



Chemical Weapons Could Change the Game in Syria

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Syrian regime unleashed full military grade chemical weapons against IS several weeks ago, a move that occasioned little response from the wider world. The assault demonstrated that the dismantling of the Syrian chemical arsenal has not been fulfilled. If repeated, the attack might precipitate a dangerous escalation of the conflict in which IS accelerates its own pursuit of WMDs.

On or about April 23, 2016, the Syrian regime launched a serious chemical attack against IS. The object of the attack was to prevent IS from occupying two essential military airfields east of Damascus. The attack involved standard military chemical weapons, probably including the sarin nerve agent in aerial bombs.

This attack was almost completely ignored by the outside world, but is nevertheless worthy of note. It marked the renewed use by the Syrian regime of chemical weapons that are far superior to the chlorine gas it usually employs (following an unverified deployment of a potent chemical warfare agent in late 2015). Assad used these military grade weapons to meet a critical strategic imperative, and his decision to do so was tolerated by the international community – an instructive result of which he no doubt took note.

The attack illuminates several points about the ongoing civil war. On the most practical level, it proves categorically that Assad – notwithstanding his commitment to eliminate the regime’s entire chemical weapons arsenal – still possesses chemical weapons of full military grade. The regime has dodged its

commitment to dispose of them by outmaneuvering inadequate international control mechanisms.

The attack also highlights the weakened position of the US in the Middle East. Red lines firmly posed by President Obama regarding the use of chemical weapons in Syria have been proven hollow. The failure of US policy on this issue, and the collapse of the US-Russian understanding regarding Syria's chemical disarmament, are worrying developments.

For its part, Russia appears largely untroubled. It is indifferent to Syria's continued use of chemical weapons, effectively offering the regime passive encouragement. The other strategic actor in Syria – Iran, along with its Hezbollah proxy – is likely to support the use by the Syrian regime of chemical weapons. The Russian-Syrian-Iranian radical axis remains the predominant alliance in the Syrian civil war, and both outside actors have a practical interest in maintaining a chemical weapons option for use by the regime.

In September 2015, an agreement was reached between Syria and Russia stipulating that Russia would supply the regime with military support for the fight against IS and the rebels. About two years earlier, under the terms of the Lavrov/Kerry agreement, Syria had undertaken to dismantle its chemical weapons arsenal. Yet while the dismantling was allegedly underway, the Syrian regime continued to use non-military grade toxic chemicals as weapons (for example, chlorine). The Russians showed no discomfort with this, even taking steps on occasion to obscure the incidents.

As things stand now, the full extent of the Syrian regime's residual chemical weapons arsenal is unknown. The precise details do not really matter. Russia will probably refrain from supplying chemical weapons directly to Assad. But Iran – which is heavily invested in the Syrian civil war and the battle against IS – might fill the gap. Iran possesses a vast inventory of potent chemical weapons, including nerve agents. It may well prefer to supply some of that inventory to Assad rather than lose – together with Hezbollah – more and more military manpower on the Syrian front.

The destruction of IS is proving to be a long and painful effort for the Syrian regime. From the regime's perspective, chemical weapons constitute an "efficient" alternative to conventional warfare against an enemy that a) is not yet capable of retaliating in kind; b) is inadequately prepared to defend itself; and c) continues tenaciously to pursue strategic assets.

From a purely military standpoint, chemical weapons appear to be a desirable alternative under these circumstances. International red lines that were shaky at best have evaporated completely, possibly because the intended target of the weapons is IS. The lack of any meaningful international will to interfere with the Syrian regime's struggle against an unsavory common enemy simplifies the regime's decision to unleash its chemical arsenal.

IS, meanwhile, is trying to advance its own WMD capabilities. There are concrete indications that the organization is seeking enhanced capacity, particularly in terms of nerve agents, and is attempting to procure radiological and biological agents. (It pursues nuclear terrorism capability as well, but is unlikely to attain it.)

IS's motivation to employ WMD will probably increase if it is itself regularly targeted by chemical weapons, and the threat will remain even if IS suffers heavy losses. IS will likely persist as an extremely radical terror organization even if it loses its capital, Raqqa. Even in a weakened state, IS should be expected to attempt to carry out terrorist operations – including WMD attacks – anywhere it can.

The recent aggressive use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime against IS is a milestone. It suggests a possible transition to the repeated, effective, and scarcely acknowledged use of chemical weapons by the regime – a development that could eventually propel an equivalent response by IS. Such a transition, if realized, could reshape the conflict by redefining both the legitimacy and the practicability of using such weapons.

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