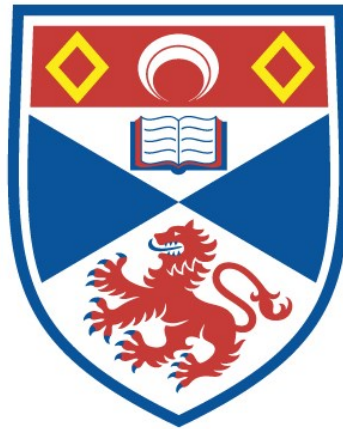# STRATEGIES OF CHEMICAL WARFARE: UNDERSTANDING THE PURPOSES OF NORM TRANSGRESSION IN WAR

Anneleen Van Der Meer

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
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Strategies of Chemical Warfare:
Understanding the Purposes of Norm Transgression in War

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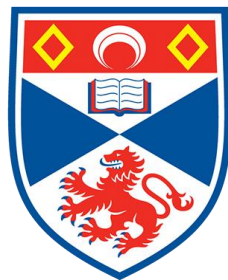
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July 2023

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Acknowledgements

Psalm 27

Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear;
though war break out against me, even then I will be confident.
I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to understand why states use chemical weapons as a strategic choice. The prevailing understanding of chemical weapons has been that there is limited military utility to these weapons, which makes it more puzzling to understand why states would risk the negative attention generated by the norm against these weapons. However, it is necessary to consider that the use of chemical weapons could be a strategic choice, not *despite* the strong norm, but *because of* the strong norm. This requires insights from the operational, the strategic, and the political levels of warfare. This research assesses these levels with reference to the Soviet-Afghan War, the Iran-Iraq War, and the Syrian Civil War, and it presents a typology to understand the effects of norm transgression. The case studies in this research confirm that various operational demands can be well-met with chemical weapons, but this requires ample time and scope for practice. At the strategic level, chemical weapons affect morale and communicate resolve, and can be instrumental in achieving significant effects by amplifying momentum. At the political level, breaking the norm affects political identities, the formation of allegiances, and the integrity of the international society, which impact the shape and direction of a war. In each of the cases, the strategic effects of the use of chemical weapons have been different. In order to ground these effects in a single conceptual framework, I applied the concept of liminality to understand the process by which the introduction of chemical weapons on a battlefield creates space for disorder. This disorder can be resolved through power reversal or towards normative stability, or it can be left unresolved to be exploited. Crucially, while such disorder can be used by defensive parties to prevent loss, it is not a war-winning strategy.

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Introduction

Introduction

Why do state actors use chemical weapons in war? This is a difficult question to answer, but it keeps coming up. The use of chemical weapons is complicated, often difficult to hide, the effectiveness cannot be guaranteed, and the act is absolutely stigmatised. In these circumstances, how do chemical weapons users benefit? During the Syrian Civil War, chlorine, sarin, and other toxic chemicals were used on a large scale over a period of at least six years by the Syrian armed forces against civilians and the armed rebellion alike. Both the Syrian Arab Army and the air force have been implied in the attacks, which can be traced to a small circle of officials around the main actor responsible: Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad (Koblentz, 2017). It came at a heavy cost: Syrian diplomatic isolation, increased attention to a conflict that did not make Assad look good, and eventually a series of air strikes by the United States, later joined by the United Kingdom, and France (Crowley, Restuccia, & McTague, 2018; Gordon, Cooper, & Shear, 2017; Price, 2019). In defence of Syria, President Putin used the supposed lack of logic of using chemical weapons as a reason to reject the allegations, claiming that it would be "utter nonsense" for Syria to use chemical weapons when it was winning the war against the rebellion ("Putin says", 2013). 'Why would they?' thus became a rhetorical question used to parry any allegations that Syria was indeed using chemical weapons.

The search for a motive for the use of chemical weapons also became a salient topic when in the spring and summer of 2018, the United Kingdom and Russia were engaged in a diplomatic standoff over the poisoning of former double-agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Yulia. Mr. Skripal, who lived in the United Kingdom, and Yulia were found in critical condition on 4 March 2018, in Salisbury. They were quickly taken to the hospital where they spent multiple weeks recovering until they regained consciousness and were eventually discharged after six and four weeks respectively. In the diplomatic confrontation that followed, the Russian side repeatedly argued that they had received no evidence to verify the British version of events, that the suspects were not tied to Russian security services, and importantly, that they had no motive to carry out such an attack (Dearden, 2018; "Russia Outraged", 2018). The motive question was also debated by analysts, who went back and forth about possible reasons why Russia would, or would not, be interested in carrying out such a provocative attack. Most pointed out that there was very little to gain for Russia in carrying out the attack, but they speculated about what that might mean. For instance, Pawel Kowal argued that Russian opposition to Putin may have wanted to undermine him, that the security services were simply punishing Skripal for his betrayal, or that Putin himself wanted to show control (2018). He even suggested that it may have been a test of hybrid warfare, to see how British civilians would respond to the use of chemical weapons in their country and cause destabilisation. Svyatoslav Kaspe responded to Kowal by arguing that the Kremlin simply had no motive, and that whoever did carry out the attack wanted to divide Russia and the West

even further (2018). Such reasoning echoes statements by Russian foreign minister Lavrov, who even suggested the United Kingdom itself had more to gain from the attack, possibly carrying it out to rally the people behind the government when Brexit was causing political trouble (Dearden, 2018). Again, questioning how this attack could possibly benefit Russia became a central element in the defence against the allegations.

It is time that we take this question seriously, rather than let it persist as a rhetorical device used to discredit otherwise valid and reliable findings that some state actors do, in fact, use chemical weapons. That is the central purpose of the present study. Political contexts vary enormously between different cases of state-mandated chemical weapons use, which is why this thesis focuses specifically on the use of chemical weapons in war. Chemical weapons have also been used in assassinations, as well as by state-sponsored non-state actors or terrorist groups, but these instances are not within the scope of this thesis and should be assessed on their own terms. The present study presents a typology for understanding the strategic effects of chemical weapons use during warfare which builds on the idea that chemical weapons are highly visible norm transgressions. Their use is difficult to hide and constitutes a clear breach of international law and the norm against chemical weapons. This makes their use inevitably performative. It is necessary to distinguish between international and regional audiences as primary target audiences of the performance, and between frame challenge and claim denial as accompanying narratives. Frame challenge refers to disagreement over the content of the norm, while claim denial refers to disagreement over whether or not an event occurred, or how it occurred. This yields four possible effects of chemical weapons use that can be strategically exploited by belligerent state actors in support of the political goals they pursue.

The case studies consist of the Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989), the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), and the Syrian Civil War (2011-ongoing). They ground the normative dynamics in an overview and assessment of military effectiveness and utility to give them an explicitly strategic character. Investigating the strategies of chemical warfare requires an interlinked assessment of the operational and (international) political level, to see which logic connects the two (Betts, 2000, p.6-7). The findings suggests that the self-understood identity of the state is a crucial factor in understanding how each state interacted with the strategic effects of chemical weapons use. Iraq pursued regional exception to the norm, which was co-constituted by its self-understanding as a strong state. The use of chemical weapons allowed it to create a strategic narrative of power reversal: the weapon of the weak, what many considered the 'poor man's atomic bomb', made Saddam Hussein strong. The Soviet Union anticipated normative change, but quickly realised that the use of chemical weapons would contribute to levels of normative instability that it could not maintain. As a superpower in decline and rather isolated as a result of the invasion, the Soviet Union was better served by normative stability, especially if it could be seen to play a role in reinforcing the anti-chemical weapons norm. The Syrian case shows that the categories of the transgression matrix collapse in on themselves: by simultaneously denying the use of chemical weapons

and evidently using them anyway, a measure of uncertainty is introduced. This constitutes Syria's identity as a 'trickster' in international affairs, and revealed the inability of the West to intervene effectively in Syria. This kept Assad right where he was, while undermining the ontological security of international society's normative order.

Research question

The main research question that I seek to answer is how we can understand the strategic effects of chemical weapons use in war. In order to answer that question, each case study engages with two additional guiding questions. The first is: what was the scope and military utility of chemical weapons use in this conflict? The second is: which norm dynamics were at play between the chemical weapons user and the international society? Both of these questions are necessary to appreciate the full meaning of strategy. Only focusing on the first would risk collapsing the strategic level into the operational level, while only asking the second question neglects the fact that the actors in question were engaged in a war that they were interested in winning (or not losing).

While I am interested in the strategies of chemical weapons, I do not claim to be able to reconstruct the strategic decision-making that led to the use of chemical weapons. In short, I set out to examine how states interacted with the strategic effects of chemical weapons in a way that benefited their war aims, not to process-trace the organisational pathways that resulted in state leadership opting to use chemical weapons, nor to reconstruct what the intentions for chemical weapons use might have been at the onset of conflict. I take a rather more theoretical approach to explore how counter-normative behaviour impacts the international level of warfighting that has become strategically crucial, as Clausewitz reminds us, in the modern period (Garard, 2022; Smith, 1990). Allegiances and alliances can sustain the war effort of weak states, although their support is not guaranteed and may shift over time. The same goes for counter-balancing alliances, and weaknesses in such alliances can be targeted and exploited. Because of their counter-normativity, chemical weapons can play an instrumental role in this process.

The use of chemical weapons can only be understood in the context of specific wars, which is what most of the literature on the utility of chemical weapons is based on. Ranging from the First World War to the Syrian Civil War, various authors have assessed the military usefulness of resorting to chemical weapons. Most of them do so on the operational level, only to conclude that the utility of chemical weapons is limited, or at least highly context-dependent (e.g. Chapman, Elbahtimy, & Martin, 2018; Haber, 1986; Krause, 1991; May, 1993; Meselson, 2017; Robinson, 1971, p. 52). Some posit that these negative assessments put the bar for military utility too high, and that the psychological effects of chemical weapons, as well as the fact that they make the activity of fighting significantly harder for the opposition, constitute useful effects (Cook, 2000; Spiers, 2017; Woods, Murray & Holaday, 2009). Future technological developments might also increase their operational attractiveness (Caves Jr., 2010). Others assess the operational and strategic circumstances in which chemical weapons have been used

by state actors, without making definitive pronouncements on their utility. These include the presence of an existential threat, an ineffective international reaction, a perception of success caused by chemical weapons, and the presence of moral disengagement mechanisms (Wiejak, 2021), as well as failure of conventional weapons, unprepared targets, enemy inability to escalate, and fears of military defeat (Quillen, 2017). However, the strategic impact of chemical weapons beyond their ability to achieve certain military goals has yet to be researched, particularly as it constitutes a norm transgression. Some have researched how the use of chemical weapons impacted the norm against them, either in terms of arms control (Ali, 2001), the potential for emulation by other states (Chapman et al., 2018), or the integrity of the norm itself (Price, 2019), but few have taken the significance of norm transgressive behaviour as a strategic act in warfare. It is this gap that I address in the present thesis.

Ontology, epistemology, and methods

The argument I pursue throughout this thesis is based on ontological, epistemological, and methodological claims from the English School tradition. The reasons for this are further clarified with reference to the alternatives in the next chapter, but the starting point is that the English School is particularly interested in the phenomenon of international society. International society is the state of international relations that describes "a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values", that "form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relationship with one another, and share in the working of common institutions" (Bull, 1977, p. 13). I share that interest as I seek to understand the way in which transgressive states push back against common values in an interconnected system in a way that, at first sight, is likely to do more harm than good. Another relevant feature of the English School is the distinction between pluralism and solidarism, which puts the finger on the tensions that exist between states wanting to 'belong', yet also seeking to retain differentiated values and cultures (Bain, 2013). Pluralist scholars maintain that international society is limited in the sense that states share common recognition of each other's sovereignty, and that this sovereignty is unconditional. This is the basis for international society, though additional levels of common values and moral choices may be identified on a situational basis. Solidarists, on the other hand, theorise that international society is based on a sense of common humanity, which gives rise to sovereignty (making it conditional). In order to be legitimate, international society has to continuously invest in cosmopolitan ethics (Reus-Smit, 2002). Christian Reus-Smit problematises the pluralist ontology in particular using insights from constructivism that challenge the distinction between international norms of sovereignty and co-existence, and domestic state identity (2002). A general agreement on what constitutes legitimate statehood determines membership of the international society, so not just any domestic arrangement will do. He also challenges the pluralist distinction between international society and world society (the common humanity view on international relations) and argues that constructivist scholars have demonstrated how non-state actors from world society influence the principles and dynamics of

international society. Finally, he posits that an evaluation of situational ethics cannot do without abstract, cosmopolitan ethics. He thus accords more ontological firmness to the solidarist position than the pluralist position.

I can only follow this reasoning in part. International society is too complex to reduce to pluralist or solidarist views, and part of my argument lies in the observation that international society has characteristics of both. It is exactly that tension that can – under the right circumstances – be exploited through processes of norm transgression. My inability to reject pluralism altogether may put my ontology on "shaky foundations", as Reus-Smith would say (2002, p. 502), but not for lack of contemplation. Additionally, some other ontological claims can be supported more firmly. From constructivism I borrow the understanding that social order is intersubjective, as each actor cannot do without the other to create (hierarchical) identities. From the English School, I take the focus on states as shorthand for statespeople, the importance of self-understanding and identity, and the primary interest in *intention* as opposed to *cause* (Navari, 2009, p. 3). This last point in particular requires additional explanation in relation to strategy. Mechanical, causal explanations of phenomena in international relations rely on a systematic ontology in which actions always produce the same effects. However, in a societal ontology, rules and institutions as well as values and culture are produced by intentional actors, not through conditioned behaviour but through conscious choice. Unfortunately, intentionality is somewhat problematic in the context of strategic studies. Strategic effects may be traced back to their cause, but we cannot assume that these effects were the same exact effects intended by the actors. All the intervening variables that render strategy-making so difficult prevent such a linear relationship (Betts, 2000). Thus, we should be careful not to confuse the levels of analysis. On the ontological level, the English School argues that international society is produced by its primary actors – statespeople – who intentionally adopt rules and institutions. They neither slavishly follow systemic pressures, nor are they completely conditioned to be rule-followers (Navari, 2009). However, this says little about whether the *produced* effects of intentional action are the *intended* effects. On the level of strategy-making, actors intentionally transgress norms and intentionally interact with the effects to give them meaning, but as this is an intersubjective process, they cannot fully control the outcomes.

Epistemologically, intentionality is not an observable phenomenon. It cannot be derived from observing cause and effect but has to be gauged via interpretation. Such an epistemology relies on a selection of concepts with which to interpret phenomena, but these concepts do not exist independently of the researcher's judgement that these are worth knowing (Keene, 2009, p. 106). Put concretely, my interest in norm transgression and strategy does not derive from the fact that these things exist 'out there', waiting to be observed. Instead, I interpret speech, actions, and other observable occurrences as being norm transgressions and strategy. Accordingly, I use an interpretivist method that seeks to understand rather than explain the different strategic effects of chemical weapons use. Interpretivism requires that the researcher looks further than what is said and done, and relies on an informed historical

understanding of context to properly reconstruct how the main actors understand themselves and understand what social phenomena they are effectuating. It means going back and forth between speech, action, and context in a hermeneutic process of reading, writing, and reflection. In philosophical terms, this is referred to as the hermeneutic or hermeneutical circle (see Grondin, 2015). This approach is historical in the sense that it is conscious of how meanings change across contexts, and how different instances of phenomena mean something different in light of what came before. For instance, chemical weapons use in Syria means what it means in light of earlier instances of chemical weapons use.

The hermeneutic approach cannot be distinct from the researcher, but the approach comes closest to some form of historical truth when it assess the ideas, desires, and claims of historical actors on their own terms. William Bain argues that the best we can achieve here is coherence based on the evidence that is available to us (2009, p.157). Building on this, the conclusions of my research represent situational truths and cannot be replicated in a causal manner. However, the implications of the conclusions do serve to challenge what is considered 'true' according to the major schools of thought in International Relations theory. In particular, I challenge the relationship between language and power and the constraining power of norms that constructivism relies on, as well as the neorealist assumption that state-identity is not so relevant a factor in strategy-making.

Finally, I have selected three case studies that I study using a comparative research method. The comparison is systematic and deductive to the extent that I examine the cases through the lens of a theoretical framework for understanding norm transgression, which is introduced in chapter 2. However, while the framework focuses my attention on specific phenomena, it is not exclusive in guiding the research. That would run counter to the interpretivist and historically sensitive methodology. Also, the framework is meant to help understand transgression, but not to make strategic claims. Instead, I have consulted a large and diverse set of sources – from interviews and newspaper articles to academic reflections – to contextualise the strategic effects of norm transgression in each case. That is an inductive process. Eventually, this results in a theoretical understanding of processes of norm transgression as strategic acts.

The first case study is the Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989), during which the United States repeatedly accused the Soviets of using chemical weapons. While there is little evidence to confirm the scale of chemical weapons use that the United States alleged at the time, it does appear likely that the Soviet Union at least tested chemical weapons in Afghanistan based on the prominence of chemical weapons in Soviet military doctrine for non-nuclear warfare. The second case study is the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), during which Iraq used chemical weapons in combat on a large scale and with a relatively great measure of openness. The final case study is the Syrian Civil War (2011-ongoing), which represents a troubling case in which chemical weapons were used throughout the war to harm civilians. All three case studies are taken from the late- and post-Cold War period, because it is imperative for this study

that the cases represented clear norm transgressions at the time they took place. Earlier instances of chemical weapons use in war, most notably the Vietnam War, occurred when the norm had not yet become as firm as it had by the 1980s. In fact, the norm against chemical weapons was debated by legal scholars and politicians alike during the Vietnam War, which contributed to how the norm came to be understood afterwards (Bonds, 2013; Meselson, 2017). Therefore, while the use of chemicals in Vietnam was understood by many to constitute a norm transgression, the lines had not yet been drawn as clearly as by the 1980s. My purpose is to come to a theoretical understanding of norm transgression and strategy, which necessitates a focus on cases that represent the object of study most clearly, that is, 'key' cases in Gary Thomas' typology (2011). This explains my case selection.

Scope and definitions of chemical weapons

This research concerns itself with battlefield usage of chemical weapons, both against military targets and civilian populations. As such, it treats chemical weapons as both physical and psychological weapons of mass destruction to the extent that they are characterised by an inability on the part of the perpetrator to restrict their effect to a specific target. This characteristic, that they are difficult to handle and target effectively, becomes an intrinsic characteristic of the terror they induce. Paralleled with my focus on battlefield usage, I especially concern myself with state(-sponsored) use of chemical weapons, over non-state usage.

In this study, I follow the definition of chemical weapons as formulated by the OPCW, the executive organisation of the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction (Chemical Weapons Convention, or CWC, in short; Convention on the Prohibition, 1993). Following the CWC, the OPCW defines chemical weapons as:

> a chemical used to cause intentional death or harm through its toxic properties. Munitions, devices and other equipment specifically designed to weaponise toxic chemicals also fall under the definition of chemical weapons. (OPCW, n.d.).

This definition is rather broad. Article II of the CWC further specifies that not only toxic chemicals, but also their precursors are prohibited. Furthermore, it details which usages of toxic chemicals are, and which are not permitted under the convention. Generally speaking, toxic chemicals are considered 'weaponised' when they are used for the purpose of warfare. Intent is therefore an important criterion (OPCW, n.d.). Various usages of toxic chemicals fall outside of the scope of the Convention, such as usages for domestic law enforcement (riot control agents in particular), protective purposes, and peaceful purposes (such as industrial, agricultural, research, medical, or pharmaceutical purposes). Toxic chemicals used for these purposes are only legal under the CWC however, if they are of the 'type and quantity consistent' with such usages (CWC, Article II.1.a, 1993).

Critically, the definition employed by the CWC and the OPWC as its governing body leaves out those chemicals that are used in warfare, but not strictly speaking as weapons. White phosphorus and napalm are the most famous examples of such chemicals that have been used in warfare, but allegedly only as an illuminating, obscuring or incendiary agent (Tessier, 2007; Neilands, 1970). Other 'border cases' of chemical weapons use include Agent Orange and other herbicides, which would not fall within the scope of the CWC as herbicides, but which many claim were indeed weaponised to harm humans and animals in Vietnam and Malaysia by the United States and the United Kingdom (Ellison, 2011; Olson & Cihacek, 2022; Sodhy, 1987).

The CWC contains appendices that list known chemical weapons. These schedules are ranked from one to three, with schedule one containing toxic chemicals that have no or little application outside of warfare, schedule two containing chemicals that have small-scale applications, and schedule three having large-scale applications (CWC, Annex on Chemicals, 1993). Accordingly, each scheduled toxic chemical (or precursor) can only be stocked by member states in quantities permitted under the convention (CWC, Annex on Verification, 1993). The majority of known chemical weapons can be categorised in a variety of ways, most commonly by generation, which reflects the various waves in which chemical weapons were developed, and by the type of chemical action by which they cause harm to the human body. The following descriptions are based on Lev Fedorov (1994), Vladimir Pitschmann (2014), and the overview of the Federation of American Scientists ("Types of", n.d.).

First generation chemical weapons are those weapons developed during the First World War and just after. They can be further subdivided into choking (asphyxiating) agents, blister (vesicant) agents, and blood agents. First generation choking agents include chlorine, phosgene, diphosgene, and chloropicrin. These cause harm primarily through the creation of pulmonary edema, causing fluid to flood the lungs. Blister agents include sulfur mustard and nitrogen mustard, known as mustard gas, phosgene oximine, and lewisite. These substances cause blisters and inflammation of skin and mucous membranes, which may also impact eyes, mouth, and lungs. The category blood agents contains hydrogen cyanide and cyanogen chloride. These vaporise fairly quickly and are therefore less effective in open air, but they have been weaponised in the Holocaust. These agents inhibit the transmission of oxygen via the blood and usually cause death through respiratory failure. Mustard gas, chlorine, and lewisite are relatively persistent, while phosgene is non-persistent. Lachrymatory agents, or tear gases, were also used during the First World War and include CS, CN, and CR.

The second generation of chemical weapons consists of the nerve agents first developed in Germany in the 1930s and 1940s, as well as later nerve gas developments from the United States, Sweden, Russia, the United Kingdom and other states. They are known as organophosphorus toxic chemicals (OTC) and distinction can be made between G-type nerve agents and V-type nerve agents. G-type agents are tabun (GA), sarin (GB), soman (GD), and clycosarin (GF), of which soman is the most lethal but sarin the

most weaponisable. Various V-type agents exist, but VX ("Venomous agent X", Halford, 2016) is the most well-known. It is more poisonous than sarin and more persistent, and can be used as an area denial weapon. It was also used in the assassination of Kim Jong-nam in 2017 (Ellis-Petersen & Haas, 2019). Nerve gasses act by disrupting the regular functioning of nerve endings, causing muscular and other bodily functions to break down. Nerve agents are highly lethal.

Third generation chemical weapons are innovative mainly because of their delivery system. Intermediate volatility agents (IVA) were developed as an operational improvement to second generation chemical weapons, but these IVA lacked the stability of the previous generation. The solution came in the form of binary weapons, in which non-toxic precursor chemicals would only be combined at the last moment before delivery. Similar systems were created for other second generation chemical weapons, including sarin. Binary weapons were being developed in the 1970s and 1980s. The Soviet equivalent of the American binary chemical weapons programme was the Foliant programme, which started in the 1980s and continued into the 1990, and which developed the novichok (newcomer) agents.

Non-lethal chemical weapons, including tear gas, hallucinogens, immobilising agents, and various sedatives, have been explored militarily as well, but these have not been weaponised quite as successfully for warfare. Apart from the use of tear gas for domestic crowd control, another notable exception was the Moscow Theatre Siege of 2002. The Russian military used of a mixture of carfentanil and remifentanil to bring about the end of this hostage situation, which cost the lives of 130 people (Pitschmann, 2014).

Chemical weapons can be delivered by air, using (barrel)bombs or spraying mechanisms, or in missiles, artillery, grenades, or other projectiles. As gas, they can also be released from cylinders or mines.

The history of the norm against chemical weapons and chemical weapons use

The anti-chemical weapons norm can be traced back to the start of the 20th century. Even though asphyxiating gas had been outlawed by the Hague Conventions of 1899, gaps in this legal text were exploited in the First World War by all major belligerents (Vec, 2017). In particular, the formulation that projectiles spreading asphyxiating gas would be illegal was not violated by using gas canisters, and when projectiles were used, it was argued that these did not have the spread of gas as their 'sole purpose'. The result was major uncertainty about the direction of the chemical weapons norm; a lot had changed twenty years after the Hague Conventions. One of the most important 'norm entrepreneurs', as Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) refer to those individuals that initially seek to establish a new norm in international relations, was German chemist Fritz Haber. During the First World War, Fritz Haber sought to convince the military and political command to allow him to research the weaponisation of chemicals by claiming that

> The gas weapons are surely not more horrible than flying metal fragments, on the contrary, the percentage of deadly gas injuries is comparably smaller, there are no mutilations and nothing is known […] in terms of follow-up injuries. (cited by Schmidt 2017, p. 79).

The quote shows that Haber based his ideas about the utility of chemical weapons on a humanitarian foundation. As Margit Szöllösi-Janze explains, Haber was motivated by the modernist philosophy that science could help mankind progress and in time, solve all problems humanity faced (2017). Thus, he seized upon the predominant philosophy of the time, and as the previous quote shows, referred to existing consensus on the need to 'humanise' war. Organisationally, he was able to motivate not only fellow scientists through his institute, but create a system in which scientists, as experts, became advisors to political and military decision makers. He did this in a political context of a highly complex war, which required experts to keep the overview of new developments that could be employed for the war effort (Szöllösi-Janze 2017, p. 13-14). Without Haber's role as a mediator, organiser, and innovator, WWI would have been unlikely to be so characterized by chemical weapons use. Haber reflected on his role as follows:

> 'I was one of the mightiest men in Germany. I was more than a great army commander, more than a captain of industry. I was the founder of industries; my work was essential for the economic and military expansion of Germany. All doors were open to me' (cited by Szöllösi-Janze 2017, p. 19).

Haber was not the only one who defended chemical weapons as humanitarian alternatives to conventional weapons, while others simply assumed chemical weapons would become yet another way of inflicting harm in war, not better nor worse than other weapons (Cook, 2000). Basil Liddell Hart, for instance, arguing for the tactical use of chemical weapons during the 1950s, reflected on the use of gas during the First World War explaining that:

> Gas offers such an alternative [to tactical atomic weapons] - especially in the new disabling but non-lethal forms that have been developed. Even in World War I the most effective chemical weapon was mustard gas, which disabled more but killed fewer than any other important weapon. Moreover it favoured, and aided, defence by its obstructive and delaying effect[1]. (1959, p. 139)

He had advocated for chemical weapons similarly sooner after the First World War had ended, as did his colleague J. F. C. Fuller (Cook, 2000, p. 62). However, it was not to be. The Hague Conventions had set chemical weapons apart from both poison and conventional weapons, allowing for their continued

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[1] Of course, the defence was hardly the problem during the First World War, but Liddell Hart is right to point out that mustard gas was used extensively to incapacitate the enemy and reduce their ability to attack. In any case, the fact that gas warfare favours the defence did not prevent the belligerents of the First World War using it offensively as well. Examples include attacks on machine-gun nests, reducing resistance, and preventing counter-attacks (Spiers, 2017).

distinct treatment (Price, 1995). Gas weapons started to occupy the minds of the public with reference to choking sensations, burns, blindness and other forms of conscious suffering. Tim Cook explains how the advent of air power exacerbated this be introducing images of mass gas attacks over cities (2000). Meanwhile, more realistic commentaries of military experts did little to change the public perception of chemical weapons.

The legal debates at this time were characterised by hierarchical principles. The Treaty of Versailles prohibited the manufacture and use of chemical weapons by Germany, while the subsequent Geneva Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or Other Gases, and of Bacteriological Methods of Warfare universalised the gas prohibition to all "civilised nations" (1925). However, the condition of war to which the Geneva Protocol referred was generally understood at the time to refer to armed conflict between sovereign states. Colonial war was an entirely different category (Langewiesche, 2022; Linstrum, 2019). Gas was subsequently used with great effect in Libya and Ethiopia by Italy (Grip & Hart, 2009; Labanca, 2004; Tezcür & Horschig, 2021), by Spain (with tacit consent from the French) against the Rif rebellion (La Porte, 2011), and by Japan against China (Martin, 2006). Some maintain that the United Kingdom used gas in Mandatory Iraq in the early 1920s (e.g. Coleman, 2005), but Raymond Douglas finds that this was ultimately prevented as some members of the Cabinet questioned the legality, and logistical issues prevented the weapons from reaching Iraq in time (2009). There is also strong evidence that Türkiye used gas against the Dersim rebellion in 1937 (Tezcür & Horschig, 2021). In any case, the understanding that these weapons would not be used against each other prevented massive chemical rearmament of the major powers in the interwar period (Price, 1995). It also raised the bar for use: chemical weapons now had to be decisive before their use could be considered. This is one of the reasons, according to Richard Price, why chemical weapons were not used in combat during the Second World War (pp. 75-77). Moral concerns were another, as was a fear of retaliation. Price shows how these elements gained special significance in relation to chemical weapons, setting them apart from other weapons that were considered conventional. Meanwhile, many military experts believed chemical weapons would and should be used in war. I have already referred to Liddell Hart's views, and American lieutenant colonel Augustin Prentiss wrote in 1937 that chemical weapons were "destined to play an even greater role in future warfare", (p. vii). It is safe to say that attitudes towards chemical weapons were mixed, but the non-use of chemical weapons in combat during the Second World War helped solidify their distinctiveness from other weapons.

The weapons of mass destruction-category further amplified the special status of chemical weapons after the Second World War, and formed the start of new efforts to ban not only the use of these weapons, but also their possession (Oren & Solomon, 2020). This proved particularly challenging as the three types of weapons grouped under WMD were very different, and different states had different interests in legitimising one or more of them. Of the three, chemical weapons were most diverse and readily available. In fact, despite ongoing stigmatisation, chemical weapons were so widespread that the three

decades following the end of the Second World War brought about no less than 18 conflicts during which chemicals were used in war, or were rumoured to have been used. These include: the Chinese Civil War (1945-1958), the French war in Indochina (1947), Israeli-Egyptian conflict (1948), the Greek Civil War (1949), the Korean War (1951-1952), the Malayan Emergency (1948-1953), the Cuban Civil War (1957), the French-Algerian war (1957), the conflict in the Rio de Oro, between French and Spanish colonial forces and the Liberation Army for the Moroccan Sahara (1958), Egyptian forces during the Yemeni Civil War (1963-1967), the Iraqi-Kurdish war (1965), in Indochina and Vietnam (1961-1970), Portuguese forces in Guinea-Bissau (1968), Israel-Palestine conflict (1969), Portuguese forces in Angola (1970), the Rhodesian war (1970), and the war in Laos and Cambodia (1975-1981) (Robinson, 1971, Tezcür & Horschig, 2021. Years indicate the timing of allegations, not the duration of conflict). It is significant that with the exception of the United States, all parties accused of using chemicals in war either denied it or were vague about it. While confirming the use of chemicals in war, the United States denied that these were weaponised chemicals as they were used as herbicides instead, referencing the precedent set by the United Kingdom in Malaysia (Robinson, 1971; Boserup, 1973).

All of these incidents, and the use of herbicides and other chemicals by the United States in particular, demonstrated the need to refine the Geneva Protocol of 1925 and clarify its provisions. For instance, a 1968 UNGA resolution interpreted the Geneva Protocol as applying to all use of chemicals against humans, animals, and plants, that cause harm because of their toxic effects (Boserup, 1973, p. 286). The United States, which had not ratified the Protocol yet, voted against, and many NATO members abstained. In 1969, the United Kingdom drafted a proposal to ban the production, possession, and use of biological weapons, fearing that outlawing chemical and biological weapons at the same time would be impossible. On the other hand, the Soviet Union was more interested in negotiating a joint ban, fearing that a separate treatment of biological weapons would stall a chemical weapons ban indefinitely. This, as well as domestic pressures, prompted the United States to unilaterally ban the production of biological and toxin weapons (Tucker & Mahan, 2009). The Soviet Union now accepted this approach and new negotiations produced the text of the Biological Weapons Convention within two years. It was opened for signature in 1972 and entered into force in 1975 (Goldblat, 1997). It opened the way for new negotiations on the topic of chemical weapons during the second half of the 1970s.

As Richard Price argued, the chemical weapons norm by this time has generally come to be understood as based on the principle that chemical weapons were inhumane (1995). This meant that they should not be used by states that considered themselves civilised, especially against other states of the same stature. Before the decolonisation period, the language of civilisation was highly racialised and racist. The case of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia forms a clear example of this (Sbacchi, 2005). However, these distinctions were more difficult to maintain in the second half of the 20th century when former colonies gained sovereign recognition. Güneş Murat Tezcür and Doreen Horschig argue that distinctions between the Global North and the Global South continued to play a role in how audiences responded to the use

of chemical weapons, but at least formally, such hierarchies were abandoned (2021). In any case, the weapons were generally understood to be inhumane and challenges to this perception were increasingly rare. At the same time, this reinforced the narrative that these were weapons of the weak; a way for technologically inferior states to be able to cause mass harm (Price, 1995). This narrative was particularly pursued by Western states, but, as will be addressed in the case study on Iraq, this understanding was not shared without qualification by those supposed 'weak' states.

The multilateral Committee, later Conference on Disarmament continued its work in producing the text of the eventual Chemical Weapons Convention. However, during much of the 1980s, the United States and the Soviet Union were engaged in a chemical stand-off over the alleged use of chemical weapons in Afghanistan. The United States had also started the development of binary chemical weapons in an apparent attempt to force the Soviet Union to make concessions on the issue of on-site inspection and verification (Divine, 1990). Timothy Divine concludes that this policy did more harm than good (1990), and the fact that the Soviet Union changed its approach to the negotiations may indeed be better ascribed to Mikhail Gorbachev's policy on international cooperation. In 1987, at Shikhany, the Soviets displayed their chemical weapons and means to destroy them, showing goodwill and a commitment to the negotiations ("Soviets Put Chemical Arms on Display", 1987).

The CWC was opened for signature in 1993 and entered into force in 1997. With the exception of the Geneva Conventions, it is currently the most-ratified treaty that concerns matters of warfare with 193 member states. It solidified the norm against chemical weapons in a legal regime and provided for the dismantling of chemical arsenals across the world with an extensive verification regime. However, it did not ease all fears over the role chemical weapons might play in the future. Around the turn of the century, the chemical weapons threat was largely conceived of in relation to international terrorism and use by non-state actors, as well as rogue states and the nexus of the three (e.g. Johnson 1997; Lavoy, Sagan, and Wirtz 2000; Weinstein 2001; Gressang 2001; Danzig 2001; Knopf 2007). This debate was particularly salient in the United States where it engulfed American scholarship and politics with studies of the (nuclear) deterrent strength of the United States and its allies vis-à-vis various asymmetric actors, many of which had not even acquired chemical weapons (Jervis 2007). Robert Jervis attests that this mode of thinking was at the foundation of the 'preventive' Iraq war in 2003 (p. 143), which received necessary critical commentary since.

The use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime during the Civil War, as well as the centenary of the First World War, brought the issue of chemical weapons back on the agenda. Price concludes that the responses to the use of chemical weapons in Syria demonstrate that the norm is still strong and not in danger of collapse (2019). Geoffrey Chapman and colleagues conclude similarly, based on both the international response and the lack of demonstrable military utility of the weapons (2018). On the other hand, Michelle Bentley has argued for the negative effects of the norm against chemical weapons,

showing how it obscured other war crimes and even aided President Bashar Al-Assad at times (2016). Thus, over the course of more than a century, chemical weapons have been lauded as emblems of modernity and derided as weapons of the weak, and they have been rejected as a nuisance and welcomed as necessary means of self-defence. It is unclear if and how chemical weapons will develop in the future, but it is unlikely that the Syrian case represents the end of it. The OPCW has been successful in eliminating most chemical weapons that have ever been developed, but the system is not water-tight. In the last six years, chemical assassinations have occurred in the United Kingdom, Russia, and Singapore, and in March 2023 it was reported that over 1200 school girls in Iran suffered symptoms possibly related to chemical poisoning. This latter case remains somewhat of a mystery, with some attributing it to Mass Psychogenic Illness ("Are Iranian schoolgirls", 2023) and others – including the UNHR Office of the High Commissioner calling it "targeted chemical attacks" ("Iran: Deliberate poisoning", 2023). However, these cases show that chemical weapons continue to surface across different contexts.

Overview of the thesis

Having introduced the research project in chapter 1, I turn to theory in chapter 2. This chapter discusses theories of International Relations and how these have studied norms and strategy. It explains how constructivism has engaged with norms most extensively, but also that this school has not explored the issue of transgression sufficiently. When it does, it takes a norm-centric approach, rather than an actor-centric approach. The chapter also demonstrates the utility of English School concepts in exploring the topic of norm transgression and draws on other studies of transgression to create a framework for understanding the effects of norm transgression. Chapters 3 (The Soviet-Afghan War), 4 (The Iran-Iraq War), and 5 (The Syrian Civil War) each address a case study to explore the military utility and normative dynamics of chemical weapons in context. Chapter 6 evaluates the findings from the case studies in the light of the theoretical framework, and draws on the anthropological concept of liminality to show how the introduction of chemical weapons opens up a social space in which actors can pursue different strategies. Finally, the conclusion answers the research question, explores the implications and limitations of this study, and provides a critique of contemporary issues including the future of the norm against chemical weapons and hybrid warfare. It closes with final thoughts about the implications of my findings for International Relations theory.

Norms and Transgression in International Relations Theory

Norms in International Relations theory

International relations are governed by conventions and ideas as much as by interest and power, constructs which might not be separable in the first place. Theorists have sought to explain the role of ideas in international politics from the beginning of International Relations as an academic field and have come up with different views and explanations. While the main concern of this thesis is with the strategic value of norm transgression, this requires that we first examine how norms are considered by various traditions of International Relations, how strategy or strategic thought features into that and how scholars have examined instances of norm transgression in the past. First, I will offer a topography of International Relations theory to determine which school(s) of thought offer the most helpful tools to study norms and norm transgression. Then, I will present a particular perspective that has attempted to unite the constraining power of norms with strategic agency, and a number of studies into transgression. Inspired by these studies and using a view of international relations inspired by English School concepts, I introduce the performer-audience relationship as a way to conceptualise the dynamics inherent in norm transgression and present a framework to understand transgression.

Realism and liberalism in classical and structural variants

Classical realism models the conduct of international politics after human nature, determining that states behave according to their power but also according to their culture and moral ideas, i.e., what 'is' and what 'ought to be'. Early theorists, such as E. H. Carr and H. J. Morgenthau, were interested in power as much as in morality and law which enabled people in government to pursue peaceful international policy. The anti-normative image of International Relations is particularly a product of neo- or structural realism, which reduced state interest to survival, either through competition or occasionally through cooperation. According to such rational choice theories norms can help facilitate the conduct of international politics, but states will only pursue norms if these enhance a state's power or influence. Where classical realism finds that stability is best served by community, and that a lack of self-restraint among states prompts aggression and instability, neorealism elevates self-interested behaviour to be desirable in order to create security. Neoliberalism instead focuses on international institutions, which may include and disperse norms, but maintains that such norms function to promote cooperation and do not change the basic utility-maximisation calculus of individual states.

Structural realist theories of international relations were popularised during the Cold War, a time of intense international rivalry, measured by material factors including the amount of nuclear warheads and the number of humans on the lunar surface. Such rivalry is a natural companion of the worldview defended by structural theorists, as states are constantly in danger of extermination in a zero-sum game. The use of microeconomic theory to inspire the methodology of International Relations during this

period altered the understanding of the ontology of international affairs towards a state-centred, rational model in which interests are steady, unchanging and exogenous (Hall, 2006). It is no coincidence that constructivist theory appeared in the 1980's and flourished in the 1990's, after the end of the Cold War, when the connections between International Relations as a field of study and the use of material factors to create power in international affairs were problematised.

'Norms' as such do not function prominently in structural-realist analyses of international politics. As far as regimes go, which are steeped in normativity and 'oughtness', neorealism maintains that these are dependent on and derived from the interests and capabilities of great powers (Krasner, 1982; Ashley, 1984). As such, they cannot be assumed to exert influence outside of the interests of the powerful states that supposedly 'created' and maintain them. One theory that represents this basic formula is the theory of hegemonic stability. Based on the idea that the distribution of power is the main determinant of international relations, this theory holds that the rise, influence, and fall of regimes are best explained as parallels of the security interests of the dominant actor in the international system, the hegemon (Gilpin, 1982; Webb & Krasner, 1989; Modelski, 1996). This view started to be challenged in earnest in the 1980s, particularly by neoliberalists but also by progressive thinkers of neorealism. For instance, Puchala and Hopkins (1982) outline the normative foundations of the colonial regime. Following the realist fashion, when they discuss the demise of this regime, they resort back to realist explanations of power (p. 73), and in doing so remain vague about the processes involved in (occasional) transgressions of the regime and the eventual collapse of the norms associated with colonialism. However and importantly, they critically note that regimes such as this often continue to exert influence when power transitions take place, and after the regimes no longer represent the interests of powerful states. Taking a neoliberal approach regarding sources of regime transformation, Young (1982) points to internal contradictions, changes in the underlying structures of power, and exogenous forces (such as technological developments or changes in adjacent regimes) in a rather positivist fashion. He does, however, draw away from state action and power balancing as the only instigators of change, and problematises 'power' as an underdefined concept. An offhand comment, that "the processes through which human tastes develop and change are poorly understood" is not followed up, but similarly points at a realisation that the pressures of the international system are not sufficient to understand international politics (p. 294).

Constructivism

Research into the role of international organisations had continued throughout the Cold War, particularly by those in the liberalist tradition, with various foci (Kratochwil & Ruggie, 1986). As briefly illustrated, regime theory in particular had been productive. It had used the language of "desirable and acceptable forms of social behaviour" to determine the existence of a regime in the first place, pointing to an awareness of the importance of norms (Kratochwil & Ruggie, 1986, p. 764). Such theorising thus included the idea that norms exert influence on social actors in international relations and were capable

of altering the 'logic of consequences' that was assumed to prescribe behaviour. Shah Tarzi even identifies instances both in neorealist and neoliberalist thought of international regimes and their underlying norms shaping state interests and behaviour, albeit to a limited extent, thereby forming a mutually constitutive relationship (2004). In addition to these theoretical developments, linguistic science had started to problematise the realist ontology that assumed structures and actors exist outside the human understanding of them (Onuf, 1989). Thus, the constructivist turn did not come out of the blue and built on a longer intellectual history of examining the role of international institutions, the future of international governance, and the mutually constitutive relationship of participants and their social environment. All international conduct is social, according to constructivists, which automatically steeps international relations in normativity. Constructivism does not reject material factors as influences on behaviour, but maintains that ideational factors combine with material factors to create possibilities for action. Following John Searle, constructivism further maintains that most objects of international relations, such as states, institutions, law, diplomacy and war, are social facts that have value and function through agreed upon social practice (1995).

When the positivist 'value free'[2] tendency of mainstream IR that focused on behaviour had started to preclude asking important questions about social pressures, patterns of expectation, and change, constructivism took up that task. Unlike the rationalist theories of international relations, constructivism views norms as crucial. Hall critiques the assumptions of rationalist theories of international relations as rendering the individual a 'rational fool', who can only behave according to the pressures of his rationality and the structure of his social environment (2006). Instead, he calls on constructivism to explain agency as well as structure, and action as well as behaviour. Following Arendt, Hall argues that an actor speaking in public, simultaneously constituting their identity and articulating their interest, forms the requirement for action and agency (p. 285). Interest and identity are therefore intrinsically linked in constructivist thought. What is more, is that actors in international relations are considered to be inherently geared towards 'doing the right thing' according to existing norms in their social environment (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). An understanding of self as 'good' (identity) creates incentives to act in such a way that is considered 'good' according to prevailing social norms (interest) as they relate to the situation at hand. By acting according to expectations, actors simultaneously reinforce a particular practice and legitimise it over alternatives. In this constructivist understanding, norms are both regulative (setting rules to benchmark action) and constitutive (forming the identity of the participants). March and Olson have termed this the 'logic of appropriateness' (1998). Risse (2000) adds to this the 'logic of arguing', which occurs when it is unclear which norm should apply to a particular situation, or what behaviour the norm prescribes. In such situations, actors engage in

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[2] Positivism is only value-free to the extent that it does not problematise its objects of study. However, by doing so, it "implicitly accepts the prevailing order as its own framework", reifying them and rejecting alternatives as irrelevant to social reality (Cox, 1981, p. 128).

argumentation to arrive at a mutual understanding that makes sense of the situation at hand. In the process, actors are willing to change their views and adjust their interests accordingly, and may be presumed to have been honest "truth-seekers from the start" (Schimmelfennig, 2003b, p. 225). Both the logic or arguing and the logic of appropriateness incorporate constructivist understandings of norm-driven behaviour in international affairs.

Risse conceptualised the logic of arguing and the logic of appropriateness to form a triangle with the logic of consequences, which is the rationalist understanding of international affairs (2000). In this understanding, actors are assumed to have given interests and they engage in communication in order to achieve their pre-formulated goal. In the spectrum between the logic of consequences and the logic of arguing, Risse allows space for actors to use norms to justify their position to a larger or smaller extent (p. 8). In this spectrum, he places the concept of 'rhetorical action' in the middle, which refers to the mode of communication in which actors use normative discourses to persuade and justify, but not to change their own position or interests. This concept is derived from Frank Schimmelfennig's work, which I will turn to in more detail later.

History of constructivism: zeitgeist and limitations

As briefly alluded to, there is an intimate connection between International Relations as an academic field and the prevailing normative and moral circumstances of international affairs. In 1981, Robert Cox wrote about how the intellectual evolution of the study of international affairs is based on practical concepts derived from historical circumstances, such as the state-civil society divide in the 18th and 19th centuries, and the prevalence of the nation state in the 20th century. He called this the "conventional cutting up of reality", which may "appear to be increasingly arbitrary when practices change" (p. 126). It follows that theories that build on such artificial constructions of social reality are time-bound. Cox proposed two types of theory to follow on from that: problem-solving theories and critical theories. Problem-solving theories, which try to identify existing structures and entities and make them work effectively to tackle area-specific problems, do not question the nature of the relationships and institutions they encounter. Critical theories, on the other hand, seek to problematise the relationship and institutions as they appear, questions the changes they undergo, and envisions alternatives. While neorealism has roots in some form of critical theory – that is, the realism from the 16th century that sought alternatives to religious hegemonic orders – it had become a problem-solving theory during the Cold War. Constructivism is critical insofar as it problematises sources of power and envisions alternative social actors as important agents in international affairs. Institutions, practices, and identities are not given, but arise from social interaction. Some constructivists, however, remain in 'problem solving mode' as they continue to reify their concepts for epistemological purposes. Hopf (1998) calls this 'conventional constructivism', which assumes regularities connecting identity and action exist and can be uncovered, even if practices might change them at some point in time. Others try to use a social epistemology as well as a social ontology and acknowledge their participation and potential alteration

of the processes they observe as researchers. This critical approach further influences how critical constructivists see power as part of every social exchange, which is necessary in the constitution of identity. Hopf explains how critical constructivism is preoccupied with "unmasking these power relations", rather than with "the production of new knowledge and insights based on novel understandings" like conventional constructivism is (1998, p. 185). Because of its largely positivist epistemology, conventional constructivism was better able to engage in discussions with the positivist studies produced by neorealist and neoliberalist colleagues. As a result, these studies became more influential in explaining the changing circumstances of the end of the Cold War, as well as the social processes – in addition to structural pressures examined by their structuralist colleagues – that contributed to Cold War stability. Examples include Nina Tannenwald's analysis of the norms surrounding nuclear weapons (1999), which challenges neorealists understandings of nuclear non-use as pure strategic considerations and introduces the norm against these weapons as having a strong constraining effect, and Alexander Wendt's (1992) critique on the reification of anarchy as the natural condition of international affairs, which serves to reproduce social relations rather than accurately describe the possibilities of what international social life could look like.

Constructivists sought to better explain the political developments of the 1990s. One of the main differences between constructivism and rationalist theories is that the former is interested in change, while the latter maintains that international relations are stable and enduring (Walker, 1987). In addition, realism and its variants are rather pessimistic about the tendency of states and statespeople to relate to each other by means of competition and conflict. The reality of the end of the Cold War stood in opposition to both the supposed stability of bipolarism and the tendency of states to be distrustful of each other and of international institutions. Instead, the 1990s saw a move to – in realist terms – unipolarity as well as the increased delegation of executive and judiciary functions to international organisations. The United Nations set up a number of international tribunals, including the International Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and the Special Court for Sierra Leone among others. Peacekeeping – a highly militaristic form of international cooperation – became a preeminent concern of the United Nations Security Council. One of the most successful pieces of international law, the Chemical Weapons Convention, was signed in 1993 and came into effect in 1997.

As Cox's analysis of theory as time-bound reminds us, the rise of constructivism in the 1990s is not neutral. It is intimately tied up with the zeitgeist of post-Cold War academic thinking, as well as the need to explain 'new' phenomena. The judicial international regimes of the 1990s, mentioned before, are examples of community norms being institutionalised. Constructivists thus set out to explain how norms originate, function, and ultimately influence state action. For instance, Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) developed the concept of a norm lifecycle, which traces actors, processes and platforms (structures) that are involved in the process of norms emerging, 'cascading' (rapidly spreading), and internalising. Risse and Sikkink (1999) similarly argued for the 'spiral model' of international norms,

which relies on domestic and international networks to put norm violators on the agenda of international political actors, as well as the pressure associated with increasing universality. These models became very influential for research into human rights norms in particular (e.g. Fleay, 2006; Shor, 2008; Richter, 2018), but have also been criticised for obscuring internal contradictions within normative regimes and moral origins of norms (e.g. Krook & True, 2010), and for their limited attention to weak internalisation or the decline of norms (e.g. Brown, 2020). This optimism regarding norms, both in terms of their unidirectional influence on behaviour and internal consistency, forms the main problem with much conventional constructivist thought. Another problem, highlighted by Antje Wiener (2003), is that many constructivists in the 1990s let go of the sociological understanding of norms as constructed and structuring (c.f. Giddens, 1979), to focus instead on a neo-Durkheimian approach to uncovering the pressures norms exert on social actors unilaterally. Subsequent attempts to introduce the study of norm decline and transgression into constructivist scholarship, as well as insights into the strategic use of norms, identity, and positionality, will be addressed later.

English School

Throughout the 20th century, a parallel tradition of studying international affairs had developed among a group of scholars associated with the British Committee on the Theory of International Politics, with intellectual roots in the work of non-English scholars including Charles Manning. The so-called English School of International Relations is sympathetic to realist notions of state centrality (although not exclusivity) and anarchy. However, it shares with constructivism an interest in regimes and norms and maintains that the anarchical structure of the international system is not prescriptive of one type of behaviour over another. As a school of thought, it seeks to understand the nature and expansion of international society rather than to make explanatory claims about state behaviour, although some English School scholars move in that direction (Buzan, 1993; Navari, 2009). While neorealist traditions postulate the laws of international behaviour to be static and unchanging, the English School is explicitly historically embedded. English School scholars describe the international societies that have emerged and expanded over time, and how diverse states have adopted new rules of conduct to join those societies (eg. Behr, 2007; Diez, Manners & Whitman, 2011; Narine, 2006). It follows that for the English School, foreign policy and international action – including preserving the balance of power – are developed through conscious choice in such international societies, rather than being behaviour that is mechanically effectuated by the anarchy of the international system (Buzan, 1993; Navari, 2009). States – as shorthand for statespeople – are rational and strategic actors in an international society and form the main units of analysis (Spandler, 2014).

Between English School adherents or sympathisers, there is debate between positivist conceptions of the international society as a community of individual, strategic actors who produce shared rules of conduct, and intersubjectivist understandings of the international society as having its own dynamics, producing norms that become distinct from behaviour (Spandler, 2015). Similarly, and along a

normative axis, there is tension between the pluralist perspective that maintains international society is best served by diversity and independence, and the solidarist perspective, which advocates for the promotion of shared norms across multiple policy areas, leaning into the 'world society' aspect of English School tradition. The pluralist perspective is most famously represented by Robert Jackson (2000), while Nicholas Wheeler (2000) defends the solidarist view with reference to humanitarian intervention.

The centrality of the concept of international society in English School scholarship should not be mistaken for the pre-eminence of an international society in contemporary international affairs. Richard Little argues that the conceptual distinctions that the English School draws between the international system, international society, and world society are methodological tools rather than observed realities (1995). The three exist simultaneously, as levels of analysis, and splitting them allows for a better understanding of the forces, practices, and actors at play. If one is interested in norms and regimes in particular, one would have to understand the nature of an international society in order to appreciate the relevant logics. It remains imperative, however, to acknowledge the simultaneous existence of an international system exerting pressures, and a world society with transnational forces. The English School also posits that states can have different degrees of association with legal or normative regimes within a wider international society, such that concentric circles appear with those furthest away from the core, the least integrated into the regimes of the core (Zhang & Buzan, 2012; Little, 1995). Moreover, Little argues, international societies are presumed to be open, creating interesting dynamics at the borders, and multiple international societies can exist within the same international system.

Within the English School, norms are not exclusively seen as external factors that cause particular forms of action. As Navari notes, norms (or 'rules of conduct') can only be demonstrated to exist as they are put into action, making them effects of social interaction rather than causes (2009, p. 6). This separates one English School understanding of norms from that of many constructivists, who argue that norms emerge as a result of social interaction, but then go on to influence not only decision-making but identity formation (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). However, as mentioned before, the English School and constructivism do share a concern with norms, particularly in circumstances in which realism would predict a challenge to a normative order, or at least a lack of normative engagement. Similarly, both traditions are interested in self-perceptions of actors (identity) and their power, rather than positivist measurements of a-historical factors such as population growth, military force, or economic developments.

What is particularly interesting and useful in the English School tradition – I prefer 'tradition' over 'theory', given the plurality of perspectives in this school – is that it seeks to understand the norms and institutions of international society as contestable and subject to interpretation. They are dynamic, yet constraining. Examining how much 'wiggle room' normative regimes allow, and how much space actors

carve out for themselves, is an interesting research project to pursue to understand the nature of international society. In its historical and interpretive forms, the English School is often more interested in 'understanding' than in 'explaining'. Examining how we can best understand the prevailing ordering of international society and the agency of actors within it, allows us to reject pure rationality and pure subjectivity and appreciate the influence of both. Essentially, Navari argues, the English School rejects the behavioural tendencies of (conventional) constructivism in favour of agency, strategy and intentionality (2009). A causal analysis does not fit in with this view naturally.

This requires a note on methodology. The use of method embedded in a justification (i.e. a methodology) by English School sympathisers and adherents has been criticised both from the inside and the outside (e.g. Finnemore, 2001; Buzan, 2004). Critics argue that there is too much methodological pluralism within the English School and that this hampers interparadigmatic dialogue. It isolates the English School because it does not allow for an 'outsider' to test its merits based on clearly defined parameters. However, Little defends the methodological pluralism of the English School, maintaining that it is necessary to appreciate the different motivations associated with the logics of international system, international society, and world society (2009). However, he is careful to point out that this methodological pluralism does not translate into ontological or epistemological pluralism. As Navari states: "international relations constitute a set of *social* relationships" (2009, p. 5, emphasis in original). This also means that "not everything goes" for the English School methods (p. 5). Navari mentions historical methodologies resembling historical drama, positivist methodologies, and social process methodologies as inappropriate. Instead, methodology should accommodate self-understanding, historicity, and 'the fact of stateness'. The latter is important not because of realist assumptions about state survival, but because the 'fact of stateness' sets the scene for social action. As opposed to realists, English School adherents view statespeople as the main actors, rather than the state itself – although the state can be personified as a shorthand (Navari, 2009, pp. 8-9).

The nature of the international society is not straightforward and some English School authors have drawn our attention to regionalism as a relevant concept. Originally, the scholars associated with the British Committee were interested in the expansion of the European international society and the way in which non-European states and other political entities were included in it. They were conscious of the 'European' genesis of the international order, as well as of alternative international societies that had existed over the course of history in different areas of the world. Following Martin Wight, Andrew Hurrell notes that

> [u]nderstandings of world order vary enormously from one part of the world to another, reflecting differences in national and regional histories, in social and economic circumstances and conditions, and in political contexts and trajectories. (2007, p. 134)

Despite this consciousness, studies of regionalism were largely absent in the English School tradition until the start of the 21st century. Barry Buzan was instrumental in reorienting the English School somewhat to constructivist insights about the possibility of building a shared identity with like-minded others to improve security and legitimacy (2004). He found examples of this in regional communities with more-or-less defined boundaries, but converging over shared values, including 'the West', the EU, the Arab League, and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference. These differ in formal institutionalisation, but share a commitment over both shared norms and shared identity. Indeed, identity is crucial in this, as a shared 'we-feeling' (you and I are alike) serves not only to distinguish between the in-group and out-group, but can also be consciously fostered as beneficial for the in-group. This, according to Buzan, is what separates pluralist communities from solidarist communities (p. 147). Rather than go further into the theoretical debate between pluralism and solidarism, it is worth drawing our attention here to the concept of regional communities as relevant focal points for analysis. It makes it possible to imagine state actors to be interested in regional legitimacy, rather than global legitimacy, or in regional hegemony, rather than global hegemony. It also draws our attention away from the traditionally Eurocentric views of English School adherents, towards alternative international societies built on alternative values in different localities. In Buzan's view, a global international society with rather 'thin' levels of shared norms and identity can be supplemented with 'thinker' regional societies. Particularly as it concerns identity, such regional society can often be observed to be more effective than a global international society might aim to be. For this reason, it is relevant to consider the self-understanding of actors – so central to English School theorising – not only in relation to the global international society, but also in relation to a regional one they might consider themselves to belong to.

Actor-centric approach to norms

Having outlined the most important theoretical perspectives on the study of norms in International Relations, I now turn to more specific concepts within the study of norms that allow us to appreciate the perspective of the main actors in international affairs. I first briefly discuss the relationship between norms and law, before turning more extensively to strategy and the strategic use of norms.

Norms and law

The centrality of norms in constructivist scholarship can be contrasted with the centrality of actors in many of the English School explorations of international society. Given the centrality of actors, the English School supposes that norms only become relevant regimes when expressed through international law, making it quite legalistic. Constructivism draws our attention to less legalistic norms, that will still have relevance for the conduct of international relations. While Peter Wilson (2009) points to law as the most important signifier of the strongest international norms, and B. A. Roberson (2009) discusses the legal process as indicative of the expansion of international society, constructivists such as Sarah Percy show how strong norms can result in weak law as well (2007).

We thus learn from constructivism that strong norms do not require strong laws. However, when law exists and is enforced, or at least pursued, this does indicate the strength of a norm (e.g. Price, 2019). When states pursue legal processes in communal ways, and hold each other to the same standard, this indicates that they have formed an international society in the sense the English School uses the term. In other words, law – particularly when enforced – implies a norm, even if a norm does not imply law. The political processes that create law are therefore highly relevant to understand the nature of an international norm-in-the-making, and the continuous shaping of international society by extension. Two of the case studies used in this research project are situated in the decade leading up to the most relevant piece of international law for our purposes, the CWC of 1993/1997. Negotiations on this topic had been ongoing in the Committee, later the Conference on Disarmament, which had first produced the Biological Weapons Convention in 1972 to follow up the 1925 Geneva Protocol. These multilateral negotiations had been picked up again in 1980 in Geneva, but issues around verification and the potential deterrent value of chemical weapons proved difficult points for agreement (Dunn, 1989; Roberts, 1992). In any case, the negotiations themselves are indicative of an awareness that the norm was salient enough to sustain diplomatic negotiations under difficult conditions. Yet it was also uncertain enough to require *legal* negotiations specifically, to specify precisely what would and would not be 'allowed' by the international society. The negotiations themselves are not the main focus of the present study, but the actions of relevant actors away from the negotiation table are equally indicative of attempts to shape the emerging norm during this period. Following Roberson (2009), the fact that the 1980s formed a focal point of law creation on the topic of chemical weapons should sharpen our attention to the dynamics of norm creation and transgression in this period, as indicators of the influence various actors were trying to assert on the international society.

Strategy

Before I introduce strategic approaches to norms as components of international affairs, we need to better understand the concept of strategy itself and this requires some diversion from our discussion of norms and IR theory. Even within the military context, from which the concept derives, strategy has been interpreted in various ways over the years. Hew Strachan notably draws attention to this issue in the context of British and American foreign policy after 9/11, contextualising the concept in Western military thought of the past 200 years (2005; 2006; 2019). Arguing that the locus of strategy-making has migrated from the military to the government, and during the Cold War often to the armchair of the academic, he reckons that we are constantly at risk of a-strategic decision-making when it is unclear who 'does' strategy (2019). War has the tendency to overtake policy once it breaks out, at which point operational demands substitute for strategy. Instead, strategy-making should be a continuous back-and-forth between the government and the armed forces, between the political need to create certain outcomes and the appropriateness of the military instrument to achieve them. In this reading, I

understand the term strategic as 'of a purpose consistent with strategy'. In other words, a course of action is strategic when it conforms to a set of choices defined to achieve political outcomes.

This requires a good degree of rational intentionality to the extent that it requires a notion of prediction, that an action is more likely to lead to certain wanted outcomes over alternative unwanted outcomes. It is in this sense that the term 'strategic' has often been used to replace 'intentional', particularly in politics and international relations, but also in business and other fields. This is also how the authors referenced in the discussion that follows, about norms and strategy, use the term. A 'strategy' is then simply a set of intentional actions aimed to achieve a purpose beyond itself, using the most appropriate means available, regardless of whether those actions and means are military or not. Using 'strategy' and 'strategic' like this without consideration (especially in a study like this, located in the military domain) risks losing sight of the different meanings of the word.

As most discussions of norms and strategy use 'strategic' similarly to 'intentional', it may be that they rely on an implicit understanding of 'grand strategy' as guiding action. Grand strategy is a divisive concept that has its critics, but its proponents most often use it to refer to some intelligent combination of all the means of statecraft in accordance with a state's self-understanding in its international environment. Hal Brands, one of the most pre-eminent defenders of the concept, uses grand strategy as "the structure of foreign policy" (2017, p. 7), or "the conceptual logic that ensures that [instruments of foreign policy] are employed in ways that maximize the benefits for a nation's core interests" (2012, p. 4). In this understanding, grand strategy trumps foreign policy, as foreign policy choices are derived from grand strategic ideas. Thus, in the classical hierarchy that subjects 'regular' strategy to policy, the introduction of grand strategy in Brands' understanding rather confusingly re-introduces a form of strategy above policy. This contrasts with earlier ideas of grand strategy, such as that of Basil Liddell Hart, who instead situated grand strategy in between policy and military strategy, arguing that the purpose of grand strategy was "to coordinate and direct all the resources of the nation towards the attainment of the political object of the war – the goal defined by national policy" (1928, p. 83). The difference lies in which domain grand strategy is understood to operate: Brand uses it for peacetime as well as wartime, while Liddell Hart applies it to wartime only.

The following discussion, about norms and strategy, is indeed applicable to both war- and peacetime. None of the authors discussed here have a military understanding of 'strategic', but use it rather intuitively, as serving a goal pre-determined by policy. In that sense, it is unrelated to military understandings of strategy. Perhaps it is determined by grand strategy, but if so, this is left implicit.

Norms and strategy

Having sketched the different understandings of norms in International Relations, as well as having briefly problematised the use of the words 'strategy' and 'strategic', we can now turn to existing ideas

of how norms combine with policy to enable the achievement of preferred outcomes. This is the final step before we can discuss the main theme of the present thesis, which is norm transgression.

The English School recognises the centrality of agency within normative structures, which is a necessary precondition for norm transgression. Rational intentionality has a prominent place in this school, which simultaneously acknowledges that norms certainly guide such intentionality as a 'telic practice' (Navari, 2010). A 'telic practice' functions not as a 'cause' of behaviour, but rather as a set of guiding principles and standards. Norms – procedural ones in particular – are embedded in such telic practices. Thus, norms do not cause behaviour, but guide action. Against this background, I will first explore Schimmelfennig's ideas about the interaction between intentionality – necessary for strategy – and normativity. We will see that intentional action in a normative environment can create opportunities, but not without constraint. Manipulating normative discourses strategically is possible, but limitations arise because people have certain understandings of meaning.

Schimmelfennig proposes an approach to the role norms play in international communities, introducing strategic thinking and incorporating both liberal institutionalist and constructivist perspectives (2001; 2003a). When faced with a dilemma, a community of states pursue a bargaining process to achieve a communal outcome which is explained differently by different philosophies of international relations. Pure, rationalist bargaining would lead to outcomes based on initial state preferences distributed according to bargaining power. Constructivist decision-making, on the other hand, depends on finding a shared logic of appropriateness (or logic of arguing) and leads to changed preferences amongst those who initially violated the membership rules of the community in question (2003a). Instead, Schimmelfennig proposes that even when community norms constrain outcomes, state preferences are not fundamentally changed. In his 'synthetic approach', what he calls 'strategic action in a community environment' requires both material explanations of individual states' preferences and interests (rationalist) and awareness of the constraints community norms exert on the outcome of such a bargaining process (constructivist). During the bargaining process, states use community norms strategically in their argumentation, seeking to attain legitimacy for their position. The position with the highest degree of legitimacy according to the shared norms wins out, as states find themselves 'entrapped' by rhetoric.

Schimmelfennig's classic example pertains to the Eastern enlargement of the European Union during the 1990s (2001; 2003a; 2003b). EU states' individual preferences to this question, Schimmelfennig shows, can be properly explained using material constructs such as geographical proximity, economic competition and integration, and EU funding policies. The initial communal response to the question of EU enlargement reflected this, according association rather than membership to the Eastern European countries. The subsequent bargaining process, however, was characterised by normative dialogue – what Schimmelfennig calls 'strategic argumentation'. Using the European Union's own stated norms and

preferences, as well as historical arguments, the Eastern European countries created a normative environment in which the nay-sayers were seen to act non-European. Rather than being convinced by this discourse, as constructivism would propose, the opponents to enlargement were forced to acknowledge the legitimacy of this discourse, particularly that countries with sufficiently liberal democratic institutions would be eligible for accession negotiations. Despite retaining their original preference, these states "acquiesced to enlargement under moral pressure", in order to maintain legitimacy (2003a, p. 179).

'Rhetorical entrapment' occurs when proponents of a certain course of action – or a certain interpretation of a norm in general – successfully manage to silence the opponents by creating a discursive environment in which opposing arguments lack legitimacy (Schimmelfennig, 2001). Norm literature distinguishes between the existence and/or moral foundation of the norm (the 'frame', in Stimmer (2019)) and the behaviour that is associated with the norm (the 'claim'). The frame determines and is determined by the value base of the norm, while the claim concerns action. When actors seek to dismiss a normative argument, they can challenge the frame or the claim. For instance, when a state is accused of chemical weapons usage, the accused state can challenge whether the chemical weapons norm applies by denying the existence of the norm (the frame). Alternatively, they can deny that chemical weapons were used at all (the claim). Accused states can also confirm the existence of the norm but challenge the relevance of the norm in the context in question, for instance by arguing that the weapons were used in retaliation, as Italy and Iraq did in 1936 and the 1980s respectively. In such cases, accused states reinterpret the frame, which is one form of challenging the frame. Following Habermas (1981), Schimmelfennig discusses a third strategy: calling into question the credibility of the accuser (2001, p. 73). Rhetorical entrapment occurs when states are unable to credibly challenge the existence or applicability of the norm (frame) or when they are unable to credibly deny that their action violates the norm.

Schimmelfennig argues that rhetorical entrapment powerfully constrains community outcomes, in particular when there is sufficient community identity (i.e. a (set of) norm(s) that define membership) and sufficient interaction density (i.e. members coordinate frequently and tend to hold each other accountable). Community identity is fairly evident for the chemical weapons norm, given the rich history of discursive rejection of these weapons and the continuous efforts to legally ban them. Interaction density is less evident, particularly as the 'community' in this case is built around a single issue and accountability has been problematic in most cases of chemical weapons usage (Tezcür & Horschig, 2020). Still, given the frequent lip service paid to the chemical weapons norm by a number of states, it is warranted to assume that rhetorical entrapment can occur in the case of chemical weapons usage, and can constrain actors without fundamentally changing their preference for usage.

The strategic use of normative arguments to achieve a community outcome is an important contribution that Schimmelfennig makes to the debate about norms in international relations. It is not entirely dissimilar to the (neo)realist or institutionalist approaches that acknowledge that states can use norms to legitimise their position when it suits them. However, the flip side of strategic argumentation – rhetorical entrapment – is better able to explain outcomes in which powerful states (in the rationalist understanding) acquiesce. This makes Schimmelfennig's theory different from pure rationalist models. It is also highly sympathetic to the research project promoted by English School scholars in the sense that the model is actor-driven, yet conscious of the legitimising and constraining force of the prevailing norms of international society.

A perspective that treats norms as tools of international affairs rather than deeply felt convictions – although those two are not mutually exclusive – is also present in some chemical weapons literature. In particular, Michelle Bentley has argued that the chemical weapons taboo in the Syrian case was applied rather strategically by American president Barack Obama, not in order to create legitimacy for intervention, but rather to focus the issue of the civil war around this topic. Observing that "significantly more have died as a consequence of conventional massacres, carried out with guns and explosive devices", Bentley argues that a focus on chemicals creates a "hierarchy of death, one within which conventional fatalities are treated as less important than those caused by chemical arms" (2015, p. 230). She thus makes the argument that the chemical weapons taboo has created a situation that draws away the attention from other forms of violence, often with more casualties and cruelty, to a normative discourse that does not adequately assess the situation. This also made Syria's CWC accession, misleadingly, the focal point of the peace process. Elsewhere, she mentioned that the chemical weapons taboo is "an expectation that can be exploited in order to encourage or coerce an audience into a certain direction and logic of understanding" (2016, p. 23). This lines up well with Schimmelfennig's proposal that norms might be used strategically in political discourse. However, unlike Schimmelfennig, Bentley seems to be more convinced of the receptiveness of the actor's discourse partners, that an actor can "'force' their audience to adopt certain interpretations and pathways of logic that complement the aims of the constructing actor(s). More than mere spin or framing, this is the control of political comprehension […]" (2016, p. 24). Rather than the rhetorical entrapment dynamic proposed by Schimmelfennig, Bentley argues more in the direction of Risse's logic of arguing, at least for the audience the speaking actor is addressing. In doing so, she relies on 'strategic narratives' theorising, as well as Quentin Skinner's work on actor agency and intention, which argues 'authors' to possess significant freedom in creating specific meaning in relation to the language they use.

Before we move away from this linguistic model about the constraints of discourse and back to an understanding of norms more generally, it is worth pointing out that Bentley's approach separates the actor and their audience to such a degree that the actor retains agency, while the audience loses theirs to the point it is in a position to be 'forced'. In fact, the audience is portrayed as unaware that this is

happening to them. The approach seems to accord to the main actor the ability to transcend linguistic conventions, an ability that is entirely denied (or ignored) on the part of the audience. This separation seems to me to be artificial. Schimmelfennig's approach does not suffer from this issue, as both the 'speaking' actor and their discourse partner are aware of the dynamics at play. As it happens, the prevailing norms align more closely with one party's interests over another, but this may be different in different circumstances.

However, what is valuable about Bentley's approach is that it draws attention to the situatedness of norms and the way actors can indeed use them strategically in order to secure their identity and legitimise a certain course of action. Turning from theory to practice, and from linguistic theory to political discourse and normative action, we can agree with Bentley that the chemical weapons norm was useful for Obama and permitted him to pursue the foreign policy he did. However, much like most constructivist writing, the analytical focus on the non-transgressive actor and the strength of a norm obscures the agency of the transgressive actor. If norm 'defenders' can use norms strategically, we have to realise that norm transgressors can do so, too. The following section provides a theoretical framework for how we might understand such transgressions.

Norm transgression

It is apparent from much constructivist and English School literature that norms function to facilitate international politics. What has long fascinated scholars is how this dynamic works, how constraining norms are, and why norms have this constraining ability. In essence, the theoretical interest was with compliance. Studying transgression simply does not contribute to an understanding of how compliance works, and it is therefore not surprising that transgression does not feature prominently in this area of International Relations. However, precisely these findings about the constraining ability of norms, and about the desire of actors to be recognised as conforming, make occasional transgressive episodes more interesting. Particularly in the context of a strong norm, backed by an extensive legal regime, transgression should receive special attention.

In current literature

Norm-related literature in International Relations is largely focussed on processes of norm-building, -socialisation, and functionality. Complementary literature from the fields of International Law and Global Constitutionalism concerns itself with the enforcement question and the legal definitions associated with certain norms. However, neither field has developed a consistent tradition of understanding or explaining processes of norm transgression, corrosion or collapse (Deitelhoff & Zimmermann, 2019). When transgressions are studied, this mostly happens in a realist fashion, rather than with an aim to understand the relationships between the transgression, the transgressor, the norm, and the broader systems context within which the transgression takes place.

Therefore, a debate about norm contestation, and specifically about transgression, is needed. An important contribution in this debate is the special issue of the Journal of Global Security Studies on this topic. It posits the question whether increased contestation 'spell[s] the death of norms and institutions' and takes on the realist challenge by asking whether 'norms [can] withstand current contestation, even when it comes from powerful states', and 'if so, under which circumstances, and why?' (Deitelhoff & Zimmermann, 2019, p. 2-3). The efforts of this journal issue to understand the links between norm contestation and the robustness of a norm is an extremely important step towards appreciating norms throughout their lifecycle. However, where the contributors of this special issue seek to understand the relationship between contestation and corrosion, we need to also appreciate the step that comes before that: the transgression itself.

More recently, scholars have started to theorise about ways in which norms are contested, why that happens and what effect this has on the strength of norms. For instance, Anette Stimmer presents a four-part framework that conceptualises four outcomes of norm contestation (2019). Depending on whether actors agree about frames (justifications) and/or claims (actions), norm clarification, neglect, recognition, and impasse can occur. Norm clarification occurs when actors agree on both the frame and the claim, and leads to a more stable and secure norm. Norm neglects results when actors agree on a course of action, but not on the underlying justification. This situation can develop towards norm clarification, but also towards norm impasse, which is the situation in which actors agree on neither the frame nor the claim. Finally, norm recognition occurs when actors agree on the justification that is applicable to the situation at hand, but not on which course of action is appropriate. This theoretical contribution helps understand and categorise normative disagreement, but remains norm-oriented rather than actor-oriented.

The actor's perspective is better accommodated in Quissell's explanation of why normative disagreement arises (2022). She points to underlying moral frameworks that underpin norms, that are more or less compatible. Specifically, she finds that 'progressive' moral frameworks include 'fairness' and 'no harm', while 'conservative' moral values include 'in-group loyalty', 'authority', and 'purity'. If norm entrepreneurs draw on a particular framework to advocate for a new norm, this may estrange or even antagonise an audience that values a moral framework on the other end of the spectrum. As Quissell's understanding deals exclusively with the 'frames' referred to in Stimmer's typology, such normative disagreements produce norm neglect or norm impasse. Quissell does not use these categories, but they are implicit in the spectrum of agreement that she proposes, sitting at the 'rejection' end of this spectrum. Norm transgression appears as one form of what norm rejection can look like (2022, p. 9).

Importantly, these studies draw our attention to justifications that allude to universally held attitudes on morality, which can be understood as central features of the existence of a norm. Justification in the context of chemical weapons use – through defence of use – can point to a perceived relevance of a

norm. A denial of use is more complex, as it can both be a desire to not be considered a norm transgressor, thus acknowledging the relevance of the norm, and also a blatant refusal to engage with international normative discourses. Regardless, official communications accompanying action are central process features in inquiries about transgressions. Still, while understanding justifications for actions is important, it does not provide insight into the strategic benefits of performing a norm transgression.

Using chemical weapons constitutes a clear norm transgression that poses a question for the broader conception of strategy: what is the strategic purpose of being a norm transgressor? In other words, with what political goal do actors – individuals, organisations, states – intentionally transgress the boundaries of socially acceptable and expected behaviour? Here I come back to a military understanding of strategy: chemical weapons are a military means. At the same time, we should be careful not to collapse back into the operational level of war when discussing strategy. I am particularly interested in the question of political success embedded in military action. My question is a relevant question to ask in the context of chemical weapons as these military tools draw international attention and scrutiny. In most case studies of chemical weapons usage, this question is addressed in limited fashion. It is assumed that the norm transgression forms a hindrance to the use of chemical weapons, as it brings with it the risk of international condemnation. Such studies emphasise that chemical weapons users tend to 'test the waters', to wait and see what the international response looks like before they proceed (Quillen, 2017; Wiejak, 2021). At this point, the question is abandoned and the studies zoom in on operational purposes of chemical weapons use narrowly, and often conclude limited military effectiveness. In order to properly address the question of strategy, we should not stop at the operational level, but try to understand what happens politically.

In the following, I address two studies that, although they are not exclusively concerned with military contexts, highlight important political features of norm transgressive conduct. As established, many constructivist studies remain norm-oriented, rather than actor-oriented. In other words, the question is not what purpose an actor might have in transgressing a norm, but what the cause or effect is of transgression. In order to understand the purpose, rather than the cause or effect of norm transgression, we need to recognise the centrality of norms in shaping behaviour that constructivism highlights, but also the agency of actors to consciously diverge from set expectations. That agency is accorded to actors in the English School tradition, but this tradition equally lacks engagement with this specific question.

Having recognised both, Miles Evers (2017) proposes a study of purposeful norm transgression along two axes: the insider-outsider dichotomy, referring to actors' self-identification, and the regulative-constitutive dichotomy, referring to transgression types (p. 788-9). Insiders consider themselves leaders of the international society, while outsiders consider themselves excluded or marginalised. Regulative transgressions are behavioural violations, such as breaking a law. Constitutive transgressions follow

from behaviour that violates the identity-shaping functions of norms, such as – in Evers' example – an individual civilian declaring war on a state (p. 788). What follows are four ideal types of transgressions: rejection (when an outsider confirms their outsider status by behaving counter to a norm), adaptation (when an insider seeks to model new behaviour for the insider-group), inclusion (when an outsider acts like an insider in order to challenge distinctions between the groups), and exclusion (when an insider sets new standards of behaviour to further divide the in- and outsider groups).

There are two main issues we need to touch on in relation to this proposal. First of all, exactly what type of international community are transgressors rebelling against, and what type are they seeking to rebuild? Evers uses the English School typology of 'international society' and 'international system' interchangeably, but zooming in on these in relation to particular transgressions would create more conceptual and practical clarity. We must acknowledge that international systems and societies are fluid, and that they can exist simultaneously across various policy fields, in different geographic localities, and at different times. At the same time, if we seek to create analytical categories like Evers does, it is wise to build on existing categorisations instead of using distinct terms interchangeably.

Second, there are instances of norm transgression that are not covered by Evers' typology. The most prominent of these are violations that are not publicly acknowledged. Evers' research question is "Why do states *intentionally and publicly* violate international norms, even when they anticipate social or material costs for doing so?" (p. 786, emphasis added), and explicitly connects intentionality and public acknowledgement in such a way that becomes impossible for a non-acknowledged violation to be an intentional violation. As he puts it:

> A norm violation must satisfy […] criteria to be considered intentional. First, a state must publicly recognize the norm's existence. Then, it must physically alter its behavior to violate the norm. Finally, a state must publicly acknowledge its noncompliance. Violations that satisfy anything less than all three criteria are difficult to distinguish from violations that were unintended: actions caused by mistake, bureaucratic drift, or a lack of resources. A state must clearly acknowledge and embrace its noncompliance. (p. 788)

Such an assumption of publicity is problematic, however. Actors can acknowledge the existence of a norm and even affirm its importance, while still intentionally violating it and denying doing so. Examples are legion. Mendaciousness is not uncommon in international politics, for instance when it comes to human rights such as the right to a fair trial, but also environmental protections, and – central to this paper – the use of chemical weapons. So, violations can be intentional without being acknowledged. To a large extent, Evers is right to leave such examples out of the scope of his paper, as he is particularly interested in norm transgressions that are performative, that is, "a public process for conveying and defining an actor's identity" (p. 788). Most of the time, this requires a public display of the transgression. However, certain norm violations stand out so much, are so visible, and cannot be

carried out 'accidentally', that even public denial is not a sign of trying to hide the truth. It is rather more puzzling than that, almost like a game that can be played in impunity; a game that also has implications for identity. Chemical weapon's usage is one of these.

Alluding to this 'game' is Xymena Kurowska and Anatoly Reshetnikov's exploration of 'trickstery' as a mode of international interaction (2021). Tricksters are inherently dualistic actors who are "both conformist and deviant, hero and anti-hero", unsettling global hierarchies and "apparently endors[ing] but indirectly subvert[ing] normative frameworks" (p. 232). Tricksters display a-morality through overidentification with norms, which allows them to be both obedient and disobedient at the same time by creating a type of 'mock' identity. Such performative actions can reveal hypocrisies and normative contradictions. Russia's protection of the Syrian regime in the face of chemical weapons allocations is used as an example. Russia identified strongly with the norm prohibiting chemical weapons and the principles of peace and security associated with it, yet accused Western regimes of politicising these principles. The Russian diplomats thus presented themselves as the ultimate guardians of the international legal order while frustrating the process of putting the legal order into action. Kurowska and Reshetnikov comment here that "Western diplomats label Russia's practices as "[…] fantasy and fiction, and generally as *playing games* and wasting everybody's time" (p. 243, emphasis mine).

Trickstery is therefore a useful concept to consider as we analyse norm transgressions that fall between neat categories of International Relations theory. The inherent plurality of such situations, in which actors transgress norms yet seek to maintain international recognition, requires that we abandon exclusionary and singular conceptions of identity and embrace plurality and subversion.

Both Evers and Kurowska and Reshetnikov offer relevant insights into understanding what happens when norms are transgressed in various circumstances. We can use them in combination with a military analysis of chemical weapons use to inform our understanding of the strategic purpose of transgressing the chemical weapons norm.

Norm transgression: a framework

My interest in the topic of transgression consists in part of the claim that the use of chemical weapons is a norm transgression that is inherently performative. The chemical weapons norm was not always strong, but has become so over the course of the last century, making the instances elaborated on in the present thesis moments of conscious, performative norm transgressions. The idea that social action is performative is not new. Sociologist Ervin Goffman used the metaphor of drama to describe how social actors are mutually judged by normative standards, and are therefore preoccupied with appearing socialised (1956). The performance is meant to appear to be conforming, not to be standing out. I propose instead that standing out, appearing to deviate, can be a goal in itself for social actors. For Goffman, performance refers to 'playing pretend', at least in so far as we are unable to gauge what goes on in the minds of others. Constructivists propose that norm performance is internalised indeed, and that

norms become embedded, even to the extent that they become taboos that are hardly spoken of (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Price, 1995). Regardless of whether norms are internalised in actuality, I use 'performance' not in the sense of 'playing pretend', but rather in relation to the audience at which behaviour is aimed. Performance in this sense has little to do with the action that is performed, but rather with the attention it generates from an audience. A performance only becomes a performance once other social actors pay attention. Particularly when those other actors – the audience – has come to expect a certain course of action, deviation generates attention.

Deviant behaviour generates attention, and can do so intentionally or unintentionally. For my argument, I focus on intentional and open deviant behaviour, performed with the goal of being seen. Resistance movements in wartime situations perform transgressive behaviours, but take all precautions to not be seen. They are intentional, but not open. Similarly, a confused elderly man on an otherwise quiet street grasping at passers-by trying to find his way home generates attention and is highly visible, but is hardly putting up a performance. It is not his intention to be looked at by many people. He would rather find an audience of one to take him home and be shielded from everyone pointing and whispering. His behaviour is openly deviant, but not intentional. Intentional and open deviant behaviour, on the other hand, is a conscious choice to draw attention, even if such attention can turn out to be negative. In constructivist scholarship, this option is hardly examined. The assumption remains that social actors are wanting to conform, as Goffman does. Alternatively, in realist or liberal scholarship deviant behaviour is not a valid category of analysis, as all behaviour is essentially neutral. I reject both the constructivist assumption that social actors want to (appear to) conform, and the rationalist assumption that norms do not matter. In fact, for intentional and open deviant behaviour to successfully draw attention, the audience has to be highly normatively oriented. Deviant behaviour cannot exist when there is no normative baseline against which to 'measure' deviance.

Audiences in international relations are not a common analytical tool, especially in norm theory. Domestic audiences are considered in foreign policy analysis, particularly through the audience cost theory that supposes that the possibility of domestic backlash helps strengthen threats and promises made internationally (e.g. Kertzer & Brutger, 2016). Discourse analysis in international relations often deals with audiences implicitly, without carefully defining it. The study of credibility and legitimacy takes a similar approach, one that implies an audience rather than defines it. With regard to norm theory in particular, Adler-Nissen conceptualises the international society to consist of an 'audience of normals': the "national governments, diplomats, journalists, companies, and organizations" who "attempt to impose stigma" on a transgressive actor (2014, p. 152). These 'normals' are the bedrock of international society, producing and reproducing the practices that keep international society going. They are not active gatekeepers, as they only spring into action once a transgression has been performed. In fact, the audience of normals is created through the process of stigmatisation in response to the transgression, a process that Goffman also engages with on a societal level (1964). Adler-Nissen refers

explicitly to the English School of International Relations on which to base her understanding of the audience of normals.

With this in mind, how might we understand transgression? Based on the literature currently available, we can create the following matrix, shown in table 1.1. On the vertical axis, we find the primary audience associated with the transgressive act and accompanying discourse. The two options – international and regional society – are not exclusive, but in most cases we can imagine there is one that takes precedence over the other. For instance, if an actor draws heavily on regional-specific political events, geography, tradition or religion, or explicitly employs a regional-identity narrative, we can assume that the regional audience is meant to be addressed and engaged. That does not mean that the act is irrelevant for the wider, global international society. Indeed, if the transgressive act is highly visible it automatically draws an international audience, and the transgressor will adjust accordingly, but that does not automatically move them into the 'international' category. The distinction is drawn from English School scholarship referred to above, which acknowledges that regional conceptions of common identity or the importance of shared standards of behaviour are often 'thicker' than international ones.

On the horizontal axis, we can distinguish between two modes of accompanying narrative. The first is 'frame challenge', which refers to situations in which transgressors actively reimagine the rules. They can challenge the norm on the grounds that the frame – rather than the claim – needs to be reconsidered. According to Stimmer's typology, such situations can lead to norm clarification (a new mutual or collective understanding about when the norm applies and to whom), or norm impasse (no common understanding about the status of the norm) (2019). 'Claim denial' refers to situations in which transgressors do not deny the relevance of the norm or seek to reimagine it, but actively deny that they have transgressed it. In other words, the claim is challenged that a specific act or event occurred. In such situations, transgressive actors will go out of their way to confirm their agreement with the norm and the relevance of the norm for the case at hand, but they will deny the norm was violated.

Response to allegations

	Frame challenge	Claim denial
International	Global adaptation	Sowing disorder
Regional	Regional exception	Shifting allegiances

Table 1.1: Transgression matrix

The following four categories can be identified:

Global adaptation can be considered as the main aim of a transgressive actor who seeks to address an international audience while actively challenging the frame employed in the allegations. By means of the transgression, such actors draw attention to themselves in order to reach a large audience. By actively reimaging the rules in the process, the strategic aim of these actors is to adjust the norm. Actors can claim that a norm is outdated and should be rejected in its entirety. They might also claim that a particular norm should not apply to the situation at hand and that the international society should reconsider its standards. This category largely aligns with Evers' category of adaptation, which he uses in the context of insiders of international society performing a regulative transgression (2017, p. 790). The example he uses is applicable here too: when NATO intervened in Kosovo in 1999, it transgressed the non-intervention principle as Kosovo was not a member state. In doing so, NATO sought a collective re-adjustment of this principle in the face of human rights violations and might therefore be considered a norm entrepreneur (Wheeler, 2000).

Regional exception can be considered as the less ambitious version of global adaptation. Actors in this category also seek to reimagine collective rules, but do so with explicit reference to their unique, regional position. Rather than rejecting the norm as a whole, such actors rather claim that the norm should not apply to them because of their regional embeddedness, their different customs, or other specifics. The insider/outsider distinction that Evers draws does not apply here, as regional actors often consider themselves to be somewhat of an insider in international society (2017). The two are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they consider their regional identity to be more important in cases where the two do conflict. An example here is the case of the FIFA World Cup hosted by Qatar in 2022. In the face of allegations of human rights violations, particularly with reference to the rights of migrant workers and LGBT+ visiting fans and locals, Qatari officials countered with a dual narrative. On the one hand, the country took steps to improve its human rights record vis-à-vis the rights of migrant workers (Al Thani, 2021). On the other hand, statespeople such as emir Shaykh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani emphasised that regarding the rights of LGBT+ individuals, they "expect[ed] people to respect our culture" ("Qatar's emir wants World Cup," 2022; Dorsey, 2022). These individuals would not be persecuted, but officials warned against public displays of affection. As such, Qatar sought to re-interpret an international norm in the context of their culture, not outrightly rejecting the rights of LGBT+ individuals on a global scale, but rather adjusting the norm for their regional situatedness. Another example is the Pan-Asianism movement of the interwar period, under the leadership of Japan, which emulated Western templates yet rejected those parts of international law it considered imperialist (Suzuki, 2014).

Sowing disorder is pursued as an objective when transgressors deny a violation has occurred or is occurring, while continuing the violating practice. This latter element, the continuation, is important in order to distinguish qualitatively from one-off violations that have less impact or seek to put an issue on the international agenda. Continued violations and denial lead to confusion. Audiences witness one thing, yet the actor in question says another. This leads to a situation in which the status of the norm becomes very insecure. The norm is confirmed to exist and to hold relevance, but is not acted upon. This discrepancy is difficult for the audience to grapple with, as it indicates a breakdown of the ability of norms to constrain behaviour. By extension, it demonstrates the inability of the international society to act through normative discourse. Short of material intervention, there is little the international society can do to make the transgressor uphold the norm. In cases where there is a lone transgressor engaging with a more-or-less global international society, various material pressures resulting from isolation are likely to remedy the situation, although this is not guaranteed.

Shifting allegiances occurs when denial happens in a regional context. Rather than readjusting the norm, such a situation is meant to create a more definite break between regions and the global normative order. The discrepancy between events and accompanying narrative described in the 'sowing disorder' category is relevant here as well. However, in this case, it is meant to create an alternative version of reality that different regions or actors within them can subscribe to. Especially in circumstances where

there is a lack of evidence or conflicting evidence (or where actors seek to create the illusion of conflicting evidence), such situations put pressure on the unity of international society and can have an impact on the ontological security of the community. This forces the international society into a difficult position. Regional fragmentation resulting from shifting allegiances also reduces the ability of the international community to act through intervention, making this category particularly impactful on normative regimes.

What follows is an exploration of three cases of chemical weapons usage, with particular attention paid to the operational and strategic logic of it along with the norm dynamics that enable certain strategic effects to take shape. The framework presented here is applied to highlight these effects and appreciate the strategic significance of chemical weapons use as a norm transgression. It is important to note that in the history of chemical weapons use state actors have rarely followed a singular narrative, but denial features most prominently. As will become clear, the Iraq case under review in this thesis is a unique case in the sense that the use of chemical weapons was admitted to during the war, albeit first in covert terms (e.g. 'insecticide') before more openly and with reference to international law in later years. In order to assess the implications of such openness, this case is placed in the 'frame challenge' column of the matrix even though Iraq denied the use of chemical weapons for most of the war. As a result, I accord more weight to statements made in later years, when the regime integrated the use of chemical weapons into a more coherent narrative to explain its view of what was going on in the region.

The Soviet-Afghan War, 1979-1989

Introduction

This chapter outlines the history of the Soviet chemical weapons programme and the alleged use of chemical weapons by the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, between 1979 and 1983. While many questions remain about the topic of chemical weapons and the Soviet-Afghan War, it is likely that chemical weapons have been used quite consistently during the first three years of the war, although not in great numbers and without any aspiration for decisiveness. In fact, the use of chemicals seems to have mainly been for training purposes, although the incorporation of chemical weapons into Soviet doctrine indicates that this went beyond occasional try-outs and was rather considered important experience for potential conflicts with Western adversaries. By 1983, the use of chemical weapons had ceased, which coincided with increased international attention for the issue and a lack of progress in Afghanistan. Very limited attempts were made by Soviet leadership to justify the use of chemical weapons in states such as Afghanistan, which was not a member state to the Geneva Protocol, but mainly the allegations that the Soviet Union actually used gas were met with denial and deflection. It appears that initially, the Soviet Union sought to reinterpret the emergent chemical weapons norm and carve out an exception for its own situation, as the United States had attempted with regards to Vietnam. However, by the early 1980s, the norm was clearer than it had been in the 1960s, and the Soviet Union's relative international isolation outside the Warsaw pact area as well as its internal weaknesses prohibited such effects from being realised.

History of the Soviet Union's chemical weapons programme

The Soviet chemical weapons programme built on earlier research and development by the Tsarist armed forces, but, like so many other branches of society, was hampered by the purges of the 1920s and 1930s. During the First World War, the Russian army suffered more deaths from chemical warfare than any other belligerent; Harry Gilchrist provides a number of 56,000, which is much higher than France (8,000) and Great Britain (6,062) (1928, p. 7). Ian Johnson blames a general lack of offensive and defensive capabilities for this discrepancy (2018). Russia started its own chemical weapons production in earnest after the Germans used chlorine on the Eastern Front in late May 1915. Phosgene, chlorine and various tear gasses were produced in weaponised from in 1916, and a gas mask capable of some protection was invented that year. This 'Kummant-Zelinskiy mask', named after its inventors, became available in 1916, but suffered from a number of shortcomings (Kojevnikov, 2002). A better mask, developed by Josef Avalov, was only introduced at the end of 1916, just months before Russia's internal affairs greatly reduced its involvement in the war.

Germany had integrated the use of gas in its operations on the Eastern front rather effectively, and according to Joachim Krause and Charles Mallory, gas had become "firmly established in German

doctrine" (1992, p. 26). The Russian experience, on the other hand, was marked by poor training and operational incompetence. In fact, the Chief of Staff General M. V. Alekseev was an opponent of chemical weapons as he believed Russia's inferiority in this respect could not be overcome soon enough (Krause & Mallory, 1992, p. 26). Overall, Alexei Kojevnikov argues that the Russian armed forces were largely unprepared for the industrial nature of the Great War: the available scientific knowledge could not be harnessed due to a lack of pre-existing relationships between civilian and military industry, and despite major investments of money and manpower, Russian capabilities remained far behind those of the other belligerents (2002). Krause and Mallory, who attempt to reconstruct the role of chemical weapons in Soviet military doctrine, conclude that Russia was not prepared for chemical war and that it ordered the use of chemical weapons as a 'morale booster' rather than because it had sufficiently integrated the weapons in operational thought (1992, p. 27).

The frustrations over this inferiority spurred both military and civilian efforts during the interwar period, during which the Soviets stressed the modernist view of the promise of technology (Johnson, 2018). The Soviet regime, having disposed of the former Tsarist government, emphasised the change in attitude towards technology vis-à-vis their predecessors. Stalin blamed the military and industrial "backwardness" of the former regime for the major losses suffered during the war (Johnson, 2018, p. 19), and according to Krause and Mallory, "special importance" was attached to chemical weapons in the subsequent period (1992, p. 34). Much like the other major powers of the interbellum, the Soviet Union formally called for a chemical weapons prohibition from 1920 onward and supported the process at Geneva in 1925 (Robinson, 1971, p. 284). It also seems that Soviet leadership preferred chemical defence research over offence (Johnson, 2018). This curious mix between investment in and discussions about the operational promise of chemical weapons on the one hand, and active efforts to ban them on the other, is typical for the time period.[3]

The Red Army first used chemical weapons during the civil war that had erupted in the wake of the October Revolution. Between 1918 and 1921, rebellious Socialists that threatened Bolshevik control – including what we would now call civilians – were targeted with gas on at least three occasions, and both the British and the Soviets had carried out aerial gas attacks in that period (Johnson, 2018). However, despite these perceived successes, the Red Army poorly maintained the stockpiles left over from their Tsarist predecessors and by 1930, the vast majority had to be decommissioned or destroyed. In 1925, after a series of reorganisations, the Soviet chemical weapons programme was organised under the Military-Chemical Defence Committee (VOkhIMU), which was a relatively independent organisation headed by Yakov Fishman. However, many talented chemists who had played crucial roles

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[3] Across Europe and in the United States, proponents and opponents of chemical weapons entered influential positions over the years and programmes were adjusted accordingly. While pledging no first use, all major powers were prepared to retaliate in kind by the eve of the Second World War. For an overview of interwar chemical weapons programmes and perspectives of the major powers in Europe and the US, see Robinson, 1971, pp. 268-293.

during the early development of chemical weapons in Tsarist Russia, had either fled or been arrested by the end of the decade. As Johnson put it: "Soviet ideological requirements trumped Fishman's technical needs, handicapping chemical weapons development" (2018, p. 23). Practically, the Soviet chemical weapons programme came to rely on German expertise and imports, which resulted in a number of successful tests and increased funding between 1926 and 1936. As a result of the Treaty of Versailles, Germany was officially prohibited from creating its own chemical weapons programme, and could benefit from cooperation with the Soviets to maintain and develop expertise abroad (Krause & Mallory, 1992, p. 38). However, a new generation of Soviet-trained chemists would gradually take over, even though their expertise was rather narrow as a result of efficiency demands (Johnson, 2018, p. 30). As a result, while the production of offensive and defensive capabilities by VOkhIMU was large, there was relatively little theoretical development and innovation. In 1937, Fishman himself became subject to the purging efforts of the regime, and the chemical weapons programme was left in disarray. Still, the Soviet Union maintained large stockpiles on the eve of the Second World War, which Johnson argues might have played a vital role in staying Germany from using theirs (2018). However, Lev Fedorov argued that the Germans had apparently overestimated the size of these stockpiles, as a result of an inability on the part of the Soviet Union to maintain full production capacity (1994).

During the opening stages of the Great Patriotic War, Soviet troops refrained from using chemical weapons for operational reasons, despite chemical weapons having a defensive role in Soviet doctrine. Forward supplies had been confiscated by German troops, a deterioration of chemical discipline hampered effective use, and the fear of retaliation was mutual (Robinson, 1971, pp. 323-324). However, these operational reasons were not the only cause of the non-use of chemical weapons at the Eastern Front. Given the operational difficulties associated with using gas effectively, and the internal purges that had greatly damaged Soviet chemical preparedness, the Soviets had become convinced that it would be dangerous to introduce chemical weapons on the battlefield, and they had committed to a non-first use policy as a result. What is more, the Soviets once again acknowledged their technological inferiority vis-à-vis the Germans, particularly in the field of chemical weapons. A fear of unknown new substances and delivery systems invented by Germany further prevented first use by the Soviet Union (Krause & Mallory, 1992, p.89).

This fear was not baseless; the Germans had indeed developed new, lethal substances. When the Soviets gained the offensive in 1943, troops captured tabun and sarin plants in Germany and modern-day Poland and recovered the scientific data necessary for the production of soman (Vásárhelyi & Földi, 2007). However, the general conclusion from the war had been that mechanised land and air warfare and strategic bombing were the main means of warfighting in the present, and chemical war was generally approached from a defensive viewpoint. Krause and Mallory describe how as a result of Stalin's restrictions on independent thinking, there was little innovation with regards to the newly discovered nerve agents, and they were not accorded a prominent place in Soviet doctrine (1992, p. 110). However,

doctrinal stagnation did not directly translate into technological and scientific stagnation. After the war, the recovery of German research on organophosphates resulted in new research on nerve gasses during the Cold War era.

These organophosphates, which are often referred to as 'second generation' chemical weapons, were produced on an industrial scale after Stalin's death (Vásárhelyi & Földi, 2007). The Soviet chemical weapons programme was further supplemented with the introduction of research on V-gas, which was tested on humans, and binary chemical weapons in the 1960s. Binary chemical weapons are composed of two chemical agents that become toxic once synthesised, a process usually prompted during delivery (Fedorov, 1994). The 'third generation' chemical weapons in the Soviet Union consisted of new nerve agents discovered through the Foliant programme, between 1973 and 1992, which are known as 'novichoks' or 'newcomers'. Vladimir Pitschmann (2014) calls these 'fourth generation', but Fedorov does not make that further distinction between the early binary weapons and the novichok agents (1994). The Foliant programme produced a number of agents, including A-234 which was the nerve agent used for the 2018 Salisbury and Amesbury poisonings (Harvey, McMahon & Berg, 2020).

The expectations regarding chemical weapons during the Cold War were rather mixed. The use of herbicides and incendiary agents by the United States in Vietnam prompted new multilateral discussions in the United Nations Conference on Disarmament (CD) and its predecessors. In 1969, Nixon had unilaterally stopped American production of new biological weapons, but the United States maintained an active chemical defence. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, appeared to be much more active in maintaining, producing, and developing chemical weapons. Only under Mikhail Gorbachev, new efforts were directed towards multilateral negotiations about a ban on chemical weapons. In light of this, in 1987 the Soviet Union hosted representatives from 45 states and journalists at a demonstration of Soviet chemical capabilities as well as means to destroy chemical munitions. At this demonstration, munitions containing first generation (lewisite and chlorine), second generation (sarin and soman), third generation (V-gas), and CS-gas (riot control, tear gas) were displayed ("Soviets Put Chemical Arms on Display", 1987; Vásárhelyi & Földi, 2007; de Vrij, 2016). While the purpose of the event was rapprochement, it also showed that the Soviet armed forces had been well-prepared to engage in chemical war in the 1980s, and had a variety of weapons and delivery systems at its disposal including warheads for tactical missiles, air bombs and hand grenades. Novichok agents were not part of the demonstration. According to United States intelligence, the Soviet Union had 80.000 troops dedicated to chemical defence by 1980, and all Soviet troops trained in chemical gear regularly (Devine, 1990). However, the military technology on display was widely recognised to be based on weapons designs from the 1960's, showing little actual innovation since then (Krause & Mallory, 1992, p. 131). It appears that the 'rediscovery' of chemical weapons after Stalin's death led to convictions that chemical weapons would be commonly used in future warfare, which becomes apparent for instance in a 1962 field manual that recommends frequent tactical use of chemical weapons (Krause & Mallory, 1992, p. 127). However, Krause and

Mallory also note that official Soviet military doctrine from the time omits mentions of offensive chemical weapons usage. They conclude that it is likely that the renewed interest in chemical weapons in the 1960s only translated into large-scale chemical weapons production in the 1970s. The 'golden age' of Soviet chemical weapons production took place in the 1970s and early 1980s (p. 155).

More than in the United States, Soviet doctrinal thinkers were concerned with planning for large scale land warfare in Europe as much as with a strategic – i.e. nuclear – war with the United States. The extent to which the non-use of nuclear weapons in such scenarios could realistically be replaced with conventional explosives is unclear, and some suggest that for certain operational purposes, chemical weapons would have been logical substitutes for other explosives in Soviet military thinking (Hoeber & Douglass, 1978; Bay, 1978). Others believed such a scenario to be plausible but were concerned about the well-known operational difficulties associated with chemical weapons (Krause & Mallory, 1992, p. 144). A third group considered the use of chemical weapons in the European theatre implausible (Robinson, 1982, p. 15). It is likely that this debate occurred inside the Soviet Union as well, and that the development and potential use of chemical weapons was not undisputed in the Soviet Union. Given the relatively large build-up of chemical weapons during the 1970s, Krause and Mallory conclude that chemical weapons likely did feature prominently in theatre war doctrine (i.e. war in Europe) around that time despite those debates. Information disclosed later by insiders such as Lev Fedorov, who worked as a chemical weapons scientist in the Soviet Union, suggests that both conventional and chemical weapons indeed featured in offensive plans for a land warfare in the European theatre (Averre, 1999, p. 135).

As mentioned, Soviet chemists developed new nerve agents, referred to as novichok, in the 1980s. According to Gryörgyi Vásárhelyi and László Földi, novichok agents were produced to achieve three particular objectives: to circumvent the upcoming chemical weapons treaty, to develop undetectable substances, and to develop substances that NATO's tactical gear could not protect against (2007). To reach the first objective, it has been suggested by former Soviet chemist and Foliant contributor Vil Mirzayanov that novichoks were designed to resemble organophosphate insecticides and pesticides (Franca et al., 2019). In fact, decisions to create binary weapons using Foliant substances were signed by Gorbachev in September and October of 1989, right as the United States and the Soviet Union had signed the Wyoming Memorandum of Understanding to provide for an exchange of data on chemical weapons (Fedorov, 1994; Franca et al., 2019). In other words, multilateral and bilateral negotiations were well underway for the creation of the Chemical Weapons Convention when the Soviet Union started production of the most potent chemical weapon ever created. This was not unlike the United States, however, which had restarted the production of chemical weapons – binary ones in particular – in 1985 under the direction of the Reagan administration and only stopped production in 1990 (Devine, 1990). Timothy Devine suggests however, that this decision was at least in part meant to put pressure on the Soviet Union to make concessions in the negotiation process, and thus to make progress towards the CWC (1990). Vásárhelyi and Földi detail that after the CWC was signed and the destruction of

existing stockpiles was underway, Russia started research and development of incapacitants, including Kolokol-1, the fentanyl derivative that may have been used during the 2002 Moscow Theatre Siege (2007). As such, while the 1980s saw a definite shift away from the large-scale use of traditional chemical weapons as doctrinally relevant, owing to significant qualitative developments in conventional weaponry and technology, the Soviet Union did not abandon chemical weapons research. Instead, research reoriented towards riot control and new nerve gasses. This aligns with ideological developments under Gorbachev, who abandoned the offensive and war-winning doctrines of his predecessors and instead advocated for war-avoidance and early termination (Krause & Mallory, 1992, p. 171).

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan

The late 1970s can be described as the heyday of Soviet doctrinal thought about chemical weapons, their utility in non-nuclear warfare and the tactical role these weapons might play in combined arms operations. It is during this time that Soviet leadership started to consider more active military engagement in Afghanistan, which had experienced two recent power transitions that left Soviet leadership with an apparently unacceptable measure of uncertainty about the ability of the Afghan government to stabilise and control the many different regions and peoples of Afghanistan. Like most wars, the war in Afghanistan was motivated by politics. Unlike the Iran-Iraq War, which occurred simultaneously, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was not a war of territorial conquest but a counterinsurgency war aimed at securing a communist regime in Kabul. The insurgency and counterinsurgency efforts had been ongoing even before the Soviets invaded, and while General Secretary Hafizullah Amin's assassination was the first act of war of the Soviets in Afghanistan, they had been sending civil and military advisors into the country in the years previous, as well as supplying Afghanistan with military equipment.

By the summer of 1978, the Parcham and Khalq factions within the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) had become rivals. When the Khalqs had prevailed a year later, a new internal power strife between Khalqist leaders Nur Muhammad Taraki, who was General Secretary at the time, and Hafizullah Amin resulted in Taraki's murder on 8 October 1979 (Amstutz, 1986, p. 39; Hughes, 2008, p. 330). The Soviet invasion started with the assassination of Amin, who had succeeded Taraki, in the night of 27-28 December 1979. This followed two full days of Soviet army airlifts into various airbases across the country, encountering hardly any resistance. Earlier in December, only 1000 Soviet troops had already moved to secure major road systems, resulting in the Soviets controlling the major lines of communication and effectively being in charge by the end of December 1979, while having relatively few troops in the country (Collins, 1983, p. 151). Among the invading troops, Central Asian Soviet military personnel was overrepresented, while Russian troops were in the minority (Reuveny & Prakash, 1999, p. 697).

Involvement in Afghanistan was initially met with hesitation among the Soviet leadership, who had mostly rejected Taraki's calls for direct interference in the months before his assassination with reference to the lack of popular support for communism in Afghanistan (Quimet, 2000, p. 716; Hughes, 2008, p. 331). However, over time, the reasons for intervention mounted to such an extent that invasion became viewed as necessary and justified by the core group of Soviet decision-makers. The friendship treaty of December 1978 was used to legitimise the invasion, even if the language of this treaty hardly supported such a unilateral decision (Amstutz, 1986, p. 46; Payind, 1989, p. 119). According to Geraint Hughes, the decision to intervene was made by a small group of Politburo members, including Andropov (KGB chairman) and Ustinov (Defence minister), while Brezhnev was suffering from ill health (2008, p. 330-331). These hawkish figures actively silenced voices that questioned the wisdom of intervention.

The literature puts forward several motivations for the Soviet invasion. The first is the fear of Muslim fundamentalism so close to the republics of the southern USSR that had Islamic majorities, which was also espoused by United States Secretary of State Haig (McIntosh, 1995, p. 418). Atheism as promoted by communism would be in strict opposition to a potential Islamic republic of Afghanistan, threatening the security of the Soviet Union's immediate neighbourhood and potentially inspiring opposition in its Islamic majority states. According to Alam Payind, the Soviet leadership probably also had "embarrassing memories of losing influence over Sudan, Egypt, and Somalia (three other Muslim countries) […] fresh in [their] minds" (1989, p. 118). Intervention with the aim of putting in place a stable pro-Communist government was in line with the Brezhnev doctrine, formulated after the Czech invasion in 1968. This doctrine held that a threat to any socialist government of a given country is a threat to "the socialist Commonwealth as a whole", thereby becoming "a common problem, the concern of all socialist parties" (Brezhnev, 1968, cited by Amstutz, 1986, p. 42).

Such a threat was also posed by Amin's designs to re-establish ties with the United States. Alam Payind cites a KGB source suspecting Amin to be a CIA agent, although this is by no means confirmed and generally unlikely (1989, p. 716; Hughes, 2008, p. 332). If these rumours were true, however, this effectively changed the situation into one directly counter to the national interests of the Soviet Union, "and the course of military intervention seemed unavoidable" (p. 717). J. Bruce Amstutz similarly speculates about the reasons for intervention, the first being a desire to stabilise a friendly regime in Kabul, and the second being that a continued presidency of Amin would inevitably lead to diminished control (1986, p. 40). However, Collins argues that without Soviet support Amin would have surely been ousted by the opposition, given his poor record of securing public support. In his analysis, the Soviets concluded that this would result in a "blow to Soviet prestige" as well as a potentially hostile new government (1983, p. 150). Hughes also mentions "considerations of prestige" (2008, p. 331). The Soviets could not live with, nor without Amin. This necessitated an intervention.

Amstutz also points towards a more regional strategic objective, namely that Afghanistan would provide the Soviets with bases only 400 miles removed from the Arabian Sea, becoming a strategic actor in the region (1986, p. 45). Scott McIntosh similarly proposes that the invasion might have been motivated by strategy rather than only security, and that a Soviet foothold in Afghanistan would provide them with a forward base close to the oil-rich areas of Iran and its ports (1995, p. 419).

The ideological environment and the dynamics of the Cold War were also conducive to the invasion. As Lester Grau (2004) points out, "in the 1970s, communism and nationalism were sweeping the planet." (p. 132). He lists Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Angola, Mozambique and Ethiopia having recently switched to becoming communist, indicating a loss for Western liberalism and capitalism. Chile, El Salvador, and Argentina might soon be added to that list, and the Soviets had warm ties with a number of communist cells in Western states (p. 133). While armed intervention in Afghanistan would be a first intervention outside of the Soviet Union's direct sphere of interest, Hughes argues that it did develop logically from the Brezhnev doctrine and the recent intensification of Soviet armed support to communist movements in the developing world (2008, p. 332).

Thus, there were strategic interests as well as ideational interests involved, such that the invasion was considered highly important. Of course, the invasion was not vital for the Soviet Union to the extent that its survival as a superpower depended on it. However, the loss of face associated with a failure to respond as well as a strategic window of opportunity to establish forward presence in Asia – given the weak government in Kabul as well as the ongoing tumult in Iraq and Iran – provided enough incentive to intervene. Of course, as the logic of conflict often goes, once the Soviets were involved in Afghanistan is became progressively more difficult to abandon these interests when success was not quickly achieved. This is one of the reasons why this conflict has often been compared to the Vietnam war: the endless conflict against an elusive enemy, with rising costs and interests that diminish relatively, while the cost of admitting defeat is too high to give in to. The role of ideology, the closed and inhospitable terrain, the day-versus-night dynamics, and even the use of chemicals are other similarities.

Initial objectives included the occupation of Afghanistan's major cities and centres of communication and infrastructure, to free up Afghan Army capacity for its fight with the mujahidin, and to provide the Afghan Army with logistical, air, artillery and intelligence support and training (Hughes, 2008, p. 337). However, the scope of the operation was constantly in motion, and by 1982 it had expanded to direct engagement with the resistance movements. It subsequently declined in 1983, when the United Nations became involved in settlement negotiations, only to intensify in 1984 and 1985. Finally, under Gorbachev, Soviet involvement gradually declined until it officially withdrew in February 1989.

The Soviet armed forces were not well equipped or trained for counterinsurgency warfare, instead having been preparing for a strategic war with NATO or China. The theatre war it was presented with in Afghanistan required a different approach, from strategic leadership down to tactical units. To the

extent that Soviet leadership had imagined theatre warfare below the nuclear threshold, it had been focused on conventional operations in Europe. Such an enemy could not be more different from the ideologically motivated and highly diverse mujahidin (Krause & Mallory, 1992). The massive use of force, both in terms of artillery bombardments and sweep operations, did little to affect the numbers and capabilities of the mujahidin in the countryside. The Soviets started to adapt in 1984, increasing the use of mobile forces and focusing on specific mujahidin groups. The use of helicopters increased the effectiveness of ground forces. However, these ground forces largely remained ill-prepared, lacking tactical skill and operational flexibility (Hughes, 2008, p. 339).

Hughes concludes that the Soviet armed forces suffered from multiple problems that came to light in Afghanistan, and ultimately contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Armed Forces. Besides poor tactical skill, the Soviets suffered from ineffective medical services, poor discipline, extensive substance abuse, rivalry in the officer corps, and racial tensions between Slavic and Muslim soldiers (2008, p. 340).

Reasons to abandon the war effort were strengthened by two factors in particular: the financial burden it imposed on Soviet finances, and Gorbachev's perestroika policy, which needed relations between East and West to improve in order to succeed (Hughes, 2008). The beginning of the end can be pinned on 5 May, 1986, when Gorbachev appointed Dr. Mohamed Najibullah to the presidency of Afghanistan to initiate a process of national reconciliation. Continued talks with the United States and Pakistan in Geneva finally led to the Geneva Accords of 1988, which provided a way out for the Soviets.

The use of chemical weapons

Whether or not the Soviets used chemical weapons during the and war in Afghanistan in the 1980s is as much unclear as it is underreported, especially in later publications, creating both doubt and suspicion. While the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Canada are among states confirming the use of chemical substances in Afghanistan, alternative theses exist explaining some of the evidence differently. One of the most famous counter-hypotheses is the proposal that obtained 'yellow rain' residue was merely bee faeces containing pollen (Robinson, Guillemin and Meselson, 1987). However, this study was carried out using the material and eye-witness accounts from South East Asia, where simultaneous and similar accusations were raised to the war in Afghanistan, but not in Afghanistan itself. On Afghanistan, the amount of academic material on this topic is not adequate and this lack of attention, especially in later years, contributes to the awkwardness of the topic and points to the delicacy of the subject. Some of the most thorough explorations of Soviet strategy, compiled by informed eye witnesses, omit mentions of chemical weapons while including military actions similar to chemical weapons in effect. Examples include the extensive bombing of hospitals as well as the purposeful injuring of civilians – injuring rather than killing, to increase the demoralising effect for caretakers. Others do make note of instances of chemical weapons use, explaining the operational logic and providing examples. The strategic logic of using chemical weapons in Afghanistan, as mentioned before, derives from the

fact that they likely featured in Soviet doctrines for land warfare in Europe, and the Soviet-Afghan War provided a testing ground to get acquainted with these weapons in practice. During the Cold War, the strategic imperative for the Soviet Union was always to be prepared to escalate conventional war with NATO with whichever means necessary. However, the actual enemy in Afghanistan turned out to be very different from the imagined enemy in Europe. As happens often, the Soviet-Afghan War created its own pressures and dynamics, and it forced the Soviet leadership to reconsider its strategy, including its strategy regarding the use of chemical weapons.

Former Medecins sans Frontières director Claude Malhuret, who does not mention chemical weapons, describes the Soviet approach as one of spreading fear and deprivation (1983). Instead of fighting the fabled Western-style anti-guerrilla war over the 'hearts and minds' of a population[4], the Soviets realised that "the war would be won by the side that succeeded in making terror reign" (p. 428). Several qualifiers emerge in the report describing Soviet tactics and operations that would not be hostile to an approach involving chemical weapons, and that are similar to those of the Kurdish genocide and the Syrian Civil War. They include attacks on civil targets, the creation of refugee flows, the separation of the opposition forces from their civilian support structure (demonstrating their inability to protect), and even the growing Soviet reliance on air force, in particular helicopters, for tactical movement. There is one important difference: secrecy. Malhuret assumes that "[i]nternational public opinion would never accept such enormities if it were informed daily on the developments in Afghanistan" (p. 431), and apparently the Soviets assumed similarly, as the press was denied access, the borders remained closed, and silence on chemical weapons usage prevailed.

McIntosh describes the failure of Soviet strategy against an elusive enemy. His 1995 analysis reveals an initial Soviet strategy of limited engagement, and he describes the Soviet forces as focussing on a number of command and communication centres as well as transport locations, while the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan armed forces were trying to engage the mujahidin in the countryside (McIntosh, 1995, p. 419). The plan was to withdraw within two years. However, as the mujahidin were in the position to choose when to engage (p. 427) and were better set for a war of attrition (p. 420), the Soviets soon realised their plan for a quick and decisive war was an illusion. Political goal, strategy and doctrine did not align, and the war was inevitably lost to high financial and political costs.

While official Soviet reports and a number of independent researchers, including McIntosh and Malhuret, do not mention chemical weapons in post-war commentary, there was some attention to the issue in preliminary foreign military assessments in 1982 and 1983. These commentators engage directly with the topic of chemical weapons, describing their use based on eyewitness accounts and satellite

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[4] Distinctions between types of counterinsurgency, including distinctions between enemy-centric and population centric approaches, and between 'terror tactics' and 'hearts and minds' have been rightfully questioned. It would not be correct to say that Western approaches to counterinsurgency, particularly during the Cold War, have been focused on the hearts and minds in actuality (Dixon, 2009; Duyvesteyn, 2011; Egnell, 2010).

imagery. One of them, Joseph Collins, analysing the Soviet military performance three years into the invasion, highlights the use of helicopters and chemical weapons as two major weapons developments of the Soviet invasion (1983). The overall operational approach by the third year of the invasion, as described by Collins, was characterised by a reliance on high-technology and superior tactical mobility, the occupation of communications centres, and the targeting of local strongholds (p. 156). This soon started to include scorched earth operations and 'migratory genocide', or the creation of large refugee flows to destabilise the insurgency base. By 1983, chemical weapons had been used in at least 15 provinces, as described by 59 reports of which 36 were corroborated, according to the US State Department reports that Collins refers to. These attacks resulted in an estimated 3000 deaths (p. 157).

Adding some reflective notes on the Soviet use of chemical weapons in Afghanistan, Collins argues that targeting civilians with these weapons reveals the circumstances in which chemical weapons have most effect, namely, against "unprotected subjects, incapable of retaliation" (Collins, 1983, p. 164-165). The extensive use of these weapons convinces Collins further that for the Soviets, "considerations of utility and not morality will govern their further use of them in future conflicts" [sic] (p. 163).

Yossef Bodansky's analysis similarly describes the mobile and flexible operations, forward engagement and the use of combined arms units that were increasingly deployed in Afghanistan to try to engage with the elusive mujahidin (1982). Like Collins, he points to chemical weapons and helicopters as the 'new' weapon technologies being integrated into Soviet doctrine as they were adapting from deep, offensive missions in Europe to counterinsurgency warfare in mountainous terrain (Bodansky, 1982, p. 274). Bodansky describes how chemical weapons were already integrated into Soviet military doctrine as a wide category of chemicals (both lethal and non-lethal), smoke, incendiary agents including flamethrowers, defoliants, and even mycotoxins (p. 284). The use of these, including agents that are more traditionally defined as chemical weapons, were increasingly used in 1980 with chemical weapons attacks becoming routine by the end of the year and having been used in all areas of significance.

Bodansky describes chemical weapons use in a number of circumstances. The first is for lethal blocks, area denial and anti-access in the many caves and creeks of the Afghanistan mountains (1982, p. 285). Persistent chemicals, such as VX or VR-55 based agents, were delivered by air and forced the insurgents to flee to 'kill zones' that were more easily accessible for conventional Soviet troops and air force. They were used in combination with mines that maimed the insurgents to restrict their mobility. The second use of chemical weapons was in mountain passes, where non-lethal agents and substances of lesser persistence, such as sarin, were used to protect the flanks of moving troops against ambushes (p. 285). The T-2 mycotoxin known as 'yellow rain' was allegedly one of the substances used in the third group of instances, which is the targeting of civilians. In order to have the biggest impact and to cause the most panic, the chemicals of choice would have to be both lethal and visible (p. 286). The purpose here was to detach the insurgency from their civilian support base by means of punitive action.

It must be noted here again that the use of yellow rain in particular has been disputed, both by scientists who have tested samples and by military analysts who comment on the logistical difficulties associated with yellow rain (e.g. Robinson, Guillemin and Meselson, 1987; Hormats, 1984). Scientific consensus is that the T-2 mycotoxin allegations do not have sufficient evidence to support the claim that this substance has been used in significant quantities in South East Asia or Afghanistan (Tucker, 2001). However, most studies and publications about this issue – from both sides of the isle – refer mainly to South East Asia and mention Afghanistan only tangentially or not at all (e.g. Marshall, 1982b; Marshall, 1986; Rosen & Rosen, 1982; Wannemacher Jr. & Wiener, 1997; Pribbenow, 2006). There simply was and is not enough access to materials retrieved from Afghanistan to make precise determinations about what happened. The 1982 United Nations investigation into the allegations was not allowed into Afghanistan, and yielded inconclusive results (A/37/259).

Publishing in the same special issue of *World Affairs* as Bodansky, Stuart Schwartzstein provides an overview of the evidence of chemical weapons use in Afghanistan by the Soviets (1982). While much of the evidence is based on testimonies and photographic (satellite) material collected by American intelligence agencies and compiled in reports for the American Congress, and could therefore be politically motivated, Schwartzstein emphasises the reliability of the evidence. He mentions testimonies by physicians treating the effects of chemical substances, eyewitness accounts of journalists and survivors, details of storage and decontamination practices shared by Soviet and Afghan defectors, and a small amount of physical evidence (p. 269).

Amstutz's 1986 military assessment reiterates the fact that the Soviets' original strategy quickly failed, drawing them into a prolonged war against an enemy that was not responsive to traditional tactics (p. 128; p. 143). Like Malhuret, Amstutz records the ruthless tactics aimed at spreading fear among the civilian population, including intimidation and reprisals, and even uses the word 'genocide' (p. 145-146). Amstutz spends relatively little time on the topic of chemical weapons, but relies on the aforementioned American intelligence reports of March and November 1982 to provide some details. He recognises the mountainous terrain as being conducive to the use of chemical weapons, as well as the terrorising effect that their use has on unsuspecting populations (p. 175). Like Collins, Amstutz also claims that Afghanistan was used as a testing ground for chemical weapons (Collins, 1983, p. 157; Amstutz, 1986, p. 175). This is particularly interesting as it indicates that chemical weapons were not used as a means of last resort, nor merely as another weapon among many. They were mostly new weapons, used in combat by the Soviets for the first time since the Russian Civil War. In comparison with a potential war against the United States and its allies, this conflict was smaller and closer to home, and in combination with the high levels of secrecy, it provided circumstances conductive to chemical testing in the field.

Writing a decade after the end of the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan and having access to more sources and reflective material, Edward Westermann was in a better position to comment on the methods of war used in Afghanistan by the Soviets. He describes how they increasingly relied on airpower, most importantly on helicopters such as the Mi-24 (Hind) helicopter gunship and Mi-6 (Hook) and Mi-8 (Hip) transport helicopters, to give close air support, carry out transportation, reconnaissance, medevac and chemical weapon delivery (1999, §14). This was an evolution and improvement from the early years of the invasion, when there was too much focus on a direct engagement with the mujahidin with combined arms and limited air support. By 1981, this reliance on combined arms started to shift in favour of airpower as a "force substitute", and by 1984 the transition to "new combined arms" was complete (§29). However, the insurgents soon acquired better missile capabilities, including Stinger handheld surface-to-air missiles that decreased the Soviet pilots' accuracy, which was sacrificed to getting out quickly without sustaining damage (§50).

Westermann also illustrates the use of terror tactics to discourage civilian support for the insurgency. A major part of this was punitive action carried out through air campaigns and by ground forces. Plunder and scorched earth tactics were also common (1999, §7), and chemical warfare had a place in this as well. Using rockets, bombs, sprays and mines as delivery methods, Soviet chemical troops carried out attacks mainly from the air (§8; §9). Phosgene, nerve agents and various incapacitants are mentioned by the US State Department report from 1982 as chemicals of choice, and often these attacks were concentrated along the Pakistani border as well as Herat province, an "insurgency hotbed" (§10). The bombings along the Pakistani borders, which Westermann describes as creating chemical "dead zones", were carried out with the intention of restricting weapons and manpower imports from Pakistan (§11).

Ceasing chemical weapons use

From the available studies, it appears that chemical weapons were no longer systematically used after 1982. One significant exception is their use during the seventh attempt to take control over the Panjshir Valley in the spring of 1984. There are at least three possible reasons for the discontinuation of use, of which one appears to be the most convincing. The first explanation is that the Soviets regarded chemical weapons to be ineffective in achieving certain military and political goals, but there is limited evidence for this proposition. If the Soviets used chemical weapons for training purposes, they would not rely on chemical weapons to achieve military results in the first place. Also, the logic of fear underlying punitive action is not exclusive to chemical weapons, but that in itself is no evidence that the use was discontinued as a response to limited effectiveness. Chemical weapons had not won the war by 1982, but neither had other technological advances by the Soviets, such as helicopters. In other words, while the Soviets may have been disappointed with what chemical weapons could achieve, this in itself cannot explain why they stopped testing and training, particularly given that domestic research and production of chemical weapons continued.

Another reason could be that the Soviets had moral motivations for discontinuing the use of chemicals against the Afghan people and mujahidin. However, such motivations would likely also impact the intensity of chemical weapons development domestically. The Soviet chemical weapons development programme was extensive throughout the Cold War, until Gorbachev declared a stop to the programme in April 1987 with the commencement of a gradual dismantling process for existing stockpiles. Evidence shows, however, that production and testing continued until the early 1990s (Fedorov, 1994, section I.2). In the 1980s, the Soviets started producing binary chemical weapons as well as new nerve agents in response to the American VX invention. As explained before, the infamous novichok agents were derived during this stage, as part of the Foliant programme (Franca et al., 2019). In sum, while usage was discontinued in Afghanistan, the domestic production of new chemical capabilities was not restrained until five years later. Against this background, ethical considerations also do not suffice as an explanation.

The global norm against chemical weapons use and more specifically, the potential condemnation and (political) retaliation, comes forward as a more appropriate explanation for the discontinuation of chemical weapons usage in Afghanistan. During 1982, and indeed earlier, the American intelligence agencies produced damning research into sustained chemical weapons usage by the Soviets (Director of Central Intelligence, 1982). In the same vein, the military assessments referenced before were being researched and published, creating international attention to the issue. This poses the question whether the international atmosphere at the time was conductive to increased pressure on the Soviet Union. The situation – including all the humanitarian law violations – was known indeed. This is a question of politics and allegiances.

While the Soviets themselves were in charge of chemical weapons use in Afghanistan, allied factions in Southeast Asia were also reported as using chemicals in the insurgency conflicts in Kampuchea (since 1978) and Laos (since 1976) (Director of Central Intelligence, 1982). With regards to the yellow rain controversy, the American intelligence community concluded at the time that

> the one hypothesis that best fits all the evidence is that the […] toxins were developed in the Soviet Union, provided to the Lao and Vietnamese either directly or through transfer of technical know-how, and weaponized with Soviet assistance in Laos, Vietnam, and Kampuchea. (p. 3).

If the allegation were true, the discontinuation of chemical weapons use in Afghanistan would have been a significant step in the disassociation of the Soviets from the Lao and Vietnamese[5]. This was significant in light of the tensions these conflicts caused with China (Zubok, 2017). It is also around this time (1982/1983) that the Soviets first publicly admitted to military involvement in Afghanistan in the first

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[5] It is interesting to note that during the civil war in Syria, the opposite happened when Russian security service employees poisoned Sergei Skripal and his daughter (and a number of innocent passer-by's) with the nerve agent known as novichok, discursively linking the regime in Moscow with its chemical weapons-wielding allies in Syria.

place. During the preceding years such engagement was denied and the Soviet role in Afghanistan was supposedly limited to training exercises (Amstutz, 1986, p. 129).

Two United Nations investigations were carried out in response to the accusations of chemical weapons use by the Soviet and DRA forces in Afghanistan, both of which were severely hampered by the refusal of Afghanistan to cooperate and allow investigators into the country. The first report was "unable to reach a final conclusion as to whether or not chemical weapons had been used." (UNGA 1981, p. 34). The second concluded that it remained "difficult to make a definite assessment regarding the veracity of the accounts given by the alleged victims or eyewitnesses", but that it "could not disregard the circumstantial evidence [indicating] possible use of some sort of toxic chemical substance in some instances". (UNGA 1982, p. 186). However, as Victor Utgoff notes, how much and what type of evidence is necessary to raise an accusation such as the United States did in matters like these, might not correspond to the normally accepted level of scientific proof (1991, p. 80). If there is a reasonable possibility that the accusations are true, raising them could save lives as well as reinforce the norm against the use of chemicals and toxins in war. At the same time, however, such accusations should not be made too lightly in order to prevent them from being taken seriously in the future. Utgoff himself concludes that even if the toxin-accusation is dismissed, there is still a sufficient amount of evidence to suggest that the Soviet Union supported, if not carried out, other chemical attacks (1991, p. 80).

The yellow rain controversy complicates the matter of Soviet chemical weapons use significantly, as it tends to obscure the evidence for the use of other chemical substances in Afghanistan. However, regardless of whether this particular yellow rain accusation is valid or not – and in hindsight we can say it likely is not – the normative discourses it spurred in the international community are interesting to examine, and we can do so in conjunction with the responses to the use of other toxic chemicals.

Norm dynamics

The United States responded in alarmist fashion to the invasion of Afghanistan, fearing it would be a prelude to establishing regional hegemony and potential invasions of Iran and the Arab states. Western European states were less concerned with such projections, instead seeking to preserve détente and commercial interests (Hughes, 2008, p. 334). Citing the Uniting for Peace resolution of 1950[6], the UN Security Council referred the matter to the General Assembly in January 1980, with only the Soviet Union and the German Democratic Republic voting against. In the GA, resolution ES-6/2 was adopted that called for the "immediate, unconditional and total withdrawal of the foreign troops from Afghanistan" (UNGA, 1980a). 104 member states voted in favour, 18 voted against and 18 abstained. By the end of the year, a similar resolution was adopted by the GA, for which 111 members voted in

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[6] The Uniting for Peace resolution (UNGA Res 377 A) was adopted by the UNGA in 1950 in response to UNSC deadlock over the Korean War. It allows a majority of 7 members of the UNSC (9 since 1965) to call for an emergency session of the UNGA to discuss the matter and advice the UNSC, circumventing UNSC vetoes.

favour and 34 members voted against or abstained (UNGA, 1980b). An important international development here, beyond East-West relations, was the effect of the invasion on the credibility of the Soviet Union in the eyes of the non-aligned states and the wider international audience. Hughes highlights how the invasion strengthened notions of Soviet imperialism and alienated Islamic countries in particular. The invasion further deepened the rift between the Soviet Union and China, and it put a definite stop to the communist expansions of the 1970s (2008, p. 334).

This relative isolation of the Soviet Union is highly significant when it comes to analysing the reasons why the Soviet Union used chemical weapons in the first place, how normative considerations featured in this decision, and why the Soviet Union might have stopped using chemical weapons if it had been using them more systematically before. Also, if the Soviet Union had merely tested chemical weapons, the normative pressures of the international community can equally explain why this was done with the utmost secrecy, and was eventually stopped. At the same time, it is apparent that we cannot isolate these international pressures from the military demands. Without military need, chemical weapons are unlikely to be used. Without international support, norm transgressions are difficult to sustain. An intelligence assessment by the CIA stipulates that the Soviet Union likely suspected that the open use of chemical weapons would draw international (legal) attention, but that decisionmakers considered this a manageable risk given the remoteness of the region and the fact that chemical leave little trace compared to conventional weapons (Directorate of Intelligence, 1983). It also points to the initial lack of traction the allegations gained in the first two years of the war, but suggests that the latest United Nations report might change this situation. It is true that most sources indicate the Soviet Union stopped using chemical weapons in 1983. Similarly, Afghan historian Mohammed Hassan Kakar, who had been imprisoned by the communist regime for his objections to the Soviet invasion, notes that "the Soviets used chemical agents in inaccessible areas so that others might not know about it" (1995, section 4.14). Citing French and Norwegian sources besides the information presented by the United States, he concludes that the secrecy was very effective in preventing verification of the allegations, but that "substances other than conventional weapons" had certainly been used in a number of places (1995, section 4.14).

For its part, the Soviet Union responded to the allegations with denial and deflection. The use of chemicals by the United States during the Vietnam War featured regularly in the counternarrative, which was accusatory in tone. For instance, with regards to the allegations of yellow rain specifically, the Soviet Union acknowledged in 1982 that samples of trichothecene mycotoxin were indeed recovered from South East Asia. However, they expressed a particular theory about how this substance would have come there. This theory is referred to as the 'Elephant Grass Theory'. By means of a report issued by the Soviet mission to the United Nations, "experts from the U.S.S.R. Academy of Sciences, the U.S.S.R. Ministry of Health, and other competent Soviet organizations" alleged an American origin for the mycotoxin in Laos and Cambodia (Marshall, 1982a, p. 32). In this account of events, the use of both herbicides and napalm by the United States in Vietnam caused a compete destruction of the natural

environment in large areas. Elephant grass seeds were subsequently dispersed, which provided fertile ground for the growth of the fusarium fungus, which can produce trichothecene and other toxins. South-eastern winds subsequently carried the toxins to Laos and Cambodia (Bowman, 1983).

"Angry and vehement" denials by the Soviet Union to the chemical weapons allegations were fairly consistent (Badhwar, 1983), with Soviet leadership calling the accusations "absurd" (Girardet, 1982). However, according to Kim Coleman, there was a brief timeframe in 1982 during which the Soviet Union sought to explain its interpretation of the Geneva Protocol as allowing for the use of chemical weapons in Afghanistan, Laos and Cambodia, as those three states were not signatories to the Protocol (2005, p. 107). Still, this narrative was not pursued to the extent that the Soviet Union admitted to the use of chemical weapons openly. As a result, this narrative did not serve to normalise the use of chemical weapons in war explicitly, but the references to Vietnam did indicate that the Soviet Union had little faith in the anti-chemical weapons norm to constrain its main adversary. The combination of chemical weapons use, denial, and discursive confirmation of the norm against these weapons can indicate that the Soviet Union was making preparations for the breakdown of this norm, or at least an exception to the norm for superpowers such as itself.

This pattern can also be observed in relation to the 1979 Sverdlovsk incident, in which dozens of people died as a result of what later turned out to be anthrax poisoning. The biological warfare agent was released from a weapons facility that was later revealed to have housed a biological weapons production site (Abramova, Grinberg, Yampolskaya & Walker, 1992; Meselson, Guillemin, Hugh-Jones, Langmuir, Popova, Shelokov & Yampolskaya, 1994). The Soviet Union denied the allegations and referred to the ongoing chemical and biological weapons negotiations to support their denial. Arguing that the United States should stop questioning their commitment to arms control, they warned that the allegations could "shatter current international accords and complicate the efforts of states to curb the arms race" (cited in Towle 1982, p. 32). The Soviet Union then pushed a narrative in which the United States was making biological warfare preparations instead, pointing at suspect weapons facilities in NATO states and a recent scandal involving the CIA and lethal shellfish toxin. In short, we find the same pattern here as with the chemical weapons allegations in Afghanistan: evidence of – in this case – production is followed by denial, discursive confirmation of the international norm, and deflection to the United States and its partners.

Whatever the scale of chemical weapons use in Afghanistan really was, the use of chemical weapons by the Soviet Union certainly did not have the characteristics of a decision made as a means of last resort, but seems to have been a deliberate choice from the beginning. This fits with the interpretation that the Soviet Union was making preparations for the norm to break down. As explained by Rafael Reuveny and Aseem Prakash, the Afghan War had the potential to bring about substantial change domestically (1999). Given that the military served an important symbolic function in Soviet society, military failure

could demilitarise Soviet society. Only when success remained out of reach while the war dragged on, the consequences of failure started to play a larger role domestically, according to Reuveny and Prakash (1999). However, despite the pressures associated with this conflict, the military strategy in Afghanistan became narrower, not broader, as the war went on, giving no indications for desperation. The discontinuation of chemical weapons, the reluctance to engage in battles for territorial control, and the increasingly specific use of air power point away from panic. That chemical weapons were not used as a means of last resort is interesting when we compare the situation in Afghanistan to the use of chemical weapons by four Arab states. In Chris Quillen's analysis of chemical weapons use by Egypt, Iraq, Libya, and Syria, he concludes that chemical weapons were used only after conventional weaponry failed:

> [E]ach initial use of [chemical weapons] seems to have been a desperate act by a losing military and a political leadership anxious to maintain military support. Leaders of military dictatorships know the value of success on the battlefield and fear losses that could cause military commanders to launch a coup at home (2017, p. 202).

The earlier analysis of the political motivations of the Soviet invasion, as well as the importance of the military as a symbolic and actual means of organising domestic control, aligns the Soviet Union with the Arab military dictatorships researched by Quillen. While not a military dictatorship per se, Soviet leadership 'knew the value of success on the battlefield'. However, their choice regarding chemical weapons is quite different from that of the Arab states. Chemical weapons were not used to appease military elites as the war appeared increasingly difficult to win, risking international condemnation in the process. Instead, as a superpower, the Soviet Union appropriated the right to use chemical weapons from the start, renegotiating the terms of the norm against chemical weapons for itself.

This is not so different from what happened with regards to the use of herbicides and incendiary agents, but also riot control agents and more lethal gases by the United States in Vietnam. In this case, the United States consistently offered its own interpretation of the Geneva Protocol, differentiating between incendiary agents and chemical weapons, and between lethal gases (covered by the Protocol) and non-lethal riot control agents (supposedly not covered by the Protocol) (Coleman, 2005, pp. 97-99). While admitting to the use of incendiary agents and riot control gas, the United States vehemently denied the use of "gas warfare". Subsequent attention by the United Nations and public pressure at home forced the Nixon administration in 1969 to reconsider the American position on chemical and biological weapons, stopping production and resubmitting the Geneva Protocol to the Senate for ratification (Coleman, 2005, pp. 104-105). The pattern is not dissimilar from what happened in the Soviet Union: denial, reinterpretation, pressure, and finally policy change. However, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan occurred a decade after the events in Vietnam that led to the United States reconsidering its position. The fact that the United States had been induced by domestic and international pressure to abandon offensive chemical weapons research and development was an important step in the

clarification of the norm against chemical weapons. Richard Price notes that the "controversy over the use of herbicides and irritant chemical agents in Vietnam by the United States [sowed the seeds] of the multilateral negotiation process" between 1970 and 1990 (1997, p. 134). As a result, by 1980, the norm against chemical weapons was less subject to challenges than it had been in the 1960s, and the ability of the Soviet Union to do so was less than it had been for the United States.

Diplomatic negotiations about codifying the norm against chemical and biological weapons were underway at the same time as the Soviet-Afghan War, but after the relative successes in establishing the 1975 Biological Weapons Convention, these achieved little progress in the first half of the decade. Brad Roberts asserts that the United States' publication of its inquiries into Soviet use of biological and chemical weapons in Afghanistan and South East Asia should be seen as "[drawing] attention to the need for improvements in the Biological Weapons Convention by publicly pursuing allegations of Soviet infractions [..]" (1986, p. 104). Given that the investigations not only concerned biological weapons, but chemical weapons too, this reasoning can be expected to also apply to the negotiations about chemical weapons, too. National and international dynamics finally converged midway through the decade. In the United States, the Reagan administration restarted chemical weapons research and development, particularly with the development of binary chemical weapons. As Devine explains, this increased pressure in the Soviet Union to seek diplomatic and legal solutions to the problem of chemical weapons, being at risk of losing its operational superiority with regards to these weapons (1990). When Gorbachev succeeded Chernenko as General Secretary of the Communist Party, he started his policy of national reform and transparency, which required international cooperation. It was under Gorbachev that the Soviet Union returned to international chemical weapons negotiations in earnest.

Conclusion

While most public information about the Soviet use of chemical weapons in Afghanistan derives from American sources and needs to be used with caution as a result, the evidence does suggest that the Soviet Union trained with and tested a variety of weaponised chemicals in the country. As one of the world's superpowers, it had been investing in chemical weapons since the First World War, with varying levels of success. However, by the 1970's, the Soviet Union possessed a significant chemical arsenal that included first generation weapons as well as nerve agents and advanced nerve agents, and a variety of delivery methods. Doctrinally, the armed forces were prepared for the use of chemical weapons both offensively and defensively. Afghanistan seems to have been used as a testing ground for the tactical and operational incorporation of chemical weapons in land war engagements. However, it is evident that the Soviet Union was unable to challenge the norm effectively, even while expecting the norm to break down as soon as conflict would break out between Warsaw Pact and NATO states. In order to provide a viable alternative normative order from the one advanced by the United States and its allies, the Soviet Union had an interest in maintaining stability in international relations and the identity of a normative state. As a result, the Soviet Union would not be able to benefit from open transgression and normative

challenge without the explicit backing of states outside of the Warsaw Pact. The relative isolation of the Soviet Union blocked this route. Such a course of action would also provide an impulse for the United States to restart their programme, which is exactly what happened when the Reagan Administration started the development of binary chemical weapons in 1985. A more subversive approach to using chemical weapons, one characterised by continued use and active denial, may have served the interests of the Soviet Union initially, but no longer as the war dragged on and new leadership preferred a more collaborative approach to international affairs. Such an approach would introduce even more normative instability. Strategically, the use of chemical weapons for testing and training purposes is rather clear and straightforward. Questioning and challenging the norm also served a strategic purpose, at least initially, as the Soviet Union sought to legitimise the possession, if not use, of chemical weapons in preparation for a potential war in the European theatre, to avoid the nuclear option. When these strategic aims were no longer deemed necessary, achievable, or politically useful, chemical weapons use in Afghanistan was abandoned.

However, chemical weapons as such were not altogether abandoned in the Soviet Union. While the Soviet Union may have concluded that chemical weapons did not create the operational advantages it was after for warfare, research continued into nerve agents and riot control agents. The Moscow Theatre Siege of October, 2002, the 2018 attempted poisoning of double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia, and the attack on Alexei Navalny in 2020 are all instances of Russia – as the Soviet Union's successor state – pushing the boundaries of normativity and legality under the CWC (Gioe, Goodman & Frey, 2019; Wheelis, 2003). But Russia and the Soviet Union are not one and the same. Following the logic that the stakes must be high for states to risk international condemnation over chemical weapons use, we can conclude that Russia is currently more afraid of internal dissidents than external isolation. As David Gioe, Michael Goodman, and David Frey put it: "The Russian message to intelligence defectors, critical journalists, and rival oligarchs is crystal clear: Choose your team carefully, and ask yourself, can it protect you in perpetuity?" (p. 569). The phenomenon of nerve gas poisoning as a method of political assassination will be further reflected upon in the final chapter to this thesis.

The Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988

Introduction

This chapter discusses the use of chemical weapons by Saddam Hussein's regime between 1981 and 1988, during the Iran-Iraq War. It starts with an overview of Iraq's chemical weapons programme and the regional dynamics that influenced decision-making in this area. The use of chemical weapons during the Iran-Iraq War likely started as a means of compensation when initial offensives were unsuccessful and conventional weapons failed to repel the Iranian counter-offensives. However, they were subsequently incorporated into the Iraqi armed forces and used in a variety of tactical and operational circumstances. While militarily effective, chemical weapons also had particular effect on the Iranian population as fears of Scud missiles carrying chemical warheads caused people to flee from Teheran. They were also used extensively against the Kurdish population in Northern Iraq. While not decisive, chemical weapons were shown to be effective indeed during this war, and with sufficient practice came to have military utility. Particularly in the last two years of the war, Hussein and members of his government publicly acknowledged and even defended the use of chemical weapons, and regional exception featured prominently in this narrative. Iraqi leadership thus sought to reinterpret the norm against chemical weapons in light of its regional circumstances, and made explicit connections with nuclear weapons both in the region and beyond. A lack of substantial international response ensured that Hussein was able to reinterpret chemical weapons as an important means of international recognition, suitable for his identity as leader of the Arab World. As a result, the norm transgression came to align strategically with his narrative of Arab exceptionalism and regional hegemony.

History of Iraq's chemical weapons programme

An often seen assessment of the use of chemical weapons by Iraq against its Iranian enemies includes the notion that Iraq first tested the waters, gauging the response of the international community before using chemical weapons more openly and extensively (Quillen, 2017; Segal, 1988). While such an exponential growth of chemical weapons use can indeed be observed form the data, the initial 'cautious' use was also simply the result of a lack of chemical weapons in the first few years of the war. From before Saddam Hussein was in power, the Iraqi leadership had pursued a chemical weapons capability, but this did not take off properly until the Iran-Iraq War required it – seemingly – as a matter of national security. Several authors observe Hussein's zeal for acquiring weapons of mass destruction, and his concentration on chemical and biological weapons after Israel's attack on the Osiraq nuclear reactor in 1981 (Ali, 2001, p. 46; Spiers, 2010, p. 102). This can be traced back to Hussein's pursuit of military and technological modernity and professionalism, which were intimately tied to his vision of regional hegemony and leadership of the Arab world (Ali, 2001; Woods, Murray & Holaday, 2009). According to Kevin Woods, David Palkki, and Mark Stout, "Saddam viewed himself on par with such historical leaders as Nebuchadnezzar and Saladin", and he subsequently framed the war with Iran in terms of Arab

defence and expansion, reclaiming the lands it was entitled to for the Arab nation (2011, p. 87-88). Williamson Murray and Kevin Woods describe the connection between pan-Arabism and military modernity as follows:

> Saddam often referred to Iraq as the "central support post of the Arab nation." "If Iraq falls," he reminded his staff, "then the entire Arab nation will fall." Saddam argued that the only way to avoid the loss of the "central support" was to develop a "sound scientific base" for the army. Everyone was going to support the objective, "the young and the old, the soldier, the officer, and the atomic scientist, and the university professor." (2014, p. 165).

Before the war, the Iraqi leadership pursued a chemical weapons capability in conjunction with nuclear and biological weapons. Hussein personally regarded chemical weapons as a useful deterrent in the regional context, in particular vis-à-vis Israel and Iran (Woods, Palkki & Stout, 2011). Iraqi officers were first trained in chemical warfare by the Soviets in the 1960s, with Iraq's Chemical Corps established in 1964. Some officers also received training in the United Kingdom and the United States (Duelfer, 2004a, p. 61). These officers brought back with them training programmes and protective and decontamination equipment. Such protective measures were disseminated into the military by chemical companies in every Iraqi military division (Spiers, 2010, p. 103). Between the 1960s and 1980s, the cooperation with the Soviet Union was beneficial to the extent that it was a relatively equal one. Unlike Syria and Egypt, for instance, Iraqi oil production ensured that Iraq constituted no financial burden for the Soviet Union and its air fields and harbours proved important strategic infrastructure that the Soviet Union could make use of in the 1970s (Kelidar, 1992, p. 787). In return, friendship with the Soviet Union would ensure that the communist party in Iraq would not pose a threat to Hussein's regime. In 1971, mustard, tabun and CS tear gas were first synthesised in Iraq in small quantities, but effective weaponization and filling munitions was not achieved until 1981. This was the result of "mismanagement and fraud", according to Iraq's own reporting to the United Nations in 2002 (Duelfer, 2004a, p. 6). The start of the war convinced the Ministry of Defence to develop chemical weapons in earnest, at which point production quickly accelerated. At this point, Hussein seemed to want these weapons as a means of deterrence against Israel as much as an operational weapon against Iran (Woods, Palkki & Stout, 2011, p. 226).

As a result of the cooperation agreements with the Soviet Union, the Iraqi armed forces were mainly provided with Soviet equipment for chemical warfare (Duelfer, 2004b, p. 3). However, the relative lack of Soviet dependency also allowed Hussein to seek relationship with Western chemical suppliers. Edward Spiers notes the West German companies Karl Kolb and Water Engineering Trading (WET) in particular as supplying Iraq with equipment and material to construct the Al Muthanna State Establishment (MSE) and other facilities (2010, p. 103). MSE in was instrumental in producing mustard gas, tabun, and sarin throughout the war, while the Habbaniyah facilities, supported mainly by WET,

produced toxic chemicals that were precursors to various (binary) nerve agents. However, not only companies in West Germany, but also in the United States, France, the United Kingdom, and other Western European states variously assisted Iraq in producing chemical weapons, often through the supply of precursor chemicals with dual use to avoid the appearance of outright support. While their governments struggled with confronting the use of chemical weapons by Iraq with their support of the Iraqi regime, companies in these countries continued to supply the Iraqi regime with the materials it needed to maintain its production of chemical weapons (Cordesman, 1991; Walker, 2017; Zanders, 1995; Zwanenburg & Den Dekker, 2010).

In the end, Iraq used 1,800 tons of sulfur mustard (mustard gas), 140 tons of tabun, and 600 tons of sarin, delivered by 19,500 bombs, 54,000 artillery shells, and 27,000 short-range rockets (Woods, Palkki, & Stout, 2011, pp. 220-221).

The Iran-Iraq War

The origins of the Iran-Iraq War lie in internal social and political turmoil, both in Iran and Iraq (Workman, 1994). The Islamic Revolution in Iran went far form unchallenged, and a foreign adversary was beneficial for the consolidation of the revolution. The Islamic Revolution was also stirring up dissatisfied elements of Iraqi society, which had long been repressed by the Ba'athist regime. This was recognised by Saddam Hussein, who blamed the Iranians for the unrest. He also held personal grievances against the Iranian state. For instance, within his family, myths of Iranian-Zionist relations had been told and re-told since the 1940s (Murray & Woods 2014, p. 17). But the bitterness towards Iran was also of a political nature. For instance, Hussein was unhappy with concessions made over the Shatt Al-Arab waterway, which formed the southern border between the counties since 1975, and was a crucial waterway in Iraqi's oil-based economy. Iraqi leadership had been forced to agree to this line to stop the civil war with the Kurds, who were supported by Iran. The civil war had been put to an end at the signing of the Algiers Accords of 1975, which Hussein has negotiated, and then unilaterally abrogated on 17 September 1980. Tensions had been growing throughout that year, which included border provocations and armed skirmishes. According to Thom Workman:

> Both regimes characterized these threats in politically inclusive terms. References to the integrity of the Arab nation or the Islamic nation were thus very common. It was not the more narrowly based regimes that were threatened, in other words, but rather the lofty principles and aspirations of nations. (1994, p. 89)

The Iran-Iraq War started in September 1980 with Iraq's invasion of Iranian territory along the border, with its main force concentrated in the south, where capture of the strategic Shatt Al-Arab area formed an important objective, as well as the Iranian Khuzestan province. Formally a response to Iranian leader Khomeini's call for an Islamic Shi'i uprising in Iraq, the attack was clearly centred on the Shatt Al-Arab geographical area, which had been the object of conflict and negotiation for over half a century

(Bakhash, 2004; Hiro, 1991; Wright, 1980). More broadly, Hussein saw an opportunity to establish Iraq as a superpower in the region as Iran's military and political leadership was weakened in the wake of the Islamic Revolution, while the American-Iranian hostage crisis, which was ongoing when Iraq launched its attacks, ensured that the international opinion was largely turned against Iran (Chubin & Tripp, 1988, pp. 28-29; Hiro, 1991, p. 71). While this also gave Iran some leverage over the United States, the tone was set. The absence of international allies proved to be extremely problematic for Iran as it had trouble replacing foreign-acquired military equipment over the course of the war, as well as gaining economic support as Iraq's blockade stifled Iranian oil exports as the war progressed (Segal, 1988; McNaughter, 1990).

Generally speaking, the Iraqi armed forces were better organised, albeit more conventionally oriented, than the Iranians, who suffered from political rivalry and purging. Simultaneously, however, the mountainous and marshy terrain along much of the southern border favoured the Iranians, while the Iraqi mobilized units could not be deployed to their full efficiency (Segal, 1988; Wilson, 2007). After President Bani Sadr was removed from office and the political infighting decreased, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps became accepted as the leading military force, and its unconventional tactics improved throughout the war as Iran's diversity of armed forces became more integrated. This was especially apparent in the way the human wave attacks were carried out. Early on in the war, these were largely uncoordinated attacks, aimed at weakening Iraqi lines through the sheer power of numbers. Later, the Iranians started to rely on intelligence, focussing their wave attacks at specific weak points and using geographical circumstances to their advantage (Wilson, 2007).

After the initial offensives by Iraq, the war entered a phase of stalemate which lasted for most of 1981. In January, Hussein was ready to respond to the call for a ceasefire by the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, but Iranian leadership interpreted this as a weakness and pressed on (Murray & Woods, 2014). The operational situation in period in particular, but also during the whole war more broadly, has often been compared to the First World War. Trench warfare, stuck mobilized units and tanks, human wave attacks and eventually the introduction of chemical weapons were the shared characteristics of both conflicts. When Iran gained the offensive in 1982, it used the tried and tested human wave attacks to regain cities and areas previously occupied by Iraq, including Khorramshahr, which had been one of the first Iraqi targets. However, when the Iranian offensives became aimed at occupying Iraqi zones across the border, and Iraqis were definitely on the defensive, the human wave attacks became less effective as Iraq turned to a strategy of deep defence. Deep and layered defensive lines, consisting of tanks, artillery, and air support as well as mines, barbed wire and other area denial weapons, effectively lured the Iranians into pockets where they would either be killed or expelled (Segal, 1988).

Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp (1988) effectively argue that both operational styles were as much influenced by practical limitations (e.g. weapons acquisition, geostrategic limitations) as by the political

and ideological underpinnings of the war. Being the 'better alternative', Iraq enjoyed the support of most states, both in the region (the Arab states, except for Syria) as well as further afield. Both the Soviet Union and the United States supported Iraq with intelligence, lethal and nonlethal equipment, dual-use toxins and chemicals and, in the case of the Soviets, possibly with access to airbases in the Caucasus region for refuelling (Segal, 1988, p. 959; Takeyh, 2010). As a result, it was able to rely on heavy equipment which strengthened its entrenched and layered defence. Such an approach was also necessary because of the lack of strategic depth that Iraq had geographically, as its major cities (Baghdad and Basra in particular) were relatively close to the Iranian border. By contrast, Iran found itself isolated, unable to effectively resupply its US-bought equipment. Much of this equipment was replaced or replenished with Soviet material and supplies from North Korea and Libya, which led to integration problems (Segal, 1988, p. 951). Iran, however, had a major numerical advantage over Iraq, and hence was able to shoulder large numbers of casualties, apparent in its reliance on human wave attacks.

Politically, however, Iran attached religious importance to this war in the wake of its Islamic Revolution, part of which was a conviction that the survival (and expansion) of Iran was intimately tied to the expansion of Islam (Bakhash, 2004, pp. 23-24). In the revolutionary spirit, it made sense for Iran to rely on manpower as the soul of the war. As Chubin and Tripp put it, for a long time Iran "sought Iranian martyrs rather than Iraqi casualties" (1988, p. 7). This was where the main thrust of their power was located, militarily, politically and ideologically. In fact, it became the desire of many to die on the battlefield as martyrs, in defence of their homeland (Khosronejad, 2013, p. 6, 11). This ideal, that the religious revolutionary zeal would lead to victory, was sustained in Iran until the final year of the war, at least among the ruling elites (Potter & Sick, 2004, p. 3; Woods, Murray & Holaday, 2009, p. 2). In Iraq, on the other hand, Saddam Hussein was eager to profile himself as a strong leader, while he was effectively in charge of an ethnically fragmented artificial state (Bakhash, 2004). A secure position for himself could only be legitimized by identifying threats to the Iraqi state to which he would respond. The armed forces would be a unifying tool to use, that would both increase his own profile as Ba'this minority leader as well as present Iraq as a modern state with a modern, professional army. This can explain Hussein's reliance both on violence (domestically and internationally) and modern, technologically advanced weaponry – including chemical weapons – (Chubin & Tripp, 1988, pp. 20-26), as well as his strategic intent at the beginning of the war: to reclaim Iranian territory that he perceived to have been 'stolen' from him in the Algiers Agreement of 1975. Having to settle with Iran against the background of the Kurdish uprising of that time was both a personal defeat for Hussein as well as a broader inability of Iraq to secure its territory. This had to be rectified, in Hussein's perception (p. 30). As a result, with the intent to lead a limited military effort to pressure Iran into submission, he ordered the initial attack to be focussed on Shatt Al-Arab and Khuzestan.

As mentioned, Iran gained the offensive in 1982 and chose to pursue this offensive quite radically, even alluding to "delivering Iraq from evil" (Takeyh, 2010, p. 371). While the tables were turned to the extent

that Iran was now on the offensive and Iraq on the defensive, the conflict quickly bogged down again owing to the lack of Iranian air power and continued reliance on unsophisticated human wave attacks. Even while Iraq was able – initially – to prevent Iran from penetrating its borders, the situation was dire as Iran was able to sustain losses in much larger quantities than Iraq (Segal, 1988; Murray & Woods, 2014). In 1983, chemical weapons were first introduced by Iraq to defend against Iranian offensives, and 1983 and 1984 formed the peak of chemical weapons use during this war. Additionally, in response to various successful Iranian offensives into Iraq in 1984, Iraq shifted its strategy towards isolating Iran further economically, by targeting Iran's oil exports in the Gulf (Johnson, 2010, p. 136, Murray & Woods, 2014). They only succeeded in part, and Iran retaliated in kind by targeting Iraqi oil transports. David Segal argued that as the years passed, it became apparent that Iraq was winning the air war, targeting Iran's economy and holding its cities hostage, but that Iran was winning the ground war through its numerical superiority (1988). However, writing in 1988, he also noted that Iraq's air superiority and ability to gradually cripple Iran's economy would eventually end the war, especially if the United States and the Soviet Union would act on their shared interest in containing Iran.

Indeed, Iran's isolation and a diminished morale among the population would eventually force it to agree to negotiations. Having targeted other Gulf states as their ships transported Iraqi oil, Iran alienated regional Arab support – to the extent that it existed in the first place – and this was compounded by overt and covert means of challenging the legitimacy of the Arab regimes (Takeyh, 2010, p. 375). A brief revival of Iranian offensive operations in 1986, aimed at Basra and the Faw peninsula, initially surprised Iraqi defences. The Faw peninsula, strategically located near Kuwait as well as forming the gateway to Basra, was captured by Iran and held for two years. However, when Iraq exchanged its static defences for mobile defences in 1988, and helped by the use of chemical weapons, the Faw peninsula was recaptured and Iraq even crossed the Iranian borders again, which it had only been able to do sparingly in the years between 1982 and 1988. The loss of the Faw peninsula, the pressure and terror resulting from the war of the cities – during which the threat of chemical-mounted Scud missiles caused a great degree of panic –, and the economic isolation greatly reduced Iranian morale in the final two years of the war. After years of revolutionary discourse, a political resolution of the war was now seen in Iran as the only way forward. Ray Takeyh notes two particular catalysts for this development: a fear of United States involvement in the Gulf, highlighted by the downing of Iran Air Flight 655 by the USS Vincennes, and the continued use of chemical weapons (2010, p. 381). Iraq had used these weapons against Kurdish civilians and Iranians feared similar attacks in its cities. Anthony Cordesman and Abraham Wagner add recent Iranian losses and diplomatic isolation as main reasons (1990). On 17 July 1988, Iran accepted the terms of the UNSC resolution 598, which called for a ceasefire and effectively ended the war. It took another month for Iraq to do the same, and fighting ended on 8 August 1988.

The use of chemical weapons

Chemical weapons use was first reported on 12 August 1981, and reports became more credible and frequent from the fall of 1983 onwards. In 1981 already, the British Defence Sales Organisation had supervised the sale of 10,000 protective kits to Iran (O'Balance, 1988). According to Chris Quillen (2017) and Richard Russell (2005), Iraq acquired a chemical weapons capability mainly in response to the Israeli nuclear capability, as the so-called 'poor man's atomic bomb'. This also becomes apparent in Iraqi foreign minister Aziz's comments as the international community was working towards establishing the Chemical Weapons Convention after the Iran-Iraq War. As Richard Price (1995, p. 142) notes, Aziz accorded a deterrent value to chemical weapons in non-nuclear geographical zones. However, such deterrence language led many analysts to consider chemical weapons in terms of decisiveness, and as chemical weapons use was *not* decisive in the Iran-Iraq War, authors such as Thomas McNaughter (1990) claim that we would be "less impressed with their effectiveness, and more with the social and international context within which they were used." (p. 8). While this may be partially true – the social and international context are crucial to consider the full effect of chemical weapons –, it is wrong to equate decisiveness with effectiveness. Indeed, while not decisive, chemical weapons were used quite extensively throughout the war, and they held great effectiveness in a number of tactical and operational situations, some of which had strategic implications.

Militarily, the decision to turn to chemical weapons was likely influenced by two factors in particular, among others. The first was the (from the Iraqi perspective) rather unexpected decision by Iran to continue the war after Iraq's initial phase of offensives was halted in late 1980. Instead, Iran redoubled their efforts, mustering large infantry armies to recapture lost territory quite successfully. In this sense, chemical weapons use can be considered a desperate measure, but one that would be sustained throughout a long period of time and would develop to become a standard option for the Iraqi armed forces. Iraqi General Ra'ad Hamdani – staff officer in the Republican Guard during the war with Iran – was interviewed by Kevin Woods and colleagues. He argued that chemical weapons were 'both' a means of desperation 'and' a means to pressure Iran, and describes the various operational circumstances in which they became standard practice. "It was an 'and', not an 'or'" (Woods et al., 2009, p. 56). A second factor was Israel's strike of the Tammuz I (Osirak) nuclear reactor in June 1981, forcing Iraq to focus on chemical weapons as the WMD alternative (Ali, 2001, p. 46). Politically, General Hamdani confirms Javed Ali's observation that chemical weapons use, especially in the later stages of the war, was meant to pressure Iran to accept the provisions laid out in UNSC Resolution 589, which also included stipulations for a cease-fire agreement (Woods et al., 2009, p. 56; Ali, 2001, p. 52).

These multiple usages of chemical weapons were also acknowledged by Hussein himself. Based on the tape recordings of Hussein's conversations with his ministers and officers that were acquired during the 2003 American invasion of Iraq, Woods, Palkki, and Stout find that he was personally involved in decision-making regarding the use of chemical weapons (2011). He found them to be very effective in

producing psychological effects that harmed Iranian morale. Hussein also advised on the use of chemicals in deep operations, targeting the Iranian rear and logistics. Whether or not those deep attacks hit their targets or not was not crucial: "Even if only one out of ten Iraqi chemical attacks were successful, [Saddam] added, Iraq's enemies would still have to worry about the remaining nine" (Woods et al., 2011, p. 228).

Apart from the initial deterrence purposes, it appears that Iraq used chemical weapons mainly, though not exclusively, for territorial defence, such as when the Iraqis lost the Kalu Heights (Oct. 1983, nitrogen-mustard) and when they successfully thwarted an Iranian offensive against the Basra-Baghdad road (Feb. 1984, sulfur mustard). Another example occurred during Iran's Operation Badr, again to capture part of the same motorway (March 1985, tabun), and during Operation Karbala-4, aimed at capturing bridges and pushing through to the Shatt Road in the Shatt Al-Arab area then held by Iraq (Dec. 1986, mustard gas) (O'Balance, 1988; Murray & Woods, 2014). Offensive usage of chemical weapons was increased in 1988. Examples include the recapture of the Faw peninsula (April 1988, sarin). A total of around 350 chemical attacks have been reported during the Iran-Iraq War, resulting in 45,000 to 60,000 casualties, excluding those who developed long-term health complications later (Ali, 2001; Bijani & Moghadamnia, 2002; Russell, 2005). Other estimates of chemical weapons casualties go beyond 100,000 (Haines & Fox, 2014, p. 109). Iran was ill-prepared against chemical attacks, a problem that persisted until the end of the war as even when gas masks improved, many *Basij* soldiers refused to shave, rendering the gas masks ineffective (Murray & Woods, 2014, p. 271).

We can observe clear development in the use of chemical weapons by Iraq. As Ali (2001) notes, the tear gas known as CS was used as early as 1982 to disrupt Iranian infantry advances by forcing them into protective gear and to allow Iraqi troops time to retreat. Over the course of the war, Iraq's chemical capability became both more varied (until it included mustard, tabun, sarin and even XV, the latter being used against the Kurds) and its use became more sophisticated. Integrating delivery systems ensured better coverage, while the development of substances like 'dusty mustard' (a variant of sulfur mustard that was dust-based rather than liquid-based and would be breathed in) increased the number of tactical purposes (p. 50). Nearer the end of the war, Iraq used chemical weapons also offensively, to not just defensively or in counter offenses, to recapture lost territory. Famously, sarin was used during the operation to recapture the Faw peninsula in 1988. This substance was also used in other offensive situations, to weaken Iranian positions before the Iraqi main force would advance on the area (p. 51). Unlike mustard gas, which was used in the first years of the war, nerve gases such as sarin were non-persistent and could be used in closer proximity to Iraq's own troops, giving a tactical advantage during assaults (Cordesman & Wagner, 1990). In May 1988, Iraq began an offensive south of Basra to retake the marshes and islands that Iran had captured in 1984 and 1987, known as the Battle of Fish Lake. Having dried out the area, Iraq was able to mount a large armoured offensive but still relied on sarin to break Iranian resistance (Cordesman & Wagner, 1990). In the north, Kurdish (*Peshmerga*) forces

received similar treatment, with bases being attacked, retreating forces being dispersed and targeted with nerve gas, and territorial battle aims being attacked with chemicals as preparation for a conventional advance (Russell, 2005, p. 198).

The main Iranian tactic, as explained before, was the human wave attack. These saw a development towards more sophistication with the use of intelligence, but in essence they retained the character of a large, sustained attack using a number of (often) 22-men squads aimed at specific targets (Pelletiere, 1992, p. 40). Interestingly, as Russell notes, chemical weapons are effective especially in this context, when they produce not fatalities but incapacitations. Given the attitude of disposability when it came to Iranian infantry soldiers, it would have been more effective to force the soldiers to assist their wounded, rather than allow them to retreat leaving their dead behind (Russell, 2005, p. 195). Simultaneously, the process of retrieving bodies and bringing them home as martyrs was made more difficult as the bodies had to be retrieved from a contaminated area. Additionally, the Iraqis focussed some of their chemical attacks at Iranian rear area support troops, after they had enveloped an Iranian advance, as these troops had less protective gear (Woods et al., 2009, p. 55). General Hamdani describes this dual use of chemicals both at the front lines and deep into Iranian supply lines and logistics.

Chemical weapons were also used to overcome geographical limitations and for area denial. Indeed, the topography of many territories around which the fighting was located lent itself particularly well to the use of chemical weapons, as they have variable measures of persistency and can enter areas that are otherwise difficult to reach. In this interview with Woods and his colleagues, General Hamdani explained that the soft and marshy lands of the Faw peninsula were not conducive to the use of artillery or air-delivered weapons, and so the Iraqis used chemical weapons to push the Iranians out (Woods et al., 2009, pp. 56-57). They used sarin because this is a non-persistent agent, which allowed Iraqi troops to overrun the area as the Iranians fled. In the mountainous areas of the north, chemical weapons also provided the coverage necessary to defend large areas, that Iraq did not have the manpower to hold (Russell, 2005, p. 195). Area denial was an additional element where chemical weapons were useful, as they were less persistent than mines (so the area could later be easily entered and controlled) and easier to employ behind enemy lines. Persistent substances like sulfur mustard or cyclosarin were used to target supply lines and assembly areas, leaving the forward troops isolated (McCarthy & Tucker, 2002, p. 64; Ali, 2001, p. 48). Iranian troops fleeing from sarin contamination would often find themselves running into mustard contaminated areas during the last months of the war. Such tactical developments point to a continuously improving integration of chemical weapons into both defensive and offensive battleplans.

Of course, Iraqi chemical attacks were especially effective in the context of potential and actual civilian casualties, particularly in the Kurdish Genocide, but also as a threat against Iranian civilians during the war of the cities. This state of the war, which intensified in the first half of 1988, was characterized by mutual targeting of each other's cities using ballistic missiles. The fear that Iraq's Scud missiles could

be mounted with chemical warheads produced a large measure of fear and panic, which caused additional pressure on the Iranian leadership. This occurred largely in the context of a declining morale, the result of an economic blockade which gravely affected life in Iran (McNaughter, 1990). As Ali notes: "The fear of chemically tipped Scuds was so great that some reports indicate that up to one-quarter to one-half of Tehran's population fled during that period [between February and April 1988]." (2001, p. 52).

During the attacks on Kurdish civilian centres, chemical weapons were used in most (some say all) of the phases that composed the Anfal campaign of 1988 (Hiltermann, 2004, p. 153). The most famous case is the bombing of Halabja in March 1988 (5,000 deaths), but other Kurdish towns and villages were targeted too. Russell references a Kurdish source that counts 200 towns and villages being subjected to chemical attacks, while Human Rights Watch claims that at least 60 Kurdish targets suffered such attacks (2005, p. 198). Woods et al. suggest that the decision to use chemical weapons against Kurdish targets was at least in part motivated by a desire for revenge (2009, p. 137, note 14). This was the result of the perceived betrayal of the Kurds breaking their truce of 1975 and aiding the Iranians when the latter opened a new front to the north-east of Baghdad (p. 11). Practically, the chemical attacks on Kurdish villages resulted in massive displacements of the Kurdish population, who were subsequently lured into traps – sometimes under the promise of amnesty. The men were separated from the women and children, who were locked into concentration camps. The men were killed, as were many women, children and elderly (Montgomery, 2001). Montgomery notes at least 40 chemical attacks (p. 92).

Doctrinally, then, the Iraqis emphasised both the physical and psychological effect of chemical weapons. Primarily aimed at unprotected civilian populations and minimally protected military forces, chemical weapons were deemed important to repel Iranian superior numbers where Iraq's superior artillery, mobile units and tanks could not achieve sufficient results, where the geographical environment was conducive to chemical weapons use, and to displace, trap and murder the Kurdish population. The claim that chemical weapons were used as a means of last resort is partially true, in the sense that chemical weapons were considered to be necessary as conventional forces failed to gain appropriate result by 1983. However, the sustained use of chemical weapons, not only in defensive, but also offensive operations, suggests that chemical weapons were not considered exceptional. Indeed, Woods et al. note that in their conversations with General Hamdani, he "seemed to view the use of chemical weapons as an inevitable progression of the conflict and their effects less than extraordinary." (2009, p. 138, note 15). The ever-expanding integration of chemical weapons in various tactical circumstances and the increasing sophistication with which they were used shows how chemical weapons were firmly embedded in operational and strategic thinking.

In terms of chemical command, it appears that Hussein was solely in charge of approving the use of chemical weapons until late 1986 (McCarthy & Tucker, 2000, p. 64), even if operational command

figures could request them to be used. From 1986 onward, the authority to approve or deny such requests was delegated to corps level commanders in order to integrate chemical weapons better into the ever-changing demands of a battle. This was part of a broader reorganisation of the Supreme Defence Council during which other responsibilities were also delegated to field commanders (Cordesman & Wagner, 1990). A separate chemical command headquarters as well as a designated chemical commander remained, who designed plans for chemical weapons use both strategically and operationally (Woods et al., 2009, p. 56). Russell suggests that the loosening of chemical command by Hussein was a result of the dangers of internal Iraqi dissent becoming less pressing in his mind than the prospect of Iranian operational success (2005, p. 196).

It was not until 1986 that Iran was able to provide its troops with anything other than basic chemical gear and antidotes. Improved gas masks, protective clothing, and decontamination equipment improved the troops' defensive capabilities, but mustard gas and nerve gas in particular remained large threats. Cordesman and Wagner blame the lack of detectors, ineffective command and control, and faulty equipment for the consistently high numbers of chemical casualties, even after the technical improvements made in 1986 and 1987 (1990). Iran itself produced chemical weapons in very limited quantities in the final two years of the war, but there is little evidence that these were used in battle. The production was limited to testing quantities and Ayatollah Khomeini is said to have prohibited the use of chemical weapons on religious grounds (Porter, 2014). While there is almost no evidence that Iran used chemical weapons during the war with Iraq, there is some evidence that Iranian chemical munitions were traded to Libya in return for Russian Scud-B missiles (Brill, 2022).

Norm dynamics

Given the taboo status of chemical weapons, their use is a powerful signalling tool in the international community. The Geneva Protocol, which was the only treaty in force during the 1980s that prohibited the use of chemical weapons, was commonly referred to by Iran, Iraq, as well as the international community more broadly. As the prohibition was clear, so the violation was clear as well, but the consequences depended greatly on political relations. However, we can establish from the outset that the use of chemical weapons changed relations and identities then as it does now. Indeed, Ali notes that the use of chemical weapons without significant push-back from the international community likely emboldened Hussein to take a more aggressive stance in the region (2001, p. 43). The most obvious result of this aggressive and emboldened stance is the invasion of Kuwait in 1990, although Hal Brands and David Palkki argue that this stemmed from a fear of a confrontation with the United States as much as Hussein's self-perception (Hiltermann, 2004, p. 159; Brands & Palkki, 2012, p. 627). However, such an emboldening effect of chemical weapons use is likely to have had a compounding effect on Hussein's already violence-oriented politics that Chubin and Tripp describe (1988, p. 21); when violence is considered the answer to establishing an identity of a powerful ruler, both domestically and in the region, a lack of normative response ensures that this ruler feels himself to be above both the other powers in

the region, as well as above norms themselves. It should be clear that chemical weapons do not just produce physical and psychological military effects, but they also induce a change in the political identity of the user. Such a change, in turn, empowers the user to act in alignment with his new identity. Additionally, as mentioned before, reliance on chemical weapons for Hussein signalled a degree of technological mastering that, even if morally questionable, was more advanced than Iran's infantry-based doctrine.

When it comes to chemical weapons use against the Kurdish population, there is again an extra political layer of meaning to be identified. We can tell that it has particular meaning as the use of poison gas in the Anfal campaign appears to be the only moment that the United States Congress aimed to take corrective efforts in the form of sanctions (through the defeated H.R.5271 - Prevention of Genocide Act of 1988). It did not do so in response to earlier reports of chemical weapons use, owing to the interest the United States had in favouring an Iraqi victory over an Iranian one (Ali, 2001, p. 52). We observe that targeting civilians with chemical weapons evokes particularly strong emotions in comparison to chemical weapons use against a (preferably trained and protected) military force. The Kurds, however, were not ordinary Iraqi civilians. Domestically, the 'Kurdish question' was a major policy issue for Hussein's regime, as the Kurdish people threatened the unity of the already fragile state of Iraq. This endangered Hussein's position domestically as well as his legitimacy internationally. An additional element here is Iran's supposed support for Kurdish forces, both during the uprising in the 70s as well as during the Iran-Iraq War (Chubin & Tripp, 1988, p. 22). The use of chemical weapons specifically as the central element in most of the stages of the Anfal campaign in 1988 has particular meaning. Ali Hassan Al-Majid, Hussein's cousin and chief commander during the Kurdish Genocide, could have relied on (and indeed used) conventional weaponry for the eradication and displacement of the Kurdish population. Instead, he employed large numbers of poison gas in indiscriminate killings purposefully. He even referred to himself by his Kurdish nickname 'Chemical Ali' (Human Rights Watch, 2003). In addition, there are tapes of him saying:

> "I will kill them all with chemical weapons! Who is going to say anything? The international community? **** them! The international community and those who listen to them." (Al-Majid in Human Rights Watch, 1993, Appendix A).

Such and other utterances suggest strong awareness of the connotations of chemical weapons use and their international status as normatively prohibited, in addition to their military purpose. The plain disdain for the international community – even if a logical conclusion following from the unwavering support Iraq had received despite chemical weapons use – also points to a perception of Iraq and its government as powerful, perceiving themselves to be able to get away with chemical weapons use. Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall conceptualise power as "the production of particular kinds of effects, namely those on the capacities of actors to determine the conditions of their existence" (2005,

p. 42). This conceptualisation is applicable here as we examine the influence Hussein and his regime sought to have on the conditions of the existence of the Iraqi state and the Arab region more broadly. Barnett and Duvall further distinguish between interactive power and constitutive power, with the first pertaining to the capacities of actors as derived from situational interaction, and the second pertaining to the capacities of actors as derived from their social identity. The second type of power is the one the Iraqi regime pursued by claiming a regional supremacy that allowed it to use chemical weapons with impunity. Barnett and Duvall identify both direct expressions of power and diffuse ones, and both are at play here. Iraq's constitutional power is presented as direct, to the extent that the international society does not act in response, and as diffuse, to the extent that the normative regime has not constrained Iraq's actions (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, pp. 46-48). Arising from the perception that the international community and its normative values *could have constrained* Iraq, Iraq's power to defy these forces reconstituted its identity within this community. However, the powerful identity that emerged as a result is not based on material capabilities, but on the normative make-up of the Iraqi government; not on chemical weapons per se, but on the transgression of the chemical weapons norm. It is therefore a constructed, relational exercise of power, as chemical weapons use acquires its meaning and effect on identity from its relation to the wider community of actors involved in upholding the chemical weapons norm, and Iraq transgressing that norm. This shows the link, also mentioned by Barnett and Duvall, between behavioural power (the power to transgress the chemical weapons norm) and self-understanding, which somewhat blurs the line between interactive and constitutive power (2005, p. 46). Al-Majid distinguishes between the (lack of) power of the international community *to constrain* Iraq, and Iraq's power *to defy* them, while General Hamdani emphasizes Hussein's personality traits in this phase (late 1980s), as violent and strong, ready to be the face of the Arab world internationally (Woods et al., 2009, p. 42). Thus, chemical weapons usage, without strong international condemnation of Iraq and its government specifically, gave rise to a sense of power on the part of the Iraqi government that was not based on its material capabilities (Iraq was reliant on loans from other Arab and Western countries to finance the war, see Chubin and Tripp, 1988, p. 111) but on its ability to manipulate normative expectations. During the war with Iran, Iraq enjoyed tacit support, even while using chemical weapons, and during the subsequent Kurdish Genocide, Iraq was able to not be restrained by international condemnation for its chemical weapons use.

Iraqi leadership distinguished its chemical weapons use against Iranian forces from their use against the Kurds. The first came to be publicly defended with regards to the Geneva Protocol, while such justifications were never claimed with regards to the Kurds. Apparently, in its search for legitimacy, chemical weapons use was a sacrifice to be made, but only in a limited fashion. The Iraqi government believed it required chemicals for the protection of the integrity of their territory against invading Iranian forces, which – as mentioned before – was an important instrument for legitimising the Iraqi state and Saddam Hussein as its ruler. Such use was also publicly defended, even to the point where foreign

minister Aziz claimed it was not in violation of the Geneva Protocol as self-defence and retaliation in kind were (supposedly) permitted (Hiltermann, 2004, p. 153). When it came to the use of chemical weapons against the Kurds on the other hand, Iraqi leadership deflected the accusations. For instance, General Hamdani claims in the interview with Woods and colleagues that the chemical attack of Halabja in March 1988 was aimed at the 84th Iranian Division and the 55th Parachute (Airborne) Division, which were located in the North East of Iraq. The Iranians had just occupied Halabja and Iraqi command feared they would infiltrate through to the city of Sulaimaniyah. According to General Hamdani, the Kurdish leadership, under Jalal Talabani, had assured them that the Kurds has evacuated from the city. Only after that, the chemical attack was carried out (Woods et al., 2009, p. 57). This stands in sharp contrast with the remarks by Al-Majid cited above, as well as the decision to destroy most of Halabja's buildings and houses once the Iraqis took over (Human Rights Watch, 1993, chapter 3). These indicate a desire to destabilise the Kurdish town and its population. Obtained Iraqi security services files reveal a similar desire on the part of the military and civilian leadership to eradicate the Kurdish population completely using chemicals, with sarin and mustard gas in particular (Montgomery, 2001, 91). In other words, publicly, chemical weapons were only meant to be used against the Iranians, who had allegedly used them first, while internally, chemical weapons were also perceived as genocidal killing tools to be used against the Kurds.

Being often in active collaboration with Iranians, the Kurdish people could have been argued to be a legitimate military target. Indeed, Hamdani repeatedly emphasises the 'treason' of the Kurds, making them potentially a political and military party to the war (Woods et al., 2009, p. 63). However, he denies they were ever specifically targeted. The Iraqi government was well aware, however, that the international community was looking on and that they would give some sort of response. Previous chemical weapons usages had already led to various UNSC resolutions condemning such use in general terms (S/RES/ 582 (1986) and S/RES/ 588 (1986)), without naming Iraq as the aggressor. Apparently, with regards to the Kurdish case, Iraq made the calculation that such a response would be worth it, if not welcome. As the UNSC resolutions remained vague and did not explicitly condemn Iraq, they posed little, if any, threat. In light of the quotation by Al-Majid, we might even conclude that such toothless resolutions confirmed Hussein's ability to defy the international pressures exerted upon him.

There are two further elements to take into consideration when assessing norm dynamics: the component of regionality and the wider chemical weapons – weapons of mass destruction linkage. The regionality of the conflict becomes evident when we look at the political relations described before: both the Soviet Union and the United States, as well as regional Arab states, strongly favoured an Iraqi victory over an Iranian one with an eye on securing regional interests. Iran was relatively isolated (Syria was its only regional ally), while Iraq was supported by a large number of foreign donors. Hussein's personal mission was regional hegemony and the war with Iran was part of the grand strategy to achieve that (Brands & Palkki, 2012; Woods, Palkki & Stout, 2011, p. 87; Murray & Woods, 2014, p. 170). The regionality was

also explicitly invoked in Iraqi discourses on chemical weapons. Placing them in a narrative of self-defence, foreign minister Tariq Aziz explained the use of chemical weapons with reference to different contexts: "You people are living in a peaceful, civilized continent" ("Iraq Acknowledges", 1988, July 1). This suggests that, from his perspective, the rules were different in different places. The lack of strategic depth in Iraq and the Middle East more broadly adds a material component to this normative discourse, in which chemical weapons can more easily substitute for nuclear ones (McNaughter, 1990).

This leads to the second element that has normative implications, namely the weapons of mass destruction discourse. In the later phase of the war, and especially after the Kurdish Genocide, chemical weapons were almost equated with nuclear weapons, and put in the same category (Price, 1997, p. 145). This is also powerful; in the West, the WMD discourse did not yet have the prominence it gained in the wake of 2001, and as far as nuclear weapons were concerned, these were reserved for the hegemonic nuclear states (Oren & Solomon, 2020). Indeed, Ido Oren and Ty Solomon note that during the Iran-Iraq War, American media never used the term 'weapons of mass destruction' nor its acronym, only 'chemical weapons' (p. 130). The link with nuclear weapons was made by Iraqi leadership instead. By explicitly linking chemical weapons to nuclear ones, the old WMD category became more politicised, less acceptable, and more easily available for a greater number of states, as the 'poor man's bomb' was deemed to be widely attainable. The power was derived from the discursive possibility to use chemical weapons as a deterrent against nuclear weapons, and thus to forestall the use of either in a confrontation between a nuclear and a chemical weapons state. Consider the following quote by Saddam Hussein in 1990, half a year before the invasion of Kuwait:

> By God, we will burn half of Israel, if it tries to harm or attack Iraq, or any part of Iraq. We do not need a nuclear bomb. We possess the binary chemical. Whoever threatens us with nuclear weapons, we will destroy him with chemical weapons (Diane Sawyer's interview with Saddam Hussein, 30 Jan. 1990, cited by Price, 1997, p. 147).

Price interprets this as an attempt to prevent the use of any WMD in a potential conflict with American forces and regional allies. However, it also speaks to the alleged strength of chemical weapons, which in comparison to nuclear weapons seems highly exaggerated. While Hussein must have been aware of this, he apparently felt it justified to take the risk and proceed with the invasion of Kuwait, relying on his chemical weapons history to deter even tactical nuclear weapons use by the United States. It appears that while in the beginning of the war, chemical weapons were a price to pay to secure the legitimacy of Iraqi leadership domestically – indicated by initial denials –, they developed into a badge of recognition internationally. This certainly seemed to be Hussein's strategic intent. In other words, the military introduction of chemical weapons into the war with Iran had international strategic implications beyond this particular conflict, and we observe again that strategic effects and identity are intimately connected.

Conclusion

In his seminal work on chemical weapons, Price convincingly argues that the power relations implicit in the chemical weapons norm during the 1980s dictated that non-developed states should not have legitimate access to weapons of mass destruction (1997). Chemical weapons were illegal and contra-normative because they represented and constituted an equalising weapon for weaker, non-developed states (Price 1997, chapter 6). We should note that this makes the transgression of the norm during the Iran-Iraq War all the more significant, as the taboo represented the interest of powerful states such as the United States.

Interestingly, the humanitarian ideals underlying the chemical weapons norm were not explicitly challenged during the Iran-Iraq War. During the previous mass use of chemical weapons in the First World War, various belligerents explored the argument that chemical weapons were, in fact, a more (or, in any case, not less) humane way of killing or indeed incapacitating, as chemicals were often not lethal, nor did they cause significant lasting physical harm, as artillery often did[7]. This was not the route Iraq took to legitimise chemical weapons more broadly, or justify their use more specifically. In fact, it is precisely the constructed de-humanity of chemical weapons that was used in propaganda- and intimidation offensives. Famously, in a February 1984 warning against an Iranian offensive, the Iraqi military speaks of "insects" and "appropriate insecticides" (Battle, 2003). Again, this shows how the norm was acknowledged to not only be powerful and potentially restraining, but also that it was an expression of humanitarian principles which should not apply to the de-humanised Iranians.

One conclusion from this might be that Iraq was consciously acting unethically, but such a thought process would be too simple. For the Iraqi government, ethics did not seem to have constituted an objective universal standard and therefore to act in opposition to humanitarian principles is not the same as acting unethically. The claim of self-defence and a sense of necessity come into play here: self-defence was Iraq's moral imperative and chemical weapons were deemed necessary to achieve that goal. Indeed, as we have seen earlier, chemical weapons were militarily appropriate weapons to use in a number of tactical situation in which the Iraqi's sought to expel Iranians or prohibit further advances into Iraqi territory. Concerning the Kurdish Genocide, the Ba'ath Party even ensured that "the noble successes of the Anfal" would be "honoured" (Montgomery, 2001, p. 95), while the Kurds were described as traitors, criminals and saboteurs. The defence of Iraq, its territorial integrity, and the superiority of the Arab population were moral priorities, as much related to Hussein's regime survival as to legitimate security concerns. They trumped ethical concerns, although this did seem to require the intermediate step of dehumanising the enemy, i.e. the Kurds and the Iranians. Simultaneously, the

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[7] This discussion evolved from pre-war to post-war positions, and both phases knew proponents of chemical weapons. Other arguments in favour of humanity included the assertion that chemical weapons would shorten any war, and therefore prevent human suffering over time, or function as a deterrent to prevent war altogether. See Price (1997), chapters 2-4, and Friedrich, Hoffmann, Renn, Schmaltz and Wolf (2017), chapters 1, 4-6.

recognition that chemical weapons represent a special category that evokes emotional responses based on ethical principles was clearly present and engaged with, as this is what 'proved' Hussein's power in the international community.

In English School language, this seems to indicate the existence of different international societies, regional ones in particular, with Iraq claiming different rules of conduct – practically and normatively – for its immediate region and context. This, in turn, is reminiscent of early arguments surrounding chemical weapons use in locations not belonging to the 'circle of civilised nations', such as the use of chemical weapons by Italy against Ethiopia in the 1930s (Price 1997, chapter 2; Tezcür & Horschig, 2020). Between those international societies, insufficient rules were understood to exist for actions to be normatively bound. In the 1930s, this was based on racialised undertones of imposed civilisation and non-civilisation, while in the 1980s, non-civilisation was claimed by Iraq itself. What remained stable, however, is the intimate connection between self-understanding and chemical weapons as a strategic option.

The Syrian Civil War, 2011-Ongoing

Introduction

The following chapter explores the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime during the civil war, between 2012 and 2018. In this conflict, chemical weapons were used to target civilians and armed opposition, in an attempt to sustain the authority of the Syrian regime after the Arab Spring had severely weakened Bashar Al-Assad's hold on the country. However, the use of chemical weapons also had significant impact on international allegiances and alliances, and had strong signalling power. After detailing the history of Syria's chemical weapons programme, this chapter explores how chemical weapons were used by the Syrian armed forces throughout the war, identifying a number of operational clusters. Chemical weapons mainly served psychological purposes, which the Syrian population was better able to withstand in the first half of the war than in the second half, when Russian military support turned the war in Assad's favour. While not decisive, chemical weapons did contribute to the fall of major urban districts in ways that are reminiscent of siege warfare. Assad has consistently denied the use of chemical weapons and acceded to the Chemical Weapons Convention in the autumn of 2013. Yet, the continued use of chemical weapons by his regime served to draw attention to the inability of Western states and their regional partners to act, while deepening ideological divides. Rather than reinterpreting the norm, Assad confirmed the norm while undermining it from within. This duality was enough to stave off unwanted military intervention, at least until 2017. While this did not lead to Assad winning the war in a political sense, he also did not lose.

History of Syria's chemical weapons programme

As in Iraq, the unique Middle-Eastern security situation as it developed over the last century was a crucial determinant of Syria's chemical weapons programme. The rivalry with neighbour Israel, which is also expressed in Syria's alliance with Hezbollah in Lebanon, long formed the main reason why Syria would not accede to the CWC (Zuhair Diab, 1997). Israel has signed, but not ratified the CWC and maintains a nuclear capability. Not acceding to the CWC was among Syria's few options to maintain some weapons of mass destruction parity with Israel, which indicates the perceived – if not actual – utility of chemical weapons as deterrents in regional contexts (Tucker, 2006, p. 275). Syria first acquired chemical weapons from Egypt in 1973 in the form of artillery shells filled with sarin, Scud missiles with chemical warheads, and aircraft spray tanks (Tucker, 2006, p. 217). In the subsequent Yom Kippur War, these were not used for fear of retaliation. The Israelis noted that both Egyptian and Syrian troops and military vehicles were extensively equipped with Soviet gas masks, seals, filters, and decontamination gear. However, Jonathan Tucker notes that these were likely meant to protect the troops from accidental release of their own chemical weapons, which included nerve gases, although they would be essential for any defensive or offensive use of chemical weapons.

Syria subsequently started its own chemical weapons programme in the 1970s, during which time it was dependent on the Soviet Union as well as West European companies for the delivery of equipment and precursors. Tucker also mentions India as a supplier (2006, p. 275). According to the 2013 American Report to Congress about Syrian chemical weapons, Syria sought self-sufficiency by the mid-1980s but was struggling to do so and had not yet fully achieved this by 1997 (Nikitin, Kerr & Feickert, 2013, p. 4). However, this dependency did not prohibit the production of vast chemical stockpiles, as several Western intelligence services as well as Israeli observers have taken note of the impressive chemical capabilities Syria possessed between 1990 and 2013. These were produced at facilities near Aleppo, Homs, and Hama which were established by President Hafez Al-Assad in the late 1980s (Tucker, 2006, p. 275). The Congressional Research Service mentions a French assessment that suggests Syria was still actively producing nerve agents more potent than sarin – which constituted the bulk of Syria's chemical weapons stock – in 2013, as well as investigating new means of delivery (Nikitin, Kerr & Feickert, 2013, p. 5-6). While much was made previously of Syria's Scud missiles being capable of carrying chemical warheads, it became apparent that Syria had started to invest more in artillery rockets for chemical warfare at a closer range, that is, inside the country (p. 7). In addition to ballistic missiles and artillery rockets, Syria also possessed chemical aerial bombs. It is clear from the available evidence that Syria initially developed chemical weapons and delivery systems with special concern for Israel and other regional threats (using ballistic missiles in particular), and that the Arab Spring formed the impetus for considering chemical weapons use within Syria's own borders (using, for instance, artillery rockets). Syria possessed sarin, sulfur mustard, and VX, but mainly used chlorine as a chemical agent during the civil war. A number of other chemical agents were being developed in smaller quantities, according to the OPCW's Declarations Assessment Team, about which the Syrian government is yet to provide clarification (OPCW, 2019).

The extent to which Syrian officials confirmed or denied the existence of the Syrian chemical weapons programme varied over the years. Oblique statements were made that confirmed Syria had a chemical weapons capability and would not hesitate to use it should Israel attack using its nuclear or chemical weapons. However, threats and statements that could be interpreted as threats were walked back on, for instance when Syrian ambassador in Egypt, Issa Darwish, denied Syria had such a capability in saying that Syria "do[es] not possess weapons of mass destruction and do[es] not threaten anyone with them" (Darwish, 1996, cited by Zuhair Daib, 1997, p. 105). Syria was part of the group of Arab states that furthered the interpretation of chemical weapons as regional equivalents of nuclear weapons in terms of deterrence capability, i.e. the 'poor man's bomb', by arguing that the CWC could only be implemented in the context of a ban on all weapons of mass destruction. Israel's nuclear arsenal was of particular concern for these states, which included Iraq, Egypt, Libya, and Lebanon (Tucker, 2006, p. 305). Rivalry among these states themselves also likely played a role, particularly as a result of Syria's allegiance to Iran and split with Iraq, and Iraq's extensive use of chemical weapons during the war with Iran. Because

of this stance towards the CWC and the regional security concerns, Syria had to maintain both a positive attitude towards the elimination of chemical weapons as well as a credible deterrence, which explains the mixed signals.

When the Syrian Civil War started in 2012, the attitude towards chemical weapons remained somewhat mixed. The Congressional Research Service report quotes a Syrian official claiming in July 2012 that Syria's chemical arsenal was exclusively meant to deter against a foreign attack (Nikitin, Kerr & Feickert, 2013, p. 9). Subsequent comments from regime officials ranged from outright denial that such an arsenal existed in Syria, to ambiguity about its existence. This ambiguity persisted into 2013, when allegations of chemical weapons use against Syrian civilians gained increasingly more traction and evidence. The Syrian government has always denied that it had carried out attacks against its own civilians, but acknowledged the existence of its chemical arsenal in September 2013. During this time, Syria started the process of CWC accession under diplomatic pressure from the international community, upon the suggestion of Russia and the United States (Nikitin, Kerr & Feickert, 2013; Trap, 2014).

The Syrian Civil War

The Syrian Civil War erupted in 2011 during what in Western states was referred to as the 'Arab Spring', a series of popular protest and revolutions in Arab states in Northern Africa and the Middle East. Protests in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen and Syria were among the largest, but people also took to the streets in Morocco, Jordan, Sudan, and elsewhere. Various causes of the Arab Spring have been identified. For instance, in economic failure. A 'youth bulge' coincided with economic downturn and caused massive youth unemployment. Political failure ensued, as protesters demanded more democratic participation, as well as social failure, as social benefits were distributed unequally. Combinations of these failures have been discussed in literature (Stepan & Linz, 2013; Campante & Chor, 2012; Wolfsfeld, Segev & Sheafer, 2013; Malik & Awadallah, 2013). Leonid Grinin and Andrey Korotayev refer to the 'modernisation trap' to explain how various social changes coincided to feed revolutionary sentiments against (semi-)authoritarian regimes, including access to education and social media (2022).

Starting in Tunisia in 2010, the protests spread across Northern Africa and the Middle East. Syrian protests started in March 2011, particularly in Dara'a, where teenagers were arrested after spraying anti-regime slogans on a wall (Zuber & Moussa, 2018; Robinson, 2012). Regime troops responded with force, and various protesters were killed, escalating the protests across the country. The civil war in Syria is characterised by the fragmentation of the belligerent parties, ranging from civilian protest movements with ethnic allegiances, to more-or-less organised Islamist factions, to government forces and international allies (Walther & Pedersen, 2020). In terms of demographics, Syria had always been home to many different ethnic and religious groups, including Christians, Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, Kurds, and Alawites, and their cohabitation had never been an easy one. President Bashar Al-Assad

inherited the presidency from his father, Hafez Al-Assad, in 2000, and represented dictatorial Alawite minority rule. Beside the Syrian state forces, three other main blocks of belligerent actors in the civil war are the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, the Islamic and non-ideological rebel insurgency, and Kurdish armed forces.

Olivier Walther and Patrick Pedersen describe how the authoritarian organisation of political life in Syria had severely circumscribed possibilities for political organisation. Potential opposition movements were disorganised as a result, having no tradition of political dialogue and vision (2020, p. 452). As the protests spread across the country, opposition groups rose organically. There were no pre-existing channels for unification, and neighbourhood militias, underground networks, and makeshift committees were the norm (Walther & Pederson, 2020, p. 452). The Free Syrian Army arose as one of the first attempts at unification, and was fairly successful because its leadership consisted of armed forces defectors former intelligence officers with pre-established networks. While many opposition groups formally joined the Free Syrian Army in 2012, and to some extent followed its tactical and strategic coordination, these relationships would not turn out to be sustainable.

As the war progressed, the FSA splintered, losing the little strategic direction it had. As the territory under rebel control expanded, more opposition groups rose up. Islamist organisations, such as Al-Nusra and Ahrar Al-Sham, often merged, splintered, re-organised and distanced themselves from each other, changing names in the process (Walther & Pedersen, 2020). Foreign sponsors, including Türkiye, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, various European states, and the United States, all had diverging preferences for which opposition groups to support, and how to organise them.

The civil war can generally be divided into two distinct phases. The first occurred from 2012, after the initial protest movements had spread across the country in 2011, until 2015. During this time, the Syrian Arab Army was struggling to reoccupy large swaths of territory along the western, more densely populated areas of Syria. Opposition groups had taken partial control in cities such as Homs and Douma, were active in parts of Damascus, and by 2015 had successfully pushed government forces out of Idlib (Sosnowski, 2020; Walther & Pedersen, 2020). The city of Aleppo in the north, which had seen heavy fighting since 2012, was under siege by the Syrian Arab Army, but neither side was able to make definitive gains until 2016. Two important developments during this phase were the rise of ISIS, and the first use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime. Both prompted internationalisation of the conflict (Schoon & Duxbury, 2019). After the war internationalised significantly in 2015, and Russia actively started supporting Assad with man- and airpower, the tide turned. This second phase started in 2016 and is ongoing. During this phase, opposition groups started losing ground as Assad was better able to enforce siege warfare (Sosnowski, 2020, p. 277). The deadlock in Aleppo was broken and with Russian help, the Syrian Arab Army regained control of most of Syria, with the exception of Kurdish-held regions in the north, and an opposition-held pocket in Idlib province. Part of what spurred the

change was the inability of the opposition movements to form a sufficiently united front, both internally and externally, which left important benefactors such as the United States and the European Union unable to push for a negotiated settlement without Assad (Schoon & Duxbury, 2019). However, Assad's military victory in most of Syria has done little to re-establish the legitimacy of the regime. The threat of further violence combined with the extreme loss of life and resources, have brought about no more than an authoritarian 'peace' rather than the resolution of conflict (Heydemann, 2020). Around half a million people have lost their lives, while more than 12 million have been forced to flee ("Twelve Years On", 2023).

The use of chemical weapons

Chemical weapons use in Syria appears to have served particular military purposes that have strategic effects. The attacks were clustered geographically around important (former) opposition strongholds such as Hama and Idlib provinces, as well as the cities of Aleppo and Douma (Eastern Ghouta), where they occurred alongside and in conjunction with conventional government offenses (Schneider & Lütkefend, 2019, p. 20). Within those battles, the chemical attacks are clustered time-wise towards the end of a series of conventional attacks, with the apparent aim of installing such fear among the population, that their resistance breaks. An in-depth BBC article, citing authorities such as OPCW officials and various research groups, speaks of a strategic pattern that reappeared in Aleppo and Douma (Nawal Al-Maghafi, 2018, October 15). Lina Khatib, who leads the Chatham House Middle East and North Africa programme, is cited in the piece saying that

> the pattern that we are witnessing is that the regime uses chemical weapons in areas that it regards as strategic for its own purposes. The final stage of taking these areas back seems to be using chemical weapons to just make the local population flee. (2018, section 3)

She further states that

> in addition to chemical weapons being the ultimate punishment, instilling fear in people, they are also cheap and convenient for the regime at a time when its military capacity has decreased because of the conflict. (2018, section 3)

Chemical weapons thus appear as weapons that are easy to produce, and yet highly effective as agents of fear and chaos, more so than conventional weapons. As in the Iraqi case, the Syrian conflict shows that when chemical weapons are used (or threatened to be used) against civilian populations, they are capable of pushing populations over the edge in a way that hastens a territorial victory. Such a victory might have been achieved by conventional means as well, but chemical weapons appear to have a much more disturbing effect. The BBC article also cites Abu Jaafar, who witnessed the chemical attacks in Aleppo:

The gas suffocates people - spreading panic and terror. There were warplanes and helicopters in the sky all the time, as well as artillery shelling. *But what left the biggest impact was chemical weapons.* (2018, section 3, emphasis mine)

The Syrian military forces used sarin and chlorine for the majority of their attacks, often delivered by air. The following reviews temporal and geographical 'clusters' of chemical attacks, and is not an exhaustive overview of all chemical weapons usage. Instead, it shows the main instances of use in connection with strategic developments. It is based on the Syrian Archive Chemical Weapons Database, which uses oral, video, and photographic evidence from individuals and organisations in Syria and triangulates this data to qualify the likelihood of the attack as well as the chemical in question ("Chemical Weapons Database", n. d.). Additional data is gathered from primary and secondary sources to provide contextual information.

The first geographic cluster of chemical attacks seems to have occurred in and around Damascus between May and September 2013, which culminated in the 21 August sarin attack in the north east of the city in Eastern Ghouta. This attack killed over 1400 people and attracted immediate international response in the form of a UNSC emergency session (Schneider & Lütkefend, 2019, p. 8; Chapman et al., 2018, p. 715). It also formed the immediate prelude to Syria's accession to the CWC in September 2013. The sarin was delivered by lob bombs, or improvised rocket-assisted munitions (IRAMs), fired from the ground (Schneider & Lütkefend, 2019, p. 15). These IRAMs are referred to as Elephant Rockets and they are highly indiscriminate. The fact that frontlines scarcely changed over this period leads Geoffrey Chapman et al. to conclude that chemical weapons were hardly effective in this situation (2018, p. 719). However, one might say the same for the (more intensive) conventional weaponry used during this phase of the conflict, which equally failed to achieve significant gain. It is therefore more likely that not the type of weapons, but rather other factors such the ability of the Syrian Armed Forces to make effective use of advantages, or the resolve and morale of the opposition, were more impactful.

As second cluster appears in April and May 2014, continuing into July and August. In this period, at least 24 chemical attacks were carried out around the M5 motorway, on the border between Hama and Idlib provinces. The towns Kafr Zita and Tamana'ah were targeted most frequently with chemical weapons (Schneider & Lütkefend, 2019, p. 8). During this series, chlorine seems to have been used most frequently. However, as Human Rights Watch note, chlorine gas easily evaporates in high temperatures, so the combination of barrel bombs and chlorine cylinders is unlikely to be lethal. Therefore HRW argues that the purpose of such combinations "is to instil fear that a poison or toxic gas has been used" (Human Rights Watch, 2014, May 13). Chapman et al. add that these attacks usually only involved no more than two chlorine cylinders encased in barrel bombs (2018, p. 720). Consequently, these attacks resulted in fewer casualties. Again, Chapman et al. conclude that chemical weapons seem to not have been militarily effective, resulting in the relative rigidity of the front lines during this series of

operations. As in the previously discussed case of Eastern Ghouta, following this analysis would also mean concluding that conventional weapons were not effective, either. This seems hardly accurate. Again, other factors might more accurately describe the reasons why the frontline barely changed. Additionally, Khan Sheikoun and Morek appear to have been the most strategic locations in this area, but neither were targeted with chemical weapons during this phase (Schneider & Lütkefend, 2019, pp. 40-41) It therefore is more appropriate to conclude that chemical weapons use was not meant to secure military advantage during this operation, except in the form of a small-scale deterrent in opposition-held towns, and to spread fear instead as a punitive measure. As a resident reports: "Every time the Free Syrian Army progresses on the outskirts of Hama city, the regime retaliates by bombing our city with poison gases" (interview by the Syrian Network for Human Rights, cited by Schneider & Lütkefend, 2019, p. 32).

A third cluster appeared in March 2015, when the cities Sarmin and Qominas (also *Qmenas*) were alternately attacked with an unknown chemical gas. This cluster spread in April and May with attacks on Idlib city, as well as the wider city region, mainly to the towns located south and south-east of the city. The Syrian Archive was unable to confirm the type of substance used, but notes that chlorine gas is the most likely ("Chemical Weapons Database", n.d.). Human Rights Watch also notes that various victims reported the smell of chlorine gas during these attacks, and that the cannisters were likely delivered in barrel bombs (Human Rights Watch, 2015, April 13). This is similar to the delivery of chlorine gas-filled cannisters in Hama, in the previous year, although the 2015 barrel bombs do not contain explosives, leaving the chlorine more potent and removing much of the warning of an explosive sound (Ross & Malik, 2015, June 16). The series of attacks coincided with a major clash between opposition and government forces, which resulted in the loss of Idlib city for the government. The gas attack at the end of March on Idlib city occurred after the government defeat and in combination with conventional shelling of residential areas, leading to the exodus of "thousands of civilians" (Rifai, 2015, March 30). Throughout April and May, chemical attacks occurred across Idlib province, although fighting only intensified in the second half of April and May when the opposition forces turned their attention westward to Jisr Al Shughur (*also Jisr Al Shoghour*) ("Syria conflict", 2015; Rifai, 2015, June 9). The chemical attacks did not seem to be aimed at the focal points of the fighting, but rather at opposition-held towns near Jisr Al Shughur and Idlib city. Again, this may indicate that they served a punitive goal – corresponding to Khatib's words cited before – rather than formed part of a coordinated defence strategy (Schneider & Lütkefend, 2019, p. 18; p. 23). Assad's government was in a weak position during this stage, before Iran and Russia started to support him more intensively (Stent, 2016; Wastnidge, 2017) and the loss of the M4 motorway, which passes Jisr Al Shughur and runs towards the Mediterranean – an area that was still under control of the government –, was an important strategic defeat. Rather than according a punitive quality to these chemical attacks, research group Bellingcat claims they reveal "desperation on the part of the government", as well as "an air of uncertainty and

perhaps even futility surrounding Assad's military actions." (Goldsmith, 2015, final paragraph). However, even if desperate, it may be expected that the Syrian armed forces would use their chemical arsenal as militarily advantageously as possible in front-line zones, especially if they do not expect major international intervention, as Bellingcat claims. In practice, the attacks remained limited although numerous, as well as aimed at rebel towns, indicating a punitive function.

Chlorine was also used in the attacks in Aleppo in November and December, 2016, which form a fourth cluster. Over the course of 26 days, eight to twelve chemical attacks were carried out. Each time, they were aimed at the ever-decreasing opposition territory, which was increasingly confined to the south east of the city (Human Rights Watch, 2017, February 13). For most of 2016, Aleppo had been the scene of a series of offensives by both government and opposition forces trying to cut and re-establish, respectively, supply lines into the opposition-held inner city, which found itself isolated and surrounded by government forces by November 2016. Human Rights Watch further notes that Russia was heavily involved in this offensive to recapture the city, carrying out air strikes and providing further air support to the government forces. Besides chlorine attacks, the Syrian government also used white phosphorus, a chemical used as an incendiary agent and legal as such[8]. However, in practice, this substance caused additional panic as it is highly inflammatory and causes fires that are hard to extinguish. The Syrian Archive records a final chlorine attack on 10 December in the Kalaseh area of Aleppo. On 13 December, the opposition reached a negotiated ceasefire settlement with the government, which effectively amounted to surrender as the government took full control over the city on 22 December ("What's happening", 2016, December 23). It led to the exodus of tens of thousands out of the area.

In a fifth cluster, the Qaboun area near Damascus was hit with chemical munitions in January, February and March 2017. In particular, these munitions were delivered using a variety of the Elephant IRAMS used in Damascus in 2013, this time containing chlorine (Al-Khatib, 2017; Schneider & Lütkefend, 2019, p. 16). The delivery of chlorine munitions in the northern part of Syria was typically done by the air force, using barrel bombs. Around Damascus, however, it seems that the ground forces of the Syria Arab Army were also equipped with chlorine weapons. Again, in July and August of 2017, Damascus and in particular the Jobar (*Joubar*) region were attacked with similar chlorine munitions. Tobias Schneider and Theresa Lütkefend note how the 2017 chlorine attacks were specifically aimed at the trenches dug by opposition forces in and on the outskirts of Damascus (p. 16). As chlorine is heavier than air, this was a particularly effective way to drive combatants and civilians out of hiding.

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[8] White phosphorus has been used extensively by Western militaries as well, for instance in Iraq and Afghanistan. Infamous is the use of the substance by the Americans in Fallujah, Iraq, in the autumn of 2004. They reportedly used it to create smoke screens, for illumination, as well as its psychological effects (Tessier, 2007). Such purposes are legal under the CWC as they do not rely on the toxic properties of the chemical. However, white phosphorus does produce harmful burns and other chemical effects, which has caused some to argue that white phosphorus is prohibited as a weapon (Christensen, 2016).

Damascus had been split between opposition forces and government forces throughout the conflict. 2017 saw an intensification of the government's action in the region after Aleppo came under government control in 2016. Bellingcat reports that it appears that the early attacks were carried out in combination with air attacks as the Syrian forces' advance was halted (Al-Khatib, 2017). Opposition in Qaboun surrendered in early May after internal conflict among the opposition forces (Barrington, 2017). The mid-2017 attacks were largely aimed at Jobar, with the goal of isolating opposition strongholds to force the opposition into negotiations and potentially surrender through a type of siege warfare (Syrian Network for Human Rights, 2017, p. 3). Apart from the previously used IRAMs, Syrian forces also allegedly used hand grenades loaded with (probably) chlorine (pp. 4-7). This indicates a turn towards more tactical use of chemical weapons, not aimed at civilians but at armed opposition in particular. Fragmentation among opposition forces prevented an effective ceasefire in the region, and fighting continued (OCHA, 2017, Dec 8).

The 4 April, 2017 sarin attack on Khan Sheikoun is noteworthy for the fact that it represents the first major use of sarin since the 2013 Ghouta attack[9]. The chemical agent was delivered by aircraft along with conventional bombs. Between 80 and 90 people were killed as a result of exposure to sarin ("Chemical Weapons Database", n.d.). Syrian and Russian bombers targeted Khan Sheikoun's hospital after they had started to receive victims suffering from the consequences of the sarin attack (Schneider & Lütkefend, 2019, p. 27, also noted by the UN HRC report A/HRC/36/55, p. 25). The sarin attack was part of the government offensive in northern Hama, near the M5 motorway. Focal points of the offensive included Khan Sheikoun, Kafr Zeita, Murek, and Al-Latamneh (also *Lataminah*). These were towns in a pocket of opposition-held territory. In April 2017, this was the only remaining opposition territory along the M5 motorway (UN HRC A/HRC/36/55, p. 22). Al-Latamneh and its countryside were targeted with chlorine on 25 March, with sarin on 30 March, and again with an unknown substance on 6 April, thus forming a sixth chemical weapons cluster. It is interesting to note that at this stage during the conflict, the Syrian armed forces not only reverted back to the more provocative sarin, but also that towns of interest were targeted as part of an offensive. Earlier, before 2016 in particular, chemical attacks were carried out behind front lines as a form of punishment, while the main Syrian force was acting defensively. The punitive element is still important, as the 2017 attacks were removed from the frontline in the absence of a ground offensive. Indeed, Khan Sheikoun and its surroundings remained in opposition hands after the air attacks.

Finally, in a seventh cluster of chemical attacks, Eastern Ghouta (particularly Douma, near Damascus) was repeatedly targeted with chemical munitions in early 2018 ("Timeline of Syrian Chemical Weapons Activity", n.d.). Various chlorine attacks in January, February and March culminated in a major chlorine

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[9] Human Rights Watch further reports on a 'forgotten' nerve agent attack, which allegedly occurred in December 2016, in ISIS-controlled Eastern Hama (Jhourn). This received little attention, probably due to the close monitoring of communications by ISIS ("The Forgotten Chemical Attacks in Syria", 2017, July 5).

attack on 7 April, killing between 40 and 70 people. This series of chemical attacks formed a relatively small proportion of total attacks carried out by the Syrian armed forces, but were part of an increased use of indiscriminate bombings in early 2018 (Schneider & Lütkefend, 2019, p. 21). Chemical and other indiscriminate attacks pushed civilians towards the centre of Douma, increasing pressure on the already limited food and medical supplies, while the suburbs collapsed and were captured by government forces. This pattern is similar to the pattern observed in Aleppo. Remembering the 2013 sarin attack, many civilians succumbed to disproportionate fear of the chemical attacks, more so than fear for conventional attacks (p. 30). As Schneider and Lütkefend note, citing opposition representatives, this effectively increased the pressure on opposition forces to negotiate and eventually come to a surrender deal, allowing close to 70.000 fighters and civilians to flee to Idlib (p. 31).

The delivery of chlorine cannisters by air, either by explosive barrel bombs or their non-explosive variety, has mostly been attributed to the Syrian Arab Air Force, specifically by a select number of helicopters under the command of Brigadier General Suheil Al-Hassan of the Tiger Forces (Schneider & Lütkefend, 2019, p. 19). The pattern of this select group's movement corresponds to the attacks recorded. In Goutha in August 2013, sarin was delivered in rockets by the 155th Missile Brigade, which is part of the 4th armoured division that reports directly to Maher Al-Assad, the President's brother, who personally ordered the attack (Koblentz, 2017). The use of sarin in 2017, when chemical attacks were centred around Khan Sheikoun and Al-Latamneh, has been traced to the 50th Air Brigade, and it is possible that Chief of Staff Ali Abdullah Ayyoub was involved in the chain of command ("German Criminal Investigation", n.d.). Ultimately, the OPCW's Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) notes that the use of strategic weapons, which includes chemical weapons, could only be approved by the Commander in Chief, i.e. the President (OPCW, 2020). He has likely delegated this authority to a small number of inner-circle advisers, including his brother Maher and five major generals, but not beyond that (Koblentz, 2017). This shows that the authorisation of use of chemical weapons remained with those high up in the chain of command. This was different in Iraq, where the authorisation was delegated to lower level field commanders midway through the war. It indicates the special status of chemical weapons for the Syrian regime, as they were to be used "only in instances of elevated (strategic) importance" (OPCW 2020, p. 58). Part of the explanation for this is that the regime maintained control over the use of chemical weapons, because to some extent it wanted to maintain control over the narrative. However, as will be elaborated upon later, such control over the narrative is an illusion in the digital era, and plausible deniability was all the regime could aspire to achieve.

Analysis of military use

Although sustained (212 chemical attacks were recorded by the Syrian Archive), military chemical weapons use in Syria has been relatively limited in terms of volume compared to chemical weapons use in Iraq in the 1980s. Chapman et al. argue that chemical weapons use in Syria has been so limited in nature that it does not challenge the chemical weapons norm, given the international response and lack

of military utility. The costs and benefits do not weigh off, in their analysis, and therefore we should not expect widespread chemical weapons proliferation (2018). They note that chemical weapons use in Ghouta (sarin, August 2013) and on the Hama Plains (chlorine, summer 2014) did not provide the Syrian Armed Forces with significant military advantages, concluding a lack of utility (p. 717; p. 720). Another important note in their study is that international response was stronger for the more advanced use of chemical weapons, sarin in particular, than for the less lethal forms, such as chlorine (p. 706). This suggests that if states are interested in using more effective chemical weapons to improve their military capability, the international community will surely respond and impose costs.

However, the cases they examine fall roughly in the first half of the Syrian conflict, during which Assad was generally in a weaker position nationally, but also internationally. This was the time when the West was almost unanimous in denouncing Assad's legitimacy and potential for post-conflict government, and when he was not considered a legitimate international partner (Edwards & Cacciatori, 2018, p. 284). For instance, well into 2015, the European Union maintained that Assad's regime was not a legitimate international partner (Turkmani & Haid, 2016, pp. 9-12). Indeed, it affirmed the opposition – no matter how fragmented – to be a necessary party to negotiations and a post-conflict state (p. 11). Such sentiments were echoed in the United States (p. 9). Even long-standing ally Iran considered the possibility of "losing the Assad dynasty" and realised it had to significantly increase its support to save the regime (Seliktar & Rezaei, 2020, p. 170). Within this national and international context, it can be expected that the morale of the opposition was higher and that civilians were better able to sustain chemical attacks during this time. The nexus between morale and resilience was also observed in Iran, where chemical attacks against Iranian soldiers became more effective when their religious zeal – which sustained their morale – waned (Russell, 2005, p. 197; Ali, 2001, p. 52). Additionally, during the years when Assad was gaining momentum (especially after Russia engaged militarily in September 2015) and increased his territorial control, chemical weapons were indeed effective at securing opposition-held cities. This includes Douma in April 2018 and Aleppo in December 2016. The fact that both these cases saw the use of chlorine, rather than the more lethal sarin, confirms that chemical weapons have military utility beyond their precise chemical effect and lethality. The episodes also confirm that chemical weapons can hardly be expected to achieve such results on their own. In both cases, they were used in the final stages of the offensive to secure the territory quickly after conventional attacks had done most of the work. However, this limited military utility, or rather, the fact that chemical weapons are not decisive, does not mean that they are not effective.

While the effectiveness of chemical weapons in Syria has not been as negligible as some argue, they were certainly not as useful as they have been on various occasions during the Iraq-Iran War. Closely aligned with Koblentz's analysis that regime security plays a large role in considerations of chemical weapons acquisition and use (2013), and that the main threat to regime security in the Syrian case has been domestic armed and unarmed opposition, it can be concluded that Assad learned Hussein's lesson:

that chemical weapons are most effective against unarmed civilian populations when morale is low, in combination with conventional weaponry. Thus, militarily and for the domestic audience, the purpose of chemical weapons was to defeat and deter (armed) opposition action.

The link between such chemical military action and the defeat of the armed opposition is not a direct one, however. As mentioned before, the series of chemical attacks (especially before December 2016, but also at several stages afterwards) seem to be more punitive in nature, targeting towns and cities behind the front line in opposition-held territory. For instance, Schneider and Lütkefeld's data show that as the frontline moved up during the 2015 rebel offensive in Idlib, the average distance measured in settlements counted from the frontline into opposition-held territory, increased from 1.25 in March to 3.8 in June (2019, p. 25). In other words, the attacks did not move along with the frontline, but continued to be aimed at set civilian targets outside of government control. Chemical weapons were thus meant to secure a political advantage first and foremost, namely to show that living in opposition-held territory was dangerous. Such attacks created a distance between civilians and their rebel government, who failed to protect them. Schneider and Lütkefeld further show that such indiscriminate attacks weakened the military support for opposition forces, pushing them towards a negotiated settlement or surrender (pp. 28-29). At this point, political advantage translated in to military advantage, as chemical weapons allowed government forces to break the resistance and to enter and take control of rebel-held territory. A more direct link between chemical weapons use and military advantage can be observed during the attacks in 2017 and 2018 in and around Douma and Damascus. Here, chlorine and sarin were used tactically in trenches and for anti-access purposes.

This means that in the Syrian Civil War, there are two patterns or parallel streams associated with chemical weapons usage. First, there is the perspective of the opposition, which was better able to sustain such attacks when moral was high, when Assad was on the losing side, and when the Syrian Arab Army were unable to pressure opposition strongholds into surrender. When Assad started receiving military support from Iran and Russia, the tide turned and conventional force put the opposition forces at a disadvantage, weakening morale. The opposition was less able to sustain chemical (and other indiscriminate) attacks and, as a result of civilian pressure and the loss of civilian support, was more easily pushed towards surrender. Militarily, then, the role of chemical weapons remained rather punitive over the course of the war, but as time progressed, the relationship between this punitive element and the military defeat of the opposition became more direct. This relationship is reminiscent of more traditional siege warfare. Siege warfare as such played a role in the Syrian conflict, too, in cases such as Aleppo where the opposition was literally encircled and cut off from supplies. Siege warfare was and is meant to put such a strain on civilian life that these civilians would pressure their leaders into surrendering.

The second perspective is that of the government forces. Progressing from using both chlorine and sarin to using chlorine almost exclusively, the Syrian armed forces started to rely less on the lethal toxic properties of the gasses, and more on the signalling strength of chemical weapons and their panic-inducing qualities. This might be partially due to the strong international response to sarin use in Douma in 2013 and Khan Sheikoun in 2017 as well as the difficulty in producing lethal sarin as the CWC regime was implemented from 2013 onwards. However, the strategy itself did not change much, and remained punitive with the aim of weakening opposition support. Militarily, it was a punitive strategy paired with an element of deterrence. As the war progressed, this was adjusted to a punitive strategy paired with an element of decisiveness. Chemical weapons were not decisive in themselves, but cumulatively with other types of indiscriminate attacks, siege warfare, and conventional force, they did lead to the collapse of the opposition. In addition to these strategic effects, the government forces also learned to use chemical weapons more effectively for tactical purposes, indicating a degree of normalisation.

Norm dynamics

When observing norm dynamics related to Syria's use of chemical weapons, we note a similar emboldening on the part of the main perpetrator – Bashar Al-Assad – that we observed with Saddam Hussein. This new identity repulses a large part of the international audience and isolates Syria to a significant extent, but is simultaneously enabled by a few close allies. It causes a doubling down on existing allegiances and introduces a definitive split between states that adhere to diverging interpretations of reality. In a way, the continued use of chemical weapons by Assad forces his allies into a distinctive normative space with significant military implications. The argument that follows proceeds from Assad's self-understanding and understanding of sovereignty to explaining how subscriptions to these understandings create allegiances that help internationalise the conflict to such an extent that it allowed Assad to achieve military victory. At the same time, it created a situation in which his adversaries were unable to take decisive action.

First of all, the use of chemical weapons is one of multiple ways in which Assad equates the Syria state with his own administration. Former British ambassador to Syria Henry Hogger comments on Assad's reliance on indiscriminate violence during the Syrian conflict in a manner that is highly reminiscent of our observations of Hussein in the Iraq-Iran War. In a 2014 publication, he argues that Assad's inclination to react so violently was the result of "a sense of destiny … equating survival of the dynasty with the safeguarding of the nation." (p. 5). Such a perception clearly distinguishes between the actors (the president and their inner circle), the country they are in charge of, and the people inhabiting the country: 'safeguarding the nation' does not mean 'safeguarding the people'. Indeed, it means 'safeguarding the regime'. Regime security, in this perception, requires regime primacy and top-down control and violence is an expression of that. While Hussein's violence was initially directed at Iran, and while his chemical weapons use in those battles served clear military purpose, his turn towards the Kurds emphasised his ability to exert top-down control and create his own rules in his own country. Acting

counter to international law in the context of a domestic conflict or civil war underlines the (perhaps unsettling) fact that Hussein and Assad were and are in charge in their territories. This situation is echoed by multiple commentators who highlight diverging interpretations of sovereignty as a principle of international relations among 'the West' and Russia, Syria, Iran, and their allies (Allison, 2013; Averre & Davies, 2015; Menshawy, 2019; 2021). Thus, insofar as global anti-violence norms such as the anti-chemical weapons norm centre around the people as opposed to the state, the transgression of these norms disenfranchises the people.

However, regime security also has an international dimension, which is not so much about regime security traditionally understood, as it is about securing the regime's identity and power internationally. Gregory Koblentz identifies four research areas in which chemical weapons proliferation can be studied by combining two sets of two criteria: international or domestic audience, and political or security benefits[10]. He argues that of those four, regime security as an explanatory factor is under-studied (2013, p. 504). This field is at the intersection of 'domestic audience' and 'security benefits'. As mentioned before, this can be a fitting explanation in the Syrian case, given that the weapons were used against domestic opposition for the benefit of the regime. However, the dimension that yields 'prestige' as an explanatory factor (namely, the intersection of political benefits and an international audience) does not seem to be of any relevance in Koblentz's explanation of the variables for the acquisition of chemical weapons. In this explanation, the chemical weapons taboo plays a restrictive role and acquiring chemical weapons in such a normative universe does not yield international prestige, as would the acquisition of nuclear weapons. However, going beyond Koblentz's excellent analysis of regime security and chemical weapons acquisition, I argue that 'prestige' is not the correct name of this category as we consider chemical weapons in particular, and that it can still be helpful in the explanation of chemical weapons acquisition and use.

'Recognition' would be a more appropriate name for the category Koblentz describes at the intersection of political benefits and an international audience. At this intersection can lie either a desire for public international praise (indeed, prestige), or a desire for public international rejection and isolation, both of which can constitute the renewal or re-emphasis of a state's leader as somehow powerful. In other words, international recognition need not be positive, but can be negative. The 'under my roof, my rules' signal of strict Westphalian sovereignty as interpreted by Syria is thereby expanded and projected internationally. Ironically, such a counter-normative position requires the norm to exist. This explains Syria's accession to the CWC, its international denials of chemical weapons use, and its efforts to not overstretch its reach and employ lethal chemical weapons excessively, inviting too strong an international (military) response. In order to be able to signal anything with its chemical weapons use,

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[10] Koblentz uses the framework to explain acquisition rather than use (2013). Rather than disagreeing with the parameters of his study, I rather refine it with a special consideration for the use, rather than acquisition, of chemical weapons.

Syria thus upholds the anti-chemical weapons norm. I therefore somewhat agree with Chapman et al.'s conclusion that the Syrian use of chemical weapons does not constitute a major threat to the chemical weapons regime, nor to the current non-proliferation practices (2018)[11]. This is echoed by Richard Price (2019). Chapman et al. mention, however, that the continued practice of non-use is not necessarily relevant for states that are "already outside the norm" (p. 706), in other words, those states that have not acceded to the CWC or those states that, by reason of their world view, do not find themselves bound by it.

International recognition starts with a domestic context that enables the use of chemical weapons. In light of this, Chapman et al's caveat that their findings might not extend to states "already outside the norm" is more important than is acknowledged in their article (2018, p. 706). Indeed, there is a growing number of states to which "being outside the norm" might apply, including non-signatories like Israel and North Korea, but also including states that challenge the prevailing (liberal) world order and perceive themselves to be outside of the norm. One might think of Sudan, which allegedly used incendiary agents against humans in Darfur in 2016 (Amnesty International, 2016), but also Russia, which used an enhanced nerve agent known as novichok in Salisbury, in the United Kingdom in 2018 (OPCW, 2018). Analysing chemical weapons use purely militarily and with reference to civil distress as indicators of an internationally projected threat not only understates the strategic potential of such subversive weapons, but also downplays the impact of the weapons domestically in those military contexts. The relative military failure of chemical weapons in the first half of the Syrian conflict does not disprove the utility demonstrated in Iraq between 1987 and 1991, and in Syria between 2016 and 2018. Coupled with the fact that Assad managed to stay in power in spite of antagonising influential states, this can still inspire states facing internal threats to acquire and use chemical weapons.

In turning now to the international dimension of recognition, I use 'strategic' in the broad, non-operational sense that connects it explicitly with foreign policy, but that is not 'a-military' per se. As Richard Betts explains, "a scheme for how to use a particular operation to achieve a larger military objective, or a foreign policy decision that requires certain military actions, are both strategic matters at different levels in the chain between means and ends" (2000, p. 6-7). And indeed, the military implications of foreign policy are enormously important. This brings us to the point raised earlier about how the use of chemical weapons forced Syria's allies into a particular stance that rejected credible evidence as factual, but which also forced Syria's adversaries to recognise Assad as an actor that could not be bypassed.

Syria is an interesting state as it compares to the other Arab Spring states. Its relationship with Iran and Russia, its particular antagonism towards Israel (and the United States by extension), and its association with Hezbollah all mean that the conflict would be at risk of internationalisation. In light of the Turkish

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[11] Although, as explained before, I do reject their assertion that this is also due to limited military effectiveness.

intervention in northern Syria in the later years of the conflict and the subsequent debate about who is the security guarantor in the region, Dmitri Trenin's observation is prescient (2012). In commenting on Russia's perspective on the conflict during this stage, he writes that to Russia, Syria

> "is about who decides: who decides whether to use military force; who decides the actors for use of that force; and who decides under what rules, conditions, and oversight military force is to be used." (Trenin, 2012)

Russia then became Assad's means of 'safeguarding the nation', a means that is a good fit for both countries. As long as Assad was indeed in control in Syria, Russia did not have an interest in changing the status quo. So close to its own southern borders, with Islamic terrorism waiting to fill any political vacuum, Russia is a proponent of established political power, even dealing with Kurdish factions. Russia is a non-intervening security guarantor. From Assad's perspective, this means that he could continue to exert the violent control over the uprising as he has done from the start, including disregarding the rules of international law. However, the 'fit' was not perfect for Russia; Assad continued to 'decide under what rules force is to be used'. After the use of sarin in Ghouta in 2013, Russian authorities were quick to act upon the American proposal for de-escalation in the chemical weapons field. The fact that Assad continued to use chemical weapons afterwards forced Russia to side with Syria publicly even more.

The western states, most prominently France, the United Kingdom, and the United States, were initially hesitant to intervene, but the 2013 sarin attack in Ghouta brought them closest to intervention (Martini, 2022). In the months leading up to the Ghouta attacks, these states had consistently delegitimised Syria in the Security Council and called upon Assad to step down, but did not intervene. When the use of sarin on such a large scale finally shifted the deliberations into high gear and the United States started using language of intervention at public fora, the American representative at the UNSC also stepped in with the plan to have Syria accede to the CWC and avoid such intervention. However, as Price notes, this came on the back of an already ongoing UN/OPCW investigation into previous allegations upon invitation from the Syrian regime (2019). The Syrian regime had blamed the opposition for using chemical weapons, thereby discursively confirming the normative regime against them. Price argues that this says something about the "international salience of the chemical weapons norm" (2019, p. 38). While true, this raises a tension that Price does not resolve in the article, because that is not the question he sets out to answer. However, it is important to address here: if Assad recognised the international salience of the norm, what was the strategic purpose of violating it, and continuing doing so after CWC ratification?

During the events of 2013, it was clear that Russia had explicitly aligned itself with Syria's narrative that the use of chemical weapons was attributable to the opposition. Syria's subsequent accession to the CWC, a process through which its chemical arsenal would be dismantled, allowed the allegiance to deepen and gain support for the position that Assad's regime was not responsible for further use of

chemical weapons. From the 2013 Ghouta attacks onwards, Russian media and government spokespersons consistently denied that such attacks occurred or claimed that they were the work of the Syrian opposition or Islamic fundamentalists, and Russian diplomats laboured in the UN and at the OPCW to shed doubt on conclusions reached in investigations (Brown, 2015; Edwards & Cacciatori, 2018; Koblentz, 2020). The allegiance between Syria and Russia was one characterised by a shared interest in denial and deception. As we observe this story unfolding, we see the climax of this dynamic being reached in March 2018 when Russia itself used a chemical weapon, novichok, in an attempt to poison former Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia (OPCW, 2018). Previously, United States spokespeople had already asserted a level of responsibility on the part of Russia regarding Syria's use of chemical weapons (Al-Khalidi, 2017). If the allegiance between the two countries on the topic of chemical weapons was implicit before, it was now explicit.

Assad's use of chemical weapons did not force Putin to take this route to the extreme of poisoning the Skripals, in the sense that this was not a one-directional relationship. Russia had its own interests in aligning itself with the regime in Syria (Allison, 2013). Also, chemical weapons also did not constitute the only norm violation Assad is guilty of. However, the use of chemical weapons is a particularly visible violation of international law, and so in practice it forms one of the clearest expressions of allegiance. This allegiance was strategically crucial for Assad. As we saw earlier, Russian involvement within Syrian territory formed the turning point in the civil war and allowed the regime to achieve military victory in large parts of the country. Each new use of chemical weapons in Syria created an opportunity for the Syria-Russia allegiance to withstand international pressure together and double down on the path chosen.

Without the use of chemical weapons, Syria would also have had an ally in Russia, so the added benefit of using chemical weapons was not that it created this alliance. However, it did become a way of signalling power and it changed the salience of the civil war from a regional matter, as Western states in particular first regarded it, into an international one, where it sharpened divisions (Martini, 2022). As much as the Arab Spring was a regional phenomenon that Western states were hesitant to intervene in after Libya, the introduction of chemical weapons drew the attention of the wider international society. The rise of ISIS and the use of chemical weapons eventually formed the impetus for three international coalitions to intervene in Syria: the Global Coalition against ISIS, the Russia-Syria-Iran-Iraq coalition against ISIS, and the 2018 US-UK-France air strikes in response the use of chemical weapons in Douma in April 2018. With the addition of the American air strikes a year earlier, in response to the chemical attacks in Khan Sheikoun, all Western intervention aimed at Assad's regime forces was carried out in response to the use of chemical weapons. Thus, the use of chemical weapons kept the Syrian conflict on the international agenda.

This is the result of the salience of the norm against chemical weapons in international relations. In August 2012, American President Obama commented on the war in Syria saying that "a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus" (The White House, 2012). From this point on, chemical weapons became the focal point of the Western alliance's engagement with Syria. It implied that no other crimes occurring in Syria would make them consider an intervention. The subsequent continued use of chemical weapons allowed Assad two benefits. First, chemical weapons became a smokescreen behind which he could carry out war crimes of all sorts (Bentley, 2016). Second, the West found itself incapable of securing enough domestic support to respond to chemical weapons violations militarily and decisively now that the OPCW was the proper, diplomatic route. Indeed, when first the United States and a year later, the US-US-France coalition carried out retaliatory strikes, Syria, Russia and Iran responded with indignation.

In response to the American strikes in 2017, Assad claimed the initial chemical attacks had been fabricated to create a pretext for the United States to retaliate, while Russia offered the explanation that the release of chemicals was a result of a Syrian airstrike on an opposition-owned chemical weapons facility (Smith-Park, 2017). Russia and Iran issued a statement via their joint command centre that the strike "crossed a red line", echoing the red line comments made by President Obama in 2012 about chemical weapons (Sharman, 2017). The response to the 2018 coalition air strikes was similar, with Russia claiming the initial chemical weapons attack had been staged by the White Helmets or by Britain, and denouncing the retaliatory strikes as acts of aggression (Roth & Ellis-Peterson, 2018; "White Helmets staged Douma", 2018). An Iranian foreign ministry spokesman said that "The United States and its allies have no proof and, without even waiting for the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons to take a position, have carried out this military attack" ("US and allies", 2018). Carrying out the chemical weapons attacks allowed Syria, Russia and Iran to strategically reverse the narrative as Western states reacted. Military and punitive purposes of chemical weapons, described earlier, combine here with their propensity to evoke an international response, to allow Syria and its allies to take the moral high ground. In its Arabic coverage, Russian news outlet RT already warned that Western states would intervene maliciously, legitimising Russia's own 'protection' of the Syrian people, in March 2018 (Dajani, Gillespie & Crilley, 2021). This was a month before the chlorine attacks of 7 April took place in Douma. Similarly, in 2017, Russia accused the United States of planting chemical substances in order to legitimise a strike ("US: No Doubt", 2017). In other words, the international response to the use of chemical weapons formed the stage upon which Syria and its allies could perform their own narrative of relevance and legitimacy.

Assad's legitimacy was further strengthened by encouraging the focus on chemical weapons, as critical voices in Western states forced their governments to confirm that regime change was not on the agenda. In a press conference after the 2018 coalition strikes, British prime minister Theresa May said that "this was not about interfering in a civil war. And it was not about regime change" (Elgot, 2018). Every new

instance of chemical weapons use in Syria thus put a magnifying glass on the lack of resolve in the West to challenge Assad's rule. This is particularly poignant as the previous Western intervention in the Middle East, the invasion of Iraq and the dramatic war that followed, had been partially sold on the basis of Iraq's supposed chemical weapons capability. According to James Strong, the memory of Iraq was indeed one of the reasons why the House of Commons voted against military intervention in Syria in 2013, which set a precedent for limited engagement (2021)[12]. This is not to say that had chemical weapons *not* been used, regime change *would* have been on the table. However, it did mean that if these Western states wanted to intervene in response to chemical weapons use, they could only do so by stressing that regime change would not happen. As a result of their domestic commitments and the legacy of the Iraq War, the Western states could try to target the means of transgression, but not the transgressor.

The sharpening of divisions is less clear on the regional level, and certainly more transient. As with the international dimension, chemical weapons do not form the core cause of this, but rather form the backdrop against which divisions are brought into focus. Regionally, the Arab – Persian tensions, the Sunni – Shia divides, and the traditional alliances determine the political landscape, and the Syrian conflict and the use of chemical weapons only had a temporary effect on the divisions. Syria had already been suspended from the Arab League in 2011 in response to the violence that was used to quell the protests. Sunni-majority states in particular supported the opposition in Syria, with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, and Kuwait taking the most active stance (Cafiero & Milliken, 2023; "Hundreds Reported Killed", 2013). The League condemned the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime repeatedly and called for international action, although it stopped short of advocating for military intervention, but referred to the United Nations instead (Kirkpatrick, 2013; "Arab League Summit", 2018). However, individual countries in the region had varying responses. Along with Kuwait, UAE and Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the main regional rival of Syria's ally Iran, expressed particular disappointment with the lack of American intervention in October 2013, when it even refused its seat in the UNSC:

> The current charade of international control over Bashar's chemical arsenal would be funny if it were not so blatantly perfidious, and designed not only to give Mr. Obama an opportunity to back down, but also to help Assad to butcher his people. (Al-Faisal bin Abdul Aziz Al-Saud, 2013, p. 41)

The event also allowed Turki Al Faisal, Saudi prince and the chairman of the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies in Riyadh, to draw attention to the broader issue of weapons of mass destruction in the region, particularly in Israel and Iran, calling for action to:

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[12] This calculus changed in 2018, after the Salisbury novichok attack, which was referenced by Theresa May to justify the retaliatory strike in April of that year ("Statements by Theresa May", 2018).

> rid the Middle East of the lewd display of dancing around nuclear proliferation by the P5+1 and Iran, and removing the Syrian chemical weapons while Israel continues to build up its nuclear, biological and chemical arsenals; and that will bring to a stop the butchering of the Syrian people by a bloodthirsty president who is now enjoying the protection of the Security Council. (idem, p. 44)

In other words, the issue of chemical weapons in Syria allowed Saudi Arabia to re-assert previous grievances. The fact that relations between the two countries have thawed again more recently shows that this dynamic is particularly temporary in the regional context. Since 2019, but more informally since 2016, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt have been among the Arab states to have initiated renewed relations as it became clear that Assad would not be removed from power (Harb, 2021; Ayton, 2021; Todman, 2016). At the moment of writing, Syria's return to the Arab League is no longer off the table ("Saudi Arabia: Talks underway", 2023).

Compared to Saudi Arabia, Egypt's response was more reserved, condemning the use of chemical weapons but urging more research, and rejecting the possibility of military intervention ("Egypt Rejects", 2013). This is not surprising, considering the recent turmoil Egypt itself experienced in the years prior. Even more hesitant, Iraq, which had previously had a leading role in the Arab League along with Egypt, abstained from voting on Syria's suspension in 2011 (Debre, 2021). The improvement in Iraqi-Syrian relations since the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 continued as the Syrian Civil War progressed. The Iraqi leadership was particularly fearful of a Sunni-led victory in Syria, jeopardising the fragile Shia rule over Iraq (Hinnebusch, 2014, p. 22). Iraq has been remarkably silent about the issue of chemical weapons in Syria, which may be related to the (relatively ineffective) use of chemical weapons against Iraqi troops and civilians by ISIS (Chapman, 2017; Shoham, 2015; UNSC, 2022).

Iran took a similar stance as its Syrian and Russian allies, often questioning the evidence for the use of chemical weapons or blaming attacks on American or opposition parties. In 2017, the Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif Khansari emphasised his disapproval of chemical weapons use by any party, referring to his experiences during the Iran-Iraq War. Rejecting that Assad had good reason to use chemical weapons in Khan Sheikoun in 2017, he suggested that the UN and the OPCW should hold to higher standards when investigating the allegations ("The Zarif Interviews", 2017). This was echoed in 2018, when a spokesman for the Iranian foreign ministry questioned the allegations of chemical attacks by the Syrian regime with reference to the fact that the Syrian regime had the upper hand, and therefore no reason to use chemical weapons. He further claimed that these allegations were rather a pretext for American and other Western countries to intervene militarily in Syria ("Iran condemns chemical weapons", 2018). The same statement also questioned the reliability of the OPCW. Speaking on the 2018 chlorine attacks in Douma, Iranian representative at the UN Jalil Iravani said in 2023 that

> During the eight-year war imposed by Hussein's regime on Iran, some Western countries either remained silent or actively supported the systematic use of chemical weapons against the Iranian people by supplying and providing such weapons of mass destruction to Hussein's regime. Now those same countries are manipulating the OPCW to further their own political agendas, potentially misusing it and its mechanisms in the case of Syria. (UNSC 2023, p. 27)

We thus observe a similar dynamic towards increasingly entrenched positions surrounding chemical weapons that we observed with regards to Russia, from questioning the evidence and politicising the OPCW to blaming Western states.

Finally, Israel's response aligned more closely to that of the United States. It has been involved in multiple missile attacks on Syrian chemical weapons facilities, and has repeatedly criticised Syria for using chemical weapons (Beaumont, 2017; Dilanian & Kube, 2018). In 2018, a foreign ministry statement read:

> The attack shows clearly that Syria continues to possess lethal chemical weapons capabilities and even to manufacture new ones. In so doing Syria is grossly violating its obligations and the decisions of the international community in this matter. (in Staff 2018, no page numbers)

The reference to the 'obligations of the international community' on the possession of chemical weapons is remarkable given the fact that Israel itself has not acceded to the CWC. However, throughout the conflict, Israel has confirmed the illegitimate nature of chemical weapons, and accused Assad along with France and Britain before the United States would definitively blame the Syrian regime (Sanger & Rudoren, 2013). Unlike the United States, France, and Britain, Israel has been involved in a large number of strikes on Syria that did not involve accusations of chemical weapons, and it is unlikely that this issue contributed significantly to the salience of Syrian instability for Israel.

It thus looks like the strategic effect of continued chemical weapons use for the regional context was the sharpening of divisions and further entrenchment of existing positions, similar to the observations for the wider international context. However, this regional dynamic was of a more temporary character as Syria's regional adversaries have started rapprochement efforts (with the exception of Israel). We have not yet observed that amongst Syria's international adversaries.

Conclusion

The Syrian Civil War is a difficult, convoluted case. The overused phrase that truth is the first casualty of war, attributed to American senator Hiram Johnson, certainly applies. What is interesting about truth, however, is that its greatest adversary is not falsehood, but uncertainty. Syrian president Assad managed to create enough uncertainty to stave off unwanted international intervention, while securing an international platform to put on display the inaction of the West. Assad had everything to lose, but chose the most confrontational course of action he could. This is thoroughly puzzling, particularly because he

hardly needed chemical weapons to maintain his position. However, a close reading reveals that chemical weapons came to form the lens through which the West focused its attention on Syria. This obscured other war crimes and paradoxically legitimised Assad, because in order to respond militarily to the use of chemical weapons, Western governments felt compelled to stress that regime change was not on the table. Indeed, what probably paralysed the international community most, was the prospect that intervention in Syria would soon come to include regime change, which would constitute a repetition of the interventions in Libya and Iraq that no one in the West was keen on replicating (Akbarzadeh & Saba, 2019). Assad thus demonstrated that norms do not suffice in the regulation of international affairs, let alone internal affairs. Assad also publicly underlined the importance of the anti-chemical weapons norm, making it appear as though the West had, yet again, managed to successfully incorporate a deviant state into its normative family. Given Assad's continued use of chemical weapons, this turned out to be a hollow 'win'.

Assad appeared to do everything he could to delegitimise the use of chemical weapons. He joined the CWC, invited inspection and elimination teams into his country, and pinned chemical attacks on terrorists. All the while, he continued to order gas attacks on civilians and opposition. Thus, rather than challenging the norm itself, he challenged the whole system of normative behaviour that bypasses state sovereignty, making a mockery out of it. It was a risky decision, but the international climate was ripe for it. The fragmentation that resulted over the question of chemical weapons and Syria was not along regional or even inter-state lines. It ran right through societies, which is particularly impactful in democracies. For those who believed Assad, there was no cause for intervention. For those who did not believe Assad, but did not want to get involved in another war in the Middle East, it was enough to choose diplomacy. Those who did not believe Assad and did not consider diplomacy to be enough, were left with too little support for intervention. Ultimately, Syria challenged what the West considered 'right', 'true', and 'logical'. It remains to be seen to what extent this format is attractive to other states, but so far it has kept Assad right where he was.

The Strategic Value of Norm Transgression

Introduction

The three case studies show how three different state actors have engaged with the question of chemical weapons use in the context of the war they were engaged in. The analyses highlight the military utility of chemical weapons in various operational circumstances, from offensive to defensive operations, in genocide, and as punitive weapons, as well as the limitations of using gas. It appears that chemical weapons are by no means war-winning weapons, but in truth, very few weapons are. It also appears that there are various operational demands that can be well-met using chemical weapons, particularly if armed forces get the chance to practice with the weapons over the course of a few years. Against that background, the case studies detail the normative dynamics involved in the process of chemical weapons use, showing the international backlash as well as support. All three actors used a particular narrative to accompany the use of chemical weapons: the Soviet Union and Syria denied the use of chemical weapons, while Iraq acknowledged it. Depending on contextual as well as intentional factors, each state actor engaged with a regional or international audience, or both, and used the existence of the chemical weapons norm variously to advance strategic goals.

First, I will briefly revisit the conventional understanding of the military utility of chemical weapons. States are unlikely to use chemical weapons if it does not create some military advantage, and so a degree of military utility is a necessary precondition for use. Without this basis, states do not use chemical weapons and so do not engage with the strategic dimension of being a norm transgressor. However, there is an extra connection between the military precondition and norm transgression: amongst my cases, states that have been on the defensive have been more successful in the use of chemical weapons than the one on the offensive. Reflecting on Clausewitz's assertion that "defence is the stronger form of war with a weaker aim" (1832/1976, p. 428, also p. 742), we can tentatively say that states on the defensive only need to retain the status quo ante, rather than achieve a political victory and the normative alignment that comes with that. After describing the military precondition, I will address each case study in relation to the norm transgression framework introduced in chapter 2, to evaluate our theoretical understanding of norm transgression and relate this to strategy. Finally, I embed these in the concept of liminality to show the differences and commonalities between the three cases.

The military utility of chemical weapons

Based on the three case studies presented here, and with additional evidence from other research into the use of chemical weapons, we can conclude that with sufficient training and time for adjustment, various states have found chemicals to be a useful force multiplier to accompany conventional operations. Thus, chemical weapons can not only be effective, but also militarily useful (Krause, 1991). This means that armed forces not only require time to learn to use chemical weapons most effectively,

but also sufficient scope. The Iran-Iraq War is the clearest example of this, where the Iraqi armed forces were not only able to learn how to use chemical weapons over a longer period of time, but were also confronted with a variety of operational demands that chemical weapons could form a partial solution to. This allowed for the integration of chemical weapons into the military apparatus, even to the extent that approval for the use of chemicals was delegated to lower-level field commanders. Chemical weapons is a broad category and different substances have different effect, persistency, and range, and therefore different utility. Mustard gas, for instance, has been used in both offensive and defensive operations as it severely impacts the opponent's ability to fight, owing to the severe incapacitory and sometimes lethal effects (Borak & Sidell, 1992). It is also effective for area denial as a result of its relatively high persistency, which is particularly useful for defensive operations, but it can also be used offensively to trap a retreating force. As discussed in chapter 3, there is some evidence of experimental use of V-class nerve gasses for the same purpose in Afghanistan. Sarin, on the other hand, has lesser persistency and can be used as a force multiplier during conventional offensives. The recapturing of the Faw Peninsula by Iraq in 1988 is the clearest example of this, but sarin was also used offensively in Syria to force civilians to pressure urban-based opposition forces to surrender. Defensively, sarin has been used in deep, layered defence in the envelopment of advancing forces. Chlorine gas is particularly simple to manufacture, but has lesser lethality. Its effectiveness lies mainly in its psychological effect, as demonstrated in punitive and terrorist bombings in Syria and by ISIS (Spyer, 2014). Chlorine gas has been shown to produce great psychological effect among civilian populations in Syria in particular, even though these attacks did not garner the same international attention as sarin attacks. Because of its lesser lethality, relatively simply protective measures, and quick evaporation, chlorine gas has been less favoured in military operations that did not directly benefit from psychological strain on civilians.

As a class of weapons, chemical weapons have often been grouped in with nuclear and biological weapons to form the weapons of mass destruction category. The name says it all: chemical weapons supposedly are capable of causing mass destruction (Oren & Solomon, 2020; Shamai, 2015). While this may be true under the right circumstances, chemical weapons more often have shown more circumscribed effect in particular tactical situations. Thus, the association with WMD is a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it intensifies the stigma, fear, and rejection of chemical weapons, as evidenced by the use of the WMD discourse in the United States' invasion of Iraq. Even though this discourse was just one line of argumentation among many, the media particularly focused on it, as did Colin Powell in his famous speech at the UN Security Council (Bahador, Moses, & Youmans, 2018). On the other hand, the WMD association artificially inflates the common understanding of the effects of chemical weapons. When their actual effects pale in comparison to that of nuclear weapons, or in comparison to the popular imagination of *Brave New World* (Huxley, 1932) and *The War of the Worlds* (Wells, 1898), there is a risk of artificial deflation instead. Effectiveness should not be confused with decisiveness. I have not

been the first to make this point. As Richard Price details when reflecting on the history of chemical weapons:

> Typical weapons today are regarded in unremarkable terms as meeting the standard of utility; indeed, the question is hardly ever brought up. Rarely, however, have such weapons met the criterion of decisiveness that is so often required of chemical weapons. (1997, p. 131-132)

Price makes his point when arguing why many states choose *not* to pursue chemical warfare, namely that they are not considered decisive and therefore not worth the trouble. However, it also applies to our assessments of the effectiveness of chemical war when it *does* occur. McNaughter, for instance, draws our attention to the difference between chemical and nuclear weapons (1990). Globally speaking, chemical weapons lack the stabilising effects of nuclear weapons in the context of deterrence. However, chemical weapons could have stabilising effect in regional contexts such as that of the Middle East, where populations are small and concentrated (1990, p. 7). There is no empirical evidence for this claim; it is simply not in the historical record, but McNaughter compels us to consider it. The point is that we need to distinguish chemical weapons from nuclear weapons and biological weapons to properly gauge their military utility, both in strategic terms and operational terms.

Without military effectiveness, which relies on time and scope for armed forces to get acquainted with the weapons so they acquire military utility, there is little reason for state actors to pursue a chemical weapons capability. Therefore, in order to prevent chemical warfare, we should not rely on a narrative that negates the military effectiveness of the weapons, as Chapman and colleagues do in part (2018). While such an approach is not entirely without merit, it skips over the fact that with ample time and practice, chemical weapons can achieve significant military results and become normalised components of state arsenals. Therefore, the usefulness of the norm against chemical weapons in preventing chemical war lies precisely in its ability to prevent states from being able to test and practice with chemical weapons. It prevents operational effectiveness of turning into military utility. This should be a warning and a call to continue preventative efforts; if states do get the opportunity to practice extensively, and the international community only intervenes when some higher-order norm is violated (such as targeting civilians) or when a particularly lethal chemicals are used (such as sarin), this may be too late. Without the extensive sanctions regime imposed on Iraq in the 1990s, it is unlikely that Saddam Hussein would have given up his chemical arsenal, given how proficient his armed forces had become. Effectiveness does not equal decisiveness and given the right circumstances, including a weak international response, there is a risks states will pursue a chemical capability.

The right circumstances include a number of elements. Given the lack of chemical weapons in general, as a result of the strong norm and the Nobel-prize winning efforts of the OPCW, future chemical war would be the result of a 'perfect storm' that is difficult, if not impossible, to predict accurately. In any case, there has to be cause for acquisition and cause for use. A threat to regime security has been shown

to have caused states to acquire a chemical capability in the past (Koblentz, 2013). There is evidence that a measure of desperation has often been present for states to turn to chemical weapons use initially (Quillen, 2017). At the same time, the operational demands of the conflict in question would need to be suitable for the use of chemicals to sustain their use. Successful and prolonged use of chemical weapons also requires international support, to shield from an intervention that would severely limit the ability to continue the use of chemical weapons. Finally, given that there is a strong norm against chemical weapons, there should also be some benefit for such a state to transgress that norm and risk international condemnation should the perfect storm materialise. Using the transgression matrix (table 6.1) introduced in chapter 2 to understand and name the relevant dynamics, this is what I turn to next.

Response to allegations

	Frame challenge	Claim denial
International	Global adaptation	Sowing disorder
Regional	Regional exception	Shifting allegiances

Table 6.1: Transgression matrix

The Iran-Iraq War

I start with the Iran-Iraq War. This conflict is not chronologically the first of the three case studies, but it presents the clearest categories to evaluate our theory by. It thus forms the clearest case of the three and provides vocabulary and point of comparison to assess the other two. The relative clarity of the case derives from the fact that Iraqi leadership eventually admitted to the use of chemical weapons, engaged in a legal discourse to justify it, and presented a clear understanding of the identity of Iraq as a state and

Saddam Hussein as its leader in the process. Appropriate knowledge of how statespeople understand the identity of the state they represent is crucial to appreciate why they might risk the recognition of that very state.

Most evidence points in the direction of the use of chemical weapons in this conflict being a case of creating regional exception. Regional exception is pursued when the region is the primary audience, and when the normative frame is challenged. Although Iraq did not exclusively engage regional audiences, its actions were very much informed by regional dynamics. The fact that this was a war for regional hegemony – and that this was Hussein's personal purpose as well – is the first clue for this. In this light, it was a war of territorial conquest and a display of power. The notion that Arabs were superior, and that Saddam Hussein should be the leader of the Arab world were the main narratives driving the conflict. Iran countered with a religious narrative, in which victory over Iraq would be a victory for Islam. Both of these narratives were of high relevance to the Middle East, where Islam has long been the dominant religion and complex relationships exist between (ethnic) nationalism and Islamism (Knudsen, 2003; Razi, 1990). However, they were less relevant to the rest of the world. The narratives employed pointed out that the Middle-East was engaged in its own historical 'trajectory', in Andrew Hurrell's words (2007). As described in chapter 2, some elements within the English School point to the possibility that actors are interested in regional legitimacy or hegemony, rather than the deepening of international society. Barry Buzan in particular draws our attention to the formation of regional interhuman societies based on a self-perceived common identity: "In matters of identity, parochialism still rules" (2004, p. 210). However, he is also careful to point out that such cultural communities cannot easily be assumed to have a "political quality" (p. 221). In other words, while regions, particularly ones with cultural or religious homogeneity, might experience *interhuman* connectedness, this does not mean that an *interstate* society can be assumed as well. This political community needs to be actively shaped. Neither for Iraq, nor for Iran, the interhuman ideals of Islam and Arabism aligned with the political reality in the Middle East. Borders needed to be redrawn.

From the perspective of Iran, this was a trajectory in which the Islamic Revolution formed a catalyst for the start of the Islamic Revolution in the wider Muslim World. As Ludwig Paul notes, the Revolution was not meant to be Iranian or even Shi'i (1999). Instead, the religious sermons of the time emphasised a foreign policy that would unite all Islamic peoples into one nation, being surprisingly kind about Sunni and Arab people as part of the jihad against the imperial West. Paul further notes that Iranian leadership portrayed the Iran-Iraq War as a war of Muslims against unbelievers, with Saddam Hussein portrayed as an agent of the West. In other words, an image is created of the Muslim world against the West, not of Iran in isolation against the West, although in practice this did become the result (Paul, 1999; Rakel, 2007). Thus, Iran was aiming for a regional dynamic in which its revolution would become the platform for unification against the West.

A similar dynamic was true for Iraq, which performed the transgression and is therefore the main actor of interest. While Saddam Hussein benefited from international (financial) support, he was hardly friendly with the international community. Hussein was particularly suspicious of the United States. Hal Brands detailed Hussein's feelings towards the United States during the Iran-Iraq War and the years leading up to as "standoffish" (2011, p. 331). In fact, it was precisely Hussein's perceived struggle for regional hegemony that prevented him from seeking more rapprochement with the United States when relations with the Soviet Union cooled down somewhat during the late 1970s. Like Iran, Iraq perceived the United States to represent imperialist tendencies, and a direct threat to Iraq's influence in the region. Iraq actively sought to mobilise anti-American sentiment in the Arab world, for instance through the Arab Charter of 1980 that urged all signatories to remove foreign troops from the region. This was an example of an Iraqi attempt to leverage regional Arabism against international interference (Brands, 2011).

Building on Arabism specifically, later enriched with Islamic narratives (Abdi, 2008; Helfont, 2018), it is clear that Saddam Hussein sought to address Arabs primarily. When discussing chemical weapons in particular, this regional dimension was again brought to the fore. The narrative of the possession of chemical weapons as a deterrent was particularly aimed at Israel, a nuclear weapons state. To the extent that Iraq was engaging an international audience, this was done with reference to any intervention from the international community in the Middle East itself, to which Iraq would have a chemical response.

By 1988, Iraq was explicitly trying to create a regional exception to the chemical weapons norm. The famous quote from foreign minister Tariq Aziz is worth revisiting and contextualising in more detail:

> You people are living in a peaceful, civilized continent. But we, year after year, had to repel hundreds of thousands of fanatical invaders who were given the divine task to kill or be killed. They were told by Khomeini they would go to paradise if they were killed. ("Iraq Acknowledges", 1988, July 1)

From Iraq's public statements as well as its actions, a narrative appears in which Iraq viewed the chemical weapons norm as applying differently to regional and global circumstances. Iraqi leadership recognised the strategic circumstances as different in both contexts, and viewed chemical weapons as appropriate in the former, though not necessarily in the latter[13]. However, we should be careful not to claim that Iraq publicly defended the use of chemical weapons in any and all Middle-Eastern matters. Tariq Aziz clearly referred to the strategic demands of self-defence in particular. This is also the strategic context in which Iraq found itself: being pushed back by the Iranians, the Iraqis had been on the defence since 1981/1982. Similarly vis-à-vis the Kurds, Iraqi leadership perceived itself to be on the defensive, defending against a domestic insurgency. The use of chemical weapons thus featured in a narrative of

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[13] The implication is, however, that this might change if other parts of the world start experiencing situations similar to what Iraq was facing at the time.

self-defence, which apparently required the transgression of a norm imposed by an international community that, according to Aziz, was not able to properly understand the regional context.

Here we arrive at the frame challenge, the second component of the regional exception category. When actors engage in frame challenging, they seek to re-interpret a norm in such a way as to align their actions with the new interpretation (Schimmelfennig, 2003; Stimmer, 2019). While this is often assumed in constructivist and related literature, such frame challenging does not need to aim for universality or for actual conviction of the validity of the adjusted frame. In other words, while recognition of the new frame would allow for smoother international relations overall, as all parties involved would be in agreement, this is not a necessary consequence or even purpose of frame challenging. In such situations, following Anette Stimmer's norm typology, an adjusted frame can either be accepted (resolving the conflict: norm clarification) or rejected (deepening the conflict: norm impasse) (2019). Particularly when states challenge a frame that is fairly stable, it is unlikely that others would agree with the change.

In the Iraqi case, we observe initial frame agreement, namely the relevance of the Geneva Protocol to apply to cases of chemical weapons usage and to prohibit the first use of these weapons. Formerly, the Geneva Protocol had been interpreted as a non-first use agreement specifically, with many states submitting reservations to that effect, and many states had indicated that they understood the Protocol to allow for retaliation in kind (Hobbs, Jefferson, Coppeard, & Pitt, 2007). Iraq claimed that Iran had used chemical weapons first, in 1980, and that Iraq subsequently retaliated and continued to do so over the course of the war ("Iraq Acknowledges", 1988, July 1). However, there is no credible evidence that Iran used chemical weapons first, or indeed that it used chemical weapons at all (Hiltermann, 2007, p. 157). Over the course of the war, we also observe a second narrative employed by Iraq, which is sometimes connected to the Geneva Protocol defence, but also operates on the basis of a different logic. This is the narrative that as Iraq is facing a threat to its national survival, *all means* are permitted to repel that threat (Hiltermann, 2007, p. 154). This frame is highly reminiscent of the frame employed by Italy in 1936, during war in Ethiopia, although it is not entirely the same. Italy had invaded Ethiopia using chlorine, phosgene, and mustard gas, and Ethiopia challenged this as a violation of the Geneva Protocol, to which both states were members. During discussions in the context of the League of Nations, whose Committee of Thirteen had appropriated the task of investigating and enforcing the Geneva Protocol, Italy put the argument forward that Ethiopia used "abominable atrocities" themselves, giving Italy the "right of reprisal". This argument continued as follows:

> The Government responsible for such atrocities – which would be inconceivable in civilised countries – has shown that it has no respect for the humanitarian spirit on which the Conventions … are based. Ethiopia … has placed herself in the legal position of being unable to appeal to them. (League of Nations, June 1936, p. 580)

Iraq put more emphasis on national survival as a cause for retaliation using chemical weapons, which was absent from the Italian narrative. However, both argued that inhuman, barbaric atrocities committed by their opponent, either in terms of weapons and tactics used or as a result of their relentlessness, permitted retaliation using chemical weapons. As it did in 1936, the international community formally rejected this frame of interpretation in the 1980s. The self-defence frame was not considered to be an established frame insofar as chemical weapons were concerned, and the UN Security Council denounced this interpretation by condemning the use of chemical weapons as illegitimate in this conflict (UNSC, 1988b).

Given the strength of the norm, exemplified by the earlier condemnations of chemical weapons usage in 1986 (S/RES/582) and 1988 (S/RES/612), as well as the ongoing international negotiations at the time, it is unlikely that Iraq believed its revised frames would be accepted by the international community in the first place. We have also established that Iraq argued for its use of chemical weapons in the context of self-defence only, while using them offensively as well, and that Iraqi leadership distinguished between the views from outside the region and form within.

The question is how we can best understand this narrative. In Aziz's quote cited above, we can recognise a self-understanding of Iraq as relatively weak, globally speaking. Regionally, however, it was beleaguered, but it bravely and firmly stood its ground against Iran. Aziz implied that he would wish his continent was as civilised as that of the people he is speaking to, but Iran had prevented that. Chemical weapons allowed Iraq to try to re-introduce civilisation in the Middle East, by defeating Iran. They thus become tools for civilisation, rather than emblems of barbarity. There is an interesting discursive play with strength and weakness going on here. By employing the narrative of regional exception, Iraq is able to manipulate the global understanding of chemical weapons as weapons of the weak and turn them into regional emblems of strength. In operational terms, this was made evident in Hussein's quote that "by God, we will burn half of Israel, if it tries to harm or attack Iraq, or any part of Iraq. We do not need a nuclear bomb. We possess the binary chemical" (Diane Sawyer's interview with Saddam Hussein, 30 Jan. 1990, cited by Price, 1997, p. 147). In other words, the dominant narrative of the time is flipped on its head. Chemical weapons form an important part of Hussein's – and by extension, Iraq's – self-understanding as powerful. The weak are now strong.

This reversal is almost biblical. It is reminiscent of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 where Jesus tells his audience that "the meek shall inherit the earth"[14]. Hussein's version of the Sermon on the Mount is a lot more wicked, given that Jesus based his claims of strength on non-violence ("Blessed are the peacemakers") while Hussein based his on violence. But for Hussein, the effect is similar. Power inversions are crucial moments: they offer audiences an alternative and a new way forward, rejecting the dominant narrative that they have grown convinced has been imposed on them. This is precisely

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[14] Matthew 5:5. See also 2 Corinthians 12:10 "For when I am weak, then I am strong" (NIV).

where the strategic element comes in. As previously described, Hussein's war was a war for regional hegemony. His transgression of the chemical weapons norm allowed him to portray a self-image of strength, control, and legitimacy. This power inversion was also based in Hussein's real experience with chemical weapons. To him, their utility was not a fantasy, as the 'Saddam Tapes' show (Woods et al., 2011). Politically, Hussein struggled with a fragmented Iraq. Successfully transgressing an international norm with impunity communicated to the regional audience that Hussein was there to stay, and was there to determine the rules in the Middle East. As Iraq grew into a successful chemical weapons user in operational terms, it also grew into developing an identity for which this was appropriate. For a supposedly 'weak' state like Iraq, open norm transgressive behaviour formed a strategic action that aligned neatly with Hussein's political purpose of regional hegemony, projecting strength instead.

The Soviet-Afghan War

The Soviet Union engaged both regional and international audiences by invading Afghanistan, and despite trying to keep the attention contained, the international audience responded to the invasion in a remarkably unified fashion. By acting outside of the Soviet space, the Soviet Union automatically engaged an international audience. This was practically unavoidable, given the political dynamics of the Cold War in which the United States and the Soviet Union carefully observed each other's every move, particularly outside of their traditional spheres of influence. At the same time, the Soviet Union was motivated to limit negative attention and tried to engage with Afghanistan's neighbours directly. As explained in the case study, the war in Afghanistan was strategically informed by the Soviet Union to counter Islamism in Central Asia and the Middle East and preserve communism, as well as to gain forward bases near oil-rich areas and the Arabian Sea. Thus, the most relevant audience for the Soviet Union to assert its legitimacy to and to preserve the allegiance of, were the other communist states. However, these were not regionally organised, but rather dispersed. Another significant communist conflict going on at the time was the civil war in Indochina, which held much more regional significance as a struggle for regional hegemony between China and the Soviet Union (Chen, 1988). In Afghanistan, however, the wider international dynamics were more significant. It was an area where the Soviet Union stood to lose, rather than to gain, making it a matter of prestige (Hughes, 2008). Nevertheless, the intervention signalled to the community of communist states that the Soviet Union would be prepared to use force should communist parties outside of the Soviet Union become too independent. As Richard Newell points out, the fact that it soon became a global matter is highlighted by the different international responses to the intervention in Afghanistan compared to those in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968 (1981). The international response coming from non-NATO states in those cases had been quite muted. However, being outside Soviet space, Afghanistan was different. In this case, the call for withdrawal was near unanimous amongst states outside of the Warsaw Pact. Two General Assembly resolutions in 1980 on the topic were passed with overwhelming majorities. Even though the invasion was one in its immediate southern neighbourhood, the Soviet Union was forced to engage a large

international audience as a result of the quick condemnation coming from Western states, Islamic states, non-aligned states, and even some communist states (Rajan, 1982). The Soviet Union attempted to primarily address a regional audience by proposing regional security agreements with Iran and Pakistan, by maintaining diplomatic relations with the Islamic Conference[15] (now Organisation for Islamic Cooperation), and by leaning on India as a representative of the Non-Aligned Movement. However, these regional overtures failed, and regionalisation was ultimately prevented by the United Kingdom and France, who maintained that "a superpower was involved, and thus regional stability could only be brought about by global action" (Smith 2013, p. 367).

In short, there is some ambiguity in what the Soviet Union's primary audience was, between which audience it wanted to engage and which it was forced to engage. However, it is clear that even if diplomacy and peace negotiations were pursued through regional channels, the audience of norm transgressive behaviour was international. It was the wider global response to the invasion as a transgressive act that surprised and isolated the Soviet Union. So when it comes to the use of chemical weapons as a transgression of a norm, this should also be the most relevant audience to consider. The international isolation brought on by the invasion would only be exacerbated by the use of chemical weapons.

While we can thus decide the audience-question in favour of the international society, the response to the allegations is more challenging. The case of the Soviet Union strikes a difficult balance between frame challenge and claim denial. As a self-understood superpower in a bipolar system, the Soviet Union was necessarily involved in norm-setting. However, the evidence put forward in the case study suggests that Soviet leadership assumed that their operations would remain largely secret, and they took every effort to ensure as much secrecy as they could. The UN investigative team that was sent to investigate allegations of the use of toxins in South East Asia and Afghanistan was not allowed into the country, and the lack of media access – let alone free media – severely hampered the flow of information. The accounts from inside the country that did reach international audiences, from people such as Claude Malhuret (1983) and Mohammed Hassan Kakar (1995), offer variable recollections, some of which confirm the use of chemical weapons and some of which simply do not discuss the issue. However, the fact that a UN investigation was launched indicates that the salience of the norm against chemical weapons was such, that any potential transgression required international attention. Even if the Geneva Protocol did not prohibit the possession of the chemical weapons, unlike the Chemical Weapons Convention, it also did not offer states the liberty to train with chemical weapon in a different state. Despite Soviet efforts to the contrary, the use of chemical weapons did come out eventually, even if disagreement exists about the extent and operational purpose of these weapons. Some argue that

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[15] The Islamic Conference was not a regional organisation strictly speaking, having membership across the globe. However, its diplomatic centre of gravity has long been Saudi Arabia and the wider MECA-region (Akbarzadeh & Ahmed, 2018).

chemical weapons had been integrated into Soviet operations as a standard option among others (e.g. Bodansky, 1982; Westermann, 1999). Others emphasise that such integration was done for training purposes, rather than as reliable weapons to be used like conventional ones (e.g. Amstutz, 1986; Collins, 1983). It is important to note that the vast majority of evidence for the use of chemical weapons stems from American sources, and that beyond the UN investigation, little international action was mounted in response to the allegations. According to Kim Coleman, American evidence

> failed to galvanise world opinion because […] the United States was unable to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that chemical agents and toxins had been used in Southeast Asia and Afghanistan. (2005, p. 108)

In other words, the Soviet Union was successful in diverting global attention away from the matter of chemical weapons, but it was getting dangerous. There was limited room for manoeuvre. As argued in the case study, based on what we know about Soviet military doctrine and the vast and diverse chemical arsenals that the Soviet Union had developed by 1987, it is likely that the Soviet Union did in fact test chemical weapons in Afghanistan. Its remoteness allowed for relative secrecy to do so. Extensive integration of chemical weapons into operations, however, seems less likely. Of course, what is crucial is what this might say about Soviet expectations for norm development. Actions like testing chemical warfare and highlighting the American use of chemicals in Vietnam, indicate that the Soviet Union was under the assumption that the norm against chemical weapons would not apply to superpowers such as itself, should operational demands require it. In other words, it was engaged in norm adaptation, challenging the normative frame, but doing so *in secret*. The Soviet Union did not publicly push for such an interpretation. In fact, it was participating in multilateral negotiations in Geneva to further strengthen the legal ban on the use of chemical weapons. This is the duality that we need to confront.

The Soviet Union sought both the benefits of being prepared for chemical war when it broke out, as well as the benefits of being seen internationally as a serious contributor to norm formation. Importantly, the evidence suggests that the Soviet Union ceased the use of chemical weapons fairly quickly after international attention gained some, even if still limited, momentum. This dynamic finds theoretical ground in Schimmelfennig's understanding of rhetorical entrapment (2001). Rhetorical entrapment is the phenomenon that normative discourses can constrain the ability of state actors to pursue their national interest when it clashes with the values of a community, and which they are unable to justify within the room for interpretation that norms allow (Schimmelfennig, 2021). I have discussed in chapter 2 that such room for interpretation is not limitless. While much literature that applies the rhetorical entrapment framework looks at how rhetorical action can be used by small states and organisations to entrap larger ones, the case of the Soviet Union is one in which it entrapped itself. The Soviet Union was participating in norm-creation both through its contributions in legal negotiations and its public denials that they used chemical weapons. The Soviets' disapproval of American chemical weapons use

in the Vietnam further strengthened this public commitment to the rejection of chemical weapons. Backtracking on these normative commitments was impossible without losing the trust of international allies and sense of moral high ground vis-à-vis the United States.

The strategic purpose of the *secret* norm transgression then, was initially simply the fact that it allowed the Soviet Union to practice with chemical weapons. However, *open* transgressive behaviour was not strategically beneficial for the Soviet Union, unlike for Iraq. Iraq could benefit from, almost revel in, the transgressive narrative because it allowed a power reversal to take shape: it allowed the state to portray itself as particularly strong. The Soviet Union, as a self-understood superpower, was not be able to do so. It would have been a further confirmation of its counter-normativity, and would have introduced further distrust between it and its potential international allies, including the communist and non-aligned states. We do not have evidence to claim that it would have, in fact, led to a power reversal in the opposite direction, that chemical weapons use would be considered weakness[16]. However, it is clear that the needs of the Soviet Union during this time were best met by international normative stability. Gorbachev recognised this. Unlike Iraq, the Soviet Union was mainly engaging an international audience in the way it dealt with chemical weapons. Recognition from this audience relied on norm-conforming behaviour. There was no strategic benefit to open norm transgression, and given the limited time the Soviet Union had had to practice with chemical weapons in Afghanistan, chemical weapons had also not yet proven militarily indispensable. Thus, the Soviet Union was left with no reason to continue transgressing the norm.

To link the manipulation of norms back to the object of war, we should point out that the Soviet Union was on the offensive during the invasion of Afghanistan, although it will have often felt defensive given their operational preoccupation with "defending bridges", in Scott McIntosh's words (McIntosh, 1995, p. 420). As Clausewitz argued, the defence is the stronger form of war with the weaker aim, and the offence is the weaker form of war with the stronger aim (1832/1976, p. 741). The stronger aim consists in the acquisition of a political victory, which is very difficult to achieve as those on the defensive can choose to bide their time until circumstances become more favourable (Sumida, 2007). Part of 'winning', for the offensive belligerent, thus consists in creating conditions that prevent such re-emergence of the defence, which include international support. The normative mechanisms that geared into action by the use of chemical weapons do not favour the offensive belligerent. Iraq only needed the situation to return to what it was before the war, and norm manipulation helped to avoid loss. It fit the winning narrative of a defender. However, the Soviet Union needed a political victory, a winning

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[16] It could be argued that norm transgressive behaviour for strong states does lead to a power reversal in which their weakness is suddenly revealed. The powerlessness of the United States in the War on Terror, for instance, became visible when it became public knowledge that it was relying on torture and unlawful imprisonment to create a false sense of security and 'winning' the 'war'.

narrative of peace. Therefore, while norm manipulation may help to avoid loss, it does not seem to work offensively.

The Syrian Civil War

The Syrian case is ongoing and while Bashar Al-Assad's regime has gained a military victory in most of Syria, the dust has yet to settle. To say that Assad has won the war would be an overstatement: Iran, Türkiye, and Russia all hold significant sway over Syria both in territorial and political terms (Akbar, 2023; Hale, 2019), and Kurdish YPG forces dominate the Syrian Democratic Forces, which is active in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) where it continues to challenge Assad's authority (Hatahet, 2019; Kivilcim, 2021). However, Assad certainly has not lost the war either. He remains the *de facto* – and through lack of alternative also *de jure* – head of state and the representative of Syria, which is maintained by the two most important security guarantors in the area, Russia and Iran. Recently, relations with Türkiye have also become more normalised ("Türkiye and Syria", 2023). At the same time, his legitimacy is rejected in the West. The European Union continues to engage with the Syrian National Coalition instead, and the United States also does not recognise Assad as Syria's legitimate ruler. All of this makes Syria is a complex, muddled, and constantly changing case.

The continued use of chemical weapons despite active denial actually fits into this confusion quite well. So, while the use of chemical weapons as a performative transgressive act sits uncomfortably in the transgression matrix, we can still use its terminology to understand it. Assad oscillates between addressing international audiences and regional ones, both creating confusion to sow disorder and creating an alternative reality for states to shift allegiances. Over the past decade, the United States and its Western allies have started to pull out of the Middle East, both allowing space for regional powers to reassert their prominence as well as for Russia to become the primary security guarantor for Syria. Like Hussein, Assad sought to demonstrate that there is an alternative to the Western-dominated normative order. The confusion that arises over Syria's use of chemical weapons is indicative of a wider process over the question who decides what happens in the Middle East. However, unlike Hussein, Assad uses a more subversive way to do that.

By pursuing a narrative of regional exception, Hussein distinguished between his region and the wider world, between a regional society and an international one. The two were portrayed as different, and Hussein had little interest in changing a global norm as long as it did not impede on his freedom to act in his region. Instead, Assad confirmed his commitment to the international society, albeit on his own terms, and his rejection of it at the same time. The consequence of this is that it enabled him to undermine the global norm against chemical weapons from within. This not only signals the inapplicability of the Western normative order in Syria, but potentially elsewhere as well.

The extreme degree of internationalisation of the conflict, as well as the highly publicised red line discourse employed by the United States that made the use of chemical weapons a focal point of the war, allowed the international audience to pay close attention to this phenomenon. The Syrian case is not a case in which the primary actor – Syria – agitated against international intervention by mobilising regional sentiments of ethnic, nationalist, or religious kinds, like Iraq did. There was no narrative of regional unity, regional ambition, or regional exception. Instead, Syria welcomed both Iranian and Russian support and relied on a narrative of the sovereign equality of states. In terms of regional politics, the Arab League suspended Syria in 2011 in response to it brutal reaction to popular uprisings, as did the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation – a sub-global organisation. Shahram Akbarzadeh and Zahid Shahab Ahmed draw our attention to the fact that this allowed Syria a regional platform as well, to show that this suspension was in violation of the OIC's principles of non-intervention in the domestic matters of its member states (2018). However, while suspended from various regional organisations, Syria also acceded to an international one: the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).

The OPCW is the executive organisation behind the CWC, one of the most universally-adhered to international legal treaties. The fact that this – counterintuitively – legitimised Assad as representative of the Syrian state has been pointed out before (Bentley 2016, chapter 6). Upon accession, Syria started to undermine the credibility of the organisation from within. Syria's response to the chemical weapons allegations has always been clear: it has consistently denied the use of chemical weapons and blamed other actors instead. While some of the denials rely on normative understandings of the immoral nature of chemical weapons, other denials are rather more absurd. For instance, in a 2017 interview with AFP news agency, Assad first claimed Syria had never used chemical weapons in its history, as "it is not morally acceptable" to do so (Assad, as cited in Smith-Park, 2017). In the same interview, he proceeded to claim rather strangely that the children in videos from the scene might not even have been dead, implying the video was staged. Earlier, in 2015, when interviewed on French television, Assad referred to the indiscriminate nature of chemical weapons as a specific reason why his armed forced do not use them (Bouchaud, 2015). These are examples of Assad paying lip-service to the norm, and at the same time, questioning the reliability of the findings of the organisation tasked with monitoring transgressions of the norm. Often calling the alleged attacks 'fabrications', Assad has accused the OPCW of falsifying reports under pressure from the United States ("Syria's Assad", 2019), and Syrian representatives at the United Nations have repeatedly claimed that the OPCW have become politicised ("Security Council Deems", 2023). Such claims serve to create confusion about whether the findings of the OPCW and their Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) can ever be trusted. Rather than having to disprove every attack, this narrative casts doubt on every finding of the IIT and is easier for Syria to maintain. Thus, by raising the accusations that the work of the OPCW has become politicised, Syria, Iran and Russia themselves politicise it.

The accusations of fabrication are hardly believable, but that is not the aim. Syria does not need to convince the governments of the international audience that they did not use chemical weapons. Two subversive dynamics are at play here. The first is that the repeated use itself frustrates the working of the global normative order by demonstrating its insufficiency, contributing to the popular understanding of international law as toothless. The second is that even if the majority of the global audience is not fooled by Assad's denials of chemical weapons use, it is enough if some groups of individuals start to doubt that Syria was, in fact, responsible. Such elements of international society contribute to the reluctance of democratic governments in particular to intervene. An example of this was the debate in the United Kingdom House of Commons, after the April 2018 retaliatory strikes by the United States, France, and the United Kingdom had just been carried out. In this debate, Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn argued that "other groups had carried out similar attacks" and that responsibility had not yet been clarified by investigators ("Syria air strikes", 2018). The White Helmets, the Syrian Civil Defence group who have been instrumental in bringing chemical weapons attacks to the attention of the international audience, have been the target of disinformation campaigns that accuse them of carrying out or staging chemical attacks ("Chemical Weapons and Absurdity", 2018). This narrative was even appropriated by a group of lecturers from British universities, the Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media, who accused the White Helmets of war crimes and staging the 7 April 2018 chlorine attack in Douma (York, 2020). Russia then cited these 'experts' to strengthen their version of events.

Syria was quite comfortable in this course of events. David Pujadas, who interviewed Assad for French television in 2015, remarked that "[Assad] is not at all conciliatory in the interview and he makes no attempt to improve his image. He's not desperate. He seemed steadfast on his positions." (Bouchaud, 2015). This is because Assad played the part of the trickster well. Trickstery, according to Xymena Kurowska and Anatoly Reshetnikov, is the art of being a trickster: a plural figure, both conformist and deviant who holds up a mirror to the hegemonic order (2021). Assad publicly maintains conformity while making a mockery of the chemical weapons norm, forcing the international audience to reflect on what their belief system consists of. Should we indeed intervene when a small state uses chemical weapons far away from us? Trickstery can also reveal moral hierarchies that make the defenders of such moral hierarchies look bad: trigger-happy, overconfident, and domineering. In the meantime, the trickster thrives in such uncertain situations. As Kurowska and Reshetnikov put it: "Tricksters can consolidate their power by purposefully 'magnifying the flux' towards uncertainty in which they appropriate the role of champions of freedom" (2021, p. 249). Applying this logic to international affairs, a space opens up for others to subscribe to the promise of freedom. This is where the shifting of allegiances-dynamic appears, though it is not solely aimed at regional audiences.

Assad, being on the defensive, has the weaker aim. He does not need to legitimise himself or propose an alternative normative order, although his dual stance on chemical weapons gives the illusion of doing both. The best the trickster can hope to achieve is normative ambivalence, although often masked as a

real alternative. Therefore, while there may be some strategic value in preventing concerted action against Syria through trickstery, it does not ultimately consolidate Assad's rule. In all, Assad's defence of the chemical weapons norm and his simultaneous transgression of it serve to both sow disorder and allow shifting allegiances, among international as well as regional audiences, thus collapsing the right side of my transgression matrix. While the international society, including its Middle-Eastern members, remains discursively committed to the chemical weapons norm, the machinations of the trickster have produced and demonstrated the lack of appetite to act on it. In Clausewitzian terms, Assad successfully revealed the weak spot, the centre of gravity, in the alliance that he perceived to be under attack from (1832/1976).

Understanding trickstery, power reversal, and normative stability: liminality

Trickstery, power reversal, and normative stability are the leading dynamics that help us understand the use of chemical weapons as a norm transgression for Syria, Iraq, and the Soviet Union respectively. A concept that is capable of uniting these three is liminality, a concept derived from anthropology, which describes the process of transition between social categories of identity.

Liminality

Liminality as an analytical concept was coined by Arnold Van Gennep, an anthropologist who used the term to describe processes of transition that individuals go through as their social status changes (Wels et al., 2011). Popularising the term, anthropologist Victor Turner applied it to the rituals he observed during his ethnographic study of the Ndembu in what is now Zambia (1967; 1969). Harry Wels and his colleagues point out that Turner does not provide strict theoretical prescriptions to the use of the term, and it has subsequently been applied to many field of social study, including International Relations (2011). The term 'liminality' refers to the *limen*, the (Latin word for) 'threshold' between two spaces. These two spaces represent ontologically secure states of being, with practices of (international) behaviour and associated expectations, and often with formalised (legal) personalities. The threshold in between represents ambiguity, and therefore ontological insecurity, as there are no set expectations or behavioural practices.

Victor Turner used liminality to describe ritual processes in which individual transition from one identity to another. He was interested in rituals as the "key to understanding how people think and feel about economic, political, and social relationship and about the natural and social environments in which they operate" (1969, p. 6). In rituals of social transition (*rites de passage*), for instance when a new leader is installed, Turner observed three stages: separation, margin (*limen*), and aggregation (p. 94). The subject of transition is first separated from the rest and brought into isolation to symbolise the removal of a fixed identity. In the next phase is ambiguous, having none of the characteristics of the past or future stage. Finally, aggregation refers to the reincorporation of the subject into the structures of the whole, now expected to behave according to the norms associated with their new position.

Therefore, as understood in anthropology, it can be said that liminality (insecurity) exists only in relation to structure (security). Versteeg (2011) explains that liminality is either a transitional state that is resolved into the structure of society (as in a rite of passage) or a permanent state that exists as a subgroup of society (such as a monastic order) (p. 6). While liminality is often applied temporally and transitionally, referring to a passing moment or event, the permanent form of liminality should not be disregarded. Many liminal spaces and groups can exist rather permanently in society, and serve both tot reinforce structure (for instance, monastic orders where people can go and 'recharge') or a to undermine it (such as the millennial cults of the 1990s). In any case, during liminal moments, events, or phases, Andrew Spiegel (2011) explains, "regular activities are suspended, people are living 'out of time', and alternative modes of behaviour and norms are envisioned" (p. 12). The individuals participating in the liminal event often experience what Turner called 'communitas' (1969). This term stands in contrast to social structure, and refers to a sense of idealistic community; a togetherness that allows for the suspension of norms and inversion of hierarchies and other social practices. Such communitas requires physical proximity of participants. It follows that liminality is concerned with both time and space; temporally and spatially, the liminal phase is separate from dominant social structures.

Victor Turner contrasted between liminality of the strong and liminality of the weak (1969, p. 168). The liminality of the strong occurs when strong or 'high' entities enter into even stronger positions, experiencing a temporary weakening in the process, while the liminality of the weak occurs when weak or 'low' entities experience a temporary superiority to "reaffirm the hierarchical principle" (p. 176). Ultimately, the weak go back to being (perpetually) weak. Power reversals are necessary in both forms in order to affirm structure: "Liminality implies that the high could not be high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low" (p. 97). Thus, in Turner's understanding, liminal times and spaces serve to maintain the dominant social structure as the participants eventually return to it and reject their liminal activities, or derive their existence from exclusion from the dominant social structure. He contrasts this with the 'liminoid', which "arises idiosyncratically and interstitially within society and its extant structures, thus making the activities in those periods/spaces experimental and potentially socially transformative" (Spiegel, 2011, p. 13). Spiegel goes on to criticise this dichotomous distinction and proposes a continuum ranging from liminality to liminoidity instead. For the purposes of this study, I will treat liminality as constituting such a continuum, therefore always having the potential of being socially transformative.

Liminality in International Relations

Before I continue with the place of trickstery, normative stability, and power reversal in liminality, it is worth discussing how the concept has been used in International Relations theory before. In International Relations, liminality is one concept among a number of concepts that help us understand ontologically ambiguous identities, including 'hybridity', 'marginality', 'interstitiality', and 'transversality'. However, as Bahar Rumelili (2012) argues, liminality uniquely allows us to understand subversiveness,

identity formation, and the role of agency in the social (de)construction of order in ways that the other concepts do not. Liminals can subvert order by tapping into ordered discourses but rejecting the narrative as a whole. Also speaking for the usefulness of liminality for the study of International Relations, Maria Mälksoo argues that it lies in its ontological aversion with opposites. She maintains that as a result of the inherently liminal nature of humans, between individual subjects and political communities, liminality could and should be applied to the analysis of international relations by rejecting the traditional hierarchies, the separation between the domestic and the international, and the individual and the state (2012, p. 482). This is a 'challenge' for International Relations – as the title of her article says – as traditional, positivist-rationalist International Relations has built its theories on static interpretations of actors and levels of analysis. Instead, liminality implies that power is relational, change is continuous, and the 'high' and the 'low' are ontologically linked. From this, an International Relations research agenda emerges that focuses on a plurality of voices and localities of action (particularly at borders or in margins), that is able to converse better with studies from the critical side of the spectrum such as Critical Geopolitics or Cultural Theory.

A particular implication of taking seriously the value of liminality for International Relations as a field of study is the realisation that international society itself is a process, but not a progressive one necessarily. Liminality, according to Mälksoo, does not entail teleological implications (2012, p. 484). This notion challenges much of constructivist literature, which, while according a proper place to change, tends to theorise that norms exert a one-directional force towards conformation, rather than diversification. Thus, it treats non-conforming behaviour as temporary (Rumelili, 2012). Instead, liminality itself – being different – can be considered as a realistic option of political identity, rather than a transitional process from which states emerge conforming to a new standard or reverting back to an old one. It allows us to consider that states, composed of individual and collective forces, can simultaneously claim membership of international society and reject it.

Moving from the theoretical implications of liminality to practical applications, we find two main understandings of liminality in International Relations literature. The first has traditional state actors as its focus, which can occupy liminal spaces in various discourses. The second looks at conventional dichotomies and challenges them by examining the agency of entities traditionally defined as 'non-state'. The first branch looks at the liminal identities of state actors, often in geographically liminal spaces in between regions and continents, and the cultural and political consequences of that. Examples are studies into Türkiye's liminal identity and the effects on foreign policy (Rumelili & Suleymanoglu-Kurum, 2017; Stoicescu, 2008; Yanık, 2011), and Australia and its ambiguous 'location': culturally and politically oriented towards the American-European society of states while also seeking to reassert itself as an Asian-Pacific state, with economic policy being directed at its Asian neighbourhood (Higgott & Nossal, 1997). Such studies help explain policy choices, ways in which such states can instrumentalise their liminality, and provide a valuable critique on the durability of 'new' security or economic

arrangements by those states, as well as the sustainability of hybrid identities. It is a space – literally – both of opportunity and of limits. States can reaffirm their liminality, creating ambiguity in the international structure, or they can be 'domesticated' into new social categories (Rumelili, 2012). Within this strand of literature, the debate produced a critique of essentialisation: liminality at once reaffirms the incompatibility of two identities discursively (that is, it draws on multiple socially constructed identities), and denies this mutual exclusivity in itself. Liminality thus challenges discursive boundaries and incompatibilities, such as those between the West and the non-West, democratic and non-democratic, civilised and barbaric, and exposes the vulnerability and inconsistency of social categories. As a result, the essence of liminality remains, per definition, uncertain.

In the second practical strand of International Relations literature, related to the question of sovereignty, liminality is applied to non-state entities with no (recent) history of recognition, but with a more or less advanced administration and sometimes a desire to be recognised in the future (Bryant, 2014, Mälksoo, 2012, Loh & Heiskanen, 2020). In this scholarship, the term 'liminality' has gained ground to describe the 'neither, nor' position that several non-state entities find themselves in. Such entities are neither a recognised state, nor incorporated fully into the sovereignty of another. These semi-independent entities often have administrations, economies, and legal systems of their own, without enjoying the recognition of sovereignty as a marker of membership of the international society. Rebecca Bryant also highlight the benefit of liminality for some of these ambiguous entities, suggesting recognition as a sovereign state would not by definition benefit them (2014). By comparing the liminality of such *de facto* – but not *de jure* – states to enclaves or besieged localities, she points to the solidarity and resourcefulness often encountered in such cases as a benefit. Additionally, the administrations of such entities can enjoy the ambiguity that allows them to "avoid cumbersome human rights and environmental obligations" (p. 128), as there is no recognised state to be stigmatised by the international society that seeks to enforce these obligations. Bryant focusses on the nostalgic effects this might create, in which solidarity and independence during sieges is romanticised. However, for the purposes of my argument it is more interesting to look at the counter-normative behaviour that is sometimes exhibited by liminal entities. Recognised states, when exhibiting counter-normative behaviour, can invite exclusion and become somewhat of an enclave, thus becoming liminal as a result of behaviour, rather than exhibiting behaviour as a result of liminality.

Trickstery, power reversal, and normative stability

Counter-normative behaviour is an important element of the original, anthropological understanding of liminality that is worth paying attention to, also and particularly in the context of international relations. The sovereignty question, and the status of semi-sovereign entities specifically, remains a worthwhile field of study. However, when it comes to chemical weapons use, we witness fully sovereign states exhibit counter-normative behaviour that sets them apart from the majority of states and signals a deviation from expected behaviour. By entering this behavioural space, such states take on a liminal

identity. This type of liminality has little to do with transitioning between non-sovereignty and sovereignty. It shows more likeness with the first strand of IR-liminality scholarship as it concerns sovereign states, but it is less concerned with a 'best of both worlds'-hybrid approach to state identity, and more with processes of subversion and inversion. We can use insights from anthropology to better understand this.

We can consider the use of chemical weapons as a liminal activity which relegates its protagonists to the margins of international society. President Obama communicated this almost literally by using the term 'red line', implying a new, separate space is entered into when chemical weapons are introduced. In the dominant narrative of the international chemical weapons norm, this norm is of "global significance" (Price, 2019, p. 43). Thus, the use of chemical weapons is a conscious inversion of a fairly universal norm as well as a subversive act that has the potential to be socially transformative. As accusations gain traction in the court of international diplomacy, it isolates the protagonist into a position in which it has to either defend the use of these weapons as permissible (norm adaptation or regional exception), or deny the use of these weapons (sowing disunity or shifting allegiances). The first of these modes could potentially alleviate stigmatisation and allow the protagonist to return to the 'audience of normals' who put forward the accusation, that is, aggregation in Turner's terms (Adler-Nissen, 2014). However, we must consider the possibility that the protagonist does not seek to make a comeback and pursues a different socially transformative function of using chemical weapons, namely to challenge the unity of those actors constituting the dominant social structure (that is, international society). Mälksoo hints at something similar when she mentions that permanent liminality

> eminates danger, as it lacks the promise of reintegration that would re-establish the previous order. Therefore, permanent liminality writ large no longer permits novelty and encourages innovation, imposing rather formlessness and disorientation as a technique of governmentality. (2012, p. 489)

This is precisely what happened with regards to Syria. Trickstery thrives in permanent liminality because it can offer no real alternative to the hegemonic order. It emanates a-morality, and "by constantly blurring distinctions between truth and lie, tricksters perpetuate anguish rather than inspire social liberation" (Kurowska & Reshetnikov, 2021, p. 236). Kurowska and Reshetnikov are careful to point out that there is no definable logic to this behaviour, at least not form the established logics of behaviour theories of International Relations rely on (i.e. consequences, appropriateness, and communication (see chapter 2). Assad, in-between the social order of the chemical weapons norm and the social disorder of chemical weapons use, is a permanently liminal figure who relies on the international order to be able to subvert it. This makes his enemies constantly question the right course of action, staving off intervention. This is the result of the way in which permanent liminality amplifies the ontological insecurity associated with the rejection of both normative and counter-normative behaviour. However,

ultimately, it can only give Assad the illusion of control, not real control. This relates back to the point raised earlier, about the defensive being the stronger form of war with the weaker aim. Assad's 'weak aim' was to preserve the status quo ante. A political victory for him merely required that he retained his position, not to acquire legitimacy and popular support.

The illusion of control is also central to the power reversal dynamic that we observed in the case of Iraq. I have already briefly touched on the concept of power reversal in Turner's understanding of liminality. Both the liminality of the strong (a high figure transitioning to an even higher position) and the liminality of the weak (a low figure temporarily presenting as high) incorporate power inversions, and Turner discussed these in instrumental terms: they serve to reaffirm the hierarchies of social order. In the case of liminality of the weak, Turner argued that this necessitates the low to exercise "ritual authority" over their superiors (1969, p. 167). Translating this from ritual contexts to the politics of international affairs, we might say that the weak experience the illusion of control in such moments. Like others who have used the concept of liminality, we need to allow the concept to be stretched somewhat to be applicable to our context, as Turner indeed allowed (Wels et al., 2011). When we do, we can observe that Iraq transitioned from regional weakness to global weakness *but regional strength* through the use of chemical weapons. Hussein perceived regional weakness vis-à-vis Iran because of 'unfair' treaties force on him in the 1970s, as well as vis-à-vis Israel because Israel had chemical and nuclear weapons. Using chemical weapons, which were globally denounced as weapons of the weak, he changed the narrative and experienced 'ritual authority' over Israel and Iran, which aligned well with his strategic aim of proving Arab superiority.

Finally, normative stability also has a place in the theory of liminality, which we observed in the case of the Soviet Union. The ultimate aim of the process of liminality is for the subject to re-integrate into the structures of social life. As described, the liminal subject goes through an intense phase of normative instability, due to the ontological insecurity associated with the lack of social identity. For the 'high', this is not a pleasant experience. In Turner's understanding, the liminality of the strong incorporates elements of power reversals because "high could not be high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low" (1969, p. 97). In Turner's rituals, the strong are subjected to humiliating treatment as they transition to even stronger positions. For instance, "The future incumbent of the chieftainship or headmanship is first separated from the commonalty and then must undergo liminal rites that rudely abase him before, in the reaggregation ceremonies, he is installed on his stool in final glory" (p. 170). Of course, the Soviet Union was not forced by anyone to enter into a liminal phase, but instead it forced itself into a liminal phase of normative instability by first transgressing the norm against foreign intervention, and then the norm against chemical weapons. While the second transgression remained relatively hidden, the first already created a sense of lowliness for the Soviet Union that it was not accustomed to. It is possible that the Soviet Union was more sensitive to this than Iraq and Syria were because of its international status as a superpower. Transgressing the norm against

chemical weapons would draw the Soviet Union further into the ontological insecurity of liminality, which its leadership was not willing to endure.

Thus, in all three case studies, the use of chemical weapons as a norm transgression gave the states in question a liminal quality that each responded to differently. The Soviet Union rejected the liminality as not only strategically useless, but as strategically dangerous because it delegitimised the Soviet Union as a norm-abiding superpower. It distanced potential allies and provided its enemies with a platform to discredit it on its own terms. The Soviet Union had rhetorically entrapped itself. The only way out was to reject chemical weapons, ultimately culminating in the Shikhany chemical weapons demonstration to enforce a diplomatic breakthrough in the negotiations to ban chemical weapons ("Soviets Put Chemical Arms on Display", 1987). Iraq revelled in the liminality as it allowed Saddam Hussein to portray an image of strength, a power reversal aligned perfectly with the historical trajectory that he had discursively put the Iraqi state on. The use of chemical weapons was strategically useful not just because of the military utility, but because the norm transgression was an emblem of the regional hegemony that Saddam Hussein was after. Syria took a riskier approach that is hard to explain, though we might try to understand the dynamics. By at once inhabiting and rejecting the identity of a norm transgressor, Assad managed to create enough doubt to stave off unwanted international intervention, but also to be able to frustrate and discredit the normative order from within. Given the reluctance of Westerns states to get dragged into another unwinnable conflict, their 'win' consisted in Assad's accession to the CWC (Bentley, 2016). As a result, by continuing to use chemical weapons, Assad communicated to the international audience that this 'win' was empty. No one really 'won' in Syria, but the trickster Assad is still there.

Conclusion

Introduction

The purpose of this study has been to understand why states might use chemical weapons as a strategic choice. The prevailing understanding of chemical weapons has been that there is limited military utility to these weapons, which makes it even more puzzling to understand why states would risk the negative international attention generated by the strong norm against these weapons. While various studies have assessed the operational circumstances in which states have resorted to chemical weapons, such as desperation, a lack or failure of conventional weapons, and an unprotected adversary (e.g. Chapman, 2017; Wiejak, 2021; Quillen, 2017), few have tried to assess the operational effectiveness of chemical weapons on their own terms (e.g. Caves Jr., 2010; Chapman et al., 2018; Grip & Hart, 2009; Spiers, 2017). Joachim Krause is careful to point out that effectiveness and utility are not the same, and that even if chemical weapons are effective, they are not necessarily militarily useful (1991). This will depend on strategic considerations, such as the type of war that is being fought, which political constraints exist, which alternatives are available, and in which circumstances chemical weapon can play a role in regional deterrence (Krause, 1991; McNaughter, 1990).

However, fewer still have considered that the use of chemical weapons could be a strategic choice, not *despite* the strong norm, but *because of* the strong norm. This requires that we combine insights from the operational, the strategic, and the political levels of warfare. The studies referenced above have helpfully shown that some operational circumstances are more conducive to the use of chemical weapons than others. A military assessment of the three case studies presented in the present research confirms that various operational demands can be well-met with chemical weapons, due to their variety in persistency, lethality, and interaction with the natural environment. At the strategic level, we have seen how chemical weapons affect morale and communicate resolve, and can thus be instrumental in achieving significant effects by amplifying momentum. Finally, at the political level, we have observed the effect that breaking the norm has on political identities, the formation of allegiances, and the integrity of the international society. These dynamics have real effects on the shape and direction of a war.

None of this is to argue that chemical weapons are any more useful for armed forces to achieve military objectives than other weapons. They are not. Most of the military objectives that chemical weapons helped achieve during the Iran-Iraq War and the Syrian Civil War might well have been achieved by different, conventional weapons, though perhaps on a different timeline and obviously using a different operational approach. However, I do argue that such an assessment of the utility of chemical weapons is too narrow and does not appreciate the full, *strategic* scope of what chemical weapons are capable of. It risks collapsing the strategic level of understanding into the operational one. At the same time, such assessments also make the question why some states have still chosen to use chemical weapons all the more salient.

In each of the cases, the strategic purpose of chemical weapons has been different. The effects on state identity and the integrity of international society differed as well. In order to ground these effects in a single conceptual framework, I applied the concept of liminality to understand the process by which the introduction of chemical weapons on a battlefield creates space for disorder. This disorder can be discursively resolved through power reversal or towards normative stability, or it can be left unresolved to be exploited. Crucially, while such disorder can be used by defensive parties to a conflict to prevent loss, it is not a war-winning strategy.

The case of Iraq shows how a state actor that considers themselves to be relatively weak in the hierarchies of international relations, can use the normative instability associated with norm transgression to create a self-image of strength. The narrative that castigated chemical weapons as weapons of the weak was flipped upside down in the regional context. With that, the ability of a relatively weak state like Iraq to defy the expectations of the international normative order with the aim of defending the integrity of the state made it appear strong. This power reversal aligned with Saddam Hussein's political goal of demonstrating the superiority of the Iraqi state and the Arab regime.

In the case of the Soviet Union, the use of chemical weapons introduced a measure of normative instability that went against its public image of a strong and stable state. It stood in opposition to the narrative it had been using to discredit the United States and its use of chemicals in Vietnam. The invasion of Afghanistan led to general condemnation outside of the Warsaw Pact area, which was not in line with the Soviet Union's self-understood superpower status. Continuing and expanding the use of chemical weapons in Afghanistan would have further problematised this identity, so the Soviet Union was not able to strategically use chemical weapons to manipulate the norm for its benefit.

Finally, the Syrian case shows how in the hierarchy of the international normative order, a low state can demonstrate the weakness of the high and challenge their ability to act. Simultaneous adherence to and violation of the norm laid bare the inability of the norm and its defenders to control behaviour. It created sufficient uncertainty to prevent unwanted foreign intervention, and every subsequent instance of chemical weapons use made a mockery of the institutionalisation of the anti-chemical weapons norm. While this did not make Assad's position any more secure to what it was before the Arab Spring, it did help prevent concerted action against him.

Having thus answered the research question, this chapter will address limitations to the study – including notes on generalisability –, speak to the wider issue of chemical weapons today, and critique the tendency to elevate 'disorder' to a viable, war-winning strategy in current discourses on hybrid warfare. I make suggestions for future research along the way, and I end with a discussion of implications for International Relations theory.

Implications and limitations

To some extent, the purpose of strategic studies is to universalise the experience of war, though careful historical analysis teaches us that there are limits to that endeavour, as there is a tension between the historicity of wars on the one hand, and war in general on the other. Tarak Barkawi and Shane Brighton define strategic studies as "an instrumental science concerned with how to survive and flourish in a world of competing armed powers" (2011, p. 528), or the "policy science" of war (p. 526). However, understanding war goes beyond this. They note that the knowledge of war is intimately tied with the social and political production of truth:

> Questions of strategy more or less directly concern the ultimate values and purposes of a polity, not to mention the more material interests at stake in arms procurement and foreign policy. A host of political investments, commitments, and powers are regularly at stake in a way that is only exceptionally the case in most other fields of inquiry in the social sciences and humanities. (p. 528)

And elsewhere:

> The enframing certainties of pacific order, of identity, continuity, and certainty always exist subject to war's undoing, to the threat that the composition of our objective order of social and political truth might be unmade in ways that *cannot be fully seen* in advance, or necessarily understood afterwards. (p. 536, emphasis mine)

These quotations serve to emphasise two points. First, that war has effects beyond the instrumentality of fighting, and that these effects impact 'order, identity, continuity, and certainty'. When applied to chemical weapons, we can say that beyond the instrumentality of chemical weapons to 'survive and flourish in a world of competing armed powers', they have the power to unmake *but also to make* order and identity. These effects are enormously powerful and the stakes are exceptionally high. The second point is that these powerful effects cannot be fully gauged in advance. Thus, while some intentionality can be assumed of rational, strategic actors, total prescience cannot. It is a well-known methodological and epistemological problem in the study of international affairs that as researchers, we are limited in our ability not only to observe intentionality, but to interpret it (Pratt, 2017).

Therefore, the present study made an assessment of the strategic *effects* of the use of chemical weapons as a norm transgression, rather than the strategic *intention*. As such, I have attributed a sense of purposefulness to the actions of political leaders, but I do not want to claim that the effects equate the purpose. We cannot assume that all the effects we observed were the exact strategic intentions of the actors involved, although it is clear that the actors were aware that chemical weapons use has effect on international order and identity and that they pursued effects of this magnitude purposefully. Richard Betts shows that strategy-making is in great measure illusionary: there is too much room for variables

to intervene between plan, execution, and result (2000). However, this does not mean that there can be no logic at all. Clausewitz, firm on the non-linearity of war, reminds us that despite "the vast, almost infinite distance there can be between a cause and its effect", it is the task of theorists to duly trace effects back to their cause (1832/1976, p. 698). While war in general is characterised by non-linearity, chemical war is even more so. As a norm transgression, the introduction of chemical weapons represents a significant escalation towards violence and away from restraint. It is a move in the direction of absolute war, when Clausewitz's trinity of reason, chance, and passion is essentially compressed. Upon such escalation, the equilateral triangle that represents the balance between the three might better be visualised as an isosceles triangle that diminishes the role of reason. Chance and passion take over.

This brings us to four limitations of the present study. The first and second are methodological, the third pertains to generalisability, and the fourth pertains to both. The first methodological limitation lies in my inability to make an assessment of what exactly went on inside the heads of the main actors in the case studies. This means I have assumed a rationality on the part of statespeople that may have been overestimated. While I have been careful to point out that I have assessed the strategic effects of chemical weapons, rather than the strategic intentions of statespeople in using chemical weapons, I have also suggested that statespeople became aware of the effects and worked to reduce or amplify them, or build on them in their strategic narratives. For instance, while Bashar Al-Assad was not able to predict how other states would respond to his use of chemical weapons and could not have rationally planned for this course of events, I assumed that he anticipated rejection. I assumed that he consciously continued in the transgression and worked to stabilise security relations with Russia and Iran to enable it. There is no direct evidence for these assumptions, but there is a lot of circumstantial evidence. For instance, direct quotes by and interviews with statespeople give evidence of the salience of chemical weapons in their portrayal of the events as they unfold, indicating an awareness of the effects of using them. I have used such direct quotes, interviews, and official statements to show a measure of consistency that implies such rationality. It is important to reiterate here that I opted for a form of institutional rationality that Christian Reus-Smit called an "ontological conception of institutional rationality" (1999, p. 161). This is a form of rationality that does *not* assume static, exogenous interests that institutions, such as states, respond to. Such rationality, which Reus-Smit called 'deontological', would not be able to explain the choice to use chemical weapons, as this is a historical exception rather than a typical case. Instead, ontological institutional rationality "grounds the cognitive processes of institutional selection within deep-seated cultural mentalities that are conditioned by intersubjective values" (p. 161). These intersubjective values, as I have assessed them in my cases, are expressed in dialogue between the protagonists of my case studies and the audiences they address. This form of rationality not only allows for, but requires "a way of thinking that is as normative as it is calculating, as value-laden as it is logical" (p. 161). Reus-Smit used this type of rationality to explain how states chose to collaborate internationally. I have used it here to explain how states chose to interact with their international

environment, allowing for both collaboration and confrontation as rational – though not always successful – outcomes.

The second methodological limitation lies in my equation of the actions of statespeople with state actions. I have assumed a unity of action amongst various statespeople that might have been misplaced. The fact that all states in my case studies were autocratic states reduces, though not entirely eliminates, the risk that important voices in decision-making were missed. However, using states as a shorthand for statespeople obscures the internal debates that may have altered strategic calculations, or that caused an action to take place that was not 'planned' by the protagonists in my study. This means that the possibility exists that I have interpreted an event as intentional, which may in fact have been accidental. I have attempted to address this limitation by looking at the use of chemical weapons throughout the wars in question as bounded series of nested events, rather than as either single events or series of single events (Thomas, 2011). For instance, in the Iraqi case, I have not treated the defence of the Kalu Heights in October 1983 with nitrogen-mustard as a distinct event from the recapturing of the Faw peninsula using sarin in April 1988. Instead, I have treated them as different expressions (generating different immediate effects) of a single phenomenon (generating an eventual, cumulative effect).

The third limitation relates to the nature of strategic studies as the pursuit of universalising the experience of war to the largest degree possible. Given the peculiarities and operational demands of each individual war, the differences in personality between the statespeople involved, the changing culture of the international society between interventionism and isolationism, or between solidarism and pluralism[17], and many more variables, there is no single strategy that can be distilled from the history of chemical warfare. Of course, the same is true for any other strategy, but this means that the generalisability of my findings is necessarily limited. It is impossible for other states to replicate how the Soviet Union, Iraq, and Syria have (attempted to) use chemical weapons. However, there are three elements to my argument that can be generalised somewhat.

First, chemical weapons introduce liminality into a social space that is already liminal. War is not regulated, despite what democratic belligerents would like their constituency to believe, though there is some normative corset in the form of humanitarian law and the just war tradition. This corset includes the rights states have to go to war, which are circumscribed by the UN Charter and by jus ad bellum principles, and as well as the ways states are allowed to behave when war occurs as prescribed by various international treaties and the jus in bello principles (Coppieters & Fotion, 2008; Best, 1997). However, despite these legal and normative principles, war remains a strange social space with different normative

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[17] To reiterate, in the English School tradition, pluralism and solidarism represent two views of the nature of international society. Pluralists argue that the international society is the coexistence of sovereign states with different values. Solidarists, on the other hand, argue that international society is based on a common humanity, represented by states, whose sovereignty is conditional. Pluralists and solidarists, particularly in normative rather than empirical form, tend to disagree over matters of humanitarian intervention and coercive approaches to norm enforcement (Bain, 2013).

expectations. In a social context that is filled with uncertainty, chemical weapons introduce an additional measure of uncertainty that can be exploited by the belligerents involved to adjust their international identity, shift allegiances, manipulate narratives, or force opponent action. The problem (or opportunity) of normative liminality, when we are momentarily placed between normative certainties, is that the possibilities seem endless. Thus, what we can generalise is that the introduction of chemical weapons in war forces all participants – direct and indirect – into a liminal space in which they have to re-assess their normative commitments, or risk losing ontological security.

Second, the sustained use of chemical weapons is embedded in specific operational circumstances and is dependent on the presence of international support, which means that states are unable to fully exploit the possibilities of liminality without the security of structure to fall back on should they miscalculate. What is more, liminals not only require political support to maintain their liminality, they also require normative stability to contrast their liminality with. This serves to reiterate Victor Turner's point that liminality cannot do without structure (1969). Therefore, when states use chemical weapons, we should not assume that they so with the intention of overthrowing the norm against them, but consider the possibility that the need to preserve the norm in order to make themselves stand out somehow.

Third, there seems to be a difference between how self-understood strong states and weak states are able to exploit the liminality that derives from the introduction of chemical weapons in war. Chemical weapons had come to be designated as weapons of the weak, or the 'poor man's atomic bomb', by the 1980s, although the use of the phrase can be traced back to the late 1940s (Toulabi, 2023). The subsequent stigmatisation of chemical weapons on the back of this discourse reinforced the interpretation that self-understood strong states should not pursue them. Similarly, the case studies have suggested that the power reversals associated with liminality are more attractive for 'weak' states than for strong states. However, more evidence is needed to fully generalise this dynamic.

This brings me to the final limitation to this study, which is concerns both methodology and generalisability. It is a limitation of case selection. Fortunately, the use of chemical weapons in war is an exception rather than a rule. I have argued that this makes the study of these instances all the more interesting, but this also means that there is a limited set of cases to choose from for such a study. As a result, the low amount of cases in this study impacts the generalisability of the results. In particular, I would have preferred to be able to include another self-understood 'strong' state in the analysis, but I have not been able to do so. The United States in Vietnam is the most obvious candidate in this respect, but I judged this case to be too much of an outlier in time and subject matter. I based that on the assessment that the norm against chemical weapons was not yet as strong during this time as it had become by the 1980s (a development impacted by the Vietnam War itself), nor as associated with weakness. The fact that the United States primarily used herbicides, which does not constitute as clear a norm transgression as the use of other chemical weapons does, further complicates the matter.

Retrospectively, I would argue that there is a strong case to be made that the American intervention in Vietnam would have been a useful addition to the present study, particularly because the legality of the use of herbicides was intensely debated at the time. Another reason is that my case studies all represent autocratic regimes, limiting my findings to non-democratic states. Therefore, the Vietnam War is a case that is worth exploring in the future.

The wider issue of chemical weapons today

The Syrian Civil War brought the issue of chemical weapons control back on the agenda, but it is by no means the only instance of chemical weapons use over the past decade. Sudan, North Korea, and Russia have also been accused of using chemical weapons in 2016, 2017, and 2018 and 2020 respectively. This raises questions about how they relate to each other and to the chemical weapons regime. These cases have been beyond the scope of the present research, but the following offers suggestions on how future research might address these in light of my findings.

Various authors have noted the swift response to the accusations in Syria, the successful activation of the OPCW and Syria's CWC accession, and the continued international attention to subsequent chemical weapons attacks and concluded that the norm is secure and effective (Chapman et al., 2018; Maksidi & Hindawi, 2017; Martin, 2015; Price, 2019). Others have noted that despite this strong international response, the realities of war, peace negotiations, and ongoing disarmament politics have severely hampered the prosecution of perpetrators and the protection of the most vulnerable (Brooks, Erickson, Kayden, Ruiz, Wilkinson & Burkle Jr., 2018; Edwards & Cacciatori, 2018; Trapp, 2017). These two literatures combined seem to suggest that the anti-chemical weapons regime is not perfect, but is the least unfavourable option to prevent the use of chemical weapons in the current international landscape.

However, the events in Syria have also generated critiques of the chemical weapons regime, pointing specifically at the 'hierarchy of death' that the taboo creates and the unequal attention the normative regime generates across cases in different places in the world. The 'hierarchy of death' phrase is used by Michelle Bentley to criticise the dominant focus on chemical weapons attacks and casualties over the thousands of deaths caused by conventional weapons (2016). The focus on (the threat of) chemical weapons obscures also other threats aimed at civilians, including severe torture, rape and sexual violence, all of which have also caused death in various ways. Bentley even argues that the taboo exacerbated the conflict by legitimising Assad, enabling him to intensify the war, while not actually solving anything. The delayed response by the United States in particular, being engaged in CWC negotiations, also allowed extremist groups time to organise and enter the conflict. Bentley's critique dovetails with my argument, that the continued use of chemical weapons in Syria created a liminal space in which the international guardians of the norm appeared to stand paralysed in the face of Syria's overidentification with the norm. Overidentification refers to the overt confirmation of the norm and the theatrical insistence on its value and importance, which blurs the lines between support of the norm and

mockery and cause the audience to question their perception (Kurowska & Reshetnikov, 2021). The second critique is articulated by Güneş Murat Tezcür and Doreen Horschig, who use the phrase 'hierarchy of victims' to show that some cases of chemical weapons use have generated a stronger response than others, and conclude that this is dependent on the perceived extent to which the victims are part of the 'civilised order' (2020). Victims of chemical weapons over the past century are primarily found amongst military personnel and civilians in the Global South, whose lives appear to be less grievable than the lives of those living in the Global North. Tezcür and Horschig show that in the majority of these instances, the perpetrators of gas warfare castigated their opponents as either uncivilised, using inhuman means themselves, or a s traitors and terrorists. There is a consistent dehumanisation that accompanies these instances. They proceed to contrast this with the response to the Skripal case in the United Kingdom in March 2018, which generated much swifter responses by Western states, going even so far as to link it discursively with the chemical attacks going on in Syria[18]. In reality, these were incomparable in scale and mortality. Tezcür and Horschig conclude that this hierarchy is a crucial weakness of the chemical weapons norm (2020, p. 378).

Hierarchies are also essential in the concept of liminality that I have used to shed light on the dynamics involved in norm transgression, particularly in the Iraq case. However, I have focused on the relative hierarchies of perpetrators in the international system, rather than the victims. Yet, there is an interesting parallel that we can draw between the two: the process of power reversal inherent in liminal situations implies that 'weak' states can better benefit from liminality than 'strong' states. If this is true, which further research can and should test, this has major implications for our understanding of how normative regimes, including arms control regimes, function. How we consider the distinction between 'weak' and 'strong' states must be carefully thought through in order to appreciate this dynamic, but the self-perception of states is a good starting point. The power reversal dynamic in a regional context (which requires a good degree of regional support), but also the suspension of such categories altogether when actors take on a trickster identity (which does not require regional support), can be attractive for states traditionally outside of the norm. Sudan comes to mind, where government troops used chemical weapons over a period of at least eight months between January and September 2016 (Amnesty International, 2016). There was very limited international attention for these attacks. Sudan denied it, and the African Union – United Nations peacekeeping force in the region was denied access to the Jebel Marra where the attacks had taken place. The 'hierarchy of victims' thesis is well-able to explain why the international community paid little attention. On the flip side, the 'weapon of the weak'-understanding of chemical weapons can be read as a self-fulfilling prophesy: it gives rise to a context in

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[18] While Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia survived the attack, the poisoning cost the life of Dawn Sturgess. Sturgess had sprayed the nerve agent on her wrist, having been given the bottle containing novichock by her partner Charlie Rowley, who had found the bottle and had presumed it to be perfume (Tobin, 2018).

which weak states can more readily make use of these weapons to suspend their own weakness and project an image of strength.

The wide category of chemical weapons as a class of prohibited weaponry also creates a false sense of homogeneity that stands in opposition to the hierarchies apparent in their use. What I mean by that, is that under the CWC, all use of chemicals as a means of inflicting harm on humans or animals constitute chemical weapons use (Article 2). The Convention cannot and does not distinguish between levels of lethality, scale of use, or consistency of use. In other words, Vladimir Putin ordering the assassination of Sergei Skripal with novichok, and Bashar Al-Assad ordering the use of sarin at Khan Sheikoun, constitutes the same legal violation. Indeed, many Western governments' responses to the Skripal poisoning included that very same linkage (Tezcür & Horschig, 2020, p. 377). Similarly, the critical journalism platform Open Democracy, when commenting on the chemical attacks in Darfur, wrote:

> The chemical assault on Jebel Marra was indeed a war crime, but the label itself did not scare Omar Al-Bashir away from committing such a violation when dictatorial counterparts like Bashar Al-Assad have gotten away with the same in Syria. (Azad, 2020).

While this interpretation is mainly voiced by Western governments and commentators in order to increase the salience of the phenomenon of chemical weapons use, we can assume that the linkage is not lost on the perpetrators of the attacks either. In fact, the occurrence of various chemical attacks over the course of the last decade, which includes the Syrian chemical attacks, the Darfur chemical attacks, the Skripal attacks, the assassination of Kim Jong-nam by North Korea, and the attack on Alexei Navalny, forms a strikingly high concentration of chemical weapons use historically speaking. If the discursive grouping of these attacks accurately reflects the viewpoint of the perpetrators as well as the audience, this might be an indication of the shifting allegiances dynamic proposed in my theoretical framework. In this reading, the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime functioned as an invitation to other 'weak' states to subscribe to their vision of how international society should be governed. Or, alternatively, the use of chemical weapons by Sudan, Russia, and North Korea functioned to signal to Assad that these countries stood by him in subversive approach to the international normative regime. This group of states can then be loosely referred to as a 'communitas', Victor Turner's term for the group of liminal figures who share the experience of norm inversion and lack a clear social identity (1969).

In Turner's understanding of society, two "models for human interrelatedness" (1969, p. 98) sit together in juxtaposition: the structure, with its hierarchies of socio-economic positions, and the communitas, which is revealed in liminal spaces but is always presumed to exist, shows the side of society that is undifferentiated and unstructured, a "communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders" (p. 98). Ritualistically, the communitas is recognised during rites of passage as an expression of common human bonds that are essential to sustain society, as structure

alone cannot constitute society. Taking these concepts out of the ritualistic context, we can recognise somewhat of an unspoken communitas among chemical weapons using states, as holding up a mirror to the hierarchies of international order. Victor Turner himself suggested a similar application of communitas:

> We could also mention the role of structurally small and politically insignificant nations within systems of nations as upholders of religious and moral values, such as the Hebrews in the ancient Near East, the Irish in early medieval Christendom, and the Swiss in modern Europe. (1969, p. 109)

The difference is, of course, that rather than being the 'moral conscious' of the wider society, the communitas in our example is the subverter of the order. We have previously noted the possibility of such subversion in Turner's conceptualisation of the liminoid as a non-ritualistic application of processes of liminality in society (Spiegel, 2011). The communitas thus offers an equalising space for states to subscribe to, in which they shed their lowly status in the hierarchy of international order. It is a thin communitas compared to the ones Turner identifies, and much less bounded, but it has potential to grow in substance as other norms become part of the discourse as well. Thus, if we consider the hierarchical nature of the chemical weapons norm as representing structure, the transgression of the norm represents communitas, which can be attractive for the 'weak' as hierarchical categories are done away with.

Sudan, Syria and North Korea fit more comfortably in that category than Russia. Having lost the superpower status associated with the Soviet Union, Russia has been broadly understood to have spent the first years of the 21st century trying to regain superpower status, or at least build up its conventional forces and economic power (Freire, 2020; Person & McFaul, 2022; Rosefielde, 2005; Rutland, 2008; Rywkin, 2008). Referring to the inadequacies of Russia's domestic politics, Rosefielde argued that at best, Russia would be a "colossus with feet of clay" (2005, p. 2). Thus, Russia has not quite succeeded in regaining recognition as a superpower, which means that even if Russia is not weak, its leadership also does not regard itself as particularly strong. But Russia has also been actively pushing the narrative that there is a global transition of sorts going on. In a 2012 speech by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov at the 20th Jubilee Meeting of the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy, he argued that:

> On the whole, a basically new landscape may take shape in the world in the next twenty years, which will mean a *painful re-adjustment* of international relations. (…)

> However, no one can say yet what contours the 21st-century world order will take and how stable and efficient it will be. One of the main goals of Russian foreign policy is making the international system fair, democratic and, ideally, *self-regulating*. (…)

> It seems that some of our Western partners in practical politics do not see the huge shifts that have taken place in the world over the last 20 years, in particular, the emergence of powerful centres of economic growth, financial power and political influence. (no page numbers, emphasis mine)

In the Russian reading, this 'painful re-adjustment' should come with the realisation in the West and in the United States in particular, that all countries in the world should be regarded as equal. In his address to the American readership of the New York Times, right as the United States was entertaining the idea of a military response to the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime in 2013, Vladimir Putin warned that:

> There are big countries and small countries, rich and poor, those with long democratic traditions and those still finding their way to democracy. Their policies differ, too. We are all different, but when we ask for the Lord's blessings, we must not forget that God created us equal. (2013, no page numbers)

Thus, having lost its superpower status, Russia is actively seeking other ways to preserve its equality in international affairs. Bringing attention to communitas has an equalising effect, according to Turner, preventing the hierarchies of structure from determining the nature of society (1969, p. 97). This may be what Russia is pursuing by aligning itself discursively with the 'weak'. At the same time, denial that chemical weapons were used, or that Russia was behind it, signals to the international community that Russia is strong, capable of targeting enemies wherever they reside, all the while securing domestic support by determining what is 'true'. In the words of David Gioe and colleagues: "although the bare-shirt horseback riding, Judo-practising, animal-wrestling Putin may have little more to offer Russia than the image of strength, he has capitalized on it" (Gioe, Goodman, & Frey 2019, p. 569).

Another interesting avenue of future research would be to consider how non-state actors fit in this system of interpretation, or if different categories are necessary to understand their interaction with the international normative system. Al-Qaeda and ISIS have both pursued and used a chemical weapons capability, and the 1994 and 1995 sarin attacks by Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo stand out as highly impactful, even if not as deadly as they could have been (Cameron, 1999; Chapman, 2017; Olson, 1999; Strack, 2017; Quillen, 2016). At the same time, Syria and Russia have been actively distancing themselves from these terrorist groups, even blaming Syrian chemical attacks on ISIS, suggesting that they are not considered part of the same communitas of transgressive entities. Terrorist groups have quite a different relationship with normative regimes that grew out of inter-state negotiations, and we should expect the performer-audience relationship to function differently as a result. Still, terrorism is thoroughly steeped in performative violence, symbolism, and communication (Matusitz, 2014), which suggests there are interesting relationships to explore. This is particularly so given the continued interest

of terrorist groups in chemical weapons, despite difficulties associated with developing them (Pita, Anadón, Romero, & Kuca, 2020).

Where does this leave the norm against chemical weapons? International law, including the chemical weapons regime, is liable to exploitation if not directly and decisively enforced. Continued violations can make intervention more difficult to achieve instead of easier, as it allows violators to construct a narrative around the violation. Therefore, the international community should first reinforce preventive measures, including for the acquisition of precursors, and collaborate extensively with commercial actors to prevent access to chemicals. Second, when chemical weapons use does occur, those seeking to protect the norm should refrain from actions and discourses that reinforce the liminality of the perpetrator and of chemical weapons themselves. Chemical weapons should not constitute any more of a red line than other violent acts targeting civilians, and should be considered in the wider spectrum of operations the perpetrator is carrying out. Allegations should be consistently followed up on without delay, even if levelled against non-members of the CWC, just as other allegations of systematic harm perpetrated against civilians should be investigated. A military response is unlikely to be proportional, and will likely serve to reinforce the liminality of chemical weapons instead. Third, we have to recognise that the norm's strengths may also be its weaknesses. For instance, the OPCW has been effective in eliminating most chemical arsenals that existed prior to its establishment, but is also quite unique in terms of scope, thus setting chemical weapons apart from other prohibited weapons, such as cluster munitions and anti-personnel mines. The comprehensiveness of the CWC, which has served to reinforce the stigmatisation of all chemical weapons in all non-peaceful circumstances, has also allowed for the discursive linking of Salisbury and Khan Sheikoun. There is no easy solution to this, and we have to engage wisely in debates about the future of the chemical weapons norm, with sufficient attention for its negative externalities.

A strategy of disorder?

The central questions I set out to answer was why states use chemical weapons. I was particularly interested in finding out what the strategic value of these weapons is, given their limited military utility and the strong norm against their use. Fundamentally, the use of chemical weapons in a normative system that rejects them creates disorder when audiences observe one thing, yet hear another. Most actors in the international system seem to prefer certainty and normative stability, as constructivist scholarship has demonstrated, but under the right circumstances, weak states under threat can profit from instability and disorder instead. In the case of Syria, the visible use of chemical weapons combined with denial created just enough confusion to prevent action. Being on the defensive, confusion on the part of his adversaries was sufficient to sustain Assad's own position. This was true not only with regards to chemical weapons and Assad's relations with potential Western interventionist states, but also with regards to his domestic opponents. The lack of unity among the opposition is one of the reasons why Assad could win a military victory (Walther & Pedersen, 2020). Operationally, it prevented strongly

coordinated adversaries, while strategically, it prevented sustainable foreign support for the opposition. However, we have also noted that while Assad is still there, this hardly constitutes a political victory. Being on the defence meant that Assad has the weaker aim, which consisted in staying right where he was. 'Divide and *rule'*, might work, but 'divide and *conquer'* is less likely.

The link between normative instability and warfare is not only visible in instances of chemical weapons use. In fact, over the past decade-and-a-half, we have seen the rise of a concept that is highly operational, yet has been accorded strategy-status in popular and political discourse, and has become almost entirely synonymous with confusion and instability: hybrid warfare. Coined by American General Mattis but conceptualised by Frank Hoffman, hybrid warfare used to refer to an operational approach to war that combines military modes of warfare with non-military modes, including crime, terrorism, and irregular tactics (Hoffman, 2007). Hoffman warned that non-state actors might use conventional means when it suited them – as did Hezbollah against Israel – while state actors might resort to unconventional means such as criminal disorder. Crucially, according to Hoffman, in order to qualify as 'hybrid war', these elements have to come together *in the same battlespace* to achieve operationally decisive effect (2007, p. 8). Otherwise, hybrid war would not be qualitatively different from so-called compound wars, which are the standard rather than the exception in the history of war. The problem is that through academic, public, and political discourse, hybrid war has morphed into something it is not: a war-winning strategy. Particularly after Russia's annexation of Crimea, the concept became popularised to almost mythical standards. Russia used little military force, implying that they 'won' because of non-military means. In a time when dis- and misinformation, energy security, migration, and operations in cyberspace vie for political attention in Western democracies, these soon became part of the adversarial relationship with Russia. After Crimea, the question arose if Russia could do it again, on a larger scale, by manipulating the salient topics of Western political discourse.

First, we have to be careful to point out that the annexation of Crimea may not have been highly militarised, implying that non-military means were decisive, but in fact it does not tell us much about the effectiveness of non-military means in the annexation of territory. This is because of the specific circumstances in Crimea, which did not 'test' non-military means in adversarial conditions all that much. Russia already had a military presence in Crimea, a large ethnic Russian population was receptive of Russian propaganda, and Ukraine did not have troops ready to defend the peninsula because everything happened so fast (Renz & Smith, 2015). In other words, the case is not representative for offensive hybrid warfare in all circumstances. However, the confusion that prevailed during those hours that the operation lasted, did create a new dynamic in the relation between Russia and the West, as the inaction of the West looked like inability. As Bettina Renz and Hanna Smith argue: "putting forward the notion of Western weakness in the face of Russia's superior 'hybrid warfare' capabilities implies respect and even fear of Russia as a powerful global actor that was not afforded to the country before" (p. 10).

Second, hybrid war is now used in reference to almost everything Russia does, implying that everything is coordinated towards a single goal that somehow threatens the West. In fact, this may better be called 'grey zone war', as it sits on the boundary between war and peace, but often authors conflate the two (e.g. Almäng, 2019; Bachmann, Dowse, & Gunneriusson, 2019; Hughes, 2020). In any case, the result is that we have started to call something 'war', that we would have probably called 'interstate competition' before the events in Crimea in 2014, and because the existence of war implies the existence of strategy, hybrid warfare itself is now considered strategy. Murat Caliskan critiques hybrid warfare as a concept synonymous to 'grand strategy' instead, but his point is similar: the way hybrid warfare is often used is far removed from the operational context in which it may have been descriptively useful (2019).

This confusion is also apparent in leading thinktanks and advisory research. For instance, the Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS), which often advises not only the Dutch government but also NATO and the European Commission, published a report on hybrid warfare in 2020. In the introduction, it says that "at their core hybrid *tactics* are tactics old as time (military posturing, *spreading propaganda* and the use of *economic measures* are well established *military strategies*)" (Torossian, Fagliagno, & Görder, 2020, §2, emphasis mine). In this one sentence, not only are tactics explained in terms of strategy, but information and economic measures are called '*military* strategies'. Fortunately, such confusion over levels of analysis is absent in a 2020 publication on hybrid war by the Institute for the Study of War, an American thinktank (Clark, 2020). While it does focus on the strategic level, rather than the operational level Hoffman originally intended, it is careful to point out that this is how Russia itself understands its conflicts in Syria, Libya and Ukraine as hybrid wars. It is the combination of all means of foreign policy, specifically including conventional means, under the direction of an information campaign. This is an important point, because it suggests Western states should create defensive measures against offensive hybrid war (p. 9). Mark Galeotti, the analyst who inadvertently and to his own regret contributed to the reification of the 'Gerasimov Doctrine' as the supposed new Russian way of war, instead warns against the perception of Russian activities as a single offensive big plan (2019). First of all, to the extent that Russia believes such a big plan exists, it is the Western way of war. Second, Russia's own capabilities to synchronise all its foreign policy tools to achieve a common purpose outside of its sphere of influence are limited.

This brings us to the third point, which is that we should be realistic about the extent to which offensive hybrid war can be successful without a strong conventional force to back it up. Because of the elevation of hybrid war to the level of foreign policy, what we actually experience of hybrid war in places Russia is interested in (i.e. states in Europe and North America, but also states in Africa where Russia is currently trying to get a foothold) consists mainly of information campaigns, some manipulation of energy security, and cyber-attacks. These are the foreign policy choices that mainly impact the average citizen in these places. The result is, at worst, uncertainty and inconvenience. Uncertainty about gas

prices, uncertainty about the intentions of our own governments, and uncertainty about which version of events we can trust. Cyber-attacks may have bigger implications, but these have not yet materialised on a large scale. Let me be clear: these things can be harmful and they can pose serious challenges to the integrity of democracies. However, they hardly win wars. Even in places where Russia's hybrid wars have been raised above the level of grey zone warfare, and include conventional military force – Syria, Libya, Ukraine, and Mali – they have not won definitively.

This is where my exploration of disorder as a strategy pursued by Assad converges with the disorder inherent in what we have come to call hybrid war, particularly as it is targeted at Western states: doubt, vagueness, and duality does not win political victories. Ukraine forms a clear example of this. Eight years of proxy war[19], combined with a constant stream of mis- and disinformation and cyber-attacks, eventually culminated in a conventional war in order to become decisive. Some have pointed out that Russia feels threatened by NATO expansion, John Mearsheimer most famously (2014), while others have pointed out the flaws in his argument, arguing that it is rather democracy that Putin fears (Person & McFaul, 2022). In any case, this suggests that Russia's hybrid warfare concept is defensive, or at least pre-emptive in orientation. I have suggested that disorder may be effective to prevent loss, but that it does not suffice as a strategy to win wars. This applies to hybrid warfare as well, inaccurate as the term may be. As a strategy of disorder, it will fall short in achieving a strong, political aim.

Norm transgression, war, and international politics: implications for theory

The theory of norm transgression proposed in this study is also applicable beyond the issue of chemical weapons. Any clear norm transgression, in particular ones that are highly visible and clearly in violation of international law, are potentially interesting to consider in this light. When studying war in particular, not any violation will do. As war is already a liminal space, few norm violations will trigger the kind of attention that the use of chemical weapons does. Targeting hospitals, weaponised sexual violence, or the use of prohibited weapons are potential transgressions that can attract enough international attention to create the dynamics described in this research. However, many transgressions in war, such as human rights abuses or the destruction of civilian targets are likely – and tragically – too common to produce the same effects. However, especially when mandated from above, those transgressions may also be indicative of subversive qualities and do demonstrate the limits of the international normative order. While they may not always create the same headlines that chemical weapons tend to generate, such violations can indicate shifting allegiances on a sub-global level or create perceptions of power among actors traditionally seen as weak.

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[19] 'Proxy war' is another term that sometimes does more harm than good when used to analyse contemporary conflict. It suggests a principal that directs an agent, but this relationship is often far more complex than that (e.g. Kudelia, 2014).

We can also consider the relationship between norm transgression and liminality as a framework for understanding in contexts other than war. State actors can challenge the normative order in many ways. The BRICS – Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa – come to mind as a group of states that participates in international fora, while also challenging hegemonic interpretations of (Western) norms (Thakur, 2014). Recently, in a blow not only to the prestige of the International Criminal Court (ICC), but also to Ukraine's cause more broadly, South Africa's President Ramaphosa suggested that he would leave the ICC to be able to receive President Putin in South Africa, for whom the ICC has put out an arrest warrant. Only a few days later, the policy was reversed ("South Africa backtracks", 2023). While the *Financial Times* article suggests that this reversal "will cause intense diplomatic embarrassment for South Africa", it could also be argued to represent a more subversive way of challenging the international legal system. It keeps the international audience, and particularly ICC-member states, on their toes. Will South Africa uphold the normative order of the ICC or not? The duality of such commitment – both confirming and challenging the normative frame at the same time – is more damaging to international norms than outright rejection because it creates internal instability. It means that there is a possibility that members of the normative regime are untruthful or unreliable. Clear and open rejection creates an insider-outsider dichotomy that functions as a form of ontological security as it clarified mutual expectations (Mitzen, 2006). This ontological security is lost when insiders themselves become unreliable. Current research into ontological security helpfully provides ways forward from neorealist conceptions of security to explain 'odd' foreign policy choices (Mitzen & Larson, 2017; Pratt, 2017; Rumelili, 2015; Steele, 2008). However, it has not yet confronted the problematic of states pursuing ontological insecurity by sowing disorder, shifting allegiances, or a combination of both. The left side of my transgression matrix, i.e. 'denial' is the most dangerous and yet under-researched set of phenomena.

This behaviour is not exclusive to non-Western states. In fact, it could be argued that this type of behaviour is a constant in international relations, and we have to be aware of our own positionality when evaluating norm transgressions. We may have been shocked, and rightfully so, when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, but of course many have pointed out that the 2003 invasion of Iraq was not any more legal or legitimate, pursued for the wrong reasons, and as a projection of American hegemony (e.g. Butt, 2019; Hinnebush, 2007; Simuziya, 2023; Strong, 2017). While the invasion of Iraq may be the clearest example of the West manipulating its own norms dishonestly, other instances exist, from regime change in Libya (de Waal, 2013; Terry, 2015; Zambakari, 2016) to the allocation of humanitarian aid (Narang, 2016). There may be many more examples that go unnoticed because of our own positionality, but that may be perceived as dishonest by certain sub-global audiences. Thus, examples of non-Western states subverting the global order and introducing instability, such as the use of chemical weapons by Syria, can be read as responses to the same behaviour demonstrated by Western states. Both

call into question the normative order. This has implications for International Relations theory as well, as it changes the relationship between norms and power.

While neorealist theory suggests that both norm confirmation and norm violation occur as extensions of state interest, some norm violations defeat that logic as they do not achieve (material) security benefits. Instead, they can reveal the weakness or desperation of a strong state in facing down an elusive, weaker enemy. In chapter 6, while discussing Iraq's power inversion, a footnote briefly alluded to the norm transgressions committed during the War on Terror as indications of American weakness rather than strength. The seemingly random air raids of non-strategic locations in Ukraine by Russian missiles in the current war is another. However, even more interesting is the perspective on and of weak (or small) states. In structuralist theories, such states are assumed to have little power, while the norms imposed by strong states determine the amount of wiggle room they can afford themselves. In constructivist theory, on the other hand, norms shape behaviour as a result of perceived appropriateness. If states do transgress norms, constructivism suggests that they likely do this as a result of competing normative demands, and potentially with the aim of establishing a new norm at the cost of another. However, looking at it from the perspective of liminal spaces, we observe that the relationship between norms and power changes: neither strength nor appropriateness determine the norm or its institutionalisation. Instead, we observe the manipulation of norms by weak and divergent states. It is a profound questioning of international order by weak states that shakes up hierarchies presumed stable by realists. It is also a move towards non-conformity that constructivists struggle with, as it does not always include a discursive challenge to an existing norm. The English School seems best positioned to take up this line of thought, given that it presumes norms to exist only when they are demonstrated, as outward signs of belonging rather than causal constructs. However, other schools of thought will have to find a way to accommodate the counter-normative power of weak states as well.

I have introduced Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall's understanding of power in chapter 4, to highlight Iraq's constitutional power to defy the international community, thus constituting his new, powerful identity in a hierarchical system (2005). It is worth revisiting here. To briefly recap Barnett and Duvall's conception of power, they distinguish between interactive (power over) and constitutive power (power to), and between direct and diffuse connections between the actors of interest. This leads to a typology[20] of four forms of power: compulsory and institutional (two forms of interaction), and structural and productive (to forms of constitution). Neorealists and neoliberalists fit more easily with the interactive forms of power, while the constitutive forms of power would speak more clearly to constructivist and English School orientations. The issue is that no matter how we understand power, each of the types assumes that power resides with the strong and not with the weak. However, I have argued that the weak can sometime be understood (by themselves or by others) to 'have' more power

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[20] The article refers to the schema as a taxonomy, but it is actually a typology (Smith, 2002).

than the strong, and that this is the result of norm transgression. If agency does not exist without structure (see Giddens, 1984), the agency of strong states is necessarily impacted if weak states challenge the structure.

We can clarify this when looking at the supposed equalising effect of the international rule-based order. The promise of international law is that all sovereign states are equal, can appeal to the same rights and have the same duties. Two dynamics appear upon closer inspection. First, the rule-based order is deeply hierarchical. The failed attempt by a number of states, many of which were Arab states, to connect nuclear and chemical weapons in a single ban is one example that evidences this (Price, 1997, p. 144-145). Nuclear weapons were, by law, reserved for the five states with permanent seats at the security council and it was to stay that way. Second, to the extent that the rule-based order is equalising, it runs the risk of making a mockery out of itself. For instance, when Saudi-Arabia was elected to chair an important panel on the Human Rights Council in 2015, it sparked outrage (Brooks-Pollock, 2015). Such instances of equalisation are inherently undermining. The point is that the international rule-based order carries in it the promise of sovereign equality, but this equality can be uncomfortable and undesirable for the strong states. It is in this tension, which is essentially the same tension explored in the pluralist-solidarist debates of the English School, that norm transgressions can create power reversals or make a mockery out of norm compliance. The English School therefore holds the most potential for exploring this further.

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