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Intelligence Veterans Voice Doubts on Syrian Crisis

Two dozen former U.S. intelligence professionals are urging the American people to demand clear evidence that the Syrian government was behind the April 4 chemical incident before President Trump dives deeper into another war.

By Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity
Global Research, April 28, 2017
Consortiumnews 26 April 2017

Region: Middle East & North Africa
Theme: Intelligence, Terrorism, US NATO War Agenda
In-depth Report: FAKE INTELLIGENCE, SYRIA

An open memorandum for the American people

From: Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS)

Subject: Mattis 'No Doubt' Stance on Alleged Syrian CW Smacks of Politicized Intelligence

Donald Trump's new Secretary of Defense, retired Marine General James "Mad Dog" Mattis, during a recent trip to Israel, commented on the issue of SyriTa's retention and use of chemical weapons in violation of its obligations to dispose of the totality of its declared chemical weapons capability in accordance with the provisions of both the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and relevant U.N. Security Council resolutions.

> "There can be no doubt," Secretary Mattis said during a April 21, 2017 joint news conference with his Israeli counterpart, Minister of Defense Avigdor Lieberman, "in the international community's mind that Syria has retained chemical weapons in violation of its agreement and its statement that it had removed them all." To the contrary, Mattis noted, "I can say authoritatively they have retained some."

Lieberman joined Mattis in his assessment, noting that Israel had

> "100 percent information that [the] Assad regime used chemical weapons against [Syrian] rebels."

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman hold a news conference in Tel Aviv, Israel, April 21, 2017. (U.S. Embassy photo by Matty Stern)

Both Mattis and Lieberman seemed to be channeling assessments offered to reporters two days prior, on April 19, 2017, by anonymous Israeli defense officials that the April 4, 2017 chemical weapons attack on the Syrian village of Khan Shaykhun was ordered by Syrian military commanders, with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's personal knowledge, and that Syria retained a stock of "between one and three tons" of chemical weapons.The Israeli intelligence followed on the heels of an April 13, 2017 speech given by CIA Director Mike Pompeo, who told an audience at the Center for Strategic and International Studies that, once information had come in about a chemical attack on Khan Shaykhun, the CIA had been able to "develop several hypothesis around that, and then to begin to develop fact patterns which either supported or suggested that the hypothesis wasn't right."

> The CIA, Pompeo said, was "in relatively short order able to deliver to [President Trump] a high-confidence assessment that, in fact, it was the Syrian regime that had launched chemical strikes against its own people in [Khan Shaykhun.]"

The speed in which this assessment was made is of some concern. Both Director Pompeo, during his CSIS remarks, and National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, during comments to the press on April 6, 2017, note that President Trump turned to the intelligence community early on in the crisis to understand better "the circumstances of the attack and who was responsible." McMaster indicated that the U.S. Intelligence Community, working with allied partners, was able to determine with "a very high degree of confidence" where the attack originated.

Both McMaster and Pompeo spoke of the importance of open source imagery in confirming that a chemical attack had taken place, along with evidence collected from the victims themselves – presumably blood samples – that confirmed the type of agent that was used in the attack. This initial assessment drove the decision to use military force – McMaster goes on to discuss a series of National Security Council meetings where military options were discussed and decided upon; the discussion about the intelligence underpinning the decision to strike Syria was over.

Mike Pompeo, now CIA director, speaking at the 2012 CPAC in Washington, D.C. February 2012. (Flickr Gage Skidmore)

The danger of this rush toward an intelligence decision by Director Pompeo and National Security Advisor McMaster is that once the President and his top national security advisors have endorsed an intelligence-based conclusion, and authorized military action based upon that conclusion, it becomes virtually impossible for that conclusion to change. Intelligence assessments from that point forward will embrace facts that sustain this conclusion, and reject those that don't; it is the definition of politicized intelligence, even if those involved disagree.

A similar “no doubt” moment had occurred nearly 15 years ago when, in August 2002, Vice President Cheney delivered a speech before the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

> “There is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction,” Cheney declared. “There is no doubt he is amassing them to use against our friends, against our allies and against us.”

The message Cheney was sending to the Intelligence Community was clear: Saddam Hussein had WMD; there was no need to answer that question anymore.

The CIA vehemently denies that either Vice President Cheney or anyone at the White House put pressure on its analysts to alter their assessments. This may very well be true, but if it is, then the record of certainty – and arrogance – that existed in the mindset of senior intelligence managers and analysts only further erodes public confidence in the assessments produced by the CIA, especially when, as is the case with Iraq and Weapons of Mass Destruction – the agency was found so lacking. Stuart Cohen, a veteran CIA intelligence analyst who served as the acting Chairman of the National Intelligence Council, oversaw the production of the 2002 Iraq National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) that was used to make case for Iraq possessing WMD that was used to justify war.

According to Mr. Cohen, he had four National Intelligence Officers with “over 100 years’ collective work experience on weapons of mass destruction issues” backed up by hundreds of analysts with “thousands of man-years invested in studying these issues.”

On the basis of this commitment of talent alone, Mr. Cohen assessed that

> “no reasonable person could have viewed the totality of the information that the Intelligence Community had at its disposal … and reached any conclusion or alternative views that were profoundly different from those that we reached,” namely that – judged with high confidence – “Iraq had chemical and biological weapons as well as missiles with ranges in excess of the 150 kilometer limit imposed by the UN Security Council.”

Two facts emerge from this expression of intellectual hubris. First, the U.S. Intelligence Community was, in fact, wrong in its estimate on Iraq’s WMD capability, throwing into question the standards used to assign “high confidence” ratings to official assessments. Second, the “reasonable person” standard cited by Cohen must be reassessed, perhaps based upon a benchmark derived from a history of analytical accuracy rather than time spent behind a desk.

The major lesson learned here, however, is that the U.S. Intelligence Community, and in particular the CIA, more often than not hides behind self-generated platitudes (“high confidence”, “reasonable person”) to disguise a process of intelligence analysis that has long ago been subordinated to domestic politics.

Secretary of State Colin Powell addressed the United Nations on Feb. 5. 2003, citing satellite photos and other “intelligence”

which supposedly proved that Iraq had WMD,
but the evidence proved bogus.

It is important to point out the fact that Israel, too, was wrong about Iraq's WMD. According to Shlomo Brom, a retired Israeli Intelligence Officer, Israeli intelligence seriously overplayed the threat posed by Iraqi WMD in the lead up to the 2003 Iraq War, including a 2002 briefing to NATO provided by Efraim Halevy, who at the time headed the Israeli Mossad, or intelligence service, that Israel had "clear indications" that Iraq had reconstituted its WMD programs after U.N. weapons inspectors left Iraq in 1998.

The Israeli intelligence assessments on Iraq, Mr. Brom concluded, were most likely colored by political considerations, such as the desire for regime change in Iraq. In this light, neither the presence of Avigdor Leiberman, nor the anonymous background briefings provided by Israel about Syria's chemical weapons capabilities, should be used to provide any credence to Secretary Mattis's embrace of the "no doubt" standard when it comes to Syria's alleged possession of chemical weapons.

The intelligence data that has been used to back up the allegations of Syrian chemical weapons use has been far from conclusive. Allusions to intercepted Syrian communications have been offered as "proof", but the Iraq experience – in particular former Secretary of State Colin Powell's unfortunate experience before the U.N. Security Council – show how easily such intelligence can be misunderstood and misused.

Inconsistencies in the publicly available imagery which the White House (and CIA) have so heavily relied upon have raised legitimate questions about the veracity of any conclusions drawn from these sources (and begs the question as to where the CIA's own Open Source Intelligence Center was in this episode.) The blood samples used to back up claims of the presence of nerve agent among the victims was collected void of any verifiable chain of custody, making their sourcing impossible to verify, and as such invalidates any conclusions based upon their analysis.

In the end, the conclusions CIA Director Pompeo provided to the President was driven by a fundamental rethinking of the CIA's analysts when it came to Syria and chemical weapons that took place in 2014. Initial CIA assessments in the aftermath of the disarmament of Syria's chemical weapons seemed to support the Syrian government's stance that it had declared the totality of its holding of chemical weapons, and had turned everything over to the OPCW for disposal. However, in 2014, OPCW inspectors had detected traces of Sarin and VX nerve agent precursors at sites where the Syrians had indicated no chemical weapons activity had taken place; other samples showed the presence of weaponized Sarin nerve agent.

The Syrian explanation that the samples detected were caused by cross-contamination brought on by the emergency evacuation of chemical precursors and equipment used to handle chemical weapons necessitated by the ongoing Civil War was not accepted by the inspectors, and this doubt made its way into the minds of the CIA analysts, who closely followed the work of the OPCW inspectors in Syria.

One would think that the CIA would operate using the adage of "once bitten, twice shy" when assessing inspector-driven doubt; U.N. inspectors in Iraq, driven by a combination of the positive sampling combined with unverifiable Iraqi explanations, created an atmosphere

of doubt about the veracity of Iraqi declarations that all chemical weapons had been destroyed. The CIA embraced the U.N. inspectors' conclusions, and discounted the Iraqi version of events; as it turned out, Iraq was telling the truth.

While the jury is still out about whether or not Syria is, like Iraq, telling the truth, or whether the suspicions of inspectors are well founded, one thing is clear: a reasonable person would do well to withhold final judgment until all the facts are in. (Note: The U.S. proclivity for endorsing the findings of U.N. inspectors appears not to include the Khan Shaykhun attack; while both Syria and Russia have asked the OPCW to conduct a thorough investigation of the April 4, 2017 incident, the OPCW has been blocked from doing so by the United States and its allies.)

Photograph of men in Khan Sheikdoun in Syria, allegedly inside a crater where a sarin-gas bomb landed on April 4, 2017.

CIA Director Pompeo's job is not to make policy – the intelligence his agency provides simply informs policy. It is not known if the U.S. Intelligence Community will be producing a formal National Intelligence Estimate addressing the Syrian chemical weapons issue, although the fact that the United States has undertaken military action under the premise that these weapons exist more than underscores the need for such a document, especially in light of repeated threats made by the Trump administration that follow-on strikes might be necessary.

Making policy is, however, the job of Secretary of Defense Mattis. At the end of the day, Secretary of Defense Mattis will need to make his own mind up as to the veracity of any intelligence used to justify military action. Mattis's new job requires that he does more than simply advise the President on military options; he needs to ensure that the employment of these options is justified by the facts.

In the case of Syria, the "no doubt" standard Mattis has employed does not meet the "reasonable man" standard. Given the consequences that are attached to his every word, Secretary Mattis would be well advised not to commit to a "no doubt" standard until there is, literally, no doubt.

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