

# Seymour Hersh exposes US government lies on Syrian sarin attack

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Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist Seymour Hersh has published an article demonstrating that the US government and President Barack Obama knowingly lied when they claimed that the Syrian government had carried out a sarin gas attack on insurgent-held areas last August.

Hersh's detailed account, based on information provided by current and former US intelligence and military officials, was published Sunday in the *London Review of Books*. The article, entitled "Whose sarin?," exposes as a calculated fraud the propaganda churned out day after day by the administration and uncritically repeated by the media for a period of several weeks to provide a pretext for a military attack on the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The article also reveals sharp differences within the state apparatus over the launching of an air war that one high-level special operations adviser said would have been "like providing close air support for [Al Qaeda-affiliated] al-Nusra."

In the end, internal differences over the launching of direct military action, compounded by massive popular opposition to another unprovoked war in the Middle East, led the administration to pull back and accept a Russian plan for the dismantling of Syrian chemical weapons. This was followed by the opening of talks with Syria's main ally in the region, Iran.

Hersh's account of systematic manipulation of intelligence aimed at dragging the American people into yet another war based on lies underscores the fact that Obama's retreat in Syria by no means signaled a turn away from militarism. Rather, it reflected a provisional change in tactics in relation to US hegemonic aims in the oil-rich Middle East, and a decision to focus more diplomatic and military resources on Washington's drive to isolate and contain what it considers more critical antagonists: Russia and, above all, China.

"Barack Obama," Hersh writes, "did not tell the whole story this autumn when he tried to make the case that Bashar al-Assad was responsible for the chemical weapons attack near Damascus on 21 August. In some instances, he omitted important intelligence, and in others he presented assumptions as facts. Most significant, he failed to acknowledge something known to the US intelligence community: that the Syrian army is not the only party in the country's civil war with access to sarin, the nerve gas that a UN study concluded—without

assessing responsibility—had been used in the rocket attack.

"In the months before the attack, the American intelligence agencies produced a series of highly classified reports, culminating in a formal Operations Order—a planning document that precedes a ground invasion—citing evidence that the al-Nusra Front, a jihadi group affiliated with Al Qaeda, had mastered the mechanics of creating sarin and was capable of manufacturing it in quantity.

"When the attack occurred, al-Nusra should have been a suspect, but the administration cherry-picked intelligence to justify a strike against Assad."

Hersh cites Obama's nationally televised speech on September 10 in which he categorically asserted, "We know the Assad regime was responsible" for a sarin gas attack on Eastern Ghouta that reportedly killed hundreds of people. In that speech, Obama claimed that US intelligence had tracked Syrian government preparations for the attack for several days before it occurred.

As Hersh documents, citing his intelligence and military sources (who are not named for obvious reasons), the US government had no advance warning of the sarin attack. Instead, it used intelligence on a previous Syrian nerve gas dry run to concoct a scenario and present it as real-time intelligence of the August 21 attack.

Hersh cites one of his sources as comparing this falsification of intelligence with the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident, in which the Johnson administration reversed the sequence of National Security Agency intercepts to justify the launching of bomb attacks on North Vietnam.

Perhaps even more damning than the "cherry-picking" and falsification of intelligence was the decision to ignore and conceal a series of intelligence reports the previous spring and summer that had concluded the Western-backed and jihadi-dominated "rebels" had the capability to acquire and use sarin. These included CIA analyses on which the White House had been briefed and an Operations Order ordered by the Joint Chiefs of Staff that concluded US ground troops sent in to seize chemical weapons sites might confront "rebel" forces "capable of attacking an American force with sarin because they were able to produce the lethal gas."

Hersh's revelations provide insider proof of what was already

obvious to any impartial and moderately informed observer—that the war propaganda about a Syrian government gas attack was a tissue of lies intended to provide a pretext for military aggression and regime-change.

The Syrian regime had no reason to carry out such an attack at the time. It was militarily routing the Sunni “rebel” forces, which were hated and despised by most of the population and had descended into looting and indiscriminate killing of Christians and Shiites. The attack occurred only a few miles from the Damascus headquarters of United Nations weapons inspectors who had been invited into the country by Assad and were beginning to investigate previous gas attacks. In May, Carla del Ponte, a member of the UN Independent Commission of Inquiry on Syria, had reported “strong, concrete” evidence that those earlier attacks had been carried out by Western-backed forces.

The Al Qaeda-linked “rebels,” however, and their American, French, British and Saudi sponsors, had every reason to carry out such an atrocity, of which they were eminently capable, in order to justify direct Western intervention and avert defeat.

The Obama administration was never able to produce a single concrete piece of evidence proving that the Assad regime had carried out the gas attack.

Hersh’s article provides a devastating exposure of the American media, which jumped at the chance once again to pump out government war propaganda. Within hours of last August’s sarin attack, both the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* were publishing editorials proclaiming as fact the Syrian government’s guilt and demanding a military response. Well-bribed television “journalists” were promoting the government line and seeking to shift public opinion behind a new war.

Hersh notes that nine days after the sarin attack, the White House invited a select group of Washington reporters and handed them a “government assessment” that he describes as a “political argument to bolster the administration’s case against the Assad government.” Excluded was “at least one often critical reporter, Jonathan Landay, the national security correspondent for McClatchy Newspapers.”

Particularly criminal was the role of the *New York Times*. The “newspaper of record” reprised its efforts to promote and legitimize government lies in the run-up to the Iraq War, once again reporting as fact, without any independent investigation, all of the administration’s claims.

Hersh cites a *Times* article that purported to prove, based on an analysis of the flight path of two spent rockets believed to have carried sarin, that the shells had to have been fired from a Syrian army base more than nine kilometers from the target. He quotes Theodore Postol, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor of technology and national security who has advised the US naval chief of operations, calling the *Times* piece “totally nuts” because the range of the rockets was unlikely to have been more than two kilometers.

Giving expression to the deeply undemocratic character of the whole operation, the *Times*’ Roger Cohen wrote in a column the day of the White House meeting with the press: “War fatigue in the United States and Britain is not an excuse for the surrender of a commodity of enduring strategic importance—national credibility—to an ephemeral one—public opinion.”

Rounding out the chorus baying for war were the pseudo-left organizations such as the International Socialist Organization, which took the government’s claims as good coin and grist for their pro-war mill.

Hersh’s article completely vindicates the position taken by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International.

As the WSWS wrote on August 22: “The unsubstantiated charges that the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad carried out a chemical weapons attack outside Damascus killing large numbers of civilians have all the hallmarks of a staged provocation aimed at provoking Western intervention.”

Four days later, we wrote: “Ten years after the US government went to war in Iraq on the basis of lies about nonexistent weapons of mass destruction, a no less grotesque provocation is being concocted by Paris, London and Washington to justify a new war of aggression against Syria.

“The allegations that the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad carried out mass chemical weapons attacks last Wednesday in Ghouta, near Damascus, lack any credibility.”

The WSWS published dozens of articles and statements over the ensuing five weeks analyzing the war drive and exposing the imperialist aims behind the demagoguery and lies. This record makes clear that the WSWS and the world socialist movement for which it speaks is the unique voice of the international working class in the struggle against war.



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