



Volume 10, Number 8 May 10, 2016

Chemical Weapons in Syria: From Red Line to Routine?

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At the end of April, Rebecca Hersman, a former U.S. deputy assistant secretary of defense wrote a sobering article titled, “Syria’s Toxic Wars: Chemical Weapons are Undermining Deterrence and Nonproliferation,” which quoted a report by the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS) that listed 161 chemical attacks with 14,581 victims and at least 1,491 deaths in Syria since 2012.¹ Hersman emphasized that “Their [chemical weapons] inhuman effects are painful, stealthy, terrorizing, and horrifying.”² Al Mauroni, the director of U.S. Air Force Center for Unconventional Weapons Studies, pushed back against Hersman’s arguments that Syria was undermining deterrence and nonproliferation. In response to Hersman, he argued that “the nonproliferation regime is not in danger of failing due to this contemporary case [Syria],” adding that “we should not over-exaggerate the Syrian military’s use of chemical weapons at the risk of identifying the wrong issues for future defense policy development.”³ Yet the challenge of chemical weapons is not limited to the Syrian military. The Asad regime no longer holds a monopoly on the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian War, and chemical weapons risk becoming a battlefield norm in Syria and Iraq.⁴

In recent months, there have been further reports about the spread of chemical weapons in Syria and Iraq. Last week, Abu Mohammed al-Assi, a member of the Free Syrian Army’s military council, told *al-Sharq al-Awsat* that Hizballah had used chemical weapons in some neighborhoods of Aleppo and Ghouta.⁵ The story also claimed that Hizballah may be manufacturing and stockpiling chemical

¹ Rebecca Hersman, “[Syria’s Toxic Wars: Chemical Weapons are Undermining Deterrence and Nonproliferation](#),” WarOnTheRocks.com, April 26, 2016.

² Ibid.

³ Al Mauroni, “[Syria Hasn’t Degraded Deterrence and Nonproliferation Regimes](#),” WarOnTheRocks.com, May 5, 2016.

⁴ Jeffrey Lewis, “[Syria is a Chemical Weapons Free-for-All. Happy Holidays](#),” ForeignPolicy.com, November 30, 2015.

⁵ “[Hezbollah, Accused of Stockpiling Chemical Weapons in Lebanon, Syria](#),” *al-Sharq al-Awsat* [English], May 5, 2016.

munitions in facilities it controls near Qusayr. Two weeks ago, Israel's Channel 10 reported that the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade, which is an Islamic State affiliate and based near the Israeli border in the Syrian Golan, may have obtained chemical munitions from the Asad regime's stockpile. Israeli officials suggested that their use would be a "red line" for Israel and would draw an immediate response.⁶ In early March, the U.S.-led coalition forces conducted air-strikes against IS chemical munitions sites near Mosul, following the capture of Sleiman Daoud al-Afari, also known as "Abu Daoud," who was an industrial engineer in Saddam's military.⁷ The Islamic State is weaponizing mustard gas, which it has used against the Kurds and Turkmen in northern Iraq.⁸ Finally, the Asad regime also continues to employ chemical weapons against its opponents in Syria.

In addition to media reports, the United Nations (UN) and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) have published a number of detailed interim reports during the past six months about the use of chemical weapons in Syria. In February, Virginia Gamba, the head of the joint UN-OPCW investigative team, confirmed that chemical weapons "are still being used by the warring parties in Syria. This has been a constant for the last two years."⁹ The UN-OPCW reports refer specifically to the use of "chlorine," "sarin" or a "sarin-like substance," and "sulfur mustard," which is known as mustard gas.¹⁰ In a letter that was attached to a 221 page November 2015 report, UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon wrote that the findings "contain some profoundly disturbing conclusions," and that "the seriousness of the conclusions of the OPCW fact-finding mission cannot be overemphasized."¹¹

During the Iran-Iraq War, Saddam's Iraq used chemical weapons as an effective instrument of terror. In 1982, Saddam introduced chemical weapons and by

⁶ Eli Levy, Gilad Shosham, Alon Ben David, "[Senior Israeli Official: 'Equipping Daesh with chemical weapons would be a red line'](#)," *Nana10 News* [Hebrew], April 27, 2016.

⁷ Helene Cooper and Eric Schmitt, "[ISIS Detainee's Information Led to 2 U.S. Airstrikes, Officials Say](#)," *The New York Times*, March 9, 2016; David Smith, Martin Chulov, Spencer Ackerman, "[Head of Isis chemical weapons program captured by US in Iraq last month](#)," *The Guardian*, March 9, 2016.

⁸ Anthony Deutsch, "[Samples confirm Islamic State used mustard gas in Iraq - diplomat](#)," *Reuters*, February 23, 2016; Tamer El-Ghobashy and Safa Majeed, "[Islamic State Struck Town With Chemical Weapons, Iraq Says](#)," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 11, 2016; Josie Ensor, "[Isil manufacturing its own chemical weapons, warns watchdog chief](#)," *The Telegraph*, May 4, 2016.

⁹ "[Syria: head of panel for joint UN body says chemical weapons probing to begin in March](#)," UN News Centre, February 22, 2016.

¹⁰ See: Enclosure II & III, "Further reports of the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission in Syria" and "Interim report of the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission in Syria regarding the incidents described in communications from the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs and Expatriates and the Head of the National Authority of the Syrian Arab Republic from 15 December 2014 to 15 June 2015 in "Letter dated 24 November 2015 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council," UN Security Council, [S/2015/908](#), November 24, 2015.

¹¹ "Letter dated 24 November 2015 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council," UN Security Council, [S/2015/908](#), November 24, 2015.

1984 they were used repeatedly, if unevenly, throughout the war, most notably in a massacre of 5,000 Kurds in Halabja on March 16, 1988. Shortly afterwards, Iraqi forces used “chemical weapons successfully to create panic among Iranian soldiers”¹² fighting on Iraqi soil. In the protracted Syrian War, where no party seems able to strike a decisive blow against its determined enemies, a growing number of belligerents appear to be exploring whether the psychological effect of chemical weapons can be a decisive force multiplier.

Underscoring this point, Hersman argues that “there is a growing perception of the efficacy and viability of chemical weapons as a tool of terror and intimidation.”¹³ Given the history of terror in the region, there is a risk that using chemical weapons as an instrument of terror could become a norm. Unfortunately, international nonproliferation diplomacy has not been an effective deterrent against using chemical weapons in Syria and Iraq. In its February report, the joint UN-OPCW investigative team warned “that all individuals, groups, entities or Governments that have any role in enabling the use of chemicals as weapons, for whatever reason and under any circumstances, must understand that they will be identified and made accountable for these abhorrent acts.”¹⁴ Nevertheless, as Hersman points out, “Of the [161 documented chemical attacks](#) since 2012, 77 percent occurred *after* [emphasis added] the passage of U.N. Security Council [Resolution 2118](#), which mandated cessation of use and elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons stockpile.”¹⁵

In September 2013, the U.S. and Russia engineered an agreement that was to disarm Bashar al-Asad of his regime’s chemical weapons. The deal provided U.S. President Barack Obama with a diplomatic alternative to using military strikes to enforce his declared “red-line,” which had been crossed by the Asad regime during the summer of 2013.¹⁶ Deterrence worked, according to Al Mauroni of the U.S. Air Force Center for Unconventional Weapons Studies. “Syria stopped its chemical weapons program and gave up its weapons for the promise of no U.S. military airstrikes.”¹⁷ Yet a March 23 OPCW report tells a different story. Despite

¹² Thomas L. McNaugher, “Ballistic Missiles and Chemical Weapons: The Legacy of the Iran-Iraq War,” *International Security* 15: 2 (Fall 1990), 5-34.

¹³ Rebecca Hersman, “[Syria’s Toxic Wars: Chemical Weapons are Undermining Deterrence and Nonproliferation](#),” WarOnTheRocks.com, April 26, 2016.

¹⁴ “First report of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons-United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism,” [S/2016/142](#), February 12, 2016.

¹⁵ Rebecca Hersman, “[Syria’s Toxic Wars: Chemical Weapons are Undermining Deterrence and Nonproliferation](#),” WarOnTheRocks.com, April 26, 2016.

¹⁶ Glenn Thrush, “[Obama’s Obama](#),” Politico.com, January/February 2016; Jeffrey Goldberg, “[The Obama Doctrine](#),” *The Atlantic*, April 2016.

¹⁷ Al Mauroni, [Syria Hasn’t Degraded Deterrence and Nonproliferation Regimes](#),” WarOnTheRocks.com, May 5, 2016.

the destruction of 24 of 27 **declared** facilities in Syria,¹⁸ “gaps, inconsistencies, and discrepancies” remained regarding the regime’s “chemical weapons facilities, activities, munitions, and chemical materials.”

In December 2012, two years into the Syrian War, King ‘Abdullah of Jordan and Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu met in Amman to discuss a military operation that would prevent Syria’s chemical weapons from falling into the hands of Islamist militants.¹⁹ Today, those fears have apparently become reality, as both the Islamic State and Hizballah appear to be stockpiling and manufacturing chemical weapons. Moreover, the Islamic State is reportedly using them against its enemies in Iraq and southern Syria. While Israel has thus far succeeded, for the most part, in remaining outside the brutal Syrian War, the proliferation of chemical weapons on the battlefield, particularly in southern Syria, presents the risk of crossing an Israeli “red line” and the attendant consequences. If so, perhaps there are lessons to be learned from the 2013 episode. Hersman offers one such powerful and sobering reminder: “Countering WMDs cannot be decoupled from the pursuit of accountability and justice, which serve the dual purpose of offering a voice to the victims and restraining potential perpetrators.”²⁰

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¹⁸ “Note by the Director General of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons: Progress in the elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons programme,” UN Security Council, [S/2016/285](#), March 29, 2016. See, also: “Note by the Director General of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons: Progress in the elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons,” UN Security Council, [S/2016/391](#), April 27, 2016.

¹⁹ [Reuters](#), December 26, 2012. See, also: [al-Quds al-Arabi \[Arabic\]](#), December 28, 2012; this report was based, in part, on quotes from Jordanian sources that appeared in a *Jewish Chronicle* article from December 2012 that is only available through its archive, which is behind a digital paywall.

²⁰ Rebecca Hersman, “[Syria’s Toxic War: Chemical Weapons Are Undermining Deterrence and Nonproliferation](#),” WarOnTheRocks.com, April 26, 2016.