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## U.S. and Russia press Syria, but are slow to destroy their own chemical weapons

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Although Iran signed the chemical weapons ban in 1993 and ratified it in 1997, analysts say, Israel's unwillingness to come clean about its own suspected stocks is rooted in concerns that neighboring Syria and Egypt have never done so.

That Syria is suddenly moving toward becoming a signatory to the weapons ban and will be "giving up its chemical weapons is all the more reason for Israel to ratify," said Tom Z. Collina, director of research at the Washington-based Arms Control Association.

Others argue that the specter of hypocrisy hanging over Washington's posture toward Israel on the chemical weapons issue is irrelevant because Jerusalem is such a close ally.

"We believe in nonproliferation, but some countries worry us more than others," said Douglas Bandow, a senior fellow specializing in foreign policy at the Cato Institute.

"I worry more about Iran and North Korea than I do about Israel and France, and that's natural," he said. "Washington's problem is that it wants to uphold a principle, but if you uphold a principle, you can't make exceptions. So that forces us to do a kind of a rhetorical dance."

It remains to be seen whether other nations may attempt to seize upon the issue in New York this week as the U.N. debates whether to put its full weight behind the U.S.-Russian deal on Syria.

Not in my backyard

An investigation by The Washington Times, meanwhile, uncovered a host of reasons for why the U.S. has failed to meet the 2012 deadline set by the treaty for destroying the weapons.

Nonproliferation analysts note that Washington and Moscow over the past decade has focused less on their own stocks than on neutralizing chemical weapons in more volatile corners of the world — namely Libya, Albania and Iraq.

But on the U.S. front, there is also a classic not in my backyard — or “NIMBY” — element at play, said James Lewis, the head of communications for the Washington-based Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation.

When Congress signed the ban 20 years ago, said Mr. Lewis, it triggered a backlash among American voters in states where the stockpiles were secretly maintained.

“No one wants a truck of sarin going down their street,” he said, explaining how Congress subsequently embarked on the delicate and yearslong enterprise of funding and implementing chemical weapons incineration and neutralization programs that met the standards of U.S. environmental law — while also not backfiring on the local political front.

“I think we bit off a little more than we could chew given the stockpiles we had built,” Mr. Lewis said. “Congressmen have to go home from Washington and they can’t go home and say, ‘Oh, guess what, we just put a chemical weapons disposal facility right there.’ If they do that, they’re not going to get re-elected.”

From Oregon to Indiana, Utah and Maryland, such politics have been playing out for two decades in eight states, with billions of federal dollars pumped toward the expensive process of dismantling the U.S. arsenal without creating environmental hazards for citizens of those states.

Cold War pork barrel?

Published reports show U.S. Army estimates of \$28 billion to cover the total cost of destroying the U.S. chemical weapons stockpile — a process not anticipated to be completed before 2021.

That the effort is mired with complications has been known for years in Washington. A 2003 report by the Government Accountability Office said it was in “turmoil,” lacked “stable leadership at the upper management levels,” and noted that the U.S. was expected to miss “milestones because of schedule delays due to environmental, safety, community relations, and funding issues.”

Analysts approached for this story downplayed the notion that the slowness with which the U.S. has gone about destroying its stockpile might be a result of a Cold War-style dance between Washington and Moscow in which neither wishes to be the first to destroy its chemical weapons stockpile.

That the business of weapons destruction might also be slow because it serves as a so-called pork barrel issue for states where the stockpiles exist is also unlikely. “I don’t think there any politicians eager to hang their hat on this as a way of bringing money into their district,” Mr. Lewis said.

Significant progress in the program has been made by last year. Operations at six sites have been completed, and the remaining 10 percent of the original stockpile is now housed in two states — Kentucky and Colorado.

What's left in those states is slated to be destroyed through a highly technical process known as "oxidation," a method deemed environmentally safer but more expensive than the previously used technique of incineration.

What it means for Syria

Big uncertainties remain over how international operatives will go about securing the Syrian cache, as well as where and how it will be destroyed.

Those questions appeared to weigh heavily this month on Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, Kentucky Republican. Construction is under way on a chemical weapons oxidation facility at the Blue Grass Army Depot in his state.

"As we've seen in my own state," Mr. McConnell said during a Sept. 10 appearance on the Senate floor, "destroying chemical weapons is extremely challenging and requires a great deal of attention to detail and safety."

In offering tepid support for the deal between Moscow and Washington, the senator reminded his colleagues that the path to "eventually securing, and destroying" Syria's stockpile is "still a long way off."

While the U.S.-Russia deal has won praise from both sides of the aisle in Washington, some lawmakers have been downright scornful.

Sen. John Barrasso, Wyoming Republican, has been one of the more vocal critics, claiming Moscow simply cannot be trusted on the chemical weapons front.

"It is especially troubling that Russia is taking the lead in Syria when it has repeatedly failed to comply with its own international commitments," Mr. Barrasso said in a statement exclusive to The Times. "Russia has proven time and time again that we can't trust them — and that they aren't working in our best interests."

The Sept. 14 framework agreement reached between Washington and Moscow calls for the complete "removal and destruction" of Syria's chemical weapons by the "first half of 2014."

Mr. Collina, at the Arms Control Association, says the timeline is ambitious, but could be met if international operatives move quickly to collect and then ship Syria's weapons to a third nation. "They've got this option of taking the stuff out of the country, so you could reasonably do that by the end of next year," he said.

According to Mr. Lewis, at the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, the most likely destination is Russia, which means a ripple effect can be expected with regard to Russia's chemical weapons destruction operations. "If it goes to Russia, they'd be using their existing destruction facilities and that would set them back even further," he said.

But, Mr. Collina said, such concerns should not be a factor right now. "The biggest priority is to either destroy these materials in Syria or remove them from Syria as soon as possible," he said. "The fact that it might slow down the chemical weapons destruction in some other country such as the U.S. or Russia would be an acceptable price to pay."