

War, propaganda and smears: An interview with Professor Piers Robinson

Part three

By Julie Hyland
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The following is the third part of a three-part interview with Professor Piers Robinson, an academic at the University of Sheffield and a member of the Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media. Parts one and two appeared on May 24 and May 25.

Julie Hyland: What is your estimation of the alleged poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal by Russia, and how do they relate to the war in Syria?

PR: We initially issued two briefing notes on Skripal. That was partly because some of the people in the Working Group who had been looking at chemical/biological events in Syria had relevant knowledge and were aware that what the British government was saying straight off was inaccurate, i.e., the idea that the nerve agent used was Russian and only the Russians could have produced it, etc.

I did feel, because at the time the Syrian government was retaking large portions of territory, that the representation of Skripal might be being exploited as part of a broader propaganda drive against Russia (which was providing military support to Syria).

If there was going to be an escalation in Syria, beyond the bombing that occurred, that would take us up against the Russians. There was a good possibility that the Skripal event was going to be exploited as part of a broader anti-Russian propaganda drive.

It's not something you can pinpoint for sure at this stage because you don't have access to the information. I don't think we will know the full truth of exactly what is happening for some time. But you can make an informed judgement call.

What we do know is that the claims being made at the time were not tenable. So when [Foreign Secretary] Boris Johnson pretty much said it was the Russians

who must have poisoned the Skripals, that appeared to be a statement of certainty that was not warranted. And, of course, the recent history of Iraq and UK government claims regarding alleged WMD stockpiles was an important reminder that governments can be strongly motivated to distort and manipulate their claims, especially when intelligence is involved.

I think the Skripal poisoning might be connected to events in the US. We do know, because Alex Thomson from Channel 4 tweeted on March 12 that the government had put a D-notice restriction on the reporting of [MI6 agent] Pablo Miller. Professor Paul McKeigue (University of Edinburgh) has issued a new briefing talking about this matter.

Pablo Miller was Skripal's handler. He was connected to [former MI6 officer] Christopher Steele. He was responsible for the dossier alleging Trump's collusion with Russia. That, as I understand it, was a key part of initiating proceedings and investigations against Trump. It appears that the dossier was linked to the Democratic National Committee in that they apparently commissioned it.

If it is the case that Skripal was in any way connected with that, it forms a possibility that there was a motive for someone other than Russia to have carried out the poisoning.

More broadly, there is the possibility that the whole Russia-gate narrative is being used for bigger political purposes—to influence Trump, to try and shore up action in the Middle East, perhaps on some level to distract Western publics from increasing awareness of how we have been involved in wars in the Middle East.

JH: What do you take from the research that you are involved in?

PR: My personal view is that the truth always comes out eventually. There appears to be a failure for Western military objectives in Syria, at least at this point in time. Arguably, it's the first failure of the post 9/11 regime-change wars and I know from studying Vietnam that at such a point things can start to unravel, with infighting, politicians arguing and secrets coming out. In Vietnam, of course, you had the Pentagon Papers coming out.

I think we are possibly at that point and I think the truth is coming out, slowly. But even if it doesn't come out, there's a very simple issue here. If I say I am not going to look at this issue (Syria and the "War on Terror") because I'm too scared or because I'm being attacked in the media, I might as well go off and do something else. There is no point in my being an academic who looks at propaganda if I sidestep exploring propaganda in cases such as Syria.

The other point is that this must be understood in the context of major wars that have at the very least been fuelled, if not then instigated, by the West. And these are wars that have been massively destructive. So however stressful my life is because of a bad newspaper article about me, it is nothing compared to the people who are out there. Talk to Vanessa Beeley or Eva Bartlett—they go to Syria and, for example, talk to mothers who have lost their sons. This is very real. So there's a basic moral issue for us as Western academics.

We need to start having a much fuller public debate about this war and all the wars we've been seeing since 9/11. We should be scrutinising our governments because they have been involved in these wars. This is basic democratic politics.

It is definitely my role as an academic, as it is with any professional, to say that "we should at the very least talk about these issues and debate them."

I come from an international relations academic background and people shouldn't underestimate the potential dangers we face. There are very high stakes in this. Quite aside from the devastation that has been caused in these wars, we are in a period of major systemic change globally. China is rising and we are seeing a more confident Russia. Major conflicts can occur at these transition points.

So when people ignore or play down the fact that we have US warships in the Mediterranean firing cruise

missiles at targets in Syria, which is manned with Russian air defence systems... this is not a situation to be taken lightly.

How far are we from a Cuban missile crisis type event in Syria? This is about the future of the next 20 to 30 years and not stumbling into a dreadful corner where we are engaged in a serious conflict with Russia, another nuclear power, with an inability to control where that ends up.

Someone said that in the run-up to the First World War many people didn't know what was going on. Before they knew it, they were plunged into a catastrophic war in Europe that decimated a generation of young men.

The current situation has that feeling about it. When you have possibly a very propagandised population, that is a very risky place to be in because the ability for publics to check government action is curtailed.

It's no good sitting around worrying about Armageddon. It probably won't come to that, but it could and we all have a responsibility to be informed and to question our governments. We should be looking at what's happening in the Middle East and be very concerned about the dangers of further military escalation and war. At the moment, people are waiting to see, in particular, what might happen in Iran. It is our responsibility to question our governments and to develop informed opinions with regard to what is going on. Lives are at stake.

Concluded

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