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CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

**Counter-Proliferation Contingency Planning Is
Needed for Syrian WMD**

**Testimony before
Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade
United States House of Representatives**

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My name is Dr. Steven P. Bucci. I am a Senior Research Fellow for Defense and Homeland Security in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies at The Heritage Foundation. The views I express in this testimony are my own, and should not be construed as representing any official position of The Heritage Foundation. Prior to coming to The Heritage Foundation I served as an Army Special Forces officer for three decades and led deployments to eastern Africa, South Asia, and the Persian Gulf. I have participated in joint exercises with regional militaries in the geographic vicinity of Syria. I also oversaw operations dealing with weapons of mass destruction (WMD) while serving in the Army and at the DoD level.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee and address this vital subject. My responsibilities at The Heritage Foundation involve research and analysis for the foundation's public policy work concerning defense and homeland security. Since at least 1985, Heritage has put forward policy proposals for U.S.-Syrian relations and broader U.S.-Middle East policy. In my testimony today, I would like to address the need for counter-proliferation contingency planning in the U.S. to address the threat of WMD in Syria.

It is my view that the situation in Syria could collapse into chaos at any moment with many dangerous consequences for the surrounding region. A major concern is that chemical and biological weapons, or possibly even radioactive material from Syria's nuclear program, could fall into the hands of terrorists. The U.S. needs to be planning for the worst-case scenario. Washington must closely monitor the evolving situation in Syria and make contingency plans in cooperation with allies to prevent the proliferation of such dangerous weapons.

Maintaining Situational Awareness

Syria's Baathist dictatorship developed and stockpiled a lethal arsenal of chemical weapons including blister agents such as mustard gas and even more dangerous nerve agents (VX and Sarin), according to chemical weapons experts.¹ These chemical munitions can be delivered by artillery, rocket launchers, Scud ballistic missiles, and aircraft. Damascus also cooperated with North Korea (and probably Iran) to develop a covert nuclear program, which Israel partially destroyed in a 2007 air strike.² Radioactive materials from this program could become ingredients for a "dirty bomb" if they fall into the hands of terrorists.

While little is known about the status of Syria's nuclear facilities, U.S. officials believe that there are at least 50 chemical weapon production and storage facilities inside Syria.³ In February of this year, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper testified before Congress that the Syrian regime has maintained security at these sites, many of which are located in rural areas away from the urban areas that have seen the bulk of the fighting. Pentagon officials reportedly

¹ "Experts Highlight Technical Challenge in Dealing With Syrian Chem Arsenal," NTI.org, June 21, 2012, <http://www.nti.org/gsn/article/syrian-chemical-munitions-are-serious-concern-experts/> (accessed July 13, 2012).

² "Background Briefing with Senior U.S. Officials on Syria's Covert Nuclear Reactor and North Korea's Involvement," April 24, 2008, <http://www.cfr.org/syria/background-briefing-senior-us-officials-syrias-covert-nuclear-reactor-north-koreas-involvement/p16105> (accessed July 13, 2012).

³ Bilal Y. Saab, Chen Kane, and Leonard Spector, "Assad's Toxic Assets," Foreign Policy.com, March 13, 2012, http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/03/13/assads_toxic_assets (accessed July 13, 2012).

assess that the regime has shown no sign that it is considering the use of chemical weapons, nor has it relaxed its guard over WMD assets, which are the crown jewels of the regime's arsenal.⁴

As the situation inside Syria deteriorates, however, there is a growing possibility that the regime could lose control over facilities as its chain of command breaks down and weapons or dangerous materials fall into the hands of defectors, looters, various rival opposition groups, or terrorists.

Those initially at risk would probably be local populations exposed to the haphazard handling of hazardous materials. The most significant danger for the U.S. and its allies is that these materials might be removed from the country and fashioned into improvised explosive devices in the United States, Israel, Afghanistan, or elsewhere. Many believe that would require a degree of organization and infrastructure normally found in a nation-state, but some non-state actors could also leverage these materials. Iran already has the means and capability to do this, using Revolutionary Guards from the Quds Force or Hezbollah, its Lebanese terrorist surrogate. Al-Qaeda, which has a front inside Syria, and an expressed interest in conducting these kinds of attacks, could seek materials in Syria as well.

This threat is not analogous to concerns during the run-up to the Iraq War. Then, the primary concern was that Saddam Hussein's regime would use weapons against another country or deliberately transfer them to a terrorist group. Further, it was suspected at the time that Iraq might have far greater WMD capabilities and means to employ them than Syria currently has. The Syrian threat is different, and the U.S. response needs to be calculated according to a different set of risks and U.S. interests. Here, the principal danger is that the regime might lose control of materials and that they could find their way to terrorists if the regime were to collapse.

The potential worst-case scenario is more like that which occurred in Libya, where the Qadhafi regime lost control of mustard gas supplies and huge stockpiles of modern weapons. While the mustard gas, stored in bulk containers, reportedly was secured, large numbers of arms, including Man-Portable Air Defense Systems (MANPADS), were seized by many different groups. Some reportedly may have been smuggled out of the country and could pose a threat to civil aviation.⁵

Military Intervention Would Be Costly and Difficult

While similarities exist between the situation in Syria and what occurred in Libya, the conditions for an outside military intervention in Syria are far different. Syria would be a much more difficult military intervention because of the greater size and capabilities of the Syrian armed forces, which have remained relatively intact, unlike in Libya. Moreover, Syria's Assad regime has more foreign allies than the isolated Qadhafi regime. Damascus can rely on Moscow to block U.N. efforts and Iran and Hezbollah to help it resist a foreign intervention.

⁴ Claudete Roulo, "Little: Syrian Chemical Weapons Appear Secure," Armed Forces Press Service, July 13, 2012, <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=117118> (accessed July 13, 2012).

⁵ Andrew Chutter, "5,000 Libya MANPADS Secured: Some May Have Been Smuggled Out," Defense News, April 12, 2012, <http://www.defensenews.com/article/20120412/DEFREG04/304120002/5-000-Libyan-MANPADS-Secured> (accessed July 13, 2012).

Such differences would make any military intervention in Syria a much riskier and potentially costly exercise. Pentagon officials reportedly estimate that it could require more than 75,000 ground troops to secure Syria's chemical warfare facilities.⁶ It is clear that even such a limited intervention, much less a full-blown humanitarian intervention launched amid a civil war, would be an enormously difficult.

While the potential for hazardous materials being smuggled out of the country is a legitimate concern, the risks associated with deploying U.S. troops inside Syria currently are greater. There are however prudent measures that the U.S. can take to mitigate the risk that hazardous materials will "leak" out of the country without putting U.S. boots on the ground.

A Prudent U.S. Policy

Washington should privately warn the Assad regime not to use its chemical weapons and that such a move will trigger much greater U.S. support, possibly including arms, for the opposition. This declaration should be a private warning, possibly delivered through Syria's U.N. ambassador, in order to increase the chances that the Assad regime might take heed. A public warning could cause Syria to react provocatively as a show of strength against the U.S.

Washington separately should make it clear to all Syrian opposition groups that they will be held responsible for securing any chemical weapons, radioactive materials, or MANPADS that fall into their hands. They should know that they will be rewarded if they turn these over to the U.S. or allied governments and punished if they retain them or pass them on to terrorists.

The U.S., its allies, and the "Friends of Syria" contact group, an umbrella organization composed of over 100 nations dedicated to finding a solution to the violence in Syria, should establish an intelligence-sharing mechanism to monitor Syrian WMD sites and track the movement of loose weapons in an effort to intercept them before they can be transferred to terrorist groups. The United States is already using satellite intelligence and drones to monitor Syrian military activities and should build up its intelligence-gathering network inside Syria. Other countries may be able to contribute important human intelligence that the U.S. lacks. Every WMD storage site must be positively identified and its location certified.

It is especially important to coordinate counter-proliferation and counterterrorism efforts with Syria's neighbors to prevent terrorist groups or smugglers from moving dangerous weapons out of the country. Turkey, which has extensive ties with the Syrian opposition, can play a critical role. Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq could also make important contributions in detecting and intercepting weapons leaking out of Syria. Particular attention should be paid to preventing them from being transferred to Hezbollah and Iran or falling into the hands of al-Qaeda. Washington should also develop contingency plans with these countries and the Syrian opposition to prepare both to receive these weapons in the event they fall into their hands, and to respond to possible use or accidental detonation of chemical or radiological weapons. Positive intelligence is vital to this effort.

⁶ Barbara Starr, "Military: Thousands of Troops Needed to Secure Syrian Chemical Sites," CNN Security Clearance blog, February 22, 2012, <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2012/02/22/military-thousands-of-troops-needed-to-secure-syrian-chemical-sites/> (accessed February 24, 2012).

Rapid-Response Plans Needed

Air strikes against chemical weapons facilities are not a wise idea. They could produce collateral damage through the attacks themselves or by releasing toxic plumes that would threaten nearby civilians. Such a strike would have an unpredictable result. Simply, bombing would be a desperate and dangerous means to attempt to prevent proliferation. If the U.S. receives actionable intelligence that terrorists have obtained or are about to obtain WMD materials, then a better plan would be to launch a targeted CIA or military operation, if practical. For example, the Pentagon should prepare to act on contingency plans for the rapid insertion of Special Operations Forces to secure, remove, or disable hazardous materials that might fall into terrorist hands. This could be costly in the lives of our most highly trained military assets, but it is the only sure way of eliminating such a threat. Given the potential costs, such a plan should be exercised very sparingly.

The U.S. government should also plan to help a Syrian successor government secure, destroy, and disable the Assad regime's WMD stockpile and production facilities, along with loose conventional weapons such as MANPADS.

Bottom line

The key to minimizing this danger is prior coordination with all parties, implementing the best intelligence resources available, and a willingness to commit Special Forces to stop specific burgeoning threats from reaching fruition. The commitment of masses of U.S. ground forces (75,000) to secure all sites that might contain WMD is not a viable option. Beyond the modest specifics noted above, the only "big" option would have to involve soldiers from Muslim countries (Turkey, Jordan, maybe a few from Iraq) either on their own, or maybe (at most) with U.S. Special Forces, U.S. Army Chemical Corps, or National Guard Civil Support Team advisors.

Controlling this threat will require continued funding to both our intelligence and special operations capabilities. Decrementing these forces will have a direct and negative effect on U.S. ability to respond to the general or a pinpoint threat from the WMD in Syria.

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