



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on September 16, 2013

Syrian “Deal” Fraught With Peril

The diplomatic agreement [reached on Saturday](#) between Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, following three days of intense negotiations in Geneva, provides support for America’s enemies while giving President Obama a little breathing room. Nothing was resolved but much was delayed.



The agreement gives Syrian President Assad just one week to hand over details of his regime’s chemical weapons arsenal, [including](#) a “comprehensive listing, including names, types, and quantities of its chemical weapons agents, types of munitions, and location and form of storage, production, and research and development facilities.” It is estimated that Assad’s arsenal is dispersed among 45 different sites throughout the war-torn country, some of which may now be threatened by rebel forces. How Assad will be able to comply is problematic at best.

In addition, UN arms inspectors must be allowed access to those facilities no later than the middle of November, and destruction of them must be completed no later than the summer of 2014. Alternatively, his weapons, [consisting of](#) 1,000 tons of chemical agents and precursors, must be transferred to some international facility under the control of the UN.

Syrian officials were delighted with the agreement. Said Syrian Minister Ali Haidar, “We welcome the agreement. It helps the Syrians emerge from the crisis and ... it has allowed for averting war against Syria. It’s a victory for Syria that was achieved by our Russian friends.”

On the other hand, after reviewing the plan’s details, Fred Fleitz, chief analyst and founder of LIGNET.com, [called it a “toothless agreement”](#) that will be difficult if not impossible to enforce:

It says that Syria will be referred to the U.N. Security Council for sanctions [if it fails to abide by the agreement] but the Russians have already said that they’re not going to tolerate authorization of the use of force....

The Syrian government has a history of not cooperating with international teams. With the lack of ... enforcement, it’s hard to see why they’re going to cooperate.

If there’s a violation, the Syrians will deny it. The Russians will back them up. There’s a lot of trouble on the horizon.

The plan represents a turnaround for the Obama administration, which has demanded that Assad resign but now has legitimized him as a trustworthy participant in the agreement hammered out between



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Russia and the United States. Joshua Landis, head of the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma, observed, "America has come around to legitimizing Assad now because the position they used to maintain was that Assad has to go. How do you negotiate with somebody when you're also saying to them, 'We want your head'?"

Warhawk Senator Bob Corker (R-Tenn.) said, "It's unclear to me how Syrian compliance will be possible under the terms of the agreement.... [I] believe Syria's unwillingness to follow through is very much an open question."

Former UN Ambassador John Bolton predicted that Assad will miss Friday's deadline, setting off a chain of events that will further delay and complicate the situation. Said Bolton, "[Assad] will slip a few days, or maybe a few more. Maybe [his] first declaration won't be full and complete, and it'll have to be amended. And then it will have to be amended again. You can see what the impact of this is as time goes on."

Added Bolton:

One of the fine ironies here is that we have agreed with Russia, which has been in violation itself of the Chemical Weapons Convention since the treaty came into force....

So the notion that Russia is going to vouch for Basher al-Assad is almost comical. You can't make this stuff up.

When it became obvious that the "deal" between Kerry and Lavrov was simply a stalling tactic to get President Obama off the hot seat and out of the corner into which he had painted himself with his "red line" declaration last year, Obama responded:

We're making it clear that this can't be a stalling tactic. Any agreement needs to verify that the Assad regime and Russia are keeping their commitments....

Russia has staked its own credibility on supporting this outcome. But we are not just going to take Russia and Assad's word for it. We need to see concrete actions.

The president won't have long to wait. Friday is just days away and the task demanded of Assad is enormous. If Bolton is right and Assad dithers and delays, Obama will be forced, under the terms of the agreement, to defer to the UN Security Council for "measures" to enforce it. Military force, however, is off the table since both Russia and China have stated flatly that military options won't be approved.

This puts Obama back to square one. He reiterated, "We will maintain our military posture in the region to keep pressure on the Assad regime. And if diplomacy fails, the United States and the international community must remain prepared to act."

But such action, denied by pressure from Congress and falling polls of the American people, is hardly likely to pick up over the next few months as Assad takes advantage of this "toothless agreement." At present, the United States has now legitimized his regime with his inclusion in it, while ignoring any constitutional constraints about a declaration of war coming only from Congress and not the executive branch.

What the agreement has done, in sum then, is to

- Solve nothing but delay everything interminably;
- Legitimize Assad;



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- Enhance the stature of Russian President Putin;
- Defang the American threat;
- Degrade further American influence in the Middle East;
- Embolden Iran as it continues with its own development of nuclear weapons;
- Support the UN Security Council.

It's no wonder that Russia and Syria consider it a victory.

photo of Bashar al-Assad (right) with Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev

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