

Use of Chemical Weapons in Syria

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Summary

Syria acquired the capability to produce chemical weapons in order to counter Israel's chemical weapons program. It imported chemical weapon precursor and dual-use production equipment from other countries including Russia, China, India and North Korea. Bashar al Assad inherited a huge stockpile of chemical weapons with production, manufacturing, storage and research facilities scattered over Damascus, Homs, Hama, Latakia and Aleppo. In 2014 when ISIS took hold of more than 34 thousand square miles of territory in Syria and Iraq, some of the chemical weapons fell into their hands and Syria became a spectacle of chemical weapon war as the world watched with bated breath. OPCW and the UN-led mission destroyed the Syrian chemical stockpile in an exceptional exercise conducted in a hostile security situation with the use of GPS cameras.

Chemical agents, including Chlorine and Sarin, have been used in Syria more than 300 times since the beginning of the Arab Spring in 2011. The first major attack took place in Eastern Ghouta district claiming lives of 1,400 civilians on 21 August 2013 and since then other cities, namely Homs, Al-Ateiba, Khan al-Asl, Adra, Aleppo and Saraqeb, came under attack. Allegations were levelled against both the state as well as the non-state actors for the use of chemical weapons. It was the April 2017 attack in Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib province that resulted in 92 casualties that invoked strong reaction from the US President Donald Trump who ordered use of Tomahawk missiles on Al-Shayrat Syrian Air Base from the U.S. Navy ships in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea. However, this did not prevent the use chemical weapons as shown in the table below.

Table: Major Chemical Attacks in Syria

Location	Date	Deaths	Chemical agent
Eastern Ghouta, Damascus	21/8/2013	1400	Nerve Agent Sarin
Khan Sheikhoun Idlib	4/4/2017	92	Nerve Agent Sarin
Al Salaliyah,	12/12/2017	42	Nerve Agent Sarin
Jrouh, Hama	12/12/2017	25	Nerve Agent Sarin
Douma, Damascus	4/2018	43	Chlorine

Source: US Government Report, Government Assessment of the Syrian Government's Use of Chemical Weapons on August 21, 2013 Human Rights Watch, Death by Chemicals.

Chemical attacks in Syria have been perpetrated by the Syrian government as well as the non-state actors. According to a study conducted by the Global Public Policy Institute in February 2019, there were 336 cases of chemical attacks in Syria and around 98 percent of them were perpetrated by the Syrian government.¹ Even though US intelligence has been reiterating that Syria held a stockpile of the nerve agent Sarin since long, presence of chemical weapons stockpile was confirmed for the first time by the Syrian Foreign Ministry spokesman Jihad Makdissi in 2012.² The non-state actors got hold of the chemical agents when ISIS took hold of more than 34 thousand square miles of territory in Syria and Iraq in 2014.

The indiscriminate fatalities associated with chemical attacks evoked strong reactions from the international actors like UK and France. The two countries sent letters to the Secretary-General of the United Nations and called for investigations into the alleged incidents of the use of chemical weapons in Syria.³ When Syrian government invited the United Nations to conduct an investigation of the 19 March 2013 attack in Aleppo, the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon announced the investigation in conjunction with the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). In 2014, the OPCW Fact Finding Mission was established to confirm the use of chemical weapons in reported attacks and determine the types of weapons used for the same. A year later, the UN-OPCW Joint Investigative Mechanism was established with a mandate to investigate the responsible actors in instances of chemical weapons use in Syria.

On 14 October 2013 Syrian government joined the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) as a possessor state and declared arsenals including 1,000 metric tons of

Category I chemical weapons, 290 tons of Category II chemicals, and 1,230 Category III unfilled delivery systems.⁴ The UN-OPCW joint mission conducted the timely elimination of the chemical weapons program in a hostile security situation. The destruction of Syrian chemical stockpile by the joint UN-OPCW mission was an exceptional exercise conducted during an ongoing civil war in the country as the rules of the chemical weapons convention was constantly being modified. For the Syrian case special precaution was taken because of the raging civil war.

Firstly, the chemical weapons transport from the storage to the destruction facility was tracked physically even though permanent tagging of individual weapons with tamperproof devices is sufficient safety measure as per the Part IV A of the verification annex of the CWC. Second, instead of the CWC Executive Council, the Director General has the discretion over preventing frivolous and abusive challenge inspection by a state party in case of Syria. Third, Syria was not given the right to 'manage access' so as to protect confidential information unrelated to chemical weapons. Fourth, as per Article IV and V of the CWC the affected state has to bear the cost of destruction as well as verification; however, in this case, CWC invited state parties to consider voluntary contributions to established trust funds through decision EC-M-33/Dec 1. Lastly, since the UN-OPCW mission was unable to find a willing and able host for destruction of the chemical weapons, the destruction was performed at a floating platform in sea and the exercise was carried out with the help of Denmark, Norway, China, UK, Germany, USA and Russia in June 2014.⁵

After the elimination of the chemical weapons, the joint mission ceased to exist in

December 2017 as Russia vetoed its extension on grounds of unprofessional conduct, while the OPCW mission in Syria continues to deal with the destruction of chemical weapon production facilities. In June 2018 the OPCW got the mandate to assign blame for chemical attacks and it formed an Investigation and Identification Team tasked with finding the perpetrators of the use of chemical weapons in Syria. The team presented its first report in April 2020 ascertaining role of the Syrian Arab Air Force in the use of nerve gas Sarin and Chlorine in Ltamaneh in March 2017.⁶ OPCW Director-General conveyed the Technical Secretariat's willingness to assist the Syrian Government in the fulfilment of these obligations under OPCW Executive Council decision EC-94/DEC.2 within the required 90-day period.⁷ However, the team is currently investigating priority cases related to use of Chlorine barrel bombs in Al Tamanah (Idlib) and Kafr Zita (Hama) in April 2014, use of Sulfur Mustard artillery shells in Marea (Aleppo) in September 2015; and use of Chlorine in Saraqib (Idlib) and Douma (Damascus) in February and April 2018 respectively.⁸

There has not been any instance of the use of chemical weapons in Syria after the series of chemical attacks in Douma (Damascus) in April 2018. The period of lull could be attributed to the growing international pressure on the Assad government along with reduced capacity of the non-state actors due to destruction of the chemical weapons sites. The economic sanctions of the individuals as well as financial institutions designated by the Ceasar Act as well as the April 2020 OPCW report that hold the Syrian government accountable for the use of chlorine and Sarine in Ltamenah in March 2017 work as an impediment for the Syrian

government. Nevertheless, the respite in the use of chemical weapons in Syria is promising but until Syria is rid of the chemical weapons stockpile, a relapse is possible.

Endnotes:

- ¹ Tobias Schneider, Theresa Lütkefend, "No Where to Hide, the Logic of Chemical Weapons Use in Syria," *Global Public Policy Institute*, February 2019 https://www.gppi.net/media/GPPI_Schneider_Luetkefend_2019_Nowhere_to_Hide_Web.pdf accessed on 14 September 2020.
- ² Syria 'will not use' chemical weapons on its own people, *BBC*, 23 July 2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-18955114> accessed on 15 September 2020.
- ³ Timeline of Syrian Chemical Weapons Activity, 2012-2020, *Arms Control Association*, May 2020, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Timeline-of-Syrian-Chemical-Weapons-Activity> accessed on 6 November 2020.
- ⁴ Richard Spencer, "Syria: inspectors find 1,300 tons of chemical weapons," *Telegraph*, 29 October 2013 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10411375/Syria-inspectors-find-1300-tons-of-chemical-weapons.html> accessed on 18 September 2020.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ OPCW Releases First Report by Investigation and Identification Team, *OPCW*, 8 April 2020, <https://www.opcw.org/media-centre/news/2020/04/opcw-releases-first-report-investigation-and-identification-team> accessed on 6 November 2020.
- ⁷ Debating Syria's Chemical Weapons Programme, *United Nations Press Release*, 10 September 2020, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14298.doc.htm> accessed on 6 November 2020.
- ⁸ Gregory D. Koblentz (2019) "Chemical-weapon use in Syria: atrocities, attribution, and accountability", *The Nonproliferation Review*, 26:5-6, 575-598, DOI: 10.1080/10736700.2019.1718336 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10736700.2019.1718336?scroll=top&needAccess=true> accessed on 27 October 2020.