



## PERSPECTIVES

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# Defying Syrian Employment of Chemical Weapons: An Outstanding American Move

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 524, July 10, 2017

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Thanks to concrete intelligence attained in real time, the US was able to warn Syria, publicly and decisively, about repeated employment of chemical weapons. This unusual development is meaningful on several levels, and mirrors the delicate geopolitical balance that exists in Syria and beyond.

The exceptional preemptive move taken recently by the White House towards Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, aimed at preventing another massacre by means of chemical weapons (CW), is meaningful on several levels. It was the direct outcome of intelligence monitoring of hangars at the Shayrat Syrian Air Force base, which supported the sarin attack in April this year.

The sarin nerve agent used by the Syrian army requires premixing of chemicals to generate the lethal toxicant. It is likely that monitoring of the logistical preparations involved in that process are what led the White House to detect suspect activity at the Shayrat air base and issue its assertive response.

The White House announcement was carefully substantiated by the Pentagon. It appears that three elements were detected, or assessed to be highly likely as active preparations:

- a. visits by personnel from a special Syrian CW unit in known and suspected CW production facilities;
- b. the mixing of precursor chemicals at the Shayrat air base; and

c. outfitting (apparently not yet final) of aircraft stationed at Shayrat with CW.

Because rigorous safety measures are required while conducting these steps, more intelligence was generated. The White House warning to Syria was tightly coordinated with the CIA, State Department, Defense Department, and the Director of National Intelligence.

The sarin precursors still possessed by the Syrian army are probably stockpiled or otherwise deployed in locations additional to the Shayrat air base. Shayrat was retrospectively monitored last April (consequent to the sarin attack) and has since been watched closely. But other equivalent installations are no less important in terms of intelligence monitoring. The catch with all these installations, Shayrat included, is that bombarding the chemical constituents therein might bring about wide dispersal of toxic substances into the environment. This is why monitoring (rather than bombarding) is essential as an intelligence tool.

The aforementioned preparatory vectors are a typical component of the strategic mode followed by the Syrian regime during several sarin attacks it has conducted, predominantly those of April 2017 and August 2013, which were very similar. Components include approval by Assad, an inability to manage militarily through conventional warfare, a target population of ordinary families rather than fighting manpower (thus far), pseudo-deniability of sarin employment, massive masking attempts, and persistent backing (if only declarative, at times) by Russia and Iran.

The detection of the chemical preparatory moves at Shayrat air base, and what followed, are remarkably illustrative on several fronts: militarily, strategically, and geopolitically. While the US involvement in April took the form of an unexpected, decisive military retaliation, its involvement in June was clinically preemptive – and, for the time being, effective. The White House statement said:

The US has identified potential preparations for another chemical weapons attack by the Assad regime that would likely result in the mass murder of civilians, including innocent children. The activities are similar to preparations the regime made before its April 4, 2017 chemical weapons attack. As we have previously stated, the United States is in Syria to eliminate the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. If, however, Mr. Assad conducts another mass murder attack using chemical weapons, he and his military will pay a heavy price.

The warning issued by the White House was very unusual. Daryl G. Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association, noted that he did not recall such a precise, preemptive public warning having been issued against a foreign government regarding banned weapons "in at least the last 20 years." More often, he explained, such matters are handled in private diplomatic or intelligence communications.

The warning was consistent, however, with the line posed by the US following the chemical massacre conducted by the Syrian regime in April. It compensates somewhat for the incompetence that marked the Obama administration, and seems to have been fruitful so far. That said, the American intolerance for Syrian CW employment might be tested indirectly by the use of chlorine as a "mild" CW.

Broadly speaking, the support lent by Russia and Iran within the CW context might be crucial. That is why US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley added, shortly after the White House statement, that "The goal is at this point not just to send Assad a message, but to send Russia and Iran a message. My hope is that the president's warning will certainly get Iran and Russia to take a second look, and I hope that it will caution Assad."

Responses from Russia came soon after the warning. Frants Klintsevich, first deputy chairman of the Defense and Security Committee in the upper chamber of the Russian parliament, accused the US of "preparing a new attack on the positions of Syrian forces, while preparations for a new cynical and unprecedented provocation are underway." Russian foreign minister Lavrov joined him, contending that the US "should not create excuses for more attacks against the Syrian army that is fighting terrorists." He added, notably, that Moscow would respond to a US "provocation" in Syria "proportionally and with dignity." Shortly afterwards, secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council Ali Shamkhani commented, "Undoubtedly, the US's unwise and adventurous behavior in Syria is a clear example of playing with fire." He described US claims about Syria's potential chemical attack as "delusional."

It was only after these responses were issued that a response came from Damascus, and it leaned heavily on the preceding Russian and Iranian statements. The Syrian foreign ministry claimed Washington's allegations about an intended Syrian CW attack were not only misleading but also "devoid of any truth and not based on any facts," and were a ploy to justify a new attack on Syria.

Of the European countries, only France addressed the Syrian CW issue. France has long contributed to a flourishing cooperation with the Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Center, the core of the Syrian CW alignment.

The new French president, Macron, held a joint news conference with Putin in May at which he stated, "Any use of CW by Syria would result in reprisals and an immediate riposte, at least where France is concerned." Following the US warning to Syria, Macron and Trump took stock of the Syrian issue and the need to work towards a common response to a chemical attack in Syria.

The other European states did not refer specifically to the matter. Overall, international reactions to Syrian CW have been neither extensive nor intensive, despite the bold American declarative intervention.

The warning was almost certainly unexpected by Syria, Russia, and Iran, and so far, they are complying with it. But they did not like it, and may yet respond more strongly. The seemingly mild comments by Lavrov about a tentative Russian response "proportionally and with dignity" might imply an anticipated escalation. A delicate, complicated balance might be developing. The option of chlorine, ostensibly as an intermediate, perhaps tolerable weapon, could be restored by Assad. Such a "test case" might possibly have already taken place on July 1 in the village of Ain Tirma, in the eastern countryside of Damascus.

Defense Secretary James Mattis maintains that the US warning to Syria not to conduct another (sarin) chemical attack appears to have been heeded by the Assad regime, at least temporarily. "It appears they took the warning seriously," he said. At the same time, he stressed that he believes Syria has retained CW in various locations in the country, in violation of the chemical agreement to which it is committed.

A useful distinction was posed by Mattis. Asked about his level of confidence that Assad has backed off, he replied, "I'm not paid to have confidence in this sort of thing. I'm paid to be one of the sentinels that watches for it." It is first of all a matter of intelligence, and it does appear that for the time being at least, Assad has indeed backed off.

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