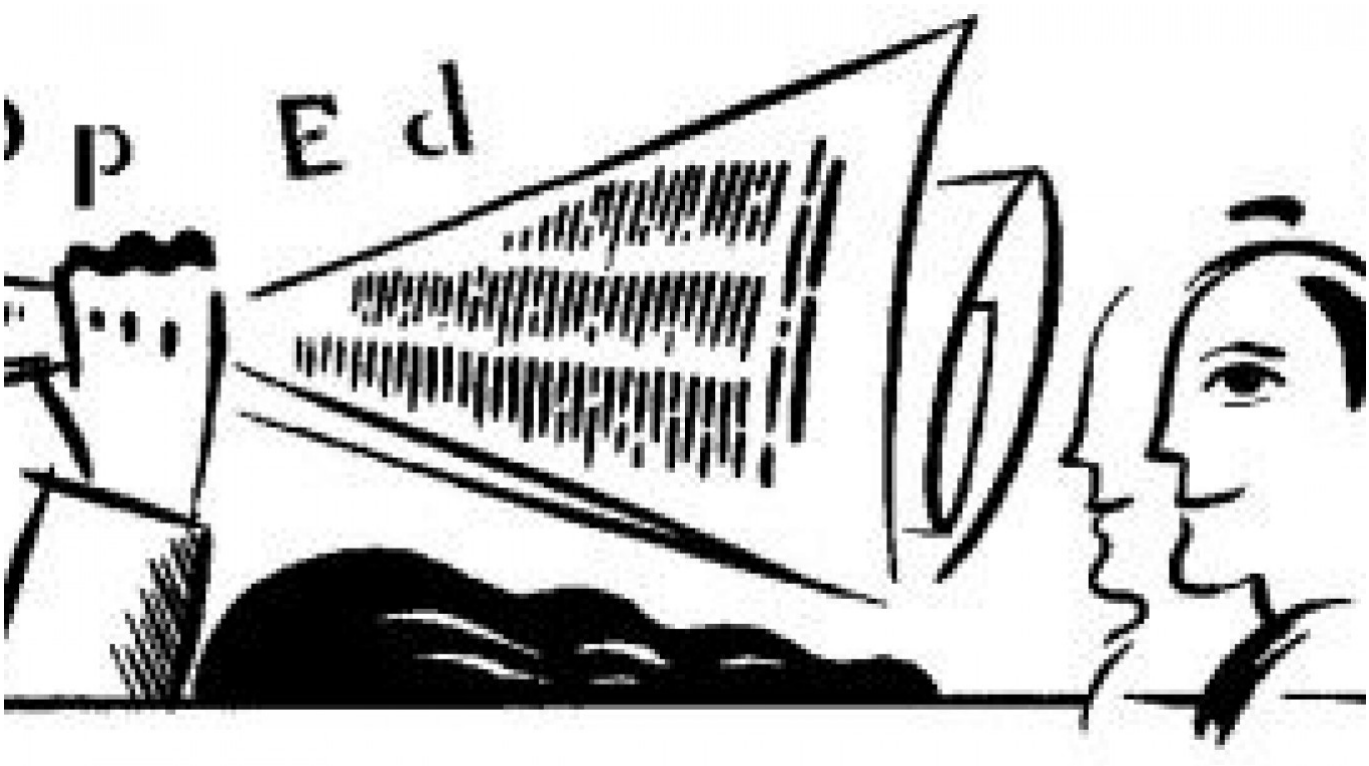
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Russia Helped Build Syria's Chemical Weapons

By James Brooke

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Western observers are right to be wary of Moscow's offer to bring Syria's chemical warfare program under international controls and, ultimately, destruction. Throughout Syria's civil war, Moscow has kept its head in the sand on the chemical weapons issue.

On Monday, just as the Russian offer was taking shape in Moscow, National Security Adviser Susan Rice said in Washington: "In the past two months, Russia has blocked two resolutions condemning the use of chemical weapons that did not even ascribe blame to any party. Russia opposed two mere press statements expressing concern about their use."

But now if the Kremlin really wants to help, they are in the best position of any nation to identify, catalog and destroy Syria's chemical weapons arsenal.

Thirty years after the Soviet Union helped to set up Syria's chemical weapons program, the Kremlin should have the best knowledge of the players and of the locations.

From 1963 to 1991, an estimated 50,000 Syrians studied in the Soviet Union. Of these, about 10,000 studied at military academies in the Soviet Union.

During this period, the Soviet Union sold — or gave — Syria $26 billion in military equipment. Today, Syria's military uses MiG fighter jets, T-64 tanks, Scud missiles, Mi-8 helicopters, Pantsir air defense systems, Amur submarines and Kalashnikov rifles.

Despite this military hardware, Syria lost land wars or battles to Israel in 1967, 1973 and 1982. After the 1982 defeat, Syria started to build a chemical weapons program to try to reach at least some level of military parity with Israel, a nondeclared nuclear state.

According to independent military sources, the recipes for the sarin, VX and other chemical poisons, the equipment for the laboratories, the blueprints for the production facilities, the missiles for delivery systems, and the experts for training, came almost entirely from the Soviet Union. Some assistance also came from Czechoslovakia, which was then a part of the Soviet bloc.

Since the beginning, the precursor chemicals were bought in from large chemical brokerage houses in Holland, Switzerland, France, Austria and Germany on the open market because most of these chemicals have dual civilian and military uses.

"Russia keeps stressing that it is against the use of chemical weapons, but we know the Syrian arsenal dates back to the days of the U.S.S.R.," Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski told reporters in Warsaw last week.☒"It's Soviet technology."

The 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union gives contemporary Moscow a layer of deniability. Even Pentagon spokesman George Little said last week, "The Syrian regime has a decades-old, largely indigenous chemical weapons program."

Little made this comment after U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel erroneously responded to a congressman's question about the source of Syria's chemical weapons, saying: "Well, the Russians supply them."

On Friday during the Group of 20 summit in St. Petersburg, the Kremlin's chief of staff, Sergei Ivanov, was asked about Hagel's charge. Ivanov dismissed it as rubbish.

Ivanov, who served for six years as defense minister, added: "Until recently, I was the chairman of the government commission on export control, which exists precisely to prevent proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, their delivery systems, including chemical and biological weapons. So I know what I'm talking about. "

After a decade of Soviet involvement, Syria started producing its own chemical weapons in the 1990s. But there are strong clues that Russian involvement in Syria's chemical program continued after the Soviet collapse.

In the 1990s, a frequent visitor to Damascus was General Anatoly Kuntsevich, ironically an adviser to then-President Boris Yeltsin on eliminating chemical weapons.

Der Spiegel wrote last year of Kuntsevich's missions: "The chemical weapons expert allegedly established connections with leading members of the Syrian regime, received large amounts

of money from them and, in exchange, provided them with details on how to manufacture VX, a powerful chemical agent. He reportedly also shipped 800 liters of chemicals to Syria that were required to produce the poison gas."

Kuntsevich's activity stopped in 2003 when he died unexpectedly on a flight from Damascus to Moscow.

In August 2010, another retired general, Yury Ivanov, died in murky circumstances. Ivanov, who had served as deputy director of the GRU, Russia's military intelligence agency, disappeared from a coastal Syrian town when he was reportedly on his way to meet Syrian military intelligence officers. His body was found several days later in neighboring Turkey.

In both cases, journalists in the Middle East speculated that the men were killed by Mossad, the Israeli intelligence agency.

Unlike Russian leaders, Israelis do not see Syria's chemical weapons program as a parlor game for scoring political debating points. After Syria and Iraq built their chemical weapons programs in the 1990s, Israel built what is probably the world's most comprehensive chemical weapons civil defense program, including a network of sensors, street sirens and gas masks for each of Israel's 8 million inhabitants.

Alumni of Soviet military schools are believed to work for Syria's Scientific Studies and Research Center, the agency that directs the nation's chemical weapons program.

Until Monday, Russia's public approach was "hear no evil, see no evil."

After Sikorski proposed that Russia take serious measures to control Syria's chemical weapons program, the Foreign Ministry responded: "Responsibility for safety of these chemical weapons lies with the government of a sovereign Syria, and nobody else. Neither internal nor external forces should try to prevent the performance of this mission or intervene in this process."

Thirty years ago, Soviet scientists created Syria's Frankenstein. Now that the chemical monster has escaped the lab, the Kremlin may be best positioned to lure it back under control.

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