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Syrian WMD: Counter-proliferation Contingency Planning Needed

James Phillips and James Jay Carafano, Ph.D.

Syria's embattled regime is likely to hold out for many more months but eventually could implode with many dangerous consequences for the surrounding region. One of the risks is that chemical weapons—and possibly radioactive materials from its nuclear program—could fall into the hands of terrorists. The U.S. needs a strategy for the worst-case scenario. Washington must closely monitor the evolving situation in Syria and make contingency plans in cooperation with allies to prevent the proliferation of such dangerous weapons, if necessary.

Keeping the Lid on Pandora's Box. Syria's Baathist dictatorship developed and stockpiled a lethal arsenal of chemical weapons including blister agents such as mustard gas and even more dangerous nerve agents. These chemical munitions can be delivered by artillery, rocket

launchers, Scud ballistic missiles, and aircraft. Damascus also cooperated with North Korea (and probably Iran) to develop a covert nuclear program, which Israel partially destroyed in a 2007 air strike. Radioactive materials from this program could become ingredients for a "dirty bomb" if they fall into the hands of terrorists.

While little is known about the status of Syria's nuclear facilities, U.S. officials believe that there are at least 50 chemical weapon production and storage facilities inside Syria. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper testified before Congress last week that the Syrian regime has maintained security at these sites, many of which are located in rural areas separated from the urban areas that have seen the bulk of the fighting. Pentagon officials reportedly assess that the regime has shown no sign that it is considering the use of chemical weapons or has relaxed its guard over WMD assets, which are likely treated as its crown jewels.

But as the situation inside Syria deteriorates, there is a growing possibility that the regime could lose control over facilities as its chain of command breaks down and weapons

or dangerous materials fall into the hands of defectors, looters, various rival opposition groups, or terrorists.

Those initially at risk would probably be local populations exposed to the haphazard handling of hazardous materials. The most significant danger is that these materials might be removed from the country and fashioned into improvised explosive devices elsewhere. That would require a degree of organization and infrastructure. Iran already has the means and capability to do this, using Revolutionary Guards from the Quds Force or Hezbollah, its Lebanese terrorist surrogates. Al-Qaeda, which has established a front inside Syria, has expressed an interest in the past at conducting these kinds of attacks and could seek materials in Syria if the opportunity arose.

This threat is not analogous to concerns expressed in the run-up to the Iraq War. Then, the primary concern was that Saddam Hussein's regime would use weapons against another country or deliberately transfer them to a terrorist group. Further, it was suspected that Iraq might have far greater WMD capabilities and means to employ them than Syria currently has in its possession.

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The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

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The Syrian threat is different, and the U.S. response needs to be calculated according to a different set of risks and U.S. interests. Here, the principal danger is that the regime might lose control of materials that eventually could find their way to terrorists if the regime collapses.

In some respects, the potential worst-case scenario is more like Libya, where the Muammar Qadhafi regime lost control of mustard gas supplies and huge stockpiles of modern weapons. While the mustard gas, stored in bulk containers, reportedly was secured, large numbers of arms including Man-Portable Air Defense Systems (MANPADS) were seized by many different groups. Some were smuggled out of the country and could pose a threat to civil aviation.

Military Intervention Would Be Costly and Difficult. The conditions for an outside military intervention, however, are far different from Libya. Syria would be a much more difficult military intervention than Libya due to the greater size and capabilities of the Syrian armed forces, which have remained relatively intact, unlike in Libya. Moreover, the Assad regime has more foreign allies than the isolated Qadhafi regime. It can rely on Moscow to block U.N. efforts and Iran and Hezbollah to help it resist a foreign intervention.

Such differences would make any military intervention in Syria a much riskier and potentially costly exercise that should be undertaken only as a last resort. Pentagon officials estimate that it could require more than 75,000 ground troops to secure Syria's chemical warfare facilities, according to CNN.¹ It is clear that

even such a limited intervention, much less a full-blown humanitarian intervention launched amid a civil war, would be an enormously costly and risky enterprise.

While the potential for hazardous materials being smuggled out of the country is a legitimate concern, the risks associated with deploying U.S. troops inside Syria currently are greater. There are prudent measures that the U.S. can take to mitigate the risk that hazardous materials will "leak" out of the country without putting U.S. boots on the ground.

A Prudent U.S. Policy. Washington should privately warn the Assad regime not to use its chemical weapons and that such a move will trigger much greater U.S. support, possibly including arms, for the opposition. This declaration should be a private warning, because that would increase the chances that the Assad regime might take heed, whereas a public warning could lead it to react provocatively to show it is standing up to the U.S. The message could be delivered through Syria's U.N. ambassador.

Washington separately should make it clear to all Syrian opposition groups that they will be held responsible for any chemical weapons, radioactive materials, or MANPADS that fall into their hands. They should know that they will be rewarded if they turn these over to the U.S. or allied governments and punished if they retain them or pass them on to terrorists.

The U.S., its allies, and the "Friends of Syria" contact group should establish an intelligence-sharing mechanism to monitor Syrian WMD sites and track the

movement of loose weapons in an effort to intercept them before they can be transferred to terrorist groups. The United States is already using satellite intelligence and drones to monitor Syrian military activities and should build up its intelligence-gathering network inside Syria. Other countries may be able to contribute important human intelligence that the U.S. lacks.

It is especially important to coordinate counter-proliferation and counterterrorism efforts with Syria's neighbors to prevent terrorist groups or smugglers from moving dangerous weapons out of the country. Turkey, which has extensive ties with the Syrian opposition, can play a critical role. Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq could also make important contributions in detecting and intercepting weapons leaking out of Syria. Particular attention should be paid to preventing them from being transferred to Hezbollah and Iran or falling into the hands of al-Qaeda. Washington should also develop contingency plans with these countries and the Syrian opposition to prepare a disaster response plan for the possible use or accidental detonation of chemical or radiological weapons.

Rapid-Response Plans Needed. Because air strikes against chemical weapons facilities could release toxic plumes that would threaten nearby civilians, bombing would be a desperate and dangerous means to prevent proliferation. If the U.S. receives actionable intelligence that terrorists have obtained or are about to obtain WMD materials, then it should launch a targeted CIA or military operation, if practical. For example, the Pentagon should prepare to act

1. Barbara Starr, "Military: Thousands of Troops Needed to Secure Syrian Chemical Sites," *CNN Security Clearance*, February 22, 2012, at <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2012/02/22/military-thousands-of-troops-needed-to-secure-syrian-chemical-sites/> (February 24, 2012).

on contingency plans for the rapid insertion of Special Forces personnel to secure, remove, or disable hazardous materials that might fall into terrorist hands.

The U.S. government should also plan to help a Syrian successor government secure, destroy, and disable the Assad regime's WMD stockpile and production facilities, along with loose conventional weapons such as MANPADS.

—James Phillips is Senior Research Fellow for Middle Eastern Affairs in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, and James Jay Carafano, Ph.D., is Deputy Director of the Davis Institute and Director of the Allison Center at The Heritage Foundation.