

Make the Syria Plan Regional

By [David Lowry](#)

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On Sept. 9, international dialogue about Syrian chemical weapons took a dizzying turn. Seizing upon a remark by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, the Russian government proposed that these weapons be placed under international control. The Syrian government immediately accepted this proposal and has now begun the process of acceding to the Chemical Weapons Convention, or CWC.

In response, U.S. President Barack Obama suspended his call for airstrikes on Syria. The governments of Russia, the U.S. and other countries are trying to reach an agreement whereby Syria's chemical weapons can be identified, secured and eventually destroyed.

The framework
for destroying
chemical
weapons in Syria
could pave

the way for better control of these weapons across the entire Middle East.

The problems to be addressed in a workable agreement are daunting. One contentious subject is the establishment of mechanisms to ensure compliance by the Syrian government. Related concerns include the coherence of command authority within that government and the extent of its control of chemical weapons. Other problems include the mechanics of identifying and securing chemical weapons in the midst of a civil war. Compounding the challenge is the potential for false-flag operations.

Nestling within this daunting challenge is one great opportunity: progress on the control of weapons of mass destruction across the Middle East and globally. Notably, establishing global control of Syria's chemical weapons could improve the climate for confirmation of Iran's non-nuclear status and for progress toward the goal of a Middle East free of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons.

The ingredients required to pursue these opportunities would enhance the workability of any Syria-focused chemical weapons agreement hammered out by Russia, the U.S. and other countries now involved. There would be two major ingredients. First, additional countries would be engaged with the problem. Iran is an especially important case, but other countries, including Israel and Egypt, could play important roles. Second, the objectives of diplomacy would be broadened to encompass global principles, exemplified in this instance by the CWC.

A first step could be to convene a special session of states party to the CWC. Any party could call for this step. The session's purpose would be to seek rapid accession to the CWC by holdout countries, with special attention to Syria. At present, Syria, South Sudan, North Korea, Egypt and Angola have not signed the CWC. Israel and Myanmar have signed but have not ratified it.

Accession to the CWC by Syria, Egypt and Israel would be symbolically and practically important. It would commit every Middle East country to the elimination of chemical weapons and, with appropriate concessions by Israel, could promote progress toward the goal of a nuclear-free region. Pursuit of these goals could provide a setting for productive engagement by Iran.

Iran is a firm ally of the Syrian government. Yet Iran's people have learned from bitter experience to abhor chemical weapons. Reflecting that sentiment, Iran made a statement to the April 2013 CWC review conference, on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement countries and China, that expressed concern that chemical weapons may have been used in Syria in violation of international norms.

In a suitable diplomatic environment, Iran could be closely engaged in international control of Syria's chemical weapons. Iran and Russia, allies of the Syrian government, could each exert pressure that ensures its compliance. Iran could also provide intelligence that helps the international community to identify and secure Syria's chemical weapons.

Accession to the CWC by Syria and Egypt would require these countries to abandon their long-standing refusal to take this action until Israel dismantles its nuclear arsenal. Similarly, in assisting Syrian and Egyptian accession to the CWC, Iran would have to overcome its long-standing resentment of Israel's regional nuclear monopoly. Although a Middle East free of chemical weapons would be safer for all parties, this outcome would be a bitter pill for Syria, Egypt and Iran to swallow if Israel's nuclear status were unaltered.

Israel's elimination of its nuclear weapons is unlikely at present, but it could abandon its longstanding position of nuclear "opacity." Another concession could be a moratorium on Israel's production of fissile material.

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