

Chemical Weapons Watchdog Is Just an American Lap Dog

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Global Research, December 26, 2019

[Truthdig](#) 18 December 2019

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Military and WMD](#), [US NATO](#)

[War Agenda](#)

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A spate of leaks from within the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), the international inspectorate created for the purpose of implementing the Chemical Weapons Convention, has raised serious questions about the institution's integrity, objectivity and credibility. The leaks address issues pertaining to the OPCW investigation into allegations that the Syrian government used chemical weapons to attack civilians in the Damascus suburb of Douma on April 7, 2018. These allegations, which originated from such anti-Assad organizations as the Syrian Civil Defense (the so-called [White Helmets](#)) and the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS), were immediately embraced as credible by the OPCW, and were used by the United States, France and the United Kingdom [to justify punitive military strikes](#) against facilities inside Syria assessed by these nations as having been involved in chemical weapons-related activities before the OPCW initiated any on-site investigation.

The Douma incident was initially described by the White Helmets, SAMS and the U.S., U.K. and French governments as involving both sarin nerve agent and chlorine gas. However, this narrative was altered when OPCW inspectors released, on July 6, 2018, [interim findings of their investigation](#) that found no evidence of the use of sarin. The focus of the investigation quickly shifted to a pair of chlorine cylinders claimed by the White Helmets to have been dropped onto apartment buildings in Douma by the Syrian Air Force, resulting in the release of a cloud of chlorine gas that killed dozens of Syrian civilians. In March, the OPCW released its [final report on the Douma incident](#), noting that it had “reasonable grounds” to believe “that the use of a toxic chemical as a weapon has taken place on 7 April 2018,” that “this toxic chemical contained reactive chlorine” and that “the toxic chemical was likely molecular chlorine.”

Much has been written about the OPCW inspection process in Syria, and particularly the methodology used by the Fact-Finding Mission (FFM), an inspection body created by the OPCW in 2014 “to establish facts surrounding allegations of the use of toxic chemicals, reportedly chlorine, for hostile purposes in the Syrian Arab Republic.” The FFM was created under the direction of [Ahmet Üzümcü](#), a career Turkish diplomat with extensive experience in multinational organizations, including service as Turkey's ambassador to NATO. Üzümcü was the OPCW's third director general, having been selected from a field of seven candidates by its executive council to replace Argentine diplomat Rogelio Pfrter. Pfrter had held the position since being nominated to replace the OPCW's first director general, José Maurício Bustani. Bustani's tenure was marred by controversy that saw the OPCW transition away from its intended role as an independent implementor of the Chemical Weapons Convention to that of a tool of unilateral U.S. policy, a role that continues to mar the OPCW's

work in Syria today, especially when it comes to its investigation of the alleged use by the Syrian government of chemical weapons against civilians in Douma in April 2018.

Bustani was removed from his position in 2002, [following an unprecedented campaign](#) led by John Bolton, who at the time was serving as the undersecretary of state for Arms Control and International Security Affairs in the U.S. State Department. What was Bustani's crime? In 2001, he had dared to enter negotiations with the government of Iraq to secure that nation's entry into the OPCW, thereby setting the stage for OPCW inspectors to visit Iraq and bring its chemical weapons capability under OPCW control. As director general, there was nothing untoward about Bustani's action. But Iraq circa 2001 was not a typical recruitment target. In the aftermath of the Gulf War in 1991, the U.N. Security Council had passed a resolution under Chapter VII requiring Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD), including its chemical weapons capability, to be "removed, destroyed or rendered harmless" under the supervision of inspectors working on behalf of the United Nations Special Commission, or UNSCOM.

The pursuit of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction led to a series of confrontations with Iraq that culminated in inspectors being ordered out of the country by the U.S. in 1998, prior to a 72-hour aerial attack—Operation Desert Fox. Iraq refused to allow UNSCOM inspectors to return, rightfully claiming that the U.S. had infiltrated the ranks of the inspectors and was using the inspection process to spy on Iraqi leadership for the purposes of facilitating regime change. The lack of inspectors in Iraq allowed the U.S. and others to engage in wild speculation regarding Iraqi rearmament activities, including in the field of chemical weapons. This speculation was used to fuel a call for military action against Iraq, citing the threat of a reconstituted WMD capability as the justification. Bustani sought to defuse this situation by bringing Iraq into the OPCW, an act that, if completed, would have derailed the U.S. case for military intervention in Iraq. [Bolton's intervention](#) included threats to Bustani and his family, as well as threats to [withhold U.S. dues](#) to the OPCW accounting for some 22% of that organization's budget; had the latter threat been implemented, it would have resulted in OPCW's disbandment.

Bustani's departure marked the end of the OPCW as an independent organization. Pfirter, Bolton's hand-picked replacement, vowed to keep the OPCW out of Iraq. In an [interview with U.S. media](#) shortly after his appointment, Pfirter noted that while all nations should be encouraged to join the OPCW, "We should be very aware that there are United Nations resolutions in effect" that precluded Iraqi membership "at the expense" of its obligations to the Security Council. Under the threat of military action, Iraq allowed UNMOVIC inspectors to return in 2002; by February 2003, [no WMD had been found](#), a result that did not meet with U.S. satisfaction. In March 2003, UNMOVIC inspectors were withdrawn from Iraq under orders of the U.S., paving the way for the subsequent invasion and occupation of that nation that same month (the CIA [later concluded](#) that Iraq had been disarmed of its weapons of mass destruction by the summer of 1991).

Under Pfirter's leadership, the OPCW became a compliant tool of U.S. foreign policy objectives. By completely subordinating OPCW operations through the constant threat of fiscal ruin, the U.S. engaged in a continuous quid pro quo arrangement, trading the financial solvency of an ostensible multilateral organization for complicity in operating as a de facto extension of American unilateral policy. Bolton's actions in 2002 put the OPCW and its employees on notice: Cross the U.S., and you will pay a terminal price.

When Üzümcü took over the OPCW's reins in 2010, the organization was very much the model of multinational consensus, which, in the case of any multilateral organization in which the U.S. plays a critical role, meant that nothing transpired without the express approval of the U.S. and its European NATO allies, in particular the United Kingdom and France. Shortly after he took office, Üzümcü was joined by [Robert Fairweather](#), a career British diplomat who served as Üzümcü's chief of Cabinet. (While Üzümcü was the ostensible head of the OPCW, the daily task of managing the functioning of the OPCW was that of the chief of Cabinet. In short, nothing transpired within the OPCW without Fairweather's knowledge and concurrence.)

Üzümcü and Fairweather's tenure at the OPCW was dominated by Syria, where, since 2011, the government of President Bashar Assad had been engaged in a full-scale conflict with a foreign-funded and -equipped insurgency whose purpose was regime change. By 2013, allegations emerged from both the Syrian government and rebel forces concerning the use of chemical weapons by the other side. In August 2013, the OPCW dispatched an inspection team into Syria as part of a U.N.-led effort, which included specialists from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the U.N. itself, to investigate allegations that sarin had been used in attack on civilians in the town of Ghouta. While the mission [found conclusive evidence that sarin nerve agent had been used](#), it did not assign blame for the attack.

Despite the lack of causality, the U.S. and its NATO allies quickly assigned blame for the sarin attacks on the Syrian government. To forestall U.S. military action against Syria, the [Russian government helped broker a deal](#) whereby the U.S. agreed to refrain from undertaking military action if the Syrian government joined the OPCW and subjected the totality of its chemical weapons stockpile to elimination. In October 2013, [the OPCW-U.N. Joint Mission](#), created under the authority of U.N. Security Council resolution 2118 (2103), began the process of identifying, cataloging, removing and destroying Syria's chemical weapons. This process was completed in September 2014 (in December 2013, the OPCW was awarded the [Nobel Peace Prize](#) for its disarmament work in Syria).

If the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons was an example of the OPCW at its best, what followed was a case study of just the opposite. In May 2014, the OPCW created the [Fact-Finding Mission, or FFM](#), charged with establishing "facts surrounding allegations of the use of toxic chemicals, reportedly chlorine, for hostile purposes in the Syrian Arab Republic." The FFM was headed by [Malik Ellahi](#), who served as head of the OPCW's government relations and political affairs branch. The appointment of someone lacking both technical and operational experience suggests that Ellahi's primary role was political. Under his leadership, the FFM established a close working relationship with the anti-Assad Syrian opposition, including the White Helmets and SAMS.

In 2015, responsibility for coordinating the work of the FFM with the anti-Assad opposition was transferred to a British inspector named Len Phillips (another element of the FFM, led by a different inspector, was responsible for coordinating with the Syrian government). Phillips developed a close working relationship with the White Helmets and SAMS and played a key role in OPCW's investigation of the April 2017 chemical incident in Khan Shaykhun. By April 2018, the FFM had undergone a leadership transition, with Phillips [replaced by a Tunisian inspector named Sami Barrek](#). It was Barrek who led the FFM into Syria in April 2018 to investigate allegations of chemical weapons use at Douma. Like Phillips, Barrek maintained a close working relationship with the White Helmets and SAMS.

Once the FFM wrapped up its investigation in Douma, however, it became apparent to

Fairweather that it had a problem. There were serious questions about whether chlorine had, in fact, been used as a weapon. The solution, brokered by Fairweather, was to release an interim report that ruled out sarin altogether, but left the door open regarding chlorine. This report was released on July 6, 2018. Later that month, both Üzümcü and Fairweather were gone, replaced by a Spaniard named [Fernando Arias](#) and a French diplomat named [Sébastien Braha](#). It would be up to them to clean up the Douma situation.

The situation Braha inherited from Fairweather was unenviable. [According to an unnamed OPCW official](#) who spoke with the media after the fact, two days prior to the publication of the interim report, on July 4, 2018, Fairweather had been paid a visit by a trio of U.S. officials, who indicated to Fairweather and the members of the FFM responsible for writing the report that it was the U.S. position that the chlorine cannisters in question had been used to dispense chlorine gas at Douma, an assertion that could not be backed up by the evidence. Despite this, the message that Fairweather left with the OPCW personnel was that there had to be a “smoking gun.” It was now Braha’s job to manufacture one.

Braha did this by dispatching OPCW inspectors to Turkey in September 2018 to interview new witnesses identified by the White Helmets, and by commissioning new engineering studies that better explained the presence of the two chlorine cannisters found in Douma. By March, Braha had assembled enough information to enable the technical directorate to issue its final report. Almost immediately, dissent appeared in the ranks of the OPCW. An engineering report that contradicted the findings published by Braha [was leaked](#), setting off a firestorm of controversy derived from its conclusion that the chlorine cannisters found in Douma had most likely been staged by the White Helmets.

The OPCW, while eventually acknowledging that the leaked report was genuine, explained its exclusion from the final report on the grounds that it attributed blame, something the FFM was not mandated to do. [According to the OPCW](#), the engineering report in question had been submitted to the investigation and identification team, a newly created body within the OPCW mandated to make such determinations. Moreover, Director General Arias stood by the report’s conclusion that it had “reasonable grounds” to believe “that the use of a toxic chemical as a weapon has taken place on 7 April 2018.”

Arias’ explanation came under attack in November, when WikiLeaks [published an email](#) sent by a member of the FFM team that had participated in the Douma investigation. In this email, which was sent on June 22, 2018, and addressed to Robert Fairweather, the author noted that, when it came to the Douma incident, “[p]urposely singling out chlorine gas as one of the possibilities is disingenuous.” The author of the email, who had participated in drafting the original interim report, noted that the original text had emphasized that there was insufficient evidence to support this conclusion, and that the new text represented “a major deviation from the original report.” Moreover, the author took umbrage at the new report’s conclusions, which claimed to be “based on the high levels of various chlorinated organic derivatives detected in environmental samples.” According to email’s author “They were, in most cases, present only in parts per billion range, as low as 1-2 ppb, which is essentially trace quantities.” In short, the OPCW had cooked the books, manufacturing evidence from thin air that it then used to draw conclusions that sustained the U.S. position that chlorine gas had been used by the Syrian government at Douma.

Arias, while not addressing the specifics of the allegations set forth in the leaked email, [recently declared](#) that it is “the nature of any thorough inquiry for individuals in a team to express subjective views,” noting that “I stand by the independent, professional conclusion”

presented by the OPCW about the Douma incident. This explanation, however, does not fly in the face of the evidence. The OPCW's credibility as an investigative body has been brought into question through these leaks, as has its independent character. If an organization like the OPCW can be used at will by the U.S., the United Kingdom and France to trigger military attacks intended to support regime-change activities in member states, then it no longer serves a useful purpose to the international community it ostensibly serves. To survive as a credible entity, the OPCW must open itself to a full-scale audit of its activities in Syria by an independent authority with inspector general-like investigatory powers. Anything short of this leaves the OPCW, an organization that was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for its contributions to world peace, permanently stained by the reality that it is little more than a lap dog of the United States, used to promote the very conflicts it was designed to prevent.

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