

The Disappearing Cause for War: al Qaeda's Ace in the Hole

by
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Abstract:

Since 2003, more than 500 chemical weapons have been discovered and neutralized by coalition forces in Iraq. These legacy weapons, including the nerve agent GB (Sarin) have been used in at least one attack staged against coalition forces. Given that undiscovered pre-Gulf War Iraqi WMDs may number in the hundreds, the author argues that these weapons pose a grave threat both to coalition forces and to the continental United States. Sourced by media reporting, published UN, UNSCOM and UNMOVIC technical assessments, as well as unclassified memorandums by the Director of National Intelligence. (2,454 words, including end notes.)

The Disappearing Cause for War: al Qaeda's Ace in the Hole

On the 16th of May, 2004, in the al Baya neighborhood of western Baghdad, an IED was disrupted on the airport highway. After a controlled detonation, the 155mm shell was discovered to contain slightly more than a gallon of the nerve agent called GB or Sarin. 1, 2 As a result of this unanticipated chemical release, two EOD technicians suffered "slight exposure" to nerve agent. 3, 4 The initial responders did not recognize the IED as anything out of the ordinary. This is understandable, for the shell bore no special banding or marks to designate it as a chemical weapon.

Had the device functioned as intended, one gallon of GB would have spread a mortal, invisible cloud over a dozen city blocks. Death would have come quickly for the Iraqi civilians living around the airport, and the 3000 coalition troops stationed at nearby Camp Victory.

Under-analyzed by the media, and perhaps under-appreciated by military strategists, the events of May 16, 2004, marked a turning point in the evolution of warfare. This single binary 155mm artillery shell, containing a state of the art nerve agent represented the most terrifying and lethal class of weapon known to man. The use of nerve gas by terrorists in Iraq was the first time in history that strategic weapons (in this case a chemical weapons) had been used on the battlefield by a non-state actor.

Since 2004, coalition forces in Iraq have come under chemical attack on at least six other occasions— most attacks used "repurposed" chemical warheads from Saddam's arsenal, nerve gases, and mustard gas.⁵ Weapons that were thought to have been destroyed. Although these incidents blipped on the media radar, pundits have failed to grasp their significance. Flaunting UN sanctions, and baffling UN inspection teams, Iraq maintained a considerable stockpile of biological and chemical warheads— up to and after the US invasion in 2003. Saddam's failure to account for his weapons of mass destruction was the *causis belli* of the Second Gulf War. In the run-up to the 2003 invasion, a nightmarish prediction was made: If the United States did not force Saddam Hussein from power, his plentiful arsenal would be made available to terrorists. That nightmare has come true.

Chemical attacks have not been limited to the use of repurposed Iraqi artillery shells and rocket warheads. In 2005, U.S. troops raided a warehouse in the city of Mosul; they discovered a weapons factory containing 1,500 gallons of chemical agents and precursors.⁶ More ominously, the clandestine lab produced bulk

quantities of nerve and mustard gasses for use against coalition targets and Iraqi civilians. Underscoring the terrorists willingness to use WMD, truck bombs containing chlorine gas were detonated in Baghdad as recently as 22 and 23 February of 2008. Blast effects and poison gas killed and wounded more than a hundred persons in these attacks.

The events of the past 18 months prove two facts: First, Saddam did *not* destroy his chemical arsenal. And second, insurgents in Iraq are manufacturing their own chemical weapons using both legacy materials from Saddaam's stockpile, as well as material produced in their own clandestine laboratories.

Even after defeat in the First Gulf War, Iraq concealed and sustained a wideranging chemical and biological warfare program. ^{7, 8} Despite UN Resolutions, surprise inspections and crushing economic sanctions, Saddam continued to manufacture WMD, and repeatedly used them against his enemies. In March, 1991, Mi-8 Helicopters swooped over the cities of Najaf and Karbala; the anti-riot agent CS and the nerve agent VX were used to kill thousands of Shiite insurgents who had attacked Iraqi police outposts and Ba'ath party headquarters. Saddam kept his arsenal topped off. Documents discovered in 2003 indicated that Iraq stockpiled 21,000 chemical warheads following Iran-Iraq war, and during the period of UN sanctions. ⁹

How were they hidden? And where are they now? The story of what happened to Saddam's weapons is both banal and astonishing. Some of Saddam's weapons 'expired', some were 'lost' through clerical snafus and mixed-up with conventional weapons and some were deliberately buried in the desert. Incredibly, this shell game was conducted right under the noses of UN Inspectors, reconnaissance planes, spy satellites and half a dozen allied intelligence agencies.

Although it is unwise to predicate estimates based on Iraq's declarations, UNSCOM's technical documents, published in 2004, give a general picture of the numbers and types of Iraq's chemical weapons. The Muthanna State Establishment was tasked with the manufacture of chemical munitions for Iraq's armed forces. It functioned under the cover of the Organization for Technical Industries, and prior to 1988, was referred to as the State Establishment for the Production of Pesticides. Within the military, the Chemical Weapons program was referred to as Project 922. ¹⁰

The largest production effort corresponded with the hostilities of the Iran-Iraq war. During the period 1981 to 1991, the Muthanna State Establishment produced 3,300 tons of mustard gas and the nerve agents Tabun (GA) and Sarin (GB). The Iraqi chemical weapons stockpile consisted of filled munitions as well as the production of bulk agent stored in mobile and fixed containers. Approximately 130,000 munitions of all types were manufactured for use against

Iran, including vesicants, choking and blood agents, incapacitating gasses, and several varieties of nerve agent. These chemicals were weaponized into 155-mm artillery projectiles, 122-mm rockets, missile warheads and a variety of aerial bombs. Most were filled and used immediately. Kept as a strategic reserve, approximately 20,000 chemical weapons remained at the conclusion of the war with Iran. Following the armistice, these surplus weapons were dispersed to dozens of locations throughout the territory of Iraq, where some were mixed with conventional munitions, abandoned, buried, or simply lost.¹¹ Chemical munitions were painted to look like conventional ordinance and were distributed to 17 locations throughout the country.¹² This is why the chemical shell found in al Baya was not recognized immediately; it looked like a piece of conventional ordinance.

Chemical agents recycled from filled munitions have been used to augment vehicle bombs or deployed singly to target coalition forces or civilian population centers. Not all of the chemical attacks have been intended to produce mass casualties. In February, 2008, cesium and thallium were used to poison six Iraqi “collaborators” in Baghdad.¹³ Terrorist assassins targeted the family of an Iraqi citizen operating an Officer’s Club for officials of the National Police; three died, and three others underwent treatment at a hospital in Jordan. The only plausible source of these materials is the laboratories of Saddam’s secret police, the Special Security Organization. The SSO is known to have used ricin, polonium, thallium, and botulism toxins to silence regime critics and to assassinate Iraqi dissidents abroad. It appears that this arsenal, too, has passed into unfriendly hands. Since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, US and coalition forces have located and destroyed considerably more than 500 chemical weapons. Most of these have been 155mm artillery shells. Most contained varieties of the vesicant HD, Mustard Gas, VX and Sarin, Tabun and Cyclosarin, including advanced binary weapons; chemical aircraft bombs, mortar projectiles, sprayers and bulkproduced agent have also been recovered and destroyed.¹⁴

Hundreds, if not thousands of chemical munitions remain at large in Iraq. Yet the myth persists— Saddam had no WMD. Clearly, there is a major disconnect between public perception, media reporting, government admissions and fact on the ground.

On 21 June, 2006 the Director of National Intelligence sent a fax to the Chair of the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, confirming the ongoing problems caused by pre- invasion Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq. ¹⁵ In it, the DNI stated,

“...Despite many efforts to locate and destroy Iraq’s pre-Gulf War chemical munitions, filled and unfilled, pre-Gulf War chemical munitions are assessed to still exist...”

Underscoring that the threat posed by these weapons extended beyond the troops on the ground in Iraq, the same memo goes on,

“...Pre-Gulf War Iraqi chemical Weapons could be

sold on the black market. Use of these weapons by terrorists or insurgent groups would have implications for coalition forces in Iraq. The possibility of their use outside Iraq cannot be ruled out...”

The memo from the Director of National Intelligence is, literally, the “smoking gun”— it states categorically that WMD of Iraqi provenance both exist, and remain a threat against coalition targets and other locations outside Iraq. It is clearly true that Saddam produced chemical weapons during the period of sanctions, lied about them, and then scattered them in various hiding places around the country. These weapons have been used against coalition forces. This use of nerve and mustard gas is the first time in history that chemical weapons have been possessed and deployed by non-state actors.

An audio tape released in March, 2008 has been confirmed by the CIA as being the voice of Usama bin Laden. On the tape, al-Qaeda's leader again warns that a “severe reckoning” is being prepared against the United States. Bin Laden’s statement comes after a silence of months, and follows a missile strike on a house in Damadola, Pakistan that left twenty dead. The CIA’s intended target was bin Laden’s deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who escaped injury.

After the fall of the Taliban and the occupation of Afghanistan, al-Qaeda’s core operatives have been in hiding. The Global War on Terrorism has at least succeeded in scattering al Qaeda's leadership and severely impairing its ability to operate. Terrorist incidents such as the London subway bombings and the attacks against Spanish trains were carried out not by core members of al-Qaeda, but by cells of freelance jihadis. These attacks, inspired by al-Qaeda, but executed by franchise terrorists, have been deadly, but are not on the scale of 9-11. Regrettably, suicide attacks within Iraq and Afghanistan have become an almost daily occurrence. It takes increasingly violent and spectacular incidents to create banner headlines; as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan grind on, al-Qaeda runs the risk of becoming irrelevant.

Bin Laden’s career of terror demonstrates a pattern of both increased operational sophistication and escalating violence. Al-Qaeda has continually stated both its desire to acquire weapons of mass destruction and a ‘right’ to use them against nations it sees as oppressing Muslims. In order to retain operational credibility, it is necessary for al Qaeda to be seen to keep up the fight against the ‘far enemy’—namely the US mainland. Al-Qaeda's self-anointed position as prime exponent of worldwide jihad will eventually compel it to use weapons of mass destruction.

Given the hundreds, perhaps thousands of unaccounted chemical weapons presently in Iraq, many security experts feel that an attack against the United States utilizing WMD is inevitable. Here to fore there have been significant technological barriers to the development and use of such weapons. Experience

in Iraq has demonstrated, categorically, the terrorists are willing and able to utilize improvised chemical weapons. Bad actors do not need access to complex military hardware in order to stage a chemical attack. Chemical agent from warheads, shells and bombs can be recycled. Weapons have been improvised using plastic bags, aerosol sprayers and smoke generators. The chief technological barrier to entry is the production of effective and lethal chemical agents— Saddam has supplied the chemicals, in abundance— the means of delivery is left to the imagination of the terrorists.

How dangerous are these unaccounted weapons? If two 155mm VX artillery shells were detonated in a crowded football stadium, say, any Nebraska home game, the casualties could exceed those suffered by the United States during the *entire* Vietnam War. One artillery shell could fit easily into a suitcase or large duffle bag.

Al Qaeda has continuously warned that attacks against the US are in preparation; whether the next instruments of terror are manufactured inside the United States, or stolen and smuggled across our borders, it may be taken as an article of faith that the terrorists will seek to kill or injure as many people as possible. Compelled by its violent ideology, and the need to maintain its credentials as prime movers of Jihad, al-Qaeda will attempt “signature” attacks against the US and nations of the coalition. It is only a matter of time before improvised or purloined chemical weapons are used to produce a mass casualty incident within the continental United States.

In the final analysis, Saddam’s disappearing WMD may be al-Qaeda's ultimate weapon.

About the Author

CHUCK PFARRER is a former Naval Special Warfare Officer and served as assault element commander at SEAL Team Six.

During the years 2003-2007, Pfarrer served as a Senior Planner for Terrorist Weapons, Methodology and Operations for the National Counter Terrorism Exercises TOP OFF 1, 2, and 3. Pfarrer has written broadly on terrorism and counter-terrorism, and was the principal author of the Weapons of Mass Destruction Annex to the National Counter Terrorism Plan. He is presently Director for Military and National Security affairs at TrillaCorpe, LLC. Pfarrer has written Op Ed for the *New York Times* and the Knight Ridder syndicate, appeared as an author and counter-terrorism expert on CSPAN2, NPR, Al Hurra, IPR, Voice of America, Fox-TV and America Tonight.

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-11-

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