

# A Dramatic American Change on Syria, but Will It Be Consequential?

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The Trump Administration has just responded militarily to a serious crisis in Syria where, on April 4, regime forces perpetrated a war crime by using chemical weapons against the town of Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib Province, killing over 70 civilians and injuring hundreds of others, including children. This was not the first such attack; scores of others have taken place over more than six years of war, such as those using chlorine-filled barrel bombs. Nor was this the only kind of aggression against the civilian population as the Syrian regime, since 2011, has used fixed-wing aircraft, helicopters, tanks, field artillery, and long sieges of towns and cities in a systematic drive to inflict as much death and damage on the Syrian people as possible. Estimates vary, but United Nations figures put the death toll so far from the Syrian war at about 400,000 while 12 million people have left their homes, 5 million of whom became refugees in neighboring and far away countries.

Needless to say, the American response may be seen by some as a radical change to both the previous Obama Administration's reticent stance on the war and the current administration's rhetoric about staying away from Syria. President Obama in 2013 refused to make good on a threat he had issued in 2012 about a "red line" that should not be crossed by Syrian combatants, especially the regime, but instead settled for a deal with Russia to strip the Asad government of its chemical weapons arsenal. The United States, however, remained involved in political maneuverings aimed at finding an acceptable process for a transition from Bashar al-Asad and his authoritarian regime.

On the other hand, the Trump Administration, up to a few days ago, had steered away from committing to any political track and washed its hands of a firm position on Asad's departure. The military involvement in Syria was to be only against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Indeed, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, US representative to the United Nations Nikki Haley, and White House Spokesperson Sean Spicer announced a nonchalant attitude about Asad and in fact threw in the towel, declaring that his fate was up to the Syrian people and that the United States should accept his reality. In this, administration officials were only doubling down on what President Donald Trump said about Syria before he declared his candidacy for president, during his campaign, and even after his election and inauguration. In fact, he seriously toyed with the idea of cooperating with the Syrian president and with Russia solely on fighting the Islamic State, which he considered the most serious threat to the United States.

But the chemical attack on Khan Sheikhoun brought in a new set of circumstances that the Trump Administration could not circumvent, neither domestically nor internationally, but could use politically. The attack brought out Haley at the United Nations, who used very tough and threatening language, and Tillerson at the State Department, who quickly decided that Asad could not be part of a future Syria. Despite the administration's appearance of using the attack cynically, it is easy to see that it was an opportunity to do multiple things: mollify domestic critics of American inaction, protect the administration from allegations of

conspiring with Russia to win the presidential election, and assure allies around the world that maybe the errant announcements by President Trump are not the final American position on international politics.

### **Mollifying the Critics**

The Obama Administration's reluctance, indeed refusal, to get directly involved militarily in Syria was both a reflection of President Obama's reticence to use war as an instrument of foreign policy and a realization of the American public's wish not to be involved in new foreign adventures after the wars of Afghanistan and Iraq. The chemical attacks on eastern Damascus in 2013 were arguably the closest the Obama Administration got to doing what President Trump did after the Khan Sheikhoun attack. With the 2013 threshold crossed, and with the rise of the Islamic State and its expansion over large swathes of northern Syria and Iraq, the Obama Administration had new conditions to deal with that made an American involvement against the Syrian regime both impossible and ill-advised.

But while that inaction was welcomed by the American public and a majority of members of Congress, Democrat and Republican, there remained some in the American political establishment who considered the American position a dangerous relinquishing of what is seen as the United States' responsibility as the leading world power. Such figures like Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham led a chorus of opposition to the hands-off approach and instead called for an American role in the creation of safe zones – that could be protected by no-fly arrangements – in northern Syria,

where refugees could settle until they could return to their homes following a political settlement. Even former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton pushed for those safe zones before she was overruled by a reluctant Obama.

Sharp criticisms were also leveled against the Obama Administration's failed mission of training Syrian opposition forces. In fact, that administration did not embark enthusiastically on such a mission for fear of it becoming the reason for more involvement. In the meantime, Kurdish forces were assisted to become a main military instrument to fight ISIL, but they soon became a vanguard for the creation of an autonomous Kurdish region, which angered and unsettled Turkey. By the time of the Russian military intervention in Syria in September 2015, the administration had lost whatever opportunity it had to influence events on the ground, with the exception of establishing an international coalition to help defeat the Islamic State. In essence, these critics believed, America's reluctance to be involved in Syria led to the defeats inflicted on the Syrian opposition since the end of 2015.

This criticism obviously transferred wholly to the Trump Administration, but with the added consideration of President Trump's not mincing words about the fate of the Syrian president and his regime. While Trump is not the first American president to effect radical changes in American foreign policy, his stance regarding Asad spoke of an acceptance by the highest office in the land of a foreign leader who for over six years committed unfathomable horrors against his own people. At least President Obama remained committed to his rhetorical rejection of the Syrian president – given the lack

of the military instrument to change the Syrian regime – and stayed engaged through Secretary of State John Kerry in trying to find a political formula for ending the Syrian crisis.

### **Thwarting Allegations**

Exposed to congressional scrutiny and media reports about alleged direct ties with Russia, the Trump Administration can easily be seen as using the attack on Syria as a way of diverting attention from the larger issue of colluding with the Kremlin to sway the presidential election. The American intelligence community has already confirmed that Russian agents hacked into candidate Hillary Clinton's email and those of her aides, as well as the Democratic National Committee's, all to dig up unsavory information against the Democratic Party's nominee. In addition, reports put the president's approval rating at about 36 percent, in large part due to the administration's appearance of chaos, confusion, and ineptitude, and in a larger part due to the reports of possible collusion with Russia.

Indeed, over the last two months, the president tried to divert attention from the Russia issue by calling it "fake news" and disparaging any allusions to it by politicians or the media. His latest and most enduring was his allegation that former president Barack Obama ordered the wiretapping of his headquarters at Trump Tower in New York. The president provided no evidence of the allegation and at least the FBI and the NSA denied the existence of such evidence. For weeks, he busied his administration with defending the original claim; even Republicans in the House of Representatives were compromised trying to

defend him. Meanwhile, an investigation in the US Senate is underway while another in the House is set to start again after the chairman of the intelligence committee in charge of the investigation, Rep. Devin Nunes, recused himself from conducting it.

### **Assuring Allies**

During his campaign for the presidency and since his inauguration, President Trump has had no qualms about announcing dramatic shifts in American foreign policy away from commitments to common positions on important issues, like the Syrian civil war. In fact, his stance on Syria portended dangerous deviations from other essential issues in American commitments around the world. NATO partners were and remain nervous about the president's berating of their supposed financial noncommitment to the alliance's military well-being. They also are worried about his warm treatment of Russian President Vladimir Putin and his seeming non-interest in the Russian occupation of Crimea and destabilization of Ukraine and other states in the Baltic. It needs to be said that European allies were ready in 2013 to participate in a punitive attack on the Syrian regime, after it crossed Obama's red line, but were overruled by British and American qualms about a strike against Syria. The Trump Administration was thus under at least moral pressure to do something about the latest chemical attack.

Importantly, the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have long waited for an American change that could address their concerns about the slaughter in Syria and the role played by Iran and its affiliated militias

such as Hezbollah. They may not necessarily believe that this latest action will change the game in favor of the Syrian opposition, which they have supported for years, but they also may believe that a new American kinetic involvement may help to improve the situation. Turkey has also been exposed to the dangers of the Syrian crisis since 2011 and plays host to close to three million Syrian refugees. Were the Syrian regime to be allowed a pass on its latest attack, it could continue to cause more tragedy and displacement. To all, the prolonged carnage in Syria had to be addressed, with the chemical attack on Khan Sheikhoun being the most gruesome reminder of it.

To be sure, responses to the American attack elicited the required approval from the same allies who, like the United States, have seen that Syria could not continue to bleed blood and refugees and that a political transition was necessary in Damascus. Major NATO European allies, Turkey, the GCC countries, Australia, and many others hailed the American operation, some considering it overdue. Israel for its part approved of it simply because it justifies attacks it has undertaken on Syrian installations to prevent the delivery of weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Israel also thinks that this operation should send a clear message to Iran not to try to change the status quo in the Syrian Golan Heights, which have become a potential ground for stationing Hezbollah fighters and equipment. As expected, Russia and Iran condemned the attack; President Putin considered it a violation of Syria's sovereignty and dispatched a Russian vessel to the Mediterranean.

## What Next?

As a limited attack on a Syrian military base, the American operation is not likely to rise to the status of being a game changer in Syria. The Trump Administration is simply not prepared institutionally to undertake a dramatic shift in how it deals with the Syrian crisis outside continuing its mission against the Islamic State. On the other hand, and despite the caution that the Syrian regime may from now on exercise on the battlefield, it is not likely to halt its operations against the Syrian opposition. By the same token, and for reasons that go beyond Syria, it is not likely that Russia will escalate its involvement, although it dispatched a military vessel to the Syrian coast.

Having undertaken this step, the Trump Administration will likely be under pressure to quickly plan for the future and ask itself the necessary questions about what is required vis-à-vis the Syrian tragedy. Such questions include: Will the United States continue to limit its involvement in Syria to fighting the Islamic State? Can it contribute to a political solution to the crisis without changing its status on the ground? Will it use whatever leverage it has with the Syrian opposition to influence the battlefield and thus impact the fortunes of the Syrian regime? Given the trouble it has with accusations of collusion with Russia during the election, can Washington still negotiate with Moscow on the way ahead?

These and other questions are essential for the Trump White House, chaotic as it is, to answer logically and sincerely; and if the answers are not forthcoming, it may find itself losing whatever small leverage it has gained from the

latest strike on Syria. From another perspective, these answers may not come easily to this administration since the president seems to respond in an ad hoc manner to important issues, whether in Syria or elsewhere, instead of according to a set of strategic principles based

on a deep understanding of the issues. In the meantime, while the United States responds to atrocities in Syria, its travel ban on Syrian refugees entering the country remains on the books.

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