CIA stages gas attack pretext for Syria escalation

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9 April 2018

The US media has seized on the latest claims by CIA-backed groups of a poison gas attack on civilians to demand a further escalation of the US-led war for regime-change in Syria and an increased confrontation with Russia.

The Syrian government claims that one of its airbases, in Homs province, has already come under missile attack. While the Pentagon is denying that it has launched any strikes on Syria yet, the rhetoric of the Trump administration indicates that preparations are being made for stepped-up military operations.

As with previous allegations of chemical weapons' use, the public is being inundated with unverified footage of suffering victims, while government officials and the corporate media, prior to any investigation and without any substantiation, declare the government of Bashar al-Assad and its Iranian and Russian allies to be guilty of a war crime.

Within minutes, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* dashed out breathless articles placing the blame for the alleged attack at the feet of the Syrian and Russian governments. The *Guardian* declared in an editorial that "Syria's renewed use of chemical weapons against its own people at the weekend is shameless and barbaric."

The current claims are no more credible than those that preceded them. The official narrative that Assad carried out a gas attack in Eastern Ghouta in 2013 was used to prepare a massive US air strike that was canceled at the last minute by the Obama administration—a retreat that earned Obama furious recriminations that continue to the present. Subsequent investigations proved that the attack was actually launched by US-backed "rebels" in conjunction with the Turkish government.

The alleged gas attack that was used in April 2017 to justify the major US cruise missile assault on a Syrian air base was similarly exposed to have resulted from an air strike on a "rebel" poison gas facility.

The previous pretexts for military escalation were staged by the CIA and its proxy forces in Syria. The latest provocation is no different.

There is no credible evidence concerning the claimed attack in the Eastern Ghouta city of Douma, a few miles from the Syrian capital. There are video clips that prove nothing, since they could have been manufactured at any time and edited to serve the purpose. The sole on-the-spot accounts come from the White Helmets, celebrated by the media as a rescue organization, but affiliated with the anti-Assad "rebels" and largely funded by the United States, Britain, Germany and other imperialist powers. This includes $23 million from the US Agency for International Development, a longtime front for the CIA.

The Trump White House has denounced the alleged atrocity, with officials making the usual warning, prior to military action, that "everything is on the table." The US National Security Council (NSC) will convene Monday for the first time under newly appointed chief John Bolton, who played a major role in the Iraq War and has publicly advocated bombing both Iran and North Korea. The NSC will recommend military options to the president.

Any such action would bring with it the imminent threat of a wider war. Both Iranian advisers and Russian military personnel are integrated with the Syrian government forces and could well be hit in any significant US military strike, triggering demands for retaliation in both countries.

A wider conflict is the deliberate aim of the US military-intelligence apparatus. For a month, the world stage has been dominated by a British-American campaign against Russia, centered on the supposed poisoning of Sergei Skripal, a British spy, and his daughter Yulia, in Salisbury, England. There has been an escalating campaign of accusations, expulsions of Russian officials, and suggestions that the incident amounts to a nerve gas attack on Britain by Moscow, i.e., an act of war.

Last week, however, the official narrative of Russian government poisoning collapsed. The British chemical weapons authority announced that it could not determine the source of the supposed poison and both Skripals were reported to be recovering—making nonsense of the claim that they had been poisoned by a deadly nerve gas manufactured in Russia.

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The new media hysteria over a poison gas attack in Syria serves to divert attention from the collapse of the Skripal provocation, while providing a fresh pretext for escalating the offensive against Russia.

There is an additional reason for the focus on Syria. Over the past week, President Trump had publicly questioned continuing the US intervention in that country, given the debacles suffered by the CIA-backed Islamist forces and the consolidation of control over most of the country's population centers by the Assad government. He initially declared that US troops would leave Syria shortly, only to reverse himself after intense pressure from the Pentagon and CIA, Congress and the media. The Douma incident has put an end to such wavering.

As the *New York Times* noted Sunday night: "Days after President Trump said he wanted to pull the United States out of Syria, Syrian forces hit a suburb of Damascus with bombs that rescue workers said unleashed toxic gas. Within hours, images of dead families sprawled in their homes threatened to change Mr. Trump's calculus on Syria, possibly drawing him deeper into an intractable Middle Eastern war that he hoped to leave."

The "rebel" group now holding out in Douma, Jaysh al-Islam, part of the Islamist opposition to Assad that includes the Syrian branch of Al Qaeda as well as the remnants of ISIS, has itself been credibly accused of using chlorine gas in the course of fighting against Kurdish forces and civilians in Aleppo in 2016. That charge, made by the Kurds, was given extensive publicity by Voice of America, the propaganda arm of the US government.

It is possible that Syrian warplanes struck a weapons cache belonging to the rebel group, causing the gas to leak out. More likely, the poison gas was deliberately released by Jaysh al-Islam, at behest of its CIA backers, to provide a pretext for US military intervention. Assuming, that is, that the reports of poison gas exposure are not simply manufactured by the US intelligence agencies for rebroadcast by a servile media.

What is least likely, from a political standpoint, is that the Assad government, just as it was on the brink of final victory in Eastern Ghouta after more than five years of bitter fighting, should suddenly unleash a poison gas attack, which would have no military value but would invite a savage response from the Trump administration and the other Western powers. A Syrian government statement pointed this out, declaring that "an army that is progressing quickly… does not need to use any kind of chemical weapons."

According to Al Jazeera and Russian news sources, Jaysh al-Islam has been so thoroughly defeated that it has struck an agreement to completely withdraw all its militia and their families from Douma over the next 48 hours or so. Russian troops will reportedly move in to take control of the city.

Iran's Foreign Ministry rebuffed the US claims of a gas attack in Douma. "Such claims and allegations by the Americans and some Western countries point to a new plot against the Syrian government and people, and are an excuse to take military action against them," a spokesman told the press.

The Russian government denounced the US campaign over the supposed gas attack as a political provocation aimed at justifying deeper US military intervention in the Syrian civil war. "The spread of bogus stories about the use of chlorine and other poisonous substances by government forces continues," the Russian Foreign Ministry said. "We have warned several times recently against such dangerous provocations. The aim of such deceitful speculation, lacking any kind of grounding, is to shield terrorists… and to attempt to justify possible external uses of force."

The latest provocation follows a well-worn pattern, from the lies over Iraqi "weapons of mass destruction" to the present. The American intelligence agencies give the signal. Nonstop coverage is immediately launched on cable television, then demands for action are made by the White House and congressional leaders, boosted by editorials written by CIA mouthpieces such as the *New York Times*.

The brazen lies of the media are accompanied by breathtaking hypocrisy. The *Times*, the *Washington Post*, NBC, ABC, CBS, CNN and company downplay and cover up the atrocities carried out by American forces and their allies—the incineration of Mosul and Raqqa, the gunning down of demonstrators in Gaza by the Israeli military, the mass killings in Yemen carried out with US support by Saudi Arabia, even as its crown prince is feted by the US ruling elite, and the ongoing slaughter in Afghanistan.

The overwhelming responsibility for the continuing carnage and suffering in Syria—as well as in Iraq, Yemen and throughout the Middle East—rests squarely with US imperialism, which has launched one war after another based on lies in an attempt to establish control over the region and its vital energy resources. The prospect of US strikes in response to the allegations of a chemical attack urgently poses the danger of a wider war and the need for an international working class movement against war and for socialism.

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