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Investigative journalist Seymour Hersh joins us to discuss his new article casting doubt on the veracity of the Obama administration's claims that only the Assad regime could have carried out the chemical attacks in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta earlier this year. Writing in the *London Review of Books*, Hersh argues that the Obama administration "cherry-picked intelligence to justify a strike against Assad." The administration failed to disclose it knew Syrian rebels in the al-Nusra Front had the ability to produce chemical weapons. Evidence obtained in the days after the attack was also allegedly distorted to make it appear it was gathered in real time.

AMY GOODMAN: On Tuesday, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons will receive the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo as its staff prepare to destroy Syria's chemical weapons arsenal. According to a U.S.-Russia deal that stopped possible U.S. military strikes against President Bashar al-Assad's regime, Syria is to disperse—Syria will be dispersing its arsenal of almost 1,300 tons of chemical weapons by mid-2014. The head of the mission overseeing the destruction of the country's chemical arms said last week fighting on the ground poses a major obstacle to implementing the agreement. This is Sigrid Kaag.

SIGRID KAAG: Despite the significant progress achieved to date in a very short span of time, the most complex and challenging work lies ahead. The removal of the Syrian Arab Republic's chemical agents for destruction outside of its territory will require tremendous coordination and collective effort. Security remains a key challenge for all of us. As you know, the destruction of a chemical weapons program has never taken place under such challenging and dangerous conditions.

AMY GOODMAN: That was the head of the OPCW mission to Syria, Sigrid Kaag.

This comes as a major new [article](#) casts doubts on the veracity of the Obama administration's claims that only the Assad regime could have carried out the attacks in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta earlier this year. Writing in the *London Review of Books*, investigative reporter Seymour Hersh argues the Obama administration, quote, "cherry-picked

intelligence to justify a strike against Assad." He reports U.S. was also aware that al-Nusra, a militant group fighting in Syria's civil war, had, quote, "mastered the mechanics of creating sarin and was capable of manufacturing it in quantity."

To find out more about the piece, we go to Washington, D.C., to speak with Seymour Hersh himself, the Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist. His latest piece in the *London Review of Books*

is headlined "Whose Sarin?" Over the decades, Hersh has broken numerous landmark pieces, including the Abu Ghraib prison abuses and the My Lai massacre in Vietnam.

Welcome back to *Democracy Now!*, Sy. Lay out your case for what it is that the Obama administration did or didn't tell us.

SEYMOUR HERSH: Actually, Amy, it's really not my case; it's the case of people in the administration who believe when they—when they take the oath, they take the oath of office to the Constitution and not to their immediate general or admiral or not to the—or not to the president even. It's about truth. And there are an awful lot of people in the government who just were really very, very upset with the way the information about the gas attack took place. And that's not to say that I have—I certainly don't know who did what, but there's no question my government does not. And there's also no question that the American president that we now have—a guy I voted for, who has a lot of good things about him—was willing to go to war, wanted to throw missiles at Syria, without really having a case and knowing he didn't have much of a case. And that, to me, is very troubling. We're talking about a major war crime here, because certainly hundreds, if not more, of innocent civilians—and some bad guys, too, rebels and others—were killed by sarin, which is a gross violation.

The case is simple. We had—in the spring, there were a number of chemical warfare attacks in various parts of Syria that were investigated by everybody. The U.N. looked at it. They determined there were four instances of small cases of maybe 10—I shouldn't say small; one dead is more than enough—but maybe 15 to 20 people killed by sarin and others incapacitated. And eventually they concluded, like they always do, the U.N., no decision on who did what. So we began looking at it. The Israelis, of course, they're a neighboring country; they're very concerned about Syrian chemical—the arsenal. It's a strategic threat for Israel. And we got some sarin, and we got some evidence. And the thing that surprised us the most is there was a lot of reporting in—known to the American community and to our allies, that al-Nusra, one of the more jihadi groups in—more radical, if you will, Islamist groups fighting against Bashar, and other groups, too, to a lesser degree, AQI, al-Qaeda of Iraq—sometimes we call it al-Qaeda of Mesopotamia—had not only the capacity and potential and the

know-how, how to produce sarin, but also had done some production of sarin. And these are reports that were very highly classified that went up the chain of command. In some cases, they were so secret that not many people in the government knew about it. They went to senior officials in the Defense Intelligence Agency. The CIA certainly was forwarding many of these reports.

It got to the point where the American government, the military, the Pentagon, looked into the whole prospect of let's go in and clean out all the—all the nerve gas on both sides. And they did what they call an ops study, operations study. It's an ops order, really, it's called. It's a major, major study, 60 or 70 various sub-parts to it. You're going to send—they concluded 70,000 American soldiers would have to go into Syria to clean out the chemical weapons on both sides. And that's a big deal. You know, you've got to feed them. You've got to protect them. You've got to find out how much toilet paper you're going to need. A major, major study was done over this summer. I think—I've been told it was supposed to—there was supposed to be what they call an NIE, a National Intelligence Estimate, on the capability of the opposition, the rebels, to manufacture sarin, but that never happened. And there we are. These reports were there. They were certainly known to the community. I can't tell you that the president himself read those documents; I don't know. But clearly, whether or not—if he didn't, he should have.

And when he went public after the incident, right away—you know, it was just this. The narrative was—the real issue was the narrative was Bashar, who we don't like, who's done terrible things—you know, certainly he's—in order to defend his regime and his government, he has killed a lot of people, and also, we have to acknowledge, had an awful lot of his soldiers killed. There's—it's a real rebel war there, civil war. And the point was that at no time did the United States ever consider al-Nusra to be a potential target of investigation. They were simply excluded from the conversation. And the narrative was Bashar did it. And it was bought by the mainstream press, as we all know, and by most people in the world. And this is why, you know, creepy troublemakers like me stay in business.

AMY GOODMAN: Let's turn to White House Press Secretary Jay Carney. He was being questioned in late August about the Syrian chemical weapons attack.

REPORTER: Jay, you were very firm in saying just now that there's little doubt that the Syrian regime was in fact responsible for this chemical attack. So, in that context, what is the purpose of this intelligence report? Is it to legitimize—to get rid of any remaining doubt and therefore

legitimize a response in the eyes of the international community?

PRESS SECRETARY JAY CARNEY: I'm not aware of any doubt that exists. Again, it's undeniable that chemical weapons were used on a large scale. We know that the regime maintains custody of the chemical weapons in Syria and uses the types of rockets that were used to deliver chemical weapons on August 21st. The opposition does not. We also know that the opposition does not have the capabilities that the Syrian regime has. And as I mentioned earlier, we have already had an assessment by the intelligence community, with a high degree of confidence that the Syrian regime has used, on a smaller scale, chemical weapons in this conflict already. So, suggestions that there's any doubt about who is responsible for this are as preposterous as suggestions that the attack itself didn't occur.

AMY GOODMAN: Seymour Hersh, your response to what Jay Carney said at the end of August?

SEYMOUR HERSH: Well, my mother would have said that he should wash his mouth out with soap.

AMY GOODMAN: Because?

SEYMOUR HERSH: Well, because—look, he's not lying; he's being told what to say, and he does it. He's being told. But four days earlier, the State Department spokesman said—a woman spokesperson said for the State Department, "We're looking at"—on the 23rd, "We have no information about what's going on. We're looking at it."

The fact is that the United States has a very, very sophisticated sensor system that we've put up, just as we also had in Iran, which helped us to conclude — I wrote about this for years at *The New Yorker*

— that we pretty much were pretty sure there was no secret underground facility in Iran, even though the press still talks about that possibility. We looked at it hard. We have sensors that were very, very good. America has great technical capability. And the same thing happened inside Syria. We have sensors. And the problem with talking about it is, once—I had no choice, because you have to mention it, but people start asking questions about what do they look like,

where are they, and that's too bad, because they're very useful. We have passive sensors that not only tell us when the Syrian—at every Syrian depot, chemical warfare depot—and sarin isn't stored. Nobody keeps sarin. It's a very volatile, acidic poison that degrades quickly. You keep the chemicals that make sarin. They're what are called precursors. There's two chemicals, when mixed, poof, alacabadra, you have sarin. So, the Syrian arsenal, the reason you can get rid of it pretty easily, as the report heard they're doing it, is because there's two inert substances that could be disposed independently. One is even an alcohol. You could just flush it. But the point being that the sensors monitor not only when the—when sarin or the chemicals are moved; more importantly, they're capable of monitoring when the Syrian army begins to mix the stuff. And once they mix the stuff, it's—as I wrote, it's a use-it-or-lose-it process. You have to use it quickly, because it degrades quickly. It doesn't stay long in the shells; it erodes the shells. And not only that, the Israelis are right there with us on this sensor system. And so, it's like a fire alarm, early warning system. You know, it's—an alarm goes off, and the Israelis know about it, as we know about it, right away. And we are not going to let the Syrian military or army get—take—create weapons, pour this stuff into warheads, move it and be ready to fire. That's not going to happen. The Israelis will attack before that happens.

So, this system said *nada*, nothing, on the 21st, the 22nd. I write about the fact there's internal reports. It wasn't until the 23rd, when the American internal—the secret government and, you know, the secret intelligence community began writing internal reports for the secretary of defense and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, saying that we've got a problem here in Syria. For days, we didn't know, because—and what does that mean? What that means is that if—if chemical warfare was used on the 21st, it didn't come from that arsenal, because there was no warning of any mixing. That doesn't mean something else could have happened, that some renegade group got some and did something. But the main warning system we had was quiet. That's a clue. That's a big clue that at least you should consider something other than the Syrian army when you begin an investigation. And so, what the press secretary said is silly. It's just wrong. I don't blame him. He happens to be a very nice guy, Jay Carney. He's just doing what he's told.

AMY GOODMAN: Seymour Hersh, we're going to break and then come back to this discussion and talk about, well, what your reputation is based on, the people, whether you name them or not, in your article, the high-level intelligence officials and analysts who were raising very serious questions behind the scenes, why weren't their warnings being heeded. We're talking to Seymour Hersh, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist. His latest [piece](#) headlined "Whose Sarin?" is appearing in the *London Review of Books*. Stay with us.

[break]

AMY GOODMAN: In our next segment, we're going to be speaking with the Reverend Jesse Jackson about Nelson Mandela, the myth and the facts, but first we continue with Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Seymour Hersh, whose [piece](#), "Whose Sarin?" has just come out in the *London Review of Books*. We'll also find out why it didn't come out in his traditional place of publication, *The New Yorker*, also *The Washington Post*.

But first, in a written statement to BuzzFeed, Shawn Turner, spokesman for the director of national intelligence, denied the claims in Seymour Hersh's article. He wrote, quote, "We were clear with *The Washington Post* and Mr. Hersh that the intelligence gathered about the 21 August chemical weapons attack indicated [that] the Assad regime and only the Assad regime could have been responsible. Any suggestion that there was an effort to suppress intelligence about a nonexistent alternative explanation is simply false." Turner also said no American intelligence agency, quote, "assesses that the al-Nusra Front has succeeded in developing a capacity to manufacture sarin." If you would respond, Seymour Hersh?

SEYMOUR HERSH: Well, what's to say? I mean, he said what he said, and I write what I did. You know, when I did—you mentioned Abu Ghraib. The senior spokesman for the Pentagon at the time, when I first began to write about Abu Ghraib, said that—literally—he literally said that, "Oh, Hersh is just throwing crap against this wall to see what sticks." I mean, a spokesman's job is to carry out what the administration wants him to say.

The fact is that I think the administration should just take the high road here and put out what it knows. I have every reason to believe they know more than they've indicated about who did what and what the sarin looked like. And, you know, as I wrote in the article, here you have a president of the United States that one day is telling us he's going to bomb Syria, and the next day he suddenly cuts a deal. He's suddenly a great constitutionalist, and he's now going to go to the Congress, because the War Powers Act, that every president has ignored, and this president ignored when he attacked Libya, suddenly is very paramount to him. So he's going to go—he's not going to bomb, despite he was—despite saying, with great braggadocio, how tough he's going to be. They crossed the red line, which was a very big phrase for him, and he's going to show that nobody can cross a red line and get away with it. And then, not

only—then he decides overnight to go to Congress, and then he accepts a very rational deal—and I'm glad he did—that the Russians put forward, with the Syrians, to dispose of the chemical arsenal or the chemicals that are in Syria.

Why? Why the turnaround? Is it because they had no information that anybody else had any—there's no other alternative? I mean, just what the—just what the—the statement you read by the press secretary—or the spokesman for the Office of National Intelligence, would raise just profound questions. If you have no information that contradicts the notion that Bashar did it, why are you walking away? And so, you know, there's more to this story, I assure you. I don't have it all. I've heard things, and—

AMY GOODMAN: So, who were the intelligence officials, the analysts, who you talked to, whether you name them or not?

SEYMOUR HERSH: Oh, you've got to be—

AMY GOODMAN: But tell us what they said to you and which agencies they were with.

SEYMOUR HERSH: I can't—look, you know what? You can go up and down, back and forth, and raise questions about anonymous sources, but believe me, if these guys—you know, they'd all be living like Snowden in Russia for the rest of their lives, if they were lucky. Nobody's going to talk for the record. These are—

AMY GOODMAN: Well, let me turn to David Shedd, who you do quote, the deputy director of the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency.

SEYMOUR HERSH: Well, I quote a document. No, I don't quote—I quote a document that was sent to him.

AMY GOODMAN: But let me go directly to him—

SEYMOUR HERSH: Sure.

AMY GOODMAN: —who spoke in July at the Aspen Security Forum about the Syrian opposition.

DAVID SHEDD: I count no less than 1,200 disparate groups in the opposition. And so, to a large extent, the conditions of Syria benefit those who have a tendency toward or are actually in the far extreme, because what happens is, they go for the space and organization and certainly what they view as their mission vis-à-vis the Bashar Assad regime and its proxy fighters with Hezbollah and so forth. They are the most effective end of that spectrum of those 1,200 groups. They are increasingly stronger within the opposition in their relative capabilities against the regime. That is not a statement on the flow and the ebb that pertains to how the regime is doing against the opposition. But within the opposition, I think, to your question, I think the al-Nusra Front is gaining in strength and is a case of serious concern for us.

AMY GOODMAN: That's David Shedd, the deputy director of the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, the DIA, speaking in July. The significance of what Shedd said, and what he also couldn't say, Seymour Hersh?

SEYMOUR HERSH: I don't know what he could or could not say. I'm not in—I can't get into his mindset. I just know that by then he had received one major report, and also the ops order was being conducted. And Shedd, by—Shedd's been around a long time. He was in the CIA

. And I haven't talked to him, and I didn't discuss this with him. But he's a fine intelligence officer. And I—he's reflecting on what—look, by the time he's talking, inside the community, for the last year, it's been known that the only game in town, whether you like it or don't like it, was Bashar, because otherwise the—what we call the secular anti—the opposition to Bashar, the legitimate, non-radical, if you will, dissenters, people from within the army, people—civilians who didn't like the lack of more social progress, etc., etc., they were overrun, even by—we know that beginning in early in the year. We knew they were being overrun by jihadists. And so, the only solution, it seemed to me, for—it seems for the government at the time, the people I know—and I've talked to people about this for years; it's been more than a year of talk—is, the only solution for stability was Bashar. You have to just like it or don't like it.

Israel, which—don't forget, Damascus is, what, 40 miles, 45 miles from the Golan Heights and 130 miles south of—north of—northeast of Tel Aviv, easily within range of any missiles. The Israelis are not going to tolerate a jihadist government inside Syria, or even any area that the jihadists will claim as an area of sharia law. They'll hit it. The only potential for stability was to keep Bashar there, or at least to get him in a position where maybe he'd be willing to negotiate some sort of collaborative government, which seems to be the only sensible theme right now.

And so, Shedd could well have been talking just about that. The reason I wrote about it, mentioned what he said, is because he got—he said what he said after getting a lot of very tough intelligence about al-Nusra and its capability. And I will also tell you there was a very scary incident in May in Turkey, in which some al-Nusra groups were found, initially reported, to have more than four pounds of sarin, and they were going to use it to hit an American air base in a place called Adana. We have a big air base there, and it caused some trouble there. I didn't write about it because by the time that case got to a trial, a further-along indictment, the government, the Turkish government, no longer claimed that they had sarin, but they were looking for it. And as we—as many in the audience in the audience may not know, Erdogan, the head of—the prime minister of Turkey, and his intelligence—chief intelligence officer, a gentleman named Fidan, are very pro-Islamist, and there's a lot of tension there about that in the region. So you have Turkey in one side that really wants Bashar to go down, but it's also an ally of ours, and it also tries to maintain good relationships with Iran. It's a very complicated, messy thing.

AMY GOODMAN: Seymour—

SEYMOUR HERSH: And the nerve gas—

AMY GOODMAN: Go ahead.

SEYMOUR HERSH: Yes, go ahead. I'm sorry. No, go ahead. I'm fine.

AMY GOODMAN: Why did the piece appear in the *London Review of Books* and not in your traditional place where you publish, in *The New Yorker* or, as it was expected to appear, in

The Washington Post

, with Executive Editor Marty Baron saying the sourcing in the article didn't meet the *Post*'s standards?

SEYMOUR HERSH: Well, that's what he told me in an—or one of his editors said in an email, after the story, when it had been, I thought, scheduled to run for a few weeks, was—and, you know, he's—look, he's the boss. He's a rational, good editor, and he's entitled to say it didn't meet—the information I got is that it didn't meet the standards of *The Washington Post*

. And I respect that. He's no fool, you know, and I don't know the guy, but everything I heard about him is that he's a very competent editor. I know people that worked with him when he was that the

L.A. Times

, which he was. And so, I don't begrudge an editor to say what he wants. You know, look, people like me, we really wear out welcomes very quickly. You know, sometimes you get tired of reporters coming in and saying, you know, the sky is always black, and it's not sunny. And that's what we do. So, investigative reporters, we have a very short shelf life. You know, we're the Bad News Bears.

AMY GOODMAN: Talk about the information that came out of the documents that NSA contractor Edward Snowden released and how they bear on this, Sy.

SEYMOUR HERSH: Well, that's why I went to the *Post*. Snowden gave—you know, Snowden—by the way, the *Post*, you've got to admire the *Post*

for publishing Snowden, too, a mainstream press newspaper doing it, obviously getting heat from the White House. One of the documents Snowden gave that ended up being in *The Washington Post*

's hands was sort of an annual budget request by the intelligence community, and it included information about the National Security Agency, a much, very much higher document than top-secret, etc., etc. And there was a section of it—the *Post*

ran only a dozen or two—less than that, maybe 17, 18 pages of the document. The rest they withheld at the request of the government, which is their right. And—but in the story, a summary story, they mentioned two things that made me think—that really woke me up. They mentioned the sensor system. And I had known about the sensor system from people inside. And as I mentioned earlier, it's difficult, because passive sensors are something that, as a journalist, I'm glad we have. Passive, nobody's hurt. We collect information that we can make judgments on.

AMY GOODMAN: These are run by the National Reconnaissance Office.

SEYMOUR HERSH: Yes, and the National Security Agency, too, runs a lot of them. And presumably, they're not to be tampered with, the findings. This administration tampered, is one of the points of the article in the *London Review of Books*, was that they tampered with something they shouldn't tamper with, a system that should be taken very seriously. But that article in *The Washington Post* mentioned the sensor system.

And it also mentioned something else, that from the day the opposition, the rebel war, began in Syria years ago—it's been a couple years now—we lost the ability to monitor Bashar and his senior persons. The NSA was no longer able to capture them. They changed the way they communicate. And, you know, one of the—one of the caveats about this whole notion of being able to intercept is an awful lot of stuff in—we have—America, we have couriers flying all day all the time, all over the world, with documents for CIA station chiefs, for ambassadors, that aren't put into communication devices, so they can't be intercepted. And we lost Bashar when the rebel war began. And I don't think—I've talked to people. We still don't have him, and there's no question we would have picked up some clue if Bashar had been actively involved in ordering the nerve gas attack. And one thing the government, to its credit, has not said in this whole thing since August the 21st, this White House has never claimed to know a thing about Bashar. We use his name all the time. We say, "Oh, Bashar did this and that." But we've never claimed to know anything about what he did or did not say, because we don't have it.

And so, that led me, to be honest, to the *Post*. And, you know, the problem was, it's not the *Post*'s problem; it's my problem. You know, why did I think a mainstream press paper would want to go so hard against—you know, from a freelancer. It was silly of me. I should have just gone to the *London Review* very quickly. My mistake.

AMY GOODMAN: And why this is significant today? In the end, President Obama chose not to strike Syria because the American people just overwhelmingly said no. But what this means for what's happening in Syria today? And also, why then did the Syrian—

SEYMOUR HERSH: Let me interrupt you, Amy.

AMY GOODMAN: Yes.

SEYMOUR HERSH: Amy, let me interrupt you. He didn't—I'm telling you, he didn't do it because the American people said no. He knew it because he didn't have a case. And there was incredible opposition that will be, one of these days, written about, maybe in history books. There was incredible operation from some very, very strong-minded, constitutionally minded people in the Pentagon. That's the real story. I don't have it; I could just tell you I know it.

And so, it wasn't just a case—you know, from the military's point of view, this was a president who many respected in many ways. There's many good things about Obama. There's a lot of things—as I said, I voted for him twice. And he's probably going to be the brightest president we're ever going to have, and maybe the best president we're ever going to have. The system is—doesn't produce always the very best, our system. But the fact of the matter is that this president was going to go to a war because he felt he had to protect what he said about a red line. That's what it was about, in the military's point of view. And that's not acceptable. You don't go to war, you don't throw missiles at a country, when there's no immediate national security to the United States. And you don't even talk about it in public. That's wrong, and that was a terrible thing to do.

And that's what this story is really about. It's about a president choosing to make political use of a war crime and not do the right thing. And I think that's—to me, Amy, that's a lot more important than where it was published and who told me no and who told me yes. I know the press likes to focus on that stuff, but that's not the story. The story is what he was going to do, and what it says maybe about him, what it says about that office, what it says about the power, that you can simply—you can create a narrative, which he did, and you know the mainstream press is going to carry out that narrative.

I mean, it's almost impossible for some of the mainstream newspapers, who have consistently supported the administration. This is after we had the WMD scandal, when everybody wanted to be on the team. It turns out our job, as newspaper people, is not to be on the team. You know, we've got a world run by a lot of yahoos and wackos, and it's our job as reporters to do the kind of work and make it hard for the nincompoops that run the world to get away with some of the stuff we're doing. That's what we should be doing more and more of. And that's just—you know, I don't think there's any virtue in it; it's just the job we have. And there's

heroism—you know, there's nothing heroic about what we do. It's heroic for some of the people, reporters in Africa, to do some of that work when they're at personal risk. We're not at personal risk. It's just not so hard to hold the people in office to the highest standard. And the press should be doing it more and more.

AMY GOODMAN: Seymour—

SEYMOUR HERSH: So he didn't do it—and one thing, last thing. He didn't do it because of public opinion. He was willing to flout it, I think.

AMY GOODMAN: Seymour Hersh, I want to thank you for being with us, Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist, speaking to us from Washington, D.C. We will link to your latest [piece](#) in the *London Review of Books*, headlined "Whose Sarin?" at democracynow.org.