



**MERIA SPECIAL REPORT:
DID ISIS USE CHEMICAL WEAPONS AGAINST THE KURDS IN KOBANI?**

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WARNING: This article's Appendix contains images which some readers may find disturbing. Caution is advised.

The fate of Kobani city now hangs in the balance, as around 9000 fighters of the Islamic State organization close in on the Kurdish held area. The current IS assault on the Kobani enclave was not the first attempt by the jihadis to destroy the Kurdish-controlled area.

The Kobani enclave, most of which is now in the hands of the IS, at one time extended to Tel Abyad in the east, and Jarabulus in the west. It constituted a major hindrance to the desire of the jihadis to maintain free passage for their fighters from Raqqa city up to the Turkish border and westwards towards the front lines in Aleppo province. IS has therefore long sought to destroy it.

Prior to the current campaign, the most serious (but unsuccessful) attempt to conquer Kobani came in July 2014, shortly following the dramatic IS advance into Iraq.

It was during this assault on Kobani that evidence emerged which appeared to point to the use by the Islamic State on at least one occasion of some kind of chemical agent against the Kurdish fighters of the YPG (Peoples' Protection Units).

The July offensive commenced on July 2nd. According to Kurdish activists, the use of the chemical agent took place on July 12th, in the village of Avdiko, in the eastern part of the Kobani enclave (now in IS hands.)¹

Nisan Ahmed, health minister of the Kurdish authority in Kobani, established a medical team to examine the incident. According to Ahmed, the bodies of three Kurdish fighters showed no signs of damage from bullets. Rather "burns and white spots on the bodies of the dead indicated the use of chemicals, which led to death without any visible wounds or external bleeding."²

Middle East Review of International Affairs (MERIA Journal) has acquired exclusive access to photographs of the bodies of these fighters, which appear below for the first time.

According to expert Israeli sources who have seen the pictures, they appear to indicate the use of some form of chemical agent, probably mustard (blister agent), but it is not possible to conclusively confirm this without further investigation.

Where might IS have acquired these agents? According to a report in the Arabic language Al-Modon website on July 16th, eyewitnesses in Raqqa city assert the existence of a facility close to the city containing chemical agents.³ The reliability of the eyewitness quoted has been indicated to MERIA by third parties.

It is possible that these were transferred to Raqqa from Iraq, following the capture of the Muthanna compound 35 miles north-west of Iraq, by IS in June.

Iraq's ambassador Mohammed Ali Al-Hakim, speaking after the capture of Muthanna by IS, singled out two bunkers at the facility, 13 and 41, as being of particular concern.

According to a UN report compiled after the departure of UN inspectors and quoted by Associated Press, bunker 41 contained "2,000 empty 155mm artillery shells contaminated with the chemical warfare agent mustard, 605 one-tonne mustard containers with residues, and heavily contaminated construction material."

At the time, the US State Department's Jen Psaki played down the importance of the capture of Muthanna. Psaki suggested that the facility contained "degraded chemical remnants" but that it would be "difficult, if not impossible, to safely use this for military purposes or, frankly, to move it."⁴

A CIA report from 2007, however, offers evidence that might challenge Psaki's apparent absence of concern.

The report notes that "The precursor and agent production area at Al Muthanna was not completely destroyed during Desert Storm. Portions of the mustard (blister agent) production and storage area survived. The VX and Tabun production (nerve agent) facilities were incapacitated."⁵

The report further observes that "ISG is unable to unambiguously determine the complete fate of old munitions, materials, and chemicals produced and stored there. The matter is further complicated by the looting and razing done by the Iraqis."⁶

With regard to the state of al-Muthanna at the time that the report was composed (2007), it observes that

Stockpiles of chemical munitions are still stored there. The most dangerous ones have been declared to the UN and are sealed in bunkers. Although declared, the bunkers contents have yet to be confirmed.

Numerous bunkers, including eleven cruciform shaped bunkers were exploited. Some of the bunkers were empty. Some of the bunkers contained large quantities of unfilled chemical munitions.⁷

So the CIA report confirms that al-Muthanna was used for the production of chemical weaponry including mustard agent. The report also confirms that investigations have been unable to 'unambiguously determine' the fate of munitions at the site, and that while stockpiles clearly are stored at the site, the precise nature of these stockpiles remains unconfirmed. There are no indications that this situation has changed in the period since the report.

The evidence appears to support the contention that on at least one occasion, Islamic State forces did employ some form of chemical agent, acquired from somewhere, against the YPG in Kobani.

No further instances have been reported. The evidence also indicates that it is likely that as a result of the capture of the al-Muthanna compound, stockpiles of chemical munitions have come into the group's possession.

The incident at Avdiko village on July 12th suggests that IS may well have succeeded in making some of this material available for use in combat.

The probable possession by the Islamic State of a CW capability is for obvious reasons a matter of the gravest concern, and should be the urgent subject of further attention and investigation.

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APPENDIX: PHOTOS







NOTES

¹ Conversations with Kurdish activists, July, 2014.

² Hadi Salameh, 'Did ISIS use chemical weapons against the Syrian Kurds,' July 16th, Al-Modon. (Arabic). <http://www.almodon.com>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Associated Press, July 9th, 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com>

⁵ Al Muthanna Chemical Weapons Complex, Iraq's Chemical Warfare Program – Annex B, April 23, 2007. <https://www.cia.gov>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.