



## Newsweek Reporter Quits after Editors Block Coverage of OPCW Syria Scandal

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**Aaron Maté (AM):** Welcome to Pushback. I'm Aaron Maté. New leaks continue to expose a cover-up by the OPCW, the world's top chemical weapons watchdog, over a critical event in Syria. Documents, emails and testimony from OPCW officials have raised major doubts about the allegation that the Syrian government committed a chemical weapons attack in the city of Douma in April 2018. The leaked OPCW information has been released in pieces by WikiLeaks. The latest documents contain a number of significant revelations, including that about 20 OPCW officials voiced concerns to their superiors that their scientific findings and on-the-ground evidence was suppressed and excluded. This is, without a doubt, a major global scandal. The OPCW, under reported US pressure, suppressing vital evidence about allegations of chemical weapons in Syria. But that very fact exposes another global scandal; with the exception of small outlets like the Gray Zone, the mass media have widely ignored or whitewashed this story. And this widespread censorship of the OPCW scandal has just led one journalist to resign. Up until recently, Tareq Haddad was a reporter at Newsweek. But in early December, Tareq announced that he had quit his position after Newsweek refused to publish his story about the OPCW cover-up.

In a lengthy piece explaining his decision, Tareq writes, "On one hand, I could continue to be employed by the company, stay in their chic London offices, and earn a steady salary. Only if I adhered to what could or could not be reported and suppressed vital facts. Alternatively, I could leave the company and tell the truth."

Well, he joins me now. Tareq Haddad, welcome to Push Back. Talk to us about what prompted your decision to resign and the events that led up to it.

**Tareq Haddad (TH):** Sure and thank you for having me on. I mean, yeah, basically, like I detailed in my piece, I wasn't going into this situation with any intentions of making a big controversy, just doing my job as a news reporter. The situation in Syria starts to pick up again and then alleged phosphorous used by Turkey. So, you know, I'm starting to look at things going on with the OPCW, as they're the body that is supposed to be investigating attacks such as those. And so it's just kind of snowballed out of there. I kept finding more and more information that, to me, this was an undeniably big news story. And, you know, everything in my gut was, there's something that needs to be printed about this. I raised it with my editors and then, got knocked back more and more. And then with time, it became clear that it wasn't because my evidence wasn't good enough. It was purely on this story is not something that's in our interests to publish to our readers. So that was essentially it, really.

**AM:** You write in your piece, "The US government, in an ugly alliance with those who profit the most from war, has its tentacles in every part of the media – imposters with ties to the US State Department sit in newsrooms all over the world. Editors, with no apparent connections to the members club, have done nothing to resist. Together, they filter out what can or cannot be reported,

inconvenient stories are completely blocked. As a result, journalism is quickly dying. America is regressing because it lacks the truth.”

So talk to us about that Tareq and how you experienced that dynamic in the newsroom, especially when it comes to reliance on sources with ties to war profiteers and Western governments themselves.

**TH:** Sure. Well, I guess there'll be two different parts to that question, but I guess, so one aspect is the editors that have links to these organizations, such as the Council on Foreign Relations. And so, for example, in my time working as a journalist, I was never aware of any kind of connection between journalism and the Council on Foreign Relations. And so that kind of was my first ever real experience of it. And I say this in the piece because some people might think that I'm being naive. And of course, they have a massive influence on journalism and it's been going for years. And that might be the case. But, it was the first time I experienced it, and it was not something that I thought was appropriate for a newsroom. You know, I've been in multiple newsrooms and, someone who's been very big on the history of journalism and the ethics of journalism, and to me, that just seemed like a complete flagrant violation of everything that journalism stands for; to have people that attend programs funded by the State Department. And, you know, they're making these connections with people in the State Department. And then, when I was presented with the kind of evidence I experienced, it kind of confirmed my feelings about that.

So the second part would be about the reliance on organizations like bellingscat, which other journalists have taken the time to show that they're not who they purport to be. I think there's still a lot of work to be done around that, because I think my understanding from the public is that a lot of people still seem to trust them. And just a kind of, you know, one sweep from them will be enough for an average reader that's not taken the time to delve into these issues. It's usually enough for them to be okay, this is an issue I can ignore now. So I think that's another vital aspect, because it's a very new development of propaganda that's not really been seen before Syria.

**AM:** Well, Tareq, let me just explain for people who aren't familiar with bellingscat, because it's very important. Bellingscat is an organization of so-called citizen journalists using open source data that has become very prominent in recent years. And now they're relied on by the media in several major stories, especially when it comes to stories that accuse Russia or Syria of nefarious acts like a chemical weapons attack. And they've come to be used as a source and even though their founder, for example, Eliot Higgins. I'll read you a quote; this is from The New York Times where, you know, they acknowledge that they don't even have a scientific background. I'll read this to you.

**TH:** Or journalistic background.

**AM:** Right! But I'll read you a quote from the New York Times, for example, talking about the founder of bellingscat. Eliot Higgins. It says, "Mr. Higgins attributed his skill not to any special knowledge of international conflicts or digital data, but to the hours he had spent playing video games, which he said gave him the idea that any mystery can be cracked." That's an actual quote from The New York Times and somehow that's deemed to be a boost to them and not shining a light on just how weak their credentials are. The very fact that they're playing video games and citing that as how they've honed their craft. And what is also concealed in how the mainstream media cites bellingscat is that bellingscat received funding from the National Endowment for Democracy, which is a US government body, and has been used to advance regime change goals around the world. Eliot Higgins himself is a fellow at the Atlantic Council, which is funded by all sorts of governments, including the US, Britain and members of NATO and the Gulf States. And yet they're used and cited often as experts. And what's interesting with this OPCW scandal is there has been a lot of concern that, in fact, the OPCW, in ignoring its own scientists and sidelining them, that they relied on bellingscat. And because a lot of the findings that were in some final OPCW reports have mirrored bellingscat, and there's a reference in the suppressed engineering report, the one that the public was not meant to see.

We could talk more about that, but this engineering expert at the OPCW, the one which concludes that actually he thinks that most likely the gas cylinders found at the scene in Douma were manually placed and not dropped from the air, but that expert, his report refers to, "supposed experts" who the OPCW consulted. And there's speculation that those supposed experts that this actual expert is referring to is bellingcat.

**TH:** Right. And I guess that would mirror a similar trend that we saw with MH 17, which I can't remember the US official that said so, but if you look on my Twitter, there's an article recently kind of describing the history of bellingcat, but US officials directly kind of almost thanked bellingcat for their investigative work in determining their results. So I think it's part of this very nefarious strategy of saying, it's just, you know, you're praising bellingcat and then you're accepting their results unquestioningly. And then people who differ from that narrative, get silenced. And that's why we have this situation that we have at the moment where, genuine scientists with no real political interest -- I've talked to some people in this industry when I was researching previous articles. You know, most of them aren't really political, they're engineers or so on and they understand the gravitas of their job, and they understand that their job isn't to be political, it's to just do the best job they can as scientists and then let the dust fall where it does afterwards. So I think that's why it's such an important story as well, because it's so dangerous to politicize a body like this. You know, these bodies were put in place for very, very important reasons to avoid those devastating attacks against human beings that shouldn't be kind of going on in this in this day and age. And if we start to politicize them and we undermine their authority, then it's very dangerous, I think, and that should go without saying.

**AM:** Since you referred to it let me just explain what MH17 is for anybody who doesn't know, that is the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 that occurred in the summer of 2014. And bellingcat was among the groups that accused or pointed the finger at Russian-backed separatists in Ukraine as having carried out that attack. But of course, that conclusion of bellingcat's, like many others, has come under question. Tareq, tell us more about your struggles internally at Newsweek and, you know, your efforts to try to resolve whatever objections you faced in trying to cover this story about the OPCW scandal in Syria.

**TH:** Sure. So it started off no different than any other news story that I would pitch. We have a messaging system called Slack, which I think a lot of people are familiar with, but first I raised it with one of my editors, Alfred Joyner. And, you know, he didn't seem to be particularly opposed to the story, but he doesn't have particular expertise in foreign affairs or anything like that. So it was automatically, I was told, to write a note to him in and Dimi Reider, who is our Foreign Affairs editor at Newsweek. You know, I sent a long, longish note with links, various documents, to support what was going on. Interestingly, almost kind of five minutes after I sent the note, I wasn't expecting a response immediately, I was just walking to get a cup of coffee, and immediately, I could start to see attempts to cast doubt over the story, but it was the kind of stuff -- it's not addressing the actual facts, it's kind of: oh, you know, the publication itself where these things come from, that's a little bit suspect -- even though it was the Mail on Sunday. I understand for political reasons, some people might disapprove of the politics of the Mail on Sunday, they tend to be more right wing in the United Kingdom. But, you know, journalists trained in the United Kingdom will know that the Mail on Sunday still has very good journalists. They exposed the 2005 MPs' expenses scandal, for example, so it's not like they're incapable of doing real journalism. And then people have raised doubts about Peter Hitchens, who's the person that wrote the Mail on Sunday piece, because he's spent the last few years as an opinion columnist. But again, I went to great lengths to try and explain, listen, I understand his recent history and why he might be controversial to some figures, but he has a very, very long reporting career -- (he) was (in the) Washington bureau, in (the) Moscow bureau for about 20 years, and, you know, he takes the time in his reporting to show how everything's been done and verified and there've been blog posts to the side, documenting how he's met with one of the OPCW scientists in a

safe house in Europe.

So it was my immediate feeling that the facts of what I was presenting weren't being discussed. It was attacking the sources or who it's coming from. And then when I kept pushing, pushing, pushing, essentially, it turned into a character attack of me. And that was the moment I became very upset and essentially decided to resign because, without being overconfident in my abilities or egotistical or anything of that nature, but throughout my reporting career, I've never really had any issues of editors not getting on with me or saying that my sources are not very good or anything like that. And even though I understand the piece I've written may be very difficult and long for people to get through, I just really wanted to explain that, I have this journalism background, I've never had any issues before, it was only when I was starting to raise questions about things that the US government essentially wouldn't want answered that I start having these character attacks. And it did feel pretty much like bullying into, "... just be quiet. Do the kind of reporting we want you to do it and don't question us if we say that you can't run the story."

And this is funny because at the time, I'm not sure if you're familiar, we had the firing of a reporter who ran this story that turned out to be wrong about Donald Trump. A week before she quit because she said, "what's Donald Trump doing on Thanksgiving? He's going to be tweeting, golfing and more." Turns out he makes a visit to Afghanistan. And, you know, this was actually happening at the same time as the OPCW thing. At the time, we were having lots of team meetings and the editors are saying, "You know, I understand if you guys are concerned, you know, please come and talk to us, we're always here to have questions. You know, if you have questions on a story, feel free to question our judgment" Those kinds of messages. And at the same time, I was going to the editors, I was raising some of my concerns. And essentially they refused to speak to me. I made three attempts to speak to Laura Davis, the London editor, and I was getting increasingly more stressed because I thought it was a very important story, and I was getting this criticism at the time from the editors, and I really just wanted to talk to her in person to share my concerns and discuss why I thought it was an important story. And then the next thing I know, I received an email that's fairly long, just listing out criticisms. So that was when I knew this wasn't on rational debate or something wrong with the facts or the facts not matching up. You know, there was an ulterior motive here.

**AM:** And so talk to us then, about your decision to resign, and did you think through what the consequences were of quitting this position, and how this would impact your ability to find another position, in a media industry where obviously jobs are already very scarce and hard to find?

**TH:** I mean, to be honest, if I don't find another position in journalism because of this, I'm perfectly happy to accept that consequence. I mean, it's not desirable, but there is no way I could have continued in that job, knowing that I couldn't report something like this. I remember, because I was thinking about resigning for about a week. In that time that I was collecting evidence and I was talking, hoping to talk to Laura, but when I received that email, that kind of was essentially a character attack, the decision became very easy because it clarified everything for me. And to be honest, I don't regret it at all. I still don't know whether chips are going to fall essentially from here. But, you know, so far the feedback from everyone has been fantastic. The support from the Internet has been really great. I'm very thankful to people have said kind things to me. And thankfully, there's been very, very little negative. You know, there's been a few of the usual people that you would expect, Eliot Higgins, and what's his name, Edward, Dave Lucas, I think? But, you know, that's nothing to me, I don't really take what they say seriously. And I don't think other people on the Internet should anymore, we kind of know who they are. And I think people that get into these long, twisted tirades with them, it's kind of going to be a waste of your time, you know what their job is to do. They're not gonna change their minds on the Internet. That's not what they're there for, they have a specific purpose, I think.

**AM:** What you would be the best outcome of your ordeal here? Of what you went through, your choosing to resign, and you choosing to come forward and tell your story.

**TH:** So I think a couple of things: one thing I tried to do is keep in mind other journalists, when I was writing this, even though I'm not aware of any other journalists in a similar position, I am definitely sure that I can't be the only one. I mean, the amount of evidence that there is at the moment surrounding these OPCW leaks is growing by the day. It's becoming harder and harder for any serious journalist to kind of look at the evidence and, you know, continue with the same thing. So I think one ideal scenario would be that other journalists start to push the issue with their respective organizations. And you know, hopefully we do start seeing some coverage, even though I'm very critical of Newsweek in the piece that I've written, I think what happened to me could have happened to any publication in the West, except for a very few. So I think, yeah, that's one thing. Hopefully other journalists will start to speak up. More long term, I don't know if this is very naive, but I'd love to see the influence of the CFR, the Council on Foreign Relations. You know, that journalists say, no, actually, you have a conflict of interest, you don't have a place in a newsroom. There is no space for you, you can't do your job adequately to hold the government to account. That's one of the journalists' main priorities. If you have this conflict of interest, sorry, it makes you not applicable to be a journalist. And then I guess finally, just as greater public awareness about how propaganda works, and it's not just bellingcat, I think. I think there's a lot of evidence to say that White Helmets as well as is propaganda. And that might have been a controversial thing to say a few years ago. But I think now it's, you know, the evidence is that it's beyond doubt, that it is government propaganda. And I think people just slowly need to get more awareness about that out.

**AM:** Well Tareq, I for one, am one of the many who really appreciate what you've done here. It takes a lot to, not just speak out about Syria, which I think is actually brave in itself, given all the smear attacks that one faces, but in your case, you risked your job over it, and you lost your job over it, and you resigned in a very principled move. And so I, for one, hope that your integrity and your courage will resonate and inspire other media outlets and journalists to display that same integrity and courage that you've shown here. And I hope that it will, because this is often how whistleblowing works and how truth telling works, it takes one brave person to set a chain in motion. And I really hope that that is what happens here.

**TH:** Yeah, me too. Yeah. That's all I can hope for, really. I had parents and stuff on the phone, and various people that I've worked with through the years, some of which, have experience of these things, and a lot of people actually told me not to do this. Some people worried for my safety. Obviously, my parents were a little bit concerned, given that it's not out of the ordinary for nefarious things to happen in these situations. But, you know, I think important you know, it was the right thing to do. I don't have any regrets. And hopefully more and more people can start to talk about it. You know, I think there are a lot of good journalists out there. The evidence is there. And I'm sure there's definitely other people that are feeling frustrated. So hopefully I've given them the template of how they can approach editors and how they can raise stories and how they can push back if their stories are declined. Hopefully that's a trend.

**TH:** I hope so, too. Tareq Haddad is a journalist up until recently, a reporter at Newsweek, and his website is <https://tareqhaddad.com/>, and we'll link to his piece where he breaks down his reporting

process about this Syria OPCW scandal and what led him to resign from Newsweek. Tareq, thanks very much.

**AM:** Thank you very much for having me.

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