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Making The Case: Dismissing the Major Critiques of Syria’s Chemical Weapons Destruction

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Our deal with Russia to destroy Syrian chemical weapons (CW) is a huge win for the United States because it will help keep those arms out of the hands of terrorists. Nevertheless, skeptics claim:

- We can’t trust the Russians or the Syrians—despite America’s history of reaching arms reduction deals with the Soviets and the Russians;
- We can’t eliminate CW during a civil war—despite our experience with CW destruction;
- We will pay too much to implement this plan—even though it is far less than what we would spend on strikes.

So far, the skeptics are wrong. While the destruction of Syria’s CW will be a challenge, it is one that we can and should meet.

Under threat of American military action, Syria agreed to sign the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) Treaty, and Russia agreed to the destruction of Syria’s chemical weapons arsenal. This not only averted immediate American intervention in Syria, but also took a significant step toward addressing a direct threat to American security—chemical weapons loose on the battlefield that could fall into the hands of terrorists.

This agreement came together over the course of just a week. What we know so far suggests that this deal is on track and is good for the United States.

In this paper, we ask and answer some of the leading concerns about the Syrian CW deal.

MAKING THE CASE

The American public resoundingly supports the initiative to remove Syria’s CW.

	Support	Oppose	No Opinion
The U.S. says the Syrian government has used CW. Should the U.S. launch missile strikes against the Syrian government?	30%	61%	9%
Russia has proposed to have Syria place its CW under UN control, which would then destroy them. Do you support or oppose this plan?	79%	16%	5%

September 18, 2013 Washington Post/ABC Poll¹

CAN WE TRUST THE RUSSIANS?

Some critics claim the Russians are just stalling to keep Assad in power and are insincere about achieving a deal. Indeed, Moscow and Damascus are closely aligned. But Russia's anti-CW effort indicates it wants to solve this problem without further escalating the war, and it seems they are acting in self-interest, if not perfect good faith.²

The Russians have ample incentive to work with the U.S. For example, if Assad were to fall, the victorious rebels could seek revenge on his most important ally by funneling some of the Syrian CW to terrorists battling the Russian government.³

Of course, we cannot be naïve when working with the Russians, but we should take to heart President Reagan's adage of "trust but verify." Throughout the Cold War, and after, when our mistrust of Putin's predecessors was at its height, the U.S. nevertheless negotiated multiple arms control treaties with the Soviets, all of which had verification mechanisms.⁴

Moreover, this isn't just a U.S.-Russia deal—the Syrian CW initiative is moving to the UN, where it will become the work of the world.

- By internationalizing this effort, and by working under UN and Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) auspices, the U.S. does not have to bear sole responsibility for this initiative.
- Such multilateral agreement also places the burden on Syria's government. As a recent signatory to the CWC, Damascus is now required to "meet the costs of destruction of chemical weapons it is obliged to destroy."⁵

MAKING THE CASE

We can't entirely trust the Russians, but we can work with them on this. They have every incentive to get rid of Assad's chemical weapons, and we need them to get it done.

The deal's general parameters are that the U.S. and Russia will:

- *Submit procedures to destroy Syria's CW stockpile to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).*
- *Review Syria's comprehensive listing of its CW munitions, storage, and production facilities. (Syria has already made an initial declaration.)*
- *Decide whether to destroy the CW in-country or remove them from Syria.*
- *Remove or destroy all of Syria's CW production-related materials by November 2013.*
- *Remove or destroy all of Syria's CW munitions by the first half of 2014.⁶*

IS IT POSSIBLE TO DESTROY SYRIA'S CW IN THE MIDDLE OF A CIVIL WAR?

Some claim that this agreement can't be implemented because it's too hard to destroy 1,000 tons of Syrian CW and precursors during a civil war. But just because it's difficult doesn't mean the U.S. or the international community should prematurely give up on this effort.⁷

- The U.S., Russia, and other countries have had experience destroying thousands of tons of CW in the last 20 years in places like the former Soviet Union, Iraq, and Albania.⁸
- Our chances of doing it together are much greater than they are if either country proceeded unilaterally—what U.S. policymakers were considering at one time.⁹

In particular, success would be a huge boon to the U.S. and our closest allies.

- Syria originally developed its CW program in the 1970s with assistance from Egypt and the USSR because it could not compete with Israel's conventional military strength.¹¹
- Other friends in the region such as Turkey (a NATO ally), as well as Lebanon and Jordan, will also breathe a little easier knowing these weapons will not be used against them by Assad, Hizbollah, or the rebels in any future conflict.

WHAT ABOUT THE COSTS?

Third Way recently examined the likely costs to the United States of removing and/or destroying Syria's CW stockpile.¹²

- Under the CWC, such costs should (and still could) be borne by the Syrian government.
- Assad himself recently estimated it would cost \$1 billion and a year to complete the destruction.¹³

But even if he can't or won't pay, and even if the U.S. has to finance the mission, this price is likely far less than if we were to strike the country militarily.

- Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Martin Dempsey wrote in a letter last year that most "periodic, limited" military strikes in Syria would be both open-ended and cost billions of dollars.¹⁴

Syria's chemical weapons stockpile consists of:

- Hundreds of tons of sulfur mustard;
- Tens of tons of VX nerve agent;
- Several hundred tons of sarin, representing most of the arsenal.¹⁰

MAKING THE CASE

If chemical weapons are away from Syria, Israel will be free from the chemical dagger wielded by its northern enemy.

- NATO's 78 day air campaign against Serbian forces in Kosovo cost approximately \$5 billion (in 1999 dollars).¹⁵

CONCLUSION

Destroying 1,000 tons of CW during the middle of a civil war will be a complex challenge, no matter how diligently the U.S., Russia, and other countries try to achieve this goal. But it can and should be attempted. Of course, even if this effort stalls or fails, the U.S. still has the option of striking Syria conventionally from U.S. bases in Turkey and our warships in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Destroying Assad's CW won't address other difficult matters related to the Syrian conflict, such as the fact that al Qaeda-linked groups have made and consolidated large territorial gains in the last year, or that Assad still has a fearsome conventional military that continues to kill civilians. But removing CW from this conflict is a step in the right direction toward lessening the terrible carnage, and a net win for the Syrian people, the region, and the United States.

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ENDNOTES

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