Dismantling Chemical Weapons in Syria: Lessons, Insights, and Implications for Israel

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Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Civil War

Long before the civil war broke out in 2011, Syria assembled an extensive array of chemical weapons, which it regarded as a strategic counterbalance to Israel's capabilities. The arsenal included advanced and extremely toxic nerve gas and diverse delivery systems suitable for a variety of war scenarios, including missiles and rockets capable of reaching anywhere in Israel.

Despite the many casualties of the Syrian civil war, among them elderly civilians, women, and children, the United States and European countries were not inclined to intervene in Syria. At a certain stage of the fighting, however, when the rebels achieved significant success and it appeared that Assad's position was weakening − many even predicted his imminent downfall − there was concern that in his desperate plight, Assad was liable to resort to use of the chemical weapons. Various parties posited possible scenarios regarding this arsenal, for example, use by Assad's forces against the rebels, transfer of elements of these weapons to sub-state organizations like Hizbollah, or shooting at Israel as an act of despair.[1] Several instances of Syria moving elements of its chemical weapons between bases were also observed in early 2013, and operational preparations on bases and alerts were reported.

These events caused various countries, foremost among them the US, and even Russia, to issue severe warnings to the Syrian President against the use of these weapons.[2] Furthermore, President Obama and senior

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US administration officials stated that operations involving the chemical arsenal, not to mention the use of such weapons, would constitute the breach of a "red line" that would require measures by the US in response. Despite these warnings, reports surfaced in 2013 of a number of cases in which chemical weapons or materials had actually been used, the most significant of which occurred on March 19 in Aleppo, with reports of some 25 civilians killed and many more injured. French, British, and Israeli sources claimed they had proof that Assad's forces had used sarin gas. The official American position was that only preliminary evidence existed, and further proof was required in order to clearly determine and verify whether chemical weapons had been used. An unequivocal American admission that chemical weapons had indeed been used would have obligated the US administration to respond; otherwise, the President's credibility would have been damaged.

The turning point came on August 21, 2013,[3] when shocking reports, testimony, evidence, and photographs of long lines of bodies began to appear – among them women, old people, and children – with no signs of violence on them. The rebels reported that a massive chemical attack had taken place, causing over 1,500 fatalities and many hundreds of injured. Photographs of casualties were published showing clinical symptoms characteristic of poisoning by nerve gas. The US began to issue official statements that positive proof existed of a sarin gas attack by Assad's forces. A delegation of UN specialists that arrived in the attack area several days later conducted an investigation; its final report stated unequivocally that it had found traces of sarin gas and fragments of rockets used to disperse the material.

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The attack prompted President Obama to announce that the US would attack Syria in order to punish Assad and as a warning not to use chemical weapons again. Before any attack took place, however, US Secretary of State John Kerry noted at a press conference on September 9, 2013 in London that the Syrian government could prevent the planned punitive attack by putting its chemical arsenal under international supervision.[4] The comment set off a significant diplomatic process: the idea was

immediately endorsed by Russia, which went beyond this proposal by expanding it into a program for dismantling Syria's chemical weapons, culminating in Syria's joining the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). Moscow called on Syria to accept the plan, and soon thereafter, Syria announced it would do so. The agreement was probably due to the realization by Russia and Syria that without such an agreement, the chances were that the US would attack, and that such an attack would have far reaching consequences for Syria and the entire region. In response, President Obama announced that he was suspending the plans for attack.

In the narrow context of chemical weapons, this was a significant victory for President Obama. His threat of an attack was effective, and achieved even more than his announced goal. Obama sought to deter Syria from any further use of the chemical arsenal, and thereby reinforce the taboo on the use of such weapons. In fact, he achieved a mandate to dismantle Syria's chemical arsenal, which will also strengthen the taboo against the mere possession of chemical weapons. Beyond this of course is the main point that measures can begin to neutralize the risks of Syria's enormous stock of chemical weapons, which is especially dangerous against the background of the civil war and in certain circumstances could fall into even less responsible hands than those of the Assad regime.

The Process of Dismantling Syria's Chemical Weapons

The Terms of the Agreement

The CWC, signed in 1992, was actually the latest in a series of conventions involving nonconventional weapons; it was preceded by the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Biological and Toxic Weapons Convention (BTWC). Like the BTWC, the CWC is a comprehensive agreement banning the development, production, manufacture, storage, and transfer of weapons, which applies to all the member countries without exception. However, in complete contrast to the BTWC, which is nothing more than a declaratory document, the CWC contains an extremely invasive control and verification mechanism − the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) − and a detailed list of substances whose development, maintenance, and use is banned. The OPCW is responsible for implementing and verifying the implementation of the agreement with Syria. Over the years, the OPCW has destroyed approximately 58,000 tons of chemical substances,

constituting approximately 80 percent of the world's entire declared stock of these weapons, including in the US and Russia.[5] The Syrian case, however, poses the most complex and difficult challenge to the organization to date.

The agreement between the US Secretary of State and the Russian Foreign Minister, which was endorsed by the UN, stipulated a very accelerated timetable. As part of the process of its accession to the Convention, already in September 2013 Syria had to submit formal declarations to the OPCW required under the organization's rules, including a list of all its chemical weapons programs, sites, quantities, types, and so on, and a general plan for dismantling them.[6] It was determined that in the first stage, the OPCW delegation visiting Damascus in early October would by the end of October neutralize and eliminate the production, mixing, and filling capacity at 23 sites declared by Syria. According to the delegation's report, the Syrians cooperated, and the plan was completed on schedule.[7] In addition, the Syrians were required by November 15, 2013 to submit a detailed plan for the dismantling of their entire arsenal of weapons, materials, and precursor materials. On December 18, the OPCW approved a dismantling plan with a timetable and benchmarks. Under this plan, destruction of the most hazardous materials was scheduled to begin by the end of December 2013 and be completed by the end of March 2014. Destruction of the less toxic chemicals was scheduled to take place by the end of June 2014, by which time Syria's chemical weapons arsenal and physical infrastructure for producing new materials would be totally eliminated.

Implementation of the Agreement

The Syrian terrain makes it difficult to implement such an ambitious agreement in such a contained timetable. The ongoing battles between the Assad forces and various rebel groups complicate the inspectors' work and jeopardize their security. Furthermore, before the war the Syrian chemical-biological apparatus included many sites and elements: research institutes, production facilities, and storage sites, as well as various weapon systems. A large portion of these sites were known to Western countries, but parts of the apparatus have been relocated during the continual fighting, and there is no guarantee that all the existing sites are known. Furthermore, there is considerable risk that chemical materials and/or weapon systems could find their way into the hands of

extremist terrorist organizations. The OPCW director general announced that despite the difficult and complex challenge, he was confident that the organization would be able to fulfill its task. However, this is the first time that the organization has had to perform such a technically complex task in a country that is actually in a state of war.

The technical, security, and logistical challenges explain the need for constant improvisation. At the beginning of the process, two possible technical-operational methods of action were considered. One was to transfer most of the chemical weapons to a third country, such as Russia, which has vast experience in handling and dismantling chemical weapons, where they would be dismantled. A large portion of Assad's chemical arsenal is stored in binary fashion, meaning that two different substances that become combat materials only when mixed are stored separately. The precursor materials themselves are not highly toxic, and transferring them is therefore relatively simple and does not require special security conditions; dismantling them is also less dangerous. It would still be necessary, however, to deal on Syrian territory with integrated weapon systems, because Assad apparently armed some of the delivery systems, and to destroy the development, production, and storage sites. The second alternative – similar in principle to the operating plan carried out by the UN delegations in Iraq following the 1991 Gulf War – was first to map, mark, and put in place human and/or camera supervision in all the relevant sites, and then to construct a plan for dismantling the apparatus on Syrian territory.

It quickly became clear that neither of these alternatives was practical – the first because no country volunteered its territory for the dismantling of the chemical weapons and materials, and the second due to the conditions in the field. The United States therefore proposed an innovative and creative third alternative, in which the hazardous chemical materials would be transported from various points in Syria to the port of Latakia; from there they would be transported on ships supplied by a number of countries (Denmark, Norway, Russia, and China) to an American ship specially outfitted to dismantle the hazardous materials at sea.[8] Due to technical and security problems as

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well as the weather, the process of removing the "most critical" chemicals did not begin until October 31, 2013. In practice, the first delivery reached Latakia Port only on January 7, 2014, and the OPCW was unable to estimate the expected delay in completing the process.[9]

The road to full implementation of the agreement is strewn with pitfalls. First, the formal Syrian declaration was not examined, and it is unclear whether from the outset some of the sites were concealed. In the initial stages of implementing the agreement, the inspectors expressed satisfaction with the Syrian government's cooperation, and the regime is not likely to completely reverse itself by retracting its commitments. However, despite efforts by the inspectors, and − presumably − operations by Western intelligence agencies, it is not certain that the Syrian government will cooperate fully and wholeheartedly and not try to conceal parts of its chemical weapons array in order to preserve a residual capability. Indeed, in late January there were several media reports that the Syrians were delaying implementation of the agreement, and the United States "strongly condemned" Syria for its failure to expedite what had been agreed on in the original agreement.[10] Second, there are objective problems stemming from the fact that removal of the chemical weapons is taking place in a country in a state of war. Even if most of the sites are located in territories controlled by the regime, the transit routes for the materials are not always protected.

On the other hand, there is no lack of resources for the effort, and many countries are willing to contribute to its success. Even Germany, which usually prefers to keep a low profile in international disputes, has expressed willingness to take part in the destruction of toxic chemical waste at the industrial level.[11] Furthermore, it is not likely that the Syrian regime would be willing to cede the diplomatic advantages it gained by completely disavowing the agreement, thereby risking the loss of its immunity and a return to the option of an American attack that was avoided following the adoption of the Russian proposal.

In sum, and notwithstanding delays in the original timetable, the process is likely to proceed in the direction of the declared objective.

Implications for the Region and for Israel

Even before its full implementation, the agreement that settled the chemical weapons crisis in Syria generated a rather long list of winners and losers. The main loser is unquestionably the civilian population

in Syria, which remains exposed to slaughter by conventional means without any hope of significant external intervention on its behalf. In the political/diplomatic sense, the agreement constitutes a severe blow to the Syrian opposition, especially its more moderate/secular elements, which pinned great hopes on the direct and indirect effects of an American attack on the regime. The signing of the agreement leaves the opposition now without any major power advocating on its behalf in any significant fashion. Other losers include the regional players, particularly the Sunni kingdoms and principalities in the Persian Gulf, headed by Saudi Arabia, which supported, and still support, the forces opposed to the regime and to Iranian influence in the Middle East in general. From the Obama administration's behavior in the crisis and with respect to the interim agreement on the nuclear issue signed with Iran in November, they have concluded that they cannot rely on active American help in their struggle.

Clearly the main immediate winner is the Syrian regime. The regime not only escaped a direct American attack; it also won what amounts to an insurance policy for the continued slaughter of its own people by means other than chemical weapons. In order for the weapons inspection and dismantling program to proceed effectively, the regime's cooperation is necessary. The desire to carry out the agreement has created a common interest between the regime and the agreement's sponsors in consolidating the regime's control (at least in the areas in which the chemical sites are located) and securing the roads on which the chemical materials will be transported (including the Damascus-Homs artery, which is of critical importance in the civil war). Furthermore, the contacts with the Syrian regime, at least during the implementation of the agreement, confer effective legitimacy on the regime from the US and other countries that were calling for its overthrow only a short time ago. The agreement deprives the regime of a weapon that is unquestionably valuable against armed forces, not to mention against defenseless civilians, but the importance of that weapon is dwarfed by the threat posed to the regime, to the point of its survival, by external intervention in response to the use of that weapon.

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In addition to the Syrian regime, the winners include Russia, whose frenetic diplomatic activity and prominence put it (back) in the center of the international political stage, and Iran, which was saved from having to make a painful choice in the event of an American attack between abandoning its chief protégé and a frontal confrontation with the US in a matter that, however important it may be, is not an absolute necessity for the Iranian regime. Ironically, however, if the agreement is implemented, the country that stands to gain the most (at least in the narrow security aspect) will be Israel, the only actor that was not directly involved at all in either the chemical crisis or the civil war.

The elimination of the Syrian chemical arsenal and Syria's ability to produce new chemical weapons components and arm their various warheads will have a significant negative impact on the main element of Syria's military/strategic capability against Israel, especially where deterrence is concerned. The conventional wisdom – shared by Syria – was that the IDF had a decisive superiority over the Syrian army in all areas, with the only military/strategic asset posing a significant threat to Israel being the chemical weapons. The Syrians regarded this weapon as providing some degree of response or deterrence against the nuclear weapons it believed that Israel possessed, and even as part of Syria's conventional tactical order of battle (for attacking airfields and emergency storage units), and certainly as a threat to the Israeli home front. Assuming that Syria is completely deprived of its chemical weapons (and that Assad does not conceal some of his capabilities or transfer them to Hizbollah), it will undoubtedly have a positive effect on Israel's military balance of power.

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In this case, it will be possible to reduce some of the resources currently allocated to this threat. The nonconventional chemical and biological threat to Israel from Egypt has existed since the 1960s. Syria joined the threat starting in the late 1970s, while the main chemical threat in the 1990s was from Iraq under Saddam Hussein. Although the Iraqi chemical threat faded following the 1991 Gulf War, the Syrian threat became more acute – it included missiles with chemical warheads covering the

entire territory of Israel. Israeli government policy has always been to provide protection to the civilian population, and Israel has thus invested extensive resources in passive protection, including the development, production, and stockpiling of means for the population (mostly for personal protection); construction of sealed rooms and shelters in public buildings for protection against nonconventional attacks; preparations in hospitals; amassing stocks of medications; and exercises on the national level. Assuming that Syria's chemical weapons stand to be eliminated completely, changes in this concept of passive protection for the civilian population should be considered, including a drastic cut in the gas masks apparatus. Israel will certainly want to protect a number of headquarters and other military facilities in order to maintain its response capability – and thereby its deterrence – against the use of a residual capability possibly remaining in the hands of Syria or another country. It may also be necessary to preserve some defensive elements, such as medications and hospital preparations, as a solution for chemical and biological terrorism scenarios. The dismantling of the chemical element in Syria's military order of battle, however, eliminates the need for the extensive and expensive solution to the chemical threat that currently exists and makes it possible to divert the resources allocated to it in the past to more urgent needs, whether security or civilian.

Implications for Arms Control

The nonconventional weapons situation in the Middle East is rather complicated. Israel's neighbors (and the entire world) believe that it has significant nuclear weapons capability, and perhaps also chemical and biological capabilities. Israel has not signed the NPT, nor has it acceded to the BWC; it has signed but not ratified the CWC. Until the signing of the recent agreement on its chemical weapons crisis, Syria had never admitted to possession of chemical-biological capabilities (at most, it hinted at "special means"), and demanded that Israel join the NPT as a prior condition for signing the BWC and CWC. Following Syria's unconditional accession to the CWC and its undertakings in this framework (weapons dismantling and OPCW inspection), various sources, including Assad himself, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov, and others began saying that Israel should contribute its part by signing the nonconventional weapons conventions.

In October 2013, Israel's political-security cabinet decided (without a vote) that Israel's policy on the CWC should not be changed.[12] Nevertheless, it appears that following the dramatic events in Syria, an in-depth discussion and reassessment of issues pertaining to policy on chemical weapons is called for. Some say that ratifying the CWC would deprive Israel of a bargaining chip for which some unspecified benefit might be obtained. Some, however, assert that ratifying the convention will only invite pressure to approve and/or ratify other conventions, which will prove a slippery slope. Judging by the history of approval, but not ratification, of the CWC, experience does not necessarily bear out this expectation. It may be more reasonable to assume that refraining from accession to any nonconventional arms control conventions suggests that Israel opposes arms control in principle, thereby inviting pressure. In the new situation that will prevail if the Syrian agreement is implemented, ratification will not necessarily damage Israel's security interests, and could support the argument that Israel's position is due to real security needs, and that when the security situation allows it, Israel will not hesitate to join the mechanisms of international cooperation. In other words, ratifying the CWC could delay pressure on more essential matters, thereby improving Israel's political standing. In any case, it appears that following the settlement of the Syrian chemical weapons crisis, the burden of proof is on those in Israel who continue to endorse a refusal to ratify the CWC.

The Syrian civil war has developed in a completely unexpected direction, with Syria agreeing to surrender its main strategic asset. Beyond the dismantling of the chemical weapons, this concession involves opportunities for changes and new directions in Israel's security policy and strategy. These opportunities should be thoroughly explored and pursued.

Notes

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