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BEWARE SYRIANS BEARING GIFTS

By Gary Gambill



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It should come as no surprise that Syrian President Bashar Assad is adding [new conditions](#) to his government's recent pledge to relinquish control of its chemical weapons (CW) to international monitors, now that the immediate threat of U.S. air strikes has receded. Assad's CW arsenal is absolutely critical to his regime's survival – he won't give it up unless and until he can dupe the West into helping him achieve this end (if then).

The Syrian regime cannot hope to win the war through conventional warfare. The country's disenfranchised Sunni Arab majority has a fivefold demographic advantage over Assad's quasi-Shiite Alawite sect, which dominates pro-regime forces. Moreover, Syria is surrounded by hostile Sunni states and Assad lacks the manpower to plug its porous borders.

Despite a growing infusion of Iranian resources and foreign Arab Shiite fighters in recent months, the regime continues to lose ground to the rebels. Its much-bemoaned recaptures of Qusayr and the Khaldiyeh district in Homs have been more than offset by losses elsewhere,¹ and both are exceptions that prove the rule – Assad's forces are manifestly incapable of expelling enemy combatants from heavily Sunni neighborhoods and villages without either razing them to the ground or capturing them through battles of attrition it can ill afford. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Ghouta suburbs of eastern Damascus targeted in the August 21 chemical attack. The rebels there had not only repeatedly thwarted regime efforts to drive them out, but were [reportedly](#) funneling in fighters from outside the area in preparation for a push into the capital.

Unrestrained use of CW has the potential to turn the tide of the war, at least in the short-term. Although some venerable analysts [maintain](#) that their introduction onto the battlefield will have no more than a “marginal” impact on the course of the conflict, the conventional wisdom that CW are of limited military value only applies to set-piece engagements between armies. Saddam Hussein's infamous March 1988 gas attack against civilians in Halabja worked swimmingly in blunting Iraqi Kurdish collaboration with invading Iranian forces.

CW are ideally suited to the task of terrorizing ordinary Syrians into spurning rebel fighters in their midst. Conventional artillery bombardments are scary, but civilians can usually take cover easily enough once they hear one beginning. Chemical warheads typically don't explode – they simply drop from the sky and quietly release their toxins with little warning (especially if they are fired at night, as was the case in Ghouta). With the large majority of

¹ On July 22, jihadist rebels captured the town of Khan al-Assal in Aleppo province and promptly [executed](#) 51 captured government soldiers. In the first week of August, jihadist rebels captured 10 Alawite villages in the Jabal al-Akrad area of Latakia province and carted off hundreds of villagers to hold for ransom, including a prominent Alawite cleric, Sheikh Badreddine Ghazal. On August 5, they captured Menagh Air Base in Aleppo province after a yearlong siege. On August 26 they had seized Khanasir, a town along the regime's supply route connecting Hama and Aleppo.

Syrian civilians potentially within range of government artillery (and all within range of aircraft), widespread CW deployment could eviscerate the rebellion in heavily populated areas of the country.

Assad probably didn't want to play this card just yet. [Intercepted calls](#) reviewed by Washington reportedly show that Syrian officials were surprised by the devastation of the August 21 attack, suggesting that field commanders either acted on their own or bungled what was intended to be a small-scale release of toxins designed, like [previous ones](#), to test the effectiveness of the weapons and gauge international reaction. [According](#) to intercepts obtained by Germany's intelligence agency, Assad repeatedly denied requests by division and brigade commanders to use chemical weapons in recent months.

Assad presumably hoped to put off large-scale CW deployment until the day when his regime can no longer deflect decisive rebel advances through conventional means. After that tipping point, the expected benefits of CW deployment will far outstrip the expected costs of American reprisals. Given the acute fears of Sunni Islamist domination and score-settling felt by many regime supporters, it's difficult to imagine a situation in which rebels are pushing into Damascus in force (or, further down the road, closing in on remaining regime outposts in the Alawite heartland of northwestern Syria) and Assad's forces choose not to blanket their enemies with poison gas. Assad may wager that the threat of catastrophic CW use at this stage of the game (and fear that the weapons will fall into jihadist hands once they are widely introduced on the battlefield) will persuade the United States to press for a ceasefire and negotiations without preconditions (which the rebels have hitherto refused).

Contrary to the prevailing conventional wisdom, Assad's sudden disarmament offer probably wasn't motivated first and foremost by fear of what Secretary of State John Kerry [assured](#) the world would be an "unbelievably small, limited kind" of U.S. military action. Indeed, a one-off American strike would deliver a substantial political payoff to the regime by legitimizing its claim that the rebellion is a tool of U.S. imperialism and, as Stephanie Gaskell has [noted](#), enable Assad "to boast that he stood up to the powerful United States" without having to contend with the full weight of that power. It could also temper growing unease about Assad's behavior in Iran,² his regime's leading external patron, which suffered tens of thousands of deaths from gas attacks during 1980-1988 war with Iraq.

Rather, Assad's disarmament offer appears to be opportunistic. Whether the events of August 21 happened by design or blunder, they achieved one thing for the embattled Syrian dictator – giving the world a taste of the horrors that will ensue if and win he gives his commanders the green light. Now is as good a time as any to hold out the carrot of CW disarmament and see what he can get from a world that doesn't want to see rows of dead Syrian children again. Any disarmament plan would lock U.S. officials into dealing routinely with his government and give them a stake in its survival for as long as the process takes (which Assad will therefore be sure to drag out). On top of this, he is now [demanding](#) that Washington stop arming Syrian rebels as a quid pro quo. Other demands and provisos are sure to follow.

Preventing, or at least minimizing, further poison gas attacks in Syria is a noble objective, to be sure (those who [dismiss](#) CW as accounting for only "a tiny sliver of the killing" thus far are missing the point). However, Obama administration officials must recognize that they cannot rid the world of Assad's chemical weapons *and* rid the world of Assad at the same time. If they think they're clever enough to achieve both, they're going to get duped.

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² Earlier this month, former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani [said](#) that "the [Syrian] people have been the target of a chemical attack by their own government."