

BULLETIN

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Potential Problems with Syria's Chemical Arsenal

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The threats posed by chemical weapons in Syria are serious challenges for all neighbours of this country, as well for the United States. The escalation of the internal conflict in Syria is a reason for concerns about the security and safety of these weapons, and about the possibility of their potential use or further proliferation in the region. The statements and actions of interested parties mean that "worst case" scenarios are unlikely, but they cannot be excluded entirely.

Syria's Non-conventional Weapons. Syria probably began development of its alleged chemical arsenal in 1973, with help of Egypt and the USSR. Before the current civil war, this arsenal was built as a counter-balance to Israel's nuclear weapons, and the main Israeli cities were the predictable targets. According to Western sources, Syria has biggest chemical arsenal in the Middle East (estimated at 500–1,000 tons) as well the capability to produce several hundred tons of sarin, mustard gas and VX each year. Laboratories, centres of production and weapons storage have been identified in Aleppo, Lattakia, Hama, Homs and Damascus. Beside Lattakia (the traditional stronghold of Alawis and Syrian government), all of the are located in areas of intense clashes between governmental forces and armed opposition.

It is difficult to verify reports about close cooperation in chemical weapons between Syria and Iran and North Korea. U.S. intelligence cannot exclude the possibility of Syrian experiments with biological weapons (anthrax and smallpox). Syria, with North Korean assistance, also tried to start its secret nuclear reactor in al-Kibar, but a pre-emptive strike by Israel destroyed it in September 2007.

Syria also has huge capabilities for delivery of chemical warheads by various means. Among these there are different types of artillery shells, rockets and ballistic missiles, as well bombs than can be used by the still-strong Syrian air forces. It is highly likely that the majority of sarin and VX warheads are intended for delivery by four elite brigades with ballistic missiles, such as *Scud*, *SS-21*, *Frog-7* and *Fateh-110* (estimated at between 200 and 600 missiles, and 84 mobile launchers for them).

Risks Associated with the Chemical Arsenal. The statements of interested governments and the comments of non-governmental experts suggest different scenarios for the conflict in Syria. Among the most serious are: (a) that the Syrian government will use chemical weapons against countries determined to intervene in the current conflict, or as "final retaliation" against Israel; (b) that this arsenal will be used by the Syrian regime against armed opposition and civilians; (c) that some part of the chemical weapons arsenal will be transferred from Syria to the friendly Hezbollah in Lebanon; (d) that al-Qaeda members supporting the armed opposition in Syria will intercept a small quantity of these weapons.

Each of these cases present many dangerous implications, reaching far beyond Syria's territory. These scenarios currently seem to be unlikely, but the development of both the conflict and the political situation could raise the probability of such outcomes. Bashar al-Assad's government is still controlling the majority of Syria, and the soldiers of the chemical weapons units are among those most loyal to him. The low probability of "worst case" scenarios should also be viewed in the context of the positions and declarations already formulated by Syria, its neighbours, and the Western powers.

International Context. The issue of control over Syria's chemical arsenal has been present constantly in policies of the Western countries, since beginning of conflict in Syria. Following media speculation, a spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Syria declared in July, that the Syrian government would never and under no condition use non-conventional weapons against civilians, but could use them in the case of "external aggression". Russian and UN representatives have lately received very similar messages from the Syrian regime. The evolution of the Israeli and U.S. attitudes to the problem are also noteworthy. Israel officially expressed its concerns in 2011, but has lately expressed the opinion that Syria's chemical arsenal is relatively secure and safe. Israel currently focuses its attention more on verbal messages to Syria and Hezbollah, in the hope of deterring them from any plans for the eventual transfer of chemical weapons. The president of the United States, who considers the possibility of such transfers or of Syria's use of chemical weapons against a civilian population as a "red lines" for American military reaction, took a very similar position in August.

Issues of contingency planning in case of crisis with the Syrian chemical arsenal have become the topic of subsequent consultations between the U.S. and Israel, Jordan, Iraq and Turkey. Statements about the necessity to secure chemical arsenal storages were also passed by the U.S., the UK and France, to leaders of the Syrian opposition in Turkey. The American media has lately been reporting on the whole spectrum of U.S. contingency planning regarding Syria. Among the options being considered are plans for use of U.S. Special Forces small units and even (although now seemingly unrealistic) securing chemical arsenal storage areas by deploying a contingent of between 50,000 and 75,000 soldiers. However, public sources show no sign that this kind of contingency planning is officially on NATO's agenda.

Lessons From Other Conflicts. Issues regarding Syria's chemical arsenal should be also seen in context of the experiences of the U.S. during intervention in Iraq, and of the NATO operation in Libya. In both cases there were many problems caused by intelligence and reconnaissance in relation to secret arsenals. The lack of a "full picture" and the politicisation of the U.S. intelligence service was especially damaging for the legitimisation and first phase of the American military presence in Iraq after March 2003. More than two hundred troops were detailed to secure the alleged WMD sites and seize their contents, instead of focusing on the stabilisation of Iraq. In the meantime, the deterioration of the security situation and breakdown of law and order in Iraq were totally ignored.

A very different but equally important case that of the conflict in Libya, which also raised some Western concerns about the security of that country's chemical arsenal. In many aspects this case was the opposite to that of intelligence regarding Iraq's WMDs. Libya's arsenals were almost entirely familiar to the Western governments, which in 2002-2003 gained access to details of Libya's secret nuclear program. After 2004, Muammar Kaddafi allowed American and British inspectors to monitor the elimination of 24 tons of mustard gas and several thousand bomb shells intended for use with the gas. This situation meant that, in 2011, the risk that Libya might use chemical weapons did not put pressure on NATO's planning for the mission, mainly because Libya's remaining and limited arsenal was not operational.

Conclusions. The presence of chemical weapons and the production infrastructure in Syria is an additional factor in an already complicated situation of civil war. Thank to a more precise declaration by the Syrian government, and the threat of a U.S. reaction, the intentional use or transfer of such weapons seems to be less likely. Israel's military capabilities also prevent larger transfers of chemical weapons from Syria to Hezbollah. The main concerns are currently related to the scenario that members of al-Qaeda, fighting in the ranks of the Syrian armed opposition, could capture small quantities of chemical weapons or chemical agents. This is also reason why U.S. military planners are preparing options with Special Forces raids, aimed at disrupting small transports of weapons or agents by terrorists. In light of fresh lessons from Iraq and Libya, the least preferable option is the intervention of a larger military contingent by the "coalition of willing", with the goal of securing the Syrian chemical arsenal or in response to genocide as a result of the use of these weapons. A military response of this kind would draw all intervening parties into a long internal conflict. In the future, and when fighting in Syria ends, a potentially bigger role for the NATO and the OPCW (Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons) might be dedicated to dismantling Syria's chemical arsenal. It might be also considered as an important part of the agenda of the International Centre for Chemical Safety and Security, newly created in Tarnów (Poland). This Centre has been planning to prepare a concept of chemical security for Kenya, but the issue of dismantling Syria's chemical arsenal could be its priority for 2013, attracting more funds and expertise (also outside the leading countries of the OPCW).