SYRIA ON TRACK FOR DESTRUCTION OF ALL CHEMICAL WEAPON RELATED MATERIALS BY JULY

Back at the end of January, I noted that Syria was being castigated for delays in removing its chemical weapon precursors when the US had not been blamed for delays in making the Cape Ray available for destruction of the chemicals to proceed. Although there were still slight delays after the Cape Ray appeared in the region, we are now seeing from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons that the original deadline of all the chemicals being destroyed by the end of June can still be met. Even more encouraging, the pace of removal of chemicals from Syria has picked up significantly and now more than a third of the material will have been removed by the end of this week.

From a press release today by OPCW:

> The Syrian Arab Republic has submitted to the OPCW a revised proposal that aims to complete the removal of all chemicals from Syria before the end of April 2014.
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> The OPCW-UN Joint Mission also verified that two more consignments of chemicals have left the port of Latakia, including a quantity of mustard gas – a Priority 1 chemical – which was previously reported last Wednesday. Another movement, a significant consignment of other Priority 1 chemicals, is scheduled to arrive in Latakia during this week, which will bring the total number of movements thus far to six.
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> The six movements represent more than 35% of all chemicals that must be removed from Syria for destruction,

> including 23% of Priority 1 chemicals and 63% of Priority 2 chemicals. In addition, the OPCW has verified that Syria has destroyed in situ more than 93% of its stock of isopropanol.

It would have been a bit more encouraging if all of the Priority 1 materials were removed first, since they present the biggest risk. It is not clear whether the shipment of a higher percentage of the Priority 2 material than Priority 1 was due to Syria withholding more dangerous material intentionally or if it was a result of logistics being dictated by where the materials were stored relative to where fighting in the ongoing civil war was taking place. In that regard, it is worth noting that Syria reported last week that there were two attempted attacks on convoys transporting the materials in late January. Although the Reuters report does not expressly state as much, we are left to assume that the attacks were unsuccessful since they were reported as merely being attempted. This same report also noted that two staging sites for the chemicals could not be accessed during the reporting period due to fighting in the area.

Returning to the OPCW press release from today, this bit at the end cannot be emphasized enough:

> Prior to initiating operations in January to remove its chemicals, in late 2013 Syria completed the functional destruction of its chemical weapons production facilities, mixing and filling equipment, and all of its munitions that were designed for use with chemical warfare agents.

That means that even though a significant quantity of dangerous material still remains inside the country at staging sites controlled by the Syrian military, the necessary equipment for mixing the two components of sarin, filling it into munitions, and the munitions themselves

into which the material would be loaded all have been destroyed. For there still to be a threat of Syria carrying out chemical weapon attacks, one would have to believe that Syria withheld equipment for carrying out the attack from this destruction process and withheld or withdrew from the staging sites enough materials to mix to carry out the attack. And keep in mind the notation above that 93% of the known supply of isopropanol, one of the two components of sarin, already has been destroyed.

Despite this progress on removing the threat of Syria using chemical weapons, there still are accusations as recently as this week that new attacks have occurred, but there doesn't seem to be any confirmation yet.

Meanwhile, AP has interviewed Sigrid Kaad, who serves as the Special Coordinator for the OPCW-UN Joint Mission:

> In an interview with The Associated Press, Sigrid Kaag said Syria has agreed a 60-day timetable to accelerate and intensify efforts toward removal of the chemicals that will be destroyed outside the country.
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> "We anticipate a lot of action in the month of March," Kaag told the AP after briefing the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons' executive council in a closed-door meeting.
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> "But of course our message is always one of continued expectation to achieve more, to do more and to do it safely and securely."
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> OPCW spokesman Michael Luhan called the new timeline "very welcome news."

Here's hoping that this new timeline holds. With Russia now distracted by its Crimean adventures, it remains to be seen whether Assad will assume he is under less pressure from Russia to comply

with the plan or if he will fear that he is less protected from an attack by Western powers if he doesn’t comply. And, of course, those pesky “Western diplomats” who feed hysteria to Reuters (why yes, it is the same Reuters reporter who gave anonymity to diplomats in January to stir the pot…) still insist that Syria must remove everything by the end of March instead of the end of April if all of the material is to be destroyed by the end of June.