

Syria: What Chance to Stop the Slaughter? Human Rights Watch (published in New York Review of Books) Kenneth Roth 30 October 2013

How should we make sense of the enforcement of a “red line” prohibiting one horrible weapon that has killed relatively few but leaving untouched the conventional weapons that the Syrian military has used to kill tens of thousands? It is easy to disparage a chemical weapons deal that aims to stop the method of slaughter responsible for fewer than 2 percent of Syria’s estimated 115,000 deaths resulting from the conflict over the past two-and-a-half years while leaving unimpeded the means used to slaughter more than 98 percent. “Red light for chemical weapons, green light for conventional weapons” would fairly summarize the approach.

Yet it would be wrong to belittle September’s last-minute diplomatic breakthrough in which Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov seized on US Secretary of State John Kerry’s seemingly offhand remark that Syria could avoid US military action by surrendering its chemical weapons. To begin with, averting another US military intervention in the volatile Middle East is no small matter. (...)

(...)

The Syrian government will undoubtedly try to squirrel away some chemical weapon capacity from its vast arsenal, but with Russia, its main political patron and military supplier, backing the deal, it would be folly for Syria to use chemical weapons again in anything like the magnitude of the August 21 attacks. (...)

The chemical weapons deal’s greatest impact may be diplomatic. (...)

(...)

Within days, this newly constructive mood on the Security Council extended to the humanitarian sphere. The chemical attack was extraordinary for the weapon used but otherwise typical of the way the Syrian military has waged war. As rebel forces have seized large swathes of Syrian territory, the Assad government has responded by indiscriminately and often deliberately attacking civilians living there. In part this reflects the classically abusive counterinsurgency strategy of draining the sea to catch the fish: make life so miserable for civilians that they flee, leaving rebel forces exposed, with no population to hide among or functioning economy from which to acquire supplies. In part this strategy also seems designed to send a message to Syrians throughout the country: this is what your life will be like if the rebels prevail where you live, so you had better support Assad.

Syrian troops have thus used rockets, artillery, cluster bombs, incendiary weapons, fuel-air explosives, and aerial bombardment to indiscriminately attack populated areas in rebel-held territory and to target functioning bakeries, medical facilities, and schools. The Syrian forces have also deployed more ordinary weapons, such as the guns and knives used to execute 248 civilians in a Sunni antigovernment enclave in early May, as documented by Human Rights Watch.

On a smaller scale, rebel factions have also committed atrocities, among them such increasingly powerful Islamic extremist groups as Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, both of which have links to al-Qaeda, and Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar. (...)

The results of such atrocities have been disastrous, with an estimated 40,000 civilians killed and the destruction of much of the country's basic infrastructure. Millions of civilians have fled their homes because of this calculated misery: more than two million to surrounding countries where they are a large and growing burden, particularly on the fragile societies of Lebanon and Jordan, and nearly five million within Syria. Close to seven million Syrians in the country now depend on humanitarian assistance for basic necessities.

The Assad government has acted with callous disregard for them, placing bureaucratic obstacles in the way of desperately needed relief. It has refused to register all but a handful of the most capable and experienced international aid agencies. It has held up urgently needed assistance in customs, and required multiple official sign-offs that doom aid shipments to extreme delays. Most harmful, it has insisted that aid be sent from government-held territory. (...)

(...) A major UN-led operation is needed.

The United Nations will ordinarily not undertake such operations without the consent of the government whose population requires assistance. The Syrian government has been loath to permit such cross-border humanitarian aid because that would undermine its efforts to make life miserable in rebel-held areas. The UN Security Council could order Syria to allow cross-border assistance, but through the end of September, Russia would have none of it. Nyet prevailed.

The chemical weapons accord provided an opportunity to address these humanitarian needs. Just five days after the Security Council resolution affirming the deal, on September 27, Russia accepted a Security Council presidential statement urging Syria to "take immediate steps to facilitate the expansion of humanitarian relief operations," including, "where appropriate, across borders from neighboring countries." (...)

The United Nations should seize this opportunity, make concrete demands for access by

specific deadlines, and report any further resistance promptly to the Security Council. Unfortunately, Valerie Amos, the UN under-secretary-general for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief coordinator, has remained vague in public about the main obstacles to distributing humanitarian aid. Apparently fearful that blaming the Syrian government would jeopardize UN access to government-controlled areas, Amos has too often resorted to anodyne statements about the problem. (...)

Yet even if the disastrous humanitarian situation begins to improve, no serious effort is underway to stop the killing of civilians by conventional weapons. As front lines have hardened, the ratio of civilian to combatant deaths has dropped, but some two thousand of the recent average monthly death toll of five thousand have been civilians. What can be done to stop this slaughter?

The Obama administration's primary answer has been peace talks. (...)

But few believe a negotiated peace is anywhere near. Civilian deaths continue, making it urgent to find some way to curtail the slaughter in the interim. Most paths for doing so go through Moscow. (...) But if Moscow has the power to stop the killing by chemical weapons, why not also stop the slaughter of civilians by conventional means? Why not insist on a new "red line" against the deliberate and indiscriminate killing of civilians? Even if the fighting continues, why not force Assad to concentrate on limiting civilian casualties—to attack only the fish and leave the sea alone?

(...)

Another way to deter further atrocities would be to enlist the International Criminal Court. Because Syria has not joined the court, it can be brought under the court's jurisdiction only by action of the Security Council, where the threatened Russian veto stands in the way. The ICC would answer Russia's concerns about rebel atrocities because it could prosecute serious crimes by all parties to the conflict, but that has not persuaded Russia, which called the suggestion "ill-timed and counterproductive."

In this case, Moscow's intransigence has been made easier by Washington's own reluctance to press for involvement of the ICC, which the US has not joined. (...) Instead the Obama administration has been promoting a new tribunal devoted only to the crisis in Syria; this would presumably be established once the war ends, despite the considerable cost and complexity of creating such a tribunal and the loss of the deterrent effect of having a tribunal examining Syria now, as the killing proceeds.

(...)

What then might be done to convince Russia to end its defense of Assad's atrocities and to continue down the constructive path suggested by the chemical weapons deal at the UN and the statement in favor of humanitarian relief? One reason Moscow has been able to continue its intransigence for so long is that it has paid little price for it. For example, Russia supplies Assad's killing machine through its official arms exporter, Rosoboronexport. One obvious way of pressuring Moscow to assume a more constructive role on Syria would be for the US and other countries to boycott Rosoboronexport. Despite a law prohibiting US purchases from the company, the Pentagon cited national security in March to waive this restriction. It purchased Russian helicopters for delivery to Afghanistan, because one legacy of the Soviet occupation is that Afghan forces are more familiar with Russian models. The British and French governments, for their part, continue to let Rosoboronexport advertise its wares at arms fairs outside London and Paris. In short, for the company and the government that controls it, it's been business as usual.

Nor has the West used for Syria the kind of paralyzing banking sanctions that have been so effective in bringing Iran to the negotiating table. Prohibiting further financial relations with any bank—Russian or otherwise—that helped to finance arms for Syria would limit those purchases by forcing the Syrian government to rely on cash payments and barter. Similar sanctions could be used to put pressure on rebel groups that are responsible for widespread atrocities.

(...)

The emerging non-Western powers also have an important part to play. Russia and China allowed the Security Council to move more aggressively to stop what many predicted would have been mass slaughter in Libya because they were politically isolated, both from the major Western powers and from the most important non-Western ones on the Security Council at the time: Brazil, India, and South Africa.

(...)

As bad as things are in Syria, they could get worse. The conflict could become even more destructive than Lebanon's in the 1980s, with the prospect of a decade or more of killing, displacement, and suffering. The longer the atrocities continue, the harder it will be to rebuild a highly diverse society. And more Syrians will be drawn to the brutality of the Islamic extremists who are in ascendancy among the rebels.

Russia

may be indispensable for reining in Assad, but the rest of the world is essential for convincing Russia to do so. The chemical weapons deal represents the best opportunity since the war

began to forge a unified international front to stop the slaughter in Syria. But that will happen only with a much more focused and consistent international effort—by both the West and others—to press Russia to live up to its responsibility to protect the people of Syria.

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