



Recalling where science, industry and military art converged
Challenging entrenched positions

www.the-trench.org

The Military Implications of the Syrian Crisis: The Chemical Weapons Dimension

Dr Jean Pascal Zanders

*Joint Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Affairs and the
Security and Defence (SEDE) Committee of the European Parliament
Brussels, 26 September 2013*

The Trench

Avenue du Jura 25
FR-01210 Ferney-Voltaire
France

Tel.: 33-6-4549 3262
e-mail: jpzanders@the-trench.org
Internet: <http://www.the-trench.org>

1. Mister Chairman, Members of the Foreign Affairs and Security and Defence Committees, I am honoured to address you today on the question of chemical weapons (CW) and disarmament in Syria. I understand that several of my recent writings on the subject have been made available to you as background information, and I will therefore limit myself to highlighting some key issues.
2. On 21 August, the world woke up to the news of major chemical warfare incidents in the Ghouta district of Damascus. Many hundreds of people died from the effects of poisonous gases. Many more will suffer from the long-term consequences of low-level exposure to a neurotoxicant, now known to have been sarin. Since the end of 2012 there have been several allegations of CW use, but none of them have been independently confirmed. Although deaths and other casualties were reported, the total image never added up to one of chemical warfare. The nature of the attack on the Ghouta district differed in many fundamental ways from the earlier allegations. The parallel mounting of several strikes into different areas, the number of victims, and the density of local reporting (i.e., volume of video footage, pictures, and corroborating witness accounts) all immediately pointed to the seriousness of the event.

Ghouta and past allegations

3. At present I am reasonably satisfied that the attacks on the Ghouta district could not have been carried out by insurgent forces. The UN Investigative Mission presented its provisional report on 16 September. The document independently confirms CW use in the Syrian civil war. Its undeniable conclusions rest on multiple types of samples, victim interviews, investigation of munition remnants and laboratory analyses. The investigators established and preserved the integrity of the chain of custody from the moment of sampling.
4. However, there are certain elements relating to those attacks that the UN investigative report does not yet fully clarify. Among the issues to be resolved beyond reasonable doubt concern the types of delivery systems and their ownership, the detailed analysis of quality of the sarin and whether the agent was industrially or artisanally produced, the high number of exposed people who seem to have made it to medical stations combined with the virtual absence of images of instantaneous death at the sites of impact, and so on.
5. The intelligence assessments of the Ghouta attacks by France, the United Kingdom and the United States rely in part on previous allegations of CW use to establish a pattern of behaviour for the Syrian government. However, this evidence is sparse and none of those countries have actually released sufficient details of their findings for a specialised civil society and academic community to assess them. Over the past few months I have warned repeatedly that overselling the limited evidence carries a real risk: factual elements are interpreted to serve the higher policy goal (i.e., military intervention); dissonant arguments are brushed off, even ridiculed. And politicians will tend to accord the data fragments a higher evidentiary value than they actually merit. These issues create ‘reasonable doubt’ and now allow Russia to exonerate the Syrian government.

Framework Agreement and the Chemical Weapons Convention

6. Russia and the United States achieved a framework agreement on the elimination of Syria's chemical warfare capacity in Geneva on 14 September. Syria announced its accession to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) in parallel, and it will become the 190th State Party on 14 October.
7. Syria is the first CW possessor to join the CWC after the treaty-specified deadlines for destroying CW and related infrastructure expired. This means that the Executive Council of the OPCW must now set the ultimate destruction date and interim milestones. To the best of my knowledge, this decision is still pending. In its absence, it is difficult to assess how feasible the target dates in the Framework Agreement are. The relationship between rights and obligations of a State party to the CWC and the specific demands in US-Russian political document still needs to be translated into a legally binding, and therefore enforceable, framework for disarmament.
8. It is, however, clear that those developments changed the international dynamics from edging closer to punitive military strikes against government forces to multinational cooperation with central roles for two international institutions, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and the United Nations.

Future of disarmament

9. Disarmament is about removing a discrete weapon category from the military doctrine of a political entity. Weapon destruction is one aspect; losing the doctrinal capacity to deploy and employ those weapons is by far the most important obstacle to future armament or re-armament with those weapons. There is no longer any testing of munitions and delivery systems; there is no longer any training of troops in their use. Scientists, engineers and technicians lose their *Fingerspitzengefühl* to optimise weapon design and capacity or production processes. True, disarmament cannot disinvent an existing weapon technology, but removing a weapon category from military doctrine eliminates the demand pressures to acquire it in the first place.
10. Disarmament is also about preventing the outbreak of war: particular weapon technologies are considered to be destabilising to international relations, so that people view their elimination as a contribution to peace and security. This was the case of CW during the 1930s. Even if war breaks out, disarmament prevents their use in combat or escalation of the hostilities. Translated to the US-Russian Framework Agreement, forcing Syria to give up its CW arsenal will prevent a future Ghouta from occurring during the civil war. With Syria joining the CWC and by identifying a central role for the OPCW, Russia and the USA have made chemical disarmament in Syria a global, longer-term responsibility rather than an *ad hoc* solution to a pressing problem.
11. If successful, the Framework Agreement's larger contribution to disarmament may be the injection of a fresh dynamic into the so-called Helsinki process to convene a meeting on the elimination of non-conventional weapons in the Middle East, as required in Final Document of the 2010 Review Conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Having said that, some of the core assumptions about regional security—in particular with regard to the strategic

relationships between Egypt, Israel and Syria—will have to be revisited both in terms of the doctrinal relationships between their respective weapon holdings and participation in the Chemical and Biological Weapons Conventions.

12. The stand-off over Iran's nuclear programme may acquire a different dynamic. The vibes reaching us from the UN meetings in New York are encouraging. The Iranian presidential election may prove to have been a watershed event in reconnecting Tehran with the world in mutually beneficial ways. Iran will in my mind play an important role in the CW disarmament of Syria and, as recent press reports suggest, it may also sit at the table to bring the war to an end. Can we really imagine the current dynamic if (limited) punitive military strikes against Syria would have taken place a couple of weeks ago?
13. I thank you for your attention.