

US defense secretary targets Syria with chemical weapons allegation

By Bill Van Auken
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Speaking on a visit to Israel on Friday, US Defense Secretary James “Mad Dog” Mattis charged that the Syrian government has violated an agreement brokered by Moscow in 2013 by holding onto chemical weapons.

“The bottom line is there can be no doubt 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,” Mattis said during a press conference, standing alongside his Israeli counterpart, the extreme right-wing Zionist Avigdor Lieberman.

Mattis refused to provide any estimate of what quantity of chemical weapons he believes are in Syrian hands, claiming that it would compromise intelligence sources. He charged, however, that Damascus was in violation of United Nations Security Council resolutions and warned that it would be “ill-advised to use any again.” He added, “We’ve made that very clear with our first strike.”

The US defense secretary’s accusations come just two weeks after American warships rained 59 cruise missiles on the Syria’s Shayrat air base, killing 15 people, the majority of them civilians.

The April 7 strike was launched in supposed retaliation for a chemical weapons incident in the village of Khan Sheikhun in Syria’s Idlib province, which reportedly killed scores of people. Within hours of the first reports of the incident—relayed to the West by Western-funded “media activists” linked to the Syrian Al Qaeda affiliate that controls the area—Washington and its allies pinned the blame on the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

Since then, the US and its allies have provided no substantive evidence that the Syrian government launched the attack, which served no rational motive,

given the militarily inconsequential nature of the target and the inevitability that it would serve as a pretext for Western retaliation.

Since then, the US has systematically blocked demands by Syria and its two principal allies, Russia and Iran, for an objective investigation of the alleged chemical attack by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov Friday condemned the US and its allies for blocking a resolution on the OPCW executive council to send a fact-finding mission “to establish whether chemical weapons were used in Khan Sheikhoun and how they were delivered to the site of the reported incident.”

Syria’s President Assad also denounced the US and its allies for blocking any impartial investigation of the Idlib chemical incident.

“We formally sent a letter to the United Nations, we asked them in that letter to send a delegation in order to investigate what happened in Khan Shaykhun,” the Syrian president told the Russian news agency Sputnik. “However, until this moment they didn’t send any group since the West and the United States blocked any delegation from coming because if they come, they will find out that their narrative about what happened in Khan Shaykhun... was a false flag and a lie.”

It is apparent that the US and the other Western powers backing regime-change in Syria fear what such a mission would uncover. One US authority on missile attacks, the MIT physicist and national security consultant Theodore Postol, has issued a report that establishes, based on evidence provided by Washington, that the chemical weapon was not delivered by a missile fired from the air, but rather set off by an improvised explosive device on the ground, meaning it was almost certainly the work of those who

control the area, the “rebel” forces tied to Al Qaeda.

Like the allegations over this staged chemical weapons attack, Mattis’ charge that Syria has kept its chemical weapons is totally unsubstantiated and designed to provide the pretext for further US military aggression.

The chemical disarmament of Syria was carried out under a deal brokered by Moscow in 2013 when the Obama administration backed down from a threat to launch airstrikes against Syria over another alleged chemical weapons incident in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta. That incident was also exposed as a deliberate provocation staged by Turkish intelligence in league with Islamist “rebels” for the express purpose of provoking a US attack. The US participated directly in the destruction of Syria’s chemical stockpiles, and the OCPW certified that all of the country’s chemical weapons had been destroyed in January 2016.

Mattis’ allegations against Syria came just a day after President Donald Trump charged Iran with failing to live up to the “spirit of the agreement” negotiated between Tehran and the major powers over Iran’s nuclear power. On Tuesday, the US State Department certified that Iran was in full compliance with the agreement, but indicated that the administration was conducting a full review of its sanctions regime to determine whether its waiver of sanctions under the terms of the deal remained “vital to the national security interests of the United States.” US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson followed up on Wednesday with a bellicose denunciation of Iran and the clear indication that Washington was prepared to abrogate the deal and escalate military confrontation.

Mattis’ Middle East tour has essentially consisted of consultation with an axis of regional enemies of Iran, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Israel.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu Friday praised what he termed “a great change in the direction of American strategy,” which he said had been “made clear by Mattis’ clear and forthright words... and very forthright deeds against the use of chemical weapons by Iran’s proxy, Syria.”

He said Israel welcomed the “strategic change of American leadership and American policy.” The Netanyahu government viewed the Obama administration as insufficiently supportive, even as Obama raised annual military aid from Washington to

some \$3.8 billion.

The main bone of contention was the Iran nuclear deal, which the Israeli government, the region’s sole nuclear power, bitterly opposed. Now, with the Trump administration’s escalating campaign of worldwide militarism and its bellicose denunciations of Tehran, the Israeli government is clearly hoping that it can scuttle the nuclear agreement and ratchet up military provocations against Iran, seen by both Tel Aviv and Washington as the principal rival for regional hegemony.

In the same statement charging Syria with keeping chemical weapons, Mattis also said that the Syrian army had “dispersed their aircraft in recent days.” US intelligence officials have reported that Damascus has redeployed its warplanes to Russia’s Hmeimim airbase near Latakia on the Syrian coast in order to intermingle them with Russian planes. Another US strike against them would inevitably mean hitting Russian personnel, raising the threat of a military confrontation between the world’s two major nuclear powers.

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