

A Century After Their First Deployment, Chemical Weapons Continue to Be Used to Gas People En Masse

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Syrian Coalition
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Today marks a hundred years since chemical weapons were first used during the Second Battle of Ypres (1915) in the First World War. Throughout the course of the war, over one million people fell victim to the use of chemical weapons, including tens of thousands of civilians. A century on, civilians are still being gassed to death by chemical weapons.

The largest chemical attack in the 21st century took place on August 21, 2013 when Assad's forces used Sarin on a large scale in the suburbs of Damascus, killing more than 1,400 civilians. Since then – and indeed before the Ghouta major gas attacks- Assad has been following an evil strategy whereby poisonous gas is deployed on a scale large enough to cause civilian casualties but small enough not to attract international condemnation.

The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) along with a number of human rights organisations and independent investigations have found that helicopters have been used to drop barrel bombs filled with poisonous gas on rebel-held areas across Syria.

The UN Security Council adopted Resolutions 2118 (2013) and 2209 (2015) banning the use of chemicals in Syria. However, the resolutions lacked an enforcement mechanism and consequently have been completely ignored by the Assad regime. The Assad regime continues to flout these UN Security Council resolutions and the Chemical Weapons Convention, and his militias continue to deploy noxious gas with impunity.

Determining culpability is vital to stopping the carnage in Syria. Unless the OPCW Fact Finding Mission is mandated to establish the perpetrators of gas attacks, its findings will have little to no impact on Assad's calculations. Once an attribution has been made, any and all steps should be considered by the UN Security Council, including measures under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, to put an end to Assad's atrocities. Otherwise, the slaughter of innocent civilians will not stop, and the international community will have to accept that its inaction amounts to complicity to mass murder.

