



Refreshing Exception: Resistance Prevented Obama From Starting Another Presidential War

Ted Galen Carpenter

July 13, 2021

In 2013, the American people came perilously close to being dragged into a full-scale war in Syria. True, Barack Obama's administration had been meddling in that country's civil strife for more than a year in an effort to help insurgents oust President Bashar al-Assad, and once ISIS made a bid to establish its "caliphate," Washington would deploy U.S. Special Forces in Syria – a presence that still continues under a different, vague pretext. However, Obama had a much larger military initiative in mind, and if he had succeeded, America's Syria entanglement might have rivaled the Iraq War in both size and disastrous consequences. The convergence of various, somewhat unusual, factors prevented that ugly outcome.

In response to some small-scale incidents in 2012 that may have involved chemical agents, President Obama warned Assad's government that any further use of such weapons would cross a "red line" that could not be tolerated. On August 21, 2013, it appeared that Syrian government forces crossed that line with a chemical attack in Ghouta, a rebel-controlled Damascus suburb. According to media reports, at least several hundred people – and perhaps more than 1,400 – died from the effects of sarin gas.

However, as Scott Ritter, a chemical weapons expert and a member of the UN inspection team in Iraq before the 2003 U.S. invasion, noted: "In August 2013, the OPCW [Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons] dispatched an inspection team into Syria as part of a U.N.-led effort . . . to investigate allegations that sarin had been used in the attack on civilians in the town of Ghouta. While the mission found conclusive evidence that sarin nerve agent had been used, it did not assign blame for the attack. Despite the lack of causality, the US and its NATO allies quickly assigned blame for the sarin attacks on the Syrian government."

So did the Western news media. Mainstream press accounts that endeavored to achieve some balance and express at least even mild reservations about the Obama administration's version of events were rare. The most devastating critique did not appear until months later, when veteran investigative journalist Seymour M. Hersh published a lengthy analysis in the *London Review of Books*. Hersh made a solid case that the attack likely was a "false flag" operation to discredit Assad's regime. He specifically implicated both extremist Syrian rebels and Turkey's intelligence service.

Obama administration officials exhibited no such doubts about Assad's guilt, though, and the White House moved to make good on its threat of retaliation. However, the administration and its hawkish media allies soon discovered that both congressional and public opposition to greater US entanglement in Syria's civil war was much stronger than anticipated. A September 3, 2013, survey by the Pew Research Center found that only 29 percent of respondents supported airstrikes in retaliation for the alleged chemical attack, while 48 percent were opposed. Worse, from the standpoint of the Obama administration's political considerations, even more Democrats and independents opposed a US strike than did Republicans.

Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes later provided a detailed account of the administration's multiplying decision-making dilemmas. Obama's initial inclination was to launch aircraft and missile attacks without seeking congressional authorization – just as he had done in Libya two years earlier. However, intense pushback from Republicans in Congress quickly undermined that option. Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-KY) and other GOP leaders made it very clear that they would excoriate Obama for unconstitutional conduct if he did not seek formal congressional approval before conducting military strikes. Most Republican members actually favored the use of force against Assad, but they had Obama in an awkward position, and they decided to exploit it to the utmost. Because of those largely partisan calculations, they subsequently signaled that they probably would oppose an authorization resolution as well.

As Rhodes noted, support from the European allies for air strikes also remained extremely hesitant. German Chancellor Angela Merkel was especially insistent that Washington proceed cautiously and not trigger a new Middle East War.

Obama faced an increasingly daunting situation. Unilateral presidential action appeared to be politically very perilous, but the outcome of a vote on a measure authorizing force was highly uncertain. Worse, there was tepid backing, at best, from the NATO allies, and there was little support among the American public for another US military adventure in the Middle East. Given the convergence of such multiple adverse factors, Obama backed away from the abyss.

Rhodes and other administration hawks lamented the situation the president was confronting. He emphasized that "foreign policy luminaries" had endorsed a congressional authorization to use force in Syria. "Clinton announced her support, AIPAC lobbied in support of our position; so did the Saudi government – but none of it mattered. Rhodes was utterly perplexed that, despite such prestigious lobbying firepower, "No wave of support materialized in Congress or in public polls."

The 2013 chemical weapons episode was a refreshing case in which an administration's desire to use military force, and strong media support for that option, did not prove sufficient to stampede the country into launching yet another ill-advised war. A Russian-sponsored agreement under which Assad was to give up his chemical weapons resolved the 2013 crisis. Opponents of air

strikes were lucky, though. If opportunistic congressional Republicans had not concluded that it was in the party's best interest to undermine Obama on this occasion – even if such behavior contradicted their own pro-war views – it's unlikely that the drive to war could have been stopped. Moreover, it is highly uncertain if such calculations will apply regarding the next crisis. Nevertheless, a presidential hunger for war was thwarted in 2013, and proponents of peace will take such a victory any time – and in any way – that they can.

Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow in defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, is the author of 12 books and more than 900 articles on international affairs.