

Syria Chemical Weapons

Background:

A crisis involving the United States and Syria occurred between 21 August and 21 September 2013 against the backdrop of the Syrian Civil War. Almost one year prior to the day that the crisis began – on 20 August 2012 – US President Barack Obama stated that chemical weapons use in the Syrian Civil War would be a “red line” for the US government that would change his calculus about US involvement in the war.

The first allegations of chemical weapons usage in the war emerged in December 2012. Between that time and the outbreak of the crisis, both the Syrian regime led by Bashar al-Assad and opposition forces alleged that the other had used chemical weapons in a number of different attacks. These alleged attacks were small scale, and the evidence regarding their occurrence was ambiguous. In March 2013, the Syrian government asked the United Nations to conduct an investigation into the use of chemical weapons by the opposition. At the same time, France and the United Kingdom asked the UN to conduct an investigation into the use of chemical weapons in Syria in general. In response to the invitation from the Syrian government, the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon established a fact-finding mission on 21 March to investigate the allegations of chemical weapons usage. This mission, known as the UN Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic, also involved representatives of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and the World Health Organization (WHO). In April 2013, the White House indicated that US intelligence was assessing “with varying degrees of confidence” the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime, but that the assessment was uncertain and that investigations were still ongoing.

PRE-CRISIS:

Inspectors from the UN Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic arrived in Syria on 18 August 2013, three days before the attack that triggered the crisis.

Summary:

On 21 August 2013, videos surfaced of a mass chemical weapons attack against civilians in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta, perpetrated by the Syrian regime. This attack was distinguished from the alleged ones that came before it by its scale and its verifiability: thousands were affected, videos of the attack surfaced immediately, and there was consensus among international intelligence entities that the Assad regime was culpable. This triggered a crisis for the US, which was concerned about its status and influence in the region, given that this attack was the first undisputed case of chemical weapons usage by the Assad regime that occurred after Obama gave his “red line” speech a year earlier. The US was particularly concerned about the negative repercussions that not responding would have on countries like Syria and Iran, who might be more likely to challenge the US in the future. President Obama stated that “this is a big event, of grave concern,” and the Obama administration initiated the first part of its major response by starting to reach out to dozens of its international counterparts. France and the UK were particularly involved: France argued strongly for a military response and released a declassified intelligence report that helped build the case against Syria. The UK called an emergency meeting

of the UN Security Council (UNSC) on the day of the crisis trigger and initially moved to introduce a UNSC resolution authorizing the use of force, until the UK Parliament voted to not support such involvement. The UNSC met on 21 August, discussed the issue, and demanded further clarity about the incident.

On 24 August, the US moved naval warships into the Mediterranean Sea in a show of force, the second part of its major response. This signaled to the Syrian regime that the US was serious about its threat of force and triggered a crisis for Syria. Syria's major response occurred the following day and consisted of agreeing to allow UN inspectors access to the site of the alleged attack in order to investigate, as well as Assad vehemently denying that his government was responsible for the attack and blaming the Syrian rebels instead.

The crisis continued to escalate, though, and on 28 August, President Obama announced that the U.S. had conclusive evidence of the Assad regime's guilt. The following day, the UK released an intelligence report confirming Obama's allegations. The US released its own declassified report on 30 August. Then, on 31 August, Obama announced that he would seek Congressional authorization for the use of force against Syria, the third and most important part of the US' major response to the crisis trigger. On 1 September, the Arab League issued a resolution urging international action against the Syrian regime over its use of chemical weapons but stopping short of endorsing US military strikes.

On 9 September, Russia announced a proposal to avoid further conflict: if Syria agreed to dismantle its chemical weapons and place them under international control, the US would forgo a military strike. The US agreed to consider the proposal, and so did Syria. Over the next several days, the US and Russia worked together to draft a full proposal, and Obama postponed any Congressional vote on the authorization of force. Russia and the US announced a finalized plan to eliminate Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles, known as the Framework for Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons, on 14 September.

On 21 September, Syria started to comply with the US-Russian Framework by submitting a declaration of its chemical weapons stockpiles and agreeing to give them up. This terminated the crisis for both sides.

Throughout the crisis, the United Nations Secretary General (UNSG) was the most involved of all UN bodies. The UNSG conducted a fact finding mission that helped put international pressure on the Syrian government, and in doing so the UNSG played a minor positive role in helping to abate the crisis. During the crisis, the UNSC was restricted to holding several emergency meetings, working toward a resolution, and issuing two statements, including a UNSC Presidential statement condemning the chemical weapons attack. The UNSC worked hard to come up with a resolution during the crisis but was unable to reach agreement and issue one until after the crisis had terminated.

Russia opposed a proposed US military strike, blamed Syrian rebels for the Ghouta attack, and claimed that the evidence implicating the Assad regime was fabricated. But it nevertheless played an important role in helping to deescalate the crisis by working with the US to reach the Framework agreement with which Syria ultimately complied. The Arab League and NATO

condemned the chemical weapons attack and spoke with US Secretary of State John Kerry about the situation, and the Arab League also issued a call for international action against the Syrian regime. Neither of these organizations' involvement had much effect on the crisis proceedings. The OPCW was heavily involved working before and during the crisis as a constituent part of the UN fact-finding mission, as well as after the crisis in terms of setting guidelines for the elimination of Syria's chemical weapons and monitoring the weapons destruction process alongside the UN.

One week after the crisis terminated, on 27 September, the Executive Council of the OPCW adopted and added further benchmarks and timelines to the US-Russian Framework agreement. Later that same day, the UNSC issued a resolution endorsing a timeline for destroying Syria's chemical weapons and indicating that if Syria failed to comply, the UNSC would debate and seek agreement on a follow-up resolution spelling out punitive measures, including the possibility of Chapter VII measures. The resolution legally bound Syria to the plan approved by the OPCW and essentially implemented the US-Russia Framework agreement. According to the UNSC resolution, Syria had until mid-2014 to eliminate its chemical weapons. In mid-2014, the OPCW indicated that the destruction of these weapons was largely on schedule despite some hiccups. In July 2015, the OPCW reported successful destruction of over 90% of the weapons that were supposed to have been eliminated. However, accusations emerged that Assad has used chlorine gas in several attacks during 2015. Chlorine gas was not included in the UNSC resolution or OPCW plan, but it is on the Chemical Weapons Convention banned list.

References:

Arms Control Association; BBC; CBS News; Guardian; International Crisis Group; LexisNexis news articles; New York Times; OPCW Syrian Chemical Destruction Data; Telegraph; US President Remarks to the White House Press Corps.