

## Conspiracy theories, Russia's antidote to chemical weapons



**Claude Salhani**

**T**here is a new weapon in the war in Syria besides chemical agents: It is called conspiracy theories. Well, then again, maybe they are not so new.

Conspiracy theories have been around forever and range from the absurd to the sublime. They are relatively simple to initiate and almost impossible to prove right or wrong if cleverly constructed.

They can have a great public relations impact because thousands of people fall for such fake news. For the record, use of chemical weapons is not exactly a novelty in the Syrian conflict.

You can find conspiracy theorists all over the world, although they seem to have a special following in the Middle East. At times, it appears the Middle East has a love affair with conspiracy theories.

To be fair, many other places and people do, too, including Russian President Vladimir Putin. A strong supporter of the Syrian regime, Putin accused the United States of staging "fake" gas attacks to discredit Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Of course, when the Russian president comes out publicly with

such a statement there is no need to offer proof, at least as far as conspiracy theorists are concerned. His statement alone gives conspiracy theorists all the ammunition they need.

Putin said Russia had information that the United States was planning to launch new missile strikes on Syria and that there were plans to fake chemicals weapons attacks there. Putin did not identify the source of this information. Many people will assume that, coming from the Russian president who obviously has access to intelligence sources, the statement must have some truth to it.

Truth, the saying goes, is the first casualty of war and in a dirty war, such as the one in Syria, it is hard to say who is telling the truth and who is not.

Can we trust statements from the Syrian government? Unlikely. Its leaders have been known to bend the truth to suit their needs.

Can we trust the opposition to tell the truth? Again doubtful, as its members have emerged through the same schools as the Syrian regime.

Can we trust the regime's allies: Russia, Iran and Hezbollah? None of the three has a great track record

when it comes to telling the truth.

Can we trust Turkey or Saudi Arabia?

Can we trust Western powers to tell the truth? Typically, they tend to have a somewhat better track record but, then again, look at the web of lies told by the United States to get into Iraq.

For decades, many conspiracy theorists promoted the notion that everything bad that happens in the region — from the Maghreb to the Hijaz — is primarily the fault of the United States' CIA.

Many conspiracy theories making the rounds on social media in the Middle East have to do with the recent chemical attack on civilians in the Idlib region, which led to a retaliatory missile strike by the United States against a Syrian airbase. Well, no great surprise here. What better subjects with which to build a solid conspiratorial thesis than those implicated in the Syrian conflict, a conflict that is increasingly difficult to explain?

And a good conspiracy, if well crafted, can go a long way in the propaganda war. It is a fact that if a falsehood is repeated often enough, it ends up being credible.

In this latest conspiracy theory apparently originating in Russia,

the chemical attack that Washington blames the regime in Damascus for was supposedly fabricated by the United States. Among evidence put forward by conspiracy theorists are videos showing supposedly fake victims of the chemical weapons attack standing up as soon as they finish acting their role. It is all fake, we are supposed to believe. The attack. The injured. The dead.

Moscow, of course, is getting a kick out of supporting the theory, which Russian leaders hope will make Washington look bad.

"A similar provocation is being prepared... in other parts of Syria including in the southern Damascus suburbs where [the US] are planning to again plant some substance and accuse the Syrian authorities of using [chemical weapons]," Putin said.

Additionally, a Turkish health minister said traces of sarin gas had been detected in the victims of the supposed chemical attack. Doctors and aid workers examining the wounded said chlorine may have been present in the weapons.

As I said, conspiracy theories range from the sublime to the absurd.

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## 'Beauty' of Tomahawks reveals insensitivity to war



**Iman Zayat**

**M**any were the reactions to the US bombing of Syria's al-Shayrat airfield but one reaction has been denounced as "sickening" and "the sickest" and it came from US news anchor Brian Williams.

On the night of April 6 on MSNBC, Williams repeatedly used the word "beautiful" to describe footage of the air strikes. He said: "We see these beautiful pictures at night from the decks of these two US Navy vessels in the Eastern Mediterranean."

Then, he quoted Leonard Cohen's "First We Take Manhattan": "I'm guided by the beauty of our weapons."

Williams went on to describe the "beautiful pictures of fearsome armaments."

In a 1988 interview, Cohen said "First We Take Manhattan" "is a terrorist song. I think it's a response to terrorism. There's something about terrorism that I've always admired."

Cohen may have admired something about terrorism but, in my case, I admit that there is something about insensitivity that I have always admired. Williams seems to pretend or is possibly unaware of the ills and faults of the Tomahawk

missiles. By mistake or maybe intentionally, he surely appears insensitive to the horrors of war.

So, I thought to myself, maybe someone should remind Williams of facts that might help us understand what a "beautiful" Tomahawk is.

The 59 cruise missiles did not bring the United States an inch closer to toppling the murderous Syrian regime. It appears that the strike was just a loud warning shot to Syrian President Bashar Assad and the Pentagon has confirmed that Russia was notified.

"US military planners took precautions to minimize risk to Russian or Syrian personnel located at the airfield," Pentagon spokesman US Navy Captain Jeff Davis said.

Just after the attack on Syria, Tomahawk-maker Raytheon Corporation emerged as a key gainer. Shares in Raytheon rose nearly 1.5% on April 7.

The price of each missile is not definitively known but it is estimated to be \$800,000-\$1.4 million. So, the cost of the fired Tomahawks could be \$50 million-\$80 million.

If repeated, "warning shots" from Trump's administration can create a perfect environment for weapons-makers to flourish — all at the expense of US taxpayers.

Williams might argue the 59

Tomahawks were a costly warning shot but they are still "beautiful."

Maybe one thing that Williams does not certainly know is that his tactless eulogy to US weapons resembles, to a certain extent, Islamic State (ISIS) eulogies to armaments.

In some ISIS propaganda songs, the sound of cannons is likened to the music of tambourines and the smoke of bombs to the scent of musk. Swords are compared to preachers of truths and weapons heal the wounds of an oppressed people.

Such songs that commend weapons have grown into key elements of the jihadist propaganda machine and have lured thousands of young people, from the West and the East, into an unprecedented insensitivity to the realities of blood-spilling and conflicts.

Weapons are weapons. The fact that they are "Made in America" does not soften their destructive force and certainly does not make them "beautiful."

Cruise missiles were first used in 1991 during the Gulf War. At that time, the US Navy claimed that Tomahawks had an accuracy rate of 85%.

The missiles were used again against Iraq in 1998 and in 2003. Eventually, Saddam Hussein was toppled but at what cost? Fourteen

years later, Iraq is still caught in a real mess, with terrorism, sectarianism, proxy wars and corruption threatening its stability.

In 1998, the US Navy fired 70 Tomahawks to hit al-Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan, killing 24 people but missing its leader Osama bin Laden.

At the same time, 13 Tomahawks hit Al-Shifa drug plant in Sudan and, witnesses said, the country was left with but a few supplies after the attack.

In 2009, the United States launched Tomahawk cruise missiles on a camp in the village of Al-Majalah in southern Yemen. The attack killed 14 alleged al-Qaeda fighters and 41 civilians, including 14 women and 21 children.

At odds with the poetic allusions of Williams is the reality on the ground: There is no beauty when we talk about Tomahawks or any other weapon.

In Syria, the situation is complex and there is no need for more complexity and "fearsome armaments." What we need in Syria is surely a plan to end that bloody conflict that has cost hundreds of thousands of lives.

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## The problems with Trump's strike on Syria



**Tom Regan**

**I**f you want American media talking heads, liberal or conservative, to hyperventilate for your presidency, it appears you just need to blow something up, preferably somewhere in the Arab world. Suddenly, you become "presidential" and every misfire, error and mistake is forgotten.

There is little doubt that Syrian President Bashar Assad is a butcher and his regime needs to go. So, on the surface, US President Donald Trump's order to bomb a Syrian airbase looks like a winner for him. It does not take much digging, however, to find the cracks in its foundation.

Until April 6, the day of the cruise missile strike, the Trump administration's policy, if you can call it that, was totally hands off Syria. Trump was not interested in replacing Assad and there had been no expression of horror at the almost half a million Syrians who had been killed in the preced-

ing years, including the "beautiful babies" who had died in horrible bombings or who had drowned trying to cross the Mediterranean to escape Assad.

In the past, Trump had suggested that he believed many Syrian refugees were terrorists. While it is interesting to think that Trump was suddenly overwhelmed by a surge of humanitarianism, he has not changed his position on his Muslim ban that includes Syrian refugees, many of whom live in abysmal conditions. It is hard to see his concern as more than a hiccup in his emotional state. This was obvious in the inability of US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley to explain the contradiction in Trump's position on US political talk shows.

Policy, what policy? We live in a complicated world. Leaders of superpowers — and the United States happens to be the only one — need a plan for how to deal with those complicated matters.

It is a somewhat disturbing idea that Trump will jettison whatever policies he does have every time he sees upsetting images on the White House TV. Did he think about how Russia would respond? Or Turkey or Egypt? Will one attack lead to more? The Syrians already have the airbase back in operation. Will he bomb it again to ensure it is not used again for a similar kind of attack?

It is hard to see any master policy design behind the attack, even with the sudden appearance of Rex Tillerson as the secretary of state.

In a different vein, but just as concerning, the US media's reactions were problematic for America and the rest of the world. In times of conflict, US editors and reporters grow epaulettes. Almost across the board, the usual suspects on cable news TV fell over themselves to applaud Trump's decision to bomb. Suddenly, airtime was filled with former gener-

als talking about "strategy".

It was déjà vu all over again. It was as if the American media had learned nothing from the long nightmare of their miscalculations and errors about the 2003 Gulf war and its aftermath. This attack raised more questions than solved them but the media were too busy being fanboys to dig deeper. (Jake Tapper of CNN was the only real exception.)

Years ago, a senior foreign editor at a national radio station where I worked told me to be careful of inside-the-Beltway journalists. "They are just a pack of lemmings attracted by bright shiny things," he said of the media in Washington. He was right.

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