

Syria Cheats

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Articles & Testimony

The regime's long history of renegeing on promises and legal obligations does not bode well for full implementation of the chemical weapons deal.

Tuesday, during the State of the Union Address, President Obama boasted that "American diplomacy, backed by the threat of force, is why Syria's chemical weapons are being eliminated." The assertion was premature. In early January, Syria's Bashar Assad regime indeed started the process of transferring its chemical weapons arsenal abroad. To date it's destroyed only 5 percent of its unconventional arsenal and it's unlikely Damascus will finish the job. Despite international commitments to the contrary, precedent suggests that Assad will retain a residual supply for future contingencies.

Like North Korea and Libya -- which famously violated international obligations on weapons of mass destruction -- there is good reason to believe that Syria will cheat on its own agreement with the United Nations to fully dispose of its chemical weapons arsenal.

Three years into a popular uprising that has left 130,000 dead, in August Assad gassed nearly 1,500 men, women, and children with Sarin. Facing international pressure, in September Damascus signed the Chemical Weapons Convention and allowed the U.N. to start a process of cataloguing, removing, and destroying CW facilities, weapons, and precursor chemicals.

A month later, Secretary Kerry praised Syrian "compliance" and called the disarmament a "credit to the Assad regime." But the honeymoon won't last. In just 13 years in power, Syria under Bashar Assad has established a prodigious track record of renegeing on promises and violating international agreements.

Assad's subterfuge started three years after coming to power, when in February 2003 then Secretary of State Colin Powell travelled to Damascus and secured a commitment from Assad to stop smuggling some 150,000 barrels of oil per day from Saddam's Iraq. Syria never halted the imports, a violation of trust that later prompted Secretary Powell to say, "I will always have that lying in my background software and on my hard drive."

Undeterred, months later Secretary Powell returned to Syria and cajoled Assad to shutter the offices and restrict the communications of Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Powell reportedly called President Bush, awakening him in the middle of the night to inform him of his diplomatic achievement. Alas, as with the earlier oil pipeline promise, this Assad undertaking also proved insincere and the terrorist headquarters remained open for business.

Later that year following the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the Assad regime moved thousands of al Qaeda insurgents bent on killing American soldiers and Iraqi civilians across the border. During bilateral security talks with the U.S., Damascus vowed to secure the frontier but the jihadi pipeline never dried up.

To be sure, these deceptions complicated Washington's Middle East policy. But while Syria's misdeeds and Assad's lies were annoying, they didn't rise to the level of strategic concern -- until 2007. That year, Israel launched an airstrike against a target in northwestern Syria that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) later confirmed was a nuclear weapons facility.

The facility at Al Kibar had been built in contravention not only of Syria's Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) obligations, but also in violation of the Comprehensive Nuclear Safeguards Agreement to which Damascus is a signatory.

Syria's egregious breach of its nuclear commitments and the regime's subsequent obstruction of the IAEA investigation do not bode well for the international effort to denude Syria of its chemical weapons capabilities.

Not surprisingly, the accuracy of Syria's inventory declaration to the Organization for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) is already in question. According to the OPCW, for example, the Assad regime declared "approximately 1,000 metric tons" of binary chemical weapons precursors, a number that seems too oddly coincident with Secretary Kerry's earlier formulation that that Syria "has "about a thousand metric tons" of these agents. (Is it possible that U.S. intelligence assessments are so precise?) Likewise, according to non-proliferation experts, given the size and scope of the CW program, the fact that the Assad regime declared absolutely no filled chemical munitions is a glaring red flag.

At present, it is too soon to tell whether the Assad regime is violating its chemical weapons commitments. After having killed so many Syrians with conventional armaments, it's difficult to see why the Assad regime would see a need to retain a residual chemical arsenal. Perhaps over the past 13 years, Bashar has come to understand that there is no cost associated with cheating.

Indeed, objectively speaking, the use of chemical weapons has changed the dynamic on the ground in Syria and in the international community, effectively strengthening the Assad regime. Not only did the regime avoid a promised U.S. military strike, as UN Special Envoy to Syria Lakhdar Brahimi noted in October, the chemical weapons deal transformed Assad from a "pariah" into a "partner."

In the coming months -- even as Damascus continues its genocidal war against its political opponents -- more blandishments are sure to be lavished on Assad. The regime will be praised for fulfilling its commitments, and the rebels may even be condemned for undermining security and delaying the disarmament process. And eventually, the U.N. -- and the Obama administration -- will pronounce Syria free of chemical weapons.

Shortly after the agreement was reached to steal Assad's chemical arsenal out of Syria, Secretary of State Kerry sought to preempt critics of the deal. "We're not just going to trust and verify," he assured, "We're going to verify, and verify, and verify." Alas, because the Chemical Weapons Convention provides signatories the right to manage access to facilities and does not mandate intrusive inspections, verification is at best a relative term. And then, of course, there is the matter of Assad's penchant for lying.

At the kickoff of the Geneva II peace conference on January 22, Syrian foreign minister Walid Moualem told U.N. secretary general Ban Ki Moon, "Syria always keeps its promises." Western governments should know better. When it comes to keeping international obligations, Syria's Bashar Assad regime seldom keeps its promises. Given the absence of consequences for pursuing nuclear and deploying chemical weapons, the inescapable takeaway for Assad is that when it comes to dictators and WMD, the old aphorism that "winners never cheat and cheaters never win" doesn't apply.

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