



The Syria Attack: Motives and Consequences

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Summary

The 14 April missile strike by the United States, France and the UK on three Syrian chemical weapons facilities aimed to enforce a much-scuffed red line on use of chemical weapons. But it was achieved in breach of international law and accompanied by a coordinated political message that the Western allies had no wider intention to oppose the Assad regime or its Russian and Iranian allies in Syria. As such, Trump is already advocating new actors like Egypt take the place of US troops in northeast Syria. While little has changed for Assad, Russia, or Iran in Syria, Israel and Turkey are increasingly dissatisfied with the West's lack of apparent post-Islamic State strategy there and will act accordingly.

Introduction

Following an alleged use of chemical weapons (CW) by the Assad regime in Syria a year ago, President Trump ordered the launch of cruise missiles against a Syrian Air Force base in order to deter future actions. The attack was relatively small-scale and had little effect on the regime except perhaps to delay CW use for some months. It was widely seen in Syria, the wider region and even in Western Europe and within the United States as an essentially symbolic gesture.

On 7 April this year there were new allegations stemming from reports of a CW attack on Douma. This was the last rebel-held town in the Eastern Ghouta enclave on the fringe of Damascus and the attack was reported to have killed

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scores of people including families sheltering in basements. This time there were multiple indications that the Trump administration was planning a much more substantial military operation and was seeking allies in order to form a coalition.

In the event, the attack was much smaller than expected, involving a three-nation force using 105 cruise missiles fired from outside of Syria against a single government research centre and two weapons bunkers. There was no formal international approval from the UN Security Council and the small-scale nature of the attack prompted much discussion as to the motivations and intentions of those involved – the United States, Britain and France.

This briefing looks at those issues and also the reaction of the main actors in the current complex civil war – the Assad regime, Russia and Iran as well as the Kurds, Turkey, Islamic State (IS), Israel and Saudi Arabia. It also makes an initial assessment of the consequences of the attack.

The Attack

A war of words between the White House and the Kremlin increased in intensity in the run-up to the US-led attack and in parallel with military preparations. For the US these centred on a rapidly increasing level of surveillance by US Navy aircraft operating from Sigonella in Sicily from 11 April and US Navy and US Air Force planes operating from Souda Bay in Crete the following day. Meanwhile, the Russian Navy moved most of its naval ships out to sea from its base at Tartus in Syria and there were reports of the Assad regime dispersing its ground and air forces from their usual locations. By 13 April there were expectation of a major US-led military operation within three or four days but in the event a much smaller operation commenced in the early hours of 14 April.

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The main attack was delivered by US air-launched and sea-launched cruise missiles with the UK using eight Storm Shadow cruise missiles launched from four Tornado strike aircraft operating from RAF Akrotiri on Cyprus. In logistic terms the French component was far more complex and wide-ranging, even though it only involved eleven cruise missiles. Eight of these were fired from Rafale strike aircraft but instead of deploying these from a base in neighbouring Jordan the French used planes from bases around France. The five strike aircraft were accompanied by Mirage 2000 interceptors and airborne early warning aircraft with the operation requiring five air-to-air refuelling. Three ship-launched cruise missiles were fired from one of three frigates with a fourth anti-submarine warfare frigate, an air defence destroyer and an auxiliary ship in support.

Motivations

In the week following the raid it became clear that there had been a marked difference within the Trump administration over the size and purpose of the attack. There were those, most likely including new National Security Advisor John Bolton, who saw Iran and Russia as the major problem and were intent on a substantial military operation. This would not only deter future CW attacks by the Assad regime but would make it clear to Tehran and Moscow that there would be severe limits on Iranian influence in a post-civil war Syria.

Others in the Pentagon, especially Defence Secretary James Mattis and Chair of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford, saw considerable dangers in the risk of escalation, especially if Russian military personnel were killed, and argued for a much more limited operation. The Pentagon won this argument but in accepting it there may have been other presidential advisors

who saw that even a more limited raid would still have domestic value in diverting attention from more local problems for the Trump administration.

For the British the Syrian action followed on from the Salisbury chemical agent incident and raised the profile of a troubled government as a defender of the realm both at home and abroad. This appeared to work, at least in the short term, though opinion polling showed minority support for the Syrian attack with many people undecided. Given Theresa May's decision to sidestep precedent and avoid a parliamentary vote on military action, London was likely an advocate of a more limited scope and duration strike.

Perhaps most significant was the French operation with the government making it clear that France had its own intelligence sources and target designation capabilities. This was a major operation that could be described as an experiment in power projection and was designed to show that France was a serious world player in its ability to project force, the only member of the EU in a post-Brexit world that would have this capability. President Macron has laid much emphasis on France and the EU developing "strategic autonomy" in use of military force, and much has been made of both his influencing Trump to respond and France's willingness and capacity to act unilaterally if necessary.

Consequences

While President Trump viewed the operation as a great success – literally a matter of "mission accomplished" – in much of Western Europe, and more so across the Global South, the reaction was essentially "so what", with little understanding of why there had been another symbolic action after all the strong words.

Russia denounced the attack but the Kremlin was reported to be content that its own forces had not been targeted and that Russia's substantial military and political investment was not under threat. Moscow has no more desire than Washington to become involved in a direct Russia-NATO conflict and the capacity of its significant deployment of air defence systems to counter a large volley of cruise missiles is probably much over-stated. Having tracked but not engaged the attack, it has probably learned much about NATO missiles and tactics.

Tehran also almost certainly saw no need for any limitation in its military support for the regime. Given that the Iranian forces in Syria are now establishing at least one permanent military base it would appear that they regard the Assad regime as secure, thus making it reasonably safe to invest in the country and consolidate their influence.

Turkey retains its antipathy to the Assad regime but is pre-occupied by the need to limit the power of the Syrian Kurds, while the Kurds themselves have serious concerns over President Trump's comments before the Douma attack about the United States withdrawing its security forces from Syria. In attacking the US-allied Kurds, Ankara appears to have more in common with Moscow and Tehran, with which it continues to coordinate its Syria approach. With the Trump administration beginning to tout Egypt's military – enduringly hostile to Turkey's pro-Muslim Brotherhood government – as a potential replacement for its troops in northern Syria, it is hard to see how such complexities may be reduced.

IS itself still retains a small territorial hold within Syria but has moved on to be much more of an underground insurgency in Iraq as well as Syria, while expanding its connections in Egypt, Afghanistan and several other theatres of

instability and conflict. Insofar as the loss of its “caliphate” may leave it in at least partial control of some “ungoverned space” at the interstices of Kurdish, regime and rebel-held territories, it is probable that its dispersed leadership would welcome even a partial withdrawal of the remaining US troops.

As to the Assad regime, the effects of the US-led attack have turned out to be minimal, not least because there were several days of warning, which allowed the regime time to disperse key military components and personnel. Unlike the relatively sophisticated Syrian CW and manufacturing capability that was dismantled under international supervision in 2013-2014, chlorine-based weapons as reportedly used in Douma are easily assembled from commercially available components. Such capacity is therefore extremely difficult to disrupt or destroy definitively.

As things stand, the Assad regime may well have concluded that it will not be hindered from using any weaponry short of CW in its determination to defeat its opponents. This element is of little consequence as the rare occasions where the regime has used CW have been in quite narrowly defined circumstances. These have been where it has used CW against civilian populations, as instruments of terror to force people to move and make it easier for the army to take over territory. The regime may well limit its CW use in the forthcoming operation to take control of Idlib Province, but all other conventional weapons will surely be used, whatever the cost to civilians.

Conclusion

In short, the US-led operation does virtually nothing to control the activities of the regime beyond possibly limiting CW use, which has been small-scale anyway. Instead, the regime and its Russian and Iranian supporters will more

likely be content that they can continue with their current actions with little fear of interference by Western states. That will leave the authorities in Saudi Arabia concerned that Assad will survive and possibly even thrive, but there will be greater concern in Israel.

For Israel its expectation of a welcome increase in direct US military involvement against the Assad regime – and, by inference, Iran – has fallen far short of expectations. This is a particular worry given that so much had been hoped of Trump's recent security appointments – Mike Pompeo to the State Department and especially John Bolton in the White House. Given that the current Israeli government sees Iran as by far the most important threat to the security of the state, and some see it as an existential threat, it is wise to expect a further increase in Israeli attacks on Iranian and Hezbollah forces in Syria.

Unless the Assad regime miscalculates in its military operations against the remaining rebel centres in Idlib Province, the most probable consequence of the Western raid on Syria will be increased Israeli involvement in the conflict. Given the rising influence of anti-Iranian hawks within the Trump administration, that escalation will not necessarily be confined to Syria.

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