

Trump Attacks Syria With Chemical Experts on the Way

President Trump ordered airstrikes on Syria as a team of experts from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons was about to arrive on Saturday to determine whether a chemical weapons attack had even occurred, Joe Lauria reports.

By Joe Lauria *Special to Consortium News*

President Donald Trump on Saturday (Syria time) ordered air strikes against Syria in retaliation for an alleged chemical weapons attack last weekend outside Damascus.

“I ordered the United States armed forces to launch precision strikes on targets associated with the chemical weapon capabilities of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad,” Trump said from the White House.

The strikes were carried out together with Britain and France, he said. CNN reported explosions at a research facility near Damascus. At a news conference later, Pentagon officials said this “phase” of the missile strikes against three so-called chemical research targets, one in the center of the Syrian capital, were completed and “no additional attacks are planned.”

U.S. officials said Russia had been told of the military operation but Gen. Joseph Dunford, chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, told the press briefing Friday night (Washington time) that Moscow was not informed of the Syrian targets. Russia had vowed to shoot down incoming U.S. and allied missiles as Russian military personnel are embedded with the Syrian Arab army at various locations in the country.

U.S. military analysts say the U.S. wanted to avoid hitting Russian targets, but once unleashed, military action can lead to unintended consequences.

Pentagon officials said they only had reports that Syrian, but not Russian, anti-missile defenses had been engaged. Whether any U.S. missiles or planes were hit would be made plain on Saturday morning in Washington, they said.

OPCW Team Was on the Way

A team of experts from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons was on its way to Syria after accepting an invitation from the Syrian government to study soil and other samples in Duma, the Damascus suburb where the alleged attack took place.

It's not clear whether the U.S.-led operation would complicate their mission as the team was due to arrive later on Saturday. It is also not certain whether the timing of the U.S.-led attack was intended to prevent the team from gathering evidence to prove whether or not chemicals were used. The OPCW does not assess blame.

Trump had threatened earlier in the week, in perhaps his strangest Tweet yet, to send "smart" and "clean" missile strikes into Syria to attack "Animal Assad." He also blamed Russia for supporting Assad, which may have been intended to get critics, who accuse him of being a Putin puppet, off his back. Indeed this latest display of American militarism may also be driven by Trump's anti-Russian critics.

Trump had backed off his threat when it was revealed that his aides had not yet agreed to the attack.

In April 2017 the U.S. fired 59 cruise missiles at a Syrian airbase that Washington believed was used to carry out a chemical attack. U.S. Defense Secretary James Mattis later said the U.S. did not have concrete evidence that Syria was responsible.

No Proof Made Public

Likewise no public proof has been offered that Syria was behind the alleged chemical attack last weekend in Duma, where as many as 70 people may have been killed.

The gas allegedly used in the Duma attack is chlorine. In 2014 Syria was certified by the OPCW to have given up its entire chemical weapons arsenal in a deal with the United States and Russia. The chemicals were destroyed on a U.S. Navy ship.

Chlorine, however, is not on the OPCW list of banned chemicals, and is not classified as a chemical weapon. Any country, including Syria, is allowed to possess it, but cannot use it as a weapon. U.S. officials know this but say incorrectly that Russia had failed to give up chemical stocks that were on the OPCW banned list. The military strikes were, as usual, egged on by influential U.S. pundits, some masquerading as reporters. Christiane Amanpour said on CNN after the attack was launched that Russia had stopped President Obama from attacking Syria by agreeing to eliminate its chemical weapons.

"The allies have been forced into this," Amanpour said, adding that they had no choice. "Russia promised that they would remove Syrian chemical weapons but they have chlorine," she said, clearly uniformed that it was a joint-U.S.-Russia operation and that chlorine is not classified as a chemical weapon.

Consortium News this week published two pieces calling on Trump to obtain evidence of Syria's guilt and legal authorization before launching an act of war. The U.S. has neither demonstrated that it is acting in self-defense nor did it get U.N. Security Council approval, making tonight's actions clearly illegal. Nor has Trump received authorization from Congress, making it illegal under U.S. law. Several Congressmen complained of this after the attack, but Dunford told the Pentagon briefing that Trump acted legally because U.S. interests were involved.

Trump Urged to Seek Evidence Before Attacking Syria

In this memo to the White House, the Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity urge President Trump to get the evidence first before deciding to strike Syria.

Special to Consortium News

MEMORANDUM FOR: The President

FROM: Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity

SUBJECT: Evidence Required for Military Decision on Syria

Mr. President,

We the undersigned Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity join a number of other credible experts including former UK Ambassador to Syria, Peter Ford (this recent interview on BBC Radio Scotland), former UN weapons inspectors and former military officers who are strongly recommending that you obtain and review actual evidence from the site of the alleged chemical attack in Douma, Syria, before ordering any military action. VIPS has previously reported credible evidence indicating that anti-government forces in Syria have themselves produced and used toxic chemical agents.

Contradictory indications exist given that the video and images of victims in the locations purportedly affected by chemical weapons came from rebel-affiliated entities known as the "Douma Revolution" and the "White Helmets" while Russian military units which later got physical access to the supposed sites and Syrian Red Crescent personnel working in the area reportedly found no indication of a chemical weapon attack.

A major question for us, as former intelligence officers with some knowledge of the operational use of misinformation and false flag actions, is what motive would the Syrian government have for making a chemical weapons attack on its own civilian population, especially at a time when it has growing popular support and is having increased military success. Why would it risk Western ire?

Rebel fighters and their families were already being evacuated to Turkish occupied Jarabulus by air-conditioned bus. As described in more detail by Scott Ritter ([here](#)), only Salafist fighters from the "Army of Islam" (Jaish al-Islam) had refused to surrender at the time of the supposed attacks.

One must therefore consider the possibility that the supposed chlorine gas attack at Douma may have been a carefully constructed propaganda fraud. Such a fraud would have as its purpose the elicitation of precisely the kind of political pressure that now has you contemplating military action. In other words, Mr. President, this may be a bid to mousetrap you into a war that neither you nor your fellow Americans want nor need.

More expert opinion and investigation needs to be applied like that voiced by former U.N. weapons inspector in Syria, Åke Sellström, (translated from original [Swedish](#)):

The attack may have come from Assad's regime, but you may as well have other explanations. Toxic substances can be dispersed in many ways, for example through explosions or smoke.

– There are many poisonous substances in circulation during the battle.

If the UN were to investigate the attack, it is not enough to see recordings or hear testimony, says Sellström.

It is essential that the United States have complete and compelling evidence before taking any decisive action. We therefore strongly recommend that you await the findings of the OPCW team which is now on its way to Douma to investigate at the actual site of the alleged attack. A competent, objective group of experts needs to conduct a thorough on-the-ground investigation and collect evidence that will either implicate the Government of Syria or exonerate it.

We have, as you have noted, been down this road before with the Iraq WMD debacle in 2003. Let us not repeat this mistake. By launching a war in Syria, we will be entering a military and political morass involving Iran and Russia that could have fatal consequences for the entire planet, especially if any of the parties feel compelled to resort to nuclear weapons.

The American people neither want nor need another military intervention in the Middle East. History tells us that any initiative centered on the use of armed force to compel acceptable behavior will not be containable and will only propagate more violence. Please do not drain the US Treasury for a war that could lead to catastrophic and unprecedented loss of life and endanger the security of Americans everywhere.

For the Steering Group, Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS)

William Binney, former NSA Technical Director for World Geopolitical & Military Analysis; Co-founder of NSA's Signals Intelligence Automation Research Center (ret.)

Richard H. Black, Senator of Virginia, 13th District; Colonel US Army (ret.); Former Chief, Criminal Law Division, Office of the Judge Advocate General, the Pentagon (associate VIPS)

Marshall Carter-Tripp, Foreign Service Officer (ret.) and Division Director, State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research

Kathleen Christison, Senior Analyst on Middle East, CIA (ret.)

Bogdan Dzakovic, former Team Leader of Federal Air Marshals and Red Team, FAA Security (ret.) (associate VIPS)

Graham E. Fuller, Vice-Chair, National Intelligence Council (ret.)

Philip Giraldi, CIA, Operations Officer (ret.)

Mike Gravel, former Adjutant, top secret control officer, Communications Intelligence Service; special agent of the Counter Intelligence Corps and former United States Senator

Matthew Hoh, former Capt., USMC, Iraq & Foreign Service Officer, Afghanistan (associate VIPS)

Larry C. Johnson, former CIA and State Department Counter Terrorism officer

Michael S. Kearns, Captain, Wing Commander, RAAF (ret.); Intelligence Officer & ex-Master SERE Instructor

John Kiriakou, former CIA Counterterrorism Officer and former senior investigator, Senate Foreign Relations Committee

Karen Kwiatkowski, former Lt. Col., US Air Force (ret.), at Office of Secretary of Defense watching the manufacture of lies on Iraq, 2001-2003

Clement J. Laniewski, LTC, USA (ret) (associate VIPS)

Linda Lewis, WMD preparedness policy analyst, USDA (ret.) (associate VIPS)

Edward Loomis, NSA Cryptologic Computer Scientist (ret.)

David MacMichael, Ph.D., former senior estimates officer, National Intelligence Council (ret.)

Ray McGovern, former US Army infantry/intelligence officer & CIA analyst; CIA Presidential briefer (ret.)

Elizabeth Murray, former Deputy National Intelligence Officer for the Near East, National Intelligence Council & CIA political analyst (ret.)

Todd E. Pierce, MAJ, US Army Judge Advocate (ret.)

Scott Ritter, former MAJ., USMC, former UN Weapon Inspector, Iraq

Coleen Rowley, FBI Special Agent and former Minneapolis Division Legal Counsel (ret.)

Peter Van Buren, US Department of State, Foreign Service Officer (ret.) (associate VIPS)

Lawrence Wilkerson, Colonel, US Army (ret.), former Chief of Staff for Secretary of State; Distinguished Visiting Professor, College of William and Mary (associate VIPS)

Sarah G. Wilton, CDR, USNR, (ret.); Defense Intelligence Agency (ret.)

Robert Wing, former Foreign Service Officer (associate VIPS)

Ann Wright, Colonel, US Army (ret.); also Foreign Service Officer who resigned in opposition to the US war on Iraq

Do U.S. Oligarchs Exist? Not in Mainstream Media

We hear incessantly about Russian oligarchs. But do they also exist in the United States? You wouldn't know it by watching cable news, says Jeff Cohen.

By Jeff Cohen



TV news shows are good at getting viewers riled up. Day and night, I hear the anchors on CNN and MSNBC getting us in a frenzy about the schemes of this or that “Russian oligarch with links to the Kremlin.” I’ve heard that phrase incessantly in recent weeks

Plenty of others have heard the “Russian oligarch” phrase. Merriam-Webster.com reported that “oligarch” was one of its most searched-for words on April 5 “following reports that Robert Mueller had questioned Russian businessmen to whom this descriptor applies.”

Webster’s defines oligarchy as a “government in which a small group exercises control especially for corrupt and selfish purposes.” Dictionary.com calls it “a form of government in which all power is vested in a few persons or in a dominant class or clique; government by the few.” So an oligarch is not just a rich person but one who has influence or control over government, rather than directly ruling, as in a plutocracy.

One phrase I haven’t heard from any of the purportedly progressive hosts on MSNBC is: “A U.S. oligarch with links to Washington.”

That avoidance is revealing when one considers an indisputable fact: U.S. oligarchs have done far more to undermine U.S. democracy than any Russian.

When Vladimir Putin first became Russian president in the early 2000s he made a deal with the oligarchs: he would leave them alone if they kept their noses out of politics. Hence they would revert to just being filthy rich. The oligarchs who remained are presumably loyal to Putin, or at least don’t try to dominate him, the way some powerfully rich Americans seek to influence the U.S. government away from what it might otherwise do.

A List

Here is a 2014 list compiled by the Brookings Institution of the 20

“Most Influential Billionaires Behind The Scenes of US Politics,” who could otherwise be called U.S. oligarchs. But they aren’t called that by mainstream media, and that’s telling. Rupert Murdoch, Jeff Bezos, the Koch brothers (and Donald Trump, who made the list) all have exercised undue influence on government for their own interests, and not necessarily the public’s. Let’s take a close look at one U.S. oligarch who didn’t make the list.

Brian L. Roberts – who certainly fits the Cambridge English dictionary definition of “oligarch” as “one of a small group of powerful people who control a country or an industry.” As chair and CEO of Comcast, Roberts runs the company

his dad founded and has sole voting rights over one-third of the corporation's stock. His annual compensation last year of \$28.6 million was less than what 14 other U.S. oligarchs – I mean, CEOs – “earned.” His net worth is estimated to be over \$1.65 billion.

Does this oligarch have “links to Washington”? In one recent year, Comcast devoted nearly \$19 million to lobbying, second only to military-industrial firm Northrop Grumman. Last year, it spent more than \$15 million. And oligarch Roberts has been a top D.C. power player for decades, having gotten his way with one president after another – from President Clinton's deregulatory, anti-consumer Telecommunications Act of 1996 to President Trump's current effort to end Net Neutrality on behalf of Comcast and other giant Internet providers.

President Bill Clinton's pro-conglomeration Telcom Act and Donald Trump's Net Neutrality assault have both undermined U.S. democracy. No Russian had a hand in it. (You may have heard that the Trump-propagandist Sinclair Broadcast Group will soon own more than 200 local TV stations; until the Telcom Act, a company could legally own no more than 12.)

You've got to hand it to U.S. oligarchs; so many of them stay on top no matter which party runs Washington. They sure have greater staying power than Russian oligarchs – who, we're constantly told, end up dead or in prison if they fall out of favor with President Putin.

Roberts certainly has the lifestyle of an oligarch. He maintains a seasonal dacha – I mean, second home – in Martha's Vineyard where he keeps his custom-built Sparkman & Stephens sloops, and where he has hosted President Obama, including at an A-list cocktail party thrown for Obama in August 2013. And Roberts reportedly just built a sprawling mansion in North Palm Beach, not far from Trump's Mar-a-lago.

But his primary residence is in Philadelphia; Obama has been a regular presence at Comcast mansions there as well. In 2013, speaking at a Democratic Party fundraiser in the Philadelphia home of Roberts' top lobbyist, President Obama commented: “I have been here so much, the only thing I haven't done in this house is have Seder dinner.”

While Russian oligarchs are often passionate game-hunters, Roberts is an avid golfer, carrying an impressive 8 handicap. Obama has famously golfed with him “on the lush fairways of the Vineyard Golf Club.”

There's one last factoid I need to add about Roberts. As Comcast's CEO, he is the ultimate boss of those allegedly progressive hosts on MSNBC. Which may help to explain their silence about U.S. oligarchs, since it would be difficult to

bring up the topic without mentioning their boss.

I really shouldn't single out Roberts. Nor the MSNBC hosts he employs. Because the problem goes way beyond this particular oligarch and that particular corporate news outlet.

Roberts is just one of dozens of powerful U.S. oligarchs. They compose a "U.S. ruling class" and preside over a "corporate state" – a couple more phrases one virtually never hears in mainstream U.S. media. One reason these oligarchs get little critical coverage and no systemic scrutiny is because – as in Russia – oligarchs are owners or major sponsors of mainstream media.

Let me be clear, so as to not overstate things: Fox News hosts are free to tarnish certain oligarchs, Democratic ones like George Soros – and MSNBC hosts gleefully go after Republican oligarchs like the Mercers and the Koch brothers.

But to get a more accurate and complete view of the workings of the U.S. political system (aka "U.S. oligarchy"), I have a suggestion: Disconnect from MSNBC, CNN, Fox and other corporate news sources and turn instead to high-quality, independent progressive media.

If you do, you'll see that the problems plaguing U.S. democracy and the U.S. economy are definitely the work of oligarchs. But they don't speak Russian.

A version of this article originally appeared on Truthdig.com

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