

IDF Intelligence: Syria Used Chemical Weapons

The Syrian regime has used lethal chemical weapons, mostly sarin gas, against armed rebels several times in the past few weeks, and is continuing to do so, the head of the Israel Defense Forces Military Intelligence Research Branch, Brig. Gen. Itay Baron, said on Monday.

Baron said that photographs showing victims with foam coming out of their mouths and contracted pupils were signs that deadly gas had been used.

Speaking at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv, Baron confirmed that "to the best of its [the IDF's] knowledge," weapons of mass destruction had definitely been used by the Syrian regime, a development which the United States and others say they are still trying to determine.

In his briefing, Baron said the lack of an "appropriate international response" to the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons was "very worrying" and was leading Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his forces to believe that there were no consequences to their use of WMDs.

"It could signal to them that their use of chemical weapons is legitimate," Baron said.

Last week, U.S. officials said that American intelligence officials were looking into the possibility that chemical weapons may have been used in Syria in a limited form, although there is no consensus yet and additional analysis is required. President Barack Obama has defined use of chemical weapons as a "red line" that would trigger unspecified U.S. action.

Baron said 1,000 people were killed on average in Syria every

week, and that since the uprising began some two years ago the death total has reached 70,000, with some 1 million displaced Syrians.

“There are more than 1000 tons of chemical weapons in Syria, plus missiles with warheads. It is a massive arsenal. The regime has already made use of some of these weapons. The fact that there has already been use of chemical weapons without an appropriate international response is very worrying. The possibility that non-state actors, who do not make the same cost-benefit calculations as states do, get their hands on these weapons is also very worrying,” Baron said.

Baron added that Russia was supporting Assad by delivering to his forces sophisticated air defense systems like the SA-17 anti-aircraft missile battery.

Baron's comments were preceded a day earlier by strong statements from Israel Defense Forces Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Benny Gantz.

“Strangely, there is considerable Russian support for the Assad regime,” Gantz said at the INSS on Monday.

“Assad is losing control and destabilizing elements are growing. Iran and Hezbollah are in up to their necks and higher in an effort to preserve ... the Assad regime and in preparations for the day after [Assad falls].”

Gantz warned that four decades of quiet along the Israel-Syria border in the Golan Heights could be in danger. He said the civil war in Syria could result in “chaos,” with violence turning toward Israel.

Baron, in his Monday briefing, said it was quite likely that Syria would fragment as a state into differing and unstable parts, a possibility that would present serious challenges to Israeli security.

There have been a number of recent incidents of cross-border fire from Syria into Israel, some intentional and some accidental. In several of the incidents, the IDF responded by targeting the sources of the fire.

Speaking about the Gaza Strip, Gantz said Israel would not accept a return to the reality that existed before Operation Pillar of Defense last November. He said the IDF would not hesitate to act to re-establish deterrence against Gaza terrorist groups, if necessary.

On the situation in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, Gantz said he hoped Egypt would continue its recent efforts to thwart the smuggling of weapons into Gaza and restore security in the Sinai region.

"I hope Egypt will become a more stable place and that what took place as a political change won't turn into a security challenge for us," Gantz said, referring to political developments in Egypt in recent years.

Gantz called for continued international pressure on Iran over its nuclear program and its global terror activities. He said Iran was continuing to take advantage of talks with international powers to further develop its nuclear program.

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