



The Situation in Syria: The Chemical Weapons Dimension

Dr Jean Pascal Zanders

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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 Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy, I am honoured to address you today on the question of chemical weapons (CW) and disarmament in Syria.

CW disarmament under international supervision

2. 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. Last Friday night, the Executive Council of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) adopted the foundation of the Framework Agreement and laid out the core CW destruction time lines for Syria. Immediately afterwards, the UN Security Council endorsed the OPCW decision and created the mandate for the UN Secretary General to support the disarmament project.
3. Syria is the first state in full possession of its CW stockpile 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 had to set the declaration and destruction requirements, as well as the ultimate date for the completion of all destruction operations (i.e., mid-2014). It will define interim milestones by mid-November.
4. We are looking at a very ambitious disarmament project, to say the least. Nonetheless, a couple of elements have rendered the outcome more plausible than had been the case two or three weeks ago. First, Syria indicated that it is prepared to work within the CWC framework even before the CWC has entered into force for it. This means that it accepts the decisions by the Executive Council of the OPCW, thus allowing much accelerated OPCW inspections, mobilisation of international assistance, and destruction operations. Relative to normal time frames in the CWC, the process thus already gains a minimum of four weeks. Second, it appears that most of the chemicals are stored in precursor form, meaning that those compounds have not yet been mixed to form the nerve agent itself. This could significantly accelerate the destruction process. Following the initial OPCW inspections of the storage sites, a clearer idea of actual destruction methods will emerge.
5. At present, Syria appears fully committed to its strategic decision to abandon CW as a means of warfare. Russia, and to a degree Iran too, will be the principal guardians of that commitment. Notwithstanding, the OPCW decision contains several paragraphs referring to compliance oversight and enforcement. In particular, it explicitly mentions those provisions in the CWC allowing referral by the Executive Council of a serious non-compliance matter to the UN General Assembly and Security Council. While the current Security Council resolution does not foresee automatic recourse to punitive actions under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, it has not closed the door on the possibility.
6. It is clear that those developments have changed the international dynamics from edging closer to military strikes against government forces to multinational cooperation with central roles for two international institutions, the OPCW and the United Nations.

Ghouta and past allegations

7. 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.
8. 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.
9. 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. With Syria's detailed declarations of weapon holdings and the verification of their accuracy by OPCW inspectors, these uncertainties will be completely removed in the near future.
10. The intelligence assessments of the Ghouta attacks released by France, the United Kingdom and the United States at the end of August 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 or 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 currently allow Russia to exonerate the Syrian government.
11. We must keep our mind open about the other CW allegations. The video footage and pictures on the internet indicate that some incidents involving chemicals may have taken place. But they cannot identify an agent, and we must beware of any form of confirmation bias. While at this stage we cannot exclude the possibility of some insurgent actions with toxicants, we must also bear in mind that because of its emotiveness, chemical (and biological) warfare allegations

have often been the subject of elaborate disinformation campaigns and hoaxes. In this particular case, with the view to drawing outside powers into the military conflict. Once again, I wish to emphasise that I am not in a position to assess whether a particular incident was a case of chemical warfare. I just want to warn against the risk of a picture just being worth the thousand words we want to hear!

A future by way of disarmament?

12. Since my invitation to speak to you, some fundamental developments have taken place with regard to CW in Syria. On the one hand, we may rejoice that the country is giving up its arsenal of poison weapons under international supervision. Yet on the other hand, the war still brings the greatest devastation onto civilians by means of conventional weapons. To them it matters little if death or injury comes from a bullet, shrapnel or gas. Many commentators from the Middle East, as well as representatives from human rights organisations, fear that as a consequence of the CW agreements those responsible for the carnage—President Bashar al-Assad foremost—will escape justice for the gross violation of the laws of war.
13. Disarmament by definition requires cooperation between states and is possible because of the almost exclusive focus on the weapon technology, rather than on the personalities or policies of the leaders involved. This was very clear from the way Russia and the USA were able to overcome personalised animosities of the past months to thrash out the joint Framework Agreement after intense negotiation, and get Syria to sign up to the CWC. True, the disarmament process recognises the Syrian government as a partner and therefore seems to bestow legitimacy on the regime. However, military strikes would not and could not have ignited the glimmer of hope to resolve the conflict that the Framework Agreement has.
14. 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 weapons 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.
15. 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. Even if war breaks out, disarmament prevents their use in combat or escalation of hostilities. Translated to the US-Russian Framework Agreement and the OPCW decision, 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 longer-term responsibility of the global community rather than a temporary, *ad hoc* reaction to a pressing problem by a few.

16. If successful, the disarmament decisions by the OPCW and the Security Council may inject a fresh dynamic into the so-called Helsinki process. The Final Document of the 2010 Review Conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty still requires the convening of a meeting on the elimination of non-conventional weapons in the Middle East. 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.
17. The stand-off over Iran's nuclear programme may acquire a different dynamic. Over the past week the vibes reaching us from the UN meetings in New York have been encouraging. The Iranian presidential election may prove to have been a watershed event in reconnecting Tehran with the world in mutually beneficial ways. As already indicated, 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.
18. Can we really imagine the current dynamic if (limited) punitive military strikes against Syria would have taken place a couple of weeks ago? However much one might regret the *Realpolitik* that underlies disarmament cooperation, it is the framework accord and the OPCW and Security Council decisions that raise the hope for negotiations to end to the civil war and for wider disarmament opportunities in the Middle East.
19. I thank you for your attention.