



PERSPECTIVES

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Assad Addresses the Chemical Weapons Issue

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 879, July 1, 2018

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: In an unprecedented television interview on May 30, Syrian President Bashar Assad made detailed comments about his army's alleged non-use of chemical weapons (CW). Referring to the (confirmed) employment of chemical weapons in Douma on April 7 and the subsequent US-British-French retaliatory raid, Assad claimed that CW had not been used by anyone (rather than by the rebels, as is usually contended).

On May 30, 2018, Syrian President Bashar Assad participated in a televised interview on *Russia Today* in which he was asked about the regime's use of chemical weapons (CW). In keeping with a lasting tradition whereby Assad laconically addresses the question of his army's employment of such weapons, he tried to detail why such employment is implausible and to deny that his army is in fact in possession of CW. Given the regional and global significance of the lingering issue of CW use by his regime, it is worthwhile to take a close look at his words.

Assad was asked in whose interest it was to gas opposition to the Syrian regime. He replied: "Is it in our interest? Why, and why now? Let alone that we don't have CW anyway, and we are not going to use it against our people. Our main battle was about winning the heart of civilians, and we won it. So how can you use CW against civilians you want to be supportive to you?"

"Second, let's suppose we have CW and want to use them. Do you use them after you finish the battle, or before, or during? It is not logical, because the timing of the alleged chemical strike was after the victory of the Syrian troops in Ghouta." He went on: "If you go to that area, it was a very crowded area by armies, by factions, and by civilians; wherever you use such armaments or weapons in that area, you are going to harm everyone, something that didn't

happen. And if you go to that area and you ask the civilians, there was no chemical attack by anyone. Even the western journalists who went there after Ghouta was liberated asked the people, and the people said we didn't see any chemical attack, so it was just a pretext in order to attack Syria.”

As for the Western approach, Assad said:

They told a story, they told a lie, and public opinion around the world and in the West didn't buy their story, but they couldn't withdraw. So they had to do something, even on a smaller scale. The Russians announced publicly that they are going to destroy the Western bases that are going to be used to launch missiles, and our information – we don't have evidence, we only have information, and that information is credible information – is that they were thinking about a comprehensive attack all over Syria, and that's why the Russian threat pushed the West to make it on a much smaller scale. We were close to direct conflict between the Russian forces and the American forces, and fortunately, it has been avoided, not by the wisdom of the American leadership, but by the wisdom of the Russian leadership. We need Russian support, but we need at the same time to avoid American foolishness in order to be able to stabilize our country.

At any rate, Assad noted, the US “trampled on international law” and “there's no guarantee that it won't happen again. What was the legal basis of the attack?”

Assad's arguments are unsound and inconsistent with established facts, and his purported drive to “win the hearts of civilians” is a cynical misstatement. Notably, the interviewer refrained from asking Assad to explain the 70 physically intact civilian victims who died during the episode.

Assad went on to elaborate on the geopolitical implications of US and Russian involvement and discussed the repercussions of the confrontation over the Douma chemical attack. He pointed to the brinksmanship involved in the sequence of events that followed the chemical attack, accentuating that it might be repeated under similar circumstances in the future. At the same time, he praised Russia for supposedly minimizing – though not hindering – the US-British-French attack on key facilities affiliated with Syrian CW. In that respect, Assad was fairly consistent with what Russian foreign minister Lavrov had said earlier: “We told the US where our red lines were, including the geographical red lines, and the results have shown that they haven't crossed those lines.” It appears that Assad is aware of the potentially far-reaching

implications of CW in Syria, but this is no guarantee that he will be cautious about its use in the foreseeable future.

There have been several other collateral developments recently. The Permanent Representative of Syria to the UN Office at Geneva took over the rotating presidency of the Conference on Disarmament (according to a decades-old practice among the body's 65 member nations that assigns the presidency by alphabetical order). Assad will be chairing the Conference on Disarmament – the UN forum dealing primarily with unconventional weapons issues – for several weeks.

At the same time, the Syrian regime is preparing for a wide military operation against the rebels in the south of Syria, near the border with Israel. Presumably, that operation will rely on conventional weapons only and will not involve Iran. But in regard to Syria at large, the Iranian military involvement remains profound. Direct evidence has been revealed of the employment of Iranian-produced chemical rockets by the Syrian regime. Vital components needed for those rockets were purchased by Iranian companies from the German company Krempel. They were later identified after chemical rockets were used against rebels.

Any or all of these developments might be consequential within the Syrian CW sphere in light of Assad's commentary.

Another fairly detailed yet different attempt to refute the employment of CW by Assad's army in Douma was expressed on June 22 by Maj. Gen. Igor Kirillov, the chief of the Russian military radiation, chemical and biological protection corps. He claimed, "The US, Britain, France, and their allies have misled the international community, relying on fabrications produced by activists to accuse Syria of violating the CW ban with Russian assistance." Kirillov alleged that the White Helmet first responders working in rebel-controlled areas falsified samples and used explosive devices to make craters that resemble those left by bombs. He added that in the images shown by activists, they were working at a site where sarin had allegedly been used but were not wearing protective gear, which would have been impossible had the nerve agent indeed been used there. Kirillov ignored the fact that sarin is a highly volatile, non-persistent nerve agent.

Kirillov scoffed at the images of massive gas canisters that activists said had been dropped by government helicopters in the Douma chemical attack. He said, "Surprisingly, the 100-kilogram canisters left tableware and furniture undamaged, and even a bed on which a canister fell was intact, signaling that the canister had been dragged into the room, as indicated by signs left on the floor."

More importantly, Kirillov claimed that a rebel chemical lab found in Douma after the town had been taken over by Syrian government forces contained components used in the production of mustard gas. He said a canister containing chlorine, similar to those used in the CW attack, was found in the same lab. Kirillov said rebel stockpiles had been discovered containing over 40 metric tons of chlorine (an incredibly high amount) and other toxic chemicals. But chlorine canisters, in whatever form, are at any rate marginal within that context. Sarin – which is possessed by Assad's army, and the incriminating factor in the Douma chemical attack – is not included in the stockpiles attributed to the rebels by Kirillov.

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