

U.S. Again Cries ‘Chemical Warfare’ in Syria

Officials still can't confirm there was a gas attack in April. So on what grounds do they predict a new one?

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Featured image: U.S. Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley at the UN this week. (Twitter/Nikki Haley/U.S. Govt)

Author's Update 9/12/18: The Syrian government, backed by Russian airpower and Iranian advisors, is preparing to undertake a major offensive designed to retake the province of Idlib from opposition forces. The newly appointed State Department Special Representative for Syria, Jim Jeffreys, claims that there is ["Lots of evidence"](#) that Syria is preparing to use chemical weapons, specifically chlorine gas, in support of the Idlib operation.

For its part, [Russia claims](#) to have specific intelligence that al Qaeda affiliates, working in conjunction with the White Helmet organization, is preparing to stage a chlorine gas attack designed to look like it was done by the Syrian government. The U.S. has warned that it would launch a major military strike against not only the Syrian government, but also Russian and Iranian targets in Syria, if chemical weapons were used in Idlib.

The issue of provenance is as relevant today as when this article was originally written, with the OPCW still assessing information to determine how the chlorine canisters discovered at Douma got there, and who was responsible for their use. The Douma incident stands as a case study against the rush to judgment when it comes to the attribution of blame, and is even more relevant today, when the mere allegation of chemical weapons use in Syria could lead to a major escalation in the fighting:

This summer the international monitoring organization tasked with investigating an alleged chemical weapons incident in the Damascus suburb of Douma on April 7 quietly published an interim report listing its preliminary findings.

Interestingly, the report, issued by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), the Nobel Peace Prize-winning agency mandated to implement the provisions of the Chemical Weapons Convention, noted that "no organophosphorus nerve agents or their degradation products were detected" on the scene—more simply put, there was no evidence of Sarin nerve agent present at the incident site, despite wide speculation otherwise at the time of the incident.

In fact, this speculation, for which the Trump administration insisted it had evidence, was used as an excuse for the U.S., France, and the UK to launch a coordinated bombing campaign against the Syrian government on April 12.

The report also notes that “various chlorinated organic chemicals” were detected, along with traces of high explosives. The “chlorinated organic chemicals” listed by the OPCW are commonly found in residential environments; several are by-products of chlorinated drinking water. The OPCW report does not provide any information about the concentrations of these chemicals, nor their physical location in relation to the victims alleged to have been killed or injured in the incident. The OPCW is continuing to assess these findings for their significance before reaching any conclusion about their relevance and meaning.

These interim findings are a far cry from the statements made by various American officials in the aftermath of the Douma incident, for which they blamed the Syrian government. On April 13, 2018, Secretary of Defense James Mattis briefed the press following the strike on Syria. In attacking Douma, Mattis said, the Syrian government “decided to again defy the norms of civilized people, showing callous disregard for international law by using chemical weapons to murder women, children and other innocents.” Mattis later added that

“we have the intelligence level of confidence that we needed to conduct the attack,” noting, “we’re very confident that chlorine was used. We are not ruling out sarin right now.”

In the same briefing, Mattis was joined by General Joseph Dunford, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who elaborated on the nature of the targets struck, noting that they were “specifically associated with the Syrian regime’s chemical weapons program,” including one that “was the primary location of Syrian sarin and precursor production equipment.”

The specificity of language used by Secretary Mattis and General Dunford, declaring Syria to have a chemical weapons program with a storage facility containing sarin nerve agent precursor production equipment, and that target modeling was conducted that took into account chemical-specific information in order to mitigate collateral damage, implied a degree of certainty backed by intelligence information that the OPCW findings simply do not support.

While the military attack on Syria in the aftermath of the Douma allegations represents the ultimate manifestation of poor intelligence, the genesis of the Douma intelligence failure did not begin with the Pentagon, but at the Headquarters of the OPCW in The Hague, Netherlands. There, the OPCW maintains an information cell within a situation center tasked with, among other things, collecting all-source information relating to the use of chemical weapons, providing initial assessments of all information with respect to its credibility, and then drafting reports based upon this analysis for use by the OPCW.



According to the OPCW interim report, the information cell monitored media reports about an alleged chemical weapons incident in Douma on April 7 and initiated a search of open-source information to assess the credibility of that allegation. The major sources of information used by the information cell in this task included news media, blogs, and the websites of various non-governmental organizations. The information cell assessed the credibility of the allegation as “high,” and as such the director-general of the OPCW ordered an investigation.

The OPCW has not detailed the methodology used by the information cell regarding its assessed findings. The sources of the images and initial information coming out of Douma, however, were known to be closely affiliated with the Jihadist group Jaish al-Islam, which controlled Douma during the time of the alleged chemical attacks. The “media association” run by Jaish al-Islam, claims that “media is a soft power through which social pressure is practiced,” a statement that should have guided the analysis of any product derived from sources affiliated with that entity. Jaish al-Islam was, at the time of the alleged chemical weapons attack, on the verge of being annihilated by the Syrian Army (indeed, the very next day, April 8, Jaish al-Islam agreed to a ceasefire arrangement which led to the evacuation of thousands of its supporters and their families from Douma.)

Another important factor is the medical findings published by the NGO Syrian-American Medical Society, or SAMS. On April 8, SAMS, in association with Syrian Civil Defense (better known as the “White Helmets”), released a press statement reporting that the day before, “more than 500 cases—the majority of whom are women and children—were brought to local medical centers with symptoms indicative of exposure to a chemical agent. Patients have shown signs of respiratory distress, central cyanosis, excessive oral foaming, corneal burns, and the emission of chlorine-like odor.”

The SAMS/White Helmet press release went on to note that,

“During clinical examination, medical staff observed bradycardia, wheezing and coarse bronchial sounds,” adding that, “The reported symptoms indicate that the victims suffocated from the exposure to toxic chemicals, most likely an organophosphate element.”

“Organophosphate” is a buzzword for sarin nerve agent. And the SAMS report makes clear that its evaluation of the clinical symptoms present among the Douma victims are also linked to chlorine exposure. The problem with the SAMS/White Helmet narrative is that sarin

and chlorine don't mix, a fact known to chemical warfare experts and duly documented in a U.S. Army study. In short, chlorine serves as a catalyst that promotes the decomposition of sarin nerve agent, meaning that if both substances were either combined or released together, the sarin would rapidly decompose.

Moreover, there seems to have been no effort on the part of the OPCW information cell to postulate alternative explanations about what could have caused the casualties that were depicted in the Douma videos. French intelligence, relying on an analysis of the same open-source information used by the OPCW information cell, noted that the symptoms observed in the images and videos "are characteristic of a chemical weapons attack, particularly choking agents and organophosphorus agents or hydrocyanic acid."

Two observations emerge from that statement. First is that the French have sustained the flawed predicate that chlorine and sarin were used together ("choking agents *and* organophosphorus agents"), which is an impossibility due to the inherent incompatibility of the substances. Second, the French had assessed that the symptoms observed were characteristic of exposure to hydrocyanic acid, a solution of hydrogen cyanide in water. Hydrogen cyanide is not associated with either chlorine or sarin nerve agent. It is, however, commonly linked to smoke emanating from structure fires. Eyewitness accounts from Douma indicated that there had been dozens of victims from the aerial bombardment that was ongoing, including many who died of asphyxiation in basements filled with smoke from fires ignited by the bombing.

That the OPCW information cell did not at least consider the possibility of a structure fire as the source of the victims observed in the images is indicative of a myopic approach toward analysis when it comes to the issue of alleged chemical weapons use in Syria.

This narrow-mindedness is in large part derived from the history of the OPCW in Syria, and the close operational bonds that organization has developed with anti-regime organizations such as SAMS and the White Helmets. The OPCW's investigation of an alleged use of sarin nerve agent in the village of Khan Shaykhun in April 2017 revealed that it had provided training to the White Helmets on chemical sampling. It had also developed a working relationship with SAMS and the White Helmets concerning the identification of alleged victims of chemical weapons incidents, and the collection of medical samples used in investigating alleged chemical weapons events.

The front-loading of analytical conclusions by the OPCW information cell in the Douma case infected everything that followed. The State Department issued a statement on April 8 noting that

"The Duma victims' symptoms, reported by credible medical professionals and visible in social media photos and video, are consistent with an asphyxiation agent and of a nerve agent of some type."

While the statement is ostensibly sourced to SAMS, the White Helmets, and Douma Revolution, had the OPCW not endorsed these conclusions, but instead provided a more balanced assessment derived from logic (i.e., chlorine and sarin don't mix) and the consideration of other possibilities (structure fires), perhaps the State Department would have been more measured in its own assessment.



Instead, Nikki Haley, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, drawing upon the same imagery used by the OPCW, made an emotional case that chemical weapons were used by the Syrian government in Douma.

“I could hold up pictures of survivors,” she told the Security Council on April 9. “Children with burning eyes. Choking for breath. I could hold up pictures of first responders. Washing the chemicals off of the victims. Putting separate respirators on the children. Families lying motionless with babies still in the arms of their mothers and fathers.

“I can hold up pictures of all of this killing and suffering for the council to see. But what would be the point?” she added. “The monster who was responsible for these attacks has no conscience. Not even to be shocked by pictures of dead children.”

Haley’s melodrama was matched by President Donald Trump, who tweeted

“Many dead, including women and children, in mindless CHEMICAL attack in Syria.”

Five days later, the U.S.-French-British bombing commenced.

That the U.S. diplomatic and intelligence communities allowed themselves to be manipulated in such a fashion should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with their respective records regarding Iraqi weapons of mass destruction or Iranian nuclear weapons. At the end of the day, however, the decision to use military force should be based on something more than intelligence “assessments” driven by incomplete and possibly misleading information—there should be a concerted effort to ascertain the truth before acting.

In the case of Douma, “truth” (i.e., a factual determination as to whether chemical agent was used) was the domain of the OPCW, and in particular the inspectors of the Fact-Finding Mission organized and mandated to carry out inspections of alleged chemical weapons usage inside Syria. The assessments conducted by the OPCW information cell, however flawed, resulted in the director-general ordering an investigation to be conducted into the Douma allegation. Rather than supporting the OPCW’s efforts in this regard, however, the United States began to attack the credibility of any findings that might accrue from such an investigation by pushing a narrative that held that the Syrian government and their Russian allies were deliberately delaying the access of OPCW inspectors to the Douma site in order

to allow evidence of their guilt to degrade.

“Syrian regime forces and their allies are denying international monitors access” to the site of the alleged chemical attack in Douma, the State Department proclaimed on April 8. President Trump ran with this, declaring in a tweet that the “area of atrocity is in lockdown and encircled by Syrian Army, making it completely inaccessible to outside world.” Interestingly, these announcements pre-dated the initial request of the OPCW to send inspectors to Syria by two days—a request which was made at the same time both Syria and Russia were formally requesting the OPCW to come to Syria to investigate the Douma allegations.

However, the OPCW report clearly shows that both the Syrian and Russian governments fully cooperated with the OPCW to provide secure access to Douma, and that any delays that occurred were due to legitimate security issues impacting inspector safety.

Now it looks like the reason the Americans and others accused Russia and Syria of delaying the work of the OPCW inspectors is that they suspected—no matter how much argued to the contrary—conclusive evidence wasn’t there to justify the April 12 military strikes. The United States laid out a military campaign predicated in large part by the notion that Syria continued to possess stocks of deadly sarin nerve agent and was using them against its own people. If one accepted at face value that sarin nerve agent was, in fact, used against Douma, then it automatically followed that there could be sarin-affiliated targets inside Syria worthy of attack.

But if the underlying assumption that sarin nerve agent was used has been proven false, then what does that say about the quality of the intelligence information and associated analysis used to justify American military action? Was the intelligence assessment regarding sarin precursor production equipment based on intelligence independent of the allegations of sarin use put forward by SAMS and the White Helmets, or colored by that erroneous conclusion?

American intelligence is currently being used to bolster charges of malfeasance in North Korea and Iran, and to sustain the potential use of military force if either situation deteriorates further. In a world where the memory of the WMD fiasco in Iraq is still fresh, one would hope that the U.S. intelligence community would attempt to avoid the mistakes of the past, where intelligence was shaped to conform to a political decision developed independent of facts. Given what the OPCW report has revealed, it appears that in the case of Douma, this lesson was forgotten or ignored. Going forward, it is essential that this not be the case, if for no other reason that a war with either North Korea or Iran will be far more consequential than a one-time missile attack against Syria.

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Scott Ritter is a former Marine Corps intelligence officer who served in the former Soviet Union implementing arms control treaties, in the Persian Gulf during Operation Desert Storm, and in Iraq overseeing the disarmament of WMD.

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