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RESPONDING TO CHEMICAL WEAPONS USE

By Lee Eysturlid
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On April 7, 2018, Syrian forces under President Bashar al-Assad conducted what is believed to be the 17th chemical weapons attack against an allegedly civilian "rebel" target in the town of Douma, killing 70 and injuring hundreds more. In response, air forces of the United States, the United Kingdom, and France conducted strikes against known Syrian chemical facilities, damaging but not destroying them.

Reactions to Chemical Weapons Use

Ironically, the recent Syrian use of chemical weapons—chlorine gas bombs, mustard gas, and sarin—coincides with the 100th anniversary of World War I. It was that war that witnessed the first, and only, mass use of chemical weapons. But why in a civil war in Syria that has seen hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths, including the use of conventional "barrel bombs" that kill far more, do chemical weapons alone evoke a Western response?

Psychologists believe that humans, in reaction to potential threats to life, unconsciously create "classes of risk." Despite the great power of explosives and firearms, chemical weapons are considered a "dreaded risk." The gruesome death or prolonged suffering these weapons cause, well-documented from World War I, are immediately terrifying and repugnant. It is not the fact that chemical weapons are lethal but the manner in which they kill that makes them singularly unacceptable.

Chemical Weapons during the World Wars and Cold War

The potential for chemical weapons use motivated efforts to ban them even before World War I. The burgeoning chemical dye industry produced, as a by-product, large quantities of poisonous chlorine gas in the 19th century, leading to a ban on its weaponization at The Hague Peace Conferences of 1899 and 1907. Since these restrictions clearly failed during the war, another far stronger effort was made in 1925 with the Geneva Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use of Poisonous Gases. The protocol did not restrict the development, production, or possession of such weapons, however.

Since 1925 there has been only sporadic use of chemical weapons. Most interesting was their near absence during World War II, especially in Europe. However, the Italian fascist regime did employ gas in the 1930s against indigenous forces in Africa. During the Cold War both the United States and the Soviet Union stockpiled thousands of tons of chemical and nerve agents, but there is no known use. The most famous recent use was by Saddam Hussein's Iraqi regime, which employed chemical weapons against both the Iranian Army and Kurdish civilians in the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s.

An Ongoing Issue

In August 1992, the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) was agreed upon by the United Nations,

banning most chemical weapons. Signatories agreed to destroy stockpiles and be open to inspection. The convention also created the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to act as a watchdog, but it has little authority. Importantly, Syria did not sign. Further, many states, including the U.S. and Russia, retain substantial quantities of chemical and nerve agents—although they see their possession as a deterrent.

The final issue comes with the potential for terrorist use of chemical weapons, exemplified by the Aum Shinrikyo cult's 1996 release of sarin gas in the Tokyo subway, killing 12 and sickening hundreds. Despite a general revulsion and official restrictions, chemical agents remain a powerful weapon.

Lee W. Eysturlid

Image Credits

Victims of alleged gas attack by Syrian government: White Helmets/Handout/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

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