

AUGUST 28, 2013

COMMENTARY

Consequence Considerations of a Syrian Strike

By LtCol Gordon D. Miller, USMC

President Bashar al-Asad's use of chemical weapons on his own people is a tragedy. If the United States conducts strikes in Syria, it is imperative that U.S. leadership at all levels be keenly focused on the intended objectives. Before any authorization is to attack Syria given, it is necessary to contemplate and take appropriate action to mitigate any negative consequences from the strikes. There are at least three potentially devastating consequences for the Middle East that could come from the strikes in Syria: Asad uses chemical weapons again, an Iranian military response, and Israeli involvement.

Part of the rationale for the strikes is to punish President Asad's use of chemical weapons and deter other nations from doing the same. If President Asad were to absorb the strikes and use chemical weapons again, this would be a significant blow to the United States' credibility and it would be compelled to escalate the assault on Syria to achieve the original objectives. Further escalatory attacks on Syria would result in more international criticism and could entangle the United States in the Syrian internal conflict. It is critical that the strikes are perceived by President Asad as threatening his interests. It would be prudent to have a detailed plan for follow-on actions in case the Syrian regime doesn't take the first round of strikes seriously.

The overt Iranian support for the Asad regime has the two countries intimately linked. With the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force on the ground in Syria, the strikes could be seen as a step towards offensive operations against Iran. This potential for a proxy war between the United States and Iran could sour the burgeoning relationship with the new Iranian President Hasan Rouhani. Further, the strikes might precipitate a military reaction by Iran against Israel or American assets in the region. Escalatory military action in the Middle East would be a global worst case scenario. Proactive messaging with all parties involved is necessary to support stabilization of the Middle East during this time of crisis.

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The influence of Israel in the region cannot be underestimated. Encouraging Israeli restraint in the current situation should be a key aspect to the construction of the coalition. The stressed relationship between the United States and Israel might embolden them to execute their own military actions. The Arab League already has condemned the use of chemical weapons but has not provided support for military action against Syria. Any Israeli involvement in the strikes, however indirect, would further erode any pan-Arab support for military actions against Syria. Israeli military strikes against Syria could lead to retaliatory attacks on Israel by state or non-state actors in the region, detrimentally destabilizing the Middle East. Extraordinary restraint by Israel during this crisis is a paramount to maintaining stability in the region.

United States leadership at all levels must conduct prudent crisis management planning to ensure the current situation doesn't generate adverse reactions. There is a possibility that responses by Syria, Iran, and/or Israel could turn the situation into a regional catastrophe. It is imperative that proper targeting and prudent messaging be thoroughly in synch with each other to prevent unintended consequences. Although these worst case scenarios have a low probability of occurring, they must be included in the planning for the impending operations to help prevent the potential for a catastrophic situation in the Middle East.

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