

# Chemical Weapons during Iran-Iraq war in Sardasht, Iran

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War is an ominous human-made event that causes both opponents great losses which cannot be calculated<sup>1</sup>. In several cases, the laws of war have been broken by both parties leading the war to be directed toward civilians, women, and children. For example, using weapons of mass destruction, including chemical weapons, against military and civilian targets, despite the fact that their use has been banned for decades under the Geneva Conventions, adopted almost 100 years ago. Also, the Chemical Weapons Convention has been established as a global convention with a control regime under the OPCW ( Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons) (Sydney 1972)<sup>2</sup>.

In fact weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons, chemical and biological warfare agents, are considered a major threat to the world because of their destructive nature<sup>3</sup> and Chemical warfare is one of the worst anomalies of wars reported in history. The use of chemical agents as an effective weapon in disabling or defeating the enemy has a long history. The history of using chemical weapons goes back to Ancient Greek wars, but the widespread use of these weapons began in the 19th century. The complications of chemical gases cause restrictions in daily activities and occupational tasks of victims. In addition, they lead to psychological problems because of physical changes, and it seems that it limits the social relationships of injured people compared to the normal population<sup>4</sup>.

The highest number of victims of chemical warfare was recorded during World War I, between 1914 and 1918. 85,000 soldiers killed while more than 1.2 million were permanently blinded, burned, or became mentally ill.

Chemical weapons are cheap and can cause many casualties. The production of these weapons is relatively easy even in developing countries and they have been used in many conflicts of the twentieth century. After Japan, most chemical attacks of the world took place in Sardasht<sup>5</sup>, despite the 1925 Geneva Protocol, in the Eight-Year War between Iran and Iraq (1988-1980). The city which become known as symbol of chemical weapons bombing. Actually, Sardasht is a small city located in the northwest of Iran, close to the border with Iraq. Between 1980- and 1988, Iran was invaded by Iraqi Baath military forces and this imposed war lasted 8 years. During this period of time, the non-militarized city of Sardasht was subject to sudden assaults. Sardasht is the third city in the world, after Japan's Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to become the target of Weapons of Mass

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.aimjournal.ir/PDF/41\\_0012.pdf](http://www.aimjournal.ir/PDF/41_0012.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/351866384\\_Investigation\\_of\\_Long\\_Term\\_Hazards\\_of\\_Chemical\\_Weapon\\_Agents\\_in\\_the\\_Environment\\_of\\_Sardasht\\_Area\\_Iran/fulltext/60adc19aa6fdcc647edb64eb/Investigation-of-Long-Term-Hazards-of-Chemical-Weapon-Agents-in-the-Environment-of-Sardasht-Area-Iran.pdf?origin=publication\\_detail](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/351866384_Investigation_of_Long_Term_Hazards_of_Chemical_Weapon_Agents_in_the_Environment_of_Sardasht_Area_Iran/fulltext/60adc19aa6fdcc647edb64eb/Investigation-of-Long-Term-Hazards-of-Chemical-Weapon-Agents-in-the-Environment-of-Sardasht-Area-Iran.pdf?origin=publication_detail)

<sup>3</sup> [https://ijwph.ir/browse.php?a\\_id=965&slc\\_lang=en&sid=1&ftxt=1&fpdf\\_version=17](https://ijwph.ir/browse.php?a_id=965&slc_lang=en&sid=1&ftxt=1&fpdf_version=17)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.termedia.pl/Journal/-46/pdf-38603-10?filename=Effect%20of%20mindfulness-based%20-%20Azad.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> [https://ijwph.ir/browse.php?a\\_id=965&slc\\_lang=en&sid=1&ftxt=1&fpdf\\_version=17](https://ijwph.ir/browse.php?a_id=965&slc_lang=en&sid=1&ftxt=1&fpdf_version=17)

Destruction and the first civil human community that fell victim to chemical attacks. Hundreds of civilians were martyred and about 8.000 injured as a result of this brutal action. The Iraqi Baathist Regime imagined that it would be able to impose its demands on the Iranian nation through chemical attacks. Hence, on June 28 and 29, 1987, Iraqi bombers attacked four crowded parts of Sardasht with chemical bombs and engulfed its residents with fatal chemical gases. Unfortunately, this awful and disastrous chemical attack brought many negative effects and consequences for residents, animals, birds, and the environment. Still many resistant and noble citizens of Sardasht are suffering from negative effects of this attack<sup>6</sup>.

Iraq's use of chemical weapons against Iran killed thousands of civilians and left hundreds of thousands wounded. In this war, more than 40,000 people have been exposed to factors such as mustard gas (MG) and are suffering from its effects.

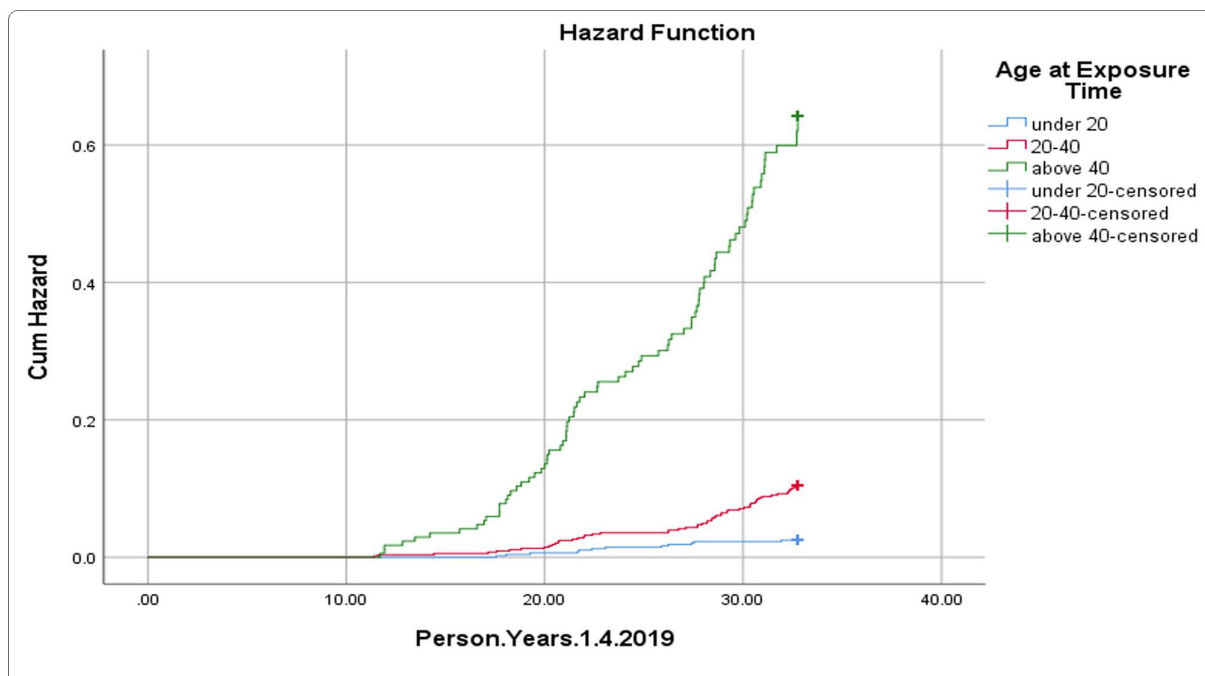
**An estimate of the number of chemical injuries and deaths during the war**

Number of Iranians disposed to chemical weapons	1,000,000 people
Number of Iranians who received medical care during their heavy exposures to chemical gases	100,000 people
Iranians killed by immediate effects of chemical agents	5,500 (3,500 people by nerve agents and 2,000 people by mustard gas)
Iranians injured by chronic effects of chemical agents (registered)	70,000 people
Iranians injured by chronic effects of chemical agents (not registered)	40,000 people
Iranian civilians injured by chronic effects of chemical agents (registered and not registered)	35,000 people

Cumulative death rates in the people exposed to MG in Sardasht, Iran, stratified by age

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<sup>6</sup>[https://www.opcw.org/sites/default/files/documents/CSP/C-20/national\\_statements/CWCC\\_20th\\_CSP\\_Karimivahed\\_ODVCW\\_Plenary\\_Statement.pdf](https://www.opcw.org/sites/default/files/documents/CSP/C-20/national_statements/CWCC_20th_CSP_Karimivahed_ODVCW_Plenary_Statement.pdf)



Various studies have shown that the severity of the complications, especially lung injuries, in people exposed to MG, can become more severe over time<sup>7</sup>.

Now, thirty-five years have passed since when the Iraqi Baath regime's warplanes dropped Mustard bombs as chemical weapons on the people of Sardasht. This event was a bitter human tragedy, though the attack was one of the main reasons for speeding up the negotiations for formulating and concluding the Chemical Weapons Convention, the city of Sardasht never managed to obtain international recognition like Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Although, Iran protested vehemently at the United Nations about the use of the weapons, which were banned under international treaties, the world's superpowers had little patience for complaints presented by the Islamic Republic<sup>8</sup>.

Apart from the physical suffering of the Iranian chemical victims and the flaws of the national and international mechanisms for pursuing the chemical victims' rights and lack of political will of the perpetrators, aiders and abettors of use of chemical weapons for taking responsibility, what more added to the chagrin and despair of the Iranian chemical victims was lack of the needed international attention to the victims. In an era when sentiments become global, the world community has not sufficiently recognized the sufferings of the Iranian chemical victims and the feeling of being forgotten is so painful to the victims. Their pains have doubled in severity due to the United States' unilateral sanctions, the illegal inhumane measures that hindered the chemical

<sup>7</sup><https://bmcpublihealth.biomedcentral.com/track/pdf/10.1186/s12889-022-13520-2.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2007-mar-19-fg-sardasht19-story.html>

victims' access to pharmaceuticals and medical equipment, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Islamic Republic of Iran's basic policy, as the biggest victim of chemical weapons in contemporary history, is based on disarming and a world free of weapons of mass destruction including nuclear, biological and chemical weapons. Membership in conventions and monitoring mechanisms of non-application of weapons of mass destruction reflects Iran policies in this regard. The anniversary of the Sardasht chemical bombing by Saddam Hussein on June 28, 1987 is marked in the national calendar as a day for fighting biological and chemical weapons<sup>9</sup>.

With pursuance of our country at the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, the 16th Chemical Weapons Conference of the member states in 2011, founded the "Network for International Support for Chemical Victims" as well as the "Volunteer Fund for Helping Chemical Victims". Unfortunately, volunteer aid of the member states of the organization to the fund has been meager, especially that of the wealthy and developed countries, and these countries do not offer serious aid to alleviate the pains of the victims of chemical weapons. Lack of the necessary political will by the countries that are allegedly defenders of mitigating the pains of chemical weapons victims is a serious challenge for achieving the goals set by the convention, including in discriminatory, efficient and complete execution of this international document.

Unfortunately, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapon's developments during recent years have been in a way that the main pillars of the convention, that is demolition of chemical arsenals, international cooperation and protection and aid against the use of chemical weapons, have been overshadowed by discussions related to non-reemergence of chemical weapons. However, Iran, in an interpreting statement with a forward-looking view at the time of membership to the convention, stressed the full, unconditional, and in discriminatory execution of all contents of the convention. For doing so, the Associations of Chemical Weapons, must pragmatically and actively participate and interact with the Chemical and Biological Associations of other countries to create cooperation and shift from the supervising standpoint over the convention's developments to the approach of demanding change. Strengthening the interactions of the chemical weapons associations with international mechanisms related to humanitarian international law and active participation including on the sidelines of other conventions for prohibition of chemical weapons and the WTO, the Red Cross and Red Crescent's international conferences as well as the Human Rights Council can considerably help promote the status of the chemical victims' associations with the Organization for the prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

However, according to the legal limits at the international level, and lack of the needed political will from the related states, it seems strengthening steps at the Civil Society level, such as at the Chemical Victims Associations and diplomatic pursuance can better provide the space for realizing the rights of chemical victims at this time.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://ipis.ir/en/subjectview/644017/The-Anniversary-of-Sardasht-Chemical-Bombing>

In conclusion, strengthening the international dimensions of Sardasht and our country's chemical associations requires two parallel approaches at domestic and international levels. Domestically, the related institutions such as the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, and the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and other departments must immediately and with full capacity continue their efforts to create the needed internal hardware and software infrastructure to support the city of Sardasht and our country's chemical victims. Internationally, a specific proposal for promoting the international image of Sardasht as the symbol for the victims of chemical weapons must be made and an annual international conference titled "Sardasht's International Conference" be held with the participation from popular-based organizations from various countries at regional and international levels, and with participation from foreign countries' officials on the anniversary of the Sardasht Chemical Bombing<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://ipis.ir/en/subjectview/644017/The-Anniversary-of-Sardasht-Chemical-Bombing>