

Report by Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media undermines claims of chemical attack in Douma

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The Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media (WGSPM) has issued a report into the alleged chemical attack in Douma this year and other alleged chlorine attacks in Syria since 2014.

The 8,300-word report drawn up by Paul McKeigue, Jake Mason, David Miller and Piers Robinson, is a devastating exposure of the propaganda claims made during the US-led, seven-year-long proxy war for regime change in Syria.

McKeigue is Professor of Genetic Epidemiology and Statistical Genetics at the University of Edinburgh. Mason is a doctoral research student, with his Master's thesis examining the "strategic communications role of the White Helmets in the Syrian Civil War." Miller is Professor of Sociology in the Department of Social & Policy Sciences at the University of Bath. Professor Robinson is an academic at the University of Sheffield.

The WGSPM report was produced in the teeth of a sustained media witch-hunt. For questioning the official narratives promoted by the media and US and British governments in relation to the Skripal poisoning and the role of the White Helmets in Syria, WGSPM were smeared in the London *Times* as "Apologists for Assad."

The report rejects claims that nerve agents were used at Douma in April and concludes that UK Prime Minister Theresa May "misled the House of Commons" in claiming Syrian and Russian obstruction of a chemical weapons investigation. WGSPM has investigated the use of unverified secondary sources for claims of earlier alleged chlorine attacks, demonstrating that these sources came from groups associated with one side in the conflict.

Claims of the use of chemical weaponry by President Bashar al-Assad's government forces have repeatedly been made to justify and provoke US-NATO military interventions. Many of the claims have involved the White Helmets, set up in 2013 as a proxy of the UK and US governments to provide logistical support and propaganda for Western-backed "rebels."

Videos have surfaced of White Helmets carrying weapons alongside the Al Nusra Front, the Syrian affiliate of Al Qaeda, and participating in atrocities against government forces. The White Helmets have provided film of themselves staging rescues in areas bombed by the government and Russian planes. They are also implicated in fabricating attacks to support the US campaign. Footage of the aftermath of an alleged April 7 gas attack in the city of Douma was broadcast worldwide. After the White Helmets filmed themselves shouting "gas" and hosing down children with water at a hospital, residents and doctors came forward to say there had been no attack.

This fabricated incident was the pretext for a missile launch one

week later by US, British and French forces.

The Douma allegations

The Douma incident occupies half of the WGSPM report. The chemical attack allegation focused on the hospital incident and photographs of apartment buildings. In one four-storey building, images revealed 35 victims and a gas cylinder lying over a hole in the roof. There was also an image of an apartment with a hole in the roof and a gas cylinder lying on a bed.

The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) had already discredited claims of the use of a nerve agent at Douma, as no traces were found in environmental samples or in blood taken from the supposed victims. These claims were made by US and French governments to justify further attacks. WGSPM described them as "poorly informed."

French Ambassador François DeLattre told the UN Security Council that video and photographic evidence of a combined nerve agent and chlorine attack left "no doubt as to the perpetrators." Only the Syrian government and its allies had this capability, he claimed. US officials briefed the press that biological samples had tested positive for chlorine and a nerve agent, probably sarin. Their press release referred only to symptoms, not to biological samples.

To justify renewed attacks on Syria, on April 16 May told parliament that Syrian authorities and Russian forces had prevented the OPCW team from visiting Douma. This was not true. The OPCW visit was delayed following a risk assessment conducted by the United Nations Department of Safety and Security. According to the WGSPM, May "may also have misled the House" in claiming that the US-led missile attack that followed was "specifically targeted" at three alleged chemical weapons sites, rather than at Syrian military infrastructure.

The WGSPM report notes that if there were concerns about chemical weaponry at the Barzeh research facility, an inspection could have been requested. The previous OPCW inspection, in November 2017, found no scheduled chemicals.

The WGSPM report cites various ramped-up propaganda claims. On April 11, former British army officer Hamish de Bretton-Gordon told the *Financial Times*, "There's no doubt this was a major chemical weapons attack," which he thought likely to be "a mix of" chlorine

and sarin.

The OPCW found no traces of nerve agent in samples from the site and from the alleged casualties of the attack. The main breakdown product of sarin is stable and long-lasting, so testing delays would not explain its absence. Environmental samples were found to contain chlorinated organic molecules. No quantitative results were given, so it cannot be known whether these were of the concentration expected with a chlorine release.

The victims were found grouped together in the middle of the building, rather than by the window. In industrial accidents involving chlorine, victims have most often tried to escape outside, so this grouping appeared to indicate exposure to nerve agent rather than chlorine. However, given the absence of traces of nerve agent, the WGSPM suggests that “the only remaining explanation is that the victims were killed by other means.”

The WGSPM said it was impossible to reach conclusions whether a chemical attack had taken place, despite the presence of chlorinated organic compounds. The OPCW had reached no conclusion, saying it needed to continue its work before drawing final conclusions.

The presence of chlorine would not distinguish between a chemical attack and a staged incident. However, witnesses testified that the hospital scene was staged and the balcony where the gas cylinder was found, with its valve over a convenient hole, occupies about one-twentieth of the whole roof area of the building—also making a chemical attack less probable than a managed massacre. The balcony is the only part of the roof easily accessible from within the building. Chlorine’s efficacy as a weapon requires its release in industrial quantities rather than the single containers found at Douma.

Earlier alleged use of chlorine

The second part of the WGSPM report examines OPCW claims that chlorine was used in alleged attacks in Syria from 2014 to date. It highlights the dubious character of the evidence produced to support these claims and some of those providing it.

From 2013, the OPCW guidelines stated that inspectors could only conclude chemical agents were used if they had been able to access sites in person and process samples taken personally in certified laboratories. The WGSPM report concludes that from 2014 on, following an incident at Talmenes, the OPCW breached these guidelines by basing its assessments on secondary sources.

The WGSPM draws attention to the political character and provenance of the third-party witnesses who supplied the samples driving the OPCW’s conclusions. These “purported non-governmental organizations with access to opposition-held areas” include:

- A Chemical/Biological/Radiological/Nuclear (CBRN) Task Force set up by de Bretton-Gordon, whom Piers Robinson described to the *World Socialist Web Site* as “never very far from the government line.”
- The Same Justice/Chemical Violations Documentation Center of Syria (CVDCS), which first appeared in 2015 with an office in Brussels, with the apparent capacity to take samples and move witnesses from Idlib to other interviewing countries, and whose operations WGSPM calls “not transparent.”
- The White Helmets, who would “be implicated if these incidents

were staged,” as images from alleged attacks after 2015 often show them present or filming the victims.

The evidence for some of the highest profile incidents is doubtful. On March 16, 2015, a family of six were killed in Sarmin allegedly by a chlorine barrel bomb. The WGSPM states “the alleged munition is implausible, the alleged mode of delivery is improbable, and the images of the child victims in hospital are consistent with drug overdose rather than chlorine exposure as the cause of death.”

The UN/OPCW Joint Investigative Mechanism, referring to unspecified “other sources,” decided a Syrian air force helicopter had dropped a chemical weapon.

The membership and transparency of the OPCW’s Fact Finding Mission (FFM) have changed over time. Originally intended to have a balanced membership, and subject to approval of the Syrian government, the FFM was later subdivided. One team has contact with the Syrian government, but “Team Alpha” works “completely non-transparently” with the opposition and has “classified” membership: “no one knows where it goes or how it operates.”

The groups are supposed to employ the same methods, but Team Alpha is “clearly working mostly remotely, relying on the Internet and the fabrications provided by the Syrian opposition NGOs.” WGSPM doubts that this team operates on the ground at all.

The FFM also uses open-source material as evidence, without explaining how this is retrieved or analysed. The material is collected by the OPCW Information Cell under Lt-Col. Leo Buzzerio, formerly of the US Defense Intelligence Agency.

The FFM concluded “with a high degree of confidence” that chlorine was used in a 21 April 2014 incident in Talmenes, without detailing how witnesses were identified, how their travel outside Syria was facilitated, or the source of images and documents. The FFM said they had received information from de Bretton-Gordon’s CBRN.

By comparing three FFM Interim Reports on the alleged chlorine barrel bomb attack in Talmenes, the WGSPM reconstructed the role of CBRN in providing evidence. The WGSPM points to inconsistencies in the video materials, including footage time-coded the day before the alleged incident. This was accepted, even though there was “clear evidence of staging” at the other alleged location.

De Bretton-Gordon told the press and parliament about his covert role in collecting samples relating to alleged chemical attacks. He dates this to when the press were discussing a “covert operation” with “MI6, the Secret Intelligence Service” at its head. As the WGSPM states, the OPCW relied on evidence “gathered by a network set up by an agent of the intelligence service of a state committed to one side in the Syrian conflict.”



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