

# Current Issues for Syria's Chemical Weapons and Nuclear Weapons Programs

January 8, 2025

On December 8, 2024, the government of Syria's Bashar Al Asad [collapsed](#) following armed offensives led by the Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (HTS) coalition. A successor government will inherit unresolved international concerns about the Asad regime's chemical and nuclear weapons programs. Those programs violated Syria's obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT)—obligations to which a new Syrian government will be subject. The Asad regime was not in compliance with these obligations, according to congressionally mandated [reports](#) from the U.S. government and [multiple](#) international monitoring organizations.

## Chemical Weapons

Syria's chemical weapons program, which began in the [1970s](#), became an acute source of international concern in August 2013 after the government [attacked](#) civilians with chemical weapons. That same month, President Obama [requested](#) congressional authorization for the use of military force against Syria; the Senate subsequently [considered](#) a [joint resolution](#) authorizing such an action. President Obama [asked](#) congressional leaders in September 2013 to postpone a vote on the measure in order for the United States to pursue a diplomatic initiative based on a Russia-brokered agreement. Under [this agreement](#), Syria agreed to accede to the CWC, which obligates parties to declare and destroy all chemical weapons stocks and production facilities. Following the government's October 2013 CWC accession, Syria declared tons of chemical warfare agents and the international community oversaw the removal and destruction of these agents. Later, the Asad government used both chemical weapons and toxic chemicals in dozens of attacks on Syrian [civilians](#).

The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), which monitors states' CWC compliance, has been unable to verify the Syrian declaration's completeness. The United States, the OPCW, and other governments have long [assessed](#) that Syria has not declared all of its chemical weapons stocks and facilities to the organization. In a December 12, 2024, [statement](#), OPCW Director-General Ambassador Fernando Arias explained that Syria's declaration "still cannot be considered as accurate and complete" and that Syria may possess "potential new components of a chemical weapons programme."

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The OPCW, the United States, and other governments have stated that Syria's new government should secure and destroy the remnants of Syria's chemical weapons program. A December 14 [joint statement](#) from the United States and a number of other governments "stressed" the need for Syria to "secure and safely destroy chemical weapons stockpiles." In his December statement, Arias [identified](#) two related tasks for the OPCW: (1) to "prevent proliferation and any further use" of Syrian chemical weapons, and (2) to "protect and maintain documents, evidence, and witnesses related to" the previous regime's chemical weapons program.

At present, the OPCW plans to send experts to Syria after "communication with new interlocutors is established," Arias explained, adding that "the Secretariat will need to identify, visit, and verify" Syrian "chemical weapons related locations and facilities." HTS officials have [stated](#) that the group will not use any remaining Syrian chemical weapons, and that they are coordinating with international organizations to secure possible chemical weapons sites.

## Nuclear Program

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) [began investigating](#) undeclared Syrian nuclear activities after a 2007 Israeli air strike destroyed a Syrian structure that, according to [U.S.](#) and [Israeli](#) assessments, was a nuclear reactor under construction as part of a Syrian nuclear weapons program. An April 2024 State Department [report](#) notes that "undeclared nuclear material might exist in Syria." Pursuant to Syria's NPT obligations, Syria has a comprehensive IAEA safeguards agreement, which the country ratified in 1969. Such agreements empower the agency to monitor declared nuclear facilities, as well as to detect undeclared nuclear activities and material.

Beginning in 2011, Syria refused to cooperate with the IAEA investigation. The Asad regime reversed this stance in March 2024. Following June ["technical discussions"](#) between Syrian and agency officials, the government permitted IAEA inspectors to visit two locations under investigation. In November 2024, IAEA Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi [reported](#) that the agency is analyzing environmental samples taken during the visit, and added that he would report the results "once the process and discussions with Syria are complete." Speaking after the Asad government's fall, Director General Grossi [stated](#) on December 11, 2024, that the IAEA currently has "a big question mark in front of us because we don't have an interlocutor."

## Selected U.S. Nonproliferation Programs

A senior U.S. official [told](#) reporters on December 9, 2024, that the United States has "good fidelity on" the status of Syria's chemical weapons. The United States "will work with" Syrian officials, international organizations, and other governments to find, secure, and dispose of "any nuclear, radiological, biological or chemical weapons material," Deputy National Security Adviser John Finan [stated](#) on December 19, 2024.

Congress has given the executive branch authorities to be used in such cases to address acute proliferation risk. The Departments of State and Defense have authorities and funds that, notwithstanding other legal restrictions, may be used for the U.S. government to perform certain work in Syria, such as securing or removing material related to Syria's chemical or nuclear weapons programs.

The State Department's Nonproliferation and Disarmament Fund (NDF), as authorized by Section 504 of the Freedom Support Act (P.L. 102-511) and annual appropriations laws, may use funds anywhere in the world, notwithstanding other restrictions. The Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration has previously provided expertise and in-kind contributions, such as technology, to NDF

projects. Similarly, the Department of Defense may use funds from DOD's Cooperation Threat Reduction (CTR) Program in response to urgent proliferation threats (P.L. 113-291). The executive branch has [waived](#) the application of terrorism-related legal restrictions on the use of some funds in Syria for counterterrorism purposes, and could possibly do so for counterproliferation reasons. Congress may wish to oversee the use of these programs in the current context.

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