

OPCW Probe Implicates ISIL in 2015 Chemical Attack on Syria's Marea

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Summary

The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW)-led Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) has concluded, based on an extensive inquiry examining munitions remnants, samples, testimony, and documentation, that there are reasonable grounds to determine that the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) deployed sulphur mustard, a banned chemical warfare agent, during strikes targeting Marea, Syria on 1 September 2015, via modified artillery projectiles. The IIT's technical analyses linked the sulphur mustard's characteristics to production methods consistent with ISIL's chemical weapons programme. This investigation, directly implicating ISIL in a chemical attack for the first time, underscores the threat posed by terrorist groups developing chemical munitions, prompting calls for accountability and prevention efforts.

Introduction

Sulphur mustard, a synthetic chemical warfare agent, induces blisters in the skin and mucous membranes upon contact, classifying it as a vesicant or blistering agent. Commonly referred to as “mustard gas” or “mustard agent,” sulphur mustard exposure poses severe health risks, with no known antidote currently available.¹ The Fourth Report of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW)’s Investigation and Identification Team (IIT), published in February 2024, provides definitive evidence of the use of sulphur mustard by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Marea, north-western Syria, in September 2015.² It is a significant development as, for the first time, the OPCW has directly attributed a chemical weapons attack in Syria to a non-State actor, specifically ISIL.



Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34743311> (Accessed on 3 May 2024)

The comprehensive investigation examined a wide range of evidence (20,492 files), including munitions remnants, 30 samples, 29 witness testimonies, and documentation related to ISIL’s organisational structure

and weapons manufacturing capabilities. Applying the standard of “reasonable grounds” used by international fact-finding bodies, the IIT’s report lays out how ISIL forces likely deployed the chemical agent during artillery strikes as part of their offensive to capture the strategically located town.

Investigation and Identification Team

The IIT was formed by the Director-General of the OPCW Technical Secretariat in accordance with the Resolution passed by the Conference of the States Parties titled “Addressing the Threat from Chemical Weapons Use” on 27 June 2018.³ The IIT commenced its work in June 2019, focusing on certain incidents in the Syrian Arab Republic for which the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) had determined that the use or likely use of chemical weapons occurred and for which the OPCW-United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism had not reached a final conclusion. The mandate of the IIT was to establish the facts and identify the perpetrators of the use of chemical weapons in Syria. In fulfilling its mandate, the IIT applies the standard of proof of “reasonable grounds”, which is consistently adopted by international fact-finding bodies and commissions of inquiry. IIT investigated for chemical attack in Marea from January 2023 to February 2024.

Findings on the Marea Attack

Based on a comprehensive analysis of all available information, IIT concluded that there are reasonable grounds to believe that on 1 September 2015, the ISIL deployed sulphur mustard in an attack on the town of Marea in Syria’s Aleppo Governorate. This chemical weapons attack occurred between 09:00 and 12:00 local time (UTC+3) as part of ISIL’s sustained military campaign to

capture the town. The IIT’s investigation indicates that ISIL units utilised one or more artillery guns to deliver the sulphur mustard agent. This method of deployment suggests a level of tactical sophistication and intentionality in the use of chemical weapons.

IIT determined that during the incident, the Syrian Arab Republic did not exercise territorial control over the specific area from which the artillery shells containing sulphur mustard were discharged. This area continues to remain beyond the jurisdiction of the Syrian Arab Republic. The IIT identified several impact locations across Marea, with no discernible targeting pattern. The remnants and munitions observed at these sites were conventional 122-mm calibre artillery projectiles modified to disperse a liquid payload. At least six projectiles leaked a black, viscous substance with a “pungent” and “garlic-like” smell upon impact. Furthermore, at least 11 individuals who came into contact with this liquid substance experienced symptoms consistent with exposure to sulphur mustard.⁴



Source: <https://www.opcw.org/sites/default/files/documents/2024/02/s-2255-2024%28e%29.pdf> (Accessed on 1 May 2024)

Munitions and Delivery

The IIT’s technical assessment determined that the munitions used in the Marea attack were 122-mm High-Explosive (HE) or High-

Explosive Fragmentation (HE-FRAG) artillery projectiles that had been modified to accommodate a liquid chemical fill instead of their original explosive payload. Crucially, the lack of fusing systems, explosive damage patterns, or explosive material residue on the projectile remnants indicated they did not contain any explosive components. Simulations by ballistics experts further corroborated that the projectiles were manually filled with a non-explosive liquid compound after removing the explosive filler. On the basis of a comprehensive analysis of the impact locations, firing directions, and operational range of the 122-mm artillery system, the IIT concluded that the projectiles were fired from within a 15-km radius of the impact sites, in areas that were under ISIL's territorial control at the time. The use of sulphur mustard delivered by artillery was part of ISIL's sustained offensive to capture the strategic town of Marea.⁵

Origin of the Chemical Agent

The IIT's analysis of the chemical composition and impurities present in the sulphur mustard used in Marea indicates that it was produced via an improvised "Levinstein" method, rather than industrial-scale manufacturing. This production route allowed the IIT to discount the possibility that the chemical agent originated from the declared stockpiles of the Syrian Arab Republic or the former chemical weapons programme of Iraq, both of which utilised the different "Meyer" synthesis route for their sulphur mustard production. Furthermore, the IIT established linkages between the characteristics of the sulphur mustard used in Marea and other confirmed instances of mustard use by ISIL forces in the region between 2015 and 2017, notably the attacks in Taza (Iraq) on 8 March 2016 and Um-Housh (Syria) on 16 September 2016. The strong similarities in composition

and impurities point to a common improvised production method employed by ISIL across these attacks.⁶

ISI Command and Chemical Weapons Programme

Based on a comprehensive review of documentation and sources, the IIT concluded that the deployment of sulphur mustard in Marea would have occurred pursuant to orders from ISIL's highest executive bodies and leadership. Specifically, the Delegated Committee operated directly under the self-proclaimed "Caliph" who oversaw ISIL's strategic decision-making at the time. The IIT further identified key ISIL members and organisational structures involved in the group's chemical weapons programme, including the Diwan Al-Jund (Department of Soldierly) and the Committee for Military Development and Manufacturing (CMDM), which received funds from Bayt Al-Mal (ISIL's treasury), were the primary drivers of the programme.⁷

Global Concerns and Reactions

Ambassador Fernando Arias, Director General OPCW, stated that OPCW has efficiently delivered on the mandate assigned to it for identifying perpetrators of chemical weapon use in Marea and expected the international community to take further action.⁸ The United States has found the findings of the OPCW in consonance with its own assessment of the incident. The US praised the IIT's impartial work and stressed the importance of maintaining its investigative capabilities to uphold the global ban on chemical weapons. It urged enhanced international collaboration to prevent terrorist access to chemical weapons and ensure accountability for their use.⁹

The UK's Minister of State for the Middle East, South Asia, UN, and the Prime

Minister's Special Representative on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict, Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, strongly denounced the utilisation of chemical weapons by ISIL in Syria. He urged the international community to regard with utmost gravity the potential for non-State actors to develop, procure, and deploy chemical weapons and specified that it is imperative for all States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention to collaborate in its due implementation.¹⁰ France asserted its resolute dedication to holding accountable those responsible for all instances of chemical weapons attacks in Syria. It maintained its steadfast commitment to ensuring a fitting response to such egregious actions in terms of punishment.¹¹

Conclusion

The OPCW's specific findings about the Islamic State's use of sulphur mustard in Marea underscore the persistent threat posed by non-State actors seeking to develop and use chemical weapons. While the investigation could not definitively pinpoint the specific chain of command behind the attack orders, it illustrated ISIL's organisational capability to manufacture and integrate chemical munitions into military operations. The findings emphasised Syria's obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention to investigate and prosecute these violations by adopting appropriate criminal legislation and holding perpetrators accountable, even when committed by non-State actors like ISIL operating in areas outside government control. As called for by the OPCW Conference of States Parties (policy-making organ), the damning evidence compiled in the findings will now be shared with the United Nations and relevant investigative bodies to support broader efforts at accountability and preventing the re-emergence of chemical weapons.

Endnotes:

- ¹ "Sulfur Mustard (Mustard Gas): Exposure, Decontamination, Treatment", Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 7 February 2023, at <https://www.cdc.gov/chemicalemergencies/factsheets/sulfur-mustard-mustard-gas.html> (Accessed on 3 May 2024).
- ² "OPCW identifies ISIL as perpetrators of 2015 chemical attack in Marea, Syria", Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), 22 February 2024 at <https://www.opcw.org/media-centre/news/2024/02/opcw-identifies-isil-perpetrators-2015-chemical-attack-marea-syria> (Accessed on 1 May 2024).
- ³ "Addressing the Threat from Chemical Weapons Use", Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), 27 June 2018 at https://www.opcw.org/sites/default/files/documents/CSP/C-SS-4/en/css4dec3_e_.doc.pdf (Accessed on 30 April 2024).
- ⁴ "OPCW identifies ISIL as perpetrators of 2015 chemical attack in Marea, Syria", Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), 22 February 2024 at <https://www.opcw.org/media-centre/news/2024/02/opcw-identifies-isil-perpetrators-2015-chemical-attack-marea-syria> (Accessed on 1 May 2024).
- ⁵ "Fourth Report by the OPCW Investigation and Identification Team Pursuant to Paragraph 10 of Decision C-Ss-4/Dec.3 "Addressing the Threat from Chemical Weapons Use" Marea (Syrian Arab Republic) – 1 September 2015", 22 February 2024 at <https://www.opcw.org/sites/default/files/documents/2024/02/s-2255-2024%28e%29.pdf> (Accessed on 2 May 2024).
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ "OPCW identifies ISIL as perpetrators of 2015 chemical attack in Marea, Syria", Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), 22 February 2024 at <https://www.opcw.org/media-centre/news/2024/02/opcw-identifies-isil-perpetrators-2015-chemical-attack-marea-syria> (Accessed on 1 May 2024).

⁹ “The Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Marea Report Release”, Press Release, Office of the Spokesperson, US Department of State, 23 February 2024 at <https://www.state.gov/the-investigation-and-identification-team-iit-of-the-organization-for-the-prohibition-of-chemical-weapons-opcw-marea-report-release/> (Accessed on 3 May 2024).

¹⁰ “UK condemns confirmed Daesh use of chemical weapons in Syria”, Press Release, Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, UK Government, 26 February 2024, at <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-condemns-confirmed-daesh-use-of-chemical-weapons-in-syria> (Accessed on 6 May 2024).

¹¹ “Syria – Report by the organization for the prohibition of chemical weapons on the use of chemical weapons in Marea”, Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, Government of France, 24 February 2024 at <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/syria/news/article/syria-report-by-the-organization-for-the-prohibition-of-chemical-weapons-on-the> (Accessed on 6 May 2024)