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We begin today’s show in Syria, where Israeli F-15 bomber jets have reportedly bombed a Syrian air base used by Iranian forces. There are reports that 14 people died in the strikes, including Iranian nationals. Israel is said to have launched the raid from Lebanon’s airspace. The Israeli bombing came a day after a suspected chemical weapons attack killed at least 60 people and wounded more than 1,000 in the Syrian town of Douma, the last rebel-held town in Eastern Ghouta. The Syrian opposition blamed the Assad government for carrying out the attacks, but Syria denied having any role. The chemical attack came one day after Syrian forces launched an air and ground assault on Douma. While international officials are still investigating what happened, President Trump took to Twitter to directly accuse Russian President Vladimir Putin of playing a role. The U.N. Security Council is meeting today to discuss the crisis in Syria. Today also marks John Bolton’s first day as President Trump’s national security adviser. We get reaction from Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Glenn Greenwald, one of the founding editors of The Intercept.

**Transcript**

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**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** We begin today’s show in Syria, where Israeli F-15 bomber jets have reportedly bombed a Syrian air base used by Iranian forces. There are reports 14 people died in the strikes, including Iranian nationals. Israel is said to have launched the raid from Lebanon’s airspace. The bombing came a day after a suspected chemical weapons attack killed at least 60 people and wounded more than a thousand in the Syrian town of Douma, the last rebel-held town in Eastern Ghouta. The Syrian opposition blamed the Assad government for carrying out the attacks, but Syria denied having any role. The chemical attack came one day after Syrian forces launched an air raid and ground assault on Douma.

**AMY GOODMAN:** While international officials are still investigating what happened, President Trump took to Twitter to directly accuse Russian President Vladimir Putin of playing a role. He wrote, quote, “President Putin, Russia and Iran are responsible for backing Animal Assad.” Trump went on to warn there would be a “Big price…to pay.” The U.N. Security Council is meeting today to discuss the crisis in Syria. The U.S. U.N. ambassador, Nikki Haley, has called for an independent investigation of the chemical weapons attack. Meanwhile, in Washington, D.C., today, today marks John Bolton’s first day as President Trump’s national security adviser.

We head now to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where we’re joined by the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Glenn Greenwald, one of the founding editors of *The Intercept*. Later in the broadcast, we’ll talk with Glenn about the latest in Brazil, the jailing of Lula, the killings in Gaza. But first, to Syria.

Can you talk about the latest in Syria, Glenn, the chemical weapons attack, President Trump blaming the attack on Assad, the, quote, “Animal Assad,” and, I believe, naming in a tweet Putin for the first time?

**GLENN GREENWALD:** So, obviously, the use of chemical weapons in any instance is horrific. It’s a war crime. It’s heinous. And it ought to be strongly condemned by everybody. I think that it’s—the evidence is quite overwhelming that the perpetrators of this chemical weapons attack, as well as previous ones, is the Assad government[[1]](#footnote-1), although, in war, there are always lots of reasons to doubt, and we certainly shouldn’t run off and make hasty decisions, until there’s a real investigation, to make the evidence available.

I think the more important question at the moment is: What is the actual solution? Obviously, what’s happening in Syria is and long has been a horrific humanitarian crisis, filled with war crimes committed by pretty much every actor there. The Assad government has killed more people than any other. But the question is: What solutions do you think are viable? Do you think that having Israel fly fighter jets over Syria and bomb whoever they decide is their enemy is something that’s really going to help the humanitarian crisis? As Israel slaughters innocent Gazan protesters and uses snipers to end the lives of journalists who are wearing press jackets, do you really think that Netanyahu is going to help the situation in Syria? Do you think that Donald Trump is going to be able to command a military action that is going to do any good for the people of Syria? Does anyone think that that would be the goal of Trump’s military action or the role of the United States government revving up its war machine, that would end up helping the Syrians?

I think we ought to have learned the lesson by now that when we cheer for military action by Western governments in the Middle East, because we’ve been emotionally manipulated to be angry about some genuinely horrific act, it doesn’t end up doing anything other than making us feel good, and it usually ends up making the situation worse. So I think it’s possible and necessary to express moral outrage at the chemical weapons attack and other attacks on Syrian civilians, while at the same time remaining sober and rational and careful about how we allow our emotions to be funneled and channeled in order to try and come up with solutions. And I think we ought to have extreme amounts of skepticism over the idea that Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu or NATO powers are going to intervene in Syria in a way that’s going to be good in any way for Syrian civilians.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** Well, Glenn, this chemical attack, and also the Israeli bombing, comes only a few days after an unusual summit was held in Ankara between President Putin and the leaders of Turkey and Iran over the situation in Syria. And obviously, the United States was conspicuously absent from that kind of a summit. I’m wondering your sense of all of these larger powers battling over what happens in Syria.

**GLENN GREENWALD:** Well, this is the problem with the debate over Syria, which is there are two sides that try and simplify it. And it’s polarized and divided many political factions, probably the principal one being the left, where there’s these really two competing, simplistic narratives, which is,

* on one hand, Assad is the only war criminal in Syria, that he’s the singular problem and that removing him will solve everything, and then,
* on the other side, the idea being that Assad is the only thing standing in between al-Qaeda and ISIS and other religious fanatics taking over Syria, slaughtering minorities, like Alawites and others,

when the reality is that it has long, for many years now, been a proxy war between all kinds of powers, including Russia, Iran, the United States, Saudi Arabia and many others.

And so, what’s happening in Syria is always incredibly complicated. And the tendency to try and simplify it is a way to impose this moral narrative on it that makes solutions really easy. “Hey, just let’s go bomb Assad out of existence,” sort of the way we tried to do with Saddam Hussein in Iraq. There are a lot of differences between Iraq and Syria, but there are lessons to be learned from every war, including the one in Iraq, or in Afghanistan or in other places around the Middle East in which the United States and its allies have intervened in the name of humanitarianism, that teach pretty clearly that the situation only gets worse, not better, the more Western powers intervene.

And I think that’s the principle that we need to start with, especially given that any military action from the United States would be led by a person named Donald Trump. He’s the commander-in-chief of the armed forces of the United States. And so, it’s really been bizarre, over the last 48 to 72 hours, watching these two competing themes emerge, that, on one hand, Donald Trump is this mentally unstable, morally unfit monster who has dementia and an attention span of a 3-year-old and is completely amoral, and then, on the other hand, this idea that the United States ought to essentially restart a new kind of war in Syria, led by that very same individual, Donald Trump. Whatever you think about Syria, does anybody believe that Benjamin Netanyahu, working with Donald Trump, is going to do anything other than make the situation infinitely worse on all levels?

**AMY GOODMAN:** I want to turn to the ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Democratic Senator Ben Cardin of Maryland, who called for an international response to the Syrian regime’s alleged use of chemical weapons on its own people Saturday. Cardin was interviewed by *Face the Nation* host Margaret Brennan.

**SEN. BEN CARDIN:** There needs to be an international response. This is against international norms and—

**MARGARET BRENNAN:** A military one?

**SEN. BEN CARDIN:** Well, first and foremost, President Assad needs to be held accountable for his war crimes. Senator Rubio—

**MARGARET BRENNAN:** He hasn’t been, in the seven years of this war.

**SEN. BEN CARDIN:** Well, Senator Rubio and I have introduced legislation—it’s passed our committee—that would hold the evidence accountable. We need to make sure that there is a proceeding started by the international community to hold him responsible. This is not the first use of chemical weapons. Secondly, Congress passed very strong sanctions against both Russia and Iran. The Syrian regime, under President Assad, cannot exist without Russia’s support and the activities of Iran. The United States, the international community need to take action against Russia and Iran for what they’re doing in Syria.

**AMY GOODMAN:** So, that’s Democratic Senator Ben Cardin of Maryland, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Glenn. If you can respond to that, and also then move into John Bolton today, first day as national security adviser? Interestingly, back in, what, 2013, at the time of the sarin attack in Syria, where I believe the U.S. said something like 1,400 people were killed, among them more than 400 children, Bolton was on Fox and said, “I think if I were a member of Congress, I would vote against an authorization to use force here. I don’t think it is in America’s interest. I don’t think we should, in effect, take sides in the Syrian conflict.” This was during the Obama years. But if you could respond to both?

**GLENN GREENWALD:** So I think it illustrates this immense irony, and also this really important and often undernoticed shift in American politics. So you have Benjamin Cardin saying “Marco Rubio and I,” Marco Rubio being one of the most pro-war, militaristic neocons in the entire United States Congress, wanting to go to war with everybody, having spent eight years accusing Obama of being weak against every U.S. adversary because he didn’t bomb enough, even though Obama bombed eight countries. So you have Marco Rubio and Benjamin Cardin, who is probably the single greatest loyalist to AIPAC in the United States Senate, maybe competing with a couple of other Republican and Democratic senators, but very high up on the list, saying, “Marco Rubio and I, Benjamin Cardin, the loyalist of AIPAC, demand that the United States government and the international community do something about Assad, do something against Russia.”

On the other hand, you have Democrats who revere Barack Obama. And what did Barack Obama do during the eight years of his presidency when it came to what was happening in Syria, or the last five or six years since the civil war in Syria began? Obama took exactly the opposite position. He said, “We’re not going to get involved in Syria. We’re not going to devote efforts to regime change.” The CIA, under Obama, did spend roughly a billion dollars a year to arm and train Syrian rebels, but nowhere near enough to actually overthrow Assad, just enough to keep the war going, because Obama was very afraid of confronting Russia in Syria, and also of the chaos that would ensue if Assad were removed. That was Barack Obama’s position. He allowed for Assad to remain in power, even after he had threatened to remove him if he crossed the red line of using chemical weapons, which Assad then crossed.

So you have this very kind of ideologically mixed debate. It doesn’t follow along traditional right-and-left lines. You have people on the right—Donald Trump, when he ran, repeatedly said the U.S. has no interest in deciding who runs Syria, that it’s not the U.S.'s business, that the U.S. can't afford to do it, that the U.S. isn’t going to make the situation better. And you have people on the left, as well, who are saying that the West should stay out of Syria. And then you have these kind of like militarists in both parties who are itching always for a new war and see this as an opportunity to start one.

Obviously, Israel wants Assad gone. The neocons in the United States want Assad gone. And so, that’s really the shift, the debate, that has emerged.

And the question is: Do you think that the neocon, militaristic foreign policy of the Democrats and the Republicans over the last 15 years, when it comes to the Middle East, has produced good or bad results?

* If you think it’s produced good results, you should be cheering Ben Cardin and Marco Rubio, demanding that Donald Trump bomb Assad out of existence and confront the Russians.
* If you think that Obama’s foreign policy was better, as I do, in this case, which was avoiding confrontation with the Russians, not trying to think the U.S. can control Syria through military action, then you ought to be opposing this kind of war drum that is now being beaten again that would lead to Donald Trump getting involved in Syria.

As far as Bolton is concerned, obviously, Bolton is a sociopath. He’s one of the most dangerous foreign policy advisers and officials of the last 15 years. People in the Bush administration who served with him and who served with people like Dick Cheney and John Yoo and Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz—actual sociopathic maniacs, as well—have said that John Bolton was probably the most unstable and dangerous person in the Bush administration. And now he’s about to move into—or he has moved into an extremely influential position, advising Trump in the White House on matters of national security. But again, it is true that there is a big movement on the right and on the left to oppose U.S. intervention in Syria, on the grounds that it’s not in the U.S. interest to try and control what’s happening in Syria. We’ll see where Bolton falls on that. I mean, one of Bolton’s primary dreams in life is to go to war with Iran. And so, opposing Assad is one way to achieve that. He’s also a loyalist to Israel, and Israel seems to want Assad gone. So it’s very dangerous right now, given who’s in power and this pro-war orthodoxy that is arising almost automatically in Washington, given how high the stakes are and how inflammatory that situation is.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** Well, Glenn, John Bolton clearly does not need a Senate confirmation for his post, but there is a Senate confirmation hearing this week regarding Mike Pompeo’s move from CIA director to secretary of state. Your sense of the impact of the Pompeo nomination in terms of foreign policy, and specifically in terms of the Middle East?

**GLENN GREENWALD:** Well, Mike Pompeo is pretty much, and long has been, a standard, traditional House Republican, under the Obama—during the Obama years. He, like Marco Rubio and lots of other Republicans, spent years claiming that Obama was weak on Putin, that he was insufficiently militaristic when it came to confronting what people like Mike Pompeo call the threat of Islamic jihadism or radicalism. He wanted to confront Assad further. When he went to the CIA, he became, you know, a Trump loyalist, but also a militarist. He was out there saying things like Russia is a grave enemy of the United States; WikiLeaks is an arm of the Russian government, and we need to crush it.

So, there’s this really bizarre reality in Washington, which is,

* on the one hand, everybody keeps claiming that Trump is really weak on Russia, that he’s a puppet of the Kremlin, that he takes orders from Vladimir Putin; and,
* on the other hand, he’s surrounded by people who are vehement militarists and anti-Russian hawks, people who spent seven years accusing Obama of being too weak in confronting Putin, and who want to confront Russia further.

And you’ve seen Trump do things to confront Putin that Obama himself refused to do:

* arming anti-Russian factions in Ukraine;
* bombing an airfield of Assad;
* now denouncing Putin specifically as being responsible for the attack;
* expelling dozens of Russian diplomats, more than any other;
* imposing sanctions on oligarchs close to Vladimir Putin.

And so this narrative that Trump is a puppet of Putin, and that the Kremlin has infiltrated the United States government and controls the U.S., is very much at odds with the reality of what the Trump administration is doing and the people who are actually running foreign policy and the things that they actually believe. And Mike Pompeo is one of the principal people who illustrates that kind of breach between the narrative and the reality.

**AMY GOODMAN:** And, of course, Pompeo, in various interviews, has talked about—it seems that he sees Syria as a place to confront Iran. And then, the whole issue of Rex Tillerson being for the nuclear deal in Iran, but President Trump—and, it looks like, Mike Pompeo—very much against.

**GLENN GREENWALD:** Yeah, I mean, I think that, you know, one of the really dangerous aspects—remember, when Rex Tillerson was nominated for secretary of state, he was held up as kind of Exhibit A as proof that Donald Trump was an agent of the Kremlin, because Rex Tillerson, as the CEO of Exxon, did a lot of business with Russia, as most oil companies obviously would. He was perceived as being friendly with the Russian government, because it was in the interest of Exxon to be friendly with the Russian government. And yet, as it turned out, Rex Tillerson was almost kind of like a moderating voice in the administration, in that he did favor the continuation of the Iran deal, which Vladimir Putin in Russia worked very closely with Barack Obama in the United States in order to facilitate. And the fact that he was booted out in exchange for Mike Pompeo, who is much more kind of maniacal when it comes to seeking confrontation in the world, including with Putin in Russia, again, I think, signifies that this administration, under Donald Trump, has moved away from Barack Obama’s posture of trying to accommodate Putin, of avoiding confrontation with him, and moving toward a posture of confronting Russia, in Ukraine and especially in Syria and when it comes to Iran.

And this is why, Amy, I think that, you know, the whole debate around Russia over the last 12 months has been so dangerous, because this climate has been created in Washington, the premise of which is that Vladimir Putin and Russia are an existential threat to the United States, that they’re our prime enemy, much like they were during the Cold War, and that we need to confront them further, and any failure on the part of Donald Trump to confront Putin militaristically and directly is proof that he did collude with the Russians or is an agent of Russia. And it’s created this incentive scheme on the part of the Trump administration to try and confront Russia even further. And that is what they’re doing. And it’s a very dangerous game to play, given that Russia and the United States still have thousands of missiles with nuclear tips aimed at each other’s cities, with very archaic, unreliable trigger systems from the Cold War still in place governing how those missiles could be used.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Glenn, we’re going to break. When we come back, we’re going south to where you are, to Brazil, to talk about this historic confrontation this weekend. The former president of Brazil, Lula, has gone to jail, although he resisted for a period of time, as many people protested outside and he holed up in the steelworkers’ union hall, where he first launched, 40 years ago. We’ll talk with you about the significance of this. And then we’ll talk about Gaza. Glenn Greenwald, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist. Stay with us.

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1. [Sometimes I wonder whether Greenwald has accepted a truce with the deep state whereby he has to espouse a stream of things that aren't true (e.g., Assad systematically poisoning his own people.) in return for being allowed continuation of his original role of providing an outlook for whistleblowers. Like Daniel Ellsberg? –FNC] [↑](#footnote-ref-1)