

Chemical Weapons Require Special Consideration and Action by
Comparison to Conventional Weapons

After days of speculation and discussion, the U.S. government has announced that there is no doubt that Syria used chemical weapons against its own people and that this action could justify American-led action against the Syrian government. In response, a growing chorus of debate has arisen over what makes chemical weapons uniquely serious enough of a violation of human rights to justify outside intervention. Even further, policymakers and media pundits alike are asking whether chemical weapons should be treated differently than conventional weapons in deciding when to use military force against human rights violations. In short, evaluation of arguments on both sides of the debate suggests that chemical weapons require special consideration and action by comparison to events involving only conventional weapons.

One factor that makes chemical weapons uniquely serious enough of a violation of human rights to justify outside intervention concerns the indiscriminate nature of the weapons. Conventional weapons such as small arms, non-nuclear bombs, missiles, and rockets support specified and targeted warfare. Although civilian casualties and other forms of collateral damage are always a possibility in conventional warfare, the controlled purpose of conventional weapons is to defend against,

or attack, the enemy's military forces. Chemical weapons, on the other hand, represent an extremely unwieldy type of warfare technology - one that is virtually impossible to control with any strategic or tactical precision. In fact, not only do chemical weapons cause widespread death and permanent harm, but once released, "these difficult-to-control poisons kill indiscriminately, recognizing neither uniform nor flag. Infants, the elderly, and the chronically ill are particularly vulnerable" (Physicians for Human Rights). As a matter of defending the most basic of human rights of innocent and vulnerable people - i.e, being safe and protected from harm - outside military intervention is, thereby, justified in cases involving chemical weapons.

In addition to the indiscriminate aspect of chemical weapons, they also pose a uniquely serious threat to human rights in terms of the global order. With last week's Syrian chemical weapons attack, for instance, some 355 people (including women, children, and elderly citizens) died while reports also claimed that as many as 3,600 patients turned up at local hospitals with "neurotoxic symptoms" in less than three hours (Aji and Bassem). As a weapon of mass destruction, President Obama and his military advisors are certainly well-aware of the fact that chemical weapons can result in casualty numbers far beyond last week's figures, even magnitudes greater.

It is entirely conceivable, for example, that a chemical weapons attack somewhere in the world could harm and/or kill hundreds of thousands or even millions of innocent civilians. In this respect, the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government establishes a dangerous and reckless precedent that poses a threat to the very order of the free world. In light of these facts, not only is outside intervention justified, but even further, some form of outside intervention by the civilized powers of the world is morally obligatory.

Interestingly, not everyone agrees that chemical weapons constitute a uniquely serious threat to human rights such that outside intervention is warranted. In his book, "The Chemical Weapon Taboo," researcher and author Richard Price argues, in so many words, that chemical weapons are no more or less horrific than conventional weapons. In fact, Price even goes as far as suggesting that death by chemical weapons, in many cases, is considerably more humane as victims of chemical weapons die relatively quickly and do not suffer the indignity of surviving with lost limbs and mutilated bodies; the claim against chemical weapons is, therefore, a matter of normative and negative perceptions more than anything else (Garrett). Even further, Price argues that over the past century, chemical weapons have wrongly become taboo for political reasons. During World War I, for example, Great Britain supposedly heightened and exaggerated

the horrors and impacts of mustard gas as a strategy for pulling the United States into the war (Cooper). In so many words, Price denies that the use of chemical weapons justifies outside intervention any more than the use of conventional weapons would.

As provocative as Price's argument may be, his argument amounts to little more than the contention that chemical weapons have gotten a bad rap over the years. Little imagination or reasonable observation of history is required, however, to understand the uniquely serious threat that chemical weapons pose to human rights. During the early 1980s, for example, former Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein, approved use of chemical weapons against Iran. Reports indicate that as many as 20,000 Iranian troops were killed by mustard gas and nerve agents in horrid fashion (Cooper 173). Later the same decade, the Hussein regime once again used chemical weapons to eradicate Kurds from their villages in northern Iraq as approximately 5,000 men, women, and children died within hours and days of the attacks; meanwhile more than 100,000 Kurdish men disappeared without a trace (Cooper 173). In the hands of a madman like Saddam Hussein, the threat of chemical weapons has no bounds. Almost just as easily as Hussein massacred Iranians and Kurds in the 1980s, chemical weapons could be used by Al Qaeda or other terrorist groups to decimate a major city like Damascus, London,

or New York. For the hundreds of thousands, or even millions, of innocent victims of such an attack, Richard Price's claim that chemical weapons have gotten a bad rap would offer absolutely no consolation. Chemical weapons, as Price fails to understand, are a uniquely serious and egregious violation of human rights that not only justify outside intervention but even demand it.

Based on the above findings, it becomes obvious that chemical weapons should be treated differently than conventional weapons when deciding when to use military force against human rights violations. Philosophers and political leaders have long agreed that some wars are justifiable for the preservation of freedom and democracy. In the context of a just war, the use of conventional weapons represents a means to a moral end. In the case of chemical weapons, however, no moral justification can be adduced according to any ethical framework or theory. Chemical weapons are extremely indiscriminate and imprecise attack systems. They are particularly pernicious and hazardous for victims. And what is more, chemical weapons can be used against any target in the civilized world including major cities and metropolitan areas inhabited by millions of innocent human beings. In other words, the risks and potential costs associated with chemical weapons demand a zero-tolerance policy by leaders of the free world. Military action and intervention may, therefore, be considered the first and last line of preemptive

defense in cases involving chemical weapons (Lavoy, Sagan and Wirtz 129).

In the final comment, although some critics argue that chemical weapons should not be treated any differently than conventional weapons, analysis of the key facts tells another story. Simply stated, chemical weapons require special consideration and action by comparison to events involving only conventional weapons because chemical weapons are inherently indiscriminate and pose a real and profound threat to the civilized global order. As such, chemical weapons present a uniquely serious and egregious violation of human rights that not only justifies outside intervention but even demands it. Moreover, military action should be considered an acceptable and justified preemptive defense in cases involving the use and/or threat of chemical weapons.

Works Cited

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