

## Why the United States Can't Lead on Syria's Chemical Weapons Atrocities

Reasonable people can disagree about how the international community should respond to the [latest apparent atrocity](#) by the Syrian government involving chemical weapons. The repeated use of these horrific and illegal weapons by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's repressive regime deserves a strong international response. Unfortunately, given its history of politicizing the issue, the United States is in no position to lead.

The controversy over Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles is not new. Both the Bush Administration and Congress, in the [2003 Syria Accountability Act](#), raised concerns over Syria's refusal to ratify the Chemical Weapons Convention. Syria's failure to end its chemical weapons program prompted a large bipartisan majority to impose strict sanctions on that country.

Syria [argued](#) that it was not the only country in the region that failed to sign the convention, nor even the first country to develop chemical weapons. Indeed, neither Israel nor Egypt, the world's two largest recipients of U.S. military aid, is [a party](#) to the convention.

Neither Congress nor any U.S. presidential administration of either party has ever called on Israel or Egypt to disarm their chemical weapons arsenals, much less threatened sanctions over failure to do so.



Egypt was the first country in the Middle East to obtain and deploy chemical weapons, [using phosgene and mustard gas](#) in the mid-1960s during its intervention in Yemen's civil war. The U.S.-backed Egyptian regime [maintains an arsenal of chemical weapons](#) to this day.

[Israel](#) has produced and stockpiled an extensive range of chemical weapons and is engaged in ongoing research and development of additional chemical weaponry. (Israel also maintains a sophisticated [biological weapons program](#), possibly including anthrax and more advanced weaponized agents and other toxins, as well as a sizable [nuclear weapons arsenal](#) with sophisticated delivery systems.)

For more than fifty years, the Syrians have witnessed successive U.S. administrations provide massive amounts of armaments to Israel, a neighboring country with a vastly superior military capability, which invaded and occupied much of its Golan province in 1967 and has subsequently colonized the region with Israeli settlers in violation of a series of [U.N. Security Council resolutions](#). In 2007, the United States [successfully pressured Israel](#) to reject peace overtures from the Syrian government, which had offered to recognize Israel and agree to strict security guarantees in return for a complete Israeli withdrawal from occupied Syrian territory.

By undermining efforts for a comprehensive and enforceable region-wide disarmament regime, the United States made it far more difficult for the international community to force the Syrian regime to get rid of its chemical weapons arsenal, which it uses against its own people.

U.N. Security Council [Resolution 687](#), passed at the end of the 1991 Gulf War, demanded the destruction of Iraq's chemical weapons arsenal and called on member states "to work towards the establishment in the Middle East of a zone free of such weapons." Syria joined virtually all other Arab states in supporting this resolution, which called for a "weapons of mass destruction-free zone" for the entire Middle East. Twelve years later, in December 2003, Syria [introduced](#) a U.N. Security Council resolution reiterating this clause, but the resolution was tabled as a result of a threatened U.S. veto.

[As I wrote at that time](#), "By imposing strict sanctions on Syria for failing to disarm unilaterally, the administration and Congress has roundly rejected the concept of a WMD-free zone or any kind of regional arms control regime. Instead, the United States government is asserting that it has the authority to say which country can have what kind of weapons systems, thereby enforcing a kind of WMD apartheid, which will more likely encourage, rather than discourage, the proliferation of such dangerous weapons."

There is no excuse for Syria's use of chemical weapons. But the history of U.S. involvement raises the question: Had the United States not opposed the international community's efforts to address the proliferation of non-conventional weapons through a region-wide disarmament regime rather than focusing solely on governments Washington opposed, would the Syrian regime have rid itself of its chemical weapons prior to the outbreak of the civil war? Could we have thereby prevented the resulting horrors of chemical weapons inflicted on Syria's people?

*Stephen Zunes is a professor of politics and coordinator of Middle Eastern Studies at the University of San Francisco.*