



Syria's Chemical Scourge

The use of horrendous chemical weapons is on the rise in Syria and Iraq, but where are they coming from?

by Animesh Roul



THE TERRIBLE odor of chlorine gas drifts on the wind in the Syrian city of Aleppo. On April 7, four civilians were poisoned by this unpredictable and indiscriminate weapon, reportedly used by Islamist rebels against Kurdish fighters in the neighborhood of Sheikh Maqsoud.

Ever since Bashar al-Assad's alleged use of chemical weapons in the Ghouta suburb of Damascus killed upwards of 1,700 people in 2013, the terrible, chaotic nature of weaponized gas has become representative of the chaos of the conflict itself. When the winds switch direction, chemical weapons kill combatants and civilians alike, and in the chlorine-scented fog of war, all sides can—and do—claim that others fired the imprecise weapons. The use of chemical weapons is a war crime that demands investigation, but in the multi-faction Syrian and Iraqi theater of war, reports conflict as to who is using the weapons and from where they're being acquired. **Illegal Weapons**

Chemical weapons were banned over 90 years ago, in part because of their unpredictability, but also be-

cause of the terrible agony the weapons inflict not only on those who die, sometimes after hours of pain, but also on survivors, who can suffer from disabilities for the remainder of their lives.

The Ghouta incident, infamously labeled as 'Syria's Srebrenica' (in reference to the July 1995 massacre during the Bosnian War) put immense pressure on the Syrian regime to declare and dismantle its chemical weapons stockpiles. Later in 2013, Syria acceded to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and began dismantling its declared chemical weapons under the process established by U.N. Security Council Resolution 2118.

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Even though international pressure in the aftermath of Ghouta led to the peaceful destruction of Syria's stockpiles, especially of nerve gas and mustard agents, the use of some chemical agents, like chlorine gas, continued, mostly around the rebel-held territories.

The use of chlorine as a weapon of war, whether



A barrel bomb exploding in Daraa, Syria

directed against civilians or combatants, is in complete violation of the 1925 Geneva Protocol, which Syria had ratified. The Geneva Protocol prohibits the “Use in War of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or other Gases”, which certainly include chlorine. Despite this, the United Nations and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), the implementing body of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), have recently confirmed the indiscriminate use of chlorine gas and other chemical weapons against civilians in Syria. A host of independent agencies and other sources, including the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and the Syrian American Medical Society, have verified that there were indeed victims of such attacks. In 2015, the U.N. Security Council passed a resolution condemning the use of chlorine as a chemical weapon in the country and clearly stated that such a violation would have consequences under Chapter VII of the U.N. Charter.

In the last few years, the blatant use of chemical weapons in the Syrian conflict has been reported over and over. Some of these incidents have been investigated and confirmed by leading world agencies, but many others cases remain under-reported and controversial, and the source of the chemical weapons remains hard to pin down.

Attack after Attack

According to anecdotal evidence, the first use of chemical strikes in Syria was in October, 2012 in Salqin, Idlib province. In December of that year, reports emerged from the city of Homs, where the Free Syrian Army rebels accused the Assad government of using

gaseous substances. Even though there were inconsistencies in the reports of these incidents, evidence surfaced later that a chemical weapon known as ‘Agent 15’ was used in Homs. This incident brought international attention to the possibility of further use of chemical weapons in Syria.

The frequency of chemical weapon attacks escalated from March, 2013, particularly in places around Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs. The March 19, 2013 chemical attacks on the Khan al-Assel neighborhood of Aleppo and al-Atebeh suburb of Damascus left at least 25 people dead and many more injured. These attacks were blamed on the Syrian opposition forces fighting against Assad’s regime. The events triggered an international outcry and investigations were undertaken under the auspices of the United Nations and other world bodies like the World Health Organization and the OPCW.

Subsequent chemical attacks were reported in other Syrian cities, including Adra on March 23, where phosphorus bombs killed two and injured over 20 civilians. In April, similar attacks occurred in Aleppo, Saraqeb, and Jobar. However, the most deadly strike took place on August 21, 2013, when rockets filled with sarin gas were launched in Ghouta, killing up to 1,700 people and affecting many more. The incident remained clouded in the fog of war as the Syrian government traded blame with rebel forces over who was responsible. Assad’s government refused to allow a U.N. inspection team access to the site, though it was already in the country.

The U.N. and Russia led separate investigations and confirmed the use of the sarin nerve agent and chlorine in previous chemical attacks. Even though

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various investigations zeroed on the use of sarin in Ein Tarma, Moadamiyah, Irbin, Dumma, Zamalka, and later Ghouta, they could not ascertain the perpetrators of the attacks: whether it was the Assad government or rebel militant groups.

In Ghouta, the rebels insisted that Assad's forces had launched the weapon, which hit them. Assad hindered investigators' efforts to reach the site and, with Russia's backing, insisted that the rebels had fired on themselves in order to blame the government and draw international support. Though Western analysts suspected the Assad regime at the time, later investigation into the range of the missile and the position of Assad's troops still could not provide proof of who was responsible. Assad nonetheless relented under international pressure and dismantled his stockpile of chemical weapons. Importantly, the Syrian regime did not declare its stores of chlorine as a weapon.

Despite Assad's supposed acquiescence to their suppression, however, the use of chemical weapons continued in Syria. Between April and May 2014, a number of cases of chlorine gas attacks emerged from the Hama and Idlib governorates in northern Syria, as did accusations and counter-accusations between government and opposition forces. The Kafr Zita chlo-

rine gas incidents on April 11, 2014 reportedly killed at least three people and affected over 100. While the government blamed the Al-Qaeda-linked Al-Nusra Front for using the gas against civilians, the opposition rebels pointed fingers at government-dropped barrel bombs, which can be loaded with chemical agents.

Even though international pressure in the aftermath led to the peaceful destruction of Syria's stockpiles, the use of some chemical agents continued.

The last reported chlorine-filled barrel bomb strikes, which continued until late May 2014, targeted the northern Syrian villages of Al-Tamanah and Al-Lataminah. The OPCW fact-finding mission (FFM) confirmed the use of chlorine in these villages. July and August then saw intermittent chlorine attacks in the suburbs of Hama, Aleppo, and Damascus.

The use of chemical agents was sporadic throughout 2014, but the succeeding year witnessed a spurt of such incidents, bringing the specter of chemical weapons back to haunt the inhabitants of Syria. Sarmin, in the northwest, was targeted in March 2015. This town is a stronghold of Islamists forces like Ahrar al-Sham and Jund al-Aqsa. Nearly six people died in the incident and as many as 30 people were affected with moderate or severe symptoms.

Here too, allegations and counter-allegations flew regarding this incident, as opposition groups claimed that Bashar al-Assad's government carried out the attack and the Syrian regime denied doing so. The subsequent months saw similar strikes in the governorates of Al-Hassakah, Aleppo, and Idlib, affecting scores of civilians.

Though it is difficult to definitively identify the perpetrators of chemi-



A Syrian soldier practising for chemical weapons in 2010



Chlorine gas in Iraq

cal attacks in the complex, multi-faction Syrian civil war, many have been attributed to the government of Bashar al-Assad. Nonetheless, it is becoming clear from recent events that the hardliner Islamist groups active in the region—including neighboring Iraq—are increasingly turning to chemical agents as weapons against their targets.

It is widely known that the previous regime in Iraq and the present Syrian government included stockpiles of chemical weapons in their military arsenals. It is unknown, however, whether or not these state-controlled arsenals have fallen into the hands of rebel factions like the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Al-Nusra Front, or other militant factions like Jaish al-Islam. Reports of substantial territorial gains that ISIS has made in both Syria and Iraq has provoked fears that they may have gained access to the remnants of chemical weapons infrastructure and stockpiles. In March, the United States led airstrikes to destroy two chemical facilities near Mosul, Iraq, which were under ISIS's control.

Both Iraqi and U.S. intelligence officials have claimed that ISIS is aggressively pursuing the development of chemical weapons. ISIS is said to have taken control of Mosul University's chemistry laboratory for some months in order to develop a new generation of explosive devices, including chemical weapons, as reported by sources in the *Wall Street Journal*.

This is not mere speculations. The Iraq and Syrian war theater has witnessed an increasing use of chemi-

cal weapons such as chlorine and mustard gas against civilians and military targets alike. There is a potential risk ISIS could smuggle the chemical weapons out of the country for an attack elsewhere.

Many of the chemical events in 2015 were attributed or linked to non-state actors, especially ISIS, with chlorine the most commonly used in Aleppo, Damascus suburbs, and Deir Ezzour. In late June, ISIS reportedly used unidentified chemical agents against Kurdish fighters affiliated with the Kurdish People's Protection Units in Al-Hasaka and Tel Brak in northeastern Syria. For a week, beginning on August 21, ISIS forces used sulfur mustard gas in an attack on the town of

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Mare'e, to the north of Aleppo. Independent sources, such as Conflict Armament Research and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, verified that ISIS used chemical weapons several times against Kurdish forces in 2015.

The claim from within ISIS that it is in possession of chemical weapons such as mustard agents came in late August from a Dutch soldier turned ISIS fighter, identified as Omar Yilmaz, who indicated that the group has acquired chemical weapons once belonging

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Bashar al-Assad meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin

to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Yilmaz's revelations came in tandem with a series of suspected incidents of mustard gas attacks in northern Iraq and Syria.

Taking Responsibility

After a short period of quiescence, chemical weapons reappeared in the Syrian theater of war this April, and the finger of suspicion is now pointed at

The hardliner Islamist groups active in the region are increasingly turning to chemical weapons.

Islamist groups such as ISIS and Jaish al-Islam. ISIS forces were accused of using mustard gas against the Syrian army during an offensive in the eastern province of Deir Ezzour, which connects Syria to ISIS's major stronghold of Raqqa. A few days later, the Jaish al-Islam militant group fighting government forces in Syria admitted to using chemical agents against Kurdish forces in Aleppo on April 7.

Even though Syria has adhered to the international norms banning chemical weapons, joined the OPCW, and subsequently destroyed its chemical weapons under international supervision, it is feared that a portion of its arsenal, particularly

chlorine gas, remains intact.

The statistics on chemical weapon use in the Syrian war are as frightening as the weapons themselves. From the beginning of the civil war in 2012 to the end of 2015, there were approximately 161 instances of chemical weapons being used, according to the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS). These events have killed 1,491 people, with another 14,581 left injured, according to a SAMS report published in February. The report, however, excluded at least 133 suspected chemical attacks which could not be substantiated through investigations by medical personnel.

A case can be built to suspect that the Bashar al-Assad

regime has retained some chemical weapons for use against its many current and potential future enemies. This reason alone may have emboldened non-state actors such as ISIS to acquire and use chemical weapons, whether against al-Assad or rival targets in war-torn Syria. It is also possible that pilfered chemical weapons from the arsenals of the Assad regime could have reached its opponents, including the Islamic jihadi forces. If ISIS possesses chemical

weapons in Syria, they are an even greater threat to the broader region. Certainly, there are unanswered questions about ISIS's capability to unleash large-scale chemical weapon attacks beyond Syria and Iraq, but

if the group finds a way to use chemical weapons against their enemies abroad, it will.

ISIS must be stopped, and Assad must reflect on his tactics. The government's continuing stockpiling and alleged use of chlorine gas is not only inhumane, but provides its adversaries with an excuse to employ the same tactics, and it jeopardizes thousands more if the government's chemical weapons are seized by forces like ISIS. ■

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