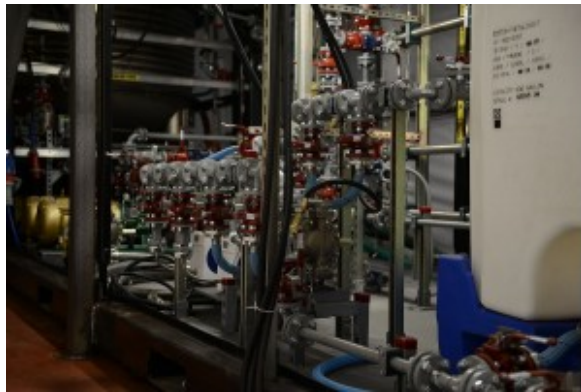


DESTRUCTION OF SYRIA'S CHEMICAL WEAPONS-RELATED MATERIALS COMPLETED WEEKS AHEAD OF SCHEDULE



One of the two Field Deployable Hydrolysis Systems installed on the Cape Ray. I'll take the value of that over a crate of MANPADS any day. (US Army photo)

As militarized local police riot in Ferguson, Missouri, Iraq continues its meltdown and Afghanistan can't even agree on how to recount votes, the world has been overdue for the tiniest morsel of good news. Good news is what we got yesterday out of the situation regarding the destruction of chemical weapons-related materials from Syria:

The United States said Monday that it had completed the destruction of the deadliest chemical weapons in Syria's arsenal, a rare foreign policy achievement for President Obama at a time when the Middle East is embroiled in violence and political turmoil.

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On Monday, Mr. Obama said that the destruction of the weapons, several weeks ahead of schedule, “advances our collective goal to ensure that the Assad regime cannot use its chemical arsenal against the Syrian people and sends a clear message that the use of these abhorrent weapons has consequences and will not be tolerated by the international community.”

The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons provided more details in a press release from their Director-General, Ahmet Üzümcü:

The Cape Ray’s consignment included the most dangerous chemicals in Syria’s arsenal: 581 metric tonnes of DF [methylphosphonyl difluoride], a binary precursor for sarin gas, and 19.8 metric tonnes of ready-to-use sulfur mustard (HD). They were neutralised with two Field Deployable Hydrolysis Systems (FDHS) on the Cape Ray, which reduced their toxicity by 99.9 percent in line with the requirements of the Chemical Weapons Convention.

Furthermore, the operation was successfully completed weeks ahead of the 60-day schedule the U.S. had estimated would be needed, and OPCW inspectors aboard the ship verified that no chemicals of any kind escaped into the sea or otherwise impacted the environment. The Cape Ray will now transport the effluent from the hydrolysis operations to Finland and Germany, where it will be offloaded for disposal at land-based facilities.

Recall that the initial US response to the chemical weapons attacks of August, 2013 in Syria was supposed to be missile strikes and a ramping up of support for “moderate” rebels fighting Assad. But John Kerry achieved some

accidental diplomacy and Assad agreed to hand over his chemical arsenal for destruction. Since then, war hawks have been castigating Obama for the very low level of support for Syrian rebels despite the fact that US air strikes in Iraq are now aimed at destroying major weaponry that the US provided to Iraq's army before it melted away in the face of opposition.

There now is substantial evidence to support the decision not to provide increased support for the moderates, as many of these moderate groups have now shifted their alliance directly into IS support. This terrific Monkey Cage blog post written by Marc Lynch and hosted at the Washington Post, provides very good background on the shifting alliances among the rebel groups:

The idea that these rebel groups could be vetted for moderation and entrusted with advanced weaponry made absolutely no sense given the realities of the conflict in Syria. These local groups frequently shifted sides and formed alliances of convenience as needed. As MIT's Fotini Christia has documented in cases from Afghanistan to Bosnia, and the University of Virginia's Jonah Shulhofer-Wohl has detailed in Syria, rebel groups that lack a legitimate and effective over-arching institutional structure almost always display these kinds of rapidly shifting alliances and "blue on blue" violence. A "moderate, vetted opposition" means little when alliances are this fluid and organizational structures so weak.

The murkiness of the "terrorist group" line in this context is apparent in these changing alliances and conflicts. For instance, the United States recently designated two key Kuwaiti Islamists as terror financiers, accusing them of channeling funds to Jubhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State. But both

were better known as backers of Ahrar al-Sham, a large Salafist organization that then worked within the Saudi-backed Islamic Front. And as recently as June, when they were allegedly funding the Islamic State and al-Nusra, one of them was holding events with FSA commander Riad al-Assad. These complexities, so deeply familiar to everyone who studies the conflict, deeply undermine the assumptions underlying plans resting on identifying and supporting “moderate rebels.”

And Lynch even makes the same point I did about the folly of the push to provide MANPADS (shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missiles) to the “moderates”:

In short, then, discussion of U.S. support for Syria’s rebels overstates the extent to which such aid would matter given the diverse sources of support available. U.S. arms would have joined a crowded market and competed within an increasingly Islamist and sectarian environment. Even the argument that Islamist fighters would shave off beards and follow the money if the United States got involved is self-defeating, since it admits that they would just as easily flip back when a better offer comes along. Both state financing and the public campaigns exacerbated rebel fragmentation on the ground as each group jockeyed for access to lucrative external patrons. The United States had far less money to offer rebels compared with the Gulf states, and placed far more conditions. It might have been able to offer uniquely privileged access to advanced weaponry, which many rebels did dearly want. Anti-tank missiles did find their way to rebel groups anyway, of course, presumably with U.S. support.

But it's difficult to imagine any responsible U.S. official signing off on providing surface-to-air missiles, for reasons made graphically apparent by the shooting down of the Malaysian Flight MH17 over Ukraine.

Writing at the Guardian, Hassan Hassan provides more details on "moderate" groups the US backed in Syria now working with IS:

According to Samer al-Ani, an opposition media activist from Deir Ezzor, several fighting groups affiliated to the western-backed Military Council worked discreetly with Isis, even before the group's latest offensive. Liwa al-Ansar and Liwa Jund al-Aziz, he said, pledged allegiance to Isis in secret, with reports that Isis is using them to put down a revolt by the Sha'itat tribe near the Iraqi border.

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This is not the first, or the only, time in which groups affiliated to the military structures backed by the US and the Gulf states have worked with Isis. Saddam al-Jamal, a top commander for the Free Syrian Army's eastern front, pledged allegiance to Isis in November and fought in its ranks, wreaking a grisly carnage in his hometown of Abu Kamal in April. Other groups affiliated to the western-backed military councils that have pledged allegiance to Isis include Liwa Fajr al-Islam in Homs.

Moderate religious groups that had been established mostly to fight jihadists are now working closely, if quietly, with Isis. Liwa Ahl al-Athar, for example, has discreetly pledged allegiance to Isis. The Salafi-leaning rebel alliance, which has a strong presence in many areas in Deir Ezzor and

beyond, is financially backed by private donors from the Arab Gulf states, but is said to be in the “good guys” list by governments that back the Syrian opposition.

The concrete success afforded by diplomatic work to remove Syria’s chemical weapon arsenal stands in stark contrast to the disaster of the approach of trying to choose a group to arm in the naive belief that the group will stay aligned to US wishes. US policymakers have a very long way to go to learn the simple lesson that whether we are talking about domestic policing or resolving international disputes, funneling more weapons into the situation never improves the outcome.