

Did Al Qaeda Fool the White House Again?

Exclusive: Despite evidence that Al Qaeda and its allies have staged fake chemical attacks in Syria before, Official Washington asserts with “high confidence” that it’s not being fooled again, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

In Official Washington, words rarely mean what they say. For instance, if a U.S. government official voices “high confidence” in a supposed “intelligence assessment,” that usually means “we don’t have any real evidence, but we figure that if we say ‘high confidence’ enough then no one will dare challenge us.”

It’s also true that after a U.S. President or another senior official jumps to a conclusion that is not supported by evidence, the ranks of government careerists will close around him or her, making any serious or objective investigation almost impossible. Plus, if the dubious allegations are directed at some “enemy” state, then the mainstream media also will suppress skepticism. Prestigious “news” outlets will run “fact checks” filled with words in capital letters: “MISLEADING”; “FALSE”; or maybe “FAKE NEWS.”

Which is where things stand regarding President Trump’s rush to judgment within hours about an apparent chemical weapons incident in Syria’s Idlib province on April 4. Despite the fact that much of the information was coming from Al Qaeda and its propaganda-savvy allies, the mainstream U.S. media rushed emotional images onto what Trump calls “the shows” – upon which he says he bases his foreign policy judgments – and he blamed Syrian President Bashar al-Assad for the scores of deaths, including “beautiful little babies,” as Trump declared.

Given the neocon/liberal-interventionist domination of Official Washington’s foreign policy – and the professional Western propaganda shops working for Assad’s overthrow – there was virtually no pushback against the quick formulation of this new groupthink. All the predictable players played their predictable parts, from The New York Times to CNN to the Atlantic Council-related Bellingcat and its “citizen journalists.”

All the Important People who appeared on the TV shows or who were quoted in the mainstream media trusted the images provided by Al Qaeda-related propagandists and ignored documented prior cases in which the Syrian rebels staged chemical weapons incidents to implicate the Assad government.

‘We All Know’

One smug CNN commentator pontificated, “we all know what happened in 2013,” a

reference to the enduring conventional wisdom that an Aug. 21, 2013 sarin attack outside Damascus was carried out by the Assad government and that President Obama then failed to enforce his “red line” against chemical weapons use. This beloved groupthink survives even though evidence later showed the operation was carried out by rebels, most likely by Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front with help from Turkish intelligence, as investigative journalist Seymour Hersh reported and brave Turkish officials later confirmed.

But Official Washington’s resistance to reality was perhaps best demonstrated one year ago when The Atlantic’s Jeffrey Goldberg published a detailed article about Obama’s foreign policy that repeated the groupthink about Obama shrinking from his “red line” but included the disclosure that Director of National Intelligence James Clapper had informed the President that U.S. intelligence lacked any “slam dunk” evidence that Assad’s military was guilty.

One might normally think that such a warning from DNI Clapper would have spared Obama from the media’s judgment that he had chickened out, especially given the later evidence pointing the finger of blame at the rebels. After all, why should Obama have attacked the Syrian military and killed large numbers of soldiers and possibly civilians in retaliation for a crime that they had nothing to do with – and indeed an offense for which the Assad government was being framed? But Official Washington’s propaganda bubble is impervious to inconvenient reality.

Nor does anyone seem to know that a United Nations report disclosed testimonies from eyewitnesses about how rebels and their allied “rescue workers” had staged one “chlorine attack” so it would be blamed on the Assad government. Besides these Syrians coming forward to expose the fraud, the evidence that had been advanced to “prove” Assad’s guilt included bizarre claims from the rebels and their friends that they could tell that chlorine was inside a “barrel bomb” because of the special sound that it made while it was descending.

Despite the exposure of that one frame-up, the U.N. investigators – under intense pressure from Western governments to give them something to pin on the Assad regime – accepted rebel claims about two other alleged chlorine attacks, an implausible finding that is now repeatedly cited by the Western media even as it ignores the case of the debunked “chlorine attack.” Again, one might think that proof of two staged chemical weapons attacks – one involving sarin and the other chlorine – would inject some skepticism about the April 4 case, but apparently not.

All that was left was for President Trump to “act presidential” and fire off 59 Tomahawk missiles at some Syrian airbase on April 6, reportedly killing several Syrian soldiers and nine civilians, including four children, collateral damage that the mainstream U.S. media knows not to mention in its hosannas of praise

for Trump's decisiveness.

Home-Free Groupthink

There might be some pockets of resistance to the groupthink among professional analysts at the CIA, but their findings – if they contradict what the President has already done – will be locked away probably for generations if not forever.

In other words, the new Assad-did-it groupthink appeared to be home free, a certainty that The New York Times could now publish without having to add annoying words like “alleged” or “possibly,” simply stating Assad's guilt as flat-fact.

Thomas L. Friedman, the Times' star foreign policy columnist, did that and then extrapolated from his certainty to propose that the U.S. should ally itself with the jihadists fighting to overthrow Assad, a position long favored by U.S. “allies,” Saudi Arabia and Israel.

“Why should our goal right now be to defeat the Islamic State in Syria?” Friedman asked before proposing outright support for the jihadists: “We could dramatically increase our military aid to anti-Assad rebels, giving them sufficient anti-tank and antiaircraft missiles to threaten Russian, Iranian, Hezbollah and Syrian helicopters and fighter jets and make them bleed, maybe enough to want to open negotiations. Fine with me.”

So, not only have the mainstream U.S. media stars decided that they know what happen on April 4 in a remote Al Qaeda-controlled section of Idlib province (without seeing any real evidence) but they are now building off their groupthink to propose that the Trump administration hand out antiaircraft missiles to the “anti-Assad rebels” who, in reality, are under the command of Al Qaeda and/or the Islamic State.

In other words, Friedman and other deep thinkers are advocating material support for terrorists who would get sophisticated American ground-to-air missiles that could shoot down Russian planes thus exacerbating already dangerous U.S.-Russian tensions or take down some civilian airliner as Al Qaeda has done in the past. If someone named Abdul had made such a suggestion, he could expect a knock on his door from the FBI.

Expert Skepticism

Yet, before President Trump takes Friedman's advice – arming up Al Qaeda and entering into a de facto alliance with Islamic State – we might want to make sure that we aren't being taken in again by a clever Al Qaeda psychological operation, another staged chemical weapons attack.

With the U.S. intelligence community effectively silenced by the fact that the President has already acted, Theodore Postol, a technology and national security expert at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, undertook his own review of the supposed evidence cited by Trump's White House in issuing a four-page "intelligence assessment" on April 11 asserting with "high confidence" that Assad's military delivered a bomb filled with sarin on the town of Khan Sheikdoun on the morning of April 4.

Postol, whose analytical work helped debunk Official Washington's groupthink regarding the 2013 sarin attack outside Damascus, expressed new shock at the shoddiness of the latest White House report (or WHR). Postol produced "a quick turnaround assessment" of the April 11 report that night and went into greater detail in an addendum on April 13, writing:

"This addendum provides data that unambiguously shows that the assumption in the WHR that there was no tampering with the alleged site of the sarin release is *not* correct. This egregious error raises questions about every other claim in the WHR. ... The implication of this observation is clear – the WHR was not reviewed and released by any competent intelligence expert unless they were motivated by factors other than concerns about the accuracy of the report.

"The WHR also makes claims about 'communications intercepts' which supposedly provide high confidence that the Syrian government was the source of the attack. There is no reason to believe that the veracity of this claim is any different from the now verified false claim that there was unambiguous evidence of a sarin release at the cited crater. ... The evidence that unambiguously shows that the assumption that the sarin release crater was tampered with is contained in six photographs at the end of this document."

Postol notes that one key photo "shows a man standing in the alleged sarin-release crater. He is wearing a honeycomb facemask that is designed to filter small particles from the air. Other apparel on him is an open necked cloth shirt and what appear to be medical exam gloves. Two other men are standing in front of him (on the left in the photograph) also wearing honeycomb facemask's and medical exam gloves.

"If there were any sarin present at this location when this photograph was taken everybody in the photograph would have received a lethal or debilitating dose of sarin. The fact that these people were dressed so inadequately either suggests a complete ignorance of the basic measures needed to protect an individual from sarin poisoning, or that they knew that the site was not seriously contaminated.

"This is the crater that is the centerpiece evidence provided in the WHR for a sarin attack delivered by a Syrian aircraft."

No 'Competent' Analyst

After reviewing other discrepancies in photos of the crater, Postol wrote: "It is hard for me to believe that anybody competent could have been involved in producing the WHR report and the implications of such an obviously predetermined result strongly suggests that this report was not motivated by a serious analysis of any kind.

"This finding is disturbing. It indicates that the WHR was probably a report purely aimed at justifying actions that were not supported by any legitimate intelligence. This is not a unique situation. President George W. Bush has argued that he was misinformed about unambiguous evidence that Iraq was hiding a substantial amount of weapons of mass destruction. This false intelligence led to a US attack on Iraq that started a process that ultimately led to a political disintegration in the Middle East, which through a series of unpredicted events then led to the rise of the Islamic State."

Postol continued: "On August 30, 2013, the White House [under President Obama] produced a similarly false report about the nerve agent attack on August 21, 2013 in Damascus. This report also contained numerous intelligence claims that could not be true. An interview with President Obama published in *The Atlantic* in April 2016 indicates that Obama was initially told that there was solid intelligence that the Syrian government was responsible for the nerve agent attack of August 21, 2013 in Ghouta, Syria. Obama reported that he was later told that the intelligence was not solid by the then Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper.

"Equally serious questions are raised about the abuse of intelligence findings by the incident in 2013. Questions that have not been answered about that incident is how the White House produced a false intelligence report with false claims that could obviously be identified by experts outside the White House and without access to classified information. There also needs to be an explanation of why this 2013 false report was not corrected. ...

"It is now obvious that a second incident similar to what happened in the Obama administration has now occurred in the Trump administration. In this case, the president, supported by his staff, made a decision to launch 59 cruise missiles at a Syrian air base. This action was accompanied by serious risks of creating a confrontation with Russia, and also undermining cooperative efforts to win the war against the Islamic State. ...

"I therefore conclude that there needs to be a comprehensive investigation of these events that have either misled people in the White House, or worse yet, been perpetrated by people seeking to force decisions that were not justified by

the cited intelligence. This is a serious matter and should not be allowed to continue.”

While Postol’s appeal for urgent attention to this pattern of the White House making false intelligence claims – now implicating three successive administrations – makes sense, the likelihood of such an undertaking is virtually nil. The embarrassment and loss of “credibility” for not only the U.S. political leadership but the major U.S. news outlets would be so severe, especially in the wake of the WMD fiasco in Iraq, that no establishment figure or organization would undertake such a review.

Instead, Official Washington’s propaganda bubble will stay firmly in place allowing its inhabitants to go happily about their business believing that they are the caretakers of “truth.”

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).
