

# Syrian WMDs Don't Justify Intervention

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Syria possesses chemical weapons. This unsurprising news has generated professions of shock and horror from world leaders. But the existence of Syria's deadly arsenal is another good reason for the United States to stay out of that nation's worsening civil war.

The ongoing fighting has excited the usual demands for U.S. intervention. But outside intervention rarely is simple or cheap, and usually the unintended consequences are many, as evident in the debacle in Iraq. If Washington breaks another country, it will bear responsibility for fixing it, something the United States has spent nearly eleven years trying to do in Afghanistan. War should be a last resort, not just another policy choice. The specter of Assad's chemical-weapons arsenal makes it even more imperative to realistically assess U.S. interests in the region.

## Outrage or Hypocrisy?

To be sure, Syria's chemical-weapons stockpile adds another complication to the hostilities. The regime could deploy chemical weapons as a last resort against the opposition. Syria's neighbors, and especially Israel, worry that regime collapse might spread WMDs throughout the Middle East and perhaps beyond. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Israel—the Middle East's premier nuclear power that also possesses chemical and possibly biological weapons—was "ready to act" to seize Syria's weapons to prevent them from falling into Hezbollah's hands.

The stakes in Syria rose even higher when Damascus warned that it would deploy chemical weapons, which it previously denied possessing, against foreign invaders. Foreign Ministry spokesman Jihad Makdissi [stated](#): "Any stocks of WMD or any unconventional weapons that the Syrian Arab Republic possesses" would not be used against the Syrian people but "are meant to be used only and strictly in the event of external aggression against the Syrian Arab Republic."

Great shock and outrage was expressed in response. UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon [intoned](#): "It would be reprehensible if anyone in Syria would use weapons of mass destruction."

The rhetoric soared even higher from nations threatening to attack Syria. The European Union, most of whose members are in NATO, declared itself to be "seriously concerned." British foreign secretary William Hague, representing a nuclear power, [announced](#) that "it is unacceptable to say that they would use chemical weapons under any circumstances." German foreign minister Guido Westerwelle, whose country actually has deployed chemical weapons in combat, called the suggestion "monstrous."

President Barack Obama [joined the chorus](#): "Given the regime's stockpiles of chemical weapons, we will continue to make it clear to Assad and those around him that the world is watching and that they will be held strictly accountable by the international community, and the United States, should they make the tragic mistake of using those weapons." He didn't mention that America has the deadliest WMD arsenal in the world.

State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland [elaborated](#): "that kind of loose talk just speaks to the kind of regime that we're talking about." Of course, she is part of an administration in which there has been much loose talk about intervening against Syria with military force.

The Western reaction to Makdissi's statement is pure hypocrisy. No one doubts that American, British, French and Israeli officials would use everything in their arsenals, including nuclear weapons, if they believed doing so was necessary for their nation's defense. Moreover, Damascus has much to fear: the United States, NATO and Israel routinely bomb and invade other nations, and the Assad regime has been the target of a concerted international campaign pushing military action against Syria. On its own terms, Damascus's threat is neither surprising nor unreasonable.

### **Not all WMDs are Equal**

Moreover, the dangers of the Syrian chemical arsenal have been vastly exaggerated. Columnist Austin Bay [warned](#) that “If the regime fails, then the evil genie of mass death may escape to haunt the Middle East and potentially the world.” He worried that “the WMDs serve as an insurance policy, wrapped within a suicide pact” and offer a “tin-pot 21st century version of mutual assured destruction (MAD) thermonuclear brinkmanship.”

Yet Syria’s chemical-weapons arsenal, thought to include cyanide, mustard gas, tabun, and the nerve agents sarin and VX, does not come close to matching the nuclear capability of the Soviet Union, which first led to the MAD scenario. While chemical weapons commonly are included among WMDs, they are less fearsome than nuclear or biological weapons. They destroy less than the former and dissipate more quickly than the latter. (Damascus also is believed to possess a limited stockpile of biological agents, including Anthrax.) For example, the 1995 chemical attack on the Tokyo subway by the Aum Shinrikyo religious cult, though morally hideous, killed only thirteen people, which “indicated the difficulty in effectively disseminating CW agents,” noted a study by the Congressional Research Service.

Chemical weapons are most useful for a traditional power with traditional delivery methods—artillery shells, bombs and missiles—not for terrorist groups with far more limited capabilities. Several countries currently have chemical weapons, but even neocons who have urged preventive military action to prevent the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Iraq, Iran, North Korea and Syria have not proposed war to stop those or other nations from developing chemical arms. Chemical weapons are a military supplement, not a new destructive force.

### **It Doesn’t Matter if Assad is MAD**

Damascus’s WMD threat was quite limited: to defend against outside aggression. Even Leonard Spector of the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies at the Monterey Institute acknowledged that Jihad Makdissi’s statement warning against invasion “seems to be an attempt to be responsible.”

Obviously, Assad’s promise to limit use of chemical weapons has little credibility. Nevertheless, his stockpile would have little utility against Syrian rebels. Damascus already has superiority in conventional weapons. Its chief weakness is widespread popular opposition. Moreover, Assad’s forces could not limit the impact of these weapons to just rebels—and ending all military restraints would guarantee a gruesome end for most anyone in the regime if the opposition ultimately triumphs.

Regime collapse would threaten potentially significant “leakage” to other states and groups. However, Israeli Lieutenant General Benny Gantz recently told the Knesset that Syria had bolstered security for its chemical weapons. At the same time, allied support for the opposition, even if justified on other grounds, is making Assad’s collapse more likely. If the United States chooses to destabilize a country and region, it can scarcely complain about the consequences.

Syria’s threat to use chemical weapons in defense is the simplest to defuse. Columnist Frida Ghitis [asserted](#) that Syria’s position “has eliminated any doubts about the need to bring an end to the al-Assad family’s brutal rule,” but it is just such demands to end that rule that led to the threat to use chemical weapons. Chemical weapons likely will not be deployed if the United States and other nations do not attack Damascus.

The expanding Syrian civil war is a tragedy. Nevertheless, the many good reasons to wish Assad’s departure do not justify the United States or NATO intervening militarily in the conflict. Indeed, Damascus’s threat to use chemical weapons in its defense is one of the best reasons for America to stay out.

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