

DOUMA

by Hari Kumar February 6, 2021

Introduction

The chlorine bombing in Douma Syria, by the Assad forces during the Syrian Civil War was another horrifying episode of Assadite fascism. But several sources of mis-information (In an older time this was known as lies) have tried hard to obscure the underlying truth. The events at Douma did not take place in an abstract isolation. The Syrian army committed innumerable massacres on behalf of Assad. Russian imperialist agencies were complicit in this. In the face of this, the smaller particular incident in Douma should be of far less concern to the left. But the April 2018 bombing in Douma was given a huge significance as a so-called 'false flag'. This was done precisely to confuse and divide the left and liberal opposition to Assad.

The underlying question was always the brutal and vicious civil war launched by a fascist dictator on the Syrian people. But the intense misinformation campaign conveniently shrouded this from view, sponsoring a deliberately misleading 'debate'. This questions whether Assadite forces or the anti-Assad forces had launched the attack. We place Douma into context, to examine claims that Douma was a so-called 'false flag' planted by the rebels themselves. Such claims, I argue, do not stand up to scrutiny, and the Syrian air force and Assad bear full responsibility not only for the Douma bombing, but all the intense brutality waged on the Syrian people. We have to understand where Bashar came from.

1. The fascist state built by Assad

Syria is a 'hereditary' fascist state - that was 'bequeathed' to Bashar Assad from his father, Hafiz Assad. ¹ Because the word 'fascist' is too loosely thrown around, I must be explicit. The Assads erected a *corporate* state which enriched a landlord and nascent bourgeoisie, and suppressed all independent working-class activity or organisations including trade unionism. In this case, the strategy was adopted by a weak and late developing bourgeoisie trying to raise a capitalist infrastructure, against imperialism.

Hafiz Assad took sole power in 1970, and increasingly turned to an open fascism. Under 'Land Reforms', the Ba'ath Party increased the land-mass of the richest peasantry, to enable leading landlords to transform themselves into a capitalist class. This consolidated an otherwise weak national bourgeoisie. This state shouldered the burden of building an infrastructure, to allow capitalist accumulation. But still the national bourgeoisie were forced into a dependency on other dominant nations. For a time the state of Syria was a comprador state to then-revisionist USSR imperialism. Later after the USSR formally renounced any socialist pretensions in 1991, Syria was forced to rely again on Western imperialism. ¹ Latterly during the period of the Civil War, it has again become subservient to a new ruling class in Russia - that represented by Putin.

In the diverse communities of Syria, Hafiz Assad welded a sectarian state to enable corporate state development. One leading historian of the area - David Hirst - wrote:

¹ Hari Kumar The Class Character of Syria – From an Oriental Despotic State to Neo-Colony to Fascist Dictatorship to Civil War - Part One"; May 24, 2018; ML Currents Today at: <http://ml-today.com/2020/11/24/the-class-character-of-syria-assad/>

"It is not in any real sense, the Ba'athists who run this country. It is the 'Alawites... In theory they run it behind the party, but in practice it is through their clandestine solidarity within the party and other important institutions... Behind the façade, the best qualification for holding power is proximity – through family, sectarian, or tribal origins - to the country's leading 'Alawite, President Assad.'" ²

Many other sources agree, including Sam Daher who conducted substantial interviews with leading exiled members of Assad's circle. ³ Any dissent was clamped down by declaring a state of emergency, which has been in place from 1963 on:

"The state of emergency... was a basic tool of the state's repressive apparatus, effectively suspending constitutional rights, legalising surveillance and media censorship, and awarding the security services the right to detain those deemed to 'threaten public security and order'. Special courts were established to deal with issues 'relating to national security'. Those accused by these courts had no right to representation and no right to appeal. Furthermore, civilians could be tried in military courts. Such exceptional powers had led to the incarceration of thousands... Torturers acted with impunity, protected by Legal Decree No. 14, a 1969 law which prohibited the prosecution of any General Intelligence Division employee for crimes committed in an official capacity. In 2008, Bashar extended the law to cover all members of the security and police apparatus."⁴

This sectarian fascism was not passively accepted, as the Syrian record of rebellions show. In particular Assad's fury was unleashed upon the Sunni minority, as in Hama:

"The Baathist army suppressed urban uprisings in 1963, 1964, 1965, 1967, 1973, 1980 and 1982, culminating in the massacre at Hama, the most traumatising of repressions, when much of the Old City was destroyed and up to 20,000 people were killed." ⁵

These rebellions were re-lit during the short lived so-called '*Syrian Spring*'. That outpouring was a reaction to an intensified exploitation as Bashar Assad violently swung into a harsh neo-liberal austerity. Characteristic of the Assad strategy of 'rule and divide' the sectarian embers were brought into flames.

2. The Start of the Civil War - the Syrian Spring

It is true that the Syrian Spring was inspired by events in Tunisia and Egypt, but previous civil resistance had begun before. Though sidelined, pressures for change and democratic rights grew nonetheless. Finally in 2011 in the city of Daara, the frustrations of the people burst out. Schoolchildren emulating TV pictures of the 'Arab spring' elsewhere, daubed anti-Bashar slogans in the night. But they were quickly arrested and, brutally tortured. The initial uprising from below, began with demands to release the youth. But it quickly grew beyond this to demand fundamental political changes:

² Hirst, D; Guardian; 26 June, 1979; Cited by Van Dam Nicholas: "The Struggle for power in Syria. Politics & Society Under Assad & the Ba'ath party"; London 1997 p. 100

³ Sam Daher, 'Assad Or We Burn the Country'; New York 2019.

⁴ Yassin-Kassab, Robin, and Leila Al-Shami. Burning Country : Syrians in Revolution and War, London, 2018. p. 18; 23

⁵ Yassin-Kassab, Robin, and Leila Al-Shami. 'Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War', London, 2018. p.13-14; 16

“in Syria it was chiefly a revolt of the peasantry - a protest by the Sunni periphery against what was perceived as the Ba'ath regime...

It was Daraa that would become the epicentre of opposition to the regime in early 2011: first ignited by the detention of schoolchildren for anti-regime graffiti, before morphing into demands for both their release along with that of other political prisoners, and then fully-fledged anti-regime protests targeting emergency laws, poor socio-economic conditions, corruption, police brutality, and arbitrary detention. Further highlighting its economic vulnerabilities, there was an insistence on also curtailing restrictive laws that forbade buying and selling of property and measures to alleviate poverty in the area “ From these rural towns, the revolt would spread to the countryside. By mid-2012, the revolution came to the major cities, Damascus and Aleppo”.⁶

An increasingly brutal assault on the people of Syria was launched by the regime. This in turn, spawned an even broader movement in the streets of the whole country. It took the organised shape of '*Local Coordination Committees*' (LRCs):

“An opposition drawing its strength from Syria's restive streets has begun to emerge as a pivotal force in the country's once-dormant politics, organizing across disparate regions through the Internet, reaching out to fearful religious minorities and earning the respect of more recognized, but long divided dissidents. The Local Coordination Committee... the committees have reached out to minorities in a remarkably diverse country. The coordination among cities has created solidarities that never existed - with a poor and neglected region in southern Syria known as the Houran or between cities with historic rivalries, like Homs and Hama.”⁷

The LRC's were led by those espousing peaceful change. As a conscious tactic, these members were systematically hunted down. Moreover the LRCs had been penetrated by mukhabarat secret police. who were advocating to adopt armed resistance. This provided further 'justification' to the Assad regime, to suppress the movement.⁸ In fact Military intelligence Directorate Unit 293 leader Rafic Shehadeh made assault rifles available to protestors through his agents.⁸

3. From early on the regime fostered inter-sectarian struggle and 'false flags'

At the same time, the Assad regime consciously inflamed sectarianism. Plenty of direct testimony to this can be cited, but the most eloquent fact is the sudden mass release of interned al-Qaeda members in Syria.³ This is linked to a previous standing policy of Bashar Assad. This was to foster sectarian violence in Iraq – in order to lead the USA away from scrutiny of Syria itself. For some time during the Iraq War the Syrian border was 'porous' and at first Syria freely allowed fundamentalists to cross over. As the USA tried to placate the Syrian dictatorship, Syria agreed to imprison them:

⁶ Amar Diwakar; "Affirming the Syrian Revolution: Experiments in Autonomy"; Economic & Political Weekly; May 27, 2017.

⁷ Anthony Shadid, Coalition of Factions From the Streets Fuels a New Opposition in Syria, New York Times, June 30, 2011 https://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/01/world/middleeast/01syria.html?_r=2&pagewanted=all

⁸ Cited Sam Daher 'Assad Or We Burn.' Ibid; p. 253; 269.

"Internal State Department cables released by WikiLeaks confirm that the U.S. had intelligence showing that almost all foreign al Qaeda volunteers entered Iraq via Syria and that Assad and his top aides were fully aware. In 2010, they acknowledged as much to visiting U.S. officials, a WikiLeaks cable showed. "In principle, we don't attack or kill them immediately," Gen. Ali Mamluk, now Assad's top intelligence advisor, said of al Qaeda operatives. "Instead, we embed ourselves in them, and only at the opportune moment do we move." ⁹

This view of Assad as an enabler of ISIS is commonly held amongst leaders in the Middle East, for example - the Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani:

"The Syrian government made an enormous mistake in 2003," said Massoud Barzani, the president of the Kurdistan Regional Government in a recent interview with The Daily Beast at his military headquarters in Suheil, in the far north of Iraq's Kurdistan region, near the Syrian and Turkish borders. "They opened the door to terrorists in order to put pressure on the American troops in Iraq so they wouldn't even think of war (against Syria)." ⁹

Moving to imprisoning the adherents of Salafism wishing to join ISIS, was simply to assure President Obama that the Syrian state would assist the USA. But then came 2011 and the Syrian Spring, when a long held second motive of the Assad regime came to the fore. As General Ali Mamluk told US officials in 2010, they wanted to use the Islamic fundamentalists:

"The regime not only had penetrated the networks but often ran them. That was by design. As Gen. Ali Mamluk told US officials in 2010, the regime as a practice would "embed ourselves" among Islamic extremists in order to turn on them later. Mamluk is currently Assad's senior intelligence adviser." ⁹

Herein on the regime moved in a conscious design to infect the peaceful and non-sectarian movement with a poisonous, ultimately self-defeating sectarianism:

"Mohammed Al-Saud... "In 2011, the majority of the current ISIS leadership was released from jail by Bashar Al Assad," he said. "No one in the regime has ever admitted this, or explained why." Al-Saud, a Syrian dissident with the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, left Syria under threat of arrest in 2011." ¹⁰

Syrian intelligence formed links in prison with the extremists, allowing them closely to track their rise in the rebel movement, according to Serriya, al-Ali, and former intelligence officials. "Every extremist group is penetrated by the regime," Serriya said. Former Sednaya prisoners took top positions in Islamist forces. For example, Abu Lukman, one of the founders of Syrian al Qaeda branch Jabhat al Nusra, is now the emir, or administrator, of Raqqa. Mahmoud al-Khalif, another Sednaya graduate, works in the security area and Haj Fadel al-Agal is responsible for social relations. One former

⁹ Roy Gutman, Assad Henchman: Here's How We Built ISIS Dark Allies Apr. 13, 2017; 'Daily Beast'; at: <https://www.thedailybeast.com/assad-henchman-heres-how-we-built-isis>

¹⁰ Simon Speakman Cordall, 'How Syria's Assad Helped Forge ISIS', 'Newsweek'; On 6/21/14 at: <https://www.newsweek.com/how-syrias-assad-helped-forge-isis-255631>

prisoner, Abu Abdulrahman al-Hamwi, is the emir of Nusra in Hama province. Other leaders include Abu Naser Drusha, a cousin of Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, the founder and principal leader of Nusra, Abu Hussien Zeniah, now in charge of Nusra operations in Qalamoun area near Damascus, and Abu Hafs al-Kiswani, a Nusra commander in Dara'a, southern Syria." ¹⁰

Moreover, from the earliest days of the civil war, the regime planted 'false flags' to incite the population against each other. Not only did this fear of each other prevent a united front from developing, it bound the Alawites even closer to the regime. To achieve this they used a thug militia known as *shabeeha* - a part of the *mukabarat* (the secret police):

"From the very start, the regime also resorted to a campaign of rumours and false-flag operations to divide Sunnis from Alawis on the Syrian coast, the home region of top regime figures and at least half of the total Alawi community. In March, armed gangs were unleashed on the port city of Lattakia. They drove around shooting from their cars, screaming threats of rape and murder. In Sunni areas they declared themselves as vengeful Alawis; in Alawi areas they posed as vengeful Sunnis. These thugs were shabeeha... meaning 'ghost', after the Mercedes Ghost, a car popular with the mukhabarat.. the term came to refer to the substate thug militias, financed by pro-regime businessmen, to which much of the repression was subcontracted." ¹¹

By 3 June 2011, the UN had reported that 1,000 people had died in the first three months of the uprising and nearly 3,000 had been detained. The scale of brutality and repression is difficult to fathom.

"Increasingly, the corpses of activists and protestors were returned to their families bearing the marks of horrific torture. Children were not spared. Videos were either smuggled out or deliberately leaked of mukhabarat taunting, whipping and electrocuting even primary school-aged children." ¹²

4. The proxy war

The USA led imperialist aggression against Iraq was followed by its complete humiliation in the Middle East. While the USA had fostered sectarianism in the Iraqi war for its own ends, now those flames were uncontrollable as new fundamentalist forces were constructed. Facing this the USA withdrew from Iraq - its' defeat akin to that in Vietnam earlier. The USA powers became determined to exert its ends through its' agents, the regional powers. These were the Israeli state, but also Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. The newly formed 'statelets' of Kurdistan were conveniently also beholden to the USA. ¹²

As the USA imperialist war of aggression centered on Iraq had ground into an inconclusive ending, the Shi'ia forces of a fundamentalist state of Iran became dominant. As the various imperialisms of the USA and the European powers struggled to get a renewed foothold again in the surrounding countries, Syrian resistance to Assad began. As seen the Assad regime

¹¹ Yassin-Kassab, Robin, and Leila Al-Shami. *Burning Country : Syrians in Revolution and War*, Pluto Press, 2018. p. 48-49

¹² The USA led war in Iraq, is dealt with in detail in: 'Kurdistan – A Marxist-Leninist Framework, Part Two'; January 2020; at <https://ml-today.com/2020/01/01/kurdistan-a-marxist-leninist-framework-part-two/>

sponsored sectarian forces inside Syria, in order in part to discredit the united resistance front. Into this volatility poured money and arms from the surrounding states.

"Syria became the site of proxy wars, of Sunni– Shia rivalries, of foreign interventions. Iranian and transnational Shia forces backed the regime; foreign Sunni extremists flocked to join the organisation known as 'Islamic State'. (Or 'the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant', or ISIS, or even 'the Caliphate'. Syrians call it 'Daesh', by its Arabic acronym.)" ¹³

To ensure the hijacking of the resistance movement by fundamentalists, the Assad regime physically targeted the leaders of the democratic wings of the movement. Effectively the united resistance of the Local Coordination Committees were taken over by brands of fundamentalists. However, the character of the anti-Assad movement did not change.

Well after the Syrian War had been raging, in order to retain power, Assad had no choice but to ask for aid from two sources: The Shi'ia theocratic state of Iran and the Russian state. Iran had long been assisting Syrian ambition inside Lebanon with its allied Shi'ia forces of the Hezbollah. They increasingly moved into Syria. As for Russia, in a previous form under the Khrushchev leadership, it had sponsored a limited Syrian state development. Though still known as the USSR its character had fundamentally changed since 1952. Syria over this period become a comprador state to the Russian state. But Hafiz Assad began to shake off Russian masters, choosing instead to be subservient to a better deal with the USA.

In the spring of 2012, Putin was entering his third presidential term. He saw the chance to regain a foothold in the Middle East for the Russian state. Together with China, Putin had already blocked three mandates for the UN in Syria. The situation was put best by the personal envoy of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei:

"What's happening in Syria is not an internal matter but a struggle between the axis of resistance on one hand and the enemies of this axis in the region and the world on the other. Iran won't allow under any circumstance the breakup of the axis of resistance, of which Syria is a fundamental part". ¹⁴

Iran, Russia and Syria – had united to become the 'axis of resistance'. Russian aid, weapons and air-strikes to defend Assad were mobilised. But even more important, the calculated sharp dealings of Putin and his Foreign minister Lavrov - were vital. A key Putin-ite strategy was tellingly revealed by Sergey Lavrov in an exchange with the French Foreign Minister Fabius:

"Laurent, do you see that glass of fruit juice in front of you on the table? You can see it orange [it was], but you know what, I see it as blue. You can give me all the arguments in the world, but I will continue to say it's blue." ¹⁴

We shall see this modus operandi play out in Douma.

5. The events of Douma April 7, 2018 - What Happened?

¹³ Yassin-Kassab, Robin, and Leila Al-Shami. *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*, London, 2018. p.9

¹⁴ Sam Daher *Ibid*; p. 324; 387

Douma was very different from the nearby cosmopolitan center of Damascus. In James Harkin's words it was one of the initial flash-points of the Syrian uprising:

"Long socially conservative and majority Sunni, in the last decade, a new Islamic piety and a vibrant subculture of Salafism both bloomed amid this new community of urban poor. When the uprising began in Syria's towns and cities in 2011, Douma was one of the first places to catch fire. If Hama was the cradle of the early revolt and Homs was its crucible, Douma was the broader Damascus region's proudest contribution to the early rebellion and a steady thorn in the side of the authorities. Once remarkable for its markets, it now grew famous for its large, carnival-like street protests against President Bashar al-Assad and his ruling clique."¹⁵

Douma was one of the last hold-outs of anti-Assad forces surrounding Damascus itself (See *at minute 1'. 58" of NYT reference*).¹⁶ By April 7th, rebels in the Eastern suburbs were finally being pushed out after five years of holding out. The majority of the rebel forces in Douma were the *Jaish al-Islam, or the Army of Islam*. (*The various factions of the forces fighting against Assad will be dealt with in a separate longer article – forthcoming*). To oust them the Syrian army, launched operation '*Damascus Steel*'. The bomb was launched as part of the 'endgame' in the taking of Douma:

"February 2018, the Syrian army, backed by Russian airplanes and emboldened by joint military successes elsewhere, began a final, determined assault. The operation was branded "*Damascus Steel*," and it met with surprising success. By March the Syrian army and its allied militias had carved Eastern Ghouta into three distinct enclaves, each under the control of a different militia. The first two quickly agreed to deals, under whose terms the fighters and their families could choose to be bussed out to northern Syria or take their chances by surrendering to the Syrian army. Jaish al-Islam, or the Army of Islam, which maintained a tight grip on Douma, held out. As March gave way to April the Syrian army was about a kilometer away, and closing in. This was the endgame. For nearly two months, in between shaky truces, Syrian helicopters and airplanes had intermittently pounded Douma. After yet another ceasefire and round of negotiations failed, they returned on Friday, April 6 with a vengeance. The government was losing patience. So were many Damascenes, who'd grown sick of the volleys of mortars being sent back into central Damascus by the rebels. Tens of thousands of civilians in Douma were caught between them, enduring skyrocketing prices, malnutrition and the outbreak of disease. Cameras from regime-friendly TV channels were trained on Douma to watch the ongoing campaign, primed for imminent victory. On Saturday, according to one account, the onslaught from shelling, airstrikes, and barrel bombs lasted a full six hours."¹⁵

Between April 6-7th helicopters from Assad's Air force attacked Douma in persistent, heavy bombing. On the evening of April 7, Syrian military helicopters dropped a chlorine bomb on the rooftop balcony of an apartment building in the opposition-held town. Dozens of people were

¹⁵ James Harkin, "What Happened in Douma? Searching for Facts in the Fog of Syria's Propaganda War"; February 9 2019; The Intercept; <https://theintercept.com/2019/02/09/douma-chemical-attack-evidence-syria/>

¹⁶ Douma Chemical Attack. One Building, One Bomb: How Assad Gassed His Own People. Syrian officials say there wasn't a chemical attack. What really happened? Malachy Browne, Christoph Koettl, Anjali Singhvi, Natalie Reneau, Barbara Marcolini, Yousur Al Hlou And Drew Jordan. NYT Jun 25, 2018; Video at: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/06/25/world/middleeast/syria-chemical-attack-douma.html>

sheltering inside as President Bashar al-Assad's forces waged an intense bombing campaign in a final push to seize control of the rebel enclave. Several videos were shot, which on later analysis clearly showed that up to 43 people were killed in these attacks.

6. Assad's explanations for the Chlorine bomb

Assad simply denied that this chemical attack had happened at first, but then gave two alternative explanations:

- (i) It was a bomb launched by the resistance fighters – whom he calls "terrorists";
- (ii) or nothing happened: "or there was no attack at all and no one died." ¹⁷

Groundwork had already been laid to spring the allegation to pin the blame on the resistance. On the day before the attack:

"The day before the Douma attack, the Russian military, as it often does, had predicted that Syrian rebel groups were "plotting explosions of makeshift chemical charges containing chlorine in a number of areas under their control." ¹⁶

Importantly, note that none of the anti-Assad forces had access to an airforce, and it did not have the immediate past history of the Assad regime in launching chlorine and gas attacks on the population. The Syrian army claimed the attack was a staged event, with bodies killed elsewhere being dragged into the building.

7. A necessary painstaking reconstruction of what happened

There had been numerous prior chemical attacks from the Assad regime army, which were already being investigated from 2013. But this one captured world attention. It led to a very short-lived attack upon Syrian installations by President Trump of the USA. Naturally given his propensity to boast, he tweeted thereafter "Mission Accomplished":

"Six days later, the United States and its allies launched cruise missiles from the air and from nearby warships and submarines at targets associated with what remains of the Syrian government's chemical weapons program. Those targets included a scientific research center in Damascus and a chemical weapons facility near Homs that had been used for the production of sarin. The massacre on April 7, said President Donald Trump, represented "a significant escalation in a pattern of chemical weapons use by that very terrible regime." In an additional information sheet, the White House noted that "a significant body of information points to the regime using chlorine in its bombardment of Duma, while some additional information points to the regime also using the nerve agent sarin." Following up with a characteristic tweet after the U.S. airstrikes, Trump declared, "Mission Accomplished!" ¹⁶

This provided the pro-Assad forces and the pro-Putin-ite forces, the moral high ground to claim the Douma attack was a 'false flag' to lure in the USA. But what are the facts?

¹⁷ Minute 2.26-2.37 video at NYT. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/06/25/world/middleeast/syria-chemical-attack-douma.html>)

It is very important to note that immediately after the chlorine bombing, the Assad forces took control and of the 'crime scene'. But in spite of that it was quickly seen in videos from bystanders, that there were two bomb canisters in the bombed and gassed-out house with approximately 35 dead victims. Again, recall the resistance forces to Assad had no air force or method to bomb from the sky.

Crucially for an early and vital long period, primarily only the Russian media was allowed into Douma and the house. At the end we will return to a significant exception - *Robert Fisk*. The Russian journalists embedded with the Russian army and the Syrian army, that propagated the message that "*the canister was carefully placed there*".¹⁸ However the data has been painfully reassembled from all videos including those of the Russian TV, interviews etc. All footage was carefully reconstructed by the independent London based '*Forensic Architecture Team*'.¹⁹ Eyal Weizman the 'principal investigator' of the team, in a video-interview for the Intercept, explained his methodology.²⁰ The independent agency '*Bellingcat*' has also performed similar analyses and come to the overall same conclusions. Such independent reconstructions have confirmed there was:

(i) *Penetration of the building from the sky*: that the bombs fell from the sky - and show the balcony rigging debris through which the bomb fell. This is a crucial point since the Syrian forces controlled the skies and the opposition had no aircraft (4'33"). The straps and hooks found surrounding the bomb enabled it to be released from a helicopter. The straps etc. were matching on a second bomb found in Douma that day.

(ii) *A prior history across Syria of Assad forces bombing*: There had been a similar pattern all across Syria of Assad's airforce helicopters dropping these types of bombs: Aleppo Nov 2016; Al-Lataminah Oct 2016; Saraquib Feb 2018. In fact the pattern included a string of chemical attacks dating back to 2013 - such that the UN had been investigating 6 attacks in 2013 alone.

(iii) *Timing relationships of events*: Observers revealed that between 7.16-7.23 helicopters left Dumayr Flight base and were then seen circling close to Douma by 7.26-7.38. Around that time that medics, activists begin reporting attacks on Douma - twitter feed White Helmets rif Dimashq.

iv) *Evidence of gas emission*: There was frost on the bomb that released gas, from a so called 'auto-refrigeration' characteristic of emission of gas at high pressure. Such auto-refrigeration seen on video after the attack at around 10 pm April 7th, 2018. (7'.43") . The later black colouring on the canister - reflects the mix of chlorine and water.

v) *Human deadly effects*: *Keith Ward* Chemical Weapons expert noted: "frothy mucous production" (*New York times video previously cited 9'.23-30"*); *Jennifer Knaack* - Chemical weapons expert at Bellingcat noted: "There appear to be corneal burns, eyes appear almost white" (*Ibid at 9'.30"-9'.40"*);

¹⁸ NYT Video as cited above 2'55'

¹⁹ Forensic Architecture Team: Principal Investigator Eyal Weizman, Project Coordinator Nicholas Masterton, Research: Robert Trafford, Grace Quah, Ariel Caine, Stefan Laxness "Chemical Attacks in Douma"; 18.07.2018; at: <https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/chemical-attacks-in-douma>

²⁰ See Intercept Video Minute 2'.58" to 5'42": at James Harkin February 9, 2019 *Ibid*; at: <https://theintercept.com/2019/02/09/douma-chemical-attack-evidence-syria/>

Blood samples from victim and survivors showed both chlorine and sarin. (*Ibid* 9'52").
Homer Venters 'Physicians for Human rights' noted there was "no evidence of physical trauma" (*Ibid* 10'.08").

vi) *Where did victims die and why there?* The pattern in where the bodies were found were on the staircase and it appeared close to sources of water. Victims had been schooled by many prior attacks and community teaching, that since the gas 'sinks' (due to its high density) to seek high ground and water to dissolve the gas off. Hence they were found in the building on the staircases and near the toilets or kitchens (*Ibid* 10'.42"). They had smelt chlorine and moved up, they could not have known it was coming from the roof and that the gas was sinking.

8. How did Douma become a weapon of those supporting Putin and Assad?

Some individuals and factions, including some posing on the left, have vehemently attacked the rebel forces as the perpetrators of the Douma bombing. The 'theory' presented is that the rebels had themselves launched the attack, in order to blame Assad - in a 'false flag' operation. These left speaking factions, go on to argue the motive for this was to 'compel' or persuade the American forces to bomb Syria. Such factions routinely use the 'left' pretext that in attacking the rebels - they are attacking the stooges of American imperialism.

Naturally attacking American imperialism is very laudable. But the events on the ground in Syria make the argument of these factions a fatuous prop to defend Assad and Putin. It first obviously ignores the nature of the Assad regime, its history and its suppression of the Syrian people. Thereby it of course, ignores or rejects the validity of the Syrian revolution. It goes on to ignore not only Assad's past history of chemical attacks and brutality, but also the known history of air-attacks by both the Syrian and the Russian army. In this the pseudo-leftists studiously ignore the reality that Russian imperialism is as vicious and as bad as American imperialism - though it is currently weaker. Finally it ignores the later complicit pact between American and Russian imperialists, to secure the crucial areas of the Middle East between themselves, and to suppress the anti-Assad rising.

The main path chosen to deny the reality of Assad's Douma attack, was to discredit the *Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons* (OPCW). This was founded in 1997, to implement a newly agreed Chemical Weapons Convention, signed by the United Nations in 1992. The OPCW has 193 signing member states, and is based in the Hague the Netherlands. From the start the dominant powers tried to subvert its stated purposes for their own ends. For example the first Director general Jose Bustani of Brazil, was removed by the machinations of the USA. The USA state was then trying to rubber-stamp an international consensus for their war against Iraq. Bustani's efforts to reach agreement with Saddam Hussein threatened this:

"The first Director-General only served about one year of his second term, after which, in April 2002, he was removed from office on grounds of lack of confidence by the member states... Director-General Jose Bustani was forced out by the U.S. government, despite the convention insisting the OPCW "shall not seek or receive instructions from any government"; the US had tried to persuade Brazil to recall Bustani... In line with his mandate, Bustani wanted Iraq to sign the convention thus allowing international chemical weapons monitors into Iraq and thus potentially impeding the U.S. push for war against Iraq. ... The removal was subsequently determined to be improper by an Administrative Tribunal of the International Labour Organization and consequently

Bustani was awarded €50,000 in moral damages, his pay for the remainder of his second term, and his legal costs." ²¹

However, after the Iraq War, it was to be the Russians who would try to subvert the functioning of the OPCW. We shall trace these developments.

The Douma events were not the first intervention of the OPCW in the Syrian Civil War. That dates from a 'Fact Finding Mission' (FFM) of 3 May 2014, to investigate "repeated allegations of the use of toxic chemicals for hostile purposes at a number of locations in the Syrian Arab Republic, on 29 April 2014." Even then the Assad government had claimed that the opposition forces were responsible. Since the OPCW team was attacked on a land route that had been set for it by the Syrian army, it abandoned the probe and blandly concluded that there was:

"52. information lend(ing) credence to the view that toxic chemicals, most likely pulmonary irritating agents such as chlorine, have been used in a systematic manner in a number of attacks." ²²

The evidence they amassed included blood sample analysis from some victims that on 15 February 2015 in Darayya there was exposure to a "a sarin-like substance". ²³ Several other reports were issued around further incidents, which can be found at the same web-site of the OPCW. ²² Most are written in the dry bureaucratise of a UN agency. By 2016 however the Director General's report makes clear - despite cautious language - that the Syrian government had created obstacles to the verification of destruction of its chemical weapons caches. ²⁴

The first Interim report on the Douma attack of 7 April 2018, dates from 6 July, 2018. This makes it quite clear that the OPCW team were hindered from early investigation unless they were escorted by the "Russian Military Police -Point 6.2". Moreover they were not allowed full access ("During the visit to Location 2, Syrian Arab Republic representatives did not provide the access requested by the FFM team to some apartments within the building" - point 6.9)." ²⁵

Nonetheless by the 7 April 2018, their first report had found evidence of chlorine in wood samples (points 6,7,8):

"the evaluation and analysis of all the information gathered by the FFM—witnesses' testimonies, environmental and biomedical samples analysis results, toxicological and

²¹ OPCW; at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organisation_for_the_Prohibition_of_Chemical_Weapons

²² S/11191/2014; 16 June 2014; 'Summary Report Of The Work Of The OPCW Fact-Finding Mission In Syria Covering The Period From 3 To 31 May 2014 at: <https://www.opcw.org/documents-related-syria>

²³ S/1318/2015/Rev.1; 17 December 2015; Point 1.5 in Report Of The OPCW Fact-Finding Mission In Syria Regarding The Incidents Described In Communications From The Deputy Minister For Foreign Affairs And Expatriates And Head Of The National Authority Of The Syrian Arab Republic"; at: <https://www.opcw.org/documents-related-syria>

²⁴ EC-82/DG.18 6 July 2016. Report By The Director-General. Conclusions On The Outcome Of Consultations With The Syrian Arab Republic Regarding Its Chemical Weapons Declaration'. <https://www.opcw.org/documents-related-syria>

²⁵ S/1645/2018; 6 July 2018: Note by the Technical Secretariat: Interim Report on the Progress of the Fact-Finding Mission Regarding an Incident of Alleged Use of Toxic Chemicals as a Weapon in Douma, Syrian Arab Republic, on 7 April 2018"; at: <https://www.opcw.org/documents-related-syria>

ballistic analyses from experts, additional digital information from witnesses—provide reasonable grounds that the use of a toxic chemical as a weapon took place. This toxic chemical contained reactive chlorine. The toxic chemical was likely molecular chlorine. (point 9.12).²⁶

By the session of 7-10 July 2020, it had decided to issue a condemnation of Syrian use of chemical weapons.²⁷

But from the start of the OPCW involvement in Syrian investigations it immediately faced repeated obstruction from the Russian delegates:

"It should be noted that the events around the OPCW cannot be understood without the context of the pressure it has faced, primarily from the Russian Federation. In November 2017, the Russian Federation vetoed the extension of the Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM), a joint UN-OPCW organisation which had a mandate to assign blame for chemical attacks. The JIM had carried out multiple investigations which found the Syrian government had used both chlorine and Sarin as chemical weapons, including the attack on Khan Sheikhoun, which killed scores of civilians. It also identified that ISIS had used sulfur mustard agent."²⁸

Moreover, by the time of the events of Douma, the Assad and Russian forces were orchestrating a complex camouflage. The Russian forces began with a blitz of 'news' to falsely portray the attack as a 'false flag' by the rebels.

"But before they'd finished, apparently concerned at the pace of events in the two weeks since the U.S. airstrikes, the Russian delegation to the OPCW threw a brazen unofficial press conference at the organization's headquarters in The Hague. In front of the assembled cameras, they produced witnesses from Douma, including an 11-year-old boy named Hassan Diab, one of those filmed at the hospital in the aftermath of the attack. Hassan and his father told the same story. Upon hearing screaming about a chemical attack they'd run to the makeshift hospital where they'd been doused with water. In retrospect, said Hassan's father, he didn't believe that there had been any chemical attack. The Russians also granted the floor to a doctor and another hospital worker who'd been on duty that day, both of whom claimed that the patients they'd seen had suffered injuries consistent with smoke and dust inhalation as a result of regular bombing. Separately, Alexander Yakovenko, the Russian ambassador to London, and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov told the international media that British intelligence services, working with the White Helmets, had been "involved in this staged event."²⁹

²⁶ S/1731/2019; 1 March 2019; 'Note by the Technical Secretariat: Report of the Fact-Finding Mission Regarding the Incident of Alleged Use of Toxic Chemicals as a Weapon in Douma, Syrian Arab Republic, on 7 April 2018'; at <https://www.opcw.org/documents-related-syria>

²⁷ Ninety-Fourth Session 7 – 10 July 2020 Executive Council; EC-94/DEC.2 9 July 2020; Decision Addressing The Possession And Use Of Chemical Weapons By The Syrian Arab Republic; at: <https://www.opcw.org/documents-related-syria>

²⁸ Bellingcat Investigative Team, 'The OPCW Douma Leaks Part 1: We Need To Talk About "Alex"'; January 15, 2020; <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2020/01/15/the-opcw-douma-leaks-part-1-we-need-to-talk-about-alex/>

²⁹ James Harkin, "What Happened in Douma? Searching for Facts in the Fog of Syria's Propaganda War"; February 9 2019; The Intercept; <https://theintercept.com/2019/02/09/douma-chemical-attack-evidence-syria/>

The Russian Federation tried to hack into the OPCW site:

"Several days after the attack in Douma, the Russian Federation deployed a GRU team to the Hague, which then attempted to hack into the WiFi network of the OPCW." ²⁸

Then came so-called leaks by a 'whistleblower codenamed 'Alex' – a former OPCW employee whose real name is Brendan Whelan. However, although he claimed to be a part of the investigating team, he had left the OPCW in August 2018, before the major analysis was performed. Whelan also claimed that some of the investigating team had been fired for somehow following a dissenting role - this was apparently Ian Henderson. However as a prior and dated memo from Sebastien Braha, the Chief of Cabinet to the Director General of the OPCW made clear, Henderson was never that. ²⁸ It seems he was on the other hand a "liaison officer between the team and Damascus". ³⁰

The evidence accumulated by the actual investigating team, was as per protocol then handed to other departments in the OPCW for scientific and technical analysis. By the rules of its mandate in the Syrian civil war, the OPCW was to then determine if chemical weapons had been used in contravention of international law. In March of 2019 the OPCW issued the full report finding that chlorine had been used.

Whelan came forward to dispute the findings. But both he, 'Wikileaks', and the UK newspaper 'The Mail on Sunday' dwell on the preliminary reports of the OPCW and only note in passing the final report. ²⁸ There were numerous mis-statements and factual errors. We do not here propose to go into each, but no doubt the Assad apologists will be able to examine the web site of 'Bellingcat'. The Bellingcat investigation convincingly rules out validity to Whelan's claims. The executive summary writes this:

1. Some reporting of this situation has ignored the context of multiple chemical attacks perpetrated by the Syrian Government.
2. Alex's complaints are not properly placed in context.
3. Alex's claims about chemistry are flawed and hugely overstated.
4. The stated conclusion of a meeting with toxicologists, which appears to support Alex's claims, is inconsistent with known effects of chlorine inhalation.
5. Alex has made misleading claims about this situation and the conclusions of subsequently leaked documents ²⁸

Elsewhere Bellingcat having reviewed all the unpublished OPCW documents as well, concludes:

"In short, the OPCW report did exactly as mandated and established that a chemical weapon was used. ³¹

³⁰ Michael Karadjis, "Assad's 2018 chemical massacre in Douma: Why conspiracy claims make no sense"; January 2, 2021; at in Syrian Revolution commentary and Analysis, <https://mkaradjis.com/2021/01/02/assads-2018-chemical-massacre-in-douma-why-conspiracy-claims-make-no-sense/>

³¹Bellingcat Investigative Team, 'Unpublished OPCW Douma Correspondence Casts Further Doubt on Claims of 'Doctored' Report October 26, 2020; at: <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2020/10/26/unpublished-opcw-douma-correspondence-raises-doubts-about-transparency-of-opcw-leaks-promoters/>

9. 'Useful Idiots' support Russian imperial interests and Assad fascism

I certainly agree with the view of all this 'dissenting noise' about the relevance and validity of the OPCW report of informed investigators such as Bellingcat and others. Karadjis of 'Syrian Revolution commentary and Analysis' wraps up all the extraordinary alliance of Putin-ites, right wingers and 'pseudo' Leftists in this manner:

"Other than the constellation of conspiracist media sources led by the Russian state, the "cover-up" story was taken up by, among others, right-wing British journalist Peter Hitchens in the rubbishy tabloid *Mail on Sunday*; by a group of allegedly "anti-imperialist" leftists in an outfit named 'Grayzone' (otherwise known as 'Red-Brown-Zone'); by far-right Trump-man in Fox News Tucker Carlson; by embedded journalist (for the Syrian military) Robert Fisk in *The Independent*; by long-term pro-Assad propagandists like Vanessa Beeley, a regular guest at Assad's throne who writes for the conspiracist site *21st Century Wire*." ³⁰

I would also add the very dubious role played in all of this by WikiLeaks, which deserves a longer discussion to itself. A little more bandwidth will be expended here however on a particularly pernicious group - of 'academics' based primarily in the UK - known as the '*Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media*' (WGSPM). This was established by former Professor Piers Robinson in 2017, and includes Professors Tim Hayward and Paul McKeigue of the University of Edinburgh, Professor David Miller of the University of Bristol and Dr. Tara McCormack of the University of Leicester. ³² Chris York hits the mark when he describes these 'academics' as 'useful idiots'. Another 'useful idiot' was Robert Fisk.

Above I emphasised that only Russian media and selected others were allowed into Douma immediately until the site could be 'sanitised'. However carefully selected - 'embedded' Western journalists were allowed in. Unfortunately for a man who had led important investigations into the Iraqi war, Robert Fisk was one recognised by the Russians as 'useful' to them. He was invited in. As dissected by Louis Proyect his subsequent reporting was 'useful'.

"Actually, it was Fisk's reporting that was shady and it only shows how out of touch Chomsky was to uphold it. *Richard Hall, a former editor at the Independent, where Fisk's reporting appears, took to Twitter to debunk Fisk's reporting: [following quotes from this]:*
 -Robert Fisk is allowed access to Douma before OCPW inspectors are allowed in. Doesn't speak to any witnesses of the attack, only a doctor who didn't see it, but says everyone "knows what happened."
 - Fisk seems perplexed why victims of the attack did not hang around in Douma when the government took over the area. And doesn't seriously deal with the fact that those who stayed behind might not be able to speak freely.
 -Fisk is among a handful of journalists given regular access by Syrian government. He and others are shepherded in on minded trips when it is useful for the government. Journalists who do make it in and write something that counters the government narrative are not allowed back.
 -Fisk notes in his piece that he was granted access to the site before chemical weapons inspectors. As were a number of other journalists who — let's be generous here — toe

³² Chris York, 'The 'Useful Idiots': How These British Academics Helped Russia Deny War Crimes At The UN'; 19 January 2020. HuffPost at: <https://tinyurl.com/yar7vyox>

the government line. That feels like an attempt to muddy the waters ahead of an independent investigation." ³³

One main thrust of many of these useful idiots is exposed by Chris York as being against the 'White Helmets'. Now it is certainly true that originally the 'White Helmets' were funded by the US and UK imperialist agencies, as Bellingcat makes clear:

"But the Russian allegations about intelligence links and propaganda maneuvers did not come from nowhere. The British-led organization that branded the White Helmets and provided its training and equipment, ARK, was run by a publicity-shy former British diplomat and funded by the U.S. State Department and the British Foreign Office. ARK's work in Syria started in 2012, when it paid Syrian activists to make propaganda films in favor of the revolt against Assad through a production company called Basma. Operating out of offices in Istanbul and Gaziantep in Turkey, it was soon bidding for civil defense contracts in Northern Syria for the kind of work that would end up being done by the White Helmets. ... ARK was also gathering intelligence on Islamist groups in the country, and those reports were being privately forwarded by a British Army liaison officer to U.S. Central Command, with an email recommending additional funding for the organization's filmmaking arm. "It would be reinforcing success for comparatively modest costs," noted the liaison officer." ³⁴

Nonetheless, it is now funded separately. More importantly it has been recording data as well as aiding injured civilians. Although it is likely seeing areas selectively allowed by the militias in whose territory they operate:

"The White Helmets are now supported by another organization, called Mayday Rescue, established by a senior ARK staffer, and no concrete evidence has emerged that ARK or its affiliates are using the White Helmets for intelligence-gathering. What's certain is that the cameras worn by these civil defence workers see what the controlling militias allow them to see, usually the bombing runs of the Syrian and Russian air force, generating skepticism among some observers about the reliability of their reporting." ³³

The very narrow-minded approach adopted by the pro-Putin-ites, is that this is purely a question of supporting USA imperialism or not. This is put by Bernardo Jurema for example, in trying to dispute that ex-President Trump was supported by the Russian state says this:

"Russiagate is a proxy through which one reveals their attitude towards U.S. institutions. If you BELIEVE in the fundamental goodness of US regime (or system or whatever you want to call the network of institutions of economic and political power that rule American society), you tend to be a Russiagater, as it explains away the election of Trump as an exogenous problem, as something of an outlier that is not rooted in structural aspects of American society. If you DISTRUST the US regime, then you're more likely to be a

³³ Louis Proyect, 'Noam Chomsky jumps the shark on Syria'; 'The Unrepentant Marxist' at: October 22, 2020 <https://louisproyect.org/2020/10/22/noam-chomsky-jumps-the-shark-on-syria/#comment-418305>

³⁴ Alex Assad; 'The OPCW Douma Leaks Part 4: The OPCW Investigation'; by a member of the Bellingcat Investigation Team'; February 11, 2020; at: <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2020/02/11/the-opcw-douma-leaks-part-4-the-opcw-investigation/>

Skeptic, because you understand that Trump is a symptom of essentially internal, structural problems of American society, and that Trump personifies a range of problems that are sufficiently explained by endogenous factors." ³⁵ [*capitals in original*].

But it is just not that simple, in such a Manichean divide. Actually both USA imperialism and Russian revanchist imperialism are anti-working class, anti-peasantry and reactionary.

Conclusion

The facts simply do not support those arguing that Assad forces were not responsible for Douma. Moreover they close their eyes to the essential fascist nature of Syria from Hafiz to Bashar. Marxist-Leninists need to develop a unified news agency to efficiently broadcast real news.

³⁵ Bernardo Jurema; "Russiagaters" versus "Skeptics"; Feb 24 2018. <https://bernajurema.medium.com/russiagaters-versus-skeptics-d4b8493a31f1>