

The Poison Gas Nightmare

The German military is training central government troops as well as Kurdish fighters in northern Iraq on defense against chemical warfare. Military aid has never made more sense.

By Matthias Nass

The so-called Islamic State has chemical weapons. It's not a pleasant thing to imagine. Why would terrorists who decapitate their victims, burn them alive, and line them up and shoot them hesitate to use poison gas against them, too? The UN Chemical Weapons Convention, which brands such use as criminal and bans it, is certainly not going to stop them.

The New York Times recently reported that a detachment of US Special Forces had detained an Iraqi expert in chemical and biological weapons who had formerly worked for Saddam Hussein's army and then joined the Islamic State. According to depositions, he gave detailed testimony describing how the Islamic State has been loading grenades with mustard gas.

Chemical weapons in the hands of the Islamic State could be a "game changer," said US Director of National Intelligence James Clapper at the mid-February Munich Security Conference. Washington's top spy can imagine "all kinds of scary scenarios," including the Islamic State using poison gas against the West. "A potentially very dangerous trend."

These are, as Clapper says, nightmare scenarios. But in northern Iraq and in Syria, these nightmares have already become reality. The Islamic State has used chemical weapons multiple times in the region it controls. In August 2015 there were reports of the use of mustard gas against Kurdish Peshmerga in the north of Iraq. In the same month, combatants near the Syrian city of Marea was shelled with artillery filled with poison gas. Nearly 30 civilians were treated for respiratory failure, blistering skin, and corrosive damage to their eyes. The Islamic State was held responsible for this attack.

The Islamic State is producing its own poison gas

Northern Iraq? Peshmerga? Yes, since January 2015 the German army has been deployed there and is supporting the Kurdish militias in their fight against the Islamic State. The reports of the use of poison gas have long unsettled the Ministry of Defense in Berlin. That is why the German security organizations investigated the claims of chemical weapon use, independent of the Americans. They have concluded that the Islamic State has a small cache of chlorine and mustard gas.

But where did the Islamic State get the chlorine gas, which is relatively easy to produce, and the more dangerous – and difficult to produce – mustard gas? Both could have come from Iraqi military camps where it is known that Saddam Hussein used both to commit mass murder. The attack on the city of Halabja alone killed 5,000 people on March 16th, 1988.

Investigations have shown that the substance used in combat in the past year is a different one than Hussein's. That means that the Islamic State is in a position to produce chlorine gas and mustard gas themselves. But how? And where?

One plausible version given by observers of the developments in Northern Iraq: The University of Mosul is a hub of chemical weapons research for the Islamic State. With its scientists and laboratories, the university fell into the hands of the Islamic State when it took over the second largest city of Iraq in June 2014. The university is said to be well-equipped, and the Islamic State is not squeamish. If a scientist would not cooperate, a pistol would be held to his head and he would be told: either you work for us, or you don't work at all.

That said, there is no evidence for the production of chemical weapons at the University of Mosul by the Islamic State.

Wherever the Islamic State produces its poison gas, the danger of them having it at all is reason enough to train Kurdish forces in the identification of chemical weapons and in the defense against them. In the meantime, the German army has given the central Iraqi government, as well as the Kurdish regional government 3,000 NBC gasmasks and filters, as well as 3,000 NBC protective suits and 40 devices that detect the presence of chemical agents. Since 2015, training in nuclear, biological, and chemical (NBC) defense has been taking place in Erbil and in Germany.

NBC Defense Specialists in Iraq

A spokesman of the German Federal Ministry of Defense said that as of February 2016, there are now two NBC Defense Specialists permanently detailed to the German contingent in the north of Iraq. "In January 2016, 22 Peshmerga and 9 Iraqis were trained in the fundamentals of NBC defense at the NBC Defense School in Sonthofen (...) The next training program in Germany has been planned for April 2016.

Rarely have more sensible measures been taken by the German military. Should the Islamic State, backed into a corner by the international anti-ISIS forces, decide to use chemical weapons on a larger scale, this aid will naturally not suffice.

As for the precautions against the nightmare scenarios foreseen by intelligence coordinator Clapper, the Western governments must meet them with every precaution in their own countries. All they must do is imagine what it means: Poison gas in the hands of the Islamic State.

This article is part of a regular series of contributions from Matthias Nass for the Bucerius network. Matthias Nass began his career with ZEIT in 1983, and from 1998 to 2010 served as Deputy Editor-in-Chief. Since 2011, he has served as Chief International Correspondent for the newspaper. His area of expertise is foreign and security policy. This article was originally published in ZEIT Online. The opinions expressed in this article belong solely to the author, and do not reflect the official position of any of the Bucerius Institutions.