

# Opposing forces mobilise for war in Syria

By James Cogan  
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The US, France, Britain, Saudi Arabia and other American allies internationally continue to threaten military action against the Assad government in Syria over the unsubstantiated and dubious allegations that its armed forces used chemical weapons last weekend in the now re-captured city of Douma.

In response, the Syrian military, backed by Russian and Iranian forces, along with Shiite-based militias from Iraq and Lebanon, are preparing their defences and a potential counter-offensive, that could include attacks on US and allied forces in the Mediterranean, the Gulf states and Iraq.

Syrian forces are reportedly on high alert, and moving aircraft and other key military assets to bases that are protected by advanced Russian-manned missile defence systems. Senior government personnel, including Bashar al-Assad and his family, have been secured in safe locations out of fear of US assassination attempts.

Vassily Nebenzia, Russia's ambassador to the UN, yesterday hit back at allegations of a chemical attack. "Our military, radiological, biological and chemical unit was on site with the alleged chemical accident [in Douma] and it confirmed that there were no chemical substances found on the ground," he stated.

The Russian army has dispatched military police squads to protect the scene, ahead of Moscow's proposed inspection of the site, and verification that the claims are false, by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW)—the Netherlands-based agency established in 1997 to monitor the international ban on chemical weapons.

Contradicting the Russian and Syrian government denials that any chemical weapons were used, the World Health Organisation (WHO) is continuing to assert—based on information from its "local partners"—that up to 500 people were sickened by toxic chemicals and as many as 43 died. The WHO press

release provided no details concerning its "local partners."

The original source of the video purporting to show victims of a chemical weapon attack was the US-funded "White Helmets"—part of the anti-Assad and Islamist-dominated rebel militias who were defeated in Douma and agreed to withdraw just days after the alleged incident.

A leading Russian politician aligned with President Vladimir Putin, Andrei Krasnov, declared yesterday that if the allegations of a chemical attack are used as the pretext for an attack on Syria, it will be viewed "not just as an act of aggression but as a war crime of the Western coalition."

Russia's ambassador to Lebanon, Alexander Zasyppkin, yesterday stressed Moscow's repeated warnings that it will retaliate against any attack that threatens its personnel in Syria. He told Lebanese television: "Russia will execute the statement of its president related to any US aggression against Syria, knocking down American missiles and striking at the sources of fire."

President Donald Trump responded to Zasyppkin's widely reported remarks with a 7 am tweet on Wednesday. He asserted: "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'!"

Behind such rhetoric, however, the US and its allies are acutely aware they are about to cross a Rubicon, into a devastating war across the Middle East that could cripple world oil production, a potential conflict with nuclear-armed Russia, and mass anti-war opposition at home.

The former head of the British Joint Forces Command, General Sir Richard Barrons, warned that the Russian statements meant that "they are going to try and sink ships, sink submarines and shoot aircraft

out of the sky—that's war.”

According to French reports, a Russian fighter-bomber, fully armed with anti-ship missiles, flew over a French frigate at combat altitude earlier in the week, in a pointed reminder that the US and allied warships deployed off the Syrian coast can be targeted and destroyed.

The Iranian government has publicly vowed to support Syria against “foreign aggression.” An unknown number of Iranian military personnel are embedded with Syrian Army units. Thousands more are operating as part of Iraqi Army and militia units, in many cases in close proximity to American military personnel, mercenary contractors and their bases in Iraq.

Israel, which is believed to be responsible for a missile attack this week on a Syrian airbase that killed a number of Iranian advisors, has placed its military on high alert. Conveying the fears in the Israeli establishment, its former head of intelligence, Efraim Halevy, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation: “You have all the players locked in battle in a very, very small area of land. We have a gradual escalation in the region and the question is, who is going to blink first?”

Trump's administration faces a barrage of demands from the American political and media establishment that it not “blink.” Trump has effectively been warned that the already concerted efforts to end his presidency will be dramatically escalated if he fails to order some form of major attack on Syria—regardless of the consequences. A significant factor in the calls for war is the desire in ruling circles for some means to divert and suppress the burgeoning wave of strikes by teachers, which threatens to trigger a broader movement of the working class against decades of falling wages and deteriorating social conditions.

In Britain, Prime Minister Theresa May, under no less intense pressure than Trump, has felt compelled to call a cabinet meeting today to try to get agreement that British forces will take part in any US-led attacks without any parliamentary vote—a politically-fraught decision.

The 2013 vote by the British parliament against involvement in a US-led attack on Syria is widely blamed by analysts for the Obama administration's backdown from taking any action. May, without even

waiting for cabinet approval, reportedly ordered British submarines to join US, French and British warships already in the eastern Mediterranean.

The French government of President Emmanuel Macron, also confronted with mounting strikes and student protests, appears to have provided the US with a guarantee of French military participation. Internationally, other US allies are extending diplomatic support. These include Australia, Canada, and a number of European Union states, headed by Germany.

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