

Flashpoint Intelligence Review for 16 September 2018

***Flashpoint Intelligence Review** is a weekly report of the country's most important or potential disruptions to the civil society. We look at signs of political and societal instability, the situation along the U.S. Southwest border, threats to national security and critical infrastructure, and significant prepper-related reporting. This report is available each week only to subscribers.*

In this Flashpoint Intelligence Review: (3,616 words)

- *Republican candidate attacked in California*
- *Senate Intelligence Committee chair: 'No hard evidence yet' of Trump campaign 'collusion'*
- *Illegal crossings rise dramatically in August*
- *Border Patrol arrests 17 gang members illegal crossing U.S.-Mexico border*
- *App stealing browser histories and sending data to China*
- *Are Syrian rebels trying to fool the U.S. into intervening against Assad, Russia?*
- *More...*

Up Front: Another major new survey released this week shows that a large majority of Americans say they don't trust the press to honestly report what is taking place in government, the country, and around the world.

The poll, conducted by Gallup and the Knight Foundation, found that “the news media, like many other major U.S. institutions, has suffered from a decline in public confidence in recent years. A key question for the future of the news media, as well as for U.S. democracy, is whether that trust is lost for good.”

Continuing, researchers said, “Most U.S. adults, including more than 9 in 10 Republicans, say they personally have lost trust in the news media in recent years. At the same time, 69 percent of those who have lost trust say that trust can be restored.”

The biggest criticisms of the press are that reporting is inaccurate and politically biased to favor the Left.

“Sixty-nine percent of U.S. adults in the current survey say their trust in the news media has decreased in the past decade. Just 4 percent say their trust has increased, while 26 percent indicate their trust has not changed. Republicans (94 percent) and political conservatives (95 percent) are nearly unanimous in saying their trust in the media has decreased in the past decade,” researchers reported. “However, declining trust is not just confined to the political right — 75 percent of independents and 66 percent of moderates indicate they are less trusting than they were 10 years ago.”

“Moderates” and “Independents” don't account for “liberals” and “Left-leaning” Americans. Other notable findings from the survey, regarding liberal Americans:

-- Overall, 17 percent of those surveyed said they “trust most news organizations;” of that figure, just 3 percent identified as Republicans, but 33 percent identified as Democrats.

-- Sixteen percent of those surveyed said the “do not trust any news organizations,” and of that figure, 21 percent said they were Republicans while just 2 percent said they were Democrats (notably, 25 percent of Independents said they had no trust in the media).

It gets worse. This mistrust of our institutions is spreading to other vital areas such as criminal justice and intelligence gathering, and I believe this dearth of trust relates directly to the so-called ‘weaponization’ of the Justice Department, the FBI, and even the Intelligence Community by the Obama administration. Every week, we learn something new in regard to the previous administration’s undertakings to spy on the Trump campaign and then saddle the newly-elected president with what appears to be a phony allegation of “collusion” with a foreign power – Russia – to undermine American democracy. There has been some fallout from these activities; FBI and Justice Department officials involved in the plot have been fired. But no one has been charged with any crimes, even though some congressional committees and independent watchdog groups appear to have turned up evidence that the FISA court was improperly manipulated in order to approve a warrant so that the FBI could place a Trump campaign figure, Carter Page, under surveillance.

Despite the dearth of evidence nearly two years after Trump won the presidential election; despite multiple declarations by various congressional committees that they found no evidence of collusion; and despite the fact that no member of the Trump campaign has been formally charged with criminal activity related to election meddling; some media outlets continue to push the notion that said collusion did occur.

Then, of course, there was an admission by then-FBI Director James Comey that former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton improperly handled classified materials via a private, unsecured email server, though she was excused for her behavior.

It’s no wonder there remains a high degree of distrust in the media, especially on the Right. And it’s understandable that an increasing number of Americans are also disillusioned or distrustful of our judicial and intelligence communities as well.

The problem is mistrust creates an insurmountable barrier between elected leaders and the Americans they serve – one that makes it nearly impossible to convince a sizeable portion of the country (or even a majority) that certain actions must either be undertaken or not undertaken for the good of the country. And when you have widespread mistrust, it’s difficult if not impossible to get a consensus on just about anything.

The media is feeding into mistrust and unrest. When news outlets fail to do their duty and report fairly and honestly, the population rejects them, and misinformation becomes much easier to spread.

The result: Growing unrest among the populace and clamor for reforms. But because there is also no unity among various factions within the country, that makes civil conflict much more likely.

Welcome to this week's Flashpoint Intelligence Review. Thank you for subscribing, and please tell your friends how to subscribe. It's free. – *Jon Dougherty*

Priority Intelligence Requirements (PIR) include:

PIR 1: What are the new indicators of sociopolitical instability and threats to the civil society?

PIR 2: What are the new indicators of potentially disruptive activity along U.S. borders?

PIR 3: What are the new indicators of systems disruption and threats to critical infrastructure?

PIR 4: What are the new threat indicators from foreign powers?

PIR 1: What are the new indicators of sociopolitical instability and threats to the civil society?

Republican candidate attacked in California

Police in Castro Valley, Calif., arrested Farzad Fazeli last week after he attacked Republican congressional candidate Rudy Peters, who is running against incumbent Rep. Eric Swalwell, a Democrat, with a switchblade. Prior to the attack, Fazeli reportedly yelled several expletives, many of them directed at President Trump. Peters was not injured, and on Twitter, Swalwell condemned the attack. [\[source\]](#) **Analyst comment:** *The attack against Peters is the latest against Republican lawmakers and candidates by Leftists who are increasingly turning to violence to express their political differences. This is more evidence that low-intensity conflict is underway in our country, despite denials by many political leaders. Also, it's worth noting that only members of one political party – the Democratic Party – have either directly called for violence against supporters of the president and members of his government or they have dog-whistled as much to their increasingly Left-wing base.*

Senate Intelligence Committee chair: 'No hard evidence yet' of Trump campaign 'collusion'

The chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee said publicly that the panel has yet to find any evidence of “collusion” or other nefarious or illegal behavior between the 2016 Trump campaign and Russia. Sen. Richard Burr, R-N.C., added that the committee's investigation was ongoing, but that thus far nothing has been found to suggest there is

anything to the ongoing narrative in media and among political opponents of the president. “We have no hard evidence of collusion,” Burr said. “Now we’re not over. That leaves the opportunity of finding something that we don’t have today.” [\[source\]](#) ***Analyst comment:** This is the first time the Senate Intelligence Committee chief has publicly stated this, and while that may be reassuring to many supporters of the president, he did add that the panel’s investigation is ongoing. The House Intelligence Committee, by comparison, announced earlier this year it had found no evidence of criminality or collusion between Trump and Russia, though the panel’s chairman, Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Calif., has said there is evidence of it between the Hillary Clinton campaign and Russian operatives. It’s also worth noting that special counsel Robert Mueller’s separate investigation is also ongoing, though he, too, has not yet announced that he’s found any collusion evidence. One thing is clear, however: The longer these probes continue, the more divisive the country becomes.*

PIR 2: What are the new indicators of potentially disruptive activity along U.S. borders?

Illegal crossings rise dramatically in August

The number of migrants apprehended while crossing illegally along the U.S.-Mexico border in August surged to a new high following a three-month decline. Trump administration officials noted that the surge was along the boundary and was not isolated to just a few locations. “During August, Border Patrol agents apprehended 37,544 migrants who illegally crossed the border between ports of entry. This is up from 22,293 in August 2017 — an increase of more than 68 percent, according to the August Southwest Border Migration reported published Wednesday afternoon by U.S. Customs and Border Protection officials. The number of arrests is also up 20 percent from July 2018 when agents apprehended 31,299 migrants,” notes the source below. Department of Homeland Security Press Secretary Tyler Q. Houlton said in a written statement, “August Southwest Border Migration numbers show a clear indicator that the migration flows are responding to gaps in our nation’s legal framework. While the overall numbers are consistent with an expected seasonal increase, the number of family units along the Southwest border increased 38 percent – 3,500 more than July and the highest August on record.” [\[source\]](#) ***Analyst comment:** Thus far, the additional deployment of Border Patrol, Guard troops, and other resources added by the Trump administration in order to staunch the illegal flow of migrants across the border have had little real effect. It’s unclear how much more effective other border security measures, including the president’s requested wall, would be, though it seems like a substantial physical barrier would do some good. Still, the ‘draw’ continues to be the level of economic opportunity in the United States versus those in migrants’ home countries. Unless or until their own countries can provide stable and growing economies and are able to offer citizens gainful employment – or until U.S. employers are adequately punished for hiring illegal aliens – then the migrant waves will continue to move northward.*

Border Patrol arrests 17 gang members illegal crossing U.S.-Mexico border

The U.S. Border Patrol arrested 17 members of dangerous gangs including MS-13 and the 18th Street Gang over the past several days in the Rio Grande sector. The arrests come as Border Patrol agents face increasing dangers along the border including being shot at from the Mexican side. The arrests of gang members come as the number of illegal crossings rose to new records in recent months. [\[source\]](#) **Analyst comment:** *Despite the Trump administration's best efforts to shore up border security, which has included stepped-up internal enforcement, legal action against 'sanctuary' cities, calling up some National Guard forces, and additional border enforcement personnel. Nothing seems to be staunching the flow of migrants, however. Part of the reason is the sheer length of the border. Another reason is because there are still too many loopholes in U.S. immigration law. Construction of the president's border wall has begun and he is likely to get more funding for it in the upcoming budget. Even an imposing physical barrier won't stop all illegal immigration and importation of illegal drugs, but it's likely to be much more effective than anything else tried so far.*

PIR 3: What are the new indicators of systems disruption and threats to critical infrastructure?

Tesla Model S can be hacked in seconds

A team of cybersecurity researchers at KU Leuven University in Belgium presented a paper at the Cryptographic Hardware and Embedded Systems conference in Amsterdam showing a technique for subverting the encryption of the wireless key fobs used by Tesla's Model S luxury sedans, using about \$600 worth of radio and computing equipment, hackers were able to read signals remotely and wirelessly from a nearby Tesla owner's fob. In fewer than two seconds, hackers managed to bypass encryption security and steal the associated car. [\[source\]](#) **Analyst comment:** *It seems as though Tesla can't catch a break. Besides questionable behavior by CEO Elon Musk, missed production quotas and financial problems, the company now faces a software challenge. But Tesla's hacking issue is part of a larger threat to all vehicles as they increasingly become wired to wireless.*

App stealing browser histories and sending data to China

A top-selling app in Apple's Mac App Store was fooling users and stealing their browser histories then sending them to China. The app, Adware Doctor, was the highest-grossing app in the company's "paid utilities" category. The app claimed to be a tool for keeping users' Mac computers safe while serving as a pop-up ad blocker as well, which sold for \$4.99. The app downloaded browser histories including websites that users searched for then sent the data to servers in China that belonged to the app maker. [\[source\]](#) **Analyst comment:** *The Chinese are the most active country engaging in espionage against the U.S. and the West, employing a 'whole of nation' approach – the use of government, military, and private-sector mechanisms – to spy. That's what makes it so difficult to defend against. China's big advantage is that while its Internet is very suppressed and regulated, Western society is much more open, giving Beijing far more opportunities to soak up data.*

Trump signs order approving sanctions against foreign election meddlers

President Trump signed an executive order last week that authorized U.S. sanctions against foreign nations who interfere in U.S. elections. The order not only covers interference with campaign infrastructure, it also covers foreign distribution of fake news and propaganda, according to National Security Adviser John Bolton. The order instructs the director of national intelligence's office to regularly assess whether foreign election interference is occurring, asks the Departments of Justice and Homeland Security for reports when election infrastructure is targeted by foreign espionage, and other responses. "We felt it was important to demonstrate the president has taken command of this issue, that it's something he cares deeply about — that the integrity of our elections and our constitutional process are a high priority to him," Bolton said. [\[source\]](#) **Analyst comment:** *This is the surest sign yet that the Trump administration is on board with those who advocate a tougher response to 'meddling' in U.S. electoral processes, but we would caution that threatening sanctions won't stop the great powers or even some regional powers from doing what they've done for decades – try to influence the direction of U.S. policy via influence operations. These operations may become more covert, if that's possible, but they're not going away. Still, signing this order is Trump's way of publicly warning our adversaries that such operations carry some additional risk.*

PIR 4: What are the new threat indicators from foreign powers?

Are Syrian rebels trying to fool the U.S. into intervening against Assad, Russia?

Several Russian media outlets, nearly simultaneously, began broadcasting "breaking news" warnings earlier this claiming that rebels occupying the last anti-government stronghold in Idlib Province, Syria, are preparing to stage chemical weapons attacks in order to blame them on the Syrian government. The Russian Ministry of Defense claimed that the anti-Assad rebels were preparing "fake footage of chemical attacks," while the Russian Center for Syrian Reconciliation announced that the "fake footage of chemical attacks" was expected to be delivered to various TV channels and Western journalists before the end of the day Tuesday, Official Russian military sources reported that two containers with chlorine-based toxic substance Jisr al-Shugur, a key al-Qaeda-held city in Idlib Province. Meanwhile, The Wall Street Journal confirmed Tuesday that the Trump administration is now having [discussions](#) with the U.K. and France regarding plans for a potential third round of coordinated strikes against Syria if regime forces utilize chemical weapons during the pending assault on Idlib. The Russian MoD's claims of a pending staged "chemical provocation" were criticized by U.S. National Security Adviser John Bolton. "That has to be, in the history of propaganda in the 20th and 21st centuries, one of the most outrageous claims that I can think of," he said. [\[source\]](#) **Analyst comment:** *It doesn't make any sense for Syria to use chemical weapons in its assault on the last rebel stronghold in the country, and it would certainly not be in Moscow's or Damascus' interest to draw in U.S. and allied forces. It does make sense, however, for the Syrian rebels to want to draw in the United States on their behalf. Russia has long-term interests in Syria, and so does the United States, albeit for different reasons. Russia sees its Mediterranean port access in Syria as strategically important,*

while Washington's interests in Syria begin and end with Israel and Iran. So, it would be in Russia's, and certainly Syria's, best interests to ensure the quickest and easiest end to the seven-year-old civil war. Needlessly drawing a U.S. military response will not serve Russia's or Syria's objectives, let alone those of Iran. If the rebels stage a chemical attack – and the U.S. is aware that the attack was staged but intervenes anyway – the White House was going to do all along in pursuit of its own agenda, which may not yet be clear.

About the editor: *Jon Dougherty has 30 years' worth of experience as a journalist, political analyst, and national and domestic security policy researcher. He has a BA in Political Science, an MA in National Security Studies and Intelligence Analysis, and spent 15 years in the military with overseas deployments to Japan and Afghanistan.*