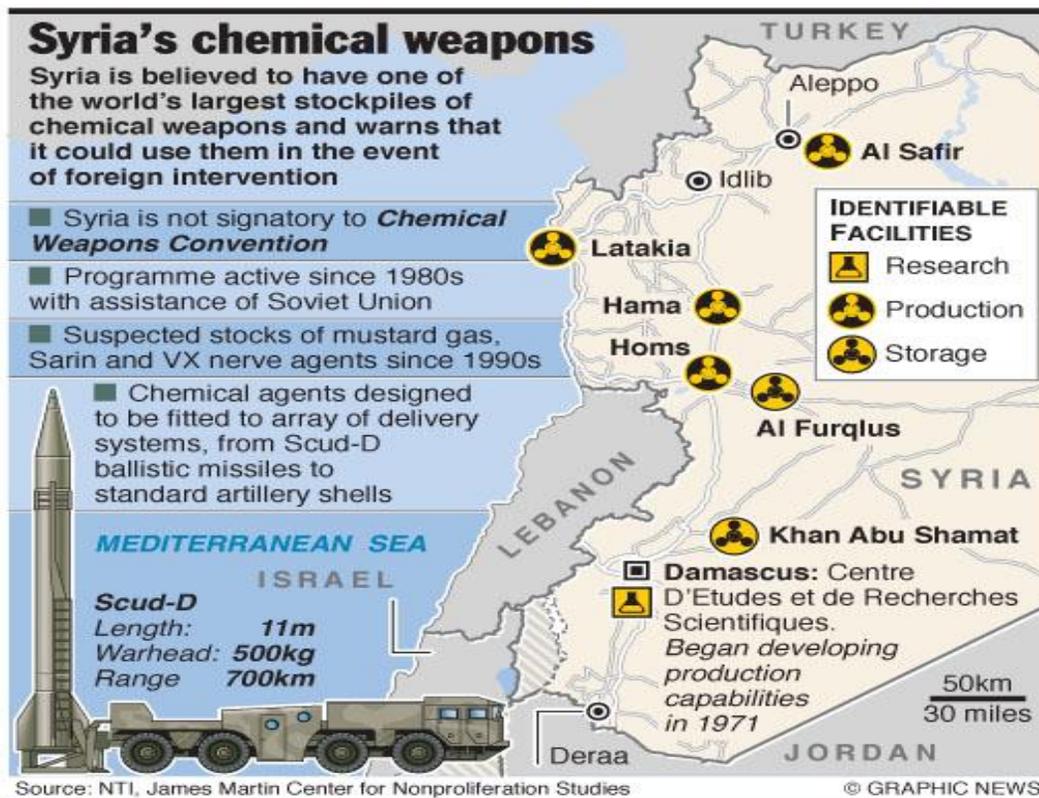




Addressing Syria's Chemical Weapons



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July 25, 2012

As the protracted civil war continues in Syria, it becomes increasingly clear that dictator Bashar al-Assad's days are numbered. The July 18 suicide bombing attack in Damascus that killed key figures within the regime's inner circle, including Assad's Defence Minister, his brother-in-law, and the head of his crisis management team were a serious internal blow to the regime. Fighting in the once untouchable capital has reportedly forced Assad to flee to the coastal city of Latakia.

Now, the strategically vital commercial capital and Syria's second largest city, Aleppo, is emerging as the key battleground between the rebel forces and the army, as each side is bracing for a major confrontation that could further tip the balance of power.

Following 17 months of conflict, and over 17,000 killed, the international community is increasingly focused on worst case scenarios that may arise in the increasingly likely event Assad is backed into a corner. Syria is regarded as possessing the largest and most advanced chemical warfare program in the Middle East, including several production facilities and many storage sites which Assad has himself referred to. Assuming regime survival is the usual priority, there is a very real possibility Assad would use any means at his disposal to remain in power. The Syrian dictator has seen what has happened to Iraqi strongman Saddam Hussein and to Libyan tyrant Muammar Qaddafi at the hands of their own respective populations, and has clearly indicated that he will do everything possible to avoid the same fate.

Will Assad resort to threatening or actually using chemical weapons? Is there a legitimate risk concerning the storages of such weapons facing potential looting by rogue elements and terrorist groups? There is a major concern that Hezbollah, under the auspices of Iran, is exploring the possibility of transferring Syrian chemical weapons to Lebanon. Al-Qaeda affiliated groups and other extremist Sunni jihadists are increasingly infiltrating the ranks of the Syrian opposition and may look to acquire these weapons as well. North Africa has witnessed significant proliferation of sophisticated and advanced weaponry looted from Libya's arms depots, causing significant destabilization, particularly in the Sahel region. There are clear and devastating implications associated with each of the nightmare scenarios concerning Syria's chemical weapons ending up in the hands of terrorist groups.

The exact magnitude of Syria's stockpile is not confirmed; however, the CIA estimates that Syria is currently in possession of several hundred liters of chemical weapons, while producing hundreds of tones of nerve agents every year, including mustard gas, VX, sarin and tabun – all with lethal effects. Syria is also suspected of possessing a biological weapons program as well; however, most of the recent attention has been focused on their chemical weapons stock. It must be noted that there is no evidence that the regime has employed chemical weapons in the past, despite claims of its use in the brutal suppression of the 1982 uprising in Hama. The fact that other authoritarian regimes in the region used chemical weapons against internal enemies leads experts to conclude that such a scenario must not be overlooked. The deployment of chemical weapons by Saddam Hussein against Kurdish and Shiite rebels (1988 and 1991, respectively) and by Yemen during its civil war throughout the 1960s, further illustrates that totalitarian Arab regimes will resort to drastic measures to preserve power and maintain control.

After Damascus acknowledged the existence of chemical weapons for the first time recently, U.S. President Barack Obama issued a direct warning, stating that the leadership will be held accountable in the event they make the "tragic mistake" of using chemical weapons.¹ This caveat comes in context of the Syrian foreign ministry's warning that chemical weapons could be

unleashed in the event of foreign intervention, adding that they would not be used against its own civilians. As the head of the Syrian National Council opposition group, Abdelbasset Seida, notes: “A regime that massacres children and rapes women could use these types of weapons.” Furthermore, Syria’s former ambassador to Iraq, the highest ranking diplomat to defect, has stated that the Assad Government will not hesitate to use chemical weapons if it believes that the regime is directly threatened. This sentiment is shared by many diplomats and observers that believe such drastic measures could be utilized if the regime perceives that there are no other options to preserve control. Some analysts believe that the fact that the Syrian Government publicly acknowledged the existence of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) is not only a veiled threat, but also a sign of desperation by a regime that has suffered considerable losses in recent weeks that may have significantly turned the tide of war. It is likely that this announcement was particularly directed at Israel.

Israeli political leaders have publicly stated that they would be prepared to attack Syria’s WMD depots to prevent transfer or looting of these weapons by Hezbollah and other terrorist groups. Foreign Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, went as far as to say that such weapons falling into militant possession constitutes a “casus belli, a red line,” for war. However, military chief Lt. Gen. Benny Gants cautioned that striking the weapons depots could force Israel to fight a broader, regional war, as distasteful to the Jewish state as it is to NATO leaders. Israel has increased its surveillance and reconnaissance missions over Syrian WMD sites utilizing sophisticated aircraft, advanced spy satellites, and unmanned aerial vehicles.² The U.S. is engaged in a similar monitoring campaign, exploiting the virtues of human intelligence as well, with spies on the ground that are likely coordinating with rebel forces and military defectors. Ideally, the end goal for both the United States and Israel is to credibly locate these weapons depots, through accurate intelligence, and to eliminate them via effective airstrikes and/or the deployment of special operations and conventional forces to seize and secure vital facilities. This mission could potentially require thousands, possibly tens of thousands, of soldiers that must be prepared for a confrontation with the regime and insurgent forces. Regional coordination and collaboration is vital in any of these scenarios; however, this mission would in all likelihood have to be led by the U.S. due to its unique capabilities and expertise.

Throughout the uprising, the White House has repeatedly demanded that Assad avoid using the most ruthless tactics against Syrian civilians, to no avail. The regime has increasingly deployed artillery and combat aircraft throughout the conflict despite American warnings from engaging in such actions. Now that reports indicate the regime is moving its chemical weapons stockpile to the border, the U.S. is working to credibly convey that utilizing these weapons is unacceptable. In addition to President Obama’s verbal warning, the U.S. should pursue this issue to the United Nations Security Council and introduce a resolution which authorizes military action if it appears that the Assad regime will rely on chemical weapons to suppress the rebellion. Credible reports show that the regime strongly considered employing these weapons in context of the devastating attack on Assad’s inner circle and significant advances by the rebel forces in vital areas. Even

Russia, Syria's strongest international ally, has publicly warned the Assad regime from using chemical weapons. This provides an opportunity for the international community to finally unite on this crucial issue and pass a UNSC resolution that would convincingly deter the Syrian regime from taking such action. Damascus must be held accountable and fear the possibility of foreign intervention, in addition to prosecution in the International Criminal Court (ICC). Defection of military leaders suggests that the real threat of ICC prosecution is taken seriously. While this is a norm-setting victory for the United Nations and the ICC, is it ultimately futile in protecting Syrian citizens at the moment. It is clear that key regional and international actors, both friend and foe, have a vested interest in securing Syria's chemical weapons, preventing its use in the conflict and containing its spread to rogue elements. This is the final red line clearly drawn in the sand that the world cannot afford to be crossed.

¹ BBC. "Syria Chemical Weapons: Obama Says World is Watching." 23 July. 2012. [BBC](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-18963720).
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-18963720>

² Katz, Yaakov. "Israel Tracks Syrian WMDs with Satellites, UAVs" 25 July. 2012. [The Jerusalem Post](http://www.jpost.com/Defense/Article.aspx?id=278898).
<http://www.jpost.com/Defense/Article.aspx?id=278898>