

Islamic State's tryst with chemical weapons in Syria and Iraq

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Summary

The Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS) Jihadist group's indiscriminate use of chemical weapons or agents against civilian and military targets in the last few years violates every international and humanitarian laws. It has not only used the weapons in its violent campaigns, but has attempted to build full-fledged chemical arsenal within its controlled territories which makes it virtually the first non-state actor pursue chemical weapon for military purposes. This piece examines ISIS' nascent chemical weapons of mass destruction program and how it has effectively used against targets in Syria and Iraq.

The sporadic and indiscriminate use of chemical weapons in Syria and Iraq's conflict zones in the last five years by both State and non-state actors have posed a great challenge to the international arms control and non-proliferation regimes. The use of these deadly weapons of mass destruction targeting civilians not only violates international law, but is also a crime against humanity. However, the perpetrators of the chemical weapons attacks including the Bashar al-Assad regime are still on the loose and have successfully evaded international scrutiny. The worst part of this otherwise multi-dimensional conflict is the use of chemical weapons or agents by non-state jihadi group -- the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or Daesh. It has not only used the weapons in its violent campaigns, but has attempted to build full-fledged chemical arsenal within its controlled territories.

Historically, no organized and designated terrorist groups have perpetrated mass fatality or disruptive attacks using any categories of weapons of mass destruction. Since the capability and intentions of jihadist groups such as Al Qaeda and ISIS have changed over the years, they opt for the most destructive and spectacular methods with available weapons system, materials or technology to maximize the impact and fear factor. The ISIS, the violent Sunni Jihadist movement that has dominated large swathes of territory had achieved some tangible success in employing these destructive and disruptive weapon systems or materials in Syria and Iraq.

Ideologically, Islamic State in Syria and Iraq has strong roots in the ideals of Abu Mushab al Zarqawi of Jordan, who was identified as Al Qaeda's chief biochemical engineer before his death in 2006. It was widely believed that

Zarqawi imparted training to a special terror cell in Afghanistan and Iraq on the use of biological and chemical agents for possible attacks in Europe and the Middle East. Zarqawi's lingering influence as a founding father of ISIS leads us to believe that this violent group won't hesitate to use these categories of weapons mass destruction and disruption against its civilian or military targets.

It is also believed that the IS leadership has received religious approval from various Islamist clerics for the use of such weapon systems. One such jihadi cleric named Nasir al-Fahd, who is currently imprisoned in Saudi Arabia, issued a religious edict or fatwa sometime in 2003 saying, "If the Muslims can't overwhelm the infidels in any other way, they are allowed to use weapons of mass destruction to kill everyone and erase them and their descendants from the earth." Al-Fahd has authored a book that approves the use of weapons of mass destruction against the non-believers.¹ So use of chemical or biological weapons by Jihadist groups against adversaries is not any more un-Islamic. In other words, the use of these weapons is no more prohibited in Islam as perceived earlier.

ISIS faced massive territorial and military reversal in Syria and Iraq recently. However, in the initial years of territorial consolidation phase, the Islamic State captured secret labs and factories in Iraq and Syria that may have helped it to pursue chemical weapon production activities. In all probability, Islamic State exploited the existing stockpiles belonging to the Iraqi or Syrian regimes, which had extensive CW programs.² In June 2014, there were reports about the capture of Saddam Hussein era chemical facility at Muthanna, near the city of Samarra, by Islamic State militants. However, the claim from the IS side regarding the possession of chemical

weapons, such as mustard agents, came in late August 2015 from a Dutch soldier turned IS fighter identified as Omar Yilmaz, who indicated that the group has acquired chemical weapons once belonging to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government. Yilmaz's revelations came with a series of suspected incidents of mustard gas attacks in northern Iraq and Syria.

In February 2016, the capture of Suleiman Daoud al-Afari, a senior engineer of ISIS' chemical weapons program, from Badoosh in north-west of Mosul, then a IS stronghold, unearthed the evil designs of IS and how it planned to use chemical agents against its adversaries in Syria and Iraq.³ Some Iraq affair experts had informed then that al-Afari was the technical expert on the chemical weapons project, but the real ideological driver behind the program was Taha Rahim al-Dulaimi. It is important to note here that al-Afari had been a member of the military under Saddam Hussein and had joined the Islamic State later.

With significant territorial losses in Iraq and Syria in mid 2017 (between June -August), the IS may have abandoned its chemical weapons/agent production by now. However, before abandoning its embryonic chemical weapons program, IS has left a mark using this insidious weapon several times since 2014 mostly with industrial chemicals like chlorine and phosphine. Independent sources such as Conflict Armament Research (CAR) and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) have claimed that the ISIS has used chemical weapons several times against Kurdish forces between January-June 2015. In August 2015, the German Defence Ministry too reported IS's chemical weapon use in Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan.⁴ The same month, the United States officials stationed in Iraq claimed that IS used sulphur-mustard in a mortar attack on Kurdish forces in

Makhmour town located in northern Iraq.⁵ Also, few reports of mustard agent use in al-Hasakah and Marea towns in Syria surfaced that month and the IS was suspected behind these strikes. In early 2016, the IS activities involving use of chemical weapons surfaced frequently as CW attacks spiked till January 2017 in Iraq and Syria.

In April 2016 the Islamic State group used mustard gas on Assad regime troops at an air base near the city of Deir el-Zour.⁶ Again between September and December 2016, chemical agents, mostly sulphur mustard, were used by the Islamic State group against targets in Aleppo and Hama Governorates. The last reported chemical attack by the Islamic State in Syria occurred in Talla al-Maqri, Aleppo in January this year (2017).⁷

In May 2016, Islamic State militants targeted Bashir in Kirkuk in northern Iraq releasing toxic mustard gas.⁸ Few months earlier, Islamic State fighters launched two chemical attacks in Kirkuk targeting the town of Taza.⁹ In 2017, there were few cases of suspected chemical weapons use by ISIS in Iraq's Mosul.¹⁰

The IHS Markit's Conflict Monitor suggests that there were over 70 alleged chemical weapons attacks perpetrated by the ISIS-41 in Iraq and 30 in Syria.¹¹ With a series of attacks to its credit, the Islamic State virtually became the first non-state actor to develop and deploy banned chemical warfare agents for military purposes. However, with the loss of its last few bastions in Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State, which is now virtually on the run and seeking safe haven for its leaders and loyal foot soldiers, may abandon this weapons program. But so far there is no publicly available evidence to suggest that the Islamic State has dumped or concealed its chemical arsenals or transferred any CW materials from its earlier strongholds.

Endnotes:

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