

Does Chemical Weapons Use by the Syrian Government Present a Watershed?

Written by Sophia Hoffmann

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SOPHIA HOFFMANN, MAY 31 2013

Scattered evidence that chemical weapons were used in Syria initially sent shockwaves through the media, amid widespread, occasionally hysterical reporting. By now, this has mellowed into the occasional news item, which, in a matter-of-fact tone, updates us on the UN's half-hearted attempts to build a more solid case against the Syrian government (or was it the rebels that used the gas, as stated by Carla del Ponte, whose comments were quickly withdrawn?).

The first, cynical question that jumps to this observer's mind is: is it really that much worse to die of poison gas, than to suffocate under a bombed building? Or than pleading for your life, as you and your family are gradually massacred by bullets to the head? Syrian government planes have been pounding civilian, multi-story family dwellings for months. Both government and rebel forces have committed mass killings. Why should the occasional, limited application of chemical weapons signify a watershed in this existing show of horrors?

Well, one may add even more cynically: because Obama said so. In late April, as the escalating violence in Syria was creating pressure on the Obama government to 'do something', Obama, at a White House press conference, made his now (in) famous comment about the 'red line', apparently signalling that the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime would galvanise the US into more significant action. Note: it is *this comment by Obama* – rather than a concern about the political and human effect of chemical weapons – that has framed nearly the entire public debate about whether their use represented a watershed or not. Once again, cynically, one might conclude that the entire effect of this debate until now has been to confirm the myth of American global superpower, and the belief, which is in such bad need of resurrection, that if only America engaged *more*, peace will come to the Middle East.

Chemical weapons are generally considered bad because their effects are hard to control, and thus will nearly inevitably result in civilian deaths, which are, surprisingly, still regarded as a war crime under international law. A number of international treaties control their use, among them the Geneva Protocol, according to which chemical weapons are “justly condemned by the general opinion of the civilised world”. Their use therefore identifies what is *uncivilised*, and therefore necessitates *some* kind of response from the leaders of civilisation to confirm their position of legitimacy and right, in their own eyes and that of those they govern.

But whether it really was the spectre of more murdered Syrian civilians that prompted Obama's red line comment is unlikely, given that 70,000 deaths have gone by without resulting in significant US engagement. In all likelihood, the comment was thus indeed an uncalculated, spontaneous reaction to reporters' questions, as is now claimed by White House aides, or perhaps it was made to appease Israeli fears that chemical warfare in Syria could spill across the southern border. The motivation behind the comment is increasingly irrelevant, as the political effect of the US sitting out the apparent use of chemical weapons use is to nullify it, turning it into just another, accepted atrocity visited on the Syrian population. This is perhaps the real watershed created by the chemical weapons/red line episode: the firm positioning of the Syrian war as one conducted in a barbarian hinterland, tragic, but justifiably beyond American responsibility, and the consequent acceptance of the use of barbaric weapons there.

This questioning of the boundaries of what is acceptable in war dovetails with the US administration's massive

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expansion of drone warfare and the debate surrounding it. It points to the ever shifting public understanding of civilised and barbaric violence, at the heart of which lies the preference, in liberal war, to engage in targeted assassinations, referred to as 'surgical' strikes, a choice of words suggesting a medical operation that will cleanse a diseased social body by removing the malignant element. The use of drones is the logical continuation of this line of thought; the ultimate prize being a deadly weapon, which can be used without disturbing the notion that peace is in fact prevailing. If war is associated with mass slaughter, then the occasional death of an individual, or a small group of individuals must be something else, even if it is carried out by horrific killing machines.

The way we think and *feel* about particular kinds of weapons thus appears only partially shaped by their extent of killing power, and significantly influenced by the way they are talked about and acted upon by the powerful. Obama's red line comment about the potential use of chemical weapons in Syria, and his subsequent inaction play on public thought and affect surrounding them. The red line comment signalled that chemical weapons belong to the uncivilised and the unacceptable, yet the inaction signalled that doing nothing about them is nevertheless an option. Only in this sense, in that it revealed a further nugget of insight about the Obama administration's position towards the Syrian conflict (a mixture of ambivalence and disinterest), the answer to whether the use of chemical weapons presented a watershed is indeed yes.

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