



FPI Bulletin: Syria Airstrike Necessary but Insufficient

April 7, 2017

By FPI Executive Director Christopher J. Griffin

The United States launched [airstrikes](#) overnight against the military forces of Bashar al-Assad in response to his regime's most recent chemical weapon [attack](#) against Syrian civilians. By destroying equipment and facilities at the Shayrat Airbase, the U.S. strike was intended to limit Assad's ability to deliver such weapons as sarin gas, the nerve agent used in the regime's most recent atrocity. This is a proportionate and appropriate response on the part of President Donald Trump, but on its own, this action will be insufficient to change the course of the six-year old war in Syria. To make a difference, the recent airstrikes must become part of a coherent and durable plan to restrain Assad and empower a moderate opposition.

In his remarks yesterday evening, President Trump declared that he had "ordered a targeted military strike on the airfield in Syria from where the chemical attack was launched." He then issued a broader call to "all civilized nations to join us in seeking to end the slaughter and bloodshed in Syria and also to end terrorism of all kinds and all types." The tension between limited strikes and the ambitious goal of ending the war is likely to define the military campaign upon which the United States has embarked – will President Trump settle for proportionate responses to specific provocations by Assad, or will he pursue a more ambitious strategy to resolve this brutal and brutally complex war?

Earlier in the day, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson [suggested](#) that the administration may even be thinking seriously about an effort to remove Assad from power—a policy that Tillerson [rejected](#) just one week ago. When asked by a reporter if the administration will "organize an international coalition to remove Assad," Tillerson simply responded, "Those steps are underway." At the same time, he suggested that such a move may only come about via a political process following the defeat of ISIS.

As President Trump rightly [noted](#) earlier this week, his predecessor's "weakness and irresolution" set the stage for the present conflict with the Assad regime. President Obama's handling of the Syrian crisis gravely damaged U.S. credibility and gradually constrained American options in response to the disaster. To justify his passivity, Obama portrayed the situation as being so hopeless that there was no point in trying to change it. Yet now, President Trump's action has begun to challenge long-held assumptions about the inexorability of the Syrian disaster.

First of all, U.S. missile salvos have shown that Russia's presence on the ground should not be an excuse for paralysis. Direct U.S. intervention provides an opportunity to present Moscow with a clear choice – either withdrawal from the theater, or leverage its relationship with Damascus to help replace Assad with a palatable alternative. Either of these outcomes would provide the United States greater flexibility for either an expanded military campaign or to seek a negotiated agreement between the regime and its opponents.

Second, it may now be possible for the U.S. to coordinate a meaningful coalition that brings together its Sunni Arab allies and potential partners within the Syrian opposition. Since 2014, a major constraint on that coordination has been Washington's insistence on supporting only military operations against ISIS, and not the Assad regime. If American policy is revised, it will

create new opportunities to protect the Syrian people from the Assad regime and to legitimize non-extremist alternatives to the ISIS and al Qaeda affiliates in Syria.

Third, it would be wrong to assume that outside pressure cannot change the war's regional consequences. Prior to Moscow's intervention in the autumn of 2015, the Assad regime was visibly crumbling, despite extensive support from Iran. If American pressure can limit Russian support while bringing together a more effective anti-Assad coalition, the United States may be able to isolate Iran and place one of its few allies in the Middle East at risk. The United States should not hesitate to seize such an opportunity.

By overturning entrenched assumptions about the war, Trump's airstrikes have opened the way toward a complete rethinking of the policy he inherited from his predecessor – one which until yesterday, he openly embraced. The great unknown is whether President Trump has either clear outcomes in mind for Syria or a strategy to achieve them. If the president is considering a sustained set of airstrikes, it would be preferable from him to request from Congress a formal authorization for the use of military force.

Even if President Trump takes these steps, no easy success in Syria is guaranteed, or even likely. However, American leadership and initiative will create possibilities that weakness and irresolution have for too long ruled out.