

International Crisis Group - Syria Statement 1 September 2013 Assuming the U.S. Congress authorises them, Washington (together with some allies) soon will launch military strikes against Syrian regime targets. If so, it will have taken such action for reasons largely divorced from the interests of the Syrian people. The administration has cited the need to punish, deter and prevent use of chemical weapons - a defensible goal, though Syrians have suffered from far deadlier mass atrocities during the course of the conflict without this prompting much collective action in their defence. The administration also refers to the need, given President Obama's asserted "redline" against use of chemical weapons, to protect Washington's credibility – (...). Quite apart from talk of outrage, deterrence and restoring U.S. credibility, the priority must be the welfare of the Syrian people. Whether or not military strikes are ordered, this only can be achieved through imposition of a sustained ceasefire and widely accepted political transition.

To precisely gauge in advance the impact of a U.S. military attack, regardless of its scope and of efforts to carefully calibrate it, by definition is a fool's errand. (...) Consequences almost certainly will be unpredictable. Still, several observations can be made about what it might and might not do:

- A military attack will not, nor can it, be met with even minimal international consensus; in this sense, the attempt to come up with solid evidence of regime use of chemical weapons, however necessary, also is futile. (...)
- It might discourage future use of chemical weapons by signalling even harsher punishment in the event of recidivism – (...), however, that consideration might not weigh heavily. Elements within the opposition also might be tempted to use such weapons and then blame the regime, precisely in order to provoke further U.S. intervention.
- It could trigger violent escalation within Syria as the regime might exact revenge on rebels and rebel-held areas, while the opposition seeks to seize the opportunity to make its own gains. (...)
- Military action, which the U.S. has stated will not aim at provoking the regime's collapse, might not even have an enduring effect on the balance of power on the ground. (...)

Ultimately, the principal question regarding a possible military strike is whether diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict can be re-energised in its aftermath. (...) In practice, it almost certainly is not feasible. Whether or not the U.S. chooses to launch a military offensive, its responsibility should be to try to optimise chances of a diplomatic breakthrough. This requires a two-fold effort lacking to date: developing a realistic compromise political offer as well as genuinely reaching out to both Russia and Iran in a manner capable of eliciting their interest - rather than investing in a prolonged conflict that has a seemingly bottomless capacity to escalate.

In this spirit, the U.S. should present - and Syria's allies should seriously and constructively consider - a proposal based on the following elements:

1. It is imperative to end this war. (...)
2. The only exit is political. (...)
3. The Syrian crisis presents an important opportunity to test whether the U.S. and the Islamic Republic of Iran can work together on regional issues to restore stability.
4. A viable political outcome in Syria cannot be one in which the current leadership remains indefinitely in power but, beyond that, the U.S. can be flexible with regards to timing and specific modalities;
5. (...) The goal should thus be a transition that builds on existing institutions rather than replaces them. (...)
6. Priority must be given to ensuring that no component of Syrian society is targeted for retaliation, discrimination or marginalisation in the context of a negotiated settlement.

Such a proposal should then form the basis for renewed efforts by Lakhdar Brahimi, the joint United Nations/Arab League envoy, and lead to rapid convening of a Geneva II conference.

Debate over a possible strike - its wisdom, preferred scope and legitimacy in the absence of UN Security Council approval - has obscured and distracted from what ought to be the overriding international preoccupation: how to revitalise the search for a political settlement. Discussions about its legality aside, any contemplated military action should be judged based on whether it advances that goal or further postpones it.

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