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Was Turkey Behind Syrian Sarin Attack?

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Exclusive: Journalist Seymour Hersh has unearthed information implicating Turkish intelligence in last summer's Sarin attack near Damascus that almost pushed President Obama into a war to topple Syria's government and open a path for an al-Qaeda victory, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Last August, the Obama administration lurched to the brink of invading Syria after blaming a Sarin gas attack outside Damascus on President Bashar al-Assad's government, but new evidence – reported by investigative journalist Seymour M. Hersh – implicates Turkish intelligence and extremist Syrian rebels instead.

The significance of Hersh's latest report is twofold: first, it shows how Official Washington's hawks and neocons almost stampeded the United States into another Mideast war under false pretenses, and second, the story's publication in the London Review of Books reveals how hostile the mainstream U.S. media remains toward information that doesn't comport with its neocon-dominated conventional wisdom.

In other words, it appears that Official Washington and its mainstream press have absorbed few lessons from the disastrous Iraq War, which was launched in 2003 under the false claim that Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein was planning to share hidden stockpiles of WMD with al-Qaeda, when there was no WMD nor any association between Hussein and al-Qaeda.

A decade later In August and September 2013, as a new war hysteria broke out over Assad allegedly crossing President Barack Obama’s “red line” against using chemical weapons, it fell to a few Internet sites, including our own Consortiumnews.com, to raise questions about the administration’s allegations that pinned the Aug. 21 attack on the Syrian government.

Not only did the U.S. government fail to provide a single piece of verifiable evidence to support its claims, a much-touted “vector analysis” by Human Rights Watch and the New York Times – supposedly tracing the flight paths of two rockets back to a Syrian military base northwest of Damascus – collapsed when it became clear that only one rocket carried Sarin and its range was less than one-third the distance between the army base and the point of impact. That meant the rocket carrying the Sarin appeared to have originated in rebel territory.

There were other reasons to doubt the Obama administration’s *casus belli*, including the irrationality of Assad ordering a chemical weapons strike outside Damascus just as United Nations inspectors were unpacking at a local hotel with plans to investigate an earlier attack that the Syrian government blamed on the rebels.

Assad would have known that a chemical attack would have diverted the inspectors (as it did) and would force President Obama to declare that his “red line” had been crossed, possibly prompting a massive U.S. retaliatory strike (as it almost did).

Plans for War

Hersh’s article describes how devastating the U.S. aerial bombardment was supposed to be, seeking to destroy Assad’s military capability, which, in turn, could have cleared the way to victory for the Syrian rebels, whose fortunes had been declining.

Hersh wrote: “Under White House pressure, the US attack plan evolved into ‘a monster strike’: two wings of B-52 bombers were shifted to airbases close to Syria, and navy submarines and ships equipped with Tomahawk missiles were deployed.

“‘Every day the target list was getting longer,’ the former intelligence official told me. ‘The Pentagon planners said we can’t use only Tomahawks to strike at Syria’s missile sites because their warheads are buried too far below ground, so the two B-52 air wings with two-thousand pound bombs were assigned to the mission. Then we’ll need standby search-and-rescue teams to recover downed pilots and drones for target selection. It became huge.’

“The new target list was meant to ‘completely eradicate any military capabilities Assad had’, the former intelligence official said. The core targets included electric power grids, oil and gas depots, all known logistic and weapons depots, all known command and control facilities, and all known military and intelligence buildings.”

According to Hersh, the administration’s war plans were disrupted by U.S. and British intelligence analysts who uncovered evidence that the Sarin was likely not released by the Assad government and indications that Turkey’s intelligence services may have collaborated with radical rebels to deploy the Sarin as a false-flag operation.

Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Erdoğan sided with the Syrian opposition early in the civil conflict and provided a vital supply line to the al-Nusra Front, a violent group of Sunni extremists with ties to al-Qaeda and increasingly the dominant rebel fighting force. By 2012, however, internecine conflicts among rebel factions had contributed to Assad's forces gaining the upper hand.

The role of Islamic radicals – and the fear that advanced U.S. weapons might end up in the hands of al-Qaeda terrorists – unnerved President Obama who pulled back on U.S. covert support for the rebels. That frustrated Erdoğan who pressed Obama to expand U.S. involvement, according to Hersh's account.

Hersh wrote: “By the end of 2012, it was believed throughout the American intelligence community that the rebels were losing the war. ‘Erdoğan was pissed,’ the former intelligence official said, ‘and felt he was left hanging on the vine. It was his money and the [U.S] cut-off was seen as a betrayal.’”

‘Red Line’ Worries

Recognizing Obama's political sensitivity over his “red line” pledge, the Turkish government and Syrian rebels saw chemical weapons as the way to force the President's hand, Hersh reported, writing:

“In spring 2013 US intelligence learned that the Turkish government – through elements of the MIT, its national intelligence agency, and the Gendarmerie, a militarised law-enforcement organisation – was working directly with al-Nusra and its allies to develop a chemical warfare capability.

“The MIT was running the political liaison with the rebels, and the Gendarmerie handled military logistics, on-the-scene advice and training – including training in chemical warfare,’ the former intelligence official said. ‘Stepping up Turkey's role in spring 2013 was seen as the key to its problems there. Erdoğan knew that if he stopped his support of the jihadists it would be all over. The Saudis could not support the war because of logistics – the distances involved and the difficulty of moving weapons and supplies. Erdoğan's hope was to instigate an event that would force the US to cross the red line. But Obama didn't respond [to small chemical weapons attacks] in March and April.’”

The dispute between Erdoğan and Obama came to a head at a White House meeting on May 16, 2013, when Erdoğan unsuccessfully lobbied for a broader U.S. military commitment to the rebels, Hersh reported.

Three months later, in the early hours of Aug. 21, a mysterious missile delivered a lethal load of Sarin into a suburb east of Damascus. The Obama administration and the mainstream U.S. press corps immediately jumped to the conclusion that the Syrian government had launched the attack, which the U.S. government claimed killed at least “1,429” people although the number of victims cited by doctors and other witnesses on the scene was much lower.

Yet, with the media stampede underway, anyone who questioned the U.S. government's case was trampled under charges of being an "Assad apologist." But a few skeptics continued to point out the lack of evidence to support the rush to war. Obama also encountered political resistance in both the British Parliament and U.S. Congress, but hawks in the U.S. State Department were itching for a new war.

Secretary of State John Kerry delivered a bellicose speech on Aug. 30 amid expectations that the U.S. bombs would start flying within days. But Obama hesitated, first referring the war issue to Congress and later accepting a compromise brokered by Russian President Vladimir Putin to have Assad surrender all of his chemical weapons even as Assad continued denying any role in the Aug. 21 attacks.

Obama took the deal but continued asserting publicly that Assad was guilty and disparaging anyone who thought otherwise. In a formal address to the UN General Assembly on Sept. 24, 2013, Obama declared, "It's an insult to human reason and to the legitimacy of this institution to suggest that anyone other than the regime carried out this attack."

Suspicious of Turkey

However, by autumn 2013, U.S. intelligence analysts were among those who had joined in the "insult to human reason" as their doubts about Assad's guilt grew. Hersh cited an ex-intelligence official saying: "the US intelligence analysts who kept working on the events of 21 August 'sensed that Syria had not done the gas attack. But the 500 pound gorilla was, how did it happen? The immediate suspect was the Turks, because they had all the pieces to make it happen.'

"As intercepts and other data related to the 21 August attacks were gathered, the intelligence community saw evidence to support its suspicions. 'We now know it was a covert action planned by Erdoğan's people to push Obama over the red line,' the former intelligence official said. 'They had to escalate to a gas attack in or near Damascus when the UN inspectors' – who arrived in Damascus on 18 August to investigate the earlier use of gas – 'were there. The deal was to do something spectacular.

"Our senior military officers have been told by the DIA and other intelligence assets that the sarin was supplied through Turkey – that it could only have gotten there with Turkish support. The Turks also provided the training in producing the sarin and handling it.'

"Much of the support for that assessment came from the Turks themselves, via intercepted conversations in the immediate aftermath of the attack. 'Principal evidence came from the Turkish post-attack joy and back-slapping in numerous intercepts. Operations are always so super-secret in the planning but that all flies out the window when it comes to crowing afterwards. There is no greater vulnerability than in the perpetrators claiming credit for success.'"

According to the thinking of Turkish intelligence, Hersh reported, "Erdoğan's problems in Syria would soon be over: 'Off goes the gas and Obama will say red line and America is going to attack Syria, or at least that was the idea. But it did not work out that way.'"

Hersh added that the U.S. intelligence community has been reluctant to pass on to Obama the information contradicting the Assad-did-it scenario. Hersh wrote:

“The post-attack intelligence on Turkey did not make its way to the White House. ‘Nobody wants to talk about all this,’ the former intelligence official told me. ‘There is great reluctance to contradict the president, although no all-source intelligence community analysis supported his leap to convict. There has not been one single piece of additional evidence of Syrian involvement in the sarin attack produced by the White House since the bombing raid was called off. My government can’t say anything because we have acted so irresponsibly. And since we blamed Assad, we can’t go back and blame Erdoğan.’”

Like the bloody U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, last year’s near U.S. air war against Syria is a cautionary tale for Americans regarding the dangers that result when the U.S. government and mainstream media dance off hand in hand, leaping to conclusions and laughing at doubters.

The key difference between the war in Iraq and the averted war on Syria was that President Obama was not as eager as his predecessor, George W. Bush, to dress himself up as a “war president.” Another factor was that Obama had the timely assistance of Russian President Putin to chart a course that skirted the abyss.

Given how close the U.S. neocons came to maneuvering a reluctant Obama into another “regime change” war on a Mideast adversary of Israel, you can understand why they are so angry with Putin and why they were so eager to hit back at him in Ukraine.