

Waltz with Bashar: Debunking a Dictator's Propaganda Dance

by Aram S - Friday, April 14, 2017

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Warning: Some of the videos linked in this article are disturbing and show the aftermath of chemical weapons attacks

On April 13th, Syrian president Bashar al-Assad gave a propaganda-filled [interview](#) to a reporter from AFP. The interview was a regurgitation of previous untruths, but emphasized the recent Khan Sheikhoun gas attack in particular. Below are select portions of the interview, which are addressed on a point-by-point basis.

Did you give an order to strike Khan Sheikhoun with chemical weapons last Tuesday?

Actually, no one has investigated what happened that day in Khan Sheikhoun till the moment. As you know, Khan Sheikhoun is under the control of Al-Nusra Front, which is a branch of Al-Qaeda, so the only information the world have had till this moment is published by Al-Qaeda branch. **No one has any other information** . We don't know if the whole pictures or videos that we've been seeing are true or fabricated. **That's why we asked for investigation to what happened in Khan Sheikhoun.** This is first.

Second, Al-Qaeda sources said that the attack happened at 6, 6:30 in the morning, **while the Syrian attack in the same area was around noon, between 11:30 to 12.** So they're talking about two different stories or events. So there was no order to make any attack, we don't have any chemical weapons, we gave up our arsenal a few years ago. Even if we have them, we wouldn't use them, **and we have never used our chemical arsenal in our history.**

reality:

Nobody has been given an opportunity to carry out an investigation in Khan Sheikhoun. A United Nations Security Council [resolution](#) was put forth which would have allowed an investigation into the events that took place, but it was [vetoed](#) by Russia. Furthermore, we *do* have plenty of information about the attack. In fact, we have reports from laboratories in Turkey [identifying](#) the toxin used as Sarin.

The first reports of the attack on April 4th came in at around 4:59AM local time, which is early for most Syrian Arab Air Force (SyAAF) strikes, but not uncommon for reports from previous chemical attacks.

Major General Igor Konashenkov [claims](#) the attack that led to the dispersal of sarin. Now the general never says "sarin", and the Assad regime/Russian government have since asserted that the gas was chlorine gas which had escaped from silos "the opposition fighters had been storing it in". This claim is easily debunked by by a video by journalist Hadi Abdullah shortly after the attack, which [shows](#) the silos did *not* contain chemical weapons. Returning to the topic of sarin, British doctor Shajul Islam was able to film some of the victims up-close, and in the [video](#) you can see the telltale pinpoint pupils that point to

[sarin](#) (or another nerve agent) rather than [chlorine](#). The next part of the Russian claim to be addressed is the highlighted portion in the above photo, the timing. The Russians (and Assad) have doubled-down on the time of the SyAAF attack that leaked the "chlorine" (which we have proven to be sarin or another nerve agent). However, when you take [video](#) from the morning of the attack and plug it into Amnesty International's [metadata extraction tool](#), you will find that much of the raw footage of the immediate aftermath of the attack was uploaded *before* 11:30 local-time. That is to say, victims of the attack were already being loaded into ambulances hours before the alleged SyAAF strike took place. So we know *that* part of the Russian/Assad regime story is also not true.

So who, according to you, is responsible about this alleged chemical attack?

The allegation itself was by Al-Qaeda, Al-Nusra Front, so we don't have to investigate who. They announced it, it's under their control, no one else. About the attack, as I said, it's not clear whether it happened or not, because how can you verify a video? **You have a lot of fake videos now**, and you have the proof that those videos were fake, like the White Helmets for example. They are Al-Qaeda. They are Al-Nusra Front who shaved their beards, wore white hats, and appeared as humanitarian heroes, which is not the case. The same people were killing Syrian soldiers, and **you have the proof on the internet anyway**. So the same thing for that chemical attack. We don't know whether those dead children were killed in Khan Sheikun. **Were they dead at all?** Who committed the attack if there was an attack? What's the material? You have no information at all, nothing at all, no one investigated.

REALITY:

This question speaks for itself and I'll allow you to draw conclusions from it. If you have questions, consult this Channel 4 [article](#).

So you think it's a fabrication?

Second, if you want to use it, if you have it and if you want to use it -- again, this is if we suppose -- **why to use it against civilians, not to use it against the terrorists that we are fighting?** Third, in that area, we don't have army, we don't have battles, we don't have any, let's say, object in Khan Sheikun, and it's not a strategic area. Why to attack it? What's the reason? Militarily, I'm talking from a military point of view. Of course, the foundation for us, morally, we wouldn't do it if we have it. We wouldn't have the will, because morally this is not acceptable. We won't have the support of the public. So every indication is against the whole story, so you can say that this play that they staged doesn't hold together. The story is not convincing by any means.

REALITY:

The Assad regime has, on numerous occasions, been named by the United Nations for their attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure. During the Battle of Aleppo, regime forces routinely bombarded schools, hospitals, marketplaces, and other locations with large numbers of civilians.

[A/HRC/34/64](#)

25. On both sides of the city, civilians paid the highest price for the brutality of violence that assailed Aleppo. **In eastern Aleppo, pro-Government forces pummelled vital civilian infrastructure**, with disastrous consequences. **Day after day, hospitals, markets, water stations, schools and residential buildings were razed to the ground.** Fearing bombardments, civilians avoided hospitals, including pregnant women, who increasingly gave birth at home without medical assistance or opted for caesareans to avoid hours in labour in hospital.

27. Launched on 23 September 2016, the aerial bombardment campaign of eastern Aleppo drastically increased civilian casualties. **Approximately 300 people – including 96 children – were killed in the first four days of the offensive alone.** By mid-October, a lack of resources and medical supplies forced doctors to amputate limbs, which might have otherwise been saved.

28. **On 14 November, government artillery fire reportedly struck an orphanage providing shelter for 50 children in Salah al-Din district, injuring two boys aged 11 and 14 years.** The children were subsequently moved to a basement, where they remained trapped for weeks. After several attempts, they were evacuated on 19 December.

29. Conditions significantly worsened in December, when **all hospitals were bombed out of service.** Residents were concentrated in ever-shrinking territory, where they lived under aerial attacks, and with insufficient food, water and heating. **Without medical facilities, several families had no choice but to leave the bodies of their dead and injured relatives in the streets. Many suffer from trauma and guilt for having survived the violence.**

So there is a precedent for government bombardment and assault on civilians, contrary to what Mr. Assad says.

With the US airstrike, Trump seems to have changed his position on you and Syria drastically. Do you have the feeling that you lost what you have called a potential partner?

I said "if". It was conditional. If they are serious in fighting terrorists, we're going to be partners. And I said not only the United States -- whoever wants to fight the terrorists, we are partners. This is basic for us -- (a) basic principle, let's say. Actually, what has been proven recently, as I said earlier, that **they are hand-in-glove with those terrorists, the United States and the West, they're not serious in fighting the terrorists**, and yesterday some of their statesmen were defending ISIS. **They were saying that ISIS doesn't have chemical weapons.** They are defending ISIS against the Syrian government and the Syrian army. So actually, you cannot talk about partnership between us who work against the terrorists and who fight the terrorism and the others who are supporting explicitly the terrorists.

REALITY:

Russian Airstrikes in Syria February 8 - March 19 (courtesy of ISW)

According to [data](#) from the independent strike-tracking team at Airwars, the global Coalition dropped an average of about 18 weapons on Daesh per day every day between February 9 and March 19, 2017. Russia, on the other hand, focused the majority of their efforts in Idlib province and around Palmyra. The Syrian regime focused their air support in similar areas, but also around Damascus. Coalition efforts against Daesh simply outpace and outmatch Syrian + Russian efforts across the board. This isn't a point of gloating; the regime is tied down on at least five fronts right now, which would stretch any army thin. Rather, the point is to prove that Mr. Assad is lying when he insinuates that the West/Coalition are supportive of Daesh. Furthermore, his point about the West denying Daesh's possession of chemical weapons is simply untrue. On numerous [occasions](#), Coalition officials have condemned Daesh for their use of rudimentary versions of chlorine gas. It is important to note that Daesh has not once been documented or reported to have used sarin.

Question 13: Because the Pentagon said that there are chemical weapons in the airbase. You deny it?

They attacked that airbase, and they destroyed the depots of different materials, and there was no sarin gas. How? If they said that we launched the sarin attack from that airbase, what happened to the sarin when they attacked the depots? Did we hear about any sarin? Our chief of staff was there a few hours later. How could he go there if there was sarin gas? **How could you only have six martyrs if you have hundreds of soldiers and officers working there, but there was sarin, and they didn't die?** The same fabricated videos that we've been seeing about Khan Sheikhun, when the rescuers tried to rescue the victims or the supposedly dead people or inflicted people, but actually they weren't wearing any masks or any gloves. How? Where's the sarin? They should be affected, right away. So this is all allegation. I mean, this attack and these allegations is another proof that it was fabricated and there was no sarin anywhere.

REALITY:

This point bears addressing because the evidence is offered as mutually exclusive when in reality it is the opposite. That is to say, if the US missiles only struck a few aircraft and merely killed 6 out of the hundreds of soldiers stationed at the base, wouldn't it stand to reason that the US *also* would have made an effort to not hit the sarin stores at Shayrat? If the American missiles could avoid killing more than 6 Syrian soldiers, they could most *certainly* avoid a warehouse. That is, if the chemical weapons are even stored at the base.

If you say that you didn't give any order, it is possible that the chemical attack could have been carried out by a rogue or fringe element from the army?

Even if you have a rogue element, the army doesn't have chemical materials. This is first. **Second, a rogue army cannot send an airplane at their will, even if they want.** It's an airplane, it's not a small car to take it from place to place or a small machine gun to use it. You can talk about somebody who has been using his pistol on his behalf the way he wants and break(s) the law, that could happen anywhere in the world, but not an airplane. This is second.

Third, the Syrian army is a regular army, it's not a militia. It's a regular army, it has hierarchy, it has very clear way of orders, so this kind of "**rough personnel tried to do something against the will of the leadership of the army**" **never happened during the last six years of the war in Syria.**

REALITY:

There is at least one recent [incident](#) in which rogue military elements in a neighboring country used aircraft, but I understand the general point here; it's very difficult to move an aircraft without upper-echelon permission. Unfortunately, that just implicates Mr. Assad in any future cases wherein chemical weapons use is (again) proven to have taken place. In fact, A/HRC/34/64 states:

52. The Commission investigated numerous incidents of allegations of **improvised chlorine bombs dropped from helicopters**, which resulted in civilian casualties. In none of the incidents reviewed did information gathered suggest the involvement of Russian forces. Given that the incidents reported were all the result of air-delivered bombs, **it is concluded that these attacks were carried out by Syrian air forces.** The use of chlorine by Syrian forces follows a pattern observed in 2014 and 2015.

Furthermore, as S/2016/738 had previously found:

42. **In most of the chlorine-related cases**, the Mechanism had obtained **information, in particular witness statements, referring to the presence of aircraft (rotary and fixed-wing) around the time and location of the incidents under investigation.** Depending on the time of the incident (daytime/night-time), the witnesses stated that they had either seen or heard the aircraft. The Mechanism repeatedly requested flight logs, situation reports and other documents of the Syrian Arab Armed Forces from the Government. The Government has not yet provided them

What makes you lose sleep?

Again, the suffering of the Syrian people. The humanitarian interaction between me and every Syrian family directly or indirectly, this is the only thing that could deprive me from sleep from time to time, but not the Western statements and not the threat of the support of the terrorists.

Yes, he really said that.

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