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Washington fabricates chemical weapons pretext for war against Syria

By Bill Van Auken

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In an attempt to pave the way for a direct military intervention aimed at toppling the government of President Bashar al-Assad, Washington, its NATO allies, Israel and Qatar have all in recent days broadcast trumped-up charges that Syria has used chemical weapons.

In a letter to members of Congress Thursday, the White House declared, “The US intelligence community assesses with some degree of varying confidence that the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons on a small scale in Syria.”

In the midst of a Middle East tour dedicated to arranging a \$10 billion deal to provide Israel and the right-wing Arab monarchies with advanced weaponry directed against Iran, US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel denounced the chemical weapons use, saying it “violates every convention of warfare.” He went on to acknowledge, “We cannot confirm the origin of these weapons, but [they] ...very likely have originated with the Assad regime.”

Similarly, British Prime Minister David Cameron charged Syria with a “war crime,” stating: “It’s limited evidence, but there’s growing evidence that we have seen too of the use of chemical weapons, probably by the regime.”

All of these convoluted statements—“with some degree of varying confidence,” “cannot confirm the origin of these weapons,” “limited evidence” and “probably by the regime”—underscore the fraudulent character of these accusations.

There is no proof whatsoever that the Assad regime used chemical weapons. The Syrian government has itself charged the US-backed rebels—dominated by Al Qaeda-linked elements who have boasted that they have obtained such arms and are prepared to use them—of carrying out a gas attack in the village of Khan al-Assal near Aleppo last March. According to the Syrian military, the weapon was a rocket carrying chlorine gas that was fired from a rebel-controlled area at a military checkpoint in an area controlled by the government. A number of soldiers were among its victims.

The Assad regime requested that the United Nations send an inspection team to investigate the incident, but the US, Britain and France demanded that any team be given unfettered access to the entire country and all Syrian facilities. This would have created the same kind of inspection regime used to prepare the US invasion of Iraq.

Knowing that they have no proof and what evidence there is points to the Al Qaeda-affiliated elements they have supported, the US and its allies are nonetheless determined to use the accusations over chemical weapons to sell another war to the public.

Powerful sections of the ruling strata in the United States are determined to provoke a direct US military intervention and are flogging the poison gas pretext for all it is worth. Much of the corporate media is demanding that the Obama administration make good on its threat to treat the use of chemical weapons in Syria as a “red line” and a “game changer.”

But what gives the US the moral authority to proclaim “red lines” on this issue? In its nearly nine-year war in Iraq, the US military used chemical weapons to devastating effect. In its barbaric siege of Fallujah, it employed white phosphorus shells and an advanced form of napalm, both banned by international conventions, to burn men, women and children alive.

The legacy of these weapons continues to plague the Iraqi people—with huge increases in child leukemia and cancer, and an epidemic of nightmarish birth defects in Fallujah, Basra and other cities subjected to US military siege.

It should also be recalled that it was the British who introduced chemical warfare to the Middle East, dropping mustard gas bombs on Iraqi tribes that resisted British colonial rule. Winston Churchill, then secretary of state for war and air, declared at the time: “I am strongly in favor of using poisoned gas against uncivilized tribes...[to] spread a lively terror.”

Washington continues to defend its own massive stockpiles of “weapons of mass destruction,” while reserving to itself the right to respond to any chemical attack with nuclear weapons.

Behind the sudden turn to promoting the chemical weapons pretext for direct military intervention is the growing frustration of the US and its European allies over the failure of their proxy forces in Syria to make any headway in overthrowing the Assad regime.

This is in large measure because the Syrian government retains a popular base and, even among those who detest the regime, many hate and fear even more the Islamist elements, from the Muslim Brotherhood to Al Qaeda, which are seeking to replace it.

The US and its allies are themselves increasingly wary about the potential “blowback” from the sectarian civil war that they have promoted. The governments in Britain and Germany as well as the European Union have all made statements in the last week warning of the dangers posed by hundreds of Islamists from their own countries going to Syria to join with Al Qaeda elements.

Behind the pretense that the cutthroats that rule the US and Europe are concerned about human rights and Syrian lives, the reality is that they are preparing bombings, the use of cruise missiles and Predator drones, as well as a potential ground invasion that will dramatically increase Syria’s death toll.

The motives underlying such a war have nothing to do with qualms about chemical weapons, but rather concern definite geostrategic interests.

“Syria and the changing Middle East energy map,” an article by Ruba Husari, a Middle East energy expert and editor of IraqOilForum.com, published earlier this year by the Carnegie Middle East Center, provides a glimpse into the real reasons for the mounting pressure for direct US-NATO intervention.

“Syria might not be a major oil or gas producer in the Middle East, but—depending on the outcome of the Syrian uprising—it may determine the shape of the future regional energy map,” she writes. “The country’s geographic location offers Mediterranean access to landlocked entities in search of markets for their hydrocarbons and to countries seeking access to Europe without having to go through Turkey. The opportunities presented to many in the region by the current Syrian regime could be lost in a post-crisis Syria. To others, new opportunities will emerge under a new Syrian regime.”

The principal losers in a successful war for regime change would be Iran, which recently signed a major pipeline deal—bitterly opposed by Washington—with Syria and Iraq that is ultimately aimed at bringing Iranian gas to the Mediterranean Sea, and Russia, which has sought to expand its own influence in energy development in the region.

The principal winners would be the US and its allies, together with the major US and Western European-based energy conglomerates.

Ultimately, the goal of US imperialism and its NATO allies in Syria is to isolate and prepare for a far larger war against Iran, with the aim of imposing neocolonial control over the vast energy-producing region stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Caspian Basin.

The real issue in this conflict is not the nature of the Syrian regime, but the nature of the regimes that rule the US, Britain, France and Germany, which are embarking on another predatory carve-up of the world like those that produced the First and Second World Wars.