Preparing for the Unknown

Washington has threatened Syria's Assad of 'consequences' should he use chemical weapons on rebel forces. Israel is deliberately taking a low profile, but has made it clear that it, too, has its red lines.

BY YEHUDAH MARKS

President Bashar Assad fears his end is near, and with good reason. In the past few weeks, the rebels have seized a number of military bases, an oil field and a hydro-electric dam in the northeast. They are using antiaircraft missiles to attack military helicopters and fighter jets that have, until now, bombarded their positions with impunity.

Desperate calls for desperate measures and Assad, who has failed to quash the 30-month revolt despite a ruthless military campaign that has left over 42,000 dead, is reportedly preparing to use his arsenal of chemical weapons against the rebels.

Intelligence reports say that Syria has filled several aerial bombs with the deadly nerve gas sarin and is ready to drop them on its own people the minute Assad gives the word.

Members of the opposition claim that the Syrian regime has already used internationally banned chemical agents, dropping toxic gases on one town, and attacking other places with phosphorus bombs.

CNN reported that the United States and its regional partners are “working the problem round the clock,” while the Sunday Times said that Israel has embarked on a “secret war” to track down Syria's chemical and biological weapons.

As part of the operation, Israeli intelligence has deployed spotters across the border to monitor the movement of Syria's unconventional arms cache, said the Times.

“For years we've known the exact location of Syria's chemical and biological munitions,” the newspaper quoted an Israeli source as saying. “But in the past week we've gotten signs that munitions have been moved to new locations.”

According to experts, the Syrians have 60 days to use these bombs before the chemical mixture expires.

U.S. President Barack Obama warned Syria last week that a chemical weapons attack would be "totally unacceptable" and would result in “consequences.”

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warned Assad that he would be crossing a “red line” if he used nerve gas against the country's rebels, but admitted that "there's little the outside world can do to stop it.”

While the U.S. faces no immediate danger from Syria's chemical weapons, and can suffice with making empty threats, Israel, which borders Syria, is another story.

Why Syria Won't Use Chemicals Against Israel

Syria has been careful not to confirm that it has chemical weapons.

In response to Washington's warnings last week, Syrian Foreign Ministry spokesman Jihad al-Makdissi issued a statement saying Damascus would not use such weapons against its own people.

Several hours later, Makdissi fled the country after being fired by Assad for making inaccurate statements that implied — or acknowledged — the presence of chemical weapons in Syria.

However, the “revelation” comes as no news to the experts, who have known for years that Syria has such weapons.

According to Dr. Dany Shoham, an authority on chemical weapons in the Middle East and a researcher at Bar-Ilan University's Begin-Sadat (RESA) Center for Strategic Studies, Syria first began ammonizing chemical weapons before the 1973 Yom Kippur War, when Egypt supplied Hafez Assad's regime with sarin and mustard gas, the first known transfer of chemical arms between Arab states.

Today, Syria possesses over 1,000 tons of deadly nerve agents, Shoham says, with Western intelligence agencies estimating that it possesses one of the world's largest stockpiles of chemical weapons.

However, Dr. Eldad Pardo of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, an expert in Middle East strategy and nuclear power, argues that even if the Syrian president uses chemical weapons against his own nation, it is unlikely that he would do so against Israel.

"The thinking among the experts is that Syria will only use chemical weapons against Israel in the worst-case scenario — for instance, if the IDF reaches Damascus," Dr. Pardo says. "So Israel doesn't really have anything to worry about.

Pardo adds that a chemical attack on Israel would be more dangerous to Syria than to Israel.

He explains that the chemical agents act like any other spray, with the effect depending on the weather and the course of wind. This makes it hard to designate a specific site for an attack.

What's more, chemical weapons only affect a small radius, and with Israel's home front defense, which includes gas masks for the civilian population, it is unlikely that a gas attack will have much affect.

In addition, Israel's Arrow and Iron Dome antimissile systems are capable of intercepting Syrian missiles, meaning that the chemicals would explode in the air, dissipating before they could harm anyone on the ground.

Pardo explains that an aerial bomb bearing a payload of sarin is only effective within a certain range and in specific concentrations. Blowing such a bomb in midair defuses the danger.

On the other hand, Syria knows that a chemical attack on Israel would trigger a severe and unconventional retaliation.

"Israel has not yet used its real power," Pardo notes. "The ammunition and force used in Gaza represents just the tip of the iceberg. If Syria were to subject Israel to a chemical attack, Israel would have no choice but to show its real strength — which wouldn't be worth the price for Syria.

Attacking the Defenseless

Experts note that Muslim regimes, which likely armed themselves with chemical weapons in order to threaten and deter Israel, have thus far used them only on their own countrymen or coreligionists.

Egypt is widely believed to have used bombs and artillery shells filled with phosgene and mustard gas against the royalist troops and civilians in the North Yemen Civil War, killing an estimated 1,500 people in 1966-67.

Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons early in the Iran-Iraq War in 1980 — primarily mustard gas, a blistering agent — and then again in 1988, during the genocidal attack against Kurds in Halabja, killing an estimated 5,000 people. During that aerial attack, the iraqi dictator apparently employed both mustard gas and nerve agents such as VX and sarin.

And Bashar Assad's father, Hafez, is said to have pumped hydrogen cyanide into the homes of Muslim Brotherhood activists in Hama in 1982, during the slaughter of some 30,000 civilians in the span of several weeks, according to the Syrian Human Rights Committee.

"The two common denominators are that the target populations were not protected and had no unconventional response," Dr. Shoham notes.

This explains why Israeli officials are showing an outward calm, with Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu issuing nothing more than a routine statement that "we are watching the Syrian chemical weapons with concern."
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The Turkish government, on the other hand, has prepared itself for possible attack — and not just with defensive measures. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu said last week that the Syrian regime has 700 missiles whose location, storage method and holders are no secret to Ankara. This was a veiled threat to destroy them.

Pardo adds that it is very possible that Assad won’t even resort to chemical warfare.

“He has now opened his chemical storehouses in order to let Turkey and the West know what he is capable of doing if they intervene, and as a warning to the West to stop giving ammunition to the rebels, or the Free Syrian Army, as they are now called.”

Pardo explains that Syria fears the intervention of the West, which could impose a no-fly zone that would make it impossible for Damascus to battle the rebels from the air.

“Heavy bombardment of towns close to the highway leading to Damascus International Airport has effectively closed the airport, making it difficult for Assad’s forces to receive ammunition from Russia and Iran. Syria knows that a no-fly zone would be critical,” Pardo says. “Assad has therefore decided to pressure the West by opening his chemical-warfare supplies, in a clear message to them that if he is stretched thin, the outcome will be extremely dangerous, a scenario the West is not interested in seeing unfold.”

Joshua Landis, director of the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma and an expert on Syria, also believes Assad won’t fully utilize his chemical weapons capabilities at this time.

“He must know that as soon as he uses them, he will have written his death warrant,” Landis told The Times of Israel. “I do not think he is suicidal or about to pursue a ‘Samson option’ as some have suggested.”

**Israeli Silence**

While the international arena is discussing Syria, Israel has not taken any side in the civil war. This doesn’t mean it doesn’t care what happens, Pardo explains. “Whatever happens to our neighbors could certainly affect us,” he says.

However, Israel’s policy for many years has been not to intervene in the affairs of neighboring countries, a policy that has now been called.

Ely Karmon, a senior researcher at the International Institute for Counter-Terror at the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzlyia, says that if Assad uses chemical weapons against his own people, a joint American, Jordanian and perhaps Turkish force of 75,000 soldiers will probably intervene, but would not require Israel’s assistance.

“Just as in the Gulf War, the United States will not want Israel interfering in the Sunni coalition,” says Karmon, who teaches a masters-level course on chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear terrorism.

**The Real Fear — Chemical Weapons Reaching Hizbullah**

Israel’s real fear is that the chemical weapons arsenal maintained in Syria may end up in the hands of Hizbullah.

The government has made it clear that any sort of transfer of chemical weapons to Hizbullah will trigger an immediate response. In July, Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman called the transfer of such weapons to Hizbullah “a justification for acts of war” and said that in such a scenario, Israel “will act decisively and without hesitation or restraint.”

Israel’s ambassador to the United States, Michael Oren, elaborated on this threat, saying that any evidence of chemical weapons being passed from the Assad regime to extremist groups like Hizbullah would constitute the crossing of a red line.

“We were those weapons to pass into the wrong hands — Hizbullah’s hands, for example — that would be a game-changer for us,” he told reporters.

“We have a very clear red line about those chemical weapons passing into the wrong hands. Can you imagine if Hizbullah and its 70,000 rockets would get its hands on chemical weapons? That could kill thousands of people.”

However, this Israeli “red line” is different from Washington’s. While Israel considers the red line to be the movement of chemical weapons to extremist groups, the Obama administration has said that its trigger for action would be any move by Syrian President Bashar Assad to use the weapons against the Syrian people.

**Israel’s Planned Attack**

According to a report in The Atlantic, Israel approached Jordan — which shares borders with Israel and Syria — about a possible airstrike on Syrian chemical weapons sites, but the Jordanians said “the time was not right.” The requests were made through informal channels during the last two months.

Although Israel reportedly attacked Syria in 2007, levelling a Syrian nuclear plant, without Jordan’s stamp of approval, the Israeli government is still concerned about putting its neighbors in jeopardy.

“The Jordanians have to be very careful about provoking the [Damascus] regime, and they assume the Syrians would suspect Jordanian complicity in an Israeli attack,” the source said.

According to the report, Netanyahu twice sent Mossad representatives to Amman to coordinate the matter with the Jordanians and receive their “permission” for the operation.

Jordan’s Foreign Minister Nasser Judeh declined to comment on the report, but did say his country was monitoring the situation closely and that his government was talking to countries in the region. “We have to be prepared for different scenarios,” he said at a press conference, adding that the Syrian regime is currently in control of these weapons and understands that using them would be a “game changer.”