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**Chemical Assad?  
On the Chemical Warfare Attack in Syria  
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On August 21, 2013 reports of a large chemical attack in the suburbs of Damascus began to surface, along with online video clips showing grim photographs of wounded civilians. According to rebel sources, rockets, some carrying chemical weapons, struck an area held by the rebels in the suburbs of Damascus during the early morning hours. The number of casualties, according to the rebels, was in the hundreds, and according to one of the reports, there were about a thousand dead.

The internet photos showed people who were injured, some with signs of poisoning but no visible marks. People could be seen shaking. This is a known symptom of exposure to nerve gas, which was not seen on previous occasions when there were reports of exposure to chemical weapons. Doctors who were interviewed in the video clips reported a lack of atropine and hydrocortisone, drugs used in treating injuries from nerve agents such as sarin and VX. On the other hand, the Syrian government, which has categorically denied the incident, claimed that allegations about the use of chemical weapons are false, and are intended to obscure the extent of the damage the rebels suffered from conventional weapons.

In the international arena, the West has expressed outrage, while Russian spokesmen have supported the Assad regime's position and condemned reports of "a premeditated provocation."

**Syrian Chemical Weapons**

Syria has been involved in developing and producing chemical weapons since the 1980s. After the First Lebanon War, the Assad regime came to the conclusion that it could not compete in the conventional battlefield against Israel and sought other ways to achieve a strategic balance. Chemical weaponry, intended to threaten and deter Israel, was one of these means.

The Syrians worked mainly on developing sarin, a nerve agent. Factories produced large quantities of this chemical weapon while other plants took care of its weaponization,

specifically, chemical warheads for the Scud B missiles in Syria's possession at that time, aerial bombs, and artillery rockets. In the early 1990s, Syria began developing the ability to manufacture a more advanced nerve agent, VX. It is not known how successful these efforts were, but considering the time that has elapsed since the project began, it is likely that the technical problems have been solved and the chemical agent is in storage.

Since the start of the rebellion in Syria in March 2011, the international community has been concerned regarding Syria's stores of chemical weapons. Although early in the rebellion there was some concern that the regime would attempt to use chemical weapons against its enemies at home, the greater fear was actually the opposite: that rebel forces would take over the stores of chemical weapons and attempt to use them against the regime – or worse, would sell quantities of chemical weapons to extremist terrorist organizations around the world. The strongest concern was of worldwide proliferation and incidents such as the sarin attack on the Tokyo subway in 1995.

However, since late 2012, repeated reports have surfaced about the use of chemical weapons in Syria against civilians. In December 2012 it was reported that seven civilians were killed by chemical weapons in the al-Bayada neighborhood of Homs. In March 2013, there were allegations that Scud missiles with chemical warheads were fired in Khan al-Assal, a suburb of Aleppo. Confirmation by Brigadier General Itai Brun, head of the Research Division of Israel's Military Intelligence (at an INSS conference in Tel Aviv on April 23, 2013) that chemical weapons were used added an official element to the claims. Along with reports of the use of nerve gas, over the past year there have also been unconfirmed reports of the use of Agent 15, which is better known by its American name, BZ. Agent 15 is a non-lethal incapacitating agent, similar in its composition to LSD.

### **Last Week in the Suburbs of Damascus**

Given the recent nature of the event and without independent media access to the affected site, it is difficult to say with certainty what happened and what the true extent of the damage is. If we reject the regime's claims that there was no incident and that the documentation online was staged by the rebels, then it is clear that something terrible occurred on August 21, 2013 in Syria. Nevertheless, while some of the injuries (and clearly not all those injured were shown) exhibited known symptoms of damage from some neurotoxin, it is difficult to determine what actually caused the injuries or how many people were injured. What we can do is analyze the incident according to several possible scenarios.

According to the first scenario, the reports are entirely accurate and that under orders from the most senior political echelon, as required by Syrian military procedure, the Syrian army attacked a concentration of rebels in a populated neighborhood with rockets carrying nerve gas. However, it is not clear why the regime would decide to use chemical weapons, and in particular, against civilians. It is not clear what tactical advantage this

offered, especially given the negative political ramifications, and indeed, the event has become a great political victory for the rebels.

A second possible scenario is that the regime ordered the use of chemical weapons in a limited fashion while assuming that if the number of casualties were small, the international political damage would be minimal. According to this scenario, the large number of casualties is a result of an operational failure.

A third scenario is that a Syrian army unit indeed used chemical weapons, but that commanders of the unit made this decision on their own, not based on an order from above. In this case, it would be necessary to check how chemical weapons – which are normally stored under the watchful eye of the most senior echelon of the regime — reached an operational unit.

A fourth albeit unlikely scenario is that as the regime claimed, the attack was carried out by a rebel unit, which somehow obtained rockets armed with chemical weapons and used them with a clear intention of besmirching the regime.

The fifth possible scenario is that people were injured by something other than chemical weapons, such as agricultural insecticide spread as a result of accidental or intentional firing at a tanker. Yet while possible, the scenario raises the question why the regime would not allow international professionals to inspect the site, confirm the story, and clear its name. (Indeed on August 24, Syrian Minister of Information al-Zoabi stated Damascus was prepared to cooperate with UN investigators in looking into this matter; findings might support this scenario.)

### **Conclusion**

It is easy to understand the rebels, who are making every effort to bring closer the moment when the West – the United States, the European Union, and NATO – decides to intervene militarily in Syria in order to depose the Bashar al-Assad regime. By this same reasoning, it is difficult to understand why the regime would wish to use chemical weapons. Furthermore, there is currently, with the regime's approval, an international team in Syria to investigate the alleged use of chemical weapons in Aleppo early this year. Using chemical weapons at this time is a public slap in the face to the entire international system.

Whether the attack was planned in advance and the order came from above, or it was the result of events over which the Syrian regime had no control, around the world it is seen as a grave incident that cannot be ignored. In the Western world, public pressure to intervene is increasing, although there is still doubt whether leaders of Western countries, particularly the United States, will decide to intervene.

Israel has been on the fence since the beginning of the events in Syria in March 2011. Israel has no real ability to influence the events, and any military intervention on either side could be more harmful than beneficial. All that Israel can do is to guard against the spillover of events into Israeli territory and to strike, as foreign reports have suggested has already been done, at sophisticated weapon systems in the possession of the Syrian army that are likely to endanger Israel and thwart their transfer to elements such as Hizbollah.

If in fact chemical weapons were used, Israel should be troubled that the regime is so trigger-happy, which could affect its willingness to use these weapons in the event of conflict with Israel as well. It would be even worse if these were chemical weapons in the hands of rogue groups, whether within the army or the rebels. In such a case, the danger of spillover and potential use against Israel is even greater.

