

Two unconvincing explanations

Written by GWYNNE DYER

The FBI raid on the office, home and hotel room of President Trump's lawyer, Michael Cohen, may persuade the president that a larger, longer-lasting distraction is needed, but it's still likely that his response to the alleged poison gas attack by the Syrian government in Douma on Saturday will be short, sharp and soon forgotten. That's how it worked last April, when Trump 'punished' Bashar al-Assad's regime for another alleged poison gas attack in rebel-held Idlib province by dropping 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles on the Syrian airbase at Shayrat from which the attack supposedly originated. Lots of explosions, not many hurt, no lasting political consequences. Trump is talking tougher this time. Asked on Sunday if military action was possible, he said: 'Nothing is off the table. ... If it's Russia, if it's Syria, if it's Iran, if it's all of them together, we'll figure it out.' And what if Russian President Vladimir Putin bears some responsibility for the attack? 'He may, yeah, he may. And if he does, it's going to be very tough, very tough. Everybody's going to pay a price. He will, everybody will.' It may just be the usual Trump bluster, but the Russians are so concerned that their UN envoy, Vasily Nebenzia, warned on Tuesday that the use of 'armed force under mendacious pretext against Syria, where, at the request of the legitimate government of a country, Russian troops have been deployed, could lead to grave repercussions. ... I would once again beseech you to refrain from the plans that you're currently developing.' Now, it's hard to believe that the Russians would not know if the Syrians were using poison gas: after all, they are using the same air bases. American advisers certainly knew what was going on when they were giving Saddam Hussein targeting data for poison gas attacks against Iranian troops in the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war. 'The Iraqis never told us that they intended to use nerve gas,' said retired U.S. Air Force Col. Rick Francona, who was a military attaché in Baghdad during the 1988 strikes. 'They didn't have to. We already knew.' The Russians would know, too 'but then why would they go along with it? The great puzzle about poison gas use in Syria is that it has no plausible military purpose. The targets are never fighters. The victims in the various videos are always civilians, and using poison gas obviously has a big political price. Why would the Syrian regime pay it, especially when it has already won the military battle? It just doesn't make sense for the regime to be deliberately killing civilians with poison gas. Maybe it doesn't have to make sense: you will often hear explanations that essentially say that Assad and his partners-in-crime are simply evil. They do it because it's wicked, and because they can. But even then you have to explain why the Russians would let them do it. Moscow says that the Douma gas attack didn't actually happen. 'Our military specialists have visited this place, along with representatives of the Syrian Red Crescent ... and they did not find any trace of chlorine or any other chemical substance used against civilians,' said Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Saturday. Instead, Lavrov suggested, it was a 'false flag' operation in which the besieged rebels deliberately staged a gas attack and blamed it on the Assad regime, or at least used video footage from somewhere else and pretended it had been shot in Douma. Can you really believe that Syrian rebels would kill their own innocent civilians in such a horrible way? Well, if they are losing the war, and the only way to turn the tide is Western military intervention against Assad, and the only way to mobilise Western opinion to support that intervention is to get him blamed for using poison gas, then maybe they would. Getting the poison gas would be no problem: the rebels overran about half of Syria in the early stages of the war, and gained control of a number of chemical weapons facilities belonging to the Syrian army. They are almost all Islamist radicals by now, and would be comfortable with the argument that the end justifies the means. I don't know which of these explanations for the gas attacks is true. Is it the brutal, incredibly stupid Syrian regime that unflinchingly undermines every one of its successes by making a pointless gas attack on civilians just as it wins a major battle fought with conventional weapons? Or is it ruthless Islamist rebels making falseflag chemical attacks because that is the only thing that might trigger a Western military intervention big enough to save them from ultimate defeat? Very stupid monsters or very clever monsters, or maybe both. Who knows? What I do know is that I feel as isolated, writing this, as I did back in early 2003 when I was one of the few Western journalists questioning all the nonsense and outright lies about Saddam Hussein's nuclear and chemical weapons that provided a justification for the invasion of Iraq. And I know that the evidence is not strong enough either way to justify a major Western military attack on the Assad regime now.