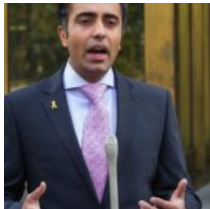


# The U.S. and the Fate of the World

It may not be an exaggeration to say that the fate of civilization is up to Americans to sort out how they want to interact with the rest of the world, argues Inder Comar in this commentary.

By Inder Comar



Americans ought to be more honest about U.S. military interventionism. There ought to be a serious debate about it.

Instead there seems to be three, entrenched foreign policy camps who never talk to each other.

The first is made up of avowed imperialists. They are easy to recognize, because they happen to be in power. They are the people for whom there is no such thing as a bad war. They have likely committed the United States to regime change in Iran. And they are currently spearheading an overly aggressive approach in attempting to defuse tensions with a nuclear-armed North Korea—an approach that will probably backfire in the end. This camp would also be the strongest to deny that there is any such thing as U.S. imperialism.

Then there are people who totally reject imperialism in any form, committed by any country, as a grave error. These are the people who recognize that there must be other values that bind relationships between nations—shared values premised on international law, human rights, Individual and spiritual freedom, and the rule of law.

I suspect it is a very small camp.

Finally, there is a third group, who've I've come to see as of two minds. They think it possible to maintain a militant foreign policy, while also saying they are using that foreign policy to spread civilized values. They want to wallow in the false glory that comes from empire, and to feel good about it.

Current political discourse in the United States—whether it is in the media, the think-tanks, or from major politicians—largely falls in this camp. For example, most Republicans and Democrats use the language of human rights and freedom to couch their perspective.

## Hiding an Interventionist Thread

But the reality of their actions, and the consequences of those actions, makes it impossible to hide an underlying imperialist thread. Thinking people cannot

ignore that it was a Democrat, President Barack Obama, who increased the use of military drones in several countries, invaded Libya, maintained and increased America's presence in Afghanistan, and even committed \$1 trillion to enhancing America's nuclear arsenal.

There has never been a more urgent time for people to really study and consider American foreign policy, and to ask fundamental questions about America's role in the world. There are people in power today who are literally playing with fire with a nuclear-armed country (North Korea) and who are goading another country (Iran) into seeking nuclear weapons in order to defend itself from the open threat of an American invasion.

An imperial foreign policy is one that makes the whole world far less safe—including the United States. We are not so different as humans. Humans, everywhere, eventually get sick of being bullied. And they eventually start to defend themselves. Or even fight back.

There is another point, too, which needs to be made. The pedigreed leaders who pace the halls of power, their think-tank enablers, and many individual Americans, very often find a false and perverse comfort in the domination, exploitation, and suffering of people who are not Americans. This is truly a despicable thing, and it needs to be called out. It was this type of thinking that created genocide in the United States, against the First Nations and indigenous people. It is this type of thinking which has killed, and which continues to kill, tens of millions abroad.

There is a fundamental choice that Americans have to make. And that is whether they will be okay with imperialism as the defining characteristic of their foreign policy. Whether they want to be known as an imperialist people. I think there is a day coming, sooner than most would like, where that choice will have to be confronted head on.

### **Worst Crime of All**

I think a lot about the terrible crime that was committed in 2003, when the United States invaded Iraq. Many rational people wonder why the purported "lessons" of the aggressive war against Iraq have not been digested by either high ranking Democrats or Republicans, and why the U.S. government continues to make baseless threats against other countries, or threaten war without a sufficient legal justification. After all, from a humane and civilized point of view, the Iraq war was not just a disaster: it was an international crime, and the worst of all war crimes, the crime of aggression.

But from the perspective of imperialism, Iraq was in many ways a success—it led

to the destruction of a regional power center, gave the United States cover to continue to involve itself in the Middle East in perpetuity, and cemented a growing alliance with Israel and Saudi Arabia, two countries who are keen to continue purchasing a large supply of U.S. armaments.

Americans are a very lucky people. They have been fortunate to not have another, greater country impose its will on them. With the exception of Pearl Harbor, Americans have never been forced to feel the weight of imperialist policies that have led to death-by-drone or death-by-missile for family members, neighbors or friends. Americans have never had their country suffocated because of trade and economic blockades from a more dominant nation. And Americans have not had to deal with violent coups, sham elections, and propped up dictators who answer to a ruling elite living thousands of miles away, who don't even care to speak the same language, who exploit the country's resources, and who could care less about the fate and destiny of every day people.

This has been the sad fate of many societies over the last 100 years, whose only crime was being a strategic interest to the American government.

But even then, as an American, I am starting to get a taste for what these things feel like. Because imperial policies abroad are now taking root in the United States, and flowering as domestic policy. Police indiscriminately kill protestors and people of color. Immigrants are targeted as objects of hate. The poor and middle class are essentially destitute – more than 40% of Americans struggle to provide for food and rent for themselves. And the American electoral process is nakedly in the control of plutocrats, who enrich themselves at the public coffers, while every day people suffer.

Imperialism abroad creates aristocracy at home; and combined, they produce only the demonic offspring of corruption, dictatorship, and total war.

It is in the hands of all of us, as citizens, to question the dominant narrative of imperialism. And it is not enough to call out the avowed imperialists—they are easy to see.

Their words and actions are very clear.

It is also critical at this time to call out the people who think they can have it both ways—that they can feel good about empire and human rights at the same time, who think it is possible to promote freedom through the barrel of a gun.

These people need to be called out for this way of thinking. Peace and liberty is promoted through peaceful and free means. You would never kill a man on the street and claim to have saved him. What's true on the street is also true between nations. And those "thought leaders" and politicians who claim that they

can advance a civilized, humanitarian agenda through weapons, threats, coups and invasions, are not just wrong, they are being willfully dishonest—either to themselves, or to the world at large.

Americans need a civic dialogue that focuses on the rule of law, human rights norms, and shared, civilized values. Americans need a foreign policy that meaningfully and respectfully displays these same values, and which uses those values in relations with other countries. Not through warfare, domination, and exploitation. It seems simple to say, but the best way to end imperialism is to simply end imperialism.

It is time for America to stop relying on its weapons, and to start relying on ethical and civilized principles.

The fate of the U.S. and perhaps the world, rests on it finding a better way to deal with itself, and with others. There will be no meaningful response and preparation for climate change, species extinction and the great refugee crises to come unless the U.S. uses its power in a positive way, and contributes to a world where dialogue, cooperation, and the promotion of peace are the foundation blocks of a civilized order.

*This article first appeared on Inder Comar's [blog](#).*

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## Israelis Continue to Open Fire on Gaza Protestors: An Eyewitness Account

An Interview with Gaza-based Palestinian Journalist, Wafa Al-Udaini

By Dennis J Bernstein



According to the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR), the Palestinian death toll since March 30, 2018 “has risen to 33, including 4 children and 1 photojournalist, and the number of those wounded has risen to 2,436, including 410 children, 66 women, 22 journalists and 9 paramedics.”

There have been no Israeli casualties.

According to PCHR, on Friday, April 20th, Israeli snipers “killed 4 Palestinian civilians, including a child, and wounded 274 others, including 41 children, 6 women and 1 journalist, in addition to hundreds suffering tear gas inhalation, including PCHR’s fieldworkers who were documenting the Israeli forces’ suppression of the entirely peaceful demonstrations near the border fence with Israel, east of the Gaza Strip.”

PCHR maintains that “for the fourth week in a row and upon a decision by the Israeli highest military and political echelons, the Israeli forces used lethal force against the peaceful protesters, who did not pose any threat to the soldiers’ life.” There is a cell phone camera recording now being widely distributed that appears to show Israeli snipers and soldiers cheering as they gun down unarmed Palestinians fleeing in the distance.

On April 17th, I spoke with Gaza-based Palestinian Journalist Wafa Al-Udaini who has been an eyewitness to all the Gaza protests in the ongoing anti-occupation, Right to Return protests since late March. Al-Udaini’s friend and colleague, Yaser Murtaja, a photojournalist and camera person for a Gaza-based media production company was shot on April 6th by Israeli sharpshooters and died the next day of his wounds.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, “Pictures posted on social media by local journalists and witness testimony from local journalists show that Murtaja was wearing a bulletproof vest and helmet that were both clearly marked with the words “PRESS” when he was hit.”

Today I interview the little brave man. He said, he went to protest peacefully to get back occupied lands #GreatReturnMarch [pic.twitter.com/5RMUc9eGNq](https://pic.twitter.com/5RMUc9eGNq)

– Wafa A Al-Udaini (@wafa\_Gaza) April 18, 2018

In the following interview, Al-Udaini offers an eye-witness recounting of the initial protest in Gaza on March 30th, in which at least 18 protesters were killed by Israeli snipers and well over a thousand people were wounded.

**Dennis Bernstein:** We are going to hear now some eyewitness accounts, some very troubling testimony of the way in which Israeli snipers, from a long distance away, behind a fence and across a field, began to gun down hundreds of people, wounding over a thousand protesters and killing at least 18 Palestinians on the first day. It was truly horrifying.

Some people were protesting, some were praying, and others, like Wafa Al-Udaini, were sitting down for a meal during the long day of anti-occupation protests, when Israeli snipers opened fire and began to gun down unarmed Palestinians.

Wafa Al-Udaini, tell us a bit of your background and then tell us what you witnessed on March 30th and the other protest days that you were an eye-witness to.

**Wafa Al-Udaini:** I live here in the Gaza Strip. My grandparents were expelled from Beersheba by Israeli gangs in 1948. Now I live as a Palestinian refugee in the Gaza Strip. I work as a journalist for different websites and on radio. I am also an activist, the leader of a youth group here composed of students and journalists who work to present Palestinian issues to the world.

We were so excited about the Great March of Return protests, which began on the 13th of March. It was a peaceful and secular march, where all Palestinians, male and female, elderly and children, came to the border fence to resist peacefully. I took my family with me and we brought along something to eat and drink. We sat together and shared our food. We were asserting our right to demonstrate and reminding the world of our right to return to the land we occupied before we were driven from our homes. I brought my camera and intended to livestream the event. We were about 700 meters from the Israeli side.

**DB:** Could you talk about when you realized that the soldiers were opening fire on civilians? Were people around you being shot?

**WAU:** At the moment, I was interviewing people around me about what life was like before 1948, stories they had heard from their grandparents. Then suddenly I heard shots and I saw people running. I asked what was happening and they told me that the Israelis were opening fire. A man fleeing with his children told me some had been murdered. The Israelis began throwing teargas and they gunned down people who were fleeing.

**DB:** Let me explain to people that there is the border fence, which is electrified, and then there is a major piece of land between the fence and where the protest was happening. My understanding is that the soldiers were sharpshooters and they were picking people off from the other side of the fence.

**WAU:** Exactly. It had nothing to do with “defense,” because of the distance and because we were unarmed. They fired on women holding the Palestinian flag. This was their crime. Claims of self defense are just ludicrous.

**DB:** A friend of yours, a journalist, Yaser Murtaja, was gunned down on April 6th. I understand he was wearing his press vest, that clearly marked him as a journalist. He was gunned down and killed by Israeli snipers. Do you think he might have been shot *because* he was wearing his press vest, and the Israelis weren't crazy about there killing fields being broadcast around the world?

**WAU:** Yes. The Israelis are realizing that they can't continue to fool people indefinitely. This camera footage of all of this flies in the face of any claims that the Israeli army is acting in self defense. These on-the-ground images show Israeli propaganda for what it is.

**DB:** It appears they are willing to wipe out peaceful protesters while the rest of the world is watching, while the US government continues to provide them with arms, and while the Western corporate press works to bury the real story.

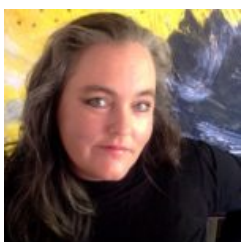
**Dennis J. Bernstein is a host of “Flashpoints” on the Pacifica radio network and the author of *Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom*. You can access the audio archives at [www.flashpoints.net](http://www.flashpoints.net). You can get in touch with the author at [dbernstein@igc.org](mailto:dbernstein@igc.org).**

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## Syrian ‘Chemical Victims’ Suffered from Dust Inhalation, Reports Say

A report by the *Independent's* veteran Middle East correspondent Robert Fisk quotes doctors in Douma saying victims suffered from dust inhalation and that a member of the White Helmets caused panic by falsely shouting, “Gas!” in a triage center. The White Helmets were then bused out with other jihadists, as Caitlin Johnstone explains.

**By Caitlin Johnstone**



We are now being told (and I assure you I am not making this up) that if the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons doesn't find evidence that the Syrian government conducted a chemical weapons attack in Douma last week, it's because Russia hid the evidence.

“It is our understanding the Russians may have visited the attack site,” reports U.S. Ambassador Kenneth Ward. “It is our concern that they may have tampered with it with the intent of thwarting the efforts of the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission to conduct an effective investigation.”

I guess the idea is that this international top-level investigative team on which tremendous credibility has been placed by the western world can be thwarted by Russians showing up with a Hoover and spraying some Febreze in the air like a teenage stoner when mom comes home? I’m not sure, but given the immense dearth of evidence we’ve been seeing in support of the establishment Douma narrative and the mounting pile of evidence contradicting it, it sure does sound fishy.

Now that the jihadist-occupied suburb of Douma has been retaken by the Syrian government, western journalists have been allowed in to poke around and start asking questions, and so far it isn’t looking great for the propaganda machine.

### **Dust Not Gas**

The *Independent’s* Robert Fisk has published a report which affirms the story so many westerners have been dismissing as Kremlin propaganda for days now after interviewing a doctor from the hospital of the area where the Douma attack was supposed to have occurred. Dr Assim Rahaibani told Fisk that what was in actuality an outbreak of respiratory distress among occupants of a dusty oxygen-deprived tunnel was made to look like the aftereffects of a chemical weapons attack when a member of the White Helmets started shouting about a gas attack in front of a bunch of video cameras. Everyone panicked and started hosing themselves down, but in the video, according to Rahaibani, “what you see are people suffering from hypoxia—not gas poisoning.”

This report was independently backed up by a reporter from *One America News Network* named Pearson Sharp, who gave a detailed account of his interviews with officials, doctors, as well as many civilians on the street Sharp says he deliberately selected at random in order to avoid accusations of bias. Many people hadn’t even heard that a chemical weapons attack had taken place, and the ones who had said it was staged by Jaysh al-Islam. The staff at the hospital, including a medic-in-training who was an eyewitness to the incident, gave the same story as the account in Fisk’s report. (Fisk also reported that the White Helmets in Duma had joined jihadists on Syrian government buses on the way to Idlib province.)

### **Weakening Narrative**

The increasing confidence with which these unapproved narratives are being



voiced and the increasing discomfort being exhibited by empire loyalists like Ambassador Ward indicate a weakening narrative in the greater propaganda campaign against the Assad government and its allies, but don't hold your breath for the part where Fox News and the BBC turn around and start asking critical questions of the governments that they are meant to be holding to account.

The journalists who have been advancing the establishment narrative on Syria aren't about to start reporting that they've gotten the entire Syria story backward and have been promoting a version of events manufactured for the benefit of CIA-MI6-Mossad agendas. You're not about to see CNN, who last year staged a fake scripted interview with a seven year-old Syrian girl to manufacture support for escalations against Assad, suddenly turn around and start asking if we're being told the full story about what's happening Syria.

Watch them closely. Watch how they steadfastly ignore the growing mountain of evidence and keep promoting the Syrian regime change agenda that the western empire has been working toward for decades. Watch them dismiss all evidence they can't ignore as Kremlin propaganda and shift the narrative whenever things start to look bad for them. Those riding the crest of the wave of establishment media are too far gone into the blob to ever admit error and change. The least among us aren't about to stop constructing a public reality tunnel which depicts them as heroes of truth, tear it all down, and start advancing a narrative which makes them look like fools at best and villains at worst. It will not happen. Luckily for us, it doesn't need to. Internet censorship is still far from closing the door on our ability to network and share information, and we've been very effective at sowing skepticism among the masses. The war propagandists are not nearly as good at their jobs as they want to believe, and we can beat them.

### **Consent Required**

They work so hard to manufacture support for war because they require that consent. If the oligarchs try to launch a war against a disobedient nation amidst very clear opposition from the public, they will shatter the illusion of freedom and democracy that their entire empire is built upon, and then they're exposed. Corporatist oligarchy has succeeded in weaving its web of dominance because its oppression has thus far remained hidden and its depravity disguised as humanitarianism. They cannot expose themselves by transgressing a loud NO from the public or else the masses will realize that everything they used to believe about their country, their government and their world is a lie.

They won't risk that. We can force them into retreating from open war by circulating facts and information and keeping a healthy level of skepticism circulating among the public. Watch them squirm, move goalposts and shift narratives, and point and yell about it whenever it happens. We can win the

media war against the propagandists. We have truth on our side.

*This article first appeared on [Medium](#).*

**Caitlin Johnstone is a rogue journalist, poet, and utopia prepper who publishes regularly at [Medium](#). Follow her work on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), or her [website](#). She has a [podcast](#) and a new book [Woke: A Field Guide for Utopia Preppers](#). This article was re-published with permission.**

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## Anatomy of a Chemical Attack

In the space of a little more than 24 hours Defense Secretary Jim Mattis learned all over again how to say, “Yes, sir,” explains Barry Kissin

**By Barry Kissin** *Special to Consortium News*



Analyzing certain aspects of the brief timeline between the date of the alleged chemical attack in the Damascus suburb of Duma on April 7 and the date of the U.S. air strikes on April 13 in supposed retaliation, reveals a very curious sequence of events.

On April 8, a day after chlorine gas was allegedly used, President Donald Trump (with no time for investigation) blamed Syrian government forces for what he called a “mindless CHEMICAL attack” and warned there would be a “big price to pay.” He did not elaborate. In a series of tweets, Trump held Russia and Iran, Syrian President Bashar Assad’s chief sponsors, responsible.

On April 11 (at 3:57 AM), President Trump tweeted: “Russia vows to shoot down any and all missiles fired at Syria. Get ready Russia, because they will be coming, nice and new and ‘smart!’ You shouldn’t be partners with a Gas Killing Animal who kills his people and enjoys it!”

The next morning, on April 12, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis [testified](#) before the House Armed Services Committee. “I believe there was a chemical attack and we are looking for the actual evidence,” Mattis told lawmakers. “As each day goes by – as you know, it is a non-persistent gas – so it becomes more and more difficult to confirm it.” Mattis said he wanted inspectors in Syria “probably within the week.”

In an [article](#) titled “[Mattis: US Wants Proof Before Striking Syria for Chemical](#)

Attack,” Military.com reported: “Currently, the U.S. and its allies ‘don’t have evidence’ that the Syrian regime carried out the attack last Saturday in the Damascus suburb of Duma that reportedly killed at least 40, Mattis said.”

In response to Congresswoman Nikki Tsongas (D-Mass.) Mattis testified: “We don’t have troops on the ground there so I cannot tell you we have evidence even though we certainly had a lot of media and social media indicators that either chlorine or sarin were used.”

Right after his testimony on Capitol Hill, Mattis attended a “closed-door White House meeting.” According to *The New York Times*, at this meeting, “Mattis pushed for more evidence of President Bashar al-Assad’s role in the suspected chemical attack ...” Evidently, Mattis was overruled. Trump was already committed.

The Pentagon conducted a briefing immediately after the US strikes the next day, on April 13. One reporter asked: “What’s your evidence it was delivered by the Syrian regime? Are you quite clear it was?” Mattis dutifully responded: “I am confident the Syrian regime conducted a chemical attack on innocent people in this last week, yes. Absolutely confident of it.”

Another reporter queried: “So up until yesterday, and I’m going to quote you here, you said, ‘I cannot tell you that we have evidence.’ So when did you become confident that a chemical attack happened?”

Mattis: “Yes, yesterday.”

Reporter: “Since yesterday, after you said that?”

Mattis: “Yes.”

And those inspectors Mattis had only the day before made clear to Congress would be coming “probably within the week?” They were just hours away from starting their work in Duma when the first U.S. cruise missile hit its target.

**Barry Kissin is an attorney, musician and political commentator.**

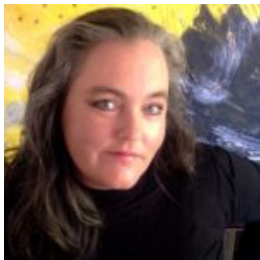
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## UK’s Russia Narrative: A Verdict in Search of a Crime

British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson is on increasingly shaky ground when it comes to his bombastic accusations against Russia in the Skripal case, comments Caitlin Johnstone

By Caitlin Johnstone

[caitlinjohnstone.com](http://caitlinjohnstone.com)



Two weeks ago, the Right Honourable Boris Johnson was asked by a German journalist how the UK government could be so very certain so very early on that the Kremlin was behind the poisoning of a former Russian double agent and his daughter in Salisbury.

“When I look at the evidence, the people from Porton Down, the laboratory, they were absolutely categorical,” Johnson replied. “I asked the guy myself, I said: ‘Are you sure?’ And he said: ‘There’s no doubt.’ So we have very little alternative but to take the action that we have taken.”

The “action that we have taken” include the expulsion of 23 Russian diplomats from the United Kingdom, a cold war escalation in which they were joined by many allied governments around the world in the largest collective ejection of Russian diplomats in world history. It would also include Johnson’s personal campaign to unite the EU behind a more aggressive stance against Russia.

As we discussed this week, the narrative about the Skripal poisoning has been in a constant state of change, with the means by which the nerve agent was administered shifting from Yulia Skripal’s suitcase to the air vents in their car to weaponized miniature drone to the family’s car door handle to the front door of the house to Sergei Skripal’s favorite Russian cereal. Since the forensics of the case are clearly all over the map, and despite this glaring fact the UK government still insists that the poisoning was most certainly inflicted by Russia, the only remaining forensics which could possibly implicate the Kremlin to such a high degree of confidence would necessarily have to be evidence found within the nerve agent itself.

And until a few hours ago Johnson’s comments actually backed this up; he didn’t cite the dodgy crime scene forensics as reason for the government’s certainty, he cited the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (DSTL) at Porton Down. He said they had found evidence within the compound which with “no doubt” implicated the Russian government.

Only problem with that? It's bullshit.

Gary Aitkenhead, the chief executive of the aforementioned Porton Down Defence Science and Technology Laboratory, has told Sky News in a scandalous new report that while his laboratory has been able to learn the chemical composition of the nerve agent used to poison the Skripals, none of the work they have done has succeeded in identifying its source.

The DSTL Twitter account has hastened to inform the public that, in direct contradiction to Boris Johnson's claims, it has never been its job to identify the source of the nerve agent, and that its identification of the compound has formed only one part of the government's conclusions. The *Sky News* report backs this up with a statement from a government spokesperson who asserts that "This is only one part of the intelligence picture" on the Skripal poisoning, adding the following:

***"As the Prime Minister has set out in a number of statements to the Commons since 12 March, this includes our knowledge that within the last decade, Russia has investigated ways of delivering nerve agents – probably for assassination – and as part of this programme has produced and stockpiled small quantities of Novichoks.***

***"Russia's record of conducting state-sponsored assassinations; and our assessment that Russia views former intelligence officers as targets.***

***"It is our assessment that Russia was responsible for this brazen and reckless act and, as the international community agrees, there is no other plausible explanation."***

But what does that mean? It means that there are no crime scene forensics implicating the Russian government as evidenced by how ridiculously all-over-the-place the narrative about how the poisoning occurred is, *and* there are no laboratory forensics proving a connection to the Russian government. According to the spokesperson's statement, that leaves only the say-so of British intelligence agencies.

And of course it does. It always boils down to blind faith in shady intelligence agencies. Fifteen years after the Iraq invasion and we're still being asked to blindly accept on faith the word of imperialist intelligence agencies. Sometimes I wonder why they even bother trying to make up excuses for their war agendas anymore. At this point they could just say "Yeah we're going to work with our allies to sanction Russia off from the world stage because we need them out of the way and want to avoid a direct military confrontation due to their nuclear weapons." At least it would be less insulting.

Also interesting is Aitkenhead's denial of Russia's assertion that the nerve agent could have come from Porton Down, not because the laboratory doesn't have such weapons in its possession but because the laboratory has "the highest levels of security and controls." Which to me sounds an awful lot like an admission that they have the same nerve agent that was used upon the Skripals in their possession.

This all comes on the back of new revelations that the US government has for years been working to hush public discussion of the novichok nerve agent, with Hillary Clinton herself ordering diplomats to downplay the issue should it arise in chemical weapon control talks.

So to recap, an accusation for which there is no evidence has been used to manufacture support for new escalations against Russia, a longtime rival of the western empire. We have been given ample evidence that the Skripal poisoning is being used to advance a preexisting agenda, and no evidence at all to the contrary. It is a verdict in search of a crime. A war in search of an excuse.

We're being lied to. Again. Just like we were fifteen years ago. Don't believe Boris Johnson. Don't believe opaque and unaccountable intelligence agencies with an extensive history of deceit and depravity. Spread truth and remain loudly skeptical. If they're going to drag us into a third and final world war, the least we can do is make it difficult for them.

**Caitlin Johnstone is a rogue journalist, poet, and utopia prepper who publishes regularly at Medium. Follow her work on Facebook, Twitter, or her website. She has a podcast and a new book Woke: A Field Guide for Utopia Preppers. This article was re-published with permission.**

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## What Did Israel Bomb in the Syrian Desert in 2007?

Israel last month admitted that it was responsible for bombing a building in Syria in 2007 that it says was a nuclear reactor under construction but there are strong doubts about what the building was for, argues Ted Snider.

**By Ted Snider**

In September 2007, in the dark of night, warplanes crossed the Syrian border and bombed a covert nuclear reactor. Recently, Israel took responsibility for the

bombing mission that obliterated the Syrian reactor.

The Israeli announcement was unnecessary if it was intended to be an admission of responsibility. The origin of the bombers had never been a mystery. As early as 2008, investigative journalist Seymour Hersh began a report on the bombing with the line "Sometime after midnight on September 6, 2007, at least four low-flying Israeli Air Force fighters crossed into Syrian airspace and carried out a secret bombing mission." Even the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) report on the bombing said that the building had been "destroyed by Israel in September 2007."

That the nuclear reactor was bombed by Israeli planes is clear. That the building the Israeli planes bombed was a nuclear reactor is far less clear.

### **The Nontechnical Questions**

If Syria was building a nuclear weapons program, they were doing it entirely without the knowledge of the CIA. CIA Director Michael Hayden told President Bush that the CIA knew nothing about the Syrian reactor. That the CIA missed a secret nuclear program is not impossible to believe or even entirely unprecedented. What is more unbelievable is that they missed it when it was right out in the open. The Syrians made no attempt to conceal their biggest secret. The highly sophisticated U.S. satellites missed what a commercial satellite easily picked up.

It is hard to make sense of that. In fact, it is hard to make sense of a lot of nontechnical features of the Israeli story. Even to the layman with no technical knowledge of enrichment or nuclear reactors, a number of features made no sense. Hersh picked up on these nontechnical anomalies in his early investigative report of the strike, "A Strike in the Dark." A former State Department intelligence expert told Hersh that many of the features that one would see around a nuclear reactor were missing from the site. There was not even any security around it.

Former senior IAEA inspector Robert Kelley expanded on this anomaly in a personal correspondence. He said there was "no security whatever: no fences, no guards, no perimeter road, no security on the river pump house, water lines run under a public highway." A nearby agricultural desert water station pump house had more security, he told me. He called the lack of security "a pretty big deal." So did Syria's then U.S. ambassador, Imad Moustapha, who told a Washington press conference in 2008:

*"An allegedly strategic site in Syria without a single military checkpoint around it, without barbed wire around it, without anti-aircraft missiles around*

*it, without any sort of security surrounding it, thrown in the middle of the desert without electricity, plans to generate electricity for it, with out major supply plans around it? And yet, it is supposed to be a strategic installation? And people don't even think of it. Yesterday, in the White House presidential statement, it was stated to the letter that that was a secret location. And yet, every commercial satellite service available on earth was able to provide photos and images of this so-called secret Syrian site for the past five, six years."*

There were other details that didn't fit the Israeli narrative either. The nuclear reactor was supposed to be based on a North Korean design, and North Korea was cast as a key player in the construction of the clandestine nuclear reactor. A North Korean ship called the *Al Hamed* attracted a lot of the spotlight. It was claimed to have brought the Syrians nuclear equipment from North Korea. But, the problem was that, in his investigation, Hersh found that neither maritime intelligence nor the ship's transponder gave any indication that the *Al Hamad* had recently docked in North Korea.

At least two people I spoke to were also struck by the absence of people and the lack of activity at the site. You need a program, one person told me. You need bureaucratic support. Building a nuclear reactor is a huge project. Kelley says "there were very few workers as in there are no busses and just a few motorcycles. That is a pretty big clue this is not a big deal. About to start up a super critical facility? No workers?"

Pursuing a different line of nontechnical questioning, one person I spoke to asked why, when war broke out in Syria, and America accused Assad and Syria, of everything from chemical weapons to barrel bombs, why did it never return to the illegal nuclear weapons program if it had real evidence that it had had one?

But, perhaps the most telling thing is not that the CIA missed what was out in the open for commercial satellites to pick up, not that they didn't "have any proof of a reactor – no signals intelligence, no human intelligence, no satellite intelligence," as a former senior US intelligence official who had access to the current intelligence told Hersh. What is, perhaps, more telling is that when they were provided with the intelligence, despite signing on to the Israeli narrative, they actually assessed only "low confidence" that the targeted site was part of a Syrian nuclear weapons program. And they weren't the only ones. Mohamed ElBaradei, then director-general of the IAEA, said that their "experts who have carefully analyzed the satellite imagery say it is unlikely that this building was a nuclear facility."

### **The IAEA Verdict**

Despite the inconsistencies and the low confidence, by May 2011, the IAEA had



rendered a verdict, repeated in their September 2014 report, that “based on all the information available to the Agency and its technical evaluation of that information, it was very likely that the building destroyed at the Dair Alzour site was a nuclear reactor which should have been declared to the Agency.” The Background section of the report informs that the information they had been provided with alleges that the bombed building was “a nuclear reactor that was not yet operational and into which no nuclear material had been introduced.”

But if the IAEA verdict is correct, why did Israel cross into Syrian air space and bomb the building in what was almost certainly an act of war? Joseph Cirincione, president of Ploughshares Fund and a leading expert on nuclear weapons, told me that he has no reason to doubt the IAEA’s verdict. But, he said, their verdict was only that it was “an unfueled nuclear reactor under construction,” and that, he said, is “only an initial step” “towards Syria developing a nuclear weapons capability.” Cirincione told me that “there was no imminent risk; no justification of an illegal Israeli attack” because Syria was still “a very long way from assembling the technical, industrial and financial capabilities needed to support a nuclear weapons program.” He said that, at this point in Syria’s development of a nuclear weapons program, the “matter should have been brought to the United Nations, not the Israeli Defense Force.”

### **The Technical Questions**

But there were also reasons to doubt the IAEA’s verdict. More problematic for the Israeli-American-IAEA story than the nontechnical questions were a host of technical questions. There were three topics of technical questions.

### **The Photographs**

The first was the photographs provided by Israel’s Mossad. There were two problems with the photographic evidence. The first was that Hayden never asked the Israelis how they got the photographs even though the CIA Director knew that at least one of the photographs had been photo-shopped to make the case more convincing, as investigative journalist Gareth Porter reports. The second was that the CIA was provided a bunch of photographs from inside a potential nuclear reactor and a bunch of photographs of the outside of the targeted building in Syria, but “nothing that links the two,” as former U.N. weapons inspector Scott Ritter has pointed out. The former were potentially of a nuclear reactor, but were the latter?

### **The Bombed Building**

The second set of technical problems involves the building itself. The first is that the building is the wrong size. The weight of the claim that the Syrian

building was a nuclear reactor rests on the Israeli-CIA insistence that the building looks like the North Korean reactor at Yongbyon upon which they claim it was modeled. It is a type of reactor known as a gas-cooled graphite-moderated (GCGM) reactor. If it looks enough like that nuclear reactor, it could be a nuclear reactor; if it doesn't, it wasn't. But it doesn't: the Syrian building didn't fit the blueprint. Hersh pointed out this crucial inconsistency early. He says that nonproliferation expert Jeffrey Lewis told him that "even if the width and the length of the building were similar to the Korean site, its height was simply not sufficient to contain a Yongbyon-size reactor."

Porter's later investigation confirmed the contradiction. Porter relied on Yousry Abushady, the top IAEA specialist on North Korean reactors. Abushady knew GCGM reactors better than anyone at the IAEA, and "the evidence he saw in the video convinced him," Porter reports, "that no such reactor could have been under construction" in Syria. And the first reason, again, according to Abushady was "that the building was too short to hold a reactor like the one in Yongbyon, North Korea." According to Abushady the building bombed in Syria was only "a little more than a third as tall" as the supposed North Korean archetype.



But there were other problems. The North Korean reactor required at least twenty supporting buildings, but the Syrian site had few or none even though Israeli intelligence insisted that it was only a few months from being ready to operate. The reactor was supposed to be a gas-cooled reactor, but there was nothing in place to cool the gas: there was no cooling tower. Porter reports that Robert Kelley also pointed to a lack of facility for treating the water in the imaging. That means the water arriving in the reactor would be full of "debris and silt." Kelley has said elsewhere that "the IAEA's analysis of the water lines that purportedly would in the future have supplied cooling water to the bombed building ignored a number of relevant features." Kelley told me there was no support for fuel fabrication or reprocessing. There was also no building for a spent fuel pond. But, Abushady says that every GCGM reactor ever built has a separate building to house the spent fuel pond. Building after building is

missing from the imaging, but the nuclear reactor was supposed to be on the verge of going operational.

## **The Environment**

But the most serious problem is the third: the environmental inconsistencies: there were three damning environmental inconsistencies: the first had to do with barite, the second with uranium and the third with graphite.

The IAEA says that Syria purchased “large quantities” of barite, which can be used, amongst other uses, to “improve radiation shielding properties of concrete.” Since the IAEA did not believe that Syria sought the barite for use in rooms in hospitals that use radiation, it said that it “cannot exclude the possibility” that the barite was intended for use in the nuclear reactor. But Ritter says that the imagery of the site makes it clear that the “shield” would already have been in place. That means that the barite would already be there. In fact, he says, nearly 2,000 tons of it would be there. So, when the building was bombed, barite would have been scattered all over the site. But sensitive environmental sampling revealed none. Robert Kelley says that “none of the concrete samples analyzed . . . contain any barite”: a fact that he says that the IAEA analysis conveniently “failed to report”. Ritter concludes that “The lack of Barite, especially when logic dictates its presence if the [Syrian] facility was in fact nuclear related, is a strong indicator that there was no nuclear function, especially that associated with the operation of a nuclear reactor. . . .”

The second crucial ingredient missing was uranium. If the bombed Syrian building was a nuclear reactor, there should have been uranium in the environmental samples the IAEA took. But there wasn't. Mohamed ElBaradei said that “so far, we have found no indication of any nuclear material.” Every sample that was actually taken from the ground in the area of the Syrian building tested negative for uranium and plutonium.

Gareth Porter says that “Tariq Rauf who headed the IAEA’s Verification and Security Policy Coordination Office until 2011, has pointed out that one of the IAEA protocols applicable to these environmental samples is that “the results from all three or four labs to have analyzed the sample must match to give a positive or negative finding on the presence and isotopics of uranium and/or plutonium.” And they did: they all gave a negative finding. There was no uranium at the Syrian site.

Strangely, though, Porter reports, uranium was found in an additional sample that was taken in violation of IAEA protocol. That anomalous result was used as evidence that a nuclear reactor had sat on that land. But, that sample was

problematic. Why did it disagree with the protocol compliant samples the IAEA had taken?

Every sample taken from the ground around the bombed building had tested negative for uranium. But, the positive sample wasn't taken from the ground around the building. It was taken from a "toilet" or, according to David Albright of the Institute for Science and International Security, from "a changing room in a building associated with the reactor." But why did the sample from inside the changeroom analyze positive for uranium?

The Syrians say the uranium came from the bombs the Israelis dropped on the site. The IAEA has rejected this explanation as having a low probability. But, Ritter says that the penetration bombs likely used by Israel could well have had uranium in them. He says that bombs dropped by the US in Kosovo led to the detection of uranium. Kelley agrees. He says that the IAEA assumed that the uranium in the bombs would have to be depleted uranium, and, since the uranium they found was not depleted, they said the uranium they found could not have been introduced by Israeli bombs. "But," Kelley has argued, "that assumption and the conclusion that followed it are incorrect. They fail to take account of the fact that natural uranium, of which Israel has an abundance based on what is known about its nuclear program, can be used as a strong nose in an earth-penetrating bomb (of the kind that was used at Dair Alzour) with precisely the same effectiveness as depleted uranium." Kelley goes on to say that the uranium that would be detected from such earth-penetrating bombs "would be similar to those found" in Syria. Kelley told me that the scientific reasoning the IAEA used was "kindergarten nonsense." Intriguingly, Ritter says that "through its admitted morphology studies" on the uranium collected, the IAEA could answer questions about the source of the uranium. He says that "The fact that the IAEA is withholding the specific properties of the anthropogenic nuclear particles . . . suggests that this issue is being used more for political purposes than scientific."

Kelley, who was still with the IAEA at this time, told me that the IAEA handling of the uranium question was "embarrassing." Stories had surfaced that there may have been traces of uranium found in Lebanon from Israeli earth-penetrating bombs. When "Israel began dropping earth penetrators in Gaza," Kelley says he "went to IAEA management and suggested we get samples." But, he told me that the IAEA refused. "So an opportunity to compare samples from three sites, Lebanon, [Syria] and Gaza passed." And with it passed the opportunity to resolve the Syrian claim that uranium could have been left by Israeli bombs.

Ritter also says the uranium could have been "brought in by the IAEA inspectors, . . . suggesting the presence . . . of cross-contaminated equipment." That might

explain why uranium was found only inside the one site and not outside on the ground all around. And, that, Robert Kelley says, is exactly what probably happened.

In a comment he made on a previous article of mine, Kelley said “the IAEA samples were almost certainly cross-contaminated.” He told Gareth Porter a lot more. Kelley told Porter that a “very likely explanation” is that the uranium found in the change room was the result of “cross contamination” from the IAEA inspector’s clothing. According to Kelley, the Syrian case would not be exceptional: this type of cross contamination had occurred a number of times before, including in Iraq.

But the barite and the uranium were not even the biggest problem. The biggest environmental inconsistency came not from testing for barite or uranium but for graphite. After all, the Syrian site was supposed to be a gas-cooled graphite-moderated reactor. If it was, then when the building exploded, it should have sent graphite everywhere, according to former UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter. Ritter says there would have been thousands of pounds of graphite in the facility already. But, he says, “there’s no evidence in the destruction. . . . If it had been bombed and there was graphite introduced, you would have a signature all over the area of destroyed graphite blocks. There would be graphite lying around, etc. This was not the case.” According to Porter, this inconsistency is what bothered Abushady the most too. He says the bombing of the reactor “would have spread particles of nuclear-grade graphite all over the site.” But none of the samples taken by the IAEA showed even a trace of graphite: graphite that would have to be there and that “would have been impossible to clean it up,” as nuclear expert Behrd Nakhai told Porter. Abushady says that “these results are the basis to confirm . . . that the site cannot [have been] actually a nuclear reactor.”

It is presumably because of the lack of uranium and graphite in the sampling that the IAEA said that “based on all the information available to the Agency and its technical evaluation of that information, it was very likely that the building destroyed . . . was a nuclear reactor” but that it was a reactor that “was not yet operational and into which no nuclear material had been introduced.”

But there are two seemingly damning problems that seem to finally refute the Israeli-American-IAEA charge against Syria. The claim, presumably, is that there was no graphite in the environmental sampling because the nuclear reactor was not yet operational. But Scott Ritter told me in a recent correspondence that

*“The graphite is an integral part of the reactor that would need to be in place prior to any nuclear material being inserted. According to the Israeli-provided*

*images, the construction stage was pre-concrete pour, meaning graphite columns would logically be in place. Even if the graphite hadn't been installed, it should have been present at the site awaiting installation given the alleged advance state of construction. Of course, the Israeli provided images could have been falsified, in which case no graphite would have been present. . . ."*

Graphite bricks and tiles would have been part of the core structure of the building if it was a nuclear reactor. Ritter says there would have been about 30,000 bricks containing around 325 tons of graphite. If a building incorporating such bricks blew up, there would be graphite everywhere. There wasn't. So, the nonoperational solution wilts.

So does the "into which no nuclear material had been introduced" solution. Saying that no nuclear material had yet been introduced was presumably supposed to make sense of the failure to find uranium in the environmental analyses. But rather than throwing a problematic result back at the Syrians, it only placed the problem right back in the Israeli-American-IAEA narrative. What is not given enough attention – and maybe even none – is that if no nuclear material had been introduced to the Syrian site, there should have been no uranium found in the additional sample taken outside of protocol from the inside of the change room of the associated building. If there was uranium brought into the change room before the Syrians had brought uranium into the site, then that means it was brought in by the inspectors who found it or from some other non-Syrian source. The anomalous uranium must have been the result of cross contamination.

And that, it seems, leaves little evidence of a nuclear reactor in the middle of the Syrian desert. No uranium, no barite and not even any of the graphite that a graphite-moderated reactor would have to be made of. Only a square building that doesn't even look like the building whose resemblance is supposed to prove that the Israelis bombed a Syrian nuclear reactor in the dark of night in September 2007.

**Ted Snider writes on analyzing patterns in U.S. foreign policy and history.**  
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## How Many People Has the U.S. Killed in its Post-9/11 Wars? Part 2: Afghanistan and Pakistan

The numbers of casualties of U.S. wars since Sept. 11, 2001 have largely gone

uncounted, but coming to terms with the true scale of the crimes committed remains an urgent moral, political and legal imperative, argues Nicolas J.S. Davies, in part two of his series.

**By Nicolas J.S. Davies**

In the first part of this series, I estimated that about 2.4 million Iraqis have been killed as a result of the illegal invasion of their country by the United States and the United Kingdom in 2003. I turn now to Afghan and Pakistani deaths in the ongoing 2001 U.S. intervention in Afghanistan. In part three, I will examine U.S.-caused war deaths in Libya, Somalia, Syria and Yemen. According to Ret. U.S. General Tommy Franks, who led the war against the Taliban in Afghanistan in reaction to 9/11, the U.S. government does not keep track of civilian casualties that it causes. “You know, we don’t do body counts,” Franks once said. Whether that’s true or a count is covered up is difficult to know.

As I explained in part one, the U.S. has attempted to justify its invasions of Afghanistan and several other countries as a legitimate response to the terrorist crimes of 9/11. But the U.S. was not attacked by another country on that day, and no crime, however horrific, can justify 16 years of war – and counting – against a series of countries that did not attack the U.S.

As former Nuremberg prosecutor Benjamin Ferencz told NPR a week after the terrorist attacks, they were crimes against humanity, but not “war crimes,” because the U.S. was not at war. “It is never a legitimate response to punish people who are not responsible for the wrong done.” Ferencz explained. “We must make a distinction between punishing the guilty and punishing others. If you simply retaliate en masse by bombing Afghanistan, let us say, or the Taliban, you will kill many people who don’t believe in what has happened, who don’t approve of what has happened.”

As Ferencz predicted, we have killed “many people” who had nothing to do with the crimes of September 11. How many people? That is the subject of this report.

## **Afghanistan**

In 2011, award-winning investigative journalist Gareth Porter was researching night raids by U.S. special operations forces in Afghanistan for his article, “How McChrystal and Petraeus Built an Indiscriminate Killing Machine.” The expansion of night raids from 2009 to 2011 was a central element in Barack Obama’s escalation of the U.S. War in Afghanistan. Porter documented a gradual 50-fold ramping up from 20 raids per month in May 2009 to over 1,000 raids per month by April 2011.

But strangely, the UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA) reported a decrease in the numbers of civilians killed by U.S. forces in Afghanistan in 2010, including a decrease in the numbers of civilians killed in night raids from 135 in 2009 to only 80 in 2010.

UNAMA's reports of civilian deaths are based on investigations by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), so Noori Shah Noori, an Afghan journalist working with Porter on the article, interviewed Nader Nadery, a Commissioner of the AIHRC, to find out what was going on.

Nadery explained to Noori, "...that that figure represented only the number of civilian deaths from 13 incidents that had been fully investigated. It excluded the deaths from 60 other incidents in which complaints had been received, but had not yet been thoroughly investigated."

"Nadery has since estimated that the total civilian deaths for all 73 night raids about which it had complaints was 420," Porter continued. "But the AIHRC admits that it does not have access to most of the districts dominated by the Taliban and that people in those districts are not aware of the possibility of complaining to the Commission about night raids. So, neither the AIHRC nor the United Nations learns about a significant proportion – and very likely the majority – of night raids that end in civilian deaths."

UNAMA has since updated its count of civilians killed in U.S. night raids in 2010 from 80 to 103, still nowhere close to Nadery's estimate of 420. But as Nadery explained, even that estimate must have been a small fraction of the number of civilian deaths in about 5,000 night raids that year, most of which were probably conducted in areas where people have no contact with UNAMA or the AIHRC.

As senior U.S. military officers admitted to Dana Priest and William Arkin of *The Washington Post*, more than half the raids conducted by U.S. special operations forces target the wrong person or house, so a large increase in civilian deaths was a predictable and expected result of such a massive expansion of these deadly "kill or capture" raids.

The massive escalation of U.S. night raids in 2010 probably made it an exceptional year, so it is unlikely that UNAMA's reports regularly exclude as many uninvestigated reports of civilian deaths as in 2010. But on the other hand, UNAMA's annual reports never mention that their figures for civilian deaths are based only on investigations completed by the AIHRC, so it is unclear how unusual it was to omit 82 percent of reported incidents of civilian deaths in U.S. night raids from that year's report.



We can only guess how many reported incidents have been omitted from UNAMA's other annual reports since 2007, and, in any case, that would still tell us nothing about civilians killed in areas that have no contact with UNAMA or the AIHRC.

In fact, for the AIHRC, counting the dead is only a by-product of its main function, which is to investigate reports of human rights violations in Afghanistan. But Porter and Noori's research revealed that UNAMA's reliance on investigations completed by the AIHRC as the basis for definitive statements about the number of civilians killed in Afghanistan in its reports has the effect of sweeping an unknown number of incomplete investigations and unreported civilian deaths down a kind of "memory hole," writing them out of virtually all published accounts of the human cost of the war in Afghanistan.

UNAMA's annual reports even include colorful pie-charts to bolster the false impression that these are realistic estimates of the number of civilians killed in a given year, and that pro-government forces and foreign occupation forces are only responsible for a small portion of them.

UNAMA's systematic undercounts and meaningless pie-charts become the basis for headlines and news stories all over the world. But they are all based on numbers that UNAMA and the AIHRC know very well to be a small fraction of civilian deaths in Afghanistan. It is only a rare story like Porter's in 2011 that gives any hint of this shocking reality.

In fact, UNAMA's reports reflect only how many deaths the AIHRC staff have investigated in a given year, and may bear little or no relation to how many people have actually been killed. Seen in this light, the relatively small fluctuations in UNAMA's reports of civilian deaths from year to year in Afghanistan seem just as likely to represent fluctuations in resources and staffing at the AIHRC as actual increases or decreases in the numbers of people killed.

If only one thing is clear about UNAMA's reports of civilian deaths, it is that nobody should ever cite them as estimates of total numbers of civilians killed in Afghanistan – least of all UN and government officials and mainstream journalists who, knowingly or not, mislead millions of people when they repeat them.

### **Estimating Afghan Deaths Through the Fog of Official Deception**

So the most widely cited figures for civilian deaths in Afghanistan are based, not just on "passive reporting," but on misleading reports that knowingly ignore many or most of the deaths reported by bereaved families and local officials,

while many or most civilian deaths are never reported to UNAMA or the AIHCR in the first place. So how can we come up with an intelligent or remotely accurate estimate of how many civilians have really been killed in Afghanistan?

Body Count: Casualty Figures After 10 Years of the "War On Terror", published in 2015 by Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR), a co-winner of the 1985 Nobel Peace Prize, estimated deaths of combatants and civilians in Afghanistan based on UNAMA's reports and other sources. *Body Count's* figures for numbers of Afghan combatants killed seem more reliable than UNAMA's undercounts of civilian deaths.

The Afghan government reported that 15,000 of its soldiers and police were killed through 2013. The authors of *Body Count* took estimates of Taliban and other anti-government forces killed in 2001, 2007 and 2010 from other sources and extrapolated to years for which no estimates were available, based on other measures of the intensity of the conflict (numbers of air strikes, night raids etc.). They estimated that 55,000 "insurgents" were killed by the end of 2013.

The years since 2013 have been increasingly violent for the people of Afghanistan. With reductions in U.S. and NATO occupation forces, Afghan pro-government forces now bear the brunt of combat against their fiercely independent countrymen, and another 25,000 soldiers and police have been killed since 2013, according to my own calculations from news reports and this study by the Watson Institute at Brown University.

If the same number of anti-government fighters have been killed, that would mean that at least 120,000 Afghan combatants have been killed since 2001. But, since pro-government forces are armed with heavier weapons and are still backed by U.S. air support, anti-government losses are likely to be greater than those of government troops. So a more realistic estimate would be that between 130,000 and 150,000 Afghan combatants have been killed.

The more difficult task is to estimate how many civilians have been killed in Afghanistan through the fog of UNAMA's misinformation. UNAMA's passive reporting has been deeply flawed, based on completed investigations of as few as 18 percent of reported incidents, as in the case of night raid deaths in 2010, with no reports at all from large parts of the country where the Taliban are most active and most U.S. air strikes and night raids take place. The Taliban appear to have never published any numbers of civilian deaths in areas under its control, but it has challenged UNAMA's figures.

There has been no attempt to conduct a serious mortality study in Afghanistan like the 2006 Lancet study in Iraq. The world owes the people of Afghanistan that kind of serious accounting for the human cost of the war it has allowed to

engulf them. But it seems unlikely that that will happen before the world fulfills the more urgent task of ending the now 16-year-old war.

Body Count took estimates by Neta Crawford and the Costs of War project at Boston University for 2001-6, plus the UN's flawed count since 2007, and multiplied them by a minimum of 5 and a maximum of 8, to produce a range of 106,000 to 170,000 civilians killed from 2001 to 2013. The authors seem to have been unaware of the flaws in UNAMA's reports revealed to Porter and Noori by Nadery in 2011.

But *Body Count* did acknowledge the very conservative nature of its estimate, noting that, "compared to Iraq, where urbanization is more pronounced, and monitoring by local and foreign press is more pronounced than in Afghanistan, the registration of civilian deaths has been much more fragmentary."

In my 2016 article, "Playing Games With War Deaths," I suggested that the ratio of passive reporting to actual civilian deaths in Afghanistan was therefore more likely to fall between the ratios found in Iraq in 2006 (12:1) and Guatemala at the end of its Civil War in 1996 (20:1).

### **Mortality in Guatemala and Afghanistan**

In fact, the geographical and military situation in Afghanistan is more analogous to Guatemala, with many years of war in remote, mountainous areas against an indigenous civilian population who have taken up arms against a corrupt, foreign-backed central government.

The Guatemalan Civil War lasted from 1960 to 1996. The deadliest phase of the war was unleashed when the Reagan administration restored U.S. military aid to Guatemala in 1981, after a meeting between former Deputy CIA Director Vernon Walters and President Romeo Lucas García, in Guatemala.

U.S. military adviser Lieutenant Colonel George Maynes and President Lucas's brother, General Benedicto Lucas, planned a campaign called Operation Ash, in which 15,000 Guatemalan troops swept through the Ixil region massacring indigenous communities and burning hundreds of villages.

CIA documents that Robert Parry unearthed at the Reagan library and in other U.S. archives specifically defined the targets of this campaign to include "the civilian support mechanism" of the guerrillas, in effect the entire rural indigenous population. A CIA report from February 1982 described how this worked in practice in Ixil:

"The commanding officers of the units involved have been instructed to destroy all towns and villages which are cooperating with the Guerrilla Army of the Poor

[the EGP] and eliminate all sources of resistance,” the report said. “Since the operation began, several villages have been burned to the ground, and a large number of guerrillas and collaborators have been killed.”

Guatemalan President Rios Montt, who died on Sunday, seized power in a coup in 1983 and continued the campaign in Ixil. He was prosecuted for genocide, but neither Walters, Mayne nor any other American official have been charged for helping to plan and support the mass killings in Guatemala.

At the time, many villages in Ixil were not even marked on official maps and there were no paved roads in this remote region (there are still very few today). As in Afghanistan, the outside world had no idea of the scale and brutality of the killing and destruction.

One of the demands of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP), the Revolutionary Organization of Armed People (ORPA) and other revolutionary groups in the negotiations that led to the 1996 peace agreement in Guatemala was for a genuine accounting of the reality of the war, including how many people were killed and who killed them.

The UN-sponsored Historical Clarification Commission documented 626 massacres, and found that about 200,000 people had been killed in Guatemala’s civil war. At least 93 percent were killed by U.S.-backed military forces and death squads and only 3 percent by the guerrillas, with 4 percent unknown. The total number of people killed was 20 times previous estimates based on passive reporting.

Mortality studies in other countries (like Angola, Bosnia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Kosovo, Rwanda, Sudan and Uganda) have never found a larger discrepancy between passive reporting and mortality studies than in Guatemala.

Based on the discrepancy between passive reporting in Guatemala and what the U.N. ultimately found there, UNAMA appears to have reported less than 5 percent of actual civilian deaths in Afghanistan, which would be unprecedented.

Costs of War and UNAMA have counted 36,754 civilian deaths up to the end of 2017. If these (extremely) passive reports represent 5 percent of total civilian deaths, as in Guatemala, the actual death toll would be about 735,000. If UNAMA has in fact eclipsed Guatemala’s previously unsurpassed record of undercounting civilian deaths and only counted 3 or 4 percent of actual deaths, then the real total could be as high as 1.23 million. If the ratio were only the same as originally found in Iraq in 2006 (14:1 – before Iraq Body Count revised its figures), it would be only 515,000.

Adding these figures to my estimate of Afghan combatants killed on both sides, we can make a rough estimate that about 875,000 Afghans have been killed since 2001, with a minimum of 640,000 and a maximum of 1.4 million.

## **Pakistan**

The U.S. expanded its war in Afghanistan into Pakistan in 2004. The CIA began launching drone strikes, and the Pakistani military, under U.S. pressure, launched a military campaign against militants in South Waziristan suspected of links to Al Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban. Since then, the U.S. has conducted at least 430 drone strikes in Pakistan, according to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, and the Pakistani military has conducted several operations in areas bordering Afghanistan.

The beautiful Swat valley (once called “the Switzerland of the East” by the visiting Queen Elizabeth of the U.K.) and three neighboring districts were taken over by the Pakistani Taliban between 2007 and 2009. They were retaken by the Pakistani Army in 2009 in a devastating military campaign that left 3.4 million people as refugees.

The Bureau of Investigative Journalism reports that 2,515 to 4,026 people have been killed in U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan, but that is a small fraction of total war deaths in Pakistan. Crawford and the Costs of War program at Boston University estimated the number of Pakistanis killed at about 61,300 through August 2016, based mainly on reports by the Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) in Islamabad and the South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) in New Delhi. That included 8,200 soldiers and police, 31,000 rebel fighters and 22,100 civilians.

Costs of War’s estimate for rebel fighters killed was an average of 29,000 reported by PIPS and 33,000 reported by SATP, which SATP has since updated to 33,950. SATP has updated its count of civilian deaths to 22,230.

If we accept the higher of these passively reported figures for the numbers of combatants killed on both sides and use historically typical 5:1 to 20:1 ratios to passive reports to generate a minimum and maximum number of civilian deaths, that would mean that between 150,000 and 500,000 Pakistanis have been killed.

A reasonable mid-point estimate would be that about 325,000 people have been killed in Pakistan as a result of the U.S. War in Afghanistan spilling across its borders.

Combining my estimates for Afghanistan and Pakistan, I estimate that about 1.2 million Afghans and Pakistanis have been killed as a result of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001.

Nicolas J.S. Davies is the author of *Blood On Our Hands: the American Invasion and Destruction of Iraq*. He also wrote the chapter on “Obama at War” in *Grading the 44th President: a Report Card on Barack Obama’s First Term as a Progressive Leader*.

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## Trump Finds Fellow Bully in Bolton

President Donald Trump’s appointment of John Bolton as his national security adviser is his most dangerous move yet, argues Marjorie Cohn.

By Marjorie Cohn

Nothing Donald Trump has done since his inauguration 14 months ago is more dangerous – to the United States, and indeed, to the world – than his selection of John Bolton for National Security Adviser. It is not surprising the president would feel most comfortable receiving advice from a fellow bully.

Trump bullies people on a nearly daily basis, directing his ire at immigrants, Muslims, women, LGBTQ people, the poor and the environment. He hurls Twitter attacks at those who disagree with him.

The president has encouraged police brutality, suggesting in a Long Island speech that law enforcement officers bang suspects’ heads against police car doors. “Please don’t be too nice” when arresting people, Trump advised. “Like when you guys put somebody in the car, and you’re protecting their head, you know, the way you put your hand over” their head, “I said, ‘You can take the hand away, OK?’”

After being told someone might throw tomatoes at him at a campaign rally, Trump urged his supporters to “knock the crap out of them ... I promise you, I will pay for the legal fees.” He stated on Fox News that a Black Lives Matter activist who was attacked at a Trump rally “should have been roughed up.”

Trump’s fellow bully Bolton also engages in abusive behavior. Melody Townsel, working on a USAID project in Kyrgyzstan, became the object of Bolton’s wrath in 1994. Townsel had complained about incompetence, poor contract performance and inadequate funding of the project by a contractor Bolton represented.

In a letter to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Townsel wrote that Bolton “proceeded to chase me through the halls of a Russian hotel throwing things at

me, shoving threatening letters under my door, and generally behaving like a madman." Townsel claimed Bolton threatened employees and contractors who refused to cooperate with him. She maintained Bolton's behavior "wasn't just unforgivable, it was pathological."

Carl W. Ford, former Assistant Secretary for Intelligence and Research, and a conservative Republican, called Bolton a "kiss-up, kick-down sort of guy" who "abuses his authority with little people," characterizing him as a "serial abuser." Bolton chairs the Gatestone Institute, which publishes hateful, racist anti-Muslim rhetoric, calling refugees rapists and hosts of infectious diseases.

Bolton was such a lightning rod that in 2005, even the GOP-controlled Senate refused to confirm him as US ambassador to the United Nations. To avoid the need for Senate confirmation, George W. Bush named Bolton to the post in a recess appointment.

But Bolton doesn't just bully individuals. He pushed for the 2003 invasion of Iraq, advocates military attacks on North Korea and Iran, favors Israel's annexation of the Palestinian West Bank, and falsely claimed that Cuba had biological weapons.

As undersecretary of state for Arms Control and International Security in the Bush administration, Bolton was instrumental in withdrawing the United States from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which heightened the risk of nuclear war with Russia.

Anthony J. Blinken, deputy secretary of state in the Obama administration, wrote in The New York Times, "Mr. Bolton had a habit of twisting intelligence to back his bellicosity and sought to remove anyone who objected."

Colin Kahl and Jon Wolf, writing in Foreign Policy, described Bolton's "pattern of warping and misusing intelligence to build the case for war with rogue states; a disdain for allies and multilateral institutions; a blind faith in US military power and the benefits of regime change; and a tendency to see the ends as justifying the means, however horrific."

When he left his position at USAID in the late 1980s, Bolton's colleagues presented him with a bronzed hand grenade.

### **Bolton Eschews Diplomacy and Slams the UN**

Bolton sees every international situation as an opportunity to make war, notwithstanding the United Nations Charter that mandates the peaceful resolution of disputes and forbids military force except in self-defense.

After two world wars claimed millions of lives, countries around the globe – including the United States – came together and established the United Nations system, “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.”

Yet in 1994, Bolton famously claimed, “there is no such thing as the United Nations.” He stated caustically, “If the UN Secretariat building in New York lost 10 stories, it wouldn’t make a bit of difference.”

When Bolton officially withdrew the US signature from the International Criminal Court treaty, he declared it “the happiest moment of my government service.”

### **Bolton Led the Charge to Invade Iraq**

Bolton led the charge to invade Iraq and forcibly change its regime in 2003, falsely claiming that President Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction (WMD). In 2002, former UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter affirmed that Hussein had destroyed 90-95% of its WMD; the remaining 5%, Ritter said, “doesn’t even constitute a weapons program . . . just because we can’t account for it doesn’t mean Iraq retains it. There’s no evidence Iraq retains this material.”

To bolster the case for war, Bolton pushed Bush to include in his State of the Union address the false statement that Iraq was seeking uranium from Niger, over the objection of the State Department.

Before the US invaded Iraq, Mohamed ElBaradei, director of the International Atomic Energy Agency, said there was no evidence Hussein had any viable nuclear program. Hans Blix, chief inspector of the UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission, verified that weapons inspectors had found no evidence of WMD.

In 2002, Bolton orchestrated the ouster of Jose Bustani, head of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, to prevent him from inspecting and revealing that Hussein had no chemical weapons. When Bustani argued he should stay in the post, Bolton threatened, “You have to be ready to face the consequences, because we know where your kids live.”

No WMD were found after the US invasion of Iraq. Some one million Iraqis were killed and the US-led regime change led to a vacuum of leadership that was filled by ISIS.

A 2006 report prepared under the direction of former Rep. John Conyers (D-Michigan) concluded that “members of the Bush Administration misstated, overstated, and manipulated intelligence with regards to linkages between Iraq and Al Qaeda; the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Iraq; the acquisition of aluminum tubes to be used as uranium centrifuges; and the acquisition of uranium



from Niger.”

Those “misstatements were in contradiction of known countervailing intelligence information, and were the result of political pressure and manipulation.” A key source of that pressure and manipulation was Bolton.

In spite of the horror the US military unleashed on Iraq 15 years ago, Bolton wrote in 2016 that the removal of Hussein was “a military success of stunning scope and effectiveness, achieved in just three weeks.”

After the disastrous US invasion of Iraq, Bolton tried to get the Iran file removed from ElBaradei in order to lay the groundwork for an unjustified attack on Iran.

### **Bolton Wants to Rip Up the Iran Nuclear Agreement**

Bolton favours bombing Iran and changing its regime and he opposes the Iran Nuclear Agreement. He has advocated an Israeli strike on Iran’s nuclear facilities and encouraged the United States to support it.

In the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Iran agreed to cut back its nuclear program and in return, received billions of dollars of relief from punishing sanctions. Iran has complied with its obligations under the deal, says a bipartisan group of over 100 national security veterans called the National Coalition to Prevent Nuclear Weapons.

Under the US Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act, the president must decide every 90 days whether Iran remains in compliance with the JCPOA and whether the agreement continues to serve US interests. Trump reluctantly certified Iran’s compliance in April and July 2017. But in October, to the consternation of his secretary of state, secretary of defense, and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Trump refused to certify Iran’s compliance with the agreement. He did not, however, pull out of the deal at that time.

On May 12, Trump will decide whether or not to end US participation in the agreement. Bolton and CIA director Mike Pompeo, Trump’s nominee for Secretary of State, both favor renouncing the deal. If the US breaches the agreement, Iran may well resume the unlimited production of nuclear fuel.

“Bolton is an unhinged advocate for waging World War III,” according to Trita Parsi, president of the National Iranian American Council. “Bolton now represents the greatest threat to the United States,” he added, stating, “Trump may have just effectively declared war on Iran.”

### **Bolton Wants to Attack North Korea**

In February, contrary to the overwhelming weight of legal authority, Bolton argued in a Wall Street Journal op-ed that mounting a first strike on North Korea would comply with international law.

Bolton stated on Fox News, "I think the only diplomatic option left is to end the regime in North Korea by effectively having the South take it over." During another Fox appearance, Bolton declared, "the way you eliminate the North Korean nuclear program is to eliminate North Korea." He maintained that North Korea having nuclear weapons was worse than the "millions" of North and South Koreans who would be killed if the US attacked North Korea.

If Trump destroys the Iran deal, it will send a dangerous message to Pyongyang that his word cannot be trusted. North and South Korea are slated to meet in April and Trump has indicated he will meet with North Korean President Kim Jong-Un. Diplomacy at this moment is critical.

Bolton has provocatively suggested a linkage between Iran and North Korea on nuclear weapons. In January, he wrote in the Wall Street Journal, "Little is known, at least publicly, about longstanding Iranian-North Korean cooperation on nuclear and ballistic-missile technology. It is foolish to play down Tehran's threat because of Pyongyang's provocations. They are two sides of the same coin."

The dangers inherent in following Bolton's favored policies in Iran and North Korea cannot be overestimated.

### **Bolton Falsely Claimed Cuba Had Biological Weapons**

Bolton argued unsuccessfully for the inclusion of Cuba in Bush's "axis of evil" (which consisted of Iraq, Iran and North Korea). Bolton advocated a military attack on Cuba one year before Bush invaded Iraq. After Bolton falsely claimed Cuba was developing a bio-warfare capacity, a congressional investigation found no evidence to support such an allegation.

As Nicole Deller and John Burroughs from the Lawyers' Committee on Nuclear Policy have documented, Bolton is widely credited with the defeat of the Protocol to the Biological Weapons Convention, which would have created an inspection system to protect us against those deadly weapons.

### **Bolton Wants to Give "Pieces" of Palestine to Jordan and Egypt**

Bolton's solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is to give "pieces" of Gaza to Egypt and "pieces" of the West Bank to Jordan since, he thinks, Palestine is composed of "bits and pieces" of the former Ottoman Empire.

In January, Bolton wrote in The Hill: “Once it becomes clear the two-state solution is finally dead, Jordan should again be asked to exercise control over suitably delineated portions of the West Bank and have the monarchy’s religious role for holy sites like the Temple Mount reaffirmed. Accepting Jordan’s sovereignty would actually benefit Palestinians, as would Egyptian sovereignty over Gaza, by tying these areas into viable, functioning states, not to the illusion of ‘Palestine.’”

Neither Jordan nor Egypt supports this proposal, and Palestinians are vehemently opposed to it. Jewish Voice for Peace stated, “The appointment of Bolton is a complete disaster for the Middle East, the US, and the entire world.”

### **Bolton’s Appointment is “a Disaster for Our Country”**

The National Security Adviser’s job is to inform the president of the different options that affect national security, briefing him on the National Security Council’s findings. Bolton is such an ideologue, he will invariably slant his advice toward waging war. Bolton is so extreme, he reportedly promised Trump he “wouldn’t start any wars” if appointed, according to CNN. In light of Trump’s aversion to reading daily intelligence reports, Bolton will play an even greater role in the formulation of policy.

Unfortunately, National Security Adviser is not a cabinet position, so Bolton doesn’t need Senate confirmation.

Former President Jimmy Carter said in an interview with USA Today that Bolton’s appointment is “a disaster for our country,” adding it may be “one of the worst mistakes” of the Trump presidency.

But as Stormy Daniels and Robert Mueller close in on Trump, the president will seek to create a major distraction. With bully Bolton egging him on, that may well be a military attack on North Korea or Iran. The consequences would prove disastrous.

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# Russia 'Novichok' Hysteria Proves Politicians and Media Haven't Learned the Lessons of Iraq

The current state of anti-Russia hysteria is reminiscent of earlier dark chapters of American history, including the rush to war in Iraq of the early 2000s and McCarthyism of the 1950s, Patrick Henningsen observes.

By Patrick Henningsen

If there's one thing to be gleaned from the current atmosphere of anti-Russian hysteria in the West, it's that the US-led sustained propaganda campaign is starting to pay dividends. It's not only the hopeless political classes and media miscreants who believe that Russia is hacking, meddling and poisoning our progressive democratic utopia – with many pinning their political careers to this by now that's it's too late for them to turn back.

As it was with Iraq in 2003, these dubious public figures require a degree of public support for their policies, and unfortunately many people do believe in the grand *Russian conspiracy*, having been sufficiently brow-beaten into submission by around-the-clock fear mongering and official fake news disseminated by government and the mainstream media.

What makes this latest carnival of warmongering more frightening is that it proves that the political and media classes never actually learned or internalized the basic lessons of Iraq, namely that the cessation of diplomacy and the declarations of sanctions (a prelude to war) against another sovereign state should not be based on half-baked intelligence and mainstream fake news. But that's exactly what is happening with this latest Russian 'Novichok' plot.

Admittedly, the stakes are much higher this time around. The worst case scenario is unthinkable, whereby the bad graces of men like John Bolton and other military zealots, there may just be a thin enough mandate to short-sell another military conflagration or proxy war – this time against another nuclear power and UN Security Council member.

Enter stage right, where US President Donald Trump announced this week that the US is moving closer to war footing with Russia. It's not the first time Trump has made such a hasty move in the absence any forensic evidence of a crime. Nowadays, hearsay, conjecture and social media postings are enough to declare war. Remember last April with the alleged "Sarin Attack" in Khan Sheikhoun, when the embattled President squeezed off 59 Tomahawk Cruise missiles against

Syria – a decision, which as far as anyone can tell, was based solely on a few YouTube videos uploaded by the illustrious White Helmets. Back then Trump learned how an act of war against an existential enemy could take the heat off at home and translate into a bounce in the polls. Even *La Résistance* at CNN were giddy with excitement and threw their support behind Trump, with some pundits describing his decision to act as “presidential.”

As with past high-profile western-led WMD allegations against governments in Syria and Iraq (the US and UK are patently unconcerned with multiple allegations of ‘rebel’ terrorists in Syria caught using chemical weapons), an identical progression of events appears to be unfolding following the alleged ‘Novichok’ chemical weapon poisoning of retired British-Russian double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in Salisbury, Wiltshire on March 4.

Despite a lack of evidence presented to the public other than the surreptitious “highly likely” assessments of British Prime Minister Theresa May and Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, President Trump once again has caved into pressure from Official Washington’s anti-Russian party line and ordered the expulsion of 60 Russian diplomats – whom he accused of being spies. Trump also ordered the closure of the Russian consulate in Seattle, citing speculative fears that Russia might be spying on a nearby Boeing submarine development base. It was the second round of US expulsions of Russian officials, with the first one ordered by the outgoing President Obama in December 2016, kicking out 35 Russian diplomats and their families (including their head chef) and closing the Russian Consulate in San Francisco, with some calling it “a den of spies”.

Trump’s move followed an earlier UK action on March 14th, which expelled 23 Russian diplomats also accused of being spies. This was in retaliation for the alleged poisoning of a retired former Russian-British double agent in Salisbury, England.

### **The ‘Collective’ Concern**

It’s important to understand how this week’s brash move by Washington was coordinated in advance. The US and the UK are relying on their other NATO partners, including Germany, Poland, Italy, Canada, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Estonia and Lithuania – to create the image of a united front against perceived ‘Russian aggression.’ As with multilateral military operations, multilateral diplomatic measures like this are not carried out on a whim.

Aside from this, there are two seriously worrying aspects of this latest US-led multilateral move against Russia. Firstly, this diplomatic offensive against Russia mirrors a NATO collective defense action, and by doing so, it tacitly

signals towards an invocation of Article 5. According to AP, one German spokesperson called it a matter of 'solidarity' with the UK. Statements from the White House are no less encouraging:

"The United States takes this action in conjunction with our NATO allies, and partners around the world in response with Russia's use of a military grade chemical weapon on the soil of the United Kingdom – the latest in its ongoing pattern of destabilizing activities around the world," the White House said. "Today's actions make the United States safer by reducing Russia's ability to spy on Americans, and to conduct covert operations that threaten America's national security."

What this statement indicates is that any Russian foreign official or overseas worker in the West should be regarded as possible agents of espionage. In other words, the Cold War is now officially back on.

Then came this statement: "With these steps, the United States and our allies and partners make clear to Russia that its actions have consequences."

In an era of power politics, this language is anything but harmless. And while US and UK politicians and media pundits seem to be treating it all as a school yard game at times, we should all be reminded that this is how wars start.

The second issue with the Trump's diplomatic move against Russia is that it extends beyond the territorial US – and into what should be regarded as the neutral zone of the United Nations. As part of the group of 60 expulsions, the US has expelled 12 Russian diplomats from the United Nations in New York City. While this may mean nothing to jumped-up political appointees like Nikki Haley who routinely threaten the UN when a UNGA vote doesn't go her way, this is an extremely dangerous precedent because it means that the US has now created a diplomatic trap door where legitimate international relations duties are being carelessly rebranded as *espionage* – done on a whim and based on no actual evidence.

By using this tactic, the US is casting aside decades of international resolutions, treaties and laws. Such a move directly threatens to undermine a fundamental principle of the United Nations which is its diplomatic mission and the right for every sovereign nation to have diplomatic representation. Without it, there is no UN forum and countries cannot talk through their differences and negotiate peaceful settlements. This is why the UN was founded in the first place. Someone might want to remind Nikki Haley of that.

On top of this, flippant US and UK officials are already crowing that Russia should be kicked off the UN Security Council. In effect, Washington is trying to

cut the legs out from a fellow UN Security Council member and a nuclear power. This UNSC exclusion campaign has been gradually building up since 2014, where US officials have been repeatedly blocked by Russia over incidents in Syria and the Ukraine. Hence, Washington and its partners are frustrated with the UN framework, and that's probably why they are so actively undermining it.

Those boisterous calls, as irrational and ill-informed as they might be, should be taken seriously because as history shows, these signs are a prelude to war.

Also, consider the fact that both the US and Russia have military assets deployed in Syria. How much of the Skripal case and the subsequent fall-out has to do with the fact that US Coalition and Gulf state proxy terrorists have lost their hold over key areas in Syria? The truly dangerous part of this equation is that the illegal military occupation by the US and its NATO ally Turkey of northeastern Syria is in open violation of international law, and so Washington and its media arms would like nothing more than to be history's actor and bury its past indiscretions under a new layer of US-Russia tension in the Middle East.

### **Another WMD Debacle?**

Is it really possible to push East-West relations over the edge on the basis of anecdotal evidence?

Former British Ambassador to Uzbekistan, Craig Murray, highlighted the recent British High Court judgement which states in writing that the government's own chemical weapons experts from the Porton Down research facility could not categorically confirm that a Russian 'Novichok' nerve agent was actually used in the Salisbury incident. Based on this, Murray believes that both British Prime Minister Theresa May and Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, and Britain's deputy UN representative Jonathan Allen – have all lied to the public and the world when making their public statements that the Russians had in fact launched a deadly chemical weapons attack on UK soil. Murray states elaborates on this key point:

"This sworn Court evidence direct from Porton Down is utterly incompatible with what Boris Johnson has been saying. The truth is that Porton Down have not even positively identified this as a 'Novichok', as opposed to "a closely related agent". Even if it were a 'Novichok' that would not prove manufacture in Russia, and a 'closely related agent' could be manufactured by literally scores of state and non-state actors.

"This constitutes irrefutable evidence that the government have been straight out lying – to Parliament, to the EU, to NATO, to the United Nations, and above all to the people – about their degree of certainty of the origin of the attack.

It might well be an attack originating in Russia, but there are indeed other possibilities and investigation is needed. As the government has sought to whip up jingoistic hysteria in advance of forthcoming local elections, the scale of the lie has daily increased.”

Murray has been roundly admonished by the UK establishment for his views, but he is still correct to ask the question: how could UK government leaders have known ‘who did it’ in advance of any criminal forensic investigation or substantive testing by Porton Down or an independent forensic investigation by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW)?

One would hope we could all agree that it’s this sort of question which should have been given more prominence in the run-up to the Iraq War. In matters of justice and jurisprudence, that’s a fundamental question and yet, once again – it has been completely bypassed.

Murray is not alone. A number of scientists and journalists have openly questioned the UK’s hyperbolic claims that Russia had ordered a ‘chemical attack’ on British soil. In her recent report for the New Scientist, author Debora MacKenzie reiterates the fact that several countries could have manufactured a ‘Novichok’ class nerve agent and used it in the chemical attack on Russians Sergei and Yulia Skripal in Salisbury.

“British Prime Minister Theresa May says that because it was Russia that developed Novichok agents, it is ‘highly likely’ that Russia either attacked the Skripals itself, or lost control of its Novichok to someone else who did. But other countries legally created Novichok for testing purposes after its existence was revealed in 1992, and a production method has even been published.”

The New Scientist also quotes Ralf Trapp, a chemical weapons consultant formerly with the OPCW, who also reiterates a point worth reminding readers of – that inspectors are only able to tell where molecules sampled in Salisbury have come from if they have reference samples for the ingredients used.

“I doubt they have reference chemicals for forensic analysis related to Russian CW agents,” says Trapp. “But if Russia has nothing to hide they may let inspectors in.”

Even if they can identify it as Novichok, they cannot say that it came from Russia, or was ordered by the Russian government, not least of all because the deadly recipe is available on Amazon for only \$28.45.

It should be noted that a substantial amount of evidence points to only two countries who are the most active in producing and testing biological and



chemical weapons WMD – the United States and Great Britain. Their programs also include massive ‘live testing’ on both humans and animals with most of this work undertaken at the Porton Down research facility located only minutes away from the scene of this alleged ‘chemical attack’ in Salisbury, England.

### **Problems with the Official Story**

If we put aside for the moment any official UK government theory, which is based on speculation backed-up by a series of hyperbolic statements and proclamations of Russian guilt, there are still many fundamental problems with the official story – maybe too many to list here, but I will address what I believe are a few key items of interest.

The UK police have now released a statement claiming that the alleged ‘Novichok’ nerve agent was somehow administered at the front door of Sergie Skripal’s home in Wiltshire. This latest official claim effectively negates the previous official story because it means that the Skripals would have been exposed at home at the latest around 13:00 GMT on March 4th, and then drove into town, parking their car at Sainsbury’s car park, then having a leisurely walk to have drinks at The Mill Pub, before ordering and eating lunch at Zizzis restaurant, and then finally leaving the Zizzis and walking before finally retiring on a park bench – where emergency services were apparently called at 16:15 GMT to report an incident.

Soon after, local police arrived on the scene to find the Skripals on the bench in an “extremely serious condition.” Based on this story, the Skripals would have been going about their business for 3 hours before finally falling prey to the deadly WMD ‘Novichok’. From this, one would safely conclude that whatever has poisoned the pair was neither lethal *nor* could it have been a military grade WMD. Even by subtracting the home doorway exposure leg of this story, the government’s claim hardly adds up – as even a minor amount of any real lethal military grade WMD would have effected many more people along this timeline of events. Based on what we know so far, it seems much more plausible that the pair would have been poisoned at Zizzis restaurant, and not with a military grade nerve agent.

When this story initially broke, we were also told that the attending police officer who first arrived on the scene of this incident, Wiltshire Police Detective Sgt. Nick Bailey – was “fighting for his life” after being exposed to the supposed ‘deadly Russian nerve agent’. As it turned out, officer Bailey was treated in hospital and then discharged on March 22, 2018. To our knowledge, no information or photos of Bailey’s time in care are available to the public so we cannot know the trajectory of his health, or if he was even exposed to the said “Novichok’.

In the immediate aftermath, the public were also told initially that approximately 40 people were taken into medical care because of “poison exposure”. This bogus claim was promulgated by some mainstream media outlets, like Rupert Murdoch’s Times newspaper. In reality, no one showed signs of “chemical weapons” exposure, meaning that this story was just another example of mainstream corporate media fake news designed to stoke tension and fear in the public. We exposed this at the time on the UK Column News here:

To further complicate matters, this week we were told that Yulia Skripal has now turned the corner and is in recovery, and is speaking to police from her hospital bed. If this is true, then it further proves that whatever the alleged poison agent was which the Skripals were exposed to – it was not a lethal, military grade nerve agent. If it had been, then most likely the Skripals and many others would not be alive right now.

Unfortunately, in this new age of state secrecy, we can expect that most of the key information relating to this case may be sealed indefinitely under a national security letter. In the case of Porton Down scientist David Kelly, the key information is sealed (hidden) for another 60+ years (if we’re lucky, we might get to see it in the year 2080). This means that we just have to take their word for it, or to borrow the words of the newly crowned UK Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson – any one asking questions, “should just go away and shut up.” Such is the lack of decorum and transparency in this uncomfortably Orwellian atmosphere.

While Britain insists that it has ‘irrefutable proof’ that Russia launched a deadly nerve-gas attack to murder the Skripals, the facts simply do not match-up to the rhetoric.

### **The Litvinenko Conspiracy**

It’s important to note that as far as public perceptions are concerned, the official Skripal narrative has been built directly on top of the Litvinenko case.

In order to try and reinforce the government’s speculative arguments, the UK establishment has resurrected the trial-by-media case of another Russian defector, former FSB officer Alexander Litvinenko, who is said to have died after being poisoned with radioactive polonium-210 in his tea at a restaurant in London’s Mayfair district in late 2006.

Despite not having any actual evidence as to who committed the crime, the British authorities and the mainstream media have upheld an almost religious belief that the Russian FSB (formerly KGB), under the command of Vladimir Putin,

had ordered the alleged radioactive poisoning of Litvinenko.

The media mythos was reinforced in 2016, when a British Public Inquiry headed by Sir Robert Owen accused senior Russian officials of ‘probably having motives to approve the murder’ of Litvinenko. Again, this level of guesswork and speculation would never meet the standard of an actual forensic investigation worthy of a real criminal court of law, but so far as apportioning blame to another nation or head of state is concerned – it seems fair enough for British authorities.

Following the completion of the inquiry, Sir Robert had this to say: “Taking full account of all the evidence and analysis available to me, I find that the FSB operation to kill Litvinenko was probably approved by Mr Patrushev and also by President Putin.”

Contrary to consensus reality (popular belief), Owen’s inquiry was not at all definitive. Quite the opposite in fact, and in many ways it mirrors how the Skripal case has been presented to the public. Despite offering no evidence of any criminal guilt, Owen’s star chamber maintained that Vladimir Putin “probably” approved the operation to assassinate Litvinenko. Is “probably” really enough to assign guilt in a major international crime? When it comes to high crimes of state, the answer seems to be yes.

According to Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova, that UK inquiry was “neither transparent nor public” and was “conducted mostly behind doors, with classified documents and unnamed witnesses contributing to the result...”

Zakharova highlighted the fact that two key witnesses in the case – Litvinenko’s chief patron, a UK-based anti-Putin defector billionaire oligarch named Boris Berezovsky, and the owner of Itsu restaurant in London’s Mayfair where the incident is said to have taken place, had both suddenly died under dubious circumstances.

The British authorities went on to accuse two Russian men in the Litvineko murder – businessman Andrey Lugovoy and Dmitry Kovtun. Both have denied the accusations. Despite the lack of any real evidence, the United States Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control blacklisted both Lugovoi and Kovtun, as well as Russian persons Stanislav Gordievsky, Gennady Plaksin and Aleksandr I. Bastrykin – under the Magnitsky Act, which freezes their assets held in American financial institutions, and bans them from conducting any transactions or traveling to the United States.

Notice the familiar pattern: even if the case is inconclusive, or collapses due

to a lack of evidence, the policies remain in place.

Despite all the pomp and circumstance however, Owen's official conspiracy theory failed to sway even Litvinenko's own close family members. While Litvinenko's widow Marina maintains that it was definitely the Russian government who killed her husband, Alexander's younger brother Maksim Litvinenko, based in Rimini, Italy, believes the British report "ridiculous" to blame the Kremlin for the murder of his brother, stating that he believes British security services had more of a motive to carry out the assassination.

"My father and I are sure that the Russian authorities are not involved. It's all a set-up to put pressure on the Russian government," said Litvinenko to the Mirror newspaper, and that such reasoning can explain why the UK waited almost 10 years to launch the inquiry his brother's death.

Maxim also said that Britain had more reason to kill his brother than the Russians, and believes that blaming Putin for the murder was part of a wider effort to smear Russia. Following the police investigation, Alexander's father Walter Litvinenko, also said that he had regretted blaming Putin and the Russian government for his son's death and did so under intense pressure at the time.

For anyone skeptical of the official proclamations of the British state and the mainstream media on the Litvinenko case, it's worth reading the work of British journalist Will Dunkerly here.

With so many questions hanging over the actual validity of the British state's accusations against Russia, it's somewhat puzzling that British police would say they are still 'looking for similarities' between the Skripal and Litvinenko cases in order to pinpoint a modus operandi.

The admission by the British law enforcement that their investigation may take months before any conclusion can be drawn also begs the question: how could May have been so certain so quick? The answer should be clear by now: she could not have known it was a 'Novichok' agent, no more than she could know the 'Russia did it.'

## **A Plastic Cold War**

Historically speaking, in the absence of any real mandate or moral authority, governments suffering from an identity crisis, or a crisis of legitimacy will often try and define themselves not based on what they stand for, but rather what (or who) they are in opposition to. This profile suits both the US and UK perfectly at the moment.

Both governments are limping along with barely a mandate, and have orchestrated

two of the worst and most hypocritical debacles in history with their illegal wars in both Syria and Yemen. With their moral high-ground a thing of the past, these two countries require a common existential enemy in order to give their international order legitimacy. The cheapest, easiest option is to reinvigorate a framework which was already there, which is the Cold War framework: *Reds under the bed. The Russian are coming, etc.*

It's cheap and it's easy because it has already been seeded with 70 years of Cold War propaganda and institutionalized racism in the West directed against Russians. If you don't believe me, just go look at some of the posters, watch the TV propaganda in the US, or read about the horrific McCarthyist blacklists and political witch hunts. I remember growing up in America and being taught "never again" and "we're past all of that now, those days of irrational paranoia are behind us, we're better than that now." But that madness of the past was not a fringe affair – it was a *mainstream* madness, and one which was actively promoted by government and mainstream media.

You would have to be at the pinnacle of ignorance to deny that this is exactly what we are seeing today, albeit a more plastic version, but just as immoral and dangerous. Neocons love it, and now liberals love it too.

Dutifully fanning the flaming of war, Theresa May has issued her approval of the NATO members diplomatic retaliation this week exclaiming, "We welcome today's actions by our allies, which clearly demonstrate that we all stand shoulder to shoulder in sending the strongest signal to Russia that it cannot continue to flout international law."

But from an international law perspective, can May's 'highly likely' assurances really be enough to position the west on war footing with Russia? When Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn asked these same fundamental questions on March 14th, he was shouted down by the Tory bench, and also by the hawkish Blairites sitting behind him.



Afterwards, the British mainstream press launched yet another defamation campaign against Corbyn, this time with the UK's Daily Mail calling the opposition leader a "Kremlin Stogie", followed by British state broadcaster the BBC who went through the effort of creating a mock-up graphic of Corbyn in front of the Kremlin (pictured above) apparently wearing a Russian hat, as if to say he was a *Russian agent*. It was a new low point in UK politics and media.

Considering the mainstream media's Corbyn smear alongside the recent insults hurled at Julian Assange by Tory MP Sir Alan Duncan who stood up in front of Parliament and called the Wikileaks founder a "miserable worm", what this really says is that anyone who dares defy the official state narrative will be beaten down and publicly humiliated. In other words, dissent in the political ranks will not be tolerated. It's almost as if we are approaching a one party state.

Would a UN Security Council member and nuclear power really be so brazen as to declare *de facto* war on another country without presenting any actual evidence or completing a genuine forensic investigation?

So why the apparent rush to war? Haven't we been here before, in 2003? Will the people of the West allow it to happen again?

As with Tony Blair's WMD's in 2003, the British public are meant to take it on faith and never question the official government line. And just like in 2003, the UK has opened the first door on the garden path, with the US and its 'coalition' following safely behind, *shoulder to shoulder*. In this latest version of the story, Tony Blair is being played by Theresa May, and Jack Straw is being played by Boris Johnson.

On the other side of the pond, a hapless Bush is hapless Trump. Both Blair and Straw, along with the court propagandist Alastair Campbell – are all proven to have been liars of the highest order, and if there were any real accountability or justice, these men and their collaborators in government should be in prison right now. The fact they aren't is why the door has been left wide open for the exact same scam to be repeated again, and again.

Iraq should have taught us all to be skeptical about official claims of chemical weapons evidence, and to face the ugly truth about how most major wars throughout history have waged by the deception – and by western governments. What does it tell us about today's society if people still cannot see this?

That's why it was wrong to let Blair, Bush and others off the hook for war crimes. By doing so, both the British and Americans are inviting a dark phase of history to repeat itself again, and again.

It's high time that we break the cycle.

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# U.S. Establishment: Nixing Arms Control

Trump's new National Security Adviser John Bolton has been instrumental in launching wars and scrapping arms control treaties – just the man for the job as the U.S. embarks on a new arms race with Russia, Ray McGovern sardonically observes.

By Ray McGovern

John Bolton's appointment as national security adviser to President Donald Trump is the latest blow to hopes for a less confrontational U.S.-Russia relationship that would include new talks on arms control. Mutual trust is now hanging by a very thin thread.

One wag suggested to me that the Bolton appointment should not really come as a surprise, since it fits the recent Washington pattern – if White House chaos can be considered a pattern. For Kremlin leaders, though, White House zig-zags are no laughing matter. Let's try to put ourselves in their shoes and imagine how the unfolding of recent events may have looked to them.

On March 1 in his state-of-the-nation address, President Putin revealed several new strategic weapons systems that Russia developed after the Bush/Cheney/Bolton administration abrogated the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which had been the cornerstone of strategic stability for the previous 30 years. (John Bolton is included in that august company because, as Undersecretary of State for Arms Control, he was Vice President Dick Cheney's enforcer to put the kibosh on the ABM Treaty.)

You would not know it from the "mainstream media," but in that same speech Putin offered to "sit down at the negotiating table" and "work together ... to ensure global security" – taking into account the strategic parity Moscow claims.

Referring to what he called "our duty to inform our partners" about Russia's claimed ability to render ABM systems "useless," Putin added: "When the time comes, foreign and defense ministry experts will have many opportunities to discuss all these matters with them, if of course our partners so desire."

## **One "Partner" So Desires**

On March 20, two days after Putin was re-elected President of Russia, President Trump decided to congratulate the winner – as is the custom – without insulting him. For this he was excoriated by mainstream media for squandering the chance to point his finger, once again, at alleged Russian interference in the 2016

U.S. election. Sitting atop Mark Landler's New York Times article that day was this headline: "Trump Congratulates Putin, but Doesn't Mention Meddling in U.S."

That was not Trump's only offense. He also disregarded instructions to berate Putin with the evidence-and-logic-free accusation that Moscow poisoned, for no apparent reason, a former Russian spy and his daughter living in the UK. Landler lamented, "Instead, Mr. Trump kept the focus of the call on what the White House said were 'shared interests' – among them, North Korea and Ukraine – overruling his national security advisers ..."

### **Parsing the NYT**

The *Times*' initial report included "arms control" in the headline and quoted Trump: "We had a very good call ... We will probably be meeting in the not-too-distant future to discuss the arms race, which is getting out of control." It was not long, however, before the NYT pared down that last sentence to "We will probably be meeting in the not-too-distant future."

Landler did include (buried in paragraph 25 of 29) the following: "During their call on Tuesday, a senior official said, Mr. Trump told Mr. Putin he had been concerned by a recent speech in which Mr. Putin talked about Russia developing an "invincible" intercontinental cruise missile and a nuclear torpedo that could outsmart all American defenses." But Landler (or his editors) took pains to omit any mention of Trump's actual reaction in suggesting an early summit to discuss arms control.

Parsing what is allowed to appear in the NYT (sometimes in altered iterations) is not very different from the "Kremlinology" tools that we analysts used to apply, back in the day, to eke insights out of the turgid prose in Pravda, Izvestiya, and other Soviet media.

More important, how the NYT played Trump's reaction to Putin's re-election – specifically, his swiftly excised suggestion of an arms control summit, probably did not escape notice among present-day Russians who do analysis of U.S. media. It requires little imagination to conclude that for the U.S. Establishment, for which the NYT is a mouthpiece, arms control is off the table, despite anything the President may have said.

### **Lots of \$ For Arms Dealers**

There are a lot of powerful people making a lot of money profiteering from arms manufacture and sales, with a portion of the profits going to senators and representatives in Congress, who get re-elected and then oblige by appropriating still more funding for what Pope Francis warned Congress are the "blood-drenched arms traders."



On March 26 President Trump ordered the expulsion of 60 Russian diplomats the U.S. identified as intelligence agents and the closure of the Russian consulate in Seattle, in response to Russia's alleged role in the poisoning of Sergei Skripal, the former Russian spy now living in England. Russia responded tit for tat, expelling 60 U.S. diplomats and closing the U.S. consulate in St. Petersburg. Russian culpability for the poisoning is far from proven.

### **Doesn't Make Sense**

Writing on March 28, Gary Leupp, history professor at Tufts University, put it this way: "Why follow up that cordial call [the congratulatory one] to Putin with the expulsion of so many diplomats? What the hell. Doesn't make sense." Leupp worries that as President Trump's political situation deteriorates, "he will be more prone to lean on his generals ... while also heeding the horrific Bolton. This is a very bad situation."

Another encomium came this week from author Daniel Lazare who pretty much summed it up:

"John Bolton is without doubt a dangerous man. Not only did he champion the war against Saddam Hussein, but, even before U.S. troops had set foot in Iraq, he told Israeli leaders that the next step would be to take out Syria, Iran, and North Korea, a goal he has pursued with single-minded consistency ever since. For Bolton, the aim is to create a growing cascade of Third World wars so as to propel the U.S. into a position as unchallenged military dictator of the entire globe. The more numerous the conflicts, the more he's convinced that the U.S. will come up on top."

### **Bolton's Return**

There is great – and justified – concern that John Bolton will have the President's ear and reinforce Trump's worst inclinations. A Yale law school graduate, Bolton has not shown much respect for the law. His record places him toward the top of the list of "crazies," the sobriquet we all used for those who later became known as neoconservatives. I discussed this background in a recent interview on Intercepted. (See 16-minute segment beginning at minute 35.)

Back in the day, I recalled, when I was working at CIA in the 60s, 70s, and 80s, we didn't talk about neocons, we talked about "crazies." We noted that George H.W. Bush was careful in keeping "the crazies" in check, giving them positions in government with prestigious job titles but where they couldn't do great harm to the country.

When George Bush, Jr. came in, he put the crazies in positions of power. Under John Bolton's influence, George W. Bush took the extreme step of scrapping the

Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which was the bedrock for strategic stability since 1972 when it was signed. Bolton was also one of the prime movers behind the Iraq invasion.

Despite Trump calling the Iraq war “a big fat mistake,” apparently he now admires Bolton for his many Fox News appearances, and he is, of course, the darling of the “blood-soaked arms traders.”

### **Negotiating Style**

Let me add one new vignette regarding his negotiating style: A senior U.S. diplomat recently shared with me that, when Bolton was Undersecretary of State for Arms Control, a colleague diplomat provided a rather revealing insight into Bolton’s attitude toward international treaties.

That colleague had just returned home from arms control talks between Bolton and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mamedov, and described how surreal and embarrassing it had been to hear Bolton lecture Mamedov about how international treaties are worthless, with the Russian arguing strongly that treaties are important and should be taken seriously.

Just the guy for the job. Strap yourself in.

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