

Policy Alert

Can It Get Worse in Syria? It Just Did

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Syria's descent into ever-greater violence steepened yesterday. Driven by the regime's desperate attempt to stay in power, an already ugly conflict took an ominous turn with the reported movement of chemical munitions and what appears to be the worst massacre of civilians yet.

CHEMICAL WEAPONS MOVEMENT

Although details are lacking on yesterday's news that the regime is moving some of its chemical weapons (CW), the development signals that something important may have changed in Syria. The regime's CW infrastructure has been well established for years, and sudden movement within it suggests a major decision may be in the making. After all, the very act of moving them puts them at risk. The opposition Free Syrian Army has been widely attacking the road system, including military convoys -- if CW transports come under attack, the weapons could be damaged, chemical agents could be released, or munitions could fall into the hands of FSA elements.

The regime's decision could be based on one of several factors. If the munitions are being concentrated at a smaller number of secure facilities, that would suggest the regime is worried about losing control of its CW as a result of combat or defections. It would also be another indication that the regime's position is deteriorating.

Alternatively, the regime may be preparing to use the weapons. If CW munitions are being deployed to operational units, that would suggest preparation for use. Use of CW would be the worst possible development of the war, one that should almost certainly trigger outside intervention.

Perhaps the regime is concerned that outside actors such as the United States are preparing to target its CW stocks. Once these weapons begin moving around, locating and targeting them becomes a much more difficult intelligence problem. Although the U.S. intelligence community will presumably be checking on all known CW facilities and operational units (air, ground, and missile) with a CW mission in the wake of yesterday's reports, the regime can send the weapons virtually anywhere in the country and could simply hide them altogether. If the regime is willing to take the risks associated with moving CW in this manner, it could indicate that Damascus is seriously worried about the prospect of outside intervention.

THE MASSACRE

As many as 200 people were reportedly massacred in the village of Tremseh yesterday, and responsibility for the killings clearly lies at the regime's feet. The town of some 7,000 people was apparently subjected to concerted attack by Syrian military forces (including helicopters, artillery, and tanks) and then sacked, in the medieval sense, by *shabbiha* irregulars. The action is consistent with tactics the regime routinely employs in its offensive operations. That this kind of incident would happen at some point was predictable following the Houla massacre in May, and similar or even worse attacks could occur in the future as the regime becomes increasingly desperate to crush the opposition.

IMPLICATIONS

The Tremseh massacre and the movement of chemical weapons show that the Syrian regime is on an increasingly deadly path and will not be diverted by negotiations. The situation is becoming rapidly worse, and diplomatic efforts to end the fighting will continue to fail. UN envoy Kofi Annan's efforts are increasingly out of touch with realities on the ground, giving the regime a fig leaf of legitimacy and time in which to break the opposition. In short, this is a dangerous regime -- dangerous to its people and, as the CW movement suggests, dangerous to the region. The time for talking with Bashar al-Assad has passed. It is time for ultimatums -- and, if those fail, armed action to topple the regime.

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