

The British Factor in U.S. Confrontations with Syria and Iran

by Carl Osgood

July 17—One characteristic common to both the U.S. involvement in the Syrian war and the U.S. confrontation with Iran, is the pressure applied by the British government to escalate tensions. In the Syrian case, the British pressured the Trump Administration to launch two military strikes on Syria in response to alleged chemical weapons attacks, both of which have since been shown to have been staged. The British clearly tried to stage a provocation, to force a U.S. confrontation with Iran by seizing an Iranian tanker and then trying to stage a provocation against a British tanker—an effort that so far has failed. The British role in these dangerous events is no different, in essence, than the British role in the ongoing effort to overthrow the duly elected President of the United States, Donald Trump.

Syria Chemical Weapons Hoax

On April 7, 2017, President Donald Trump ordered a series of cruise missile strikes on a Syrian airbase claimed to have been the launching point for a chemical weapons attack allegedly carried out on April 4 in the village of Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib province. The claim of a Syrian chemical bombing was made by the White Helmets, originally a British intelligence creation, with a record of supportive presence at, or participation in, jihadi terrorist acts in Syria. A week earlier, on March 31, then U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis had been in London, meeting with his then British counterpart, Michael Fallon. Throughout their joint press conference, Mattis toed the British line on Russia as an aggressor state while Fallon called, in effect, for the ouster of Syrian President Bashar al Assad.

On April 11—at the time of a G7 foreign ministers meeting and a phone call between President Donald Trump and British Prime Minister Theresa May—the



Guardian reported, “Whitehall sources say Britain has been instrumental in helping to persuade the U.S. to support the idea that Assad and his family must be removed from power before progress can be made.” Trump and May “agreed that a window of opportunity



U.S. Embassy/London
U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis (l.) and UK Defence Secretary Michael Fallon holding a joint press conference in London on March 31, 2017.



Victims of an alleged chemical weapons attack in Ghouta, Syria.

now exists in which to persuade Russia that its alliance with Assad is no longer in its strategic interest,” a spokeswoman for 10 Downing Street said.

Almost exactly one year later, on April 7, 2018—just as the resistance of the jihadis occupying the Damascus suburban area of Eastern Ghouta was about to collapse, and when President Trump was talking about withdrawing U.S. troops from Syria—another alleged chemical weapons attack took place in the Eastern Ghouta town of Douma. One week later, Trump was once again goaded into launching cruise missile and air strikes, which this time saw the involvement of British and French forces as well. According to an April 10 Associated Press report, British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson was agitating heavily to “punish” the Assad government for yet another chemical attack.

In a statement after the April 14 strikes, Theresa May issued a statement claiming that British intelligence had determined that Assad was responsible for the April 7 chemical attacks, and declared, “This persistent pattern of behavior must be stopped.” Just weeks before, in two reports dated March 13 and March 23, 2018, Fernando Arias, the Director-General of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), had reported to the agency’s executive board that inspectors had found no evidence of banned chemical agents in inspections of Syrian facilities, including those of the Scientific Studies and Research Center, one of the targets of the April 14 strikes.

We now know, from the June 26, 2019 [report](#) of OPCW’s Working Group on Syria, Media and

Propaganda, that the investigators only spent a few hours in Douma and interviewed no witnesses, while the bulk of the investigation was devoted to interviewing opposition sources in Turkey. That report also noted biases on the part of certain individuals associated with the investigation against any evidence that tended to contradict the official narrative that the Syrian government was responsible for the attack. One particular member of the investigative team, a British national, was shown to have close ties to both the White Helmets organization and its founder, British mercenary James Le Mesurier. Among the manifestations of the team’s biases was the suppression of an [engineering](#)

[report](#), leaked in late May that showed that the gas cylinders allegedly used in the attack, were placed at the site manually rather than dropped from aircraft. That same Working Group report also extensively documented the explicit role played by the British government in promoting the false chemical weapons narrative.

Failed Iran Tanker Provocation

On June 13, 2019, two oil tankers, one owned by a Norwegian company, the other Japanese-owned, were attacked in the Gulf of Oman, just after transiting the Strait of Hormuz. The United States immediately blamed Iran for the attacks, but have to date failed to provide convincing evidence. One week later, on June



U.S. Navy/Robert S. Price

Guided Missile Destroyer USS Ross fires a Tomahawk land attack missile during 6th Fleet operations in the Mediterranean Sea on April 7, 2017.



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The remnants of a U.S. RQ-4A Global Hawk surveillance drone shot down by Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps, June 21, 2019.

20, Iranian forces shot down a U.S. RQ-4 reconnaissance drone that they claimed had been flying in Iranian airspace just outside the Strait of Hormuz. That same night, President Trump rejected cruise missile and air strikes in retaliation for the shoot-down, reportedly just 10 minutes before the strikes were to be launched. On June 24, British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt declared that if the U.S. launched strikes on Iran, British forces would participate. That same day, Andrew Murrison, a British Foreign Office minister and member of the Privy Council, was in Tehran and said the U.K. believed Iran “almost certainly bears responsibility for the [June 13] attacks.”

On July 4, Royal Marines seized the *Grace I* supertanker in the waters off Gibraltar, an action which was quickly welcomed by U.S. National Security Adviser John Bolton. The Royal Marines claimed that Gibraltar authorities had said the ship was carrying crude oil to Syria in violation of EU sanctions. The Russian Foreign Ministry called the seizure a deliberate British provocation. Even former Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt, the current chairman of the

European Council on Foreign Relations, questioned the application of EU sanctions to the *Grace I*. “One refers to EU sanctions against Syria, but Iran is not a member of the EU. And the EU as a principle doesn’t impose its sanctions on others,” he tweeted. “That’s what the U.S. does.”

On July 9, it emerged that a British tanker, the *British Heritage*, owned by BP, had been on its way to Basra, Iraq to pick up a million tonnes of crude oil, but that the order was canceled and the ship, still empty, went to waters just off the Saudi port of Dammam. The next day, CNN reported, the tanker “turned off its transponders for almost 24 hours” while travelling through the Strait of Hormuz.

On July 11, the British Ministry of Defense claimed that speed boats from Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) navy had targeted the *British Heritage* as it passed through the Strait of Hormuz. A source in the Ministry claimed that the IRGC had intended to divert the *British Heritage* into Iranian waters and seize it in retaliation for the seizure of the *Grace I*. The interposition of the *HMS Montrose*, a British Royal Navy frigate, supposedly prevented the Iranian operation to seize the *British Heritage*.



According to news reports, there are 15 to 30 British-flagged commercial vessels in the Persian Gulf on any given day, but only one Royal Navy warship, and yet the (empty) *British Heritage* was being escorted by the *Montrose* on that particular day.

By July 12, it had become clear that this staged “attack” was not provoking the United States into attacking Iran. Hunt then called for

“cooler heads” and on July 13 “exited” the original provocation, offering Iran the release of the *Grace I* for a guarantee that its oil would not be delivered to Syria. Iran officially rejected the offer as the Iranians regard Britain’s seizure of the *Grace I* as an act of piracy.

That is where the matter stands as of this writing.