

# US condemnation of chemical weapons use not applied to Israel

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The Obama administration plans military action against Syria under the pretext—totally unsubstantiated—that President Bashar al-Assad’s regime ordered the use of chemical weapons in an attack on a Damascus suburb on August 21. It has described the use of chemical weapons as a “moral obscenity,” such that the United States has a “moral obligation” to punish the country that uses them.

No such moral obligation is invoked against Israel, however, which has the largest stockpile of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons in the Middle East, and is the only state not to have signed the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. As *Foreign Policy* web site pointed out on Monday, not only has the US known for decades about Israel’s chemical weapons, it has also kept quiet about them.

But it is not just that Israel possesses a large arsenal of chemical weapons. It has also used them against the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, against Lebanon and Gaza during military assaults in 2006, and during Operation Cast Lead against Gaza in 2008-2009. Such was the evidence against Israel that Tel Aviv was forced, after initially denying accusations by the Lebanese government that it had done so, to admit that it had used phosphorous shells, which cause chemical burns, in its war against Lebanon in 2006.

A protocol to the 1980 Convention on Conventional Weapons bans the use of white phosphorus as an incendiary weapon against civilian populations or in air attacks against enemy forces in civilian areas.

None of this has ever evoked a word of condemnation from Washington or Israel’s European allies, much less a call for Israel to get rid of its chemical weapons, sanctions or a threat of a military assault to defend the victims of Israel’s military might. Indeed, the US has funded Israel’s armed forces to the tune of \$3 billion a year for years, and last year voted to increase this support.

In other words, it is entirely legitimate for a US ally to

develop, build and use chemical weapons and for Washington to continue to fund Israel’s criminality. The same is not true for its enemies.

The 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention prohibits the manufacture, use and transfer of the deadly weapons, but provides no mechanism for enforcing its rules. This is now a task that the US, one of the foremost developers, suppliers and users of chemical weapons from the 1950-53 Korean War onwards, has arrogated to itself as the world’s policeman.

While 189 states have signed and ratified the convention, Israel signed but did not ratify it. Israel is one of just seven countries, along with Burma, Angola, North Korea, Egypt, South Sudan and Syria, which either did not sign and/or ratify the treaty.

Israel also never signed the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention. Its attitude towards both is one of ambiguity.

In 1993, the US Congress Office of Technology Assessment WMD [Weapons of Mass Destruction] proliferation assessment included Israel in its list of countries having undeclared offensive chemical warfare capabilities. Five years later, Bill Richardson, a former deputy assistant defence secretary, said, “I have no doubt that Israel has worked on both chemical and biological offensive things for a long time. There’s no doubt they’ve had stuff for years.”

Israel has a centre for chemical and biological medical research, its top secret Israel Institute for Biological Research (IIBR), at a secure site in Ness Ziona, 20 kilometres south of Tel Aviv, with another at Dimona in the Negev. Employing hundreds of scientists and technicians, the IIBR is widely believed to have developed chemical and biological weapons, but official censorship prevents any discussion of its activities.

Following the crash in 1992 of an El Al plane carrying nerve gas ingredients from Israel to the US into an Amsterdam residential area, the Dutch daily *NRC*

*Handelsblad* found “strong links” between IIBR and similar research centres in the US, “close cooperation between IIBR and the British-American biological warfare program,” and “extensive collaboration on BW research with Germany and Holland.”

Since 2001, following the outbreak of the second intifada, there were several documented incidents of Israeli soldiers using an “unknown gas” against Palestinians, particularly during a six-week-long campaign by Israeli military forces in Gaza.

The well-known US film director James Longley happened to be filming in Gaza, Khan Yunis and Rafah during the first major Israeli incursion in the spring of 2001. He immediately filmed the victims. *Gaza Strip*, his award-winning film, shows very graphically the reality of chemical warfare--the canisters, the doctors, the eyewitnesses, and the awful suffering of the victims, many of whom were hospitalised for days or weeks.

These attacks were to continue for several years. In June 2004, Gush Shalom, an Israeli peace group, reported an incident in the West Bank village of al-Zawiya where 130 patients were being treated for gas inhalation after the Israeli army broke up nonviolent protests against Israel’s security wall. The group said it was not the usual tear gas. It asked, “Now, is this a way of dispersing a demonstration, or is it chemical warfare?”

As the news of these new gases trickled out, international journalists investigated, with BBC Television carrying out a special report in 2003 into Israel’s use of “new, unidentified weapons”. It reported that Israel refused “to say what the new gas was.”

During Israel’s military assault on Gaza in the summer of 2006, doctors reported that dozens of victims had completely burned bodies and shrapnel-type injuries that X-ray machines had been unable to detect.

Lengthy research and analysis of the samples of metals found in the victims’ bodies and examination of the unusual wounds led to the conclusion that the most likely cause was missiles very similar to the US-made Dense Inert Metal Explosive (DIME). Other victims were found to have traces of tungsten, a highly carcinogenic substance.

Israel again used phosphorous shells, whose effects are extremely harmful, in the weeks-long aerial bombardment of the largely unarmed and defenceless civilian population during Operation Cast Lead in 2008-09--the murderous assault on Gaza that resulted in between 1,166 and 1,417 Palestinian deaths, with just 13 Israeli deaths, 4 of them from friendly fire.

The UN fact-finding report, known as the Goldstone Report, reiterated the findings of numerous other respected international studies, confirming Israel’s disproportionate use of force against the Palestinians, and accusations against Israel and Hamas of war crimes and “possible crimes against humanity”, including Israel’s use of phosphorous. It said that Israeli forces were “systematically reckless” in using white phosphorus in built-up areas, citing the Israeli attack on the UN Relief and Works Agency compound in Gaza City, the attack on the Al Quds hospital, and the attack on the Al Wafa hospital.

Far from this resulting in any referral of Israel to the International Criminal Court, Goldstone and his co-authors were subject to an international campaign of bullying, intimidation and vilification of the investigation by Israel, leading Goldstone to make a cringing retraction of his own conclusions. But his three co-authors rejected calls to recant their report or misrepresent its purpose, saying that it would “disregard the rights of Palestinian and Israeli victims to truth and justice”.

It was Israel’s development of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons, coupled with its vastly superior military forces, that prompted Damascus to establish its own chemical weapons programme following the capture in 1967 of Syria’s Golan Heights, their subsequent occupation and annexation, and the establishment of Israeli settlements inhabited by 20,000 Israelis.



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