

**Forum:** Security Council

**Issue:** The Situation in the Syrian Civil War with regards to the use of weapons of mass destruction

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## Introduction

Alongside the development of science and technology has come the production of weapons, most notably nuclear, biological or chemical ones that can cause harm on a massive scale. Weapons of Mass Destruction do not discriminate between civilian and combatant and lead to inhumane deaths. Thus, they are one of the most significant areas of concern not only with regards to the Syrian Civil War, but warfare in general. Since 2013, the use of Weapons of Mass Destruction in the Syrian Civil War has occurred mainly in the form of chemical attacks carried out by the Syrian Government. At a time when the Syrian Civil War has escalated into a full-fledged proxy conflict with involvement from major world and regional powers, chemical weapons have been a way for the depleted forces of the Assad government to prevail in the war. The consequences of the use of chemical weapons, however, has displaced and painfully murdered Syrian civilians. While the Security Council has been quite ineffective in resolving the Syrian Civil War itself due to conflicts between its permanent members, ending the use of Weapons of Mass Destruction is an issue that concerns the well-being of the masses. Thus, even sides that are in proxy conflict in the Syrian Civil War are more likely to cooperate, making the solution of the issue more feasible.

## Definition of Key Terms

**Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs):** Weapons that possess the capacity to inflict death on a massive scale to the point where their very presence in situations of conflict is considered a significant threat. In the modern age, Weapons of Mass Destruction of concern are nuclear, chemical, or biological. Weapons of Mass Destruction are especially a cause of concern because unlike more traditional forms of warfare, they do not distinguish between combatant and civilian.

**Proxy Warfare:** Proxy warfare occurs when instead of directly participating in the war itself, a regional or world power indirectly partakes in conflict, through means such as but not limited to supplying weapons, or in certain cases, partaking in the conflict on a small scale. States' participation in proxy warfare is often motivated either by economic reasons or the desire to increase their sphere of influence on specific regions. The Syrian Civil War is a proxy war

between several parties, more detail on which can be found in the Major Parties and General Overview sections.

**Chemical Weapons:** Chemicals used to cause intentional harm and death through their toxic properties. Chemical weapons are the most common Weapons of Mass Destruction used in the Syrian Civil War. Most notable chemicals include choking agents such as chlorine gas, nerve agents such as sarin, or blister agents such as sulphur mustard, all of which lead to painful deaths through suffocating and convulsions.

## General Overview

Even though the agenda item is specifically focused on eradicating the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian Civil War, understanding the dynamics that gave rise to and continue to perpetuate the war is crucial in achieving any peaceful solution. Thus, this section will focus on the underlying dynamics of the Syrian Civil War, as well as more specific information on the use of Weapons of Mass Destruction, with special emphasis on chemical warfare.

## The Escalation of the Syrian Civil War

In March 2011, the violently authoritarian measures of Bashar al-Assad's government, combined with economic problems such as unemployment and the onset of the Arab Spring in neighboring countries resulted in protests against the regime. The Syrian government's deadly crackdown to crush his opposers, which he referred to as "foreign-backed terrorism" intensified the conflict. The conflict between the regime and the rebels was further propagated by sectarianism. While the rebels were part of the majority Sunni sect, the ruling Assad family, as well as state-backed irregular forces and irregular militias were part of the minority Alawites.

Backed by countries such as Russia and Iran, Assad's forces have begun using increasingly violent measures. Shootings, which were initially the most common cause of death have since then been replaced by shelling, and eventually airstrikes. Conflicting viewpoints of the Security Council's permanent members, with the US supporting the rebels and Russia supporting Assad's government have prevented UN efforts in achieving peace in the region.

## Chemical Weapons and the Assad Government

The first chemical attack was a sarin attack that occurred in a Damascus suburb in 2013, and raised concerns for the UK parliament and US President Barack Obama, bringing the two countries to the brink of agreeing on airstrikes on Syria. However, a later deal was struck between Russia and the US, agreeing that the US and UK would refrain from airstrikes if the Syrian government agreed to stop chemical attacks. Three days later, the Syrian government agreed to the Chemical Weapons Convention and declared its chemical weapons to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). According to OPCW reports, Syria's 1300 tonnes of chemical weapons were destroyed at sea and the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism, who were responsible for overseeing the process were awarded the

Nobel Peace Prize for their work. In January 2016, the OPCW declared that Syria's chemical stockpile had been destroyed.

However, the Mechanism admitted shortly after that there were inconsistencies in Syria's declared stockpile. Given that the process of chemical disarmament is based on transparency in the CWC, the Syrian government used industrial loopholes to continue chlorine gas production, despite international airstrike threats from the US and UK. It is likely that Assad's government signed and ratified the treaty to prevent airstrikes and further pressure and gain time. The vast majority of chemical attacks in Syria have utilized chlorine gas, which is especially difficult to monitor by the OPCW due to the fact that it has legitimate industrial uses, and its production is relatively straightforward.

Despite the absence of official UN investigation since JIM's collapse in 2017, which will be further elaborated upon in the upcoming sections, there is a plethora of video evidence that the Syrian government is responsible for the chemical attacks, not to mention Syria's previous patterns of behavior on the issue. Syria, at this current stage in its Civil War, finds itself facing world superpowers with the sole support of Russia and Iran, and its stockpile of conventional weapons depleted. In some cases, the Assad government has started using its weapons in cases where it cannot take back control using conventional weapons. However, an examination of attack patterns also reveals that chemical weapons have also been used alongside conventional government offenses. An especially alarming use of chemical weapons by Syria has been to send a strong message to the inhabitants of the area. Those attacked with chemicals often flee the area in masses, which has been one of the methods the Assad government has used to drive out opposition forces and civilians. Needless to say, such war strategies are not only a violation of the Geneva Protocol and the CWC, but also considered war crimes.

## **Major Parties Involved and Their Views**

**United States of America:** United States of America is the most dominant factor among the foreign interventions of the Syrian Civil War. United States formulated its coalition, composed of UK, France, Germany, Italy, and other western allies. The US-led coalition was primarily against the non-state actors of the regions, mainly the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant; however, it also managed to supply arms to Free Syrian Army. Although US involvement was more dominant against the ISIS, and not the Syrian government, despite its intelligence and military support to the free Syrian force, US has officially attacked the Shayrat Airbase with missile strikes, a deliberate attack against the Syrian forces. Furthermore, US's involvement within the conflict is also allegedly an attempt to raise influence within the region through arms trade and ratio supplement to non-state actors.

**The Russian Federation:** The Russian Federation is Assad's regime's greatest supporter. In 2015, with an official request by the Syrian government, Russian military intervention in the

Syrian Civil War commenced. The intervention was primarily against the rebels, or freedom fighters, and the Jihadist groups, mainly the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant. As well as providing troop support, Russian Federation supplied arms to the Syrian army as well. While the Russian military support was quite effective from the Syrian government's perspective, Russian military strikes were allegedly exemplifying war crimes against civilian life as they were very specifically targeting civilians in Northern Syria. Furthermore, Russian intervention in the Syrian Civil War was allegedly a proxy war attempt for eliminating the American influence within the region, which has been exerted through the US led coalition against the Islamic State. The Russian intervention enabled the Syrian government to reclaim Aleppo in 2016 and Palmyra, a historically important city, in 2017. Finally, as Syrian Civil War became one of the most prominent issues of the United Nations Security Council, Russian Federation's defense of Syria in the UN's only decisive council became crucial for Syria's international status.

**Syria:** After the United States and Russia, Syria is currently believed to be in possession of the world's third-largest chemical weapons stockpile. currently governed by the regime of Bashar Assad. Syria's chemical weapons were discovered in 2012, although being prohibited by international law, which has been financially supported by 20 other nations. The chemical weapons stockpile was being investigated by the United Nations, upon request by many states, which was concurrent with a sarin attack in Ghouta. Usage of such weapons took international attention, hence, became a primary topic in the Security Council. Aside from the chemical weapons aspect, Syria is the main belligerent in the Syrian Civil War, which emerged upon rebellion against the Asad regime. Syria has been allegedly using its chemical weapons against the Free Syrian army, which is the opposition against the regime.

**Iran:** Iran is one of the superpowers in the middle east, leading the Shia sect of Islam. Iran's main rivalry in the region is Saudi Arabia, whom has been corresponding with Iran through proxy wars, for instance in Yemen Civil War and in the Syrian Civil War. Due to the nature of its current formation, Islamic revolution opposing the American imperialism within Middle East, Iran has been substantially opposing the American influence within Middle East and, therefore, has been supporting anti-imperialist governments within the region. For the Syrian Civil War, Iran has been a clearly supporting the Syrian Arab republic through their military and intelligence support. Although the support isn't mainly composed of military supplement, Iran's aid to Hezbollah has been indirectly supporting the Syrian forces for the elimination of the opposition. Furthermore, Iran's aid to Syrian Arab Republic is a part of its greater goal in Middle East: maintenance of its authority over the region. Keeping Syrian Arab Republic as an ally enables Iran to maintain its geopolitical presence.

**OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM):** Established in 2015, JIM's mandate is to identify individuals, entities, groups or governments who were involved in the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian Civil War. The Mechanism functions mainly through inspectors in the war zone. However, despite promises from Russia on providing safety for inspection, JIM's operations in the Syrian Civil War were compromised. The organization was later shut down upon Russia's challenge of JIM's legitimacy.

## Timeline of Events

<b>23 July 2012</b>	Syrian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Jihad Makdissi confirmed Syria's possession of chemical weapons for the first time.
<b>20 August 2012</b>	US President Barack Obama warned of a US military response in case major stockpiles of chemical weapons are discovered.
<b>19 March 2013</b>	Alleged chemical weapons attacks were reported in Aleppo and Damascus, with 25 people dead and many more injured.
<b>21-26 August 2013</b>	The UNSC held a meeting, and authorised a UN investigation into the alleged attacks of 19 March. The Syrian government also ratified the investigation.
<b>14 September 2013</b>	The US Secretary of State and the Russian Foreign Minister proposed a plan of accounting, regulating, and dismantling Syria's chemical weapons.
<b>16 September 2013</b>	The Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, published the UN report on the usage of chemical weapons in Syria, which stated their usage on a "relatively wide scale" against civilians. It did not, however, specify who committed the act.
<b>27 September 2013</b>	The OPCW proposed, and the UNSC agreed to enforce, a plan to dismantle Syria's chemical weapon stockpiles.
<b>31 October 2013</b>	The OPCW declared that Syria had destroyed all of its declared chemical weapons production facilities.
<b>January-September 2014</b>	The Assad regime shipped its declared chemical weapons in the course of 9 months, to be destroyed in a US ship through hydrolysis.
<b>6 March 2015</b>	The UNSC condemned the recent chlorine use in the Civil War, which resulted in, according to HRW, more than 200 civilian casualties.
<b>7 August 2015</b>	UNSC Resolution 2235 created the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) to determine the parties responsible for chemical weapon usage in the Syrian Civil War.

<b>6 November 2015</b>	The OPCW claimed that ISIS used mustard gas in 21 August 2015 in northern Syria.
<b>21 October 2016</b>	The JIM declared that the Assad regime was responsible for a chemical attack in Idlib.
<b>4 April 2017</b>	Chemical weapons were used once again in northern Idlib, and the Assad regime denied responsibility.
<b>6 April 2017</b>	The US initiated a missile attack against the Syrian military base where the attack was allegedly committed from.
<b>12 April 2017</b>	Russia vetoed a UNSC resolution that held Syria accountable for the 4 April attack and called upon Syria to provide full access to investigators
<b>16 November 2017</b>	The mandate of JIM expired
<b>23 January 2018</b>	France launched the International Partnership Against Impunity for the Use of Chemical Weapons, an initiative to collect data on chemical weapons and attacks
<b>13 April 2018</b>	France, the UK and the US launched precision strikes on Syrian chemical weapons facilities, intended as a deterrent
<b>27 June 2018</b>	A session of the OPCW granted the OPCW the mandate to investigate and attribute responsibility for chemical attacks

## **UN Involvement and Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue**

The disarmament of chemical weapons is a process that takes place mainly through the OPCW with Security Council supervision. Furthermore, the Syrian Civil War's situation as a proxy war means that peaceful intervention of non-partisan nations through channels other than the Security Council is nonexistent. Hence, the UN has been the main organ of concern in terms of solving the issue.

A plethora of UN efforts have proven fruitless in ending the deplorable violation of human rights that has been continuing in Syria in the past six years. The UN's main setback in achieving peaceful involvement and disarmament in the region has been the ongoing proxy warfare, primarily between the United States and Russia, who have been wielding their veto powers at the expense of compromise and peace in the region.

One of the UN's main steps in destroying the Syrian government's chemical stockpile has been the JIM, which was effective in disarming Syria's reported stockpile. However, both the Syrian government's illegitimate use of chlorine and the gridlock between Russia and the United States prevented JIM from achieving its full potential as a method for ensuring accountability on the issue. JIM continued its investigations after the inconsistencies in previous OPCW reports were revealed in 2016, and found both the Islamic state and the Assad government implicated in chemical attacks. Shortly after, Russia challenged the legitimacy of JIM findings, and even though the JIM mandate was renewed for one more year, competing drafts in the UN from the US and Russia, as well as a Japanese compromise were vetoed. France has since set up a group of nations in an attempt to carry out JIM's aims, yet the group has not been particularly useful. The Security Council also debated referring Syria to the ICC, where it would be tried for its war crimes. However, the referral was vetoed by the Russian Federation.

## Relevant UN Documents

S/RES/2118 [https://undocs.org/S/RES/2118\(2013\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2118(2013))

Prohibited all parties in Syria, including the Assad government, from using, producing, transferring and/or acquiring chemical weapons. The resolution also called upon Syria to comply with the OPCW decision by providing the OPCW with access to any and all chemical weapon sites, as well as accepting OPCW personnel.

S/RES/2235 [https://undocs.org/S/RES/2235\(2015\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2235(2015))

Established the Joint Investigative Mechanism in collaboration with the OPCW.

S/RES/2319 <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2319>

Extended the mandate of the JIM for one year.

## Treaties and Events

### The Geneva Protocol

Following the widespread use of chemical weapons in World War I, the Geneva Protocol was signed in 1925. The main purpose of the protocol is to prevent the use of chemical and biological weaponry during times of war, and it is signed by most UN Member States

### The Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC)

Opened to signature in 1993 and entered into force in 1997, the CWC is the main legislation of concern in ending the use of chemical weapons. It has been signed by 193 states-parties (three non-signatory UN Member States are Egypt, North Korea and South Sudan, while Israel has signed but not ratified the Convention). Unlike the Geneva Convention, which only outlaws the use of chemical weapons, the CWC also outlaws the possession and transfer of chemical weapons and requires their destruction in a specific timeframe. It is implemented by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), to which all signatories are



required by the CWC to declare their chemical arsenals. The OPCW then monitors state-parties' disarmament process, ensuring compliance with the CWC.

## **Possible Solutions**

The main and most effective solution to the use of chemical weapons in Syria can only be achieved if the permanent nations of the Security Council agree that the prohibition of chemical weapons should be prioritized over a proxy power struggle. Considering the prominence of proxy warfare in the region, not just merely for maintaining order, but also for nations' interests, the humanitarian disaster is mostly overseen.

Additionally, more elaborate investigation on stockpiling of chemical weapons within the region is also an essential step for eliminating any form of authority contradicting The Chemical Weapons Convention.

Finally, delegates should bear in mind that although ISIS territory is drastically approaching to an end, the supporters and ideological followers are not, which constantly poses a risk to people in the region.

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