

## **Syrian conflict – on the brink of a new phase?**

The 29-month long conflict in Syria seems to be heading into a new, more dangerous phase, following the 21 Aug incident in which chemical weapons were allegedly used in the Ghouta suburb of Damascus. The conflict now seems poised to expand beyond Syria's borders, with wider repercussions, with the UN Security Council paralyzed by threat of veto by its permanent members.

The death toll of over 100,000, refugee outflow of over 2 million, and over 4 million displaced persons is rapidly growing, threatening the stability of neighbouring Jordan, Turkey and the already fragile Lebanon and Iraq. The prolonged conflict has witnessed increasing involvement and strength of Al-Qaeda affiliated elements such as the Jabhat Al-Nusra, raising the spectre of Syria becoming an Al-Qaeda base.

In the early hours of 21 Aug, a series of rockets appear to have been fired at rebel held areas in the Ghouta suburb of Damascus. Shortly after, social media witnessed a huge volume of messages and videos reporting deaths due to some form of gas. The symptoms were similar to those caused by exposure to a nerve gas Sarin. Medical responders also fell victim to this toxic gas. Medecins sans Frontiers, a well respected and impartial NGO, has reported typical symptoms of nerve gas poisoning by a large number of victims. None of the victims had any wounds or physical injuries.

Western intelligence agencies have evidence of intercepts of orders being issued to Syrian military units to mobilize and prepare chemical weapons for an attack, and the rocket launches were from areas controlled by the Assad regime, launched against exclusively rebel held areas. Estimates from western sources put the number of deaths at over 1400, including over 400 children. A UN chemical weapons inspectors team which was present in Syria managed after some delay to access the area and collect samples which will be analyzed and their report is awaited.

Syria holds a large stock of chemical weapons and has not signed the Chemical Weapons Convention banning the use of such weapons. During earlier months, there have been persistent reports of use of chemical agents by the regime forces in various parts of Syria. The rebel forces do not have access to chemical weapons nor the ability to deliver them. The circumstantial evidence strongly suggests that a chemical attack using Sarin gas was unleashed by the Syrian regime. While the Syrian regime and Russia deny these allegations, the Western and Arab countries have condemned the Assad regime and called for action to be taken against it. The Syrian regime in turn, has accused the rebels of using chemical weapons provided with the help of Saudi Arabia.

The UN Security Council has been unable to take action because of divergences within the Permanent five, with Russia threatening to use its veto against Western backed resolution calling for Chapter VII action against Syria. The US has been preparing for a military strike of "limited duration and scope" to punish the regime (and not to remove it) and degrade its capacity to use chemical weapons in future, and the US Congress seems set to give President Obama its

approval when it meets on 9 Sept. The UK Parliament refused to grant PM Cameron the authority to take military action in support of the US, being haunted by the experience of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. France has supported President Obama's decision to go in for a military strike. The Arab league has strongly condemned the Assad regime (suspended from membership) but has stopped short of explicitly calling for military action.

Meanwhile US has built up its naval assets in the Eastern Mediterranean to five missile destroyers and 3 nuclear submarines all heavily armed with cruise missiles, and two carrier battle groups have been stationed in the area, to react to any threats. Air assets have been built up at bases in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Cyprus by the US, France, and UK. Israel has been preparing for any eventuality including possible gas attacks, and has tested its anti-missile defence systems.

The tensions in the region and possibility of a US military strike, and possible counter reaction by Syria and Iran have created turmoil in oil markets and financial markets. Further volatility can be expected in the next week, as the likelihood of a strike increases. In the face of the prospect of a widening conflict, many countries including India have called for a political solution. At the same time the use of chemical weapons cannot be ignored. What possibilities are there for a constructive approach even if there is a military strike?

First and foremost, the UN Security Council must strongly condemn the use of chemical weapons in general, and mandatorily call on all parties to declare and place all their stocks of such weapons under international supervision and control by the OPCW. Failure to do so should invoke Chapter VII measures. The wording of such a resolution would make it difficult to veto. This is the first step if the Security Council is to have any semblance of authority and relevance and for the CW Convention to be preserved. Otherwise the General Assembly should step in with an appropriate resolution under "uniting for peace".

Secondly the UN Security Council should organize the Geneva Conference at which all the parties to the Syrian conflict and the UNSC members should participate without any preconditions whatsoever, in order to find a peaceful solution to the conflict. This effort can no longer be outsourced to the US and Russia, but must be brought firmly under the broader UN framework as soon as possible. Only then can we begin to deal sensibly with this long drawn out conflict.

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