



Aaron Mate spars with British diplomat over Syria cover-up

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Aaron Maté (AM): Welcome to Pushback, I'm Aaron Maté. As I've been covering, I recently spoke at a meeting of UN Security Council members about the OPCW's cover up scandal in Syria; the censorship of findings in its probe of an alleged chemical attack in Douma that undermined allegations that the Syrian government was guilty. And this has been a cover up going on for many years now, which I've covered extensively at The Grayzone. And in this segment, I want to talk about an aspect of this meeting that occurred between me and the British representative. The UK has been very central to the OPCW cover up. The UK joined the US and France in bombing Syria based on the allegations. And then when OPCW leaks emerged showing that the OPCW had suppressed findings that undermined the case that Syria was guilty of a chemical attack in Douma and these findings also pointed to this incident being staged by insurgents backed by the US and UK. The UK was among the states that have tried very hard to suppress any accountability for this cover up. So that was on display at the UN when I came to speak. Before I get to the UK representative's remarks, here is just a brief clip of what I said at the UN.

AM at the UN: This is now the third time that I've had the opportunity to address members of the Security Council about the controversy surrounding the OPCW's investigation of the alleged chemical attack in Douma. And if I can share one opinion, while I really appreciate this opportunity, I have to say that I find it unfortunate that nearly five years after that alleged incident in Douma, this controversy around the OPCW investigation is still being debated in public rather than being addressed by the OPCW. Because fundamentally, this is a controversy that is internal to the OPCW. And at the heart of it are at least two veteran inspectors from the OPCW with nearly 30 years of combined experience who worked on the Douma investigation, who deployed to Syria for the Douma investigation. And what they say is very simple. They have accused senior officials at the OPCW of suppressing findings from

their probe and putting out unsupported conclusions that basically implicate the Syrian government in a chemical attack. And they are not demanding that their own opinions be affirmed as the ultimate truth. They just want the right to be heard. And rather than hearing these inspectors, allowing them to come in and voice their concerns, allowing the OPCW to weigh the findings that were suppressed, the OPCW has refused to meet with them and has even denigrated them in public.

AM: So that is from my opening remarks at the United Nations. For my full comments you can go to [The Grayzone.com](http://TheGrayzone.com) and I'll link to my comments also in the notes for this episode. Well, turning now to the British government's response. So after I spoke, many countries had the chance to share their comments on the OPCW and Syria. And one of them was the representative from the UK. His name is Thomas Phipps, he's a British diplomat. I've sparred with him many times on Twitter. And here we were face to face, and he did not like what I had to say. But first, this is what he said overall about the meeting, which was organised by Russia and the issue of Syrian chemical weapons in general.

Thomas Phipps (TP): Russia's systematic efforts to undermine the integrity of the OPCW over the last decade are almost as egregious as Russia's repeated use of chemical weapons. No one should be fooled by today's charade. Your choice of briefers, your denial of the Syrian regime's repeated chemical weapons use, your attacks on the OPCW work, your recent refusal to engage in council meetings on Syria chemical weapons all lay bare your cynicism in organising an event that purports to address the OPCW's diminishing authority. The vast majority of the international community understands that it is you that has worked to undermine the OPCW. Colleagues, the Chemical Weapons Convention and the work of the OPCW is too important for us to allow the Russian Federation to succeed. In 1988, eight years after diplomatic negotiations on the convention began, Saddam Hussein's Iraqi army conducted a chemical weapons attack on the village of Halabja, which killed between 3000 to 5000 people. The horror and the deaths of these thousands of civilians brought increased urgency to efforts to secure a commitment by states to never, under any circumstances develop, produce, acquire, stockpile, transfer or use chemical weapons. 20 years after the convention was opened for signature in Paris, the Assad regime released the nerve agent sarin in the Ghouta district of Damascus, killing more than 1400 people, many of them children. Despite the adoption by consensus, Resolution 21 18 in 2013, the Syrian regime did not destroy all of its chemical weapons stocks. And the council continues to discuss to this day the gaps and inconsistencies in Syria's initial declaration. We know that the Assad regime went on to use chemical weapons on numerous occasions, including in Douma in 2018.

Aaron Maté (AM): So that is British diplomat Thomas Phipps. He mentioned several things. He mentioned the Halabja massacre in Iraq, which you'll hear my response to later on in this broadcast. One thing I did not respond to at the UN, so I wanted to respond to now, which is what he said about Ghouta in 2013, this claim he made that Syria was guilty of a chemical attack in Ghouta in 2013. Well, if you've seen my reporting on this at [The Grayzone](http://TheGrayzone.com), you'll

know this allegation is very much contested. It's contested by leaks from inside the US, where Obama administration officials back when Obama was considering bombing Syria over the Ghouta allegation and officials from the Obama administration leaked claims that the intelligence that was supposedly produced to assert that Syria was guilty was not very solid. And in fact, the term they used was that this was not a "slam dunk". And that was a deliberate reference to the claims of George Tenet back when he was the director of the CIA, when he came to George W Bush and said, The intelligence about Iraq WMD [weapons of mass destruction] is a slam dunk. In Syria, Obama administration officials leaked the fact that it was not a slam dunk. That was a very carefully chosen term. And among the officials to use that term, it was none other than James Clapper, who was the director of national intelligence under Obama. He came to Obama and said to him that the intelligence is not a slam dunk. And that was an obvious way of saying, the intelligence about Assad's supposed guilt was just not there. And that's why as Seymour Hersh later reported, Obama did not bomb Syria because he was told by his top officials that the case against Syria was not very strong, among other reasons, which Hersh detailed in his report. So that is my response to Thomas Phipps when it comes to the Ghouta allegation. Let's get to the issue at hand, which is the Douma allegation of April 2018. And in his comments, the British diplomat Thomas Phipps took issue with what I said.

TP: Mr. Maté made various claims today in this meeting, one of which he focussed on at length was the issue of foaming at the mouth and whether or not it can be caused by chlorine. He said quite clearly that the IIT does not address this issue in its report, that is simply not true. It's not true. It does so directly on page 43 of the reports under Section 6.106. And I encourage you to also, I mean, look online, look at the very clear attempts, unsuccessful attempts, that have been made to counter the claims that Mr. Maté continues to make.

Aaron Maté (AM): So that was UK diplomat Thomas Phipps, pointing to apparently some online information that he says rebuts my reporting when it comes to Douma and also issuing a specific challenge to me, to my claims about the recent OPCW IIT report not addressing the issue of whether or not the foaming seen in the victims in Douma is consistent with chlorine gas. So I responded to Thomas Phipps when I got the chance to speak after him.

AM at the UN: I want to note that in the responses from states, including the US and UK, that no one disputed the central claim of my remarks today, which was that the findings of the Douma probe were suppressed, censored. Now, I'm not here to pass any moral judgements, but I just want to note the fact that we have Member States who do not contest the documented fact that the Douma findings were suppressed, but yet they oppose any action to address this suppression. And on that note, I'll also point out that I asked the question of these delegations, the US, UK and France - I mistakenly asked Germany, but they're not here - whether or not they will support the call of distinguished diplomats like the first director general of the OPCW, José Bustani, and former senior UN official Hans von Sponeck, to simply have the OPCW meet with all of the original members of the Douma team and let

them not just the two dissenting inspectors, but all the original members of the Douma team, let them discuss their concerns and let them put forth the evidence that was suppressed. I never got an answer back to that question, which I've now asked several times.

What I did get from the representative of the UK was a substantive challenge on one issue, which I appreciate him raising. Unfortunately, he has left the room, so he is not here anymore to hear my response, which is unfortunate because I think he could benefit from hearing my answer. Now, he pointed out that the IIT report and he said it's on page 43, paragraph 6.106. He argued that the IIT does address the issue of whether foaming is consistent with chlorine gas; profuse rapid foaming as observed and reported in Douma is consistent with chlorine gas. And he says that the IIT did address that issue. I point out two things in response. First of all, my argument was that the IIT's toxicologist does not issue a judgement on whether or not the symptoms, including profuse foaming seen in Douma, are consistent with chlorine gas. The IIT's toxicologist does not. Now there is a reference which the representative from UK pointed to of the IIT, making a claim about chlorine gas and foaming. Not specific to Douma, not assessing whether those specific symptoms in DOuma are consistent, but the IIT does make one reference which I will read. This was the paragraph he referred me to, it says this: The IIT also notes that as chlorine gas reacts with the cells and moisture in the gastrointestinal tract to produce acids, that reaction also leads to the oral and nasal secretion of a foam like substance, which may or may not have a pink tint believed to be blood. Let's assume, although they don't state it, let's assume that they are trying to say here that this passage applies to what happened in Douma. Well, turning to the footnote for this claim, which is in the IIT report, it's a study called Chlorine Gas Inhalation, human clinical evidence of toxicity and experience in animal models. Now, I have that study. I've produced it, and it's unfortunate, that the British representative is not here for me to tell him that the source that is adduced by the IIT for that claim about a foam like substance contains no reference to a foam like substance whatsoever. There's no mention of the word foam. There's no mention of the word secretion. No mention of frothing. There is nothing in the source provided by the IIT to support its claim that chlorine gas can produce a foam like substance. And again, the issue here is not just whether chlorine gas can produce foaming, it's whether it can produce it rapidly, because the circumstances of the Douma incident, according to the official IIT narrative, is that the Douma victims died within minutes because they were overcome by a toxic chlorine gas. So accordingly, the foaming would have to have occurred within minutes as well. And that's also what some alleged witnesses have reported.

So the IIT's own source does not support its claim because, again, in the study that is provided here by the IIT in that footnote, there is no mention of foaming whatsoever. This underscores my point that no one has challenged the findings of the original German toxicologists, who found that the reported and observed symptoms of profuse rapid foaming in the Douma victims is consistent with chlorine gas. It underscores another point that I made, which is that this is not the domain of journalists and representatives of governments that bomb Syria. This should be dealt with by scientists. And in this case, we have the actual

scientists who produced the original report whose findings were censored. Those censored findings include the findings of the German toxicologists, who said there was no consistency between the symptoms in Douma and the use of chlorine gas.

AM: Just to be clear, our response to the British diplomat: no one is saying that chlorine gas cannot cause foaming. The question is, do the circumstances of how the foaming allegedly develop in Douma are those consistent with chlorine gas? And according to every expert who's weighed in on this, they have not. And the OPCW's new IIT report does not contradict them. As I just talked about in a new article I publish at The Grayzone.com. The IIT basically avoids this question entirely and the example he tried to give me where he's pointing out that a part of the IIT report says that chlorine gas can cause foaming, it doesn't address the core question of whether or not chlorine gas can cause rapid death and rapid foaming. And the answer given by the German toxicologists was unequivocally, no. And that's presumably why they were censored. And that's presumably why nobody, including the IIT's new toxicologist, has contradicted them. And that was the point of my remarks there. Now, earlier, the UK Representative Phipps also invoked the Halabja massacre committed by Saddam Hussein in Iraq. And I had something to say about that, too. So here was my response to him on that.

AM at the UN: The representative of the UK also referenced the Halabja massacre in Iraq, where Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons against Kurds in a horrific attack. What he did not mention is that when Saddam Hussein committed that atrocity, he was supported in it by the US who were an ally of Saddam Hussein and actually gave him material to carry out chemical attacks. And in the aftermath of that attack and this is relevant to this history, the US falsely accused Iran of committing the Halabja massacre, shielding their ally Saddam Hussein, at that time. So there is a history here of certain member states falsely accusing other member states of committing chemical attacks in order to shield the real perpetrators.

AM: So that was my response to the UK Representative, Thomas Phipps. Now, after all this happened, I pointed out on Twitter that he had claimed in comments directed at his colleagues that they should all go online and look at what he called a very clear and very successful attempt to rebut my claims about Douma. But he didn't offer any examples in his comments. And after he spoke, he actually left the room, so he wasn't around to provide any more detail. So on Twitter, I challenged him to provide some examples of these supposedly online articles that have rebutted me, and I encourage him to share them on Twitter, since he didn't at the UN. He responded to me by citing an article by Bellingcat that doesn't address a single claim I've ever made. It doesn't even mention me. And he overlooked the fact that Bellingcat, which is a state affiliated outlet of the UK, his own government, in leaked documents by a UK contractor working for the British government, this UK contractor called Bellingcat, somewhat discredited for spreading a disinformation, which is an assessment I happen to agree with because I've exposed Bellingcat's disinformation before, notably when they put out a fake claim about an OPCW whistleblower and claiming he was sent a letter that

disproved his grievances. And I pointed out that not only was this letter never sent, it didn't prove anything that rebuts him at all. So and then he cited a thread by somebody on Twitter who constantly replies to everything I say. So those are his examples of rebuttals to me.

Bellingcat, which is a state affiliated website and a Twitter thread, people can judge for themselves whether or not that is sufficient in rebutting all the reporting I've done, including now more than a dozen articles. So that was my exchange with the British representative, Thomas Phipps. It was, I think, very illuminating. I think it, as I said, it underscores my point that really, rather than having me debate the question of chlorine gas and foaming with a representative of the British government, neither of us being scientists, this is a matter that should be left up to the actual OPCW scientists. But because the OPCW has suppressed its scientists' findings and won't let its own scientists now air their findings, that's why this issue is now playing out in the public domain. And I personally I'm grateful, at least, that if we're not going to have accountability at the OPCW at least we're going to have this type of discussion in public. We'll leave it there for now and I'll see you next time here on pushback. Thanks for joining me.

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