Syria Chemical Weapons Elimination Plan and the Next Steps

Events

Prepared Remarks

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The large-scale use of chemical weapons against rebel-controlled areas outside Damascus on Aug. 21 required a strong international response to help ensure that further such attacks are not launched ever again in Syria or elsewhere.

And in the weeks and months since, there has been a strong and clear message that the further use of chemical weapons will not be tolerated.

The UN chemical weapons inspection team found evidence of extensive use of the nerve agent sarin, determined the type of rockets used in the attacks, and calculated the direction from which the rockets were fired.

In the wake of these horrible attacks, which killed more than 1,000 men, women, and children, U.S. and Russian leaders, as well as a wide array of CWC states parties, have worked together to establish international control of and to eliminate Syria’s chemical arsenal.

And to its credit, the Syrian government has recognized that the human and security costs of these weapons far outweigh any perceived military or political value they may have once had.

Under the agreement negotiated Sept. 14 by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, the UN and the OPCW have put into motion an expeditious plan for accounting, inspection, control, and elimination of Syria’s deadly arsenal under the auspices of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). The agreement calls for the entire stockpile, including chemical agents, production facilities, and delivery systems, to be safely eliminated or, if necessary, removed from the country by mid-2014.

Without the CWC, establishment of the OPCW and the strong track record of the OPCW over the past 15 years, the agreement negotiated Sept. 14 by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, for the elimination of Syria’s chemical arsenal would not have been possible.

To its great credit, the OPCW has stepped up to the task and adjusted its operations to meet the tight deadlines for verifying the Syrian chemical weapons declaration and the elimination of its relatively small stockpile of weaponized material and larger stockpile of precursor chemicals.

On October 1, a joint team of OPCW and UN officials arrived in Syria and on October 6, 2013 the destruction of Syria's stockpiles of chemical weapons and equipment began under UN and OPCW supervision.

On October 27 Syria submitted the details of its plans for "total and verified destruction" of its chemical weapons stockpile and production facilities to the OPCW.
On October 31, the OPCW confirmed that Syria destroyed, or rendered inoperable, all of its declared facilities for mixing and producing chemical weapons.

On November 15 the OPCW Executive Council approved a plan for the elimination of Syria’s stockpile of chemical weapons that calls for transporting the bulk agents and precursor materials outside of Syria for destruction.

The "most critical" chemicals are to be transported out of Syria by December 31, 2013 and the remainder by February 5, 2014. The plan calls for the destruction of certain priority chemicals by March 15, 2014 and by Dec. 31, 2014, all effluents are to be destroyed.

It is very important to keep in mind that with the verified disablement of Syria’s declared mixing and filling equipment and production facilities that was completed by Oct. 31, the risk of further CW use against Syria’s people has been severely reduced as the potential for rapid weaponization has been eliminated.

Through the work of the UN and the OPCW under the Lavrov-Kerry Plan, this has been achieved in a less costly and far more effective way than a cruise missile strike ever could have accomplished.

But serious security, technical, and financial challenges that lie ahead, including the removal of the bulk agents and precursors from Syria on a tight schedule and under war-time conditions to the port of Latakia.

As announced last Friday, Nov. 29, the United States has offered to contribute a destruction technology, full operational support and financing to neutralize Syria’s priority chemicals once they are out of the country on a U.S. naval vessel at sea using hydrolysis. The MV Cape Ray is currently undergoing modifications to support the operations and to accommodate verification activities by the OPCW.

Once the bulk chemicals are removed from Syria and as United States, the OPCW, and commercial entities use hydrolysis and incineration to eliminate the bulk and precursor chemicals and effluents, it is essential that the operation is conducted properly rather than quickly or necessarily on deadline.

Based on my knowledge of the plans—which are still being developed—the operation can be conducted safely and securely and in an environmentally responsible manner.

However, we would strongly advise that before the operation in undertaken that a much more thorough public information effort is put into play to describe the operation in order to avoid misperceptions about public health, environmental, and security risks.

Toward a WMD Free Zone in the Middle East

Syria’s decision to join to the CWC and to eliminate its CW stockpile is an important step to reduce the dangers of the Syrian civil war and toward a WMD Free Zone in the Middle East.

Syria's accession to the CWC should also spur the remaining Middle East holdouts, Egypt and Israel, to join the treaty and prompt them and other states to take additional, overdue steps needed to move the region closer to becoming a zone free of all types of weapons of mass destruction.

The Arms Control Association urges all OPCW states parties and the Director-General to use their good offices to encourage action by these two key CWC hold-out states.

Thank you.

• Daryl G. Kimball
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Chemical Weapons

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