

Still using chemical weapons

The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) is a Hague-based intergovernmental body that works for the elimination of chemical weapons. It was formed after the Chemical Weapons Convention — an arms control treaty that bans the production, stockpiling and use of chemical weapons — entered into force in 1997. The OPCW is the implementing body of the Convention. All its 192 member states are required to destroy their existing stockpiles of chemical weapons and stop large-scale production. These actions are subject to verification by the OPCW. According to the OPCW, over 96% of the world's declared chemical weapons stockpiles have been destroyed. The OPCW has the powers to inspect chemical production facilities. Israel has signed the agreement but is yet to ratify it. The countries that have not signed it are Egypt, South Sudan and North Korea.

A team of inspectors from the OPCW recently arrived in Damascus, the Syrian capital, to probe a suspected chemical weapons attack in the neighbouring town of Douma. Rebels and monitors say chemical weapons were used in the rebel-held town on April 7, killing at least 70 people, while the Syrian regime as well as its Russian backers say the attack was fabricated. The OPCW inspectors will investigate if chemical weapons were actually used in Douma. They will interview witnesses and doctors and collect environmental and biomedical samples from the survivors. Earlier, OPCW had concluded that chemical weapons were used in Syria's Eastern Ghouta (2013) and Khan Sheikhoun (2017).

After the Eastern Ghouta attack, the U.S. and Russia joined hands to take Syria's chemical weapons out of the country. The operation was carried out under the OPCW's watch. The organisation's chief, Ahmet Üzümcü, announced in The Hague in June 2014 that the last of Syria's declared chemical weapons had been shipped out of the country for destruction. But Syria continued to see chemical attacks, which have been blamed both on the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and the rebels, raising questions on whether Syria has indeed got rid of its arsenal. The Douma attack underscores this fear. The main problem is that even the OPCW has only limited access to Syria. Even with the Douma investigation, there are allegations that Russia has tampered with evidence on the ground. In theory, the OPCW should be allowed to destroy Syria's entire chemical weapons stockpiles.

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