

OPCW corruption vs Syria exposed

By Richard Bardon

The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), the intergovernmental body created by the 1993 UN Chemical Weapons Convention to monitor signatory nations' compliance, has been doctoring reports to blame the Syrian government for chemical attacks on civilians for over five years. In a 26 June report titled "[How the OPCW's investigation of the Douma incident was nobbled](#)", members of the Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media, a group of academics and independent researchers based mainly in the UK, draw upon disclosures by OPCW whistleblowers, supported by their own research, to show that personnel from countries hostile to Syria usurped control of the OPCW's investigative functions in 2014, turning the once independent and impartial organisation into a vehicle for jihadist-generated regime-change propaganda.

The "Douma incident" refers to accusations by the White Helmets—a [fake-humanitarian group](#) run by jihadists and funded by the UK and US governments—that on 7 April 2018 the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) dropped both chlorine gas and the organophosphorus nerve agent Sarin on the jihadist-occupied Douma township in Eastern Ghouta, an outlying region of Syria's capital Damascus, killing 43 civilians. The accusations were never plausible, since a highly lethal nerve agent like Sarin would have killed thousands, including the SAA soldiers already pouring into the area. Moreover, the last of Syria's stockpile of chemical weapons and precursor compounds had already been verified destroyed by the *United States Navy* in June 2014, under a deal brokered by Russia. Nonetheless, US President Donald Trump, French President Emmanuel Macron and UK Prime Minister Theresa May seized upon the White Helmets' allegations to justify a cruise missile attack one week later on civilian and military infrastructure they insisted was involved in Syria's (imaginary) chemical weapons program.¹ British foreign correspondent Robert Fisk soon reported that doctors he spoke to in Douma had seen no chlorine poisoning, either; rather, a large number of people had sought treatment for hypoxia (oxygen starvation) after inhaling smoke and dust produced by the fighting, but were videoed in hospital by the White Helmets and presented as victims of chemical weapons. This was later confirmed by 17 eyewitnesses at an April 2018 press conference in the Netherlands;² and by Lebanon-based BBC producer Riam Dalati, who wrote 13 February 2019 on Twitter that "I can prove without a doubt that the Douma Hospital scene was staged."³

False findings

The OPCW Fact-Finding Mission in Syria (FFM) categorically ruled out Sarin in its Final Report on Douma, but went to great lengths to keep alive the idea that



Children in Douma in 2018 getting washed down following an alleged chemical attack, which was staged. Photo: Screenshot

chlorine gas had been used.⁴ In doing so, it attributed the presence of chlorine compounds "not naturally present in the environment" to a release of chlorine gas, which could just as well come from household cleaning products. And to support the theory that the putative chlorine gas had "likely" come from two portable gas cylinders supposedly dropped from aircraft, it relied not on engineering data collected on-site, but computer modelling by unnamed "experts" which defied the laws of physics. In a 13 May blog post, Professors Paul McKeigue, David Miller and Piers Robinson of the Working Group published a leaked OPCW engineering report showing that the OPCW went to these "experts" *only after its own experts had exonerated the SAA*.⁵ That document, signed off by OPCW engineering sub-team leader Ian Henderson—a top-level specialist with over 20 years' experience—but excluded from the Final Report, stated that the evidence was "inconsistent with what would have been expected in the case of either cylinder being delivered from an aircraft", and that the alternative hypothesis that they had been placed manually (i.e. planted by "opposition" jihadists) "produced the only plausible explanation for observations at the scene."

OPCW captured

In their 26 June report, McKeigue, Miller, Robinson and their associate Jake Mason show not only how and by whom the OPCW Final Report was "nobbled" (slang for interference to stop a horse winning a race), but that the people responsible have done the same to previous OPCW investigations.

"The roles of the [current] Director-General [Spanish diplomat Fernando Arias] and the newly appointed director of the Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) [Mexico's Santiago Oñate] are mostly ceremonial", they reported, while the real boss of the OPCW is Chief of Cabinet Sébastien Braha, a French diplomat since 2006 and Permanent Representative to the OPCW since 2014. "Our sources report that even before he took up his post as an employee of the OPCW, he was frequently in the building giving instructions on expectations from his capital to the Technical Secretariat." The Principal Investigator and *de facto* boss of the IIT, Elise Coté, is a Canadian diplomat.

1. "Russia blames British Intelligence for fake Douma 'chemical attack'", AAS, 18 Apr. 2018.

2. "Syrian medics, 'victims' debunk Douma chemical attack lie", AAS, 2 May 2018.

3. "BBC producer blows the whistle on 'staged' Douma chemical attack", AAS, 20 Feb. 2019.

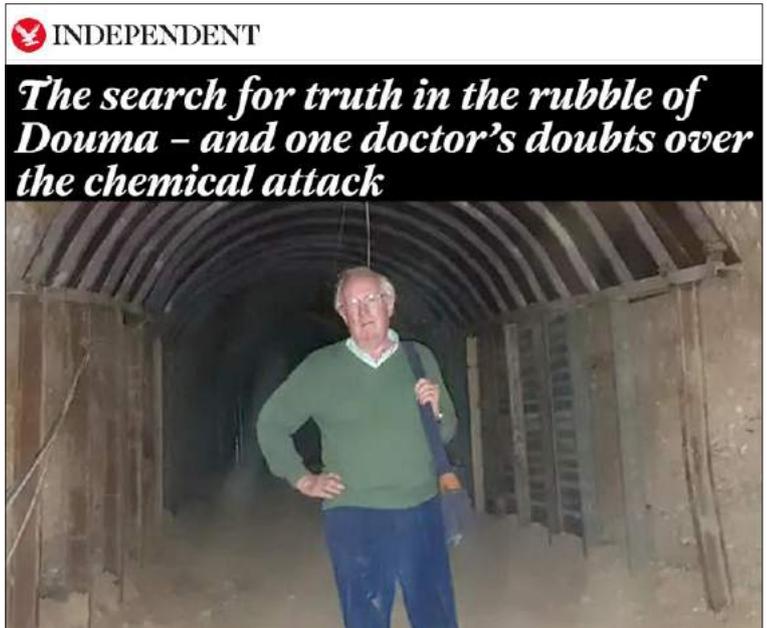
4. "OPCW Douma report does not implicate Syrian government in 'gas attack'", AAS, 13 Mar. 2019.

5. "OPCW suppressed evidence clearing Syrian army of 2018 'gas attack'", AAS, 22 May 2019.

Both have obvious conflicts of interest given their governments' demands for regime-change in Syria; however "the OPCW lacks any procedure for managing such situations". The IIT was created in June 2018 at the initiative of France, the UK, the USA, Saudi Arabia and Jordan (all adversaries of Syria), purportedly to allow the OPCW Technical Secretariat to "identify the perpetrators of the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic", despite this being outside its authority as prescribed by the Chemical Weapons Convention.

The FFM was likewise established in violation of the OPCW's charter, to bypass normal investigative protocols. As the Working Group notes, the Chemical Weapons Convention (Part XI of the Verification Annex, "Investigations in cases of alleged use of chemical weapons") provides "strict procedures for investigations of alleged use, and does not empower OPCW management to interfere in such an investigation.... In April 2014, when the first alleged chlorine attacks were reported from opposition-held areas, the Director-General decided to create a new operation designated the 'Fact-Finding Mission in Syria', with a mandate 'to establish the facts surrounding allegations of the use of toxic chemicals, reportedly chlorine, for hostile purposes in the Syrian Arab Republic.' This was announced on 29 April 2014, before any meeting of the Executive Council had considered it ... [to allow] the Technical Secretariat to set its own rules and procedures for the investigation of alleged chemical attacks in Syria." The OPCW's then Director-General was Turkish diplomat Ahmet Üzümcü, whose country was a co-instigator of the regime-change war against Syria in 2011. The first FFM Team Leader, Malik Ellahi, had been Üzümcü's political advisor. During a May 2014 investigation the FFM ceased conducting inspections in Syria and "resorted to collecting evidence in Turkey, with witnesses and materials supplied by opposition-linked NGOs", a practice it continued in subsequent investigations.

In early 2015, the Working Group reported, the FFM was split into two teams, dubbed Alpha and Bravo. As Russia's OPCW representative Alexander Shulgin protested 14 April 2017 to the OPCW Executive Council, the FFM's mandate required that "its membership should be approved by the Syrian government, and it should be balanced", but that this was no longer the case: "One [Team Bravo], led by Steven Wallis from Britain, works in contact with the Syrian government, while the other one [Team Alpha], headed by his fellow countryman Leonard Phillips, deals with the claims filed by the Syrian armed opposition. ... [Team Alpha's] membership is classified, and no one knows where it goes or how it operates ... but they are clearly working mostly remotely, relying on the internet and the fabrications provided by Syrian opposition NGOs, and never go to Syria."



Top: Russia organised this OPCW press conference at the Hague in April 2018 to present people from Douma who contradicted the official account. Above: *The Independent* correspondent Robert Fisk was the first Western journalist to report from Douma, and also contradicted the claims of a chemical attack. Photos: Screenshot

(Emphasis added.) The Working Group records that in his capacity as Team Alpha leader, Phillips—a chemical engineer and freelance chemical weapons consultant—was responsible for FFM reports on allegations in Idlib in Spring 2015; Marea, August 2015; Ltamenah, 30 March 2017; and Khan Sheikhoun, April 2017. "These investigations were based on interviews with White Helmets in Turkey and materials that they provided", wrote the Working Group. "We have been told that Phillips met regularly in Turkey with ['former' British military intelligence officer] James Le Mesurier, founder of the White Helmets."

It was after the alleged Sarin attack in Khan Sheikhoun that Trump first reneged on his campaign promise to get out of Syria, and instead ordered a cruise missile strike on the Syrian Air Force base from which the attack was supposedly launched. Leading US rocket scientist and weapons expert Prof. Theodore Postol swiftly debunked the notion that the supposed Sarin bomb photographed at the scene—again by the White Helmets—was an air-launched munition,⁶ and legendary investigative

6. "US expert: 'amateurish' White House chem weapons report 'cannot be true'", AAS, 19 Apr. 2017.

journalist [Seymour Hersh](#) later confirmed what the Russian Ministry of Defence had said all along: In a sortie of which the US military had been notified well in advance via “de-confliction” channels, a Syrian Air Force jet had bombed a facility where jihadists made and stored their own chemical weapons, after which a change of wind had blown toxic smoke into populated areas.⁷ The Working Group reports that a separate investigation, by the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism, released a flight map showing that the Syrian jet had not come within 5 km of the town. The JIM also reported that some of the alleged victims were admitted to hospital *before the attack even happened*, including in another town 125 km away.

In the Ltamenah case, Phillips blamed the SAA for a Sarin attack on the basis of “munition parts”, supplied by the White Helmets, which were somehow still contaminated with intact Sarin in February 2018, eleven months after the alleged incident. The Working Group notes that “A review of studies by Western defence research establishments shows that intact sarin does not persist in the open for more than one or two days in warm weather”, whereas at the earliest date given for the parts’ possible collection and preservation (e.g. in cold storage) they would have been lying in the open for at least 15 weeks. And in Idlib in 2015, Phillips found that the SAA had “likely” used improvised chlorine munitions made from canisters designed to hold the hydrochlorofluorocarbon refrigerant R22, and bottles of potassium permanganate, “wrapped in detonating cord and enclosed in a steel barrel”—ignoring first that such a mechanism allows no means for the chemicals to mix prior to dispersion, and more importantly that the R22 canisters were single-use disposable models whose valves had not been modified, and so cannot have been emptied and refilled. “R22 is non-toxic, with or without mixing with potassium permanganate”, the Working Group notes; therefore, “If the canisters could not have been refilled with something else, they could not have been used in chemical munitions either on their own or with potassium permanganate.” In all three cases Phillips had systematically ignored or distorted evidence that the “attacks” were staged.

For such “services to international security”, Queen Elizabeth II invested him an Officer of the Order of the British Empire in June 2018.

Sami Barrek, a Tunisian OPCW inspector and analytical chemist, took over from Phillips in January 2018, and the Working Group’s sources confirmed that he was the Team Leader in charge of the FFM mission to Douma—but left after only three days, and “was subsequently seen in Turkey with the White Helmets”. In January 2019 teams Alpha and Bravo merged once more, and

7. “Syria ‘chemical attack’: the facts”, AAS, 12 Apr. 2017.



Top: White Helmets attending an alleged victim of the 2017 Khan Sheikhoun Sarin attack, touching him with their bare hands. Above: By contrast to the White Helmets, at an actual Sarin attack, in the Tokyo subway in 1995, responders took extreme precautions. Photos: Screenshot

Serbian former OPCW inspector Boban Cekovic was rehired as the new FMM head. Both men appear to have continued Phillips’s practices. The Working Group reports: “Our sources have provided information that fills in some details of how the investigation was nobbled. An internal note shared among OPCW staff members dated 23 June 2018 stated that: ‘the OPCW report on the alleged chemical attack in Douma Syria on 7 April is currently under review by management. As it is currently drafted, the report indicates a high degree of probability that the alleged chemical attack was staged by an opposition group.’ The note concluded: ‘I predict that the OPCW simply will not be allowed to issue a report that raises any doubts on the pre-judged guilty party.’ ... From then onwards the investigation proceeded in secrecy, nominally led by Barrek, with all the FFM team members who had deployed to Douma excluded.” None therefore knew who had written the Douma Final Report, but “It is presumed that Barrek as Team Leader up to the end of 2018 and Cekovic as Head of the FFM from the beginning of 2019 were the formal lead authors. OPCW staff members have told us that the subsequent investigation involved consultation with Len Phillips, who was frequently seen in the building with Barrek during the summer of 2018.”

The Working Group closed its report with an invitation to the OPCW Technical Secretariat to restore its credibility by submitting all of the materials that went into Douma Final Report, as well as those collected for the previous FFM reports mentioned, for independent public re-assessment—or if it would not, for more whistleblowers to step forth and do so in its stead.