



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

SITUATION ASSESSEMENT

White House Rhetoric and Syria: Striking without Strategy

Policy Analysis Unit | April 2018

The April 2018 Missile Strikes on Syria: Absence of Strategy in the White House Rhetoric

Series: Situation Assessment

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Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

PO Box 10277

Street No. 826, Zone 66

Doha, Qatar

Tel.: +974 44199777 | Fax: +974 44831651

www.dohainstitute.org

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Introduction

The United States, together with the United Kingdom and France, launched a punitive military strike on several Syrian regime positions on 7 April 2018. The show of power came in retaliation for Bashar Al-Assad's use of chemical weapons against civilians in the town of Douma within the Eastern Ghouta district of Damascus. Careful coordination by the Pentagon ensured that there were no Russian casualties, and similarly, there were no reports of Iranians or Syrian regime operatives being killed carefully avoiding any Russian, Iranian or Syrian regime casualties.¹ The limited scope of the attack calls into question Trump's seemingly adamant claim that Assad would pay a "heavy price". There is no consensus in Washington as to whether the Assad regime used a nerve agent (Sarin) in Douma, or if it "merely" used chlorine gas, which the US can tolerate as just one more crime committed by the Syrian Regime.

Nature of the Attack

The US president turned to Twitter, his medium of choice, to announce that the US would be retaliating to the use of chemical weapons in Douma, promising that Assad and his allies in Russia and Iran would pay a heavy price.² Within the US Administration, debate centered not on the principle of a "punitive" strike against the regime, but rather on the scale and intensity of the strike. According to administration officials, Trump wanted a sustained crackdown on the Syrian regime.³ In contrast, Defense Secretary James Mattis and the commanding officers in the US military insisted on the need not to lose sight of the wider strategy in Syria and warned against the possibility of direct confrontation with Russia.

Trump's temperamental character won out in the end, and conveniently distracted from the news of the FBI raiding his lawyer's office and home as part of an investigation that could ultimately jeopardize his presidency. Trump's approach led to confusion in the US National Security Council deliberations to determine the nature of the military operation against the Syrian regime. On April 11, 2018, he surprised his advisors with his response to a Russian

¹ Zachary Cohen and Kevin Liptak, "US, UK and France launch Syria strikes targeting Assad's chemical weapons," CNN, April 14, 2018, accessed on 18/4/2018, at: <https://cnn.it/2Hz2gd1>

² Philip Rucker et al., "Big price to pay': Inside Trump's decision to bomb Syria," *The Washington Post*, April 14, 2018, accessed on 18/4/2018, at: <https://wapo.st/2qI5i6L>

³ Cohen and Liptak.

threat to intercept any US missiles fired at Syria and target their launch sites on twitter. He tweeted, "Get ready Russia, because they will be coming, nice and new and smart!".⁴ The tweet provoked widespread criticism based on the fact that Trump has long fiercely criticized his predecessor, Barak Obama, for announcing military actions in advance. He responded with a follow-up tweet the next day, stating "Never said when an attack on Syria would take place. Could be very soon or not so soon at all!"⁵

Trump pushed for a much tougher response than the previous strike on the [Shayrat Airbase last year](#), but Mattis said the strikes would be a "one-time shot", to send a strong message to Assad.⁶ Practically speaking, this means that the goal of the recent military operation was no different from the 2017 strike, which failed to persuade Assad to stop using chemical weapons against civilians. Attempting to absorb Trump's indignation about the limitations of the strike and the military options presented to him, the Pentagon extended the scale of the latest strike massively compared to the 2017 action against Shayarat. The United States, Britain and France fired 105 rockets in contrast to the 59 fired in 2017, and targeted three regime positions as opposed to just one in the previous strike. The United States, Britain and France announced that the strikes were limited to undermining the chemical weapons capacity of the Syrian regime and did not aim to overthrow Assad or alter the balance of power on the ground. Although Trump described the operation as successful, and tweeted "Mission Accomplished", the Pentagon acknowledged that Syria maintained elements of its chemical weapons program and that it cannot guarantee the regime would not be able to carry out a chemical attack in the future. This despite claiming to have "struck at the heart of Syria's chemical weapons program".⁷

The "Red Line" for the Trump Administration

Although the US has not yet confirmed whether Sarin gas was used in the Douma attack, the decision to strike implied the regime had used the nerve agent as this would be consistent with Washington's policy since 2012 as well as Trump's 2017 attack on Shayrat. According to a 2013

⁴ Alex Ward, "Trump just tweeted that a strike on Syria is imminent," VOX, April 11, 2018, accessed on 18/4/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2Ht2XHj>

⁵ Tae Kim, "Trump tweets again on Syria, saying attack could be 'very soon or not so soon at all'," CNBC, April 12, 2018, accessed on 18/4/2018, at: <https://cnb.cx/2HyrlVy>

⁶ "Right now, this is a one-time shot'," CBC, April 14, 2018, accessed on 18/4/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2JUeZrv>

⁷ Phil Stewart and Tom Perry, "U.S. says air strikes cripple Syria chemical weapons program," *Reuters*, 12/4/2018, accessed on 18/4/2018, at: <https://reut.rs/2vdo3UW>

agreement between the US and the Syrian Regime, mediated by Russia, and by which an American strike was avoided, Syria was supposed to have handed over all of its chemical weapons. It is clear that the Syrian regime has no intention of upholding that agreement, with US officials confirming that chlorine gas was used in the Douma attack. Yet they have also made clear that the evidence on the use of the sarin nerve agent remains inconclusive, according to US Vice President Mike Pence and Defense Secretary Mattis.⁸ Other officials believe that samples from the site of the attack indicate that both chlorine gas and sarin were used.⁹

The previous data raised questions about Trump's new "red line", which, if crossed, instigates US military intervention. The US envoy to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, hinted hours after the Western military attack on the Syrian regime that the United States will strike again, if "poison gas" is used again, saying: "the United States Ready was prepared to sustain the pressure if the Syrian regime was foolish enough to test our will", and told the Security Council that "when our president draws a red line, our president enforces the red line".¹⁰ If chlorine gas has become the new red line, then it is a new standard, hard to enforce in the current political context; the Syrian regime has used the gas on dozens of occasions before without a US response. Chlorine is not even included in the 2013 agreement to rid the country of chemical weapons. The regime was permitted to use it for civilian needs, but not military objectives, a condition thus far ignored by Damascus.

Absent Strategy

One of the most significant outcomes of this latest military strike could be the revision of US strategy in Syria, or lack thereof. Only 10 days before the strike, Trump had insisted that US forces presently stationed in Syria would be coming home "very soon."¹¹ Despite the warnings of his national security advisors and US army generals that the forces needed to stay in Syria, the president remained determined to impose a timeline for their return, possibly as soon as

⁸ Phil Stewart, "In Syria strikes, U.S. blurs red line for intervention," *Reuters*, April 14, 2018, accessed on 18/4/2018, at: <https://reut.rs/2ITHSCY>

⁹ Kevin Liptak and Elise Labott, "Mattis warns Trump about Syria risks," *CNN*, April 14, 2018, accessed on 18/4/2018, at: <https://cnn.it/2EWfD3W>

¹⁰ David Rutz, "Haley Takes Shot at Obama: When Trump Draws a 'Red Line,' He Enforces It," *Free Beacon*, April 14, 2018, accessed on 18/4/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2H1AdpH>

¹¹ Margaret Talev and Daniel Flatley, "Trump Says He Wants U.S. Troops to Leave Syria Soon," *Bloomberg*, April 3, 2018, accessed on 18/4/2018, at: <https://bloom.bg/2uQHmTM>

six months, even with the potentiality of a White House reversal.¹² Following the chemical attack in Douma, Trump clashed with the US military institutions once again, taking a completely new stance. He pushed for a tough and sustained response against the Syrian regime, which his military advisors, cautious to avoid a confrontation with Russia and Iran on Syrian territory, warned against.¹³

Trump's contradictions did not stop there. Indicating the absence of a clear strategy in Syria, and with his announcement of the latest missile launches against the Syrian regime, Trump asserted his desire for US withdrawal from the "turmoiled" Middle East, to leave its fate in "the hands of its people". He stated that the "United States is not seeking a long-term presence in Syria" and that other parties must undertake this role.¹⁴ According to an official in the Trump Administration, the US has two aims in Syria today; firstly the guaranteed defeat of ISIL, ensuring it cannot reemerge as a power in the region; and secondly, to prevent the Assad regime from using chemical weapons.¹⁵ Assad knows that the US has no replacement for him, nor does it envision a future for Syria following his departure, especially after the Trump White House withdrew support for any kind of armed opposition to the Syrian regime. The regime was thus able to release a video of Assad arriving at work the morning after the strikes captioned, "Morning of Resilience".¹⁶

Conclusion

To the Assad regime, Trump's missile strike was little more than attention-seeking grandstanding. Regardless of Trump's new red line of chlorine gas, the matter has proved one thing; the White House does not consider the killing of Syrian civilians with conventional weapons, including barrel bombs, worth intervention. Even Trump's rhetoric about an increased regional role for the likes of Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Qatar and Egypt in order to ease US withdrawal is without merit. These countries' positions change with temperament. Egypt

¹² Paulina Dedaj, "Trump 'ideally' wants US troops out of Syria within 6 months," Fox News, April 5, 2018, accessed on 18/4/2018, at: <https://fxn.ws/2J3C8GC>

¹³ Rucker et al.

¹⁴ "Joined by Allies, President Trump Takes Action to End Syria's Chemical Weapons Attacks," The White House, April 14, 2018, accessed on 18/4/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2HIKM6a>

¹⁵ Lesley Wroughton, "Despite Trump's 'Mission accomplished', question raised over U.S. Syria strategy," *Reuters*, April 14, 2018, accessed on 18/4/2018, at: <https://reut.rs/2ENfwri>

¹⁶ Stewart and Perry.

supports the Assad regime, while both Saudi Arabia and the UAE are likely to enter a conflict with Turkey which is another country theoretically opposed to Assad. Moreover, the Russian presence in Syria prevents the possibility of any other player undertaking an influential role without US support.