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Islamic State's Tryst with Chemical Weapons in Syria and Iraq

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Weapons, Materials,
Proliferation,
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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 titled "[A Treatise on the Legal Status of Using Weapons of Mass Destruction Against Infidels](#)" that approves the use of weapons of mass destruction against the non-believers. 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.

"The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has not only used the weapons in its violent campaigns, but has attempted to build full-fledged chemical arsenal within its controlled territories"

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. 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 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. 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. 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. 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. 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).

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

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. 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.

(This article was originally published in CBW Magazine, IDSA, New Delhi in December 2017)

CBRN News Update: January 2018

CHEMICAL: “Fighting Impunity: International Partnership against Impunity for the Use of Chemical Weapons”

[France Diplomatie](#), January 23, 2018

The partnership against the impunity for the use of CWs brings together around 30 countries to supplement the international mechanisms to combat the proliferation of chemical weapons”

The partnership against the impunity for the use of chemical weapons was launched in Paris on 23 January 2018. Bringing together around 30 countries and international organizations, its purpose is to supplement the international mechanisms to combat the proliferation of chemical weapons. This intergovernmental initiative deals exclusively with the issue of impunity for the perpetrators of chemical attacks worldwide, and is a forum for cooperation in which the participating States have made five broad commitments, such as ‘to gather, compile and retain all available information on those who use chemical weapons’; to facilitate the sharing of information with countries and relevant international organizations so that the perpetrators will one day be held accountable for their actions; to use all existing mechanisms to identify the individuals and entities involved by providing all available documentation and supporting multilateral action to sanction them and last but not the least, ‘to help States which so require with capacity-building in order to implement mechanisms to collect information, or appropriate national legislation to prosecute the perpetrators of chemical attacks’. *Read more about the Joint Declaration of Principles [Here](#) and about other details, [Here](#).*

CHEMICAL: “Russia Rejects U.S. Criticism On Syrian Chemical Weapons”

[RFERL](#), January 24, 2018

Russia has lashed out over a U.S. charge that Moscow bears responsibility for the use of chemical weapons in Syria, and accused Washington of stymie efforts to end the State Rex Tillerson said that Moscow "ultimately bears responsibility for the victims" of a new suspected chemical attack near Damascus. President Vladimir Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, said on January 24 that U.S. officials were jumping to conclusions "without any grounds whatsoever." "We categorically disagree with the approach of the Americans, who have essentially muddied the real investigation of previous instances" of Syria chemical attacks, Peskov told journalists. Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov, meanwhile, claimed that the United States was attempting "to foment tensions and find pretexts for accusing Moscow of covering up instances of chemical-weapons use."

Western governments have long accused Moscow of using its clout as a veto-wielding UN Security Council member to protect Assad -- whom President Donald Trump has called a "criminal" -- from punishment for alleged chemical attacks and other actions. The Syrian Army and government have consistently denied using chemical weapons during the war, now in its seventh

year, while Moscow says extremists have used chemical weapons in the past. UN efforts to sanction perpetrators of chemical attacks have failed, repeatedly blocked by Russia.

Activists and rescue teams said the Syrian government is suspected of using poisonous gas that affected nearly 20 civilians in a rebel-held suburb near Damascus on January 22.

CHEMICAL: “Rescuers in rebel-held Syrian area accuse government of gas attack”

Reuters, January, January 22, 2018

Rescue workers in a Syrian rebel-held enclave east of Damascus accused government forces of using chlorine gas during bombardment of the area on Monday, and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said at least 13 people had suffered suffocation. The Syrian army and government have consistently denied using chlorine or other chemical weapons during Syria’s conflict, now in its seventh year. The White Helmets civil defence rescue force, which operates in rebel-held parts of Syria, said 13 civilians including women and children had been “injured after (the) Assad regime used Chlorine gas in Douma city in Eastern Ghouta”.

Douma is in the eastern Ghouta, a suburb east of Damascus where almost 400,000 people have been under siege by the Syrian government and allied militia since 2013. Eastern Ghouta is the last major rebel position close to the capital. The health directorate for opposition-held areas in the Damascus region said patient symptoms “suggest they have been exposed to chlorine gas inhalation”.

In the past two years, a joint U.N. and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) inquiry has found the Syrian government used the nerve agent sarin and has also several times used chlorine as a weapon. OPCW has also said Islamic State has used sulfur mustard.

BIOLOGICAL: “Nairobi forum discusses combating biological weapon attacks”

Xinuha, January 16, 2018

Kenyan institutions of higher learning and state-funded research bodies will channel investments toward programs aimed at strengthening bio-security measures in the country, strengthening bio-security measures, policymakers and scholars said robust financing for research, capacity building and public awareness is key to strengthening Kenya's capacity to respond to attacks by rogue entities using biological weapons.

Roy Mugiira, director of technical services at the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation, said public universities should explore innovative ways to strengthen bio-security amid threats linked to unregulated

The threat of WMDs including biological weapons is real and universities must contribute to government efforts in raising the awareness on bio-security," Mabel Imbuga, Kenya

movements of biological and chemical toxins."Kenya is a signatory to the United Nations Security Council resolution that prohibits use of biological toxins that could pose a threat to global peace," Mugiira said.

Mabel Imbuga, vice chancellor of the Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, said that with Kenya and other African countries being at risk of biological toxins, there was need to invest in deterrent measures."The threat of weapons of mass destruction including biological weapons is real and universities must contribute to government efforts in raising the awareness on bio-security," Imbuga said.

*"The most immediate challenge to international security is posed by the evolution of the North Korean nuclear program":
Henry Kissinger*

NUCLEAR: "China needs more nuclear warheads to deter US threat, military says"

[South China Morning Post](#), January,30, 2018

China must expand its nuclear stockpile so it can better deter and hit back at an enemy strike as geopolitical uncertainties mount and the US appears bent on a nuclear build-up, according to the Chinese military's mouthpiece. In the *PLA Daily* on Tuesday, a commentary said China had enough nuclear weapons to prevent "bullying" by other nuclear powers but still needed to respond to changes in US strategy.

"To enhance China's strategic counterbalance in the region and maintain China's status as a great power, and protect national security, China has to beef up and develop a reliable nuclear deterrence capability," it said. It also said China would still stick to the "no first use" doctrine, meaning there were no circumstances in which it would be the first to use nuclear weapons.

The commentary comes as the administration of US President Donald Trump is expected to unveil its new military weapons policy later this week. A leaked draft of the document says Washington will ramp up new nuclear projects and deploy more "low yield" nuclear bombs, according to the Huffington Post. Military analysts said China was poised to increase its own arsenal of nuclear warheads but there were no plans to rival the United States. Beijing-based military analyst Zhou Chenming said China only needed to add about 100 warheads to its stockpile to counter threats from the US and India. "Nuclear weapons are hugely expensive to maintain and China is very pragmatic. Beijing will not spend too much money on an arms race," Zhou said.

China has never declared the scale of its nuclear stockpile but the Washington-based Arms Control Association puts the country's total at 270 warheads, the fourth-biggest of the five main nuclear states. Russia has 7,000, the US 6,800, France 300 and Britain 215, the association estimates.

NUCLEAR: “Kissinger, Shultz Warn of Rising Nuclear Perils”

[Voice of America](#), January 25, 2018

Two former U.S. secretaries of state on January 25, warned lawmakers of a marked rise in nuclear dangers stemming from North Korea's race to develop atomic weapons and the means to deliver them. Henry Kissinger, who served in the Nixon and Ford administrations, highlighted "a systemic failure of the world order" in dealing with nuclear proliferation. George Shultz, who served in the Reagan administration, called the spread of nuclear weapons "a major problem that can blow up the world."

"The most immediate challenge to international security is posed by the evolution of the North Korean nuclear program," Kissinger said at a hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee. He said Pyongyang's determined defiance of the international community could have a ripple effect elsewhere. "If North Korea could maintain its capability in the face of opposition by China and the United States and the disapproval of the rest of the world, other countries are bound to feel that this is the way for achieving international prominence and the upper hand in international disputes," Kissinger said. "The denuclearization of North Korea must be a fundamental objective. And if it is not reached, we have to prepare ourselves for the proliferation of weapons to other countries."

*“The most immediate challenge to international security is posed by the evolution of the North Korean nuclear program”:
Henry Kissinger*

Shultz expressed alarm about what he sees as changing attitudes regarding the use of atomic weapons. “President Reagan thought nuclear weapons were immoral, and we [the Reagan administration] worked hard to get them reduced," Schultz said. "I fear people have lost that sense of dread [about nuclear weapons], and now we see everything going in the other direction. The more countries have nuclear weapons, the more likely it is that one is going to go off somewhere, and the more fissile material is lying around, anybody who gets fissile material can make a weapon fairly easily."

NON-PROLIFERATION: “India Enters Australia Group”

[The Wire](#), January 19, 2018

India on Friday (January 19) joined the Australia Group which aims to stop the development and acquisition of chemical and biological weapons, a move that may take the country an inch closer to joining the Nuclear Suppliers' group (NSG). This is the third multilateral export control group – after the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) and Wassenaar Arrangement – that India has become a member of. In a [press release](#), the 42-member Australia Group said there had been “very strong support” for India’s membership at its plenary meeting in June 2017. Following that, “consensus was reached intersessionally” to admit India to the club. “India then reaffirmed its intention to join the group,” said the announcement.

The Ministry of External Affairs said that the series of multilateral export control groups that India has joined “helps in establishing our credentials” for joining the NSG. India joined the MTCR in June 2016, followed by the Wassenaar Arrangement in December 2017

The **CBRN Digest** is an attempt to document the trends and developments relating to Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear weapons and their proliferations. The Digest is scheduled to be published at the beginning of each calendar month, assessing events and developments of the previous month.

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