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THE SYRIAN CHEMICAL WEAPONS AGREEMENT IN PERSPECTIVE

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Summary

The agreement reached by the United States and Russia on a joint strategy on dismantling Syria's chemical weapons, which led to the breakthrough UN Security Council binding resolution on 27 September, has much reduced the risk of a US-led military intervention in the Syrian civil war. This briefing relates that surprising and welcome development to the chances of wider negotiations that might see an end to the war, including the proposal to hold a Syria peace conference, the so-called Geneva II conference, in mid-November. It also looks at Russia's motivations in seeking a negotiated solution and the confluence of interests that may be uniting the US and Russia.

The Chemical Weapons Negotiations

The US/Russian agreement, reached on 14 September, required a full declaration of Chemical Weapons (CW) stocks within a week, followed by their destruction during 2014. Syria has admitted holding CW stocks, has made a declaration and has applied to sign up to the Chemical Weapons Convention. UN chemical weapons Inspectors are due in Damascus on 1 October. It is likely that this required strong pressure from Moscow, quite probably involving the Iranians as well. The agreement faces many problems, including the accurate identification and elimination of stocks in the middle of a complex civil war, and there are already major criticisms from US Republican and Israeli sources over the US decision to agree to this. It is probable that an issue in the US compromising with the Russians was the preference to avoid a deterrent strike because of the risk of escalation, as well as the real risk that Congress would not vote in favour of the strikes.

Even so, four factors should be born in mind:

- There are reliable reports that over the last two years the regime has consolidated its bulk stocks and weaponised CW systems in a reduced number of sites because of fear of rebel forces gaining access. Moreover, a higher proportion than expected of the chemical arsenal is in bulk form rather than as weaponised stocks ready for use. This makes the issue of identifying and removing them rather less difficult than supposed.
- If progress is made, it is highly unlikely that the regime will use CW in the near future and,
- In the long term, signing up to the CWC means that a successor regime will have difficulty in acquiring CW stocks.
- CW disarmament by Syria would leave just two Middle East States (Egypt and Israel) outside the Convention. - That is still a useful achievement.

In the context of the civil war, though, the CW issue is nothing like as significant as is currently argued. It will be of real value only if it is the start of a much more fundamental process aimed at bringing the war to an end.

The Current State of the War

Two recent ORG briefings have focused on the Syrian civil war (May and June 2013) and have concluded that the conflict has entered a period of stalemate, with no side in a position to control the entire country. The August briefing further reported that:

- Although the Assad regime has considerable financial problems, it remains reasonably robust and can look to Iran and Russia for support. Its successes against rebel groups in towns and cities to the north of Damascus have been mainly against the more secular rebel elements, but this has been enough to consolidate regime power in that key part of the country.
- However, in much of the north and east of the country, jihadist paramilitaries have grown in strength. In early August, they over-ran an important regime air base north of Aleppo, which had been under siege for more than nine months, and briefly seized several Alawite villages in Latakia governorate, the Assad regime's stronghold.
- This combination of regime success against more secular rebel elements and the growing prowess of more jihadist-orientated militias means that the stalemate is evolving much more into a conflict between the regime and jihadists.

Its conclusion, in the context of its analysis of the al-Qaida movement, was that the growth of extreme jihadist paramilitaries in Syria was the most significant increase in the status of the al-Qaida idea worldwide. It also argued that western intervention in response to CW use could well enhance that element by demonstrating, once again, the tendency of the "far enemy" of the US, to intervene in states at the heart of the Islamic world.

Leaving to one side the CW element, the war retains two significant aspects in relation to a possible settlement.

- It is a rarity in international conflicts - a double proxy war - with the rebels backed by Saudi Arabia and Qatar but with those states indirectly supported by the US and some western allies, and the regime backed by Iran but also supported by Russia and, to an extent, China. This double proxy element, with each of the regional powers determined to see their parties to the conflict prevail, means that if either side improves its position, the other side will be aided by its wider support. Thus Iran cannot afford to let the regime fall for fear of losing considerable regional influence, but the Saudis and Qataris regard the fall of that very same Assad/Alawite regime as essential in preventing the formation of a "Shi'a crescent" stretching from the Mediterranean through Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Iran to the Indian Ocean.
- The second element is the continuing rise of radical Islamist paramilitaries, many of whom control substantial territory and have proved themselves to be the most effective opponents of the regime. Although not a unified paramilitary force, they coordinate much more effectively than the more secular elements, even to the extent that non-Islamist militias will on occasions fight under their direction because of their prowess and effectiveness. Moreover, in recent weeks there has been substantial conflict in parts of northern Syria between Islamist rebels and some of the more secular group aligned with the Syrian National Council. Partly as a result of this, the Islamist elements have become even more cohesive than before and, on 25 September, 11 of them disassociated themselves from the Turkey-based Syrian National Coalition opposition umbrella.

Motivations

Much recent analysis of the CW negotiations tends to the view that Russia has substantially increased its status at the expense of the US, but this may be too restrictive an assessment. Elements within the Obama administration have expressed substantial concern over the risk of escalation once even a limited US military action against Syria starts, and this has included senior military personnel. The Russian proposal on chemical weapons not only averted the risk of an immediate strike on Syria but also got President Obama “off the hook” of a defeat in the US House of Representatives in the vote that Obama himself had initiated.

Simplistic analysis points to Putin attempting to exploit US divisions over intervention in Syria to increase Russian status to the point where it is once more considered a superpower. What this analysis leaves out is Russia’s own concern over the development of powerful Islamist paramilitary movements in Syria, a development with two implications:

- As these movements come to prominence in the rebellion, and may even come to dominate the rebel forces overall, so the Assad regime will have greater difficulty in maintaining control of territory. That is worrying for Russian influence in the region, but it also means that any increase in Russian support for the Assad regime will be seen among radical Islamists as further proof of Moscow’s perfidy.
- What is almost entirely ignored is Russia’s serious domestic security concerns over radical Islam. This extends well beyond the aftermath of the bitter Chechen wars of the 1990s and is mainly focused on the current intensive counter-terrorism campaign that Russia is engaged in against the extreme Salafist Caucasus Emirate in the North Caucasus. Although little reported in the international media, in recent years the Emirate has carried out over 2,200 attacks, many of them against officials of the Russian state. These have resulted in the deaths of over 1,500 state officials and 400 civilians, making the North Caucasus an intensive region for Russian security operations. Furthermore, the site of the 2014 Winter Olympics is the Black Sea resort of Sochi, immediately to the west of the North Caucasus region.

Because of the rise of the Islamist factions in Syria, and the risk that overt support for the Assad regime will incite further anti-Russian moves by the wider Islamist movement, Russia therefore, has a strong motive for seeing an early end to the war in Syria, even if that requires a compromise involving the standing down of Assad. This may seem a strange conclusion given the current strength of the Syrian regime, but for Russia there is the paradox that the longer its proxy in Syria survives, the more the radical Islamists will come to the fore among the rebels, so that Russia will be increasingly seen as attacking radical Islam. Given its domestic predicament in the North Caucasus this is to be avoided. Moreover, this is not an indirect issue, since there is some evidence that Islamist paramilitaries from Chechnya and Dagestan are active in Syria.

What this means is that Russia has a greater interest in ending the war than is generally acknowledged, whereas the main supporters of the radical Islamists in Syria, sources in Saudi Arabia and Qatar in particular, have a strong interest in both supporting these groups and prolonging the war so that their influence in a post-Assad Syria is maximised.

It is here that there is an unusual confluence of interests between Washington and Moscow, a confluence that is getting lost in the midst of all the attention being given to the CW issue. Thus, Russia would like to see an early compromise ending of the conflict, using its

considerable influence over the regime, to minimise Islamist influence, and so would the US. But it is the US that may have the influence with Saudi Arabia and Qatar in restraining their support for the radical Islamists.

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