

[ACOUSTIC MUSIC PLAYING]

INTERVIEWER: What is the legacy of chemical warfare? How does it alter landscapes and lives? Narges Bajoghli is a media and political anthropologist and a postdoctoral fellow at the Watson Institute. Joost Hiltermann is program director for the Middle East and North Africa for International Crisis Group. We spoke with them recently during a break in the Middle East Toxic Wars Conference here at the Institute.

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Welcome, both of you.

NARGES Thank you.

BAJOGHLI:

JOOST Thank you very much.

HILTERMANN:

INTERVIEWER: You've organized this Middle East Toxic Wars Conference, which is the fifth engaged scholarship conference here at Middle East Studies in the Watson Institute. And you describe the conference as taking a look at the Middle East as the ground zero for chemical attacks. You cite the Iran-Iraq War, the Persian Gulf War, the ongoing Syrian Civil War.

So can you describe the genesis of this conference? What inspired you to organize it? Why is it important for us to be looking at these chemical attacks, and the aftermath, and the environmental implications?

NARGES Sure. Well, I've been working on issues of chemical warfare for almost a decade, now. A little bit more than a decade. And since I am a researcher of post-revolutionary Iran, there's really no way that you can study the politics of Iran without looking at the Iran-Iraq War of the '80s. And then that leads you to the extensive use of chemical warfare during about five years of that eight-year period of the war.

So I've been interested in this issue for a very long time. But you know, because it tends to fade away from the headlines of the news and it hadn't really been there for a very long time, it

doesn't, in my opinion, receive the sort of attention that it needs to because of the long-term consequences of the war. When these cases of chemical warfare began to come up again in Syria, and I was asked to put on a conference, I thought, this is the perfect opportunity to really bring together people from all over the world who are working on issues of chemical warfare in the Middle East and beyond. To bring everyone together and have a conversation about this. And encourage further research and further work on this.

INTERVIEWER: So it's research on the aftermath. I know long-term, terrible, terrible things happened to soldiers, and they have to live-- and civilians-- and they have to live with this forever. Environmental implications, also terrible. Is the goal someday to be in a world without chemical weapons?

NARGES
BAJOGHLI: Ideally, yes. Without chemical weapons, biological weapons, nuclear weapons. But you know, I think as part of today also highlights, there is a lot of profit to be made from the trade of such things. And there's a lot of politics and power at play, here.

So even though that would be the ideal goal, I think in many ways, we have to be realistic. And understanding that that may not be a reality that we live in, as much as we would hope to. So given that, what can we as researchers, or NGO leaders, or filmmakers do to continue to be sympathetic and empathetic to the claims of those who have been exposed? And to bring this to a wider audience.

INTERVIEWER: Well, it's interesting that you mention all the kinds of people who are here at this conference. Because I think of war-- I think a lot of people think of war as a geopolitical phenomenon. But you're an anthropologist. And you've invited physicians, and medical anthropologists, and political scientists to this. So what questions are you asking? And how does your anthropological lens add to our understanding of chemical warfare?

NARGES
BAJOGHLI: One of the things that anthropologists pay a lot of attention to is, what are people on the ground saying and doing and thinking and feeling? And so when we look at warfare from an anthropological perspective, it's-- when we think of war in general, a lot of what we pay attention to as a general community is the power plays and the things that we see in the news. Anthropology really, I like to think, goes into the belly of the beast and looks from the ground up.

And so if we're not thinking about things like chemical warfare and their legacies, what anthropology does is it goes and sees that there are communities who are still suffering from

the effects of chemical warfare 35 years after a war has happened. When the journalists have left, when we've stopped talking about these issues. So then that means it's still an issue that we need to think about, and that we can in some ways unearth again in the international conversations that we have about these issues.

INTERVIEWER: That is really important. And Joost, you spoke today as part of a panel titled "Investigating Ground Zero." Also on that panel was a physician I know. And he was talking about how first responders are often first on the scene after an attack.

And so they're really well-placed to see what has happened. And to maybe make judgments or at least collect evidence. But their first task is to prevent death and reduce suffering. Do they have a role as well as more activists or advocates as you were saying earlier?

JOOST
HILTERMANN: You know, when you are in a position as a first responder, I think for some, it would be very difficult not to speak out, simply because of the horror that they experience and that they see. You certainly wouldn't want to restrict that. But there are certain risks attached to becoming advocates, when in fact you are a medical professional.

You're supposed to be neutral. There is a potential tension there-- a real tension, there. But I think first of all, the first duty of a first responder should be to save lives. That's clearly what their main objective is. As advocates, I'm a bit more skeptical because of the risks involved to the personnel, and to the people you're trying to help, and to the facilities in which you're helping them.

But I think there is a second very important role that they are very well equipped to carry out and ought to carry out, which is the documentation of what goes on. Because doctors, of course, keep files on their patients. And they may take tissue samples, blood samples.

These can be critically important in later investigations into what actually took place. That is value-neutral in a sense, because you are not drawing the conclusions. You are just providing the facts.

What we do see is that, because of the politicization of these attacks as you mentioned, it is very important that independent, nonpartisan investigations take place. And they do, through the United Nations, or in the case of chemical weapons, through the Organization for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons, the OPCW.

INTERVIEWER: Well, I wondered, is there any formalization of that? Are doctors trained? Doctors Without Borders, or Iranian doctors? Syrian doctors who are on the scene? Is there any training to also be getting samples and be making the samples safe?

JOOST
HILTERMANN: Well, the problem is, with the qualifications and the expertise, is that most doctors that are working in a certain location have never been exposed to the problem of chemical weapons.

INTERVIEWER: So they might not know what they're looking at?

JOOST
HILTERMANN: They don't know what they're looking at. They may understand it's chemical weapons, but if you provide the wrong remedy for the chemical agent involved, then you may do more harm than you do good. And so what we saw in the Iran-Iraq War, for example, in the early days when the Iranian doctors and military doctors dealt with the casualties coming in, is that they didn't know what they were dealing with, what chemical agent they were dealing with. And so it was very difficult to treat correctly. And then of course, the information that comes out is also-- it can also be wrong or is confusing, because you get different reports from different doctors making different diagnoses.

INTERVIEWER: Let's talk a little bit about your book, *A Poisonous Affair*, about Saddam Hussein's use of chemical weapons on the Iraqi town of Halabja in 1988, which killed thousands of people. You showed in that book that chemical weapons were a part of an integrated, strategic, really well-executed plan on the part of Saddam Hussein. And you also make the point, I believe, that it was American policy, since it favored Iraq over Iran as perhaps the lesser of two evils, that that allowed the Reagan administration to ignore or turn a blind eye to this terrible thing that was going on. Are there parallels or dissimilarities that you could point to with the recent attacks in Syria?

JOOST
HILTERMANN: Well, one of the points to my presentation was to show that, in fact, both in Iraq in the 1980s and now in Syria today, there are international sponsors to perpetrators for chemical attacks that serve to justify these attacks or to cover them up-- to provide a cover story. And so in Iraq in 1988, when the chemical attack-- Saddam Hussein's chemical attack happened on the town of Halabja, killing thousands, the United States, within days, came up with a cover story, claiming that actually the Iranians had also carried out a chemical attack.

They didn't deny the Iraqi one, but they basically diffused the responsibility. And that led to a delay in an international response to it through the UN Security Council. And its response in the end was a so-called balanced one, condemning both Iran and Iraq for the use of chemical

weapons during the war, even though Iran had not used chemical weapons.

In Syria today, we see that Russia is playing a very similar role with regard to the Syrian regime. Which was responsible, for example, for a number of chemical attacks during the conflict in the past few years. But the example I raised today was the attack on April 4 of this year on the town of Khan Shaykhun.

Within hours, the Russian defense ministry came up with a story that in fact, this was not-- yes, it was an attack by the Syrian Air Force, but it wasn't a chemical attack. It was a conventional attack on a rebel facility, which held toxic gases inside, which were released as a result of the explosion. Which caused, then, the death of civilians in the town. We go back to the question of investigations and the need for non-partisan investigations that look at. And they need to go back to the first responders and to the evidence that has been collected by organizations such as MSF and others, who may not know what they're dealing with, but do have the facts in their hands that these experts who come in can evaluate.

[ACOUSTIC MUSIC PLAYING]

INTERVIEWER: How did you bring filmmaking into your career as an anthropologist?

NARGES
BAJOGHLI: I've been very interested for a long time about the way in which media is produced. And because I was looking at that from a research perspective, I also knew that if that's what I wanted to study, I needed to really understand media. I was very lucky in that during my graduate training at New York University, there was a program through the Department of Anthropology where I was getting my PhD that partnered with the Tisch School of Arts, there, that trained us in documentary filmmaking. So for three and 1/2 years of my PhD training, I was doing documentary filmmaking.

INTERVIEWER: At the same time?

NARGES
BAJOGHLI: Yeah, which was incredible. Unfortunately, academic writing is not widely read outside of the academy. But we are now, all over the world, part of cultures that are very visual. People consume media a lot.

What that meant was that it gave me a whole new set of tools to communicate what it was that I was looking at. And so I decided that what I wanted to do was to really focus on the survivors of chemical warfare in Iran in a different way. And to shed a light on them and their stories not

through the state. To really look at where these survivors-- what's happened to them today.

So you know, they've lost a lot of their eyesight. Their lungs are very damaged. They've developed very complicated forms of cancer. But then to also have them say that they are very in this compromised position, in which they've been exposed to these chemical weapons and are being used as a political tool by the Iranian state, but at the same time, are very critical of the way that they're being portrayed.

That's really the story I wanted to get at. Because a lot of times, especially when we're talking about these sorts of regional wars that have a lot of different actors involved, including superpowers like the United States, there is a lot of political posturing that happens. And at the expense of those who are the victims of these sorts of weapons. And so I wanted to cut through that with this sort of work.

INTERVIEWER: Like an anthropologist.

NARGES Like an anthropologist, yeah.

BAJOGHLI:

INTERVIEWER: I'm just going to come back to this question again. So in 1997, I think the Chemical Weapons Convention entered into force?

JOOST Six, I think. 1996. Maybe 1997.

HILTERMANN:

INTERVIEWER: Will we see a war without chemical, or for that matter, biological weapons? Leaving the nuclear question aside just for the purposes of this discussion. Can it be universally considered beyond the pale?

JOOST Let's talk about chemical weapons for a moment. They were first used in the First World War in the battlefields in Belgium and northern France. And it was chlorine, and phosgene, and mustard gas, especially. Mustard gas is very nefarious for the reasons that Narges said, because of the-- changes your genetic make-up, and causes cancer and horrible lung problems.

Right after the First World War, because of that experience, the international community as it was at the time came together and signed the Geneva Protocol of 1925, which banned the use of chemical weapons in war in international conflict. It wasn't sufficient, but it was

something. And that ban-- and that norm, because it really was a norm against this horrific weapon, held essentially until the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. So that's an awful long time.

And then it was broken by Saddam Hussein with the help of suppliers and others. And the United States, which knew very well that Iraq was using it. We know this from intelligence documents that we obtained under FOIA. And that, in fact, provided satellite intelligence to the Iraqi forces, so that they could target their chemical strikes more accurately. So that's complicity.

It was also the United States that, immediately after the Iran-Iraq War in 1988, 1989, organized the Paris Conference on Chemical Weapons. And then was instrumental in pushing through the Chemical Weapons Convention in 1993, which came into effect several years after that. The important thing is that this was a comprehensive ban, not just on the use of chemical weapons and not only in international conflict, but any use of chemical weapons.

But also the trade, and production, and stockpiling of chemical weapons. So it was a comprehensive disarmament treaty and a human rights treaty, very interestingly. Then the norm was reinstated. Then it lasted until just a few years ago-- 2012, 2013, when the Syrian regime started using chemical weapons. And then the Islamic State, the insurgency, also started using it.

And now we need to make sure that we find a way, with the help of Russia, which is the sponsor of the Syrian regime, to reinstate that ban once Russia feels confident that it has achieved its primary objective in the war, which is to preserve the regime. We may not like that. But if that is what is going to happen, then maybe we see an opportunity to talk to the Russians, in this case, and other members of the international community to reaffirm this very important ban against chemical weapons, so that we don't see the recurrence of that weapon in future conflict.

INTERVIEWER: I actually read somewhere that as early as the 17th century, they were using poisoned bullets.

JOOST Well, I mean, there is, of course, a history of poisoning wells and other things.

HILTERMANN:

INTERVIEWER: But industrial level.

JOOST You know, and you can say the Holocaust was--

HILTERMANN:

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, I was going to, but I thought you were on a roll.

JOOST

But I was talking-- we were talking very in-- I mean, these are the choices we make. But the

HILTERMANN:

use of chemical weapons in the battlefield, and of course civilians are exposed to them on these occasions, especially when they're being targeted.

NARGES

But can I ask a question here? And I've always wondered this, because this is something that,

BAJOGHLI:

you know, I've said, too. And I know that it's written about, that the first use of chemical warfare on a massive scale since World War I was the Iran-Iraq War. But then what about Agent Orange in Vietnam? I know the US doesn't allow it to be classified as a chemical weapon, but.

JOOST

Well, it's a chemical, of course. And it killed a lot of people. But it wasn't necessary-- it was

HILTERMANN:

used for defoliation. Its primary purpose was not to kill or to attack people. That was a secondary effect. Now, the secondary effects, as we talked at the conference today, sometimes are worse than the primary ones. So there's an issue here. And it is worthy of discussion.

But it wasn't used as a weapon as such. But you can make the same argument for white phosphorus, for example. Because it's actually a marking tool in warfare. But you can also-- but first of all, they land somewhere, and they do have a lethal effect. And if you then actually fire them at a civilian neighborhood, then obviously, people are going to be hurt by it.

And frankly, phosphorus burns are the worst burns you can imagine. There are a lot of things that are being used on the modern battlefield that are not in and of themselves weapons, but whose effect is actually just as bad, if not worse, than the weapons themselves.

NARGES

So it's a question and problem of categorization.

BAJOGHLI:

JOOST

Yes.

HILTERMANN:

INTERVIEWER:

Well, thank you both for coming in today. I know you have to get back to your own conference. But I really appreciate having the chance to talk to you today. And also, thank you for reaching beyond the academy, both of you, to a wider world. To make people pay attention and care

about this.

NARGES

Thanks for having us.

BAJOGHLI:

JOOST

Thank you. It was a great opportunity.

HILTERMANN:

[GUITAR MUSIC PLAYING]

INTERVIEWER:

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