a pro-Kremlin analyst and deputy head of the Plekhanov Economic University, said Russia regards the US and British stance on Syria as "cynical," since it thinks Western leaders understand that the attack was a rebel ploy but nonetheless are shifting the blame to Assad as they move closer to intervention.

"There was a provocation and an information war ... and then everybody pretends that they believe it," Markov said. "This approach will lead to chaos in international politics."

Markov also compared the Syria rhetoric to the build-up to war in Iraq, but said Washington's promise that no response to Syria will involve American troops on the ground demonstrates that the United States is closer to Russia's position and is "more restrained" than France and the UK.

The Kremlin will continue to seek access for UN investigators to the site of the attack but will oppose any UN security council resolution authorising use of force against Assad, Markov predicted.

"If it were proven that Assad committed the chemical attack then Russia would stop supplying him militarily, but it would nonetheless be against international intervention," Markov said. "Whose side would [intervention] be on? Because Assad is now fighting Al Qaeda and Al Nusra."

Russia has long opposed military intervention in Syria on the grounds that it would violate Syria's sovereignty. It would take a "complete humanitarian catastrophe" for the Kremlin to support intervention, Markov said, but for now there is still

hope that Assad can win and bring order to the country.

"Russia is not interested in Assad himself, it's interested in the norms of international war," Markov said. "We don't think it's right to enter a civil war against a sitting president. We don't like that logic."

Updated at 1.13pm BST

12.47pm BST

Syria's government has blamed "terrorists" – a term it commonly uses for rebel groups – for the sniper attack on the UN team, Reuters reports.

Syrian TV cited an unnamed information ministry source as saying:

The Syrian government will hold the armed terrorist groups responsible for the safety of the members of the United Nations team.

12.45pm BST

Reuters reports that the UN inspection team has now successfully reached the site of the suspected chemical attack, citing unnamed "activists".

12.43pm BST

Here's footage of some more words today from Hague, taking a very similar line to his interview earlier (see 9.31am). Here, the foreign secretary says the British government is "clear" there was not just a chemical weapons attack but that it was carried out by the Syrian government. He says:

All of the evidence points in that one direction.

Hague argues that if the government believed the attack was carried out by opposition forces it should have allowed UN inspectors to visit immediately, and that subsequent bombardment could have destroyed a lot of evidence:

We have to be realistic now about what the UN team can achieve.

12.21pm BST

Ban Ki-Moon's office has [issued this statement](#) about the sniper attack. Still no word – understandably – about who might be suspected of carrying it out:

The Spokesperson for the secretary general has the following update on the UN chemical weapons investigation team in Damascus:

The first vehicle of the chemical weapons investigation team was deliberately shot at multiple times by unidentified snipers in the buffer zone area.

As the car was no longer serviceable, the team returned safely back to the government check-point. The team will return to the area after replacing the vehicle.

It has to be stressed again that all sides need to extend their cooperation so that the team can safely carry out their important work.

12.10pm BST

AFP now have a quote from a UN spokesman, Martin Nesirky, about the

sniper fire. No injuries were reported, he said:

The first vehicle of the chemical weapons investigation team was deliberately shot at multiple times by unidentified snipers.

Reuters adds the spokesman as saying the car could no longer be used, and a replacement was being brought.

Updated at 12.13pm BST

12.06pm BST While we await more news on the sniper attack on the UN inspection team – it seems only a vehicle was damaged, with no casualties reported currently – here is the [official UN transcript of Ban Ki-Moon's strong comments on Syria](#) earlier today.

12.03pm BST Germany says it would also support an international military response should a chemical attack be confirmed, AP reports.

Angela Merkel's spokesman, Steffen Seibert, said that if UN inspectors confirm the use of chemical weapons, "it must be punished" and that Germany would not rule out the use of force.

11.58am BST

Vehicle of [@UN #Syria #ChemicalWeapons](#) team hit by sniper fire. Team replacing vehicle & then returning to area.

— [UN Spokesperson \(@UN_Spokesperson\) August 26, 2013](#)

Here is what the UN itself is saying about the sniper fire. No information about who might be behind the shooting.

Updated at 12.00pm BST

11.53am BST AFP is reporting a UN spokesman as saying snipers have shot at weapons inspectors as they work in Syria. More details when we have them.

[#BREAKING](#) Snipers in Syria shoot at UN chemical inspectors: UN spokesman

— [Agence France-Presse \(@AFP\) August 26, 2013](#)

Updated at 11.55am BST

11.44am BST

[#Syria's](#) Foreign Ministry: UN inspection team allowed to conduct investigations into chemical weapons use allegations pic.twitter.com/s9B5O16yTW

— [SANA English \(@SANA_English\) August 26, 2013](#)

The English-language Twitter feed of the official Syrian news agency has just sent this slightly cryptic update and photo.

11.33am BST And what of China? As ever, the official response is cautiously worded. Wang Yi, the foreign minister, has released this statement, as quoted by Reuters:

China has paid close attention to the reports of the use of chemical weapons inside Syria, and China resolutely opposes the use of chemical weapons no matter who uses them.

China supports the UN's secretariat to, in accordance with relevant UN resolutions, open an independent, objective, fair and professional investigation, to find out what really happened as soon as possible...

The only way out for the Syrian issue is a political resolution. All parties ought to cautiously handle the Syrian chemical weapons issue to avoid interfering in [efforts] to

11.28am BST resolve the Syrian issue politically.
A good guide to the latest US position on Syria comes in [this New York Times article](#), which quotes a senior (but unnamed) Obama official as saying Washington sees "very little doubt" that Assad's forces used chemical weapons last week.

The president has been discussing military options with his national security team, the story adds:

While administration officials emphasized that Mr. Obama had not decided to take action, they said he was determined not to be drawn into a protracted debate over gaining access for the United Nations investigators, because of doubts that they could now produce credible findings.

11.20am BST There is, of course, a significant and as yet barely addressed question looming amid all this talk of 'action' against Syria: what form would that action take? The Financial Times' James Blitz has addressed this as one of three key questions over Syria for the US and his allies (the other two were: how much more time should be left to gather evidence about the suspected chemical attack; and could it be done without a UN resolution).

On the specifics of military action, he says (the full article is [behind a paywall here](#)):

Until now, US and British military chiefs have been deeply opposed to any sustained engagement on the side of the rebels in Syria. They believe that there are no moderate rebel groups who would be able to fill the power vacuum if the Assad regime collapsed.

However, many military experts believe that what should be contemplated now is a one off intervention by the US and its allies which, at the very least, signals that they will not tolerate the continued use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime in this conflict.

Brigadier Mike Herzog, a former senior figure in Israel's Ministry of Defence, says the US should conduct what he calls a "stand-off air strike" on a Syrian military establishment. "You could target airfields, air assets, helicopters," he says. "Hitting any of these in a single strike would do a lot of damage. If it is big enough Assad will take notice. It could deter Assad from allowing chemical weapons to be used in this way again."

Blitz adds that there are many risks to this, not including the possible death of civilians and of Russian and Iranian nationals inside Syria.

11.12am BST Turkey has said it would join any international coalition against Syria even without UN Security Council endorsement, the [AFP news agency reports](#).

The country's foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, told the Milliyet newspaper:

If a coalition is formed against Syria in this process, Turkey will take part in it...

After the inspection, the United Nations needs to make a decision on sanctions. If there's no such decision, other options will be on the agenda.

Updated at 11.21am BST

11.07am BST The Labour party has reiterated they would expect the case for any military action against Syria involving Britain to be put to parliament. The shadow foreign secretary, Douglas Alexander, has released this statement:

Both the foreign secretary and the prime minister have previously made commitments to the House of Commons that parliament would be recalled before a decision about further UK involvement in Syria was taken.

This morning's interview by the foreign secretary only confirmed the need, before any action is taken, for ministers to make their case to parliament.

11.03am BST While of course I understand the foreign secretary's reluctance to discuss specific military deployments, he and the prime minister do need to be open about the objectives, the legal basis, and the anticipated effect of any possible UK military action in Syria.

10.51am BST Given both the seriousness of the reported chemical weapons strikes in Syria, and the enduring and complex nature of the conflict itself, ahead of any action being taken I would fully expect the prime minister to make his case to parliament.

Here's Ban, speaking in Seoul.

10.41am BST Prime Minister cuts short his holiday due to crisis in Syria and is expected to chair National Security Council meeting on Tuesday

— Sky News Newsdesk (@SkyNewsBreak) August 26, 2013

Sky News says David Cameron is to curtail his current break in Cornwall due to the situation in Syria. No confirmation from elsewhere yet.

10.39am BST My colleague, Kim Willsher, in Paris, has sent me the latest on Syria from François Hollande, [who spoke to the Le Parisien newspaper](#):

Everything will be decided this week. There are several options on the table that go from the reinforcement of international sanctions to air strikes via arming the rebels.

It's still too early to say anything concrete about what will happen. The UN experts will carry out their inquiry at the scene. We will also leave a little time for the diplomatic process, but not too much time. We cannot not react to the use of chemical weapons.

Kim adds:

Hollande, Jean Yves Le Drian, the defence minister and Laurent Fabius, the foreign affairs minister, have been holding talks on Syria since the chemical attack. Hollande spoke to Obama late on Sunday and told him that France, like Great Britain, would be at his side if "an action of force" was decided.

Updated at 10.50am BST



The UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon, speaking at a press conference in Seoul. Photograph: Ahn Young-joon/AP

10.12am BST

This is Ban Ki-Moon at the press conference in Seoul. He's in the South Korean capital on a 5-day visit.
UN secretary general calls for urgent action

Ban Ki-Moon has just made some very strongly-worded comments in Seoul, where he is on a visit. The full text is below but in brief he is calling for a full and immediate inspection of the attack site (which he says should happen today) and a stern – if not specified – response if the allegation are proven. He says: "And every hour counts. We cannot afford any more delays":

The United Nations team on the ground, led by Dr. Sellstrom, has been working intensively around the clock to respond to the latest reports of alleged use of chemical weapons.

I have been in constant contact with many world leaders as well as my senior staff at New York headquarters and in Damascus.

The UN investigation mission was in Syria before this most recent horrific attack. Now, following talks in the country between my high representative for disarmament, Ms Angela Kane, and top Syrian officials, the mission is expected to begin conducting on-site fact-finding activities today, 26th of August, in just a matter of hours.

And every hour counts. We cannot afford any more delays. We have all seen the horrifying images on our television screens and through social media. Clearly this was a major and terrible incident.

We owe it to the families of the victims to act.

All those in Syria have a stake in finding out the truth. The whole world should be concerned about any threat or use of chemical weapons. And that is why the world is watching Syria.

I demand that all parties allow this mission to get on with the job so that we can begin to establish the facts. The team must be able to conduct a full, thorough and unimpeded investigation. I have total confidence in their expertise, professionalism and integrity.

Their success is in everyone's interest – all parties in Syria and all concerned States. It will address the recent allegations in the Damascus area and its success can have a deterrent effect on possible further use of chemical weapons in Syria and elsewhere.

We are determined to answer the call of our member states, fulfill our mandate and resolve deeply disturbing unanswered questions.

If proven, any use of chemical weapons by anyone under any circumstances is a serious violation of international law and an outrageous crime. We cannot allow impunity in what appears to be a grave crime against humanity.

At the same time, it remains essential to achieve a complete cessation of hostilities, so that humanitarian assistance can urgently be delivered. All parties to this conflict should agree on an indefinite ceasefire.

10.04am BST

It is not just the UK and US who are seeking a response to the suspected chemical attack, and the wider chaos within Syria. France's foreign minister, Laurent Fabius, told Europe 1 radio this morning that there would be a "proportionate response":

It will be negotiated in coming days. All the options are open. The only option that I can't imagine would be to do nothing.

David Cameron, we are told, has interrupted his family holiday to speak to Barack Obama and Angela Merkel, as well as Fabius's boss, Francois Hollande.

9.59am BST

Nick Watt's full story about Hague's comments this morning [is now up](#). Here's another snippet of what the foreign secretary had to say, comments which indicate the appetite for diplomatic pressure is running out:

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1334 comments. Showing 50 conversations, threads collapsed, sorted oldest first

« Prev 1 2 3 ...10 Next »

24 PEOPLE, 42 COMMENTS



BrownMoses

26 August 2013 9:49am

30

I've just [put together a post](#) showing how I've found the exact position of one of the munitions used in the alleged chemical attack, which you all might find interesting. There's also [this detailed look](#) at the munition by the arms specialist Nic Jenzen-Jones.



PeterBrit BrownMoses

26 August 2013 10:01am

121

Very interesting. One thing I'm slightly confused about is that we were told that this chemical attack was in the context of a massive Syrian army offensive into the rebel areas concerned. That might make tactical sense if the gas attack was followed immediately by a Syrian army offensive that hit the rebels when they were still stunned by what had happened. Yet there doesn't seem to have been a massive Syrian army offensive in the areas concerned and the rebels still seem to hold them. Any idea what that's all about? Did the army stop its offensive, did the rebels defeat it, or was there never a massive offensive?



TVwriter PeterBrit

26 August 2013 10:28am

19

This from Patrick Cockburn in today's Independent may be relevant.

What stops the Syrian army capturing many rebel areas is not armed opposition but shortage of troops, unwillingness to suffer casualties among trained soldiers and an inability to hold captured areas in the long term. If Syrian generals did use chemical weapons last Wednesday this lack of manpower might explain why they did so.

Show 39 more replies

Last reply: 26 August 2013 7:28pm

18 PEOPLE, 29 COMMENTS



PeterBrit

26 August 2013 9:50am

369

I certainly support UN inspectors being sent in to try to find out what happened, but I'm concerned that already Hague is moving the goalposts. Hague is suddenly saying diplomacy isn't working even though, diplomacy with the threat of force, is precisely what has allowed the UN inspectors to have access.

I'm also concerned that Hague and US officials are suddenly saying that it's too late for the UN inspectors to go in, that most evidence will have been destroyed. This seems unlikely, and it directly contradicts Hague and the US's position earlier this year when they claimed that evidence gained weeks after alleged attacks proved for sure that Assad's regime had used chemical weapons then.

Hague should not be our foreign minister, because he simply has no credibility.



meffisto PeterBrit

26 August 2013 10:00am

212

The UK's foreign policy, especially with regards to Syria, has no credibility. As such, William Hague is a perfectly fitting Foreign Secretary.



ChaoLe PeterBrit

26 August 2013 10:31am

36

BTW, when Assad agrees the visit of inspectors 4 DAYS after attack, and only under the strong pressure, does he have any credibility in your opinion? When he shells the area affected by the CW, does he have any credibility?

Related information



UN inspectors ordered out by regime after 90 minutes – doctor

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