



OPCW

Executive Council

Ninety-Fourth Session
7 – 10 July 2020

EC-94/NAT.17
19 June 2020
ENGLISH and RUSSIAN only

RUSSIAN FEDERATION

**ON THE OPCW INVESTIGATIONS INTO INCIDENTS OF THE ALLEGED USE OF
CHEMICAL WEAPONS IN LTAMENAH, SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC ON 25, 26,
AND 30 MARCH 2017**

General observations

As a result of the successful actions of the armed forces of the Syrian Arab Republic against the numerous terrorist groups located in Syria, there has been an uptick in the frequency of unfounded accusations against the official authorities of Damascus and their involvement in alleged unlawful acts against the population of that country, including the ostensible use of chemical weapons.

Against the backdrop of demands posed by certain Western countries and like-minded States regarding the resignation of the lawfully elected President Assad of Syria, the fake news stories continue about incidents involving chemical weapons or toxic chemicals in the territories controlled by anti-Government forces. Those instigating and propagating these stories are all the same pseudo-humanitarian organisations and agencies with funding from abroad, such as the “White Helmets”. In using these tactics, the United States and their allies attempt to discredit the Government of Syria in a roundabout manner, while justifying their own military interference in Syria’s domestic conflict, including the “retaliatory” missile strike against Syrian military facilities and civil infrastructure in breach of the United Nations Charter and generally recognised standards of international law. It is within this very context that the activities of the Investigation and Identification Team (IIT)—which was forced upon the OPCW by Western countries in contradiction to the fundamental provisions of the Chemical Weapons Convention (hereinafter “the Convention”) and its underlying principle of consensus—should be considered.

In light of the tasks that have been assigned to the IIT by its creators, the findings of the first IIT report on the chemical incidents that took place in Ltamenah on 24, 25, and 30 March 2017 accusing the Syrian Government of using chemical weapons were completely predictable. The inappropriate methods used to conduct the investigation, the dubious accuracy of the information set out in the report, and the unsubstantiated conclusions have clearly demonstrated the aims of the group of countries led by the United States to use the fabricated Syrian “chemical dossier” to carry out their own geopolitical agenda in Syria and the Middle East as a whole.



In spite of the active propaganda campaign launched by Western countries in support of the “objectivity, professionalism, and independence” of the IIT, it is impossible to conceal the obvious: the report is biased, politically motivated, factually inaccurate, extremely weak from a professional point of view, and technically unconvincing. Even the way in which the first conclusion is worded—“there are reasonable grounds to believe”—goes to show that the authors of the report were unable to reach an unequivocal conclusion.

In the footsteps of the Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) in Syria and the former OPCW-United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM), which produced altogether dubious and contradictory results on the Syrian matter, the IIT is attempting to prove the military expedience of the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian armed forces. However, even the report’s approximation of an of the analysis of the military situation in the area of Ltamenah and Hama in March and April 2017 brings one to the logical conclusion that there was no need for this kind of action on the part of Syrian Government forces. Over the period under consideration, the Syrian Army, with support from air forces, continued its offensive in the Hama Governorate, taking back control of 75 per cent of its territory. This success demonstrated the self-sufficiency of the army forces in that area and the resources it had to take on its fight against terrorists, as well as the absence of any theoretical need to use chemical weapons or toxic chemicals.

Clearly, the use of three chemical munitions over the course of one week of intense military action would not have produced any substantial practical results on the ground, or even have any kind of intimidating effect on the local population, the majority of which does not support the rebel fighters. To the contrary, it was the fighters and terrorists who would have benefited from this kind of provocation, inciting the desired international response and in doing so, frustrating or weakening the offensive of the Syrian Army.

In addition to the political context of the situation as a whole with the so-called Syrian “chemical dossier”, the following factors also make the IIT report unreliable.

1. The IIT conducted its investigation remotely, without having experts visit the area of the alleged use of chemical weapons and without any participation of the Syrian side. This method essentially defeats the purpose of the entire investigation.

The management of the OPCW Technical Secretariat did not even consider it necessary, in line with the requirements of the Convention, to officially notify Damascus of the start of the IIT’s work on the specified incidents.

2. As sources of information, the IIT cites certain unnamed States Parties to the Convention, anonymous witness, and “various” and “numerous” sources. We note that most of the agencies to which the IIT ran for assistance are acting in the interests of the Syrian opposition and are financed by States that are hostile to Damascus. Among these entities, the following stand out: the Chemical Violations Documentation Center of Syria (CVDCS), Human Rights Watch, Open Society Justice Initiative, Peace SOS, Syria Civil Defence (SCD), Syria Justice and Accountability Centre, Syrian Archive, Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), and the Syrian NGO Alliance.

A number of questions arise when it comes to the work methods of the staff of the IIT, and these are well known by the FFM and the JIM. The report, for example, contains over 50 references to certain “specialists” and “specialised and forensics institutes”—

the State affiliations and types of activities of which are left completely unaddressed. One thing is clear: the personnel and agencies that were used as sources of information can in no way be called neutral when it comes to their stance on Damascus. Their prejudice regarding the events that started in 2011 in Syria leaves zero room for any doubt.

3. In light of the remote nature of the IIT's investigation, its assurances of a "meticulous assessment", "verification", or "reconstruction" of the sequence of the FFM's actions to ensure chain-of-custody remains an unproven inference. In practice, the samples and fragments of alleged chemical munitions were provided to the FFM by certain parties (typically members of the "White Helmets") in a third country several months after the actual incidents. Consequently, there can be no confidence that the materials and samples provided to the FFM were actually collected in Ltamenah, and not some other site in Syria or even another country. Therefore, there is no basis for confirming compliance with chain-of-custody procedures.

The situation is the same with the witnesses from the FFM and the IIT: in particular, there is no evidence that they actually exist, or that they were directly in Ltamenah at the time of the chemical incidents.

The report completely overlooks an altogether sensitive question: did the OPCW Technical Secretariat transfer a portion of the samples collected by the FFM from the aforementioned unknown parties to the Syrian side? As far as we know, in spite of the numerous requests by Damascus in this regard, this was not done.

All of the above constitutes a flagrant breach of the Convention, its Verification Annex, and other relevant documents adopted by the OPCW.

4. With its reference to certain satellite images, the IIT continues to accuse Syria of having a chemical munitions storage unit at the al-Shayrat airbase. It is unclear exactly where the confidence and ability come from to visually distinguish the relevant facilities from a conventional munitions storage unit. The question also arises: where were these satellite images in 2017?

Back in 2017, the Syrian side insisted on having OPCW experts urgently visit the al-Shayrat base and provided the proper security guarantees. Unfortunately, the trip was disrupted by the actions of an external aggressor—the United States—that hastened to launch a missile strike on the airbase on 7 April 2017, to prevent any official denial by the OPCW experts of the unfounded accusations of the Government of Syria's involvement in the chemical incident in Khan Shaykhun on 4 April 2017. Regarding the OPCW experts, they never did make it to the airbase, explaining that there allegedly would not be anything left there to see after the missile strike.

For the purposes of further clarification of the situation that had developed in April 2017, the Russian Federation and Iran submitted a draft decision to the OPCW Executive Council under which the Director-General of the Technical Secretariat would have officially been instructed to conduct an inspection at the al-Shayrat airbase. This proposal was rejected by the United States and its allies, who initiated a vote on it. At the same time, they offered no reasonable argument to fortify their position.

The IIT has completely ignored the circumstances detailed above, having laid out unsubstantiated accusations against the Syrian Government.

5. It seems absurd to include information in the report regarding the sources of data on the activities that took place at the al-Shayrat airbase. In particular, the assertion is that they are based on a certain network of “observers on the ground” from the opposition, which allegedly intercepted the communications among pilots about the targets for and coordinates of airstrikes to be launched. Who are these people, what technological abilities do they have, and how reliable are their “observations”? There are, of course, no answers to those questions.

When put together, all of the circumstances addressed above and the complete spectrum of inconsistencies addressed below result in a final product that demonstrates that the main goal of the IIT is to justify the unlawful acts of aggression of the United States of America and their allies against Syria in 2017 and 2018, and to create other reasons for interested States to interfere directly in the domestic affairs of the Syrian Arab Republic.

Assessment of the IIT report on specific incidents of alleged use of chemical weapons in Ltamenah

The IIT report presents incorrect assessments of similar subject matters that are set out in the documents of the FFM and the JIM. In a number of cases, these are of a fundamental nature.

It is noteworthy that in all three cases, no geographical coordinates were linked to any of the alleged events—which is extremely important when conducting an investigation in good faith.

Regarding the incidents of 24 and 30 March 2017, the IIT made an attempt to use so-called ‘unique’ technology that the Syrians used to synthesise binary sarin and employ this as irrefutable evidence that no one else could have done so. These kinds of statements are simply incorrect.

Following Syria's accession to the Convention, Damascus handed over to the OPCW detailed materials on the methods used to synthesise sarin, and a portion of the precursors removed from Syria were destroyed on the Cape Ray, a specialised American vessel, in the Mediterranean. Therefore, the ‘unique’ composition of ‘Syrian’ sarin has not been a secret for a long time now and could easily have been reproduced in order to orchestrate provocations in Syria.

Regarding the incident of 24 March 2017

1. The IIT refers to certain flight data and information from “various” (unidentified) sources and claims that on 24 March 2017, a Syrian military airplane dropped at least one aerial bomb containing a toxic chemical. The report indicates that the IIT assessed video footage of the area of the alleged chemical incident and confirmed the geo-location thereof through ‘two independent verifications by a specialised institute’. In other words, the geo-location of some videos were established—not the location of the alleged incident itself.

2. Based on the results of the video analysis, the IIT concluded that the size of the crater created by the impact of the munition was between 1 to 2 metres deep and approximately 2.5 metres in diameter, with a circular shape, and therefore fits the scenario of an aerial bomb (paragraph 7.9). However, the photo available in the report shows a crater of different sizes, and the FFM's report (paragraph 5.14 of S/1636/2018) indicates that the witness described the crater as being about 1.5 metres in diameter by one meter in depth. No explanation is provided for this discrepancy.
3. The IIT report refers to the use of an aerial chemical bomb (containing 132 kg of sarin) under “favourable” weather conditions. However, the FFM's report on this incident states that there were no deaths, and that all casualties were reported as mild. The FFM reports up to 30 civilian casualties (paragraph 5.12) who received medical treatment, while the IIT report notes only 16 casualties, including both civilians and rebel fighters, five of whom were intubated (paragraph 7.14). It is also telling that the IIT was never able to locate medical records for the individuals allegedly affected by sarin, and the symptoms were recorded as if they were provided word-for-word by medical staff and the patients themselves. At the same time, as noted in the IIT report, someone allegedly established that some patients spent anywhere from 24 hours up to 10 days in an unidentified hospital (paragraph 7.15).

In this context, the IIT report does not contain anything that could shed light on such significant discrepancies. Nor is there any answer to the question of exactly what kind of therapy was used to treat those affected, the documents used to record the methods and courses of treatment, medical prescriptions, and so on.

4. Of the six samples of metal fragments allegedly extracted from the crater and handed over to the FFM by the “White Helmets” on 19 February 2018, only two were found to have any connection to chemical weapons (SDS28, SDS29). There is no evidence proving who collected these fragments at the site, or where or how they were stored prior to being transferred to the FFM. Only one fragment (SDS28)—a heavy metal cone with an attached metal sheet—has been examined in detail (there is no photo in the report). After conducting a photogrammetric study and on the basis of the opinions of certain munitions experts, it was concluded that the fragment was likely a part of an M4000 Syrian chemical aerial bomb. However, professionals have good reason to doubt the validity of this assessment.

For example, the IIT itself notes in its report that according to information received “from States Parties to the Convention and public sources”, it learned that Syria had repurposed 2,000 unfilled chemical aerial bombs into conventional ones in 2013 and used them in combat activities before Damascus acceded to the Convention (paragraph 7.21). However, this is not confirmed in the IIT report, allegedly due to the absence of relevant documents and material evidence. At the same time, there is no mention of the availability of open-source videos on the Internet (one of the sources of information recognised by the FFM and the former JIM) in which rebel fighters demonstrate the extraction from the ground of unexploded “chemical” M4000 aerial bombs equipped with conventional explosives.

As a result, in light of the above and the severe corrosion (over a course of at least five years) of virtually all metal fragments handed over to the FFM, it cannot be excluded that they could have been a part of unexploded or previously detonated “chemical” aerial bombs that had been repurposed into conventional munitions.

Furthermore, the overall lack of technical expertise raises doubts as to whether all five metal fragments submitted were actually fragments of M4000 aerial bombs.

With regard to the “chemical” part of the IIT report, which includes the main findings of purportedly additional studies, we note that these were either already known from the FFM reports on the composition of agents, or give rise to serious doubts about their correctness and validity. There are also questions about the presence of traces of “pure sarin”—an unstable chemical compound (that decomposes within a few hours in warm weather)—detected on metal fragments that were transferred to the OPCW in February 2018. It should be noted that the same “pure sarin” was found in soil samples taken both directly from the crater (SLS35) and from within a radius of up to 100 meters from it. It was also detected in a similar sample “from the crater” that was handed over to the FFM on 12 August 2017 (four months after the incident) (paragraph 7.32). There is no explanation for this phenomenon in the report.

Regarding the 25 March 2018 incident

1. The FFM report mentioned two helicopters, which allegedly dropped a total of four cylinders filled with chlorine, while the IIT document mentioned only one helicopter and one cylinder. According to the FFM's findings (paragraph 5.44) one of the cylinders allegedly hit a reinforced concrete soil-covered rooftop of a “hospital carved inside a rock formation”, while passing through it without detonating an explosive substance (according to the information available, the roof was reportedly at least two meters thick). With reference to the results of analyses performed at the DL3 laboratory, it is indicated that the substance was trinitrotoluene, traces of which were found on this cylinder.

The IIT believes (para 8.28) that there was no explosive charge in this single cylinder at all and its opening/deformation was caused by the kinetic impact that took place when it hit the roof, which is evidenced by abstract (and therefore doubtful) mathematical modelling. Neither the official materials of the technical examination of the penetration through the reinforced concrete roof of the hospital by the cylinder nor its deformation at the moment of impact are provided in the report. The size and appearance of the hole that allegedly formed as a result of the cylinder penetration through the roof and into the room indicate that it has very even edges, which is typical for ventilation holes found in the underground structures of illegal armed groups.

2. The IIT claims that up to three persons died and at least 32 persons were injured following this “attack” (paragraph 8.22). Most of the cases were described as “predominantly moderate” (paragraph 8.24), although for semi-enclosed premises their severity should be high. It is also stated that “[...] it was not possible to conclude with a high degree of confidence that the described symptoms were caused by chlorine gas”. No medical documentation is available.
3. The IIT experts were unable to reach a clear conclusion on the use of chlorine (paragraph 8.35): “[...] there is no single chemical that unequivocally and directly indicate the use of chlorine gas and its origin”. However, the paradoxical conclusion is made that a chlorine cylinder dropped by a Syrian Air Force helicopter allegedly broke into the hospital through its roof, ruptured, and released chlorine, affecting at least 30 persons (paragraph 8.36).

Regarding the 30 March 2017 incident

1. The IIT report does not indicate the size of the crater, but merely claims that it was formed by an aerial bomb with a low explosive payload, which allegedly indirectly indicates the chemical nature of the munition (paragraph 9.8).

Furthermore, it is stated that one of the metal fragments (08SDS in the FFM report) would be consistent with a component of the mixing system of a M4000 chemical aerial bomb. The grounds for such conclusion are once again not given in the document.

A universal bomb explosive charge allegedly discovered at the location of the incident cannot serve as evidence of the use of a chemical aerial munition in Ltamenah, since it is used in the widest range of aviation ammunition.

On the whole, all the analysed fragments of the alleged M4000 chemical aerial munition have traces of severe corrosion. From the available photographs, it is difficult to accurately determine the duration of corrosion. However, taking the climatic conditions of Syria into account, it clearly exceeds five years. Moreover, according to the FFM and the IIT, the fragments were removed from the crater immediately after the bomb exploded, which cannot be true. Russian experts have repeatedly pointed out this important aspect, but the IIT has completely ignored this information and did not conduct the necessary examination.

2. Like the FFM, the IIT claims that 60 people were affected in Ltamenah on 30 March 2017. Just like with the 24 March incident, the absence of the victims is noteworthy and requires additional explanation, given the high mortality rate of sarin. In contrast, according to the FFM, in Douma on 7 April 2018, about 70 people allegedly died from a single cylinder of chlorine, although chlorine is much less toxic than sarin.
3. According to the FFM report on this incident, representatives of the “White Helmets” transferred 10 soil samples and 25 metal fragments to the Mission. In 34 cases, the designated laboratories detected either sarin or substances related to it as decomposition products or technological impurities. At the same time, the results of the analyses differ significantly for the exact same samples in terms of the identification of specific substances. Furthermore, an analysis of four biomedical samples—blood and hair samples from alleged exposed persons provided by representatives of the “White Helmets”—showed a complete absence of sarin biomarkers. It is obvious to us why these facts, which cast doubt on the use of sarin in Ltamenah, are absent in the IIT report.
4. In paragraph 11.10 of its report, the IIT argues that only a highly organised group could stage this kind of chemical attack, and ISIL, they say, does not fall into that category. This conclusion—particularly with regard only to ISIL—seems strange. The very possibility of staging a chemical attack on 30 April is confirmed by a video in which two unknown men in British-produced green protective suits collect soil samples in a territory marked with ‘Danger’ signs in English. Then they collect these signs and oddly, another person shows up in the “contamination zone”, but in ordinary clothing and flip-flops on his bare feet, which in situations involving the use of military grade nerve agent looks simply fantastic.

The question is: why did the IIT completely ignore this video material which clearly confirms the staged nature of this incident? As for the “highly organised” groups that are capable of staging things like this, thanks to the efforts of curators from the special services of well known interested States, they are quite numerous among the opponents of Syria’s legitimate authorities. In this regard, we will only mention the craftsmen from the “White Helmets”, who were evacuated from Syria in a highly organised fashion, and sheltered by the governments of some Western States, having received “hush money”.

The continued politicisation of the work of the OPCW concerning Syria is unacceptable. Responsible States Parties to the Convention should pool their efforts to put an end to the attempts of the United States and a number of other countries to put the Organisation “at the service” of their own political and geopolitical interests.

--- 0 ---