

The Fear of Syrian Chemical and Biological Weapons

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Summary

Reports of a Chlorine gas attack in Syria amid the ongoing UN-OPCW inspection and destruction of chemical weapons in the country shows the impunity of some sections of the parties fighting in Syria and their willingness to use "unconventional" weapons. The destruction exercise is quite useful in the sense that it will reduce the number of chemical weapons in Syria and eliminate the chances of these forces acquiring more such weapons. However, there are fears about undisclosed chemical as well as biological weapons; and Syria's capabilities about the latter remain more elusive. Suspicions that the rebels might have got, or may get, access to some of these weapons adds to the anxiety of the international community. And, overall, the biggest question is if the whole exercise is going to cease the incessant deaths that are no less horrible than inflicted by "unconventional" weapons.

The protracted sectarian conflict in Syria has brought focus on its chemical and biological weapons capability. The West contemplated that the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria might use chemical weapons to gain an upper hand on the rebels in case the conventional strength was weakened. Under the pressure of the rhetoric of an intervention by a Western coalition or UN forces, the Syrian Foreign Ministry spokesman Jihad Makdissi had assured the international community that no "unconventional weapons" in the Syrian stockpile would be used in any circumstances in Syria, but only in the case of an "external aggression".¹ It was an indirect but first ever acceptance by Syria of its possession of "unconventional" weapons. As the West had not been able to intervene in Syria due to several reasons ranging from reluctance of the United States (US) to the opposition in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) by Russia and China, the issue of chemical weapons was used by the US President Barak Obama as a face saving "red line" for the use of force against the Syrian Government. He had warned Syria, on August 20, 2012 that the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime was the "red line" that would change his "calculus" regarding intervention. Reports of an impending use of chemical weapons by Syria in late 2012 compelled President Obama to reiterate his commitment to the "red line".

The first major chemical attack took place at Khan al-Assal village near Aleppo on March 19, 2013 killing at least 26 and injuring more than a hundred.² The Assad regime did not immediately allow the UN investigation team to enter Syria for the verification of the attack. However, the West claimed on the basis of intelligence that Sarin was used in the attack. Later, Russian

inspection team collected samples from the site and confirmed the use of chemical weapons and blamed a section of the rebel Free Syrian Army for the incident. However, the perpetrators of this attack could not be identified beyond doubt due to suspicions about the chain of custody of samples for forensic examination. In the wake of the high certainty of the use of chemical weapons in the March 2013 incidence, the Obama administration announced military help to the opposition in the form of protective equipment, medical aid and training.

Amid the criticism of the UNSC and the US led west for their reluctance to intervene despite nearly hundred thousand deaths and millions of refugees in the neighbouring countries, another chemical weapon attack took place in Ghouta near Damascus on August 21, 2013, resulting in nearly 1400 deaths. This attack took place even as a UN inspection team was in Syria to find out the truth about the origin of the earlier reported use of chemical weapons.³

The attack resulted in a huge international outcry and the Obama administration was compelled to step up the interventionist rhetoric to honour the red line. While the US congress was to vote on a proposal for the approval of intervention in Syria in form of targeted airstrikes, realising the grim situation for its ally Syria, Russia came up with a diplomatic plan to prevent the imminent strike. Russia proposed for the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons under the supervision of the international community. In order to avoid an external intervention, Syria agreed immediately and signed the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) on 14 September 2013, the day the US and Russia agreed on a framework for the elimination of the chemical weapons in Syria in soonest and safest manner. The Convention entered into force for the Syrian Arab Republic on October 14, 2013. The

UNSC Resolution 2118 adopted on 27 September 2014, decided and provided a plan for the destruction of the declared and surrendered Syrian chemical weapons. Syria had provided two lists of material, weapons and sites within the time period stipulated in the Resolution. Although sections of the US establishment suspect veracity of the disclosure, they accepted that the lists provided by Syria were quite comprehensive than they had expected. The resolution set the deadline of 30 June 2014 for complete destruction of the Syrian chemical weapons stockpile.

The Syrian chemical weapons stockpile was huge; as it contained 1000 metric tons of Category I weapons, 290 tons of Category II chemicals and 1230 unfilled delivery systems such as rockets.⁴ It includes several hundred tons of Sulphur Mustard and Sarin and tens of tons of nerve agent VX. A United Nations (UN) & Organisation for Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Joint Mission comprising experts is entrusted with the process of inspection and destruction of chemical weapons as well as production facilities. Despite adverse security conditions, the team has been able to complete verification activities in 21 out of the 23 declared sites. Items from the remaining unvisited sites have been removed and verified against the Syrian disclosure. Phase-I of the destruction programme has already been completed as all the facilities of production and mixing capabilities had been "rendered inoperable"⁵ by 31 October 2013.⁶ According to an update report to the OPCW, 92.5 per cent of the disclosed chemical materials have been removed and destroyed.⁷ These weapons and materials are to be destroyed outside Syria. Therefore, the whole process is moving slowly due to adverse security conditions in Syria as well as denial by several countries to provide their facilities for the destruction of the weapons. Syria has

also failed to meet a couple of deadlines for handing over its stockpile. Although the OPCW feels that the deadline is still achievable, experts have already started talking about the extension of the deadline to the end of 2014.

Amid the reports of a recent chemical attack in the rebel-held Syrian village Kfar Zeita on 11 April 2014, the whole exercise of the ongoing inspection and destruction of the Syrian chemical weapons under the supervision of the UN-OPCW team comes under question. It is suspected whether the Joint Mission would be able to achieve its objectives in its entirety. The truth about who used the gas would come out only after the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission submits its report.⁸ However, the rebel Syrian National Coalition claimed that the government forces used poisonous gas against people while the Syrian television, run by the government, blamed the Al-Nusra Front for using Chlorine in the attack killing 2 and injuring more than hundred people.⁹ At the same time, the television did not clarify how it ascertained that the used gas was indeed Chlorine, banned under the Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or Other Gases, and of Bacteriological Methods of Warfare, signed in Geneva in 1925, to which Syria also became a party in December 1968. If the reports of the attack are true, they suggest undisclosed possession of chemical weapons by one or both of the conflicting parties, most likely the government forces.

The recent attack has raised fears about the undisclosed chemical weapons and facilities, and the willingness to use them.¹⁰ However, the US administration has not responded to the recent attack as strongly as it had responded to the

earlier attacks. Meanwhile, a section of experts are now pointing towards the biological weapons capabilities of Syria which had signed the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) in April 1972 but has not ratified it yet. The willingness to use chemical weapons in the ongoing Syrian conflict has also increased the fear about biological weapons that are outside the ambit of current inspection and eliminations programme underway in Syria primarily because biological weapons are more lethal than chemical weapons and also difficult to be detected and verified.

Syria is suspected of having developed a biological warfare programme since 1970s. Even then the assessment about the programme has been highly variable. Some experts assume it highly developed with efficient delivery systems while others find the capabilities as borrowed and rudimentary. However, the US Intelligence Chief James Clapper warned the US Senate intelligence committee in January 2014 that Syria might have made significant strides in biological warfare. Although he noted that the country still is not able to successfully produce an efficient biological agent delivery system, he warned that the conventional weapons in possession of Syria could be modified for the purpose.¹¹ Based on the duration of their suspected longstanding programme, Syria might be capable of limited agent production. According to Dany Shoham, by 2002 Syria was reportedly concentrating on two bacterial agents, anthrax and cholera and two toxins including botulinum and ricin.¹² It is also suspected of retaining strains of smallpox from its last natural outbreak in 1972.¹³ It is also suspected to have cooperated with the erstwhile Soviet Union, North Korea, Iraq and Iran. Suspicions about the country's capabilities to produce harmful biological agents for the purposes of war correspond with the development of the Syrian

pharmaceutical industry as most of the biological warfare research and development facilities cannot be distinguished from a normal medical research unit because of the dual-use nature of the agents and equipments. However, the new research and development capability of the Syrian pharmaceutical sector is doubted by scientists as the sector is based on generic medicines.¹⁴

The debate about the external intervention in Syria has been focused on the chemical weapons so far, although the rationale is questionable given the number of deaths in the country. Approximately 150,000 people have already died in the civil strife in Syria which warrants a more serious form of intervention.¹⁵ Both conventional and unconventional weapons are made to kill. The number of death by conventional weapons and the alleged use of poisonous gases despite the ongoing chemical weapons destruction make the issue of intervention in Syrian more complicated. It shows the impunity of certain sections of parties involved in the conflict that are not ready to follow any restriction regarding the nature of weapons. This heightens the fear of the use of biological weapons as well.

The situation in Syria and the involvement of terrorist elements like Al-Qaeda in large number in the fight against the Assad regime make the chemical and biological agents in Syria vulnerable to falling in hands of the terrorists. Nobody knows if there are additional undisclosed chemical weapons stockpiles. One can only hope that the Syrian government has disclosed its entire stockpile as well as facilities in order to avoid external involvement. Even then, the biological weapons, howsoever developed they are, remain elusive. The international community needs to find some way out to avoid any biological weapons use in Syria. The issues of chemical and biological weapons in Syria

are complicated and addressing them will be a larger political game involving the issues of intervention, sovereignty and medical self-reliance. The biggest question remains whether the incidents of use cease after the UN-OPCW Joint Mission is over and if not, what would be the next alternative for the international community.

Endnotes:

- ¹ It was stated in the Syrian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Jihad Makdissi's press conference on July 23, 2012.
- ² The numbers differ according to various reports. The number of deaths may be higher and the number of injured may be even much higher.
- ³ "Syrian activists accuse government of deadly chemical attack near Damascus", by By Loveday Morris and Karen DeYoung, *Washington Post*, August 21, 2013, at http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/syrian-activists-accuse-government-of-deadly-chemical-attack-near-damascus/2013/08/21/aeaa157e-6-0a50-11e3-89fe-abb4a5067014_story.html
- ⁴ "Syria: inspectors find 1,300 tons of chemical weapons", by By Richard Spencer, *The Telegraph*, October 29, 2014, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10411375/Syria-inspectors-find-1300-tons-of-chemical-weapons.html>
- ⁵ "Update on Syrian chemical weapons destruction and the fact-finding mission into alleged Chlorine gas attacks", *OPCW*, May 22, 2014, at <http://www.opcw.org/news/article/update-on-syrian-chemical-weapons-destruction-and-the-fact-finding-mission-into-alleged-chlorine-gas/>
- ⁶ "Director-General updates the executive council on the work of the OPCW-UN Joint Mission", *OPCW*, November 5, 2013, at <http://www.opcw.org/news/article/director-general-updates-the-executive-council-on-the-work-of-the-opcw-un-joint-mission/>
- ⁷ "OPCW-UN Joint Mission: Total chemical material removed and destroyed raised to 92.5%", *OPCW*, April 24, 2014, at <http://www.opcw.org/news/article/opcw-un-joint-mission-total-chemical-material-removed-and-destroyed-raised-to-925/>

- ⁸ “OPCW to undertake fact-finding mission in Syria on alleged Chlorine gas attacks”, *OPCW*, April 29, 2014, at <http://www.opcw.org/news/article/opcw-to-undertake-fact-finding-mission-in-syria-on-alleged-chlorine-gas-attacks/>
- ⁹ “Obama administration: ‘Indications’ chemical weapons used, again, in Syria”, *Fox News*, April 21, 2014, at <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2014/04/21/state-department-indications-chemical-weapons-used-again-in-syria/>
- ¹⁰ Syria’s case is similar to Iraq where the chemical programme was much larger than estimated and where the investigation teams were similarly misled. It had taken nearly eight years to eliminate the entire weapons stockpile from Iraq. For more see Bruce Riedel, “The challenges of UN inspections in Syria”, by Bruce Riedel, *Brookings*, September 11, 2013, at <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2013/09/11-challenges-un-inspections-syria-riedel>
- ¹¹ “ Syria may be able to produce biological weapons”, *The Telegraph*, January 29, 2014, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10605512/Syria-may-be-able-to-produce-biological-weapons.html>
- ¹² “Assad’s suspected biological weapons more lethal than his chemical arsenal”, by Patrick Goodenough, *cnsnews.com*, September 10, 2013, at <http://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/patrick-goodenough/assad-s-suspected-biological-weapons-more-lethal-his-chemical>
- ¹³ “Syria’s bio-warfare threat: An interview with Dr. Jill Dekker”, by Jerry Gordon, *New English Review*, December, 2007, at http://www.newenglishreview.org/Jerry_Gordon/Syria%27s_Bio-Warfare_Threat:_an_interview_with_Dr._Jill_Dekker/
- ¹⁴ “Country Profile-Syria: Biological”, *NTI*, last updated in February 2013, at <http://www.nti.org/country-profiles/syria/biological/>
- ¹⁵ “Report: More than 146,000 people killed in Syrian civil war”, by Noah Rayman, *Time*, March 13, 2014, at <http://time.com/24077/syria-death-toll/>