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'Chemical warfare' plunges Syria to new lows

By Victor Kotsev
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Recent reports of limited chemical warfare in Syria come amid a new government offensive against the rebels. The fog of war, which has thickened in the last weeks, makes it difficult to say who is winning, and a large-scale international intervention still appears distant, meaning that the violence that has claimed more than 70,000 lives in just over two years (a recent average of 150-200 a day) is only set to plunge to further horrors.

The latest claims of chemical weapons use state that a woman and two children were killed in a poison gas attack in the northern city of Aleppo on Saturday. Several other such incidents were reported recently, with the rebels and the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad accusing each other of perpetrating the attacks. We may not know the full truth for some time to come, even though a United Nations team tasked with investigating these claims has been standing by and hoping to obtain permission to enter the country for at least a week now.

Also on Saturday, the Times of London claimed that soil samples smuggled out of the country had confirmed beyond doubt that "some kind of chemical weapon" had been used on at least one occasion, although it was not known who was behind the attack and what exactly chemical had been released. In any case, regional countries have stepped up preparations for expanded chemical warfare, with unconfirmed reports claiming that protection kits were being distributed to the rebels by their regional benefactors, and to the pro-Assad forces, by the government.

Still, although the administration of United States President Barack Obama has said in the past that the use of chemical weapons would constitute crossing a red-line that would trigger a

military intervention, and despite a frantic spell of recent diplomatic activity, it does not look as if any decisive action is imminent.

There has been much speculation recently that an upcoming marathon of meetings between Obama and Middle Eastern leaders—those of the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Jordan and Turkey—scheduled to take place a month after the US president's March tour of the region, would set the stage for dramatic action in Syria. Yet, for now at least, the White House is denying the reports.

"The United States has never had an interest in Syria as itself," said in a recent panel discussion aired on al-Jazeera Syria expert at the University of Oklahoma Joshua Landis. "The latest reports say that the average American family is in debt \$40,000 for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Americans are angry about this... And that's the terrible news for Syrians, I think, that the world is beleaguered and they haven't had a deep interest in Syria." [1]

Until now, the Western strategy has relied mostly on arming and training the rebels—but only up to a point and in such a manner that they can deny involvement later. This may change, however, if the opposition starts losing the war visibly.

According to different reports, both the government and the rebels have stepped up training of their militia fighters through foreign-organized 15-day training programs. According to the Daily Telegraph, Saudi Arabia has been paying for American intelligence officials to train "moderate" rebels in Jordan with an eye to "liberating" southern Syria. [2] The Americans, it is believed, are doing this in order to prevent entrenched jihadist elements from gaining further influence with the opposition.

The Syrian regime, meanwhile, has reportedly assembled a 50,000-strong militia force, separate from the army, with help from Iran, and is looking to expand its ranks to 100,000. According to Reuters, some of the training takes place in Iran and mirrors the program attended by fighters of the Lebanese militant organization Hezbollah. [3]

Most accounts appearing in Western media claim that the rebels are winning on all fronts, and the recent capture of several army bases and new swathes of territory appears to confirm these reports. However, much less is being written and said about an ongoing government counter-offensive, [4] and we can only glean from sporadic narratives of reverses near Damascus and the southern border areas that the fighting is not always going so well for the opposition.

Should the government forces turn the tide of the battle, or should it turn out that the accounts of rebel victories have been grossly exaggerated—as happened during an uprising some 30 years ago centered around the city of Hama—the Western and Gulf Arab backers of the rebels would face a dilemma. Either they would have to lose face in a major way and see Syria firmly lodged in the Iranian sphere of influence, or they would have to step in directly as they did in Libya in 2011.

All the international players involved in the conflict have been readying contingency plans for the latter scenario, though it is unclear that these would ever come to fruition. Their hope appears to be that the rebels would keep fighting until the government forces collapse on their own—if not under military pressure, at least due to bankruptcy.

According to the Associated Press, Syria's vital oil industry, which fills government coffers and provides fuel for army tanks and other heavy equipment, has been nearly destroyed by the rebel gains of the last months, while the country's currency has plunged 80% compared to the dollar since the start of the uprising. [5] The website Now Syria recently released statistics showing that Syria's exports in 2012 plunged to \$185 million, down from \$7.21 billion in 2011 and \$11.35 billion in 2010. [6]

Yet there are few certainties in Syria, and the onset of chemical warfare could at least draw in a limited way Syria's neighbors - if not in a full-scale offensive to finish off the regime, then in the creation of buffer zones near the borders of the Levantine country. Turkey has long toyed with the idea, and unconfirmed recent reports coming from sources as diverse as al-Jazeera and the right-wing Israeli rumor mills claim that Israel is preparing contingencies of its own-perhaps even including a new invasion of southern Lebanon (see note 1).

Such a scenario, unfortunately, would not stop the bloodshed inside Syria, and it is uncertain that even a full-scale military intervention would accomplish this task. The ongoing disintegration of the country appears unstoppable, and with it the expanding tragedy of the Syrian people.

Notes:

1. Inside Syria - Preparing for the day after al-Assad's fall, al-Jazeera, April 7, 2013.
2. Saudi Arabia backs push to carve out liberated southern Syria, The Daily Telegraph, April 5, 2013.
3. Insight: Syrian government guerrilla fighters being sent to Iran for training, Reuters, April 4, 2013.
4. Syrian troops widen offensive in border areas, Ynet, April 13, 2013.
5. Syria oil industry buckling under rebel gains, April 6, 2013.
6. Steep fall in Syria foreign trade in 2012, Now Syria, April 7, 2013.