

**Israel says Syria used chemical weapons**  
**By William Booth and Craig Whitlock, the Washington Post**  
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TEL AVIV — Senior Israeli military officials on Tuesday stated that forces loyal to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad have used chemical weapons against the country's civilians, saying their evidence — including photographs of victims foaming at the mouth — made them “nearly 100 percent” certain.

It was the most direct and public assertion by Israel to date that Syria has resorted to chemical weapons, which would be a troubling escalation of a brutal civil war that has stretched on for more than two years. Coming less than a week after France and Britain made similar allegations about Syria to the United Nations, the remarks could add to the mounting international pressure on the United States — which has repeatedly said it will not tolerate the use of chemical weapons — to intervene in the Syrian conflict.”



Forces loyal to Syria's President Bashar al-Assad walk in Khan al-Assal area near Aleppo, close to the site where a chemical weapon attack was said to have occurred in March. (Reuters)

“To the best of our professional understanding, the regime used lethal chemical weapons against gunmen in a series of incidents in recent months, including the relatively more famous events of the 19th of March,” said Brig. Gen. Itai Brun, chief of the research division of Israel's army intelligence branch. Brun was speaking at a conference at the Institute for National Security Studies here.

A second senior military official, speaking on the condition that he not be named, said there were five cases — including the March 19 incidents in Aleppo and Damascus — in which chemical weapons appear to have been used. This official said “dozens” were killed in the attacks when a “sarin-type” chemical was dispersed.

President Obama has warned the Assad government that the use of chemical weapons would represent “a red line” that could lead to U.S. military intervention in the long-running Syrian conflict.

Israeli military officials said they believe that Assad and his military used the chemical weapons as a kind of “test case” to gauge the reaction of the international community. They said the chemicals were dispersed in a limited way, and not intended to kill hundreds.

“It wasn't operational, it was a test,” said one military official.

U.S. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, who visited Israel this week as part of a Middle East trip focused on Syria and Iran, earlier called the evidence that Assad's forces had deployed chemical weapons “inconclusive.”

After the Israeli statement that chemical weapons had been used, Hagel spokesman George Little said Washington “continues to assess reports of chemical weapons use in Syria. The use of such weapons would be entirely unacceptable. We reiterate in the strongest possible terms the obligations of the Syrian regime to safeguard its chemical weapons stockpiles, and not to use or transfer such weapons to terrorist groups like Hezbollah.”

The Israeli assertion echoes conclusions reached last week by France and Britain. In letters to U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, the two European powers informed the United Nations that there is credible evidence that Syria has used chemical weapons on more than one occasion since December.

According to senior diplomats and officials briefed on the accounts, the evidence included soil samples and witness interviews that point toward nerve agents used in and around the cities of Aleppo, Homs and Damascus.

The Israelis said they have shared their findings with their U.S. counterparts.

Asked why the United States might be hesitant to confirm chemical attacks, the senior Israeli commander said, "I think when you draw a red line, you are very hesitant to cross it."

Israeli analysts collected photographs — many from open sources, such as opposition and media Web sites — that showed victims of what they concluded were chemical attacks.

"The constricted pupils, the foaming at the mouth, the additional signs indicate in our view that lethal chemical weapons were used," said Brun, speaking in Tel Aviv. "What lethal chemical weapon? Apparently sarin — in addition to the regime's use of neutralizing chemical weapons that are not lethal."

The Israeli military leaders said they were especially concerned about chemical weapons in an unraveling Syria because they could be transferred to militant groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon for use against Israel.

Brun criticized what he called a lack of international response to Syria's use of chemical weapons.

"The very use of chemical weapons without an appropriate response is a very troubling development, because it can, of course, signal that such a thing is legitimate," Brun said.

A senior Israeli officer said the Assad government has been actively consolidating its chemical weapons stockpile, for fear that it could fall into rebel hands. The government appears to have moved the material from 35 or 40 sites scattered around the country to 15 or 20 apparently more secure locations.

Whitlock reported from Amman, Jordan. Joel Greenberg contributed to this report from Jerusalem.

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