

Saudi Oil, Money Bribes and the Killing of Osama Bin Laden

Interview with Seymour Hersh

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Seymour Hersh is an American investigative journalist who is the recipient of many awards, including the Pulitzer Prize for his article exposing the My Lai massacre by the U.S. military in Vietnam. More recently, he exposed the U.S. government's abuse of detainees in the Abu Ghraib prison facility.

Hersh's new book, [The Killing of Osama Bin Laden](#), is a corrective to the official account of the war on terror. Drawing from accounts of a number of high-level military officials, Hersh challenges a number of commonly accepted narratives: that Syrian president Bashar al-Assad was responsible for the Sarin gas attack in Ghouta; that the Pakistani government didn't know Bin Laden was in the country; that the late ambassador J. Christopher Stevens was at the U.S. consulate in Benghazi in a solely diplomatic capacity; and that Assad did not want to give up his chemical weapons until the U.S. called on him to do so.



Ken Klippenstein: In the book you describe Saudi financial support for the compound in which Osama Bin Laden was being kept in Pakistan. Was that Saudi government officials, private individuals or both?

Seymour Hersh: The Saudis bribed the Pakistanis not to tell us [that the Pakistani government had Bin Laden] because they didn't want us interrogating Bin Laden (that's my best guess), because he would've talked to us, probably. My guess is, we don't know anything really about 9/11. We just don't know. We don't know what role was played by whom.

KK: So you don't know if the hush money was from the Saudi government or private individuals?

SH: The money was from the government ... what the Saudis were doing, so I've been told, by reasonable people (I haven't written this) is that they were also passing along tankers of oil for the Pakistanis to resell. That's really a lot of money.

KK: For the Bin Laden compound?

SH: Yeah, in exchange for being quiet. The Paks traditionally have done security for both Saudi Arabia and UAE.

KK: Do you have any idea how much Saudi Arabia gave Pakistan in hush money?

SH: I have been given numbers, but I haven't done the work on it so I'm just relaying. I know it was certainly many—you know, we're talking about four or five years—hundreds of millions [of dollars]. But I don't have enough to tell you.

KK: You quote a retired U.S. official as saying the Bin Laden killing was “clearly and absolutely a premeditated murder” and a former SEAL commander as saying “by law we know what we’re doing inside Pakistan is homicide.”

Do you think Bin Laden was deprived of due process?

SH: [Laughs] He was a prisoner of war! The SEALs weren't proud of that mission; they were so mad it was outed...I know a lot about what they think and what they thought and what they were debriefed, I will tell you that. They were very unhappy about the attention paid to that because they went in and it was just a hit.

Look, they've done it before. We do targeted assassinations. That's what we do. They understood—the SEALs—that if they were captured by the Pakistani police authorities, they could be tried for murder. They understood that.

KK: Why didn't they apprehend Bin Laden? Can you imagine the intelligence we could have gotten from him?

SH: The Pakistani high command said go kill him, but for chrissake don't leave a body, don't arrest him, just tell them a week later that you killed him in Hindu Kush. That was the plan.

Many sections, particularly in the Urdu-speaking sections, were really very positive about Bin Laden. Significant percentages in some areas supported Bin Laden. They [the Pakistani government] would've been under great duress if the average person knew that they'd helped us kill him.

KK: How did it hurt U.S./Pakistan relations when, as you point out in your book, Obama violated his promise not to mention Pakistan's cooperation with the assassination?

SH: We spend a lot of time with [Pakistani] generals Pasha and Kayani, the head of the army and ISI, the intelligence service. Why? Why are we so worried about Pakistan? Because they have [nuclear] bombs. ... at least 100, probably more. And we want to think that they're going to share what they know with us and they're not hiding it.

We don't really know everything we think we know and they don't tell us everything... so when he [Obama] is doing that, he's really messing around with the devil in a sense.

... He [Bin Laden] had wives and children there. Did we ever get to them? No. We never got to them. Just think about all the things we didn't do. We didn't get to any of the wives, we didn't do much interrogation, we let it go.

There are people that know much more about this and I wish they would talk, but they don't.

KK: You write that Obama authorized a ratline wherein CIA funneled arms from Libya into Syria and they ended up in jihadi hands. [According to Hersh, this operation was coordinated via the Benghazi consulate where U.S. ambassador Stevens was killed.] What was Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's role in this given her significant role in Libya?

SH: The only thing we know is that she was very close to Petraeus who was the CIA director at the time ... she's not out of the loop, she knows when there's covert ops. ... That ambassador who was killed, he was known as a guy, from what I understand, as somebody who would not get in the way of the CIA. As I wrote, on the day of the mission he was meeting with the CIA base chief and the shipping company. He was certainly involved, aware and witting of everything that was going on. And there's no way somebody in that sensitive of a position is not talking to the boss, by some channel.

KK: In the book you quote a former intelligence official as saying that the White House rejected 35 target sets provided by the Joint Chiefs as being insufficiently painful to the Assad regime. (You note that the original targets included military sites only—nothing by way of civilian infrastructure.) Later the White House proposed a target list that included civilian infrastructure.

What would the toll to civilians have been if the White House's proposed strike had been carried out?

SH: Do you really think that at any time this is discussed? You know who's sanest on this: Dan Ellsberg. When I first met Dan, it was way early—in '70, '71, during the Vietnam War. I think I met him before the Pentagon Papers were around. I remember him telling me that he asked that question at a meeting while planning the war [regarding B-52 targets] and nobody had even looked at it.

You really don't get a very good hard, objective look. You can see a movie in which they seem to do it, but that's not really so.

I don't know if [regarding Syria] they looked at collateral damage and noncombatants, but I do know that in wars in the past, that's never been a big issue. ... you're talking about the country that dropped the second bomb on Nagasaki.

KK: In a recent [interview](#) with the Atlantic, Obama characterized his foreign policy as "Don't do stupid shit."

SH: I read the Jeff Goldberg piece...and it of course drove me nuts, but that's something else.

KK: As you point out in your book, Obama originally wanted to remove Assad. Isn't that the definition of stupid? The power vacuum that would ensue would open Syria up to all kinds of jihadi groups.

SH: God knows I can't tell you why anybody does anything. I'm not inside their head. I can tell you that the same question was asked by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs—Dempsey—which is why I was able to write that story about their going, indirectly, behind his [Obama's] back because nobody could figure out why.

I don't know why we persist on living in the Cold War, but we do. Russia actually did a very good job. They not only did the bombing that was more effective than what we do, I think that's fair to say. Russia also did stuff that was sort of more subtle and more interesting: they renewed the Syrian army. They took many major units of the Syrian army offline, gave them R&R and re-equipped them. Got new arms, got a couple weeks off, then they came back, got more training and became a much better army.

I think in the beginning, there's just no question, we wanted to get rid of Bashar. I think they misread the whole resistance. Wikileaks is very good on this...there's enough State Department documents that show that from 2003 on, we really had a policy—not very subtle, not violent, but millions of dollars given to opposition people. We certainly were not a nonpartisan foreign government inside Syria.

Our policy has always been against him [Assad]. Period.

One of the things that comes across just in the current stories about all the travails we're having about ISIS allegedly running all these terror teams in Brussels and in the suburbs of Paris... it's very clear, ironically, that one of the things France and Belgium (and a lot of other countries) did was after the Syrian civil war began, if you wanted to go there and fight there in 2011-2013, 'Go, go, go... overthrow Bashar!'

So they actually pushed a lot of people to go. I don't think they were paying for them but they certainly gave visas. And they would spend four or five months, come back and do organized crime and get in jail and next thing you know they're killing people. There's a real pattern there.

I do remember when the war began in 2003, our war against Baghdad, I was in Damascus working for The New Yorker then and I saw Bashar and one of the things he told me, he said, 'Look, we've got a bunch of radical kids and if they want to go fight, if they want to leave the mosque here in Damascus and go fight in Baghdad, we said fine! We even gave them buses!'

So there's always been a tremendous, Why does America do what it does? Why do we not say to the Russians, Let's work together?

KK: So why don't we work closer with Russia? It seems so rational.

SH: I don't know. I would also say, why wasn't the first door we knocked on after 9/11, Russia's? They just had a terrible 10-year war with Chechnya. Believe me, the Chechen influence in the Sunni world in terms of jihadism is strong. For example I've been told by my friends in the intelligence community that al-Baghdadi (who runs ISIS) is surrounded by a lot of guys with experience in Chechnya. A lot of people involved in that operation did.

So who knows the most about jihadism? You look at it from the Russian point of view—we never like looking at things from other people's point of view.

KK: In the book you quote a Joint Chiefs of Staff adviser who said that Brennan

told the Saudis to stop arming the extremist rebels in Syria and their weapons will dry up—which seems like a rational request—but then, you point out, the Saudis ramped up arms support.

Seymour Hersh: That's true.

KK: Did the U.S. do anything to punish the Saudis for it?

SH: Nothing. Of course not. No, no. I'll tell you what's going on right now ... al Nusra, certainly a jihadist group... has new arms. They've got some tanks now—I think the Saudis are supplying stuff. They've got tanks now, have a lot of arms, and are staging some operations around Aleppo. There's a ceasefire and even though they're not part of it, they obviously took advantage of the ceasefire to resupply. It's going to be bloody.

KK: Just to be clear, the U.S. hasn't done anything to punish or at least disincentivize the Saudis from arming our enemies in Syria?

SH: Quite the contrary. The Saudis and Qatar and the Turks put money into those arms [sent to Syrian jihadis].

You're asking the right questions. Do we say anything? No. Turkey's Erdogan has played a complete double game: for years he supported and accommodated ISIS. The border was wide open—Hatay Province—guys were going back and forth, bad guys. We know Erdogan's deeply involved. He's changing his tune slightly but he's been deeply involved in this.

Let me talk to you about the sarin story [the sarin gas attack in Ghouta, a suburb near Damascus, which the U.S. government attributed to the Assad regime] because it really is in my craw. In this article that was this long series of interviews [of Obama] by Jeff Goldberg...he says, without citing the source (you have to presume it was the president because he's talking to him all the time) that the head of National Intelligence, General [James] Clapper, said to him very early after the [sarin] incident took place, "Hey, it's not a slam dunk."

You have to understand in the intelligence community—Tenet [Bush-era CIA director who infamously said Iraqi WMD was a "slam dunk"] is the one who said that about the war in Baghdad—that's a serious comment. That means you've got a problem with the intelligence. As you know I wrote a story that said the chairman of the Joint Chiefs told the president that information the same day. I now know more about it.

The president's explanation for [not bombing Syria] was that the Syrians agreed that night, rather than be bombed, they'd give up their chemical weapons arsenal, which in this article in the Atlantic, Goldberg said they [the Syrians] had never disclosed before. This is ludicrous. Lavrov [Russia's Foreign Minister] and Kerry had talked about it for a year—getting rid of the arsenal—because it was under threat from the rebels.

The issue was not that they [the Syrians] suddenly caved in. [Before the Ghouta attack] there was a G-20 summit and Putin and Bashar met for an hour. There was an official briefing from Ben Rhodes and he said they talked about the chemical weapons issue and what to do. The issue was that Bashar couldn't pay for it—it cost more than a billion bucks. The Russians said, 'Hey, we can't pay it all. Oil prices are going down and we're hurt for money.' And so, all that happened was we agreed to handle it. We took care of a lot of the costs of it.

Guess what? We had a ship, it was called the Cape Maid, it was parked out in the Med. The Syrians would let us destroy this stuff [the chemical weapons]... there was 1,308 tons that was shipped to the port...and we had, guess what, a forensic unit out there. Wouldn't we like to really prove—here we have all his sarin and we had sarin from what happened in Ghouta, the UN had a team there and got samples—guess what?

It didn't match. But we didn't hear that. I now know it, I'm going to write a lot about it.

Guess what else we know from the forensic analysis we have (we had all the missiles in their arsenal). Nothing in their arsenal had anything close to what was on the ground in Ghouta. A lot of people I know, nobody's going to go on the record, but the people I know said we couldn't make a connection, there was no connection between what was given to us by Bashar and what was used in Ghouta. That to me is interesting. That doesn't prove anything, but it opens up a door to further investigation and further questioning.

This interview was lightly edited for readability.

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