

Chemical Anarchy: Islamic State, Chemical Weapon and Syrian War Theatre

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Summary

There has been an increase in speculations surrounding the possible use of chemical and biological weapons in the aftermath of Paris massacre. These fears and speculations are not random or isolated. They emerge from events in the war theatres of Iraq and Syria that witnessed increasing use of chemical weapons such as chlorine and mustard gas against civilians and military alike across the globe after the outbreak of Ebola virus.

Some big questions following the aftermath of Paris massacre are two-fold. Firstly, whether the so called Islamic State (IS) would now look to acquire capability to develop or use strategic weapon systems, including those that are chemical and biological in nature, to overcome its conventional military inadequacies in Iraq and Syria; and if the IS would venture out with these insidious weapon system, especially chemical weapons, to attack foreign capitals. The answer is far from negative.

Arguably, speculations are rife among international experts, including those serving in the French and US governments, about the possibility of Chemical and Biological weapon attacks. French Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian has said that a chemical or biological weapon strike is among the risks emanating from the IS. The French prime minister too expressed similar apprehension few days ago.

Earlier, both Iraqi and US intelligence officials claimed that the IS group (ISG) is aggressively pursuing the development of chemical weapons. Talking to the Associated Press, they claimed that the ISG had already set up a centre with a team of scientists to research and experiment the weapons.

These fears and speculations are not random or isolated, rather stemmed out of events in the war theatres of Iraq and Syria that witnessed increasing use of chemical weapons such as chlorine and mustard gas against civilians and military alike.

CW incidents in Syria¹:

The United Nations and Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) have already confirmed the indiscriminate

use of chemical weapons against civilians in the on-going Syrian Civil War. Host of independent agencies and other sources active on the ground too have verified these events. In the last few years, there have been many blatant cases of chemical weapon attacks. Some of these incidents have been investigated and confirmed by leading world agencies like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Human Right Watch, while some other cases remain controversial or under-reported.

The most deadly attack took place in Khan al-Assal and in Ghouta between March - August 2013, in Syria where various estimates suggest that no less than a couple of thousand people died and scores bore the brunt of the deadly gases.² The UN and Russians led separate investigations and confirmed the use of Sarin nerve agent and chlorine in both the attacks; they could not, however, ascertain the perpetrators of the crime -- whether it was the government that was behind these attacks or the rebels or militant groups.

Almost two years after Khan al Assal incident, which took place on March 19 (2013), once again the spectre of chemical weapon returned to haunt inhabitants of Sarmin (Idlib province) in the northwestern Syria.³ There were allegations and counter allegations regarding this. Syrian opposition group claimed that Bashar al-Assad's government carried out the chlorine gas attack in Sarmin, while the Syrian regime denied any such acts.

It is a widely known fact that the previous regime in Iraq and the present Syrian government are known to have stockpiled chemical weapons in their military arsenals. Whether these state controlled arsenals are falling in the hands of the IS or other militant factions presently engaged in a prolonged civil war in the region is largely unknown.

However, reports suggest that the IS has seized large swathes of territory both in Syria and Iraq and is feared to have controlled the remnants of CW stockpiles and infrastructures.

Even though Syria joined the OPCW, the international implementing body of the Chemical Weapons Convention, following the deadly Ghouta attack and declared its chemical weapon arsenal, which were destroyed subsequently under international supervision, many fear that Syria still has undeclared arsenal, especially chlorine. Syria didn't include chlorine stockpiles on its list of declared chemical weapons, as it does not fall under weapon category.

Islamic State's Chemical Jihad?

The claim from the IS side regarding the possession of chemical weapons, such as Mustard agents, came in late August this year from a Dutch soldier turned ISIS fighter identified as Omar Yilmaz, who indicated that the group has acquired chemical weapons once belonging to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Yilmaz's revelations came with a series of suspected incidents of mustard gas attacks in northern Iraq and Syria.⁴

Independent sources such as Conflict Armament Research (CAR) and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) have claimed that the IS has used chemical weapons several times against Kurdish forces between January -June 2015. In August this year, 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 ISG have used sulphur-mustard in a mortar attack on Kurdish forces in Makhmour town located in Northern Iraq. The location has been in the news and a battlefield between the Kurdish forces and the Islamic State.⁵

A month after, US agencies found leads to show that ISG is making and using crude chemical weapons such as mustard agents in a powder form in Iraq and Syria. In September, a senior Russian Foreign Ministry official informed that Islamic State group has obtained the scientific documentation necessary to produce chemical weapons. According to Hakim Al Zamili, the head of the Iraqi parliament's security and defence committee, IS has been working towards production of chemical weapons, particularly nerve gas.⁶

Outlook

Numerous indications of IS having used CW notwithstanding, there are doubts or unanswered questions about its capability to conduct or unleash any large scale chemical weapon attacks in Western countries or even within its territory against rival fighting forces. However, if the Islamic State finds psychological or physical effectiveness of chemical weapons, by perpetrating mass fear and disruption, its use against western targets or civilian populace in European capitals or elsewhere would be a reality soon.

Endnotes:

1. A graphical details of purported Chemical weapons use in Syria and Iraq can be found here, <https://activist1.wordpress.com/2015/09/03/from-a-gassed-grandfather-to-alleged-use-of-chemical-weapons-by-is-the-horrors-of-mustard-gas/>
2. For one such reports citing multiple case of CW use in Syria, See "UN: Multiple chemical attacks likely in Syria", Al Jazeera, December 13, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/12/un-chemical-weapons-syria-attacks-20131212224042210713.html>
3. "Syria: Chemicals Used in Idlib Attacks: Security Council Should Act Decisively to Establish Responsibility" , Human Right Watch, April 13, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/04/13/syria-chemicals-used-idlib-attacks>
4. See, Omar Yilmaz's statement cited in "Where Did ISIS Get Its Chemical Weapons?", Daily Beast, September 2, 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/09/02/where-did-isis-get-its-chemical-weapons.html>
5. Andrew Tilghman, "U.S. confirms Islamic State use of chemical weapons, Military Times, August 21, 2015, <http://www.militarytimes.com/story/military/2015/08/21/isis-used-mustard-gas-makhmour-against-kurds/32116637/>
6. "ISIS determined to produce chemical weapons: say officials" Al Arabiya, November 19, 2015, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/world/2015/11/19/ISIS-determined-to-produce-chemical-weapons-say-officials.html>