

War: Crime ? Continues

First there needs to be a real investigation, official and by real journalists — the thing that should have happened before Trump jumped in with his blustery missile attack (as he 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!’”*) — into whether there was a chemical attack at all on April 7 in the suburb of Douma, and if so, who was behind it.

The claim of an attack is being made by the so-called “White Hats,” a supposedly non-governmental medical aid organization backed and funded by the US and founded by a member of British intelligence which reportedly has links with the Al Nusra terrorist organization in Syria. The Syrian Red Crescent organization which is affiliated with the Red Cross and has a much better reputation as both an aid organization and as a non-partisan truly medical service, has not confirmed a chemical attack. Meanwhile, the Russian television service RT is reporting that the White Hats actually rushed into a Damascus hospital where victims of fighting in Gouda were being treated, and set off a panic among patients by shouting “chemicals, chemicals!” and dousing people with water, leading to the charge of a chemical attack. Russia is also claiming that British intelligence agents were behind the staging of the event.

Many critics are noting that, as in prior questionable cases of the Syrian government being accused of using banned chemical weapons, this one occurred not when the government was losing and in a desperate situation, but when it was close to winning control of an area and was really in the “mopping up” phase. Indeed, rebel fighters had already given up and were availing themselves of an evacuation agreement, boarding chartered buses to take them to a safer area in the north of Syria, when the alleged “attack” occurred. (Why one has to wonder, would Assad have launched a chemical attack in that situation, knowing it would provoke another US military response? It makes no sense.)

It is also suspicious that the UN had already ordered inspectors from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to go to the site of the alleged attack to look for evidence of chemical use, but the Trump administration couldn't even wait the four days it would take them to get there to launch an attack — an attack that is bound to delay their arrival and make finding that evidence increasingly difficult and problematic.

It is also significant that the OPCW has been instructed only to search for evidence of chemical weapons use, not to determine blame for its use.

The danger of course, is that if the Syrian government has not been the perpetrator of this or earlier gas attacks, as some investigative reporters like Robert Sheer have claimed, those who would then likely be responsible — the

anti-Assad rebel forces — could be encouraged by this attack and the one Trump launched last year after a similar questionable use of chemical weapons, to launch more such faked Syrian attacks, in hopes of luring the US deeper into the Syrian civil war quagmire.

Obviously, such concerns are not being even considered at the White House. Indeed, if this contrarian line of reasoning is correct, it would be more likely that the US and its allies, Britain and France, are involved in the planning of such “false flag” attacks on civilians.

The US media, are largely cheerleading this attack, with reporters asking for details about its success at hitting alleged targets of Syrian chemical weapons storage, manufacture and research, instead of demanding answers as to the attack's legality. When the decision to launch the attacks is questioned at all, it is not its obvious violation of international law that is raised, but the far subordinate question of whether the president has the right to order such an attack on his own, without the prior approval of Congress. While that is certainly an important question for Americans to ask, given that there was and is no imminent threat of Syria attacking the US or US forces (which in any case are in Syria illegally), it would hardly be any better if Congress did declare war on Syria, since that too would be a war crime under international law.

Clearly we are now in a very dangerous period, with a president, unconstrained by a Congress controlled by his own party, at the same time facing grave and mounting legal threats to his presidency. He is clearly looking at ways to divert media attention from himself and his own criminal behavior and to get an increasingly restive public to rally ‘round the flag and around himself as “commander in chief” of a nation at war.

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Pipelineistan Continues-

The AGP's viability beyond Syria was also dependent on Nabucco, another pipeline proposal intended to diversify Europe's gas imports.

That idea, floated by a consortium of European and Turkish energy companies in 2002, was slated to cost more than \$10 billion. The project would pipe 31 billion cubic meters of natural gas a year some 3,000 km from Central Asia, via Turkey, to Baumgarten in Austria. But by 2009 Nabucco had still not started, and projected construction costs ballooned to more than \$25 billion.

Eight years later, Nabucco has still not progressed due to the extraordinary cost and the politics at play.

The Nabucco pipeline would be essential for both of the contending pipelines, which would need to piggyback off it if they want gas to reach Europe. But while Russia was opposed to Nabucco and the idea of a Qatari pipeline, it was not enough of a reason for conflict, says Dargin.

Furthermore, Russia had managed to axe Nabucco in 2007 by announcing its South Stream pipeline project, which was to cut out Turkey altogether by crossing the Black Sea to Bulgaria and onto Europe.

The project was cancelled in 2014 due to political issues with the European Union.

Then Moscow proposed the Turkstream project in 2014, which was again to cut across the Black Sea but then on to the European side of Turkey. It was cancelled after a Russian jet fighter was shot down by Turkey in November 2015.

While both projects are back on the cards, especially Turkstream, neither could transport Iranian or Qatari gas across Turkey.

While the project was politically expedient, it ignored economic and energy realities. First, the project was estimated to cost \$10 billion, but it was unclear who would foot the bill, particularly as Tehran was — and still is — under US and international sanctions, as is Syria, since 2011.

Second, Iran lacks the capabilities to export significant amounts of gas. Sanctions mean it cannot access the advanced US technology that

would allow it to exploit gas from the South Pars field that borders Qatar.

That Russia would force Damascus to veto a Qatari pipeline in favour of an Iranian one also ignores another reality — that Moscow and Tehran are potential energy rivals.

Competition for gas access in the region is not between Qatar and Iran, but Russia and Iran,

The Russians have the biggest share of the European market, and they want to secure that.

Despite talk of how pipeline wars would enable Europe to diversify away from Russian gas, Russian gas exports to Europe hit a record high in January 2017.

In December 2016, commodities trader Glencore and the Qatar Investment Authority, the country's sovereign wealth fund, acquired a 19.5 percent stake in Rosneft, Russia's state-owned oil company, for \$11 billion.

Result: Qatar has achieved easier access to the European market than any pipeline through Syria ever could offer.

The Iranian pipeline would have to cross Iraq. Aside from the problems of building infrastructure in a conflict zone, plans to pipe gas just a short distance from Iraq to Syria were not viable even in 2009.

Deacons says that the Iraqis were observers of the AGP project and that he also discussed bringing gas in from Iraq over the Euphrates with the EU ambassador to Iraq.

"But it all got bogged down in politics. And the Iraqi infrastructure was so badly maintained and destroyed that they would have had to rebuild, not just fix, it.

"Huge infrastructure investment was needed before even bringing in pipelines."

Likewise, politics would also impact any Qatari plans.

Dargin explains: *"Such a pipeline would have had to pass through Saudi territory, which perhaps would have been an even larger obstacle than Syria, as Riyadh has blocked and obstructed numerous proposals for regional pipelines."*

Indeed, Saudi obstruction caused planners in the mid-2000s to redraw routes for the Dolphin pipeline, which pipes gas from Qatar to the UAE. All three are members of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

"Saudi Arabia placed numerous hurdles in the undersea passage of the Dolphin pipeline as it would pass through its maritime boundaries," says Dargin. "Saudi opposition was the principle reason we do not see a Qatari pipeline to Bahrain or Kuwait."

Indeed, Saudi opposition to Qatari gas pipelines has been so strong that Doha has switched its strategy from dry gas pipelines to liquefied natural gas (LNG) instead.

As a result, Doha has become the world's largest LNG exporter during the past 15 years. It has invested more than \$11bn on an LNG cargo shipping fleet that is independent of fixed pipeline infrastructure and can take LNG anywhere. The fastest-growing gas markets are in Asia, especially Japan, China, South Korea and India.

LNG is also a more competitive option than piping dry gas to Europe, where gas demand is flat and forecasts depressed compared to Asia and within the Middle East itself.

Naser Tamimi, an independent Qatari energy expert, says: "With the existing infrastructure, Qatar doesn't have enough gas to sell to Europe through a pipeline, as most contracts currently are to Asia and long-term, while demand within Qatar is rising."

"A pipeline has to be economically justifiable and secure demand from buyers in the long-term to recover pipeline costs."

"Maintaining the pipeline and paying transit fees to host countries, in the most optimistic scenario, would cost between \$7-\$9 per British Thermal Unit (BTU) to reach Europe. LNG is cheaper, even with the most expensive scenario, at \$5-\$5.50 per BTU."

Such factors all coalesce to make both the Qatari and Iranian suggestions nigh impossible.

"But at the end of the day it's a pipe dream."

-Paul Cochrane
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