

COMMENTARY

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## The Limits of a Limited Strike

By Nora Bensahel

**W**e now know a great deal about how a military strike against Syria might unfold – but it is far less clear what broader strategic objectives such a strike would achieve, if any. The reported details of the planned strike strongly resemble Operation Desert Fox in Iraq in 1998 – a limited four-day bombing campaign that had virtually no strategic effect.

According to administration officials, the strike would aim to degrade and deter the ability of the Asad regime to use chemical weapons again by targeting the headquarters, units, and delivery systems that may have been involved in last week's attack. The strike would apparently last for only a couple of days, using Tomahawk missiles and other weapons that can be launched safely beyond Syrian airspace, against an initial target list of less than 50 sites. White House spokesman Jay Carney stressed yesterday that any military action would respond solely to the use of chemical weapons in Syria and would not be “about regime change.”

Yet such a limited strike would probably not achieve either objective. A strike would not directly target any chemical weapons sites – a wise choice, since otherwise Asad would further disperse these weapons around the country and make them even harder to locate. Yet this choice also limits the effects that a U.S. strike would have on those capabilities. Destroying the infrastructure surrounding Asad's chemical weapons is a much less direct route that would make it harder, but far from impossible, for the Asad regime to use its chemical weapons again, particularly since they can be launched from artillery pieces that cannot be easily destroyed by long-range standoff weapons.

Deterring Asad's regime from using chemical weapons again may be even more difficult. Asad is clearly a murderous dictator locked in a bitter struggle for survival, who will do whatever it takes to retain power. But we do not know why he conducted a significant chemical weapons attack last week – a question that both supporters and opponents of the regime are asking – and it is very hard to

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deter something from happening again when you don't know what caused it in the first place. If Assad believes, for whatever reason, that using chemical weapons can help him survive, then he will do so again, and the pain inflicted by a limited strike will not change his mind. And if deterrence fails in this way, then the United States may well feel compelled to respond more strongly next time, or begin to contemplate more invasive forms of intervention that may lead to regime change. This would start the country down the slippery slope towards the larger-scale intervention that administration officials clearly want to avoid.

Although some administration officials see Kosovo as a precedent for air strikes in Syria, it is actually much more likely to resemble Operation Desert Fox. For four days in December 1998, U.S. and British forces conducted air strikes against Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) facilities after the latest crisis over U.N. weapons inspectors. This limited campaign, conducted mostly with cruise missiles and bombers, failed to achieve its objectives because it had no clear effect on Iraq's WMD program and left all of the key strategic issues unresolved. A similarly limited campaign in Syria may well generate a similar outcome.

*Dr. Nora Bensahel is a Senior Fellow and Deputy Director of Studies at the Center for a New American Security.*

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Center for a New American Security  
1152 15th Street, NW, Suite 950  
Washington, DC 20005

TEL 202.457.9400  
FAX 202.457.9401  
EMAIL [info@cnas.org](mailto:info@cnas.org)  
[www.cnas.org](http://www.cnas.org)