

Gaping Plot Holes In OPCW Report On Alleged Syrian Chemical Attack

By Caity Johnstone

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The Courage Foundation, an international protection and advocacy group for whistleblowers, has published the findings of a panel it convened last week on the extremely suspicious behavior of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in its investigation of an alleged chemical attack in Douma, Syria last year. After hearing an extensive presentation from a member of the OPCW's Douma investigation team, the panel's members (including a world-renowned former OPCW Director General) report that they are "unanimous in expressing our alarm over unacceptable practices in the investigation of the alleged chemical attack in Douma, near the Syrian capital of Damascus on 7 April 2018."

I'll get to the panel and its findings in a moment, but first I should provide some historical background so that readers who aren't intimately familiar with this ongoing scandal can fully appreciate the significance of this new development.

In late March of last year, President Trump publicly stated that the US military would soon be withdrawing troops from Syria, causing some with an ear to the ground like independent US congressional candidate Steve Cox to predict that there would shortly be a false flag chemical weapons attack in that nation. This was because the public had already been shown that highly suspicious chemical attacks tended to happen when the Trump administration begins pushing for a reversal of standing US Syria policy, as I noted in April 2017 immediately following the alleged attack in Khan Shaykhun.

“I was able to predict Douma in 2018 because it happened already almost exactly 1 year prior, at Khan Shaykhun, April 4, 2017,” Cox told me on Twitter earlier today. “Khan Shaykhun also occurred within days of the Trump Admin saying we’re leaving Syria.”

And, like clockwork, on April 7 2018 dozens of civilians in Douma were killed in an incident which was quickly reported as a Syrian government chemical attack by all the usual establishment narrative managers on Syria, with everyone from the White Helmets to Charles Lister to Eliot Higgins to Julian Röpcke loudly flagging it on social media to draw the attention of mainstream news outlets who were slower to pick up the story.

There was immediate skepticism, partly because acclaimed journalists like Sy Hersh have been highlighting plot holes in the official story about chemical weapons in Syria since 2013, partly because Assad would stand nothing to gain and everything to lose by using a banned yet highly ineffective weapon in a battle he’d already essentially won in that region, and partly because the people controlling things on the ground in Douma were the Al Qaeda-linked extremist group Jaysh-al Islam and the incredibly shady narrative management operation known as the White Helmets. Those groups, unlike the Assad government, most certainly would stand everything to gain by staging a chemical attack in the desperate hope that it would draw NATO powers into attacking the Syrian government and perhaps saving their necks.

Long before any investigation into this suspicious incident could even be begun, much less completed, the US State Department declared it to have been a chemical weapons attack perpetrated by the Syrian government, saying “the Assad regime must be held accountable”, and that Russia “ultimately bears responsibility” for the attack. Which was of course mighty convenient for US geostrategic interests.

On the 14th of April 2018, the US, UK and France launched an

airstrike on the Syrian government as punishment for using chemical weapons, citing secret "intelligence" which the US government claimed gave them "very high confidence that Syria was responsible." The public has to this day never been permitted to see this intelligence. This all happened before any formal international investigation could take place.

The OPCW conducted their investigation, and in July 2018 published an interim report saying that "no organophosphorus nerve agents or their degradation products were detected, either in the environmental samples or in plasma samples from the alleged casualties." This ruled out sarin gas, invalidating earlier reports by Syria war pundits like Charles Lister who claimed that sarin had been used, but it didn't rule out chlorine gas. In March of this year the OPCW issued its final report saying forensics were consistent with chlorine gas use and advancing a ballistics report which strongly implicated the Assad government by implying it was an aerial drop (Syrian opposition militias have no air force). The official Twitter account for the UK Delegation to the OPCW tweeted at the time that the report "confirms chemical weapons used, demonstrating the vital importance of OPCW's work. This confirmed chlorine attack was only the latest example of Asad regime's CW attacks on its own population."

In May of this year, a leaked internal document from the OPCW investigation was published by the Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media which completely contradicts the findings of the official report published in March. The leaked Engineering Assessment said that "observations at the scene of the two locations, together with subsequent analysis, suggest there is a higher probability both cylinders were manually placed at those two locations rather than being delivered from aircraft," which would implicate the forces on the ground in the incident rather than the Assad government.

The OPCW indirectly confirmed the document's authenticity by telling the press that its release had been "unauthorised".

Climate Audit's Stephen McIntyre published an excellent thread breaking down how the document invalidates the OPCW's claims which you can read by clicking [here](#). Establishment narrative managers had a very difficult time spinning the fact that the OPCW had taken it upon itself to hide findings from the public which dissented from its official report on an incident which preceded an international act of war upon a sovereign nation, and all the implications that necessarily has for the legitimacy of the organization's other work.

Throughout this time, critical thinkers like myself have been aggressively smeared as deranged conspiracy theorists, war crimes deniers and genocide deniers for expressing skepticism of the establishment-authorized narrative on Douma. Which takes us to today.

The Courage Foundation panel who met with the OPCW whistleblower consists of former OPCW Director General José Bustani (whose highly successful peacemongering once saw the lives of his children threatened by John Bolton during the lead-up to the Iraq invasion in an attempt to remove him from his position), WikiLeaks editor-in-chief Kristinn Hrafnsson, Professor of International Law Richard Falk, former British Army Major General John Holmes, Dr Helmut Lohrer of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, German professor Dr Guenter Meyer of the Centre for Research on the Arab World, and former Deputy National Intelligence Officer for the Near East Elizabeth Murray of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity.

So these are not scrubs. These are not "conspiracy theorists" or "Russian propagandists". These are highly qualified and reputable professionals expressing deep concerns in the opaque and manipulative way the OPCW appears to have conducted its investigation into the Douma incident. Some highlights from their joint statement and analytical points are quoted below, with my own emphasis added in bold:

“Based on the whistleblower’s extensive presentation, including internal emails, text exchanges and suppressed draft reports, we are unanimous in expressing our alarm over unacceptable practices in the investigation of the alleged chemical attack in Douma, near the Syrian capital of Damascus on 7 April 2018. We became convinced by the testimony that key information about chemical analyses, toxicology consultations, ballistics studies, and witness testimonies was suppressed, ostensibly to favor a preordained conclusion.”

“The convincing evidence of irregular behaviour in the OPCW investigation of the alleged Douma chemical attack confirms doubts and suspicions I already had. I could make no sense of what I was reading in the international press. Even official reports of investigations seemed incoherent at best. The picture is certainly clearer now, although very disturbing.”

~ Bustani

“A critical analysis of the final report of the Douma investigation left the panel in little doubt that conclusions drawn from each of the key evidentiary pillars of the investigation (chemical analysis, toxicology, ballistics and witness testimonies,) are flawed and bear little relation to the facts.”

From the section on Chemical Analysis:

“The interpretation of the environmental analysis results is equally questionable. Many, if not all, of the so-called ‘smoking gun’ chlorinated organic chemicals claimed to be not naturally present in the environment’ (para 2.6) are in fact ubiquitous in the background, either naturally or anthropogenically (wood preservatives, chlorinated water supplies etc). The report, in fact, acknowledges this in Annex 4 para 7, even stating the importance of gathering control samples to measure the background for such chlorinated organic derivatives. Yet, no analysis results for these same control samples (Annex 5), which inspectors on the ground would have gone to great lengths to gather, were reported.”

“Although the report stresses the ‘levels’ of the chlorinated organic chemicals as a basis for its conclusions (para 2.6), it never mentions what those levels were – high, low, trace, sub-trace? Without providing data on the levels of these so-called ‘smoking-gun’ chemicals either for background or test samples, it is impossible to know if they were not simply due to background presence. In this regard, the panel is disturbed to learn that quantitative results for the levels of ‘smoking gun’ chemicals in specific samples were available to the investigators but this decisive information was withheld from the report.”

“The final report also acknowledges that the tell-tale chemicals supposedly indicating chlorine use, can also be generated by contact of samples with sodium hypochlorite, the principal ingredient of household bleaching agent (para 8.15). This game-changing hypothesis is, however, dismissed (and as it transpires, incorrectly) by stating no bleaching was observed at the site of investigation. (‘At both locations, there were no visible signs of a bleach agent or discoloration due to contact with a bleach agent’). The panel has been informed that no such observation was recorded during the on-site inspection and in any case dismissing the hypothesis simply by claiming the non-observation of discoloration in an already dusty and scorched environment seems tenuous and unscientific.”

From the section on Toxicology:

“The toxicological studies also reveal inconsistencies, incoherence and possible scientific irregularities. Consultations with toxicologists are reported to have taken place in September and October 2018 (para 8.87 and Annex 3), but no mention is made of what those same experts opined or concluded. Whilst the final toxicological assessment of the authors states ‘it is not possible to precisely link the cause of the signs and symptoms to a specific chemical’ (para 9.6) the report nonetheless concludes there were reasonable grounds

to believe chlorine gas was the chemical (used as a weapon).”

“More worrying is the fact that the panel viewed documented evidence that showed other toxicologists had been consulted in June 2018 prior to the release of the interim report. Expert opinions on that occasion were that the signs and symptoms observed in videos and from witness accounts were not consistent with exposure to molecular chlorine or any reactive-chlorine-containing chemical. Why no mention of this critical assessment, which contradicts that implied in the final report, was made is unclear and of concern.”

From the section on Ballistic Studies:

“One alternative ascribing the origin of the crater to an explosive device was considered briefly but, despite an almost identical crater (understood to have resulted from a mortar penetrating the roof) being observed on an adjacent rooftop, was dismissed because of ‘the absence of primary and secondary fragmentation characteristics’. In contrast, explosive fragmentation characteristics were noted in the leaked study.”

From the section titled “Exclusion of inspectors and attempts to obfuscate”:

“Contrary to what has been publicly stated by the Director General of the OPCW it was evident to the panel that many of the inspectors in the Douma investigation were not involved or consulted in the post-deployment phase or had any contribution to, or knowledge of the content of the final report until it was made public. The panel is particularly troubled by organisational efforts to obfuscate and prevent inspectors from raising legitimate concerns about possible malpractices surrounding the Douma investigation.”

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