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France Leads Initiative to Combat Impunity

February 3, 2018 8:35AM EST

By Sara Kayyali



A man breathes through an oxygen mask at a medical center in Douma, Eastern Ghouta in Damascus, Syria January 22, 2018. © 2018 Reuters

Early on January 22, I began receiving reports from residents in Eastern Ghouta in Syria of chlorine being used in a ground attack on Douma. It was not the first time the besieged town suffered a [chemical weapons attack](#). Almost five years ago, on August 21, 2013, a chemical attack had killed hundreds of civilians, many of them children. It was the first wide-scale use of chemical weapons in decades. The likely culprit [was](#) the Syrian government.

Fast forward five years, Syria has [ratified](#) the UN Convention on the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) created (and then Russia later [vetoed](#)) an investigative body tasked with attributing responsibility for the use of chemical weapons. Still the Syrian government [continues](#) to use chemical weapons with impunity. Since the attack on Eastern Ghouta, its forces have used chemical agents at least 30 more times.

In the days that followed the recent attack on Eastern Ghouta, we spoke to first responders and doctors, who described symptoms and smells on the victims they treated consistent with the use of

chlorine gas. They told us that more than half of those they treated were women and children. This was the [fourth alleged use](#) of [chemical](#) weapons in Eastern Ghouta since the mandate of the UN investigative mechanism ended on November 17

Only a day after the January 22 attack, France launched a [political initiative](#) to combat the proliferation of chemical weapons and ensure that using them has consequences for those who do so. Aptly called 'No Impunity', the initiators also imposed [sanctions](#) against individuals and businesses with links to Syria's chemical weapons program.

The French-led initiative is a welcome break from the dangerous attempt to make chemical weapons the [new normal](#), but on its own it is not enough.

The UNSC and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons should renew the investigative mechanism, or find an alternative. There is no substitute for UNSC action. But in its absence, states should follow France's footsteps to ensure that neither Ghouta nor any other place in Syria or elsewhere is ever hit by chemical weapons again.

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