

No Nerve Agents Found - The OPCW Interim Report on Douma

By [Media Lens](#)

Global Research, July 18, 2018

[Media Lens](#) 17 July 2018

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

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#), [US NATO](#)

[War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [SYRIA](#)

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In terms of suffering caused, there is often not, in fact, much to choose between dismembering and burning people alive with high explosives, shredding them with shrapnel, and choking them with poison gas. Modern 'conventional' weapons can be far more cruel and devastating than, for example, chlorine gas. But chemical weapons, prohibited by international law, are extremely potent in allowing Western 'humanitarians' to justify 'intervention' in response to crimes – real, hyped or imagined – that the West has itself far surpassed using more respectable forms of mass murder.

Noam Chomsky has [observed](#) that

'propaganda is to a democracy what the bludgeon is to a totalitarian state'.

This is certainly true for social control at home, but propaganda also allows nominally democratic states to wield their military bludgeons abroad in much the same way as totalitarian states.

Thus, in April, it happened again: the entire corporate media system rose up with instant certainty to damn an enemy state for crimes against humanity on April 7, in Douma, Syria.

This was not acceptable death by bomb and bullet; this was a nerve gas attack. The villainous agent on every journalist's lips: sarin, a highly toxic synthetic organophosphorus compound that has no smell or taste, but which quickly kills through asphyxiation.

As we [discussed](#) at the time, there was no question that this was a repetition of the fake justification for war to secure non-existent Iraqi WMDs, or to prevent a fictional Libyan massacre in Benghazi. Instead, the Guardian editors [insisted](#) that this certainly was 'a chemical gas attack, orchestrated by Bashar al-Assad, that left dead children foaming at the mouth'. From the safety of his Guardian office, assistant editor Simon Tisdall [hammered](#) the drum for a war that risked even nuclear confrontation:

'It means destroying Assad's combat planes, bombers, helicopters and ground facilities from the air. It means challenging Assad's and Russia's control of Syrian airspace. It means taking out Iranian military bases and batteries in Syria if they are used to prosecute the war.'

By contrast, Scott Ritter – a former chief UN weapons inspector in Iraq who understands the issues – was more [cautious](#):

‘The bottom line, however, is that the United States is threatening to go to war in Syria over allegations of chemical weapons usage for which no factual evidence has been provided. This act is occurring even as the possibility remains that verifiable forensic investigations would, at a minimum, confirm the presence of chemical weapons...’

No matter, on April 14, three days after Ritter’s article appeared, the US, UK and France attacked Syria in response to the unproven allegations.

Robert Fisk of the Independent [visited](#) Douma and spoke to a senior doctor who works in the clinic where victims of the alleged chemical attack had been brought for treatment. Dr Rahaibani told Fisk what had happened that night:

‘I was with my family in the basement of my home three hundred metres from here on the night but all the doctors know what happened. There was a lot of shelling [by government forces] and aircraft were always over Douma at night – but on this night, there was wind and huge dust clouds began to come into the basements and cellars where people lived. People began to arrive here suffering from hypoxia, oxygen loss. Then someone at the door, a “White Helmet”, shouted “Gas!”, and a panic began. People started throwing water over each other. Yes, the video was filmed here, it is genuine, but what you see are people suffering from hypoxia – not gas poisoning.’

When Fisk’s report wasn’t ignored, it was sneeringly dismissed. A headline in The Times [read](#):

‘Critics leap on reporter Robert Fisk’s failure to find signs of gas attack’

The Times, which is no stranger to controversy, suggested that there were big question marks over Fisk’s record:

‘Fisk is no stranger to controversy.’

No Organophosphates Found

On 6 July 2018, the Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), issued an interim report on the FFM’s investigation regarding the allegations of chemical weapons use in Douma. The passage that jumped out of the [report](#):

‘No organophosphorus nerve agents or their degradation products were detected, either in the environmental samples or in plasma samples from the alleged casualties.’

No sarin! But is it possible that any nerve agents had degraded and disappeared before

OPCW investigators reached the site? An April 17, Guardian article had [reported](#):

‘The OPCW has been racing against the clock to collect samples from the site of the attack, a three-storey house in Douma, in which scores of people died in a basement. Jerry Smith, who helped supervise the OPCW-led withdrawal of much of Syria’s sarin stockpile in 2013, said samples of nerve agent rapidly degrade in normal environmental conditions... The Russian military and Syrian officers have had access to the house since last Thursday, raising fears that the site may have been tampered with. However, Smith said it was likely that residual samples of nerve agent would remain for at least another week, even after an attempted clean-up.’

The OPCW later [commented](#):

‘On 21 April 2018, after security concerns had been addressed, the FFM team conducted its first visit to one of the alleged sites of interest, and it was deemed an acceptable risk to enter Douma...’

In other words, OPCW’s race ‘against the clock’ appeared to have been successful. Charles Shoebridge a former Scotland Yard detective and counter terrorism intelligence officer, [observed](#):

‘if OPCW find no traces, likely not due to any inspection delay’

Before we examine ‘MSM’ reaction to the OPCW report, particularly to the failure to find ‘organophosphorus nerve agents or their degradation products’, let’s look at their initial reaction to claims of a nerve agent attack on April 7.

Initial Response – ‘Those Symptoms Don’t Come From Chlorine’

CNN [reported](#) on April 14:

‘Senior US officials expressed confidence Saturday that both chlorine and sarin gas were used in Syria’s alleged chemical weapons attack on the Damascus enclave of Douma last week...’

CNN cited reports ‘from media, nongovernmental organizations and other open sources’ that ‘point to miosis – constricted pupils – convulsions and disruptions to central nervous systems. Those symptoms don’t come from chlorine. They come from nerve agents... It’s a much more efficient weapon, unfortunately, the way the regime has been using it, and it’s resulted in higher deaths, it resulted in terrible pictures.’

The Financial Times cited Hamish de Bretton-Gordon, a former commanding officer of the UK’s chemical biological radiological and nuclear regiment (see [here](#) on his credibility as an impartial source):

‘There’s no doubt this was a major chemical weapons attack. The big question is whether it was chlorine or sarin. I am favouring a mix of the two.’ (David Bond and Rebecca Collard, ‘Experts say gas attack proof will take weeks: Civil

war. Douma Inspectors are struggling to access site of alleged atrocity as Assad's troops move in,' Financial Times, 12 April 2018)

A Telegraph [article](#) opened with this harrowing line:

'The victims were found exactly where they had been when the gas hit. Their silent killer had given little warning.'

This clearly suggested a very powerful nerve agent, as the article explained:

'Medics on the ground reported smelling a chlorine-like substance, but said the patients' symptoms and the large death toll pointed to a more noxious substance such as nerve agent sarin.

"The number of casualties is so high and that's not typical for chlorine," said Dr Ahmad Tarakji, president of the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS), which assists hospitals in Eastern Ghouta. "Unfortunately, because of a lack of resources, we can't take blood samples."

The claims did indeed suggest something much more powerful than chlorine, as The Daily Mail made clear in a report also citing de Bretton-Gordon:

'If it was chlorine, they could have escaped. But they died after just taking a few steps.' (Vanessa Allen, 'Little girl left foaming at the mouth by horrific gas attack,' Daily Mail, 16 April 2018)

The Mail cited an 'activist' making the same point:

'Ibrahim Reyhani, a White Helmet civil defence volunteer, said anyone who touched the bodies started getting sick, and said he believed a mixture of sarin and chlorine had been used.

'He told the Sunday Times: "If it's just chlorine, if you smell it you can escape. But sarin you breathe and it kills you."

The Telegraph [published](#) an op-ed by de Bretton-Gordon:

'There have been a number of chlorine attacks, but it would appear that chlorine, although outlawed by the Chemical Weapons Convention, is below the threshold for the UK and France to strike.

'Saturday's attack, with so many deaths and casualties, looks possibly to be a mixture of chlorine and the nerve agent sarin, and this atrocity must surely stretch above their threshold for action.'

It is worth reiterating again – as media responses to the OPCW's latest report, conspicuously, have not – that chlorine was *not* a sufficiently deadly agent to cause either the claimed level of carnage or the claimed level of Western moral outrage. In 2015, Barack Obama [noted](#): 'Chlorine itself, historically, has not been listed as a chemical weapon.'

Charles Shoebridge [commented](#):

‘while headlines of chemical weapons are undoubtedly dramatic, the relatively low lethality of chlorine makes it an ineffective – and therefore arguably also unlikely – choice of weapon...

‘Indeed, given the low toxicity of the allegedly small amounts used and the unpleasant bleach smell that always betrays chlorine’s presence, in most instances people could avoid being killed by simply walking away – another indication of its near uselessness as a weapon. Perhaps the only way it could be tactically effective is if used to drive people from trenches or bunkers to allow them to then be killed with bombs and bullets – but again, the amounts of chlorine needed would be far more than is alleged, and the accuracy needed to target in this way is unlikely to be achieved using unguided rockets as alleged this week in east Ghouta, or by dropping a “barrel bomb” from a helicopter.’

Chlorine gas was not included in the list of Syrian chemical weapons reported to the OPCW. It is an unsophisticated weapon that could also be deployed by ‘rebel’ forces and to which they have had access. The OPCW [reported](#) in August 2016: ‘Chlorine is available to all parties in the Syrian Arab Republic.’

A Guardian [leader](#) also linked the alleged attack in Douma to sarin:

‘Dozens of civilians in the Douma district were killed by Syrian government chemical attacks on Saturday.’

It continued:

‘This is not the first time this has happened. Since the use of sarin at Khan al-Assal in 2013 there have been dozens of chemical attacks by the regime.’

Peter Hitchens [commented](#) on the Guardian’s coverage in the Mail on Sunday:

‘Here is the Guardian, on 9th April 2018: “Aid workers and medics described apocalyptic scenes in the besieged city of Douma, where at least 42 people have died from what appears to be a chemical attack, as they scrambled to save the survivors of the latest atrocity in Syria...

“Doctors said the symptoms had been consistent with exposure to an organophosphorus substance.”’

Hitchens asked:

‘Which doctors? Note the absence of named, checkable sources in a story written some distance from Damascus. This was typical of almost all western media reports of the episode at the time.’

Hitchens observed that OPCW had found no traces of organophosphates but that ‘The quoted “doctors”, being unidentified, cannot now be approached to ask for their response to

this.'

Responding To OPCW's July 6 Report

The skwawkbox website [noted](#) that the BBC had covered, and distorted, OPCW's July 6 report. A BBC headline read:

'Syria attack was chlorine gas - watchdog

'The deadly attack in Douma in April left dozens of civilians dead and caused and international outcry.'

This was complete invention. As skwawkbox commented: 'the OPCW report emphatically does *not* say that *chlorine gas was used*'. The report actually said:

'Along with explosive residues, various chlorinated organic chemicals were found in samples from two sites, for which there is full chain of custody. Work by the team to establish the significance of these results is on-going. The FFM team will continue its work to draw final conclusions.' (Our emphasis)

Chlorinated organic chemicals are extremely common, found in degreasers, cleaning solutions, paint thinners, pesticides, resins, glues, and many other mixing and thinning solutions. The BBC amended the article, which later read:

'The report said two samples from gas cylinders recovered at the scene tested positive for chlorine.'

Skwawkbox [commented](#) again:

'This is a classic example of a technically-correct claim that is completely misleading.

'The [OPCW] report does note the presence of chlorine in some samples tested from the cylinders - but not chlorine gas or the residues that would be expected from its reaction with other substances...

'The relevant page of the OPCW's full report states that no 'relevant chemicals' were found from a swab inside the opening of one cylinder:

'In debris and on other items around the cylinder, chlorine compounds were found - but these are common compounds that would be unlikely to be formed simply by chlorine reacting with something on site.'

In similar vein, Alec Luhn, the Telegraph's Russia correspondent, [tweeted](#):

'The April chemical attack in Douma was caused by chlorine gas, the OPCW says. Or it was completely staged, if you still believe the Russian authorities'

Sharmine Narwani, a writer, commentator and analyst covering Middle East geopolitics,

[replied](#) brusquely but accurately:

‘No, the OPCW didn’t say that. It found traces of chlorine on the scene, which it would find in your house or office or water supply too, if sampled. Try actual #journalism.’

OffGuardian [noted](#) several headlines covering OPCW’s findings. Reuters reported:

‘Chemical weapons agency finds “chlorinated” chemicals in Syria’s Douma’

The Independent wrote:

‘Syrian conflict: Chlorine used in Douma attack that left dozens of civilians dead, chemical weapons watchdog finds’

As Off-Guardian noted, the headlines should have read: No nerve agents found.

Remarkably, these rare mentions aside, the OPCW interim report has been ignored by most major newspapers and media, including the Guardian.

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Michel Chossudovsky

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ISBN Number: 978-0-9737147-6-0

Year: 2015

Pages: 240 Pages

List Price: \$22.95

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