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STRATEGIC TRENDS

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EMERGING CHALLENGES

The chemical weapons' threat in Syria and Iraq

Last March Ambassador Ahmet Üzümcü, the Director General of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) expressed serious concerns about recent reports of the possible use of chemical weapons by non-state actors in Iraq.

On March 9, a suspected ISIS gas attack on the Iraqi town of Taza, south of Kirkuk killed three children and wounded some 1.500 people. In April there was an attack on the Makhmour-Gwer front (only about 40 kilometres southwest of Erbil): six Kurdish soldiers were injured by ISIS mortars containing chemical weapons. On April 7, 23 people were killed and over 100 others injured in a chemical attack by ISIS against members of the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) in the Syrian city of Aleppo. The US-led coalition said the chemicals used so far include chlorine and a low-grade sulphur mustard, which are not very potent.

The rise in chemical attacks by ISIS has prompted the Kurdish regional government to issue an urgent request to Washington and other Western capitals for thousands of gas masks and the OPCW director general also called for vigilance to prevent potential chemical attacks outside Syria and Iraq. It is suspected but not proven that ISIS may have produced it autonomously.

Moreover the Lebanese organization, Hezbollah, was accused, last May, by Syrian opposition fighters of using chemical weapons, supplied by the Assad regime, in some neighbourhoods of Aleppo and Ghouta, areas which have a clear Hezbollah's presence. Since 2013, Hezbollah has been accused by the Free Syrian Army of having transferred a part of Assad's chemical arsenal from Syria to Lebanon.

These news reopen the debate on the controversial dismantling of the Assad regime's chemical arsenal and its possible appropriation and use by the Nusra Front, ISIS and other non-state actors. Some 2014 estimates of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) were indicating the existence of storage and production sites of chemical agents that have not been declared by the Syrian. Some plants producing ricin (a highly lethal toxin) were destroyed before Syria adhered to the OPCW programme, after the chemical attack in Ghouta,.

The OPCW team began operating in Syria in early October of 2013 and, later this month, international observers confirmed that the equipment for the production, blending and loading of chemical weapons delivered by the Assad regime, had been destroyed together with 92% of the ammunition. US, Russia and French intelligences estimate that the regime possessed some 1.000 tons of chemical weapons.

An eventual confirmation of ISIS deploying even crude chemical weapons could help further coalition building, while an assessment by the Israeli intelligence that Hezbollah may be similarly equipped could lead to a broad military action by the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) against South Lebanon and the beyond Golan Heights.