

Washington Accuses Moscow of ‘Sowing Doubt’ over Narrative of Assad’s Culpability in Chemical Attack

By [RT News](#)

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While Moscow continues to call for a thorough and independent probe into the Syrian chemical attack, the White House has “declassified” an open-sourced report that pins the blame on Damascus while accusing Moscow of “sowing doubt” over the US narrative.

“We have gone back through and looked at all the evidence we can and it’s very clear who planned this attack, who authorized this attack and who conducted this attack itself,” Defense Secretary **James Mattis** said Tuesday adding that he has “no doubt” that Assad was responsible.

On April 4, toxic gas, believed to be sarin, killed dozens of civilians in Khan Shaykhun in the Idlib province of Syria. At the time of the attack, the town was under the control of Tahrir al-Sham, formerly known as the al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Nusra Front.

Witness accounts on social media in the immediate aftermath pinned the blame on an airstrike by Syrian government forces. Reports from the scene also captured civilians foaming at the mouth, with witnesses saying a white smoke spread across the town. The chemical attack was immediately used by the US as a pretext to launch its first unilateral retaliatory strike on a Syrian air base.

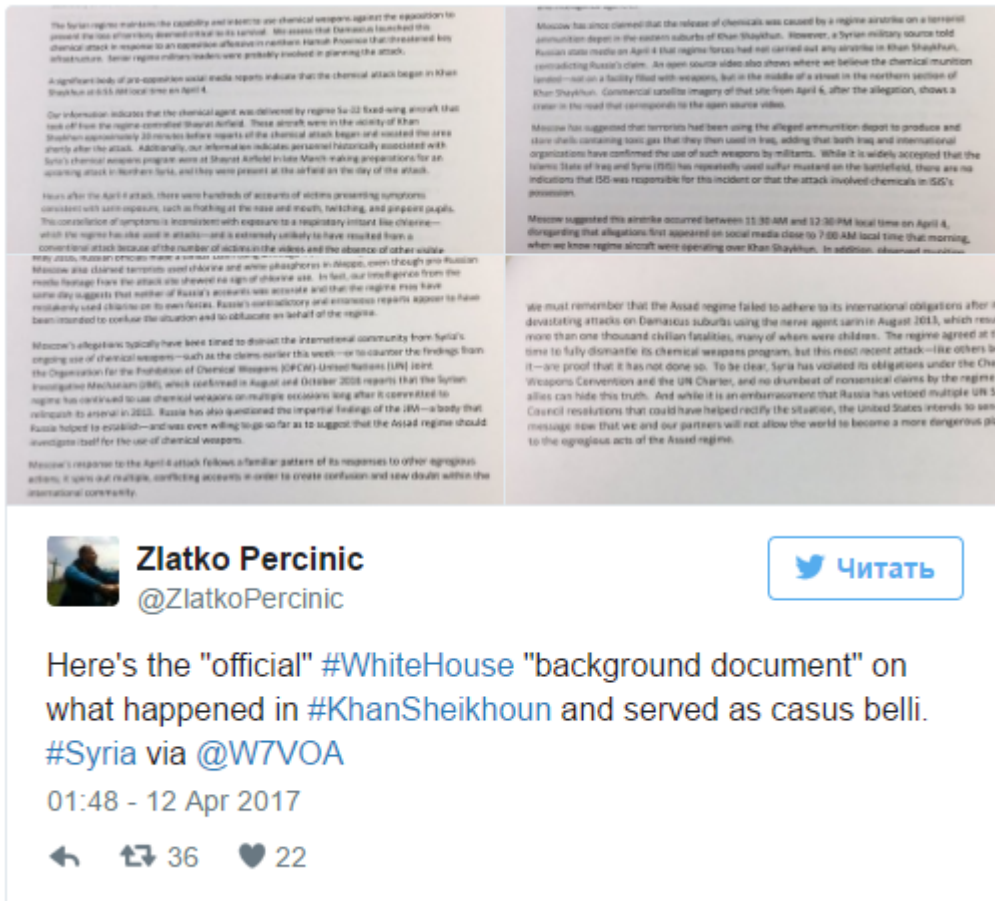
Both Moscow and Damascus called for a thorough and independent probe to establish the full picture of the tragedy. Russia believes that Syrian planes bombed a terrorist munitions depot which contained, among other arms, toxic agents that remained under jihadist control following the UN-supervised destruction of Damascus’ sarin stockpiles in 2013.

The US, however, continues to insist that it could only be the Syrian air force that used the chemical weapon under the orders of **President Bashar Assad**, dismissing any alternative scenarios. Mattis refused to share the evidence the Pentagon used to reach its verdict, while the White House noted that it had plenty of social media and open-source material to back its hardcore conclusions.

“The information we have downgraded and declassified includes a wide body of open-source material, both social media accounts. It includes open-source videos, reporting, open-source imagery, et cetera, as well as our own geospatial intelligence, our signals intelligence, and it includes physiological samples of victims of the attack,” a senior White House official said during the [briefing](#) Tuesday.

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An official “background” document about the attack released by the White House accused Moscow of disseminating “conflicting accounts in order to create confusion and sow doubt within the international community.” Roughly half of the 4-page paper was devoted to “refuting the false narratives” vaguely attributed to “Moscow” or “Russian state media.”



The tweet features a large image of a document with the following text:

The Syrian regime maintains the capability and intent to use chemical weapons against the opposition to prevent the free election deemed critical to its survival. It is assessed that Damascus launched the chemical attack in response to an opposition offensive in northern Hama. Previous attacks threatened key infrastructure. Some regime military leaders were probably involved in planning the attack.

A regime-run body of an opposition social media reports indicate that the chemical attack began in Khan Sheikhoun at 0:55 local time on April 4.

Our information indicates that the chemical agent was delivered by regime Su-22 fixed-wing aircraft that took off from the regime-controlled airport in Hama. These aircraft were in the vicinity of Khan Sheikhoun approximately 20 minutes before reports of the chemical attack began and visited the area shortly after the attack. Additionally, our information indicates personnel historically associated with Syria's chemical weapons program were at Sheikha Al-Jadid in late March making preparations for an upcoming attack in northern Syria, and they were present at the airfield on the day of the attack.

Hours after the April 4 attack, there were hundreds of accounts of victims presenting symptoms consistent with sarin exposure, such as frothing at the nose and mouth, hiccups, and pinpoint pupils. This constellation of symptoms is consistent with exposure to a respiratory irritant like chlorine— which the regime has also used in attacks—and is extremely unlikely to have resulted from a conventional attack because of the number of victims in the villages and the absence of other visible injury signs. Russian officials have also stated that the attack was not a conventional attack.

Moscow also claimed terrorists used chlorine and other poisons in Aleppo, even though one Russian media outlet from the attack also showed no sign of chlorine use. In fact, our intelligence from the same day suggests that neither of Russia's accounts was accurate and that the regime may have mistakenly used chlorine on its own forces. Russia's contradictory and erroneous reports appear to have been intended to confuse the situation and to deflect attention from the regime.

Moscow's allegations typically have been used to divert the international community from Syria's ongoing use of chemical weapons—such as the claims earlier this week—or to counter the findings from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) United Nations (UN) Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM), which confirmed in August and October 2016 reports that the Syrian regime has continued to use chemical weapons on multiple occasions long after it committed to relinquish its arsenal in 2013. Russia has also questioned the impartial findings of the JIM—a body that Russia helped to establish—and was overwilling to go so far as to suggest that the Assad regime should investigate itself for the use of chemical weapons.

Moscow's response to the April 4 attack follows a familiar pattern of its responses to other aggression victims: it spins out multiple, conflicting accounts in order to create confusion and sow doubt within the international community.

Moscow has since claimed that the release of chemicals was caused by a regime airstrike on a terrorist ammunition depot in the eastern suburbs of Khan Sheikhoun. However, a Syrian military source told Russian state media on April 4 that regime forces had not carried out any airstrikes in Khan Sheikhoun, contradicting Russia's claim. An open source video also shows where we believe the chemical munition landed—on a facility filled with weapons, but in the middle of a street in the northern section of Khan Sheikhoun. Commercial satellite imagery of that site from April 4, after the allegation, shows a crater in the road that corresponds to the open source video.

Moscow has suggested that terrorists had been using the alleged ammunition depot to produce and store shells containing toxic gas that they then used in Iraq, adding that both Iraq and international organizations have confirmed the use of such weapons by militants. While it is widely accepted that the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has repeatedly used sulfur mustard on the battlefield, there are no indications that ISIS was responsible for this incident or that the attack involved chemicals in ISIS's possession.

Moscow suggested this airstrike occurred between 11:30 AM and 12:30 PM local time on April 4, disregarding that allegations first appeared on social media close to 7:00 AM local time that morning, when we know regime aircraft were operating over Khan Sheikhoun. In addition, observed munitions

we must remember that the Assad regime failed to adhere to its international obligations after its devastating attacks on Damascus suburbs using the nerve agent sarin in August 2013, which result more than one thousand civilian fatalities, many of whom were children. The regime agreed at the time to fully dismantle its chemical weapons program, but this most recent attack—the others but it—are proof that it has not done so. To be clear, Syria has violated its obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention and the UN Charter, and no number of erroneous claims by the regime or allies can hide this truth. And while it is an embarrassment that Russia has vetoed multiple UN Security Council resolutions that could have helped rectify the situation, the United States intends to send a message now that we and our partners will not allow the world to become a more dangerous place to the egregious acts of the Assad regime.

Based on “pro-opposition social media reporting” the White House is “confident” that an SU-22 that took off from a Damascus-controlled airfield dropped “at least one munition” containing chemical weapons. After further investigation of “open source” imagery Washington firmly dismissed the scenario of a conventional munition hitting jihadists’ chemical stockpile as “inconsistent.”

The White House also noted that the symptoms suffered by the victims of the chemical attack were consistent with sarin exposure. According to the US “assessment” neither Islamic State (IS, formerly ISIS/ISIL) or other terrorists in the area has access to sarin.



While Mattis rejected unsubstantiated claims that Russia knew of the Syrian chemical attack in advance, the White House accused Moscow of trying to cover the attack and “sow doubt” over the US narrative.

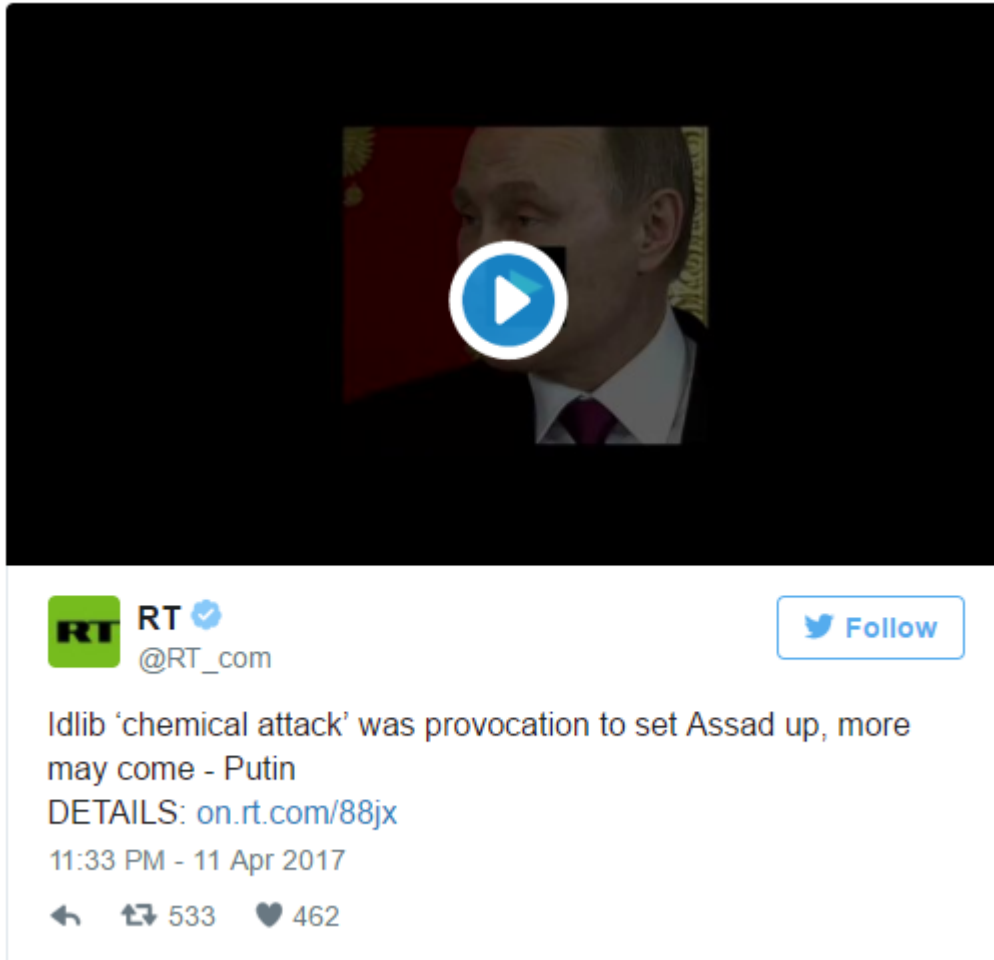
“I think it’s clear that the Russians are trying to cover up what happened there...To cover up Syrian regime culpability in a chemical weapons attack,” the White House official noted.

Russia however never denied or attempted to hide the incident, but on the contrary and from the very outset, tried to get an international team of UN experts to visit the site of the alleged chemical strike to get an expert conclusion. Moscow also insisted, prior to US retaliatory strikes on Friday, that specialists visit the Shayrat Airfield – the base bombed by the US.

The US-presented evidence and logic were dismissed by **Colonel-General Sergey Rudskoy**, who questioned the “*authenticity*” of information concerning the attack circulating in the media. He said that the course of events reconstructed through the means of social media evidence raised “*serious doubts*” not only among the Russian military but also “*among many respected experts and organizations.*”

The Syrian Army has no chemical weapons and has “*no need*” to use any such arms, as it has already been conducting a successful offensive on militant positions, the Russian General Staff official has said. Rudskoy also noted that after the 2013 OPWC mission which supervised the surrender of Damascus’ chemical stockpiles; terrorists are the only actors which have access to Syria’s remaining chemical agents.

“Out of 12 facilities used for storing and producing chemical weapons, ten were destroyed as confirmed by the OPCW experts. The Syrian government has no access to the remaining two facilities as they are located on a territory controlled by the so-called opposition,” Rudskoy said at a briefing, adding that it remains unclear if the chemical weapons stored at these two facilities had been destroyed.



Earlier on Tuesday, Russian **President Vladimir Putin** called the attack on Khan Shaykhun a “*false flag*” operation aimed at discrediting the Assad government and warned of similar incidents in the future.

“These actions are aimed at creating a new pretext for accusing the government of Syria of more chemical weapons attacks and provoking more strikes by the US,” added Rudskoy. He said militants were transporting toxic agents into several parts of Syria, including Eastern Ghouta, the site of the 2013 chemical weapons incident.

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