Regional Proliferation and the "Arab Spring":
Chemical Weapons in Libya and Syria

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Since December 2010, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has undergone tremendous social and political change. The so-called "Arab Spring" has in some states led to the demise of old authoritarian regimes, as in Libya and Egypt, and in other states to ongoing internal conflict and instability, as in Syria. While in the long term the process of regional change may lead to a more democratic and prosperous Middle East, in the short term virtually all MENA countries have had to cope with an increasingly volatile and unstable political and security environment.

This article analyzes the impact of the Arab revolutions and the post-transition instability on regional proliferation of nonconventional weapons,[1] looking specifically at chemical weapons (CW). The focus is on two countries, one where the Arab awakening has led to regime change (Libya) and one sustaining a prolonged internal conflict (Syria). Both countries are known for possessing or having possessed WMD programs. As such, the article examines the history and status of these countries' programs, while assessing the effect of the revolutions on both Libya's and Syria's capacity to secure their CW. Finally, the study discusses the impact of these trends on regional as well as Israeli security.

A Look at the Syrian and Libyan Programs

Once thought of as the exclusive domain of superpowers and first world nations, since the 1960s and 1970s nonconventional weapons have gradually become part of the arsenals of a number of developing countries.

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In the case of Libya, several factors motivated Muammar Qaddafi in the 1980s to attempt to develop a biological and chemical weapons program. First, Qaddafi felt that these weapons represented a way to balance Libya's military inferiority when compared to a number of its regional neighbors, including Egypt (which had also developed a chemical weapons arsenal) and Israel, with its conventional and alleged nuclear military power. Second, Libya's armament occurred in the context of a regional race, as during the same period other nations, including Syria and Iraq, were also acquiring nonconventional weapons. Moreover, Qaddafi's calculation was that the successful acquisition of chemical weapons would give him and his regime immunity against any attempt to topple it.

During the 1980s, the Qaddafi regime started building three central chemical weapons facilities.[2] The first, Rabta, near Tripoli, was an industrial complex called Pharma-150, and had the capacity to produce 10,000 pounds a day of chemical weapons such as mustard gas and nerve agents.[3] In tandem, Libya built two additional facilities,[4] both of them well fortified against aerial bombings. While developing chemical weapons, the country also started investing in delivery systems, especially ballistic missiles.[5]

During the 1990s, as the international community stepped up its efforts to stop CW proliferation, increasing attention was devoted to the seemingly growing Libyan arsenal. Western countries, led by the United States, were particularly concerned about the trend, especially given Libya's support of international terrorism. In this context the US forbade companies operating on American soil from helping Libya's armament.[6] In 1993 Libya, like Egypt and other Arab nations, announced that it would not join the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), arguing that chemical weapons disarmament could only occur as part of a comprehensive ban on WMD in the region, which was not possible until Israel agreed to give up its alleged nuclear program.

In 2003, Libya and Great Britain embarked on secret negotiations designed to normalize relations between Libya and the international community. As a result, in October 2003, Libya allowed British and American inspectors to visit its military facilities and labs to verify Libya's chemical and other nonconventional weapons programs.[7] Then, in December of that year, Libya announced it was abandoning all WMD programs and that it intended to join all the existing international

conventions.[8] Until that point, Libya had never revealed or admitted the existence of nonconventional weapons programs, while consistently claiming its activities were civilian and intended for peaceful purposes.

To this day it is not exactly clear what motivated Qaddafi to take this dramatic step. However, it is likely that the growing international pressure against both nonconventional weapons and state support for international terrorism in the aftermath of 9/11 played a role in pushing Qaddafi to relinquish his CW program. In addition, the 2003 US invasion of Iraq and the rapid downfall of Saddam's regime made Qaddafi wary of future external interference in Libya, leading him to forfeit his WMD program in exchange for the insurance the West would not topple his regime. Moreover, Qaddafi likely recognized that the CW program was far from having reached the point where it could grant him immunity against external intervention or coups, and thus preferred to accept the political bargain.

By 2004 Libya submitted a partial declaration on its chemical weapons storage facilities to the UN Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).[9] Libya declared 3,500 aerial bombs intended to disperse chemical weapons, along with 24.7 metric tonnes (MT) of sulfur mustard and 1,390 MT of precursor chemicals.[10] The OPCW began to inspect and verify all the declared stockpiles, finding that Libya's manufacturing capabilities were far more modest than what had been assumed, and that its arsenal was in terrible condition, in terms of security, materials quality, and maintenance.

Once it joined the CWC, Libya embarked on efforts to change its image, and it became very active in the organization. It called on other nations in the region to follow in its footsteps and abolish biological and chemical weapons. In practice, however, the program to destroy Libya's chemical weapons proceeded fairly slowly, despite the assistance from the United States and Italy. While the aerial bombs were destroyed immediately after Libya joined the convention, the process of destroying the sulfur mustard and precursor chemicals lagged behind.[11] On the eve of the revolution, Libya requested an extension to complete the destruction of its chemical weapons.[12]

Syria's interest in nonconventional weapons apparently began in the 1970s. There is evidence that before the Yom Kippur War in 1973, Egypt provided Syria with its initial CW capability.[13] At the outset of the program, in the early 1970s, Syria bought chemical material and ballistic missiles

abroad, but after a while the country developed its own manufacturing capabilities with foreign assistance. Indeed, in the early 1980s, Hafez al-Assad began to show an interest in developing nonconventional weapons motivated both by Syria's security concerns with respect to Israel and its desire to balance Israel's significant advantages in conventional weapons and achieve some level of strategic deterrence against Israel's alleged nuclear weapons. Moreover, cognizant of Israel's aerial superiority, the Assad regime chose to develop its ballistic missile capabilities for the launching of its biological and chemical weapons.[14]

Syria is currently believed to have one of the largest and most sophisticated operational arsenals of chemical weapons in the world,[15] based primarily on nerve agents. This group represents the most advanced form of military chemicals materials. The main agent is sarin (also known as GB), an extremely toxic and volatile agent. The Syrians are also thought to have persistent VX, even more toxic than sarin.[16] The launch mechanisms include aerial bombs and shells, but the chief strategic weapons are ballistic missiles (Scuds and its derivatives as well as the SS-21) capable of reaching every part of Israel. Much less is known about the country's biological weapons program, with disagreement as to whether the country has developed an offensive biological weapons capability.[17] The components of Syria's chemical weapons structure are dispersed over a large number of sites throughout the country, while the regime is believed to run four production facilities.[18]

Until recently, the Syrian regime never acknowledged the existence of its CBW program and arsenal, despite the fact that during Hafez al-Assad's years in power many claims were made that Syria had "a secret weapon" or "an appropriate response" to Israel's military advantage. During the CWC talks and in other international forums, the Syrian position was that as long as Israel refused to destroy its nuclear weapons, Syria would reserve the right to arm itself with chemical weapons and not destroy such weapons if it had them. In an infamous January 2004 interview, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad reiterated that his country had a right to defend itself, adding that "it is not difficult to get most of these weapons [CBW] anywhere in the world and they can be obtained at any time."[19] The Syrian position remains firm to this day; it opposes joining the CWC and coordinates its political stance with Egypt.

Implications of the Arab Awakening for CW in Libya and Syria

By the time the Libyan revolution drew to a close, the OPCW estimated that Libya was still in possession of roughly 45 percent of its sulfur mustard and 60 percent of its raw ingredients (precursor chemicals), whose existence had been declared but not yet destroyed.[20] The CW arsenal did not play a role during the revolutions, and despite rumors to the contrary,[21] Qaddafi did not resort to chemical weapons, a choice likely influenced both by political considerations as well as by his knowledge that the weapons were not fit for operational use.

With the end of the old regime and the creation of the Libyan National Transitional Council (NTC), the new authorities announced that it identified additional chemical weapons stockpiles the Qaddafi regime had failed to declare.[22] When in January 2012 the OPCW inspected Libya for the second time since the revolution, it confirmed that Qaddafi had an undeclared stockpile of chemical shells.[23]

The fact that the regime had not disclosed the existence of these two sites raised additional concerns over the existence of other undeclared CW. In addition, there was concern that components of the arsenal might have fallen into the wrong hands, namely, terrorist groups both within Libya and abroad. To date, however, these concerns have not proven founded. The post-Qaddafi UN inspections of the declared sites confirmed that no weapons components went missing during the revolution. The same is not true for the rest of Qaddafi's arsenals. For example, the United States estimates that out of Qaddafi's 20,000 estimated man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS), only 5,000 have been recovered and secured.[24] Needless to say, the smuggling of Qaddafi's arsenal represents a serious regional, as well as global, proliferation challenge.

Since first assuming power, the NTC repeatedly stressed its commitment to working with the UN to dismantle the remains of the nonconventional arsenal, and the subsequently elected Libyan government has maintained the same position. The international community has been highly involved in efforts to recover and secure Qaddafi's arsenal, both financially[25] as well as by through technical cooperation and assistance.[26] The new Libyan authorities have shown eagerness to coordinate and cooperate with the OPCW, as well as with the UN Support Mission in Libya and with individual countries offering assistance, including the United States and Iraq.[27]

The situation in Syria is far less secure, as unlike the case of Libya, the initial protests met with extensive and indiscriminate brutality by the Syrian government, and have evolved into a bloody internal war between the Assad government and the opposition forces. Moreover, with the government seemingly unable to break the ongoing stalemate and repress the opposition, and with the opposition slowly gaining ground and eroding the regime's supporting base and capabilities, the international community has become more and more concerned about Syria's CBW arsenal.

The first main concern is that the Assad regime, increasingly desperate and fighting for survival, may choose to resort to CW use against its own people. Although this scenario is predominantly internal, the open use of CW would have broader destabilizing consequences at the regional level. Until now, Assad has understood that the use of these weapons would constitute crossing the only real red line imposed on him by the international community, and as such, he has continued to play by the rules of the game. However, as the conflict escalates further and his position deteriorates, this scenario can simply not be discarded.

Assad and his entourage have waved the banner of CW to warn against external intervention. For instance, a senior official in the Assad regime announced that if Syria were to use any chemical weapons, it would do so only against foreign elements. This statement was in itself significant because it represented the first Syrian admission that it in fact possessed chemical weapons (though this announcement was later denied by claiming that it was "taken out of context").[28] Even so, this "revenge scenario," whereby Assad would turn its CW outwards toward countries like Israel or Turkey in order to deflect attention from the internal conflict and "punish" the international community, seems unlikely given the cold-blooded rationality employed by the regime until now.

Second, Israel in particular has voiced concern that an increasingly desperate Assad regime may transfer some of its nonconventional weapons to Hizbollah. This option also seems unrealistic, at least until the regime is engaged in an all-out war with the opposition and has the interest of maintaining strict control of its entire military arsenal. However, if the regime felt with absolute certainty that its demise was imminent and inevitable, then it could potentially attempt such a transfer. The international community should take this scenario extremely

seriously, which would significantly boost the capabilities of Hizbollah, an already powerful non-state armed group.

A third source of international anxiety has been the ongoing chaos raging in Syria. Accordingly, there is a concern that the government may lose control of its CBW arsenal, with the weapons landing in the hands of the rebels. The international community is especially concerned about local jihadist groups obtaining access to Syria's chemical arsenal. In the past the anti-Assad opposition forces assured that they would secure the chemical arsenal, as in the Libyan case, but with the conflict escalating and becoming ever more brutal, this scenario also raises concerns.[29]

To deal with the risks associated with Syria's CW, the international community, led by the United States, has closely monitored the events unfolding in Syria, taking a number of diplomatic as well as practical measures. Both the United States and Israel view the possibility of the CW falling into the wrong hands as a grave risk and have made preparations for the possibility of preventing dangerous entities from getting their hands on components or parts of the biological and chemical weapons.[30]

First, these preparations have focused on increasing surveillance of the sensitive sites. The US is reportedly working together with Israel, Jordan, Turkey, and NATO to closely monitor activities at all known CW sites.[31] Second, at the diplomatic level, several nations, including the United States and most recently Turkey, have warned Assad of dire consequences should he dare use his chemical weapons, either domestically or externally.[32] The Israeli government has also drawn its own red lines and issued strongly worded warnings that any change for the worse from Israel's perspective in the chemical weapons situation would force the country to take drastic steps, including embarking on a military attack.[33] Moreover, the international community has urged Assad to increase the security of his arsenals, reacting positively to the report that Assad had removed some of the nonconventional weapons from the areas more affected by the war.

Third, the US has also invested in operational plans to intervene directly and either seize control of the sites and secure them or destroy them by military attacks. Since early 2012, it has been reported that the United States conveyed to Syria's neighbors – Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia – its willingness to assist and help coordinate activities that could prevent proliferation of nonconventional weapons from Syria.[34] Specifically, ongoing plans focus on how to secure the CW arsenals in

the aftermath of the seemingly inevitable collapse of the Assad regime. The shaky post-revolutionary transition period that would likely follow the fall of the regime is indeed seen by a number of concerned parties – from the United States, to Israel, Turkey, and Jordan – as the most perilous scenario. In addition, the blueprint used to secure CW in Libya may prove inadequate for Syria. In fact, the country's arsenal is far more extensive, well-maintained, and sophisticated; its chemical agents are believed to be already weaponized; the CBW arsenal is believed to be highly dispersed; and it may include an offensive biological program.

All these elements make the challenge of recovering and securing Syria's CW far greater than in the case of Libya. An aerial military campaign to destroy the sites would be massive and costly, risking a high number of casualties on the ground as well as at the environmental level. Moreover, it also risks falling short of identifying and destroying Syria's entire CW arsenal. At the same time, securing the sites from the ground would be complicated, requiring both superior intelligence and a high number of troops deployed on the ground. Recently, it was reported that the US would need as many as 75,000 ground troops to secure all of Syria's weapons.[35]

Another related concern regards the timing of an eventual military operation in Syria: here the international community seems to lack precise knowledge of the state of the CW, with periodic reports of alleged transfer of weapons between sites. Similarly, it is extremely difficult to determine with certainty whether Assad is indeed taking steps to secure his arsenal, or whether he is acting to increase its operational readiness, as recently asserted by US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta.[36] As such, the international community faces a serious dilemma as to if and when to intervene on the matter of Syria's CW. This predicament is only worsened by the ongoing deterioration of the conflict in Syria. Also, recent reports indicating the regime is employing Scud missiles against the opposition confirm the gravity of the situation on the ground.[37]

So far, the international community's (only) red line against relying on nonconventional weapons has apparently deterred the regime from relying on these weapons. However, in the past months, the international community appears increasingly concerned that diplomatic pressure against Assad may not be enough. The recent UN declarations that it will be provide anti-CW protection gear to the United Nations Disengagement

Observer Force Zone deployed on the Golan Heights seem to confirm this notion.[38]

CW in Libya and Syria: Threat Assessment

One of the unintended byproducts of the ongoing regional process of mass-scale unrest and mobilization against the established authoritarian regimes has been an increase in the degree of volatility and instability of the MENA region. The implications of this trend for regional security are not negligible, especially when it comes to assessing the effect on regional proliferation of nonconventional weapons.

However, not all regional cases are alike. In the case of Libya, the country's CW program − largely outdated and in a state of advanced deterioration even before the anti-Qaddafı revolution begun − was already monitored and destroyed under the auspices of the OPCW. In addition, since the collapse of the old regime, the new authorities have been coordinating and cooperating with the international community on retrieving and securing the remnants of the CW arsenal. As such, the threat of proliferation of CW has been dealt with adequately, although the proliferation of other parts of Qaddafı's arsenal, including antiaircraft missiles, still represents a serious problem as well as a substantive challenge to regional security.

The case of Syria, on the other hand, seems to present a far greater challenge, given the more extensive, sophisticated, and dispersed nature of Assad's arsenal. The international community's strong calls against employing CW have deterred Assad from resorting to this option. As such, it is important for the international community to continue to make unequivocally clear to Assad that tapping CW will immediately lead to direct external intervention and to the collapse of his regime.

However, as the situation on the ground continues to deteriorate, diplomacy alone may not be enough to deal with Syria's CW threat. Moreover, guaranteeing the safety of the nonconventional arsenal will prove increasingly difficult the more the conflict spins out of control. The same problem will also apply to the likely shaky post-Assad transition period.

Therefore, the international community must continue to monitor the unfolding of the events in Syria very closely, as well as devising post-regime change contingency plans to recover and secure or destroy the weapons. Interestingly, identifying and securing Assad's CW is one of

the few truly shared interests of all of Syria's neighbors − from Jordan, to Iraq, Lebanon, Turkey, and Israel − as well as of the international community at large. There should therefore be international as well as regional coordination on this topic. Similarly, the international community should reach out to the opposition forces, as in a post-Assad era they would become an important partner in securing CW and preventing proliferation. On this, the case of Libya and the active role the local interim authorities took in tackling the chemical weapons should serve as a positive example.

Notes

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