

Syria After the Missile Strikes: Policy Options

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Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel, Committee members, thank you for inviting me to testify today on an issue with direct implications for American values, interests, and global leadership. Six years after the Syria crisis began, it has become the twenty-first century's most severe humanitarian tragedy and one of its thorniest international security dilemmas. Nearly 500,000 Syrians have been killed, with the Bashar al-Assad regime directly responsible for the majority of these deaths. The displacement of 12 million Syrians has created a refugee crisis, challenging many of Syria's generous neighbors who are struggling to absorb those fleeing for their lives. In perpetuating the conflict, Assad and his Russian and Iranian allies have undermined the U.S.-led international liberal order, including global norms regarding the protection of civilians during conflict.

The April 6 U.S. missile strikes on the Al Shayrat air base were an arguably justified response to the Syrian regime's unconscionable sarin gas attack on Khan Sheikhoun days earlier, but they appear to be entirely divorced from any strategy for U.S. engagement to resolve the Syrian crisis. For targeted strikes such as these to have an impact on the overall arc of the conflict, they cannot be launched in a vacuum. They must represent one aspect of a broader diplomatic strategy utilizing economic, political, and other security levers.

Any short-term benefits conferred by the strikes will erode, absent a multi-prolonged diplomatic strategy. Syrian civilians who cheered the strikes will see them as a momentary engagement by an Administration that otherwise has shown little interest in addressing Syrian suffering. In the aftermath of these strikes, the Administration must identify key policy objectives and design strategies to achieve them. These objectives include: a negotiated agreement to de-escalate the fighting; defeating ISIS in Syria in a way that is sustainable; continued counter-proliferation efforts to stop the Assad regime from using chemical weapons; and renewed efforts to protect Syrian civilians and to deliver lifesaving humanitarian aid. To achieve these policies will require a fully funded State Department; diplomats and civilian aid experts will be responsible for a strategy that combines non-military coercion with public and private diplomacy.

Ending the Syrian Civil War, through a Transition to a New Governing Body

Three weeks after the Al Shayrat air base attacks, it is still unclear whether U.S. policy toward the Syrian regime and the Syrian civil conflict has shifted. As a candidate, President Trump

espoused an isolationist approach, even specifically warning in 2013 against military intervention in Syria.¹ Indeed, during the week before the strikes, the Administration publicly rolled out what appeared to be a coordinated, significant policy shift, with multiple public statements by both Secretary Tillerson and Ambassador Haley that a transition away from Assad was no longer a U.S. policy priority.² These statements likely encouraged Assad to use chemical weapons in Khan Sheikhoun. Yet in the wake of the Al Shayrat strikes, these same Cabinet members and other senior Administration officials reversed course and issued public statements remarkably consistent with those issued by the Obama administration, making it clear that Assad's departure would be necessary to end the Syrian civil war.³

It is urgent that the White House clarify U.S. policy and stand behind the need for Assad to step down, in line with the 2012 Geneva Communiqué. This document called for the establishment of a transitional governing body with full executive powers, to include members of the Syrian government and opposition. This Communiqué was endorsed by the UN Security Council – including Russia – and endures as the most practical basis for an eventual negotiated political settlement. Any movement away from this policy would embolden Assad and his backers, including Iran and Hezbollah. This not only would perpetuate the Syrian conflict and endanger countless more Syrian civilians; it also would expand the grave threat posed by Hezbollah to Syria's neighbors, particularly Israel.

In pushing for a negotiated end to the civil war, the Administration should seek to leverage the Al Shayrat strikes to help further multilateral and unilateral diplomatic efforts. Coercive diplomacy must be used to push Russia to resume negotiations on military de-escalation (i.e. meaningful ceasefires) and humanitarian access. Despite many efforts, both tracks failed in 2016 because Russia believed it had the upper hand and was unwilling or incapable of pushing its proxy in Damascus to comply. Hopefully, Secretary Tillerson used his recent trip to Moscow to make clear that continued Russian support for Assad will be met with additional U.S. sanctions on Russian entities. (And to use whatever threat of further military force may indeed worry Moscow.) The strikes also offer an opportunity to warn Iran regarding its support for the regime in Damascus, and to push both Russia and Iran to make commitments to rein in Damascus ahead of the next Astana meeting that they are hosting in early May.

There are other tools available in the Administration's tool kit to accelerate pressure against Damascus, including the new sanctions authorities offered in the *Caesar Syrian Civilian*

¹ Nicholas Fandos, "Trump's View of Syria: How it Evolved in 19 Tweets," *The New York Times*, April 7, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/07/us/politics/donald-trump-syria-twitter.html?_r=0

² Elise Labbot, Nicole Gaouette, and Richard Roth, "US Signals Openness to Assad Staying Put," *CNN Politics*, March 30, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/03/30/politics/tillerson-haley-syria-assad-turkey/index.html>.

³ Angela Dewan, "U.S. Envoy Nikki Haley Says Syrian Regime Change is Inevitable," *CNN Politics*, April 10, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/04/09/middleeast/syria-missile-strike-chemical-attack-aftermath/index.html>.

Protection Act. However, leveraging the strikes into a comprehensive pressure strategy must be done quickly, because whatever new momentum offered by the strikes will dissipate.

Defeating the ISIS Caliphate in Syria

Since January, the Trump Administration has talked repeatedly about increasing its efforts to defeat ISIS, but it remains unclear how the strategy for countering ISIS relates to the Administration's overall Syria policy goals. In less than three months, the White House has nearly doubled the number of ground troops in Syria to support U.S. partners engaged in the ISIS fight.⁴ A liberation offensive to rout ISIS from Raqqa is imminent.⁵ Yet while the policy goal of eliminating ISIS' safe haven and command center in Syria is clear, the strategic conundrums inherent in this proposition remain unresolved.

First, the Administration has not explained to the American people why it is increasing U.S. boots on the ground in Syria. Americans deserve to know the extent to which ground forces will participate in the dangerous fight against ISIS in Syria's northern and eastern regions and for how long U.S. forces will remain in Syria training their partners.

Second, the post-conflict stabilization strategy remains murky: Will the Kurdish YPG (the People's Protection Units) and other Syrian Democratic Forces who represent the key ground forces in the liberation operation govern this mostly Arab territory? Has this plan been pre-coordinated with Turkey? Will the YPG and other Kurdish forces tacitly cooperate with the Assad regime, once ISIS has been defeated, thus complicating U.S. policy even further? How will the United States ensure that the YPG liberators will protect the rights of the local Syrian population, thereby preventing another cycle of grievance that could yield yet another generation of future terrorists? Planning for the actual Raqqa operation is relatively straightforward, but figuring out what to do when the U.S.-backed forces succeed is not.

Neighbors such as Turkey are keenly interested in the question of who will rule large swaths of Syrian territory in ISIS' wake, particularly if the YPG fighting force prevails. The planning for the post-liberation stabilization period in Syria is a significant diplomatic effort. It will have to be carefully integrated into the overall policy planning for the resumption of diplomacy between the regime and the opposition discussed above.

⁴ In March, President Trump deployed 400 more troops to Syria, bringing the number of ground troops to 1,000. See Lucas Tomlinson, "Turkish Jets Bomb U.S.-backed Forces," *Fox News World*, April 25, 2017, <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2017/04/25/turkish-jets-bomb-us-backed-forces-in-iraq-syria-us-officials-say.html>.

⁵ Aaron Stein, "Raqqa: A Very Long and Nasty Fight," *The Cipher Brief*, March 17, 2017, <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/article/middle-east/very-long-and-nasty-fight-1089>.

Reports that the Administration plans to cut Fiscal Year 2018 regional stabilization funds and economic support funds to neighbors such as Jordan are deeply problematic, as these types of cuts will undermine the sustainability of any near-term win against ISIS. Within Syria itself, cutting humanitarian and governance assistance to the people liberated from ISIS will be self-defeating. International assistance is necessary to ensure that those who once lived under ISIS rule are now offered basic services and humanitarian assistance. This type of assistance represents a relatively modest investment with a potentially significant return – sustainable stabilization can protect these territories from ever again becoming a safe haven for radical terrorist groups.

Preventing the Proliferation of Chemical Weapons

Explaining the strikes on April 6, President Trump referred directly to a counter-proliferation policy goal, saying: “It is in this vital national security interest of the United States to prevent and deter the spread and use of deadly chemical weapons.” Secretary Mattis’ public remarks since the Al Shayrat strikes suggest that, at least from a Department of Defense perspective, preventing the use of chemical weapons (CW) was the key policy objective of the strikes.⁶ In a public statement issued this week while visiting Israel, Secretary Mattis again warned Assad against using chemical weapons.⁷

Yet if the urgent policy goal from the U.S. military’s perspective is to prevent the Syrian regime from using sarin gas and other CW in the future, the deterrent effect of the limited strikes may prove to be insufficient. Deterrence should be accompanied by the physical destruction of chemical weapons caches – an effort requiring difficult multilateral diplomacy. While the agreement had many flaws, overall the 2013 U.S.-Russian mechanism to work with the United Nations and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to destroy Syria’s declared CW stockpiles severely limited Assad’s ability to use these weapons against U.S. troops, allies such as Israel, or Syrian civilians. Assad’s illegal secret retention of CW stocks or capacity to regenerate them violated international law, but the CW threat to Syrian civilians and to the United States and our allies would have been far worse in the absence of the 2013 agreement. On balance, OPCW’s post-2013 presence in Syria, with Russian support, has advanced U.S. counter-proliferation goals, making it harder for the Syrian regime to use these horrific weapons.

⁶ Secretary Mattis told reporters that “the purpose of this attack was singularly against chemical weapons use,” on April 11, 2017. Ryan Browne, “Mattis on Syria: ISIS Remains the Priority but Chemical Weapons Will Not Be Tolerated,” *CNN Politics*, April 11, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/04/11/politics/mattis-syria-isis-chemical/index.html>.

⁷ “Defense Secretary Mattis Warns Syria Still has Chemical Weapons,” *CBS NEWS*, April 21, 2017, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/defense-secretary-james-mattis-warns-syria-still-has-chemical-weapons/>

In addition to continuing to use further strikes should Assad again use CW, a new round of multilateral diplomacy will be necessary to protect earlier counter-proliferation efforts. Last week, the Russians vetoed a UN Security Council Resolution calling for an investigation into the Khan Sheikhoun attacks. Russia's intransigence and disinformation campaign on the Khan Sheikhoun attacks contrasts starkly with its relatively cooperative approach in 2013. This regression is worrisome.

Russia may be at odds with the United States in terms of its overall policy goals in Syria, but we need Russian cooperation and support on limited issues such as counter-proliferation. Strong, multilateral diplomacy will be required to push Russia toward, at a minimum, returning to the moderate levels of cooperation on CW issues that occurred from 2013-2017.

Finally, as part of the effort to deter Assad from any further CW use, the U.S. must lead multilateral efforts to maintain the international opprobrium focused on Syria in the wake of the Khan Sheikhoun attacks. The Administration should coordinate with European allies and other partners to set the record straight in the face of Russian disinformation campaigns, continuing to declassify and make public U.S. information that demonstrates the Assad regime's culpability for this gruesome use of sarin gas against Syrian civilians. It should press European and other partners to do the same.

Protecting Syrian Civilians, Providing Humanitarian Relief, and Promoting Accountability

Protecting the Syrian people must remain at the heart of U.S. policy in Syria. This effort includes humanitarian assistance; support for civil society in liberated, opposition-controlled areas; and accountability for ongoing human rights violations, including the Khan Sheikhoun attack. Since the start of the conflict, the United States has been the largest single bilateral donor of humanitarian assistance to the Syrian people. In the past months, however, the aid flowing from the United States and other donors has not been reaching most of the Syrians in need. Some organizations on the ground are estimating that only 10 percent of international aid is arriving into opposition-controlled areas of Syria (where over 5 million Syrians reside), because the Assad regime is deliberately holding up cross-border aid in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 2254.

The Administration has yet to explain how the Al Shayrat strikes fit into any strategy to ensure civilian protection, or how the United States will respond to other equally horrific, non-CW attacks against Syrian civilians. Almost immediately after the U.S. strikes, the Syrian regime used Al Shayrat as the base for additional bombing campaigns against Syrian civilians. The Syrian Air Force has already resumed aerial bombings of Khan Sheikhoun using conventional

weapons.⁸ There are a number of levers available to the U.S. government to deter and punish Syrian officials – and their Russian and Iranian champions – who are involved in deliberately targeting civilians. The Trump Administration should focus on sanctioning individual perpetrators, as authorized in the *Caesar Syrian Civilian Protection Act*.

Finally, even though immediate justice for these crimes sadly is improbable, the Administration has opportunities to maintain U.S. leadership on longer-term accountability efforts by the international community. Ensuring appropriate documentation of these human rights violations is vital. The United States has been a leading donor in the arena of international accountability efforts in the past, and opportunities exist to demonstrate that U.S. statements on accountability for Khan Sheikhoun and other violations of international law are more than just empty words. Continued U.S. leadership at the United Nations will ensure that the highly effective UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria can continue its work to gather evidence and to document violations.

Conclusion: The Risks of Foregoing a Mature Strategy in Favor of Inchoate Tactics

Absent a clear and consistent articulation of U.S. strategy toward Syria, the limited strikes earlier this month will have little to no material impact. Many of our allies cheered on these strikes, yet these friends may have done so assuming a major U.S. strategic shift toward greater military intervention where none exists. An articulation of a strategy will also help our allies contribute to the diplomatic efforts that should follow the strikes – such as pushing Gulf partners to deliver some of the armed opposition groups to the Astana talks in May or urging European partners to join the United States in sanctioning Russian, Iranian, and Syrian military officials who have perpetrated crimes against the Syrian people.

The April 6 strikes only offer leverage if they can jump-start a new strategy combining economic sanctions, multilateral counter-proliferation efforts, and new investments in diplomatic negotiations. Following the strikes, U.S. diplomats must push the regime and its Russian and Iranian backers toward a de-escalation plan that may allow for opposition-regime talks. European allies should offer their own set of new sanctions against Syrian, Iranian, and Russian officials. Driving ISIS out of Syria will require a careful assistance plan to support local governance and humanitarian assistance for the mostly Arab Syrians who have been living under ISIS rule. None of these strategies can be executed without a fully funded, empowered State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development – mobilized to advance U.S. leadership and influence in pursuit of these objectives.

⁸ Louisa Loveluck and Zakaria Zakaria, “Despite U.S. Missile Barrage Syria Continues Airstrikes Against Rebels,” *The Washington Post*, April 8, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/warplanes-return-to-syrian-town-devastated-by-chemical-attack/2017/04/08/38a5d8cc-1bdc-11e7-8598-9a99da559f9e_story.html.

