

# To strike Syria or not

## *The viewpoint from the White House*

Roberta Haar

On 21 August 2013 Syrian president Bashar al-Assad appeared to directly challenge Obama's personal credibility with the deadliest use of chemical weapons since Saddam Hussein used them against the Kurds in 1988. The White House's first response was to stall, asking for more conclusive evidence, followed by an unpredictable and apparently uncontrolled policy-making process that left many frustrated. Without a doubt, Obama had no risk-free choices and even fewer good options in dealing with Syria. This article considers the pressures on Obama to punish Assad with a military strike and weighs them against the challenges in today's political environment that inhibited the implementation of a strike policy.

On the one hand...

### *Degrading the regime*

The primary motivation for the Obama administration to punish Assad was the possibility to degrade his regime. Although Assad is certain to have prepared for possible punitive measures, for example by hiding chemical stockpiles and other important military assets, the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) counseled Obama that degrading Assad was possible. In a joint statement Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey said on 10 September 2013 that the DoD had a "plan for a militarily significant strike that would do the following: deter the Assad regime's further use of chemical weapons and degrade the regime's military capability to employ chemical weapons in the future."<sup>1</sup> This assurance was important since Assad's assessed chemical weapons stores were 1,000 tons. The amount used to kill more than 1,400 Syrians required only a very small portion of his stockpiles. Complementing the DoD's confidence to reduce Assad's chemical weapons capabilities, the U.S. State Department argued that U.S. military involvement could prevent the rebels' defeat, support moderate allies, avert the collapse of the state and help stem the refugee crisis, which has already

resulted in 2 million refugees in neighboring states and 5 million displaced inside Syria.

The most likely scenario to degrade Assad's military capability and his ability to employ chemical weapons in the future would use airstrikes. Such attacks could destroy command-and-control facilities, artillery systems and especially Assad's aerial resupply capacity — in other words his runways. In these circumstances probable weapons would be naval-launched cruise missiles or similar systems fired from international or allied territory. In the case of the latter, Israeli, Jordanian, Saudi Arabian, Turkish, and even Italian soil might be made available for land-based attacks.

Striking Assad's runways would be essential because Russian and Iranian military and commercial planes continue to arrive daily to offload weapons, ammunition and personnel. Despite its current economic predicament it is estimated that Iran is spending \$500 million a month to keep Assad in power.<sup>2</sup> Part of this support comes in the form of concessional loans (totaling some \$7 billion), which Syria uses to buy oil from Iran.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, Iran flies conscripts for the regime to Tehran where they receive guerrilla warfare training. It is approximated that at least 20,000 militiamen have been trained in this way so far.<sup>4</sup> For its part, Russia sup-

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plies the regime with ammunition, rifles, attack helicopters and advanced missiles designed to complicate any possible U.S. air strikes.<sup>5</sup> Hitting runways would further be effective because all of Syria's borders, except the one with Lebanon, are either controlled by the rebels (in the cases of Turkey and Jordan) or are easily monitored by the rebels (which is true for the border with Iraq).<sup>6</sup>

Any strikes used to degrade Assad's military machine would have to be significant because precision-targeting would only have a limited effect. In fact, over the past year Israel has delivered half a dozen pinprick strikes on caches of advanced

weapons inside Syria (almost certainly because they were destined for Hezbollah in Lebanon) but these operations did not alter Assad's mindset or conduct. Moreover, as Obama invested more political capital into a punitive action against Assad, the more Obama would have to raise the stakes and the strike level. Still, the question of how significant to make the strikes was perplexing for the White House. This is because for the Assad regime, the war is an existential battle. The willingness to commit any crime already resulted in 13 prior documented instances of chemical weapon use before the 21 August attack. The regime must have calculated it could survive any American response or at least hoped for further inaction. Although there is some evidence that the August attacks were a mistake. For instance, U.S. intelligence overheard that Syrian officials were surprised by the devastation of the assault and according to intercepts obtained by German intelligence Assad repeatedly denied requests by division and brigade commanders to use chemical weapons in the preceding months.<sup>7</sup> Whether the level of chemical weapons use in August was a mistake or not, if Obama could sufficiently degrade Assad's ability to employ chemical weapons and Obama accompanied such punitive strikes with a robust diplomatic push, there was a possibility to goad Assad towards dialogue and ultimately end the war.

### *Regional considerations*

The second element that the White House weighed is related to the motivation to degrade Assad's regime; namely, that important U.S. allies in the region wanted it to punish Assad because the struggle for Syria has become a complex

regional conflict. Over time it has morphed into a proxy battle that pits anti-Western Shia Iran and Hezbollah against more pro-American Sunni Saudi Arabia and the Gulf sheikhdoms.

Turkey and Israel also wanted strikes to go ahead. In fact, officials in Ankara as well as in Riyadh reacted with hostility to the 14 September 2013 deal midwifed by the Russians to dismantle Syria's chemical weapons program, arguing that the deal did nothing to resolve the Syrian crisis or remove Assad. Of course, the Syrian Opposition Coalition wished that strikes would go ahead as did moderate rebels under General Salim Idriss, who would have benefited from any assault that compromised Assad's ability to fight.

### *Global policeman*

The third consideration that Obama took into account is tied to American Exceptionalism or the idea that the U.S. is endowed with an exceptional global leadership role, including global activism. This is based on the premise that the U.S. is still the only power capable, and at times willing, to commit real resources and make real sacrifices to build, sustain and drive an international system committed to international law, democracy and the promotion of human rights. This role translates into an expectation that the U.S. has obligations to punish the Syrian dictator's use of weapons that cause mass terror. American Exceptionalism could include a reemphasis of America's values and its persistent ideas of an open and democratic global order.

Unfortunately, in the recent past the U.S. has made trade-offs preferring stability over the promotion of its values, which has damaged its credibility in the Middle East.<sup>8</sup> An American Exceptionalism that accentuates values combined with meeting Assad's aggression with the appropriate force may help to rebuild American moral authority in the region.

### *American credibility*

The final reason is the factor most personally affecting Obama himself: if Assad's attacks were permitted to go unchecked, U.S. credibility, and Obama's especially, would suffer. Although Obama had publicly declared a red line would be crossed if Assad used chemical weapons, evidence of their smaller-scale use did not modify his stance. For two and a half years Obama eschewed calls for intervention despite pressure from his opposition (who argued that Obama's policy toward Syria was weak, indecisive and harmful to America's credibility), pressure from within his own administration (from e.g. Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta,

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CIA director David H. Petraeus and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton), 120,000 deaths, millions of refugees and clear human rights atrocities. Moreover, Obama was eager to let other countries take the lead role against the Assad regime, such as Turkey and the members of the Arab League.

Obama's avoidance strategy included the hope that the Syrian opposition would make important military gains early on that would force Assad to step down, although Obama refrained from supporting them with weapons or training until late summer 2013. Only when the Assad regime appeared to directly challenge Obama's personal credibility did Obama shift strategy. What is clear about all of these motivations, bar the first, is that the calculation for the White House to punish Assad or not for his use of chemical weapons had more to do with what is good for America and Obama personally rather than for Syria.

...but on the other

#### *Human security*

But there are factors that challenged military action, the first being whether or not military engagement is an appropriate

means for protecting civilians from atrocities (of whatever kind) committed by their governments? The answer in Syria's case is probably not, since if this were true, some sort of military intervention would have happened already in the more than two and a half years of the war. Moreover, civilians are likely to suffer. For example, in Kosovo civilian distress at the hands of the regime got worse before it got better.

If the use of the military is not appropriate for protecting civilians, military action must be about something else, for instance, protecting a set of shared international understandings or norms about the proper conduct of warfare. But while Obama made this case at a news conference at the G-20 summit in St. Petersburg, the United States has not punished the other governments that violated this norm in the past and unfortunately, the U.S.' record on upholding international human rights norms has not been good. Moreover, if military action is to be undertaken for humanitarian reasons for it to be *legal* a UN Security Council resolution authorizing it is necessary. Russian President Vladimir Putin pointed this fact out in his controversial and condescending opinion editorial in *The New York Times*.<sup>9</sup> However, if recent activity in the council is any guide, getting a Security Council resolution would

[A B2 long range bomber is escorted by fighter jets. In weighing all the factors to strike Syria or not, Obama cannot ignore financial restraints, such as the high costs of deploying advanced weapons in a significant strike \(photo: U.S. Air Force/Cecilio Ricardo\)](#)



be difficult. The resolution that did pass, which obliged Assad to hand over chemical weapons, actually postponed the use of force to ensure compliance until some later (or possibly never) date.

### *Unintended consequences*

Whether or not a Security Council resolution could be attained, the next matter that the White House had to consider is whether if pushed, Assad might be tempted to utilize his main remaining source of leverage — a missile strike against Israel or other neighboring allies. Additionally, significant strikes could pull the U.S. into the conflict in ways it does not want. Former Secretary of State Robert Gates argued on 17 September 2013 that a strike would be like “throwing gasoline on an extremely complex fire in the Middle East.”<sup>10</sup> Gates further pointed out that recent interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya clearly illustrated how American military action could lead to unintended consequences. Similarly, General Dempsey warned that military force could not resolve the underlying differences now fueling the war in Syria.<sup>11</sup> It also might be interesting to note that Kosovo, the intervention most often raised as the efficacious example, was a 78-day air attack, which pro-

duced massive destruction before Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević capitulated.

### *Financial constraints and public opinion*

The third factor constraining a strike is that previous recent military incursions have saddled the U.S. with costly commitments and debt. Brown University's *Costs of War Report 2011* calculates that the expenditures since 2001 in Afghanistan and Iraq have amounted to \$2.3 trillion. While George W. Bush may have been able to disregard the expenditure of his foreign policy, Obama cannot. The U.S' financial constraints prompted Michael Mandelbaum to argue that the U.S. is a “frugal superpower” on a budget.<sup>12</sup> Defense Secretary Hagel said a potential operation against Assad would cost “tens of millions of dollars,” but it would more likely cost up to a billion depending on the number of targets and the replacement costs of munitions. B2 bombers cost \$60,000 an hour and a one way flight to Syria takes 18 hours. Any costs must also factor in the effects of the Sequester and the recent shutdown on the DoD.

The fourth element that the Obama White House had to take into account is also related to its two protracted

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wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. A war-weary American and international public would be hard to convince, especially as polls indicated that 69% of Americans opposed strikes on Syria and more than 70% opposed strikes without congressional authorization.<sup>13</sup> Although the same polls showed that Americans believed that Assad had used chemical weapons against his fellow citizens, Americans nevertheless did not want to get involved in another military conflict. Once Obama publicly committed himself to punish Assad for crimes against humanity, his administration engaged in a media blitz designed to change public attitudes. Obama's key technique of getting the public on his side was an unambiguous emotional appeal using images of dead and wounded children. It is also clear that Obama's gamble to seek congressional approval was an attempt to overcome this lack of public support and perhaps insulate his foreign policy choice from domestic political pressures. Statements Obama made just prior to the G20 meeting were also undoubtedly designed to insulate him personally from a strike policy. In answer to a question about whether punitive strikes were needed to his "preserve" his credibility, Obama said the world and the U.S. Congress set the red line with the ratification of the Chemical Weapons Ban Convention and the Syria Accountability Act.<sup>14</sup>

### *Moderate and radical rebels*

A fifth restraining factor is interconnected with the transition of the conflict and the radicalization of the Free Syrian Army. One of the main reasons rebels began fighting with extremist groups was because radicals had weapons and means. This fact meant that ironically Al Qaeda and the U.S. over time seemed to be on the same side, a point that Obama's domestic opposition wasted no time in pointing out. For example, Senator Ted Cruz said, "the U.S. doesn't want to become Al Qaeda's air force."<sup>15</sup>

One approach to counter radicalization is to arm moderate Syrian rebels, an option that has been extensively debated. Obama preferred to err on the side of caution and refrained from supplying arms to any rebels, lest they fall into the hands of Al Qaeda operatives. He only agreed to furnish the rebels with small arms and anti-tank weaponry in June 2013, after initial intelligence reports that Assad had crossed Obama's red line against the use of chemical weapons. Still, Obama hesitated and actual weapons were only delivered to rebels in September 2013. Obama has also moved forward with a covert program of training for moderate Syrian rebel forces. These CIA-trained commandos should make a difference as they take to the field.

However, radicalization remains a problem. Increasingly, moderate rebels are consumed by a side fight against Al Qaeda linked groups.

The final option that the Obama White House took into consideration is the question whether other possible nonmilitary measures would work instead or even better

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than punitive military strikes? These included an arms embargo, or new smarter sanctions on both the Assad regime and specific individuals involved in the chemical attacks or referring Assad to the International Criminal Court (ICC) for war crimes and

issuing a warrant for his arrest. But as U.S. Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power pointed out, all of these measures were advanced in the UN Security Council (UNSC) in the past year and even watered-down versions were rejected by Russia, often with China supporting it.<sup>16</sup> For example, the day after the use of chemical weapons, the UNSC could not even agree on putting out a press statement disapproving the use of such weapons. Moscow also continues to demand that Assad be protected from referral to the ICC.

### Does inaction have costs?

The analysis above endeavors to shed light on the pros and cons that the White House weighed in the days and weeks after Assad used chemical weapons. Today, we know that Obama decided to explore the Russian route, which gave him a get-out-of-jail-free-card of sorts, since he was likely to experience a humiliating loss in Congress on the vote to give him authority for strikes. To lessen his humiliation Obama argued that *credible* threats were enough to get to the Russian proposal. Still the Russian option is not without problems. It also locks U.S. officials into dealing with Assad for the foreseeable future, a relationship that Assad will be sure to drag out, with help from Russia using its veto if necessary to buy him time. While dealing with Assad is assured, Assad's willingness to negotiate an end to the war is not.

Obama has clearly tried to avoid taking any risks in his response to the civil war in Syria. Despite pressure from his domestic opposition, pressure from within his own



administration, the mounting deaths and refugees, for over two years Obama avoided calls to intervene in the conflict. Only when the Assad regime appeared to directly challenge Obama's personal credibility did he consider punitive measures. Still, Obama remained cautious, clearly preferring the costs of inaction over those of action. This preference resulted in a White House that struggled to evaluate the pros and cons of militarily striking Assad — a political struggle that in the end only the Russians seemed able to resolve.

Roberta Haar is a Lecturer in International Relations and American Foreign Policy at University College Maastricht, Faculty of Humanities and Sciences, Maastricht University.

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A close-up view of the Za'atri camp for Syrian refugees as seen from a helicopter. The U.S. State Department argued that U.S. military involvement could help stem the refugee crisis in Syria (photo: U.S. State Department)