

Media Manipulation: Seymour Hersh Unearths More Lies on Syria

By [Jonathan Cook](#)

Global Research, April 06, 2014

jonathan-cook.net

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Investigative journalist Seymour Hersh has a second fascinating essay that rewrites the official record of the sarin gas attack on Ghouta, near Damascus, in August last year. As usual, Hersh uses his sources in the US security establishment to throw light on what really took place. The bottom line: Turkey was almost certainly the party responsible for the attack, hoping it would force Obama to honour his threatened "red line" if Assad used chemical weapons. Was the Assad regime to be brought down by a US military campaign, Turkey assumed it would be able to turn Syria into a client state.

Like the earlier article, this one will probably gain very little attention. It is published in the obscure UK literary publication the London Review of Books. Presumably like last time, Hersh could not find a mainstream publication willing to take it – and I'm guessing that, like last time, these stunningly important revelations will be shunned by the liberal media. Instead, it will be consigned to the memory hole, along with so much other evidence of western crimes against humanity. Pundits and analysts will continue to tell us confidently that Assad carried out the Ghouta attack, oblivious to Hersh's findings.

The reason the New York Times, the Washington Post and the Guardian have been studiously ignoring Hersh's investigations on this, it seems to me, is that they show the Obama administration's foreign policy is just as criminal as the previous Bush White House's.

Here is a summary of Hersh's main findings:

* Obama's sudden climbdown on his threatened military strike against Assad was in part forced on him by a chemical analysis of samples of the sarin used in Ghouta, which showed that its signature did not match that of the stockpiles held by the Assad regime.

* Despite US claims, the White House knew that the Syrian rebels had developed chemical weapons production facilities. UN investigators thought the Syrian opposition were the most likely culprits behind earlier chemical weapons attacks, in April and May 2013.

The American and British intelligence communities had been aware since the spring of 2013 that some rebel units in Syria were developing chemical weapons. 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.

* The military strike being prepared by the White House after the Ghouta attack was, far

from small-scale, as secretary of state John Kerry intimated, modelled on the shock and awe campaign against Saddam Hussein.

Under White House pressure, the US attack plan evolved into 'a monster strike': two wings of B-52 bombers were shifted to airbases close to Syria, and navy submarines and ships equipped with Tomahawk missiles were deployed. 'Every day the target list was getting longer,' the former intelligence official told me. ... 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 US developed a back channel of weapons-smuggling to the Syrian rebels, known as the rat line, in cooperation with Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, using the "liberated" arsenals from Libya following the west's ousting of Gaddafi.

The rat line, authorised in early 2012, was used to funnel weapons and ammunition from Libya via southern Turkey and across the Syrian border to the opposition. Many of those in Syria who ultimately received the weapons were jihadists, some of them affiliated with al-Qaida. ... 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. ... 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.

* The job of the US consulate in Libya - the one where ambassador Christopher Stevens was killed - was to provide logistical assistance with the rat line. That was the reason the consulate was attacked.

'The consulate's only mission was to provide cover for the moving of arms,' the former intelligence official, who has read the annex, said. 'It had no real political role.' ... Washington abruptly ended the CIA's role in the transfer of arms from Libya after the attack on the consulate, but the rat line kept going. 'The United States was no longer in control of what the Turks were relaying to the jihadists,' the former intelligence official said. Within weeks, as many as forty portable surface-to-air missile launchers, commonly known as manpads, were in the hands of Syrian rebels. On 28 November 2012, Joby Warrick of the Washington Post reported that the previous day rebels near Aleppo had used what was almost certainly a manpad to shoot down a Syrian transport helicopter. 'The Obama administration,' Warrick wrote, 'has steadfastly opposed arming Syrian opposition forces with such missiles, warning that the weapons could fall into the hands of terrorists and be used to shoot down commercial aircraft.'

* By late 2012 the US had assessed that the rebels were losing the civil war, and started to downgrade their involvement in the rat line. That left Turkey's Recep Erdogan the main loser.

The American decision to end CIA support of the weapons shipments into Syria left Erdoğan exposed politically and militarily. 'One of the issues at that May

summit was the fact that Turkey is the only avenue to supply the rebels in Syria,' the former intelligence official said. ... Without US military support for the rebels, the former intelligence official said, 'Erdoğan's dream of having a client state in Syria is evaporating and he thinks we're the reason why. When Syria wins the war, he knows the rebels are just as likely to turn on him - where else can they go? So now he will have thousands of radicals in his backyard.'

* Erdogan therefore became focused on exploiting the "red line" Obama had set on Assad's use of chemical weapons to force the US to attack Syria.

Erdoğan knew that if he stopped his support of the jihadists it would be all over. The Saudis could not support the war because of logistics - the distances involved and the difficulty of moving weapons and supplies. Erdoğan's hope was to instigate an event that would force the US to cross the red line. But Obama didn't respond [to the previous chemical weapons attacks] in March and April.' ... We now know it was a covert action planned by Erdoğan'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. ... Barring a major change in policy by Obama, Turkey's meddling in the Syrian civil war is likely to go on.

www.lrb.co.uk/2014/04/06/seymour-m-hersh/the-red-line-and-the-rat-line

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