

The Faint Red Line: How the West Should Respond to the Syria Chemical Weapons Report

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Brief Analysis

Europe and the United States can no longer dismiss the strategic and tactical relevance of the regime's CW attacks, which have continued throughout the conflict and demand further military, diplomatic, and judicial action.

For the first time since the Syria war began, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) has directly attributed three chemical attacks to Bashar al-Assad's forces. An [April 8 report \(https://www.opcw.org/media-centre/news/2020/04/opcw-releases-first-report-investigation-and-identification-team\)](#) by the newly established Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) confirms once again that, despite its commitment to disarm, the regime continued to employ chemical weapons, including sarin, throughout the conflict. The conclusive findings provide an opportunity for the United States, Britain, and France to review the shortcomings of their policies, clearly articulate their "redline" commitments regarding CW use in Syria, and use all available levers to further isolate the regime and its backers and hold them to account.

WHAT DOES THE REPORT SAY?

The IIT report directly blames the Syrian military for three CW attacks that occurred within the span of one week in late March 2017. The findings provide evidence that the regime not only concealed part of its CW stockpile during the international disarmament process (2013-2014), but that it continued to employ these proscribed weapons with near impunity. This is the first time that the OPCW, tasked with overseeing and implementing the Chemical Weapons Convention, has waded into the diplomatically fraught waters of attribution.

While comprehensive and conclusive, the report is unlikely to affect the conflict's strategic trajectory—or even the

CW file. The regime's culpability had been well-established prior. Indeed, the [authors' own research \(https://www.gppi.net/2019/02/17/the-logic-of-chemical-weapons-use-in-syria\)](https://www.gppi.net/2019/02/17/the-logic-of-chemical-weapons-use-in-syria) shows that Syrian government forces employed CW more than 340 times throughout the war, with more than 90 percent of these incidents occurring after the U.S. redline kerfuffle that followed the deadly August 21, 2013, attacks and subsequent disarmament process.

It is further apparent from the report, as well as from media reporting and disclosure, that Britain, France, the United States, and others were already well aware of Syria's surviving CW stockpile and persistent attacks but had let the issue slide in order to avoid being drawn further into the war. In fact, Washington and its partners detected CW use as recently as May 2019 but, despite issuing fire-and-brimstone warnings at the time, chose not to act.

In that sense, the IIT's findings should be read as another indictment of Western policy that for years has been uninterested in containing the worst excesses of the Syrian military campaign. The three attacks investigated took place only days before the April 4, 2017, high-casualty attack in Khan Sheikhoun, images of which triggered global outrage and, eventually, an American military response. This indicates that, as far as U.S. policy was concerned, the true redline in Syria was never about CW use as such—which never ceased throughout the war—but rather about the loss of face that might result from not responding to a particularly high-profile incidence.

MILITARY IMPLICATIONS AND RESPONSES

The United States and European powers have repeatedly failed to appreciate the second-order effects of the regime's war strategy. Besides the injury to international norms, the effective and low-cost use of CW in Syria could inspire other embattled regimes and nonstate actors to emulate Assad's approach, as the Islamic State has already done repeatedly.

For years, theoreticians of weapons of mass destruction held that CW—the “poor man's nuke”—had lost most of their battlefield utility. Yet the authors' research shows that even low-lethality agents such as chlorine offer tactical and strategic utility that outweighs even the potential cost of international retribution. From their first use in late 2012, CW have proven a small but essential component of the Assad regime's war strategy, which revolves around campaigns of civilian punishment and displacement. Seeping into trenches, tunnels, and shelters, chemical agents complement the specific effects of conventional bombardment, leaving civilian populations no option but to leave opposition-held areas while depriving insurgents of popular legitimacy and resources. Indeed, the IIT report shows how the Syrian military's conventional and chemical campaigns are intertwined at the operational level in key frontline formations.

For this reason, any military response to CW use should target not only production and storage facilities, but also those Syrian units responsible for carrying out the attacks. Thus far, these units have included the 22nd Air Division, the Praetorian 4th Armored Division, and the “Tiger Forces” and associated 63rd Helicopter Brigade. In addition to deterring future use of proscribed weapons, punitive strikes could serve the wider goal of arresting the Syrian mass violence and displacement campaign—without stepping onto the slippery slope of regime change. This would have been true for any attack since Washington issued its redline in 2012, all the way through to the last recorded attack near the town of Kabani last May, which would have provided an early opportunity to deter the most recent regime offensive against Idlib province. That ongoing campaign [has since displaced](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/idlib-may-become-the-next-gaza-strip)

[more than a million civilians and threatens to create another refugee crisis for Europe \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/idlib-may-become-the-next-gaza-strip\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/idlib-may-become-the-next-gaza-strip) [and has been led by precisely those units identified in the IIT report and the authors' research as responsible for CW attacks \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-crisis-in-idlib\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-crisis-in-idlib)

The cost-benefit ratio of strikes is all the more favorable today because long-held assumptions about the inherent

risk of military action in Syria have proven false again and again. At various points, Israel, Turkey, and the United States have attacked CW development sites and other regime positions without direct Russian interference.

Besides military action, Western states have a number of diplomatic and judicial levers at their disposal. For example, they could use the IIT findings to build a strong case in the OPCW Executive Council and State Party Conference for issuing sanctions against the regime, as well as depriving it of the legitimacy conferred by unqualified membership in the organization. The findings should also be used to rally signatory states who have previously been on the fence about the Syrian CW file.

Europeans in particular have been looking for ways to continue their engagement with Syrians while sidelining Assad's circle. Despite the regime's battlefield successes, more than a third of Syria's prewar population remains displaced beyond its grasp, while its governance at home **looks shaky**

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/syrias-economic-crisis-sparks-rare-protests-in-regime-territory>. A policy centered on Syrians, wherever they may reside, rather than territorial Syria could provide avenues to shape the country's future and mitigate the risk of radicalization as swaths of brutalized civilians feel abandoned by the international community. Accountability, above all for the most heinous of crimes, and truth-seeking thus become essential policy tools for European states looking to shape a future Syrian body politic. Otherwise, the regime's proven tactic of unrestrained violence may succeed at cowing the rest of the population into submission.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of the IIT's findings, Britain, France, and other states should advocate for sanctioning the Syrian regime and suspending its privileges as a full member of the OPCW in line with the "collective measures" provision under Article XII of the Chemical Weapons Convention. They should also advance the issue to the UN Security Council and General Assembly, where they would likely face another Russian veto. If collective measures prove impossible to achieve (which is likely), national authorities should issue additional sanctions of their own. In either case, U.S. assistance would lend major weight to European actions.

The same governments, in coordination with regional partners such as Turkey and Israel, should reiterate and clarify their redlines regarding CW use in Syria and follow through swiftly and consistently in case of any violations. When selecting targets for punitive strikes, officials should consider the wider context of the war, hitting Syrian air force and frontline formations responsible for attacks in addition to production and storage facilities.

Governments should also expand their support for **[harm mitigation and response capacities on the ground](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/syrias-three-governments-confront-the-coronavirus)** **<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/syrias-three-governments-confront-the-coronavirus>** in northwest Syria through assistance to local humanitarian and civil society initiatives. Useful measures include sending protective equipment and medical supplies to the Syria Civil Defense (aka the White Helmets) and medical charities operating on the ground; providing technical know-how on the collection and preservation of evidence; and bolstering early warning systems such as Syria Sentry.

Finally, European governments should continue advancing the cause of accountability via multilateral and national channels. Additional funding should be provided to IIT, the UN International Impartial and Independent Mechanism, and the OPCW Fact Finding Mission to hasten and expand their work. National intelligence on concealed stockpiles and facilities could be provided more consistently to support the work of the OPCW Declaration Assessment Team. Similarly, declassifying information on chains of command could complement public versions of the IIT report and help civil society organizations pursue prosecutions in national courts under universal jurisdiction.

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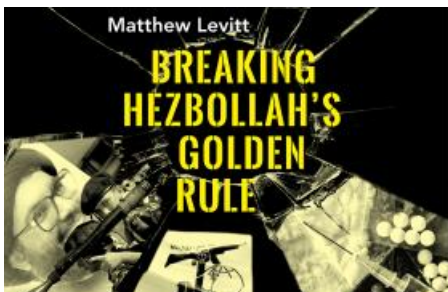
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