

POLICY PERSPECTIVES

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A Chemical Weapons–Free Middle East?

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Three weeks ago Egypt walked out of a preparatory committee meeting for the 2015 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference in protest at the lack of progress toward holding a conference on a weapons of mass destruction (WMD)–free zone in the Middle East. The deadline had been arbitrarily set in 2010 for 2012. Given destabilizing state systems, shifting regional alignments, and overall ongoing conflict in the Middle East, it is no surprise that convening a conference last year proved impossible. Even in times of relative peace, the issues surrounding arms control and disarmament in the Middle East are complex. The linkage of all WMD (nuclear, biological, chemical weapons and missiles) in particular has hardened the decades-long stalemate. But it is precisely the reality of events unfolding in the Middle East that requires all sides to come to the negotiating table, especially on chemical weapons (CW) if not on all WMD. Claims of CW use in Syria, regardless of origin, should motivate regional and global leaders to take steps to eliminate this cruel weapon.

Chemically Charged, Politically Uncertain

Chemical weapons have long been a feature of the Middle East with at least six states known to have, or suspected of having, CW programs.¹ It is also the only region to have experienced recurrent CW use: by Egypt in its support of South Yemen during the Yemen War (1963–1967) and by Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), including against its own Kurdish citizens (1988). As recent allegations of CW use

in Syria heighten the potential that another round of chemical warfare is being witnessed in the Middle East, Israel contemplates preemptive strikes on Syrian CW facilities and the United States (re)considers its red line. Indeed, the Middle East could be classified as the world’s most “chemically charged” security environment, with the Arab uprisings underscoring the urgent need for the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) to be universalized in the region.

Historically Used

Chemical weapons were first introduced on a massive scale during World War I, resulting in 1.3 million casualties (including 90,000 deaths) across the European theatre. That experience led the League of Nations to negotiate the 1925 Geneva Protocol prohibiting the use of chemical and biological weapons, albeit the reservations noted by 35 states parties upon membership provided loopholes, as did the agreement’s lack of enforcement. Because the Geneva Protocol did not ban the possession of chemical weapons, states continued to develop their stockpiles with at least 20 states joining the chemical club, producing at a minimum *half a billion* metric tonnes of chemical weapons over the course of the twentieth century.²

Despite the adoption of the Geneva Protocol, there were cases of CW use following its entry into force by Italy (a party to the Protocol) in Libya in 1930 and again in Ethiopia in 1935–1936, and Japan (a signatory) against China in 1937–1945. But it was not until the late 1960s

¹ Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Libya, and Syria. Iran declared two CW production facilities and no stockpiles on its ratification of the CWC in 1997. Libya joined as a CW possessor in 2004, as did Iraq in 2009.

² Cindy Vestergaard, “The Disarmament Factor: Toward a Typological Theory of WMD Disarmament” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Copenhagen, December 2010), p. 118.

when Egypt (a full state party) was carrying through its CW campaign in Yemen and the United States (a signatory) was employing herbicidal warfare in Vietnam³ that negotiations in Geneva addressed a treaty banning not only the use, but also the possession of chemical weapons. With toxic chemicals employed on two fronts, the United Nations responded with studies on the effects of chemical and biological weapons (CBW) and the General Assembly issued resolutions condemning their use in 1966 and then from 1969 onward. Although, the CBW issue was put on the agenda of the disarmament negotiating body in Geneva in 1968, it would take more than two decades of talks and more CW use in the Middle East (by Iraq) before the CWC, the world's first—and only—verifiable disarmament treaty, was opened for signature in 1993.

The Road to Damascus

With 188 states parties, the CWC is nearly universal, leaving only eight states outside of the treaty. Of these eight, three are in the Middle East: Israel has signed but not ratified the treaty, while Egypt and Syria are neither signatories nor states parties. All, however, are states parties to the Geneva Protocol. President Bashar al-Assad confirmed publicly for the first time in July 2012 that Syria possessed chemical weapons and was ready to use them on foreign forces if invaded. Any such weapons use would complicate and weaken support from the few, but important, allies Syria has remaining. Russia has urged Syria to abide by the Geneva Protocol and communicated “the inadmissibility of any threats of use of chemical weapons” to the Assad regime,⁴ while China and Iran, both parties to the Geneva Protocol and CWC and victims themselves of CW use, have remained

silent on Assad's threat. That silence could be difficult to maintain for domestic reasons should CW use in Syria be confirmed.

Not much is publicly known about Syria's CW program, but it is suspected of having one of the most advanced programs in the Middle East with a stockpile of hundreds of tonnes of CW agent, including mustard gas, sarin, and possibly VX nerve agent. As violence in the country has intensified since the outbreak of civil unrest in 2011, concerns about the custody, security, use, and potential transfer of Syria's stockpile have risen. The first alleged case of CW use in Syria was in Homs on December 23, 2012. The second occurred in the village of Khan al-Assal in northern Aleppo province on March 19, 2013, for which Syria's government and opposition blamed each other. Both sides called for an inquiry into the attacks, prompting the United Nations to assemble a team of inspectors. The team, however, remains on standby in Cyprus until the terms of reference between the United Nations and Syria are agreed on. The holdup is that while the United Nations is firm that all claims of use should be investigated, Syria maintains that only the March 19 attacks should be examined.

And there have been more claims: Adra on March 29, Sheikh Maqsoud on April 13, and Saraqeb on April 29.⁵ While the United States, France, Britain, and Turkey all claim they have evidence of attacks, specific details about them are still lacking. Confirming allegations of CW use is complicated by a variety of factors, not least of which is the challenge of identifying the source of such attacks (the Syrian regime? opposition rebels? another group entirely?). Nonetheless, their confirmed use would certainly become, as Jordan's King Abdullah put it, a “trip wire for many nations in the international community.”⁶

³ The United States sprayed more than 76,500,000 liters of phenoxylic herbicides over parts of Southern Vietnam and Laos from 1962 to 1972. See Valerie Adams, *Chemical Warfare, Chemical Disarmament* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 77, 79.

⁴ Reuters, “Russia tells Syria chemical arms threat is unacceptable,” July 25, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/07/25/us-syria-crisis-russia-chemical-idUSBRE86O15V20120725>.

⁵ BBC News, “Syria Chemical Weapons Allegations,” May 17, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-22557347>.

⁶ King Abdullah, “Jordan's King on Syria's Chemical Weapons,” *CBS Evening News* video interview, August 6, 2012, <http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=7417330n>.

...and to Cairo and Jerusalem

It has been 25 years since the last use of chemical weapons by a state (by Iraq in 1988). If use by Syria is confirmed, this would break what has become the world's longest "chemical peace" in close to 100 years. If a nonstate actor is confirmed to be the source, this would mark the second such attack since the apocalyptic group Aum Shinrikyo released sarin gas in the Tokyo subway system in 1995, killing 13 people and injuring thousands. Either way, if the world is to maintain a chemical peace, states parties to the CWC need to work persistently to uphold the principles of a treaty that took decades to negotiate. Nonstates parties such as Egypt and Israel could take their cue from Japan, which, despite its political and WMD regional tensions with North Korea, ratified the CWC within a month of the 1995 attacks.

Although movement toward nuclear disarmament is regionally and internationally stunted, diplomacy to universalize the CWC in the Middle East should be started without delay. Egypt and Israel, along with France, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Russia, have an opportunity to address the CW threat by developing and engaging in a viable cooperative structure that includes the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) at the table. The UN secretary general and the OPCW director general could jointly propose a chemical weapons-free zone in the Middle East and offer assistance. Such a zone would go beyond universalization of the CWC in the region as it would also include provisions for reciprocal regional inspections and confidence-building measures along with CWC membership. Israel, as a signatory, could make an announcement that it is ready to ratify the CWC provided others also acceded. The very process of negotiating a chemical weapons-free zone would be a means of nurturing new attitudes of reconciliation between parties. More immediately, it would mean that full CW disarmament in the region could be realized, removing the CW threat from the region for generations to come.

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