



INSS Insight No. 467, September 17, 2013

The Disarmament Agreement on Syria's Chemical Weapons, Act I: A Win-Win Situation?

Amos Yadlin

The agreement on Syria's chemical weapons, reached between US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and reported on September 14, 2013, is all sewn up. It appears that the United States was determined to reach an agreement only if it met strict criteria on all the substantive issues related to disarming Syria of its chemical weapons.

The purpose of the agreement is the total destruction of Syria's chemical capability and its components: chemical agents, dual-use warheads, production facilities, storage sites, and relevant operational units. A short and inflexible timetable was set for implementing the agreement: one week to report the extent and location of the Syrian chemical arsenal, a month and a half for inspectors to inspect the sites, and nine months to complete the disarmament process. The decision will likely be backed by a UN Security Council resolution (albeit with the possibility of a Russian veto later), including action on the basis of Chapter 7 of the UN charter, which allows imposition of sanctions and the use of military force in order to enforce the decision. The Syrians do not have the right to appeal the Russian-American plan, and they will not be allowed to set conditions for its implementation.

If implemented, the significance of this comprehensive agreement is that four parties will emerge victorious from the crisis in a win-win-win-win situation. Russia, which led the process to formulate the agreement, has in effect restored its status as a player in the Middle East equal to the United States. The Obama administration was not eager to take military action, and the agreement gave it a political-diplomatic way out with a significant strategic achievement. The Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria has succeeded in preventing a painful US military strike, and even received "approval" of sorts to continue its war against the rebels and kill civilians by any means it chooses, other than chemical weapons. Lastly, the longstanding threat to Israel from chemical weapons might be removed, which would also free Israel of the financial burden of providing gas masks to its population.

Nevertheless, at this early stage there are also two casualties of the agreement:

- a. Justice and morality: The superpowers have chosen not to get involved in a comprehensive solution to the civil war and the ongoing killing in Syria. Bashar al-Assad, who is responsible for the deaths of more than 100,000 Syrian civilians, including by means of weapons of mass destruction, is not being punished and has even received ostensible approval to continue the aggression.
- b. The Syrian opposition and all those who believe that the Assad regime is not worthy of continuing to rule Syria, and that it should be toppled for moral and strategic reasons (i.e., as a death blow to the radical axis).

It is too early to envision definitively the strategic balance that will emerge with the efforts to implement the agreement, and the jury will be out for several months. The Syrian regime could lose its strategic arsenal, which in its eyes was insurance against threats both domestic and foreign. If it forfeits its chemical weapons, the regime will lose the ability to deter its adversaries and thwart forces that aspire to unseat it.

Consequently, Assad will likely do everything in his power to sabotage the process and retain operational chemical capability while concealing his deceit. This would be an attempt to limit the price he is forced to pay to avert the US attack. In the past, Assad has not hesitated to lie and deceive leading European and American diplomats. He has denied responsibility for the murder of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri and a series of other senior Lebanese officials, denied transferring advanced weaponry to Hizbollah, and even denied that Syria has a nuclear program and a chemical weapons arsenal. Secretary of State Kerry, who in his previous capacity as head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee visited Damascus often and discussed the peace process with Assad, was himself a victim of Assad's lies, and in particular, Assad's denial that he transferred Scud missiles to Hizbollah.

Reports to the effect that Assad is now transferring chemical weapons to Iraq and Lebanon look more like psychological warfare by the Syrian opposition against the regime and against the agreement. There is no logic to the transfer of weapons to Iraq. Those in control of the Syrian-Iraqi border are Sunnis, Syrian rebels who are Assad adversaries, and it is not clear who in Iraq would receive the Syrian chemical weapons. However, there is a great deal of logic in transferring chemical weapons to Hizbollah, which offers a relatively safe haven for the Assad regime. At the same time, chemical weapons in Lebanon are a red line for Israel, and according to sources in the Pentagon, Israel has taken action recently several times in order to disrupt the transfer of advanced weaponry – Syrian, Iranian, or Russian – from Syria to Hizbollah.

How might an agreement to disarm Syria of its chemical weapons be implemented? There are three main scenarios, with potentially very different strategic results.

One scenario shows a process conducted according to plan. Within a week, the Syrian regime will report on everything that is required, and leading intelligence agencies in the world will confirm the report's credibility. By the end of November 2013, a professional force of inspectors will enter Syria and receive the regime's full cooperation and protection from attacks by opposition forces. This force will go to all relevant sites under regime control, and locate and deal with the chemical agents and the means of production for the chemical weapons. By mid-2014, all chemical components will be destroyed or removed from Syria. The chances that this scenario will materialize if Assad continues his previous behavior are limited. At the same time, some have argued that Assad now realizes that the use of chemical weapons jeopardizes his regime more than it helps it. If so, this scenario might in fact materialize.

A second – opposing – scenario has Assad do all that he can to delay the disarmament process and, with Russia's tacit support, dissolve the agreement. Assad, who confronted the challenge of being ousted from Lebanon, returned there after the world was focused on other crises and for many years withstood pressure from the United States not to allow jihadists passage to Iraq. Thus, the regime could provide incomplete reports in an attempt to conceal some of its chemical arsenal until the event blows over, cause delays on various pretexts, and complicate matters for the inspectors, as it has done for the inspection mechanism of the Arab League and the UN since 2011. For their part, the Russians will cooperate with Assad in a way that resonates of their previous endorsement of Assad's claim (until about a week before the agreement was formulated) that he had not used chemical weapons on Syrian soil and that if they were used, it was by the rebels. According to this scenario, the Russians will benefit from their stopping the US strike, reentering the game in the Middle East, and continuing the relationship with the ruling regime in Syria. This scenario too has little likelihood of materializing.

In a third, intermediate scenario, the Russians would honor their commitment to the United States, and Assad would work very cautiously and less flagrantly to retain possession of his chemical arsenal, attempting to save some of it, avoid full reporting, delay the arrival of the inspectors, and complicate their mission. However, when he is reprimanded by Russia or realizes that he is essentially inviting a firm Security Council resolution against him or a US military strike, he will resume more significant cooperation. This scenario is quite likely.

The first scenario does not present challenges to the West as far as chemical weapons are concerned. Nevertheless, it does obligate the West to address the issue of the continued killing in Syria by conventional means, and take a stand on the future of the Assad regime and on support for non-jihadist rebels. The agreement on chemical weapons does not mention the Geneva 2 process, and it certainly does not prevent its progress. If the process continues, Russia may allow Assad and his close associates to be removed from

power while ensuring the continuation of the existing regime, with certain reforms, in order to protect their foothold in Syria.

The second scenario returns the world to the starting point: President Obama and Secretary of State Kerry have announced that they will not compromise on a failure to fulfill the agreement and that the option of an attack remains on the table. Hence, if there is a flagrant violation of the agreement, which is backed up by solid intelligence, the administration will reconsider the issue of a strike, which would then be more legitimate, both in the eyes of the American public and the international community. However, if this were to occur, Russia would likely use its veto power in the Security Council and the United States would be forced to act unilaterally and without the explicit approval of international law, or in other words, to take action that the president has sought to avoid in recent weeks.

The third scenario is the most problematic. Like his Iranian allies, Assad could maneuver cautiously so as not to create a pretext for breaking the rules and for a resolution in favor of an attack. The removal and destruction of chemical agents would encounter great difficulty, and the inspectors would be hard pressed to create a safe work environment and would suffer attacks by unidentified "armed elements" (the UN and the peacekeeping forces are not known for their determination in the face of fire and terrorism). In the absence of definitive proof that Assad is sabotaging implementation of the agreement, the West would have a hard time restoring the military option and conveying a credible message that the next stage is to use it.

The big elephant in the room is of course Iran. Any scenario that develops in Syria will be studied closely by the Iranians, with an emphasis on the credibility of the American military option, President Obama's red lines, the support of the American public for a military strike, and the significance of Russia's conduct (concern for the survival of its allies or true concern about proliferation of weapons of mass destruction). The Iranians will carefully examine the international community's response to a lack of Syrian cooperation on nonconventional weapons on the one hand, and the unrestrained, continued killing with conventional weapons on the other. The conclusions drawn in Tehran will undoubtedly have consequences for international efforts to confront Iran's progress toward completion of its military nuclear program.