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How to Make the "Red Line" Mean Something

CHUCK FREILICH

More than 70,000 Syrians have been killed by their own government, and there is now overwhelming evidence that the regime has used chemical weapons. The “international community”, in a display that is cynical even by its own usual jaded standards, has remained impassive and impotent.

Even the Obama Administration, which declared Syria’s use of chemical weapons a "red line" and "game changer", has done everything in its power to stay out of the Syrian crisis, intentionally setting unattainable standards of proof for the use of chemical weapons and pursuing diplomatic options that are unlikely to yield much. In effect, it has attempted to distance itself from what it cannot help but know as fact.

President Obama is in an unenviable position. While he presumably shares the collective sense of moral outrage at Syria’s atrocities, there truly are no good solutions to the crisis in general and the chemical weapons issue in particular. Moreover, when the President announced his "red line" policy, he clearly was not thinking in terms of the limited chemical weapons use that actually occurred but of massive or widespread use. If the slaughter of tens of thousands of people has not warranted intervention, a few dozen more dying of poison gas does not in itself justify a policy change.

Nevertheless, the use of chemical weapons violates fundamental international norms and sets dangerous precedents. To ignore it, or to try to smooth it over through futile diplomatic efforts, is unacceptable.

The Stakes

Chemical weapons were used extensively during World War I, leading to a sense of international abhorrence and to a norm against their future use, ultimately enshrined in the Chemical Weapons Convention. Ever since then, there have been only a few violations of this norm: -Japan’s use against China in the 1930s and during World War II; Egypt’s use in Yemen in the 1960s; and Saddam Hussein’s use in the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s and against his own Shiite population following the 1991 Gulf War. (Terrorists also conducted a chemical attack in Tokyo in 1995.) These exceptions to the norm must not be allowed to multiply. Every additional case increases acceptance of the use of chemical weapons, and of the use of even more lethal weapons of mass destruction.

A failure to respond to Bashar al-Assad's use of chemical weapons would not only encourage him in the belief that he can perhaps get away with an even bigger use next time; it would also undermine U.S. strategic credibility well beyond the Syria case. This begs the obvious question: At what point does the "red line" really become one? How many people have to be killed before we say it has well and truly been crossed? Hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands?

A failure to respond would also create a highly dangerous, North Korea-like precedent: that a heinous, brutal regime can buy immunity from intervention by acquiring weapons of mass destruction. This is particularly true in the case of Iran, which is undoubtedly watching every U.S. move closely, adjusting its calculations as regards America's likely response to Iran's nuclear weapons program, a far greater threat than Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles.

Syria straddles a number of crucial Middle Eastern fault-lines that make its domestic crisis important to the entire region. All of these fault-lines have been disturbed by Assad's use of chemical weapons. First, Syria has become the focal point of the broader Sunni-Shiite battle for regional dominance, pitting Iran, Saudi Arabia and others against each other. The civil war has already had significant spillover effects on Syria's neighbors, with hundreds of thousands of refugees severely burdening Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. Jordan, always in danger of destabilization, is deeply worried, as is Lebanon, whose ever-simmering ethnic tensions could boil over into renewed civil war. Syrian instability threatens Turkey's ethnic balance in the southeast, while Iraq's tenuous ethnic balance and stability have also been challenged by the primarily Sunni-led rebellion in Syria. Israel fears that the sporadic border incidents of the past year could lead to renewed large-scale hostilities on its long-quiet border with Syria and to an even broader conflagration.

Finally, there is the moral consideration. We cannot remain passive in the face of mass murder and the flouting of such fundamental international norms. The United States must balance its ideals with the exigencies of realpolitik; it certainly cannot intervene in every global crisis. But there is a vast difference between a policy of near total disengagement and one of massive intervention. The challenge is to find an effective and politically viable middle course. The Obama Administration's current policy is not it.

The Options

American efforts to deal with the Syrian issue should be focused primarily on the chemical weapons—and possibly also on providing broader cover for Syria's civilian population—but not on direct military intervention in the civil war. An American ground intervention is neither warranted by US strategic considerations nor politically viable, so we can rule out that option right away. There may be a need for the limited use of special forces to deal with certain chemical weapons sites, but

certainly no ground troops beyond this. The objective here is narrowly defined to allay concerns about mission creep.

Diplomacy is obviously the preferable course of action, but in reality the options are painfully few.

The Syrian regime ignored repeated U.S. warnings not to use chemical weapons. While further entreaties cannot hurt, they are unlikely to be any more effective unless backed up by a firm demonstration of American resolve, especially as the regime approaches its denouement.

UN diplomatic efforts have proven futile so far, leading to the resignation of former mediator Kofi Annan and now to reports that the current mediator, Lakhdar Brahimi, intends to resign in frustration as well. This is hardly surprising given the zero-sum nature of the civil war; it is in all likelihood a battle to the death. Neither side truly seeks compromise; they might seek an accommodation *in extremis*, at which point the other side would probably “smell blood” and refuse to compromise.

Diplomatic efforts are thus highly unlikely to achieve any more success than they have to date.

Moreover, the chemical arsenal is the ultimate guarantee of the regime's existence, and so it will be fundamentally unwilling to forgo it. Regime preservation, at all costs, has been the paramount objective of the Assads for forty years.

Some place their hopes in Russian mediation and in the upcoming U.S.-Russian conference, but in all likelihood these hopes are baseless. The bilateral relationship is rocky today; stymieing American influence around the world, rather than resolving issues of joint concern, appears to be Putin's paramount objective, and Russia has strategic interests of its own in Syria. Indeed, Russia has been a primary obstacle to American attempts to deal with the Iranian nuclear issue. So far it has adopted a consistently obstructionist role on Syria as well.

Russia certainly does not wish to see Syria use chemical weapons, but it will not put the screws to one of its only two allies in the Middle East, much as it has refused to press Iran over its far more dangerous nuclear program. In any event, its influence over Syria is far more limited than many believe. Syria is dependent on Russia for - diplomatic cover in the Security Council, but it already has a very large military and does not need more Russian weapons to suppress the rebellion (although additional advanced air-defense and other systems would be important in warding off an international intervention). Moreover, the regime is not overly concerned with international opprobrium, especially given that it faces a threat to its future.

China continues to pursue its policy of total nonintervention in the affairs of foreign countries, regardless of the consequences. With the exception of Iran and Hizballah, both of which are directly involved in an effort to prop up the regime, Syria has no other friends in the world and there are no other players with leverage of significance. Should Syria make massive use of -chemical weapons the diplomatic situation may change, but we are not there yet and this would probably require truly horrific developments. In short, diplomacy is not the answer.

Economic options. Due to its support for terrorism and involvement in the development of weapons of mass destruction, Syria has long been the target of American sanctions. Bilateral relations are thus minimal, and U.S. (and EU) leverage limited. In any event, the chemical arsenal, the Syrian regime's ultimate guarantee, is of far greater importance to it. Moreover, the regime itself is largely impervious to economic pressures; public suffering will not change its policy.

A semi-military variation on the economic option is an economic and naval blockade, designed to prevent commercial and weapons shipments to and from Syria. Turkey and Jordan could cease all commercial ties, though they are likely to prove reluctant to thoroughly cut them off. Iranian-dominated Iraq will not cooperate, and Lebanon is incapable of enforcing a blockade, whether it wishes to or not. Even a partial economic blockade would have some long-term consequences but fail to affect the current situation.

Syria's coastline is short, less than 200 kilometers, its maritime trade limited and its navy inconsequential. A naval blockade might have a long term influence on the regime, but it is hard to envisage the political will needed for a sustained American or international move of this sort. Furthermore, Russia maintains a small naval base in the Syrian port of Latakia and would presumably object, though its naval vessels could be exempted. Succor is unlikely to come from economic measures.

Military options. Syria's chemical arsenal, one of the world's largest, includes airborne bombs, rockets, ballistic missiles and artillery shells. Control of the arsenal is highly centralized in the hands of forces whose loyalty to the regime is presumed to be assured. The number of chemical sites is estimated at less than twenty, and experts believe that they still know the location of the airborne bombs and rockets/missiles, although they are less confident about locating the artillery shells, which may have been dispersed.

Chemical weapons are normally kept in binary form—in other words, they are composed of two different chemicals which must be mixed in order to achieve a significant toxic effect. As long as they remain in binary form, the dangers of collateral damage and civilian casualties from an attack are minor. This is especially true if the weapons are stored in reinforced underground sites. If mixed and released into the air, sarin and VX, the primary weapons in Syria's arsenal, are highly lethal but dissipate rapidly.

Syria's chemical capabilities pose three distinct threats: use against the Syrian opposition and civilian population, transfer to a third party outside of Syria, such as Hizballah, or loss of control over the arsenal, or parts thereof, to the opposition, to Hizballah, al-Qaeda and others.

There is also the important question of whether the United States would be trying to prevent the use of these weapons or responding after the fact.

Without access to detailed military planning information, one cannot fully assess the ways in which each of these scenarios could be addressed, but the following are some initial considerations. (The use of ground troops beyond limited special forces has been ruled out, as already noted, and thus is not analyzed here.)

No-fly/no-movement zone. A no-fly zone is one way to prevent a chemical attack against the opposition. Prevention of rocket and artillery attacks, as well as the transfer of chemical weapons to a third party, intentional or not, would require a no-movement zone as well. Due to intelligence limitations, this option could not be completely enforced.

Various defense officials and experts have warned of the extremely dense Syrian air-defense system, but as Israel's reported air attacks (apparently three since January) have clearly demonstrated, it is far from impenetrable. Moreover, the United States has vastly superior capabilities, including stealth aircraft. There is, however, a significant difference between staging a handful of airstrikes and maintaining and sustaining a no-fly zone. Syria's air force could also be grounded, at least for periods of time, by air or missile strikes designed to render airbases inoperable. No-fly, and especially no-movement zones, would require a significant commitment, whether by the United States or by a coalition. No one can guarantee zero losses, but the military challenges are not insurmountable if the political will is there.

Direct attack. Since we may not know where all of the chemical weapons are located (especially the artillery shells), it will probably not be possible to destroy them completely. The objective, however, would not be to completely destroy the arsenal but to diminish it significantly. If Syria were left, for example, with 20 percent of its current arsenal, this would make a significant difference in terms of both the regime's capabilities and self-confidence.

There are, however, some lesser options. For example, one could attack a relatively vulnerable target like the chemical command headquarters as an indication of resolve and as a means of degrading Syria's command-and-control capabilities. The downside is that this might force the Syrians to decentralize control over the arsenal. A further possibility is to attack a number of targets where the weapons are still in binary form or are not adjacent to population centers. This would downgrade Syria's overall capability but could again lead the Syrians to disperse the remaining capabilities and decentralize control.

These direct attack options would have differing levels of effectiveness. A major challenge is the need for precise intelligence, which is far from a sure bet.

Sending a message. A number of options exist to "send a message" to the regime to dissuade it from further chemical weapons use. For example, the United States could attack one site and follow it up with a stern warning. This would strengthen American credibility and deterrence without risking the

downsides of a broader operation. Alternatively, other target(s) of value could be attacked, whether only indirectly related or even unrelated to the chemical arsenal—for example, the defense ministry. The United States and the West could also let Assad know that further chemical weapons use would change the endgame from a negotiated transfer of power, in which Assad and his family would be allowed to leave the country, to his personal demise. They could also convey similar messages to the heads of the chemical command and to officers in the chemical units, that they will be held personally accountable if they give or obey an order to use chemical weapons or possibly even to transfer them to a third-party. Similar messages were transmitted to Saddam and commanders of his WMD units during the 2003 Gulf War.

As the regime crumbles, the danger grows that Syrian chemical weapons will fall into the hands of opposition forces, Hizballah, al-Qaeda and others. It should be made abundantly clear to the opposition forces that international recognition and assistance is contingent on their willingness to transfer all chemical and other weapons of mass destruction to international control for immediate removal or destruction—much in the way that UNSCOM, a UN force, was charged with dismantling Iraqi weapons of mass destruction following the 1991 Gulf War.

Some sites—for example, those in which weapons are in binary form or are close to population centers—may require the use special forces for destruction or for safe removal from Syria. The latter eventuality would likely only be feasible after a new and cooperative regime had assumed power.

In conclusion, it is clear at this point that the Obama administration does not intend to take military action or do much else, barring a massive use of chemical weapons. Even then, it hasn't been clear about how it would respond. Moreover, having allowed so much time to slip away, the administration has lost the political momentum that would have been necessary for a military intervention. Were the administration to change its approach, it could make use of a belated “confirmation of the intel” to justify military action, but this appears increasingly unlikely.

Syria's use of chemical weapons gives the Obama Administration no attractive options, but it would set too dangerous of a precedent and so cannot be allowed to pass without a response. It's hard to make a final recommendation on the appropriate action without having access to all the classified data, but a highly limited strike along the lines indicated above—that is, an attack on one or more chemical sites, the chemical command headquarters or some other target of high value for the regime—should be considered. The United States must make Assad and other proliferators understand that the use of weapons of mass destruction places them clearly and unmistakably on the wrong side of the red line.

Chuck Freilich, a former Deputy National Security Adviser in Israel, is a senior fellow at Harvard's Kennedy School and the author of [*Zion's Dilemmas: How Israel Makes National Security Policy*](#).