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THE CHALLENGE OF ELIMINATING CHEMICAL WEAPONS IN SYRIA

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Abstract:

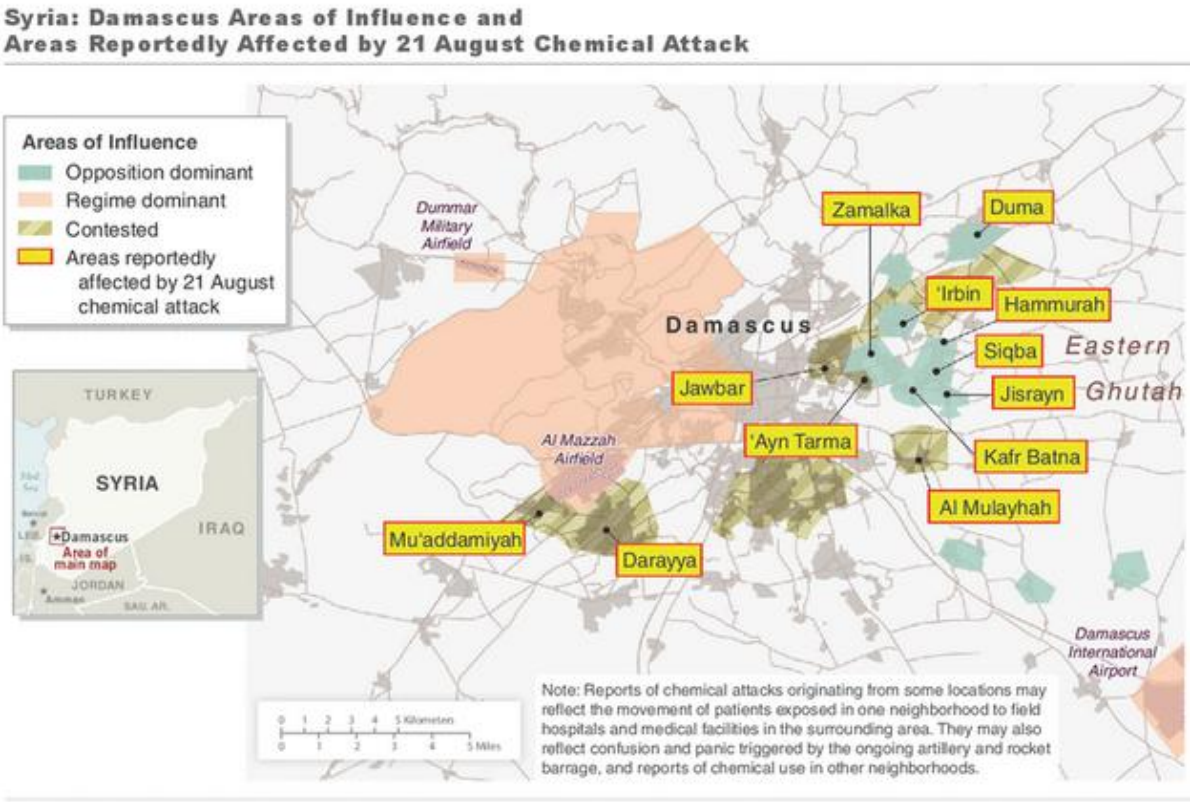
The last 16 September, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-Moon presented the report prepared by the inspector team to investigate the alleged use of chemical weapons in the Syrian conflict. The analysis of samples carried out in laboratories designated by the OPCW (Organization for the prohibition of chemical weapons) confirmed what was obvious: the use of sarin gas on August 21st near Damascus. The international response to the incident was not a military intervention but the pressure on the Syrian Government to adhere to the Chemical Weapons Convention and to undertake the destruction of its chemical arsenal in accordance with the agreement reached between the US and Russia.

Keywords:

Syria, chemical weapons, sarin gas, OPCW, CWC

EVIDENCE OF CHEMICAL WEAPONS USE IN SYRIA

Last September 16th, UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-Moon presented the report[1] made by the team of inspectors working in Syria to determine whether chemical weapons were used during the Syrian conflict. The team was composed of members from the United Nations, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and the World Health Organization (WHO). The report focuses on the attack on the Ghouta area on August 21st 2013. The inspectors, already in Damascus since August 18th to investigate possible use of chemical weapons in previous attacks, were unable to carry out their work until August the 26th. According to the established protocols to the Chemical Weapons Convention, the team conducted interviews and took samples and graphic evidence. Analyses of samples were conducted in several laboratories[2]: VERIFIN (Finland), SPIEZ (Switzerland), FOI (Sweden) and Bundeswehr Research Insitute for Protective Technologies and NBC Protection (Germany).



Source: http://www.washingtonpost.com/

[1] http://www.un.org/disarmament/content/slideshow/Secretary_General_Report_of_CW_Investigation.pdf

[2] La lista de los laboratorios designados aparece recogida en el documento S/1124/2013 de la Secretaría Técnica de la OPAQ.

This report is the "unambiguous evidence" that sarin gas has been used against the Syrian population. This may not be a very innovative contribution given that, early in September, the UK had already confirmed the use of this aggressive chemical material after analysing the clothes of one victim in the prestigious Port Down laboratory. Moreover, video broadcast of the attack showed evidence that an aggressive neurotoxic chemical material was used. Nevertheless, the report provides four important points:

- After strictly following all protocols in the sample gathering, the chain of custody, and the analysis conducted by OPCW-accredited laboratories, **there is no doubt that sarin gas was used in the attack**, as the analyses have demonstrated.

- Although the trajectories of the projectiles in two of the inspected areas are inferred in the report, it is not possible to confirm the authors of the attacks.

- The unprecedented unsafe conditions under which the inspection has taken place have been a challenge to the OPCW. Visits to the areas of the attacks were restricted to certain hours, after the cease-fire agreement between the government and the opposition. In order to facilitate inspections, a five-hour cease-fire was declared between the 26th and 29th of August. Even the team of inspectors had several incidents, which highlight the importance of guaranteeing safety in their job. **"The mission was complex and highly delicate**," as described in the report.

- The period between the attack and the presentation of the report has been enough for the international community, especially Russia and the US, to reach an action agreement regarding the use of chemical weapons in Syria, which does not mean they have reached an agreement to resolve the conflict.

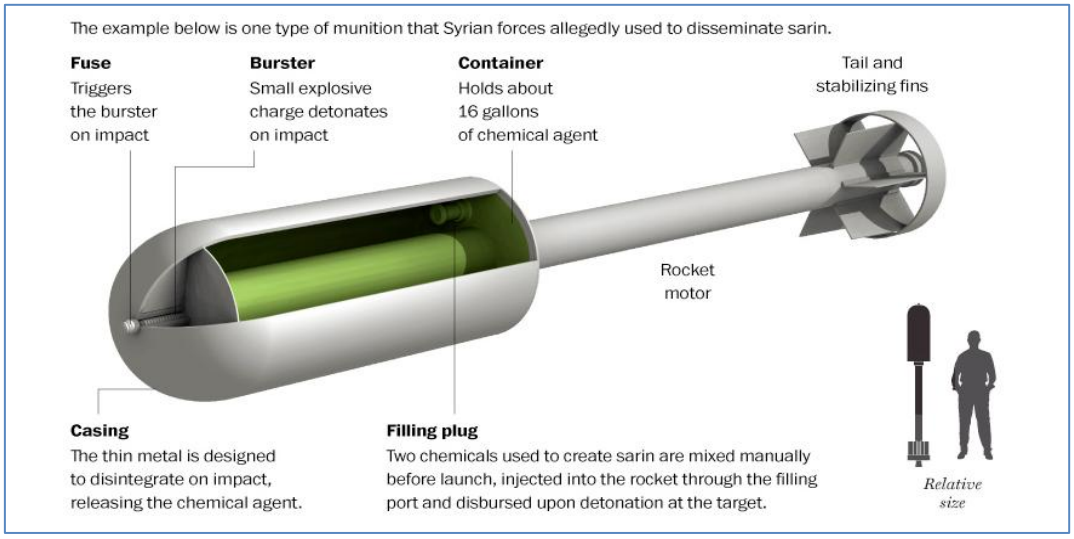
AGREEMENT BETWEEN RUSSIA AND THE US TO ELIMINATE CHEMICAL WEAPONS IN SYRIA

It is now clear that the "red line" drawn by Obama to intervene in the Syrian conflict has been trespassed. So far, the international response has focused on eliminating the chemical weapons, which is only a part of the problem. Diplomacy has prevailed over military intervention in resolving the conflict.

The agreement reached between the US and Russia, called "*Framework for Elimination of Chemical Weapons in Syria*"[3] is based on Syria's adhesion to the Chemical Weapons Convention[4] (CWC) on September 14th, which requires Syria to declare its chemical weapons stockpile, to refrain from using it, and to destroy it in a truthful, transparent and verifiable way within the established deadlines.

Russia and the US have proposed a Security Council resolution including not only the conditions of the agreement, but also the possibility for action under chapter VII of the UN Charter in case Syria fails to comply with the CWC.

The agreement also provides that, within one week, Syria must issue a full report on its chemical weapons stockpile (types of agents, launching system, munitions, and research, production and stockpiling facilities). Once the stockpile has been declared –which is believed to be made up of more than 1.000 tons of chemical agents (mainly VX, Sarin and sulfur mustard) and precursors[5], and always under OPCW supervision, the US and Russia will determine the best way to eliminate the weapons, even if it entails destroying them out of Syrian territory or on its coast.



Type of munition used in the attack with sarin gas in Syria.
Source: http://www.washingtonpost.com/

[3] http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/09/214247.htm
[4] http://www.opcw.org/index.php?eID=dam_frontend_push&docID=6354
[5] http://www.gouvernement.fr/sites/default/files/fichiers_joints/syrie_synthese_nationale_de_renseignement_declassifie_02_09_2013.pdf

POSSIBLE ISSUES IN ELIMINATING CHEMICAL WEAPONS IN SYRIA

The agreement between the US and Russia regarding the steps for the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons is the first step of a process that looks difficult and may undergo changes as the established deadlines elapse. The internal conflict in Syria will pose a challenge to the process of disarmament and verification, which must be quick, safe and effective. It will be a difficult task.

Verifying the disarmament will be a great challenge for the OPCW, for one simple reason: as the conflict continues, ensuring the safety of inspectors is a priority. Since no international civic-military mission has been created to ensure the peaceful development of the disarmament and verification process, al-Assad's government is responsible for the safety of inspectors.

As happened in Libya, it is suspected that Syria will not declare all its chemical stockpile and rebels will already have their own stockpile, not subject to declaration. Under these circumstances, a new chemical attack should not be ruled out.

Regarding the destruction of the stockpile, there are two main issues: facilities, and chemical agents and their launching systems. It should be determined whom, how and when. In the Syrian case, the time is running out. For other countries in possession of chemical weapons, the disarmament process has taken several years to start and is not yet finished. Al-Assad will have to complete the disarmament in a short period and under international pressure.

We should note that the destruction process must be a careful procedure that ensures safety for operators and the population, respecting the environment at the same time. Regarding Syria, there is a risk that the destruction process will not strictly comply with all these OPCW requirements. There should be a balance between the pace of disarmament and the safety of the population and the facilities.

It should also be determined how the technology used by other countries –such as Russia and the US- will be transferred for the destruction process. The techniques employed include hydrolysis and incineration, among others. There are mobile plants which perform these techniques that could be transferred to Syrian territory, although the setting-up would delay the process.

The possibility of moving the chemical weapons out of Syrian territory or, at least, to somewhere on the coast is mentioned in the US-Russia agreement. However, transfers will

further complicate the disarmament, since they are not only a logistical challenge, but also a security challenge for the staff working on them and for the load itself, which could suffer an incident or sabotage.

Finally, regarding financing, disarmament processes are expensive[6]. The destruction of chemical weapons in Syria may require fund raising, though when, by whom and how much is still to be determined.

In the meantime, the conflict between the government and the rebels will continue, though using conventional weapons.

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[6] Cost estimations for destroying 1.000 tons are between $1-3 billion. http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/09/how-much-will-it-cost-to-destroy-syrias-chemical-weapons/279715/