

## **The U.S. Attacks on Syria: What Comes Next?**

**Anthony H. Cordesman**

No one should underestimate the value of the cruise missile strikes the United States launched on April 7, 2017. Attacking a single air base will scarcely cripple the Syrian Air Force, nor will it limit Syria's ability to use its remaining chemical weapons. The strikes have, however, sent a very important signal to both America's friends, its critics, and its enemies.

One key message is that in the first real crisis of his Presidency, President Donald J. Trump listened to his expert advisors, proved to be flexible in changing his position, chose an option proportionate to the task, communicated effectively with Russia to avoid Russian losses, and acted quickly. He neither failed to act, nor did he overreact, and he sent a clear message that the United States would not only confront a localized threat—but would act in spite of Russian pressure.

The U.S. strikes will not, by themselves, alter the course of the Syrian civil war, nor will they reduce the overall level of civilian suffering. The strikes may well, however, have set a precedent that will keep Assad from using chemical weapons again, as well as send a broader message that the United States will stand up to Russia. They have also shown that the United States will still use force when necessary—something many states in the Middle East and outside it had come to question—along with U.S. willingness to establish real-world "red lines" in dealing with any power that uses weapons of mass destruction.

The U.S. action may also have a broader impact in limiting Assad's use of state terrorism against his own people. The United States has focused far too much on ISIS and extremist violence by non-state actors. State terrorism by a secular authoritarian like Assad is no better than violent religious extremism by a non-state actors, and the impact of chemical weapons and barrel bombs have shown that state terrorism can be, in fact, far worse.

The failure to act earlier seems to have sent the worst possible message. Assad seems to have felt that he was secure enough with Russian aid, and after U.S. statements that seemed to back away from seeking to push him out of power, to use even the worst forms of terror against the Syrian rebels. Under these conditions, using chemical weapons as tools of terror made good sense from the Assad viewpoint. Pro-Assad Syrian forces, Iran, Russia, and Hezbollah had driven the rebels and many civilians to concentrate in Idlib. Even the limited use of Sarin nerve gas created a new level of civilian fear and panic, undermined rebel forces, and helped create the conditions that allowed the Assad regime recover more territory and weaken rebel forces.

The U.S. cruise missile strikes have now made it clear that Assad can still be a major political target, that his use of the worst form of a terror weapon can result in retaliatory strikes that are more costly than Assad's continuing use of chemical weapons is worth. They have also made it tangibly clear that neither the United States nor the world will ignore Syrian civilian suffering or will take it for granted.

The fact remains, however, that reacting to the death of less than 100 Syrians from poison is no solution to the grim reality of the Syrian conflict. The UN now estimates that half a decade of civil war has resulted in the Assad regime killing and injuring hundreds of thousands of civilians, and has put some 13 million Syrian civilians at risk, including millions of children.

Striking in response to chemical weapons attacks will not keep Syria from using other forms of state terrorism on the ground, including ceasefire violations and agreements to withdraw troops. It

does not send a clear message about the Syrian use of barrel bombs against civilians—and a child that dies slowly under a collapsed building suffers far more than one that dies nearly instantly from Sarin. The strikes do not keep Russia from supporting Assad with air strikes that claim to be directed against terrorists and extremists, but instead hit hospitals, markets, and other civilian areas—a form of precision state terrorism that is less visible than barrel bombs, but no less effective.

## **What Comes Next?**

The key question now is what comes next? The options are not good, but there are a wide range of options that can have a positive effect, and most do not have to involve the massive use of force—particularly any large-scale use of U.S. ground forces.

One such option, for example, is to make it clear that any future use of chemical weapons will lead to even more serious U.S. strikes, *and* will lead to broadening the threat of such U.S. reprisals to include Assad's use of barrel bombs and air attacks on clearly civilian targets—and possibly strikes on pro-Assad ground and air forces that violate ceasefires and evacuation agreements and attack clearly civilian targets.

The United States can work more quietly with its Arab allies in the region—Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar—to link the flow of arms and money to the rebels to any further Assad escalation of attacks on civilians and even to fully restoring the demand that negotiations must drive Assad from power.

Sanctions remain a powerful option, particularly if they are directed at outside firms, financial links, air and sea traffic, and movements by Syrians and foreigners in and out of Syria. They can be particularly strong if the United States names and links the sanctions target to civilian suffering every time the use of sanctions are applied.

Russia may have committed a critical mistake by saying the United States is guilty of war crimes, and saying that it would take the issue to the Security Council. This is the perfect opportunity for the United States to document every Syrian use of chemical weapons, and every attack on civilians. To this end, showing that Assad has used state terrorism again and again is a critical form of strategic communications.

So is providing a full chronology and documentation of the long Russian history of using air strikes against targets related to civilians, and how many times Russia has attacked rebels that are not extremists, along with the fact that Russia has known of—and fully tolerated—Assad's use of state terrorism since at least its major intervention in Syria in 2015. As the work of the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) has shown, Assad has scarcely been the only use of state terrorism in Syria.

The option Senators McCain and Graham have suggested of destroying the entire Syrian Air Force has obvious dangers, but it is an option. It is also, however, an option the United States can threaten to use. Instant escalation may be too much. Escalation in reaction to continued provocation is another, and slow incremental implementation could put steady pressure on Assad and Russia over time.

Stating that the United States will use its war against ISIS in Eastern Syria to help the Kurds and Arab rebels to create safe zones until Assad goes is another option that presents both risks and opportunities. The size of such safe zones can also be expanded to effectively divide Syria into a

broader rebel-controlled East—although the strength of extremist elements in the overall mix of rebel forces may now make that broader form of option too dangerous to use.

The United States should not use limiting humanitarian aid to the Assad controlled areas in Syria as an option. The ethical and moral cost exceeds the military benefit. It can, however, work with its allies to offer Syria major international aid—the equivalent of an international Marshall Plan level—but only if Syria's factions can agree on a peace settlement that excludes Assad, excludes those around him who are guilty of state terrorism, and excludes extremist rebel factions. Recovery and development aid won't work as long as the fighting continues, or if Syria remains hopelessly divided, but it might become a major incentive to reaching a real peace over time.

There are many other variations on these themes. The things the United States must not do, however, is fail to follow up on one set of strikes, to retreat into tolerating Assad, or to go back to negotiations based on the hope Russia will somehow cease to use Syria as a lever against the United States without strong incentives to do so. Equally important, President Trump must focus on finding real ways to reduce or end the overall suffering of the Syrian people, and not simply focus on the real—but very limited—impact of chemical weapons.

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