

# Removing Syria's chemical weapons

---

**JP** [jpost.com/Opinion/Op-Ed-Contributors/Removing-Syrias-chemical-weapons-326790](http://jpost.com/Opinion/Op-Ed-Contributors/Removing-Syrias-chemical-weapons-326790)

By GERALD M. STEINBERG

Syrian President Bashar Assad in Fox News interview, September 18, 2013 Photo: Screenshot

Effective arms-reduction processes have always been difficult and uncertain, and there are many reasons to be sceptical regarding the prospects of success in the case of Syria. But history shows that in some cases, shared interests have led to treaties, enforcement and major reductions in nuclear and chemical weapons stockpiles.

The agreement reached by Russia and the US on Syria builds on the lessons learned in decades of armscontrol agreements. Perhaps most importantly, the political environment is similar to the periods of détente during the Cold War.

While the Americans and the Soviets continued to confront each other in Vietnam and elsewhere, they shared core interests in preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction to unstable countries and regions, including in the Middle East.

In the Syrian case, the two major powers would both stand to benefit from the agreement and its implementation, while failure would be very costly. Russian President Vladimir Putin has succeeded in returning Russia to center stage, as co-manager of international crises with the US – an historic achievement after 25 years in which Russia was dismissed as weak and largely irrelevant.

To maintain this regained prestige, the agreement must be implemented, while a breakdown would weaken Putin's position and again endanger the survival of his client (the Assad regime) in Syria. In addition, the Russians are vulnerable to terror attacks, including the use of chemical weapons, and have an interest in strengthening the taboo.

For US President Barack Obama, this agreement has the potential for untangling the complexities caused by the failure to deter Syria from using chemical weapons. On the one hand, Obama's actions displayed popular opposition to becoming involved in Syria, but on the other hand, he could not simply walk away. The agreement with the Russians has resolved this dilemma for now, but if it is not implemented, Obama will be forced to act or to lose even more credibility, both domestically and with Israel, regarding the US pledge to prevent Iran from achieving a nuclear weapons capability. To highlight the threat of force if implementation is blocked, US Secretary of State John Kerry reiterated the continuing threat of unilateral military action against Syria.

Furthermore, in contrast with early arms-control frameworks that were ambiguous and lacked "teeth," the terms negotiated in Geneva contained specific procedures and milestones, beginning with a one-week deadline for Syria to provide a full list of its stockpiles.

This is another reflection of decades of experience, including failed agreements that allowed North Korea to acquire nuclear weapons and Iran to move closer to doing so. Here as well, lessons have been learned.

Enforcement in the case of Syria will require extensive Russian- American cooperation – together, they can eventually neutralize most of the stockpiles, as is also specified in the agreed text. Such coordination in meetings of the UN Security Council will avoid the lengthy debates and delays, as in the cases of Iraq and Iran. The inspection and destruction process must begin quickly to maintain credibility – a difficult task under the civil-war conditions in Syria. On the other hand, if they cannot agree in the Security Council, the failure will be obvious and costly to both.

The mechanisms for verifying the Syrian report on its chemicalweapons stockpiles – estimated at over 1,000 tons of sarin, VX and mustard gas – also reflect decades of experience. The Chemical Weapons Convention, signed in 1993, was much tighter than the earlier Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and it tried to close the large loopholes that allowed Saddam Hussein, Muammar Gaddafi and, later, Iran to hide their illicit nuclear programs. The CWC and the Office for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons included more aggressive inspection as well as destruction mechanisms.

Many countries, including the US and Russia, began to destroy tons of CW stockpiles under OPCW supervision – although the process was slow and expensive. Most of the Middle East stayed away, including Syria, which maintains the largest CW arsenal.

The experience of the existing verification and inspection system allows for an accelerated procedure, beginning

with the analysis of the Syrian reporting of its CW stockpiles. Satellite and other remote sensing technologies will allow for detailed analysis of this report, followed by on-site inspections.

As stated by Kerry in Geneva, the US and Russia know the location of these storage sites (which are in areas held by the regime) and would be able to quickly detect Syrian efforts to hide the information or to create confusion. In addition, neutralization of the manufacturing facilities can begin quickly, followed by destruction of missiles and artillery launchers. The full process, involving thousands of individual weapons, could take many months, as acknowledged in the agreement, but a good start is essential.

This is an admittedly optimistic scenario, although anchored in a realist interpretation of Russian and American interests on this issue. There are still many areas of disagreement, particularly regarding the survival of the Assad regime, and they could lead to crises and confrontation. But having gone very far in reaching an agreement, a failure to implement the terms would be very costly for both Putin and Obama.

The author, from Bar-Ilan University and NGO Monitor, has advised the US and Israeli governments on arms control and served as the Israeli delegate to IAEA workshops on a Middle East Nuclear Free Zone.