

By Jonathan Cook

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Veteran investigative journalist Seymour Hersh, the man who exposed the Mai Lai massacre during the Vietnam War and the US military's abuses of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib in 2004, is probably the most influential journalist of the modern era, with the possible exception of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, the pair who exposed Watergate.

For decades, Hersh has drawn on his extensive contacts within the US security establishment to bring us the story behind the official story, to disclose facts that have often proved deeply discomfiting to those in power and exploded the self-serving, fairy-tale narratives the public were expected to passively accept as news. His stature among journalists was such that, in a sea of corporate media misinformation, he enjoyed a small island of freedom at the elite, but influential, outlet of the New Yorker.

Paradoxically, over the past decade, as social media has created a more democratic platform for information dissemination, the corporate media has grown ever more fearful of a truly independent figure like Hersh. The potential reach of his stories could now be enormously magnified by social media. As a result, he has been increasingly marginalised and his work denigrated. By denying him the credibility of a "respectable" mainstream platform, he can be dismissed for the first time in his career as a crank and charlatan. A purveyor of fake news.

Nonetheless, despite struggling to find an outlet for his recent work, he has continued to scrutinise western foreign policy, this time in relation to Syria. The official western narrative has painted a picture of a psychotic Syrian president, Bashar Assad, who is assumed to be so irrational and self-destructive he intermittently uses chemical weapons against his own people. He does so, not only for no obvious purpose but at moments when such attacks are likely to do his regime untold damage. Notably, two sarin gas attacks have supposedly occurred when Assad was making strong diplomatic or military headway, and when the Islamic extremists of Al-Qaeda and ISIS – his chief opponents – were on the back foot and in desperate need of outside intervention.

Dangerous monsters

Hersh's investigations have not only undermined evidence-free claims being promoted in the west to destabilise Assad's government but threatened a wider US policy seeking to "remake the Middle East". His work has challenged a political and corporate media consensus that portrays Russia's Vladimir Putin, Assad's main ally against the extremist Islamic forces fighting in Syria, as another dangerous monster the West needs to bring into line.

For all these reasons, Hersh has found himself increasingly friendless. The New Yorker refused to publish his Syria investigations. Instead, he had to cross the Atlantic to find a home at the prestigious but far less prominent London Review of Books.

Back in 2013 his contacts within the security and intelligence establishments revealed that the assumption Assad had ordered the use of sarin gas in Ghouta, outside Damascus, failed to stand up to scrutiny. Even Barack Obama's national intelligence director, James Clapper, was forced to admit privately that Assad's guilt was "not a slam dunk", even as the media widely portrayed it as precisely that. Hersh's work helped stymie efforts at the time to promote a western military attack to bring down the Syrian government.

His latest investigation questions whether Assad was responsible for another alleged gas attack – this one in April, at Khan Sheikhoun. Again a consensual western narrative was quickly constructed after social media showed dozens of Syrians dead, apparently following a bomb dropped by Syrian aircraft. For the first time in his presidency, Donald Trump received wall-to-wall praise for launching a military strike on Syria in response, even though, as Hersh documents, he had no evidence on which to base such an attack, one that gravely violated international law.

Hersh's new investigation was paid for by the London Review of Books, which declined to publish it. This is almost disturbing as the events in question.

What is emerging is a media blackout so strong that even the London Review of Books is running scared. Instead, Hersh's story appeared yesterday in a German publication, Welt am Sonntag. Welt is an award-winning newspaper, no less serious than the New Yorker or the LRB. But significantly Hersh is being forced to publish ever further from the centres of power

whose misinformation his investigations are challenging.

Imagine how effective Woodward and Bernstein would have been in bringing down Richard Nixon had they been able to publish their Watergate investigations only in the French media. That is the situation we have reached now with Hersh's efforts to scrutinise the west's self-serving claims about Syria.

US-Russian cooperation

As for the substance of Hersh's investigation, he finds that Trump launched 59 Tomahawk missiles at a Syrian air base in April "despite having been warned by the US intelligence community that it had found no evidence that the Syrians had used a chemical weapon."

In fact, Hersh reveals that, contrary to the popular narrative, the Syrian strike on a jihadist meeting place in Khan Sheikhoun on April 4 was closely coordinated beforehand between Russian and US intelligence agencies. The US were well apprised of what would happen and tracked the events.

Hersh's sources in the intelligence establishment point out that these close contacts occurred for two reasons. First, there is a process known as "deconfliction", designed to avoid collisions or accidental encounters between the US, Syrian and Russian militaries, especially in the case of their supersonic jets. The Russians therefore supplied US intelligence with precise details of that day's attack beforehand. But in this case, the close ties also occurred because the Russians wanted to warn the US to keep away a CIA asset, who had penetrated the jihadist group, from that day's meeting.

"This was not a chemical weapons strike," a senior adviser to the US intelligence community told Hersh. "That's a fairy tale. If so, everyone involved in transferring, loading and arming the weapon ... would be wearing Hazmat protective clothing in case of a leak. There would be very little chance of survival without such gear."

According to US intelligence, Hersh reports, the Syrian air force was able to target the site

using a large, conventional bomb supplied by the Russians. But if Assad did not use a chemical warhead, why did many people apparently die at Khan Sheikhoun from inhalation of toxic gas?

The US intelligence community, says Hersh, believes the bomb triggered secondary explosions in a storage depot in the building's basement that included propane gas, fertilisers, insecticides as well as "rockets, weapons and ammunition, ... [and] chlorine-based decontaminants for cleansing the bodies of the dead before burial". These explosions created a toxic cloud that was trapped close to the ground by the dense early morning air.

Medecins Sans Frontieres found patients it treated "smelled of bleach, suggesting that they had been exposed to chlorine." Sarin is odourless.

Hersh concludes that the "evidence suggested that there was more than one chemical responsible for the symptoms observed, which would not have been the case if the Syrian Air Force – as opposition activists insisted – had dropped a sarin bomb, which has no percussive or ignition power to trigger secondary explosions. The range of symptoms is, however, consistent with the release of a mixture of chemicals, including chlorine and the organophosphates used in many fertilizers, which can cause neurotoxic effects similar to those of sarin."

Political suicide

Hersh's main intelligence source makes an important contextual point you won't hear anywhere in the corporate media:

"What doesn't occur to most Americans is if there had been a Syrian nerve gas attack authorized by Bashar [Assad], the Russians would be 10 times as upset as anyone in the West. Russia's strategy against ISIS, which involves getting American cooperation, would have been destroyed and Bashar would be responsible for pissing off Russia, with unknown consequences for him. Bashar would do that? When he's on the verge of winning the war? Are you kidding me?"

When US national security officials planning Trump's "retaliation" asked the CIA what they knew of events in Khan Sheikhoun, according to Hersh's source, the CIA told them "there was no residual delivery for sarin at Sheyrat [the airfield from which the Syrian bombers had taken off] and Assad had no motive to commit political suicide."

The source continues:

"No one knew the provenance of the photographs [of the attack's victims]. We didn't know who the children were or how they got hurt. Sarin actually is very easy to detect because it penetrates paint, and all one would have to do is get a paint sample. We knew there was a [toxic] cloud and we knew it hurt people. But you cannot jump from there to certainty that Assad had hidden sarin from the UN because he wanted to use it in Khan Sheikhoun."

Trump, under political pressure and highly emotional by nature, ignored the evidence. Hersh's source says:

"The president saw the photographs of poisoned little girls and said it was an Assad atrocity. It's typical of human nature. You jump to the conclusion you want. Intelligence analysts do not argue with a president. They're not going to tell the president, 'if you interpret the data this way, I quit'."

Although Republicans, Democrats and the entire media rallied to Trump's side for the first time, those speaking to Hersh have apparently done so out of fear of what may happen next time.

The danger with Trump's "retaliatory" strike, based on zero evidence of a chemical weapons attack, is that it could have killed Russian soldiers and dragged Putin into a highly dangerous confrontation with the US. Also, the intelligence community fears that the media have promoted a false narrative that suggests not only that a sarin attack took place, but paints Russia as a co-conspirator and implies that a UN team did not in fact oversee the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons stockpile back in 2013-14. That would allow Assad's opponents to claim in the future, at a convenient time, yet another unsubstantiated sarin gas attack by the Syrian government.

Hersh concludes with words from his source that should strike fear into us all:

“The issue is, what if there’s another false-flag sarin attack credited to hated Syria? Trump has upped the ante and painted himself into a corner with his decision to bomb. And do not think these guys [Islamist groups] are not planning the next faked attack. Trump will have no choice but to bomb again, and harder. He’s incapable of saying he made a mistake.”

Four questions

Hersh’s investigation contributes to a more complex and confusing picture of events in Khan Sheikhoun. In the absence of an independent investigation, there is still no decisive physical evidence to confirm what happened. That makes context and probability important factors for observers to weigh.

So let us set aside for a moment the specifics of what happened on April 4 and concentrate instead on what Hersh’s critics

must

concede if they are to argue that Assad used sarin gas against the people of Khan Sheikhoun.

1. That Assad is so crazed and self-destructive – or at the very least so totally incapable of controlling his senior commanders, who must themselves be crazed and self-destructive – that he has on several occasions ordered the use of chemical weapons against civilians. And he has chosen to do it at the worst possible moments for his own and his regime’s survival, and when such attacks were entirely unnecessary.

2. That Putin is equally deranged and so willing to risk an end-of-times conflagration with the US that he has on more than one occasion either sanctioned or turned a blind eye to the use of sarin by Assad’s regime. And he has done nothing to penalise Assad afterwards, when things went wrong.

3. That Hersh has decided to jettison all the investigatory skills he has amassed over many decades as a journalist to accept at face value any unsubstantiated rumours his

long-established contacts in the security services have thrown his way. And he has done so without regard to the damage that will do to his reputation and his journalistic legacy.

4. That a significant number of US intelligence officials, those Hersh has known and worked with over a long period of time, have decided recently to spin an elaborate web of lies no one wants to print, either in the hope of damaging Hersh in some collective act of revenge against him, or in the hope of permanently discrediting their own intelligence services.

Hersh's critics do not simply have to believe one of these four points. They must maintain the absolute veracity of all four of them.