

Hersh: Trump Ignored Intel Before Bombing Syria

In an exclusive interview, veteran investigative reporter Seymour Hersh discusses his new report that President Trump bombed a Syrian military airfield in April despite warnings that U.S. intelligence had found no evidence that the Assad regime used a chemical weapon

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*Below is the full transcript of the interview with **Seymour Hersh** on his report about the western allegations on Syria.*

AARON MATÉ: It's the Real News. I'm Aaron Maté. When the US bombed a Syrian military airfield in April, the White House said US intelligence had confirmed the Assad regime used chemical weapons in the town of Khan Shaykhun. Well a new report says the opposite is true. Veteran journalist **Seymour Hersh** reports US intelligence actually warned president Trump it had no evidence that the Syrian military had used sarin gas.

Hersh writes that Russia had warned the U.S. about a Syrian military strike before Khan Shaykhun was bombed, and he says that bombing set off secondary explosions that released poisonous gases on the ground. Seymour Hersh's article, "Trump's Red Line," was published by the German newspaper [Die Welt]. Earlier he joined me to discuss it. Welcome Sy..

SEYMOUR HERSH: Hello.

AARON MATÉ: Thank you for joining us. You're reporting that Trump ordered the attack on the Syrian military airfield, despite US intelligence doubts that it was in fact Assad who had used chemical weapons in Idlib. Can you explain what that intelligence was?

SEYMOUR HERSH: It was a pre-planned mission. Very simply, it was a secret mission. One of the reasons that a lot of people, even in Syria and Russia didn't know what was going on, it was a mission, we had, the Russians ... Look, first of all you have to understand Russia, Syria, America, we work very closely together on bombing attacks and operations inside the country. I know some people find that surprising. By the way we also, a part of our American support team, we have planes from the UK, the Brits, the Aussies. Canadians also fly some missions.

They're all guided and monitored by a process known as deconfliction, which just simply means that everybody who moves any place lets one central body which is a group, a group we control, an office we control, a computer center, computers, we all know where everybody is. There's not only not been a crash since the bombing began. Russia began bombing almost it will be two years ago this fall. A lot of bombing going on, constantly on

ISIS targets and al-Nusra targets, et cetera, rebel targets that we consider to be our enemy, which they are.

So it's monitored. This is a special [inaudible 00:02:36] because Russia's, Russian intelligence service gave our intelligence service some information about a secret high level meeting taking place in this town. It's a pretty large city. It was pretty bombed. A lot of bombings been going on there. There's a lot of bombing. It's all in Idlib Province. This is, Idlib Province, this is the last outpost, the last sort of holding place outside of Raqqa for the rebel outfits, the crazies, the jihadists, the sulafists. Not so much, al-Nusra's very big there. ISIS is very big in Raqqa but those are the last two places.

Bashar is going to hold on. He's going to hold the country together. He's going to start a rebuilding program. Whether we like him or don't like him, that's a reality. The Russians have been effective in bombing in a way that we have not been effective in Afghanistan and in the war in Iraq. They're quite effective which is also a blow to our ego. If you remember when Russia began bombing, **President Obama** said it'll be a quagmire for them. Well it hasn't been. They pulled, they pulled Bashar ... I guess the cliché is "up by his bootstraps" or whatever. He's now in a dominant position.

There was, we knew about a meeting. The word was from the Russians to us, our intelligence services, was if you have a guy there, you're buying somebody, we, you, like to pay money to get information or other reasons, if you have somebody going to that meeting on April 4th, in this town, in a command and control center, don't let him go. Find a way to get him out gracefully. And so that was kept very secret.

So the planning was done for days because it involved, the zone is called, it's at the operational zone six, really is what they call it. It's a Russia operational zone. Syria operational zone. We do not operate there, militarily, with planes, bombing. That's done by the other services. It was a Syrian plane, an upgraded Syrian plane with a special Russian bomb, laser guided bomb. Russia, unlike us, Russia's, they don't spend the money we do on laser guided stuff. The Russians tend to be cherry about it but this is going to be laser guided. They brought in a better version of an old MIG called an SU24 Syrian jet with a very senior Syrian General piloting.

All this was pre-planned and staffed. The target was pre-planned. It was done early in the morning because command and control centers have a lot of people around. There's shops there where they supply medicines and food. They, al-Nusra will keep control of the population by having goods, by having cooking oil and propane gas and medicines and foods and disinfectants, which are based in chlorine for washing bodies. There, in that society, as you all should know, when you get killed in a bombing raid in the Muslim world, you have to wash the body and bury it right away. That's a big reason for the command control centers to have control.



Victims of Khan Shaykhun suspected chemical attack transported (Source: [One News Page](#))

They have the right, they have the right soaps and cleaners for this kind of work. All chlorine based by the way. Anyway, so everybody knew what the target was. The president was told when the incident happened, and the other side began talking about, "We know nothing about what really happened because no independent unit has been, no UN unit has been allowed to go into the area. It's too dangerous. You could lose your head easy." And not just emotionally. We mean literally.

There's been no real primary ... I have no idea what happened. The other side claims sarin was used. It's very possible there was some local sarin there. I just don't know, but the bomb that was dropped was not sarin. There was no intent by Syria to do anything other than destroy, early in the morning, a meeting of the leadership of the local jihadist groups there. They had a meeting about what to do.

AARON MATÉ: So here's my question. If Russia warned the U.S. beforehand about this pending strike by the Syrian military on that rebel location, why hasn't Russia come out and said, "Hey, you know, we even warned the U.S. about this so they knew in advance that the strike was coming?" Why hasn't Russia said that because it would further their argument that they, that the U.S. acted erroneously in targeting Assad?

SEYMOUR HERSH: Well, do you really want the other side to know you have inside information on a meeting? I mean, just think it through. If you have a covert, if you're running people, you're running agents, intelligence agents inside, let's say al-Nusra. If you're running operations inside their operations, why would you want to talk about it before or after? You don't. You wouldn't. Just like, you don't think we ... We clearly have had people in strange places and have learned stuff in advance. We do not talk about it, even after the fact. There's not reason to talk about it, because at this point you jeopardize those people that are there, although it's pretty obvious that once the bombing took place, there was this secret meeting. A lot of people know somebody betrayed it, but why would you want to talk publicly about it? That doesn't surprise me as being such an anomaly.

AARON MATÉ: Right. Okay. Those cleaning agents that you mentioned were present in that building, are you suggesting that that might have been the source of the chemicals that killed and wounded so many people?

SEYMOUR HERSH: I don't know anything about what happened there. There's been no independent investigation. The one thing we know about is that the power and water was pretty much knocked out in that city. It's a city, at one time, of 48,000. A large city. Big farming community. We know that, we do know from academic studies by a number of people ... There's a guy named **Sam Howler** has written about it, out of Yale who's living in Beirut now. We know that the one way you maintain control of Idlib Province, which has a lot of independently minded people, not everybody there is interested in Sharia law. Many are just ... It's a farming community. We know that command and control centers, which was targeted also have foodstuffs and other stuff and the understanding was that there either was a two story building that was a target. There was a basement there. Very likely there would be a lot of stuff supplied there, stored there, including, plastic containers full of cooking oil.

You may know under a lot of heat, in an explosion, plastic develops into something that in World War I was known as phosgene, another poisonous chemical. Any cloud can be ... We all know from fires, that people die from smoke inhalation. Any cloud can be very damaging. The strike took place in April, one of those days in April which apparently is very not unusual in that region, that area, northern area of Syria ... They were close to 60, 70 miles away from the the Turkish border, Hatay Province. You get a lot of inversions, a lot of cold air, holding clouds down.

Once you bombed, there were, we have ... We saw some bomb damage, I haven't seen it but I've been told that there were, a cloud was formed because there were probably munitions also in the basement. Nobody is quite sure what. The Russians had put up a drone before that for a few days to just see the pattern of life there, what was going on. It's called POL. They monitor what, who goes in and out, when the stores open. I think that, my guess is, I don't know this ... One reason for making the strike so early in the morning was before shops nearby.

There was, I understand there was a shop in which you could buy batteries, a shop in which you could buy fabrics. There was a shop where you could get food stores, so there was a lot of stuff they had to blow up. You generated a cloud full of a lot of stuff. Chlorine because chlorine disinfectant is used for the bodies, other stuff. Do I know if there were the precursors for sarin? I would doubt it. Sarin's pretty lethal. You have to be pretty sophisticated, but there could have been.

Is it possible for some of that stuff to melt and form a less, not a ... I did a book about chemical and biological warfare way back in '68, a few thousand years ago and that was my first book. One thing about military grade sarin. It doesn't take a lot to wipe out a population. You're talking about a small container would wipe out, you know, hundreds if not a thousand, couple thousand people. It's very lethal. Within minutes.

This wasn't the most advanced form of sarin if there was sarin. But we really don't know. That's not the issue. The issue in my story, is not to try and explain what happened but to explain what did not happen. What did not happen is Syria did not drop a sarin bomb that morning. It was known to everybody in the command. Period.

AARON MATÉ: Okay. Let's talk about how the White House dealt with this. Can you talk about the internal deliberations inside the White House? Did **President Trump** receive intelligence that some analysts believed it was inconclusive, or it was conclusive on the fact that Assad had not dropped the weapon? Did Trump know that?

SEYMOUR HERSH: The story's all about the briefing he got. He did get told beforehand, a day beforehand. There's no evidence to support what you want to believe. There were photographs shown by the ambassador, Ambassador Haley, were beamed up. As I said, I started to say earlier, I didn't finish the thought. There was no electricity or water there. We bombed it so much. It wasn't until a team, they call them white helmets, a rescue team. They're first responders who respond primarily in rebel held territory. That's the best thing to say about them.

There's been reports about them being supported by us and the United Kingdom, but they're certainly there in the rebel territories. They came and they had generators and they had water tanks too I gather. By ten, eleven o'clock, YouTube stuff was going up. I don't know anything about the origin of the photographs, about their ... I just don't know. All I

know is they began to show some photographs of people suffering badly. I don't know. There were reports, they were taken to hospitals. Some places, they were showing signs of chlorine poisoning. Other signs were what they called near sarin or sarin neurotoxic.

Sarin causes you to have a bunch of things happen. Eyeballs dilate, you defecate. There's a whole series of symptoms from sarin. Even light form of sarin, but a lot of people survived it, which makes the sarin that was used not the most potent.

AARON MATÉ: So on Trump's decision making, he basically tells his advisors, that no matter what, we're going to launch a strike so I want some options. Can you walk us through that?

SEYMOUR HERSH: You're dealing now with the reason I'm writing this story, and the reason why people wanted me to write this story even though I had a hell of a time getting it published. The president ignored the intelligence. The intelligence was there, I think he made up his mind, they believed the people involved. Some of them believe he made up his mind right away when he saw photographs whose providence, whose chain of custody was not known. We don't know where they came from or when they came from. They could have been from that day. I'm not an expert on it. I'm just telling you nobody knew where they came from.

If sarin was used, it wasn't, but they knew it wasn't from the bomb, so there's a lot of confusion but the one point they made is that sarin, Syria did not drop a sarin bomb. He didn't care. He'd seen the photographs. That's basically what happened. So they gave him a series ... He didn't ask for options. They gave him a series of options for them. The most extreme being decapitation. Kill **Bashar Assad**, assassinate him. Two, put the bomb, or bomb every place where he lived.

The first one was do nothing. The second was what they called the gorilla option, bang your chests, hit a target that's not very significant and that's what they did. They warned the planes that did the bombing took off from an airbase a few hundred kilometers, less than that, away, near homes, farther north, northwest. They bombed that airbase after telling the Syrians and the Russians what they were going to do in advance and minimized the damage there.

He got to do some bombing. He got to go on television. He got to get good ratings. He got to look like a serious leader, which is what happens when you, when in America we tend rally around our captain. A lot of people were very troubled by the fact that he just overlooked the intelligence. The purpose of me writing the story really is nothing more than to say presidents should not do that. That's not what you do. You listen to the people who give you the intelligence. That gets muddled in a lot of issues because a lot of people see the story as somehow reflecting not as badly as they want the world to reflect on Syria.

If you remember, the cry immediately was that Bashar had gassed his own people again with sarin as he allegedly did four years earlier. Then the Russians chimed in by denying it. Here you had Syria which is obviously very much hated by most Americans I guess. The polls probably show that. We don't like Bashar Assad, and so for the president it was the easy win. He'd bomb somebody nobody likes. From the press reaction today, it's clear that not liking Syria and not liking Russia for the mainstream press is much more important than what the president did which always surprises me but maybe it shouldn't.

AARON MATÉ: Sorry. On this point, you report about how the White House did some briefings for the media and push on them this line that Assad had definitely used chemical weapons and they were just responding. You write about, very critically about how the media went along with it without asking some basic questions.

SEYMOUR HERSH: What else, what else do I do for a living? Pick on the media because they don't ask basic questions? Because they harden up stories? Look, you know, you're a reporter. You want to be on page one. I worked at the New York Times for years. The drive to get on page one is pretty acute.

AARON MATÉ: Can you explain though what happened there in terms of the vague and qualified language that the White House used but still got turned into front page news on the New York Times?

SEYMOUR HERSH: All that happened was the White House never said it was an official intelligence report. They said it was intelligence information because there was no report that said Syria did it. They had to go and ... They were, the briefer, to his credit ... I don't know who he was. Everybody does but they have a name, I'll go along with that. I don't, it's okay. The briefer was very careful to say this is intelligence information. He did not say it's the conclusion or the recommendation or the assessment. They didn't even bother with that. He then had a lot of qualifiers. He said, we believe, we suspect, we, we did say we assess here and there. He never, if you actually looked at it, he never really made the claims, and the reporters in generally ... I picked on the New York Times but they did the same thing everybody else did. They're the best paper we have and I always think, I always think, I always like to hold them to the highest possible standard.

Most of the time, they meet that standard. This is a one off. When you get a crisis like this, it seems to me, not matter what, no matter how much you believe or don't believe the president, you can call him a liar everyday but when there's a crisis like this, everybody gloms at any word that's said and just immediately rush into print, put in the headlines. It's too bad because it leads to a lot of sort of vague reporting and inaccurate reporting. The paper's hard mode is that ... They even went to the point they suspected that there could be a Syrian sarin depot, sarin processing point at the airfield.



OPCW Training Course (Source: UN)

Well let me tell you something about the real stuff, the military stuff, which of course the United Nations knows more about. If you remember after the incident in 2013, the alleged sarin attack by Syria, a group called the OPCW, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, it's a UN group, they're responsible for monitoring something called the

Chemical Weapons Convention. They took out, oh I think 14 months they spent taking out all of the chemical weapons known to be in Syria's arsenal, including all of the gases and chemicals that when melded together make sarin and nobody knows more about the sarin that's in the Syrian arsenal than that group, the prohibition group, the OPCW.

They know whether, there's a big difference between military grade sarin, which had additives in it for toxicity, lethality, to make it easier to handle and what we call kitchen sarin. We know that al-Nusra for example, there's been intelligence reporting, I've written about it. I mean I actually have the reports. There's been intelligence reporting since earlier, early in '03, June of '03, June of '13 rather, and we know that it goes back even further with al Qaeda that there's been a great interest in chemical weapons including nerve gas, by the jihadists.

AARON MATÉ: My last question. This attack on the Syrian air base and what Trump is doing right now in Syria, do you think Trump is escalating military conflict inside Syria and toward Assad and Iran?

SEYMOUR HERSH: Doesn't matter what I think. Only matters what I know. I don't watch cable television anymore because reporters and politicians go on and they begin every time they have a panel, they ask the panel a question, in the nightly, those shows and the first two words everybody says is "I think." I don't care what somebody thinks about politics. I don't know what he's doing. I don't know. I don't think many of us do. I think probably Trump doesn't either. So there we are.

AARON MATÉ: We'll leave it there. I want to thank Seymour Hersh, legendary investigative journalist. His latest piece for [Die Welt] is "Trump's Red Line." Thank you Sy.

SEYMOUR HERSH: Tell your boss hello.

AARON MATÉ: Will do. And thank you for joining us on The Real News.

Seymour (Sy) Myron Hersh born April 8, 1937, is an American Pulitzer Prize winning investigative journalist and author based in Washington, DC. He is a regular contributor to The New Yorker magazine on military and security matters. His work first gained worldwide recognition in 1969 for exposing the My Lai Massacre and its cover-up during the Vietnam War, for which he received the 1970 Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting. His 2004 reports on the US military's mistreatment of detainees at Abu Ghraib prison gained much attention. Hersh received the 2004 George Polk Award for Magazine Reporting given annually by Long Island University to honor contributions to journalistic integrity and investigative reporting. This was his fifth George Polk Award, the first one being a Special Award given to him in 1969.

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