

# JoMUN XV

**Forum:** Disarmament Commission

**Issue:** Investigating the allegations of chemical and biological weapons abuses in Syria

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## INTRODUCTION

On the 4th of April 2017, one of the deadliest chemical attacks in recent history occurred in Syria, killing at least 92 people and injuring hundreds more, in a town called Khan Sheikhoun. With the town under the occupation of the Syrian opposition, the Syrian government has been accused of being responsible for the attack as an act of retaliation to the opposition; however, President Bashar-al-Assad labels the whole incident as a “fabrication”. While that claim is improbable, as it has been detested by several intelligence agencies in Europe and North America, investigations into the abusive use of chemical and biological weapons in Syria from all groups continues. The international community regards an act like this as a crime against humanity.

If the government of Syria had conducted the attack on Khan Sheikhoun, it would illegitimise the Assad regime due to its commitment of a crime and broken a promise on disarmament. An agreement was reached in 2013, after a similar attack in Ghouta that killed almost 300 civilians, between the Syrian government and other signatories of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) to allow all its chemical stockpiles to be destroyed. The treaty prohibits any use, production, stockpiling, or transfer of chemical weapons. With confirmation that the government has deployed sarin, chlorine, and other chemical bombs in several locations, the convention has not been respected and the threat of chemical attacks remain prevalent, causing the need for further deterrence on the issue.

While Syria’s chemical warfare capabilities have been extensively documented, its biological warfare capabilities are far less comprehensive. There are currently no concrete indications of the production of offensive biological weapons in Syria, yet United States officials continue to mention the threat of it as “[they possess] a number of conventional and chemical weapon systems that could easily be modified for biological agent delivery”.

A chemical weapon, as defined by the CWC, is a toxic chemical used to cause physical damage or irritation. Even household chemicals, such as chlorine, can be utilised as a weapon to cause coughing, vomiting, irritation, or even rapid death at high concentrations. Biological weapons are systems that invigorate the presence of disease-infested agents in humans or the environment to cause harm. Both weapons are categorized as weapons of mass destruction and are heavily condemned as unethical act of war due to their horrific effects.

## DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

### **Chemical Warfare**

The use of toxic properties to purposefully inflict pain.

### **Sarin**

A deadly nerve agent present in some chemical weapons that can cause death.

### **Biological Warfare**

The use of infectious agents to purposefully spread diseases to humans, animals, or the environment to inflict pain.

#### **Agent**

A substance that produces or can produce a chemical, biological, or physical effect on another entity.

#### **Offensive (research, weapon, etc.)**

Any object or information utilized with the intent to harm or kill.

#### **Dual-use technologies**

Products with a civilian and military purpose (i.e. chlorine).

#### **Geneva Protocol**

A treaty that prohibits the use of chemical or biological weapons in international armed conflict.

## BACKGROUND ON THE ISSUE

Chemical and biological warfare dates back to the 1000 B.C. with the use of Arsenic smoke by the Chinese and poisoned arrows as a weapon. Since then, the lethality of these weapons has increased exponentially. On the edge of the beginning of World War II, Germany led the race of chemical ammunition with the creation of one of deadliest nerve agents, sarin. Around the same time, France, England, Canada, Japan, and Germany also possessed biological weapons that could disseminate anthrax, cholera, and other diseases. The use of these weapons was minimal due to the threat of retaliation with a similar magnitude, however, the most infamous example of chemical warfare was the use of cyanide-based gas by Nazi Germany to conduct the massacre of Jewish people and other minority groups in concentration camps. During the aftermath of this large-scale massacre, the term 'crime against humanity' was introduced and several treaties were created to prohibit the use of chemical and biological agents as weapons. Despite these efforts, these weapons continue to be stockpiled and utilised in combat.

Conflict between Syria and Israel from the 1960s to the 1980s is one of the main reasons behind the development of a chemical warfare program in Syria, but not a biological warfare program. As the Israeli military strengthened with the presumed possession of weapons of mass destruction, Syria rejected ratifying the CWC while this threat to its national security existed. During the 1970s, foreign suppliers – Egypt and the Soviet Union – aided the development of the program by providing weapons and training. In the 1980s, production of chemical weapons began, yet Syria remained highly dependent on its foreign allies to continue supplying chemical agents. After the chemical massacre in Ghouta, Syria, the state joined the CWC with an immediate disarmament plan set by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).

Despite a declaration on August 2014 stating the termination of all chemical production facilities in Syria, the United Nations have confirmed the use of chemical warfare agents in the ongoing Syrian Civil War. Amidst conflict, it seems that the Assad regime is unwilling to entirely surrender its chemical stockpiles over to the OPCW. A joint investigation between the United Nations and the OPCW, initiated in 2015, aimed to identify the groups responsible for partaking in chemical warfare during the Syrian civil war and led directly to the president and officials of the Syrian Arab Republic. While the government continues to accuse the Syrian opposition of using chemical weapons, Human

Rights Watch and the United States denounce those claims, stating that most do not have the capability to develop such complex agents. Despite this, chemical warfare continues to be used by all forces in the civil war to invoke fear and cause large-scale destruction.

## MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED

### **Syrian Arab Republic (the Syrian Government)**

Since joining the CWC in 2013, the Syrian government continually insists that they do not possess any chemical weapons and have not used chemical weapons “in [its] history” (Assad). These claims are continually denounced by investigations conducted by the United Nations, non-governmental organisations, and several other national intelligence agencies. Several chemical attacks within Syria have been confirmed to be conducted by the Syrian government or army.

### **The Russian Federation**

Russia has blocked eight UN Security Council resolutions regarding Syria since the beginning of the civil war; one of them “condemning the Syrian authorities’ use of heavy weapons”. Russian interests within the state are dependent on the survival of the Assad regime, thus the reason behind Russia’s continuous efforts to support President Assad and his government, socially and militaristically. After the chemical attack in Khan Sheikhoun, Russia attempted to shift the blame from the Syrian government to the rebel groups. Russia provided training to Syrian forces in the 1970s, and continues to supply arms and ammunition to the Syrian military.

### **The United States of America**

The United States does not stand behind the continuous human rights violations committed by the Assad regime, with the Trump Administration recently attributing the Khan Sheikhoun chemical attack directly to President Assad and condemning any usage of chemical weapons, just as the previous administration did. Sanctions have been placed upon Syria’s Scientific Studies and Research Center (SSRC) twice since 2000 for supposedly producing and distributing weapons of mass destruction. The United States limited support to the main opposition group, the National Coalition, and supports negotiations to end the war and implement a transitional leadership.

### **The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabia possesses no weapons of mass destruction and is a signatory to both the CWC and Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC). However, Saudi Arabia is a major player within the Syrian civil war, opposing the Assad regime and is one of the largest providers of financial and militaristic support towards various rebel groups. The state condemns the use of chemical weapons by enforcing domestic laws against it within Saudi Arabia, and publicly denouncing any use of it by other states; specifically, the Syrian government.

### **The Republic of Turkey**

Turkey possesses no weapons of mass destruction, unless provided by the United States, and is a signatory to both the CWC and BTWC. Due to its shared border with Syria, Turkey is able to monitor the status of non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and act in collaboration with other states to attempt to reverse any alarming observations. The state actively rejects the Assad regime, providing arms to rebel groups and shelter to displaced persons.

### **The Islamic Republic of Iran**

During the Iran-Iraq War, Iran maintain a chemical warfare program that was dismantled by the OPCW after the state ratified the CWC in 1997. Iran is also a signatory to the Geneva Protocol and

BTWC, however, US intelligence suspect that if intended, dual-use technologies could be utilised for biological warfare. Though Iran has proven to be a strong ally of President Assad, having provided, extensive logistical, financial, and militaristic support to the Syrian government, due to its history, Iran condemns the use of chemical weapons “regardless of who has used it and who are the victims”.

### Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW)

This intergovernmental organisation came into existence alongside the implementation of the CWC, prohibiting and requiring the destruction of chemical weapons. Becoming a party of the OPCW requires the declaration of all chemical warfare production and stockpile facilities, the consensual destruction of all such facilities, and yearly financial contributions by all state parties to the organisation. Constant inspections of destruction facilities and investigations of alleged use of chemical weapons by state parties are carried out by the organisation.

TIMELINE OF KEY EVENTS	
<b>1970 - 1980</b>	The Syrian Arab Republic begin developing a chemical warfare program.
<b>April 1972</b>	The Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC) treaty becomes open to signatures.
<b>April 1972</b>	The Syrian Arab Republic signs the BTWC with no ratification.
<b>April 1997</b>	The Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) treaty comes into effect, alongside the implementation of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).
<b>March 2011</b>	The Syrian Civil War begins.
<b>July 2012</b>	Syrian Foreign Ministry confirms possession of chemical warfare agents.
<b>June 2013</b>	All of Syria’s chemical stockpiles have been transferred out of the state for destruction and several bunkers permanently sealed or destroyed.
<b>August 2013</b>	Syria’s deadliest chemical attack occurs in Ghouta, Syria, with thousands of casualties. President Bashar-al-Assad denies all allegations, but multiple intelligence agencies conclude the Syrian government to be responsible.
<b>September 2013</b>	The Syrian government accedes to the CWC.
<b>January 2016</b>	The OPCW confirms the complete destruction of all Syrian chemical warfare materials.
<b>April 2017</b>	The deadliest attack since Ghouta occurs in Khan Sheikhoun, allegedly conducted by the Syrian government, however, investigations are ongoing.

## RELEVANT UN RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES, AND EVENTS

*The United Nations has worked actively alongside the OPCW in enforcing the prohibition on the production and use of chemical weapons internationally. One of the main goals of the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) is to “strengthen the disarmament regimes” of chemical and biological weapons in states worldwide. The United Nations as a whole provides yearly reports regarding chemical and biological warfare, and aid investigations conducted, especially in the Syrian Arab Republic, regarding the use of such weapons in conflict. However, many resolutions regarding chemical warfare in the Syrian Arab Republic, issued by the Security Council, have not been adopted due to vetoes issued by primarily the Russia Federation and the People’s Republic of China.*

### **Convention of the Prohibition of the Development, Production, and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on their Destruction, March 26, 1975**

This treaty is the first international agreement regarding the disarmament of the entire biological branch of the weapons of mass destruction. It calls upon state parties to nationally implement the appropriate measures through domestic legislature and other constitutionally or judicial processes.

### **Convention of the Prohibition of the Development, Production, and Stockpiling of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction, April 29, 1997**

The establishment of this treaty occurred alongside the implementation of the OPCW to ensure the contents of the treaty would be successfully enforced by the organisation through detailed operations.

### **Framework for Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons: United Nations Resolution 2118, September 27, 2013, Resolution 2118 (S/RES/2118)**

Following the chemical attack in Ghouta, the resolution outlines a plan of an accelerated program for the Syrian Arab Republic to eliminate its chemical arsenal by mid-2014.

### **UN-OPCW Joint Investigative Mechanism: United Nations Resolution 2235, August 7, 2015, Resolution 2235 (S/RES/2235)**

In response to violations of Resolution 2118, the resolution calls for impartial investigations on obtaining identification of the users of chemical weapons within the Syrian Arab Republic to pursue peace in the state and protect the national and international security.

## PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE

### **Chemical Weapons Convention**

The coexistence and partnership between the treaty and its implementing body, OPCW, has proven to be highly successful in achieving the goal of universal disarmament of chemical weapons. As of 2016, the OPCW has confirmed that 90% of the world’s declared chemical weapons stockpiles has been eliminated. While issues remain with the existence of undeclared stockpiles, as proven in the Syrian Arab Republic, and other unknowns, the OPCW have made overwhelming progress over the past two decades.

### **Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention**

The success of this treaty remains ambiguous, however, their work has been substantial over the past 4 decades. Non-compliance has been one of the largest issues with state parties. The Soviet Union and Iraq were the most serious, with both state parties having withheld information about their biological warfare program. While there has been detailed documentation of both state parties' programs, to this day investigations continue surrounding hidden biological facilities in both states.

## POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

### **Safe Handling Instructions/Rewards**

With the dispersion of power within the state of Syria due to the civil war, the rebel groups maintain control of large sections of the country. Since the government is the only group that has the capability to produce chemical agents, all rebel groups in possession of chemical weapons most likely get them from abandoned stockpiles or government facilities. Countries in support of rebel groups, or against Assad, could provide them with information how to disable or secure loose chemical weapons to ensure no unexpected explosions occur, and then offer financial or militaristic benefits should they choose to disarm them.

### **Investigations into Production Facilities**

Investigations, possibly conducted by the OPCW or branches under the United Nations, into potential chemical agent production facilities that remain within Syria, and the presence of those same types of facilities in surrounding countries (Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Iraq, and Turkey) in order to locate and destroy them. All of Syria's neighbouring countries have acceded to the CWC.

### **Investigations into Production Facilities**

Using the results from the investigations conducted by the UN-OPCW joint investigation, impartial interrogations could be conducted with the identified individuals to gain insight into the chemical or biological capabilities of any group, government or opposition, within Syria.

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## APPENDIX OR APPENDICES

*This website contains the position of most countries in relation to any weapon of mass destruction, with an extensive account of their history and such:*

<http://www.nti.org/learn/countries/>