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**THE TRAP OF CHEMICAL WEAPONS  
IN SYRIA**

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**THE TRAP OF CHEMICAL WEAPONS IN SYRIA**

**Abstract:**

*The use of chemical weapons as the decision point for a possible U.S. military intervention in the Syrian civil war is probably a mistake because it is extremely difficult to conduct a verification of its use, by one side or both of them, at least while the war is ongoing.*

**Keywords:**

*Syria, chemical weapons, red line, President Obama.*

## TO BE OR NOT TO BE IN THE INTERVENTION OF SYRIA

There is no doubt that the current intense debate about the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian civil war is not a minor issue. Their classification as weapons of mass destruction and their indiscriminate character, in addition to the great difficulty of controlling their scope and effects, make these weapons precisely have a bad image that transcends their real potential in order to enter into an even legendary scope.

Following its widespread use during World War I, its virtual absence in World War II was seen as a very positive step. However, this non-use of chemical weapons in a conflict that witnessed massive aerial bombardments of villages, immense concentrations of artillery or even the only use to date of the gun by definition, the atomic bomb, which remains a paradox.

But the world is not built around fully rational realities, but around perceptions. And it is in this level where there is the possible use of chemical weapons in Syria. It has spread the conviction that this must be the limit to, in principle to the regime of Al Assad, his performance in the war.

We must remember the words publicly announced on the 30<sup>th</sup> of April by President Obama at a press conference in the White House, regarding the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime against the population, which would be considered as “red line” that, if breached, would force a change in its policy towards the conflict, which easily can be interpreted as an allusion to a military intervention. The statement is linked to previous ones, in which he said:

*We will not tolerate the use of chemical weapons against the Syrian people, or the transfer of those weapons to terrorists<sup>1</sup>.*

He even used, in the press conference, the expression of *game changer*, explaining that the use of this weapons would completely change the scenario in Syria and the North American attitude towards the conflict. Nonetheless, he did not specify what kind of intervention would cause the chemical attacks, although he added that the intervention must be, in any case, carried out in coordination with the allies.

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<sup>1</sup> *Chemical Weapons and Consequences*, The Wall Street Journal, 25<sup>th</sup> of APRIL 2013

After these words, it has been logically interpreted that the long awaited intervention in Syria depended solely on the use or not by the Syrian regime, rebel militias, or terrorist groups embedded in the militia of chemical weapons. In his brief speech, President Obama laid in these weapons the “to be or not to be” of the Western intervention in the war, an attitude that can’t be described as a success for the reasons set out below.

### **Parallelism with the Intervention in Iraq**

The controversial issue of the reasons that led to the North American invasion of Iraq in 2003 constituted an immediate association of the possible intervention in Syria. The already famous presence – or not – of weapons of mass destruction in the hands of Saddam Hussein’s regime is an issue that, after a decade, has not been resolved politically, either in the United States or in many of the nations that either accepted or, on the contrary, rejected the arguments made at the time by the Bush administration.

In any case, moving back to perceptions, the memory of those arguments today is not pleasant for most of the public and therefore a statement that inevitably takes us back to those times is an unwise choice.

Consequently, many voices have been raised that warn of how the United States would be using, for a second time, the same argument to justify the willing intervention in Syria. But this is not true, as evidenced by an essential tinge.

President Obama did not speak, at any moment, about the mere possession of chemical weapons and the potential danger of its use against the population, as President Bush did regarding Iraq, in which case, he would have repeated the 2003 strategy, but he specified the used of these weapons.

There is a great distance between both lines. Firstly because getting into a pointless debate about the possible possession of chemical weapons by the Syrian government is discarded. Their existence, conceived as weapons of deterrence against the Israel’s nuclear weapons – technically even at war with Syria – is not only discussed, but it has been repeatedly recognised by the Syrian regime.

Secondly because setting the red line in the use of weapons intends favouring the position of Al Assad. Unlike in Iraq, it would not be the United States that would carry out a pre-emptive attack, but such an attack, if it occurred, would be reactive and in response to a regime that would have broken the rules in an unacceptable way or an opposition camp surpassing the

limits of their struggle. Once again, the eternal game of the first aggressor and the war of justice.

### American Unwillingness to Intervene

Consequently, the American attitude, indeed mismatched with some of its key allies who choose to support the rebels, would be an attempt to deter Al Assad's use of weapons rather than finding an excuse to intervene.

And it is neither the American President nor the population who wish an intervention, a new war overseas. As Ramos explains very well<sup>2</sup>, President Obama inherited two wars, Iraq and Afghanistan – the first, probably unnecessary; the second, imperative, – that have been undermining the patience of the population, the strength of their armed and security forces, and the state coffers<sup>3</sup>. His work has been precisely to put an end, in the best possible way, to both conflicts.

After the Iraq period and being on the verge of completing or at least mitigating the US presence in Afghanistan at least until 2017, the possibility of opening a conflict scenario of unpredictable duration and results is seen with great hesitation by the US administration. This intervention would also be contrary to the spirit of *nation building at home*<sup>4</sup> with which the United States intend to consolidate a sustainable global leadership, burdened by decades of over-expansionism and over-interventionism in a Cold War scenario, first, and in a War on Terrorism, afterwards.

The characteristics of the Syrian theatre, along with the geopolitical implications of all kinds that adorn the regional environment, suggest that a limited naval intervention, which could be possible, would not be enough in order to ensure a stable post- Assad Syria, so that it would be essential, once again, to resort to the deployment of ground troops on the field, in this moment so reviled by American and Western society in general.

In short, the economic, societal, and political necessities of President Obama suggest that an intervention of this nature is a last resort of the US agenda. Moreover, and in accordance with the concept of "leadership in the shadow" that the United States intend to exercise, the ground intervention would necessarily have to count with a substantial collaboration of its allies, and specially of the European superpowers with greater military capabilities, and

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<sup>2</sup> Jorge Ramos Avalos, *La guerra que Obama no quiere*, The Miami Herald, 13<sup>th</sup> of May 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Eisenhower Study Group, The Watson Institute, *The Costs of War since 2001*, June 2011.

<sup>4</sup> National effort to develop infrastructure and procedure to increase the economic development and activity, such as roads, bridges, high-speed trains, improved ways and means of management of ports and airports, etc.

Turkey, so geographically close to the conflict scene. All with a degree of fatigue similar to the US, in the process of withdrawal or significant reduction of their forces in Afghanistan, and also immersed in a, very severe in some case, economic crisis.

All of the above is justified and tested, in parallel, in the subsequent declarations by the members of the American administration. Given the evidence of the use of chemical weapons in Syria, either by the regime or the rebels, they have been quick in clarifying that in order for that alleged use to constitute the crossing of the hypothetical red line marked by President Obama, it is necessary for its use to be systematic, indiscriminate or other similar terms. It is wise to rectify.

### **Existence of Other Bigger or Smaller Motivations**

A not so much tackled aspect, perhaps absorbed by that fascination for weapons of mass destruction in general, and for chemicals ones in particular, is the fact that only that circumstance is worthy of trying to avoid a greater suffering to an extremely punished population during these two years of war and with nearly a hundred thousand dead and missing people.

The systematic and indiscriminate use of air force or heavy artillery on neighbourhoods controlled by the rebels, the continuous actions by the militias to the regime in a fierce repression, the participation in the war of jihadist international contingents, or the summary executions by supporters of the regime that often put on the internet, not to mention the increasingly worrying situation of sectarian clashes in Lebanon on the Syrian war or the hundred thousands of Syrian refugees, are probably arguments at least equally important as the possible use or not of chemical weapons.

It would seem more reasonable to speak of intolerable humanitarian situations as the limit to a relative inaction of the international powers, who may have the capacity to impose to both sides a negotiation without preconditions in order to allow a negotiated solution to the conflict, which would be a great political initiative, rather than trust everything to a demonstrated use of chemical weapons that is, moreover, very difficult to verify unequivocally.

## Verification and Intervention, or Is It the Other Way Around?

It is not the intention of this paper to make a technical analysis of the issues surrounding the verification of the use of chemical weapons, which can be found in several papers published by the Institute<sup>5678</sup>, but to highlight what appears to be a contradiction.

Obviously, with all of the information above, and in light of the many possible indications regarding the use of chemical weapons, both by the regime and by the rebels, it is necessary to consider the following:

- The use of chemical by the opposing party has become a leading propaganda weapon. The mere acceptance by the international community of such use may be the key to the military victory, especially for the rebels, but it could be also for the regime.
- Consequently, both sides strive to “prove” the use of weapons by the other. Obviously, in this current context of war, these demonstrations lack credit, even when they include the testimony of qualified professionals such as Syrian doctors, stating that the nature of the injuries of the wounded may be subject of coercion or act by partisan interests.
- The visual assessments, samples obtained, we don’t know how they subsequently come to laboratories outside the Syrian territory, any independent inspection teams would be targeted by the authorities of either side in the territory under their control, and all other attempts of verification are untrustworthy in the current situation.
- Any side that got to use weapons would obviously prevent the complex technical and legal procedure that could verify, unequivocally, the use of chemical weapons from being completed with guarantees, so that it would not go beyond or incomplete or unreliable evidence.
- The use of CARV<sup>9</sup>, UAV<sup>10</sup>, UGV<sup>11</sup>, conventional aircraft or deployable laboratories, which could take samples and ensure the chain of custody of them until their analysis

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<sup>5</sup> CN Bartolomé Cánovas Sánchez, *Siria, otra vez a vueltas con las armas químicas*, <http://www.ieeee.es/>

<sup>6</sup> René Pita, *Análisis de la amenaza química y biológica de Siria*, <http://www.ieeee.es/>

<sup>7</sup> María del Mar Hidalgo García, *El traslado de las armas químicas en Siria: amenaza o protección*, <http://www.ieeee.es/>

<sup>8</sup> María del Mar Hidalgo García, *Las contradicciones del empleo de armas químicas en Siria*, <http://www.ieeee.es/>

<sup>9</sup> Contaminated Area Reconnaissance Vehicle

<sup>10</sup> Unmanned Aerial Vehicles

<sup>11</sup> Unmanned Ground Vehicles

in independent technically qualified laboratories, require the full consent and support of the authorities and complete freedom of movement throughout the Syrian territory, a fact that, in the middle of the ongoing civil war, is obviously impossible.

It remains only to conclude that the conditions for unambiguous, scientific and juridical verification of chemical weapons by one or both sides of the Syrian civil war can only occur in the event of an international military intervention on the ground, which would safeguard and ensure the use of technical means needed for such verification, as well as physically protect inspectors.

That is to say that the necessary verification that would cause foreign intervention, led by the United States, can only be carried out with full guarantees after the intervention. A problem with a very tough solution.

## CONCLUSION

It is not right to place the use of chemical weapons as a reason for an US intervention in the Syrian civil war, although it could be considered as Western without taking it as unanimous, as it happened in Iraq and Libya before, this results extremely difficult to make a verification of its use by one or both sides, at least as long as the war is not over.

In fact, the most likely conditions may only necessary to perform this verification could only happen once there is a ground and airspace control after a military intervention and an important terrestrial dimension. Since the cause and effect are confused and inverted when analysing the problem, it is evident that a vicious spiral has been set from which it will be very difficult to escape.

In any case, the possible US-led intervention is a purely political decision, thus apart from the possible use of chemical weapons, there are numerous reasons than can boost both the intervention and a non-intervention, so that placing an element so difficult to verify as a decision factor, makes us find ourselves in an awkward situation, with more disadvantages than advantages on which there should be no emphasise.

In this regard, the conference on Syria to be held next month in Geneva, also with the attendance of Russia, will address new strategies to possibly walk to the end of the conflict. It will obviously address the issue of the use of chemical weapons, but it would be desirable that it is addressed in a rigorous way, as well as other aspects, tackled in this document, that are as relevant as, at least, the use of chemical weapons.

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