

Assessing the Case for Striking Syria

Prepared statement by

Dr. Stephen Biddle

*Professor of Political Science and International Affairs,
George Washington University
Adjunct Senior Fellow for Defense Policy,
Council on Foreign Relations*

Before the

Committee on Homeland Security

*United States House of Representatives
1st Session, 113th Congress*

Hearing on “Crisis in Syria: Implications for Homeland Security”

The Administration has requested a Congressional vote to authorize an American use of military force against the Syrian government in the aftermath of an apparent Syrian chemical weapon (CW) attack against mostly civilian targets in the Damascus suburbs on August 21. Should the Congress authorize such a strike, or oppose it?

The purpose of this testimony is to weigh the principal arguments for and against such an authorization.¹ As with most complex issues, there are important arguments on both sides of the question, and I seek to present them in a balanced way. Neither the case for nor the case against using force is without serious costs and risks – there is no option here that does not have important dangers. Reasonable people can disagree on the net merits given this.

Yet on balance the case against using force is stronger here. Syria poses a major asymmetry in stakes between ourselves and President Assad: we have interests in Syria, both humanitarian and realpolitik, but they are limited; for Assad this is a literally life and death struggle for his own survival and that of his Alawite

¹ The author would like to thank Julia MacDonald of George Washington University and Kevin Grossinger of the Council on Foreign Relations for their assistance in preparing this testimony.

community. This underlying difference in stakes will make it very difficult for us to impose our will on Assad at a price we should be willing to pay. Sooner or later we are thus likely to face a choice between standing down with important aims unmet or escalating to levels of commitment that outstrip our interests in the conflict. If so, it is better to stand down sooner, and more cheaply, rather than later, and more expensively. It would have been better if we had never begun this escalatory process by issuing “red line” threats that were not in our interest to enforce; nevertheless it is wiser to cut our losses while these losses are still relatively limited rather than doubling down and, in all likelihood, increasing the eventual price of failure. Although there are important costs in backing down, this is ultimately the least-bad course even so.

Nor is it clear that the United States can preserve its credibility with only limited airstrikes that leave Assad in power and the war unresolved. Preserving U.S. credibility is among the most commonly cited arguments for using force. Yet a limited strike sends ambiguous signals whose ambiguity will be highlighted if the strikes fail to topple Assad or end the war: perhaps America will look resolute for acting at all, but Iran or others could instead see us as feckless for limiting ourselves to pinpricks when the declared U.S. ambition of removing Assad remains unachieved. Given the asymmetry in stakes here, ambitious aims like toppling Assad are likely to require far more than limited airstrikes; limits we impose on ourselves are thus likely to leave unmet our stated ambition of removing Assad and this will inevitably allow others to read this self-limitation as a lack of resolve to finish the job. Limited strikes now thus do not settle the credibility question: we will always be sending the Iranians ambiguous signals unless we commit more force that the stakes here are worth to us.

Below I assess these arguments in terms of the various aims some have cited as grounds for using force. Assessing these arguments is complicated by the still-undefined nature of the proposed attack, its targets, and its objectives, and the plasticity of the proposed authorizing resolution, whose exact wording is still under negotiation. To evaluate the issue properly it is thus necessary to consider a range of possible objectives, their importance, and the prospects of achieving them with attacks of different kinds. I therefore treat in sequence each of the five main goals an attack might be designed to achieve: deterring further CW use and upholding norms against the employment of such weapons; preserving U.S. credibility; enabling a negotiated settlement to the war; toppling Assad and his government; and ending the humanitarian crisis by saving civilian lives. I conclude with summary observations and recommendations.²

Deterring Syrian CW Use and Enforcing International Norms

Among the most salient purposes now cited by strike supporters is to deter further CW use by Syria and to enforce an international norm against the use of such weapons. A relatively limited U.S. attack, it is often argued, might be enough to tip the balance of Syrian government cost and benefit against the use of CW, which would have a number of advantages if so.

² I assume below that Syrian government forces did indeed use chemical weapons on August 21, and before then on a more limited scale. There has been debate over the adequacy of the Administration’s evidence on this point, but it is not my purpose to adjudicate this debate or weigh the technical details pro or con, especially in an unclassified analysis. Suffice to say that the Administration had given few indications before August 21 that they were spoiling for a chance to attack Syria in a way that would give them a motive to manufacture evidence of Syrian CW use – on the contrary, their preference seemed clearly to avoid military action, and their perceived self-interest presumably lay in holding any adduced evidence to a very high standard of proof. I can only assume, therefore, that they are convinced, and I will proceed on the assumption that they are right.

Many believe, for example, that chemical weapons are uniquely abhorrent and should be prohibited on humanitarian grounds regardless of the actual scale of killing they produce. There has been a longstanding (if imperfectly observed) norm against chemical warfare; many who would like international politics in general to be more rule-bound and less anarchic thus favor upholding this norm as a way of promoting norm compliance more broadly.

There are also realpolitik reasons to limit CW use. In particular, chemical weapons are often seen as a means for weaker powers to end-run American advantages in conventional warfare, hence the United States has a military incentive to discourage their use in order to reinforce U.S. conventional superiority. Some worry that chemical weapons could be obtained or synthesized by terrorists and used against American or allied civilians. And CW poses environmental hazards that vary with the prevailing winds and the scale of release, and could in principle threaten Syria's neighbors, including Israel. Other things being equal, it would clearly be in America's interest to see an end to the use of chemical weapons, whether in Syria or elsewhere.

Other things are not equal, however. In particular, limited strikes could well fail to deter Assad. The stakes for Assad in Syria's civil war are literally existential. Not only could he and his family be killed or imprisoned if his government falls, but the war now involves a powerful strand of identity conflict pitting Assad's Alawite minority sect, which has governed Syria for generations, against the majority Sunnis, who dominate the rebel movement. In an identity war of this kind, the entire losing community risks oppression at best and genocide at worst at the hands of the victorious group. Assad probably views the conflict as a struggle for the survival of his entire sectarian community. Successful deterrence requires a credible threat to impose pain that exceeds the recipient's stake in the conflict. This will be very difficult to do with Assad.

Of course, the issue here is not necessarily victory or defeat in the war as a whole, but merely Syrian use of one weapon type – CW – in the conduct of that war. Can the U.S. credibly threaten to impose enough pain on Assad to persuade him to withhold this one weapon while continuing the war with conventional means alone?

Perhaps. After all, withholding CW use is not tantamount to suicide or surrender for Assad. He has a large, well-equipped conventional military that might well succeed even without CW. Assuming that Syrian CW use was deliberate (and not accidental or unauthorized), Assad has apparently concluded that it helps him militarily, but CW probably isn't decisive for the outcome of the war and perhaps Assad will conclude that he's better off without it and without the danger of American airstrikes that further CW use could bring.

But we cannot know for sure. And there are many good reasons to be cautious about our ability to predict Assad's reaction to American threats or small-scale American airstrikes.

Our ability to understand Assad's decision calculus is very limited. This is a man from a very different cultural background and upbringing than ours, in the midst of a desperate war for survival, whose knowledge of the United States and our likely future actions is limited and subject to a wide array of cognitive biases and organizational pathologies. Many authoritarian governments find accurate reporting of unwelcome news very difficult: bearers of bad tidings can pay with their lives or their freedom for speaking truth to power in dictatorships. Such governments may thus tend to discount threats from outside powers designed to dissuade them from their preferred policies – who will insist on telling Assad that he must bow

to American pressure when the price of bearing such bad news could be the firing squad?³ Psychologists tell us that leaders' prior preferences and expectations strongly influence their perception of new information: a dictator who has committed himself to a war of survival using any means necessary, who desperately wants to believe that his strategy can work, and who may have calculated that the outside world would stand aside, may well tend to discount American threats as bluffs because he so badly wants them to be and because human cognition encourages all people to try and fit new information into preexisting expectations. It can be difficult for threats to overcome motivated cognitive biases that encourage people to believe that their preferred strategies will work.⁴ Deterrence turns on the specific decision calculus of the opponent – it is the enemy's perceptions, not ours, that determines whether they desist under threat or not. To be confident that a deterrent threat will succeed we must be confident that the enemy will read the threat as we wish it to be read, and will evaluate it the way we hope it will be evaluated. Given all the perceptual filters and sources of potential bias at work in our relationship with Bashar al-Assad, it is impossible to guarantee that our deterrent threat will succeed.⁵

The more limited the strike, moreover, the greater the odds that Assad discounts our threat and continues to use CW. One way to read a small U.S. use of force is that it signals American willingness to escalate if Assad defies us. But it could also be read just the opposite way: as a signal of U.S. *unwillingness* to strike massively (if we were really willing to use massive force, why haven't we?), and a sign that the U.S. is *reluctant* to commit. The very emphasis the Administration now places on the limited nature of our prospective attack is a very plausible indication of Presidential ambivalence and unease with the use of force in Syria; Assad would not have to be crazy to read this as a sign that the U.S. lacks the will to intervene decisively. Limited attacks send ambiguous signals that can be read as commitment or reluctance; the more limited the attack, the more ambiguous the signal and the lower the odds that an audience subject to cognitive, cultural and institutional blinders will read it the way we want them to.

Assad also needs to worry about others' perceptions of *his* resolve. To survive, he must convince his officers and his soldiers that he is resolute and capable of winning the war – if he looks weak or irresolute, lieutenants who fear getting stuck on the wrong side of a losing war might jump ship and defect or flee early while they still can. He might well regard a limited U.S. airstrike as a test of his own ability to project an image of toughness and commitment to his own officers and thus refuse to back down. He is also presumably wary of signaling weakness to the rebel alliance in a way that could embolden them or encourage them to hold out for maximalist ambitions of ousting or trying him. Just as we worry about the

³ On intelligence assessment and reporting in autocracies, see, e.g., Kenneth Pollack, *The influence of Arab culture on Arab military effectiveness* (PhD dissertation, MIT, 1996), ch. 3; Kevin Woods, James Lacey, and William Murray, "Saddam's Delusions: The View from Inside," *Foreign Affairs*, May-June 2006; Barry Blechman and Tamara Coffman Wittes, "Defining Moment: the Threat and Use of Force in American Foreign Policy," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 114 (Spring 1999), pp. 1-30; cf. Dan Reiter and Allan Stam, "Democracy and Battlefield Effectiveness," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 42 (June 1998), pp. 259-277.

⁴ See, e.g., Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), ch. 4. For an overview of the cognitive and other potential barriers to successful deterrence across cultural divides, see Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, eds., *Psychology and Deterrence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

⁵ One could also argue that this is not actually a case of deterrence but an instance of what Thomas Schelling calls *compellence* – deterrence uses threats to prevent enemy action, compellence uses threats to cause the enemy to act. Inasmuch as Assad is evidently already using CW (albeit on a still-limited scale), one could argue that U.S. demands amount to a compellent strategy to cause Assad to act by halting something he is already doing. This distinction matters in that compellence is often considered harder and less likely to succeed than deterrence. On the distinction and its implications, see Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008 ed. of 1966 orig.).

effects of backing down on perceptions of our toughness and credibility (see below), so Assad has the same worries or even more so – and this could lead him to defy our wishes and continue CW use simply to demonstrate his own toughness and resolve.

If our strike fails to deter Assad, and we detect further Syrian CW use, what then? Do we double down and escalate to heavier attacks to prove that we meant it? If not, would this not be at least as damaging to our credibility and reputation for resolve than if we decline to attack in the first place? After all, the declared purpose of the attack would presumably have been to deter CW use – if the purpose has not been met, would standing down not send the message that anyone who simply rides out initial, limited U.S. airstrikes is off the hook, devaluing the currency of small-scale attacks and making it less likely than before that we can signal resolve through the limited use of force in some future crisis? If we are not actually willing to follow through and carry out the implicit threat of escalation inherent in a limited strike then the limited strike amounts to a bluff; if we are caught bluffing we reduce our ability to succeed without follow-on escalation the next time, even if the next time we really *are* willing to escalate.

How important, then, is it that we deter Syrian CW use, and how much force should we be willing to apply to this end? In fact the stakes here for the United States are real, but quite limited.

Yes, we do have realpolitik interests in deterring prospective enemies from CW use, but our forces are trained and equipped to operate in chemical environments, and it is unlikely that CW use alone could defeat the American military or even impose intolerable military costs or casualties. We should prefer that wars stay conventional, but we should not be willing to pay a heavy up-front price in Syria to ensure this. CW has proven to be a very difficult weapon for terrorists to use effectively; for CW to be as lethal as readily-available non-CW alternatives such as truck-borne fertilizer bombs would require access to sophisticated delivery means capable of disseminating CW agents efficiently over large areas. While it is not impossible for future terrorists to master this, they have not to date, and it is not clear that U.S. airstrikes against Syria would meaningfully affect the likelihood of this happening in the future. Syrian CW could in principle affect Israel or other neighbors, but CW releases as large and uncontrolled as this would also threaten Alawite civilians on a scale that is at least as likely to deter Assad as the threat of U.S. airstrikes.

The normative stakes are similarly real, but limited. The United States does have an interest in discouraging the use of “taboo” weapons such as chemical, biological, or nuclear arms, and there is some reason to believe that norms help reduce the scale of their employment. Yet these norms have not prevented CW from being used when states felt they needed them most, and other weapon types subject to public opprobrium have similarly been used when states felt they had to: unrestricted submarine warfare and bombing of civilian homes were both condemned before World Wars I and II, but were widely used when militaries felt they needed them to avoid defeat.⁶ Norms can help reduce such use at the margin, and this is valuable, but it is not

⁶ On the role of norms in shaping international political behavior in general, and weapon use choices in particular, see Jeffrey Legro, *Cooperation Under Fire* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); idem, "Which Norms Matter? Revisiting the "Failure" of Internationalism," *International Organization*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (1997): 31-63; Richard Price, "Reversing the Gun Sights: Transnational Civil Society Targets Land Mines," *International Organization*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (1998): 613-644; Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons Since 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); R. Charli Carpenter, "Vetting the Advocacy Agenda: Network Centrality and the Paradox of Weapons Norms," *International Organization*, Vol. 65, No. 1 (2011): 69-102. On chemical weapons specifically see Richard Price, *The Chemical Weapons Taboo* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007). On conditions under which norms during warfare break down, see

infinitely valuable and the scale of military action justified now to support the CW taboo is thus correspondingly limited.⁷

Nor is the issue of norm compliance as clear-cut as is sometimes suggested. In fact there are conflicting norms affected by any U.S. strike: an attack might uphold the norm of CW non-use, but it would surely undermine the norm against interstate uses of force without UN Security Council authorization except in cases of self-defense. Many, especially in the Arab world, would surely see any U.S. strike without UNSC approval as a self-interested exercise of power rather than a selfless enforcement of humanitarian norms.⁸ It is not clear that a U.S. attack would on balance conduce to greater norm observance afterward rather than lesser.

None of this is to suggest that a deterrent strike cannot work, or that Assad is guaranteed to ignore our threats, or that an initial attack means we are doomed to escalate. But none of these perils can be ruled out. And the circumstances here – especially the pressure Assad is under to succeed and the barriers to our ability to project his response with confidence – make the dangers particularly acute. Reasonable people could argue that we are best served by rolling the dice and taking our chances with a limited strike for deterrent purposes, and maybe that will succeed if attempted. But it would be irresponsible policy making to strike on the assumption that it will work, and without a plan for what we will do in the event that a small-scale attack fails, because it may well. And the limited nature of our interests in deterring CW use means that it would not take much escalation beyond a limited initial strike for our efforts to exceed our stake.

Preserving U.S. Credibility

When the President announced last year that Syrian CW use would cross a “red line” in a way that would change his calculus, he was clearly threatening to escalate U.S. involvement if Assad used CW. Nations routinely rely on threats to deter rivals from aggressive action; for deterrence to succeed without war, such

Alexander Downes, *Targeting Civilians in War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008). Finally, for a recent discussion of the relative importance of military utility over normative concerns in U.S. public opinion see Daryl G. Press, Scott D. Sagan, Benjamin A. Valentino, "Atomic Aversion: Experimental Evidence on Taboos, Traditions, and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 107, No. 1 (2013): 188-206.

⁷ Nor is there a strong logical basis for treating CW as uniquely abhorrent. Even in World War I, where CW was more widely used than ever since, the scale of suffering inflicted by gas weapons was vastly smaller than that caused by conventional weapons. In Syria today, the 1,429 civilian deaths attributed to CW in the August 21 attack is dwarfed by the perhaps 100,000 people killed to date by conventional munitions. It is obviously horrible to die from convulsions and asphyxiation after ingesting Sarin gas, but it is also obviously horrible to die from being disemboweled by conventional artillery or having ones' limbs blown off by conventional roadside bombs. The unique cultural history of chemical weapons and their similarity to insecticide inspires some to treat them as a thing apart from high explosives or other means of killing and wounding humans, but it is far from clear that any rigorous ethical argument would make a clear distinction.

⁸ See, e.g., Shibley Telhami, "Questioning Credibility," *Foreign Policy*, September 6, 2013. On conflicting norms in Syria, see Clive Crook, "The Moral Case for a Syria Strike," <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-09-04/the-moral-case-for-a-syria-strike.html>. It is also debatable how strong or how normatively compelling the anti-CW norm is. Jeffrey Legro, for example, has argued that norms on weapon non-use are most influential when the norm coincides with a military preference to avoid such weapons and an absence of perceived military need on the part of prospective users: Legro, *Cooperation Under Fire*. CW has often met these conditions in the past, but to the extent that Assad believes his regime is threatened by rebels without easy access to CW of their own, he may thus see a real military need to employ such weapons – as others have, too: notably Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq War: see Victor Utgoff, *The Challenge of Chemical Weapons* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1990), pp.69-87; Anthony Cordesman and Abraham Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War, Volume II: The Iran-Iraq War* (Boulder: Westview, 1990).

threats must be believed by their target audience. Much is thus at stake in the credibility of American threats. Among the areas where this matters most is the case of Iran: the President is hoping that a vague threat of military action will deter the Iranians from crossing the nuclear threshold. Many now argue that if the President issues a clear threat to Assad and then backs down when Assad calls his bluff, this will signal weakness and irresolution to Iran and encourage them to proceed with their nuclear program and ignore American threats to destroy it first. This problem is compounded by the Administration's apparent foot-dragging on earlier evidence of smaller-scale Syrian CW use: for months, the Administration responded to allies' claims of such use by delaying for further study, then finally authorizing only a minimal response by promising small arms and ammunition for the Syrian rebels and delaying delivery of even that.

The Administration's understandable ambivalence over intervention in Syria might imply that the best course would have been to walk back the President's "red line" comment (which was apparently not included in his prepared remarks) in subsequent press guidance. Instead, the Administration reiterated its commitment to the CW "red line," and in public comments by the Secretary of State and others after the August 21 attack it radically reinforced its commitment to punish Assad. Whatever the reputational costs of ignoring the "red line" before August 21, they are now much higher as a result of this very public re-commitment.

Given this, wouldn't it undermine the credibility of *all* U.S. assurances – both promises to allies and threats to enemies – for the United States to now withhold the escalation it has so clearly threatened?

Yes, it will. It would have been better if the "red line" commitment had never been made, and if the President had not tied U.S. credibility to this threat. In doing so, he created a U.S. national security interest in preserving our credibility that did not exist beforehand, and to back down now, in the aftermath of this commitment, is to incur a cost in diminished credibility going forward. That will indeed reduce our deterrent leverage for hard cases like Iran, and our ability to reassure allies.

The question, however, is *how much* deterrent power we would lose by backing down here, how much cost and risk we would incur by acting, and just as important, how much improvement in deterrent credibility we would gain by limited actions commensurate with our limited stakes in Syria. In fact the reputational effect of backing down now is easy to exaggerate, the danger of further escalation if we act now is substantial, and the benefit of limited action without such escalation is itself limited.

Political scientists have studied reputation and credibility, and the results of a generation of scholarship suggest that statesmen often overestimate the degree to which reputation shapes others' behavior in future crises. This is partly due to cognitive bias: prior beliefs shape perception of incoming information, and rivals who want to act aggressively without U.S. interference often harbor fond beliefs that the U.S. is a paper tiger who will stand aside rather than challenging them. This prior belief often leads them to discount evidence of U.S. resolve and fixate instead on instances where the U.S. backed down. Where the prior belief is strongly held it can be very difficult to overcome by piling up cases of resolve – even a small sample of irresolute behavior can overwhelm all this, and there has already been more than enough irresolution in U.S. behavior (over decades) to provide all the evidence needed for motivated bias to persuade rivals like Iran that the U.S.

is irresolute.⁹ But statesmen also exaggerate the importance of reputation relative to circumstances in shaping rivals' behavior. Most states pay less attention to others' history in other times and places than they do to others' real capabilities and apparent stakes in the immediate matter at hand. States may believe others are paper tigers, but if others' capabilities and interests in the current crisis make them a threat then statesmen usually pay attention and act accordingly.¹⁰ Cognitive bias makes it hard for the U.S. to establish a reputation for toughness with enemies who believe we are irresolute; the importance of circumstances over reputation anyway makes it less valuable to act merely to build reputation – especially when acting now might weaken us militarily or reduce the force we can actually bring to bear on other crises later.

And if we do attack Syria now, the risk of escalation is serious. Limited U.S. airstrikes will almost certainly not end the war. They may or may not deter future Syrian CW use (see above), but they will surely not end the war, and probably won't change its trajectory much if our strikes are indeed limited. Some believe that we can mount a limited strike, declare the commitment embodied in the President's "red line" met, and halt with no further obligations. Perhaps. But if so this will occur in spite of clear failure to stop the violence, topple Assad, or prevent him from killing Syrian civilians with conventional weapons. A brutal war will continue, with further atrocities from conventional weapons if not CW, and with ongoing calls from a harried rebel alliance and especially its moderate wing that we do something to help prevent their slaughter. It is obviously difficult to ignore such calls now, when the U.S. military has not been committed to the conflict. How much harder will it be once we have crossed the threshold and intervened ourselves? We would then face the additional charge that our unwillingness to escalate is allowing future rivals to believe that they can survive U.S. airstrikes, and that U.S. airpower's reputation for efficacy is at risk. Unless we act with enough violence to defeat Assad or otherwise end the war, there is no natural threshold beyond which we escape from the charge that our credibility is threatened by our failure to escalate. Unless we are prepared to do whatever it takes, we will thus eventually be forced to stand down with important aims

⁹ Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, ch. 4. The literature on learning in international relations similarly suggests that beliefs of third parties are unlikely to change because vicarious learning rarely occurs. See Jack Levy, "Learning and Foreign Policy: Sweeping a Conceptual Minefield," *International Organization* 48, no. 2 (1994): 279-312. Yuen Foong Khong, for example, finds that U.S. leaders paid little attention to the French experience from Vietnam despite the fact its potential to provide valuable information about the resources, tactics, and resolve of the North Vietnamese. See Yuen Khong Fong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

¹⁰ Daryl Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); Aaron Friedberg, *The Weary Titan: Great Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline 1895-1905* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988). See also Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation in International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), which argues that reputations for resolve do not require repeated uses of force to sustain. For further studies that cast doubt on the claim that reputation matters see Paul K. Huth and Bruce R. Russett, "What Makes Deterrence Work? Cases From 1900 to 1980" *World Politics* Vol. 36, No. 4 (July 1984): 496-526; and Ted Hopf, *Peripheral Visions: Deterrence Theory and American Foreign Policy in the Third World, 1965-1990* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995). Where reputation is claimed to matter to foreign policy outcomes, the conditions under which it does so are restrictive and highly context dependent: see, e.g., John D. Orme, *Deterrence, Reputation and Cold-War Cycles* (London: MacMillan, 1992); Jonathan Shimshoni, *Israel and Conventional Deterrence: Border Warfare from 1953-1970* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988); and Elli Lieberman, "What Makes Deterrence Work: Lessons from the Egyptian-Israeli Enduring Rivalry," *Security Studies*, Vol. 4 (1995): 833-92. Glenn Snyder, in *Deterrence and Defense: Toward a Theory of National Security* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), argues that reputations are only likely to form when the behavior of a defender runs counter to the expectations of the potential attacker. Finally, a recent study of reputation and military effectiveness tends to support the importance of capability and stakes in shaping third party judgments about an opponents' war-fighting ability, but again these reputational effects are circumscribed to cases where the fighting environment is similar. See Kathryn Cochran, "Strong Horse or Paper Tiger? Assessing the Reputational Effects of War Fighting" PhD Dissertation Duke University 2011.

unmet and risk allowing Iran or others to label us a paper tiger as a result. This will be just as true after an initial airstrike as it is now – striking now does not absolve us from the charge of irresolution and fecklessness, it just continues the debate into the next phase of the war after greater levels of prior commitment. And if it makes sense to ignore such charges then and limit our commitment to a single wave of limited airstrikes, why would it not make just as much sense to ignore such charges now and limit our commitment to arming and training the rebels without U.S. military action? If we care only about a legalistic satisfaction of the Presidential “red line” commitment without actually toppling Assad or ending the war, then why can’t we satisfy this requirement with a truly minimum response and simply up the ante on aid to the rebels? In fact the more we invest and the more we commit the prestige and reputation of the U.S. military to the war, the greater the escalatory pressure we will face if that commitment is limited and falls short.

If we are not prepared to do whatever it takes, then we will thus ultimately suffer some degree of price to our reputation and credibility; this is not a cost that can be averted with a limited program of airstrikes unless Assad proves less resolute than his own stakes would imply. In fact the price may be lower now than if we climb higher on the escalatory ladder before we accept our limits and back down.

Enabling a Negotiated Settlement to the War

The Administration clearly hopes to resolve the conflict with a negotiated settlement in which the Assad regime and the rebels agree to lay down their arms in exchange for a power sharing deal of some kind. The prospects for such a deal are currently remote, however. Neither side is willing to accept the compromises needed, and neither side trusts the other to comply with any such terms in the aftermath. Some argue that U.S. airstrikes could play a catalytic role in enabling such a deal by changing the regime’s interest calculus: by tilting the playing field in favor of the rebels, they argue, such strikes could give the regime an incentive they now lack to make compromises and accept a negotiated peace. Some cite the 1995 Dayton Accords that ended the war in Bosnia, arguing that a program of NATO airstrikes brought the Serbs to the table and enabled settlement; if so, perhaps U.S. airstrikes in Syria could produce a comparable result in 2013.

There are many challenges here, however. The Dayton analogy, for example, is a weak one: the negotiations were conducted following not just a program of NATO airstrikes but a massive Croatian-Bosniak ground offensive in Operation Storm that had swept Serbian forces from the Krajina in a four-day blitzkrieg and threatened the Serbs with military annihilation if they refused a deal.¹¹ No comparable rebel blitzkrieg is in store for Syria. Nor can we readily predict the effect of limited airstrikes on either the regime’s or the rebels’ willingness to parley: the same opacity that complicates effective deterrence makes it very hard to anticipate either sides’ decision calculus on talks, and it is not uncommon for outside intervention to harden its allies’ bargaining position as they see their prospects improving rather than increasing their willingness to compromise. There is no way to ensure that airstrikes would not leave us further from a deal rather than closer, and the complexity of the situation should encourage modesty in any claims that we can fine-tune either sides’ incentive structure with a bombing campaign.

¹¹ On Operation Storm, see *Balkan Battlegrounds: A Military History of the Yugoslav Conflict, 1990-1995*, two vols., (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2003)

Arguably a bigger challenge, however, is the post-settlement requirements for success such a strategy would create. Civil wars are difficult to settle, but many ultimately end in negotiated deals of some kind. It is far from clear that conditions in Syria today are ripe for such a deal, but the war will probably end that way some day. Such settlements, however, frequently break down in renewed violence – after all, the conflict itself often destroys any vestiges of mutual trust and creates dense webs of internecine fear, anger, and motives for revenge.¹² Where such settlements do not simply revert to open warfare in the aftermath, it is often because the presence of outside peacekeepers, in substantial numbers, stabilizes the situation and damps postwar escalatory spirals long enough for the effects of time to gradually diminish tensions.¹³ Perhaps the most useful analogy to be drawn from the Dayton Process in this respect is thus its peacekeeping dimension: in the immediate aftermath of the war, NATO deployed some 60,000 heavily armed soldiers as peacekeepers, and they remained in significant numbers for years thereafter – in fact, some 600 of them remain today.¹⁴ Even if airstrikes could catalyze negotiations, even if those negotiations succeeded, and even if the result ended the war, there would still be a need for a major and highly risky outside commitment to send ground forces to stabilize the result. It is far from clear where such a large outside peacekeeping force would come from – set aside the international financial investment needed to complete the process. Without this, even a nominally successful negotiation would be wasted. For U.S. airstrikes to be a rational component of a larger strategy for ending the war via negotiation, some strategy for stabilizing the result is thus needed, and this would require large ground force commitments that are hard to see forthcoming any time soon.

Toppling Assad

¹² On settlement breakdowns and the resurgence of violence see Robert Harrison Wagner, "The Causes of Peace," in Roy Licklider, ed., *Stopping the Killing: How Civil Wars End* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), pp.235-268; Roy Licklider, "The Consequences of Negotiated Settlements in Civil Wars, 1945-1993," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 89, No. 3 (1995): pp.681-690; Monica Duffy Toft, "Ending Civil Wars: A Case for Rebel Victory?" *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Spring 2010), pp. 7-36; Monica Duffy Toft, *Securing the Peace: The Durability of Civil Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). On general barriers to negotiating civil war settlements see James Fearon, "Why Do Some Civil Wars Last So Much Longer Than Others?" *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (2004): 275-301; Barbara F. Walter, "The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement," *International Organization*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (Summer 1997): 335-364; Barbara F. Walter, *Committing to Peace: The Successful Settlement of Civil Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Barbara F. Walter, "Bargaining Failures and Civil War," *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 12 (2009): 243-61; Michaela Mattes and Burca Savun, "Information, Agreement Design, and the Durability of Civil War Settlements," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (2010): 511-524.

¹³ On the importance of third party guarantees see Walter, "The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement," pp. 335-364; Caroline Hartzell, Matthew Hoddie and Donald Rothchild, "Stabilizing the Peace After Civil War" *International Organization* Vol. 55, No. 1 (2001):183–208; Walter, *Committing to Peace*; Mattes and Savun, "Information, Agreement Design, and the Durability of Civil War Settlements," pp. 511-524. On the merits of peacekeeping and peace building more specifically see Michael Doyle and Nicholas Sambanis, "International Peacebuilding: A Theoretical and Quantitative Analysis," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 94, No. 4 (December 2000); Virginia Page Fortna, "Does Peacekeeping Keep Peace: International Intervention and the Duration of Peace After Civil War," *International Studies Quarterly* Vol. 48 (2004): 269-292; Michael Doyle and Nicholas Sambanis *Making War and Building Peace* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Virginia Page Fortna, *Does Peacekeeping Work? Shaping Belligerents' Choices after Civil War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). On the importance of peace settlements including power-sharing arrangements see Caroline Hartzell and Matthew Hoddie, "Institutionalizing Peace: Power Sharing and Post-Civil War Conflict Management," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (2003): 318-332; Caroline Hartzell and Matthew Hoddie, *Crafting Peace: Power-Sharing Institutions and the Negotiated Settlement of Civil Wars* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 2007); Charles T. Call, *Why Peace Fails: The Causes and Prevention of Civil War Recurrence* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2012).

¹⁴ <http://www.fas.org/man/crs/93-056.htm>;

http://www.euforbih.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=15&Itemid=134

Bashar al-Assad is no friend of the United States, and his government is responsible for slaughtering tens of thousands of its own people. Many would like to see his regime fall, and many see U.S. airstrikes as a potential means to this end. It is very unlikely that a limited, short-duration air campaign could bring this about, however. A regime-changing campaign would have to be larger in scale, longer in duration, and more expensive to mount, but it is plausible that if we became effectively a co-belligerent with the rebel alliance we could eventually catalyze Assad's defeat, as we and others did to Muammar Qaddafi in Libya. Here, too, however, there are downstream problems that reduce the appeal of U.S. intervention.

Many have discussed the problem of al-Qaeda affiliated jihadists among the rebel alliance, and the danger that Assad's defeat could simply replace him with an even worse alternative in a new government sympathetic to the Jabhat al-Nusra or other jihadi elements that now fight alongside them to topple Assad. This is a very serious danger, and one that cannot be ameliorated from the air alone. The political engineering needed to create a stable, democratic, pro-Western postwar government in a country as deeply divided as Syria would be exceptionally demanding and would require a substantial political, economic, and probably military presence on the ground to succeed. This is not an agenda for a low-cost, limited engagement in Syria – and it is unclear whether even an ambitious, lavishly funded postwar state-building program could succeed given the violent, highly-mobilized character of the war today and the atomized, disunified quality of the opposition.

Nor is it clear that toppling Assad would even end the war. On the contrary, Assad's fall could easily just change the sides and the cast of characters without even reducing the scale of violence. As we saw in Iraq, unseating a dictator does not necessarily produce peace, much less democracy. Assad's Alawite community feels deeply threatened by Syria's Sunnis and vice versa, and it is entirely possible that they would respond to an Assad collapse with an insurgency along Iraqi lines as a means of protecting themselves from Sunni overlordship. If so, the sides would change: Alawites would go from the government side to the insurgency; Syria's Sunnis would transform from insurgents to the government; but the war would continue. And if the rebel alliance failed to forge a unified governing slate, an equally likely outcome would be an atomized internecine civil war along the lines of 1990s Afghanistan, in which multiple armed factions – some Sunni, some Alawite, some Kurdish, and others none of the above – fight it out among themselves for power and influence. Even if American military force drove Assad from power, this is not tantamount to peace, democracy, or stability – in fact, it is far from clear that Syria after Assad would pose much of an improvement over Syria with Assad absent a massive outside investment in state-building and high-risk stabilization.

Ending the Humanitarian Crisis

Among the more important justifications for action the President has cited is the need to respond to the outrage of Assad's slaughter of his own people. The Syrian civil war is now among the world's most severe ongoing humanitarian crises, and certainly warrants action of some kind in response.

The problem is what kind of response to provide. Many would like the United States to do something, but it is far less clear what can be done that could actually solve the problem at a cost the American people would plausibly be willing to bear.

At a minimum, it is very unlikely that a limited program of airstrikes would end the killing. Even if these catalyzed Assad's fall, which is unlikely, it is even less likely that toppling Assad would end the violence, as noted above. It would change its contours, but the ensuing warfare could kill at least as many Syrians as today's, as Afghanistan's experience in the 1990s suggests. If we are serious about ending the killing in Syria then a far more intrusive intervention on a far larger scale will be needed. Tilting the playing field a bit from 10,000 feet is not sufficient for this purpose.

Nor is arming and equipping the rebel resistance likely to end the killing. In fact, the empirical evidence suggests the opposite: outside support normally lengthens such wars and increases the death toll, as outside aid to one side in the war typically encourages increased aid to the other side from its respective patrons.¹⁵ The result is often stalemate, wherein parallel escalation in assistance yields symmetrically higher firepower and more violence rather than a quick victory for either side. Unless we are prepared to simply overwhelm Iran's ability to assist Assad, aid to the rebels is thus likely to be countered by increases in Iranian (or Russian) assistance to Assad rather than ending the war quickly in the rebels' favor. In fact, as noted above, to truly end the killing would probably require foreign boots on the ground, in large numbers, to impose a settlement, enforce its terms, and stabilize the aftermath to prevent violence from returning into a security vacuum of the sort that Iraq saw after 2003. The American people seem unlikely to support this.

Without such a commitment, however, the most that the international community can really do is to stand ready to facilitate a negotiated settlement if and when the combatant parties become interested in one – and to apply the limited pressure that sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and other non-military means allow. Limited military options – whether airstrikes, arms for the rebels, or something else – may or may not accomplish anything, but they are very unlikely to end Syria's humanitarian crisis.

Conclusions

None of the objectives usually cited as motivating American airstrikes on Syria are thus likely to be accomplished by a limited intervention without serious risks. The details differ from objective to objective, but the underlying theme that connects them is the problem of asymmetric stakes. Assad's existential stake in this war gives him an incentive to escalate rather than back down in the face of American attacks that threaten his hold on power – and even a limited program of airstrikes nominally restricted to the prevention of CW use poses a threat to Assad's grip: if Assad fails to respond he risks being seen as weak by lieutenants he requires for his survival. Assad's survival motive, coupled with our limited interests in the conflict, restrict our ability to coerce him at a cost we can afford. This weakens the prognosis for an attack aimed at any of the objectives discussed here – whether to deter Syrian CW use, to buttress American credibility, to compel a settlement, to topple Assad, or to resolve the humanitarian crisis. All require changing Assad's

¹⁵ Dylan Balch-Lindsay and Andrew J. Enterline, "Killing time: The World Politics of Civil War Duration, 1820-1992," *International Studies Quarterly*, 44 (2000): 615-42; Ibrahim Elbadawi and Nicholas Sambanis, "External Interventions and the Duration of Civil Wars." Paper presented at the workshop on the Economics of Civil Violence, March 18-19, 2000, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ; Patrick M. Regan, *Civil wars and foreign powers: Outside interventions and intrastate conflict* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000); Patrick M. Regan, "Third party interventions and the duration of intrastate conflicts," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46 (2002): 55-73; David E. Cunningham, "Blocking Resolution: How External States Can Prolong Civil Wars," *Journal of Peace Research* 47 (2010): 115-127. On the impact of third party interventions on civilian victimization more specifically see Reed M Wood, Jacob D Kathman, and Stephen E Gent, "Armed Intervention and Civilian Victimization in Intrastate Conflicts," *Journal of Peace Research* 49, 5 (2012): 647-660.

interest calculus by force (and maybe others' as well) but without exceeding the limits imposed by our limited interests. If we fail to have the effect we hope on Assad's calculus, the result could easily be escalatory pressures that lead to bigger, costlier, riskier interventions than those promised at the outset – and that quickly exceed our modest objective stakes in the struggle.

It is important to emphasize, however, that there are major limits to our ability to predict Assad's actions. Perhaps we will be lucky and he will neither test our willingness to respond to further CW use nor retaliate elsewhere via proxies such as Hezbollah or allies such as Iran. After all, the Israelis struck a Syrian nuclear reactor in 2007 and the Iraqi reactor at Osirak in 1981 without either state retaliating in kind; Assad might judge discretion the better part of valor and comply quietly with U.S. preferences on CW use without counterattacking or escalating. Of course the context of these attacks was very different: Assad is now locked in an existential struggle where his own reputation for resolve is under a microscope in ways it would not have been in 2007. The safest conclusion is thus surely to emphasize our limits of knowledge and prediction. But an important implication of those limits is our inability to ensure that a limited U.S. attack would succeed in any of its stated objectives. And an attack that does not succeed will surely be followed by pressures to escalate that are likely to be as great or greater than today's.

Nor does this suggest that inaction is a costless or risk-free policy, either - inaction poses risks and costs of its own. In particular, other states and especially Iran could view an American failure to make good on the President's "red line" commitment as evidence that the United States issues empty threats and lacks the will to use force. The costs of this reputational effect may be easy to exaggerate, but they are not zero. The best way to avoid this problem would have been to avoid the commitment, but what's done is done. Hence the choice is now between different kinds and scales of cost and risk to accept – not between a cost-free and a costly policy. In this context, on balance it is probably less risky to accept the cost to U.S. credibility and forgo the risk of escalation in Syria. To risk a U.S. war in Syria in order to reduce the risk of a U.S. war in Iran comes perilously close to Bismarck's famous aphorism that preventive war represents suicide from fear of death. But this is far from a panacea, and perhaps the most important implication looking forward is to be cautious in committing U.S. credibility to situations where our stakes are so much smaller than our rivals'.