

8 Issues to Think About Before Bombing Syria

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There are eight main issues that the West should consider before bombing Syria:

1. What are the intervention goals?

All statements coming from Western leaders — particularly the U.S., Britain and France — suggest a narrow focus on chemical weapons rather than action designed to sway the overall trajectory of the conflict in Syria. Beyond a perceived sense of the need to "do something," the intention seems to be to send a signal on chemical weapons to deter further use in the Syria arena and reinforce a global norm alongside an apparent goal of restoring Western credibility. Washington, in particular, seems to have been convinced that if it takes no action on its own "red line" threat, it would be a sign of weakness and send a signal that it has replaced a gung-ho policy with a gun-shy one.

Less than 1 percent of casualties in Syria are even being attributed to chemical weapons claims. If there is a plan involving military action to reduce the suffering of Syrians

and improve the situation, then presumably that would be aired irrespective of proof of chemical weapons use.

Nevertheless, any action will have consequences well beyond the chemical weapons issue, so any proposed action should also be measured against broader criteria of prospective implications for Syria and broader regional issues, including sectarian escalation, refugee flows and instability in Iraq and Lebanon, radicalization and diplomacy with Iran.

2. The chemical weapons dilemma

The West will try to influence the military balance in Syria if there is a strike, but there is a danger that the options under consideration could make the situation worse in Syria, in the region and for the prospects of crisis management diplomacy.

If chemical weapons have been used in Syria, preventing its further use doesn't suggest that Syrian casualties will be reduced, given that at least 99 percent of deaths are not attributable to chemical weapons.

3. The problem with evidence

Western powers may now be convinced beyond reasonable doubt that the Assad regime has deployed chemical weapons. Yet that determination has not been made in a sufficiently robust way. It must at least be taken seriously and acknowledged that there is a degree of conviction with which some non-Western actors are making a counter case — whether that be in Russia, China, Iran or elsewhere in the region and the world, notably on a who-benefits basis.

The suggested irrefutability of the Western claim is undermined by the fact that United Nations inspections have not had sufficient time to determine who might have used chemical weapons in Syria. It is worth remembering that the UN inspectors on the ground — a development that the West pushed for hard at the UN — are ostensibly in Syria to review claims of chemical weapons use from five months ago. Western leaders would therefore appear to be on shaky ground in claiming that an investigation of chemical weapons use from five days ago is too little, too late.

4. The legality challenge

In addition, the legality of military strikes against Syria in the absence of authorization by the UN Security Council is questionable at best. There does not appear to be any basis to claim that military action is being undertaken in self-defense. While the use of chemical weapons undoubtedly violates international law, this does not mean that a coalition of countries has the right to take punitive action without the authorization of the UN Security Council. Therefore, the only possible legal basis for action lies in the disputed notion of humanitarian intervention.

Whatever legal arguments are advanced, an attack on Syria would inevitably fuel the belief around the world that Western powers are willing to act outside the Security Council when they wish. Military action would help reinforce the international norm against the use of chemical weapons but arguably undermine the norm against the use of force without Security Council backing. Every time that Western countries bypass or act outside the Security

Council, international legality and collective security is undermined.

5. The military dynamic of Western intervention

The signals from Western leaders suggest that any military action would be limited in scope and duration. But it will be difficult for Western powers to limit their strikes to being one-off. It can also be self-defeating if the goal is to deter and restore credibility.

What if Syria uses chemical weapons again? The Syrian opposition, whose main goal for a long time has been to draw in Western military intervention, would do everything to make claims of new atrocities and to provoke Assad.

6. Impact on the trajectory of the Syria conflict

The conflict can get worse for Syrians, even more destabilizing for the region and can generate new threats to Western security.

The regime has not yet unleashed all the firepower it has. The rebels will undoubtedly see this as an opening to a more extensive Western military intervention and will calibrate their actions and public relations efforts accordingly.

In terms of domestic opinion in Syria, the Assad regime does not benefit when U.S. missiles are dispatched from offshore locations and appear over their skies, especially if there are civilian casualties.

Finally, how will this impact the flow of refugees? There is already a devastating refugee crisis that is stretching the coping mechanisms of neighboring states. The possible impact on the refugee situation cannot be a secondary consideration.

7. Impact on the region

The current Western debate on Syria is taking place in the absence of a broader strategic conversation on prioritizing what matters most for Western interests in the Middle East. The default position is to place the emasculation of Iran as the top priority item, despite growing evidence that the greatest threat from the region is a cycle of sectarian escalation with Syria at its core. This sectarian violence is fueling radicalization, threatening to increase the level of anti-Western jihadism across the Greater Middle East.

An attempt to rethink Western powers' Middle East policy should therefore focus on a strategy, the center point of which should be regional de-escalation, requiring more, not less, diplomacy with those with whom the West disagrees, notably Iran and Russia. It is hard to see how a military escalation can serve this goal. But it is easy to see how it would further squeeze the space for sectarian de-escalation.

8. A diplomatic alternative

Until now, most Western policy debate has navigated between military-lite and diplomacy-lite options. Military-lite is what is under consideration now, but pushing harder on diplomacy is what the West should be doing.

In the immediate term, a diplomatic alternative might include working to expand the UN mandate for chemical weapons inspectors. Pushing Russia on this issue will play to an area in which Russia might be highly defensive about. Russia's position is stronger in opposing military force. The West should insist on obtaining clearer evidence on chemical weapon use in advance of further discussions at the Security Council. This would build on the positions that Russia, China and Iran have taken against chemical weapons use to push Assad on inspectors.

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