

Syria Chemical Attack: Douma Whistleblowers Respond to OPCW's Attempts to Discredit Them

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Two whistleblowers that have been speaking out about a scandal within the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) have responded to the organization's attempts to discredit them. The OPCW has been doing some serious damage control over its investigation into a chemical attack that allegedly took place in Douma, Syria on April 7th 2018. New revelations from The Grayzone and journalist Peter Hitchens severely undermine the OPCW's attack on the brave whistleblowers.

Leaked [documents](#) and [testimony](#) from the two whistleblowers show the OPCW ignored its experts and suppressed findings to fit the narrative that the Syrian government was responsible for the alleged attack in Douma.

The OPCW published its [final report](#) on the Douma incident in March 2019. That report concluded there were "reasonable grounds" to believe a chemical attack took place and that chemical was "likely molecular chlorine." The first leak that undermined the final report was an [unreleased engineering assessment](#) published by the Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media. The assessment analyzed two cylinders found in Douma that were said to be the source of the chlorine gas.

Central to the claim that the Syrian government was responsible for the alleged attack was the idea that the two cylinders were dropped from an aircraft. But the unreleased engineering assessment concluded there was a "higher probability that both cylinders were manually placed at those two locations rather than being delivered from aircraft." This conclusion was left out of the final report.

The OPCW launched an investigation into the dissemination of the engineering assessment and released a report on it in February. The report titled, "Report of the Investigation into Possible Breaches of Confidentiality" does not find enough evidence to pin the blame on either whistleblower for leaking the assessment. Instead, the report is an [attack on the credibility](#) of the two individuals known as "Inspector A" and "Inspector B."

Inspector A is Ian Henderson, a 12-year OPCW veteran and author of the leaked engineering assessment. Inspector B, a 16-year OPCW veteran, wishes to remain anonymous and is likely the whistleblower who used the pseudonym "Alex" when he gave testimony to journalist Jonathan Steele for a [story](#) published by *Counterpunch*.

The OPCW claimed that Henderson's engineering assessment was not an official OPCW document and that Henderson completed it without going through the proper channels. A

written statement from Henderson to the UN was [published by The Grayzone](#) shortly after the OPCW's report on the leak came out and severely undermined this claim. According to Henderson's statement, he had a green light from OPCW management to conduct the study, and upon its completion, the assessment was peer-reviewed by other OPCW employees.

Henderson and Inspector B responded to the OPCW attack through journalist Peter Hitchens in [his blog](#) for *The Mail on Sunday*. Both inspectors describe the OPCW's investigation report as "a bait and switch tactic that creates the illusion of a report about a breach of confidentiality, when in fact it is little more than a public defense of the scientifically questioned Douma Report."

Besides taking issue with the contents of the breaches of confidentiality report, the detailed response published in *The Mail* reiterates the whistleblowers' main concerns with how the OPCW handled the Douma investigation. The OPCW Douma Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) that deployed to Syria was replaced with a team of inspectors that only deployed to "Country X," which is likely Turkey. The Douma FFM compiled a detailed [116-page interim report](#) that was highly altered by OPCW management before it was released to the public. After internal issues with the interim report, the Douma FFM was replaced.

The findings and scientific work of the Douma FFM were completely ignored in the drafting of the OPCW's final report. One example of this is a meeting between OPCW inspectors and toxicologists that took place in June 2018, where toxicologists were shown pictures and videos of alleged victims. WikiLeaks [published minutes](#) from this meeting in December. According to the minutes, the "key takeaway" for the OPCW team that attended the meeting was that "the symptoms observed were inconsistent with exposure to chlorine."

The findings from the June 2018 meeting with toxicologists are reflected in the original interim report but are not included in the final report. The final report mentions two consultations with toxicologists, one in September 2018, and one in October 2018, but no details from these meetings are given.

The OPCW claims that after the Douma FFM was dismissed, the bulk of the scientific work for the report took place. But as Inspector B puts it, "Regardless of what new information had been gathered since the Interim Report, it is scientifically unacceptable to exclude any facts that could impact on the conclusions of an investigation."

The Grayzone [obtained letters](#) from both Henderson, and Inspector B addressed to OPCW Director-General Fernando Arias. In these letters, both men protest the OPCW's investigation into the breaches of confidentiality.

[In his letter](#), Henderson defended his and Inspector B's reputation, "I feel that I need to respond to the attempted smear on the reputations of Inspector B and myself. We are long-serving and dedicated OPCW supporters. We both have reams of documents such as performance appraisals, emails, letters of commendation and others, that reflect a history of service at the highest level in terms of qualifications, skills, expertise, leadership, integrity and professionalism throughout our time at the OPCW."

Henderson also addressed issues with the Douma investigation and brought a new detail to light. One of the cylinders in Douma was found on a rooftop balcony (known as Location 2), according to Syrian opposition that was on the ground, chlorine was discharged from the cylinder into the building and killed dozens of people in the basement. Henderson explains

in his letter to Arias that the basement was not connected to the rest of the building. Henderson wrote, “The drafters of the final FFM report appear to have accepted that victims throughout the apartment block at Location 2, were immediately exposed to such high concentrations of chlorine that they collapsed on the spot and were not able to exit the building. This is all the more puzzling taking into account the upper parts of the building and the basement were not connected (i.e. the gas had to exit the building onto the street and re-enter the basement door).”

Henderson also raises a question about the meeting with toxicologists discussed above. Henderson asks, “Why did the report drafters omit the opinions of the toxicologists who considered the symptoms inconsistent with chlorine?”

The OPCW claims three independent experts disagreed with the conclusions of Henderson’s engineering assessment. Henderson suggests that he and these three independent experts should get together to “justify their work” and show “what facts, information, data, assumptions and inputs were used.” Henderson believes this exchange of facts and methodology will “quickly show who has got the wrong end of the stick.”

[Inspector B’s letter](#) also defended the reputation of the two whistleblowers. Both Henderson and Inspector B raised issue with the way Director-General Arias described them as “individuals who could not accept that their views were not backed by evidence.” Inspector B responded to that claim by saying, “It is not that A and B ‘are individuals who could not accept that their views were not backed by evidence’, it is that A and B are individuals who could never accept that a scientific investigation is not backed by science.”

Reading the long accounts from Henderson and Inspector B, it is undeniable that there was some sort of cover-up within the OPCW. Both Henderson and Inspector B said US officials from an unknown agency presented “evidence” to the Douma FFM that “proved” the Syrian government carried out a chemical attack in Douma. It was around the time of this briefing that the Douma FFM was replaced. The US had a clear motive to influence the OPCW’s investigation. Shortly after the alleged attack, the US, UK, and France launched an airstrike against Syrian government targets.

The blame for this cover-up does not lie solely on OPCW management, media outlets that have ignored this scandal share the responsibility. Since Russia intervened in Syria on behalf of the Syrian government, any information that goes against the Western narrative related to the war is framed as Russian propaganda or disinformation. But which government has a history of waging war in the region over false pretenses, especially related to chemical weapons or WMDs?

In Peter Hitchens blog for *The Mail on Sunday*, Ian Henderson presented a question he believed the investigators should have asked the Director-General. A question every investigator or journalist should ask: “Why would two of the most qualified senior Inspection Team Leaders, with impeccable records of scientific expertise, impartiality, and judgment, arguably the best in the organization, suddenly ‘go rogue?’”

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