

# **COMMENTARY**

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## **Syrian Crisis and Chemical Weapons: Has the Main Issue Been Sidelined?**

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In the past month the world seems to have come a full circle. Coming on the heels of a reported chemical weapons strike in the suburbs of Damascus, the Syrian capital on 21 August 2013, Syria was brought to the brink of facing American military strikes and the region at large stood at the risk of an enlarged military flare up with major global powers on opposing ends of the spectrum. The Russian proposal of 10 September 2013 to take the Syrian chemical weapons under international safeguards and ensuring its destruction was readily accepted first by the US as a feasible option and thereafter by President Bashar al-Assad of Syria too. The Framework Agreement of 14 September drafted by the US and Russia in Geneva offers promise but there could be many hiccups before its implementation. While this turnaround has averted the immediate danger of the Syrian regime facing military strikes, some larger questions loom over this bloody conflict which has been going on for more than two years now. Will the proposed takeover and destruction of chemical weapons resolve the ongoing crisis in Syria? Given the hugely laborious and time consuming process of safeguarding and dismantling chemical weapons, how much time will it take for the eventual destruction of the chemical weapons stockpile? Will the US and the international community wait for the said time period while the Syrian civil war rages on, killing hundreds every week? Finally, the moot question; has the chemical weapons issue sidelined the larger and more disturbing issue of the ongoing civil war in Syria?

The first critical issue is that of takeover, safeguard and eventual destruction of chemical weapons in Syria. Each of the three steps is not only daunting in its scope but also time consuming and difficult. In case of Syria, it is estimated that chemical weapons are spread over

more than 20 sites all over the country. The list of chemical weapons sites submitted by Syria to the UN and the Organization for Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) has been called the 'initial list' indicating that more details are awaited. The possibility of some of these sites being in rebel controlled areas cannot be ruled out. In such a scenario, even if the Syrian regime agrees to provide security, it may not be able to guarantee the same in rebel controlled areas. Even if the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, the umbrella organization of Syrian opposition is to be a party to this initiative, it does not control all groups within the Syrian opposition to ensure safety of inspectors. Thus, the possibility of a risk-free safe passage to the UN inspectors to all Syrian chemical weapons site itself is suspect.

The destruction of these weapons stockpiles thereafter is a long drawn out process. It involves categorization of chemical weapons into various grades as well as segregating them into various types like assembled unitary chemical weapons (CWs) (artillery projectiles, mortars, air bombs, rockets, rocket warheads, spray tanks), CW agents stored in bulk, binary munitions and recovered CW munitions. The destruction is thereafter to be carried out in specially constructed destruction facilities which could take up to 2-3 years to construct. Due to the civil war, and the resultant precarious security situation, all time lines could get stretched.

The eventual process of physical destruction is again a very pain-staking and time consuming process. The magnitude of the process can be gauged from the fact that the US and Russia are among the countries which have not been able to destroy their chemical weapons stockpiles till now, despite taking two extensions from the OPCW. As per the Chemical Weapons Treaty of 1997, nations with chemical weapons stockpiles were given ten years to destroy their stockpiles. The US, Russia, South Korea, India and Albania, all missed the main 2007 deadline and were given a five-year extension. While India, South Korea and Albania have finished destruction by 2012, United States, Russia and Libya still lag behind. As per fresh estimates, the US is likely to destroy all stockpile by 2023 and Russia by 2018.

Given the nature of process just outlined, it is difficult to imagine the timeline sought in the case of war-torn Syria being adhered to. The Framework Agreement lays down a very ambitious timeline of verification of chemical weapons sites as also destruction of production facilities by November 2013 and physical destruction of all chemical weapons in Syria by mid-2014. In context of the constraints and the detailed procedures required to be undergone, it is indeed a very ambitious time line, a fact acknowledged by both the US and Russia.

The issue, therefore, cannot be resolved easily and there could be many hindrances in the final outcome. Whatever happens of the chemical weapons, the more serious issue of the civil war in Syria has got sidelined in the past fortnight. The bloody war in Syria continues unabated with pitched battles between the Syrian regime forces and the rebels. Already over a 100,000 lives have been lost and hundreds more are dying every week. Over 4.5 million people have been

forced to live as refugees in neighbouring countries like Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and Iraq and over two million people are internally displaced. Neither the US nor the regional countries or groups like the Arab League are ready to undertake any direct action to stop the civil war. Arming of the opposition by the US-led alliance is only adding fuel to the fire. Syria is a devastated country and is virtually split into three or four distinct territories. Analysts fear balkanization which could have far reaching consequences on Syria's internal stability and the regional dynamics of this volatile region.

While usage of chemical weapons is a grave concern and a serious breach of international laws and treaties, the bigger and ongoing crisis of daily loss of innocent human lives in Syria cannot be lost sight of. Along with chemical weapons, the international community and the UN have to find an integrated solution to end both.

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