

Gaping Plot Holes In OPCW Report On Alleged Syrian Chemical Attack

By Caity Johnstone

Source: [Medium.com](https://medium.com)

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.”

[Caity Johnstone on twitter.](#)

Saudi Arabia opens war of words with Iran

By Sharmine Narwani

Source: [RT](#)

For years the Saudis have waged proxy battles against Iran, with little success. Now, despite this history of losses, Riyadh appears to be mobilizing for an ill-conceived confrontation with the Islamic Republic.

“We know we are a main target of Iran,” speculated Saudi Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) in an interview early this month.

Then came the threat. “We are not waiting until there becomes a battle in Saudi Arabia, so we will work so that it becomes a battle for them in Iran and not in Saudi Arabia.”

These are fighting words indeed. The Iranians certainly thought so, Defense Minister Hossein Dehghan responding with unusual ferocity: “We warn them (Saudis) against doing anything ignorant, but if they do something ignorant, we will leave nowhere untouched apart from Mecca and Medina.”

In other words, if the Saudis launch direct aggression against Iran, this will be Riyadh’s last war anywhere, ever.

It’s an important line to draw. The Saudis, after all, have been in meltdown since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran saw popular protests dethroning a King (gasp).

And so, for the past 38 years, we have witnessed an increasingly aggressive Saudi Arabia in the region, chasing

down Iranian/Shia enemies where there were none. Just look at Yemen, where the two-year Saudi bombing blitz has killed over 10,000 civilians, or Bahrain, where Saudi troops and tanks snuffed out dissent in the Shia-majority state, or Syria, where Saudis send weapons, cash and support to ISIS, Al-Qaeda and other head-chopping extremists. This Saudi hysteria has now touched every corner of the world, and by the \$100+ billion Riyadh has invested in radical schools, mosques, and propaganda to indoctrinate an entire generation of Muslims in Wahhabi-style intolerance.

But while the Saudis are hell-bent on thwarting Iranian influence – real or imagined – Riyadh has never dared to take on the Islamic Republic directly.

As former US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates famously noted in a 2010 WikiLeaks cable, the Saudis always want to “fight the Iranians to the last American.” To which he then added, “it is time for them to get in the game.”

Now perhaps, under the direction of a 31-year old princeling, the Saudis are planning to do just that.

Saudi Arabia vs. Iran

Some perspective first on these two Persian Gulf “rivals,” in which I borrow heavily from an earlier interview of mine:

Both Iran and Saudi Arabia are rich in energy resources and have used this rentier wealth to advance their national goals, albeit with vastly differing results. Iran’s economy is focused on diversification away from the energy sector, developing self-sufficiency and becoming a net exporter. Saudi Arabia is import-focused. Iran spends \$15 billion per annum on its military – compared to Saudi’s \$80 billion – yet has one of the most competent military forces in the region and builds its own hardware. The Iranian political system is Constitution-based, diverse, and representative, with loudly

competing political blocs that come with their own media and constituencies. The Saudi monarchy is based entirely on the rule of one family, with no meaningful elections or contesting political bodies, and little freedom of expression in the media. Regarding power projection, Iran favors the soft power tools of diplomacy, trade, and alliance-building based on common worldviews/objectives, whereas the Saudis have expanded their influence far and wide by spreading Wahhabi doctrine through schools, mosques, media and other institutions globally – and by blatantly buying the loyalty of allies.

In the past few years, we have clearly observed how Iran and Saudi Arabia's nation-building approaches have affected the success of their geopolitical strategies. Both states have experienced existential fears and threats, and their respective alliances have now confronted each other on a few battlefields. Iran has approached the matter of its strategic depth carefully and built alliances with partners that genuinely share the common values of independence, self-determination, and resistance against imperialism.

The Saudis, on the other hand, have forged their external alliances with hegemony or dominance as the primary objective – irrespective of the divergent interests and values of allies. There is little contest – one side is a nation- and region-building, while the other flails about with unreliable alliances, propped up by petrodollars and all the strategic brilliance of a sledgehammer.

How can this relationship be classed as a rivalry, when the two don't even operate on the same playing field? Would Tehran even notice Riyadh outside of OPEC meetings if it weren't so belligerent at every turn, on every border?

But MbS's promise to bring "the battle" to Iran must be taken seriously because it will not be launched alone. The Saudi prince's chest thumping comes courtesy of an upgrade in relations with Washington. US President Donald Trump is

enthusiastically pushing billions of dollars in weapons sales to the Saudis, and has chosen Riyadh as the destination for his first official foreign visit, championing the establishment of an "Arab NATO" that partners with Israel to confront Iran.

Don't expect a conventional military confrontation as the opening gambit, however. The US, Israel and Saudi Arabia are experienced in subversion and sabotage activities against the Islamic Republic, and this is where they are likely to focus their initial efforts.

Last week, Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei warned of foreign interference in the lead-up to Friday's presidential poll: "the security of the country should be fully protected during the elections. Anyone who violates this should know he will certainly be punished."

Calling for public vigilance, Khamenei outlined short, medium and long-term "enemy" goals in Iran: "to distort the country's security and trigger chaos and sedition... targeting issues like that of the economy and living conditions of the people...(and) an effort to change the system."

So how will the Saudis play a role? Riyadh's hand in this "battle" will likely be seen on and inside Iran's borders, in the same form we have witnessed in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and other theaters flooded with Saudi-backed militants.

Stirring up minority populations

Demographically, Iran is around 60 percent ethnically Persian, followed by a mix of Azeris, Kurds, Lurs, Turkmens, Arabs, and others. Some 99 percent of Iranians are Muslim, more than 90 percent of these Shia, the rest Sunni, and the remaining one percent a mix of Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and others.

The main pockets of Kurds are in the northwest on the Iraqi/Turkish borders and in the north-east bordering Turkmenistan – Iranian Kurds are both Sunni and Shia. The

second largest ethnicity, Azeris, who are mainly Shia, are also in the northwest on Iran's border with Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Iranian Arabs who are concentrated in the south near the Iraqi border and the Persian Gulf – as well as around the Strait of Hormuz – are also mostly Shia. Iranian Sunni populations consist mainly of Kurds, Turkmens, and Balochis, and this is the demographic where signs of foreign interference are most notable today.

In recent years, thousands of Iranian security forces have been killed on the border of Iran's Sistan and Baluchistan province with Pakistan – most recently in April when ten Iranian border guards died in a cross-border terrorist raid.

Reportedly, the operation was conducted by Jaish al-Adl (Army of Justice), a sectarian terrorist group the Iranians say is being directed by the US and Saudi Arabia. The US has traceable ties to some of these groups, notably Jundallah which received Bush-era funds from Washington before being listed as a terrorist organization. That "terrorist" designation, Iran knows, means little. The Mojahedin-e-Khalq (MEK) was listed by the State Department for decades, but then de-listed in 2012 and is today being actively courted by US officials.

Jaish al-Adl is an offshoot of Sipah-e-Sahaba, an anti-Shia extremist group banned in Pakistan, but which appears to continue to enjoy both Saudi and Pakistani support. Sipah leaders are ferried around the border areas with Pakistani guards, and fill their ranks with young graduates of Saudi-funded Deobandi madrassahs rife inside the Pakistani border.

US hands are all over the minority map in Iran too. Media, think tanks and politicians highlight and encourage aspirations of Iranian minorities at every opportunity, and will undoubtedly take a more active role in stirring divisions as tensions escalate.

Cue the Kurds. Both US and Saudi fingerprints are all over this project of inciting a Kurdish rebellion inside Iran. Last June and July, for the first time in 20 years, Kurds in Iran's northwest clashed with Revolutionary Guards, killing several on both sides.

The Kurdish group involved was the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI), a longtime Iranian-designated terrorist organization that announced in 2015 it would take up arms against the state. Not surprisingly, that declaration came shortly after PDKI leader Mustafa Hijri visited congressional leaders in Washington.

A vigilant Iran

American dirty tricks are certainly not new in Iran. Former Kennedy-era State Department official Richard J. Barnet wrote in 1968: "The (US) intervention in Iran in 1953 to unseat Premier Mohammed Mossadeq was America's first successful attempt in the postwar period to subvert a nationalist government."

According to Barnet, "Five US agents and seven Iranian intelligence operatives" led by CIA operative Kermit Roosevelt "plotted the coup from a Tehran basement." They were responsible for "recruiting street mobs to oppose the Mossadeq supporters... With the help of substantial sums, which Roosevelt used for hired demonstrators to whip up the growing anti-Mossadeq mobs, and the support of the Iranian army, heavily dependent on US equipment, the insurgents were able to turn the tide against the intractable premier and to drive him from office."

Iran is intimately familiar with these foreign machinations and has been vigilantly countering them in the decades since the Islamic Revolution.

This is not the compliant Shah's Iran – this Iran, today, is an independent, sovereign nation-state that came through an 8-

year foreign-imposed war with Iraq and built with its own hands a formidable military deterrent.

As we have seen with Iran's activities in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, the country's 'strategic depth' is a red line – its national borders even more so. After warning the Iraqi government in 2014 that it would take decisive action if ISIS came within 40 kilometers of its border, the Iranian air force – for the first time since the Iran-Iraq war – used F-4 Phantom fighter jets to conduct airstrikes in Diyala province on its western border.

Iran's armed forces chief Mohammad Hossein Bagheri has also now threatened military action on Pakistani territory unless Islamabad takes control of its borders, saying: "Unfortunately, the Pakistani border area has turned into a refuge and training ground for terrorists hired by Saudi Arabia, with the approval of the United States."

In a letter this month to the UN Security Council, Iran's UN Ambassador Gholamali Khoshroo addressed the Saudi threats: "We have no desire, nor any interest, in an escalation of tension in our neighborhood...We continue to stand ready for dialogue and accommodation to promote regional stability, combat destabilizing extremist violence and reject sectarian hatred...We hope Saudi Arabia will be persuaded to heed the call of reason."

The Saudi princeling Mohammad bin Salman made a novice's mistake by threatening to bring war to Iran – he put the world on notice. Any Iranian reaction now bears the full legitimacy of international law for a measured retaliation. The Saudi borders are long, its populations restive, and its soldiers have not seen this kind of war. We may yet live to see a Saudi royal eat his words.

