

Turkey's Concerns on Syrian WMDs

Written by Serhan Ünal

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SERHAN ÜNAL, MAY 8 2012

Among the countries shaken by the Arab Spring, Syria has a very unique place, particularly due to its weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). The international community's main concern should be these weapons, more than any other Syria-related problems. In the countries that have already experienced the Arab Spring, such as Tunisia, there were no WMDs. Hence, there were no severe problems with uncontrolled WMDs. In Egypt, the army always maintained enough control and, therefore, the international community was not overly concerned by the potential proliferation of Egyptian WMDs. Libya's Muammar Gaddafi finally signed the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) in 2004. Tripoli has been a party to the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC) since 1982, and to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) on nuclear weapons since the 1970s. After Gaddafi's ratification of the chemical weapons convention, stockpiles in Libya were destroyed to a great extent. Thus, there was no significant WMD capability in Libya either.

Syria is different to all other countries hit by the Arab Spring. It is not one of the signatory states of the CWC, and persistently sets Israel's ratification of the NPT as a precondition to sign the treaty. According to researchers from the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies,[1] Damascus has certain chemical weapons capacities – the bulk of which probably consists of mustard and nerve gases – and could feasibly use them under certain circumstances [2]. Moreover, Syria has well-known delivery capabilities such as Russian-made Scud-B, Scud-C missiles and smaller-scales warheads for closer targets.[3] In addition to these, some news sources have hinted at Iranian attempts to send chemical and conventional supplies to Syria by sea and land during the last six months.[4] The north of Iraq is a particularly suitable area to send these supplies, due to the power vacuum in the region. When all of these parts are put together, a clear picture arises: Syria has chemical weapons and the delivery capabilities to use them.

At this point, what should concern Turkey most is the possibility of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK in its Kurdish acronym) or other terrorist organisations acquiring all or part of those chemical weapons during the disorder in Syria. Until now, Assad has been able to control them successfully, and he does not seem likely to use these weapons, because using WMDs against Syrian protesters could pave the way for further foreign intervention and weaken the legitimacy of Assad's Ba'ath Party. Nevertheless, if Assad becomes desperate, the world may observe the realisation of Nixon's mad man theory, with Assad using WMDs against his own people. Apart from the possibility of Assad using those weapons, their mere existence may become problematic. As long as the current turmoil continues, and the number of defectors from the army increases, the Syrian government's control over its WMDs could become compromised, and those weapons may be smuggled by terrorists from unsecured Syrian military facilities.

If reality mimics this nightmare scenario, Turkey's primary concern should be the possibility of the PKK acquiring some part of these weapons. During the last few months, in the two largest Turkish cities of Ankara and Istanbul, some bombs were left in the streets; luckily, they were disposed successfully. [5] Yet, if the PKK or any other organisation is able to place conventional explosives on Turkish streets, stolen Syrian chemical agents can be used there too. If they are detonated successfully, hundreds of people could easily be killed in a single attack. This risk is not only there for Turkey, but also for others in the immediate neighbourhood of Syria. Although terrorist organisations may not always be willing to use WMDs, due to the risk of losing their legitimacy and the foreign support they receive from certain members of the international community, a PKK armed with chemical weapons is unacceptable to the security of Turkey. Therefore, Turkish decision-makers should take this point into consideration

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in considering their next moves.

A similar situation occurred with the demise of the Soviet Union at the beginning of 1990s. Thousands of highly-destructive Soviet WMDs and some delivery capabilities were practically freely-available to some states and non-state organisations, including religious radicals, insurgent, ethnic and terrorist groups. To handle this situation, Washington agreed to a deal with Moscow, known as the Cooperative Threat Reduction Program. This groundbreaking agreement, developed by U.S. senators Sam Nunn and Richard Lugar, helped to denuclearise Ukraine and remove WMDs from former parts of the Soviet Union, and out of the hands of rogue actors.[6] Unfortunately, when it comes to Syria, such a program cannot be conducted, because the countries which are expected to develop and finance it are the ones cheering for the overthrow of the Assad regime.

The United States claims to know where Syria's WMDs are stockpiled. If this is the case, then the question is: How can these weapons best be secured until a new and internationally-respected authority re-establishes control over Syria? Giving the job to United Nations observers is the first choice that comes to mind. The UN plans to increase its number of observers on the ground to 300 in a few weeks, and they could possibly be stationed near the facilities where those weapons are kept. Nevertheless, although monitoring the changing situation is vitally important, it is not enough. America's powerful political leadership is needed before the presidential elections prevent U.S. decision-makers from taking bold steps. Besides, the complex ethnic and religious composition of Syria makes the problem much more difficult to solve. The absence of a trustworthy Syrian opposition group able to control these weapons remains an obstacle to resolving this problem.

If Syria loses control over its WMDs, due to increasing desertions in the Syrian army, a novel security problem may appear in the Middle East. The most dangerous scenario in that situation, from Turkey's perspective, will be a PKK with a chemical arsenal. Neither the increasing number of Syrian refugees, nor Assad's violent crackdown on the Syrian opposition, poses such a major security threat to Turkey and the region. The international community's main security concern should be the fate of Syrian WMDs following the Arab Awakening.

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[1] See Bilal Y. Saab, Chen Kane, and Leonard Spector, 'Assad's Toxic Assets', in *Foreign Policy*, 13 March 2012, available at: http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/03/13/assads_toxic_assets (accessed on May 1, 2012).

[2] See <http://www.nti.org/facilities/708/> (accessed on May 2, 2012).

[3] A National Intelligence Council report on this issue can be found at: http://www.dni.gov/reports/2011_report_to_congress_wmd.pdf (accessed on May 1, 2012).

[4] A very recent example was about a Ukrainian ship: http://articles.cnn.com/2012-04-18/world/world_europe_turkey-syria-weapons_1_cargo-ship-arms-embargo-syria-s-mediterranean?s=PM:EUROPE (accessed on May 1, 2012).

[5] "Small Bomb Injures One Near PM Office", *Hurriyet Daily News*, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/small-bomb-injures-one-near-pm-office.aspx?pageID=238&nID=15348&NewsCatID=341> (accessed on May 1, 2012).

[6] See for example the account by David E. Hoffman, *The Dead Hand: The Untold Story of the Cold War Arms Race and its Dangerous Legacy* (New York: Doubleday, 2010).