

Arria-formula Meeting on Syria Chemical Weapons

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What's In Blue

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Today (20 January), Russia will hold an open Arria-formula meeting titled “Implementation of Security Council Resolution 2118: OPCW Fact Finding Mission (FFM) Report on Douma”. It is rare for Russia to organise an Arria-formula meeting. Since the start of the use of this format in 1992, it appears that Russia has organised only four Arria-formula meetings – on Sierra Leone, Iraq sanctions and two on Angola – with the last one being held in 1998.

At press time, the briefers for the meeting had yet to be announced.

According to the concept note circulated by Russia ahead of the meeting, the Arria-formula meeting will be held at 3 pm in the ECOSOC chamber, will be webcast and is open to accredited NGOs and media.

The 7 April 2018 chemical weapons attack on the city of Douma in Eastern Ghouta led to one of the most divisive periods in the Security Council in the post-Cold War era. In the aftermath of the attack, the US, along with France and the UK, carried out more than 100 airstrikes on 12 April against Syrian military facilities that had reportedly been involved in the storage and production of chemical weapons. Following the chemical weapons attack, the Council failed to pass three draft resolutions. Two were competing versions by Russia and the US that would have established a UN Independent Mechanism of Investigation (UNIMI) regarding the use of chemical weapons. The third was a Russian draft regarding the investigation by the OPCW into the incident in Douma.

At the time of the 7 April incident, Russia denied that chemical weapons had been used at all and blamed Western intelligence services for having staged a provocation.

The OPCW FFM’s final report on its investigation of the reported use of chemicals as a weapon in the city of Douma on 7 April 2018, which was published on 1 March 2019, concludes that the evaluation and analysis of all the information gathered by the FFM “provide reasonable grounds that the use of a toxic chemical as a weapon took place” and that “the toxic chemical was likely molecular chlorine”. The report also concludes that two facilities in Douma that the Syrian government claims were used by the opposition to produce chemical weapons were not used for their manufacture.

Although the FFM is not mandated to assign responsibility, the report establishes that it is possible that two yellow industrial cylinders “were the source of the substances containing reactive chlorine” that caused structural damage in two locations (one of the cylinders was found in a rooftop terrace and the other passed through the ceiling and hit the floor of a different building).

According to the concept note for the Arria-formula meeting circulated by Russia, there are questions about the conclusions of the final report of the FFM. One criticism which was raised is that inspectors who were part of the initial team did not contribute to the final report and that any contrary views they might have had were ignored.

It appears that such concerns about the validity of the FFM's conclusions on the Douma incident were raised by Russia during closed meetings of the Council over the past year. It seems that Russia maintained that this called into question the credibility of the work of the OPCW. In this regard, it also questioned the legitimacy of the OPCW's Investigation and Identification Team (IIT), which was established to identify perpetrators of chemical weapons attacks in Syria following a June 2018 decision of the Conference of State Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention. The IIT was formed after the Council failed to renew the UN-OPCW Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) that it had established through resolution 2235 of 7 August 2015 to determine responsibility for the use of chemical weapons in Syria; three consecutive vetoes by Russia—which questioned the methodology employed by the JIM—led to its termination in late 2017. In October 2019 the OPCW announced that the IIT would focus its work on nine incidents.

Issues relating to the FFM's report on Douma were also raised during a private meeting of the Security Council on the chemical weapons file which took place on 5 November 2019. During that meeting, Fernando Arias, the Director-General of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), and Izumi Nakamitsu, the Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, presented an overview of the FFM's work on the Douma report. It seems that Arias provided evidence that in his view demonstrated the validity of the FFM's conclusions. Members took the opportunity to express their support for the OPCW and reaffirm the importance of its investigations in Syria, although some others were sceptical of Arias' arguments. It appears that at that meeting, Arias also mentioned that the IIT is likely to present its first report by the end of February or in early March.

Following the 5 November private meeting, the Council adopted on 22 November a presidential statement welcoming the briefing of the Director-General of the OPCW and reaffirming its strong support for the Chemical Weapons Convention and for the work of the OPCW in accordance with the Convention.

During the most recent Council consultations on chemical weapons in Syria which took place on 6 January, Russia announced its intention to convene an Arria-formula meeting on the FFM's final report on the Douma investigation.

As has been the case in the past, Council members are likely, during today's meeting, to express sharply contrasting positions regarding the analysis and conclusions put forward by the FFM. As in past meetings on the chemical weapons file, some members may raise concerns regarding the limited cooperation of Syria on these matters, while others may argue that Syria's chemical weapons have been destroyed and that Syria has cooperated to the best of its ability. This will be the first opportunity for new elected members to express their views on this issue publicly.

Tags: Arria formula, Chemical weapons, Insights on Middle East, OPCW, Syria