

The use of chemical weapons in Syria: misleading narratives and ongoing consequences

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What we know so far

Richard Guthrie summarised what we know so far. The Middle East accounts for less than 5 per cent of the manufactured chemical weapons (CW) yet all credible allegations of use since World War II emanate from this region. The instances were:

- Yemen, during the civil war and Egyptian intervention (1963 and 1967)
- Iran-Iraq war, in every year between 1984 and 1988
- Iraqi Kurdistan in 1987 and 1988
- *Syria 2013 and 2014*

It seems that before the civil conflict started in Syria in 2011 the country had a CW programme of some sort, though it is unclear whether it consisted of research, production or links with other programmes. Syria faced significant strategic pressure to respond to Israel's nuclear potential and its superiority in conventional forces. It is thought that both the Syrian and Iraqi CW programmes began after the Arab defeat in the 1973 war with Israel, and also followed the 'successful' deployment of CW by Egyptian forces during the Yemen civil war in the 1960s. The Syrian programme may have expanded in 1982 as deterrence against Israel during the latter's invasion of Lebanon. It is thought to have focused on air-launched weapons to be used against Israeli populations, not as tactical weapons as alleged to have been used in Damascus in 2013.

It is notable that early in the Syrian uprising tear gas was used against demonstrators. In July 2012 the government announced that CW 'would not be used against Syrians', which was taken to be an implicit admission that it had CW. In early 2013, allegations of the use of CW by both sides were brought to the UN Security Council and a UN team arrived in Syria to investigate in August 2013.

On 21 August 2013 attacks in East Ghouta were found to be affecting the nervous systems of victims. In September the Sellström report based on samples gathered at the site suggested that sarin had probably been used – but the perpetrators were not identified. On 27 September UNSC 2118 was adopted calling for 'the expeditious and verifiable destruction of all Syria's chemical weapons' (OPCW).

Competing narratives

Dr McLeish examined the competing narratives generated in social media by the issue of chemical weapon use in Syria, based on a project entitled 'Data Capture in Syria' supported by Sussex and Cranfield universities.

From the beginning of the civil war the dominant narratives came from the regime and from the opposition, which had close ties with jihadists. At first there were no allegations of CW use, but images of pain and suffering were used to vilify enemies, and later CW allegations fitted easily into this pattern of behaviour. Julian Perry Robinson has noted the relative weakness of CW as a battlefield weapon, but its strong emotional impact.

The social media data which the project used had some limitations. First, the categories for searches were preset by the company providing the software; second, the research focussed on news discussion forums and blogs. It did not cover Twitter or YouTube, or the Russian version of Facebook, though these are now being worked on.

The graphs showing the response on these social media to alleged CW use showed some mentions in 2012/13 but a big spike at the time of Ghouta (including the work of Syrian citizen journalists). However, she noted that the social media spikes did not correlate with what CW analysts consider important. What gains traction is milestones – what is happening (particularly the Western response), and what may happen.

There were three competing narratives:

Nothing happened: This view was taken by Syrian state and the Russians – alleging that the attacks were ‘stage managed’. This was dismissed in the West but given credence in other countries

Syrian state responsibility: This view was supported by opposition leaders and western governments, but there was disagreement between the US and the UK on the presentation of the data, expressed in varying degrees of certainty and problems with narrative. There is no ‘smoking gun’ nor any explanation of why CW were used on that date or at that scale. This creates space for speculation. For example, Israeli sources speculated that Assad’s brother could have been responsible, a view taken up by Sellström who suggested in an interview that responsibility could lie with the opposition or with Assad’s brother. A further speculation was that the attack was a mistake on the part of the Syrian military who had used too much CW in the battle for the capital.

Deliberate rebel use: This view was supported by Putin – that the rebels used CW to make it look like a Syrian state attack to provoke external intervention.

On social media, however the picture was rather different. ‘The regime did it’ gained least credence; next came ‘deliberate non regime use’; but the dominant view – against western expectations – was that ‘nothing happened’. This view can be dismissed but there are still people out there who promote it, based on the same set of facts as the other positions, but interpreted according to specific political perspectives.

This raises the question of how traction is gained, or lost. This is the first time that governments are not in charge of the media and the flow of information. This, together with the speed of dissemination on social media, has created their ‘megaphone impact’. The space has been created in which to speculate on these competing narratives. However, Dr McLeish pointed out that the volume of detail and views has led to information overload, which in turn has led to public disinterestedness.

Richard Guthrie: Ongoing issues

This is the first time a CW programme has been destroyed in a country at war, but there are still outstanding issues, particularly the question of destroying production facilities. Several other issues have also hampered the work:

- The impact of the international crisis in Crimea/Ukraine which has made interactions with Russia much more difficult.
- The source of attribution: evidence on the ground would look similar whether it was attributed to the regime or the opposition seeking to make it look as though the government did it.
- The fluidity of opposition groups – some of those currently in opposition had previously been under government control and some members of the opposition have defected back to the regime side.
- This lack of attribution reduces the chances of reaching any kind of accountability, let alone justice.

The recent chlorine allegations since early 2014: in some ways this is a consistent pattern of allegations. The gas has been delivered in barrel bombs from helicopters – and so far no one has found evidence that the opposition have access to helicopters.

The UN fact-finding mission that visited Syria in April/May 2014 came under attack and so could not do research on the ground. Its members did, however, interview a lot of people. Their report lends credence to the view that toxic chemicals – most likely ‘pulmonary irritating agents such as chlorine’ – were used.

Implications of the use of chlorine:

- It had a significant psychological impact on the local population, who could not know if it was sarin or not.
- The fact that there were only a few casualties in each attack meant they did not grab the headlines and therefore attracted little international attention. This in turn weakens the taboo against use.
- There were also difficulties for forensic analysis as chlorine is difficult to distinguish in environment.
- Finally, there is the dual use dilemma: a ban on possession of chlorine gas and related substances would have severe public health consequences, particularly in relation to drinking water.

Lessons learned:

- The importance of maintaining skill sets for dealing with the destruction of any remaining CW programmes of non-states parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention
- The cost of destroying Syria’s CW programme was less than expected
- Maintain the taboo against CW, which makes it harder for sponsor states to ignore infringements.

Up till now there has been remarkable success diminishing the legitimacy of CW, but the use of chlorine gas could erode this trend, as international attention diminishes. CW issues in Syria cannot be solved in isolation – the internal conflict is too deeply entrenched. There is a need for accountability, both to achieve justice and to inhibit future use. But there are no simple recommendations to make.