

COMMENTARY

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The President is Right to Intervene, but Then What?

By Richard Fontaine

President Obama is right to take action in response to the Assad regime's chemical attack on Syrian civilians. Yet in the absence of a strategy that aims at ending the broader humanitarian catastrophe in Syria, the impending attacks will raise as many questions as they answer.

Bashar Asad's creeping brutality for two years successfully forestalled Western intervention in the Syrian civil war. His gas attack on civilians outside Damascus represents the most significant such use of chemical weapons since Saddam Hussein's notorious massacre of Iraqi Kurds in 1988. Asad's attack may well prove his "Srebrenica moment," akin to the galvanizing effect of that massacre on Western sensibilities.

It certainly warrants an American response. In employing chemical weapons against civilians, Asad has violated an international norm that the United States and others have worked laboriously to enforce. Should the Syrian regime face no consequences for the use of such weapons, it would likely be emboldened to do so again – as might other militaries in the future.

For this reason, President Obama established a red line that he repeatedly suggested would elicit an American response. Credibility matters in foreign policy, and by demonstrating that its words are backed with action, the United States can telegraph resolve that will matter in other areas, such as the effort to forestall Iran's development of a nuclear weapon.

Yet, when this engagement is over – and by all accounts it will be a highly limited attack – a raging civil war in Syria will endure, one that has left 100,000 dead and millions displaced. The war has flooded Turkey and Jordan with potentially unsustainable numbers of refugees while exporting instability to Iraq, Lebanon and elsewhere. And should the limited military strikes fail to turn the tide,

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Asad – backed by his Iranian, Russian and Hezbollah supporters – may well retain the momentum.

There are contradictions today in American policy: the President has said that Asad's fall is inevitable, but his spokesman suggested yesterday that regime change is not in the cards. The administration announced months ago that it would arm the rebels, but no weapons have yet made their way into rebel hands. The Secretary of State raised the possibility of a political settlement to the war in Syria, but no diplomatic process is in place. The coming military action will represent punitive strikes, but what if Asad uses chemical weapons again?

It is time to align the impending campaign with a strategy that seeks to accomplish key American aims – namely, the defeat of the Asad regime and its Iranian and Hezbollah allies and an end to the humanitarian destruction in Syria. The United States can change the equation in Syria by weakening the Asad regime or strengthening the rebels, or both. Despite the obvious difficulties, the United States should take real steps to enhance the training, communications and equipping of moderate rebels. And Washington should begin consulting with its partners on the shape of a post-Asad Syria. The impending military strikes may be limited in scope and duration, but American interests in Syria will endure long afterward.

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