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Trump's faux war in Syria

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To no one's surprise, the so-called international community, led by the United States, has done neither of the two things that truly might affect the course of the Syrian conflict.

It has not hit the Assad regime's powerful Russian backers where it might really hurt — Vladimir Putin's international and domestic prestige in hosting the FIFA World Cup. It has not held off from another bout of half-hearted military intervention. Limited air strikes achieve little more than the self-satisfaction of hawks in Washington.

Intermittent bombing by the West escalates tensions with Russia, widening and prolonging the war and can only add to, rather than ameliorate, the suffering of Syrians.

It would be so much easier and effective to target the World Cup in Russia but that is not quite so dramatic as firing a burst of American, British and French missiles and bombs into Syria. Even so, the suggestion bears sober consideration. It comes from Kassam Eid, an anti-Assad activist who survived a 2013 chemical attack on Moadamiya on the outskirts of Damascus, managed to get out of Syria and has been writing books about the war.

Days after the April 7 chemical attack on Douma, which has since been blamed on the Assad regime, Eid pleaded with Britain and other Western powers to drop the war rhetoric and urgently lobby FIFA. The West, Eid said, should work overtime to take the World Cup away from Putin as punishment for Moscow's blase attitude to the Syrian regime's repeated defiance of the norms of war.

A late pull-out from Russia — the FIFA World Cup starts in June — would be a huge financial hit for the Russian government, Eid pointed out, as well as a dreadful domestic humiliation for Putin.

He has a point but Eid's sensible, shock-but-no-awe strategy has received little attention and certainly no action.

Instead, all focus has been on US President Donald Trump's war-whoops disguised as tweets about the "Gas Killing Animal (Assad)" and the "nice and new and 'smart!'" American missiles headed for Syria. No matter that missiles have headed for Syria and Trump promises more, this is still tough talk for the sake of talking tough. Limited US strikes, supported by France and the United Kingdom, and apparently cheered on by the Saudis and Qataris, are pretence not a plan.

As Emma Ashford, analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute think-tank in Washington, put it: “For those who want a military response, the question is simple: Can you tell me any practical response short of full-fledged invasion that could prevent this?”

She was referring to further chemical attacks or other atrocities on civilians by the Syrian regime but the question could also cover the ghastly but indisputable reality: Syrian President Bashar Assad rules Syria against all odds and nuclear-armed Russia stands stoutly with, behind and all around Assad.

Russia has underlined its position. Its ambassador in Lebanon, Alexander Zasyarkin, told Hezbollah’s Al-Manar TV in Arabic that any American “missiles will be downed and even the sources from which the missiles were fired.”

That did not happen on the morning of April 14, but it still could, if as Trump has said, the US was “prepared to sustain this response until the Syrian regime stops its use of prohibited chemical agents.”

The Russian envoy’s remarks have been decoded by General Sir Richard Barrons, who led the United Kingdom’s Joint Forces Command from 2013-16 as the growl of “war.” Barrons interpreted the Russian ambassador to say “that if the US and allies decide to strike against Syrian chemical weapons and delivery aircraft, not only are they going to try and shoot down the missiles in flight... they are going to try and sink ships, sink submarines and shoot aircraft out of the sky — that’s war.”

Would the United States go to war with Russia in Syria over Syria? It can hardly be said to care deeply about the plight of Syria’s harried people. Trump has demonstrated scant sympathy, having regularly demonised Syrian refugees, refusing to take them in and recently freezing US State Department funds intended to help stabilise parts of Syria recovered from the Islamic State. Trump has publicly called for a US pullout from Syria while leaving others to “take care of it.”

Limited US strikes would be a faux war, one that would have no winners but the losers would certainly be the Syrian people.