

## Opinion

## Editorial

## Reports of chemical weapons use in Syria are worrying

Reports that Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime recently carried out a chlorine attack in the besieged enclave of Eastern Ghouta are cause for serious concern.

If confirmed, this would be at least the ninth instance since December 23, 2012, that the international community has been alerted to alleged chemical weapons use by the Damascus regime.

The world's chemical weapons watchdog, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), is said to have opened an investigation into the alleged recent chlorine attack in Eastern Ghouta.

As has happened many times in the past, the Syrian government and its Russian allies vehemently denied chemical weapons use. Even as he described the accusations as "false," Syrian Ambassador to the United Nations Hussam Edin Aala said his country "cannot possibly be using chemical weapons because it very simply has none in its possession."

Under a 2013 deal between the United States and Russia, Assad's government was supposed to have shipped out of the country its stockpile of chemical weapons. However, the agreement did not include chlorine because of its industrial uses.

In September 2014, just weeks after Syria dispatched the last of its chemical arsenal overseas, the OPCW confirmed that chlorine gas was being used in Syria.

Four years on, Damascus still claims its innocence. As before, its government has shifted blame for the alleged chlorine attack on Eastern Ghouta to "terrorist groups."

It's true that extremist groups fighting in Syria have been accused of chemical weapons use and are likely to have been involved in such activities. In November 2015, for instance, an OPCW fact-finding team determined with "the utmost confidence" that people were exposed to sulphur mustard in an attack in Marea, in northern Syria, where the Islamic State (ISIS) was fighting another rebel group.

That said, almost every neutral inquiry has found much to dispute in the systematic denials put out by Damascus (and Moscow) regarding chemical weapons use by Syrian government troops. An investigation by the United Nations and OPCW concluded in 2016 that Syrian government forces used chlorine gas on several occasions. The investigative report accused Syrian government forces of perpetrating a sarin nerve gas attack that killed more than 80 people.

Some media outlets recently said the United Nations is examining a report, yet to be released, according to which Syria may have found a source for stockpiling chemical weapons all over again. The New York Times and the Associated Press said the report contains "substantial new evidence" about cooperation between Syria and North Korea on ballistic missile and chemical warfare since 2008.

Amnesty International said the United Nations should publish its report. Lynn Maalouf, Amnesty's director of research for the Middle East, said the report would be "an ominous marker" if accurate, of the suspected crimes of the Syrian government and of its suppliers. To help "replenish its supplies would be a particularly egregious betrayal of humanity," she said.

Several Western countries warned they will consider evidence of the use of chemical weapons as ample reason for military retaliation against the Syrian regime.

The issue of weapons of mass destruction has, of course, become overly politicised. It was the pretext for the US-led military invasion of Iraq in 2003, with all its disastrous consequences.

However, if chemical weapons are proved to have been used in Syria by the regime or by any other party, further escalation of an already bloody conflict is to be expected.

## Region's children shouldn't serve as political props

There is an unfortunate tradition in the Middle East of drafting children to serve as extras at political and military rallies. Children celebrating adult belligerence are often seen on the streets of Beirut, Baghdad, Sana'a and other regional capitals.

The most recent example of using children as political props came when Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan put a 6-year-old girl on stage, a few days ago, to illustrate his patriotic narrative during a ruling party meeting in the city of Kahramanmaraş.

His words to the child predictably provoked a wave of international criticism.

"Her Turkish flag is in her pocket," Erdogan said of the weeping girl. "If she becomes a martyr, God willing, she will be wrapped with it. She is ready for everything, aren't you?"

Such displays of muscular nationalism have become frequent since Turkey began its military incursion into the Kurdish-controlled Syrian enclave of Afrin but the use of a child is reprehensible.

Children are already victims of the conflicts that beset the region.

For leaders to glorify children's "martyrdom" is a step too far.



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## Yemen needs a project for the future built on culture of life

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“What Yemen needs is a political project synced first and foremost with the culture of life and not the culture of death imported from Iran.”

Everybody in Yemen wants to go back to the past with one notable exception: the "legitimate" government represented by President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi.

Hadi does not have any past to go back to, except perhaps when it comes to reviving the times of former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh and playing his role. Hadi needs to get over his Saleh complex and ensure Yemen's transition to a new era and relinquish his fantasy of becoming president of a unified Yemen.

One of the major problems in Yemen is the lack of a clear project for the country's political future. None of the power-sharing schemes, which were in place from 1962-90 and then 1990-2011 when the Muslim Brotherhood was doing its best to bring down Saleh and his heirs, has succeeded.

For all practical purposes, 2011 marked the demise of Sana'a and the central power in Yemen. Saleh's demise was carried out in stages and culminated in his assassination last December. It would be pointless to expect Saleh's party, the General People's Congress (GPC), to play any significant role in Yemen's future.

The first political stab in Saleh's back came in 2007 at the hands of the Islamist party Al-Islah. Following the death of its founder, Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar, Al-Islah joined the Muslim Brotherhood in its struggle to wrench power from Saleh.

Taking advantage of the end of the old coalition and the instability that followed an alleged assassination attempt on Saleh by the Muslim Brotherhood in June 2011, the Houthis made a muscled entrance onto the political scene.

Despite the many mistakes Saleh has made, including helping the Houthis and hooking them up with Iran, he was the

best authority on Yemeni affairs. Without him, however, the GPC is practically dead. The party has a great past but does not have a future despite its large popular base and its moderate ideology.

The Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood is in no better position than the GPC. It is part of the "legitimacy" coalition but is much divided. Some Brotherhood members have rallied the Houthis and are undoubtedly nostalgic of the days when they were blackmailing Saleh. They shared power and fortune because many lucrative projects in telecommunications, oil and fishing went to some of their leadership.

Abdelmalik al-Houthi also wants to go back to the old days – to the old days of the Imamate. Immediately after seizing Sana'a, he announced the birth of a new "legitimacy" in Yemen, that of the "revolutionary legitimacy." On September 26, 1962, a revolution and a military coup put an end to the Imamate era in Yemen and the Houthi revolution of September 2014 put an end to that revolution.

What Yemen needs is a political

It is time for Yemen to move past the psychological block of a unified Yemen.

project synced first and foremost with the culture of life and not the culture of death imported from Iran. The Houthis should forget about reviving the Imamate era because they have no political, economic or educational project for Yemen. Their only project is to be part of Iran's expansionist plan in the Arabian Peninsula.

Southern Yemen is also dreaming of the old days, the pre-unification days, that is. It's a legitimate dream except that experience has shown that South Yemen cannot stand as an independent state.

The big question is: Can the "legitimate" government offer a project for Yemen's future? It has no past to hark back to unless there is someone dreaming about being another Saleh. It's best to forget that dream.

In its struggle for self-defence, the Arab coalition involved in Yemen might need the "legitimacy" front in Yemen. That should not prevent this "legitimacy" front from reforming itself and formulating a project for Yemen that goes beyond just fighting disease, hunger and poverty.

It should be a project that takes into consideration the fact that Yemen is part of a regional security system that extends from the Arabian Gulf to the Horn of Africa. This is the reality that must be internalised by the "legitimacy" front that seems to be preoccupied by deciding who should be in charge of the duty-free zone in Aden's airport.

It is time for Yemen to move past the psychological block of a unified Yemen. It is time to start thinking of a Yemen that represents a strategic security zone that shares borders with Saudi Arabia and Oman and whose southern coast extends from the Arabian Gulf to the Red Sea. Smack in the middle of this coast, the Bab el Mandeb Strait is crucial to navigation in the Suez Canal.

Is there a "legitimacy" in Yemen capable of shaping a vision for the future of Yemen?



Daily struggle. Displaced Yemeni children attend a class inside a tent at a camp in the northern district of Abs in Yemen's Hajjah province, on February 24.

(AFP)