

## Syrian Civil War and the Chemical Weapons Use

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### Summary

Syria is in the middle of civil war since March, 2011. Recent reports of use of chemical weapons in Syria and US President Barack Obama's official statement on this issue has given a new turn to the Syrian conflict. Chemical Weapons (CW) usage and geopolitics of global interests complicate the issue. Achieving a sustainable solution will require serious and sustained efforts on part of all the actors involved in Syria.

US President Barack Obama's April 30, 2013 statement that the US would "...take military action against Syria if hard, effective evidence is found of use of chemical weapons and if Syria crosses the chemical weapons red line" has received global attention.<sup>1</sup> The Syrian civil war started in March 2011, initially with antigovernment street protests inspired by Arab spring in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. However, it converted into more formal protests when the opposition took part in long uprising against the Ba'ath regime of President Basher Al-Assad in 2011-12.<sup>2</sup> Since then, more than 70,000 people have been killed and around one million Syrians are living in refugee camps in different neighboring countries.<sup>3</sup> Syrian government has opposed foreign intervention in civil war and in the investigations of chemical weapons.

Recent reports on the alleged small-scale use of chemical weapons in Syrian war have given birth to speculations about the possibility of its use in the ongoing war. As of now, which side used these weapons is not clear as both are blaming each other for this. It was reported for the first time in December 2012 that chemical weapons were used in Syrian cities of Homs and Aleppo. Allegedly, the largest use of chemical weapons took place on March 19, 2013 in the area of Khan al-Asal, in which about 40 people were killed and more than 300 admitted for symptoms.<sup>4</sup> However, doubts persist due to lack of verifiable evidence on chemical weapons usage. Experts say that allegations of chemical warfare are based on two types of evidence; video footage of alleged chemical attacks in Syrian hospitals and the soil and human tissue samples taken out of Syria and analysed by labs in the United States and Britain.<sup>5</sup> While there are doubts about the reliability of the samples,

the US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel has recently confirmed that there is some degree evidence of chemical weapons use.<sup>6</sup>

Officially, the Syrian government had never accepted possessing chemical weapons until July, 2012, when the spokesman of Syria's foreign ministry said, "Any stocks of (weapons of mass destruction) or any unconventional weapon that the Syrian Arab Republic possesses would never be used against civilians or against the Syrian people during this crisis at any circumstance, no matter how the crisis would evolve"<sup>7</sup>. It must be noted that Syria has neither signed the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC)\* nor ratified the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC)\*\* and has never made a formal declaration of its stock.<sup>8</sup> Syria is widely believed to possess large quantities of the highly toxic mustard gas and Sarin nerve agent and it is believed that Syria has attempted to develop more toxic and persistent agents such as VX gas.<sup>9</sup> It was reported that poisonous gas Sarin was used on small scale in recent attacks in Syria. Patients had respiratory and neurological symptoms - respiratory, including shortness of breath, bronchospasm, a lot of secretion and respiratory failure requiring mechanical ventilation, and some neurological symptoms, confusion, and convulsions. Some of the victims reportedly went into coma.<sup>10</sup>

After the reports of chemical weapons attack in Syria, opposition forces in Syria and some Western countries blamed Assad government for attacks even as the Syrian government continued blaming rebels for these incidences. International bodies investigating the matter are also somewhat influenced by the ongoing political blame game; earlier, the UN independent commission of inquiry had denied Assad government's involvement in chemical attack by saying that 'its not Syrian

government but the rebels who used chemical weapons'<sup>11</sup>. However, the very next day, UN commission changed the statement and said that it had "no conclusive proof that opposition rebel forces in the country had used the deadly nerve agent sarin"<sup>12</sup>. The US doubted this claim and said, "Any chemical weapon use that has taken place in Syria was done by the Assad regime and that remains its position"<sup>13</sup>. It is important to note that some western and middle-east countries are supporting the rebels and providing them weapons. On the other hand, countries like Russia, Iran and China continue supporting to Basher's Government.

The involvement of militant groups in Syrian conflict and the associated fear of the spread of lethal weapons to al- Qaeda make the situation extremely complicated as well as volatile. Israel's willingness to use force, like the recent air attack on the Syrian military research center to stop weapon supply to Lebanon based militant group Hezbollah, on one hand and Iran's support and weapons supply to Hezbollah via Syria further compounds the situation. While the global powers jostle to prioritise their interests, with every passing day the toll of civilians deaths in Syria is mounting.

## Endnotes:

1. Obama hints at potential military action in Syria, Hezbollah ready to intervene in support of Syria's Basher al-Assad, , The Associated Press, April 30, 2012, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/story/2013/04/30/obama-syria.html> Accessed on May 1, 2013
2. Syria profile, BBC News, May 1, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14703856> Accessed on May 3, 2013.
3. World seeks answers as Syria civil war evolves, Mariano Castillo and Fred Pleitgen, CNN, April 30, 2013, <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/04/30/world/meast/syria-civil-war/index.html>, accessed on May 1, 2013

4. What We Know about Chemical Weapons in Syria, Voa News, <http://www.voanews.com/content/what-we-know-about-chemical-weapons-in-syria/1653286.html>, Accessed on May 4, 2013
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  6. Is the Syrian government using chemical weapons? By Jonathan Marcus, BBC diplomatic correspondent, BBC News, April 25, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-22291805>, Accessed on May 1, 2013
  7. Syrian Official's Statement on W.M.D., NY Times, July 23, 2013, <http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/07/23/syrian-officials-statement-on-w-m-d/?ref=middleeast>, ROBERT MACKEY Accessed on May 3, 2013
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  9. Ibid
  10. What We Know about Chemical Weapons in Syria, Voa News, <http://www.voanews.com/content/what-we-know-about-chemical-weapons-in-syria/1653286.html>, Accessed on May 5, 2013
  11. Case Study of the Bhopal Incident, Environmental toxicology and human health – vol. I - *case study of the bhopal incident* - Paul Cullinan, <http://www.eolss.net/sample-chapters/co9/e4-12-02-04.pdf>, accessed on may 5, 2013
  12. U.N. has testimony that Syrian rebels used sarin gas: investigator, Reuters, May 5, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/05/05/us-syria-crisis-un-idUSBRE94409Z20130505>, Accessed on May 7, 2013
  13. No proof Syria rebels used chemical weapons, says UN, France 24.com, May 7, 2013, , <http://www.france24.com/en/20130506-un-no-proof-syrian-rebels-used-chemical-weapons>, Accessed on May 7, 2013
- \* Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, <http://www.opcw.org/chemical-weapons-convention/>, Accessed on May 5, 2013
- Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) – The CWC aims to eliminate an entire category of weapons of mass destruction by prohibiting the development, production, acquisition, stockpiling, retention, transfer or use of chemical weapons by States Parties.
- \*\* The Biological and Toxin Weapons convention Website, <http://www.opbw.org/> Accessed on May 5, 2013
- Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC) – Is a convention on the prohibition of the development, production and stockpiling of bacteriological (Biological) and toxin weapons and on their destruction.