

Intel Vets Voice Doubts on Syrian Crisis

Two dozen former U.S. intelligence professionals are urging the American people to demand clear evidence that the Syrian government was behind the April 4 chemical incident before President Trump dives deeper into another war.

AN OPEN MEMORANDUM FOR THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

From: Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS)

Subject: Mattis 'No Doubt' Stance on Alleged Syrian CW Smacks of Politicized Intelligence

Donald Trump's new Secretary of Defense, retired Marine General James "Mad Dog" Mattis, during a recent trip to Israel, commented on the issue of Syria's retention and use of chemical weapons in violation of its obligations to dispose of the totality of its declared chemical weapons capability in accordance with the provisions of both the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and relevant U.N. Security Council resolutions.

"There can be no doubt," Secretary Mattis said during a April 21, 2017 joint news conference with his Israeli counterpart, Minister of Defense Avigdor Lieberman, "in the international community's mind that Syria has retained chemical weapons in violation of its agreement and its statement that it had removed them all." To the contrary, Mattis noted, "I can say authoritatively they have retained some."

Lieberman joined Mattis in his assessment, noting that Israel had "100 percent information that [the] Assad regime used chemical weapons against [Syrian] rebels."

Both Mattis and Lieberman seemed to be channeling assessments offered to reporters two days prior, on April 19, 2017, by anonymous Israeli defense officials that the April 4, 2017 chemical weapons attack on the Syrian village of Khan Shaykhun was ordered by Syrian military commanders, with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's personal knowledge, and that Syria retained a stock of "between one and three tons" of chemical weapons.

The Israeli intelligence followed on the heels of an April 13, 2017 speech given by CIA Director Mike Pompeo, who told an audience at the Center for Strategic and International Studies that, once information had come in about a chemical attack on Khan Shaykhun, the CIA had been able to "develop several hypothesis around that, and then to begin to develop fact patterns which either supported or suggested that the hypothesis wasn't right." The CIA, Pompeo said, was "in

relatively short order able to deliver to [President Trump] a high-confidence assessment that, in fact, it was the Syrian regime that had launched chemical strikes against its own people in [Khan Shaykhun.]”

The speed in which this assessment was made is of some concern. Both Director Pompeo, during his CSIS remarks, and National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, during comments to the press on April 6, 2017, note that President Trump turned to the intelligence community early on in the crisis to understand better “the circumstances of the attack and who was responsible.” McMaster indicated that the U.S. Intelligence Community, working with allied partners, was able to determine with “a very high degree of confidence” where the attack originated.

Both McMaster and Pompeo spoke of the importance of open source imagery in confirming that a chemical attack had taken place, along with evidence collected from the victims themselves – presumably blood samples – that confirmed the type of agent that was used in the attack. This initial assessment drove the decision to use military force – McMaster goes on to discuss a series of National Security Council meetings where military options were discussed and decided upon; the discussion about the intelligence underpinning the decision to strike Syria was over.

The danger of this rush toward an intelligence decision by Director Pompeo and National Security Advisor McMaster is that once the President and his top national security advisors have endorsed an intelligence-based conclusion, and authorized military action based upon that conclusion, it becomes virtually impossible for that conclusion to change. Intelligence assessments from that point forward will embrace facts that sustain this conclusion, and reject those that don’t; it is the definition of politicized intelligence, even if those involved disagree.

A similar “no doubt” moment had occurred nearly 15 years ago when, in August 2002, Vice President Cheney delivered a speech before the Veterans of Foreign Wars. “There is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction,” Cheney declared. “There is no doubt he is amassing them to use against our friends, against our allies and against us.” The message Cheney was sending to the Intelligence Community was clear: Saddam Hussein had WMD; there was no need to answer that question anymore.

The CIA vehemently denies that either Vice President Cheney or anyone at the White House put pressure on its analysts to alter their assessments. This may very well be true, but if it is, then the record of certainty – and arrogance – that existed in the mindset of senior intelligence managers and analysts only further erodes public confidence in the assessments produced by the CIA, especially when, as is the case with Iraq and Weapons of Mass Destruction – the

agency was found so lacking. Stuart Cohen, a veteran CIA intelligence analyst who served as the acting Chairman of the National Intelligence Council, oversaw the production of the 2002 Iraq National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) that was used to make case for Iraq possessing WMD that was used to justify war.

According to Mr. Cohen, he had four National Intelligence Officers with “over 100 years’ collective work experience on weapons of mass destruction issues” backed up by hundreds of analysts with “thousands of man-years invested in studying these issues.”

On the basis of this commitment of talent alone, Mr. Cohen assessed that “no reasonable person could have viewed the totality of the information that the Intelligence Community had at its disposal ... and reached any conclusion or alternative views that were profoundly different from those that we reached,” namely that – judged with high confidence – “Iraq had chemical and biological weapons as well as missiles with ranges in excess of the 150 kilometer limit imposed by the UN Security Council.”

Two facts emerge from this expression of intellectual hubris. First, the U.S. Intelligence Community was, in fact, wrong in its estimate on Iraq’s WMD capability, throwing into question the standards used to assign “high confidence” ratings to official assessments. Second, the “reasonable person” standard cited by Cohen must be reassessed, perhaps based upon a benchmark derived from a history of analytical accuracy rather than time spent behind a desk.

The major lesson learned here, however, is that the U.S. Intelligence Community, and in particular the CIA, more often than not hides behind self-generated platitudes (“high confidence”, “reasonable person”) to disguise a process of intelligence analysis that has long ago been subordinated to domestic politics.

It is important to point out the fact that Israel, too, was wrong about Iraq’s WMD. According to Shlomo Brom, a retired Israeli Intelligence Officer, Israeli intelligence seriously overplayed the threat posed by Iraqi WMD in the lead up to the 2003 Iraq War, including a 2002 briefing to NATO provided by Efraim Halevy, who at the time headed the Israeli Mossad, or intelligence service, that Israel had “clear indications” that Iraq had reconstituted its WMD programs after U.N. weapons inspectors left Iraq in 1998.

The Israeli intelligence assessments on Iraq, Mr. Brom concluded, were most likely colored by political considerations, such as the desire for regime change in Iraq. In this light, neither the presence of Avigdor Lieberman, nor the anonymous background briefings provided by Israel about Syria’s chemical weapons capabilities, should be used to provide any credence to Secretary Mattis’s

embrace of the “no doubt” standard when it comes to Syria’s alleged possession of chemical weapons.

The intelligence data that has been used to back up the allegations of Syrian chemical weapons use has been far from conclusive. Allusions to intercepted Syrian communications have been offered as “proof”, but the Iraq experience – in particular former Secretary of State Colin Powell’s unfortunate experience before the U.N. Security Council – show how easily such intelligence can be misunderstood and misused.

Inconsistencies in the publicly available imagery which the White House (and CIA) have so heavily relied upon have raised legitimate questions about the veracity of any conclusions drawn from these sources (and begs the question as to where the CIA’s own Open Source Intelligence Center was in this episode.) The blood samples used to back up claims of the presence of nerve agent among the victims was collected void of any verifiable chain of custody, making their sourcing impossible to verify, and as such invalidates any conclusions based upon their analysis.

In the end, the conclusions CIA Director Pompeo provided to the President was driven by a fundamental rethinking of the CIA’s analysts when it came to Syria and chemical weapons that took place in 2014. Initial CIA assessments in the aftermath of the disarmament of Syria’s chemical weapons seemed to support the Syrian government’s stance that it had declared the totality of its holding of chemical weapons, and had turned everything over to the OPCW for disposal. However, in 2014, OPCW inspectors had detected traces of Sarin and VX nerve agent precursors at sites where the Syrians had indicated no chemical weapons activity had taken place; other samples showed the presence of weaponized Sarin nerve agent.

The Syrian explanation that the samples detected were caused by cross-contamination brought on by the emergency evacuation of chemical precursors and equipment used to handle chemical weapons necessitated by the ongoing Civil War was not accepted by the inspectors, and this doubt made its way into the minds of the CIA analysts, who closely followed the work of the OPCW inspectors in Syria.

One would think that the CIA would operate using the adage of “once bitten, twice shy” when assessing inspector-driven doubt; U.N. inspectors in Iraq, driven by a combination of the positive sampling combined with unverifiable Iraqi explanations, created an atmosphere of doubt about the veracity of Iraqi declarations that all chemical weapons had been destroyed. The CIA embraced the U.N. inspectors’ conclusions, and discounted the Iraqi version of events; as it turned out, Iraq was telling the truth.

While the jury is still out about whether or not Syria is, like Iraq, telling the truth, or whether the suspicions of inspectors are well founded, one thing is clear: a reasonable person would do well to withhold final judgment until all the facts are in. (Note: The U.S. proclivity for endorsing the findings of U.N. inspectors appears not to include the Khan Shaykhun attack; while both Syria and Russia have asked the OPCW to conduct a thorough investigation of the April 4, 2017 incident, the OPCW has been blocked from doing so by the United States and its allies.)

CIA Director Pompeo's job is not to make policy – the intelligence his agency provides simply informs policy. It is not known if the U.S. Intelligence Community will be producing a formal National Intelligence Estimate addressing the Syrian chemical weapons issue, although the fact that the United States has undertaken military action under the premise that these weapons exist more than underscores the need for such a document, especially in light of repeated threats made by the Trump administration that follow-on strikes might be necessary.

Making policy is, however, the job of Secretary of Defense Mattis. At the end of the day, Secretary of Defense Mattis will need to make his own mind up as to the veracity of any intelligence used to justify military action. Mattis's new job requires that he does more than simply advise the President on military options; he needs to ensure that the employment of these options is justified by the facts.

In the case of Syria, the "no doubt" standard Mattis has employed does not meet the "reasonable man" standard. Given the consequences that are attached to his every word, Secretary Mattis would be well advised not to commit to a "no doubt" standard until there is, literally, no doubt.

For the Steering Group, Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity

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Trump's Next Most Dangerous Possibility

Assuming President Trump doesn't blunder into World War III, the next greatest harm he may do is reverse the modest U.S. steps toward fighting global warming, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

With the wide path of destruction that Donald Trump has been cutting – in which the damage is affecting matters ranging from principles of nondiscrimination to ethical integrity of government officials to reliable health care for Americans – it is easy to lose sight of what ultimately would be the most consequential destruction of all: the damage to a habitable planet.

The consequences may not be as immediately apparent, during the first 100 days or even during four years, as some of the other carnage, but the importance to humanity is even greater. As with many other Trump policies, it is not yet clear exactly what the administration will do regarding a specific initiative such as the Paris accord on climate change, but the overall thrust of opposing any serious effort to retard global warming is all too obvious.

The recent demonstrations known as the march for science, although ostensibly not aimed at any one leader, were a salutary expression of concern, given that denial of climate change and the associated opposition against efforts to slow global warming represent one of the most glaring rejections of science, right along with the Seventeenth Century inquisition of Galileo. The rejection is of a piece with Trump's contempt for truth on most any topic.

It is hard to know what goes through the minds of the climate change deniers and skeptics that Trump has installed in his administration. Most likely they are smart enough to know better but are playing out an appallingly selfish, politically narrow-minded, and short-sighted approach toward what sort of world will be left to their children and grandchildren. This is suggested by some of their contrived verbal formulations.

For example, Scott Pruitt, to whom Trump has given the job of presiding over the evisceration of the Environmental Protection Agency, says, "I think that measuring with precision human activity on the climate is something very challenging to do..." Who's talking about "precision"? That's a false standard.

The overwhelming scientific consensus is that human activity is a major, and

probably the major, contributor to what is highly consequential global warming, even if the exact effects cannot be measured or predicted with “precision.”

The posture assumed on this issue by the likes of Trump and Pruitt is highly irresponsible. The *Washington Post* editorial page puts it aptly: “Children studying [Trump’s] presidency will ask, ‘How could anyone have done this?’ ”

The Why of Climate Denial

Contempt and disdain are proper attitudes to adopt toward the climate change deniers, including the ones in the current administration. They should be shamed either for displaying such inexcusable ignorance or, what is even worse, for displaying selfishness and short-sightedness despite knowing better.

But that is not enough. And the problem goes far beyond Donald Trump. It extends to much of the Republican Party. As the *Post* editorialists observe, the GOP is “a once-great American political party embracing rank reality-denial.” James Inhofe was throwing snowballs in the Senate well before Trump was elected.

A savvy response to the deniers is to point out some of the more immediately visible economic and political consequences of the destructive approach toward climate change that the current administration has embraced. One should point out how not being in the forefront of developing renewable energy sources represents regression, not progress, for the U.S. economy, no matter how much false hope is given to Appalachian coal miners about getting jobs back. Former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg is a prominent political leader who commendably is adding his influential voice to this subject.

One also should point out how the Trump administration’s degenerate posture on energy and climate change isolates the United States internationally. The posture makes the United States an object of disdain for taking a Dark Ages approach toward an issue in which, more than any other, everyone in the world has a stake. Anyone in the United States who professes to care about U.S. leadership in the world ought to be concerned about this, regardless of attitudes about atmospheric science.

The loss of U.S. leadership is especially evident in comparison with the other of the two biggest emitters of greenhouse gases: China. Although several years ago China had a backward view of the issue of climate change, seeing it as a Western excuse for trying to retard China’s economy – a notion that Donald Trump would later adopt in the reverse direction by describing climate change as a Chinese “hoax” – Beijing is now making a concerted effort to do something about the problem.

China may have already passed, as of four years ago, its peak use of coal. There

are no signs that the Trump administration's back-sliding on the issue has lessened China's commitment to take a progressive and responsible path on the matter.

Besides revamping its own energy structure, China has become a global leader on the issue. And besides being persuaded by the scientific research that describes how vulnerable China is to damage from climate change, Beijing also sees its progressive posture on the subject as a further way to exercise soft power in the sense of international influence.

Trump's retrograde attitude toward many aspects of the international order that have served the United States well has already meant surrendering much global leadership to China. His backward attitude on climate change means surrendering still more.

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France Circles Back to Status Quo

Though the names are different, the French election is playing out much like the last one when a candidate who might have brought change was brought down by scandal, opening the way for the same-ol' policies, writes Gilbert Doctorow.

By Gilbert Doctorow

The vast majority of commentary in U.S. and West European media about the first round of voting in the French presidential election on April 23 concurred that the vote represented an unprecedented repudiation of the political establishment. After all, neither of the two top vote-getters, Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen, belonged to the major center-right or center-left parties, the Republicans and the Socialists respectively. The ugly character assassination pervading the campaign was also noted.

And yet, in many ways, the French first-round outcome was precisely "precedented" within French experience if we look back just five years to the election that brought Francois Hollande to power and, still more, within the U.S. experience if we look back over the several "bait and switch" presidential elections of the past quarter century.

In 2012, the French presidential candidate best prepared by experience and knowledge to lead France out of its economic and social woes was Dominique Strauss-Kahn, at the time Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund. He was widely expected to receive the nomination of the Socialist Party, but was brought down by a sex scandal that many believed at the time was an entrapment arranged by his enemies, including those in the United States where Strauss-Kahn's sexual profligacy led to his indictment for sexual assault although the charges were later dropped.

Because of Strauss-Kahn's legal troubles, the majority of French who had their fill of President Nicolas Sarkozy were left with the Socialists' poor second choice, Francois Hollande, who proved over the last five years that he was witless and utterly lacking in substance. During his tenure, France has limped along and played a supporting role to the Continent's hegemon, Germany.

In 2016, the presidential candidate best prepared by experience and knowledge to lead France was Francois Fillon. He offered both domestic and foreign policies that would mark a significant departure from the wishy-washy and ineffectual programs of Hollande and of Sarkozy before him. Perhaps most unorthodox of these policies within the Center-Right, from which he came, was his advocacy of good, constructive relations with Russia.

But Fillon was brought down by a concerted campaign of character assassination. Yes, he was likely guilty of abusing the hiring privileges of his office to assign state compensation to his wife and sons. But that has been a very widespread abuse in the French political establishment and represents institutionalized corruption that did not begin with and will not end with Fillon.

Democratic politics is not for Boy Scouts. It has always and will always have rough edges – and candidates will not be perfect men and women. The question, which should count above all others, is whether the candidate has the programs that will change people's lives for the better and the force of will and political skills to realize them.

The Macron Muddle

Meanwhile, the administrative resources of the French government and the media have been used to promote the candidacy of a total nonentity, Emanuel Macron, whose main virtue is that he is NOT the National Front's Marine Le Pen, the great nightmare candidate for the French establishment and beyond its borders for the European Union establishment, as well as for supporters of globalism around the world.

Macron's second featured attribute is his youth. At 39, he will be the Fifth Republic's youngest ever President. In this sense his candidacy parallels electoral politics in the United States, where being a black or being a woman has been used to draw votes to candidates who otherwise do not stand up to scrutiny.

Macron's taking the lead position in the first round has been greeted with jubilation by world stock markets. The Nasdaq finally broke through the 6,000 level. European bank shares soared in reaction to the prospect of France being run by a former investment banker.

However, if he wins the second round, Macron will come to office without an organization to govern, with only the slightest chance of achieving a parliamentary majority in the upcoming National Assembly elections in June. He will be obliged to cobble together a ruling coalition, meaning there will be little coherence in his government and its policies. Coalitions are formed to share the spoils of office, not to get things done.

We may expect France to muddle along and to continue to be subservient to Berlin, the capital of European powerhouse Germany, and Brussels, the home of the European Union's bureaucracy. This will be a setback for those who had hoped France would break the stultifying consensus over austerity, over migrants, over sanctions on Russia – issues that are destroying the European Union from within. But the biggest loser may well be the French nation.

Gilbert Doctorow is a Brussels-based political analyst. His latest book *Does Russia Have a Future?* was published in August 2015
