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**The Chemical Weapons Crisis in Syria:
En Route to a Political Solution?**

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The comment by US Secretary of State John Kerry at a press conference in London on September 9, 2013, whereby the government of Syria could avoid a US punitive strike by placing its stores of chemical weapons under international control, has led to a political solution to the Syrian chemical weapons crisis. The idea was adopted almost immediately by Russia, which transformed it into a plan to destroy Syria's chemical weapons and have Syria join the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). Russia called upon Syria to endorse the proposal, and soon thereafter Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Mualem, who met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Moscow, announced that Syria had accepted the plan. In response to the Syrian announcement, US President Barack Obama declared that the proposal should be examined seriously, and therefore he was suspending the planned attack.

In a meeting in Geneva on September 14, 2013, Secretary Kerry and Foreign Minister Lavrov agreed on a framework for elimination of Syria's chemical weapons. The main idea underlying the framework is to assure a rapid assumption of control by the international community over these weapons. The main elements of the framework are:

- a. Syria must submit a comprehensive listing of its chemical weapons and installations within one week.
- b. The destruction of the chemical weapons and its verification will be done according to the stringent procedures of the CWC.
- c. The Syrians must provide the Organization for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and supporting personnel with an immediate and unfettered right to inspect any and all sites in Syria.
- d. All chemical weapons and equipment will be destroyed in the first half of 2014, with the possibility of removing weapons for destruction outside of Syria. The two sides also concluded a side agreement on the methodology of the destruction.
- e. The agreement provides for UN administrative and logistical support to the OPCW for inspections and destruction. In the event of noncompliance, the two

sides agreed to impose measures under Chapter 7 within the UN Security Council. According to Chapter 7 the Security Council can authorize use of force.

The Russian proposal that led to this agreement and its acceptance by the Syrian regime stem from the Russian and Syrian understanding that without it, the chances of a United States attack are considerable, and that such an attack would have far reaching consequences. Now that Syria has announced that it will join the CWC within 30 days, it seems that Syria has no choice but to follow this framework agreement.

On the face of it, there was little reason for the two countries to be so disturbed by prospects of a US strike, once the President and the Secretary of State labored to emphasize the limited scope of the planned action. Rather, the key to understanding the Syrian and Russian perspective is apparently their conspiratorial view of US policy. They are convinced that the main objective of the United States is regime change in Syria, as was the case first in Iraq and later in Libya. Russia has emphasized since the beginning of the Syrian crisis that it will not allow the United States to repeat the Western ploy, whereby a limited resolution in the UN Security Council gave legitimacy for a broad attack that toppled the Qaddafi regime. Russia has substantiated its declarations with actions and successfully prevented any decision in the Security Council by using its veto power. However, the August 21, 2013 chemical attack in the suburbs of Damascus reshuffled the cards by creating a situation in which there is considerable legitimacy for a US strike, even without a Security Council resolution. From the perspective of Russia and Syria, such a strike is only the first step in a broad military move to topple the regime. Therefore, both countries are highly interested in preventing an attack, especially considering that from Bashar al-Assad's point of view, chemical weapons have become a burden in terms of their influence on his regime's ability to survive, although this means that he is relinquishing a strategic deterrent toward Israel. From Russia's point of view, this is an opportunity to regain its place as a pivotal actor in the region.

This framework agreement represents a significant victory for President Obama, as his threat to attack has achieved more than its declared goal. Obama sought to deter Syria from further use of chemical weapons and thereby bolster the norm of non-use. In practice, he may achieve Syrian chemical weapons disarmament, which will also strengthen the norm of non-possession of chemical weapons. Beyond that, concrete steps will be taken soon to neutralize promptly the dangers of Syria's vast arsenal of chemical weapons, which could potentially fall into even less responsible hands than Assad's brutal regime. From Israel's point of view, this would be a relief and a precedent with far reaching consequences for Iran and its nuclear program, because it would strengthen the belief in the need to pressure Iran and score similar achievements. If on the other hand the agreement is not implemented by Syria, Obama's resolve will be tested again. An attack would preserve his credibility, and the chances are good that it would prevent further use

of chemical weapons. Failure to carry out an attack would hurt his credibility and erode the ability of the United States to influence actors in the Middle East, including Iran.

There are considerable difficulties on the road to implementation of the plan. First, it must be assured that Syria (and its supporters, primarily Russia) negotiated in good faith and does not attempt to gain time and dilute the final objective. So far it appears that Russia, which devised the proposal and apparently also pressed Syria to accept it, will continue to support the plan, which is likely to yield Russia political and strategic gains.

Second, the situation in Iraq following the 1991 Gulf War is instructive regarding actual implementation. As directed by a UN resolution, teams of experts were sent to Iraq to expose, inspect, and destroy Saddam Hussein's arsenal of chemical and biological weapons. The regime, however, made every effort to thwart the work of the inspectors, and consequently, it took them several years to destroy the weapons. The conditions in Syria today, with battles raging between Assad's forces and various rebel groups, are much more problematic than in Iraq, and it would likely be very difficult to destroy Syria's chemical arsenal under such conditions. Furthermore, there is a considerable risk that chemical materials and/or weapon systems may fall into the hands of extremist terrorist organizations. In addition, the Syrian biological and chemical arsenal includes many research institutes, production sites, storage sites, and various types of weapon systems. Although a considerable number of these sites were previously known to the West, during the civil war there have been shifts in this arsenal, and today it is not certain that all the sites are known. Under these circumstances, in order for the inspection and destruction plan to be implemented effectively, cooperation with the Syrian government would be necessary.

From the technical-operational perspective, there are at least two main alternatives. The first option is to transfer most of the chemical arsenal to a third country such as Russia, which has vast experience in handling and destroying chemical weapons. A considerable part of Syria's chemical materials is stored in a "binary" fashion, that is, as two different components that become highly toxic only when mixed. The original components are not highly toxic, and therefore, it is relatively easy to transport them; no special safety precautions are needed and destroying them is less dangerous. However, it will still be necessary to deal also with integrated weapon systems on Syrian soil that are already filled with the final toxic agent, since Assad has apparently armed some of his missiles and rockets, and also to destroy sites for development, production, and storage.

The second option is similar in principle to the plan for Iraq in the 1990s. Through existing intelligence and cooperation from the Syrians, it will be necessary, with the aid of observers from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in The Hague, to map, mark, and place human inspectors and/or cameras at all relevant

sites. In the second stage, a plan will be needed to destroy the arsenal on Syrian soil. Here too, there are several possibilities that from a technical-logistical and safety perspective are not simple, since the demands will almost certainly be in accordance with strict OPCW standards. (In Iraq in the 1990s, the OPCW had not yet been established and strict safety conditions were not imposed.) The first option appears preferable because it will be possible to circumvent some of the difficulties described and neutralize the inventories of chemical weapons in a relatively short time.

Thus the political solution proposed presents not inconsiderable difficulties. However, from the perspective of the principles of the agreement and its implementation, a golden opportunity has been created to eliminate one of the largest and most dangerous stores of chemical weapons in the world, which is a great danger to the region at large and to Israel in particular. At the same time the question whether Israel should also ratify the CWC, which it has already signed, may come up with the new conditions in Syria.

