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Herausgegeben von  
Stefan Korinth, Paul Schreyer  
und Ulrich Teusch



## The OPCW Scandal and the Silence Cartel

**Whether in politics or in the media, anyone who circulates and operates tendentious, one-sidedly constructed narratives plays with high stakes. If even one component of the construction loosens or proves to be fragile, consequential damage can threaten to cause the entire building to collapse. Even the most cunning narrative managers quickly come to the end of their manipulative skills.**

ULRICH TEUSCH, 22 January 2020

On April 7, 2018, chemical weapons were allegedly (and repeatedly) used in Syria, in fact in Duma, near the capital Damascus. The "Assad regime" was held responsible (also repeatedly). Just one week later, on 14 April, the USA, Great Britain and France retaliated, taught the Syrian "ruler" a lesson and carried out numerous "air strikes" against his country.

This was undoubtedly a risky and, on top of that, an act of war in violation of international law, which, true to the motto "shoot first - ask questions later", was set in motion. None of the countries involved in the bombing had previously subjected the widely circulated "Assad did it" claim to even a rudimentary fact-check, and none had provided the interested public with any solid evidence.

The Western quality media presented the same picture. They reliably held their office and acted without any significant doubt or remorse as bellicistic cheerleaders. Like almost exactly one year before, during the alleged use of chemical weapons in the Syrian Khan Sheikhoun, they did not dream of waiting for a clarification of the events or even to admonish. Nor did it occur to them to promote such clarification through independent research or any other kind of relevant information.

The few exceptions to this rule can be counted on one hand: Immediately after the events in the Duma, the ZDF man Uli Gack and the independent correspondent Robert Fisk made themselves unpopular with dissident assessments. Unlike their numerous critics, however, both Gack and Fisk had looked and listened on the scene. And on February 13, 2019, BBC reporter Riam Dalati reported that after almost six months of research, he was able to prove unequivocally that the horror scene filmed on April 7 in a Duma hospital and broadcast worldwide was a production.

However, such findings did not reach the general public, i.e. they were hardly ever reported. It was not the researchers and investigative journalists who had the say in those days. The big word was rather spoken by the chief commentators and editorials. They pronounced their verdicts with such provocative self-confidence that one could have suspected that they had just returned from the Duma and were all eyewitnesses to the events there - which, of course, could not be said. In vain, one searched in the media war cries for trace elements of that virtue that was known and appreciated in earlier times as "journalistic diligence".

### Impossible assignment?

Only when the storm had passed - that is, when we had put the media-effective staging, the accusations, the retaliation behind us - only then was the "Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons" (OPCW) allowed to appear on the scene. Its mission was to find out with scientific meticulousness and unerring objectivity what had actually happened in the Duma.

But was this not a "mission impossible"? At least a rather strange mission? For wasn't it much too late? Shouldn't the OPCW investigation have been at the very beginning, that is, the first step? What was the point of its work now that the verdict had long since been passed, the sentence had been set, the punishment executed? At this advanced stage, was an unbiased, open-ended investigation even conceivable? Was it still desirable at all? Or was it even allowed? Would the USA, France and Great Britain really and needlessly surrender to the risk of being refuted and subsequently wronged by the OPCW? Would they not rather press for a confirmation of their Duma interpretation and thus also for retroactive legitimization of their acts of war? In other words: Would they not try to instrumentalize the OPCW for their own purposes?

The answer is: they would not only - they have.

### Two reports

But one by one. First you have to hold on: In principle, the OPCW is like most other international organizations. On the one hand, the OPCW has many honourable and competent staff members who are by no means easy to bow to possible political pressure and who could be expected to investigate the facts relevant for a serious judgement in the Duma case as well. On the other hand, the OPCW is always a mirror of its member states; their respective interests and the balance of power between them can of course have an impact on the work of the organisation. In any case, the OPCW has found itself in a difficult position in the context of its Duma mission. One could also speak of a dilemma. How would it deal with it? How did it deal with it? Did the "Fact Finding Mission" that sent her to Syria work freely?

The OPCW submitted two Duma reports: an interim report on 6 July 2018 and the final report on 1 March 2019. Most people will not have read the original and the full report but will have learned about the results through other channels. It is therefore necessary to make a strict distinction between the statements in the reports and the reports on the statements. The OPCW is responsible for the statements, the media is responsible for the reports.

The OPCW interim report of July 2018 initially made people sit up and take notice: It stated that "no residues of organophosphorous nerve toxins or their decomposition products" had been found in the Duma. An attack with chemical weapons (one had suspected sarin) was thus definitely ruled out. However, "various chlorinated organic chemicals" had been detected. This rather vague and reserved statement was blown up by a large part of the western media in such a way that one could easily speak of deception or even lies. The OPCW, it was often claimed, had come to the conclusion that chlorine or chlorine gas was actually used in the Duma.

But the OPCW had not reached this conclusion at all. It only found some chemical compounds containing chlorine, carbon and hydrogen in different configurations as main elements. However, according to the Moon of Alabama portal, which massively criticized the general coverage of this finding, there are hundreds, if not thousands, of such "chlorinated organic chemicals". Therefore, it is not possible to infer the use of chlorine gas from their existence or their discovery.

In its final report of March 2019, the OPCW became a little clearer, but overall it remained cautious and kept options for withdrawal open. It wrote there that there were "good reasons" to believe "that the use of a toxic chemical as a weapon took place on 7 April 2018", that "this toxic chemical contained reactive chlorine" and that "the toxic chemical was probably molecular chlorine". (Note the phrases: "good reasons" ..., "probably" ...)

The many corpses that could be seen in the pictures spread by the white helmets had not been examined by the OPCW. Consequently, the OPCW could not answer the question of when, where and what they had died of. Even the two much-discussed pressure vessels (also known as cylinders or canisters) found in destroyed buildings remained partially mysterious. Whether they contained chlorine gas could not be determined beyond doubt. While the OPCW had kept a low profile in its interim report, it did make the observation in its final report that the containers had been dropped from the air - which was to be understood as an indication of the responsibility of the Syrian military. Despite many ambiguities and vague findings, most Western media interpreted the final report as if the "Assad-has-do's-do's" thesis had now been confirmed by the OPCW.

### Whistleblowers and Leaks

That was the state of affairs in March 2019, and at first it seemed that the case was closed. But that was not the case. On the contrary, after the publication of the final report, things really got going. In the course of their almost one year's work, the staff of the Fact Finding Mission to the Duma had discovered that the OPCW management had either ironed out unpleasant investigation results or turned them into a politically acceptable form. Naturally, the staff first tried to settle the resulting conflicts and disagreements internally. When they failed and the final report, which in their view was questionable, was available, some of them sought publicity.

There were numerous revelations, which began in May 2019 and continued until the end of the year. Explosive key documents that should have been kept under lock and key or whose destruction had even been ordered were leaked to the public, internal OPCW communications and important emails were

leaked. At least two whistleblowers from the ranks of the OPCW, the Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media and the Courage Foundation, as well as Peter Hitchens and Jonathan Steele, two renowned British journalists, were involved in the revelations. In November and December 2019, WikiLeaks was added with four waves of publications; it contributed further insights and substantiated already known facts with new evidence. There was no reasonable doubt as to the authenticity of all these documents and statements published from various sources. In addition, they fit together, i.e. they confirmed each other and gave an overall picture.

### Narrative collapse

For those who had taken note of all this, by the end of 2019 at the latest, it was clear that the Duma narrative had collapsed, the credibility of the OPCW had been destroyed. There had been too much manipulation, deception and lies that could no longer be denied. As a result: The already rather vague and cautious reports of the OPCW would have been even more cautious and would probably have had a completely different tenor if they had not been manipulated, doctored and censored by the OPCW leaders for political reasons.

The first blow to the credibility of the OPCW was dealt in May 2019. At that time, the "Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media" brought a technical expertise on the two containers found in the Duma to the public. Its author, long-time OPCW staff member Ian Henderson, was astonished to find that its elaboration was not reflected in the final report of the OPCW published in early March. The reason for this was not difficult to explain, however. Henderson had stated that it was unlikely that the two containers had been dropped by an aircraft or helicopter. The result of his investigations was rather that it was more likely that the containers had been dropped manually by someone where they were later found. Incidentally, Ian Henderson repeated his critical remarks only recently, on 20 January, in a video message to the UN Security Council.

Then, in mid-October 2019, another OPCW whistleblower, who - for reasons of self-protection - called himself "Alex", appeared at an expert conference of the Courage Foundation. Among other things, he said that most members of the Duma team had problems with the OPCW reports, considered them scientifically weak, illegal and possibly fraudulent. Both whistleblowers said that individual statements in the reports were "highly misleading and not supported by facts"; or they were "appalled at how much the facts were misrepresented".

For example, the draft interim report on the two pressure vessels prepared by the Fact Finding Mission stated that "although the cylinders may have been the source of the suspected chemical release, there is not enough evidence to confirm this". This resulted in the edited and then published report being the complete opposite: "The team has enough evidence at this time to conclude that chlorine or another reactive chlorine-containing chemical was probably released from the cylinders."

More problems: The symptoms observed in the alleged victims (e.g. foaming at the mouth) did not fit with a poisoning with chlorine. In addition, the OPCW had suggested rather than proved the leakage of chlorine gas and - above all - avoided precise and therefore meaningful information on the concentration of chlorine or chlorides. Whistleblower Alex, on the other hand, argued that the levels of chlorinated organic chemicals found in the field were "no higher than would be expected in any household environment", in fact "much lower than what would be expected in environmental samples", comparable to or even lower than the chlorine levels for drinking water recommended by the World Health Organisation. The OPCW had deliberately concealed this extremely important fact in its public statements. It was also highly

irritating that many members of the Fact Finding Mission to the Duma were not involved in the preparation of the final report, which was instead drafted by the so-called "core team" of the OPCW.

### Bolton and Bustani

In the case of the Duma, one could thus observe a political instrumentalization of the OPCW by Western forces. That this instrumentalization would occur was not really surprising, as a glance at the history of the OPCW teaches. Even the first Director General of the Organization, the Brazilian diplomat José Bustani, had already bowed to political pressure: At the beginning of 2002, the US government of George W. Bush demanded Bustani's resignation because he had thrown a spanner in the works of the war preparations against Iraq which were in full swing, because he had supported the work of the UN weapons inspectors with great commitment and because he had pushed for Iraq's admission to the OPCW. In turn, the USA had no interest in this, because it threatened to expose the big lie about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction - and thus the alleged reason for the war.

After John Bolton, at the time responsible for arms control and international security issues in the US State Department, had already put pressure on Bustani by telephone, he appeared personally at the OPCW headquarters a few weeks later to intimidate him. "Cheney [then US Vice President, UT] wants you to take your hat off," he said, "we cannot accept your way of doing things. And then: "You have 24 hours to comply with Washington's decision. If you do not, we will find ways to retaliate." After a pause, Bolton added: "We know where your children live. You have two sons in New York."

In addition, the USA threatened to stop its financial contributions to the OPCW (it provided almost a quarter of the budget). Success was not long in coming: On 21 April 2002, Bustani was removed from office. He was succeeded by Rogelio Pfirter, the Argentine diplomat favoured by Bolton. Under his leadership, the OPCW developed into a compliant tool of US foreign policy. And always hovering over it was the sword of Damocles that the US could cut funding to the organization if it were to resist. Finally, in 2010, Turkish career diplomat Ahmet Üzümcü became head of the OPCW, having previously held the post of Turkish ambassador to NATO. Robert Fairweather, a British diplomat, served as Üzümcü's head of cabinet. Fairweather was thus the central figure of the OPCW; he did the actual work, everything important went through his desk.

### OPCW in the Syrian War

The term of office of Üzümcü and Fairweather was mainly marked by the Syrian war, which had been going on since 2011. When chemical weapons were deployed in Ghouta in 2013, US President Obama saw a "red line" he had drawn and was about to intervene massively in the war. But his own secret services had doubts about the authorship of the Syrian military. Obama rowed back, and it was Russian diplomacy, of all people, that built him a bridge. So, he was able to resolve the crisis without losing too much face. The Moscow intervention had the effect of destroying Syria's arsenal of chemical weapons under the supervision of the OPCW. In September 2014 this was achieved, and by October 2013 the OPCW had already been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for its disarmament work.

But even after this fundamental break, the issue of chemical weapons remained acute and topical in Syria. Now the use of chlorine (a substance not covered by Syria's commitment to the elimination of chemical weapons) was a recurring theme. In 2014, the OPCW reacted by sending a fact-finding mission, which - according to former UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter - did, however, reveal a tendency towards one-sidedness and bias, especially since it was engaged in a close, probably all too close working relationship

with questionable organizations such as the White Helmets or the "Syrian American Medical Society" (SAMS).

As far as the Duma investigation since April 2018 was concerned, Robert Fairweather was in no enviable position. He and his organization were supposed to prove something that obviously could not be proven. Shortly before the publication of the interim report, Fairweather and members of the Fact Finding Mission also received a visit from the USA. Representatives of a U.S. government agency (more details are not known) developed considerable pressure and demanded a "smoking gun". The Americans emphatically stated that the Syrian regime had carried out a gas attack and that 170 kilograms of chlorine had been found in the two containers. (It should be noted in this context that the aforementioned John Bolton was working in the US government as National Security Advisor parallel to the Duma mission of the OPCW, namely from April 2018 to September 2019 ...).

Since Fairweather and his boss Üzümcü left the OPCW in the same month, i.e. in July 2018, they inherited the hairy problem to their successors, the new OPCW Director General Fernando Arias and his head of cabinet Sébastien Braha. And Braha delivered - namely, a final report that pleased and satisfied both his whisperers and the media. However, it was at the expense of the truth and the credibility of the OPCW.

Scott Ritter, the former UN weapons inspector, writes about the consequences:

"The implications of this turn of events go far beyond simply refuting the allegations regarding the events of April 2018. The credibility of the OPCW itself and every report and conclusion it has published regarding allegations of the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government is now suspect".

And, I might add: Other activities of the OPCW, such as the Skripal case, are not spared this loss of credibility.

### The Silence Cartel

What happened in the course of the OPCW's Duma mission and became notorious in the course of 2019 is a tangible scandal, which was followed by a second, no less tangible scandal. In fact, the OPCW disaster should have dominated the headlines of the international press for weeks. But it did not, and it still does not - not even to some extent. Independent media have of course repeatedly picked up on the events, in Germany above all the online magazine Telepolis and its editor-in-chief Florian Rötzer. But hardly any well-known mainstream journalist has taken up the subject. And if one did, like Guardian columnist George Monbiot, it was only to play down the scandal to the best of his ability or even to deny it. Monbiot scoffed that the Assad apologists had the upper hand, but that didn't change one iota in their assessment of the Syrian war. Assad's guilt has been proven so often that one case more or less (i.e. Duma) plays no role at all in the overall balance.

Is Monbiot slow on the uptake - or is he just pretending? Doesn't he realize that he's missing the point - or is he deliberately distracting from the issue? This is by no means about Assad or his apologists. It is about something quite different and much more important: the destruction of the credibility of a major international organisation, the OPCW. And it was not Assad who ruined that credibility, but Western countries - the United States, France, Great Britain. And why did they do it, if, as Monbiot thinks, it is clear who is guilty in Syria anyway? Apparently, they did it because they wanted to eliminate any risk in the Duma. No risk whatsoever to the narrative! - That was the slogan.

And now that the manipulators have slipped out of narrative control and are facing a shambles - what are they doing? Monbiot's fellow countryman, former British Ambassador Craig Murray, observes an

extremely audacious damage control procedure that, in his opinion, would have been unimaginable just a few years ago: one simply spreads the cloak of forgetfulness over the disaster. One does not report. One silences the matter dead, in unison. And if someone steps out of line and tries to talk, you prevent it as much as you can - as in the case of the Newsweek editor who wanted to put the story in his magazine but was called off by his bosses and then threw down the pieces in protest.

We experience the silence of the wolves. In their desperate attempt at narrative control, the leading and quality media of the western world simply pretend that nothing happened. They cannot think of anything better. And, it seems, they even get away with it, because the independent media are still not strong enough to break the silence cartel. In the extensive non-reporting on such a central complex of issues as the Duma/OPCW, the gap- and lie-press fall into one. A sentence by the writer Yevgeny Yevtushenko comes to mind: "When truth is replaced by silence, then silence is a lie."

Comments:

ERICH KRÜCKL, 23 January 2020, 10:55 a.m.

A very successful beginning of "Multipolar" - keep it up.

M. CROW, 23 January 2020, 10:55 pm

I agree. A brilliant start from Multipolar with three important and substantial articles!

I have also been watching the unfolding OPCW scandal for a while now. What continues to leave me stunned is the widespread extent of the silence cartel. In the past years, despite a clear whip-side in the media mainstream, one could still hear some dissenting opinions (e.g. Michael Lüders or Günter Meyer in ZDF, Hans-Christof Kraus in FAZ, Seymour Hersh in der Welt). Not so with the OPCW scandal. The ranks are closed; not a single mainstream journalist has reported on it in Germany.

And the height of the fall is increasing day by day. If our leading media were now to report truthfully on the OPCW scandal, they would be confronted with a great many unpleasant questions: Why did they not report about the leaks earlier? What exactly was the alleged "Russian disinformation" that tried to "dismiss the use of chlorine gas as a staging"? And who actually carried out propaganda here?

But the silence will not be maintained forever. What if the issue continues to escalate? What if Russia and China withdraw their support from the OPCW? If they threaten to retaliate in case of renewed missile attacks? How do you explain that to your readers then? I assume that at some point in the near future, a Here's Nothing To See Here article will appear in the Spiegel or the fact finder, which will be able to throw sand into the eyes of at least some of the readers. Bellingcat has already delivered the template.