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SYRIA

WEST ASIA: A NEW COLD WAR?

AND INDIA'S OPTIONS





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THE TRUTH

ABOUT CHEMICAL ATTACK IN SYRIA

Logically for Assad forces that have an upper hand in the conflict, no useful purpose could have been served by using chemical weapons. His administration is definitely not so naïve not to understand the international implications of such an act. Hence, there exists a possibility that just to put Assad in the dock, his opposing forces could have stage-managed this attack. However, such claim could be made with certitude only if correct evidence is available to that effect and in the 'fog of war' it is very unlikely that such evidence (if any) could ever be gathered.



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Historically, it has been observed that various activities that happen during the wars, at times remain unanswered. Military operators do experience uncertainty in situational awareness and are not sure about the reasons behind various actions happening on the battlefield. Such situation is normally described as a 'fog of war'. At present, a 'fog of chemical warfare' has been experienced over the Syrian theatre. It is a reality that chemical weapons are getting used and people are getting killed in this war. However, it is becoming increasingly difficult to exactly pinpoint the agency which is doing this act. There have been various claims and counter-claims about the people involved in these activities. Global agencies supported by the United Nations





UN investigation team taking samples from sand to test for a chemical attack in Syria.

have identified the miscreants; however, still some confusion prevails in certain cases.

Chemical Weapons Banned

Since the end of 2012, there have been various incidences of the usage of chemical weapons on Syrian soil. Historically, the use of chemical weapons in warfare stands banned under the *1925 Geneva Protocol*. This convention is about no use of weapons of mass destructions (WMDs) in the wars and chemical weapons being

a WMD, naturally stands banned from usage. In addition, there are other relevant rules of customary international law which could be interpreted as pointers towards banning the use of chemical weapons.

One of the significant conventions which do not permit the use of chemical weapons is the 1992 Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) mechanism. At global level, this is one of the most successful mechanisms and

almost all countries in the world, barring very few, are signatories to this mechanism. The OPCW (Organisation for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons) is mandated under this mechanism to ensure the signatory States to this mechanism adhere to their commitments. Syria is party to CWC and on 14 October 2013, the CWC entered into force for the Syrian Arab Republic, making it the 190th State Party to the treaty. The OPCW is one of the most professional and respectable



Syria was pressured for accession to the Chemical Weapons Convention and immediately, a joint mission of the UN and the OPCW was established. This led to the successful removal of Syria's declared chemical weapons

OPCW worked very hard and just within approximately one year successfully destroyed 96 per cent of Syria's declared chemical weapons stockpile. However, in spite of this, still chemical weapons are found being used in the Syrian theatre and this is raising the suspicion about actually who is using the chemical weapons on the battlefield.

Many Agendas

Assad regime totally remains in a denial mode and is found continuously arguing that they are not using any kind of chemical weapons. However, except Russia no one is ready to accept their claim. Presently, Syria's Civil War is being fought on multiple fronts. It is not a war amongst two warring factions, but there are many factions. There are fighters belonging to different alliances. Amongst them every group have different agenda to fight the war. These groups also expect different end results and outcomes of this war. President Bashar al-Assad aims to reassert control nationwide. He is being opposed

organisations which has also won the Nobel Peace prize. Presently, OPCW is responsible to ensure that Syrian State does not produce, procure, stockpile or use chemical weapons. However, it is important to appreciate that OPCW is more of a technical and policy organisation and not a security or intelligence organisation.

Main Suspect

It is a reality that chemical weapons have been used in the Syrian theatre since last five years and United Nations have confirmed this fact based on the

investigation carried out by the UN fact-finding mission and a UNHRC Commission of Inquiry. Syrian Ba'athist military was the main suspect, due to a large arsenal of such weapons in its custody. Immediately after the reported incidents of use of chemical weapons in 2013 international community responded very swiftly. Syria was pressured for accession to the Chemical Weapons Convention and immediately, a joint mission of the UN and the OPCW was established. This led to the successful removal of Syria's declared chemical weapons. The

mainly by Sunni Arab opposition forces. While Islamic State (ISIS) is keen on erasing Syria's border and attaching parts of Iraq to have their own State. While Kurdish militants have different agenda. In addition, there are various factions and sub-factions, which at times, are found operating with their own agendas. On top of all this, external powers like the West and Russia have their own strategic calculations. They predominately use airpower to conduct their operations. Midst all this chaos, sporadically chemical weapons are found getting used and amongst claims and counter-claims by various factions, it actually becomes difficult to decide the actual proliferators and users of the chemical weapons.

chlorine or sarin, a nerve agent, is said to have been used. Mostly, these attacks are known to be conducted by the Syrian government.

The US has been very vocal about punishing the users of the chemical weapons. On occasions, they have been found taking unilateral actions in this regard. Around a year back on 4 April 2017, chemical weapons were used, killing more than 80 people. The US believed that this attack had been carried out by Assad government. Hence, President Trump gave the order to launch an attack on the al-Shayrat airbase. A massive attack was launched on this base and 59 *Tomahawk* missiles were shot. It was thought that such action could work

During last seven years in the Syrian conflict, possibly around 2,000 people have died owing to the use of chemical weapons. However, 2 to 4 lakh humans have been killed by conventional weapons

Assad Hand

After any chemical weapons attack, the US and allied forces are always found presenting a proof to demonstrate the hand of Assad regime in carrying out such attacks. Though President Assad and Russia deny their involvement in such attacks, still at times they are also found not very cooperative towards OPCW to undertake investigation. As per the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, at least 34 chemical attacks since 2013 have occurred and in many of which

as a deterrent and Assad forces would not use chemical weapons again. However, on 7 April 2018 the rebel-held town of Douma, east of Damascus again witnessed use of chemical weapons killing an estimated 40 people including children with lethal chlorine gas. In response, the United States and their allies attacked three facilities associated with Syria's chemical weapons programme. They targeted a scientific research centre in the greater Damascus area, a chemical weapons storage facility west of Homs, and a chemical weapons equipment storage facility and command post, near Homs.

Conspiracy

This recent attack raises a suspicion about who actually could be behind these attacks. The US is convinced that Assad regime is the real culprit and they have already punished it for that. However, logically for Assad forces that have an upper hand in the conflict, no useful purpose could have been served by using chemical weapons. His administration is definitely not so naïve not to understand the international implications of such an act. He knows for sure that the world has no appetite for any chemical non-sense. Hence, there exists a possibility that just to put Assad in the dock, his opposing forces could have stage-managed this attack. However, such claim could be made with certitude only if correct evidence is available to that effect and in the 'fog of war' it is very unlikely that such evidence (if any) could ever be gathered.

The use of chemical weapons in Syrian theatre and the response of the rest of the world to this use, also demonstrates the hypocrisy of modern day world. During last seven years in the Syrian conflict, possibly around 2,000 people have died owing to the use of chemical weapons. However, in this conflict, the overall deaths estimated owing to use of conventional weapons and other reasons are known to exceed 2 to 4 lakh humans. Still what gets often debated is the use of chemical weapons, the weapons which are possibly being used by all warring factions because they are the weapons to create mayhem, both physically and politically. **DSA**

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