

New exposé by Seymour Hersh: Turkey staged gas attack to provoke US war on Syria

By Patrick Martin
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In a lengthy article published Sunday by the *London Review of Books*, investigative journalist Seymour Hersh reports that the sarin gas attack on a Damascus suburb on August 21, 2013 was actually carried out by Syrian “rebel” forces acting at the behest of Turkey, for the purpose of providing a pretext for a US attack on Syria.

The gas attack killed many hundreds of people in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta, and the Obama administration and the corporate-controlled US media immediately blamed the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad for the atrocity. The *New York Times*, in particular, published a lengthy analysis by its military “expert,” C. J. Chivers, which purported to show, based on rocket trajectories, prevailing winds and other technical factors, that the gas shells could only have been fired from Syrian army artillery positions.

For several weeks, the Ghouta attack became the pretext for a warmongering campaign by the White House and the US and European media. Obama threatened immediate air strikes, claiming that the Syrian government had crossed a “red line” against the use of chemical weapons, which he had laid down in 2012.

The US president then abruptly reversed himself and announced he would seek congressional approval first, only to call off any overt military action in favor of a deal brokered by Russian President Vladimir Putin in which Assad agreed to the supervised dismantling of his chemical weapons stockpiles.

By Hersh’s account, “Obama’s change of mind had its origins at Porton Down, the defence laboratory in Wiltshire. British intelligence had obtained a sample of the sarin used in the 21 August attack and analysis demonstrated that the gas used didn’t match the batches known to exist in the Syrian army’s chemical weapons arsenal. The message that the case against Syria wouldn’t hold up was quickly relayed to the US joint chiefs of staff... As a consequence the American officers delivered a last-minute caution to the president, which, in their view, eventually led to his cancelling the attack.”

The US military leadership also knew that White House claims that there could be no other source for the sarin gas than the Syrian army were false. “The American and British intelligence communities had been aware since the spring of 2013 that some rebel units in Syria were developing chemical weapons,” Hersh reports. “On 20 June analysts for the US Defense Intelligence Agency issued a highly classified five-page ‘talking points’ briefing for the DIA’s deputy director, David Shedd, which stated that al-Nusra maintained a sarin production cell...”

Hersh quotes extensively from this US government document, which the office of the US director of national intelligence now denies ever existed:

“Al-Nusrah Front’s relative freedom of operation within Syria leads

us to assess the group’s CW [chemical weapons] aspirations will be difficult to disrupt in the future... Turkey and Saudi-based chemical facilitators... were attempting to obtain sarin precursors in bulk, tens of kilograms, likely for the anticipated large scale production effort in Syria.”

Hersh notes that members of al-Nusra were arrested in Turkey last May in possession of two kilograms of sarin. They were charged in a 130-page indictment with “attempting to purchase fuses, piping for the construction of mortars, and chemical precursors for sarin.” All have since been released pending trial, or had charges dropped altogether.

Those arrests followed chemical weapons attacks in Syria in March and April 2013, where a UN investigation found evidence implicating the Syrian “rebels.” One source told Hersh, “Investigators interviewed the people who were there, including the doctors who treated the victims. It was clear that the rebels used the gas. It did not come out in public because no one wanted to know.”

The “no one,” of course, was the US government, its European allies, and its UN stooges—as well as their political apologists in the media and the pseudo-left groups such as the International Socialist Organization that were either openly campaigning for military intervention in Syria or justifying it by portraying the US-financed “rebels” as the bearers of a democratic revolution.

When the August 21 attack took place, Obama ordered the Pentagon to draw up plans for bombing Syria, and, as a former intelligence official told Hersh, “the White House rejected 35 target sets provided by the joint chiefs of staff as being insufficiently ‘painful’ to the Assad regime.”

The US bombing plan ultimately envisioned “a monster strike” involving two wings of B-52 bombers equipped with 2,000-pound bombs, as well as Tomahawk cruise missiles fired from submarines and surface warships.

Hersh continues: “The new target list was meant to ‘completely eradicate any military capabilities Assad had,’ the former intelligence official said. The core targets included electric power grids, oil and gas depots, all known logistic and weapons depots, all known command and control facilities, and all known military and intelligence buildings.”

The bombing attack drawn up at the direction of the Obama White House would have itself constituted a war crime, causing thousands if not tens of thousands of casualties and crippling Syria as a functioning society.

Hersh then passes on to his most important revelation: that US officials believed the Turkish government, or its intelligence agencies, had instigated the gas attack in Ghouta.

He cites concerns among US military and intelligence leaders that “there were some in the Turkish government” who supported “dabbling with a sarin attack inside Syria—and forcing Obama to make good on his red line threat.”

This was reinforced by the British military intelligence finding on the type of gas used in Ghouta. This included a message to the Americans: “We’re being set up here.” This was followed by a further message about the Ghouta attack that “a senior official in the CIA sent in late August: ‘It was not the result of the current regime [i.e., Assad]’. UK & US know this.”

Hersh suggests that the bitter controversy over the attack on a US consulate and CIA mission in Benghazi, Libya in 2012, which killed four Americans including the ambassador to Libya, Christopher Stevens, is directly linked to the infighting over Syria.

It has been widely reported that the CIA organized the shipment of Libyan weapons stockpiles from Benghazi to the Syrian rebels. Hersh cites a “highly classified annex” to the report of the Senate committee that investigated the Benghazi attack.

This document “described a secret agreement reached in early 2012 between the Obama and [Turkish] Erdogan administrations... By the terms of the agreement, funding came from Turkey, as well as Saudi Arabia and Qatar; the CIA, with the support of MI6, was responsible for getting arms from Gaddafi’s arsenals into Syria. A number of front companies were set up in Libya, some under the cover of Australian entities. Retired American soldiers, who didn’t always know who was really employing them, were hired to manage procurement and shipping. The operation was run by David Petraeus, the CIA director who would soon resign when it became known he was having an affair with his biographer.”

According to Hersh, after the Benghazi fiasco, the CIA was pulled out, but the Libya to Turkey to Syria pipeline continued, possibly including “manpads”—portable surface-to-air missile launchers, which the Obama administration had opposed supplying the rebels out of concern that they would be used to attack civilian airliners.

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan tasked Turkey’s National Intelligence Organization (MIT) with engineering a provocation that would give a pretext for direct US military intervention. Hersh quotes his source: “‘The MIT was running the political liaison with the rebels, and the Gendarmerie handled military logistics, on-the-scene advice and training—including training in chemical warfare,’ the former intelligence official said. ‘Stepping up Turkey’s role in spring 2013 was seen as the key to its problems there... Erdogan’s hope was to instigate an event that would force the US to cross the red line. But Obama didn’t respond in March and April.’”

Two sources described to Hersh a working dinner during Erdogan’s visit to Washington in May 2013 in which Obama, Secretary of State John Kerry and National Security Adviser Thomas Donilon met Erdogan, foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu and MIT chief Hakan Fidan. Erdogan appealed for Obama to attack Syria, telling him “your red line has been crossed.” Obama then pointed at Fidan and said, “We know what you’re doing with the radicals in Syria.”

Hersh cites a “US intelligence consultant” who describes a classified briefing for Martin Dempsey, chairman of the joint chiefs, and Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, prepared before the August 21 gas attack. The briefing noted “the acute anxiety” in the Erdogan regime over the military setbacks for the Syrian rebels and warned that the Turkish leadership felt “the need to do something that would precipitate a US military response.”

In the period following the gas attack, Hersh’s former intelligence official source explained, communications intercepts and other data supported the suspicion that Turkey had organized the Ghouta attack. “We now know it was a covert action planned by Erdogan’s people to push Obama over the red line,’ the former intelligence official said. ‘They had to escalate to a gas attack in or near Damascus when the UN inspectors’—who arrived in Damascus on 18 August to investigate the earlier use of gas—‘were there. The deal was to do something spectacular. Our senior military officers have been told by the DIA and other intelligence assets that the sarin was supplied through Turkey—that it could only have gotten there with Turkish support. The Turks also provided the training in producing the sarin and handling it.’”

Only a week ago, evidence surfaced that supports the credibility of Hersh’s report. A video was posted on YouTube of a meeting of Turkish officials, including Fikan, in which the intelligence chief suggests that Turkish agents should mount an attack on a Muslim shrine inside Syria to provide a pretext for a Turkish invasion of the country.

Hersh’s account is his second long exposé in four months of the “false flag” gas attack in Damascus. Both articles were published in the British journal because no major US newspaper or magazine will any longer publish material from the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist.

Beginning with his reporting of the My Lai massacre in Vietnam for the *New York Times*, Hersh has specialized in developing sources in the US military and intelligence apparatus, frequently those with policy differences with the current administration in Washington. Hersh left the *Times* for *Newsday*, and then wrote for the *New Yorker* for many years.

Both the *New Yorker* and the *Washington Post* refused to publish his first report on the Ghouta gas attack, which charged that the sarin attack had been carried out by Syrian rebels in the al-Nusra Front, forcing Hersh to find a British publisher for his account. The US press was largely silent on that report, and it has so far blacked out the latest exposure.

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