

**Syria's WMDs – Are they under control?**

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## Clan Labs In The CBRNE Environment

By Marc Dugas

*“Take a pinch of red phosphorous, a smidgen of ephedrine, a dash of iodine and a skosh of lye. Add some distilled water and simmer for a few hours and hope it doesn’t explode and kill you.”*

Excerpt from The Betty Cranker Cookbook

Crystal meth is created by cooking the *ephedrine* or *pseudoephedrine* found in cold medicines or weight loss aids. The pills are crushed into powder, then blended to a steady boil with other solvents like starter fluid or Coleman fuel. This creates a bubbly, sudsy chemical reaction which can be strained and set aside to dry in the basement or living room.

The foaming white, crumbly residue can be smoked in a traditional crack pipe made from glass or ceramic (high in 3-5 minutes) -- or placed gently upon a small sheet of tinfoil, heated from below with a cigarette lighter and the vapors inhaled (high in 2-3 minutes). If the end product looks more like crystals than powder, they can be melted over a spoon, drawn into a syringe, and injected into your bloodstream (immediately high). If you just want to put it in your mouth and swallow, you have to wait fifteen minutes.

A single dose of meth lasts for six to eight hours. The identical portion of cocaine would get you high for maybe twenty minutes. Popular slang for meth includes ice, crystal, crank, also tina - a corruption of the word *sixteen*, based on the concept of one sixteenth of an ounce, the smallest amount required to get a decent high on.

Dr. Mary Holley, obstetrician and chairperson of Mothers Against Methamphetamine, informed the Associated Press



that one initial hit of meth is the equivalent of ten orgasms all on top of each other, each lasting for 30 minutes to an hour, with a feeling of arousal that lasts for another day and a half. She is quick to confess that the effect doesn't last long: "After you've been using about six months or so, you can't have sex unless you're high. After you have been using it a little bit longer you can't have sex even when you're high. Nothing happens."

**Tweaker Couture**

In the period from 2008 to 2009, there were overall reductions in coca, cannabis, and poppy production worldwide, according to the United Nations yearly drug report. But there are startling numbers showing during the same period, amphetamine type stimulants (ATS) were experiencing enormous growth.

ATS manufacture is highly attractive because of its low cost and high profitability, a \$63 billion dollar market for about 500 metric tons of product worldwide, annually. Interdiction is difficult as chemical precursors are produced in every industrialized country and readily smuggled across borders, and personal consumption is way up.

To supply North American markets, 80% of ATS is created in large, professional laboratories in Central and South America, and southern California. The precursors are shipped there and manufactured into usable, high grade product for personal consumption. The 20%



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balance of ATS is created in household kitchens and bathrooms, vehicles, garages, hotels, rental apartments and rural outbuildings in the US and Canada.

It is these “Bevis and Butthead” labs that present the greatest danger to local CBRNE teams, because even though the larger labs make the most product, they are much safer.

### Safety Considerations For CBRNE Teams



Creating methamphetamine is a dangerous process. Small labs account for more fires, explosions, hazardous waste dumping, and public endangerment than large labs, and so are of greater concern to CBRNE personnel. Here are the main concerns:

**1) IMPROVISED EXPLOSIVE DEVICES** - In a document readily available online called “Secrets of Methamphetamine Production” by Uncle Fester, we find the following paragraph:

*A nice addition to any underground laboratory is a self-destruct device. This consists of a few sticks of dynamite armed with a blasting cap, held inside an easily opened metal can. The purpose of the metal can is to prevent small accidental fires from initiating the self-destruct sequence. If Johnny Law pays an uninvited visit to his lab, the underground chemist lights the fuse and dives out the window. The resulting blast will shatter all the glass chemical containers and set the chemicals on fire. This fire will destroy all the evidence.*

I.E.D.'s must be a primary consideration, especially for the first responder who stumbles on a clan lab while attending on an unrelated matter. Lab operators don't care about collateral damage. Get the hell out. Bomb Disposal Units are mandatory before raiding or exploring a known clan lab.

**2) CHEMICAL HAZARDS** - The easiest way to detect clan labs are when they explode, which happens frequently, depending on how much meth the operator uses himself. Because smaller labs don't have access to pharmaceutical grade chemical precursors, they often have to make their own.

Among the precursors are ephedrine, pseudoephedrine, phenylpropanolamine, red phosphorous, iodine, hydrochloric acid, anhydrous ether, hydroiodic acid, anhydrous ammonia,



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acetone, benzene, formic acid, hydrogen peroxide, methanol, N-methylformamide, and toluene. By themselves not all are toxic, but they are often combined or used to create precursors which are then more dangerous.

Anhydrous ether is very flammable, has a powerful odor, and evaporates so quickly that an explosive cloud of vapor can fill a room, requiring only a spark from a cooler or burner to set it off. Phenyl acetic acid is a common precursor, smells like cat urine, and is hard to ignore as the stench gets into everything.

Crystal meth can be hidden and stored by dissolving it in grain alcohol, and later evaporated for use again. Be suspicious of large quantities of booze in the liquor cabinet at a lab.

One variant of the ephedrine reduction method for producing methamphetamines is to combine iron sulfide and hydrochloric acid to produce hydrogen sulfide, the Japanese suicide gas. The gas is then bubbled into a suspension of iodine in water to produce hydroiodic acid. Dumping waste iron sulfide and hydrochloric acid into sewers can increase the risk of hydrogen sulfide poisoning to unprotected personnel.

Occasionally it is necessary to clear out entire buildings of tenants while cleanup is performed over a period of weeks to months. Each pound of ATS produced creates about 5-6 pounds of hazardous waste to be disposed of, and costs thousands to tens of thousands of dollars per cleanup.



**Precursors**

A Fire pumper with charged lines should be on standby. PPE must consist of splash protection like a Tychem F suit, boots, gloves, and an SCBA. A RECCE Team would likely enter initially with Level A or B protection until air quality and explosive gas limits are determined with a photo ionization detector, and I.E.D. risk is mitigated. The Toronto Police have their own fully equipped clan lab teams, who enter on their own for preservation of the evidence chain, so Fire and EMS services usually remain on standby until this phase is complete.

**3) MEDICAL RISK FOR METH USERS** – Lab operators may end up using their own product, and will typically get careless and spill and blow up their own labs. “Meth Mouth” (loss of teeth), skin burns, skin and eye irritations, and pulmonary edema are common complaints from operators.

High blood concentrations of heavy metals have been found in lab operators. Users are a risk to themselves and others when tweaking, and they can be awake and malnourished for many days, clawing at their skin, and getting crankier by the minute until they meet up with a friendly paramedic or police officer.

At the point of arrest and/or transport to hospital, users can be in danger from excited delirium, resulting in hypertension, high fever, tachycardia, and hyperventilation. If handled roughly or restrained in the prone position, meth users may die unexpectedly from positional asphyxia. Consider sedation, and expect to patch for higher than normal doses required to overcome their condition. When confronting a tweaker:

- **Keep your distance.** Coming too close can be perceived as threatening.
- **No bright lights.** The tweaker is paranoid and bright lights may cause them to react violently.



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- **Slow your speech, lower your voice.**
- **Slow your movements.** The tweaker is paranoid and may misunderstand your movements.
- **Keep your hands visible,** or they may feel threatened and become violent.
- **Keep the tweaker talking.** A tweaker who falls silent can be extremely dangerous. Silence often means that his paranoid thoughts have taken over reality, and anyone present can become part of the tweaker's paranoid delusions.

4) **STRUCTURAL HAZARDS** – Wearing PPE makes it difficult to see hazards, including booby traps, IED's, holes in floor or trip hazards.



5) **ELECTRICAL HAZARDS** - Non-code wiring, by-passed electrical panels and overloaded circuits create an electrocution risk for operators. The excess electrical usage caused by these hazards often reveals the location of grow ops and meth labs.



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6) **ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS** – toxic mold from grow operations is prevalent due to high humidity. Creating precursors to create meth coats the walls with red phosphorus and other toxic chemicals, and can completely destroy the interior structure of a building.



### 7) **CHILD ENDANGERMENT**

Many jurisdictions are now finding that children are commonly exposed to the hazards of clandestine methamphetamine labs. In 2003, police found more than 3,000 children at methamphetamine lab sites. Young children frequently put their hands in their mouths, have higher metabolic and respiratory rates than adults, and have developing central nervous systems, all leaving them vulnerable to harm from inhaling, absorbing, or ingesting toxins from chemicals.

About two-thirds of children found at labs seized by police tested positive for toxic levels of chemicals in their bodies. Others suffer burns to their lungs or skin from chemicals or fire. Some have died in explosions and fires. Many are badly neglected or abused by parents indulging in drug abuse. (Senior citizens whose caretakers are lab operators are similarly vulnerable. Pets, including guard dogs, can also be harmed.) When police agencies start targeting labs for investigation and seizure, social service agencies and family courts should be prepared for increased workloads, as well.

#### Summary

There are many clan lab drugs and grow operations, all equally dangerous. Whatever type of lab you find, consider the danger to yourself and the public to be high until the scene is rendered safe. Buildings may need to be evacuated, Fire department pumpers should be ready to respond. I.E.D.'s must be checked for and disabled by bomb disposal teams, HAZMAT must be prioritized for detection and disposal, and patients must be decontaminated, assessed, treated, and transported by EMS, all the while preserving evidence for FIS. Social services may become involved in long term plans for relocating tenants and children, and mold or chemical remediation of a building will likely take place. All in all, a long and costly process for a quick high and a short hard on.



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**THREATWATCH**   
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