

**Proliferation central: Syria's nuclear, chemical and biological weapons**

by Carl Ungerer

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Of the half dozen or so countries around the world that continue to present a serious proliferation risk, Syria is currently among the most dangerous, least understood and of highest importance to international counter-proliferation efforts.

South Africa and Libya walked away from clandestine nuclear weapons programs a few years ago and opened up facilities to international inspections. Pakistan has made an attempt to crack down on rogue proliferation networks. And China has become a more responsible partner in global efforts to stop proliferation. Even Iran and North Korea are engaged in disarmament negotiations with the UN and the Six Party Talks respectively.

In contrast, Syria's President Bashar Assad has in recent years openly declared his support for accelerated proliferation activities.<sup>1</sup> And, despite Syria's international legal obligations, Assad and his generals are putting words into action.

Last week's revelations of Syrian efforts to acquire a nuclear weapons capability through the construction of a plutonium power reactor close to the Euphrates River at Al Kibar are deeply concerning, but fully consistent with Syria's recent proliferation behaviour. In fact, Syria's nuclear and chemical weapons aspirations are the worst kept secret in the Middle East.

Although the Syrian reactor was successfully destroyed by the Israeli Defence Force in September last year, the exposure of the nuclear reactor will once again focus international attention on the regional and global threat posed by Syria's unconventional weapons and its growing ballistic missile capability.

Syria has a long proliferation record. Syria is a party to the 1925 Geneva Protocol, which bans the use of chemical and bacteriological weapons, as well as the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). But Damascus has never taken its legal responsibilities seriously.

Following heavy losses during the Six Day War with Israel in 1973, Syria embarked upon a concerted proliferation campaign which reportedly included buying chemical artillery shells from Egypt. According to US and Israeli intelligence estimates, Syria has since established an indigenous chemical weapons program including the stockpiling of several chemical

agents for aerial bombs and between 100–200 chemical warheads for Scud-B and Scud-C ballistic missiles. The chemicals include the deadly nerve agents Sarin and VX.

The Syrian biological weapons program is opaque but of potential concern. Although very little open source information is available, Syria has refused to ratify the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention and is judged to be capable of developing a limited range of biological agents, although they have probably not done so yet.

From the evidence presented in Washington last week, it is clear that senior North Korean officials made multiple visits to Syria during the construction phase of the Al Kibar reactor from 2001 onwards. The close collaboration between Syria and North Korea adds a particularly worrying element to this proliferation equation—and could possibly de-rail current diplomatic efforts through the Six Party Talks to achieve denuclearisation on the Korean peninsula.

### **The road to Damascus via Tehran**

The development of the Al Kibar reactor shows that Syria remains dependent on foreign sources for key elements of its proliferation wish list. So the growing convergence between Syrian and Iranian strategic interests, most recently on display during the 2006 war in southern Lebanon, is another complicating factor.

In many ways, Syria and Iran are two sides of the same proliferation coin. Solving one will not be possible without solving them together. And non-proliferation efforts in the Middle East will not be achievable, until there is an open and inclusive international regime that recognises Israel, Pakistan and India as *de facto* nuclear weapon states.

The prospect of a terrorist organisation acquiring a nuclear, chemical or biological weapon and using it against the West is the one low-probability, high-consequence event that keeps national security planners awake at night.

Although no state has yet been willing to hand over unconventional weapons to a terrorist organisation because of the very real prospects of immediate strategic repercussions, the growing nexus between Syria, Iran and Hezbollah constitutes a strategic policy problem that Australia and other supporters of the non-proliferation regime cannot ignore.

### **Policy options**

In 1985, the Australian Government established the Australia Group (AG) to deal specifically with the sort of proliferation challenges that Syria today presents.

The AG has played a crucial role in constraining proliferation activities, particularly the regulation of dual-use equipment and materials on sale from European companies willing to sell to Middle Eastern clients. But the AG, like other supply-side export control arrangements, is under stress and directly subverted by secret proliferation networks and the seemingly unstoppable North Korean nuclear arms bazaar.

There is a real sense in the Middle East that the proliferation genie is out of the bottle, and that the region is on the cusp of an arms race. And senior Israeli military commanders are becoming increasingly concerned that the next Arab–Israeli war may be a nuclear one.

Australia has direct strategic interests in ensuring that this does not occur. In dealing with this proliferation problem, Canberra has several policy options up its sleeve, including:

- initiating and leading an international diplomatic campaign to persuade Syria to take the 'Libyan option' and to end its nuclear weapons program
- using the strict verification and inspection mechanisms contained within the Chemical Weapons Convention to initiate a full and immediate audit of Syria's chemical weapon program
- reinstating and fast tracking negotiations on a verification protocol to the Biological Weapons Convention
- strengthening export controls through a more open and inclusive dialogue with companies that sell dual-use chemical and biological equipment to the Middle East
- funding and expanding the US-led Cooperative Threat Reduction initiative to include North Korea, Iran and Syria.

Australia's long-standing non-proliferation and disarmament credentials give it a unique opportunity to contribute to current proliferation challenges. And no challenge is more serious than the strategic consequences of unrestrained nuclear, biological and chemical weapons proliferation in the Middle East. Dealing with the Syrian problem should therefore be a priority for any renewed Australian counter-proliferation diplomacy.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> 'We won't scrap WMD stockpile unless Israel does, says Assad', The Telegraph, 6 January 2004.

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