

Ex-Weapons Inspector: Trump's Sarin Claims Built on 'Lie'

Scott Ritter takes on White House Syria attack claims.

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Featured image: Sarin gas victim in Syria, as reported in April 2017. (Photo from [Ninian Reid / Flickr](#))

On the night of June 26, the White House Press Secretary released a statement, via Twitter, that, "the United States has identified potential preparations for another chemical weapons attack by the Assad regime that would likely result in the mass murder of civilians, including innocent children." The tweet went on to declare that, "the activities are similar to preparations the regime made before its April 4 chemical weapons attack," before warning that if "Mr. Assad conducts another mass murder attack using chemical weapons, he and his military will pay a heavy price."

A Pentagon spokesman backed up the White House tweet, stating that U.S. intelligence had observed "activity" at a Syrian air base that indicated "active preparation for chemical weapons use" was underway. The air base in question, Shayrat, had been implicated by the United States as the origin of aircraft and munitions used in an alleged chemical weapons attack on the village of Khan Sheikhun on April 4. The observed activity was at an aircraft hangar that had been struck by cruise missiles fired by U.S. Navy destroyers during a retaliatory strike on April 6.



American journalist Seymour Hersh

The White House statement comes [on the heels of the publication of an article](#) by Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist Seymour Hersh in a German publication, *Die Welt*,

which questions, among many things, the validity of the intelligence underpinning the allegations leveled at Syria regarding the events of April 4 in and around Khan Sheikhun. (In the interests of full disclosure, I had assisted Mr. Hersh in fact-checking certain aspects of his article; I was not a source of any information used in his piece.) Not surprisingly, Mr. Hersh's article has come under attack from many circles, the most vociferous of these being a UK-based citizen activist named Eliot Higgins who, [through his Bellingcat blog](#), has been widely cited by media outlets in the U.S. and UK as a source of information implicating the Syrian government in that alleged April chemical attack on Khan Sheikhun.

Neither Hersh nor Higgins possesses definitive proof to bolster their respective positions; the latter draws upon assertions made by supposed eyewitnesses backed up with forensic testing of materials alleged to be sourced to the scene of the attack that indicate the presence of Sarin, a deadly nerve agent, while the former relies upon anonymous sources within the U.S. military and intelligence establishments who provide a counter narrative to the official U.S. government position. What is clear, however, is that both cannot be right—either the Syrian government conducted a chemical weapons attack on Khan Sheikhun, or it didn't. There is no middle ground.

The search for truth is as old as civilization. Philosophers throughout the ages have struggled with the difficulties of rationalizing the beginning of existence, and the relationships between the one and the many. Aristotle approached this challenge through what he called the development of potentiality to actuality, which examined truth in terms of the causes that act on things. This approach is as relevant today as it was two millennia prior, and its application to the problem of ascertaining fact from fiction regarding Khan Sheikhun goes far in helping unpack the White House statements regarding Syrian chemical preparations and the Hersh-Higgins debate.

According to Aristotle, there were four causes that needed to be examined in the search for truth — material, efficient, formal and final. The *material cause* represents the element out of which an object is created. In terms of the present discussion, one could speak of the *material cause* in terms of the actual chemical weapon alleged to have been used at Khan Sheikhun. The odd thing about both the Khan Sheikhun attack and the current White House statements, however, is that no one has produced any physical evidence of there actually having been a chemical weapon, let alone what kind of weapon was allegedly employed. Like a prosecutor trying a murder case without producing the actual murder weapon, Syria's accusers have assembled a case that is purely circumstantial — plenty of dead and dying victims, but nothing that links these victims to an actual physical object.



A group of White Helmets without full protective gear hosing down children after an alleged chemical attack. (Photo from hurriyetdailynews.com)

Human Rights Watch (HRW), drawing upon analysis of images brought to them by the volunteer rescue organization White Helmets, of fragments allegedly recovered from the scene of the attack, has claimed that the material cause of the Khan Sheikhun event is a Soviet-made KhAB-250 chemical bomb, purpose-built to deliver Sarin nerve agent. There are several issues with the HRW assessment. First and foremost, there is no independent verification that the objects in question are what HRW claims, or that they were even physically present at Khan Sheikhun, let alone deposited there as a result of an air attack by the Syrian government. Moreover, the KhAB-250 bomb was never exported by either the

Soviet or Russian governments, thereby making the provenance of any such ordinance in the Syrian inventory highly suspect.

Sarin is a non-persistent chemical agent whose military function is to inflict casualties through direct exposure. Any ordinance intended to deliver Sarin would, like the KhAB-250, be designed to disseminate the agent in aerosol form, fine droplets that would be breathed in by the victim, or coat the victim's skin. In combat, the aircraft delivering Sarin munitions would be expected to minimize its exposure to hostile fire, flying low to the target at high speed. In order to have any semblance of military utility, weapons delivered in this fashion would require an inherent braking mechanism, such as deployable fins or a parachute, which would retard the speed of the weapon, allowing for a more concentrated application of the nerve agent on the intended target.

Chemical ordinance is not intended for precise strikes against point targets, but rather delivery of the agent to an area. For this reason, they are not dropped singly, but rather in large numbers. (The ab-250, for instance was designed to be delivered by a TU-22 bomber dropping 24 weapons on the same target.) The weapon itself is not complex—a steel bomb casing with a small high explosive tube—the burster charge—running down its middle, equipped with a nose fuse designed to detonate on contact with the ground or at a pre-determined altitude. Once detonated, the burster charge causes the casing to break apart, disseminating fine droplets of agent over the target. The resulting explosion is very low order, a pop more than a bang—virtually none of the actual weapon would be destroyed as a result, and its component parts, readily identifiable as such, would be deposited in the immediate environs. In short, if a KhAB-250, or any other air delivered chemical bomb, had been used at Khan Sheikhun, there would be significant physical evidence of that fact, including the totality of the bomb casing, the burster tube, the tail fin assembly, and parachute. The fact that none of this exists belies the notion that an air-delivered chemical bomb was employed by the Syrian government against Khan Sheikhun.

Continuing along the lines of Aristotle's exploration of the relationship between the potential and actual, the *efficient cause* represents the means by which the object is created. In the context of Khan Shiekhun, the issue (i.e., object) isn't the physical weapon itself, but rather its manifestation on the ground in terms of cause and effect. Nothing symbolized this more than the disturbing images that emerged in the aftermath of the alleged chemical attack of civilian victims, many of them women and children. (It was these images that spurred President Trump into ordering the cruise missile attack on Shayrat air base.) These images were produced by the White Helmet organization as a byproduct of the emergency response that transpired in and around Khan Sheikhun on April 4. It is this response, therefore, than can be said to constitute the *efficient cause* in any examination of potential to actuality regarding the allegations of the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government there.



The [White Helmets](#) came into existence in the aftermath of the unrest that erupted in Syria after the Arab Spring in 2012. They say they are neutral, but they have used their now-global platform as a humanitarian rescue unit to promote anti-regime themes and to encourage outside intervention to remove the regime of Bashar al-Assad. By White Helmet's own admission, it is [well-resourced, trained and funded by western NGOs and governments](#), including USAID (U.S. Agency for International Development), which funded the group \$23 million as of 2016.

A UK-based company with strong links to the British Foreign Office, May Day Rescue, has largely managed the actual rescue aspects of the White Helmet's work. Drawing on a budget of tens of millions of dollars donated by foreign governments, including the U.S. and UK, May Day Rescue oversees a comprehensive training program designed to bring graduates to the lowest standard—"light," or Level One—for Urban Search and Rescue (USAR). Personnel and units trained to the "light" standard are able to conduct surface search and rescue operations—they are neither trained nor equipped to rescue entrapped victims. Teams trained to this standard are not qualified to perform operations in a hazardous environment (such as would exist in the presence of a nerve agent like Sarin).

The White Helmets have made their reputation through the dissemination of self-made videos ostensibly showing them in action inside Syria, rescuing civilians from bombed out structures, and providing life-saving emergency medical care. (It should be noted that the eponymously named Oscar-nominated documentary showing the White Helmets in action was filmed entirely by the White Helmets themselves, which raises a genuine question of journalistic ethics.) To the untrained eye, these videos are a dramatic representation of heroism in action. To the trained professional (I can offer my own experience as a Hazardous Materials Specialist with New York Task Force 2 USAR team), these videos represent de facto evidence of dangerous incompetence or, worse, fraud.

The bread and butter of the White Helmet's self-made reputation is the rescue of a victim—usually a small child—from beneath a pile of rubble, usually heavy reinforced concrete. First and foremost, as a "light" USAR team, the White Helmets are not trained or equipped to conduct rescues of entrapped victims. And yet the White helmet videos depict their rescue workers using excavation equipment and tools, such as pneumatic drills, to gain access to victims supposedly pinned under the weight of a collapsed building. The techniques used by the White Helmets are not only technically wrong, but dangerous to anyone who might actually be trapped—the introduction of excavators to move debris, or the haphazard drilling and hammering into concrete in the immediate vicinity of a trapped victim, would invariably lead to a shifting of the rubble pile, crushing the trapped victim to death. In my opinion, the videos are pure theater, either staged to impress an unwitting audience, or actually conducted with total disregard for the well-being of any real victims.

Likewise, the rescue of victims from a hazardous materials incident, especially one as dangerous as one involving a nerve agent as lethal as Sarin, is solely the purview of personnel and teams specifically equipped and trained for the task. “Light” USAR teams receive no hazardous materials training as part of their certification, and there is no evidence or even claim on the part of the White Helmets that they have undergone the kind of specialist training needed to effect a rescue in the case of an actual chemical weapons attack.

This reality comes through on the images provided by the White Helmets of their actions in and around Khan Sheikhun on April 4. From the haphazard use of personal protective equipment (either non-existent or employed in a manner that negates protection from potential exposure) to the handling of victims and so-called decontamination efforts, everything the White Helmets did was operationally wrong and would expose themselves and the victims they were ostensibly treating to even greater harm. As was the case with their “rescues” of victims in collapsed structures, I believe the rescue efforts of the White Helmets at Khan Sheikhun were a theatrical performance designed to impress the ignorant and ill-informed.

I’m not saying that nothing happened at Khan Sheikhun—obviously something did. But the White Helmets exploited whatever occurred, over-dramatizing “rescues” and “decontamination” in staged theatrics that were captured on film and rapidly disseminated using social media in a manner designed to influence public opinion in the West. We don’t see the actual rescue at the scene of the event—bodies pulled from their homes, lying in the streets. What we get is grand theater as bodies arrive at the field hospital, with lots of running to and fro and meaningless activity that would actually worsen the condition of the victims and contaminate the rescuers.

Through their actions, however, the White Helmets were able to breathe life into the overall narrative of a chemical weapons attack, distracting from the fact that no actual weapon existed and thus furthering the *efficient cause* by which the object—the non-existent chemical weapon—was created.

Having defined the creation of the object (the non-existent chemical weapon) and the means by which it was created (the flawed theatrics of the White Helmets), we move on to the third, or *formal cause*, which constitutes the expression of *what* the object is. In the case of Khan Sheikhun, this is best expressed by the results of forensic testing of samples allegedly taken from victims of the chemical attack, and from the scene of the attack itself. The organization responsible for overseeing this forensic testing was the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, or OPCW. Through its work, the OPCW has determined that the nerve agent Sarin, or a “Sarin-like substance,” was used at Khan Sheikhun, a result that would seemingly compensate for both the lack of a bomb and the amateurish theatrics of the rescuers.



During an OPCW training course on emergency response to chemical incidents, participants learn to use protective gear. (Source: UN)

The problem, however, is that the OPCW is in no position to make the claim it did. One of the essential aspects of the kind of forensic investigation carried out by organizations such as the OPCW—namely the application of scientific methods and techniques to the investigation of a crime—is the concept of “chain of custody” of any samples that are being evaluated. This requires a seamless transition from the collection of the samples in question, the process of which must be recorded and witnessed, the sealing of the samples, the documentation of the samples, the escorted transportation of the samples to the laboratory, the confirmation and breaking of the seals under supervision, and the subsequent processing of the samples, all under supervision of the OPCW. Anything less than this means the integrity of the sample has been compromised—in short, there is no sample.

The OPCW acknowledges that its personnel did not gain access to Khan Sheikhun at any time. However, the investigating team states that it used connections with “parties with knowledge of and connections to the area in question,” to gain access to samples that were collected by “non governmental organizations (NGOs)” which also provided representatives to be interviewed, and videos and images for the investigating team to review. The NGO used by the OPCW was none other than the White Helmets.

The process of taking samples from a contaminated area takes into consideration a number of factors designed to help create as broad and accurate a picture of the scene of the incident itself as well as protect the safety of the person taking the sample as well as the integrity of the crime scene itself (i.e., reduce contamination). There is no evidence that the White Helmets have received this kind of specialized training required for the taking of such samples. Moreover, the White Helmets are not an extension of the OPCW—under no circumstances could any samples taken by White Helmet personnel and subsequently turned over to the OPCW be considered viable in terms of chain of custody. This likewise holds true for any biomedical samples evaluated by the OPCW—all such samples were either taken from victims who had been transported to Turkish hospitals, or provided by non-OPCW personnel in violation of chain of custody.

Lastly, there is Aristotle’s *final cause*, which represents the *end* for which the object *is*—namely, what was the ultimate *purpose* of the chemical weapons attack on Khan Sheikhun. To answer this question, one must remain consistent with the framework of

examination of potential to actuality applied herein. In this, we find a commonality between the four causes whose linkage cannot be ignored when assessing the truth of what happened at Khan Sheikhun, namely the presence of a single entity—the White Helmets.

There are two distinct narratives at play when it comes to what happened in Khan Sheikhun. One, put forward by the governments of the United States, Great Britain, France, and supported by the likes of *Bellingcat* and the White Helmets, is that the Syrian government conducted a chemical weapons attack using a single air-delivered bomb on a civilian target. The other, put forward by the governments of Russia and Syria, and sustained by the reporting of Seymour Hersh, is that the Syrian air force used conventional bombs to strike a military target, inadvertently releasing a toxic cloud from substances stored at that facility and killing or injuring civilians in Khan Sheikhun. There can be no doubt that the very survival of the White Helmets as an organization, and the cause they support (i.e., regime change in Syria), has been furthered by the narrative they have helped craft and sell about the events of April 4 in and around Khan Sheikhun. This is the living manifestation of Aristotle's *final cause*, the end for which this entire lie has been constructed.

The lack of any meaningful fact-based information to back up the claims of the White Helmets and those who sustain them, like the U.S. government and *Bellingcat*, raises serious questions about the viability of the White House's latest pronouncements on Syria and allegations that it was preparing for a second round of chemical attacks. If America has learned anything from its painful history with Iraq and the false allegations of continued possession of weapons of mass destruction on the part of the regime of Saddam Hussein, it is that to rush into military conflict in the Middle East based upon the unsustained allegations of an interested regional party (i.e., Ahmed Chalabi and the Iraqi National Congress) is a fool's errand.

It is up to the discerning public to determine which narrative about the events in Syria today they will seek to embrace—one supported by a Pulitzer Prize winning investigative journalist who has made a career out of exposing inconvenient truths, from My Lai to Abu Ghraib and beyond, or one that collapses under Aristotle's development of potentiality to actuality analysis, as the manufactured story line promoted by the White Helmets demonstratively does.

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