

The Financial Case for the Unconventional Disarmament of Syria

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For several weeks, Third Way has been making the case for the unconventional disarmament of Syria. Doing so would avoid direct American military involvement in the war, while also eliminating the greatest threat to U.S. national security interests in Syria—Assad’s huge stockpile of chemical weapons.

Now that such an effort is underway with the deal brokered by Secretary Kerry, it’s time for policymakers to assess what it would cost. And the answer is that it would be a tremendous bargain for the United States. Here’s a quick analysis:

First, after more than a decade at war in Iraq and Afghanistan, we know that the purely financial costs are enormous (not to mention the staggering cost in lives lost and forever changed):

- We spent, at one point, \$10 billion per month during the Iraq War, which was fought over the illusion of WMDs.¹
- In Syria, eliminating Assad’s chemical weapons by force would cost a lot too. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey said:
*“Thousands of special operations forces and other ground forces would be needed to assault and secure critical sites... Costs could also average well over \$1 billion per month.”*²

Second, we actually know something about the costs of destroying chemical weapons, and those are much less:

- The U.S. Army’s Chemical Materials Agency oversaw the destruction of just over 28,364 tons of chemical weapons—nearly 90% of the U.S. stockpile—for approximately \$28 billion.³ That’s about \$1 billion per 1,000 tons.
- The remaining 10% of the stockpile will be eliminated by 2023, and the destruction is estimated to cost \$10.6 billion, or about \$3 billion per thousand tons.⁴

- The U.S. has spent \$13 billion on the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program (CTR), which works with former Soviet states on securing and dismantling nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons.⁵ \$1 billion of this went to the Shchuch'ye (pronounced Shoo-chee), Russia chemical weapons destruction facility, which has since eliminated over 2,365 metric tons of chemical weapons.⁶

Thus, we could probably destroy all of Syria's actual chemical weapons for something in the neighborhood of a few billion dollars. That would be a fantastic financial bargain.

And it might not even cost us that much. Syria has ratified the Chemical Weapons Convention treaty, which requires that "each State Party shall meet the costs of destruction of chemical weapons it is obliged to destroy."⁷ So Syria is now legally financially responsible for the destruction of its chemical weapons.

Even if American taxpayers aren't legally on the hook to pay for anything, some of the costs may bleed into the U.S. side of the ledger. But, compared to the alternatives, it will be well worth the investment, because destroying Syria's chemical weapons stockpile, thereby keeping them out of the hands of terrorists, will fulfill a core security interest of the United States. And it does so with no cost in American lives and relatively little cost in American treasure.

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