



## Chemical Weapon Attacks Amongst the Yezidi Community of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Awareness, Knowledge and Resilience

Saman Omar (Centre for Genocide studies, University of Duhok)

samanomar.ns@gmail.com

Zenobia Homan (Centre for Science and Security Studies, King's College London)

zenobia.homan@kcl.ac.uk

### Abstract

This study explores present-day knowledge of chemical weapon attacks amongst the Yezidi population of the Kurdistan region of Iraq, which remains at risk of attack. The scope of the research covers the Anfal campaigns, the use of chemical weapons during the Syrian civil war, and chemical attacks launched by so-called Islamic State (IS).

The authors conducted a series of qualitative interviews (10) and surveys (20), across a wide social sample (gender, age, education, profession) – speaking to victims of chemical weapon attacks as well as those with no experience of them. Information was gathered on public awareness and current security concerns, particularly considering the role of memory.

This research may be utilised to enhance access to information, education, and emergency response – in order to increase resilience and preparedness amongst the vulnerable Yezidi community. The authors hope to contribute to the conference objectives to enrich dialogues, improve curricula, and work toward establishing an Early Warning Centre.

**Key words:** Chemical Weapons, Collective Memory, Public Communication, Education, Resilience, Preparedness, Yezidis



## Chapter 1. Chemical Weapon Attacks in and around the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

This paper is divided into three sections: the first chapter introduces the project, its history, the research questions, and the aims. The second chapter explains the data collection methods that were used. The third chapter presents the data and analysis, and conclusions based on the project findings.

### 1.1 Introduction

This paper investigates present-day knowledge of chemical weapon attacks amongst the Yezidi (Yezidi, Ezidi or Eyzidi) population of Kurdistan. The purpose of the study is to increase resilience and preparedness amongst the Yezidi community by documenting public awareness and current security concerns. The authors used a series of qualitative interviews and surveys to explore access to information, education, communication, and collective memory.

Previous research, on chemical weapon use in Syria, has shown that chemical weapons have far-reaching implications for the communities they target.<sup>1</sup> It has also been found that chemical warfare can have a greater psychological impact on local communities than conventional bombings, weakening social and economic networks.<sup>2</sup> However, this knowledge can be utilised to generate foresight, enhancing planning and response. It has been found essential to build up capacities to mitigate the impact of chemical weapons on local communities, and to strengthen communities by empowering support networks.<sup>3</sup> As such, this research aims to generate practical outcomes and to enrich dialogues.

### 1.2 Background

The Yezidi people are an ethno-religious minority, the majority of whom reside in the Sinjar region, a historically disputed area in Northern Iraq. Prior to the IS invasion in 2014, the Yezidi population counted over 600,000.<sup>4</sup> This paper focusses on Yezidi knowledge of the Anfal attacks, the use of chemical weapons during the Syrian civil war, and chemical attacks launched by so-called Islamic State (IS).

Figure 1: Map of chemical weapon attacks in and around the Kurdistan region, 1988-2013.<sup>5</sup>

The Anfal operations were carried out against Kurdish civilians between February 22 and September 6, 1988, at the end of the Iran-Iraq war. The Iraqi government had long considered the Kurds a threat to its regime,<sup>6</sup> and the goal of the campaign was to destroy the defensive capabilities of Kurdish ‘rebels’.<sup>7</sup> At this time, Saddam Hussein was the leader of the Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party and the military ruler of the region – and the former Iraqi Minister of Defense Sultan Hashim was the military commander of

1 El Bakry, I. & Schneider, T. 2021. How Chemical Weapons Impact Women and Break Communities. The Specter of Chemical Weapons Use in Syria. Global Public Policy Institute. <https://chemicalweapons.gppi.net/analysis/the-last-straw-gender/>

2 Wessely, S. 2001. Psychological implications of chemical and biological weapons. BMJ, Vol. 20, No. 323 (7318), pp. 878–879.

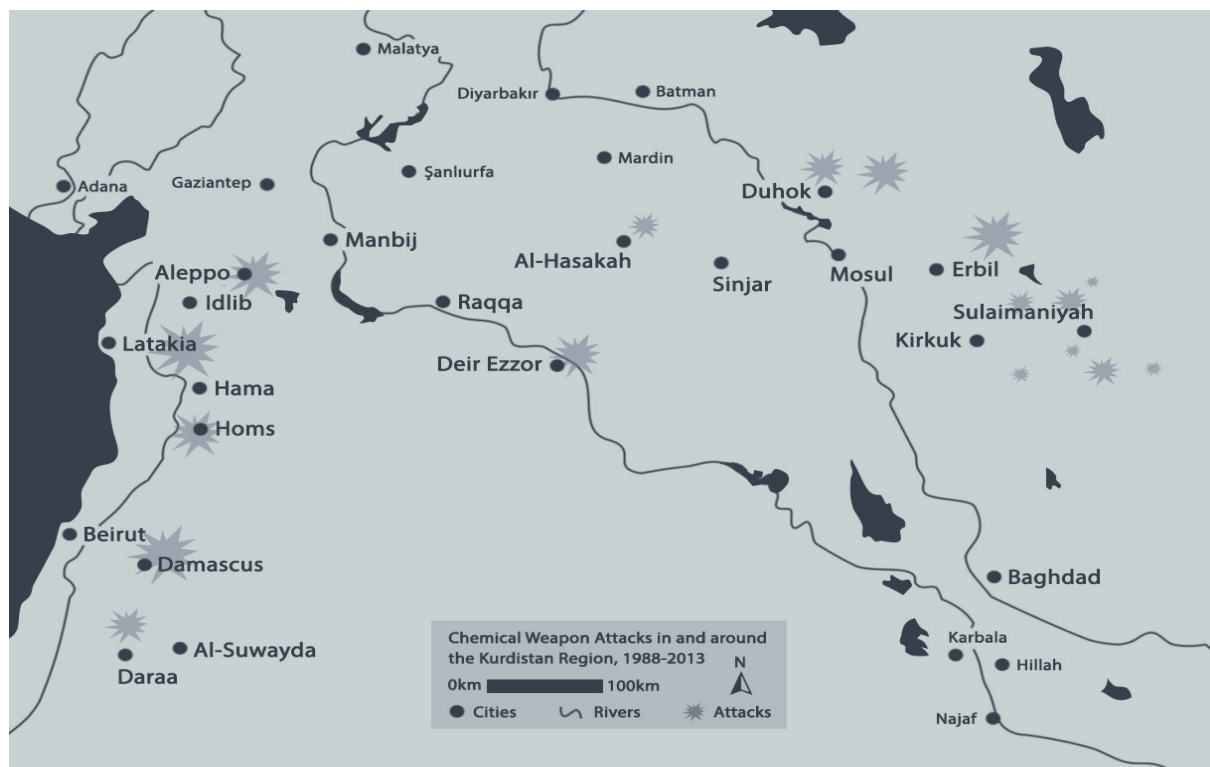
3 El Bakry, I. & Schneider, T. 2021. How Chemical Weapons Impact Women and Break Communities. The Specter of Chemical Weapons Use in Syria. Global Public Policy Institute. <https://chemicalweapons.gppi.net/analysis/the-last-straw-gender/>

4 Van Zoonen, D. & Wirya, K. (2017). Yazidis: Perceptions of Reconciliation and Conflict. Middle East Research Institute. <http://www.meri-k.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Yazidis-Report.pdf>

5 Drawn by author, based on <http://www.rightsmaps.com> and <https://chemicalweapons.gppi.net/>.

6 Bengio, O. 2012. The Kurds of Iraq: Building a State Within a State. Lynne Rienner: London, p. 177-180.

7 Bernick, V. 2012. The Anfal Campaign: A Politically Feasible Atrocity. <https://s3.amazonaws.com/pozen/system/ckeditor/attachments/283/vanessa-bernick-martin-baro-essay.pdf>.



the campaign.

The attacks were carried out with involvement from the Armed Forces, Air Force, Special Forces, Republican Guard, and Commando Forces, as well as the Departments of Security, Intelligence, and Chemical and Biological Weapons.<sup>8</sup> This took place over eight campaigns: February 23-March 19, Sulaymaniyah region; March 22-April 1, Qardagh, Bazian and Darbandikhan; April 20, Garmian, Kalar, Baunur, Kifri, Douz, Senkao, Kader Karam; May 3-8, Kowayh, Taq Taq, Ağcılar and Nawshwan regions; three attacks between May 15 and August 26, the area around Shaqlawa; and August 25-September 6, Badinan, Amidi, Akri, Zakho, Sheikhan, and Dohuk (see Figure 1).

Weapons that were used included mustard, cyanide, nerve gas and phosphor. According to international standards of crimes, these attacks fall within the framework of the genocide – as subsequently indicated in the reports of international human rights monitoring organisations.<sup>9</sup> Other destruction included conventional aerial bombings, burning of buildings and vandalization ('scorched earth' policy), paired with abduction and deportation.<sup>10</sup>

It is estimated that between 50,000 and over 150,000 people were killed and almost all villages in Iraqi Kurdistan were destroyed. The Anfal operations mark one of the darkest periods of Kurdish history, as well as the largest-scale chemical attacks directed against a civilian population since World War I.<sup>11</sup>

This was not the last time chemical weapons would be used in the region however. The Global Public Policy Institute estimates that more than three hundred chemical weapon attacks took place over the course of the Syrian civil war (2011-present).<sup>12</sup> The majority of these attacks were carried out by the



Assad regime in 2013, using improvised chlorine munitions and sarin. The targets were population centres surrounding ‘rebel’ positions, particularly in the northwest of Syria (or Western Kurdistan) (see Figure 1).

It has been argued that continued limited international response to chemical attacks has weakened the norm against chemical weapons.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, researchers have found little reason to directly link the attacks in Syria to further chemical weapon use by other states.<sup>14</sup> Instead, they warn for their potential use by non-state actors, who are less sensitive to international pressure.

Indeed, in 2014, IS attacked Sinjar (see Figure 1) – home to a large Yezidi population. It is estimated that over 5,000 Yezidis were killed; and another 6,000 were captured. More than 500,000 Yezidis were forced to flee the Sinjar region.<sup>15</sup> The community suffered terrible human rights abuses, now likewise recognised as genocide by several bodies of the United Nations and numerous multi-national organisations.<sup>16</sup> These were conventional attacks, but there is a realistic non-conventional threat as well. Although the use of chemical weapons was banned in the 1997 Chemical Weapons Convention, global manufacturing of chemicals is rapidly growing and as outlined above it has not prevented states or terrorist organisations from using them.

## Chapter 2. Interview and Survey Methods

This paper is based on a small-scale, explorative, qualitative data set – placing emphasis on individual experiences rather than numbers. The timeframe for data collection was from September 2021 to January 2022, covering a wide social sample. Participants ranged from taxi drivers to peshmerga, as well as farmers, students and stay at home parents. They were from Duhok or Sinjar (Shingal), and aged between 19 and 70, with educational levels from primary to tertiary.<sup>17</sup>

In conversation with local experts and public, the authors selected 5 questions for semi-structured interviews (10 participants) and printed surveys (20 participants). These questions addressed knowledge of chemical weapons, knowledge of the Anfal attacks, and knowledge of weapons used by IS. Where participants were comfortable discussing this, questions covered any personal experience with chemical weapon attacks, and concerns about occurrence of and preparedness for chemical weapon attacks. The authors also asked participants whether there is sufficient community awareness of chemical weapon attacks – and what support could look like in case a chemical weapon attack occurred. The survey included further multiple choice questions about fear of chemical weapons, confidence in emergency response measures, and information about chemical weapons in public education.

Interviews were held in Kurdish, keeping in mind that interviews as a method are not “a mere technique” or “innocent”.<sup>18</sup> By bringing up chemical weapon attacks, participants may be reminded of painful experiences; and their awareness of chemical attacks may be increased where it otherwise would not have been. The authors strove to include any contribution, related or unrelated to the set questions: in-

13 Hersman, R. 2016. Syria's Toxic War: Chemical Weapons are Undermining Deterrence and Proliferation. War on the Rocks (blog). <https://warontherocks.com/2016/04/syrias-toxic-war-chemical-weapons-are-undermining-deterrence-andnonproliferation/>; Graham-Harrison, E. 2016. Chemical Weapons Attacks in Syria May Normalise War Crimes, Experts Warn. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/11/syria-suspected-chlorine-gas-attack-in-aleppo-kills-womanand-two-children>.

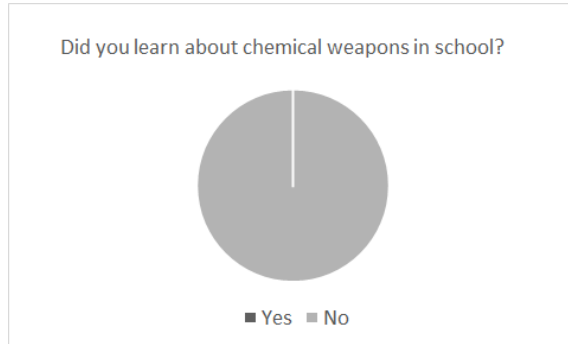
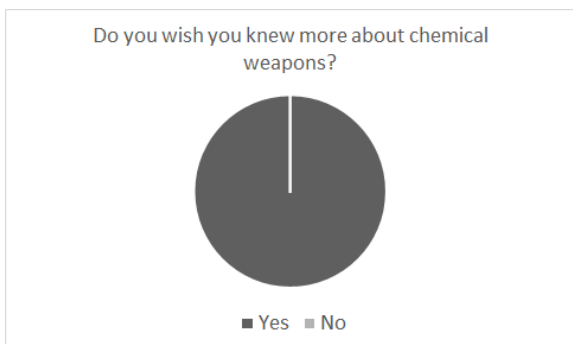
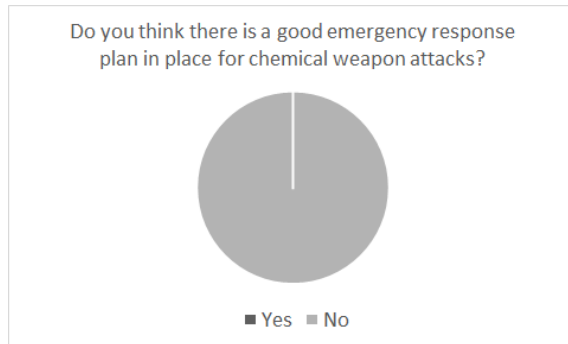
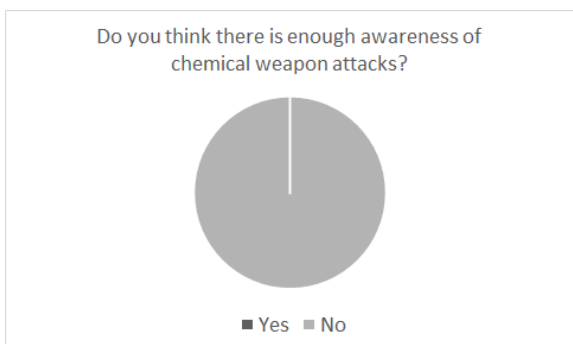
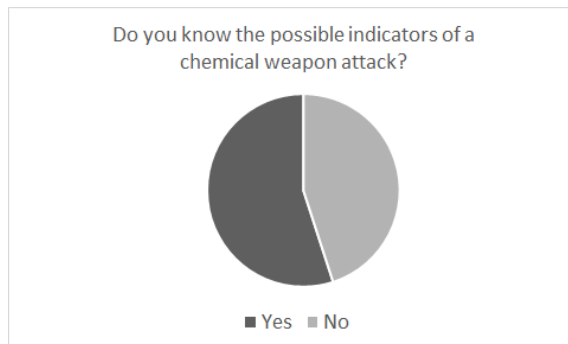
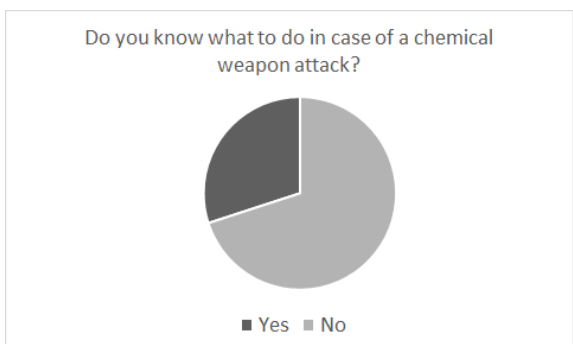
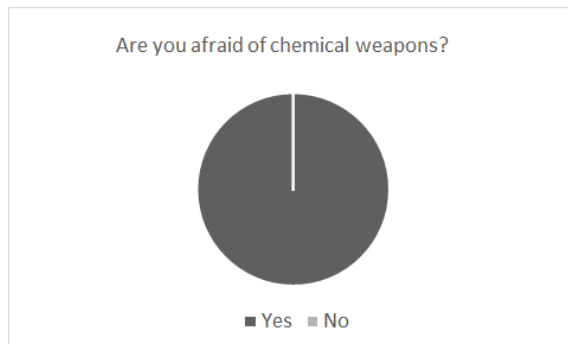
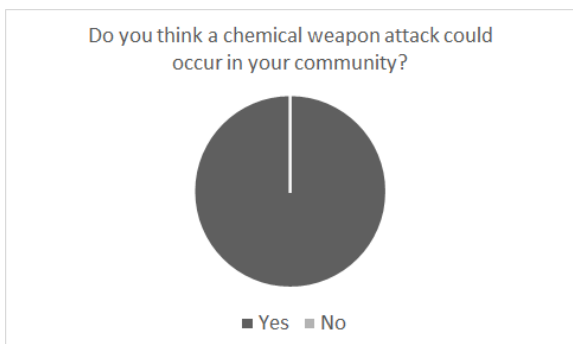
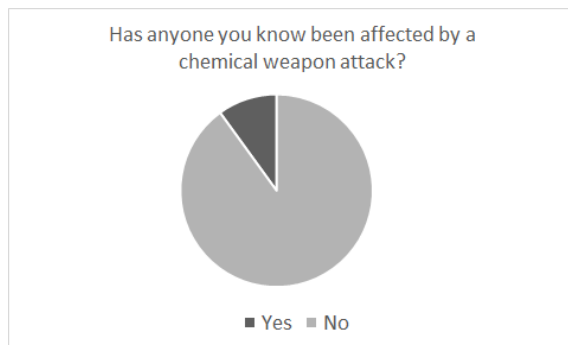
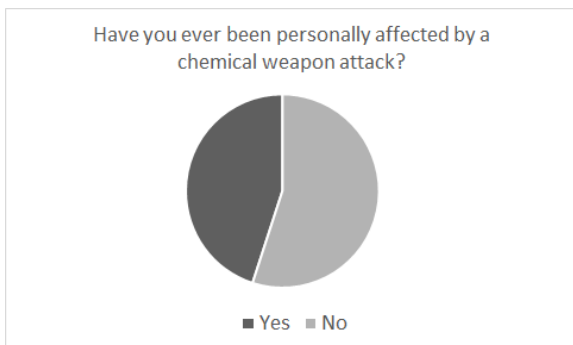
14 Chapman, G., Elbahtimy, H., & Martin, S. B. 2018. The Future of Chemical Weapons: Implications of the Lack of Military Utility in the Syrian Civil War. Security Studies, 27(4), pp. 704-733.

15 See the “Supporting Shingal's Returnees Project” (2020), Barzani Charity Foundation. <https://bcf.krd/>

16 Baser, B. & Toivanen, M. 2017. The politics of genocide recognition: Kurdish nation-building and commemoration in the post-Saddam era. Journal of Genocide Research, Vol. 19, No. 3, pp. 404-426.

17 All interview subjects were provided with an information sheet and consent form according to King's College London research project guidelines. While we recorded personal information such as participant names, for privacy reasons and in accordance with General Data Protection Regulation we have chosen not to publish these in the report.

18 Aradau, C. & Huysmans, J. 2014. “Critical methods in International Relations: The politics of techniques, devices and acts.” European Journal of International Relations 20(3), pp. 596-619.





interviewees' own interpretations, ideas, and challenges. In doing so, particular attention was paid to the difference between positivist data collection (objective collection of information) and interpretivist data generation (reflexive exploration of meaning-making and context). 19

## Chapter 3. The Role of Memory in Preparedness and Resilience

### 3.1 Data and Discussion

When communities across the world are surveyed about the dangers of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), often other concerns take priority. For example, access to food, housing and sanitation, climate change, and terrorism in general.<sup>20</sup> This can be attributed to the fact that WMD attacks are rare, and sometimes their possibility seems distant. However, when the authors surveyed the Yezidi community 100% of respondents conveyed that they were afraid of chemical weapons, and that they thought a chemical weapon attack could realistically occur in their area (see Table 1-10). Notably, less than half the survey respondents had experienced such an attack previously, and very few personally knew anyone (else) who had ever been affected by such an attack. Although further research is necessary, it may be possible to link this unique response directly to the region's past (as described above).

When asked what chemical weapons were, survey participants responded with “killing machines”, “weapons of mass destruction”, and “weapons used against humanity” – but one respondent also answered “guns”. Significantly, interview subjects who had been affected chemical weapon attacks talked about chemical weapons at the same time as other atrocities – not singling them out as a unique type of attack but rather part of one set of traumatic events. For example, abduction, displacement, and conventional bombing. Indeed, about the Syrian civil war it has likewise been reported that the difference between unconventional and conventional attacks was considered “a distinction without a difference”: chemical

Table 1-10: Survey data.

weapons were seen as another addition to the regime's “arsenal of indiscriminate violence”.<sup>21</sup>

One interviewee said that they had “zero information about how to protect ourselves from chemical weapons”: it was often not immediately obvious what they were attacked by, only that they were attacked. All interviewees affected by the Anfal campaign lost relatives in the attacks, and all suffered from breathing problems afterward. This unawareness of chemical weapons and their effects is not uncommon. A victim of the Aum Shinrikyo sarin subway attacks in Tokyo said “At first I didn't think much of it (...) my eyes felt dry, a bit like I had strained them.”; and when he was later asked in hospital what he thought had happened, he replied “no idea”; adding that he felt guilty that this had rendered him unable to warn others.<sup>22</sup> Similar stories exist in the Middle East. A survivor from Halabja said that “... the morning of the attack, there was constant bombardment. (...) We did not know a chemical weapon was actually used until four o'clock in the afternoon.” He also added that most people subsequently died trying to escape via the main road, which the Iraqi government had anticipated: “one of the chemical weapons had been dropped in one of the main water springs in the area (...) so after walking for miles,

19 Bliesemann de Guevara, B. & Poopuu, B. 2021. 'Preparing for Fieldwork Interviews'. The Companion to Peace and Conflict Fieldwork. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

20 Homan, Z. H., Dewey, K. F., Shounak, S. & Khursid Mirza, E. 2022. Communicating Deterrence: Drivers of Misperception in India and Pakistan. Centre for Science and Security Studies, Occasional Papers Series. <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/csss/research/publications>

21 Schneider, T. & Lütkefend, T. 2019. Nowhere to Hide: The Logic of Chemical Weapons Use in Syria. Global Public Policy Institute. [https://gppi.net/media/GPPI\\_Schneider\\_Luetkefend\\_2019\\_Nowhere\\_to\\_Hide\\_Web.pdf](https://gppi.net/media/GPPI_Schneider_Luetkefend_2019_Nowhere_to_Hide_Web.pdf).

22 Gray, R. 2019. What is it like to be caught up in a chemical attack? BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190705-how-to-survive-a-nerve-agent-attack>.





people tried to get fresh water, not knowing...”<sup>23</sup> Another survivor described driving into a battlefield in north-western Iran, taking four soldiers with breathing problems. Unaware that they were affected by sulfur mustard, he closed the car’s windows – but soon “grew nauseous and dizzy”, noticing “a strong chemical odour” coming from the passengers.<sup>24</sup>

An Anfal victim from this study added “There were almost eight military aircraft, and they were attacking the village (...) we were injured, and we could not breathe, and tears came from our eyes. (We realised that) the village was attacked with chemical weapons when the birds fell to the ground after about 30-35 minutes.” Likewise unaware of chemical weapon use at the time of the attack, an IS victim recalled “(... A peshmerga) stayed for almost 10 days at the hospital and all the time blood was coming from his mouth. (...) The Americans did medical tests for us – and they informed us that chemical weapons had been used against us.”

About the potential of future chemical weapon attacks, interview subjects brought up concerns about Iran, Iraq, Turkey and IS – but also felt that countries were possibly unlikely to really use such weapons due to international pressure. Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey are all now signatories to the Chemical Weapons Convention, which prohibits the development, production, stockpiling and use of chemical weapons and works toward their destruction. Penalties for noncompliance are not clear however: “serious damage” to the convention could result in “collective punitive measures”.<sup>25</sup> For example, whilst Syria became a signatory to the convention in 2013, it subsequently became clear that it had retained a chemical weapons capability.<sup>26</sup> However, Russian and Chinese vetoes have thus far prevented the imposition of multilateral sanctions.<sup>27</sup>

Participants stressed the importance of international support and aid, not only in the case of an attack, but also in preventing one. For example, in 2018 the European Council adopted restrictive measures against the proliferation and use of chemical weapons – namely asset freezing and travel bans for those directly responsible for the development and use of chemical weapons as well as those who provide financial, technical or material support, and those who assist, encourage or are associated with them.<sup>28</sup>

Victims of the chemical weapon attacks in Syria have repeatedly voiced disappointment about the lack of decisive international action, stating that “(...) the apparent freedom to use chemical weapons” has led “to the collective realization that nothing and no one will protect civilians from the violence and brutality of the regime”.<sup>29</sup> Several of the Anfal victims that were interviewed for this study spoke about a strong desire for justice, intending to tell their story in a court of law. Whenever anyone spoke about those they had seen injured or killed, they – unasked and unprompted – remembered all of their names. Yet, “the use of chemical weapons has often caused little to no punitive measures with a long-term effect.”<sup>30</sup>

23 Nukes of Hazard. 2020. Survivor of 1988 Chemical Weapons Attack Shares His Story. Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation. <https://arms-controlcenter.org/survivor-of-1988-chemical-weapons-attack-shares-his-story/>.

24 Stone, R. 2018. Seeking answers for Iran’s chemical weapons victims—before time runs out. Science. <https://www.science.org/content/article/seeking-answers-iran-s-chemical-weapons-victims-time-runs-out>.

25 OPCW. 2022. Chemical Weapons Convention, Article XII: Measures to Redress a Situation and to Ensure Compliance, including Sanctions. <https://www.opcw.org/chemical-weapons-convention/articles/article-xii-measures-redress-situation-and-ensure-compliance>.

26 Woodward, B. 2022. Uniting to stop the proliferation of chemical weapons in Syria (speech). UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/uniting-to-stop-the-proliferation-of-chemical-weapons-in-syria>.

27 Masterson, J. 2021. The Eroding Norms Against Chemical Weapons Use Will Need More Than Another Syria Censure to Survive. Just Security. <https://www.justsecurity.org/76588/the-eroding-norms-against-chemical-weapons-use-will-need-more-than-another-syria-censure-to-survive/>.

28 EU Sanctions Map. 2021. Chemical Weapons. <https://www.sanctionsmap.eu/#/main/details/46/?search=%7B%22value%22:%22%22,%22searchType%22:%7B%7D%7D>.

29 Schneider, T. & Lütkefend, T. 2019. Nowhere to Hide: The Logic of Chemical Weapons Use in Syria. Global Public Policy Institute. [https://gppi.net/media/GPPI\\_Schneider\\_Luetkefend\\_2019\\_Nowhere\\_to\\_Hide\\_Web.pdf](https://gppi.net/media/GPPI_Schneider_Luetkefend_2019_Nowhere_to_Hide_Web.pdf).

30 Horschig, D. Tezcür G. M. 2021. Chemical Weapons and the Hierarchy of Victims. War on the Rocks. <https://warontherocks.com/2021/02/chemical-weapons-and-the-hierarchy-of-victims/>.



Today, the greatest concern amongst interview subjects was for chemical attacks by IS. Participants all mentioned reports or stories of recent chemical weapon attacks – via acquaintances, rather than international organisations or publications – demonstrating the importance of collective consciousness and community narratives.<sup>31</sup> Researchers have previously suggested that in Iraq and surrounding areas this could be linked to the events of Saddam-era chemical weapons.<sup>32</sup> In this context, chemical weapons have been considered psychological weapons, because the existence of the threat itself can inflict the same fear and anxiety as witnessing a physical attack.<sup>33</sup>

Consequently, when asked what specific types of support were desired, survey participants responded with “medical”, but equally, “psychological”. Memory plays a crucial role here. One of the interviewees from Sinjar said “then I returned to Shingal with my family members, and it was good – we returned to our land. But the story of the Shingal attack was in our minds, which was painful.”

## 3.2 Conclusions

In 2016, the European Parliamentary Research Service reported that the world must prepare for the possibility of a chemical or biological attack by IS. They noted that people are generally “not contemplating the possibility that extremist groups might use chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear (CBRN) materials during attacks” and that “under these circumstances, the impact of such an attack, should it occur, would be even more destabilising”.<sup>34</sup> As solutions, they suggested increasing public campaigns, and improving information sharing between states – as well as formal legal, political and operational measures (for example, an action plan against illicit trafficking of relevant materials).

This study specifically investigated the current level of awareness of chemical attacks amongst the Yezidi community. Since 2020, there has been an increase in Yezidis returning to their homeland – “spurring a newfound sense of urgency for the prioritisation of transitional justice (and) a period of transition from persecution and displacement to restoration and rebuilding for the Sinjar community.”<sup>35</sup>

Interviews indicated a strong lack of knowledge about the effects and impact of chemical weapons at the time of the Anfal attacks, with little change during the attacks by IS almost 30 years later. The surveys showed that the present Yezidi community is afraid of chemical attacks and concerned they could occur again – yet they do not believe there is sufficient awareness, or an acceptable plan for emergency response.

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31 See A. Funkenstein, “Collective Memory and Historical Consciousness,” *History and Memory*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1989), pp. 5-26.

32 Binder, M. K., Quigley, J. M. & Tinsley, H. F. 2018. Islamic State Chemical Weapons: A Case Contained by its Context? *Combating Terrorism Center*. <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/CTC-Sentinel-Vol11Iss3.pdf>.

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## نۆخته

ئەظ ئۆلۆگولینە ھاتیە کرن لىسەر ھەرشین ىزەكى ئەتوومى دناظ ضطاكى ئیزدى دا ل كوردستانى، ئەوین ھەتانووكە ھەرشا ئەظى مەترسى لىسەر وان، ضارزووظى ئۆلۆگولینا مە تاوانى ئەنفالان بخوؤظە دطرت، بكارھینانا ىزەكى ئەتوومى ل شەرى سظیل ل سووریا، ھەرشین ھاتینە کرن ذلاىى رىكخراوا دەولەتا ئىسلامى .

ھەذمارا (۱۰) ضاظشیکەفتنن جوورى ھاتیە کرن ودىسان راشرى و بوضونا (۲۰) كەسین دى ذى ھاتیە وەرطرتن، نموونەیین مە كۆمەلایەتی بەرفەرە بوون: (رەطەز، تەمەن، زانستى، ئیشە)، ئەم دطەل قۆربانىن ھەرشا ىزەكى ئەتوومى ئاخفتینە، ديسان كەسین بى سەربوور، مە ئیزانین لىسەر رەوشەنبیریا طشتى و مەترسىن ئاسایشى نووكە وەرطرتینە تاییەت رولى بېردانكى دئەظى ترسى دا .

ئەم طرنطیى ب ئۆلۆگولینى ددن ب مەرەما طەھشت بۆ ئیزانین و زانین و بەرسظ و سەرەدەریەك لەز و دەم ل دەست دذى ىزەكى ئەتوومى، ب مەرەما زیدەكرنا ھوشیارى و ئامادەكارى دناظ ضطاكى ئیزدى، ب ھىظییا ھندى كارى مە ببت ذیرخانە بۆ ئارمانجین كۆنفرانسی ل دان و ستاندنا و طۆھارتنا ئیزانینا، باشرتكرنا سیستەمى خواندنى، كاركرن بۆ دامەزرتندنا سەنتەرین ھوشیاریا ئیش وەخت .



## الخلاصة

الدراسة تستكشف مدى المعرفة الحالية للسكان الأيزيديين في كردستان بهجمات الأسلحة الكيميائية، والتي لا تزال معرضة لخطر الهجوم. يغطي نطاق بحثنا حملات الأنفال، واستخدام الأسلحة الكيميائية أثناء الحرب الأهلية السورية، والهجمات الكيميائية التي شنّها ما يسمى بتنظيم الدولة الإسلامية. لقد أجرينا سلسلة من المقابلات النوعية (١٠) والاستطلاعات (٢٠)، عبر عينة اجتماعية واسعة (الجنس، والعمر، والتعليم، والمهنة) - تحدثنا لضحايا هجمات الأسلحة الكيميائية وكذلك أولئك الذين ليس لديهم خبرة بها. قمنا بجمع معلومات حول الوعي العام والمخاوف الأمنية الحالية، لا سيما بالنظر إلى دور الذاكرة. نحن مهتمون باستخدام هذا البحث لتعزيز الوصول إلى المعلومات والتعليم والاستجابة للطوارئ - من أجل زيادة المرونة والاستعداد بين المجتمع الأيزيدي. نأمل أن نساهم في أهداف المؤتمر لإثراء الحوارات وتحسين المناهج والعمل على إنشاء مركز للإنذار المبكر.