Selective Skepticism

written by Stephen R. Shalom | September 3, 2013

Skepticism is always warranted in the face of government claims, but some folks seem unable to apply the same level of skepticism to claims by Syria's dictator as they do to those of the U.S. government. This will not help us in waging a sustained effective campaign against U.S. military action against Syria; to rest our case on acceptance of Assad's claims weakens our argument. We need to explain why a U.S.-led war on Syria is not the solution, whether or not Assad is responsible for the horrific chemical weapons attack in the Ghouta suburbs of Damascus.

There are still unanswered questions about the August 21 gas attacks in the Damascus suburbs, and it seems the UN inspectors won't shed much light on the question of who was responsible for the attack, since their mandate was only to confirm whether chemical weapons were used. The circumstantial evidence incriminating Syrian government forces seems quite strong, though whether the scale of the attack was intended or accidental and whether it was authorized by Assad himself is unknown.

Several so-called anti-imperialist sources, however, have charged that rebel culpability for the attacks is proven by the hacked emails of a British defense contractor, Britam Defence, in which two officials of the company discuss a White House-approved plan for Qatar to provide the rebels with chemical weapons to use to try to implicate Assad.

Unfortunately, those who bandy this story about don't bother to refer to the following report from the *Guardian* of June 26, 2013:

> "The Daily Mail has apologised and paid £110,000 in libel damages to a London defence firm it wrongly linked with an alleged chemical weapons plot in Syria.
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> "Britam Defence Limited complained that an article on the Daily Mail's website Mail Online falsely accused two of its executives of conspiring in a 'nefarious and illegal plot' in the Middle Eastern state 'for enormous financial reward'.
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> "The article quoted one email supposedly sent between two executives at the company which claimed to show that Britam had agreed to supply chemical weapons to Homs for use in an attack. However, the emails turned out to be forged.
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> "Adam Tudor, a solicitor at law firm Carter-Ruck, said on behalf on [sic] Britam: 'The emails were not written or sent by the claimants (or by anyone at Britam Defence Limited or anyone associated with them), and the illegal hacking of Britam Defence's website remains the subject of a criminal investigation.
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> "'The claimants had no involvement in any chemical weapons plot and would never contemplate becoming involved in the heinous activities which were the subject of the article.'
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> "Daily Mail publisher Associated Newspapers agreed [sic] the six-figure libel settlement after accepting that the emails were fabricated and that the allegation of a chemical weapons plot was untrue.

> "Martin Wood, for Associated Newspapers, said in a statement before the judge, Mrs Justice Nicola Davies: 'My lady, on behalf of the defendant, I confirm that the defendant offers its sincere apologies to the claimants for the damage and distress caused by the publication of these false allegations, which had appeared on US websites.
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> "'The defendant acknowledges that the emails in question were completely fabricated and that there is no question of any of the claimants being involved – or even considering becoming involved – in the heinous actions to which the article referred. The defendant is pleased to set the record straight.'"

The *Daily Mail* removed its original story from its website, suggesting to some that covert operations were at work. But removing a story that one acknowledges was based on forged evidence is hardly mysterious.

This is not the only example of anti-imperialist sources uncritically parroting pro-Assad misinformation. Among the stories now well debunked are ones claiming that residents of Ghouta admitted that the Saudis provided chemical weapons to rebels, that the opposition slaughtered 120 children in Tal Abyad, that Syrian rebels were arrested in Turkey with sarin gas, that the opposition was responsible for the massacre in Houla (claimed by a report in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, but solidly refuted by the UN's Commission of Inquiry and Der Spiegel).

None of this is to support a U.S. military strike on Syria, even if Assad's responsibility for the August 21 chemical weapons attacks is proven conclusively. A U.S. assault would be disastrous on many levels: for the Syrian people, for the Syrian revolution, and for world peace. We must oppose U.S. military action in Syria, but not because we swallow pro-Assad propaganda.