

Weapons Inspector Refutes U.S. Syria Chemical Claims

Scott Ritter is arguably the most experienced American weapons inspector and in this interview with Dennis J. Bernstein he levels a frank assessment of U.S. government assertions about chemical weapons use.

By Dennis J Bernstein



In the 1980's, Scott Ritter was a commissioned officer in the United States Marine Corps, specializing in intelligence. In 1987, Ritter was assigned to the On-Site Inspection Agency, which was put together to go into the Soviet Union and oversee the implementation of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty. This was the first time that on-site inspection had been used as part of a disarmament verification process.

Ritter was one of the groundbreakers in developing on-site inspection techniques and methodologies. With this unique experience behind him, Ritter was asked in 1991, at the end of the Gulf War, to join the United Nations Special Commission, which was tasked by the Security Council to oversee the disarmament of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. From 1991 to 1998, Ritter served as a chief weapons inspector and led a number of teams into Iraq.

According to Ritter, in the following Flashpoints Radio interview with Dennis Bernstein conducted on April 23rd, US, British and French claims that the Syrian Government used chemical weapons against civilians last month appear to be totally bogus.

Dennis Bernstein: You have been speaking out recently about the use of chemical weapons in Syria. Could you outline your case?

Scott Ritter: There are a lot of similarities between the Syrian case and the Iraqi case. Both countries possess weapons of mass destruction. Syria had a very large chemical weapons program.

In 2013 there was an incident in a suburb of Damascus called Ghouta, the same suburb where the current controversy is taking place. The allegations were that the Syrian government used sarin nerve agent against the civilian population. The Syrian government denied that, but as a result of that incident the international community got together and compelled Syria into signing the Chemical Weapons Convention, declaring the totality of its chemical weapons holdings, and opening itself to be disarmed by inspections of the Organization

for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. Russia was chosen to be the guarantor of Syria's compliance. The bottom line is that Syria had the weapons but was verified by 2016 as being in 100% compliance. The totality of Syria's chemical weapons program was eliminated.

At the same time that this disarmament process was taking place, Syria was being engulfed in a civil war which has resulted in a humanitarian crisis. Over a half million people have died. It is a war that pits the Syrian government against a variety of anti-regime forces, many of which are Islamic in nature: the Islamic State, Al Nusra, Al Qaeda. Some of these Islamic factions have been in the vicinity of Ghouta since 2012.

Earlier this year, the Syrian government initiated an offensive to liberate that area of these factions. It was very heavy fighting, thousands of civilians were killed, with massive aerial bombardment. Government forces were prevailing and by April 6 it looked as if the militants were preparing to surrender.

Suddenly the allegations come out that there was this chemical weapons attack. It wasn't a *massive* chemical weapons attack, it was dropping one or two so-called "barrel bombs," improvised devices that contained chlorine gas canisters. According to the militants, between 40 and 70 people were killed and up to 500 people were made ill. The United States and other nations picked up on this, saying that this was proof positive that Syria has been lying about its chemical weapons program and that Russia has been behind Syria's retention of chemical weapons. This is the case the US made to launch its missile strike [on April 14].

There are a lot of problems with this scenario. Again, why would the Syrian government, at the moment of victory, use a pinprick chemical attack with zero military value? It added nothing to the military campaign and invited the wrath of the West at a critical time, when the rebels were begging for Western intervention.

Many, including the Russian government, believe that this was a staged event. There has been no hard evidence put forward by anyone that an attack took place. Shortly after allegations of the attack came out, the entire town of Douma was taken over by the Syrian Army while the rebels were evacuated.

The places that were alleged to have been attacked were inspected by Russian chemical weapons specialists, who found zero trace of any chemicals weapons activity. The same inspectors who oversaw the disarmament of Syria were mobilized to return to Syria and do an investigation. They were supposed to start their work this past weekend [April 21-22]. They arrived in Damascus the day after the missile strikes occurred but they still haven't been out to the

sites. The United States, France and Great Britain have all admitted that the only evidence they have used to justify this attack were the photographs and videotapes sent to them by the rebel forces.

I have great concern about the United States carrying out an attack on a sovereign nation based on no hard evidence. The longer we wait, the longer it takes to get inspectors onto the site, the more claims we are going to get that the Russians have sanitized it. I believe that the last thing the United States wanted was inspectors to get on-site and carry out a forensic investigation that would have found that a chemical attack did not in fact take place.

DB: It is sort of like cleaning up a police crime scene before you check for evidence.

SR: The United States didn't actually bomb the site that was attacked. They bombed three other facilities. One was in the suburbs of Damascus, a major metropolitan area. The generals said that they believed there were quantities of nerve agent there. So, in a building in a densely populated area where we believe nerve agent is stored, what do we do? We blow it up! If there had in fact been nerve agent there, it would have resulted in hundreds or even thousands of deaths. That fact that nobody died is the clearest evidence yet that there was no nerve agent there. The United States is just winging it, making it up.

One of the tragedies is that we can no longer trust our military, our intelligence services, our politicians. They will manufacture whatever narrative they need to justify an action that they deem to be politically expedient.

DB: Isn't it also the case that there were problems with the allegations concerning Syria using chemical weapons in 2013 and then again in 2015? I believe *The New York Times* had to retract their 2013 story.

SR: They put out a story about thousands of people dying, claiming that it was definitely done by the Syrian government. It turned out later that the number of deaths was far lower and that the weapons systems used were probably in the possession of the rebels. It was a case of the rebels staging a chemical attack in order to get the world to intervene on their behalf.

A similar scenario unfolded last year when the Syrian government dropped two or three bombs on a village and suddenly there were reports that there was sarin nerve agent and chlorine gas wafting through the village, killing scores of people. Videotapes were taken of dead and dying and suffering people which prompted Trump to intervene. Inspectors never went to the site. Instead they

relied upon evidence collected by the rebels.

As a weapons inspector, I can tell you that chain of custody of any samples that are to be used in the investigation is an absolute. You have to be at the site when it is collected, it has to be certified to be in your possession until the laboratory. Any break in the chain of custody makes that evidence useless for a legitimate investigation. So we have evidence collected by the rebels. They videotaped themselves carrying out the inspection, wearing training suits that would not have protected them at all from chemical weapons! Like almost everything having to do with these rebels, this was a staged event, an act of theater.

DB: Who has been supporting this particular group of rebels?

SR: On the one hand, we have the actual fighters, the Army of Islam, a Saudi-backed fundamentalist group who are extraordinarily brutal. Embedded within the fighters are a variety of Western-trained and Western-funded NGOs such as the White Helmets and the Syrian-American Medical Society. But their primary focus isn't rescue, in the case of the White Helmets, or medical care in the case of the Syrian-American Medical Society, but rather anti-regime propaganda. Many of the reports that came out of Douma originated with these two NGO's.

DB: You mentioned "chain of custody." That's what was most ridiculous about sending in inspectors. The first thing you would want to do is establish chain of custody and nail down the crime scene.

SR: I was a participant in the Gulf War and we spent the bulk of that war conducting a massive aerial campaign against Iraq. I was one of the people who helped come up with the target list that was used to attack. Each target had to have a purpose.

Let's look what happened in Syria [on April 14]. We bombed three targets, a research facility in Damascus and two bunker facilities in western Syria. It was claimed that all three targets were involved with a Syrian chemical weapons program. But the Syria weapons program was verified to be disarmed. So what chemical weapons program are we talking about? Then US officials said that one of these sites stored sarin nerve agent and chemical production equipment. That is a very specific statement. Now, if Syria was verified to be disarmed last year, with all this material eliminated, what are they talking about? What evidence do they have that any of this material exists? *They just make it up.*

If I had been a member of that inspections team, I would have been able to tell you with 100% certainty what took place at that site. It wasn't that long ago that the allegations took place, there are very good forensic techniques that

can be applied. We would be able to reverse engineer that site and tell you exactly what happened when. Let's say an inspection team had gone in and we found that there was sarin nerve agent. Now, the US government can say, there is not supposed to be any sarin nerve agent in Syria, therefore we can state that the Syrians have a covert sarin nerve agent capability. But still you don't know *where* it is, so now you have to say we assess that it *could* be in this bunker.

We bombed empty buildings. We didn't degrade Syria's chemical weapons capability. They got rid of it. We were among the nations that certified that they had been disarmed. We just created this phantom threat out of nothing so that we could attack Syria and our president could be seen as being presidential, as being the commander in chief at a time when his credibility was being attacked on the home front.

DB: Amazing. That helps clarify the situation. Of course, it also leaves us terrified because we are so far away from the truth.

SR: As an American citizen who happens to be empowered with knowledge about how weapons inspections work, how decisions are made regarding war, I am disillusioned beyond belief.

This isn't the first time we have been lied to by the president. But we have been lied to by military officers who are supposed to be above that. Three top Marine Corps officers stood before the American people and told bald-faced lies about what was going on. We have been lied to by Congress, who are supposed to be the people's representatives who provide a check against executive overreach. And we have been lied to by the corporate media, a bunch of paid mouthpieces who repeat what the government tells them without question.

So Donald Trump can say there are chemical weapons in Syria, the generals parrot his words, the Congress nods its head dumbly, and the mass media repeats it over and over again to the American public.

DB: Are you worried that we might end up in a shooting war with Russia at this point?

SR: A week ago I was very worried. If I am going to give kudos to Jim Mattis it will be because he took the desire of Trump and Bolton to create a major crisis with Russia over the allegations of Syrian chemical weapons use and was able to water that down into putting on a show for the American people. We warned the Russians in advance, there were no casualties, we blew up three empty buildings. We spent a quarter of a billion dollars of taxpayer money and we got to pat ourselves on the back and tell everybody how great we are. But we avoided a

needless confrontation with the Russians and I am a lot calmer today about the potential of a shooting war with Russia than I was a week ago.

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio of this interview and the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.
