Lies and hypocrisy over Syrian “gas attack”

Patrick Martin
8 April 2017

While the American military subjected Syria to bombardment by dozens of Tomahawk cruise missiles, its most important ally, the US media, subjected the American population to its own bombardment—nonstop propaganda claiming that the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad is guilty of using nerve gas on its own population.

There has been no investigation on the ground to substantiate the claims by Syrian rebel groups, mainly affiliated with Al Qaeda, that 70 people died from the use of chemical weapons in the town of Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib province. Video footage and photographs, which are easily manipulated or faked, have served in the place of evidence.

President Trump cited the pictures of children dying as the reason from his reversal of policy in relation to Syria. As late as Monday, Trump administration officials were conceding that President Assad’s hold on power seemed secure and declaring that the main focus of US policy in Syria was to destroy the Islamic fundamentalist group ISIS. Less than 72 hours later US destroyers were launching cruise missiles at a Syrian airbase.

Trump’s religion-tinged bathos about avenging “beautiful babies” who were “children of god” would be more convincing if he had not devoted so much of his administration’s first 80 days in office to making life miserable for babies of all races and nationalities, but especially those from the Middle East.

It was not long ago that White House press secretary Sean Spicer was defending the US detention of children coming from seven Muslim-majority countries, both visitors and refugees, on the grounds that they were potential terrorists. Asked in particular about the seizure of a five-year-old Iranian boy, separated from his mother by Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents, Spicer replied, “to assume that just because of someone’s age or gender or whatever that they don’t pose a threat would be misguided and wrong.”

Trump himself famously declared that he would order the killing of the children of suspected Al Qaeda and ISIS terrorists if they had the poor judgment to be in the company of their parents when they became the targets of US cruise missiles. And in the current US-backed onslaught on ISIS-held Mosul, the second-largest city in Iraq, thousands of innocent civilians, including many, many children, have been blown to bits or incinerated by US bombs. Neither Trump nor the American media have shed any tears over the children of Mosul.

There has been no serious media examination of the evidence around the Idlib gas attack, in part because there is no evidence to present. The Russian counterclaim that Syrian warplanes struck an Al Qaeda nerve gas factory has been dismissed out of hand, although the Al Qaeda affiliate in Syria, the group formerly named the al-Nusra Front, is known to possess such facilities and to have used such weapons.

Another problem with the Assad gas attack narrative is that the US government, along with Russia and the United Nations, supervised the destruction of Syria’s stockpile of banned chemical weapons in 2013-2014, under an agreement brokered by Russian President Vladimir Putin to call off a previous planned US missile strike on Syria, under the Obama administration.

US intelligence agencies repeatedly certified that Syria’s chemical weapons stocks had been destroyed, and that the Assad regime was adhering to the Putin-Obama agreement. Now these same intelligence agencies claim that the Assad regime has made use of the same nerve gas weapons that were supposedly trucked out of Syria, loaded onto ships, and destroyed under US supervision.

Then there is the bothersome question of what could have motivated the regime of Bashar al-Assad, at a time

© World Socialist Web Site

when it has largely completed the military rout of the US-backed "rebels," to give Washington a pretext for intervention by suddenly and gratuitously dropping a nerve gas bomb on Khan Sheikhoun, a town of no military significance.

One observer, former Obama State Department official Antony Blinken, writing in the *New York Times* in support of the Trump-ordered missile strike, referred in passing to the problem of motivation, describing the use of sarin gas in Idlib as "totally unnecessary" for the Assad regime's survival, and "hugely embarrassing to Moscow."

Blinken also suggested darkly that Russia could face retaliation for its continued support for Assad, declaring, "The recent horrific attack in the St. Petersburg subway—apparently by an ethnic Uzbek possibly radicalized by the war in Syria—may be a preview of things to come if Moscow does not begin to extricate itself from the Syrian morass."

It would not be difficult for the US intelligence agencies, with their vast array of Islamic fundamentalist clients, including Al Qaeda affiliates in Syria, Yemen and other countries, to engineer such "consequences" for Russia.

An attempt at squaring this particular circle, providing a rationale for what Blinken called "totally unnecessary," comes in an analysis published in the same issue of the *Times* Friday, under the headline, "The Grim Logic Behind Syria's Chemical Weapons Attack."

The article points to Assad's consolidation of power, culminating in declarations from top US officials that removing him from power was no longer in the cards, then poses the question: "So why would Mr. Assad risk it all, outraging the world by attacking civilians with what Turkey now says was the nerve agent sarin, killing scores of people, many of them children?"

Anyone expecting an actual answer to this question would be naïve, given the byline of the article. The author, Anne Barnard, is a longtime conduit for CIA and Pentagon propaganda in the Middle East. She cites mostly unnamed "analysts" who assert that "rather than an inexplicable act … it is part of a carefully calculated strategy of escalating attacks against civilians."

However, the only "analyst" she quotes by name, Bente Scheller, the Middle East director of the Berlin-based Heinrich Böll Foundation, admits, "Militarily, there is no need." In other words, there is no "strategy" under which a nerve gas attack on a small town in Idlib province provides any benefit to the regime.

For the rebels, on the contrary, there is plenty of benefit in claiming or staging such an attack.

The *Los Angeles Times* pointed to this in a commentary Friday, noting that Assad had seemed "stronger than ever" at the beginning of the week, but now "the chemical incident not only has put the Assad government on the defensive. It may breathe new life into a divided, demoralized rebel force that has been losing territory and has looked to be on the verge of defeat."

There is no question who benefited from the supposed gas attack, the newspaper continued, regardless of authorship: "even if the incident was, as Syrian and Russian officials suggest, instigated by the Syrian opposition to draw international wrath onto Assad's head, the effect is undeniable: Assad's position is suddenly more precarious than ever."

If one poses the fundamental question, "Who benefits?" in relation to the supposed nerve gas attack in Idlib, the answer is imperialism and its "rebel" stooges in Syria. All the media propaganda in the world cannot disguise this fact.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site