

# Was there a chemical attack in Douma?

Early this month, just hours before US President Donald Trump announced that he had sanctioned a strike against targeted chemical weapon factories in Syria, the United States ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, told the UN Security Council that Syria's Bashar Assad had chemical weapons that he had been unleashing on the Syrian people – a claim that appeared to be based almost entirely on a video of children allegedly suffocating after a chemical attack.

It was a scene eerily similar to the one that took place in the chambers of the UN Security Council fifteen years ago, in February 2003. Then, to justify why the United States and its allies needed to invade Iraq, the then US Secretary of State, Colin Powell, described to UN Security Council members how Saddam Hussein was harbouring weapons of mass destruction in various sites across Iraq. Within days of this carefully orchestrated speech, US and British coalition forces had gathered their air and sea power around the Gulf, and the war on Iraq began, unleashing untold suffering and mayhem on the people of Iraq, whose effects are being felt to this day.

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Powell would later regret making this speech – he had also insinuated that Iraq had links with Al Qaeda – and even went on to describe President George Bush's decision to invade Iraq

as “a strategic error” that would create a leadership vacuum in the country. Indeed, with the centre no longer holding, things started to fall apart in this once secular country, with some of Saddam’s Baath party loyalists joining rebel groups or extremist Islamic factions, including the phenomenon known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which has threatened to create a “caliphate” across the Muslim world.

The Russian and Syrian governments have claimed that the most recent images of a chemical attack in Douma in eastern Ghouta are fake or stage-managed by Syrian opposition or rebel groups supported by the West, such as the first responders known as White Helmets (who are partly funded by the British government). They have questioned the timing of their chemical attack allegations: precisely at the moment when the Syrian government, with Russian military support, appears to have defeated ISIS.

There could be some truth to what they are saying. Early this week, the award-winning British journalist Robert Fisk, reporting from the site of the so-called chemical attack in Douma for the UK’s *Independent* newspaper, quoted a Syrian doctor who said that the children seen in the video “were not overcome by gas but by oxygen starvation in the rubbish-filled tunnels and basements in which they lived, on a night of wind and heavy shelling that stirred up a dust storm”.

Fisk’s assessment of the attack is far more credible than that of the French president Emmanuel Macron who declared that he had “proof” that Assad was using chemical weapons in Douma. Few journalists asked how he had obtained this evidence, given that the area is under government control and no inspector from the UN or from the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons has yet gone there to corroborate this claim.

CNN, did, however, send a reporter to a refugee camp in Turkey where victims of the Douma attack were staying. After sniffing a seven-year-old Syrian girl’s backpack, the reporter

concluded that there was definitely something in it “that stings”. If the poisonous chemicals released by Assad in Douma were so life-threatening and toxic, shouldn’t the girl and her family have been quarantined and not allowed to have contact with non-medical personnel, let alone a foreign journalist?

Both the 2003 Iraq war and the latest strikes by French, British and US forces (now pejoratively being referred to as F.U.K.U.S) on alleged chemical factories in Syria were aided by Western media. In the Syria case, the media has chosen to propagate the narrative that Assad, like Saddam, is an evil tyrant that must be taken out with the help of the morally upright West that cares about democracy and human rights. Few media organisations appear to have noted the tragic irony that the West’s military interventions in Iraq and Syria have, in fact, contributed to worsening human rights abuses in these countries.

To understand more clearly Western media’s role in these disinformation campaigns, the case of Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist, Seymour Hersh, almost a solitary dissenting voice whose reporting has been repeatedly ignored or downplayed, is particularly instructive. In March 2003, when the US-led war on Iraq was underway, Hersh revealed how, during a crucial four-month period leading up to the attacks on Baghdad, US and British officials had falsely accused Saddam Hussein’s government of trying to buy huge quantities of uranium from Niger, one of the world’s poorest countries.

In his article, published in the *New Yorker*, Hersh had revealed that documents used to support the uranium link between Iraq and Niger were fake. In fact, one letter dated July 2000 even bore the Niger president’s signature, a clumsy, amateurish forgery. Analysts suggested that the forgers assumed that it would be much more credible to implicate a poor African country rather than the three other leading exporters of uranium oxide, namely, Canada, Australia and Russia, who would have convincingly been able to defend

themselves against charges of helping Iraq build nuclear weapons. By the time the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohammed El Baradei, discredited these accusations, it was too late: Washington had already begun marching towards Baghdad.

At any other time, Hersch's story would have taken on Watergate proportions, but it barely made headlines. Although it is generally acknowledged that the truth is the first casualty of war, the Iraq war showed that journalists actively colluded in suppressing the facts, thereby becoming part and parcel of the military campaign of US and British coalition forces.

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Hersh's uncomfortable truths about the Iraq war could not, however, be ignored when his explosive exposé on the mistreatment and physical abuse of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq was published in the *New Yorker* in May 2004. The published images of the tortured prisoners were extremely damaging to the US military's reputation. Even then, Washington refused to take responsibility, attributing the abuse to "a few bad apples". The war continued and left in its wake more than 600,000 dead, casualties of a war that should have never started.

The West's shameless occupation and fragmentation of the Arab world goes back to the 1916 agreement negotiated by Mark Sykes

of Britain and François Georges-Picot of France that enabled Britain and France to carve up and control Arab territories after the demise of the Ottoman Empire. Britain helped rebels to vanquish the Ottoman army in the Middle East and then assigned itself the territories now known as Iraq, Kuwait, Jordan and Palestine, while France took Syria, Lebanon and southern Turkey.

The Sykes-Picot Agreement ensured that no strong non-European military would rule the oil-rich Arab world after the Ottomans left. The strategy to achieve this was to install weak and pliant leaders (preferably monarchs) in these territories and to keep the region in a permanent state of turmoil by pitting ethnic or religious factions against each other (for example, by helping Sunni factions to take up arms against Shias, as the West has done in Syria and Iraq). All of this would be aided by a military-industrial complex that ensured the steady flow of weapons manufactured by the West into the region.

This is exactly what played out in Iraq and what is now playing out in Syria, nearly a century after Sykes-Picot. Unsettlingly for the West, the Russians have figured this out (as they did in 1917 when they made details of the agreement public), and are resisting attempts to bring about regime change in Syria. As one British security strategist remarked (before being abruptly cut off by a Sky TV anchor): Why attack Assad now when ISIS has been vanquished?

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The logic of these wars advances on a base commercial instinct: the use of Western taxpayers' resources for an expensive and destructive military campaign whose objective is the total destruction of enemy infrastructure. Having achieved this end (through the doctrine of Shock and Awe), a military regent is installed to oversee the extraction of enemy resources for the victor's benefit. But just as important is the very lucrative business of reconstruction: tenders to rebuild destroyed roads, dams, bridges, pipelines, buildings, water and sewer systems, in other words, the country, are then given to crony Western private companies. Enter Blackwater, Kellogg Brown and Root and other private subcontractors with close links to the political establishment in Washington, London and Paris. The whole campaign is prosecuted under cover of a media-driven narrative of Western concern and charity for the once-doomed peoples of the vanquished dictator, now living in a free and functioning democracy. We have seen it in Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, to name the most recent examples. Are we going to see this charade replayed in Syria?

Assad may very well be the monster he is portrayed to be, but the much older enemies of the Syrian people are those who once again seek to perpetuate mayhem in Syria and in the region for their own selfish commercial and geopolitical interests.