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## OPINION

OP-ED

### Options for action in Syria

Ignoring Assad's use of chemical weapons would set a terrible precedent.

By Chuck Freilich

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Outrage. That's what we should feel over the Syrian government's slaughter of more than 70,000 of its own people and its use of chemical weapons. And outrage is what we should feel over the international community's total impotence.

Despite nearly irrefutable intelligence regarding Syrian use of chemical weapons, which the Obama administration acknowledges, the White House persists in setting a burden of proof that is impossible to achieve in practical terms and is designed to allow the U.S. to avoid military involvement in Syria almost at all costs.

Moral outrage notwithstanding, the administration's reticence is not without foundation. When the president termed the use of chemical weapons a "red line" and a "game changer," he presumably did not mean a limited use leading to a few tens of deaths — as appears to be the case — but to the use of a weapon of mass destruction. If the slaughter of 70,000 by conventional means has not led to [intervention](#), the killing of a relative few with chemical weapons doesn't make that big a difference.

Moreover, the Syrian situation truly does not present the administration with any good options, and the American people are clearly wary of further Mideast wars. The argument can also be made that the U.S. should save its residual willingness to intervene in the Mideast for [Iran's](#) rapidly developing [nuclear program](#), a greater danger to American interests, its allies in the region and regional security.

Nevertheless, even the limited use of chemical weapons violates a fundamental international norm and an American failure to respond would create another North Korea-like precedent that would be a source of deep encouragement for the Assads of the world: WMD buys even a heinous regime immunity from international retaliation. Iran is no doubt watching in the wings, deriving its own conclusions regarding what the U.S. defines as unacceptable behavior. The administration's hopes that Russia can or will play a positive role, leading to a diplomatic resolution, are most likely baseless.

Some military officials and experts who are opposed to involvement in Syria have floated the idea that a military operation would require 75,000 troops, but this is merely a scare tactic designed to deter any action. No one is advocating a ground invasion, and there is a vast gap between doing nothing and full intervention.

One minimal approach would be a targeted strike against a Syrian chemical weapon storage facility (the total number is thought to be less than 20), the chemical command's headquarters or some other target the regime values. The objectives would be to deliver a clear message that the U.S. will not acquiesce even to limited use of chemical weapons and to deter their future use, an increasing likelihood if the previous use goes unpunished.

There are broader options as well. The U.S. and its allies could impose a no-movement zone or even a limited no-fly zone to prevent the use of chemical weapons and to provide havens for millions of Syrian civilians displaced by the fighting. Syria does have a dense air defense system, and it would not be a cakewalk as in Libya, but as unconfirmed Israeli airstrikes over the weekend demonstrated, those defenses are far from impenetrable.

Two years too late, the administration could also try to develop the more congenial elements within the Syrian opposition. True, there are no "good guys" among them, but the ongoing policy of almost total disengagement has ensured that the United States will have no influence over the outcome and that radicals in the opposition will gain ascendancy. Involvement does not ensure success, but since the Assad regime's demise does not appear imminent, there is still time to begin diplomatic, political, economic and military engagement, including limited provision of arms, to the less-bad opposition elements.

Support for the opposition now and when it takes over (the regime will probably fall at some point) should be made contingent on a willingness to transfer all chemical weapons to international control. Meanwhile, Bashar Assad must be made to understand that further use of such weapons will truly be this kind of a game changer: The international objective would no longer be an orderly transfer of power that would allow him and his family to leave Syria peaceably, but his own personal demise.

American strategic interests may not warrant a major intervention — indeed, the U.S. cannot police the entire world — but there are times when our outrage must be turned into action, limited as it may be.

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