

# US claims of Syria nerve gas attack: The anatomy of a lie

Patrick Martin  
13 April 2017

The claims by the US government that the Syrian government carried out a chemical weapons attack on the town of Khan Sheikhoun, in southern Idlib province on April 4, have been backed by a week of nonstop media propaganda, as well as uncritical support, across the official political spectrum, for the missile strike ordered by President Trump against a Syrian base.

The charges against the Syrian government are absurd and unbelievable. The campaign mounted by the Trump administration, the intelligence agencies, the Pentagon and the Democratic Party demonstrates complete contempt for the intelligence of the people, and a belief that they can lie with impunity, because nothing they say will be challenged by the servile American media.

No lie is too great. If the US intelligence agencies declared tomorrow that Putin was responsible for an outbreak of tornadoes or a hurricane striking the US Gulf Coast, by means of a secret Russian program to alter the weather, their claims would be presented as the gospel truth by NBC, CBS, ABC, CNN and Fox, while the *New York Times* would publish a four-page “investigative” report, complete with maps and charts provided by the CIA.

When a policeman shoots down a working-class youth, it takes months, sometimes years, to complete the investigation. In the case of the Syrian events, it required only minutes for the US government to affix blame and three days to carry out the punishment, firing 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles at a Syrian airbase.

In analyzing a crime, there are three factors to investigate: motive, means and opportunity. In relation to the nerve gas attack on Khan Sheikhoun, neither the Russians nor the Syrians had any reason to carry out the attack. The Assad regime had nothing to gain from the use of nerve gas on a town that was not a significant military target. Moreover, carrying out such an attack would inevitably provoke US military retaliation, something that Assad, on the brink of complete victory in the protracted civil war, would hardly want to risk.

The Syrian rebels and the US government, on the contrary, had motive, means and opportunity. The rebels would view any loss of life as a small price to pay to bring about US intervention in the civil war which they were losing. They have stockpiles of nerve gas and have shown before, in the staged attack on Ghouta in 2013 which killed many more people, a willingness and ability to carry out such a provocation.

Just as importantly, the rebels and their CIA sponsors had opportunity. According to a detailed analysis of the Khan Sheikhoun attack by the respected US physicist and missile expert Theodore Postol, emeritus professor at MIT, the physical evidence strongly suggests that the delivery system for the nerve gas was a mortar shell placed on the ground, not a bomb dropped from a warplane. That

means the attack was almost certainly carried out by those who controlled the ground around Khan Sheikhoun, the rebel forces linked to Al Qaeda.

Postol’s analysis is in reply to the four-page document issued Tuesday by the National Security Council, the White House body that coordinates US foreign and military policy, purporting to prove the Syrian government’s responsibility for the alleged sarin gas attack.

The American media described the NSC document as an unusually detailed and factual account, making use of US intelligence material that was declassified for that purpose. The *Washington Post* said the US government was “unveiling intelligence discrediting Russia’s attempts to shield its ally, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, from blame in last week’s deadly chemical attack.”

The *Post* went on to characterize the “declassified findings” as “part of a coordinated broadside against Russia” that was supplemented by “new detail of what U.S. officials believe they know about the chemical weapons strike on Khan Sheikhoun,” offered by White House officials who briefed the press on the document.

The *New York Times* said the document “contains declassified United States intelligence on the attack and a rebuttal of Moscow’s claim that insurgents unleashed the gas to frame the Syrian government.” There were similar reports in the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the television and cable news networks, all of them presenting the intelligence agency accounts as unchallengeable fact.

These media reports are not only demonstrably false, they are absurd. Any serious examination of the NSC document reveals it to be a series of bare assertions without any supporting evidence.

The White House document closely resembles the assessment issued by the US intelligence “community”—the 17 agencies that comprise the massive apparatus of spying, political provocation and assassination for American imperialism—on alleged Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election.

It is filled with phrases like “The United States is confident” ... “We have confidence in our assessment” ... “We assess” ... “Our information indicates” ... “It is clear” ... and so on. In other words, “this is the US government speaking, trust us.”

There is one reference to “signals intelligence,” without any elaboration. This is followed by the declaration, standard in all official statements citing information allegedly supplied by the spy agencies: “We cannot publicly release all available intelligence on this attack due to the need to protect sources and methods ...” Once again, “trust us.”

The NSC report makes the first attempt by the US government to attribute a motive to the alleged Syrian gas attack, claiming, “We

assess that Damascus launched this chemical attack in response to an opposition offensive in northern Hamah Province that threatened key infrastructure. Senior regime military leaders were probably involved in planning the attack.”

No evidence is cited to back these bare assertions, which raise obvious questions. Why should the Syrian government suddenly resort to sarin gas in a town of no obvious military significance, when it did not use nerve gas—and was never accused of doing so—during the critical battles of the past year in Aleppo? Government forces reconquered the rebel-held portions of that city, the country’s largest population and business center before the civil war, in a bloody struggle conducted without the use of chemical weapons.

Even when the forces of President Bashar al-Assad were under attack in his home province of Latakia, where the local population, from the Alawite religious minority which is his main base of support, faced the threat of extermination if the Sunni Islamists were victorious, they did not resort to chemical weapons to beat back the rebel offensive.

The *New York Times* sought to address this problem by citing “senior White House officials, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss the declassified intelligence report.” These officials “asserted that the Syrian government, under pressure from opposition forces around the country and lacking enough troops to respond, used the lethal nerve agent sarin to target rebels who were threatening government-held territory.”

This account makes even less sense than the NSC report, since the alleged nerve gas attack did not “target rebels who were threatening government-held territory,” but civilians in a town in rebel territory, including, as media reporters and Trump administration officials have repeatedly emphasized, large numbers of women and children. In other words, the American media is simply piling lie upon lie, without even taking the time to make the new lies consistent with the old ones.

From a military standpoint, the resort to chemical weapons in Khan Sheikhouh is pointless. From a political standpoint, it is counterproductive, to say the least, for the Assad regime. For the US-backed Islamist “rebels,” however, such an atrocity is a political goldmine, potentially providing a pretext for US and eventually NATO intervention into a civil war that the rebels are losing badly.

The NSC document makes no attempt to address, let alone rebut, such arguments. Its four-page document includes only one page of supposedly factual “findings” by the U.S. intelligence agencies, consisting of vague and unsupported assertions, and then a page disputing the claims of Putin and Assad that no gas attack occurred.

In the course of this, the NSC document cites video and eyewitness testimony about the impact of a chemical agent, as well as medical reports from Turkish doctors, but none of this evidence indicates the source of the nerve gas, if it was indeed a factor in the deaths at Khan Sheikhouh.

Criticizing Russian claims of fabrication, the NSC document declares, “It is clear, however, that the Syrian opposition could not manufacture this quantity and variety of video and other reporting from both the attack site and medical facilities in Syria and Turkey while deceiving both media observers and intelligence agencies.”

Why should anyone believe that the “media observers and intelligence agencies” were among the deceived? Far more likely that the US intelligence agencies and the “media observers,” particularly those employed by the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and other conduits for the US government, were active participants in the deception.

The CIA has ample experience in the creation of provocations and fabrication of “evidence,” which is then supplied to its favored press outlets to create the impression of “objective” reporting. Absolutely nothing that is reported on such a basis deserves the slightest credibility.

It is noteworthy that the Russian government has repeatedly called for an objective, authoritative international investigation into what happened at Khan Sheikhouh. This is in sharp contrast to the conduct of the Trump administration, which has acted as judge, jury and executioner rolled into one—claiming to determine the facts, identify the perpetrators and carry out the punishment in a three-day period. This is the method, not of justice or the enforcement of “international law,” but the law of the jungle, in which the most powerful imperialist military power simply does what it wants.

There is every reason to believe that the poison gas attack on Khan Sheikhouh was staged by the CIA and its rebel stooges to force a reversal of policy by the Trump administration and pave the way for US military intervention. It follows the pattern of the last previous alleged chemical weapons attack, in August 2013, when the rebels were seeking to gain direct American support, and US Secretary of State John Kerry told them that something needed to happen. Soon after, more than a thousand people were killed by nerve gas in Ghouta, a rebel-held suburb of Damascus.

The political beneficiaries of this attack were the Syrian rebels. Seymour Hersh, one of a handful of real journalists still practicing his profession and not in jail or exile, conducted a meticulous exposure of the Ghouta attack, demonstrating that it had likely been carried out by the al-Nusra Front, the Al Qaeda affiliate in Syria, with chemical weapons supplied by Turkey. The al-Nusra Front, under a new name, is the dominant force on the ground today in Khan Sheikhouh.

The Ghouta attack did not have the expected effect. After the British parliament voted against joining an attack on Syria, and in view of sharp divisions within the Pentagon over whether to intervene, President Obama pulled back, to the enormous frustration of the CIA, and of leading Democrats like his former secretary of state, Hillary Clinton.

If Clinton had won the 2016 presidential election, there is no doubt there would have been an immediate and dramatic escalation in the American involvement in the Syrian civil war. Following Trump’s surprise victory, a ferocious conflict has ensued, centering on bogus allegations of Russian manipulation of the election to assist Trump, aimed at shifting the Trump administration’s policy towards Russia and Syria.

This has now culminated in the apparent victory of the US intelligence agencies and the Democrats in this internecine struggle within the US ruling elite, and Trump’s embarking on a course that threatens to produce full-scale US military intervention in the Syrian civil war, and poses the danger of direct confrontation with a nuclear-armed Russia.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**