



## Syria: Wrong War, Wrong Place, Wrong Time

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April 14, 2018

*What about all the other, deadlier weapons? A PR exercise will change nothing.*

President Donald Trump has received applause from all the wrong places for his latest attack on Syria. The Bashar al-Assad regime is brutal, but the U.S. government should not police arbitrary rules of war or, even worse, get involved in someone else's civil war. The president is being pushed into adopting Hillary Clinton's policy.

The president began his television address on Syria with sharp criticism of "the evil and despicable attack" allegedly made by the Assad government, and evil and despicable it was. Yet there is less to the use of chemical weapons than the fevered international reaction suggests.

What is truly "evil and despicable" is war.

The president cited the "horrors of World War I," especially the estimated one million dead or wounded from gas, after which "civilized nations joined together to ban chemical warfare." Yet the prohibition really was directed at the living, not the dead. Chemical weapons were not the great killer, accounting for about 3 percent of military and few civilian casualties: Between nine and eleven million military personnel are thought to have died in the Great War. Another 22 to 24 million were wounded. Those shredded or buried by an artillery barrage, cut down by machine gun or rifle fire, or sent to the ocean's bottom by a torpedo or depth charge were equally dead. And far more were killed with those "acceptable" weapons than by gas.

In fact, contra the president's claim that "even small amounts [of chemicals] can unleash widespread devastation," they really are not weapons of mass destruction. A nuclear bomb can destroy a city; a biological attack can infect a population. Chemical weapons are far less effective. In fact, they do far more to generate a special fear among those who survive — ironically including Adolf Hitler, who despite his many crimes never used the weapon that had harmed him.

Syria has been a terrible charnel house not because of the widespread use of chemicals, but because any low tech civil war in an urban area is going to be horrid, especially when the combatants include determined brutal authoritarians, violent religious extremists, and ruthless outside forces. Bombs and bullets have killed the vast majority of the half million estimated dead Syrians. Is it that much worse to die from a chemical weapon than a barrel or cluster bomb?

Indeed, the latest apparent attack was thought to have killed between 40 and 70 people. Such a toll from a more conventional assault would have been unremarkable and gone unnoticed. The real tragedy of Syria is that the deaths of scores of people, day after day, no longer is cause for comment.

Ironically, Assad's presumed use of chemicals may have helped end fighting in Douma attack sooner, reducing the otherwise inevitable human toll. Why, having largely triumphed over its enemies, would Damascus use chemical weapons? The insurgent group Jaysh al-Islam refused to follow fighters elsewhere in agreeing to evacuate the besieged city. After air strikes and chemical attacks Jaysh al-Islam came to terms, perhaps under pressure from the local population. That result does not sanctify the use of horrid weapons, but it demonstrates the moral complexity: Would the "international community," whatever that is, prefer another week or two of conventional attack with far more than 40 to 70 civilian deaths?

In fact, Washington policymakers were equally callous when confronted with a similar dilemma. The Reagan administration backed Saddam Hussein after his ruinous attack on Iran. The U.S. provided him with dual use products for chemical weapons and aided his armed forces knowing that he planned to use chemical weapons against Iranian forces. Apparently Americans' moral outrage dissipated when Iranians were the target.

In his TV talk the president challenged Iran and Russia: "What kind of a nation wants to be associated with the mass murder of innocent men, women, and children? The nations of the world can be judged by the friends they keep." Yet Moscow and Tehran could ask the same question of Washington's support for Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen. Riyadh was not attacked. Instead, it intervened in a long-running — essentially from when the original two Yemeni states gained independence — internal conflict in order to restore to power an ousted president expected to do Saudi Arabia's will.

Although the Saudis do not use chemical weapons, their air strikes are responsible for the vast majority of the 10,000-plus civilian deaths, exacerbated by a naval blockade, cholera epidemic, collapse of the health care system, widespread destruction of infrastructure, and much more. "What kind of a nation wants to be associated with" this sort of war, Mr. President?

The latest attack, supposedly directed at three chemical weapons facilities, is a bit tougher than last year's pin prick missile barrage, but it is no less a PR exercise. Al-Assad does not need chemical weapons to win the conflict. If all he loses after using them is some of his chemical weapons infrastructure, he hasn't paid much of a price. The military balance on the ground has not changed.

He could fear a tougher attack in the future, but the Trump administration flinched, avoiding hitting facilities or forces which could result in Russian casualties. That consideration won't change. Even now Moscow and Tehran might increase their aid in attempt to speed al-Assad's conquest of the few areas that remain under insurgent control. The two governments also could work with Turkey against Kurdish forces in the Northeast, where some 2000 Americans are deployed.

At least President Trump wants to bring the latter home. He realizes that it is not in America's interest to satisfy the fevered imagination of international social engineers who by occupying a quarter of Syria hope to force Assad's fall, despite his triumph over most of the insurgents, exclude from Syria Iran, which was allied with Damascus before the civil war, face down Moscow, whose relationship with the Assad dynasty runs back to the Cold War, and convince Ankara, which has spent years warring on Kurdish separatists, to embrace a de facto Kurdish statelet within Syria. These are fantasies in the sky.

Unfortunately, the president has allowed those who work for him to effectively set policy and thereby thwart his objectives. He justifies Washington's continued presence as necessary to finish off the Islamic State, but that is not America's job. The U.S. joined the conflict to stop ISIS from further metastasizing when it was rapidly expanding. Since then the so-called caliphate has lost 98 percent of its territory, while the Iraqi government has stabilized, the Syrian government has recovered, the Turkish government has stopped helping the wannabe-caliphate on the sly, and the Russian government has jumped in. They, along with the Kurds and other local forces, can handle the remaining two percent of the Islamic State.

In his televised address the president said what most Americans desperately want to hear: "No amount of American blood or treasure can produce lasting peace and security in the Middle East." Finally, a president who understands the obvious in the Mideast.

But President Trump needs to resist well-connected members of foreign policy establishment, including those who fill his administration, to make that a reality. Which means firmly, finally, and completely leaving Syria — including ISIS and chemical weapons — to others.

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