

Moral Outrage Necessitates Defining a Strategy for Syria

Written by Robert G. Rabil

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ROBERT G. RABIL, SEP 16 2013

President Obama has deferred his decision to strike at the Syrian government in response to a chemical attack on a Damascene suburb by asking Congress to give him authorization. Apparently, this political move stemmed from both the ambivalent policy the administration has thus far been pursuing towards Syria, and the potential grave repercussions of a military strike. In a foretelling action, the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee voted in favor of a strike. On the other hand, Russia broached a plan for Syria to relinquish control of its chemical weapons to avert a U.S. strike. Essentially, Washington has painted itself into a corner by committing strategic mistakes and it would be foolish to commit another mistake based on narrow assessments of the Syrian crisis.

Broadly speaking, insufficient knowledge about Syria, partisan politics and American fatigue from foreign intervention have underwritten the administration's ambivalent policy towards Syria. In as much, the administration desired to remove the Syrian regime as it sought to temper its involvement in the crisis. The corollary of this policy prevented Washington from taking a political initiative regarding the Syrian conflict, opting instead to support various and at times contradictory initiatives sponsored by America's regional allies, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar. Taken place in a regional political vacuum following the removal of the Iraqi regime in 2003, these regional initiatives were soon countervailed by Iranian-Hezbollah initiatives intended to reinforce the Syrian regime as an aspect of reinforcing the Persian Shi'a axis in the region. No sooner, the Syrian crisis evolved into a terrible sectarian strife. The conflict degenerated into two camps matching each other in ghoulishness and viciousness. The regime's flagrant violations of human rights by using indiscriminate chemical weapons have been horribly mirrored by the radical elements of the opposition's dehumanizing policy of decapitating innocent non-Sunni Syrians.

Meanwhile, Hezbollah's military intervention in Syria has become essential to its *raison d'être* as a hydra-like political and jihadi organization, organically linked to the Iranian regime. Hezbollah, at the behest of its patron, entered the battle for three interrelated reasons: 1) to maintain the viability of the Iranian-led rejectionist axis by securing and expanding the territorial connection of Tehran and West Beirut; 2) to deny Israel the capacity to undermine Hezbollah as an Iranian proxy/deterrent force by depriving it of its Syrian strategic depth before defanging it in a future war; and 3) to step up to the challenge, as dictated by regional developments, to transform itself into a political and military regional power shaping the new order in the Middle East.[1]

It is imperative for the United States to understand that it is no longer dealing only with the Syrian regime. Moreover, contrary to the prevailing conventional wisdom in the United States, Hezbollah is now more interested in putting its hands on Syria's stockpiles of conventional and unconventional weapons inside Syria, for its deep and costly involvement in the conflict has already made the organization a player in the regime's decision making process. The impressions of the Alawi-Shi'a rump state have already been delineated in a way so as Hezbollah's stronghold in Lebanon has been connected to the regime's stronghold from the urban centers of Damascus and Homs to the Alawi heartland in Tartus and Latakia. As such, a potential American limited strike against the Syrian regime will have little strategic impact other than re-affirming American credibility and displaying American power.

Ominously, Hezbollah has mobilized its members and readied its rockets in the direction of Israel. In a recent speech by Hezbollah's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, he avowed that "should the need come for him to go to Syria,

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he would go there taking Hezbollah with him.”[2] At the same time, Iran has issued multiple statements to the effect that Israel and the region would suffer in the event Washington launched a punitive strike against the Syrian regime. Though the possibility of regional war is slim, given the apt deterrence strategy of Israel, the multiplicity of actors, together with raw emotions in the region, may accidentally provoke a wider conflagration. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, unlike many in the region who have slanderously spoken for or against a strike, has taken a sober decision to keep his cabinet calm, yet prepared for contingencies, as United States ponders its forthcoming limited strike against the Syrian regime.

No less significant, Iran and Hezbollah’s commitment to the Asad regime has been reinforced by their firm belief that Russia would not forsake it. This belief is anchored in Russia’s geostrategic view that its national security may be threatened by the fall of Syria into the hands of Salafi-jihadists, including Chechens, Ingushes and Dagestanis, who have been fighting in Syria. Recently, they created their own Jihadi Caucasus Front.[3] The potential emergence of Syria as a theatre of operations for Salafi-Jihadists poses a threat not only to the restive Caucasus, but also to the heartland of Russia in Bashkortastan and Tatarstan. Russians have been concerned about the advent of Salafism (ultra-orthodox Islam) into its own heartland at the expense of Sufism (Muslim mysticism) and the other schools of Islam there. This, in turn, could affect the Russian policy of promoting Russian nationalism as a national idea (Russkaya (Russian idea) versus Russkii (ethnic Russian)) inclusive of multi-ethnic and multi-religious communities.

In fact, Tatarstan, which was held up as a model of stability and religious harmony, has been shaken since July 2012 by the assassination of Islamic leader, Valiulla Yakupov, and the botched assassination attempt on Tatarstan’s chief mufti, Ildus Faizov. Many in Kazan seem to think that these crimes are related to the public campaign of both men to combat the rising influence of Salafism. For Russian authorities, these acts were more than crimes. They underscored the Salafists’ attempt at undermining Russian nationalism. It is no wonder that Iran and Hezbollah are confident that Russia would rush to the Asad regime sophisticated surface to air missiles in the event Washington carried out a strike against the regime.

The United States should be moved by the moral outrage over the Syrian regimes indiscriminate use of chemical weapons. Yet, the Obama administration has to contextualize its potential strike by formulating its military objectives within a political framework serving the country’s national interest and preparing it for a possible regional conflagration. Simultaneously, an effective potential strike needs to be linked to a political strategy mapping a stop to the vicious mayhem engulfing Syria. This is the main question that needs to be asked. Otherwise, Washington will be committing a foolish act fueling more moral outrage.

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[1] Robert G. Rabil, “Syria Part of Aggressive Iranian Strategy,” *The National Interest*, June 18, 2013.

[2] See Hassan Nasrallah’s speech, delivered on August 16, 2013, on Hezbollah’s Al-Ahed News website, available at <http://www.alahednews.com.lb/essaydetails.php?eid=81839&cid=149>.

[3] See news on Lebanese Television station MTV, September 8, 2013.

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