



Security of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD)-Related Materials in the Iran Conflict: Considerations for Congress

March 9, 2026

As U.S. [military operations](#) in Iran continue, Congress may examine how U.S. and partner forces plan to [address](#) potential loss of control by Iranian authorities of weapons of mass destruction (WMD)-related— or chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN)—materials and related facilities. CBRN materials in conflict zones may be at increased risk of proliferation to non-state actors, terrorist groups, or states. Regional instability could create opportunities for illicit trafficking networks to move sensitive materials across borders. Some WMD-related facilities in Iran have [reportedly](#) been targeted in U.S. or Israeli airstrikes. Ongoing [military operations](#) in Iran may [complicate](#) onsite damage assessments and efforts to secure CBRN.

Iran reportedly possesses civilian and military facilities related to CBRN. Iranian authorities may be motivated to move or secure sensitive material but may not succeed in maintaining custody. In addition to [nuclear material stocks and facilities](#), Iran’s dual-use chemical and biological materials could be at risk of accidental release or diversion. [Assessments](#) by the U.S. [State Department](#) have noted Iranian [noncompliance](#) with the [Chemical Weapons Convention](#) and [Biological Weapons Convention](#), including development of pharmaceutical-based agents “for offensive purposes” and central nervous system-targeting [riot control agents](#). Facility operators may lose control of civilian [radiological](#) material, which could be transported across borders and used in explosive devices. Iran operates a nuclear research reactor and power [reactor](#), which if damaged, pose [safety issues](#) such as radioactive release or cooling loss. Civilian nuclear facilities elsewhere in the region might be at risk.

In WMD-equipped countries experiencing instability, including the former Soviet Union, Libya, and Syria, Congress has shaped programs to bolster the security of vulnerable WMD stocks and related research and production facilities. In 1991, for example, Congress enacted the [Soviet Nuclear Threat Reduction Act](#), which authorized [cooperative threat reduction](#) (CTR) programs in the former Soviet Union. These programs have since expanded globally to address proliferation risks, including in the Middle East and Africa.

Addressing CBRN security in a nonpermissive environment creates unique challenges, which Congress may reexamine in the context of Iran. During Syria’s civil war (2011-2024), the Bashar Al Asad regime

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IN12666

possessed and used chemical weapons, which the regime in 2013 agreed to remove and eliminate from the country. International inspectors' capacity to examine facilities and continued use of chemical weapons (CW) in the country was hampered by active conflict. U.S. officials noted preparations for scenarios in which the United States would secure WMD to prevent access by terrorist groups. Using authorities provided by Congress, the Departments of State, Defense, and Energy worked with neighboring countries to bolster border controls. Following the regime's collapse in 2024, the Syrian transitional government has cooperated with international organizations to identify the remnants of chemical weapons and nuclear facilities. United Nations (UN) officials have expressed concern over possible terrorist access and the difficulty of verification due to Israeli military strikes.

The context for securing WMD can alternate between nonpermissive and cooperative environments due to conflict or government changeover. In 2011, after the fall of the Qadhafi regime in Libya, chemical weapons stocks were first secured by forces aligned with the United States. Later, the new government in Libya asked the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to complete the destruction of chemical weapons stocks. In 2016, the UN Security Council (UNSC) expedited CW removal to prevent terrorist acquisition. In Iraq, much of the WMD dismantlement work was accomplished by UNSC-mandated international inspectors in the country before 2003. The new government cooperated with the OPCW and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to destroy program remnants. U.S. nonproliferation programs in Iraq and Libya have since engaged former WMD weapons scientists in civilian projects to prevent proliferation of their expertise.

The Departments of State and Defense have authorities and funds that, notwithstanding other legal restrictions, may be used for programs or personnel involved in nonproliferation work in sanctioned countries, such as securing or removing material related to chemical or nuclear weapons. (DOD is "using a secondary Department of War designation," under Executive Order 14347, dated September 5, 2025.) The DOD CTR program is authorized to respond to urgent proliferation threats (P.L. 113-291, §1323). The State Department's Nonproliferation and Disarmament Fund (NDF), as authorized (P.L. 102-511, §504, and annual appropriations), may use funds anywhere, notwithstanding other restrictions. The Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration participates through its defense nuclear nonproliferation programs.

Congress has instructed the executive branch on nonproliferation programs, requiring, for example, the advancement of nonproliferation in the Middle East (P.L. 113-66, §1304) to improve border security, detection, and interdiction. Congress has also appropriated funds for U.S. Special Operations Command, which coordinates the counter weapons of mass destruction (C-WMD) mission to "maintain the specialized units, equipment, and expertise to eliminate limited WMD materials in non-permissive conditions during military operations." These forces were engaged in past scenarios.

In consideration of the Administration's stated objective to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons, Congress may assess how U.S. military operations have achieved counterproliferation and nonproliferation goals and how operations by Israel or other U.S. partners may affect or support CBRN security. Congress may examine what priority is being given to this threat, to include inadvertent or intentional transfers to terrorist organizations. It may request briefings on the status of Iran's control of WMD-related materials and facilities and whether personnel are able to maintain operations. Congress may assess what executive branch programs and authorities are being used and whether they are adequate, if any additional detection or other equipment may be required by partner countries, and what emergency preparedness measures are in place in case these protections fail. Congress may review the role and financial needs of international organizations such as the IAEA or OPCW in verification or emergency response. Congress could provide funds for personnel to enable U.S. or international securing or removal of CBRN, whether as part of a negotiated agreement or in a nonpermissive environment.

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