

Leaked email on alleged chemical attack shows 2018 strikes against Syria based on lies

Niles Niemuth
25 November 2019

On Saturday, WikiLeaks published an internal email written by a member of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) fact-finding mission to Syria that exposes the far-reaching effort to suppress and distort evidence in order to claim that the government of Bashar al-Assad was responsible for the alleged April 7, 2018, gas attack in Douma, a suburb of Damascus then held by CIA-backed Islamist “rebel” forces.

The revelation once again makes clear the lying character of the campaign to justify the US regime-change operation in Syria, which has turned large sections of the country into a wasteland, killing hundreds of thousands of people and turning millions more into refugees.

The alleged attack in which as many as 49 people were reportedly killed was seized on by the governments of the United States, Britain and France to justify the launching of air and missile strikes just one week later against Syrian government forces. The attacks took place just hours before an OPCW fact-finding team was due to arrive in Syria to begin an investigation. The assault brought the US and its allies to the brink of open war not just against Syria, but also against the Assad government’s allies Iran and Russia.

The alleged attack in Douma came as Assad was consolidating control of the areas around Damascus and shortly after Trump had announced that US troops deployed to control the eastern half of Syria would soon be leaving. The purported Syrian government gas attack was seized on as a *casus belli*.

On April 8, one day after the alleged chemical attack and before any investigation had been carried out, Trump tweeted that there had been a “mindless CHEMICAL attack” by the “Animal Assad” backed by Russia and Iran, and that there would be a “big price to pay.” Under the guidance of Trump’s newly appointed national security advisor, John Bolton, military options were

drawn up to attack Syria. The air and missile strikes were launched on April 13, US time.

Saturday’s WikiLeaks release makes clear that the OPCW report published in July 2018 was shaped to conform with the public allegations made by the US, UK and France. British *Mail on Sunday* columnist Peter Hitchens, in an article based on the WikiLeaks release, noted that the doctoring of the OPCW fact-finders’ report “appears to be the worst instance of ‘sexing-up’ in support of war since the invasion of Iraq and Tony Blair’s doctored dossiers.”

The investigator who authored the memo, and who remains anonymous, sent the email to OPCW Chief of Cabinet Robert Fairweather and his deputy, Aamir Shouket, on June 22, 2018, to raise “grave concern” about details that had been excluded from or changed in the soon-to-be-published redacted report on the agency’s investigation into the alleged gas attack. He wrote that the redacted report had strayed so far from the evidence collected that it “no longer reflects the work of the team.”

The email highlights statements that misrepresent the evidence collected in the on-the-spot investigation, including the assertion that the team had found “sufficient evidence at this time to determine that chlorine, or another reactive chlorine-containing chemical, was likely released from cylinders.” This was simply not the case. As the whistle-blower explained, while samples were recovered that had been in contact with one or more chemicals containing a reactive chlorine atom, they could have come from multiple sources, including household bleach. Moreover, there was insufficient evidence to show that the cylinders supposedly dropped onto Douma by Syrian helicopters were the source of a chemical release.

Another claim in the official report, that “high levels” of chlorinate organic derivatives were detected at the site of the alleged attack, was also false. According to the investigator, these chemicals were found in trace amounts

as a low as 1–2 parts per billion.

The release of the email by WikiLeaks is only the latest episode in the unraveling of the official account, which began to come apart almost as soon as the alleged gas attack was trumpeted in the bourgeois press, accompanied by unverified video footage of children apparently suffering in a hospital.

Already in October 2018, the Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media published the results of its investigation into the incident, which found that given the evidence presented by the OPCW, it was impossible to determine if a chemical attack had in fact taken place. Initial claims by the US and France that nerve agent had been used had been dismissed out of hand by the OPCW.

Last May, an unpublished report authored by ballistics expert Ian Henderson, who led the OPCW's engineer sub-team in Douma, was leaked. In it, Henderson raised serious questions about the claim that the attack was carried out by chlorine cylinders dropped from the air, a claim that implicated Assad's forces. Instead, Henderson's report concluded it was more likely that the two cylinders examined by investigators had been placed in their positions, implying that the purported attack had been staged by the Islamist forces that controlled the area at the time of the incident.

Last week, Jonathan Steele, former senior foreign correspondent for the *Guardian*, reported in *Counterpunch* on a briefing by an OPCW whistleblower known as Alex, who relayed an incident in July 2018 in which dissenting experts were told in no uncertain terms at a meeting with three unidentified American officials that Syria was responsible for the alleged chlorine gas attack in Douma.

The final OPCW report published in March of this year omits any quantitative analysis of the low levels of chlorinated organic chemicals uncovered by investigators, undercutting the official claims of a chemical gas attack.

The annual conference of the OPCW begins today in The Hague, where the whistleblower who spoke to Steele hopes to raise concerns about the Douma investigation, though there are no indications that the organizers will allow such a discussion.

In the course of the more than eight-year regime-change operation in Syria, during which the US and its allies have used various Al Qaeda-linked Islamist militias as their proxy forces, one CIA-sponsored provocation after another has been used in an (unsuccessful) attempt to stampede US public opinion behind the war. In 2013, a chemical gas attack in Eastern Ghouta was blamed on

Assad and used to justify the preparation of massive US air strikes, which were called off at the last minute by Obama. This incident was later exposed by investigative reporter Seymour Hersh as the work of US-backed rebels acting with the support of Turkey.

The pseudo-left groups that have lined up behind the criminal US war in Syria and pushed for an even bigger bloodbath stand exposed. The now defunct International Socialist Organization, which dissolved into the Democratic Party earlier this year, used its *Socialist Worker* publication to promote the CIA-backed opposition and denounce anyone who opposed the US intervention as a stooge of the bourgeois Assad government and “imperialist” Russia and Iran.

WikiLeak's critical role in bringing the investigator's damning email to light makes clear once again why its founder and publisher, Julian Assange, is rotting away in England's maximum security Belmarsh prison, facing extradition to the United States and 175 years in prison for exposing American war crimes in the Middle East. The US intelligence agencies and the entire political establishment, Democrats and Republicans alike, intend with their persecution of Assange, condemned by United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer as a form of torture, to put a permanent clamp on information about the crimes of US imperialism.

The US government, with its immense resources and vast intelligence apparatus, has not yet succeeded in shutting down one of the most crucial resources in bringing before the public the truth about the operations of US and world imperialism. It is up to the international working class, as a vital part of its struggle to defend its democratic and social rights, to come to the defense of Assange as well as Chelsea Manning and demand their immediate release from prison and the dropping of all charges against them.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact