

**Russian Disinformation and the OPCW: An Analysis of Russian
Efforts to Undermine the FFM and IIT Investigations into the
2018 Douma Chemical Attack**



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31/07/2024

A Thesis submitted to the Board of Examiners in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts in Conflict Studies & Human Rights

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Date of Submission: 31/07/2024

Programme Trajectory: Research LAB (15 ECTS) and Thesis (15 ECTS)

Word Count: 14,571

Referencing System: Chicago (Notes & Bibliography)

Abstract

This thesis analyses the attempts by Russian state representatives at the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) to undermine the OPCW's investigations into the April 7th 2018 Douma chemical attack. Forty-three people were killed in the incident when Syrian government forces dropped two chlorine cylinders onto the rebel-held town, provoking international condemnation and punitive military strikes by the US, UK, and France. The OPCW investigated the incident through its Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) and Investigation and Identification Team (IIT), concluding that a chemical attack had indeed occurred and attributing responsibility to regime forces. The Douma incident and subsequent investigations have been the subject of a multidimensional disinformation campaign spearheaded by Russia, the Assad regime's key ally, aimed at denying regime responsibility and discrediting the OPCW's findings.

Whilst existing studies have focussed on Russian disinformation in the online sphere, this thesis examines the attempts of Russian representatives at the OPCW and MFA to undermine the FFM and IIT via their official statements on the topic from 2018-2023. Through the Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) of fifty-one Russian statements, the thesis identifies the specific arguments and critiques employed by Russian officials to undermine the investigations. Furthermore, by applying a conceptual framework theorising the authority and legitimacy of international organisations (IOs) and the epistemic authority of international fact-finding missions, the thesis analyses how these arguments and critiques challenged the FFM and IIT. This analysis reveals that Russian officials systematically contested different elements of the claim the epistemic authority of each investigation and, more broadly, the institutional authority and legitimacy of the OPCW.

Keywords: *Russia; Syria; Douma; OPCW; Disinformation; Chemical Weapons; International Fact-Finding Missions; International Organisations; Authority; Legitimacy*

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Dr Iva Vukušić for your advice, encouragement, and feedback during the research and writing process.

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List of Abbreviations

CWC – Chemical Weapons Convention

FFM – OPCW Fact-Finding Mission

IIT – OPCW Investigation and Identification Team

IO – International Organisation

ISIL – Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

JIM – OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism

MFA – The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

NGO – Non-Governmental Organisation

OPCW – Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons

RTA – Reflexive Thematic Analysis

UK – United Kingdom

UN – United Nations

UNSC – United Nations Security Council

US – United States

Introduction and Literature Review

0.1 Context

Between 19:10 and 19:40 on April 7th 2018, 43 people were killed and dozens more wounded when at least one Syrian Arab Air Force helicopter dropped two chlorine-filled gas cylinders onto residential buildings in the rebel-held area of the Syrian town of Douma.¹ This was the conclusion reached on January 27th 2023 by the Third Report of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons' (OPCW's) Investigation and Identification Team (IIT), tasked with identifying the perpetrator of the attack. The incident was not isolated, but instead represented one case within a broader pattern of chemical weapons usage in the Syrian civil war. Indeed, according to the Global Public Policy Institute, the Douma incident constituted the 324th chemical attack perpetrated by the Assad regime since the conflict began in 2011.²

Figure 1: The Location of Douma in Syria ³



¹ OPCW Technical Secretariat, *Note by the Technical Secretariat: Third Report by the OPCW Investigation and Identification Team Pursuant to Paragraph 10 of Decision C-SS-4/DEC.3, "Addressing the Threat from Chemical Weapons Use", Douma (Syrian Arab Republic) – 7 April 2018, S/2125/2023*, January 27, 2023, 2.

² Tobias Schneider and Theresa Lütkefend, *Nowhere to Hide: The Logic of Chemical Weapons Use in Syria* (Berlin: Global Public Policy Institute, 2019), 11.

³ Sharon Marris, "Weapons Inspectors Visit Site of Alleged Chemical in Syria's Douma," *Sky News*, April 22, 2018, <https://news.sky.com/story/weapons-inspectors-visit-site-of-alleged-chemical-attack-in-syrias-douma-11340755>.

The Douma attack gained widespread media attention at the time and provoked punitive military strikes from the US, UK, and France – who blamed the Assad regime – against suspected Syrian chemical weapons facilities.⁴ Meanwhile, the OPCW, the international organisation (IO) at the heart of international chemical weapons governance, conducted two investigations into the incident in line with its long-running involvement in Syria which began with the government’s 2013 accession to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). The first investigation was conducted by the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) and was mandated to solely assess whether a chemical attack had occurred. The mission concluded in its Final Report, published on March 1st 2019, that chemical weapons had indeed been used.⁵ The second investigation, conducted by the OPCW IIT, was mandated to attribute blame for the attack and reached the aforementioned conclusion on January 27th 2023 that Syrian government forces were responsible.⁶ Multiple open-source media investigations, including those conducted by investigative journalists from Bellingcat and the New York Times, supported the reports’ findings.⁷

However, events in Douma and the subsequent OPCW investigations have been the subject of an intense, multidimensional disinformation campaign spearheaded by Russia, the Syrian government’s key ally, seeking to deflect blame from the Assad regime and undermine

⁴ Peter Beaumont and Julian Borger, “Syria: US, UK and France Launch Strikes in Response to Chemical Attack,” *The Guardian*, April 14, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/14/syria-air-strikes-us-uk-and-france-launch-attack-on-assad-regime>.

⁵ OPCW Technical Secretariat, *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*, S/1731/2019, March 1, 2019, 30-31.

⁶ OPCW Technical Secretariat, *Third Report by the OPCW Investigation and Identification Team*, S/2125/2023, 115-118.

⁷ Eliot Higgins, “The OPCW’s FFM Report on the April 7th 2018 Douma Attack Versus the Open Source Evidence,” *Bellingcat*, March 1, 2019, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2019/03/01/the-opcw-ffms-report-on-the-april-7th-2018-douma-chemical-attack-versus-the-open-source-evidence/>; Malachy Browne et al., “One Building, One Bomb: How Assad Gassed His Own People,” *The New York Times*, June 25, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/06/25/world/middleeast/syria-chemical-attack-douma.html>.

fact-finding efforts.⁸ Russia’s disinformation has permeated global public discourse, including in Western states like the US, amplified not only by conspiracy theorists but also by celebrities, politicians, journalists, and other public figures.⁹ Whilst Russian disinformation efforts surrounding the Syrian civil war have been extensive and wide-ranging, existing literature has highlighted that the Douma attack and related investigations have been the subject of an especially concerted campaign.

0.2 Research Question and Sub-Questions

This thesis will shed light on the efforts of Russian officials to undermine the FFM and IIT investigations into the Douma attack via statements delivered at the OPCW and through the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), centring on the following main research question:

How have Russian state representatives at the OPCW and MFA attempted to undermine the epistemic authority and legitimacy of the OPCW FFM and IIT investigations into the chemical attack in Douma, Syria (April 7th 2018) between 2018-2023?

To answer this question, the thesis will engage with the following three research sub-questions in turn:

⁸ Gregory Koblenz, “Chemical-Weapon Use in Syria: Atrocities, Attribution, and Accountability,” *The Nonproliferation Review* 26, no. 5-6 (2019): 590-591.

⁹ The Syria Campaign, *Deadly Disinformation: How Online Conspiracies about Syria Cause Real-World Harm* (London: The Syria Campaign, 2022), 9.

1. *What sources of authority does the OPCW draw on and how did the FFM and IIT investigations into the Douma chemical attack derive their claim to epistemic authority?*
2. *What specific arguments and critiques did Russian officials employ between 2018-2023 to undermine the FFM and IIT investigations into the Douma attack?*
3. *How did these arguments and critiques challenge the authority and legitimacy of the FFM and IIT investigations?*

In engaging with these sub-questions, the thesis will discuss how the OPCW derives its institutional authority and how the FFM and IIT investigations derived their specific claim to epistemic authority; identify the specific arguments and critiques employed by Russian officials as part of their disinformation campaign; and analyse, in relation to the study's conceptual framework, how these arguments and critiques undermined the investigations. Through these steps, the thesis will answer the main research question and thereby contribute to filling a gap in existing literature, highlighted below.

0.3 Conceptual Framework and Methodology

The conceptual framework of the study, detailed in the following chapter, will adopt a social constructivist understanding of the key concepts. It will firstly define authority and legitimacy and discuss the sources of authority for IOs like the OPCW. Drawing primarily on Barnett and Finnemore's work, it will explain the claim of IOs to five ideal-type sources of authority, including rational-legal and delegated authority.¹⁰ Secondly, the framework will

¹⁰ Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore, *Rules for the World: International Organisations in Global Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

outline how international fact-finding missions derive their specific claim to epistemic authority, adopting Lesch's framework for analysing this claim based on a mission's delegation, implementation, and dissemination of findings.¹¹ Constructing this conceptual framework is crucial not only for understanding how the OPCW and its FFM and IIT investigations derive their claims to different forms of authority, but also for analysing how Russian officials challenged these claims.

Meanwhile, to identify the specific arguments and critiques employed by Russian officials in their statements on the Douma attack and investigations, this thesis utilised Braun and Clarke's qualitative method of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA).¹² Following the strategic selection of 51 relevant statements by Russian representatives at the MFA and OPCW, this involved a five-step process of data familiarisation, systematic coding using NVIVO 14 software, and theme development. Chapter 3 will outline the full data selection and analysis processes prior to the presentation of findings.

0.4 Literature Review and Relevance of Research

Whilst scholars have examined many important aspects of chemical weapons usage in Syria, the OPCW's investigations into the matter, and Russia's related disinformation campaigns, this thesis will fill a distinct gap in existing literature. The following literature review will situate the thesis within current scholarship, outline the empirical contribution it will seek to make, and highlight its academic and social relevance. Firstly, it will discuss the strategic use of chemical weapons in the Syrian civil war and contextualise the Douma attack

¹¹ Max Lesch, "Contested Facts: The Politics and Practice of International Fact-Finding Missions," *International Studies Review* 25, no. 3 (2023): 1-27.

¹² Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide* (London: Sage, 2022).

within this pattern. Secondly, it will outline existing literature on the OPCW's investigations and their political dynamics. Thirdly, it will examine studies addressing Russian disinformation campaigns in the Syrian civil war before, finally, highlighting the academic and social relevance of further research in this field.

0.4.1 The Use of Chemical Weapons in Syria

Scholars have charted both the extent of chemical weapons usage by the Assad regime in the Syrian civil war and the strategic logic behind it. Prior to the 2011 uprising, the Syrian government's chemical stockpile was primarily understood as a strategic balance to Israel's presumed nuclear deterrent.¹³ This changed in 2012 when these weapons were first directed against the Syrian people. According to the Global Public Policy Institute, chemical weapons were used in the Syrian conflict at least 336 times from 2012-2019, with 98% of attacks attributed to regime forces and the remainder to the Islamic State group (ISIL).¹⁴ These attacks included high-profile incidents such as the August 2013 Sarin attack on Eastern Ghouta which left ~1400 civilians dead and sparked international condemnation – including US President Barack Obama's ultimately hollow declaration that chemical weapons use constituted a 'red line' – and a diplomatic push to eliminate Assad's chemical capabilities.¹⁵ For reasons expanded on below, this international effort largely failed to prevent further use; indeed, the 2018 Douma attack represented the 227th chemical strike by government forces since the red line incident of 2013.¹⁶ This underlines the impunity with which the Syrian regime was able to perpetrate chemical attacks throughout the conflict.

¹³ Rebecca Hersman, Suzanne Claeys, and Cyrus Jabbari, *Rigid Structures, Evolving Threat: Preventing the Proliferation and Use of Chemical Weapons* (Washington D.C.: Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 2019), 10.

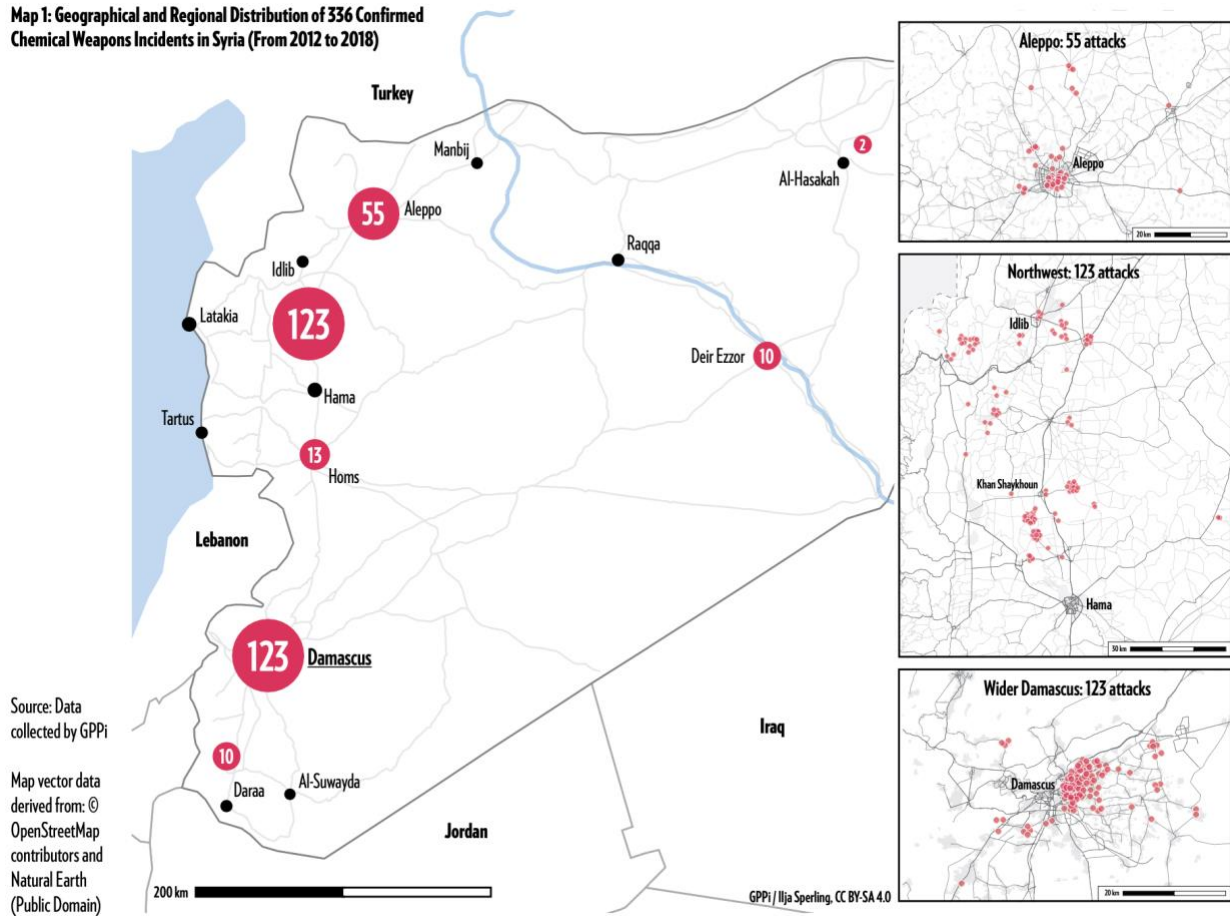
¹⁴ Schneider and Lütkefend, *Nowhere to Hide*, 3.

¹⁵ Hersman, Claeys, and Jabbari, *Rigid Structures*, 10.

¹⁶ Schneider and Lütkefend, *Nowhere to Hide*, 11.

Figure 2: Global Public Policy Institute Graphic Showing the Distribution of Chemical Attacks in Syria, 2012-2018 ¹⁷

Map 1: Geographical and Regional Distribution of 336 Confirmed Chemical Weapons Incidents in Syria (From 2012 to 2018)



As Schneider and Lütkefend argue, “the Assad regime did not merely ‘get away’ with its use of these banned weapons, but succeeded in using them for strategic ends.”¹⁸ A Centre for Strategic and International Studies report summarises these goals as “counterinsurgency, terror, and collective punishment.”¹⁹ Primarily using improvised chlorine munitions deployed from helicopters or artillery, attacks were used to induce panic in besieged populations and to punish the civilian inhabitants of rebel-held territory.²⁰ The 2018 Douma attack exemplifies

¹⁷ Ibid., 10.

¹⁸ Ibid., 3.

¹⁹ Hersman, Claeys, and Jabbari, *Rigid Structures*, 10.

²⁰ Ibid., 10-11.

this strategy, with crudely-adapted chlorine cylinders aerially dropped onto the Damascene suburb, the final rebel stronghold in the area, generating intense panic.²¹ Douma was recaptured just one week later.²² Overall, Syrian regime forces used small-scale chemical attacks extensively throughout the conflict to significant strategic effect, with the Douma attack emblematic of this pattern.

0.4.2 OPCW Investigations and Their Political Dynamics

The regime's chemical attacks led to the deployment of numerous international fact-finding missions – primarily conducted by the OPCW in conjunction with the United Nations (UN) – the evolution and political dynamics of which have been widely analysed. Koblenz, for example, has comprehensively charted these numerous investigations, summarizing them in the table shown below.²³

²¹ Schneider and Lütkefend, *Nowhere to Hide*, 11.

²² “Syrian Army Claims Recapture of Eastern Ghouta,” *France 24*, April 15, 2018, <https://www.france24.com/en/20180415-syria-army-declares-full-recapture-eastern-ghouta>.

²³ Koblenz, “Chemical-Weapon Use in Syria,” 577.

Figure 3: Koblentz's Summary of International Chemical Weapons Investigations in Syria²⁴

Investigative body	Authority	Mandate	Duration
Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (COI)	Human Rights Council, "Situation of Human Rights in the Syrian Arab Republic," S-17/1, August 22, 2011	"to investigate all alleged violations of international human rights law since March 2011 in the Syrian Arab Republic, to establish the facts and circumstances that may amount to such violations and of the crimes perpetrated and, where possible, to identify those responsible with a view to ensuring that perpetrators of violations, including those that may constitute crimes against humanity, are held accountable"	August 2011–present
UN Secretary-General's Mechanism for Investigation of Alleged Use of Chemical and Biological Weapons (UNSGM)	UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/42/37, November 30, 1987; UN Security Council Resolution 620, August 26, 1988	"to ascertain the facts related to the allegations of use of chemical weapons, to gather relevant data, to undertake the necessary analyses for this purpose, and to deliver a report to the Secretary-General"	March–December 2013
OPCW's Fact-Finding Mission (FFM)	UN Security Council Resolution 2118, September 27, 2013; Executive Council, "Reports of the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission in Syria" EC-M-48/DEC.1, February 4, 2015; UN Security Council Resolution 2209, March 6, 2015	"to establish the facts surrounding allegations of the use of toxic chemicals for hostile purposes in the Syrian Arab Republic"	April 2014–present
Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM)	UN Security Council Resolution 2235, August 7, 2015; UN Security Council Resolution 2319, November 17, 2016	"identify to the greatest extent feasible individuals, entities, groups, or governments who were perpetrators, organizers, sponsors or otherwise involved in the use of chemicals as weapons"	August 2015–November 2017
International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to assist in the investigation and prosecution of persons responsible for the most serious crimes under International Law committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011 (IIIM)	United Nations General Assembly Resolution 71/248, December 21, 2016	"to collect, consolidate, preserve and analyse evidence of violations of international humanitarian law and human rights violations and abuses and to prepare files in order to facilitate and expedite fair and independent criminal proceedings, in accordance with international law standards, in national, regional or international courts or tribunals that have or may in the future have jurisdiction over these crimes, in accordance with international law"	2017–present
OPCW's Investigation and Identification Team (IIT)	OPCW, "Addressing the Threat from Chemical Weapons Use," C-SS-4/DEC.3, June 27, 2018	"identify the perpetrators of the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic by identifying and reporting on all information potentially relevant to the origin of those chemical weapons"	June 2018–present

²⁴ Ibid.

The most significant of these investigations are the FFM, the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM), and the IIT. The key development between these investigations was the expansion of their mandate from simply establishing whether chemical attacks had occurred towards attributing responsibility.²⁵ Whilst the FFM, established in 2014, had no power to attribute blame, the JIM (2015-2017) did – an agenda continued by the IIT which was established by the OPCW alone after Russia utilised its UN Security Council (UNSC) veto to prevent the JIM’s renewal.²⁶ Whilst a detailed outline of the FFM and IIT investigations into the Douma attack will be provided in Chapter 2, acknowledging the difference in mandate between the FFM, on one hand, and the JIM and IIT, on the other, is critical for understanding the overall political dynamics behind Syrian and Russian resistance to the investigations.

The shift towards attribution from 2015 has been widely linked to increased Syrian and Russian resistance to investigation. Koblenz argues that the launch of the attributive JIM sparked Russia and Syria’s “concerted, multidimensional effort to undermine the legitimacy and capability of the OPCW.”²⁷ Notte, meanwhile, concludes that US-Russian cooperation – critical to Syria’s 2013 accession to the CWC and the subsequent destruction of its declared chemical stockpiles – unravelled with the JIM’s implementation; cautious cooperation gave way to Russian and Syrian accusations of pro-Western bias and unprofessionalism.²⁸ Edwards and Cacciatore provide further insight into the strategic logic behind the shift in Syrian-Russian engagement with the OPCW and investigations.²⁹ They argue that initial cooperation

²⁵ Ibid., 576-579.

²⁶ Ibid., 578-580.

²⁷ Ibid., 579.

²⁸ Hanna Notte, “The United States, Russia, and Syria’s Chemical Weapons: A Tale of Cooperation and Its Unravelling,” *The Nonproliferation Review* 27, no. 1-3 (2020): 215-218.

²⁹ Brett Edwards and Mattia Cacciatore, “The Politics of International Chemical Weapon Justice: The Case of Syria, 2011-2017,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 39, no. 2 (2018): 292.

reflected a desire to enhance the Assad regime's legitimacy through the semblance of cooperation and transparency, whilst the subsequent decision to undermine investigations – and the OPCW as an institution – resulted from the potentially-damaging consequences of attributive investigations which could specifically identify the regime as a perpetrator of illegal chemical attacks. This body of literature thus charts not only the evolution of chemical weapons investigations in the Syrian conflict, but also the collapse of cooperation between Syria/ Russia and the OPCW from 2015 onwards.

0.4.3 Russian Disinformation Campaigns

Russia's efforts to undermine the investigations and shield the Syrian government from accountability have centred on a well-documented, multi-dimensional disinformation campaign. Wilson and Starbird define disinformation as "information that is deliberately false or misleading."³⁰ A disinformation campaign, meanwhile, comprises "an assemblage of information activities – employed to mislead for a strategic, political purpose."³¹ Jones et al. highlight that Russia's extensive involvement in the Syrian conflict, aimed at preventing the overthrow of the Assad regime and simultaneously undermining Western geopolitical interests, has involved not only military support but also concerted efforts to legitimise Bashar al-Assad and delegitimise opposition groups.³² Disinformation campaigns deflecting blame for regime-perpetrated atrocities (e.g. chemical attacks), challenging the Western narrative of the conflict, and discrediting local opposition have played a key role in this.³³

³⁰ Tom Wilson and Kate Starbird, "Cross-Platform Disinformation Campaigns: Lessons Learned and Next Steps," *The Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* 1 (2020): 2.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Seth Jones et al., *Moscow's War in Syria* (Washington D.C.: Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 2020), 1.

³³ *Ibid.*, 50.

A 2022 analysis by human rights NGO The Syria Campaign identified three core, interwoven topics at the heart of Russia’s disinformation campaigns: false claims about the White Helmets (a rescue group operating in rebel-held areas who have played a key role in documenting regime-perpetrated atrocities); false claims about chemical weapons usage; and attacks on the OPCW’s investigations.³⁴ Whilst some studies (such as one conducted by The Syria Campaign itself in 2017) have primarily focussed on Russia’s delegitimisation of the White Helmets and others have situated disinformation about Syria within Russia’s broader information operations (including that which sought to influence the 2016 US election), a more salient body of literature for this study has specifically focussed on disinformation surrounding chemical weapons and the OPCW investigations.³⁵

Within this existing literature, scholars have emphasised the scale of Russian disinformation surrounding chemical attacks and the OPCW and highlighted a specific focus on the 2018 Douma incident. Stewart has labelled Russia’s attempts to shield the Assad regime from accountability for its chemical weapons use “one of the most comprehensive disinformation campaigns of the past decade.”³⁶ According to The Syria Campaign’s 2022 analysis, Russian disinformation on the topic of Syria from 2018-2021 almost entirely focussed on undermining OPCW reports, discussing little else.³⁷ Disinformation about the 2018 Douma attack and subsequent investigations was especially intense, possibly due to the Western military strikes in its aftermath and the extensive media coverage that the incident attracted. The Syria Campaign, for example, identified “the biggest peak of disinformation”

³⁴ The Syria Campaign, *Deadly Disinformation*, 6.

³⁵ The Syria Campaign, *Killing the Truth: How Russia is Fuelling a Disinformation Campaign to Cover Up War Crimes in Syria* (London: The Syria Campaign, 2017); Renee DiResta et al., *The Tactics and Tropes of the Internet Research Agency: New Knowledge Report Prepared for the United States Senate Select Committee on Russian Interference in the 2016 Election* (Austin: New Knowledge, 2018), 12.

³⁶ Mallory Stewart, “Symposium on the New Challenges in Weapons Inspection: Defending Weapons Inspections from the Effects of Disinformation,” *AJIL Unbound* 115 (2021): 106.

³⁷ The Syria Campaign, *Deadly Disinformation*, 9.

to have come in April 2018 in the aftermath of the attack, also highlighting a particular focus on the OPCW's Douma investigations from 2020-2021.³⁸ Indeed, out of the nearly 50,000 tweets about Syria posted between 2015-2021 which were included in their analysis, the six most shared/ retweeted all either claimed the Douma attack was staged or that the subsequent OPCW investigations were compromised.³⁹

Rodgers emphasises the cross-platform nature these campaigns, explaining how false claims about the Douma attack were promoted by Russian officials, state social media accounts, state-controlled media outlets such as Sputnik News, and an army of synthetic actors (e.g. bots).⁴⁰ These actors combined to “flood the information zone with conflicting and contradictory theories and narratives.”⁴¹ Once present in the information space, disinformation was amplified not only by fringe conspiracy theorists such as notorious pro-Assad blogger Vanessa Beeley, but also by more reputable voices from the journalistic, political, and celebrity spheres who (often unwittingly) repeated false claims.⁴²

Russia's disinformation about Syrian chemical attacks and the OPCW has damaging consequences. Firstly, it denies victims recognition and can lead to them – and others who document the attacks – being harassed, accused of lying, and even misrepresented as legitimate targets.⁴³ Secondly, it hinders accountability and perpetuates chemical weapons use – the impunity of Syrian forces' repeated chemical attacks is testament to this effect.⁴⁴ Thirdly, it presents a dangerous challenge to the international regime of constraint on

³⁸ The Syria Campaign, *Deadly Disinformation*, 6-9.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁰ Joseph Rodgers, *Information Pollution and What it Means for Arms Control* (Washington D.C.: Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 2024), 2.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴³ The Syria Campaign, *Deadly Disinformation*, 16.

⁴⁴ Hersman, Claeys, and Jabbari, *Rigid Structures*, 23.

chemical weapons use.⁴⁵ Impunity erodes deterrence whilst a robust verification system – central to chemical weapons governance – cannot operate “without the ability to validate and trust factual information.”⁴⁶ Furthermore, the degradation of the OPCW’s authority and legitimacy undermines the CWC treaty it exists to uphold, the cornerstone of the international chemical weapons regime.⁴⁷ Finally, disinformation generates doubt among state actors, preventing a robust international response and thus further weakening deterrence.⁴⁸

0.4.4 Academic and Social Relevance of Further Research

As outlined above, existing literature has addressed the purpose, scale, cross-platform dynamics, and damaging consequences of Russian disinformation surrounding Syrian chemical attacks and the related OPCW investigations. However, scholars have neglected to systematically analyse the specific arguments and critiques employed to undermine OPCW investigations outside of the social media realm. For example, whilst in the social media sphere Nassetta and Fecht produced an in-depth analysis of the narratives being espoused by Russian-controlled synthetic actors in the aftermath of the Douma attack, comparable analysis of the arguments and critiques employed by Russian state officials has not been conducted.⁴⁹ Given the multi-platform nature of Russia’s disinformation campaigns, highlighted above, this gap presents a clear opportunity to build on existing literature.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 23.

⁴⁷ Mallory, *Defending Weapons Inspections*, 108.

⁴⁸ Hersman, Claeys and Jabbari, *Rigid Structures*, 7.

⁴⁹ Jack Nassetta and Ethan Fecht, *All the World is Staged: An Analysis of Social Media Influence Operations Against US Counterproliferation Efforts in Syria* (Monterey: James Martin Centre for Nonproliferation Studies, 2018).

Further research on this topic also bears social significance. As emphasised by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, better understanding disinformation in the chemical weapons sphere is critical to countering the threat it poses – this is hugely important given the damaging consequences of such campaigns.⁵⁰ Additionally, in a broader context, Lesch highlights an increasing trust deficit in international institutions and fact-finding missions, driven in part by those – Russian officials in this instance – seeking to undermine them through disinformation campaigns.⁵¹ As efforts to spread disinformation and sow confusion about conflicts around the world continue, from Ukraine to Gaza, gaining a better understanding of the dynamics of such campaigns is vitally important.

This thesis will advance existing literature through a thematic analysis of statements by Russian representatives at the OPCW and MFA seeking to undermine the OPCW’s FFM and IIT investigations into the 2018 Douma attack, which scholars have identified as the target of an especially intense disinformation campaign. The identification of the specific arguments and critiques employed by these officials will complement existing studies which have focussed on related disinformation circulating in the online sphere. Furthermore, the thesis will assess how these critiques and arguments challenged the investigations by grounding analysis in a conceptual understanding of the authority and legitimacy of fact-finding missions and IOs.

⁵⁰ Hersman, Claeys, and Jabbari, *Rigid Structures*, xii.

⁵¹ Lesch, “Contested Facts,” 3.

0.5 Chapter Outline

The thesis will proceed as follows. Chapter 1 will present the conceptual framework of the study, discussing the authority and legitimacy of IOs and the epistemic authority of fact-finding missions. Chapter 2 will apply the conceptual framework to the OPCW and its FFM and IIT investigations in relation to sub-question 1, outlining the sources of the OPCW's authority and examining the claim to epistemic authority of the FFM and IIT investigations. Chapter 3 will begin by detailing the data selection process and analytical method of RTA, before identifying the specific arguments and critiques employed by Russian officials to undermine the FFM and IIT, thereby answering sub-question 2. Lastly, Chapter 4 will engage with sub-question 3, analysing how these arguments and critiques sought to undermine the investigations in relation to the conceptual framework.

Chapter 1: Conceptual Framework

To analyse how Russian officials have attempted to undermine the authority and legitimacy of the OPCW's FFM and IIT investigations into the Douma attack, it is first necessary to define these key concepts, outline how IOs derive authority and legitimacy, and to similarly conceptualise how international fact-finding missions derive their specific claim to epistemic authority. This framework will be applied to the OPCW and the two investigations in the following chapter in relation to sub-question 1 and will subsequently inform analysis of the critiques and arguments employed by Russian officials in relation to sub-question 3. Drawing on a social constructivist understanding of the key concepts, this chapter will firstly define the concept of authority, outline different ideal-type sources of IO authority, and discuss the concept of legitimacy and processes of (de-)legitimation. Secondly, it will explain the function of international fact-finding missions and, through Lesch's framework, examine both how they derive a claim to epistemic authority and the factors which impact the perceived credibility of this claim.

1.1 The Authority and Legitimacy of International Organisations

In pursuing their social purpose, IOs like the OPCW draw on various sources of authority. IOs can be defined as “formal, multilateral, and bureaucratic arrangements established to further cooperation between states.”⁵² Authority, meanwhile, is “the ability to induce deference in others.”⁵³ Authority only exists in the context of a social relationship between actors – it stems from the recognition by one actor of the other's authority, a

⁵² Jonas Tallberg and Michael Zürn, “The Legitimacy and Legitimation of International Organisations: Introduction and Framework,” *The Review of International Organisations* no. 14 (2019): 583.

⁵³ Deborah Avant, Martha Finnemore, and Susan Sell, “Who Governs the Globe?” in *Who Governs the Globe?* ed. by Deborah Avant, Martha Finnemore, and Susan Sell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 9.

recognition which encourages deference and thus confers power.⁵⁴ Importantly, authority therefore requires a degree of consent from those who defer.⁵⁵

Barnett and Finnemore identify four ideal-type sources of authority which IOs draw on to induce deference in those they govern: rational-legal authority, delegated authority, moral authority, and expert authority.⁵⁶ Rational-legal authority stems from the IO's bureaucratic characteristics.⁵⁷ Modern bureaucracies are highly professionalised, hierarchical, procedural, and legalised bodies. Their technocratic, impersonal nature generates a semblance of competence, depoliticisation, and impartiality which encourages deference. Importantly, however, in fulfilling their social purpose IOs often must make inherently political decisions which can clash with this impartial, depoliticised ideal, generating tension.⁵⁸ Secondly, IOs draw on delegated authority.⁵⁹ IOs are formed by an act of delegation whereby states choose to recognise their authority over a particular issue area, pooling their sovereign political authority into the organisation and granting a degree of autonomy. Thirdly, moral authority is derived on the basis of the IO embodying a set of principles considered normatively 'good' – in working to advance these principles, an IO distinguishes itself from apparently self-serving state interests and presents itself as embodying a greater, depoliticised cause.⁶⁰ Fourthly, Barnett and Finnemore highlight the role of expert authority.⁶¹ IOs possess staff with specialized, detailed knowledge and training surrounding the issue area the IO exists to govern. The possession of specialised knowledge not only encourages deference to experts to solve problems, but also enhances an IO's claim to impartiality – experts are seen to provide

⁵⁴ Ibid., 9-10.

⁵⁵ Barnett and Finnemore, *Rules for the World*, 20.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 20-25.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 20-21.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 21.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 22.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 23.

⁶¹ Ibid., 24.

objective, scientific judgement. The power stemming from perceived expertise has been well-documented, for example by Haas in his classic work on epistemic communities.⁶²

Additionally, Avant et al. highlight one further source of IO authority which merits attention: capacity-based authority.⁶³ This stems from an IO's ability to satisfactorily complete the social tasks which it has been established to accomplish – tasks inherently valued by the state actors who created the IO. Overall, the ability of IOs to induce deference in those they govern rests on these five ideal-type sources of authority.

However, as Sending argues, authority is not static but instead always 'under construction'.⁶⁴ The sources of authority outlined above do not automatically generate deference on behalf of the governed. Instead, IOs must constantly strive for recognition in a dynamic struggle; as Avant et al. underline, authority is "a social relationship, not a commodity".⁶⁵ Authority is contested, and merely possessing the characteristics highlighted above does not guarantee deference. In relation to the OPCW, for example, it can be expected that Russian officials, in attempting to undermine the investigations, will challenge different elements of the organisation's claim to authority.

The contestation of IO authority is closely linked to the concept of legitimacy. Legitimacy, in relation to IOs, can be defined as the "beliefs of audiences that an IO's authority is appropriately exercised."⁶⁶ This is a sociological rather than normative understanding of legitimacy, grounded in audience perception as opposed to moral principles.

⁶² Peter Haas, "Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination," *International Organization* 46 (1992): 3.

⁶³ Avant, Finnemore, and Sell, "Who Governs the Globe?" 13-14.

⁶⁴ Ole Jacob Sending, *The Politics of Expertise: Competing for Authority in Global Governance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 28.

⁶⁵ Avant, Finnemore, and Sell, "Who Governs the Globe?" 9.

⁶⁶ Tallberg and Zürn, "Legitimacy and Legitimation," 583.

This does not mean, however, that normative principles (e.g. procedural transparency) are inconsequential, as they are likely to impact audience perception. Tallberg and Zürn highlight the distinction between legitimacy and authority – whereas authority centres on the recognition of an IO’s ability and right to govern a certain issue area, legitimacy centres on the perception of whether that authority is being exercised appropriately.⁶⁷ The level of perceived legitimacy enjoyed by an IO has important impacts, effecting its ability to remain central to states’ cooperation in the given issue area, to lead in the creation of new rules and norms, and to secure compliance with existing ones.⁶⁸

As with authority, legitimacy is not static but instead contested via the twin processes of (de-)legitimation. Legitimation refers to the deliberate attempts of actors to enhance the legitimacy of an IO by arguing that its authority is exercised properly and appropriately.⁶⁹ This can be done either by the IO itself – self-legitimation – or relevant external actors such as states. Conversely, delegitimation can be understood as the deliberate attempts of actors to challenge an IO’s use of its authority, thereby undermining its legitimacy.⁷⁰ Legitimation and delegitimation are communicative practices, intended to influence the perceptions of relevant actors towards the IO in question, and can be discursive – for example in the form of public statements – or behavioural – for example through demonstrations or other repertoires of protest.⁷¹ In the context of Russian officials’ attempts to undermine the FFM and IIT, critiques and arguments can thus be expected not only to challenge elements of the OPCW’s authority, but also the appropriateness of the way that authority is exercised through the investigations.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 586.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 582.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 585.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 585-586.

⁷¹ Ibid., 588-589.

1.2 The Epistemic Authority of International Fact-Finding Missions

The FFM and IIT investigations are examples of international fact-finding missions. As Krebs highlights, “one of the most certain facts about conflicts is uncertainty about facts.”⁷² Disputes over facts can intensify conflict, hinder accountability, and lay the path for further abuses and crimes.⁷³ The literature review highlighted these very dynamics in relation to chemical attacks in Syria. IOs deploy fact-finding missions to obtain credible knowledge in situations of epistemic uncertainty and thus claim epistemic authority. Lesch defines international fact-finding missions as “groups of experts mandated by IOs to investigate a conflict situation, ideally on the ground, by establishing credible facts and ascertaining allegations of norm violations.”⁷⁴ Fundamentally, they are mechanisms of knowledge production which allow IOs to claim epistemic authority over a contested set of events.⁷⁵ In this context, epistemic authority is defined as “the claim to provide objective and impartial knowledge.” – a claim which encourages deference to the IO’s judgement.⁷⁶ Fact-finding missions are important mechanisms for addressing the violation of rules and norms in conflict, not least in the context of chemical weapons use where the ability to establish factual information is critical.

Similarly to other forms of authority, the epistemic authority of international fact-finding missions is not automatically recognised but instead contested. Russian efforts to undermine the investigations into the Douma attack are a prime example of this. Indeed, as highlighted in the literature review, fact-finding missions and IOs increasingly face doubts

⁷² Shiri Krebs, “Designing International Fact-Finding Missions: Facts, Alternative Facts, and National Identities,” *Fordham International Law Journal* 41, no. 2 (2018): 343.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 344.

⁷⁴ Lesch, “Contested Facts,” 2.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

over the trustworthiness and credibility of the expert knowledge they produce.⁷⁷ Lesch proposes a valuable framework for analysing fact-finding missions, arguing that their claim to epistemic authority rests on three classes of explanatory factor: those relating to the delegation of the mission, its implementation, and the dissemination of its findings.⁷⁸ The delegation of the mission relates to the mandating body (the IO), the content of the mandate, and the holders of the mandate (those who conduct the fact-finding).⁷⁹ Factors relating to the implementation of the mission's mandate are primarily procedural and technical, including the sources of evidence and means of evidence collection/ analysis, whether fact-finders are able to perform site visits, and the fair consultation of different parties or stakeholders.⁸⁰ Finally, the dissemination of findings relates to the report ultimately published by a fact-finding mission.⁸¹ These reports are crucial communicative tools which detail the conclusions drawn by a fact-finding mission and how they were reached. The credibility of these reports can be impacted, for example, by clear accounts of procedure and a demonstration that conclusions are rooted in evidence. Mégret similarly touches on this dynamic, underlining that the processes of communication and self-legitimation are central to the ultimate credibility of fact-finding missions.⁸²

Lesch's approach to analysing international fact-finding missions is important for this study in two regards. Firstly, it provides a framework – applied in the following chapter – through which to understand and analyse the FFM and IIT investigations into the Douma attack. Secondly, it will inform analysis of the critiques and arguments employed by Russian

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 9.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 10.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 12-13.

⁸¹ Ibid., 13-14.

⁸² Frédéric Mégret, "Do Facts Exist, Can They Be 'Found', and Does it Matter?" in *The Transformation of Human Rights Fact-Finding*, ed. by Philip Alston and Sarah Knuckey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 42.

officials to undermine the epistemic authority and legitimacy of the investigations. Officials are likely to challenge various aspects of the investigations' delegation, implementation, and dissemination of findings.

1.3 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the conceptual framework of the thesis. Firstly, it defined the concept of authority and outlined the ideal-type sources of authority that IOs draw on, also highlighting its dynamic, contested nature. It similarly outlined the concept of legitimacy, explaining how it is enhanced and degraded via the twin processes of (de-)legitimation. Secondly, the chapter explained the purpose of international fact-finding missions, highlighting their role as mechanisms of knowledge production in situations of epistemic uncertainty, before outlining Lesch's framework for analysing missions based on their delegation, implementation, and dissemination of findings. The framework developed in this chapter will be applied to analyse both the authority and legitimacy of the OPCW and its FFM and IIT investigations, and the critiques and arguments employed by Russian officials to undermine them.

Chapter 2: The OPCW, FFM, and IIT

Having developed a conceptual framework for analysing the authority and legitimacy of IOs and international fact-finding missions, this chapter will discuss the OPCW and its FFM and IIT investigations in relation to sub-question 1, reiterated below:

What sources of authority does the OPCW draw on and how did the FFM and IIT investigations into the Douma chemical attack derive their claim to epistemic authority?

Firstly, this chapter will explain the purpose and structure of the OPCW and analyse its sources of authority. Secondly, it will discuss the FFM investigation into the Douma attack through Lesch's framework, outlining its delegation, implementation, and dissemination of findings, also highlighting the damaging impact of leaked internal documents. Finally, it will similarly analyse the IIT investigation. Overall, the chapter will provide important contextual detail about the OPCW and the two investigations and conceptualise their claims to authority. This is crucial for subsequent analysis of Russian officials' attempts to undermine the investigations.

2.1 The OPCW

The OPCW is a treaty-based IO born on April 29th 1997 when the CWC, initially signed in 1993, came into force.⁸³ Mandated under Article VIII to fulfil the objectives of the Convention, the OPCW is the focal point of international chemical weapons governance and ultimately seeks their permanent elimination. The organisation's core aims centre on the

⁸³ "History," OPCW, accessed July 16, 2024, <https://www.opcw.org/about-us/history>.

destruction of existing stockpiles, preventing proliferation, verifying and enforcing compliance, encouraging international cooperation, and achieving universal membership. In pursuit of these goals, the OPCW conducts inspections, oversees and verifies stockpile destruction, investigates suspected violations, and provides technical assistance to national authorities.⁸⁴ With 193 States Parties, 98% of people live under the CWC.⁸⁵

Headquartered in The Hague, The Netherlands, the OPCW is comprised of the Conference of the States Parties, the Executive Council, and the Technical Secretariat. The Conference is the organisation's principle decision-making organ, with each member-state represented with one vote, and bears overall responsibility for promoting the goals of the CWC and overseeing the Executive Council and Secretariat.⁸⁶ The Executive Council, comprising 41 member-states biennially elected by the Conference, is responsible primarily for supervising the Secretariat, monitoring compliance, and recommending measures for adoption by the Conference.⁸⁷ Most dialogue at the OPCW regarding the Douma incident and investigations occurred within the Executive Council. This included numerous Russian statements analysed in this study, with Russia holding a Council seat from its inception until the end of 2023, when it was not re-elected. Meanwhile, the ~500-strong Secretariat is the bureaucratic body of expert and administrative staff headed by the Director-General, who is elected by the Conference.⁸⁸ The Secretariat is responsible for implementing the OPCW's work, from the day-to-day running of the organisation to verification inspections and investigations like the FFM and IIT. Although supervised by the Council and Conference, the

⁸⁴ "Our Work," OPCW, accessed July 16, 2024, <https://www.opcw.org/our-work>.

⁸⁵ "OPCW Basics," OPCW, accessed July 16, 2024, <https://www.opcw.org/about-us/opcw-basics>.

⁸⁶ "Conference of the States Parties: Setting the OPCW's Strategic Direction," OPCW, accessed July 16, 2024, <https://www.opcw.org/about/conference-states-parties>.

⁸⁷ "Executive Council: The Governing Body of the OPCW," OPCW, accessed July 16, 2024, <https://www.opcw.org/about-us/executive-council>.

⁸⁸ "Technical Secretariat: Facilitating the Implementation of the Convention," OPCW, accessed July 16, 2024, <https://www.opcw.org/about/technical-secretariat>.

Secretariat carries out these key functions, entrusted to it by the Convention and delegated to it by the Council, independently.

The OPCW draws on each ideal-type source of authority previously highlighted. It draws rational-legal authority from its rigid organisational structure, strict procedures, and bureaucratic Secretariat. As a treaty-based organisation, it also exemplifies delegated authority. Additionally, the Secretariat is directed in its activities by the formal decisions of the States Parties in a further act of delegation. Meanwhile, in pursuing the elimination of chemical weapons, almost universally perceived to be normatively admirable, the OPCW draws on moral authority. The Secretariat wields expert authority via a high degree of relevant technical expertise, comprising numerous scientists, inspectors, and subject-matter experts. Finally, the OPCW draws on capacity-based authority through its unique ability to oversee the international chemical weapons regime and assist with disarmament efforts.

2.2 The FFM Investigation

2.2.1 Background and Delegation

Director-General Ahmet Üzümcü established the FFM on April 29th 2014 under his mandate to uphold the CWC following repeated allegations of Syrian chemical attacks.⁸⁹ The authority of the mission was subsequently reinforced by several decisions of the Executive Council, UNSC Resolution 2118, and the consent of the Syrian regime. FFM investigations into alleged attacks were never mandated to attribute responsibility, but solely to establish whether toxic chemicals had been used as weapons.

⁸⁹ “Fact-Finding Mission,” OPCW, accessed July 16, 2024, <https://www.opcw.org/fact-finding-mission>.

Following media reports of the Douma attack on April 7th 2018 – assessed by the Secretariat’s Information Cell – the Secretariat announced its intention to deploy an FFM team on April 10th 2018.⁹⁰ Separately, both Syrian and Russian officials requested the deployment, alleging the incident had been staged.⁹¹ The team, comprising nine investigative experts and two interpreters, entered Syria on April 14th.⁹² Investigators were mandated to “gather facts regarding the incident of alleged use of toxic chemicals as a weapon, in Douma... and to report to the Director-General”.⁹³ The team who conducted the site visits were supported by off-site Secretariat staff and independent experts.

2.2.2 Implementation

The team received operational instructions to “review and analyse all available information pertaining to the reported incident”.⁹⁴ Whilst a UN reconnaissance party came under hostile fire when assessing the security situation on the ground on April 17th 2018, security arrangements were subsequently made with Syrian and Russian officials which allowed the team to physically visit locations of interest in Douma.⁹⁵ These locations were:

- ‘Location 1’: The hospital where victims were treated
- ‘Location 2’: The apartment block where a chemical cylinder was found on the roof
- ‘Location 4’: The apartment block where a chemical cylinder was found in a bedroom
- A warehouse which Syrian officials requested the team to investigate

⁹⁰ OPCW Technical Secretariat, *Report of the Fact-Finding Mission Regarding the Incident of Alleged Use of Toxic Chemicals as a Weapon in Douma*, S/1731/2019, 5.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 8.

- A suspected chemical facility

Full access was permitted except in Location 2 where Syrian officials partially restricted access.⁹⁶

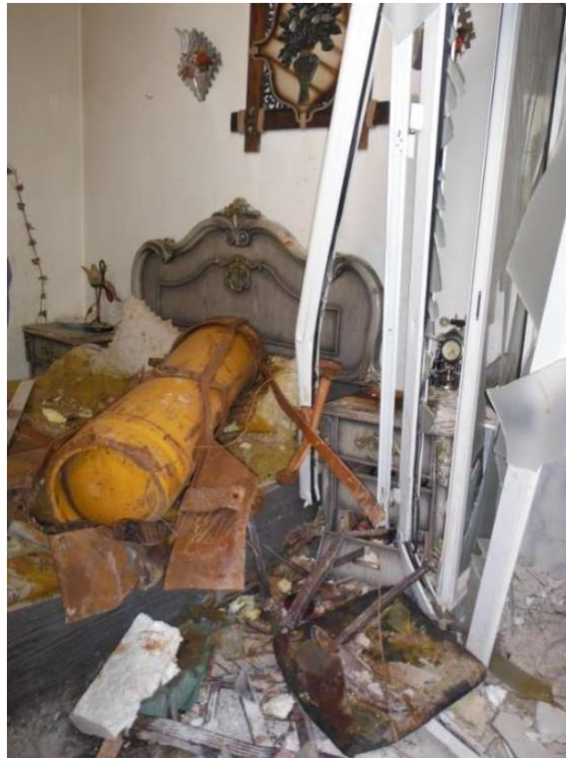
*Figure 4: FFM Investigators at Location 2 – The Cylinder on the Roof*⁹⁷



⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 53.

Figure 5: Location 4 – The Cylinder in the Bedroom ⁹⁸



Investigatory activities followed OPCW procedures and included the collection and analysis of environmental and biomedical samples; photography and analysis of the two chemical cylinders; computer modelling; interviewing 39 witnesses and medical staff; reviewing open-source material; and commissioning independent technical assessments.⁹⁹ The ground team decided not to exhume victims' bodies due to the time elapsed since the attack. The FFM re-deployed several times to Douma throughout 2018 whilst off-site assessments also continued, with investigatory activities concluding on February 8th 2019.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ OPCW Technical Secretariat, *Third Report by the OPCW Investigation and Identification Team*, S/2125/2023, 77.

⁹⁹ OPCW Technical Secretariat, *Report of the Fact-Finding Mission Regarding the Incident of Alleged Use of Toxic Chemicals as a Weapon in Douma*, S/1731/2019, 9-10.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

2.2.3 Dissemination of Findings

The FFM's Final Report, published on March 1st 2019, concluded that there were "reasonable grounds that the use of a toxic chemical as a weapon took place... likely molecular chlorine."¹⁰¹ Whilst acknowledging a lack of access to the deceased, the report concluded that 43 had likely been killed and more injured by chlorine released from the two cylinders discovered at Locations 2 and 4.¹⁰² At Location 2, the cylinder had impacted the roof, releasing gas and killing 43 people seen throughout and in front of the building below in video footage.¹⁰³ At Location 4, the cylinder passed through the roof and landed in a bedroom, leaking some gas which reportedly injured two interviewees.¹⁰⁴ The cylinder had originally landed on the bedroom floor, but had been moved onto the bed prior to the FFM's arrival.¹⁰⁵ Witnesses suggested that the incidents had occurred between 19:00 and 22:30.¹⁰⁶ The report found no evidence of nerve agents and no indication the warehouse and other facility of interest were linked to chemical weapons.¹⁰⁷

As previously highlighted, the dissemination of a mission's findings is important for its credibility. The first report issued by the FFM, published on July 6th 2018, was an Interim Report which provided a status update on the mission, detailing the background, aims, and activities of the investigation; no conclusions were included.¹⁰⁸ Meanwhile, the 106-page Final Report contained strong detail on every aspect of the investigation. The report

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 31-32.

¹⁰² Ibid., 30-31.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 31.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 25-31.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 63.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 24-25.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 30.

¹⁰⁸ OPCW Technical Secretariat, *Note by the Technical Secretariat: Interim Report of the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission in Syria Regarding the Incident of Alleged Use of Toxic Chemicals as a Weapon in Douma, Syrian Arab Republic, on 7 April 2018*, S/1645/2018, July 6, 2018.

communicated the investigation's rigour and displayed a high degree of transparency, acknowledging limitations such as a lack of access to the deceased. It outlined the activities, procedures, and scientific methods of the FFM team, whilst supporting documents, open-source evidence, timelines, and photographs were provided. It also explained the evidence used to reach conclusions in significant detail. This rigour, detail, transparency, and self-legitimation enhanced the FFM's claim to epistemic authority over the incident.

2.2.4 Leaked Material

The OPCW suffered a series of internal leaks casting doubt on the FFM investigation which, although ultimately unfounded, impacted its epistemic authority and fuelled disinformation. Between June 2018 and May 2019, documents including draft reports, email chains, and meeting minutes were released on Wikileaks and the website of the so-called Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media.¹⁰⁹ The documents cast doubt on the FFM's chemical analysis and toxicological conclusions whilst a leaked 'engineering assessment' suggested that the two chemical cylinders were manually placed at Locations 2 and 4, thus supporting a 'staging' scenario.¹¹⁰

After the 'engineering assessment' was leaked, just 2 days before the publication of the FFM report, the Secretariat launched an internal investigation into breaches of confidentiality. It published its findings on February 6th 2020, attributing the leaks to two former employees – Inspectors A and B – who had assisted parts of the Douma

¹⁰⁹ Bellingcat Investigative Team, "The OPCW Douma Leaks Part 1: We Need to Talk About 'Alex'," *Bellingcat*, January 15, 2020, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2020/01/15/the-opcw-douma-leaks-part-1-we-need-to-talk-about-alex/>.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

investigation.¹¹¹ Director-General Fernando Arias highlighted that, contrary to their claims, neither individual was an official member of the FFM team and neither had complete information, with no involvement in the final six months where most FFM analysis occurred.¹¹² Director-General Arias stated that, “Inspectors A and B are not whistleblowers. They are individuals who could not accept that their views were not backed by evidence.”¹¹³ Bellingcat investigative journalists supported this critique. Naming Inspectors A and B as Ian Henderson and Brendan Whelan, respectively, they concluded that the former employees had made unsubstantiated, misleading claims and had also lied to colleagues and external organisations.¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, the leaks undoubtedly fuelled disinformation about the incident.

2.3 The IIT Investigation

2.3.1 Background and Delegation

The IIT was established on June 27th 2018 via decision C-SS-4/DEC.3 of the Conference – adopted by majority vote – through which it is mandated to identify the perpetrators of specific chemical attacks in Syria and report its findings to the Executive Council and UN.¹¹⁵ The IIT replaced the OPCW-UN JIM, breaking new ground for the OPCW with its attributive function. It solely investigates cases where the FFM has

¹¹¹ “OPCW: Independent Investigation into Possible Breaches of Confidentiality Report Released,” OPCW, February 6, 2020, <https://www.opcw.org/media-centre/news/2020/02/opcw-independent-investigation-possible-breaches-confidentiality-report>.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Bellingcat Investigative Team, “The OPCW Douma Leaks Part 4: The OPCW Investigation,” *Bellingcat*, February 11, 2020, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2020/02/11/the-opcw-douma-leaks-part-4-the-opcw-investigation/>.

¹¹⁵ “Investigation and Identification Team (IIT),” OPCW, accessed July 16, 2024, <https://www.opcw.org/iit>; OPCW Conference of the States Parties, *Decision: Addressing the Threat from Chemical Weapons Use, C-SS-4/DEC.3*, June 27, 2018.

established the use of chemical weapons and neither has the power to determine legal/criminal responsibility, nor to recommend any type of response – it is restricted to fact-finding only.¹¹⁶ Importantly, Russian officials have never accepted the legitimacy of the IIT’s mandate, voting against its creation (alongside numerous other states) and arguing that its attributive agenda oversteps the Secretariat’s role under the CWC, encroaching on the powers of the UNSC.¹¹⁷

The IIT selected the Douma incident for investigation based on its severity, the information available, the chemical used, its place within a pattern of similar incidents, and the perceived reliability of witnesses.¹¹⁸ The investigation, beginning in January 2021, was conducted by Secretariat staff supported by ten independent experts in fields such as military affairs, open-source analysis, and trajectory simulation.¹¹⁹ These consultants provided technical advice and reviewed the IIT’s findings.

2.3.2 Implementation

The IIT conducted a detailed, multi-method investigation between January 2021 and December 2022 which involved reviewing the FFM’s findings; reviewing witness statements and conducting further interviews; analysing open-source information; reanalysing FFM samples; computer modelling; and requesting/ reviewing information from relevant States Parties.¹²⁰ Overall, more than 19,000 files were reviewed, 66 witness statements assessed,

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ OPCW Conference of the States Parties, *Russian Federation: Statement by G.V. Kalamonov, Head of the Delegation of the Russian Federation, on the Results of the Vote on the British Draft Resolution at the Fourth Special Session of the Conference of the States Parties*, C-SS-4/NAT.42, June 27, 2018.

¹¹⁸ OPCW Technical Secretariat, *Third Report by the OPCW Investigation and Identification Team*, S/2125/2023, 10.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 11.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 10-11.

and 70 samples analysed.¹²¹ Meanwhile, a threshold of ‘reasonable grounds’ was the degree of certainty required to identify perpetrators.

The team made substantial efforts to assess the Russian/ Syrian standpoint, enhancing investigatory balance. Russian and Syrian material submitted to the FFM was reassessed and the team requested all further available information from both states – neither cooperated.¹²² The IIT also explicitly committed to assessing the ‘staging’ scenario.¹²³ By welcoming evidence from all parties and investigating alternative scenarios, the IIT sought to enhance its epistemic authority by nullifying accusations of bias and countering disinformation.

Numerous investigative challenges were acknowledged in the report. These included a lack of Syrian government cooperation which prevented further site visits; the length of time elapsed since the incident; witness intimidation; the spread of disinformation surrounding the incident; and the destruction of evidence, including the two chlorine cylinders in question.¹²⁴ Despite these challenges, the report emphasised that findings were reached via a robust methodology and met the required threshold of certainty.

2.3.3 Dissemination of Findings

The IIT report, published on January 27th 2023, concurred that chlorine was released from the cylinders at Locations 2 – where 43 people were killed – and 4 – where mild injuries were caused after the cylinder only partially ruptured.¹²⁵ Furthermore, it concluded that the

¹²¹ Ibid., 11.

¹²² Ibid., 14-15.

¹²³ Ibid., 15.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 13-14.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 110-119.

cylinders were improvised for release from helicopters.¹²⁶ The damage to the cylinders indicated that they had been dropped from a minimum height of 175m and 140m, respectively.¹²⁷ Analysis of military activity in the area – based on witnesses and open-source information – suggested that the cylinders were delivered between 19:10 and 19:40 from at least one Syrian Arab Air Force Mi8/17 helicopter, likely from 63rd Helicopter Brigade, operating out of Dumayr airbase under the Tiger Forces.¹²⁸ The IIT was unable to establish a precise chain of command linking the attack to any specific commander to the requisite degree of certainty.¹²⁹

Several elements of the IIT report strengthen its epistemic authority. Firstly, it systematically debunks the ‘staging’ scenario, explaining that no supporting evidence was discovered by the IIT nor, despite requests, provided by Syria/ Russia. Properly assessing this scenario both strengthened the IIT’s claim to impartiality and challenged widespread disinformation. Secondly, the report openly acknowledged the challenges of the investigation, outlined above. This transparency extended to the whole 140-page report which provided extremely detailed explanations both of investigative processes and how conclusions were reached. Finally, the report strongly emphasises the independence, objectivity, and impartiality of the investigation and the raw ‘factuality’ of its findings.¹³⁰ Such self-legitimation is critical in the face of external delegitimation efforts.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 112.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 112-115.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 115-118.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 117-118.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 10-13.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter has provided contextual information about the OPCW and its FFM and IIT investigations, applying key concepts previously outlined. Firstly, it discussed the OPCW, highlighting its sources of authority. Secondly, it analysed the FFM investigation, outlining the mission's delegation, implementation, and findings, and underlined the role of leaked material in fuelling disinformation. Finally, it assessed the IIT investigation through the same framework. By contextualising the OPCW and its Douma investigations and analysing their claims to authority, this chapter has provided a foundation for subsequent analysis of the attempts of Russian officials to undermine them.

Chapter 3: Thematic Analysis of Russian Statements on the Douma Incident and Investigations (2018-2023)

Having discussed the OPCW, FFM, and IIT and conceptualised their respective claims to authority, this chapter will proceed by thematically outlining the arguments and critiques utilised by Russian officials at the MFA and OPCW to undermine the investigations. The chapter is guided by the second sub-question of the study:

What specific arguments and critiques did Russian officials at the MFA and OPCW employ between 2018-2023 to undermine the FFM and IIT investigations into the Douma attack?

Following an explanation of the data selection process and analytical method of RTA, the chapter will present each identified theme in turn:

1. An Alternative Story: Russia's Version of Events
2. Russian Cooperation and Western Obstructionism
3. Technical and Procedural Critiques of the FFM Investigation
4. Bias and Manipulation of the FFM Investigation
5. Illegitimacy and Manipulation of the IIT Investigation

In line with the sub-question above, this chapter will focus on providing a detailed representation of the arguments and critiques comprising each theme, as identified via the data analysis process. The identification of these specific critiques and arguments is crucial for answering the main research question, whilst the next chapter will analyse them in a conceptually-grounded manner in relation to sub-question 3.

3.1 Data Selection and Method of Analysis

3.1.1 Data Selection

To analyse the critiques and arguments employed by Russian officials to undermine the OPCW investigations, it was first necessary to sample and select relevant statements. Mason defines sampling and selection as the “principles and procedures used to identify and gain access to relevant data sources that are potentially generative in relation to a wider universe, and to select from them for the purposes of meaningful insights into your intellectual puzzle.”¹³¹ Data must be “suitably generative of the type of knowledge you want to develop” – a strategic approach to selecting generative data is thus required.¹³² Guided by this principle, I selected statements via a three-step process of identifying relevant sources and actors; compiling potential statements; and reviewing and selecting relevant statements for analysis.

Having identified the opportunity to build on existing literature by closely analysing the critiques and arguments employed by Russian officials to challenge the Douma investigations as part of a multidimensional disinformation campaign, identifying the sources of relevant statements and the key officials and departments involved was the logical first step in the data selection process. Through open-source online research, I identified Russian statements to the OPCW Executive Council and Conference – made primarily by Russia’s Permanent Representative to the organisation Alexander Shulgin – and those issued by the MFA – especially the Information and Press Department and its Director Maria Zakharova –

¹³¹ Jennifer Mason, *Qualitative Researching*, 3rd ed., (London: Sage, 2018), 53.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 54.

to be the main sources. The focus on these sources of statements is reflected in the study's main research question.

Figure 6: Alexander Shulgin ¹³³



Figure 7: Maria Zakharova ¹³⁴



¹³³ "US Encouraging Chemical Terrorism by Supporting Extremists in Syria: Russia's OPCW Envoy," *TASS*, November 23, 2018, <https://tass.com/world/1032319>.

¹³⁴ "Maria Vladimirovna Zakharova: Director of the Information and Press Department," The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, accessed July 23, 2024, https://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/dip/director/.

Secondly, I compiled a large set of statements for review from within the relevant timeframe for the study: the date of the incident on April 7th 2018 to the end of 2023, the year that the IIT report was published. This involved, firstly, compiling each Russian statement to the OPCW Conference and Executive Council within that period using the OPCW’s online archive and, secondly, using keyword searches to identify potentially relevant statements within the MFA’s online public communications archive.¹³⁵ Finally, I reviewed each statement, selecting for analysis all those with substantial discussion of the Douma incident or investigations – discussion exceeding, for example, a passing one-sentence reference. In total, I selected 51 statements. A full, chronologically-ordered list can be found in Appendix 1, whilst the following table provides a summary:¹³⁶

Figure 8: Data Selection Summary

Total Statements	
51	
Number of Statements by Source	
MFA Archive	32
OPCW Archive	19
Numbers of Statements by Year	
2018	20
2019	14
2020	5
2021	5
2022	0
2023	7

¹³⁵ To access these archives, see: <https://www.opcw.org/resources/documents> (OPCW); and https://mid.ru/en/press_service/spokesman/official_statement/ (MFA).

¹³⁶ In the following analysis, statements are cited through reference to their ‘statement number’ (e.g. ‘Statement 1’, ‘Statement 2’ etc.). Statement numbers are indicated in Appendix 1. This citation system has been used for additional clarity for the reader given the large number of statements with very similar titles and sometimes released by the same actor on the same date. Full information about the provenance of each statement can be found in Appendix 1.

Most relevant statements were made in 2018, the year of the incident, and 2019, the year of the FFM Final Report. Meanwhile, the seven statements made in 2023 followed the publication of the IIT report.

One limitation of the data selection process was that, as a non-Russian speaker, I was limited to English-language statements only. Nevertheless, given my focus on statements targeted to an international audience, and thus readily available in translation, this was not a major problem. All statements in the MFA public communications archive were available in English, as were all but two relevant Russian statements to the OPCW.¹³⁷

3.1.2 Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Analysis of statements followed Braun and Clarke’s framework of RTA, “a method for developing, analysing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset, which involves systematic processes of data coding to develop themes.”¹³⁸ Whilst often used to analyse interview data, RTA is highly applicable to document analysis.¹³⁹ The ‘reflexive’ approach stresses the active role of the researcher in knowledge production, recognising subjectivity and interpretation as central to qualitative analysis.¹⁴⁰ Themes are developed by organising clusters of codes around a central commonality, in contrast with other approaches whereby themes are generated early in or prior to the coding process.¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ For unknown reasons, official translations of two specific Russian statements to the OPCW (Statements 48 and 49) were unavailable. Having unsuccessfully requested official translations from the OPCW press office, I decided to utilise an online tool to translate them. The fact that Statements 48 and 49 were not available in English has been noted in Appendix 1.

¹³⁸ Braun and Clarke, *Thematic Analysis*, 4.

¹³⁹ Hani Morgan, “Conducting Qualitative Document Analysis,” *The Qualitative Report* 27 (2022): 73.

¹⁴⁰ Braun and Clarke, *Thematic Analysis*, 4.

¹⁴¹ David Byrne, “A Worked Example of Braun and Clarke's Approach to Reflexive Thematic Analysis,” *Quality and Quantity* 56 (2022): 1393.

I followed a five-step process to analyse the selected statements and generate themes:

- *Data Familiarisation*: This entailed a close reading of each statement in the dataset.¹⁴² At this stage I also uploaded all the statements to NVIVO 14, which I utilised for the coding process.
- *Generating Codes*: Coding involves the development and application of “descriptive or interpretive labels for pieces of information that may be of relevance to the research question.”¹⁴³ Whilst deductive, theory-driven coding can also be used in RTA, I followed an inductive, data-driven approach – the purpose of the conceptual framework in this study is to analyse the themes identified in statements, not to generate theoretically pre-defined codes. Furthermore, I pursued a combination of semantic (or descriptive) and latent (or interpretive) coding, engaging with both the surface-level meanings of the data and underlying ideas.¹⁴⁴ I systematically coded the whole dataset in a chronological order, making revisions and changes to previous codes as required in line with the reflexive principles of RTA. The full codebook, including code definitions, can be found in Appendix 2.
- *Generating Themes*: After coding all statements, I organised clusters of related codes into candidate themes, guided by the principle that themes must be internally lucid, externally distinct, and reflective of the breadth of the dataset.¹⁴⁵
- *Reviewing Themes*: I reviewed the coded data items within each candidate theme, checking for internal coherence and external heterogeneity and moving codes as required.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴² Ibid., 1398.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 1399.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 1397.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 1403.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 1404.

- *Defining and Naming Themes:* This involved a close review of the data within each theme in relation research sub-question 2 and the subsequent identification of key extracts to be used in the analytical discussion below.¹⁴⁷

3.2 Theme 1: An Alternative Story: Russia’s Version of Events

*Figure 9: Theme 1 Coding Summary*¹⁴⁸

Codes	Statements Containing Code	Code Frequency
Evidence of Staging Uncovered by Russian Investigators	3	3
Evidence of Western Involvement	1	1
False Attack as Staged Provocation	27	31
History of Staged Provocations	10	14
Illogical to Use CW in Douma	1	1
Inconsistencies in Douma Footage	4	6
Independent Investigations into Staging	3	3
Media Reports of Staging	3	4
No Evidence Found by Russian Investigators	1	1
Proof Incident was Staged	14	19
Provocation Directed by Western States	4	6
Staging Perpetrated by White Helmets and NGOs	15	18
Testimony of Douma Residents	9	10

This first theme relates to Russian officials’ alternative explanation for the Douma incident of April 7th 2018 and the evidence presented to support their claims. From their earliest statements on the attack until after the 2023 publication of the IIT report, officials

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 1407.

¹⁴⁸ ‘Statements Containing Code’ refers to the number of statements in which the given code was used at least once. ‘Code Frequency’, meanwhile, refers to the total number of times this code was used. This number frequently exceeds the number of ‘Statements Containing Code’ because codes were often used multiple times in a single statement. Whilst RTA differs fundamentally from the quantitative method of Content Analysis, the number of statements containing a given code and the code frequency is indicative of a code’s prevalence throughout the statements analysed.

constructed a consistent and compelling argument that the incident was a cynical provocation staged by the White Helmets, in conjunction with Western governments, designed to legitimise the use of military force by the US, UK, and France against the Assad regime. Proof presented included Russian military investigations on the ground, the testimony of residents, media reports, and independent investigations supporting the ‘staging’ scenario.

An MFA press release the day after the incident on April 7th warned that,

False information is being planted about the alleged use of chlorine and other toxic agents by the Syrian government forces. The latest fake news about a chemical attack on Douma was reported yesterday. These reports are again referenced to the notorious White Helmets... We recently warned of the possibility of such dangerous provocations.¹⁴⁹

Allegations of a provocation were swiftly followed by assertions that the staged incident was directed by Western powers – primarily the US and UK – to justify strikes on Syrian government facilities. In a statement to the Executive Council the following week, Alexander Shulgin claimed that “Everything went in accordance with the script that had been prepared in Washington”, simultaneously dismissing the incident as “nothing but a planned provocation of the United Kingdom Secret Service... in order to deceive the international community and justify their aggression in Syria.”¹⁵⁰ The story of a staged provocation – perpetrated by the White Helmets and directed by Western governments – was consistently pursued in ensuing statements.

Officials presented a range of evidence to support their claims. An investigation conducted by “high professionals and world-class experts” in the Russian military apparently

¹⁴⁹ Statement 1.

¹⁵⁰ Statement 4.

found no evidence of a chemical attack, but instead discovered alleged witnesses of the staging.¹⁵¹ These witnesses – including a six-year-old boy – were subsequently transported to The Hague to testify about “what really happened in Douma” in a press conference on April 26th 2018.¹⁵² At the same event, officials presented “undeniable proofs” that video footage of the incident had been doctored.¹⁵³ Later, evidence from journalists, such as American reporter James Harkin (who questioned the veracity of footage from the incident), and ‘independent’ investigations, such as that undertaken by Maxim Grigoriev of the pro-Russian Foundation for the Study of Democracy, was cited as further proof.¹⁵⁴ Lastly, officials highlighted an alleged precedence of staged chemical provocations in Syria, pointing especially to the 2017 Khan Shaykhun incident which similarly led to US missile strikes; “Now we have seen that the incident in Douma was a rude provocation – quite similar to the one in Khan-Shaykhun. Both of them have been conducted under one scenario.”, claimed Shulgin.¹⁵⁵

Whilst not directly addressing the OPCW investigations, the alternative version of events constructed by Russian officials is intimately connected to their attempts to undermine them. By pre-empting the investigations with a consistent and coherent explanation, supported by supposedly incontrovertible evidence of foul play, officials laid the groundwork to challenge the credibility of any findings which contradicted their version of events. This is perhaps the most fundamental way to challenge a fact-finding mission: the production of a compelling alternative story.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Statement 8.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Statement 21; Statement 26.

¹⁵⁵ Statement 9.

3.3 Theme 2: Russian Cooperation and Western Obstructionism

Figure 10: Theme 2 Coding Summary

Codes	Statements Containing Code	Code Frequency
<i>Sub-Theme 2A: Russian Cooperation with Investigations</i>		
Demand for FFM Impartiality	9	9
Denial of Obstructing Investigation	10	13
Desire to Find the Truth	14	18
Guarantee of FFM Security	1	1
Praise for OPCW and Staff	5	8
Request for FFM Deployment	5	6
Russian and Syrian Cooperation with Inspectors	11	12
Welcoming FFM Deployment	8	10
<i>Sub-Theme 2B: Western Obstructionism</i>		
Condemnation of Strikes on Syria	8	10
Destruction of Evidence	1	1
Politicisation of OPCW	9	9
Pressuring of Secretariat by Western States	8	10
Strikes Obstructing and Endangering FFM	11	12
Western States Pre-Empting FFM	8	12
Western States Rejecting the Truth	17	19
Western States Spreading Disinformation	10	16

Theme 2 comprises two sub-themes which, when analysed together, convey the desire of Russian officials to clearly delineate the conduct of Russia and its Syrian ally, on one hand, and that of Western powers – primarily the US, UK, and France – on the other, over the course of the FFM investigation. Statements present Russia and Syria as compliant, cooperative, and seeking an impartial OPCW investigation to uncover the truth behind the Douma incident. In contrast, Western states are depicted as pariahs, illegally launching missile strikes on Syria, pre-empting an objective investigation, spreading disinformation, and pressuring the OPCW to do their bidding.

3.3.1 Sub-Theme 2A: Russian Cooperation with Investigations

Interestingly, Russian representatives and their Syrian counterparts were swift to request the deployment of an FFM team to Douma and welcomed its arrival. Officials subsequently emphasised this fact, also stressing the work being done by Russian forces to facilitate the investigation. For example, Shulgin stated to the Executive Council on April 16th 2018 that,

This mission, I recall, was dispatched with the consent of the Syrian authorities...The Russian Federation, in its turn, has also offered every support to the OPCW Technical Secretariat in carrying out this mission. Given the fact that the Russian Military Police Forces are deployed in Douma we have an opportunity to ensure security in those areas where the OPCW inspectors will work. Of course, we will not impose this aid. The mission should do its work impartially.¹⁵⁶

Allegations that Russia had obstructed investigations – for example by restricting access or removing witnesses – were fiercely denied.¹⁵⁷ Rather, officials repeatedly emphasised their desire to find the truth and insisted that “the real perpetrators of the use of chemical weapons must be identified and brought to account.”¹⁵⁸ The OPCW investigation, asserted Maria Zakharova in December 2018, must be conducted “transparently, professionally and without regard for the political orders of any Western countries, even the most influential.”¹⁵⁹ Overall, Russian officials at the MFA and OPCW emphasised their cooperation with FFM inspectors and desire for an impartial investigation – the suggestion being that this would inevitably confirm their version of events.

¹⁵⁶ Statement 4.

¹⁵⁷ Statement 32.

¹⁵⁸ Statement 15.

¹⁵⁹ Statement 20.

3.3.2 Sub-Theme 2B: Western Obstructionism

In stark contrast, officials condemned US, UK, and French strikes as an illegal act of aggression, arguing that they delayed and obstructed FFM inspectors and pre-empted an objective investigation.¹⁶⁰ Speaking to the Executive Council, Shulgin accused the US and its allies of “waging information warfare and dissemination of fake news”, deflecting these allegations away from Russia itself.¹⁶¹ Whereas Russian officials stressed their desire to uncover the truth, they accused Western powers of rejecting it. For example, Shulgin condemned the decision of several Western countries to boycott a Russian briefing on Douma, characterising them as “reluctant to acknowledge their wrong-doing” and pursuing an “ostrich policy”, whilst putting up a “smoke screen of disinformation and defamation”.¹⁶² Importantly, Western governments were also accused of attempting to pressurise the Technical Secretariat – “while proclaiming their commitment to the elimination of chemical weapons and the strengthening of the OPCW’s role, they completely disregard it or seek to manipulate the organisation”, complained Zakharova at an MFA press briefing in July 2019.¹⁶³ This links closely to accusations of manipulation within the FFM and IIT, which this chapter will further elaborate on.

3.3.3 Russia and Syria vs The West

Assessing these two sub-themes together, a division is drawn between the compliant and principled actions of Russia and Syria and the illegal, disruptive, and manipulative actions of the US, UK, France and their Western allies. These contrasting portrayals do not

¹⁶⁰ Statement 3; Statement 8.

¹⁶¹ Statement 10.

¹⁶² Statement 12.

¹⁶³ Statement 26.

directly undermine the OPCW’s investigations but remain significant for two reasons. Firstly, the image of a cooperative, compliant Russia and Syria – actively requesting and welcoming an impartial FFM investigation – seeks to dispel notions of a cover-up and accusations of obstruction, bolstering the story of Syrian victimhood previously outlined. Secondly, the image of an aggressive US-led West, rejecting the truth and pressurising the OPCW, lays the groundwork for OPCW findings contradicting the Russian version of events to be portrayed as a surrender to Western manipulation and disinformation.

3.4 Theme 3: Technical and Procedural Critiques of the FFM Investigation

Figure 11: Theme 3 Coding Summary

Codes	Statements Containing Code	Code Frequency
Critique of General FFM Investigatory Procedures	5	5
Critiques of Assessment of Chemical Cylinders	6	12
Critiques of Chemical Analysis	4	6
Delay of FFM Deployment	1	1
Delay to FFM Final Report Publication	1	1
FFM Limiting Site Visits and Interviews	3	3
Improvement of FFM Required	5	5
Unreliability of White Helmets	10	13

Despite requesting and initially welcoming the FFM’s deployment, Russian representatives extensively critiqued the investigation. These critiques can be divided into two thematic categories: those challenging the investigation from a technical, procedural perspective, discussed here, and those alleging bias and manipulation from a political perspective, discussed below. The critiques included in this theme target the investigation’s

technical implementation – its competence as opposed to its integrity – focussing on issues such as delays and analytical procedures.

Officials vigorously critiqued the implementation of the FFM investigation – an investigation they supposedly wanted – from the beginning of its deployment until after the publication of the Final Report. At an MFA press briefing on April 21st 2018, Zakharova described the 11 days it took for FFM inspectors to arrive as an “unacceptable” delay, also highlighting the limited number of planned site visits and witness interviews as “a matter of serious concern”.¹⁶⁴ Upon release of the Interim Report on July 6th 2018, officials condemned the methods employed. For example, Zakharova complained that “It is totally incomprehensible why only 31 of the 100 samples the FFM collected in Douma were selected for analysis at the designated labs.”¹⁶⁵ She also argued that the chemical sample analysis did not appear “professional”.¹⁶⁶ Shulgin, meanwhile, criticised the FFM’s use of unreliable evidence from the “notorious pseudo-humanitarian” White Helmets, supposedly collected in violation of “the established order of collection and preservation of evidence (chain of custody).”¹⁶⁷

Shortly after the release of the FFM’s Final Report on March 1st 2019, Russia circulated a Note Verbale at the Executive Council which systematically challenged the investigatory procedures and technical assessments of the FFM, further undermining the mission’s competence and the reliability of its findings.¹⁶⁸ Criticisms included, for example, further accusations that chain of custody principles had not been correctly followed;

¹⁶⁴ Statement 7.

¹⁶⁵ Statement 18.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Statement 19.

¹⁶⁸ Statement 24.

assertions that chemical analysis in Location 4 indicated that the aperture through which the gas cylinder had supposedly entered was instead caused by an explosion; and the argument that, had the cylinders been delivered aurally, they would have displayed far greater damage.¹⁶⁹ Through these critiques, officials painted a picture of an incompetent FFM investigation drawing on unreliable evidence and utilising flawed technical procedures to generate erroneous conclusions.

3.5 Theme 4: Bias and Manipulation of the FFM Investigation

Figure 12: Theme 4 Coding Summary

Codes	Statements Containing Code	Code Frequency
Bias of Final Report	8	8
Bias of Interim Report	1	3
Doctored Final Report	6	7
Evidence from OPCW Leaks	10	11
Falsification of Evidence by FFM	10	11
FFM Experts Sidelined	4	4
Independent Expert Critiques of FFM	10	13
Lack of Transparency in Confidentiality Investigation	3	5
Media Critiques of FFM	4	4
Omissions in Interim Report	2	3
Prevention of FFM Expert Testimony	9	13
Prevention of Publication of Technical Assessments	3	4
Problems with Findings of FFM Final Report	7	14
Reliance on External Expert Assessments	5	6
Selective Use of Evidence in Final Report	6	7
Tailoring of FFM Findings	8	8
Use of FFM Report to Justify Strikes	6	6
Western Influence Over FFM	5	6

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

In parallel with the technical critiques outlined above, Russian officials expounded a more prominent, extensive, and damaging set of allegations that the FFM investigation was subject to intentional, politically motivated manipulation. Officials alleged that the reports were biased and that findings were tailor-made to retrospectively justify US, UK, and French strikes on Syria, with Western officials influencing the investigation. Within this supposed conspiracy, evidence was allegedly falsified and selectively used whilst FFM experts were sidelined in favour of suspect external assessments. As evidence of this malign activity, officials cited media reports, independent experts, and, particularly, the leaked OPCW material highlighted in the previous chapter.

Accusations of bias and manipulation began with the publication of the Interim Report, perhaps because it became clear at that stage that the investigation would likely refute Russia's version of events. Without further elaboration, Zakharova claimed that "the reader can immediately see the political bias" of the report, casting doubt on its impartiality.¹⁷⁰ Subsequent statements prior to the Final Report's publication continued to question this, with Shulgin arguing in November 2018 that the "Impartiality of the FFM can be doubted as long as the two heads of the Mission were British nationals. They have presumably gained such positions in order to come to the 'right' conclusions."¹⁷¹ Such statements clearly challenged the integrity of the investigation and its staff.

Most allegations, however, came after the publication of the Final Report. Rejecting the mission's findings, officials argued that evidence presented by Russia – such as the testimony of Douma residents – had been intentionally ignored, whilst experts within the

¹⁷⁰ Statement 18.

¹⁷¹ Statement 19.

FFM had been sidelined in favour of external assessments in a process lacking transparency.¹⁷² Whereas external experts were, in reality, consulted due to their specific technical knowledge, Zakharova argued in July 2019 that they had been drafted in to reach the conclusions desired by the US.¹⁷³ Russia subsequently demanded an in-person briefing with all individuals involved in the FFM alongside the full publication of the external technical assessments – the OPCW’s denial of this request was portrayed as evidence of a cover-up. “One gets the very strong impression that any and all attempts are being made to hide the truth from us”, stated one Russian official to the Conference in November 2019.¹⁷⁴

Leaked material relating to the FFM was presented as further evidence that the investigation was compromised and the Final Report manipulated, with Henderson and Whelan portrayed as courageous whistleblowers standing up to injustice. According to Zakharova, the leaked documents confirmed Russia’s suspicions of the “politically biased falsification of the reports by the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission, unprecedented in its cynicism and scale”.¹⁷⁵ The leaks also served as the basis for the specific accusation that evidence had been falsified and the report doctored – or even “completely rewritten” – prior to publication after a briefing by US officials.¹⁷⁶ Speaking in July 2021, Zakharova argued that Henderson and Whelan “deserve credit for their personal courage. Despite being pressured by a certain group of countries consolidated by Euro-Atlantic ‘values’, Mr Henderson and Mr Whelan have been fighting for the credibility of the Nobel Peace Prize-winning organisation for two years.”¹⁷⁷ Whereas the OPCW sought to dismiss Henderson and Whelan as disillusioned and uninformed, Russian statements attempted to legitimise their claims. In addition to the leaks,

¹⁷² Statement 26.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Statement 30.

¹⁷⁵ Statement 36.

¹⁷⁶ Statement 37.

¹⁷⁷ Statement 41.

officials also cited a variety of independent critiques of the FFM stemming from media reports to former OPCW staff, including ex-Director-General José Bustani, to bolster their accusations.¹⁷⁸

This set of allegations, more prominent than the technical and procedural critiques, directly challenged the impartiality of OPCW staff and the FFM, also disputing the transparency of the investigation. Russian officials argued that, rather than seeking to establish objective facts surrounding events in Douma, the FFM instead sought to advance the narrow interests of a small group of Western states through the production of a manipulated and falsified report which justified their strikes on Syrian facilities. Such accusations undermine the perceived impartiality and depoliticisation which is so crucial to fact-finding missions and international organisations, presenting a more damaging challenge than the technical critiques previously highlighted.

3.6 Theme 5: Illegitimacy and Manipulation of the IIT Investigation

Figure 13: Theme 5 Coding Summary

Codes	Statements Containing Code	Code Frequency
Critiques of IIT Cylinder Findings	1	1
Falsification of IIT Report	5	8
IIT Based on Unreliable FFM Findings	1	1
Illegitimacy of IIT Mandate	6	8
Refusal to Cooperate with IIT	1	1
Selective Use of Evidence by IIT	2	2
Tailoring of IIT Findings	1	1
Use of IIT Report to Justify Strikes	4	4
Western Influence Over IIT Investigation	4	7

¹⁷⁸ Statement 44.

Critiques of the IIT investigation were less extensive and varied than those relating to the FFM and can be organised into a single theme, amounting to a total dismissal of the investigation. Officials entirely rejected the legitimacy of the IIT's mandate, characterising it as an illegal body, and dismissed its report into the Douma incident as a falsification designed to justify US, UK and French missile strikes. The IIT was, essentially, presented as a tool through which Western powers could pressurise the Syrian regime and justify their illegal actions.

In contrast to their approach to the FFM outlined in Theme 2, Russian officials made no attempt to feign cooperation with the IIT, instead reaffirming their consistent rejection of the body's mandate upheld since its establishment in 2018. Statements emphasised the Russian stance that the IIT's establishment violated the CWC and encroached on the powers of the UNSC. For example, Shulgin argued in March 2023 to the Executive Council that, "Never has the UN Security Council delegated its authority under Article 7 of the UN Charter to the OPCW or its Secretariat. Thus, the activities of the IIT not only fall entirely outside the legal framework of the Convention but also violate the UN Charter."¹⁷⁹ In light of this perceived illegitimacy, officials stressed that non-cooperation with the investigation "is a matter of principle for Russia."¹⁸⁰ This complete rejection of the IIT's mandate was a key element of Russia's critique of the body's investigation into the Douma incident.

Meanwhile, the IIT report was dismissed as "yet another fabricated concoction".¹⁸¹ Summarising the Russian position, Shulgin told the Executive Council in March 2023 that,

¹⁷⁹ Statement 49.

¹⁸⁰ Statement 45.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

In short, in our view, the report and the conclusions of this report are simply fulfilling a political order handed down to the Technical Secretariat by the Americans, the French, and the British to absolve this trio of countries of responsibility for the unprovoked aggression against the Syrian Arab Republic on the night of April 14, when they launched a massive missile strike.¹⁸²

Further advancing the idea of Western manipulation, an MFA statement asserted that “The experienced hand of NATO secret services is clearly visible through the text of the report.”¹⁸³ No elaboration was provided. Criticisms of specific details of the investigation were limited, far removed from the intricate technical attention afforded to the FFM. Nevertheless, officials further disputed that the chemical cylinders could have been delivered by air – their primary critique of the actual content of the IIT report – and argued that the investigatory process was flawed from the outset due to its reliance on the supposedly corrupted evidence of the FFM.¹⁸⁴ Statements largely did not engage with the content of the findings or details of the investigatory process beyond this, and did not comment on the IIT’s systematic dismissal of the ‘staging’ scenario.

Overall, Russian statements critiquing the IIT investigation into the Douma incident were limited in number and scope but were highly consistent, challenging it in two regards. Firstly, statements rejected the legitimacy of the IIT’s mandate, characterising it as an abuse of the OPCW’s authority. Secondly, officials argued that the investigation was falsified, with findings tailor-made in line with the orders of Western states led by the US, UK, and France. These accusations closely echoed the critiques levelled towards the FFM, challenging the impartiality of the investigation and the OPCW more broadly.

¹⁸² Statement 49.

¹⁸³ Statement 45.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.; Statement 49.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the specific arguments and critiques employed by Russian officials at the OPCW and MFA to undermine the FFM and IIT investigations into the Douma attack. After explaining the data selection process and analytical method of RTA, the chapter presented each of the five themes identified in Russian statements and detailed the arguments comprising them. Firstly, it explained Russian officials' alternative version of events which centred on the argument that the attack was a staged provocation perpetrated by the White Helmets. Secondly, it highlighted the contrasting characterisation of Russia and Syria's conduct – cooperative, compliant, and constructive – and that of Western states – aggressive, disruptive, and obstructionist. Thirdly, the chapter described Russia's technical and procedural critiques of the FFM investigation, which challenged the investigatory competence of the mission. Fourthly, it addressed Russian accusations of bias and manipulation within the FFM investigation, allegations which strongly challenged the mission's impartiality and transparency. Finally, it explained Russia's critiques of the IIT, which focussed on the legitimacy of the body's mandate and further accusations of manipulation.

Chapter 4: Russia's Contestation of the Authority and Legitimacy of the Investigations and the OPCW

Chapter 2 applied the study's conceptual framework to the OPCW, FFM, and IIT, analysing their claims to authority, whilst the previous chapter identified the specific arguments and critiques employed by Russian officials surrounding the Douma incident and investigations, organised into five themes. This chapter will analyse those arguments and critiques in relation to the study's conceptual framework, focussing on the following sub-question:

How did the arguments and critiques employed by Russian officials challenge the authority and legitimacy of the FFM and IIT investigations?

Firstly, the chapter will argue that Russian officials' alternative explanation for the attack represented a claim to epistemic authority over the event, thereby challenging the OPCW's own claim. Secondly, it will discuss why Russian officials accepted the FFM's mandate and highlight how, in contrast, they heavily challenged that of the IIT. Thirdly, it will outline how officials challenged the implementation of the FFM investigation, simultaneously challenging the OPCW's expert authority. Finally, the chapter will demonstrate how allegations of manipulation regarding both investigations fundamentally challenged the claim to impartiality which is central to both the epistemic authority of the FFM and IIT, and to the authority and legitimacy of the OPCW itself.

4.1 Russia's Claim to Epistemic Authority

The alternative explanation for the Douma attack presented by Russian officials represented a claim to epistemic authority which challenged that of the OPCW investigations. This explanation, highlighted in Theme 1, centred on the argument that the incident was a staged provocation perpetrated by the White Helmets, colluding with Western governments, and that Russia had uncovered irrefutable proof of this conspiracy. As previously outlined, fact-finding missions are mechanisms of knowledge production deployed to allow IOs to establish a claim to epistemic authority – “the claim to provide objective and impartial knowledge” – over a disputed set of events.¹⁸⁵ By pre-emptively offering their own account, supposedly grounded in hard evidence, Russian representatives themselves claimed to provide objective, factual knowledge over the Douma incident; this claim subsequently allowed officials to challenge the contradictory findings and epistemic authority of the FFM and IIT.

Echoing the language of fact-finding missions, officials stressed the evidence-based nature of their conclusions and appealed to expert authority to support their claims. For example, the supposed rigour of the Russian military investigation was emphasised, whilst officials asserted that the evidence they presented, such as the testimony of Douma residents, constituted “undeniable proofs” of a fabricated provocation.¹⁸⁶ In addition to citing the expertise of their own investigators, representatives also drew on other sources of expert authority – alternative to that of the OPCW – to suggest that an expert consensus supported

¹⁸⁵ Lesch, “Contested Facts,” 2-3.

¹⁸⁶ Statement 8.

the Russian standpoint. For example, a January 2023 press release from the MFA responding to the IIT report's publication argued that,

There is no doubt that this was a staged chemical weapons attack. Syrian and Russian experts, as well as former members of the OPCW Technical Secretariat who were initially involved in investigating the provocation by the White Helmets and shared their eyewitness testimonies, as well as prominent independent international experts and human rights activists have presented exhaustive and accurate evidence to this effect in the OPCW, the UN Security Council and General Assembly.¹⁸⁷

By stressing the factuality of their account and appealing to expert authority, Russian officials strengthened their claim to epistemic authority – contradictory to that of the OPCW – over events in Douma.

Furthermore, this alternative explanation tied into a broader constellation of mutually-supporting Russian disinformation about the Syrian conflict. Jones et al. underline that, overall, Russian disinformation has sought to legitimise the Assad regime, challenge the Western characterisation of the conflict, and undermine local opposition.¹⁸⁸ The Syria Campaign further highlighted that false claims about the White Helmets – including accusations that they were colluding with extremist groups such as ISIL – formed a central pillar of this broader campaign.¹⁸⁹ Russia's explanation for the Douma attack – with the Assad regime portrayed as the innocent victim of an elaborate provocation staged by the rogue White Helmets and their Western allies – advanced, and was simultaneously supported by, this existing web of claims. By situating their explanation within existing narratives about the Syrian conflict, officials further strengthened the credibility of their claims whilst promoting their strategic goals.

¹⁸⁷ Statement 45.

¹⁸⁸ Jones et al., *Moscow's War in Syria*, 50.

¹⁸⁹ The Syria Campaign, *Deadly Disinformation*, 6.

4.2 Delegation and Mandate Legitimacy

Factors relating the delegation and mandate of a fact-finding mission are key to its epistemic authority.¹⁹⁰ A legitimate mandate and mandating body heighten a mission's credibility and epistemic authority, whilst perceived illegitimacy degrades this claim. The concept of legitimacy, meanwhile, relates to audience perceptions surrounding the appropriate exercise of authority – perceptions which can be influenced via the communicative processes of (de-)legitimation.¹⁹¹

Considering this, Russian officials' acceptance of the FFM's mandate and request for its deployment – highlighted in Sub-Theme 2A – is perhaps surprising, especially in light of the breakdown in cooperation between Russia/Syria and the OPCW from 2015 onwards.¹⁹² There are two central explanations for this decision. Firstly, having previously accepted the legitimacy of the FFM's mandate (with the FFM established prior to 2015), a sudden U-turn could have heightened suspicion that a Syrian-perpetrated attack had indeed taken place. Instead, officials likely believed that requesting and welcoming the FFM's deployment would give an impression of Syrian innocence, express confidence in Russia's explanation of events, and enhance a sense that the Russian government was determined to reach the objective truth of the matter.

Secondly, the decision helped Russian officials to differentiate between their own self-reportedly good behaviour and that of Western states, primarily the US, UK, and France. As outlined in Sub-Theme 2B, Russian officials accused these states of an aggressive

¹⁹⁰ Lesch, "Contested Facts," 10.

¹⁹¹ Tallberg and Zürn, "Legitimacy and Legitimation," 583-586.

¹⁹² Koblentz, "Chemical-Weapon Use in Syria," 579.

violation of international law, obstructing and pressurising the OPCW, spreading disinformation, and rejecting the truth. This reflected an attempt to deflect these accusations away from Russia and Syria, whilst also portraying the OPCW as being under heavy pressure from Western states and associating the idea that the attack had been perpetrated by the Assad regime with Western disinformation.

In contrast, Russian representatives made no show of cooperation with the IIT, entirely rejecting the legitimacy of its mandate. This likely stemmed both from the fact that the Russian government had never accepted the IIT's mandate – with attribution for chemical attacks potentially extremely damaging to the Assad regime's legitimacy – and that the FFM report demonstrated that OPCW investigators disagreed with Russia's explanation. In arguing that the IIT's mandate went beyond the remit of the Technical Secretariat as defined by the CWC, officials delegitimised the investigation by characterising it as exceeding the OPCW's delegated authority. Moreover, by asserting that Western states had “forced” the OPCW to form the IIT, officials portrayed it as a politicised instrument of Western control, further delegitimising it.¹⁹³ Overall, a total rejection of the IIT's mandate to investigate the Douma incident and determine responsibility for the attack was central to Russian officials' attempts to undermine the investigation.

4.3 Implementation and Expert Authority

Despite welcoming the deployment of the FFM, Russian statements concertedly undermined the implementation and competence of the investigation through procedural and technical critiques that challenged both its epistemic authority and the expert authority of the

¹⁹³ Statement 47.

OPCW. The implementation of a fact-finding mission relates to the technical procedures and investigatory processes through which evidence is collected and conclusions are reached – crucial to the mission’s claim to provide credible, objective knowledge of a set of disputed events.¹⁹⁴

Russian officials systematically challenged the implementation of the FFM investigation. As identified in Theme 3 of the previous chapter, this ranged from complaints about the time taken to deploy the mission to allegations that FFM staff had incorrectly followed chain of custody principles and disputes surrounding the technical assessments of the two chemical cylinders. Whereas the OPCW’s Interim and Final Reports – as explained in Chapter 2 – emphasised the strict procedures followed by FFM investigators, the rigorous scientific methods employed, and the technical expertise of staff, Russian statements painted an entirely different picture. They portrayed the FFM’s investigatory work as sloppy, scientifically dubious, and unreliable. With the implementation of a fact-finding mission forming a central pillar of its claim to epistemic authority, these critiques represented a clear challenge to that of the FFM.

Through these critiques of the FFM, officials also demonstrated a refusal to defer to the expert authority of the OPCW as the mission’s delegating body. As Barnett and Finnemore highlight, the expertise and specialised knowledge held by the staff of IOs encourages deference to their judgements.¹⁹⁵ Typically, this is especially applicable in highly technical situations like chemical weapons investigations. Nevertheless, expertise does not guarantee deference, as demonstrated in this case. The technical and procedural critiques

¹⁹⁴ Lesch, “Contested Facts,” 12-13.

¹⁹⁵ Barnett and Finnemore, *Rules for the World*, 24.

directed towards the FFM by Russian representatives challenged the competence and technical professionalism of the Secretariat, thereby contesting the expert authority of the OPCW.

Officials noticeably chose not to go to the same lengths to challenge the technical implementation of the IIT investigation. Indeed, statements did not engage with the substance of the IIT report beyond brief critiques of the assessment of the two cylinders and its use of evidence produced by the FFM. Officials instead focussed their critiques on the IIT's mandate, highlighted above, and allegations that the investigation was falsified, expanded on below. This decision may have stemmed from the fact that, as explained in Chapter 2, the IIT report was extremely detailed in its evidence-based assessment of the incident and systematically debunked Russia's 'staging' scenario. Considering this, officials chose not to engage with the implementation of the investigation and content of the report, instead entirely dismissing the investigation as an illegitimate falsification. In addition, it must also be noted that Russian officials simply made fewer statements about the IIT investigation than the FFM, meaning that less detailed critique was inevitable.

4.4 Impartiality, Authority, and Legitimacy

Perceived impartiality is crucial both for the epistemic authority of fact-finding missions and the authority of IOs. The epistemic authority of a fact-finding mission rests on the claim to provide impartial, factual knowledge, independent of political interests.¹⁹⁶ Meanwhile, impartiality and depoliticisation is also an important element of an IO's claim to

¹⁹⁶ Lesch, "Contested Facts," 9.

rational-legal and moral authority.¹⁹⁷ Russian officials' extensive allegations that the FFM and IIT investigations were biased and manipulated presented a damaging challenge to this impartiality, undermining the epistemic authority of each investigation and the authority and legitimacy of the OPCW itself.

As highlighted in Themes 4 and 5 of the previous chapter, officials alleged that the FFM and IIT had been manipulated on a politically motivated basis. Regarding the FFM, they argued that evidence had been selectively used and falsified, dissenting experts sidelined, and the Final Report doctored, with its findings tailor-made to retrospectively justify US, UK, and French strikes on Syria. OPCW staff allegedly undertook these cynical actions in collusion with Western governments, with leaked material misleadingly presented as evidence of this. Subsequent allegations regarding the IIT echoed these claims, focussing on the accusation that the falsified IIT report had been crafted to the political orders of the US and its allies to assign guilt to the Syrian regime, thereby justifying the military response.

Impartiality is critical to a fact-finding mission's claim to epistemic authority over a disputed set of events, making these allegations particularly damaging. Whilst the OPCW reports stressed the procedural transparency and professionalism of the investigations and the factual, evidence-based nature of their findings, Russian officials rejected this. Indeed, even actions aimed at enhancing the rigour and objectivity of the investigations were portrayed as sinister and suspicious – a clear example of this is the way that officials turned the consultation of independent, external experts against the FFM. Allegations of manipulation and falsification within each investigation contradicted the OPCW's claim to provide objective, impartial knowledge over the events of 7th April 2018 in Douma, instead

¹⁹⁷ Barnett and Finnemore, *Rules for the World*, 20-23.

portraying the investigations as serving a narrow, political purpose – the vilification of the Syrian regime and legitimization of the Western response.

By arguing that the FFM and IIT served this political purpose, Russian representatives not only challenged their epistemic authority but also their legitimacy. The investigations were solely mandated to ascertain whether a chemical attack had occurred and to attribute responsibility for this attack, respectively; for them to instead be used to bolster the political agenda of a small group of Western states evidently does not represent an appropriate use of this delegated authority. Thus, allegations of manipulation which undermined the impartiality of the FFM and IIT investigations represented an especially damaging challenge.

Furthermore, the suggestion that OPCW staff manipulated the investigations to advance a political agenda undermined the rational-legal and moral authority of the organisation. As noted in the conceptual framework, rational-legal authority is derived from an IO's bureaucratic nature which generates a semblance of competence and impartiality that, in turn, encourages deference.¹⁹⁸ For Secretariat staff to manipulate fact-finding missions in collusion with specific member-states contradicts and undermines this. Moral authority, meanwhile, is derived from an IO's claim to pursue a goal or set of principles considered normatively good by member-states and the wider international audience.¹⁹⁹ In the OPCW's case, this is the cause of eliminating chemical weapons. The accusations by Russian officials that the OPCW, via the manipulation of the FFM and IIT, was not advancing this goal, but instead vilifying the innocent Syrian government and justifying the illegal actions of the US and its allies, inverted this claim. Rather than advancing the righteous cause of chemical

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 21.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 23.

disarmament and non-proliferation, manipulation of the FFM and IIT purportedly revealed an alternative, overtly political agenda.

Finally, Russian allegations that the OPCW's social purpose had been perverted into the political service of the US and its allies challenged the organisation's institutional legitimacy. The alleged pursuit of a cynical, political agenda – far removed from the OPCW's duty to uphold and promote the CWC – represents a flagrant abuse of the OPCW's recognised delegated authority. Thus, accusations of this nature demonstrate a clear attempt to delegitimise the organisation, with potential negative implications for its ability to continue to effectively govern the international chemical weapons regime.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how the arguments and critiques employed by Russian representatives at the OPCW and MFA sought to systematically undermine the epistemic authority and legitimacy of the FFM and IIT investigations, as well as the authority and legitimacy of the OPCW as the investigations' mandating body. The chapter firstly argued that Russia's alternative explanation of the incident constituted a competing claim to epistemic authority, strengthened by appeals to expert authority and its relationship to a broader web of disinformation. Secondly, it discussed the delegation of each investigation, highlighting how officials chose not to dispute the FFM's mandate, possibly to enhance a sense of Syrian innocence, whilst, in contrast, they dismissed that of the IIT, totally rejecting its legitimacy. Thirdly, the chapter addressed technical critiques of the FFM's implementation, arguing that these both undermined the epistemic authority of the investigation and contested the expert authority of the OPCW. Officials' lack of focus on the

implementation of the IIT was also noted. Finally, the chapter analysed accusations of manipulation surrounding both missions, highlighting how, by disputing their impartiality and that of OPCW staff, these allegations contested not only the epistemic authority and legitimacy of the FFM and IIT, but also the rational-authority, moral authority, and legitimacy of the OPCW.

Conclusion

5.1 Findings

This thesis has closely analysed how Russian representatives at the OPCW and MFA systematically attempted to undermine the OPCW's FFM and IIT investigations into the Douma chemical attack from the date of the incident on April 7th 2018 to the end of 2023. Whereas previous studies have assessed related Russian disinformation in the online sphere, this thesis focussed on the arguments and critiques espoused by government representatives through their official statements. The study has thus advanced existing literature on Russian disinformation campaigns surrounding the OPCW's chemical weapons investigations during the Syrian civil war. Furthermore, by adopting a framework conceptualising the authority and legitimacy of IOs and the specific claim to epistemic authority of fact-finding missions, the study went beyond merely identifying the specific arguments and critiques employed by officials, additionally analysing how they challenged the investigations.

Through the analysis of 51 Russian statements, the thesis identified five key themes within officials' arguments and critiques:

1. An Alternative Story: Russia's Version of Events
2. Russian Cooperation and Western Obstructionism
3. Technical and Procedural Critiques of the FFM Investigation
4. Bias and Manipulation of the FFM Investigation
5. Illegitimacy and Manipulation of the IIT Investigation

Firstly, officials presented an alternative explanation for events in Douma, arguing that the incident was a provocation staged by the White Helmets in collusion with the US-led West, aimed at demonising the Assad regime. Supposedly irrefutable evidence was cited in support of this claim. Secondly, officials emphasised the apparently cooperative and compliant conduct of Russia and Syria with regards to the FFM, contrasting this with that of the US, UK, and France, who they portrayed as pariahs bent on military reprisal and uninterested in objective investigation. Thirdly, despite welcoming the deployment of the FFM, Russian representatives vehemently criticised its technical implementation, ultimately characterising it as an incompetent and unreliable investigation. The fourth theme identified in the analysis reflected a shift from Russia's emphasis on cooperation with the FFM and primarily technical critiques of the investigation towards accusations of manipulation, beginning with the publication of the FFM Interim Report in July 2018. Officials argued that the FFM had been manipulated by OPCW staff to reach pre-determined findings designed to retrospectively justify Western strikes on Syria, drawing heavily on leaked OPCW material to support this claim. Lastly, officials disdainfully dismissed the IIT investigation. They rejected the legitimacy of its attributive mandate and, echoing the allegations made towards the FFM, asserted that the investigation had been manipulated with findings falsified to advance the same political agenda.

Whilst targeting each investigation slightly differently, these arguments and critiques systematically challenged both the epistemic authority of the FFM and IIT and the authority and legitimacy of the OPCW itself. Russia's alternative explanation of events – the staging scenario – represented a claim to epistemic authority over the incident which challenged that of the FFM and IIT with their inevitably contradictory findings. Meanwhile, the decision to accept the FFM's mandate and welcome the mission expressed confidence in the Syrian

regime's innocence, bolstering this claim. In contrast, officials never accepted the attributive mandate of the IIT, characterising it as an illegitimate abuse of the OPCW's delegated authority. Perhaps due to the damaging impact of the IIT's attributive agenda to the Assad regime's legitimacy, Russian representatives made no attempt to even feign cooperation with the investigation, instead seeking to entirely dismiss it. Regarding the investigations' technical implementation, the characterisation of the FFM as incompetent challenged the mission's epistemic authority and represented a contestation of the OPCW's expert authority. However, Russian representatives paid little attention to the technical implementation of the IIT and the content of the report, possibly due to its comprehensive and compelling dismissal of the staging scenario. Lastly, although their treatment of the delegation and technical implementation of the FFM and IIT differed, officials challenged the impartiality of both investigations via near-identical allegations of manipulation in pursuit of the political agenda of Western states. These accusations constituted not only the most prominent, but also the most damaging challenge to the investigations, undermining the claim to impartiality at the centre of their respective claims to epistemic authority, as well as contesting the rational-legal authority, moral authority, and institutional legitimacy of the OPCW itself as the investigations' delegating body.

5.2 Limitations and Opportunities for Further Research

A primary limitation of this study concerns its scope, with analysis centring on statements by Russian representatives at the OPCW and MFA, available in English. It is possible that statements delivered in other domains and languages, for example via Russian state media, would have targeted different elements of the FFM and IIT investigations, yielding further insight. Furthermore, as noted in the literature review, official statements

comprised just one element of an extensive multi-platform disinformation campaign surrounding the Douma attack and OPCW investigations. Whilst this thesis and other existing studies have examined elements of this campaign in isolation, future research could analyse the interconnected dynamics between, for example, online and offline disinformation, or comparatively analyse the content in relation to differing target audiences. Such studies would allow for a better understanding of the overall dynamics of Russia's multi-platform disinformation campaigns.

Secondly, this thesis limited itself to identifying the arguments and critiques employed by Russian officials and analysing, in relation to theory, how they challenged the credibility of the FFM and IIT. Whilst this yielded valuable insight into how officials sought to undermine the investigations, future research could study the real-world impact of the campaign. For instance, researchers could seek to assess whether these efforts to undermine the investigations had any tangible effect on relevant audiences' perceptions of the investigations and the OPCW. This type of analysis would enable researchers to analyse, for example, which specific arguments and critiques were most effective in influencing perceptions of the investigations.

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Appendix 1: Chronological List of MFA and OPCW Statements Included in Analysis

OPCW Archive: <https://www.opcw.org/resources/documents>.

MFA Archive: https://mid.ru/en/press_service/spokesman/official_statement/.

Statement Number	Date	Title	Person or Department/ Organisation	Type of Statement	Available via OPCW or MFA Archive
Statement 1	08/04/2018	Press Release on the Situation in Syria	MFA	Press Release	MFA
Statement 2	11/04/2018	Comment by the Information and Press Department on the Investigation into the Alleged Use of Chemical Weapons in Douma, Syrian Arab Republic	Information and Press Department	Press Release	MFA
Statement 3	14/04/2018	Statement by the Foreign Ministry	MFA	Press Release	MFA
Statement 4	16/04/2018	Statement by the Head of the Russian Delegation, Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the OPCW, Ambassador A.V.Shulgin at the 58th Meeting of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Executive Council	Alexander Shulgin	Statement to OPCW Executive Council	OPCW
Statement 5	17/04/2018	Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova's Response to a Media Question Regarding the OPCW Experts' Access to Douma	Maria Zakharova	MFA Press Briefing	MFA

Statement 6	19/04/2018	Russian Defence Ministry Representative's Speech at the 58th Meeting of the OPCW's Executive Council, The Hague, April 16	Russian Defence Ministry Representative	Speech at OPCW Executive Council Meeting	MFA
Statement 7	21/04/2018	Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova's Comment on the OPCW Inspectors' Visit to Douma, Syria	Maria Zakharova	MFA Press Briefing	MFA
Statement 8	26/04/2018	EC-M-58/NAT.7 - Introductory Statement by the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to The OPCW H.E. Ambassador Alexander Shulgin at the Briefing for the CWC States Parties with the Participation of the Residents of Douma (Syrian Arab Republic) The Hague, 26 April 2018	Alexander Shulgin	Statement to OPCW Executive Council	OPCW
Statement 9	26/04/2018	EC-M-58/NAT.8 - Statement by the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to The OPCW H.E. Ambassador Alexander Shulgin at the Briefing for the CWC States Parties with the Participation of the Residents of Douma (Syrian Arab Republic) The Hague, 26 April 2018	Alexander Shulgin	Statement to OPCW Executive Council	OPCW

Statement 10	26/04/2018	EC-M-58/NAT.9 – Closing Remarks by the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to The OPCW H.E. Ambassador Alexander Shulgin at the Briefing for the CWC States Parties with the Participation of the Residents of Douma (Syrian Arab Republic) The Hague, 26 April 2018	Alexander Shulgin	Statement to OPCW Executive Council	OPCW
Statement 11	28/04/2018	Opening Remarks by Russia's Permanent Representative to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons Alexander Shulgin at a News Conference Following a Briefing at the OPCW with Residents of Douma (SAR), The Hague, April 26, 2018	Alexander Shulgin	Press Conference at OPCW	MFA
Statement 12	28/04/2018	EC-M-58/NAT.10 – Statement by the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the OPCW, 28 April 2018	Alexander Shulgin	Statement to OPCW Executive Council	OPCW
Statement 13	04/05/2018	Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, May 4, 2018	Maria Zakharova	MFA Press Briefing	MFA
Statement 14	16/05/2018	Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Kerch, May 16, 2018	Maria Zakharova	MFA Press Briefing	MFA
Statement 15	15/06/2018	Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria	Maria Zakharova	MFA Press Briefing	MFA

		Zakharova, June 15, 2018			
Statement 16	10/07/2018	EC-88/NAT.23 – Statement by G.V. Kalamanov Deputy Minister of Industry and Trade of the Russian Federation at the Eighty-Eighth Session of the Executive Council	Georgy Kalamanov	Statement to the OPCW Executive Council	OPCW
Statement 17	12/07/2018	EC-88/NAT.24 – Statement by H.E. Ambassador A.V. Shulgin Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the Eighty-Eighth Session of the Executive Council	Alexander Shulgin	Statement to the OPCW Executive Council	OPCW
Statement 18	12/07/2018	Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, July 12, 2018	Maria Zakharova	MFA Press Briefing	MFA
Statement 19	15/10/2018	Press Release of the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the OPCW	Alexander Shulgin	Press Release	MFA
Statement 20	26/12/2018	Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, December 26, 2018	Maria Zakharova	MFA Press Briefing	MFA
Statement 21	14/02/2019	Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, February 14, 2019	Maria Zakharova	MFA Press Briefing	MFA
Statement 22	25/03/2019	Comment by the Information and Press Department on the OPCW Special Mission’s Report Concerning the Results of Investigating the April 7, 2018, Incident Involving	Information and Press Department	Press Release	MFA

		the Use of Chlorine in Douma, Syria			
Statement 23	11/04/2019	Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, April 11	Maria Zakharova	MFA Press Briefing	MFA
Statement 24	26/04/2019	EC-90/NAT.41 – Request for Circulation of a Document	Russian Permanent Representation to the OPCW	Russian Note Verbale Circulated at the OPCW Executive Council	OPCW
Statement 25	08/05/2019	Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, May 8, 2019	Maria Zakharova	MFA Press Briefing	MFA
Statement 26	17/07/2019	Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, July 17, 2019	Maria Zakharova	MFA Press Briefing	MFA
Statement 27	08/10/2019	EC-92/NAT.26 - Statement by H.E. Ambassador A.V. Shulgin Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the OPCW at the Ninety-Second Session of the Executive Council	Alexander Shulgin	Statement to the OPCW Executive Council	OPCW
Statement 28	10/10/2019	EC-92/NAT.30 - Statement by H.E. Ambassador A.V. Shulgin Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the OPCW at the Ninety-Second Session of the Executive Council Under Agenda Item 7 (H)	Alexander Shulgin	Statement to the OPCW Executive Council	OPCW
Statement 29	08/11/2019	Comment by the Information and Press Department on	Information and Press Department	Press Release	MFA

		a Closed Themed Event on OPCW Problems			
Statement 30	25/11/2019	C-24/NAT.55 – Statement by Mr O.N. Ryazantsev Head of the Delegation of the Russian Federation Deputy Minister of Industry and Trade of the Russian Federation at the Twenty-Fourth Session of the Conference of the States Parties	Oleg Ryazantsev	Statement to the OPCW Conference of the States Parties	OPCW
Statement 31	28/11/2019	Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, November 28, 2019	Maria Zakharova	MFA Press Briefing	MFA
Statement 32	29/11/2019	C-24/NAT.38 - Statement by H.E. Ambassador A.V. Shulgin Deputy Head of the Delegation of the Russian Federation Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the OPCW at the Twenty-Fourth Session of the Conference of the States Parties	Alexander Shulgin	Statement to the OPCW Conference of the States Parties	OPCW
Statement 33	02/12/2019	Opening Remarks by Russia's Permanent Representative to the OPCW Alexander Shulgin at a News Conference on the 24th Session the Chemical Weapons Convention Meeting, The Hague, November 28, 2019	Alexander Shulgin	Press Conference	MFA
Statement 34	26/12/2019	Briefing by Foreign Ministry	Maria Zakharova	MFA Press Briefing	MFA

		Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, December 26, 2019			
Statement 35	07/02/2020	Comment by the Information and Press Department on the Briefing in the OPCW on Revealing Confidential Information During the Drafting of Its Fact-Finding Mission on the Alleged use of Chlorine in the Syrian City of Douma on April 7, 2018	Information and Press Department	Press Release	MFA
Statement 36	20/02/2020	Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, February 20, 2020	Maria Zakharova	MFA Press Briefing	MFA
Statement 37	10/03/2020	EC-93/NAT.35 - Statement by H.E. Ambassador A.V. Shulgin Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the OPCW at the Ninety-Third Session of the Executive Council	Alexander Shulgin	Statement to the OPCW Executive Council	OPCW
Statement 38	07/07/2020	EC-94/NAT.67 - Statement by H.E. Ambassador A.V. Shulgin Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the OPCW at the Ninety-Fourth Session of the Executive Council Under Agenda Item 6(H)	Alexander Shulgin	Statement to the OPCW Executive Council	OPCW
Statement 39	30/07/2020	Briefing by Deputy Director of the Information and Press Department Alexey Zaytsev,	Alexey Zaytsev	MFA Press Briefing	MFA

		Moscow, July 30, 2020			
Statement 40	15/04/2021	Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, Moscow, April 15, 2021	Maria Zakharova	MFA Press Briefing	MFA
Statement 41	22/07/2021	Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, Moscow, July 22, 2021	Maria Zakharova	MFA Press Briefing	MFA
Statement 42	09/09/2021	Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, Moscow, September 9, 2021	Maria Zakharova	MFA Press Briefing	MFA
Statement 43	05/10/2021	EC-98/NAT.50 - Statement by H.E. Ambassador A.V. Shulgin Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the OPCW at the Ninety-Eighth Session of the Executive Council	Alexander Shulgin	Statement to the OPCW Executive Council	OPCW
Statement 44	29/11/2021	C-26/NAT.74 – Statement by Mr O.N. Ryazantsev Deputy Minister of Industry and Trade of the Russian Federation at the Twenty-Sixth Session of the Conference of the States Parties	Oleg Ryazantsev	Statement to the OPCW Conference of the States Parties	OPCW
Statement 45	30/01/2023	Foreign Ministry Statement on the Report Released by the OPCW Investigation and Identification Team Regarding the April 7, 2018, Douma chemical Attack	MFA	Press Release	MFA
Statement 46	06/02/2023	Joint Statement of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of	MFA	Press Release	MFA

		the Russian Federation Sergey Lavrov and the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates of the Syrian Arab Republic Faisal Mekdad Pertaining to the Issues of the Chemical Weapons Convention			
Statement 47	14/03/2023	Press Release on the Joint Briefing by Permanent Representatives of Russia and Syria to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) on the Inconsistencies, Omissions and Discrepancies in the Third Report by the OPCW Investigation and Identification Team Titled Addressing the Threat from Chemical Weapons Use on Douma, Syria, on April 7, 2018	MFA	Press Release	MFA
Statement 48*	14/03/2023	EC-102 – Statement by the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the OPCW Ambassador A. V. Shulgin at the 102 nd Session of the Executive Council, The Hague, March 14, 2023	Alexander Shulgin	Statement to the OPCW Executive Council	OPCW
Statement 49*	14/03/2023	EC-102 – Statement by the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the OPCW	Alexander Shulgin	Statement to the OPCW Executive Council	OPCW

		Ambassador A.V. Shulgin at the 102 nd Session of the Executive Council Under Agenda Item 6(F) ‘Threat of Chemical Weapon Use (Syria)’			
Statement 50	15/05/2023	Statement by the Head of the Russia Delegation Deputy Minister of Industry and Trade of the Russian Federation Kirill Lysogorskiy at the Fifth Session of the Conference of the States Parties to Review the Operation of the Chemical Weapons Convention	Kirill Lysogorskiy	Statement to the OPCW Conference of the States Parties	OPCW
Statement 51	06/07/2023	Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, Moscow, July 6, 2023	Maria Zakharova	MFA Press Briefing	MFA

* Official translations unavailable

Appendix 2: Codebook

Code	Definition	Statements Containing Code	Code Frequency
<i>Theme 1 – An Alternative Story: Russia’s Version of Events</i>			
Evidence of Staging Uncovered by Russian Investigators	References to evidence reportedly discovered by Russian military investigators on the ground supporting the allegation that the incident was staged	3	3
Evidence of Western Involvement	References to evidence suggesting that Western governments were involved in the incident in Douma on the ground	1	1
False Attack as Staged Provocation	Statements claiming that the incident in Douma was not a real chemical attack, but instead a staged provocation	27	31
History of Staged Provocations	References to an alleged precedence of staged chemical provocations	10	14
Illogical to Use CW in Douma	Statements claiming that it would not have made logical sense for the Syrian government to utilise CW in Douma	1	1
Inconsistencies in Douma Footage	Statements outlining supposed inconsistencies in, and manipulation of, footage released online of the aftermath of the Douma attack	4	6
Independent Investigations into Staging	References to investigations by independent experts who support the view that the incident was staged	3	3
Media Reports of Staging	References to media articles and investigations supporting Russia and Syria’s version of events	3	4
No Evidence Found by Russian Investigators	Statements claiming that Russian military investigators had found no evidence of a chemical attack in Douma	1	1
Proof Incident Was Staged	Statements claiming Russia possesses proof that the incident was a staged provocation	14	19
Provocation Directed by Western States	Allegations that the staged provocation in Douma was planned, directed and funded by Western governments and security services	4	6

Staging Perpetrated by White Helmets and NGOs	Allegations that the White Helmets and other NGOs opposed to the Assad regime perpetrated the staging of the attack	15	18
Testimony of Douma Residents	Statements referring to or citing the testimony of residents of Douma who gave a briefing at the OPCW HQ in The Hague on April 26 2018. The residents supported the Russian version of events.	9	10
<i>Sub-Theme 2A – Russian Cooperation with Investigations</i>			
Demand for FFM Impartiality	Statements demanding that the FFM mission carries out its work impartially, professionally, and in line with established procedures	9	9
Denial of Obstructing Investigation	Statements denying that Russian or Syrian officials obstructed or inhibited the FFM investigation on the ground in Douma or through other actions.	10	13
Desire to Find the Truth	Statements stressing the desire of Russian officials to uncover the objective truth behind the Douma chemical incident.	14	18
Guarantee of FFM Security	Statements made prior to the FFM deployment guaranteeing the security of FFM staff in Douma	1	1
Praise for OPCW and Staff	Statements praising the OPCW and members of the Technical Secretariat	5	8
Request for FFM Deployment	References to the Russian and Syrian request for the deployment of OPCW inspectors to Douma	5	6
Russian and Syrian Cooperation with Inspectors	Statements emphasising Russian and Syrian consent and cooperation with the FFM investigation, including through the provision of security	11	12
Welcoming FFM Deployment	Statements welcoming the deployment of FFM investigators to Douma	8	10
<i>Sub-Theme 2B – Western Obstructionism</i>			
Condemnation of Strikes on Syria	Statements condemning military strikes by the US, UK, and France against Syrian targets in response to the Douma attack as violations of international rules and norms	8	10
Destruction of Evidence	Concerns surrounding the destruction of evidence related to the Douma attack, namely the two chemical cylinders in an alleged missile strike.	1	1

Politicisation of OPCW	Statements claiming that the OPCW has become politicised by Western states, as opposed to being a purely technical body	9	9
Pressuring of Secretariat by Western States	Allegations that Western states have applied political pressure to the staff of the Technical Secretariat	8	10
Strikes Obstructing and Endangering FFM	Allegations that the strikes on Syria carried out by the US, UK and France obstructed and delayed the deployment of the FFM, and potentially endangered inspectors	11	12
Western States Pre-Empting Investigation	Statements arguing that, by conducting missile strikes against Syria, the US, UK and France jumped to an undue conclusion of Syrian guilt and disregarded the need for an OPCW investigation	8	12
Western States Rejecting the Truth	Statements alleging that Western officials ignore or reject the truth about the Douma incident	17	19
Western States Spreading Disinformation	Statements accusing Western states of spreading disinformation regarding the Douma incident	10	16
<i>Theme 3 – Technical and Procedural Critiques of the FFM Investigation</i>			
Critique of General FFM Investigatory Procedures	Broad, generic critiques of the FFM's procedures and investigatory methods.	5	5
Critiques of Assessment of Chemical Cylinders	Critiques of the FFM's technical assessment of the two chemical cylinders allegedly dropped in Douma	6	12
Critiques of Chemical Analysis	Statements critiquing the chemical and toxicological analysis conducted by the FFM from a technical perspective	4	6
Delay of FFM Deployment	Refers to statements which criticise the length of time taken to deploy FFM investigators to the sites of interest in Douma.	1	1
Delay to FFM Final Report Publication	Critiques of the length of time taken to publish the FFM's Final Report into the Douma attack	1	1
FFM Limiting Site Visits and Interviews	Claims that the FFM inspectors only wished to visit a limited number of sites and interview limited individuals within Douma	3	3
Improvement of FFM Required	Statements arguing that the FFM is not up to standards and requires improvement	5	5
Unreliability of White Helmets	Statements asserting that the White Helmets are not a reliable or trustworthy	10	13

	source of information about the Douma attack		
<i>Theme 4: Bias and Manipulation of the FFM Investigation</i>			
Bias of Final Report	Statements alleging that the FFM Final Report was biased	8	8
Bias of Interim Report	Statements alleging that the FFM Interim Report was biased	1	3
Doctored of Final Report	Statements alleging that the FFM Final Report was doctored, manipulated or changed by elements within the OPCW Technical Secretariat	6	7
Evidence from OPCW Leaks	Statements citing information from OPCW whistleblowers and leaked documents as evidence of malpractice within the Douma investigation and bias within the Final Report	10	11
Falsification of Evidence by FFM	Allegations that members of the Technical Secretariat falsified evidence and information used within the FFM Final Report	10	11
FFM Experts Sidelined	Statements claiming that internal FFM experts who supported the Russian and Syrian version of events were sidelined and their opinions ignored	4	4
Independent Expert Critiques of FFM	References to critiques made by independent experts of the FFM investigation	10	13
Lack of Transparency in Confidentiality Investigation	Statements suggesting that the OPCW's internal investigation into breaches of confidentiality lacked transparency and served to vilify whistleblowers	3	5
Media Critiques of FFM	References to media articles critiquing the FFM investigation	4	4
Omissions in Interim Report	Statements claiming that the FFM Interim Report failed to mention important and relevant pieces of information	2	3
Prevention of FFM Expert Testimony	Statements on the denial of Russia's request for a briefing by all experts involved in the FFM investigation, including external experts who provided technical assessments	9	12
Prevention of Publication of Technical Assessments	Statements on the denial of Russian requests for external technical assessments on Douma incident to be published	3	4
Problems with Findings of	Critiques of the findings of the FFM Final Report	7	14

FFM Final Report			
Reliance on External Expert Assessments	Critiques of the FFM's reliance on three external expert technical assessments, for example engineering assessments	5	6
Selective Use of Evidence in Final Report	Statements claiming that evidence was used selectively to compile the FFM Final Report, ignoring important facts	6	7
Tailoring of FFM Findings	Allegations that the findings of the FFM Final Report were pre-determined and report tailored towards the interests of Western states	8	8
Use of FFM Report to Justify Strikes	Claims that the FFM Final Report was produced to retrospectively justify US, UK and French strikes on Syrian targets after the Douma attack	6	6
Western Influence Over FFM	Statements alleging that Western states hold influence of the FFM mission and staff	5	6
<i>Theme 5 – Illegitimacy and Manipulation of the IIT Investigation</i>			
Critiques of IIT Cylinder Findings	Statements refuting the specific findings regarding the two chemical cylinders	1	1
Falsification of IIT Report Findings	Statements alleging that the findings of the IIT Report were falsified	5	8
IIT Based on Unreliable FFM Findings	Statements arguing that the IIT investigation was compromised because it was based on the flawed FFM investigation	1	1
Illegitimacy of IIT Mandate	Statements arguing that the establishment of the IIT was illegitimate and illegal and that the IIT is thus an illegitimate body	6	8
Refusal to Cooperate with IIT	Statements confirming Russia's refusal to cooperate with the IIT investigation due to its illegitimate mandate	1	1
Selective Use of Evidence by IIT	Statements accusing the IIT investigation of disregarding crucial evidence	2	2
Tailoring of IIT Findings	Allegations that the findings of the IIT Report were pre-determined and tailored to suit Western interests	1	1
Use of IIT Report to Justify Strikes	Claims that the IIT Report was designed to retrospectively justify US, UK and French strikes on Syria	4	4
Western Influence over IIT Investigation	Allegations that Western states held influence of the IIT investigation and the drafting of the report	4	7

END OF PAPER