

# Atlantic Council Lies Dashed “On the Rocks” in Syria

By [Tony Cartalucci](#)

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Theme: [Media Disinformation](#), [Terrorism](#),  
[US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [SYRIA](#)

*The Atlantic Council describes itself as:*

...an essential forum for navigating the dramatic economic and political changes defining the twenty-first century by informing and galvanizing its uniquely influential network of global leaders. Through the papers we write, the ideas we generate, and the communities we build, the Council shapes policy choices and strategies to create a more secure and prosperous world.

The Atlantic Council seeks to create this “*secure and prosperous world*” for [its corporate-financier sponsors](#) which include weapons manufacturers like Airbus, Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, and Boeing – big-oil interests like Chevron, BP, and ExxonMobil – big-banks like JP Morgan, Bank of America, and HSBC – and also governments and organizations like the US State Department itself, the UK’s Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and NATO.

Yet despite the scale and scope of both the Atlantic Council’s mission and resources, its ability to influence public perception appears to be diminishing.

It has been in Syria in particular where the Atlantic Council’s influence has reached all time lows in both credibility and effectiveness. This is owed mainly to the fact that Atlantic Council “experts” are confined to armchairs in offices scattered across the West while alternative media sources are on the ground in Syria.

A recent piece co-authored by one of these Atlantic Council “experts” – Aaron Stein – along with US Army reserve officer Luke J. O’Brien – serves as an example of how ineffective the Atlantic Council and its sponsors have become in communicating narratives to the public.

Alleged Rationale for Syrian CW Use is Illogical at Face Value

The article titled, “[The Military Logic Behind Assad’s Use of Chemical Weapons](#)” published in “War on the Rocks,” claims as its premise (emphasis added):

**When Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s regime uses chemical weapons, as it has done on at least four different occasions in the past five years (August 2013, March 2017, April 2017, and April 2018), conspiracy theorists and Russian propaganda outlets immediately kick into gear to begin denying it. They posit that the Syrian regime would never use chemical weapons because, after all, it is already winning the civil war.** Instead, these outlets suggest, the anti-Assad opposition (working with external powers) stages “false flag” events to provide excuses for an American military strike aimed at toppling the regime.

These denials are absurd for a number of reasons, one of which is that there is **an obvious - but often overlooked - rationale for the regime's use of chemical weapons. The Syrian conflict has demonstrated the value of these weapons for Assad's enemy-centric approach to counter-insurgent warfare**, which is premised on the idea of using overwhelming force to punish local populations where insurgents are active. Rather than working to deliver services and stability to contested spaces to compel popular support, **the intent is to re-establish central government control through naked aggression.**

The article would claim that chemical weapons (CWs) are more psychologically damaging to targeted populations than conventional weapons. The article also makes the claim that to dislodge militants from even a moderately-sized structure, it would require upward to 147 unguided 155mm artillery shells. Thus CWs - Stein and O'Brien argue - are more efficient than conventional weapons.

The article claims that CWs can (emphasis added):

...seep into these buildings with relative ease, as long as the shells land even reasonably close to the target. In Syria as well as in other conflicts, the anti-Assad opposition has dug fairly sophisticated tunnel systems that are, in theory, impervious to the regime's heavy artillery and unguided bombs. To effectively target these buried facilities, Assad has turned to chemical weapons, which often descend and concentrate in low-lying areas. **The advantage is clear: The regime can ensure heavy casualties with a small amount of effort, either by incapacitating or killing combatants, or by terrorizing these groups and the civilians who live alongside them.**

Yet in order for this narrative to be viable - readers would need to believe that the Syrian government had only encountered determined, well-entrenched enemies on "*at least four different occasions in the past five years,*" as admitted in the article's opening paragraph - an utterly absurd notion at face value.



Even casual observers of the Syrian conflict are now familiar with the dense urban environments combat has taken place in, with literally hours of combat footage available even to the Atlantic Council's office-bound "experts" to observe online, depicting Syrian combat operations using conventional weapons to dislodge militants from "*moderately-sized structures,*" immense structures, and even entire cities.

While Stein and O'Brien attempt to describe Syria deploying chemical weapons as a cheap

and effective weapon of war to dislodge entrenched enemies, the fact that they themselves only cite four attacks in the past five years and the fact that the number of dead from those attacks – 1,620 by the West’s most politically-charged accusations – represents only 1.2% of the total number of militants killed or 0.45% of the total war dead since 2011 – reveal their premise as an inverted reality.

#### All Areas Syria “Used Chemical Weapons,” Still Held by Militants Afterwards

Stein and O’Brien never explain how such limited use of chemical weapons – even if the Syrian government was the culprit in each case – afforded Damascus any significant advantage over the overwhelming use of conventional weapons Damascus is actually winning the war with.

In fact, all of the CW attacks they cited in their opening paragraph appear to indicate precisely the opposite.

The first attack cited by Stein and O’Brien was the 2013 Ghouta incident itself – Eastern Ghouta having only just been liberated by Syrian government forces in 2018 – 5 years after the alleged attack.

The second cited attack was in Ltamenah, Hama in 2017. Ltamenah – at the time of this writing – is *still* under militant control.

The third cited attack was the Khan Sheikhoun incident. The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) would admit in its own report that its investigators were unable to access the actual site of the attack because it was still firmly held by anti-government militants. At the time of this writing – Khan Sheikhoun is also *still* held by militants.

The fourth and final incident cited by Stein and O’Brien was the recent Douma incident – in which allegations of CW attacks were made when the city was all but already taken by Syrian forces.

In other words – in 3 out of 4 cases cited by Stein and O’Brien themselves – CW attacks attributed to the Syrian government failed to produce any tactical or strategic advantage. In 2 out of 4 cases, militants *still* hold the areas the alleged attacks took place in. The fourth and final case was a chemical attack carried out when Syrian forces had already obtained victory through the use of conventional weapons.

Of course, there is another serious problem with claiming Damascus opted to use CWs in the absence of precision-guided munitions – Damascus does indeed have access to precision-guided munitions in the form of the Russian air force.

#### Syria Does Not Lack Precision Strike Capabilities

The article attempts to make the argument that the Syrian government lacks “*precision-guided munitions*,” and thus has used CWs as a “cheap” substitute, claiming:

Unlike expensive precision-guided munitions (and the advanced command, control, communications, and intelligence systems needed to use them), even smaller and less advanced states can field chemical weapons programs relatively cheaply.

And:

If you're an army forced to fight a war on the cheap, chemical weapons make a great deal of sense.

Yet this is entirely untrue. Syria does indeed have access to precision-guided munitions in the form of the Russian air force.

While Stein and O'Brien cite only four CW attacks they assign blame to the Syrian government for – to be charitable – consider the highly questionable UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria and its claims of over two dozen CW attacks attributed to Syrian government forces.

Compare that number to the number of daily Russian air sorties at various points since its 2015 military intervention in Syria on behalf of Damascus.

The Daily Beast – a decidedly anti-Moscow publication – would describe the tempo of Russian air operations in Syria in its 2016 article titled, "[Russia Is Launching Twice as Many Airstrikes as the U.S. in Syria](#)," claiming (emphasis added):

Five months after the first Russian warplanes slipped into Syria to reinforce the embattled regime of President Bashar al-Assad, **the Kremlin's air wing near Latakia—on Syria's Mediterranean coast in the heart of regime territory—has found its rhythm, launching roughly one air strike every 20 minutes** targeting Islamic State militants, U.S.-backed rebels and civilians in rebel-controlled areas.

**"From Feb. 10 to 16, aircraft of the Russian aviation group in the Syrian Arab Republic have performed 444 combat sorties** engaging 1,593 terrorist objects in the provinces of Deir Ez Zor, Daraa, Homs, Hama, Latakia and Aleppo," the Russian defense ministry claimed in a statement.

From February 10 to February 16, 2016, Syria had at its disposal on average, 74 airstrikes per day – versus the 4 CW incidents in 5 years cited by Stein and O'Brien or the roughly 24 incidents the UN Commission of Inquiry dubiously accused Damascus of.

It is clear that Damascus had at its disposal a more effective and less politically controversial method of delivering effective firepower onto well-fortified targets than "CWs." The Daily Beast itself admits in its article that Russian airpower was *"tilting the balance of the war in Bashar al-Assad's favor."*

Claims that Chemical Attacks Do Not Serve US Interests are also Absurd

Stein and O'Brien also claim that the US has no means of intervening and toppling the Syrian government because of Russia's military presence in Syria. The article claims:

Assad can count on the presence of Russian forces in Syria to act as a deterrent against strikes that could threaten regime stability. He can reasonably assume that American military action has to be refined to try and prevent unintended escalation, and will therefore be relatively small in scale.

However – it was the staged CWs attack in 2013 and subsequent attempts to cite such attacks as a basis for US-led regime change that – in part – prompted Russia’s direct military intervention in the first place.



The US is also currently occupying the vast majority of Syrian territory east of the Euphrates – an occupation originally predicated on fighting the so-called “Islamic State” (ISIS). Yet with ISIS all but defeated, the US has justified its continued presence in Syria in part based on allegations of remaining CWs – meaning that again – Stein and O’Brien’s premise is refuted – this time by the very establishment their war propaganda is meant to serve.

The Guardian’s article, [“US military to maintain open-ended presence in Syria, Tillerson says,”](#) would report (emphasis added):

In his Stanford speech, [then US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson] laid out five US goals in Syria: the defeat of Isis and al-Qaida, a UN-brokered resolution for Syria that involved Bashar al-Assad’s departure, a curb on Iran, conditions for the safe return of refugees, **and the complete elimination of remaining chemical weapons.**

### The Bottom Line

Claiming that Syria is using CWs as a “cheap” substitute for precision-guided munitions to dislodge militants from fortified positions contradicts reality both in terms of basic facts on the ground and logic. The fact that Stein and O’Brien failed to cite even one single instance where the use of CWs provided Damascus any measurable advantage tactically or strategically exposes their “analysis” as – at best – lazy war propaganda.

In fact, the four instances they do cite illustrate precisely the opposite – with militants remaining in control of contested territory after the use of these supposedly “cheap” and “effective” weapons.

Claiming that Damascus needs CWs for a lack of precision-guided munitions requires readers to ignore the fact that Russia has provided such capabilities to the Syrian government in the form of airstrikes since 2015, amounting on average to 74 a day at varying points in the conflict.

Claiming that the United States does not benefit from staging chemical attacks when the very pretext for its continued occupation of Syrian territory – according to the US Secretary of State – includes accusations of CW use by the Syrian government – at face value is a contradiction.

For the Atlantic Council and “War on the Rocks” which published Stein and O’Brien’s article, had their goal been serious analysis – finding actual experts is imperative. Had their goal been to produce convincing war propaganda – it is recommended that they find more skillful liars than Stein and O’Brien.

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*Tony Cartalucci is a Bangkok-based geopolitical researcher and writer, especially for the online magazine [“New Eastern Outlook”](#) where this article was originally published. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.*

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