



Daniel M. Gerstein

Regional action needed to prevent Syrian chemical attacks

Last month the world watched in horror as innocent Syrian civilians were brutally attacked by chemical weapons. France recently joined the United States, Britain, Turkey and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in assigning blame for the April 5 attack to the Syrian government and President Bashar Assad.

In a sense, the French announcement comes as no surprise given the incontrovertible evidence uncovered by the other investigations. The chemical used was sarin – a powerful nerve agent. The chemical formulas match those of known Syrian stocks and the aircraft that conducted the attack came from a Syrian Air Force base. Hard to argue with such facts.

What has been a surprise is the tepid global response. Russia continues to defend the Assad regime, accusing Syrian opposition forces of staging the attack “to draw the United States into the nation’s 6-year civil war.” With every statement from President Vladimir Putin or the Russian government, the indifference towards the Chemical Weapons Convention and rule of law becomes more evident.

After an initial salvo of cruise missiles by the United States on the

airbase from which the chemical attacks were launched, follow-up actions have been modest and slow in coming. The Trump administration announced sanctions on 271 employees of the Syrian government agency responsible for producing the chemical weapons and ballistic missiles. The cruise missiles and sanctions are a start. However, a broader discussion of a strategy for Syria is needed to halt the further use of chemical weapons.

After an emergency meeting and an initial flurry of condemnations at the United Nations, no tangible action has occurred. Not surprisingly, Russia vetoed the UN resolution condemning the killings and calling on Syria to assist in the investigation. Meanwhile, the norms against the use of these horrific weapons continue to be threatened by the lack of broader action.

Perhaps most surprising has been the deafening silence on the issue by countries in the region. These countries are the ones most likely to be affected by the continuing violence and use of chemical weapons.

Rather than (more) righteous indignation or continued (unsuccessful) calls for Assad’s ouster, countries in the region and supporting powers should do something to tighten border controls and those over precursor chemicals.

While options for influencing

Assad are admittedly limited, some actions could be undertaken to deter future use of chemical weapons. First and foremost, regional leaders could continue to apply pressure on the Assad regime to drive home the message that the use of these weapons will not be tolerated.

Borders with Syria could be sealed to prevent any of the remaining stocks from leaving the country. This would likely require a mix of military, law enforcement and border police to ensure that any illicit crossings are immediately halted. In the event that chemical weapons do breach the Syrian border, response forces should be prepared to stop suspect shipments, conduct searches of cargo and have appropriate protection to avoid becoming casualties themselves.

Despite global efforts to eliminate Syria’s chemical munitions stocks in 2014, it has become clear they were not fully successful and that Syria as a new member of the Chemical Weapons Convention is in violation of the treaty.

To eliminate any remaining stocks of chemical weapons, a second international effort could be undertaken to account for all of Assad’s stocks, transport the munitions to a safe location and destroy them.

On the disposition of Assad,

regional leaders could make clear that the future of Syria does not include him. They could call for the International Criminal Court to indict Assad for war crimes. The Chemical Weapons Convention is not the only treaty countering weapons of mass destruction Assad has violated. Others include the nuclear non-proliferation treaty as Assad has failed to provide a full accounting of Syria’s nuclear programme, the ballistic missile regime and the Biological Weapons Convention where concerns remain about past activities.

Over the past 15 years, the norms against the use of chemical weapons have continued to be threatened, with increasing state and non-state actor use. Most of these attacks have occurred in the Middle East. This trend cannot be allowed to continue. Nations in the region are in the bullseye and should act now to prevent further chemical attacks and put a halt to this abhorrent form of warfare.

Daniel M. Gerstein is a senior policy researcher at the RAND Corporation and an adjunct professor at American University. He was the undersecretary (acting) and deputy undersecretary in the Science and Technology Directorate of the Department of Homeland Security from 2011-14.

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What will it take to stop the current destruction?



Claude Salhani

What will it take to awaken the leaders in the Arab world who continue to believe that their will can be imposed on their people regardless of the cost in material damages and human lives?

How many more cities in the Arab world need to be destroyed and how many more innocent people must die before these leaders realise the absolute madness of such violence?

And how many more millions of Arabs must become refugees before those responsible for the carnage accept the fact that changes in a modern society must come through the ballot and not by the bullet?

How many more years of death and destruction will it take for Bashar Assad and others like him to figure out that they have overstayed their welcome?

These leaders, blinded by their beliefs in the need to impose a political and sectarian diktat, have caused untold misery and bear the

responsibility for millions of deaths and injuries and the physical and psychological scarring of future generations. They stood by as thousands of children were orphaned and thousands of parents rendered childless.

They have sanctioned the killing and torture of countless numbers of people simply because they disagree with them. They have starved and gassed their opponents. They continue to lie about the use of banned weapons of mass destruction, such as chemical bombs.

Yet the rest of the world stands by. What is happening in Syria and Iraq today is a blemish on all of humanity.

Yesterday it was Hama, then Homs and then Aleppo. Today it is Mosul and Raqqa.

What of tomorrow?

Will the lunatics who believe that their god is greater than the god of their neighbours feel the need to destroy more Arab cities?

Will they not be content before bringing ruin to the entire Middle East?

How many more cities in the

region need to suffer before the instigators of death and destruction realise that there are alternatives to dictatorship?

Will they bring their carnage to other great cities of the region? Will they be satisfied to see the apocalyptic shape in which they left Mosul is repeated in other great cities of the region?

New images for CNN by Gabriel Chaim, a Brazilian photojournalist using a camera mounted on a small drone, gives us insight into the scope of destruction and devastation that befell what was once Iraq’s second largest city as government forces backed by the United States fought for control of what remains of this martyred city.

Mosul now takes its place alongside Homs, Hama and many other Arab cities that have suffered incalculable losses. From a prewar population of more than 1.6 million, Mosul’s population has been cut to about one-third of that. Those who remain in the beleaguered city struggle to find food and water to survive.

Islamic State (ISIS) militants

are regrouping around Raqqa, the expected site of the next major offensive. There, US-backed military units are preparing for a final showdown with ISIS. That battle for control of the Islamists’ stronghold in Syria is expected to be even more violent with Russian Air Force planes participating in the fight against ISIS.

In Syria, President Bashar Assad hardly merits the title of president, given that he hardly controls about one-third of his country and is entirely dependent on the military assistance of Iran, Iraq, Lebanon’s Hezbollah and the Russian Air Force. Without their help, Assad would probably have been history long ago.

Some of these Arab leaders are ignorant of the past. History is the best indication of what the future might bring and history has shown us that even the mightiest of dictators are eventually taken out in the most humiliating manner. It is only a matter of time.

Claude Salhani is a regular Arab Weekly contributor.

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Much like chemical weapons, conventional arms kill innocent civilians



Harun Yahya

With the 20th century came many new wars and the destructive mentalities of fascism and communism. The deception of the so-called lower races and the ridiculous claim they did not have a right to live were popularised. As these twisted ideologies were infused into people, it became easier for some to kill others. This mentality spelled disaster and the 20th century witnessed two horrible world wars.

The use of chemical weapons was one of the foulest legacies humans left behind in this era. Certain politicians deeply admired during war times, such as Winston Churchill, openly advocated the use of chemical weapons. Prisoners of war became test subjects for chemical weapons and the first world war resulted in the death of more than 100,000 soldiers from chemical weapons.

During that war, 124,000 tonnes of chemical gas were used. In 1919, the British Royal Air Force deployed chemical bombs against Bolshevik revolutionaries during the Rus-

sian civil war and again against the Kurds in the region of Mosul, Iraq. During the same period, fascist Italy also used chemical weapons. As a result, more than 100,000 Abyssinians lost their lives.

During the second world war, it was the Japanese who resorted to using chemical weapons the most, carrying out chemical attacks against other Asian countries, particularly the ones they regarded as lower races.

In 1988, the Iraqi regime unleashed a chemical attack on the Kurdish population of Halabja, killing 5,000 people within minutes.

As the production of chemical weapons went on, wars and skirmishes around the world continued with the relentless and ever-increasing use of conventional weapons, including napalm and barrel bombs.

While chemical bombs killed people in horrible ways, conventional weapons were just as bad. They destroyed people’s houses and blew their bodies to pieces. Just like chemical weapons, conventional weapons and bombs, which are also massacre machines, were used with insidiousness and perfidy, again

mostly affecting civilians. Today, civilian casualties from conventional weapons have reached dramatic proportions.

The international community’s strong condemnation of the use of chemical weapons is praiseworthy. However, the reason many private and non-governmental organisations remain silent when it comes to conventional weapons should be questioned.

We all saw how strongly the media reacted to the recent chemical attack in Syria, with headlines naming it a “crime against humanity.” Earlier, however, when civilians were killed in Damascus, Daraa and Idlib with conventional weapons, the world did not show the same indignation. While the UN Security Council quickly convened after the chemical attack, it did not take any action for the attacks that took place one week before.

It is certainly wrong to consider the loss of innocent lives to conventional weapons acceptable and dismiss it as “collateral damage.” If bloodshed—particularly the dropping of bombs on innocent people—is considered normal, should we not worry about the reign of such un-

scrupulous people? Regarding killing people with bombs and machine guns as acceptable while condemning chemical weapons might pave the way for a major disaster.

Yet, sadly, that path has already been paved. The silence we witness while such a terrifying amount of blood is being shed is alarming. This is a form of subliminal reconstruction imposed on society by certain war profiteers. It leads to people getting used to things they would have never otherwise gotten used to and advocating things they would have never otherwise advocated. It is up to all of us to put an end to such an insidious perception.

The struggle we face is to avert any ideology that deems people worthless and war reasonable. Wars are cultivated by twisted ideologies; those same ideologies foster ruthlessness. It falls upon us to thwart the schemes of those who present weapons of mass destruction as a lesser crime in their own ways and to refute the mentality of those who consider war a necessity.

Harun Yahya is a Turkish writer on science and faith.

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