

Iraq's
Use of Chemical Weapons against Iran:
UN Documents 1984 – 1988

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Background:

History of Chemical Warfare

Throughout ancient and medieval times poisons (e.g. poison arrows) were commonly used in warfare, although at various times in history societies have tried to limit their use. The first international agreement limiting the use of chemical weapons dates back to 1675, when a French-German agreement not to use poison bullets was concluded in Strasbourg. Over the next two hundred years, large-scale development of chemical weapons became feasible due to industrialization and the development of chemical technology. In 1874, the Brussels Convention on the Law and Customs of War was adopted. It prohibited the employment of poison or poisoned weapons, and the use of arms, projectiles or material to cause unnecessary suffering. An international peace conference held in The Hague in 1899 led to the signing of an agreement that prohibited the use of projectiles filled with poison gas.

The first large-scale use of chemical weapons, in the modern era, occurred during World War I, on battlefields near Ieper (Ypres), in Belgium. In the course of that war, 100,000 tonnes of toxic chemicals, such as chlorine, mustard gas and phosgene were deployed, resulting in about 90,000 deaths and over a million casualties.

The horrors of chemical warfare experienced during World War I caused such outrage that the countries of the world resolved to ban the use of toxic chemicals or chemical weapons in war for all time. This commitment resulted in the signing of the 1925 Geneva Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or Other Gases, and Bacteriological Methods of Warfare. Iran acceded to the Protocol on 5 November 1929, while Iraq acceded on 8 September 1931.

The Geneva Protocol bans the use of chemical weapons in war, but does not prohibit the development, production or possession of such weapons. Many states signed the Geneva Protocol, but with reservations that they had the right to retaliate in kind with chemical weapons should they or any of their allies be attacked in such a way. Many parties to the

Protocol also reserved the right to use chemical weapons against states that had not joined.

In the 1990s the international community succeeded in producing a treaty that would verify the destruction of chemical weapons worldwide as well as ensure the non-proliferation of these weapons and the toxic chemicals used in their manufacture. The Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction (otherwise known as the Chemical Weapons Convention, or CWC) was opened for signature on 13 January 1993 and entered into force in 1997.

Chemical Warfare during the Iran-Iraq War

During the 8-year war between Iran and Iraq (1980-1988) Iraqi forces employed chemical weapons extensively against Iranian targets including both military personnel and civilians in border towns and villages. The agents used by the Iraqis fell into two major categories based on chemical composition and casualty-producing effects: The most frequently-used compounds were organophosphate neurotoxins, known as nerve agent Tabun, Sarin and VX. Mustard gas (Sulfur Mustard) was also used extensively.

Iraqi troops are reported to have used vomiting agents during their initial smaller attacks on the Helaleh and NeyKhazar zones in 1981. They then employed chemical weapons in August 1983 on the Piranshahr and Haj-Omaran battlefields and later in November 1983 on the Panjvien battlefield.

The first extensive chemical attack by Iraqi troops was carried out in March 1984, when they used tonnes of sulfur mustard and nerve agents against Iranian soldiers on the Majnoon Islands battlefields (along the southern border). Afterward, extensive employment of chemical weapons by Iraqi troops in March 1985 led to huge Iranian casualties both soldiers and volunteer combatants. Following requests by the Iranian Government, UN specialist teams were sent to Iran in March 1984, April 1985, February/March 1986, April 1987, March, July and Aug 1988. The conclusions, based on field inspections, clinical examinations of casualties, and laboratory analysis of samples,

were released as official UN Documents (S/16433, S/17127, S/17911, S/18852, S/19823 , S/20060 , S/20134). Based on the UN fact finding team's investigations they confirmed the use of mustard gas as well as nerve agents against Iranians.

The reports were subsequently submitted to the Security Council and two statements were released on 13 March 1984 and 21 March 1986 condemning the use of chemical weapons. But neither these two statements, nor Resolution 612 (May 1988) or Resolution 620 (August 1988) secured the cessation of chemical weapons attacks by the Iraqi regime which continued to violate international law with impunity.

Chemical attack against civilian targets

The Iraqi regime not only used chemical weapons against military targets, but frequently targeted civilian residential areas, especially the border towns and villages.

According to official reports, there were more than 30 chemical attacks against Iranian (and some Iraqi Kurds) non-military targets.

The main attacks were:

- Sardasht (28 June 1987)
- Villages around the city of Marivan (March 1988)
- Halabja, with the massacre of more than 5000 civilians (16 March 1988)
- Villages around the cities of Sarpole Zahab, Gilane gharb and Oshnavieh (May–Jun 1988).

Even some medical centers and field hospitals were targeted by chemical munitions which resulted in high casualties among medical personnel.

The most recent and accurate description of chemical weapons use by Iraqi forces during the conflict is the 2003 United Nations Monitoring Verification & Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC) report. This document estimates that 1,800 metric tonnes of mustard gas, 140 tonnes of Tabun and over 600 tonnes of Sarin were used against Iran using munitions that included approximately 19,500 aerial bombs, 54,000 artillery shells

and 27,000 short-range rockets. In excess of 1 million Iranians sustained exposure to these agents during the war, resulting in thousands of deaths from their acute effects.

This tragedy was a horrifying epic in the annals of modern warfare, inflicting enormous suffering that continues to the present day in the form of latent illness among tens of thousand of survivors.

The chemical warfare toll

During the Iran-Iraq War, an estimated one million Iranians, both military and civilian, were exposed to chemical warfare agents. More than 100,000 Iranians were documented to have received emergency medical care for chemical injuries. Half of those injuries were moderate to severe. During the war, at least 7,500 Iranians died directly and immediately from chemical injuries (4,000 from nerve or blood agents and 3,500 from mustard agent). Since the end of the war in 1988, several hundred have died of chronic complications due to mustard intoxication.

In 2014, more than 25 years after the end of war, approximately 75,000 Iranians are registered as receiving care for chronic effects from chemical weapons injuries. Of these around 10,000 are civilians. An additional 25,000 civilians are estimated to be currently affected by chemical weapons injuries but not included in the national registry.

Morbidity and Mortality from Chemical Warfare Agents (CW) during Iran-Iraq War	
Iranians exposed to CW agents	1,000,000*
Iranians who received medical treatment for heavy exposure	100,000
Iranian deaths from direct and immediate CW effects	7,500 4,000 nerve or blood agents 3,500 mustard agent
Iranians with chronic CW injuries, in registry	75,000
Iranians with chronic CW injuries, not in registry	40,000*
Iranian civilians with chronic CW injuries *registered & unregistered)	35,000*

*Estimate

While this book is about the use of chemical weapons against Iranians, it is important not to forget victims of Saddam's chemical weapons attacks in Iraq. In the Anfal campaign (1986 – 1989), the Iraqi military used nerve and mustard agents against Kurdish villages in the northern provinces of Iraq. About 5,000 civilians in the town of Halabja alone died instantly from nerve agent poisoning on 16 March 1988, and many other Iraqi towns and villages were also gassed in this campaign. It is estimated that at least 20,000 Iraqi civilians sustained moderate to severe chemical injuries. Many of them were evacuated to Iran for medical treatment.

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