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ANALYSIS OF THE REPORT BY THE INVESTIGATION AND IDENTIFICATION TEAM OF THE ORGANISATION FOR THE PROHIBITION OF CHEMICAL WEAPONS ON THE CHEMICAL INCIDENT IN SARAQIB, SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC ON 4 FEBRUARY 2018

The report of the Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) (S/1943/2021, dated 12 April 2021) outlines the mandate, legal and practical bases for its work, and the findings of the investigations conducted in the period from April 2020 through March 2021.

The sources of information that were consulted include: the corresponding official report of the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) in Syria (S/1626/2018, dated 15 May 2018), materials obtained through the IIT's interviews with alleged witnesses of said chemical incident in question, statements from experts in this field, and the results of analyses of samples and cylinder remnants from the site of this chemical incident.

An analysis of the IIT Report established the following:

1. Paragraph 4 of the report's executive summary states that the IIT adhered to applicable OPCW procedures to ensure the chain of custody. However, the IIT never went to the site of the incident in Saraqib; all material evidence was gathered and sent by representatives of the "White Helmets", a non-governmental organisation (NGO). Samples were taken by the NGO on 5 February 2018 and transferred to OPCW representatives on 19 February 2018 (i.e., two weeks after the incident). The FFM and IIT reports contain no information on the NGO ensuring chain of custody when taking, transporting, and storing the samples.

   The findings set out in the IIT's report (paragraphs 4, 6.35, 8.1 – 8.12, and 10.1) are non-specific and unsubstantiated and include words such as "there are reasonable grounds to believe", "on the basis of the degree of certainty of "reasonable grounds"", "allegedly used" etc..

   The IIT's approaches to investigating chemical incidents are similar to those applied by the FFM and contain from the same fundamental shortcomings that the Russian Federation pointed out back in 2018 and repeatedly addressed within the OPCW, namely: the remote nature of the investigation, disregard for the chain of custody requirements when collecting material evidence, and the use of online mass media and

NGO representatives from countries that are hostile to the Syrian authorities as main sources of information.

2. The report is overflowing with open-source information that is irrelevant to the subject of the investigation (paragraph 6.7, "Meteorological conditions"). Yet at the same time, about the use of aircraft by the Syrian Army during the period under consideration is sparce, with only general data included (paragraph 6.6).

In paragraph 5.18 of the report, it is mentioned that there were no active military operations near Saraqib on 4 February or in the days following. Therefore, the conclusion is made that the most probable motive for the airstrike with the use of chlorine was revenge for striking down a Russian SU-25 aircraft by rebels in unlawful armed groups the day before. This phrasing appears to be an attempt to artificially link the incident in question with Russia (paragraphs 5.13 and 6.5), which is unacceptable and requires immediate explanation from the OPCW leadership.

3. There are contradictions in the witness accounts of the incident. The report does not provide confirmation that these individuals were indeed in Saraqib.

Of the seven victims who were interviewed by the FFM and the IIT and allegedly present at the site during the alleged incident, at least three were members of the "White Helmets" (paragraph 6.45), which is hostile to the Syrian Government.

Paragraphs 6.9 and 6.14 of the report state that witnesses of the incident intentionally tried to approach the site of the event, and they began to feel unwell as a result. Chlorine gas has a sharp and unpleasant smell, causes a burning sensation and irritation in the eyes, as well as lacrimation; the natural response would be to leave the contaminated area, rather than a desire to enter a zone with a high concentration of gas, as indicated in the report.

Paragraph 6.9 of the report says that several witnesses "heard a helicopter sound between 21:15 and 21:22 and one or two items falling and hitting the ground". The witnesses recalled in particular that they did not hear explosions. It is clear from paragraph 6.13 and Image 4 of the report that one more crater was found at the site that took shape from a conventional munition explosion within the same timeframe, which contradicts witness accounts.

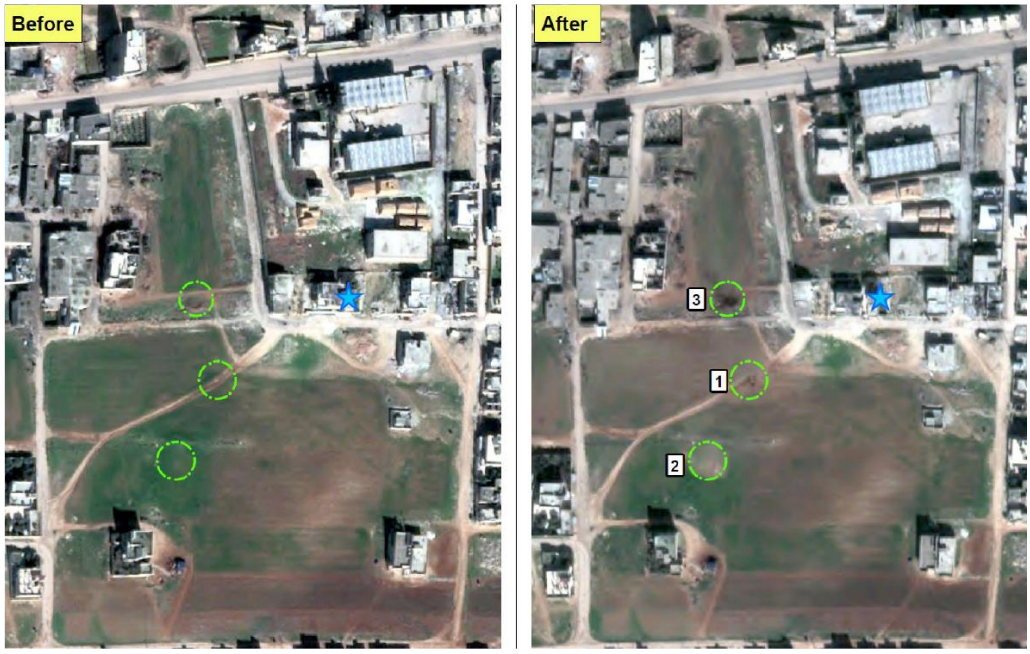

Image 4 of the Report: a satellite image of Saraqib before the alleged incident (left) and the following day (right). Numbers mark the craters caused by Cylinder 1 (Crater 1), Cylinder 2 (Crater 2), and the blast of an explosive munition (Crater 3)

Paragraph 6.9 of the Report indicates that the witnesses interviewed by the IIT recalled seeing the lights of a helicopter approaching the site of the incident. However, Syrian Air Force helicopters do not fly over settlements at altitudes below 2,000 meters for safety reasons. They are expressly prohibited from violating the blackout requirements when conducting night-time combat missions over enemy-controlled territory in order to avoid being fired at.

Therefore, the credibility of the accounts from the witnesses interviewed by the IIT is questionable.

4. In paragraph 6.34 of its report, the IIT notes that “certain sarin-related compounds were found in the samples analysed on behalf of the FFM by two designated laboratories” (Table 1).

No.	Description	Results laboratory 2	Results laboratory 3
1	Wipe from cylinder 1	Tris(chloropropyl)phosphate	Isopropyl methylphosphonate
2	Wipe from cylinder 1	Chloroacetic acid Dichloroacetic acid	
3	Soil near cylinder 1	Diisopropyl methylphosphonate Isopropyl methylphosphonate Dichloroacetic acid	Diisopropyl methylphosphonate Isopropyl methylphosphonate Methylphosphonic acid
4	Soil near cylinder 1	Chloroacetic acid Diisopropyl methylphosphonate Tetrachlorobenzene Bis(dichloropropyl) ether	Diisopropyl methylphosphonate Methylphosphonic acid
5	Soil near cylinder 1	Diisopropyl methylphosphonate Chloromethylphenol Dichloromethoxybenzene	Diisopropyl methylphosphonate
6	Soil near cylinder 1	Bis(dichloropropyl)ether Diisopropyl methylphosphonate	Diisopropyl methylphosphonate Isopropyl methylphosphonate Methylphosphonic acid
7	Wipe from cylinder 2	Pyrophosphoric acid Tris(chloropropyl)phosphate	Isopropyl methylphosphonate
8	Wipe from cylinder 2	Dichloroacetic acid	Diisopropyl methylphosphonate Isopropyl methylphosphonate Trinitrotoluene
9	Soil from crater of cylinder 2	Chloral hydrate 2,4-Dichlorophenol Trichloroacetic acid Diisopropyl methylphosphonate Trinitrotoluene	Diisopropyl methylphosphonate Isopropyl methylphosphonate Trinitrotoluene
10	Soil from crater of cylinder 2	2,2,2-Trichloroethanol Trichloroacetic acid Chloroacetic acid 2,4-Dinitrotoluene 4-Amino-2,6-dinitrotoluene 2-Amino-4,6-dinitrotoluene Trinitrotoluene	Diisopropyl methylphosphonate Isopropyl methylphosphonate Trinitrotoluene
11	Soil from crater of cylinder 2	Chloral hydrate Chloroacetic acid Trichloroacetic acid Trinitrotoluene	Diisopropyl methylphosphonate Isopropyl methylphosphonate Trinitrotoluene
12	Piece	Chloroacetic acid Trinitrotoluene	Isopropyl methylphosphonate Trinitrotoluene
13	Soil near cylinder 2	2,2,2-Trichloroethanol Trinitrotoluene Diisopropyl methylphosphonate	Diisopropyl methylphosphonate Isopropyl methylphosphonate
14	Grass at 10 m from cylinder 2	2,4,6-Trichlorophenol Tetrachloroethane Dichloromethoxybenzene Dichloroacetic acid Trichloroacetic acid	Isopropyl methylphosphonate

TABLE 1: Results of a chemical analysis of samples presented in the FFM Report on the incident in Saraquib (S/1626/2018)

In paragraphs 6.36 and 6.37 of its report, the IIT attempts to explain sarin-related markers identified in the samples by claiming that sarin could have been used together with chlorine, or that it was related to a previous sarin incident in the same area. Unable to find a strong argument to support the hypothesis (paragraph 6.39), the IIT refrained from pursuing this aspect of the incident further, which shows that the IIT ignores any inconvenient facts contradicting a pre-orchestrated conclusion on the use of chlorine by Syrian Government forces.

The IIT explains the presence of "chlorinated organic compounds" in the samples (paragraphs 6.30 and 6.31) by the presence of high levels of chlorine or other reactive chlorine compounds. However, the formation of such compounds via exposure to chlorine gas in soil or the metal cylinder is ruled out.

Since the FFM and the IIT do not have blank control samples of soil from the site of the incident, the conclusion (paragraph 6.31) about high chloride ion content in samples from the site of the incident is unsubstantiated.

The only explanation for the presence of the substances under consideration in the samples is that they were falsified by the "White Helmets", similar to the chemical incident in Khan Shaykhun on 4 April 2017.

5. According to the pictures presented in images 6 and 7 of the report, as well as paragraphs 6.9, 6.12, and 6.19, the cylinder in Crater 2 fell into the grass at an angle of about 45 degrees.

Image 7 of the Report: Photo of Cylinder 2 taken
by the "White Helmets" NGO at the site of the alleged incident

An analysis of the data presented shows that the cylinder was more likely destroyed by the detonation of a small explosive charge, rather than as the result of being dropped from a high altitude.

Images 6 and 7 of the report also show heavy corrosion on the cylinder, although the photo was taken by the NGO the morning after the incident. Such substantial corrosion could not have developed—even as a result of chlorine exposure—in less than twelve hours after the cylinder's alleged use for the delivery and release of chlorine gas and its transfer to the FFM.

6. The use of chlorine as a chemical weapon is effective if used in mass quantities and in favourable weather conditions. During World War I, German troops carried out a major gas attack on 22 April 1915 by releasing approximately 180 tonnes of chlorine, causing over 3,000 French soldiers to die from suffocation, and inflicting various degrees of burns upon more than 7,000.

   With regard to the incident in Saraqib, the IIT recorded the use of one cylinder containing roughly 120 litres of chlorine (paragraph 8.1), which caused 12 people to sustain minor injuries; they were released from the hospital within two hours after being admitted.

   Thus, it would not have made any sense for the Syrian authorities to use chlorine within the context of the incident under examination.

7. In paragraphs 6.27, 6.31, 6.36 and 8.3 of its report, the IIT states that it engaged a large number of well-known experts and research institutes to examine the materials it received, but did not disclose their names, thus making it impossible to draw any conclusions regarding the professional level of the analysis or its credibility.

We request that this document be circulated as an official document of the Ninety-Seventh Session of the Council and published on the Organisation's website and extranet.

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