



THE SIRYAN CHEMICAL AGENT SCARE

In 1968 Syria ratified the Geneva Protocol that prohibits the use of chemical and biological weapons, yet the Protocol does not limit production or storage of the very same chemical agents. In 1972 the Damascus government also signed (but didn't ratify) the "Convention on toxic and biological arms". The Syrian authorities, however, never signed the convention commonly known as the "Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction".

The lack of a signature at the bottom of the abovementioned convention was justified by Syria as being a measure of protection against the aggressiveness of Israel which - not a small detail in the eyes of the Syrians - signed the convention but never had it ratified by its parliament. Tel Aviv also possesses nuclear weapons. The lack of international controls over the chemical weapons owned by Syria makes it difficult to quantify exactly what chemical agents Syria has, where they are produced and where they stockpile such agents. With the advent of civil war there increases a risk that such chemical agents fall into the wrong hands.

Syria has no doubt one of the most important arsenals of chemical agents in the Middle East. This capacity to produce them and the possibility to use them have been guaranteed by the assistance of various countries in the course of time. Since the 70's Egypt (during the '73 war), the USSR (now Russia), North Korea (especially in the loading of the missile nose-cones), and lately Iran (since 2005) all contributed to increase the arsenal of Bashar al Assad. Iran allegedly provided assistance in the production of chemical precursors through the Organization of the Iranian Military Defense, with a 1\$ billion fund promised by Ahmadinejad while in Damascus in 2007.

The agreement included the financing of scholarships to Syrian students for their studies at the Institute for Technology and Applied Sciences at the University of Teheran.

In addition to international assistance in the sector (especially in armed systems capable of launching chemical, tactical and strategic warheads, artillery nose-cones and air-ground bombs), it is a fact that the technology regarding the use of chemical weapons is easier to come by, acquire and administer than nuclear power.

All that we know about the quality of chemical agents owned by Syria, their quantity, production sites and stockpiling, derives from the statements of defectors, info gathered by governments and intelligence agencies (through the use of drones and spy satellites as well) and from the statements of experts. All of the above must be contextualized and evaluated on the basis of intentions and interests of those issuing the statements.

On February 5, 2003, the then-US secretary of State Colin Powell spoke to the United Nations. During his statement he showed videos, played telephone recordings and showed photographs to the Security Council to prove that Saddam Hussein had sought weapons of mass destruction. All of it to spark the second Gulf war. History teaches us that the line between the truth and a lie is a very ephemeral one indeed. As we all know those weapons were never found and Powell's exposure will remain a landmark in the history of disinformation.

Which types of chemicals

Syria surely owns vesicant agents such as Iprite (mustard gas) and nerve gases as well. The latter, more efficient than the Mustard gas, has been accessible to the alawite regime at least since 1986, the year in which such accessibility was officialized by the US Special National Intelligence Estimate and later emphasized by the public statements of Israeli leaders like the then-Prime Minister Yitzhaq Shamir, the Defense Minister Yitzhaq Rabin and the Foreign Minister Shimon Peres. In 1996 Russian authorities charged the former general Anatoly Kuntsevich with having shipped 800kg of chemical precursors (components for nerve gases) to Syria. In July 2001 a Syrian missile test with the presumed use of chemical warheads was reported.

From 2002 until today, reports by the CIA have always confirmed the presence of vesicants and nerve gases (especially Sarin, which has no smell nor color). Among these was their most lethal evolution (in the viscous state, more toxic and persistent than the gas itself): VX. This chemical agent, allegedly sold to Syria by the aforementioned General Kuntsevich, allegedly resembles an equivalently lethal Russian chemical agent called "substance 33" or "V-gas". The same chemical agent had been promised (end of the 80's, beginning of the 90's) by the then-head of the Chemical Military Service, General Pikalov, to Syria during one of his visits to Damascus.

In May 1998 an experiment with Scud-C missiles armed with VX warheads was carried out near Damascus. The same was done in the year 2000 with a Scud-D and in July 2001 with a Scud-B near Aleppo.

In July 26, 2007, the loss of mustard gas (Iprite) from a plant near Aleppo (where fighting between loyalists and rebels has been ongoing for months) caused the death of tens of people.

It seems that Syria opted for stockpiling the chemical agents in a liquid base rather than in a binary system. In other words, the chemicals are kept in containers (generally stainless steel with protection valves) and need to be mixed an instant before being used to render them aggressive. This facilitates their handling, transportation and use. It must be noted that precursors are often automatically mixed inside the nose-cone or the warhead of the bomb after its launch, thus making the agent aggressive only against the objective and not during launching procedures.

The need for coupling precursors at the last instant is due to their volatility. Once they are mixed, the agents maintain their lethal effect for a limited amount of time (roughly 60 days, or 10 weeks for nerve gases). As we mentioned, all of these chemical agents are highly toxic and, once they are used, cause widespread contamination. The nerve

gases strike a person's nerve system and cause immediate death. The vesicants pertain to the category of the "incapacitants" and produce - during a span of 24 hours - burns, respiratory problems, damages to the eyes and edema of the lungs. Their tactical uses are thus distinct: the former are used to physically eliminate the enemy, the latter are used to weaken physically and psychologically (and are thus used mainly against the civilian population).

The quantities

We have no data on the quantities of available chemical agents in Syrian hands even though, in the evaluations of western intelligence agencies, there should be several hundred tons of them (especially iprite and/or vesicants). Yet the quantities are not so important since a small quantity of such chemical agents is sufficient to cause great damage. It is far more important to note that such chemical agents are generally stockpiled in protected sites (military deposits, bunkers, caves, tunnels or underground facilities) and that they are guarded by elite corps of the Syrian army, especially the Republican Guard. This offers some measure of safety so that even in the uncertainty of civil war the Syrian chemical arsenal will not end up in the hands of radical and terrorist groups such as Jabhat and Nusra. It is rumored that Hezbollah units have also been deployed in the protection of the chemical caches (or, alternatively, they have been used in the training of the Syrian military who protect the caches). This is certainly not good news, especially for Israel.

Where they are produced and stockpiled

There is some information available about the sites where Syrian chemical weapons would be stockpiled. Sometimes these informations are contrasting and sometimes they are undermined by disinformation. More often than not info, hypotheses, statements by defectors and instrumental emphasizing by countries or intelligence agencies make the truth hard to grasp.

Yet there are no doubts about one such place. The place where research and studies on aggressive chemical agents (and perhaps on biological weapons as well) have been concentrated. It is the Centre D'Etudes et de Recherches Scientifiques (CERS), with headquarters in Damascus. Egypt, Russia (the Oriental Petrochemical Industry) and the Iranian Military Defense Organization have all collaborated with the CERS on such studies. Three stockpiling facilities are administered by the CERS, two of which are just a few tens of kilometers from Damascus (Dumayer and Khan Abu Shamat). The third is located in the district of Homs (Furglus).

Additional aggressive chemical agents (especially Sarin) are allegedly stockpiled in 5 air bases (for two reasons: because they might be mounted inside airplane bombs or missiles and because the airforce is the regime's most trusted armed force). The stockpiling facilities were once scattered in over seventy different locations. Recently, because of the civil war, chemical agents have been concentrated in 10-12 locations only.

Then there are the production facilities. In time Syria has wanted to render itself independent in the production of chemical precursors. The installations where production takes place were located in an industrial center in Homs (VX production), in

a Scud missile base in Hama (VX, Sarin and Tabun production), in Latakia (near the harbor), in Aleppo (in the area of Al Safira, which is also an experimentation-research center and missile base - Scud D - where rebel attacks have concentrated themselves lately) and in Masyaf (between Homs and Banyas). In August 2012 near Al Safira in a deserted area (Diraiham, near the village of Khanasir), the Syrian and Iranian experts have run tests on nose-cones armed with aggressive chemical agents. In Hama and Aleppo there are also two alleged underground facilities for the production Scud-B and Scud-C missiles run with the direct cooperation of Iran. North Korea and China have also provided assistance in the past.

Altogether, counting research centers, production facilities, aerial or missile bases and stockpiling facilities (some of the precursors would have been kept separately from the rest of the mix in some facilities), there are over 30 sites at risk.

Finally, there is the civil part of the structure, with at its head the Syrian pharmaceutical industry, a sector that has developed thanks to the assistance of French companies. Syria covers roughly 85% of its pharmaceutical needs with its local production. There is a public company called "Saydalaya" that administers imports of raw materials in a state of monopoly. The sector is so developed that part of the Syrian production of pharmaceutical supplies is exported to the Middle East and Africa. Some of the Syrian pharmaceutical companies are also licensed to produce for other foreign companies.

Behind the legal production of medicines, however, the Syrian regime has used its connections to acquire "dual use" technology and to import the raw materials needed for its military aims.

The fact that the Syrian pharmaceutical industry supports the chemical weapons sector is proven by the events of 1991. In that year there were a series of incidents with venomous gases that forced 5 pharmaceutical factories to halt production: three in Aleppo, one in Damascus and one in Homs. Perhaps it is not by hazard that these factories are located in the same areas that are today considered to be where aggressive chemical agents are developed.

Apart from "Saydalaya", there are two more public companies that are thought to be implicated in the military program:

- DIMAS in Damascus. The company officially produces serums, but it is headed by a general (Hikmat Tahrani) and is under the superintendence of the Ministry of Defense.

- THAMECO in Damascus. The company depends from the Ministry of Industry. In the past this company created a consortium with French companies for the construction of a second facility in Aleppo. The structure went bankrupt in 1989 and was later allegedly transformed by the Syrians in a plant for the production of chemical agents.

France was involved more than others in the Syrian pharmaceutical sector because, during the 80's, they furnished most of the materials and assistance needed by Syria. Yet in 1992, France adhered to the so-called "Australia Group", which implied monitoring every export that could be considered "dual use". After 1992, Syria sought materials on the black market with the complacency of the Russian authorities.

Speaking of the pharmaceutical sector, one must not overlook the fact that Syria produces over 2 million tons of phosphates annually in a large facility located in Palmira (the facility was built with the assistance of Russia and through a joint-venture with an Indian firm). Phosphates are widely used in the pharmaceutical sector and in other sectors.

The development of biological weapons

Syria seems to have made advances in the field of biological weapons as well. In 1990, the then-US secretary of defense Dick Cheney had spoken officially about the issue. In 2011 the head of the US National Intelligence wrote a report for Congress in which Syria's possession and ability to develop biological weapons was hypothesized.

The hypothesis stemmed from the presence of a facility in Cerin, on the Mediterranean coast, where biological agents (together with pharmaceutical products) were allegedly researched and produced. Additional programs would have been started at the CERS in Damascus, which has a biological department. The CERS used to organize weekly international conferences on "Arab Sciences" in order to acquire know-how in the sector. The CERS has also sent its technicians to France to study toxicology and virology. Another center of research (officially marine research) for the development of toxins from animals and marine plants would be active in Latakia.

These structures allegedly produce bacterial agents such as anthrax and cholera and toxins like botulin and ricin (plant toxin). Anthrax is usable even in extreme environmental conditions, while the cholera germ can pollute water and foods. Toxins such as botulin have devastating effects. The possibility of spreading epidemics such as smallpox, the plague and brucellosis is also part of the biological warfare department.

Syria's capacity in the development of biological weapons is no different from other Middle Eastern countries such as Israel, Iraq and Iran. It is an unequivocal fact that a country able to develop and handle aggressive chemical agents can apply that ability in the biological field as well. It is also very hard to distinguish between the military and civil finalities of biological program.

The Syrian biological sector has developed greatly thanks to Russian help, especially in terms of arming missile warheads. With regards to the development of ways to disperse germs and bacteria in the air (and chemical agents as well) the know-how would have been acquired from the University of Aleppo in conjunction with several German universities. The use of biological agents as a weapon of mass destruction is more efficient if those agents are launched with long-range missiles, thus making the agents a strategic, not tactical, weapon.

Possible foreign intervention

The United States have openly admitted (see the recent public statements of General Martin Dempsey, joint chief of staff of the US army) that there exists no preventive measures that could stop Bashar al Assad's regime from employing aggressive chemical agents. It also seems problematic to recover such agents were they taken from the loyalists and landed in the hands of the rebels. Thus it is a fact that right now the US cannot take action. The most they can do is threaten to take action, as did

Barack Obama (August 2nd and December 3rd 2012), Hillary Clinton and Leon Panetta. The only thing Israel can do is distribute Diazepam, an antidote against nerve gases, to its military medical facilities.

In order to check Syrian chemical arsenals, international troops would have to be used on the ground in Syria, which is highly improbable for the time being. Nevertheless, the US president has drawn a "red line", saying that the employment of chemical agents on the part of the regime would cause an immediate intervention of the superpower in the Syrian conflict. Yet even if the "red line" were to be crossed (it would mean that the regime is collapsing), the deployment of troops would take too long to prevent Assad from using the chemical/biological weapons extensively. Neither would it guarantee the securement of stockpiling facilities by the international contingent, seen that according to recent studies the task would require at least 75 thousand soldiers. The truth is that as of today there aren't any countermeasures that could avoid the use and dispersal of aggressive chemical agents.

There are rumors of elite troops from both Western and Arab countries (including instructors from the Czech republic) being presently trained in Jordan (150 of these are allegedly American). Israel would have pressured king Abdallah of Jordan for authorization to fly over the country in case air attacks against bases and stockpiling facilities are needed. There is also an alleged accord between the US and Turkey for the transit and temporary stockpiling of aggressive chemical agents on Turkish ground and in three facilities in Turkey, Israel and Jordan that are presently active and under US supervision. All of these options show that the problem cannot be solved.

The employment of special forces (that would have to fight together with the rebel militias) or an air strike against stockpiling facilities are both problematic. The first option would cause loss of men and raise the problem of having to back rebel groups whose trustworthiness is unknown, the latter would be even riskier, for a bombardment of the facilities could produce a toxic cloud. It has been evaluated that if the chemical agents owned by Syria were to be destroyed safely - this could be done with special incinerators that protect the environment - it could take anywhere from six months (optimistic evaluation) to a year's time (the more realistic evaluation).

Instructions for the use of chemical agents

As we have said, aggressive chemical agents can be inserted inside the nose-cones of artillery projectiles or tank projectiles, missiles and bombs. Syria has the technical know-how to do any of the above.

Speaking of surface-to-surface (SS) missiles, Syria has over 700 Scuds that have striking ranges varying from 300 km (type "B" and "D") to 5-600 km (type "C"). For lesser distances they can use the SS-26 (also called Iskander 9K720, with an approximate range of 250 km) and the SS-21 (70-80 km). At least 100 of Syria's Scuds of the "B" type can be armed with chemical warheads (especially Sarin and VX) as well as an additional 80 missiles of the "C" type. All of these missile's chemical (or biological) warheads are mounted with aerial dispersion or cluster mechanisms that can magnify their efficiency upon impact.

It also seems that Syria has implemented a packaging system for the chemical agents that can be used in both airplane bombs and artillery projectiles (or even tank projectiles). The difference being that an airplane bomb can carry up to 250kg of explosive (or chemicals) while an artillery projectile, depending on its caliber, can carry anywhere from 1,5 kg to 5,5 kg. A tactical rocket can carry up to 8 kg.

The Syrian army is made up of about 315.000 foot soldiers, 40.000 airforce men, 60.000 belonging to the aerial defense and 8.000 in the navy (423.000 men overall). They own 3700 tanks, over 3.200 artillery cannons, over 1.300 rocket launchers, 1,200 mortars, roughly 400 airplanes and over 170 helicopters. It is clear from these numbers that if Bashar al Assad were to decide to use chemical or biological weapons, he would cause widespread death and destruction. During the last 10 years the importation of weapons from Russia has increased by 580% (this explains Moscow's reluctance to lose such an important client).

The latest developments

Information about the Syrian chemical arsenal is mostly extracted from the statements of defectors and refugees. Adnan Silou, a General that joined the rebels, spoke of them. General Manas Tlass (son of the more well-known Mustafa), who defected to France, also revealed some information. Also, in December, General Abdelaziz Jassim al Shalal, former head of the military police who later joined the rebels, said that Assad's army had used chemical weapons in Homs. It is perhaps the most documented claim (there is a video by Al Jazeera and statements by the US consul in Istanbul) of the possible use of venemous gases by the regime. The agents would have been fired in the neighborhood of Al Bayada in Homs, where loyalist tanks opened fire. The video shows people vomiting, coughing and having trouble breathing before being rushed to the hospital. Perhaps it wasn't Sarin, which has more devastating effects, but something similar to it and less lethal.

On July 24, 2012, the spokesman for the Syrian government, Jihadi Maqdisi, mentioned for the first time that Syria possesses chemical and biological agents and threatened to use them in case of a foreign attack.

Intelligence-wise (we are talking about satellite monitoring systems and drone here) there have been signs of odd movements, such as the transport and binding of precursors, the loading of warheads, unusual activity near the facilities and the transfer of chemical agents to military bases by means of special units.

The main problem is not so much that Syria might decide to use the chemical agents, as such an act would mean that Bashar's regime has collapsed. The problem is that these chemical agents might land in the hands of Islamic extremists and terrorists. The military capabilities of the Jabhat Al Nusra militias, made up of foreign Islamic combatants that are doing quite well in the north of the country, are part of the problem.

It is not by chance that on December 11th, 2012, Washington has included the group among the "foreign terrorist organizations". Jabhat Al Nusra has over 10.000 well-trained and well-equipped men (with funding coming from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar). Of these, about 3.000 are fighting near Aleppo right around the Al Safira base.

Also, if any of these aggressive chemical agents were to land in Lebanon (the 2008 adherence of Lebanese authorities to the Convention on chemical weapons is irrelevant), it would be a devastating blow to Israeli national security.

WHAT HAPPENED TO LIBYA'S CHEMICAL WEAPON STOCKPILES?

The entire world is worried about Bashar al Assad's chemical weapons and fear they could fall in the wrong hands, presumably the Hezbollah or – even worse – radical islamist groups fighting alongside the rebels, should the Syrian regime fall.

But there is another arsenal of chemical weapons most people have forgotten about. Libya's WMDs were under international monitoring and had to be destroyed. The truth is Muammar Khadafi hid most of them. And in the chaos of the civil war most of Khadafi's chemical weapons stocks are untraceable.

How the sector developed

In one of his several political back turns, in 2003 Muammar Ghaddafi decides to put an end to his nuclear program (which, as a matter of fact, had never attained any tangible result) and to destroy his chemical weapons stocks. Two facilities are to be demolished or converted: the nuclear research center in Tajoura and the chemical production plant in Rabta.

In those same days a shipment of centrifuges is intercepted in a container during its transit in an Italian harbour, thus evidencing Khadafi's nuclear resolve. But it was also at the same time that Saddam Hussein is attacked for his alleged WMD program. Khadafi's decision was hence dictated by pragmatism, rather than by his desire to rid himself of chemical weapons.

On December 19 2003 Muammar Khadafi announces his willingness to put an end to his WMD programs (including nuclear, chemical weapons and related missile's programs) and on February 5 2004 he signs the Convention on Chemical Weapons. Khadafi mandates the destruction of his stocks by the end of that year.

According to the deal, Libya will now refuse to develop, produce, stock or use chemical weapons in the future and to destroy all existing supplies. The elimination of the stocks is put under the control of the Hague based Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).

In 2004 Libya spontaneously declares and puts under the vigilance of the OPWC the following amounts of chemical weapons:

- 24,7 metric tons of mustard gas
- 1390 metric tons of chemical precursors
- 3543 aerial ammunitions (still not loaded with chemicals)
- 3 facilities dedicated to the productions of chemical weapons

We are talking about blister agents (Iprit), precursors of nerve gases (Tabun, Sarin and Soman), but no asphyxiating agents (Phosgene, Diphosgene, Chloride, Chloropicrin). Pretty strange for a country producing chemical weapons – whose production requires basic technological know how – to stock vast amounts of the most efficient chemicals (like the nerve gas) and to renounce to crowd control gases or biological weapons.

Nevertheless, this is what Khadafi declares and this is what is put under international surveillance. Ammunitions are immediately destroyed by bulldozers.

The main site responsible for the production of chemical weapons that needs to be dismantled is in Rabta. An international project aims at its re-conversion into a pharmaceutical plant. The tender put out by the Libyan government (represented by the “Pharmaceutical and Medical Supply Company” owned by the Health Ministry and managed by Dr. Fathi Asseid) is won by an Italian company: Pharmachim in Milan. The contract envisages the construction of two factories: one dedicated to the production of the raw materials, the other to the packaging of the finished medical products.

The project goes ahead among increasing difficulties. This is because the Libyans want to use Rabta's conversion as a bargaining chip for the regime. In other words, Muammar Khadafi wanted to exchange his will to give up WMDs with financial and political gains. The Italian company manages to build the medicine production plant (for which the Libyans never hire the personnel to make it work), but not the raw materials' production site. Thus, to Libya's advantage, the project is not completed. Furthermore, Tripoli has no intention whatsoever to buy raw materials abroad. According to the original projects, Rabta's new facility should have been dedicated to the production of four low cost and patent-free medicines mainly for the cure of AIDS.

To conceal their true intent, the Libyans put the blame for the delay on the Italian company Pharmachim. They claim deadlines are not respected, payments are late, Visas for Italian technicians following the project are denied, construction flaws are denounced, containers are blocked in the ports. Rabta's conversion is turned into a political game for a regime with no interest in pharmaceutical production.

A 30 meter sand sacks barrier surrounding Rabta becomes yet another issue. The Americans and the British want it demolished, Tripoli refuses. The earthwork also serves the purpose of protecting the facility from wind and sand. Then more problems with international authorities arise. When US technicians ask to visit Rabta permissions are denied. Often Italy is called in to mediate between international “requests” and Libya's “good faith”.

The deal signed with the OPCW envisaged the reconversion of Rabta and the destruction of the chemical weapons stocked in Ruwaha, 80 km from Rabta. Once again the Libyans start with their dilatory tactics. They initially choose an Italian company, then – following the attacks in Benghazi against the Italian Consulate in February 2006 – they say they could choose an American one. But then, after the signing of the Italy-Libya friendship treaty, the Italians are in pole position once again. The destruction of the chemical weapons requires the construction of a specifically designed incinerator that would annul all environmental risks.

The tender posted by Libya's military procurement is won by a Swiss-Italian company called “Sipsa Engineering”. The man responsible for the program is Gen. El Ghadi, head of the National Committee for the Elimination of Chemical Weapons. The US insists on having a US company oversee the destruction of the stocks, but to no effect.

The issue of the earthworks surrounding Rabta (whose elimination was part of the international deal signed by Tripoli) and the destruction of the chemical weapons stocks intersect the negotiations between Libya and the United States. Tripoli asks the OPCW to turn the barrier into a permanent structure. British and Americans want to avoid any perimeter protection that could conceal future improper uses of the facility.

Libya's delay in destroying its chemical stocks are justified by the deadlines agreed with the OPCW that are progressively pushed back from December 2009, to May 1 2010 and then to the end 2011. Then the Libyans also claim they don't have qualified personnel for the destruction of the stocks (even though they hint at hiring Italian technicians) and that they lack adequate environmental legislation. Libya quotes the case of the United States, whose chemical weapons stocks were to be destroyed by April 29 2012. The limit was not respected for about 10% of the stocks because of the limits imposed by some States of the Union. The US deadline has been set for 2021.

Muammar Gheddafi knew he could play blackmail as long as he had his chemical weapons in hand and the reconversion of Rabta was not over. There was also a certain hostility to American requests within the regime, namely Gen. El Ghadi, and from a lesser known figure, Ahmed Hasnawi, the forefather of Libya's chemical weapons program.

Rabta's plant was built with machineries from a German company involved in embargo violations. The supplies were, at least on paper, a control room for the production of penicillin originally destined for Hong Kong. The Libyans, probably with German help, converted the plant to the production of chemical weapons. There were people working both in the control and packaging rooms. At that time all employees wore protection masks and suits to avoid

contamination. Besides from the control room, there was also an assembly line for the loading of the nose cones and a stocking system.

Today, also thanks to the new pharmaceutical production parts installed by the Italians (and completed in 2007), Rabta's control room has been partially dismantled, but could still be reconverted to the production of chemical weapons. The smokestack has been destroyed, the assembly line for the nose cones dismantled (and possibly taken and hidden elsewhere) and the packaging room eliminated (even though the storehouse is still functioning). A new centrifuge, a few reactors and some tanks would be needed. But since the control room is almost intact, the time needed to go back to a military production can be very short, definitely less than a year. And this was part of the blackmail Muammar Khadafi could exert on his counterparts.

The quantities of chemical weapons declared to the OPCW were contained in about 350 containers, each holding 20/30 liters of chemical agents. The containers showed signs of corrosion and had to be substituted with metal ones. Such a limited amount of chemicals to be burnt did not justify the size of the incinerator being built by Sipsa. The furnace costed 25/30 million euros and was paid for by the Libyans, even though a 5 million contribution was asked to the Italians for having "favored" one of their companies.

The question back then was whether Libya also had other undeclared stocks to destroy, like hospital waste, expired fungicides, weed killers or insecticides. The most dangerous hypothesis was whether Libya had other chemical weapons hidden somewhere unbeknown to the international community.

The suspect was fueled by other elements. Libya, besides from the oversized Rabta incinerator, already had another one operating near Tripoli's Italian cemetery. It had been built in the 70s to burn the bones of the dead who had been desecrated by Khadafi's men. Furthermore, the Libyans were also anonymously contacting Italian and French companies for the supply of a mobile disposal plant for liquid chemicals that had to be assembled and managed by local technicians in unspecified desert locations. There were rumors of underground stocks of methanol chloride (a weed killer, but also a basic intermediate product for gas), thionyl chloride, phosphate trichloride and vinyl chloride. All these chemicals suggested the presence of stocks of nerve or asphyxiant gases.

The nose cones and missiles loaded with chemical weapons are also missing. If we look at the assembly line put in place in Rabta and compare it with the list handed over to the OPCW, there is a remarkable absence of loaded nose cones as if these never existed. This is yet another suggestion that Libya could have tricked the international community. And that Rabta's facility could have been extremely active in the production of chemical weapons as the

environmental pollution, including several dead birds, surrounding the plant suggests.

The rebellion and the current situation

When the first protests in Libya began on February 15 2011, the reconversion of Rabta and the destruction of the chemical weapons stocks were not over yet.

After Khadafi's fall, in November 2011 and February 2012 the rebels discovered two more deposits containing ammunitions loaded with chemical weapons. Hundreds of artillery nose cones loaded with mustard gas and other empty containers. This was the first proof of Muammar Khadafi's lies. Furthermore, the stocks in Ruwagha still have to be disposed of. Their elimination began in October 2010 and was then suspended during the civil war. By November 2011 only 55% of the mustard gas and 40% of the chemical precursors in Ruwagha were destroyed. Yet another stock of mustard gas was found in September 2011 in Sebha which would confirm the scenario of a mobile disposal plant to be used in the desert.

The Libyan National Transition Council has been cooperating with the OPCW, but has also declared it is incapable of destroying all chemical weapons stocks by May 2012. A new plan has been put in place to restart the destruction of the chemicals in March 2013 and to complete it by December 2016.

Yet, even though the new Libyan authorities are cooperating with the international community, they still don't have the full control over their country. Chemical weapons stocks are not adequately protected and some storehouses could still be hidden. Following Khadafi's fall, the militias that fought the regime have failed to disarm. There are today around 200,000 armed men, including Islamist militias, roaming around the country. In the case of a new round of social instability, the control over lethal weapons could become a plus.

Evidence piling up before Muammar Khadafi's demise showed there were unaccounted stocks of chemical weapons. If this were true, where are they? Have they been discovered? If so, by whom?

KHADAFI'S LIBYA AND THE ANGLO-AMERICAN RENDITIONS

In Autumn 1995 a new terrorist group steps on the stage in North Africa. It is the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), “Al Jama’a al Islamiyah al Muqatilah” in Arabic. Their aim is to fight and overthrow Muammar Khadafi whilst trying to coagulate around their struggle against the Rais all the opposition forces at home and abroad. It is the first military response to the systematic elimination of dissidents carried out with impunity in several European countries by the regime's hit men.

The Group is formed by former Libyan combatants who have returned home after having fought the Soviets in Afghanistan. From a political point of view, the LIFG features historical dissidents and members of a defunct clandestine organization, the one founded by Awatha Zuwawi, an Islamic law student from Benghazi who led the opposition in Cyrenaica in 1986 and who was arrested and eliminated in 1989. Zuwawi had been in touch with Osama bin Laden in Pakistan and was also allegedly in contact with the CIA.

The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group chose the same name as that of a group that had seen the light in 1990 on the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Its then chief, Abdul Ghaffar, was arrested in Egypt in 1993 and then handed over to the Libyans. At that time Khadafi was still on the West's black list. Besides from eliminating opponents abroad, the regime in Tripoli had been accused of the attack against the U.S. servicemen packed “La Belle” disco in Berlin (April 5 1986), the bomb on a Pan Am flight over Lockerbie, Scotland (21 December 1988) and another bomb on a UTA flight traveling from Brazzaville to N'Djamena that exploded over Niger (19 December 1989). So initially the LIFG, because of its involvement in the fight against the Libyan dictator, benefited from good press in the West.

Long before the LIFG came to the surface, Muammar Khadafi had already faced islamist lead uprisings and mainly in Cyrenaica. His approach had always been heavy handed like in 1986 when, following an assassination attempt against government officials, he executed the nine people responsible for the attack. But the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group posed some serious difficulties for the regime. Khadafi himself was the object of several failed assassination attempts: a bomb in 1996 that saw the involvement of some men from the Presidential Guard, an attack in Boukrine in June 1997 and another failed attempt on June 2 1998 when one of his famous Amazons acted as a human shield to spare the beloved leader.

The LIFG attacks generated a strong response from the regime forcing several members of the group to seek refuge in Afghanistan where, starting from 1999, they begin having the first contacts with Al Qaeda and where, for financial reasons, they start building training camps for foreign fighters,

mainly Saudis and Kuwaitis. The international links the LIFG creates go hand in hand with their continuous fight against the Libyan regime.

The US led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 made of the LIFG one of the numerous Islamic terrorist groups and not a legitimate opposition to Khadafi anymore. Following 9/11 the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group was blacklisted by the UN (October 6 2001) for being affiliated with Al Qaeda. The American occupation pushed the LIFG to seek refuge in Iran, where they reconstituted their HQ, while most of its members fled elsewhere (Iraq, Syria, Algeria, Sudan and Pakistan). All of these events lead the LIFG closer to international terrorism. Such an involution favored the Libyan regime and had a positive impact on the relationship between Muammar Khadafi and the United States. Both countries were now on the same side in the fight against Islamic extremism allowing for new cooperation and dialogue.

The detente was also helped by other gestures from Tripoli: the payment on “humanitarian grounds” (thus without taking any responsibility) of 35 million USD for the victims of the “La Belle” bombing, the delivery and judgement in the Netherlands for the Lockerbie bombing of Abdelbaset Mohamed al Megrahi and Lamin Khalifa Fhimah (the first one convicted to 20 years in prison and then extradited to Scotland and the latter acquitted), the beginning of 2.7 billion USD negotiations for Lockerbie victims (paid out in 2003) that lead to a re-opening of relations with the United Kingdom.

Libya soon shifted from being a rogue State dedicated to terrorism to one of the strongholds in the fight against terrorism. The redemption was completed in 2003 when Libya officially declared it would renounce to its weapons of mass destruction and allow international inspectors in its nuclear facilities and chemical weapons production plants. At this point anti-terrorism cooperation became central in Tripoli's international relations, re-aligning Libya on moderate terms and rehabilitating Muammar Khadafi's figure. It was one of the several back turns in the history and policy of the Rais.

On the opposite front, the LIFG was under increasing pressure and persecution, not only in Libya, but also in the West.

The new context allowed for the development of the so-called “extraordinary renditions” (the extraordinary, thus without due process or abidance to international rules, transfer/delivery of alleged terrorists to their countries of origin) that saw a direct cooperation between the Libyan intelligence (namely the External Security Service, ESS), the CIA and MI6.

The man leading the talks for Libya was Musa Kusa, whom – due to his involvement in terrorist activities – was not allowed to go to the United States, but was granted hospitality in London under the good auspices of the British intelligence. In October 2001 the US Deputy Secretary of State, William

Burns, went to London to meet with a delegation headed by Musa Kusa. The Chief of the ESS went to Michigan State University and is a former Ambassador to the UK and was definitely capable of dialoguing with his counterparts.

Tripoli soon extended its anti-terrorism cooperation to other Arab countries like Yemen, Egypt, Algeria and Morocco. Terrorist exchanges with Algiers was a consolidated habit. But in 2003, after mediating with Niger, Libya granted the extradition to Algeria of one of the chiefs of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, Amari Saifi.

From that moment onwards, Libya was allowed inside Guantanamo to interrogate Libyan detainees (namely Omar Deghayes, who had fled Libya in 1986 following his father's killing by the regime). In 2004 two LIFG members, Abdullah Sadeq (caught in Thailand) and Abu Munder al-Saadi (apprehended in Hong Kong) were detained by local security forces, interrogated by US officials and then extradited to Tripoli.

In April 2004 US President George W. Bush publicly declared that Libya had abandoned terrorism. Two months later, William Burns, accompanied by the anti-terrorism chief J. Cofer Black, was on an official visit to Tripoli to re-open diplomatic relations and cooperate against terrorism. A few months later the US eased its sanctions against Tripoli, American oil companies signed new deals with the Libyans and Khadafi's regime was involved in a regional Washington-financed anti-terrorism program.

In Autumn 2004 the United States added the LIFG to its terrorist black list favoring Khadafi's attempts to get rid of the organization undermining his regime. After all, the Libyan Supreme Guide was after his armed opposition, rather than international terrorism. In 2001 Tripoli had placed a one million USD bounty on the arrest of 6 LIFG members accused of having sent money to Al Qaeda following the robbery in a Libyan bank. A clumsy attempt to get rid of members of the Group or of simple opposers who were not in any way involved in operational activities. One of them was Ash Shamis, who was stopped and arrested on Libyan request in Orlando, Florida, in 2002. Interrogated by the FBI, he was later released and allowed to return to the United Kingdom where he had been living for the past 30 years.

Renditions were not solely American. There were also British renditions. Several traces of what became a consolidated practice involving both Libya and the UK were found by the rebels in the files of the External Security Service in Tripoli. And this could be one of the reasons why Musa Kusa, after having fled the rebellion, found refuge in London. This could be a prize for his past cooperation or the price for his silence over a series of extra-legal, or rather illegal, actions. The British had blacklisted the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group on October 10 2005.

Sami al Saadi, also known with his nom de guerre of Abu Munthir, fled to China in 2004 with his wife and four children and asked for political asylum in Britain. A joint anglo-libyan operation, with the direct knowledge of the CIA, obtained his extradition from Hong Kong to the Maldives and then to Tripoli. Al Saadi and his wife were both incarcerated and he was subject to torture. A British tribunal has recently found the British government guilty for Al Saadi's rendition awarding him a 2.23 million pound compensation. Another similar case still pending judgement is that of Abdul Hakim Belhaj. He too was arrested in March 2004 together with his pregnant wife at the Bangkok airport, Thailand, and immediately transferred to Tripoli. Tortured in the Abu Salim prison, he was pardoned by the regime after publicly renouncing to armed struggle. Belhaj was one of the leaders of the rebellion and is today the military commander in Tripoli.

British anti-terrorism cooperation with Libya was interlinked with financial and political interests. Following al Saadi's rendition, the UK obtained gas concessions and an increase in the trading exchanges. The Lockerbie case was part of the game. The Libyans insisted they wanted Abdulbaset Megrahi's return and menaced economic retaliations. London claimed they had no competence since it was a Scottish tribunal who handled the case. The stall was overcome when the Libyan negotiator, Musa Kusa of course, obtained Megrahi's freedom on August 20 2009 on humanitarian grounds since he was "terminally ill".

Acclaimed as a hero upon his return and welcomed by Khadafi's son Seif al Islam, Megrahi survived until May 2012.

Anti-terrorism until the fall of Khadafi's regime

Once Muammar Khadafi had been able, in the name of international cooperation, of getting rid of internal terrorism, he only had one more problem to solve: Islamic opposition to his regime. After 2004 this meant the Muslim Brotherhood and the political wing of the LIFG still opposing the Rais. Thanks to the mediation of Hamas, a solution was found with the Brotherhood: they would be released from prison in exchange for a halt to all their hostile activities against the regime and the promise to keep out of Libya's internal affairs.

With regard to the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, the issue was more complex. In 2007 the radical wing of the organization had announced it would join Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and continue its armed struggle against the regime. A brigade, the "Katibah al Shuhada", stationed on the border between Libya and Algeria. The London-based political wing of the Group was instead against the allegiance to AQIM. And this is where Seif al Islam Khadafi comes in with his pardon offers aimed at weakening the

opposition. Khadafi's narcissism could not tolerate that the leader of the Arab masses was being criticized by an Islamic opposition.

Until then the LIFG had had a rigid structure revolving around a Consultative Council (Shura) below which were five Committees; juridical, military, information, security and economic. In reality all military operations were decided by the extremists deployed in Algeria.

Starting in 2008 Musa Kusa was able to negotiate with the London based political wing of the LIFG who abjured the groups affiliation with AQIM. Several members of the organization were freed after renouncing the armed struggle. Of the 4-500 LIFG combatants of the 90s, a mere 50/60 people were part of the "Katibah al Shuhada". Nevertheless, events leading to Khadafi's fall have proven the leading role Islamist militias have played in the rebellion. Belhaj's appointment as Tripoli's security chief is a good piece of evidence.