

Chemical Weapons, the Red Line and Beyond: Evidence and Intransigence over Syria

Written by Ciaran Gillespie

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CIARAN GILLESPIE, AUG 30 2013

In a previous piece for e-IR, I argued that while there seemed to be a substantial split within the Obama administration as to the wisdom or strategic value in entering the war in Syria in a more direct manner (rather than through existing military aid and training programs), 'evidence' of a chemical attack would likely be decisive. I referred to 'evidence' not because I assumed that there would be some conspiratorial effort for a war under false pretences, but precisely because discussion of chemical weapons usage in the conflict had, up to that point, lacked any real substance.

However, a new piece of research by Julian Perry Robinson at the Harvard University Sussex Program provides a great platform for assessing what we know and don't know about the extent of chemical weapon usage in the Syrian civil war. While there have been serious grounds to suspect deployment of agents like Sarin, actual proof has never been forthcoming. This fact will not be lost to even the most casual observer, as anything remotely concrete would have made a huge splash in the reporting of the conflict.

Robinson is not particularly critical of the US, French, British and Turkish interpretation of unsubstantiated evidence and makes clear that, were it found to be the case that the Syrian military had indeed used chemical weapons, an inadequate response could be seen as tantamount to toleration. However, he also makes clear that the failure of the above mentioned states to publicly disclose to scientific audiences the analytical methods employed in ascertaining the use of Sarin is deeply troubling. The evidence available to the public up until recently was the result of reporting from journalists, civil society workers and both pro and anti-government forces.

The radical departure from a situation of brooding suspicion to an overt, shocking attack in Ghouta left many analysts puzzled. Even among those who believed the regime had been using Sarin, the strategy only seemed remotely logical if the agent was used in a very limited manner to break through rebel lines and inflict psychological trauma without resulting in the kind of casualties that would pressure a more direct military response from external states. Seasoned Middle East correspondents like Patrick Cockburn, who had previously warned that evidence of gas attacks by the regime should be treated with utmost scepticism (such was the irrationality of their deployment) were forced to accept the evidence from the new attack was 'compelling'. The right to scepticism is of course earned, as Cockburn is arguably one of the foremost western chroniclers of the catastrophic occupation of Iraq.

He recently appeared opposite Syrian human rights activist, Razan Zaitouneh on *Democracy Now* when she challenged all those with lingering questions about the potential culpability of rebel forces by stating "if you believe that we are a crazy people who would kill themselves and their children, then you can ask such a question." However difficult it is to rationalise the actions of the regime, it is equally if not more difficult to see how agents fighting in the name of a free Syria would be allowed to undertake such a murderous act unimpeded. Unfortunately, the internet seems awash with conspiratorial allegations (branching into territories way beyond the scope of the conflict in Syria) that repeat the mantra of a false flag without any substantive evidence. Until such allegations satisfy some kind of baseline burden of proof, they should be treated with the same scepticism as the claims of the states that wish to intervene.

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While we can sift more information as we go along, compelling evidence that indicates the reasoning, culpability and effect of the horrendous attack in Ghouta is still obfuscated in the carnage that is the conflict's day to day *mise en scène*. Currently, intercepts being pushed out by US intelligence indicate that while the attack may have emanated from Syrian forces, it is quite likely the result of a breakdown in the chain of command and may not have occurred as the result of any overt central order. It may come to light that this act, and what is to follow, was the result of a rogue military officer of the 'General Jack D. Ripper' ilk. Or perhaps even worse, some morbidly depressing accident. Does it matter? It would seem that we have reached the point at which demands for investigation and evidence into the matter will fall on deaf ears in the US. Cases have been made, lines have been drawn and the missiles are currently being loaded.

But evidence does matter, and it is clear that while overt outside intervention now seems inevitable, the biggest question for which not even the most perfunctory body of evidence has been volunteered is, to what effect? What evidence has been provided that this course of military action will improve the situation of Syrians? Children are fleeing the country at a rate of two per minute, with tens of thousands flooding Iraqi Kurdistan this month amidst fears of ethnic cleansing. There are 2 million refugees in other countries that are increasingly experiencing violent fallout from the continuation of this protracted proxy conflict. These are the kind of factors that any legitimate action under the UN Charter would be forced to prioritise.

While the precedent of Kosovo (the war deemed illegal yet 'legitimate') and the international norm of Responsibility to Protect have been invoked to justify military action in light of the inevitable Security Council veto by Russia and China, there has been no substantive evidence offered that any such campaign will improve the situation in either Syria or the wider Middle East. Any action justified under Responsibility to Protect is, according to the tenets of the principle, deemed legitimate only under the grounds that the operation will act in some way to mitigate further harm. Obama has been fairly clear in the last few days that the action being planned is intended as a 'shot across the bow', a punishment that is not designed to bring down the regime as this is not clearly a strategic goal yet. We know from existing studies of conflict longevity that this type of non-decisive intervention has a tendency to prolong civil wars, but there is little indication that this is being factored into the case for bombing. Indeed, even in the much vaunted case of Kosovo, it has been established that NATO bombing initially exacerbated violence and ethnic cleansing.

For critics of NATO action in Kosovo, one of the most dangerous precedents the action set was the apparent normalisation for states to conduct unilateral military action, in defiance of international legal restrictions, as long as the justification is couched in the language of human rights. This would become part of the moral and legal approach used to justify the invasion of Iraq a few years later. In Kosovo, intervening states were accused of using the tragedy as a means of justifying the continued existence of NATO, an organisation designed ostensibly for geopolitical manoeuvring against the USSR/Russia, in the post-Cold War era. Have we seen any evidence that the motivations for a military campaign in Syria are any purer of purpose?

Not particularly. The motivation seems to be, at best, a form of face-saving, a punitive attack to make sure the US does not lose credibility over Obama's infamous red-line remark (buoyed up by British and French determinations to appear important in the international tug of war between true powers in the Middle East). At worst, it is an intervention on behalf of one side, not just in Syria's war, but potentially in intra-state conflicts stretching from North Africa to Pakistan. The substantial split in expert opinion, the reluctance even by many hawkish Syrian experts over the years to agitate for a full on military engagement should give serious pause for thought. The airwaves and internet are awash with argument but very little substantial evidence that indicates how our new moral imperative will translate into an improvement in the lives of ordinary Syrians.

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