



PERSPECTIVES

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Sanctioning the Syrians

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The recent US sanctions against 18 senior Syrian officers for chemical weapons (CW) employment seem to represent little more than a last-ditch compensation for the hands-off record of the outgoing Obama administration. However, despite their poor timing, these sanctions are considerably more meaningful than they might at first appear.

On January 12, eight days before the end of the Obama administration, a last-minute, “too late too little” move was taken in the form of sanctions against 18 Syrian individuals and one organization involved in the military use of chlorine against Syrian civilians in 2014-15. (Notably, more chlorine attacks were carried out by the Bashar Assad regime in 2016.)

This is the first time the US has personally sanctioned officers serving under Assad in connection with Damascus’s violation of the CW Convention and a related UN Security Council resolution. While important in and of itself, this move appears to be an attempt to compensate somewhat for the hollowness of the American response to the continuing use of CW by Assad forces over the past few years. Time and again, the Obama administration was criticized for its indifference and incompetence in this regard, despite sound and detailed information assembled by the US intelligence community on chemical attacks by the Syrian regime. That intelligence was above and beyond the results of investigations conducted by the Organization for the Prohibition of CW.

The sanctions are valuable nonetheless. The data compiled about the sanctioned parties illuminates a persistent, active Syrian alignment towards

retaining operational CW capabilities. The sanctioned persons include highly ranked officers affiliated with the following bodies:

- Scientific Studies and Research Center (ostensibly a civilian entity; actually responsible for the development of CW) – three brigadier generals and three colonels;
- Syrian Political Security Directorate – one major general (chief of the Directorate);
- Syrian Military Intelligence – two major generals (the head plus the former head, still active under military affiliation) and one brigadier general;
- Syrian Air Force Intelligence – two colonels;
- Syrian Arab Republican Guard – one major general (the commander);
- Syrian Air Force – two major generals (including the Air Force commander) and two brigadier generals;
- The Organization for Technological Industries (a subsidiary of the Syrian Ministry of Defense that assists in the production of CW; it is linked to the Scientific Studies and Research Center) – its managing director.

The stated linkages of these individuals to chemical warfare include:

- developing and proliferating CW;
- acting or purporting to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, the Scientific Studies and Research Center;
- directing a branch of the Scientific Studies and Research Center affiliated with CW logistics;
- organizing CW attacks;
- transporting chemical munitions;
- engaging in air support sorties from Hamah Air Base using various aircraft, including helicopters carrying toxic barrel bombs;
- dropping toxic gas via barrel bombs from helicopters on Syrian towns;
- operating at locations in Syria associated with CW-related missions;
- materially assisting, sponsoring, or providing financial, material, or technological support for, or goods or services in support of, the government of Syria.

These elements represent a full machinery, except for a military CW producer. The substitution is furnished by a common industrial toxic chemical (chlorine). The regime appears to have decided to take the risk that the use of a relatively “tolerable” toxic chemical warfare agent, chlorine, would be revealed in order to conceal additional critical elements.

The Syrian machinery unveiled by the American sanctions is fairly integrated, in that it consists of bodies in charge of the security, protection, intelligence, arming, weaponization, deployment, conveyance, employment, and masking of CW.

The nucleus of the Syrian system is the Scientific Studies and Research Center, which is in charge of developing a variety of weapons, both conventional and unconventional. This body, which remains nearly intact, represents the core of Syrian knowledge on the subject of CW and contains Syria's elite scientific manpower.

All in all, it can be postulated that an orderly, functional alignment to retain CW capacity and operational competence still exists in Syria, in spite of the dismantling of most (definitely not all) of Syria's CW arsenal. Assad's regime evidently did not abandon its fundamental paradigm concerning the strategic urgency of CW for Syria. The regime is likely to make an effort to regain much wider CW capabilities if and when it reestablishes governance over Syria or parts of the Syrian territories. It appears the regime might be approaching such a recovery.

Syrian scientists undoubtedly have the professional knowledge needed for that purpose. However, in 2013, Syria became a state party to the CW Convention, and would therefore have to be a good deal more sophisticated if it is to successfully implement such a scenario. Iran, a CW Convention state party that did accomplish the construction of an operational CW arsenal, is likely to assist Syria in that effort.

Tehran is an important facilitator for Damascus in this area. It is deeply entrenched within the Syrian defense establishment, and would prefer a chemically augmented Syria. North Korea, which has provided assistance to the Syrian nuclear weapons program in the past, might also step in. Both Tehran and Pyongyang have already given technological support to critical components of past Syrian CW inventories. Although the future scenario is theoretical for the time being, it should be taken into account.

In terms of politics and diplomacy, the Obama administration's sanctioning of the 18 Syrians was an appropriate, intelligence-based move, if a late one. Conducted mere days before the termination of the Obama era in 2017, it would have had greater impact had it occurred closer to the events, which took place in 2014-15. The disclosures were meaningful, but the untimely sanctions are mere window-dressing.

At the same time, it should be noted that the majority of the past Syrian CW arsenal was dismantled as a corollary – if unintended – of American pressure on Assad following the Syrian massive employment of nerve agent in 2013.

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