

# Selective 'obscurity': US checkered record on chemical weapons

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US Marine from Echo Company 2nd Battalion 2nd Marine Regiment mans a 240 mm caliber machine gun mounted on his Humvee during a sweep through the Zaidon market, located southeast of Fallujah, during an operation, 15 November, 2005. (AFP Photo/David Furst)

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The US charge against Syria is being driven by Damascus' alleged use of chemical weapons against civilians. While Washington is quick to intervene on moral grounds, its own checkered past regarding WMDs may put the world's policeman under the spotlight.

*"Nobody disputes – or hardly anybody disputes – that chemical weapons were used on a large scale in Syria against civilian populations,"* US President Barack Obama told a briefing Wednesday. *"We have looked at all the evidence, and we do not believe the*

*opposition possessed ... chemical weapons of that sort."*

It is this charge, so far unsubstantiated by UN inspectors, that underpins Western attempts to intervene militarily in Syria.

*"If we are saying in a clear and decisive but very limited way, we send a shot across the bow saying, 'Stop doing this,' this can have a positive impact on our national security over the long term,"* Obama said.

On Monday, US Secretary of State John Kerry was more emphatic in stressing the ethical basis for intervention.

*"Let me be clear: The indiscriminate slaughter of civilians, the killing of women and children and innocent bystanders, by chemical weapons is a moral obscenity."*

The obscenity of such attacks is a reality Kerry is all too familiar with, as the decorated war veteran served at a time when the US was engaged in a decade of chemical warfare in Vietnam.

From 1962 to 1971, the US military sprayed an estimated 20 million gallons of defoliants and herbicides over Vietnam,

Laos and Cambodia in a bid to deprive the Vietcong of food and cover.

The Vietnamese government estimates that 400,000 people were killed or maimed and 500,000 children born with birth defects as a result of the so-called 'rainbow herbicides.'

Christopher Busby, an expert on the health effects of ionizing radiation and Scientific Secretary of the European Committee on Radiation Risk, said it was important to make the distinction that defoliants such as Agent Orange are not anti-personnel weapons designed to kill or deform people, and are thus “not quite the same as using a nerve gas or something that is intended against personnel.”

*“But nevertheless, it had a very serious effect, and they shouldn't have used it because they must have known that it would have these side-effects,”* Busby said. *“At least, when they were using it they must have learned that there would be these side-effects, and they should have stopped using them at this or that point. But they didn't.”*

A similar legacy was left by the deployment of white phosphorous and depleted uranium following the US-led 2003

invasion of Iraq.

Busby said that while the genotoxic effects of white phosphorous were debatable, the deadliness of depleted uranium was beyond question.

*"All of the genetic damage effects that we see in Iraq, in my opinion, were caused by... depleted uranium weapons. And also [non]-depleted uranium weapons of a new type. And these are really terrible weapons. These are weapons which have absolutely destroyed the genetic integrity of the population of Iraq,"* he said.

The people of Fallujah, where some of the most intense fighting during the Iraq war took place, have since suffered a veritable health crisis.

**Four studies** on the health crisis in the city were published in 2012. Busby, an author and co-author of two of them, described Fallujah as having *"the highest rate of genetic damage in any population ever studied."*

There is a case to be made that in terms of Agent Orange, White Phosphorous and depleted uranium, the often deadly consequences have been a side-effect rather than the goal of their deployment.

While Washington currently argues that the use of chemical weapons is a “red line” that requires a swift and immediate military response to deter future crimes against humanity, the US has a checkered record on the issue, said former CIA analyst Ray McGovern, citing the time when then-US ally Saddam Hussein deployed chemical weapons against Iran during the Iran-Iraq War – [with US knowledge](#).

*“We had the famous picture of Donald Rumsfeld shaking hands with Saddam Hussein,” McGovern told RT. “That happened the day after the first public announcement that the Iraqis had used mustard gas against the Iranians. So [turning a] blind eye, yeah, in spades.”*

*“The problem is that we knew what was going on, and there is a Geneva Convention against the use of chemical warfare. Our top leaders knew it,” McGovern continued. “The question is: had they no conscience, had they no shame?”*

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