

# The Russian-U.S. solution for Syria's chemical weapons: ramifications for Israel

By Yossi Alpher

## ■ Executive summary

Against a backdrop of considerable uncertainty and regional instability, the Russian-U.S. initiative to eliminate Syria's chemical weapons arsenal poses a host of ramifications for Israel. Possible positive outcomes include the removal by non-military means of Syria's non-conventional threat and new momentum for the international community to impose controls on Iran's nuclear programme. On the other hand, the chemical weapons initiative, coupled with a demonstration of Russian support, appears to have strengthened a mafia-like regime in Damascus that has a proven propensity for both barbarity and cynical deception. Moreover, the perception of ongoing U.S. withdrawal from active involvement in the Middle East, coupled with Russia's apparent new "ownership" of the Syrian regime, may require Israel to rethink additional regional strategic calculations.

The international drama generated by the large-scale use of chemical weapons in Syria on August 21st 2013 is far from over. In view of the ongoing fighting and the Assad regime's proclivity for obfuscating its role in a variety of atrocities, we still do not know if there can and will be an effective supervision regime for the Syrian regime's chemical weapons arsenal. By the same token, we do not know whether an U.S.-led punitive attack on Syria is still an option if the new arms control initiative fails. Nevertheless, international developments of the past month have created a new reality in and around Syria that has already impacted Israel's strategic interests and calculations.

This new reality and its ramifications for Israel are the topic of this expert analysis. These ramifications revolve around Israel's relations with the U.S. and Russia, Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's improved chances for political survival, the consequences of an effort to implement chemical disarmament in Syria, the implications of the new reality for Syria's other neighbours whose fate touches on Israel's, and the status of the Golan Heights, which has been a tranquil border for decades.

## U.S. strategic withdrawal from the Middle East

Of primary significance for Israel is overall U.S. behaviour in this crisis. The Obama administration's repeated equivocations regarding its "red line", the negative attitude toward a military strike displayed by the American public and Congress, the effect of Britain's parliamentary rejection of a co-operative military endeavour, and U.S. readiness to co-operate with Russia in a disarmament initiative despite the almost-certain prospect of interminable delays and Assad regime deception – are all playing out against the backdrop of the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan. In Israel's perception, Washington is increasingly unlikely to undertake any new military involvement in the Middle East.

Israeli strategic and political circles recognise in these developments two potential trends. On the one hand, and notwithstanding the obvious differences between chemical weapons in Syria and the nuclear weapons programme in Iran, the likelihood that Israel could depend on the U.S. to launch a military strike against Iran if and when President Obama's Iranian nuclear red line is crossed appears to have been reduced. On the other hand, in view of the prospect of productive Russian-U.S. co-operation in

disarming Syria, and factoring in the decidedly more moderate emerging profile of the Rowhani presidency, the possibility of an agreed political solution to the Iran nuclear crisis appears to have increased.

In recent days Israel's political leaders, from Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu down, have openly registered their understanding of the contradictory repercussions of the Russian-U.S. deal regarding Syria. On the one hand, as Netanyahu himself noted (quoting an untranslatable Talmudic proverb), if Israel doesn't look after itself, no one will. On the other hand, Netanyahu allowed that the agreement to strip Syria of chemical weapons would be judged by its outcome, while Israeli strategic circles have acknowledged that the removal of Syria's non-conventional threat – which, after all, was created to deter and threaten Israel – would be a most welcome spinoff of the Syrian civil war.

### **Russia's emergence as Syria's key ally and minder**

Until mid-September 2013 Russia did not appear to Israel to be the most important regional or international supporter of the Assad regime: Iran and its Lebanese Shia proxy Hizbullah took precedence. This situation has now changed. Russia's demand that the Syrian government abandon a key strategic weapon was apparently based on Russia's assessment that the alternative was a process of U.S. military intervention leading to the regime's downfall and possibly a takeover by radical Islamists – an outcome the Russian government considers a strategic threat because of its potentially incendiary effect on Islamists in Russia. Russian (and Iranian) disgust with Bashar al-Assad's use of chemical weapons against Syria's civilian population may also have played a role in the Kremlin ultimatum.

The consequent Russian intervention is nothing short of stunning in its strategic impact. From here onwards, when looking northward at events in Syria, Israel must factor Russia into its calculations to a far greater extent than previously. Insofar as Russia and Israel maintain good relations, this could have favourable results. On the other hand, considering Russia's suspicions of U.S. motives for intervention in the Arab world (i.e. regime change ending in disaster, as evidenced in Iraq in 2003, Libya in 2011 and even in U.S. endorsement of Muslim Brotherhood rule in Egypt in 2012) and its appreciation of the U.S.-Israel relationship, the entire chemical weapons affair could cloud Russian-Israeli relations.

Looking beyond Israel to the rest of the Arab world, which is predominantly Sunni, Russia's perceived alliance with the Syrian Alawites and their Iranian, Lebanese and Iraqi Shia backers could now prove more problematic than ever for Russian-Arab relations. Since civil war broke out in Syria in 2011 the Sunni Arab world has not hidden its disapproval of Russia's support for the Assad regime. In an extraordinary encounter in late July 2013 the director general of Saudi intelligence, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, apparently tried and failed to either bribe or intimidate

Russian president Vladimir Putin to distance him from Assad, the Saudis' enemy. Now Russia will presumably make the case to the Sunni Arabs that its capacity to defang Syria at the regional strategic level and achieve non-military solutions to the Syrian conflict serves their interests as well. As Israel calculates its need for Arab allies against Iran, it must pay close attention to developments in Russian-Arab relations.

### **Survival of the Assad regime**

Despite – or perhaps because of – the prospect of losing its chemical arsenal, the Assad regime's near-term prospects for survival appear to have improved thanks to Russia's support and international recognition of the disarmament facilitation role the Syrian government is now expected to play. Assessments regarding the regime's collapse and/or Syria's descent into total chaos, which were prevalent just a few months ago, must at least temporarily be set aside. But this may not be quite the same regime.

Israel confronts an embattled northern neighbour backed solidly by Russia, Iran, and a steady stream of extremist Shia volunteers from Iraq and as far afield as Yemen and Bahrain. In the Israeli perception the Assad regime, with its mafia-like nature and reliance on terror, lying and deception, is increasingly dependent on its allies. Not only will the loss of its chemical weapons weaken its deterrent profile, but the influence of its friends will reduce its capacity for independent decision-making.

If the months ahead witness a successful Russian-U.S. diplomatic effort, building on success in Syria, to resolve the crisis over Iran's nuclear programme, this could play to Israel's strategic advantage. If, on the other hand, as many in Israel certainly anticipate, Assad is caught obfuscating and obstructing efforts to eliminate his chemical arsenal, conceivably with Putin's connivance, the Levant arena could face new prospects of escalation in the conflict engulfing it.

### **Regional non-conventional disarmament**

Success in disarming Syria of its chemical weaponry could conceivably have a ripple effect that would pose disarmament issues not only in Iran, but possibly in Israel as well. Assad has already demanded that Israel, too, give up its chemical weapons (it is not known to have any, but it has never ratified the chemical weapons disarmament treaty that it signed in 1993). If Russia is significantly involved in a nuclear disarmament deal with Iran, Israel will probably come under pressure in this regard too. Indeed, in mid-September 2013 Putin went on record linking Syrian chemical and Israeli nuclear disarmament, while Israel narrowly rebuffed an Arab initiative at the International Atomic Energy Agency demanding that it join the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

In other words, Israel's declared readiness (going all the way back to Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir in 1991-92) to contemplate nuclear disarmament only when all the Middle East countries, including Iran, have signed peace agree-

ments with it could be challenged by developments catalysed by Syria's August 21st chemical weapons attack.

### Syria's other neighbours

These same developments will affect Turkey, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon in ways that could impact on Israel as well. These neighbours of Syria are very diverse in their orientation. Unlike Israel, none has much to fear from Syria's chemical arsenal. But only Turkey resolutely opposes Assad's ongoing rule and openly supported a U.S. military strike that might have hastened the regime's demise. Shia elements in Iraq and Lebanon are aiding the Assad regime, while Jordan is aiding the opposition and is reportedly covertly working with Israel to secure its border with Syria. All are dealing with a huge flow of refugees that will only abate when the Syrian civil war is over. Only Israel has avoided both a refugee problem and – even factoring in a recent verbal tilt against Assad – choosing sides in Syria.

To the extent that the Assad regime's grip on power is strengthened by the Russian-U.S. disarmament move, Turkey, Jordan, and Sunni elements in Lebanon and Iraq stand to lose. So do Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which financially support the rebels. Under these circumstances Jordan in particular, but possibly Turkey as well, might seek closer security co-operation with Israel. If the new diplomatic momentum in the Levant extends into Iran and mitigates Tehran's nuclear threat, the Netanyahu government in Israel can probably expect heightened international pressure to move toward a solution of the Palestinian issue. On the other hand, if the Syrian disarmament effort fails or even somehow exacerbates the human suffering there and U.S. support for moderate rebel factions is augmented, we can expect little change in the regional balance of power and interests.

### The Golan Heights

The ceasefire that characterised Syrian-Israeli relations on the Golan Heights for decades after the 1973 war reflected both countries' need for stability and quiet and their fear of the consequences of renewed warfare. This accomplishment was all the more remarkable in view of the repeated failure of negotiations aimed at a territories-for-peace solution on the Heights. In the past year or so, however, the situation there has been destabilised by the Syrian civil war, with minor incidents usually caused by stray rebel shelling.

On the broader Israeli-Syrian front, Israel has reportedly on several occasions interdicted strategic arms shipments sent by the beleaguered Assad regime to Hizbullah in Lebanon, thereby backing up a "red line" set by the Israeli government, without the Syrian armed forces responding in any way. These developments seemingly underline the interest of both Israel and the Assad regime in maintaining quiet along their land border despite the civil war.

The outlook for the future of the Golan border is more problematic. To the extent that the Salafist opposition takes root along the Syrian side of the line or total anarchy prevails in southern Syria, Israel can at some point expect terrorist attacks and will face a dilemma regarding how and against whom to respond. If and as the Assad regime comes under even greater Iranian/Hizbullah influence than at present, Israel's borders with Syria and Lebanon could merge into an Israeli-Iranian proxy front. Greater Russian influence in Syria, on the other hand, probably bespeaks a quieter border.

Only one scenario points to the long-term prospect of renewed Israeli-Syrian peace talks centring on the territory of the Golan: victory in Syria by moderate, secular opposition elements. That is not a likely prospect. Not surprisingly, then, after decades of delay, the Israeli government recently issued licences to drill for oil and gas on the Golan.

### Conclusion

Until now, Israel has assessed that nothing good would emerge from the Syrian civil war; it was essentially looking at bad and worse outcomes. It feared a triumphant Assad regime that would reinforce the Iranian and Hizbullah threat to Israel's north, while it was wary of an opposition victory that would place Salafist Sunni extremists near its northern border and destabilise Jordan. Against this backdrop, the removal of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal would certainly be a welcome byproduct of the disaster visiting the Levant.

As matters stand, there is nothing to stop the ongoing disintegration of the post-Ottoman Levant state system to Israel's north and the huge refugee crisis it is generating. Now the situation that has developed in and around Syria since the August 21st 2013 attack near Damascus bespeaks an additional array of potential developments, some seemingly beneficial and some not, over which Israel is likely to have little – if any – control. ■

## ■ THE AUTHOR

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