The Strategic Significance of Syrian Regime’s Chemical Attacks (Jan. – Apr. 2014)

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ABSTRACT

After the deadly chemical attack in Ghouta, last August 2013, the Syrian government agreed to destroy all of its chemical weapons. Even though by April 2014, 92.5% of Syria’s chemical arsenal had been destroyed and as Syria approaches the end of the chemical arms removal program, the world has witnessed a sudden resurgence of chemical strikes, with a marked hike last April. This report summarizes the latest chemical attacks and concludes that the Assad regime is using chemical terror to advance its military goals, becoming a state we can define as a non-conventional terrorist actor.

* The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT).
Background

Syria is a non-nuclear weapon state party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and has a Comprehensive Nuclear Safeguards Agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Syria has/had one of the most advanced chemical warfare (CW) capabilities in the Middle East. It appears to have acquired a capability to develop and produce chemical weapons agents, including mustard gas and sarin, and possibly also VX nerve agent. Chemical weapons agents have allegedly been produced since the 1980s at facilities located near the Hama, Homs, and Al-Safira villages in the Aleppo region. However, Syria depended on foreign sources for some dual-use equipment, and for the precursor chemicals critical to CW agent production.1

Syria possesses Scud-B and Scud-C ballistic missiles, artillery shells, and rockets that are believed to be capable of delivering chemical warheads. Until recently, Syria had refused to become a member of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC).

After the deadly chemical attack in Ghouta, last August 2013, in which between 281 (French Intelligence Report)2 to 1429 (U.S. Report)3 persons were killed, sparking international outrage and threats, the Syrian government agreed to destroy all of its chemical weapons.

Even though the program has suffered some setbacks, it appears that by April, 26th, 2014, 92.5% of Syria's chemical arsenal had been destroyed, according to Sigrid Kaag of the OPCW5.

Since Syria began its shipments in January 2014, there seems to have been a sudden resurgence of chemical strikes, with a marked hike last April, as Syria approached the end of the chemical arms removal slightly behind schedule.

Latest chemical attacks

Hereunder is a comprehensive list of the latest attacks / threats involving chemical arms since January 7th, 2014, when the first ship filled with chemicals arms left Syria.6

(1) Jan. 8, 2014: Syrian Chemical-Arms Sites under Attack

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4 The Free Syrian Army counted 1729 casualties, as reported by the Lebanese Daily Star “Bodies still being found after alleged chemical attack: Opposition” August 22, 2013.
6 See Annex I.
An anonymous source from the Syrian government told the OPCW that insurgents had assaulted a storage site near the city of Homs and a second site outside Damascus, according to the European diplomat. Mr. Sabbagh did not specify when the attacks took place, the identities of the attackers or what damage, if any, had resulted, but said that the attacks “would have been disastrous if the terrorist plans had worked.” The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reports 2 dead in Homs on that day, but it is not clear whether or not they are related to the attack.\(^7\)

(2) Jan. 12, 2014: Rebels accuse Syrian Government of launching chemical attack\(^8\)

The rebel-dominated suburb of Daraya, southwest of Damascus, sustained a prolonged assault with what appeared to be the standard missile and mortar attacks used throughout the war. But at least one corner of Daraya was hit by a more unorthodox weapon that is becoming more common by the day: the so-called barrel bomb. No reported casualty.

Mar. 2, 2014: Libya intercepts mustard agents bound to Syrian rebels\(^9\)

Libyan officials recently caught several members of a Muslim extremist group as they attempted to send deadly chemical weapons (mustard gas) to Syria. The gas was confiscated by Libyan soldiers.

(3) Mar. 13, 2014: Rockets hit Chemical-Transit Port.\(^10\)

Rocket-launching from a considerable distance hit the Syrian coastal city of Latakia on the day of a transfer to its port of a chemical weapons consignment slated for destruction, reported Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) sources to ANSA on Wednesday.

Mar. 31, 2014: Rebels deny seizure of coastal territory in view of disrupting chemical disarmament.\(^11\)

(4) Apr. 1, 2014: Fighting rages near Syria’s Chemical Arms Transit Port


Apr. 10 – 22, 2014:

Apr. 10, 2014: New Syrian chemical strike draws foreign scrutiny.\(^12\) Renewed accusations that the Syrian regime continues to use chemical weapons against civilians: members of the Syrian opposition, including the Syrian National Coalition, have accused the regime of using chemical weapons, mainly in the suburbs of Damascus, in areas such as Jobar and Harasta. “There have been at least four such attacks in recent months, involving high doses of chlorine and pesticides,” said Sinan Hatehet, director of the Coalition’s media office.


15 killed. He added that the chemicals were primarily being used as a psychological weapon. The regime categorically denies carrying out any chemical weapons attacks, and accuses the rebels of having done so, in Khan al-Asal and in Ghouta.

Apr. 14, 2014: Syrians trade blame for chlorine gas strikes.\textsuperscript{13}

Apr. 15, 2014: Saudi Arabia demands action after new reports of Syrian government gas strikes.\textsuperscript{14}

Apr. 22, 2014 Evidence of two weeks of chlorine barrel bomb attacks.
Hereunder is a list of videos collected by blogger and reporter Elliott Higgins, alias Brown Moses, of alleged chemical attacks in Syria between April 11 and April 21, linked to the use of chlorine gas inside barrel bombs:\textsuperscript{15}

(5) April 11 - Kafr Zita, Hama Hama (2 civilians, 1 rebel)
(6) April 11 – Harasta, Damascus Damascus (2 civilians)
(7) April 12 - Al-Taman'ah, Idlib Idlib (3 civilians, 4 rebels)
(8) April 14 - Atshan, Hama
(9) April 16 - Kafr Zita, Hama
(10) April 16 – Harasta, Damascus Damascus (2 civilians)
(11) April 18 - Al-Taman'ah, Idlib Idlib (2 civilians, 7 rebels)
(12) April 18 - Kafr Zita, Hama Hama (2 rebels, 1 civilian)
(13) April 21 - Telmans, Idlib Idlib (1 rebel, 1 civilian)\textsuperscript{16}

Apr.21, 2014: Opposition groups accuse the regime of striking with Chlorine laden barrel bombs dropped from helicopters on Telmans, in the central province of Hama.\textsuperscript{17}

Higgins adds that the playlist represents only some of the reported chlorine attacks with 6 in Kafr Zita, and 2 others in Harasta, Damascus on April 11 and April 16.
The attack on Harasta is also mentioned in a Reuter’s article that appeared on the same day.\textsuperscript{18}

(14) Apr. 22nd, 2014: Daria, near Damascus, targeted with small barrel bombs containing chlorine gas. No deaths, small number of casualties.\textsuperscript{19}


\textsuperscript{15} “Evidence from two weeks of chlorine barrel bomb attack,” \textit{Brown Moses blog}, April 22, 2014 at \url{http://brown-moses.blogspot.co.il/2014/04/evidence-from-2-weeks-of-chlorine.html}

\textsuperscript{16} The number of victims varies for the attack according to sources.


\textsuperscript{18} Oliver Holmes,”Syrian Opposition accuse Assad’s forces of New Poison Gas Attack,” \textit{Reuters}, April 16, 2014.

\textsuperscript{19} Idem.
(15) Apr. 30, 2014: Third chlorine attack on Al-Tamanah, Idlib. The attack involved barrel bombs dropped from helicopters. There was one dead, and 70 wounded.20

On April 21, 2014 French President Francois Hollande stated that there are indications of new Syrian chemical strikes. Hollande said he has “confirmation” but “no proof” that the Assad regime is still using chemical weapons against its population.21

In a recent interview French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said the Assad regime used toxic agents at least 14 times since October 25 of last year but it has been difficult to garner definitive proof because chlorine gas generally evaporates too quickly to collect samples. According to Fabius, the chlorine attacks “show that the regime of Bashar Assad is still capable of producing chemicals weapons, and determined to use them.”22

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry stated lately that unconfirmed "raw data" appears to back French findings that Syria launched more than a dozen new chemical attacks. "It has been made clear by President Obama and others that use would result in consequences," if the data were to be proven, Kerry said, without binding this “to a precise time, date, manner of action.”23

Western security officials are investigating recent allegations that Iran supplied to the Syrian regime 10,000 canisters filled with chlorine gas ordered from China and loaded on flights to Syria.24 China North Industries Group Corporation (Norinco) strongly denied it had exported any chlorine gas or cylinders to Syria after opposition activists in the rebel-held village of Kfar Zeita in the Hama province uploaded a video of people choking and being fed oxygen after what they said were bombs dropped from helicopters on April 11 and 12. Further footage showed a partially exploded canister bearing the chemical symbol for chlorine along with Norinco’s name.25 Norinco however did not mention the possibility Iran was the supplier of the Chinese chlorine.

By the end of April the OPCW decided to send a fact-finding mission to Syria to investigate allegations by rebels and activists of chlorine gas attacks and the Syrian government agreed to accept the mission and promised to provide security in areas under its control.26

**Syria a non-conventional terrorist state**

According to intelligence sources from Britain, France and the United States, Syria maintains an ability to deploy chemical weapons, information that could strengthen the allegations that Syria's

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military recently used chlorine gas in its bloody civil war. Britain, France and the United States had provided relevant information to the OPCW months ago, including on specific undeclared chemical weapons sites. In a tacit acknowledgement of the original declaration's incompleteness, Syria in early April 2014 submitted a more specific list of its chemical weapons to the international disarmament mission after discrepancies were reported by inspectors on the ground.  

From the analysis of the overall information concerning the behavior of the Damascus regime in the use of chemical weapons against the civilian population and the rebel forces it seems that Assad has learned the lesson of the August 2013 major chemical attack in the Ghouta area and the U.S. threat of a military punishing attack.

It has therefore decided to use minor chemical attacks with chlorine (less lethal and impressive than mustard gas or sarin) and possibly other strong non-lethal gasses, in order to win tactical battles in strategic areas - the Damascus neighborhoods and north-western Syria.

The Assad regime is thus using chemical terror to advance its strategic military goals, becoming the first regime since Saddam Hussein gassed the Iraqi Kurdish town of Halabja in 1988 that can be defined as a non-conventional terrorist state.

In a way Assad gives legitimacy to non-state actors, including the rebel and terrorist groups active in the Syrian civil war, and beyond, to use the same methods.

28 See the map in Annex II.
## Annex I - Summarizing Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Town / Province</th>
<th>Attacker</th>
<th>Substance</th>
<th>Dissemination</th>
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<td>Chemical Arms Site</td>
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<td>Government</td>
<td>Barrel Bomb</td>
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<td>Government</td>
<td>Chlorine &amp; Pesticides</td>
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<td>Latakia</td>
<td>Insurgents? Government?</td>
<td>Chemical Transit Port</td>
<td>Rockets</td>
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<td>Barrel Bomb</td>
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*30 The number of casualties is published by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights at [http://syria.hr/en/](http://syria.hr/en/). The numbers should be taken cautiously because the cause of death is not specified, and thus some of the noted casualties could be from causes unrelated to the chemical attack. [http://syria.hr/en/](http://syria.hr/en/)
Annex II – Map of the chemical attacks

The map was created using ZeeMaps services, for interactive map of the attacks in Syria [click here].