SUMMARY: INSS Arms Control Program Seminar

Implications of Syria Joining the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC)

Monday, March 31, 2014

Panel 1: The Chemical Weapons Agreement and its Aftermath: Implications for Syria

Chair: Brig. Gen. (ret.) Shlomo Brom, INSS

Dr. Eitan Barak, Hebrew University of Jerusalem – Syria's Chemical Weapons Disarmament and its Implications for CWC Universality:

> By June 2014, Syria is due to conclude the destruction of its CW arsenal. Barak discussed the amounts and types of CW that have been destroyed thus far, and whether Syria was slowing down on its cooperation with the OPCW.
> He also said there has been progress with the CWC, with 190 members at the present time. In September 2013, Syria expressed its readiness to disarm its CW arsenal. At the same time, Israel and Myanmar have not yet ratified the CWC. Angola, South Sudan, North Korea and Egypt have not signed the CWC.

Dr. Jonathan Spyer, GLORIA Center, IDC Herzliya – Implications for Syria's Civil War

> The loss of chemical weapons capabilities did not significantly hurt the Assad regime's ability to fight war. The regime was recuperating, and chemical weapons played a very small part in this process. Support from Iran and its proxies as well as Russian diplomatic support and weapons facilitated this recuperation. Did Assad learn from the agreement that any action on his part short of chemical weapon use will not illicit international response? On the one hand, one can compare the outrage following the use of chemical weapons with the lack of response to previous massacres. This might have strengthened Assad belief that the West will not interfere. On the other hand, Assad might have realized that he is not facing a serious Western military intervention even prior to the use of chemical weapons. Overall, Assad tactics have not changed before and after August 2013—with the exception of chemical weapons use.

Prof. Eyal Zisser, Tel Aviv University – How Much Does it Matter? Implications for Syria's Long Term Defense Strategy

> Assad knows the facts but does not understand their meaning. He does not understand the meaning of chemical weapons use and why the world was so outraged. He feels that he is fighting for his survival. In his view, Assad is not only fighting the rebels but also in the

population which supports them. He uses drastic tactics of wiping clean areas with aerial bombing, artillery and rockets, and he does not see a problem with the limited use of chemical weapons as well.

Two trends are prominent in Syria. First, Syria is experiencing a widespread protest. Second, the regime survives as the opposition falters. The opposition is lacking a unified political leadership. In reality, the opposition is a collection of gangs backed up by "volunteers" from other countries, going through a process of radicalization. Despite years of war, the Syrian system has yet to collapse. The army and institutions are functional. The Syrian civil war is a war of attrition and it is difficult to predict its outcome.

Panel 2: Implications for Israel and the Region

Chair: Dr. Anat Kurz, INSS

Prof. Yair Evron, INSS – Should Israel Sign the CWC?

Since WWI, chemical weapons have not been effective against military forces. They were used extensively in WWI, but very little since then. The main exception is Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war. CWs are more a psychological tool against vulnerable populations and a weapon of terror. They are not an effective military tool. The conventional threat to Israel has diminished. There is a very low probability of Hamas and Hizbullah using CWs against Israel. However, there is a danger that a terrorist organization such as Al Qaida could use CWs.

How does Israel deter the use of CWs? Deterrence should be based upon a conventional response. Deterrence cannot be based upon CW use. There is no logic in striking vulnerable populations. There is no strategic benefit in utilizing CW. In view of Israel's conventional superiority, it has no need to threaten the use of CWs or nuclear weapons.

Therefore, Israel should ratify the CWC.

Dr. Emily Landau, INSS – Middle East Chemical Weapons-free Zone: Option or Illusion?

Landau highlighted that negative regional developments can also engender new perspectives on old problems, and produce new opportunities. This could be the case for Assad's horrific use of chemical weapons against his population – which has already sparked new thinking about opportunities for initiating regional security dialogue in the direction of a process geared to establishing a Chemical Weapons Free Zone (CWFZ) in the Middle East.

The advantages for Israel of a regional approach to dealing with this category of WMD include: cutting the very problematic link some have drawn between Syria joining the CWC and Israel's need to immediately ratify the Treaty (the specifics that led Assad to join were his blatant and tragic violation of the chemical weapons norm and a threat of force – a story far-removed from anything relevant to Israel); to transfer discussion of how to address this weapon from the global to the regional framework; to enable regional states to take charge of the process – to "own it" -- including carving out a verification mechanism that would be regionally based; and to begin building up a measure of inter-state confidence which is sorely needed in this region in the face of the tremendous trust-deficit underscored by the fact that four states in this region – Iraq (under Saddam Hussein), Libya, Syria and Iran – have joined international nonproliferation and disarmament treaties, and then proceeded to violate their commitments by clandestinely working on the weapons programs they had rejected, while deceiving the international community. Finally, Arab states' reactions to the suggestion to begin regional dialogue by focusing first on chemical weapons would provide some indication of whether these states are truly interested in regional security processes or only in stripping Israel of its strategic deterrent.

Panel 3: Global Implications

Chair: Dr. Yehuda Ben Meir, INSS

Cameron Brown, INSS – The Effect on the Chemical Weapons Taboo

When witnessing a serious infraction of an important norm, people frequently see it as a sign the norm is unraveling. However, Brown argued, such infractions actually provide one of the best ways to gauge the true strength of a norm. Brown gave an overview of norms, including why actors abide by them and a methodology for how to test norm strength. After giving a brief overview of the history of the chemical weapons taboo, Brown examined the reaction of the international community to the Syrian use of chemical weapons, and especially the Syrian response, and compared it to previous violations of the chemical weapons taboo. Brown concluded that the norm against the use of chemical weapons has, in fact, never been more robust.

Yoram Schweitzer, INSS – Will Terrorists Use Chemical Weapons?

CW that are weaponized are not easily accessible. Few terrorist organizations are interested in acquiring CWs, since it is not worth the effort or the risk of getting caught attempting to acquire them. Terrorist groups are unlikely to have the resources to acquire

such weapons, and will pay a high price if they are used. Those who carried out the sarin attack in Japan in 1995 were experienced terrorists with knowledge of CW. And still, the attack didn't have the impact that was sought. Most terrorist organizations, including those based in the Middle East, are not interested in carrying out CW attacks.

Nevertheless, it is possible that an organization such as Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria could use CWs against Israel *as a provocation*. If it can obtain CWs, there is a danger that they could be used.

Getting Syria to Yes: Implications for American and Russian Regional Standing

- **Dr. Oded Eran**, INSS – The View from Washington

Point of view from Washington: The United States sees the agreement and the joining of Syria to the CWC as a considerable diplomatic achievement. They have succeeded in influencing Syrian decision making without deployment of force while cooperating with Russia. Although the removal of chemical weapons is behind schedule, it is progressing (60 percent of chemical weapons removed thus far).

Point of view on Washington: The United States decided to use force but did not follow through. This change of heart is perceived by countries of the Middle East, Saudi Arabia in particular, as a very worrisome hesitance to use force. The United States explains this change as an increase in military strength on the one hand, and a diminished tendency to use it on the other hand.

- **Amb. Zvi Magen**, INSS – The View from Moscow

Russia seeks to consolidate its global position, and has felt marginalized by a Sunni-Western alliance. Russia is strengthening its position through a Shiite-Alawite coalition. Assad has remained in power in Syria through Russian support. Because they believed the US threat to attack Syria to be realistic, Russia decided to press Syria to join the CW agreement. It is not clear, however, that Russia will support the agreement over the long term.

As a result of Russian anger over the Western policy towards Ukraine, it has threatened to take actions over Iran and Syria. It could damage the sanctions policy vis-à-vis Iran, and could work to strengthen Assad further. The Syria issue remains central for Moscow.

Keynote Address: MK Ofer Shelah, Member of the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee – Implications for Israel's Security

In general, he senses a bit of disappointment by some in Israel that the U.S. did not use military force against Syria. But the results from Syria being forced to sign the CWC were very positive for Israel. If over the summer there were fights over gas masks at distribution centers, now we are cancelling their distribution entirely. In other words, a major strategic threat has been lifted.

Another advantage of the deal is that the major threat of Syria CW was not that the regime would use CW against Israel, but that extremist opposition groups would get their hands on CW and use it. Each day that goes by and Syria disarms, that possibility fades.

On Israel joining the CWC, Shelah said that Syrian use actually strengthened the legitimacy for maintaining arsenals of weapons it is believed by many abroad to possess, because as opposed to Syria, Israel is thought of as being a responsible country.