

IS launches chemical weapons: How great is the threat?

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July 23, 2015

Confirmation from two reputable organizations this week that the self-described Islamic State used chemical weapons against Kurds in Iraq offers clues into the group's capabilities and intentions.

Though the use of chemical weapons can create fear, the recent attack in some ways points to IS's limitations.

The type of chemical weapon used, which contained chlorine, is not very potent. And while chlorine can cause a violent physical reaction, the effect of such weapons is mostly psychological. Indeed, IS might have used chemical weapons primarily to save their conventional ammunition.

So the message some analysts are taking from the attack is that the Islamic State is frustrated at having been repeatedly rebuffed by Kurds, and that frustration is bubbling over.

"They are particularly irritated by the fact that they can't consolidate the territory," said Nicholas Heras, research associate in the Middle East Security Program at the Center for a New American Security. "They have got the message that the Kurds won't bend to their will, and they will fight for every inch."

The two groups that confirmed the use of chemical weapons come from Britain, and one reported that its investigative team in Mosul, Iraq, found "dark yellow liquid" leaking from an IS mortar, emitting a powerful odor. The team said it experienced symptoms related to the use of chlorine, said James Bevan, executive director of Conflict Armament Research.

Chlorine wasn't designed to be a weapon of mass destruction, which "makes the term [chemical weapon] a little bit misleading," said Jennifer Cafarella, Syria analyst and Evans Hanson fellow at the Institute for the Study of War.

It is an industrial chemical that can be bought commercially in Turkey and in Syria. It is a form of chemical warfare, since the Islamic State is using it on the battlefield, and it can affect a number of victims, but “it’s not necessarily lethal, and has lower casualty counts,” Cafarella said.

“It’s another asymmetric tactic that ISIS has in its arsenal,” she said. “It generates psychological effects in a way that’s incredibly cheap.”

In the list of IS atrocities, it would rank comparatively low, said Heras of the Center for a New American Security.

“From targeting civilians to selling women into slavery to boasting about recruiting children and formalizing a process by which they militarize children,” he said, “the limited and episodic use of homemade chemical weapons for tactical purpose . . . falls lower on that scale.”

The Islamic State is packing these agents into mortars in an effort to force an end to its battle with the Kurds, Heras said.

This means that, for the time being, the Islamic State is using chlorine “tactically.” It is cheaper to use chlorine than to expend the precious resource of arms and ammunition.

But if the Islamic State increases its use of the weapons—or example, using them against Sunni tribes that it first tried to cajole into declaring loyalty—the shift could indicate increasing desperation.

“ISIS history is to try to mix force with conciliation,” Heras said. “If they use chemical weapons to target Sunni Arab villages, they have made the calculation that they would rather make an example out of those areas, and show, ‘This is what happens if you don’t accept our good graces.’ ”