

Background Press Briefing on Syria

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Press Briefings

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James S. Brady Briefing Room

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SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: This briefing today is about a declassified — or it's a summary based on declassified information about the attacks on the 4th of April. So this is on background only. Attribution is senior White House official, and it will be embargoed until the end of the brief. And I'll have each of my colleagues come up here and introduce themselves.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: My understanding is you'd just like to ask some questions. So I'm happy to go through some details of the narrative, or just take questions incoming, if you have them.

Q Do you mind walking through some of the narrative related to the chemical weapons attack — what Russia knew perhaps beforehand, or during, or after, and some of the reporting that has come out about a Russian drone, et cetera?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So let me start with the narrative of what we think happened in the attack. And let me tell you, to start with — what we've done here is we've declassified a lot of intelligence with great thanks to our colleagues in the intelligence community so that we can be very forthcoming with you about the amount that we know about this attack and why we believe the Russian and Syrian narratives are false. And we think it's really important for you to understand the depth of information that we have that supports this narrative.

I would say that since we started coming forward, in the immediate wake of the attack, all of the way through to today, we continued to get additional information. And the information we get about this attack continues to be clear and consistent with our understanding of the attack, starting on the day of the attack, April 4th, and working all the way through today.

And I would say we, even as recently as last night, for today, declassified additional information that, again, lends additional weight and credibility to the narrative I want to share with you today.

The information we have downgraded and declassified includes a wide body of open-source material, both social media accounts. It include open-source videos, reporting, open-source imagery, et cetera, as well as our own geospatial intelligence, our signals intelligence, and it include physiological samples of victims of the attack. And again, all of that tells a very clear and consistent story about what we think happened.

So to be clear, based on the pro-opposition social media reporting, those reports indicate that the chemical attack began in Khan Sheikhun at about 6:55 local time on April 4th. Our information makes quite clear that the attack came from SU-22 fixed-wing aircraft out of the Shayrat airfield, which is regime-controlled. These aircraft were in the vicinity of Khan Sheikhun for about 20 minutes before reports of the chemical attack came out, and they vacated the area shortly after the attack. And I think some of you have seen the information that we shared previously about the tracks of those aircraft that came out of the Khan Sheikhun airfield — or out of the Shayrat airfield, lingered over Khan Sheikhun, and came back to that airfield.

In addition, we have information that suggests that personnel historically associated with the chemical weapons program were at Shayrat airfield in late March preparing for this attack. On the dates surrounding the attack, and the day of the attack, they were again present at that airfield. Hours after the attack, there were hundreds of accounts of victims of the particular chemical weapons attack.

The victimology, the symptomology of those victims is very consistent with nerve agent and sarin exposure. And now, as I will note, we do have physiological samples from a number of victims that confirm sarin exposure. The symptomology was quite consistent. We saw miosis, or pin-point pupils. We see frothing at the nose and mouth, twitching. All of those are consistent with nerve agent. They are not consistent with chlorine.

Also, the victimology shows that those people don't have other wounds or injuries that would be consistent with a conventional attack.

I would note, as well, that another clear symptom of sarin or nerve agent exposure is that the secondary responders also started to have symptoms consistent with sarin exposure. And those were the people that were there that took in the victims, that were touching them, that were removing their clothing. Some of those also passed out and had other symptoms of sarin exposure.

So by about 12:15 local time, the open source was very clear: It showed images of dead children of varying ages. And then we started to get accounts of the hospital, where some of those victims were being taken, being bombed at about 1:10 p.m. local. It showed, again, victims flooding to that particular hospital before there was a conventional attack against that hospital.

The impact craters that we have in imagery and open source show conventional weapons being used around that hospital, not chemical weapons there. The other information we have shows that leakage around the actual weapon that we think the sarin came from, not

explosive debris that we would expect if it had been an explosive munition that it hit chemicals or something that would be consistent with a Russian attack. And again, we think that is not true.

Q Sorry, can you just go over that one —

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yeah, I'll come back through it. Let me hit the Russian narrative all the way through, and I'll help you there.

We also think — some people have alleged that videos had been fabricated, that a lot of this information had been fabricated. The absolute massive data we have, and all the different vehicles we've gotten it from — open-source videos, to victim accounts, to imagery, to signals intelligence — it's just too massive for really any intelligence organization to fabricate in that short a period of time. We just think that's not a feasible explanation.

And then we did confirm that some of the videos that were shot of the account, we did go to independently confirm that the times at which those videos were taken were consistent with the times of the attack and not from prior footage of other attacks, other places.

So let me walk through a little bit — and, I would also note the World Health Organization came up with similar analysis on April 5th. It, too, felt that the victims had been exposed to nerve agent based on the same kind of symptomology along the board. And we do expect that as others continue — and we would expect we are looking forward to the OPCW's fact-finding mission, looking into this event itself, and we think it's really important for them to get out there, for them to have access to the site of the attack, to the airfield, to other places that might be affiliated. And we expect that any samples they find will again be consistent with what we've found so far.

In terms of the Russian narrative — and I'll get back to your question about them and the inconsistency — across the board, starting in 2013 and then since, we've seen both the Russians and the Syrians have a very clear campaign to try to obfuscate the nature of attacks, the attackers, and what has happened in any particular incident.

They've thrown out a bunch of potential agents, a bunch of potential responsible or accountable parties. And, often, their own information is inconsistent with their own narrative.

They certainly have dismissed the allegations of a chemical weapons attacking Khan Sheikun. They called it a "prank of a provocative nature." But again, we don't think it's remotely possible for the Syrians or the Russians to have fabricated this much information so fast and so consistently on this attack.

I'd also note that we've, of course, got extensive media observers and we have our own intelligence information. And the intelligence information and the accounts we've gotten from our partners, again, suggest very similar outcomes in this attack.

They noted, as I said — the Russians did — that this was a regime attack against a munitions depot, and that perhaps that terrorists had been holding chemical munitions that were attacked and then exploded from there. As I noted, we think that the information is inconsistent with that narrative. There is, as I said, leakage, and not in this hospital or this area where they said a building was attacked, but in a separate place where we can see the leakage from that munition. It is inconsistent with where the Russians would say that this attack happens and where the gas came from. And similarly, again, it's leakage; it does not show explosive dissemination of the chemicals. And we don't see a building, again, with that chemical residue we would expect if the Russian narrative was true.

Q When you say leakage, that's how a chemical weapon is supposed to work. It's deliberate leakage?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Right. Yeah, absolutely.

Q It's dispersed.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: It's dispersed. But there's always leakage around the outside, or almost always leakage around the outside that shows that the material inside has leaked out as it disseminates.

Q Rather than it was bombed and then exploded.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Exactly. Exactly.

Q Do you believe it was only one munition that was dropped on the 4th?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So I don't have details on the number of munitions here for you, but I think it's fair to say we think it's at least one munition. And we have one particular munition that we've seen via overhead that we think is a munition that contains sarin.

Q How do you explain the Russian drone at the hospital?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So I don't think we have information for you today to talk about the Russian drone or any other information on the Russians, per se. We just want to walk right through the narrative here. We're still looking into what we think the intelligence community assessment or other is about Russian knowledge of involvement, et cetera. And I'm sure we'll come forward with more information on that, if we have it.

Q (Inaudible) on the question foreknowledge of Russia.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: We don't have information on that, per se. I think it's clear that the Russians are trying to cover up what happened there.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'll say we're still looking into that, into the particulars of that question. And there's not a consensus on our side about the extent or how to interpret the information that we have and continue to get.

However, what we do know from looking at a history of the Russian military and the Syrian military operating together for the better part of two years now closely, since the Russian advisory mission and assistance mission began in earnest in 2015. And in addition, two militaries that have a decades-long support relationship. Based on that historical pattern, we've seen that these two militaries operate very closely, even down to an operational and tactical level.

And so considering the fact that there were Russian forces co-located with Syrian forces at the Shayrat airfield, in addition to many other installations — many other Syrian regime installations around the country — we do think that it is a question worth asking the Russians about how is it possible that their forces were co-located with the Syrian forces that planned, prepared, and carried out this chemical weapons attack at the same installation, and did not have foreknowledge.

Q So just to be clear, the attack that you mentioned against the hospital, which you said was aimed at covering up the initial chemical weapons attack, was that carried out by munitions that are linked to Russia?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, we don't have information on that today.

Q Is it the assessment at this point, though — can you say the least that — and you spoke to this a little, and, [senior administration official], I want to get your take — that the Russians tried to cover up the chemical weapons attack? Do you believe that that is the case?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, we don't know the tactical intentions of the Russians on that day on any operations that they may have been involved in.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So what I would say, in terms of cover-up — just in terms of cover-up to follow there, I'm talking about the absolute — coming out afterwards to say it was terrorists, to say that they're —

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The cover-up is the —

Q (Inaudible) stockpile —

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, I would say —

Q — you would say is absolutely an attempt to cover up a —

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: To cover up Syrian regime culpability in a chemical weapons attack.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The cover-up is the disinformation that has happened from the day of the attack to today.

Q In your estimation, does this action show an increase in Russian involvement? Or is it has always been with Russia?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: What I'd like to do right now is get back to going through the narrative, and then we'll take more of the questions. If you can just finish going through the —

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yeah, if I can just finish why we think the Russian narrative is false.

So getting back to why we think the Russian narrative is false — Moscow, as I noted, said that the release of chemicals was caused by the terrorist — a strike on a terrorist ammunition depot, but a Syrian military source told Russian state media on April 4th that regime forces had not carried out any strike in Khan Sheikhun, which contradicted Russia's claim directly.

An open-source video shows where we believe the chemical munition landed — again, not on a facility with weapons, but in the middle of a street in the northern section of Khan Sheikhun. The imagery of that site from April 6th, after the allegation, shows a crater in the road that corresponds to the open-source video, so we can track to where we think that particular munition was.

The Russians also allege that the terrorists — this was a bombing on a terrorist ammunition depot. We do not assess and have not assessed that ISIS or other terrorists in the area have sarin. So while ISIS is using sulfur mustard — and we've documented that quite well, and certainly oppose chemical weapons use by any actor, state or non-state, and are working, of course, to be able to push back ISIS chemical use as well — it is quite clear to us that in this case this is not a terrorist holding of sarin or terrorist use of sarin. But we do know that the Syrian regime has sarin, that it used it in the 2013 attack, and there are outstanding questions from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons that make quite clear that Syria has not fully come clean on the locations, facilities, types of agents, or personnel involved with its chemical weapons program, causing us additional questions on what's there.

In terms — is there more you want me to hit from the Russian piece?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Go ahead.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think it's a clear pattern of deflecting blame. We've seen this in multiple accounts, including when the OPCW-U.N. joint investigative mechanism came out with reports in August and October of last year identifying Syria as culpable in three chemical weapons attacks. In these three cases these were chlorine attacks. They were from a different airfield here. The United States did come out with designations on personnel affiliated with that attack on that airfield to condemn that use, as well.

This is quite concerning, given that the Russians were part of setting up the deal by which Syria was supposed to give up its chemical weapons. It was party to the deal to create the Joint Investigative Mechanism to investigate these attacks. The JIM did come forward with clear attribution calls, and Russia has refused to accept those along the way.

And I think I would leave it there on the narrative.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Okay. So stepping back to some of your earlier questions, we're going to open this up again to questions. But to be clear, you're going to receive a 3.5-page background document at the end of this that's going to run you through this narrative that will be very detailed.

One thing I want to address is the questions come up before. We had a lot of questions about a hospital, about munitions use on that hospital, about who was responsible for bombing that hospital. So, at this time, what you'll see in this document is a discussion of the Russian use of information and disinformation for obfuscatory purposes in an attempt to shift blame or to transfer blame away from the Assad regime, to prevent counter-narratives about U.S. actions. That's what we're addressing and discussing today.

We don't have any comment right now on who may have been involved in bombing that hospital and why and how. So that piece, just to be clear — because there was some confusion about that — we're talking — when we talked about the Russian role, we talked about the obfuscatory information campaign, not the other thing that you asked on. We don't have a comment on that at this time.

And I'll open it up to questions.

Q Have you exchanged any information with the Russians? Because it's easy — they say one thing, you say another thing. Why don't exchange the information, compare it?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, so we've come forward with a lot of the information we have publicly already. This is another attempt to come forward publicly with that information.

We have had conversations at a variety of levels with the Russians, as well, to explain to them what we understand about the attack, and ask them to be helpful to our efforts to get the Syrians to come clean. We have not done a full intelligence exchange, and I'm not sure that's particularly likely at this point.

Q I think I heard you mention signals intelligence. Do you have any SIGINT that actually indicates any level of collusion between Russia and Syria, or any indication that Assad himself ordered this strike?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So we don't have any comment on that right now.

Q On the question of the delivery mechanism for the sarin, are you sure that the (inaudible) was Syrian air force?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: We are confident, as I noted, that the SU-22 took off from the Shayrat airfield, which is regime-controlled, and dropped the strike, and we believe the Syrian regime is culpable.

Q Do you have any details about the origin of the sarin?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: We don't have additional details on the origin of the sarin. It's well-documented that the Syrians produce sarin as part of their chemical weapons program. They were supposed to, of course, have destroyed — declared and destroyed all of that agent.

Q You had talked about the movement, in late March, indicating that personnel were moved to this base to prepare these weapons. Do you have any intelligence that indicates these types of personnel were moved to other airbases within Syria, that they may be preparing more chemical weapons attacks in the future?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So I can tell you that we take very seriously the possibility that Syria may have additional agents elsewhere. We are working with our intelligence community to understand every piece of information they have about where such munitions might be located, who might be ahold of them, and I can tell you that that's going to be part of what we try to figure out and where we go from here.

Q Do you believe that the Assad regime still owns a large stock of chemical weapons, especially sarin and the nerve gas, or is it the small (inaudible) amount that they use, like we saw in (inaudible)?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So I don't think we have any comment on how much we think is left. As I noted, we're working with our intelligence community to figure out what it is. But our clear goal right now, and the goal of this strike, was, in large part, to deter further chemical weapons uses by the Syria regime.

Q In the end, is there any indication that this action is an increase in Russian involvement?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, I don't think it's — I don't think it indicates an increase. I mean, in the whole — let's say, in the whole environment of operational cooperation between the Russian military and Syrian military, the level of cooperation is quite high, so we've seen. We haven't seen that peak or drop. It's been steady.

Q So following, then this isn't a provocative action aimed at the U.S., per se?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Don't see any indication of that. There were clear operational reasons, we think, probably, why they employed the weapons.

Q My question is about what President Putin said this morning, suggesting, according to him, the rebels were preparing other attacks around — outside Damascus. Can you give us any insight on that, and your view of those statements?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Of chemical attacks?

Q Yes. Yeah, well, I don't think it was — I don't think there was a specification.

Q He specifically said that there will be other provocations like this one that — and then the General Staff of the Russian Forces — armed forces — already said that the rebels, whom you call rebels, are already bringing in the substances.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I would just say — so to be clear, we are very confident that terrorists, or non-state actors, did not commit this particular attack. We are confident as well that these terrorists or rebels don't have sarin, so they would not be able to conduct a follow-on attack of this sort, given especially that they didn't conduct the first one.

Q Given the fact that chemical weapons were used in this attack, do you have a sense of whether Syria got rid of any of its chemical weapons — where that stockpile stands at this point? And have you thought about next steps in terms of trying to get rid of it?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So we do know that Syria gave up a huge amount of its chemical weapons — over 1,000 tons of chemical weapons. They declared them. And we had, through and incredible international effort with our partners, removed those chemical weapons and destroyed them.

Nevertheless, Syria — it is clear that Syria's declaration was not complete. The OPCW has additional questions, and we look to the OPCW and the entire international community to support the OPCW's effort to press Syria for answers to the outstanding questions, to get them to declare any agent, facilities, personnel, or others involved in the chemical weapons program, and most certainly get rid of anything that's left.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Okay, we're going to hold for a second. [Senior administration official] is going to make a quick point here, and then we'll jump back into Q&A.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yeah, I think it's important to understand the context in which these weapons were employed, what motivated the regime — the fact that they were losing in a particularly important area, and that's what drove it.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yeah, so in the middle of March, opposition forces launched an offensive from Southern Idlib province toward the major city of Hama, which is a strategic city in Syria. It's Syria's third city, and it's also the location of a key Syrian regime airbase that has been crucial for the regime and the forces that support it for projecting power from central Syria, both along the western spine, from Aleppo down to the south, and also further to the east to support operations in Palmyra. So that is an airbase that the regime had to calculate that it could not lose.

The opposition offensive approach was able to penetrate to within just a couple of miles of that strategic airbase and also threatened the Hama population center within just a few miles.

At that point, the regime we think calculated that with its manpower spread quite thin, trying to support both defensive operations and consolidation operations in Aleppo and along that north-south spine of western Syria, and also trying to support operations which required it to send manpower and resources east toward Palmyra, we believe that the regime probably calculated at that point that chemical weapons were necessary in order to try to make up for the manpower deficiency.

That's why we saw, we believe, multiple attacks of this nature against locations that the regime probably determined were support areas for the opposition forces that were near Hama — for example, in the town of Al-Tamanah and then in the town of Khan Sheikhun, both of which are in what would be, in military terms, the rear area for the opposition forces that were on the front line.

So we believe certainly that there was an operational calculus that the regime and perhaps its Russian advisors went through in terms of the decision-making.

Q You said there was an operational reason for this attack.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Correct.

Q So just to clarify what you just said, this was an attack on civilians, but your understanding is that these civilian areas were seen as providing some sort of operational support for the opposition forces, which is what they're —

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes. Now, I don't mean — I don't mean that that means that the munitions were aimed at some sort of military capability. What I —

Q They were aimed at civilians.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: They were clearly aimed at areas that were most likely civilian areas. However, what I mean is that they were most likely intended to create pressure in what was deemed a rear area for those opposition forces that were fighting.

Q So understanding that, just a quick follow-up on that, is there anything about the timing, why this took place now — or when it did?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: In terms of the timing?

Q So you explained to us why you think they chose to attack where they did. Why did they do it then?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes, if you look at sort of the punch-counterpunch of opposition and regime forces that are fighting in the vicinity of Hama, yes, you can see that — in that context, you can see that the chemical weapons attacks seem — could fit within the flow of a punch-counterpunch — operational punch-counterpunch.

Q You said just a second ago, multiple attacks of this nature. So multiple sarin attacks, not just (inaudible)?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So it's a multiple chemical weapons attacks. So we think that the regime has consistently used chemical weapons over time, not necessarily all sarin, to be able to fill conventional voids in its ability to reach the opposition.

Q — the context of your colleague's conversation with us about this particular one, so I'm just trying to clarify if they're all sarin attacks, or just the one in Khan Sheikun, which you have established with your high degree of confidence.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So we would say that there are more than 200 allegations of regime chemical use since 2013, when Syria promised to give up its chemical weapons. We assess that many of those are credible. In terms of what we've been able to say right now, at least one of those is sarin, and we're continuing to look into —

Q Khan Sheikun, correct?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: It's Khan Sheikun, right.

Q With all of this confirmation that you have today, how are you employing the world community, to include the U.N., as it relates to what's happening with the punch-counterpunch? And also with the collusion with Russia and Syria together, how are you employing them? And also is this clarification and confirmation ramping up efforts against Syria?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So I'll start, and then I'm going to let these guys follow on.

In terms of the chemical weapons piece of this, it's incredibly important that we speak with one voice at the United Nations and at the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. We need to speak with a clear message: That chemical weapons use of any kind, by any actor, is absolutely intolerable. That is our goal, and we need to do everything we can, collectively, to make sure that comes across clearly.

We're working with all of our partners, and we've made this message clear to the Russians as well, and will continue to do so, that we believe it's in no state's interest that any actor uses chemical weapons.

Q Support of additional forces, especially now that you believe to think that they have more agents left, be it sarin or what have you —

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So we're still working through our partners. We have to get through U.N. and OPCW this week. We're continuing engagement there, and then we'll work with the international community. Really important is going to be for the fact-finding mission at the OPCW to do its job, to turn over any information that it has to the Joint Investigative Mechanism so that we have an outside body confirm, I think, is what they will do, what we already very strongly believe — that the Syrian regime is behind this attack.

And again, I don't think there's evidence to the contrary at all, but we need to let the international community — and empower those mechanisms of the international community to do their jobs. And our hope is that that will lend additional weight to what we've already talked here about.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: We're going to let my colleague set up there. And do you want to follow on with that?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, no, that's fine.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Quickly, we're going to end here. But what I'd like to say on this is it's also — you guys have asked about this several times. Speaking with one voice is what we just said. This is an opportunity. We have a clear, concise and definitive analysis here. We understand what happened there with a very high degree of confidence. And this is an opportunity, going back to an earlier question, for the Russians to choose to stop the disinformation campaign and make the commitment to accept what happens and work forward to eliminate WMDs from Syria together.

And that's it, we're going to leave it there. Thank you. The document will be handed out. Thank you for being here. And this is on background. I'm going to finish off — on background, senior White House officials, embargoed until we walk out of the room. Document is coming to you.

END

12:40 P.M. EDT