

Forum: The Security Council

Issue: The issue of chemical weapons in Syria

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Introduction

The issue of chemical weapons in Syria surged before the start of the ongoing Syrian civil war, back on the year 2011. However, the world became more aware of the use of these inhumane weapons after the war started in 2012. There was a great quantity of documented attacks from various parties within the jurisdiction as well as numerous refugees that left the country and spread throughout all of Europe. Also, in that year the United Nations confirmed the use of such weapons in the country. It is important to point out that the use of chemical weapons is by different parties within the jurisdiction, being some of these the Syrian military forces, the Islamic State as well as other organizations.

Chemical weapons have been banned worldwide in the past because they are considered ruthless. As a matter of fact, chemical and bacteriological warfare were prohibited in the 1925 Geneva Protocol. Such protocol was drawn up and signed in 1925 under the auspices of the League of Nations but it only entered into force in 1928. (UN Office for Disarmament Affairs). However, the Syrian government allegedly affirmed in 2012 that the chemical arsenal would be used against "external threats" (Kimball, 2018). Although the president Bashar Al-Assad made that statement a few years ago, it was proved that the Syrian armed forces made use of such weapons, leading to a decrease in the government's credibility. Within the chemical weapons used throughout the conflict, the most utilized by every party are the sarin gas, sulfur mustard, and chlorine, which have devastating effects on the human body.

Definition of Key Terms

Sarin gas

Sarin is a human-made chemical agent considered originally designed as a pesticide during 1938 in Germany. It is a clear, colorless, odorless and tasteless liquid in its pure form, however, it can evaporate into gas causing it to spread into the environment and acting as a nerve agent. (CDC, 2015)

Sulfur mustard gas

The sulfur mustard gas or also known as mustard gas is a type of chemical warfare agent that is responsible for causing blistering on the skin and mucous membranes on contact. It was originally introduced by Germany during World War I and it was proved to be catastrophic and inhumane. It can be rather odorless or smell like onion, garlic or mustard. Also, it can have a yellow or brown color or it can even be colorless. Although it is commonly presented as a gas, it can also be found in liquid or solid form. (CDC, 2015)

Chlorine (Weaponized)

Weaponized chlorine can be found as a poisonous gas, however, non-weaponized chlorine can be found in industries and household products. Chlorine is actually released in the liquid form and immediately turns into gas that stays close to the ground and spreads rapidly. Its color can be yellow or green. Regarding the odor, it has been recognized that it has an irritating odor similar to the odor of bleach. It can also have devastating results when mixed with certain chemicals, causing explosive reactions or forming explosive compounds. However, it is not a flammable chemical. (CDC, 2013)

De facto

The meaning of the "de facto" situation is that was although it exists or it is part of the reality, it has not been recognized through a formal act or by a competent authority. An example of this situation would be a rule that everyone follows even though it has not been recognized, so it is considered a "de facto" rule. The opposite for "de facto" would be "de jure" which literally means "by right, legally". (Collins Dictionary)

War crime

A war crime is defined by the International Criminal Court (ICC) as: "Willful killing, or causing great suffering or serious injury to body or health."

Arab Spring

The Arab Spring was a series of political protests that looked for regime changes, humanitarian changes or cultural changes which were carried out between 2011-2013. These protests were carried out throughout Arabia, in countries such as but not limited to Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Libya. Tunisia has had some improvements after these series of protests but many of them had a government that reflected political instability and oppression, which was and still is Syria's case nowadays. (History.com editors, 2018)

Background Information

How did it start? - Syrian civil war

The issue of chemical weapons in Syria pretty much arises with the origin of the ongoing Syrian civil war. As a result of the Arab Spring uprisings within the Syrian jurisdiction, various peaceful protests were carried out. In fact, as a result of these protests in the region, Tunisia's and Egypt's presidents were toppled. These series of events motivated the Syrian population to try to achieve a similar goal due to the lack of freedoms and economic woes present in the government. Consequently, Assad's government responded in a violent and inhumane way, with chemical weapons, torture, and imprisonment. During this period, a lot of people died, especially the youth sector that still attended school. As a response, in July 2011 the Free Syrian Army was created with former military members, who looked to overthrow the Syrian government. Furthermore, it is thought that global warming had a role in the sparking of the conflict, after a severe drought heavily affected the territory, resulting in a big emigration, which included 1.5 million people. (Al Jazeera, 2018)

As mentioned before, the Syrian civil war started in the year of 2011. Such confrontation started as an armed conflict between the Syrian armed forces and Syrian rebel groups, also known as the Opposition. It should be mentioned that the Syrian government had international support, which had different interests in ending the conflict. Russia, the USA, and neighboring countries are a great example of those countries. Although the USA has been against Syria's use of chemical weapons in the war, their main interest was to prevent the spread of terrorism and terrorist ideologies and eventually try to eradicate it. (Wikipedia, 2018)

The use of chemical weapons started to increase at the end of 2012 by the Syrian government, which includes the recognized attack to Ghouta which killed around 1400 civilians in 2013. The fact that it murdered lots of innocent people motivated the emigration of the inhabitants, leading to a widespread of refugees around Europe, around 13.5 million people required the UN assistance in order to seek for a safer environment. It should be pointed out that Syria's population consisted of 22 million before the war started.

Apart from the chemical attacks that practically forced the population to leave, these are not the only factors that are prejudicial to the country. Furthermore, precisely in the year 2015, Bashar Al-Assad called for military support. The Russian Federation, as an ally,

provided that support carrying out an "anti-terrorist" operation, destroying approximately 12.000 buildings and bringing down 35.000 opponents. However, this operation lasted a total of 5 months and it also killed between 300.000 and 470.000 innocent people. Not only has this series of actions put the civilians' lives in risk, but it also had a detrimental effect on the cattle and crop growth, as well as on the sanitary conditions. (Historia do Mundo, 2017)

Returning to the topic of the usage of chemical weapons in the Syrian territory, it is important to clarify that it is a war crime, meaning that it is a serious infraction for the UN. In addition, in 1993 the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) made a comprehensive ban on chemical warfare which was put into force in 1997. The corresponding organization of the CWC was the aforementioned OPCW where 193 parties are part of, including Syria.

However, later in the years, the Syrian Foreign Ministry Spokesman confirmed that they possessed chemical stockpile but that it would only be used against external threat, and not in their territory. At this stage, various countries were concerned about the future of the conflict, especially the US, whose president at the time explicitly stated that there would be a military response if there was any chemical activity. Given that fact, the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon stated that he would launch an investigation in the Syrian territory regarding the chemical weapons. Prior to that, the US and France had sent letters that sought for the authorization to intervene in the conflict. (Kimball, 2018)

Major consequences in Syria

It is clear that with such conflict present in a country there would be great consequences to the government, being these: economic, political, social, health and psychological issues, whatsoever. The majority of the consequences stated, are because of the use of chemical weapons, but still, some of them will take into account the whole Syrian civil war.

Health issues

Considering chlorine and sarin gas, it should be noted that these are gases that act very fast. However, Sarin gas stays a little longer on the territory, making it difficult for UN investigative teams to study the area safely. Severely exposed people to sarin gas are most likely to die whereas the mildly exposed people are usually able to recover completely. Sarin, as a nerve agent, can have detrimental effects, symptoms varying from vomiting and diarrhea up to paralysis and asphyxiation. (Becker, 2018)

Psychological issues

Similarly to the bombs on both World Wars, chemical weapons have a great psychological impact on those who have the unfortunate experience of suffering from it, starting off by the fact that these are designed to inspire terror on the population. Several interviews with people who went through a chemical weapon experience confirm that it is an "unforgettable horrible experience". What is more, it was proved that these chemical weapons are likely to cause Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders (PTSDs) causing people not to live their lives as they used to. (Becker, 2018)

Political consequences

Clearly, the usage of chemical weapons by the Syrian government caused a lot of controversies in the UN. Being these actions considered as war crimes and a violation of the CWC a lot of Member States have stopped supporting the country. Not only have countries stop supporting Syria, but also several of them have taken military action in the territory in order to stop inhumane actions. Apart from that, it seems that Bashar Al-Assad lost political credibility since he gave some false statements regarding the possession of chemical weapons as well as the denial of using such weapons. The government was proved to have used chemical weapons according to several reports made by the OPCW.

Economic consequences

As a consequence of the violation of human rights on the territory, financial sanctions were imposed for Syria and also its ally Russia. Despite the several economic penalties the government suffered, it should be considered the emigration of the active population, causing a serious economic effect on the country. Although it has already been mentioned above, it should be noted that approximately half of the population left the country.

Government's perspective and response

According to an interview made directly to the Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad in 2018, he has denied every accusation made to him. Starting off by stating that he did not use any chemical weapon because they were removed from the country since 2013. However, he said that if the hypothetically had chemical weapons, they should be used during the battle and not be left unused.

Another statement that he gave is that all the reports made by the UN are a farce since reports "can also be allegations" and that there is no strong evidence to back up those documents. What is more, he accused the UK, US, and France of having taken this opportunity to use it as an excuse for attacking his country, therefore "preventing the Syrian army of liberating more areas". (Papachelas, 2018)

Syria's current situation

Surprising as it may seem the current situation, as of January 2019, is pretty much monotonous as it has always been. Although there was a withdrawal of every chemical weapon in Syria carried out by the OPCW, chemical warfare is still present in the country, whether it is launched by Assad's regime or other factions. According to the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission, in April of 2018, there were an estimated 85 chemical attacks by several actors, including the Syrian government and the opposition. The dismantling of Syria's chemical arsenal was conducted by the UN in conjunction with the US under the condition that no military action would be taken within their territory. This deal was settled on September 2019. (Kimball, 2018)

What came as a surprise was that in January of 2019 the US President Donald Trump withdrew its troops due to the fact that "they were no longer needed in the country". Still, he left some troops in a key military position located in southern Syria. Despite the troop withdrawal, the United States emphasized that its position against chemical weapons remains the same and threatened by stating that if the country sees chemical activity in the country it would have a stronger military response than April of 2018. (The Guardian, 2019)

To sum up the conflict in the present time, it is clear that it does not seem that any solution can be seen in a near future, especially for the tension that is present in the country and between the different Member States and organizations involved in the matter.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

The Syrian Arab Republic

The President's Bashar Al-Assad regime has proven to be directly involved in the usage of chemical warfare, varying from chlorine and sarin gas to sulfur mustard gas. Still, the OPCW-UN JIM was only able to attribute responsibility to his regime back to the years 2014 and 2015 on two different occasions. Although the UN has strong evidence that the Syrian government has used chemical weapons during the civil war, Bashar Al-Assad continues to deny the usage of such weapons. As a matter of fact, in the year of 2017, Assad

stated that the report which accused him of using chemical weapons was fabricated and that it was only an excuse for the USA to attack them. (BBC, 2017)

Apart from that, it is believed that Syria possesses much more chemical warfare than declared for the fact that lately, the UN team investigation of chemical weapons found undeclared chemical stockpile in a military facility. What is more, the Syrian government is being held under suspicion for the fact that they have not been respecting deadlines for the destruction of such weapons as well as some events that prevent the UN team investigation to look into possible areas affected by chemical weapons. (Kimball, 2018)

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS)

The Islamic State nowadays is at war with Bashar Al-Assad's government. It started off as an Al Qaeda splinter group and its leader is called Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Back to its origins, it had called a caliphate at northeastern Syria. It is a paramilitary group that is considered as a terrorist group by the UN and several Member States. They are believed to have caused several infractions of national and international law, and also follow a doctrine of Sunni Islam. They obtain their revenue from controlling territory and through the sale of oil through the black market. What is more, in 2015 the UN reported that they were using approximately 3.500 people as slaves, most of them being women and children. Apart from attacking the government, within the Syrian territory, they do not sympathize with other opposition groups (there are more than a thousand opposition groups), Shia factions or civilians, therefore those are a usual target for such organization. ISIS is known internationally for the different activities they have executed especially in Europe and in the Middle East, varying from public executions, crucifixions, and other acts. (CNN, 2019) (Wikipedia, 2018)

USA

The United States of America has shown interest in ending the conflict and the usage of chemical warfare since the beginning of the Syrian civil war. Even though there was an election between, it seems that Barack Obama and Donald Trump have had a very similar approach regarding the issue of chemical weapons in Syria. Throughout the whole conflict, the US has constantly threatened the Syrian government with military force every time they see chemical weapons in the territory. Furthermore, the United States has taken an active role in the matter by submitting several resolutions. Lately, in April of 2018, the US together

with the UK and France launched precision strikes to facilities that were storing chemical weapons. (Kimball. 2018)

Russian Federation

Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, Russia has always been allied to Syria. In fact, Russia has provided military support throughout the conflict as a whole. Not only have they provided military support, but also within the UN by taking advantage of their diplomatic position. During the course of the conflict, the US proposed two draft resolutions that had the aim to extend the investigation of chemical weapons in Syria, which Russia later vetoed. Moreover, Russia has been denying allegedly false accusations and also risking their diplomatic relation with the US and other countries by defending its ideology and alliance with Syria. (Wikipedia,

OPCW

The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons is an intergovernmental organization with 193 Member States. It actually has a seat in The Hague and its main objective is to eliminate every sort of chemical weapon around the globe. Within their programme, they have various aims in order to have the best approach to the issue. Such goals consist of a credible and transparent regime, protection and assistance, international cooperation and universal membership. In the Syrian conflict, the OPCW has been having a very important role due to their consistent studies on the territory and the collaboration on the elimination of the declared Syrian chemical warfare. Prior to the elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons, the main job of the organization was to study and confirm if there was any use of chemical warfare within the jurisdiction. However, there are many branches of this organization that have different objectives. (OPCW) (Wikipedia, 2018)

OPCW-UN JIM

The OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) is part of the organization of the OPCW and was created in 2015 after the UN Security Council adopted the Resolution 2235 that addressed the use of chemical weapons. Such organization was given one year of a mandate, until 2016, but the UN Security Council renewed its mandate for another year. Its main function was to attribute responsibility for the usage of chemical weapons in the territory. The OPCW-UN JIM held Assad's regime accountable for using chemical warfare in their territory as well as the Islamic State. In 2017 the mandate of such organization could not be renewed for the fact that the Russian Federation vetoed the resolution that pretended to

extend its mandate. Despite that fact, nowadays the OPCW was allowed to attribute responsibility for the usage of chemical weapons in Syria. (OPCW) (Wikipedia, 2018)

Timeline of Events

Date	Event
July 23, 2012	The Syrian government admitted for the first time that it possessed chemical weapons and that they would not be used against the Syrian people, but only against “external aggression.”
August 20, 2012	US President Barack Obama explicitly stated that he would take military action if the United States sees or suspects of the usage of chemical weapons within the Syrian jurisdiction.
March 21, 2013	UN-Secretary General Ban Ki-moon announced the UN would conduct an investigation in Syria regarding chemical weapons together with the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).
April 26, 2013	The US President remarked that the international community would work together in order to gain solid proof that Assad's regime is using chemical weapons.
August 14, 2013	The Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad allowed the UN inspection team to investigate possible chemical attacks. However, the team is in charge of proving if there was a chemical attack in the suspected area. The team should not attribute responsibility to any party.
August 26, 2013	The UN team was unable to study certain areas due to an attack by snipers to their convoys in Syria. Luckily, no UN personnel was injured.
August 28, 2013	The US government concluded that Assad's regime had been using chemical warfare and therefore was very motivated to take military action in Syria.

- September 9, 2013 Russian Foreign Minister announced a Russian proposition that consisted in Syria agreeing to place its chemical weapons under international control and dismantling them only if the US would agree not to take military action in the Syrian territory
- October 1, 2013 A team of the OPCW arrived in Syria to begin the destruction and dismantling of all of Syria's declared chemical stockpile as well as the destruction of the country's chemical facilities.
- November 15, 2013 The OPCW Executive Council confirmed a plan which objective was to eliminate every declared chemical weapon and facility no later than June 30, 2014.
- December 31, 2013 Syria missed the deadline to retire their chemical warfare out of the country.
- April 24, 2014 By this date, the supposed 92 percent of the Syrian chemical weapons were taken out of the country.
- May 1, 2014 Syria missed the deadline to remove its chemical stockpiles from the country before May. The remaining chemical weapons were being held in Damascus.
- March 6, 2015 The UN Security Council adopted a resolution condemning chlorine as a weapon in the ongoing Syrian civil war and a threatening action if these are used again.
- May 8, 2015 The OPCW confirms traces of Sarin and other gases at a facility in Syria that was not declared.
- August 24, 2016 The OPCW-UN JIM submitted a report which held responsible the Syrian government for two attacks made in 2014 and 2015 in Syria. Also, such report indicated that the Islamic State made use of chemical weapons in 2015.
- April 12, 2017 The Russian delegation vetoed a UN Security Council Resolution that addressed the responsibility of the April 4 attack to Assad's regime. Their justification was that it was too soon to hold somebody responsible for the attack.

June 26, 2017	The US ambassador Nikki Haley said that if Syria made a chemical attack, their allies, Russia and Iran, would also be held responsible for any further use of chemical weapons.
October 24, 2017	The resolution which requested an extension of the OPCW-UN JIM mandate was vetoed by the Russian Federation.
November 17, 2017	A UN Security Council Resolution submitted by Japan aiming to extend the OPCW-UN JIM's mandate was vetoed by the Russian Federation.
January 23, 2018	France launched the International Partnership Against Impunity for the Use of Chemical Weapons,
April 7, 2018	The Human Rights Watch (HRW) has documented 85 chemical attacks in Syria since 2013.
April 13, 2018:	Russia stated that if any strikes were made against the Syrian government, there would be consequences for those Member States involved in the attack. Without hesitating, France, the UK, and the US launched precision strikes on three Syrian chemical weapon facilities.
June 27, 2018	A special session of the OPCW voted to allow the mandate to investigate and attribute responsibility for chemical weapons usage that was confirmed by the OPCW Fact-finding mission.

Relevant UN Treaties and Events

- Chemical Weapons Convention, 13 January 1993
- Middle East (Syria), 6 March 2015, (S/RES/2209)
- Middle East (Syria), 7 August 2015, (S/RES/2235)
- The situation in the Middle East (Syria), 31 October 2016, (S/RES/2314)
- The situation in the Middle East (Syria), 17 November 2016, (S/RES/2319)

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, there were plenty of resolutions presented regarding chemical weapons throughout the conflict, which only 4 of them passed; 3 of those

4 resolutions were voted unanimously. Despite the fact that there were only 4 resolutions approved, that does not take away the fact that there were different countries that submitted resolutions and that aimed at setting an end to this issue. (Wikipedia, 2018)

As an active actor in the conflict, the US proposed a resolution in April 2017, which hold accountable the Syrian government for the use of chemical weapons. The Russian Federation quickly vetoed the resolution as a whole due to the fact that "it was too soon to attribute responsibility of such actions". It should be noted that the resolution attributed responsibility for a chemical attack occurred a week sooner.

This was not the only resolution that the Russian Federation used their diplomatic position to veto it. Also, in October 2017, the US submitted a resolution that had the objective of extending the mandate of the OPCW-UN JIM, an organization who was in charge of finding the actor responsible for the usage of certain chemical attacks, but it could not pass for the veto that Russia imposed.

Lastly, on the day after the expiration of the OPCW-UN JIM, Japan submitted a resolution whose aim was the same as the previous US resolution, to extend such organization's mandate. Once again, the Russian Federation had no choice rather than vetoing the resolution.

On the next year, France launched the "International Partnership Against Impunity for the Use of Chemical Weapons", an initiative that aims to share information about chemical attacks and publically list individuals and entities sanctioned for their involvement on the usage of such weapons. Then, the Russian Federation called a last-minute UN Security Council to extend the OPCW-UN JIM mandate. However, the US said this action was made with the objective of "creating a distraction from the launch of the new partnership." (Kimball, 2018)

Possible Solutions

Although it may seem that throughout the 7-8 years of the issue of chemical weapons in Syria there have been exploited every single alternative to tackle it, it should be noted that there are some other solutions that can favor the majority of Member States that are seeking to put this matter to a peaceful end. Also, some of the solutions may not tackle the issue as a

whole and put an ending to it, but they might help the country and population living in it to be well prepared for the consequences that it has.

One strategy to end this conflict or at least diminish the use of chemical warfare is to prohibit the fabrication and stockpiling of such weapons within the jurisdiction and geographic area (meaning Syria's neighbors) to assure the fact that it would not have these weapons or at least not an easy way to get them.

In relation to the previous strategy, every Member State could work together in order to strengthen border patrols, and supervise every large-scale importation, whether it is by airplanes or ships.

Another factor that could help the actual population living in the Syrian country is education about the different chemical weapons present in the country in order to have the knowledge to treat the symptoms that they cause when medical aid is not an option available at the time. What is more, together with that recommendation, medical aid could be asked to different Member States and organizations so as to them to provide gas masks or any type of useful equipment and medicine to counter the gas effects on the people.

As it is an issue that concerns a significant amount of governments, transparency of the knowledge acquired regarding chemical weapons within the area should be a very effective measure in order to tackle the issue effectively as soon as possible.

The most important thing to ask for in this situation is for cooperation between the Member States not only to eradicate the presence of chemical weapons in Syria but also to put an end to the ongoing civil war. Without cooperation, it is very difficult to have an optimistic approach to the harsh reality that Syria is facing, especially when there are so many people dying due to these lethal weapons.

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