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## Did Assad Order the Syrian Gas Attack?

By Philip Giraldi  
April 25, 2017

On the morning of April 4, a Syrian Air Force Russian-made Sukhoi-22 fighter bomber dropped or fired something at a target in rebel-held Idlib Governorate. A cloud of some chemical substance subsequently materialized and drifted to the adjacent inhabited village of Khan Shaykhun, where it killed between 50 and 100 people. We also know that the Russians used a “hotline”<sup>[1]</sup> prior to the attack to alert the United States military that the strike would be taking place against what was apparently described as an arms depot.

We also know about what might be considered collateral damage. The deaths and alleged use of chemical weapons were described<sup>[2]</sup> by President Donald Trump as a “vital national-security interest” and served as the pretext for a strike by 59 U.S. cruise missiles two days later, which was directed against the Syrian air base at al-Shayrat. The U.S. attack did little damage and the base was soon again operational. The White House also reversed itself regarding possible Syrian peace talks, declaring that Bashar al-Assad must be removed<sup>[3]</sup> as a condition for any political settlement of the ongoing crisis. It also described Russia as complicit in protecting the Syrian president. Secretary of State Tillerson declared that bilateral relations with Moscow cannot improve<sup>[4]</sup> as long as Russia is supporting al-Assad. The relationship with Russia is, according to President Trump<sup>[5]</sup>, at an “all-time low.”

The U.S. government, in support of its narrative justifying the cruise-missile attack, has issued a four-page assessment<sup>[6]</sup> entitled “The Assad Regime’s Use of Chemical Weapons on April 4,

2017.” The report was issued by the National Security Council, which is part of the White House, and was authored by Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster, the national-security advisor, rather than Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats. The provenance suggests that it might not be what it is touted as, a “Summary of the U.S. Intelligence Community’s Assessment ...” It makes a number of claims, some of which might be considered fact-based, while others seem questionable.

Bear in mind that nearly all the information and physical evidence available from the attack site in Syria has come from anti-Assad sources linked to al-Qaeda affiliate al-Nusra, which controls the area. This includes the so-called White Helmets, who are opposition surrogates <sup>[7]</sup>. The established narrative derives from this material as well as from bipartisan assertions of Assad’s “certain” guilt, even from normally liberal Democrats <sup>[8]</sup>, which are being presented as fact.

The four-page White House report is supplemented by commentary <sup>[9]</sup> provided by McMaster and Secretary of Defense James Mattis (also a former general) on the day of the U.S. attack, as well as a more recent interview <sup>[10]</sup> with CIA Director Mike Pompeo, which describes the decision-making process and the military options. Each official, as well as President Trump, took it as a given that Syria had carried out the attack. Regarding the motive for such an attack, the report claims that Damascus was seeking to halt a rebel advance. Others in the media have claimed that it was done to “test” the United States or intimidate the Syrian population, but some other observers find those explanations elusive. After all, Bashar al-Assad would have had no good reason to stage a chemical attack when he was winning the war, while the rebels theoretically had plenty of motivation to stage a “false flag” attack to alienate Damascus from Western Europe and the Americans.

There is considerable repetition in the White House report describing Syrian involvement, rebel inability to mount a chemical attack, physical remains, and symptoms of the dead and injured. It says that the U.S. government is “confident” that the Syrian government carried out a chemical attack using “a neurotoxic agent like sarin ... against its own people” on the morning of April 4, and that it would have been impossible for the rebels to fabricate the incident because it would be too complicated for them to do so. The alleged U.S. intelligence relating to understanding the attack included Sigint, geospatial monitoring, and physiological examination. Plus “Credible open source reporting ... tells a clear and consistent story.” This included commercial-satellite imagery, which shows the impact sites of the weapons used, and opinions registered by civilian agencies like *Medecins Sans Frontieres* and Amnesty International.

The U.S. government report also maintains that Syria has violated its international obligations by retaining chemical-weapons capabilities even though it agreed to destroy all stocks in 2013. The narrative also insists that the still highly controversial attack made on Ghouta in 2013 was, in fact, carried out by Damascus. Syrian chemical-weapons experts were *probably* “involved in planning the [current] attack.” Symptoms of the victims were consistent with exposure to sarin.

Since the attack, per the report, the Russians and Syrians have been spinning out “false narratives” employing “multiple, conflicting accounts [of what took place] in order to create confusion and sow doubt within the international community.”

As noted above, beyond the bare bones of the Syrian attack, the U.S. retaliation, and the casualties, there is little in the incidents and the surrounding analysis that can be regarded as hard fact. Little in the National Security Council report is unassailable, and one should note that almost none of it is based on U.S. intelligence resources. The possibility that a Syrian chemical-weapons expert was “probably” involved expresses uncertainty, suggesting that an intercepted telephone call is being generously interpreted. And the geospatial monitoring is either a satellite (or even a drone) overhead, or possibly an AWACS plane operating along the nearby Turkish border, which would register the flight path of the Su-22 and the subsequent explosion(s), hardly conclusive evidence of anything beyond what we already know to be true.

The thinness of the U.S. intelligence came through in an April 13 talk by CIA Director Mike Pompeo, who described <sup>[10]</sup> the pressure from the White House to come up with an “assessment.” As a bottom line, he commented that “Everyone saw the open-source photos, so we had reality on our side.” One might observe that that reality was derived from Google satellite photography possibly adjusted by the rebels and freely interpreted by the media, not from the \$80 billion per year intelligence community.

Observers should also reexamine the assumption that rebels would be unable to either mount a chemical attack or create a “false flag” operation. There have been numerous instances of ISIS and al-Nusra use of chemicals both in Syria and Iraq, the most recent <sup>[11]</sup> being just this past week in western Mosul. And the similar Ghouta “false flag” in 2013 almost succeeded <sup>[12]</sup>, apparently aided by Turkish intelligence <sup>[13]</sup>, stopped only when Director of National Intelligence James Clapper paid a surprise visit <sup>[14]</sup> to President Obama in the Oval Office to tell him that the case against Damascus was not a “slam dunk.”

And the physical evidence that the Syrians launched a chemical attack from the air has been challenged. The only eyewitness to surface <sup>[1]</sup>, a 14-year-old, has described how she saw a bomb drop from an airplane and hit a nearby building, which produced a mushroom cloud. It is just as the Russians and Syrians described the incident and rules out sarin, which is colorless. And then there is the testimony of Professor Theodore Postol, professor emeritus of science, technology, and national-security policy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Postol has examined the evidence <sup>[15]</sup> in the photos and concluded that the toxin was fired from the ground, not from the air, adding that no competent analyst would believe otherwise—suggesting that there was a rush to judgment. Postol concluded that “it can be shown, without doubt, that the document does not provide any evidence whatsoever that the U.S. government has concrete knowledge that the government of Syria was the source of the chemical attack.”

Former weapons inspector Scott Ritter has also disputed the findings <sup>[16]</sup> in the White House report, noting that what evidence there is points to the use of conventional weapons by the Syrians. He also notes that the Su-22’s available weapons cannot deliver a chemical or gas attack from the air, something which Donald Trump and his advisers might not have been aware of.

And then there are the victims. The tests confirming <sup>[17]</sup> the presence of sarin were carried out in Turkish hospitals and Ankara is far from a neutral party, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan having demanded repeatedly <sup>[18]</sup> that al-Assad be removed.

It is all too easy to forget that the rebels and their associates are killers, with little to differentiate them from the crimes that are being laid at Bashar al-Assad's door. Two recent examples of rebel brutality include the beheading <sup>[19]</sup> of a child and the recent bombing <sup>[20]</sup> of Syrian refugees waiting to cross into government-controlled territory. The latter attack killed more people—including women, children, and babies—than the incident at Khan Shaykhun, but it was not so much as mentioned by President Trump. It was only briefly reported in the U.S. media before being dropped down the memory hole, presumably because it did not fit the prevailing narrative.

Other videos and pictures of Khan Shaykhun victims cited by the White House show survivors being assisted <sup>[21]</sup> by alleged medical personnel, who appear not be wearing any protective garb. If the chemical agent had actually been sarin, they too would have been affected. And the symptoms of sarin are similar to the symptoms experienced with exposure to other toxins, including chlorine and smoke munitions. One survivor noted a smell of rotten food and garlic. Sarin is, in addition to being colorless, odorless.

And then there is the question of al-Assad's chemical-weapons supply. It is now being asserted by the White House that the Syrians retained a significant capability, but that is not what Secretary of State John Kerry said in July 2014, when he claimed everything was destroyed <sup>[22]</sup>: “We struck a deal where we got 100 percent of the chemical weapons out.” The United States, working with Russia, was instrumental in destroying the Syrian chemical stockpile.

It certainly appears that there was a rush to judgment on the part of the White House and the top presidential advisors. It is possible that al-Assad did what he has been accused of, but the Trump administration decided to assign guilt to the Syrians before they could have known with any clarity what had happened. As in the case of Iraq, the available intelligence was made to fit the preferred narrative. All that remained was to call a meeting of top advisors to determine exactly how to punish Damascus. The truth about what occurred in Syria on April 4 remains to be discovered, and is almost certainly possessed by many in the U.S. intelligence community. Perhaps someday, someone who understands what happened will feel compelled to reveal what he or she knows.

Meanwhile, the fallout from the incident and the U.S. retaliation is severe and potentially catastrophic. As Princeton Professor Stephen Cohen, America's leading expert on Russia, put it recently <sup>[23]</sup>:

I think this is the most dangerous moment in American-Russian relations, at least since the Cuban missile crisis. And arguably, it's more dangerous, because it's more complex. ... So the question arises, naturally: Why did Trump launch 50 Tomahawk missiles at a Syrian Air Force base, when, God help us, he did kill some people, but was of no military value whatsoever? Was this meant to show ‘I'm not a Kremlin agent?’ Because, normally, a president would have done the following. You would go to the United Nations ... and ask for an investigation about what happened with those chemical weapons. And then you would decide what to do. But while having dinner at Mar-a-Lago with the leader of China, who was deeply humiliated, because he's an ally of Russia, they rushed off these Tomahawk missiles.