

Tareq Haddad 2:33 PM

Hi both,

Following a conversation with Alfred regarding the story, sending you both an explainer note with some of the documents to look into as they contain some pretty bombshell revelations. In essence: The UN chemical weapons watchdog (the OPCW) doctored reports to say that Syria was responsible for the Douma chemical weapons attack. When I covered this (and the Khan Sheikhoun attack) at the time for IBTimes, that was my strong suspicion because there were a lot of discrepancies, but it could not be said explicitly because there was insufficient evidence aside from facts not quite adding up.

I had mostly forgotten about it, but while I was looking into the Turkey white phosphorus story a few weeks ago, I came across this blog post that documented the transcript of a conversation with a Guardian Middle East correspondent on the BBC World Service. On the show, he said that an OPCW whistleblower he had spoken to said when his fact-finding team went, they didn't find evidence that chlorine was present any more so than in normal conditions - i.e. it was not used.

<https://timhayward.wordpress.com/2019/10/27/major-revelation-from-opcw-whistleblower-jonathan-steele-speaking-to-the-bbc/>

I didn't raise it at the time because I didn't feel the evidence was strong enough, but afterwards, Wikileaks put out a call for leakers to come forward because there were reportedly many people at the OPCW who were not happy with what has been going on. On Saturday, Wikileaks published the first link below with (and the next 3 links are internal documents that come from the organisation):

<https://wikileaks.org/opcw-douma/>

<https://wikileaks.org/opcw-douma/document/OPCW-Analytical-Points-final/>

<https://wikileaks.org/opcw-douma/document/OPCW-Statement-final/>

<https://wikileaks.org/opcw-douma/document/20190227-Engineering-assessment-of-two-cylinders-observed-at-the-Douma-incident/>

The Mail on Sunday published a piece saying the same thing this Sunday and also includes evidence and conversations with people involved:

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7718627/Sexed-dossier-furore-alleged-poison-gas-attack-Assad.html>

There is also plenty of other information that corroborates what's being said here, but I don't want to send an overload of stuff. Please let me know your thoughts as soon as possible as I think this is a hugely important piece with a lot of implications.

Tuesday, November 26th



Tareq Haddad 11:51 AM

Hey Dimi - do you think you could let me know on this soon as I'd like to start working on this today if possible? (although I'm off I think it's important so I want to work on it)

One thing worth pointing out is that at the end of the Mail on Sunday piece, there is a leaked email from the whistleblower in the copy. It is worth reading in full if you haven't seen it already as it is very strong and is extremely strong evidence for the things that are being alleged. It is very possible that it came from the same whistleblower that the Guardian journalist spoke to because Hitchens tweeted about that revelation at the time and it would not surprise me if he took it further.

Re our chat about some slight concerns, I'm aware that Hitchens has been an opinion columnist for a while but he was also a respected reporter for a long time (about 20 years I think) and worked as a Washington and Moscow correspondent in addition to being a deputy news editor. Also, despite the obvious problems with the Mail Online, the Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday still have high standards of journalism (particularly the latter) and it would not publish something like this lightly. Reading through the actual reporting again, it is clearly solid and validated by the available facts.

Hope this helps. Let me know please.



DimiReider 1:21 PM

hey - sorry, didn't realize you planned to work on your day off. Here are my thoughts:

1. Bellingcat just published a thorough refutation here:

<https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2019/11/25/emails-and-reading-comprehension-opcw-douma-coverage-misses-crucial-facts/>. Most crucial for our purposes is that the email appears to concern a very early version of the report, not the one that was released: *"A comparison of the points raised in the letter against the final Douma report makes it amply clear that the OPCW not only addressed these points, but even changed the conclusion of an earlier report to reflect the concerns of said employee."*

2. Even Hitchens opens his piece with "IF SUBSTANTIATED". Which suggests even he had hunch that it isn't. And also explains why it's an opinion piece, not a news report.

3. Hitchens's past career on other beats is no warranty of his expertise / judgement on this new beat, if it even amounts to a beat in his case.

4. Indeed, some of the more experienced Syria hands have since dismissed the leak and/or Hitchens:

<https://twitter.com/ClarkeMicah/status/1198967498021974016>

Finally - and I think the above is enough to pass it up, so this is more of a side note - I'm also not sure how is it an urgent story. Leak has been out since weekend. It's certainly no scoop. Yet despite the days that passed, not a single respected media outlet - many of whom boast far greater regional expertise, resources on the ground and in newsroom than Newsweek does — have taken this leak remotely seriously. Which already yesterday made me wonder how we could and why we should. It's not ideal, of course: we should always strive for original reporting, not wait for others to scoop us. But when something a) sharply deviates from the narrative of facts accepted by most recognized experts b) is widely available anyway c) is something other, better resourced media will have had a stab at -- it does us no harm to see what our colleagues

elsewhere decided to do. (It's not just about Syria - this was part of my reluctance to put take up this weird story going around since yesterday about Ilhan Omar being a Qatari spy. Not a single serious US site picked it up, which confirms my hunch it's BS.) (edited)

1:23 PM

In short, good on you spotting and insisting on what may well have seemed like a major story, and i'm sorry to pour cold water all over it. but on this occasion, I say we pass.



Tareq Haddad 5:59 PM

Thanks for the thorough explanation Dimi, but I'd like to say a few things in response.

5:59 PM

Bellingcat's article is not a thorough refutation. They raised 7 points which I will address:

1.1 Point 1 says the wording regarding the presence of chlorine was changed from "likely" to "possible" in line with what the disgruntled OPCW employee said, but this confirms that there was in fact a disgruntled employee (among others) who was not happy about the changes in the report. The final wording was still taken by journalists to mean that chlorine was present, because importantly, like the complainants said, the report did not say that the chlorine was only present in trace amounts—hence insufficient to say it was present beyond the levels of chlorine normally found in the atmosphere.

1.2.1 Point 2.1 has faulty logic and is not supported by paragraphs 8.6-8.19 as the author claims. The author claims that it is absurd to say it is "disingenuous" to single out chlorine when multiple chemicals at the same levels were present because of other alleged chlorine attacks. Firstly, there is nothing disingenuous about that observation. If chlorine was used, you would expect chlorine levels to be higher than trace levels and it is insufficient to say because it is suspected of being used in the past, without pointing to a specific instance, it explains this suspected incident. It is the job of the investigators to determine whether it was used in this incident and their finding was that it was not. Paragraphs 8.6-8.19

explain the presence of other chemicals, which like the chlorine in question, can be caused by other naturally occurring factors. Various sections in those paragraphs state exactly that.

1.2.2 Because the final report uses the wording that the OPCW investigators suggested on a chemical technicality does not wipe away why they were unhappy with the final report because it was still largely misrepresentative of the facts. As the Mail on Sunday piece reports, some of the disgruntled employees requests were met to keep them on the side, but when the final report was unrepresentative, they were happy and hence why we have this leaked email in question.

1.3 Same as above.

1.4 Again, simply because the final report took on some of the investigators complaints, does not mean that the final report was not largely unrepresentative hence the unhappiness of investigators and the leaked email.

1.5 Same as above. 1.6 Because analysis showed the cylinders are believed to have fallen from a height as suggested, that does not mean they contained chlorine. As discussed in other points, investigators found that there was "insufficient evidence to affirm" that chlorine came from the cylinders and that it was a "major deviation from the original report" to suggest that they had.

1.7 Same as previous.

6:00 PM

1.8 Conclusion: The conclusion is not accurate because it says that the complaints are inapplicable and outdated. This is false as the complaint still stands that only trace levels of chlorine were found. It says that it is significant that the wording was changed from "likely" to "possible" because the OPCW downgraded its confidence, but this does not account for the fact that the majority of journalists took this report to mean that chlorine was in fact used.

1.9 A further point about Bellingcat: You mention how Newsweek may not have the resources to properly have a stab at something like this, but it is funny how Bellingcat, a team of 11 people does. It has no adverts and makes no money but somehow reports on the things it reports. Coming out of nowhere and with no prior experience in journalism for its founder, it has scooped all journalists

on deeply complicated issues such as on MH17, a range of chemical weapons attacks and the Salisbury assassinations. Not once has it ever deviated from the official U.S./U.K. line and it savagely goes after anyone that publishes anything contrary to what they say. In the meantime, they are almost completely funded by RUSI and The American Council. RUSI is a think tank that is an arm of the British Army (and makes no attempt at hiding this) and the American Council is the same in relation to the DoD. Additionally, Eliot Higgins, the founder, was a senior fellow at the American Council for 3 years. There are other things I can point to as evidence, but it is not some well-meaning journalistic enterprise as it makes out to be. It is clearly an attempt to control the narrative and if we genuinely care about real journalism and facts, not simply parroting the affirmations made by extensions of intelligence agencies in support of illegal wars, then Bellingcat should not be taken seriously.

6:00 PM

2. The "if substantiated" wording is just being careful around a hugely significant story with big implications. The letter has in fact since been substantiated as accurate by Reuters and it verified the email was as it purports to be.

<https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-syria-crisis-chemicalweapons/chemical-weapons-body-defends-syria-attack-conclusions-after-leaks-idUKKBN1XZ1QH>

Also, you say that this is an opinion piece, but it is clearly written as a news item and all of the statements are factual.

 U.K.

Chemical weapons body defends Syria attack conclusions after leaks

The head of the global chemical weapons organisation on Monday defended the agen...

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3 and 4. I was simply pointing out Hitchens' prior experience because you said he was simply an opinion writer. His background in journalism is substantial and was at a high level. His experience in the Middle East or chemical weapons may be limited, but that does not nullify anything in his reporting here.

After all, he was able to get a hold of this highly damaging letter. If you can point to anything factually incorrect, then I'd be glad to address. The tweet you linked does nothing to dismiss the leak. It is simply quote from the new OPCW head that's the same as in the Reuters piece. I don't believe that the head of the organisation would say anything other than to defend themselves and to dismiss the leak.

6:01 PM

Reuters reporting on the letter addresses your point about respectable media outlets taking up the story. Several other versions are now up, based on this – although in diluted form in comparison to the Mail on Sunday piece. I was not suggesting this was a scoop, but felt it was urgent because every day that passed made the story older as is the case with everything else that we do. Also, you made no mention of the actual letter in itself in your response. The presence of it alone is extremely newsworthy and it is worthy of publication. It is only a sharp deviation from the facts because journalists failed to report on what was happening with Syria adequately and we have a repetition of Iraq where a country is destroyed on false premises. I do not say this because I'm trying to damage the U.K. or the U.S. but because I care about their reputations and what they offer and because it is my job as a journalist to hold those governments to account. When serious allegations are levelled against Syria or Russia, we have no problems in publishing them and we do so almost instantly without the proper evidence. When some journalists who pay attention try to report on misdoings by the U.S. or the U.K., they face many hurdles in doing so like what's happened here. This situation makes many people distrustful of media when we publish countless things to build the case for war, but remain silent when facts that don't support the government narrative are dismissed. It's damaging to the readership of Newsweek and others to report in a manner that does not fully convey the truth and it is no wonder why many people turn to other places if they really want to know what's going on.



Tareq Haddad 6:19 PM

Apologies if I sound a little frustrated, I understand the need to be careful with stories like this, but I also came into journalism because I deeply care about covering stories that are really in the public interest and this, in my opinion, is absolutely one of them.

Yesterday



DimiReider 12:01 PM

Hey Tareq - thank you - noted. let's chat when you're in tmrw.