

Large-Scale Chemical Weapons Use Against Syrian Civilians: Military Implications

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Brief Analysis

If it becomes reasonably clear that the Assad regime was responsible for today's apparent chemical strikes, nothing less than direct military action will alter its calculus or prevent further massacres.

Based on extensive video, photo, and eyewitness accounts, it seems clear that something major and terrible happened today in Syria. Thousands of people were reportedly killed or wounded, nearly all in the Damascus vicinity. No previous action by the regime or the opposition has produced casualties on this scale or in this geographical concentration. This appears to have been a calculated act, likely intended to change the military situation around the capital in a decisive way. It also coincides with the anniversaries of two ineffectual U.S. policy pronouncements: President Obama's August 18, 2011, declaration that Bashar al-Assad must "step aside," and his August 20, 2012, statement that the use of chemical weapons (CW) would be a game changer.

The obvious explanation for what occurred is that the regime decided to resort to large-scale CW use against civilians. Of course, care must be taken to rule out other possibilities, such as rebels employing CW or a local regime commander deciding to use them on his own initiative. Yet if this assessment reasonably concludes that the regime leadership is responsible for massacres on this scale, then the United States and its allies must give an appropriate and telling response. That means direct military action against regime forces and, if CW use continues, against the regime's leadership and associated targets.

POTENTIAL MOTIVATIONS

Although the motivation for today's action is unknown, large-scale CW use indicates that major or strategic objectives were involved, and that several factors were at work. CW use also fits the regime's longstanding pattern of behavior and its current situation on the ground. First, the military situation in the Damascus area, while not critical, has not been going in the regime's favor. Government offensives in the suburbs have not met with great

success and have resulted in significant casualties for both the regime and its Hezbollah and Shiite allies.

Meanwhile, rebel forces in the countryside have been conducting an offensive of their own and scoring some tactical successes.

Second, military developments in other parts of the country may have altered the regime's calculus. The recent rebel offensive in Alawite portions of Latakia, though rolled back, embarrassed the regime and caused it to divert military resources to the area. Rebels have also been making progress around Aleppo city and in the countryside, the capture of Mengh airfield being the most significant event. Combined with the situation around Damascus, these developments may have led the regime to conclude that it needed to do something decisive.

More broadly, the regime has long sought to break the connection between the people and the armed resistance, separating the rebels from their support base. To achieve this objective, it has made extensive use of artillery, aircraft, and missiles against civilians in rebel areas of control. Large-scale CW use would be a logical extension of this policy.

WHAT HAPPENED?

While details need to be confirmed regarding types of CW employed, delivery means, areas struck, and casualties, reports thus far indicate a major coordinated operation involving artillery units and surface-to-surface missiles, and possibly aircraft. Attacks by air units would be a decisive indicator of regime responsibility. The operation is unlike any of the previous cases of CW use in Syria, which were relatively small in scale, limited in terms of casualties, and often seemingly designed to reduce the risk of detection by outside observers.

The operation apparently included near-simultaneous conventional bombardment of several rebel centers of resistance in the Damascus area. Based on activist reporting, locations affected include Douma, Jobar, Zamalka, Arbeen, Ein Tarma, al-Mouadamiya, Saqba, and Harasta. Sarin gas, a nerve agent whose effects are at least somewhat consistent with those reported from the scene, is said to have been employed, though determining the specific agent involved will require technical analysis. Reported casualties are very high: over 1,000 killed and several thousand wounded. Medical facilities in affected areas are said to be overwhelmed, with little capacity to treat the wounded. Many of those hurt are women and children; casualties among rebel fighters are unknown.

Longer-term effects will probably include significant disruption of civilian activity, refugee movements, and psychological issues. In all likelihood, the attacks will dramatically increase the sense of vulnerability among civilians and fighters in rebel-held areas across Syria, though it remains to be seen whether the regime will succeed in its objective of breaking support for the resistance. For their part, the rebels have only a limited capability to respond to CW attacks on this scale, lacking effective means of striking the types of regime forces involved or defending themselves against such weapons. And they have essentially no capability to protect the civilian population against further CW attacks. Civilians are simply defenseless in this regard.

In addition, the chemical strikes might be part of a larger operation in the capital area. Activists have reported intense air and artillery bombardment, as well as ground attacks on rebel-held areas. They have also indicated that elements of the regime's 4th Armored Division are conducting movements and preparations consistent with a planned offensive. In a military sense, it would be logical for Assad to exploit the situation by moving against rebel centers of resistance and support while they are disrupted and coping with casualties.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The Damascus area has long been the most likely location for serious regime use of CW since victory in the capital is essential. If the regime is conclusively shown to be responsible for today's attacks, it would suggest that Assad and his cohorts feel pressured by the military situation and unconstrained in their actions. They likely understood that decisive action would be supported -- perhaps even actively encouraged -- by their Iranian and Hezbollah allies,

for whom the war has become a resource drain and a political liability.

Although an authoritative assessment of what happened is necessary, it should not be too drawn out. Large-scale CW use is a direct and serious challenge to the United States and its allies. Regardless of who conducted today's attacks, the Syrian government is responsible for the security of its chemical arsenal. If some of its CW fell into rebel hands, the regime is responsible for declaring that immediately and seeking international assistance to remove such weapons from rebel control.

The international community should act quickly. Its response should certainly not be made subject to a regime or Russian veto. Rather, if it becomes reasonably clear that the regime used CW, direct and serious action should be taken whether or not Moscow allows a UN Security Council resolution. Such a course is justified not only on the basis of CW use, but also because of the number of civilian casualties. Specific measures should include:

- Providing medical assistance to affected areas
- Increasing the CW defense capabilities of civilians
- Creating a warning system for future CW attacks
- Providing the rebels with additional capabilities to strike regime forces involved in CW operations
- Launching direct military strikes against any regime units involved in conducting today's CW attacks and their supporting command-and-control and logistics elements
- Imposing a no-drive zone on regime forces in the affected area
- Warning the regime that further CW use will lead to attacks on regime leadership and associated targets

If the regime has indeed ignored repeated U.S. warnings that systematic CW use is a redline, then it will likely ignore anything less than a clear threat to its ability to conduct the war. Diplomatic and other measures may be useful in a supporting role, especially in pressuring the regime's allies, but they cannot be counted on to have any real effect on the regime's calculus.

Jeffrey White is a Defense Fellow at The Washington Institute and a former senior defense intelligence officer. ❖

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