

Opinion

# What Are the Most Disturbing Details for Russia in the OPCW Report on the Incidents in al Latamena City?

**SNHR**

SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

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The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), founded in June 2011, is a non-governmental, independent group that is considered a primary source for the OHCHR on all death toll-related analyses in Syria.



On June 27, 2018, the mandate of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) was expanded <sup>1</sup>, with its new remits including the ability to identify those responsible for the use of chemical weapons, a crucially important achievement in the fields of law and human rights. The primary cause behind the OPCW's expanded remit were the victims killed or injured by the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons against them, especially after Russia ended the work of the international Joint Investigative Mechanism established by Security Council Resolution 2235 <sup>2</sup> in August 2015 in order to identify the perpetrators of the crime of using chemical weapons. Russia achieved this by using its veto power at the Security Council in November 2017 on two consecutive occasions <sup>3</sup> within 24 hours.

A few months later, on April 7, 2018, the Syrian regime again used chemical weapons against the people of Douma city <sup>4</sup> in Damascus Suburbs. With no specialist chemical committee qualified to officially identify the perpetrators of the crime (there is a committee specializing in identifying the perpetrators of crimes, namely the Independent International Commission of Inquiry (COI), whose mandate includes all violations committed in Syria, including those using chemical weapons, but this committee does not specialize in chemical weapons specifically). On April 10, 2018, the United States of America submitted a draft resolution <sup>5</sup> to the Security Council to establish an investigation committee that would have the remit to identify those responsible for using chemical weapons, but this effort was thwarted again by the Russian veto; Russia's ability to invoke a veto in this way is why most of the world's countries have resorted to supporting expansion of the OPCW's mandate. As expected, a number of countries hostile to giving broader powers to international law opposed expanding the OPCW's remit, and it virtually goes without saying that these countries are: Russia, China, Iran, Lebanon, Venezuela, Cuba, North Korea, and similar authoritarian states that brutally control their peoples and seek to vote for each other in international forums as a bloc opposed to democracy and human rights.

<sup>1</sup> OPCW, CWC Conference of the States Parties Adopts Decision Addressing the Threat from Chemical Weapons Use <<<https://www.opcw.org/media-centre/news/2018/06/cwc-conference-states-parties-adopts-decision-addressing-threat-chemical>>> [12 April 2020]

<sup>2</sup> UNSC Res 2235 (7 August 2015) UN Doc S/RES/2235

<sup>3</sup> UNSC, Draft resolution to renew the mandate of the Joint Investigation Mechanism for a period of 12 months, (16 November 2017) <<<https://undocs.org/en/S/2017/962>>> [12 April 2020]

UNSC, Draft resolution to renew the mandate of the Joint Investigation Mechanism for a period of 30 days, (17 November 2017) <<<https://undocs.org/en/S/2017/970>>> [12 April 2020]

<sup>4</sup> BBC, Syria war: At least 70 killed in suspected chemical attack in Douma, <<<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43686157>>> [12 April 2020]

<sup>5</sup> UNSC, Draft resolution to establish the United Nations Independent Mechanism of Investigation for a period of one year, <<<https://undocs.org/en/S/2018/321>>> [12 April 2020]



The OPCW's Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) began its work in July 2019<sup>6</sup>, initially choosing nine incidents to work on, namely:

Al Taman'a on April 12, 2014, Kafr Zita on April 18, 2014, al Taman'a on April 18, 2014, Marea on September 1, 2015, al Latamena on March 24-25- and 30, 2017, Saraqeb on February 4, 2018, and Douma on April 7, 2018. After months of continuous work in accordance with the customary scrupulously professional methodology and the highest standards, the OPCW's IIT issued its first report<sup>7</sup>, concerning the three incidents in al Latamena city, with the report decisively confirming the use of sarin gas by Syrian Regime forces in the March 24 and 30 attacks, and chlorine in the March 25 attack, which targeted al Latamena Hospital.

These findings are clearly deeply disturbing to the Russians who had denied the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons at the Security Council and in repeated statements by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with the report containing a large amount of irrefutable evidence and exhaustive details on the incidents in question which expose the falsity of the Russia's claims. Given that the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) has signed a Principles of Cooperation agreement with the IIT, and shared the data and evidence in its possession about these three incidents, I can confirm through regular discussion and work with the IIT that it is a professional team that works to ensure the highest possible degree of accuracy and reliability, and that the report contains a large amount of evidence and details that completely undermine the Russian statement. I believe, however, that there are two issues concerning the report which the Russian regime finds most worrying, namely: The first: Details in the report about the time chosen for the attacks clearly show that they were planned and studied very carefully based on analysis of the weather condition on that day and at the specific time when the attack took place, according to the reports from the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), which indicated that the sky was clear, the winds were light, and the temperature at the ground level was 4 to 5 Celsius, and sunrise around 05:30 in the morning; the IIT noted that these conditions were favorable for the use of sarin gas, asserting that whoever took the decision to attack at this time had knowledge of this, with these considerations taken into account in ordering the attacks on March 24 and March 30, 2017.

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<sup>6</sup> Reuters, Exclusive: New chemical weapons team to launch first Syria investigations, <<[<sup>7</sup> OPCW, the first report of the OPCW's Investigation and Identification Team \(IIT\) <<\[2\]\(https://www.opcw.org/sites/default/files/documents/2020/04/s-1867-2020%28e%29.pdf>> \[April 12, 2020\]</a></p></div><div data-bbox=\)](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-syria-chemicalweapons-exclusi/exclusive-new-chemical-weapons-team-to-launch-first-syria-investigations-idUSKCN1U51XQ>> [12 April 2020]</a></p></div><div data-bbox=)



I believe that this point can be augmented to indicate that there was a clear intention by the Syrian regime to kill the largest possible population regardless of their age, with this point also mentioned in the report of the United Nations Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic<sup>8</sup>, concerning the chemical attack on the two Ghoutas of Damascus on August 21, 2013. This indicates that the Syrian regime set out in a deliberate and calculated manner to kill and annihilate as many Syrians as possible, and can therefore be accused accordingly of committing genocide, and not only a war crime, but also a crime against humanity by using chemical weapons in these incidents and similar ones.

The second: The report confirms that the sarin used on the 24th and 30th is the same sarin made by the Syrian regime: The IIT took several complex technical steps in order to prove this, and, in a nutshell, proved that the aerial bombs used are of the M4000 type, and this type has been built and developed by the Syrian regime only; the IIT also analyzed the sarin used on the 24th and 30th, the results of the analysis showed that they are of one composition, and then examined samples present at the OPCW, which it obtained during the stages of the Syrian regime's destruction of its stockpile of chemical weapons following the Russian-US agreement after the Syrian regime's attack on the two Ghoutas of Damascus on August 21, 2013, the results of the samples showed that the sarin used on the 24th and 30th was manufactured on the same procedures as the sarin that the OPCW obtained from the Syrian regime, and this is conclusive evidence that the source of the sarin is the same.

The IIT also added new information by confirming that the composition of this sarin is identical to that of the sarin used in the attack on Khan Sheikhoun city on April 4, 2017, for which the Joint Investigative Mechanism, established by Security Council Resolution 2235, has already proven the Syrian regime's responsibility.

In order to assess the extent of the Russian discomfort, we must remember that on January 4, 2016, the OPCW announced that the last substances among the Syrian chemical weapons (75 cylinders of hydrogen fluoride) had been destroyed<sup>9</sup>, with the chemical attacks on al Latamena taking place 14 months after this date, which constitutes new evidence of the extent of the misinformation and deception practiced by the Syrian regime on the inter-

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<sup>8</sup> United Nations, Report Report of the United Nations Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic on the alleged use of chemical weapons in the Ghouta area of Damascus on 21 August 2013, (16 September 2013) <<<https://undocs.org/en/A/67/997>>> [12 April 2020]

<sup>9</sup> OPCW, Destruction of declared Syrian chemical weapons completed, <<<https://www.opcw.org/media-centre/news/2016/01/destruction-declared-syrian-chemical-weapons-completed>>> [12 April 2020]



national community and the OPCW, all with complete Russian sponsorship and protection. This also provides further confirmation that Russia is directly involved in the Syrian regime's concealment of large quantities of chemical weapons, as does the fact that Russia is a party to the Russian-US agreement in September 2013, and a guarantor that the Syrian regime would destroy all its chemical weapons; in addition to this, Russia, after every new chemical weapons attack by the Syrian regime, no matter how these are proven beyond any doubt, as is the case in the report we are talking about, fails to take any punitive action against the Syrian regime, rather it denies these attacks again, and returns to accuse the OPCW as it did after the issuance of this report, which confirms its shameful involvement.

Whilst there is no doubt that Russia bears a great responsibility for the war crimes, crimes against humanity, and crimes of extermination committed by the Syrian regime, it must be noted, however, that Russia is a totalitarian rogue state with a terrible record in respecting international law and human rights, so the responsibility lies more with those states where international law is embedded in their systems and taught in their universities; Article VIII of the Chemical Weapons Convention is clear in its calls on all the world's countries to punish those states that violate the agreement. The Syrian regime has violated this agreement dozens of times, and the countries of the world must act immediately after this report, particularly the notorious 'red-line' center, the United States of America!

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<sup>10</sup> OPCW, Chemical Weapons Convention, Article VIII, <<<https://www.opcw.org/chemical-weapons-convention/articles/article-viii-organization>>> [12 April 2020]





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