

An International Solution to the Syrian Crisis

Written by Oren Barak

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OREN BARAK, SEP 6 2013

What should be done with regard to the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad, which is widely accused of carrying out a chemical weapons attack against civilians in the suburbs of Damascus on August 21, 2013? Members of the US congress are currently debating the pros and cons of a unilateral military strike against Syria, after President Barack Obama had decided to ask for their opinion. However, in view of the severity of the act committed by the Syrian regime, it is the international community – and not the US – that should be entrusted with punishing all those responsible for this heinous crime.

Many observers argue that the international community is helpless in the face of Syria's behavior since the beginning of the revolt against President Bashar al-Assad and his regime in 2011, especially as long as Syria enjoys support from Russia, China and Iran. But as I will argue below, the past record of the international community in dealing with mass atrocities suggests that this is not the case, and there are quite effective ways to overcome the resistance of Syria's allies to measures designed to punish and deter it.

The first step that can be taken by the international community is the issuing of international warrants against all perpetrators of war crimes in Syria. As more information on the chemical weapons attack in Syria becomes available, the identity of these war criminals and their whereabouts might be revealed. While it is unlikely that these individuals would give themselves up or be extradited by Assad's regime, they cannot escape justice forever. Nazi war criminals are brought to justice even today, more than seven decades after they committed war crimes, and other war criminals (e.g. from the Balkans and Africa) were tried by international courts not long afterwards.

Second, a worldwide coalition against the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime, which includes all 193 members of the United Nations, should to be assembled. Indeed, some states, most notably Russia, China and Iran, support Syria and will probably oppose such a move. But this still leaves 189 states which, at least theoretically, can be persuaded to join. If such a massive coalition is formed, moreover, would Russia, China and Iran, which are highly dependent on other states in the world, be able to ignore it?

Last but not least, the international community should regard Syria as an ostracized state so long as President Assad is in power. Syria's embassies across the world should be closed, Syrian diplomats should be expelled from all UN member states (and possibly also from the UN), and all of Syria's foreign assets – including those belonging to perpetrators of war crimes – be seized. The international sanctions against South Africa during the period of Apartheid are a precedent that can be followed.

Together, these steps are liable to result in significant pressure on the Syrian regime and its domestic and outside supporters, and may even lead to change within it. This is because they will signal in clear terms that it is "game over" for President Assad and for all those responsible for such deplorable crimes, even if they manage to win the war for Syria, turning them into a liability domestically as well as externally.

Why is this course of action more promising than a unilateral US military action against Syria, which is currently debated by the US congress?

First of all, there is no guarantee that military action will be able to achieve its dual goal of punishing and deterring

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Syria. The perpetrators of the chemical weapons attack will probably not be affected by the operation since the time that elapsed since the chemical weapons attack has offered them ample opportunities to hide. Indeed, it is likely that those who would suffer most from the operation, even if sophisticated weapons are employed, would be innocent civilians, not only in Syria but also elsewhere in the Middle East. Moreover, a small-scale operation, such as the one contemplated by the US, would probably not deter Syria, particularly if its regime manages to present itself as “standing up to the foreign aggression” launched against Syria. Egypt during the Suez War of 1956 and Iraq in the Gulf War 1991 are two cases in point.

Second, if Syrian command and control systems are damaged by the US military operation, the result might be even less control by the Syrian regime over its security forces, including the chemical weapon units of the Syrian army. According to some reports, this might have been the cause of the massive use of chemical weapons by the Syrian army on August 21, and this scenario could be repeated.

Third, a unilateral military operation against Syria is liable to have grave possible regional consequences. Syria and its allies, Iran and the Lebanese party-militia Hizbullah, which have great stakes in the survival of the Assad regime, may retaliate against neighboring states that are supportive of the US, such as Israel, Jordan, Turkey and the Gulf monarchies, and possibly also against US targets in the region and beyond, and this might further exacerbate regional tensions and confrontations. Internationally sanctioned moves against Syria, such as those described earlier, can help evade this scenario.

But the main reason why collective action by the international community along the lines suggested earlier – difficult as it might be to put together – is better than unilateral military action by the US, is that military operations that are meant to punish and deter wrong-doers, and particularly those that are unilateral in nature, often get out of hand. Since 2001, this has been the case in Iraq, where the attempt to depose President Saddam Hussein and his regime has instead resulted in a major political and military debacle for the US, largely because of the domestic tensions and conflicts triggered by the invasion and the subsequent dismantling of Iraq’s political and military institutions.[1] The military interventions in Afghanistan in 2001 and, in more limited way, in Libya in 2011, have been more legitimate, particularly because it was an international organization, NATO, and not only the US, that was involved in them. But there, too, political stability and domestic security have not yet been attained. It is questionable, moreover, whether such limited engagement would suffice to topple the Assad regime, and even if it does, whether this would not plunge Syria, which is a divided society, particularly since 2011, into an even more brutal civil war.

To conclude, the chemical weapons attack against civilians carried out by the Syrian regime should be handled by the international community and not by the US alone, and other means besides military ones ought to be considered. This would not only improve the chances of “getting it right” in Syria, but also provide a template for dealing with similar crises in the future.

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Oren Barak is an associate professor in political science and international relations at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He has served as visiting scholar at Harvard University and as a visiting professor at the University of Texas at Austin. Barak’s research areas include the relationship between the state, society, and the military in the non-Western regions and ethnic and national relations. He is the author of *The Lebanese Army: A National Institution in a Divided Society* (SUNY Press, 2009) and *Israel’s Security Networks: A Theoretical and Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge University Press 2013, with Gabriel Sheffer). He is the editor of *Existential Threats and Civil-Security Relations* (Lexington Books, 2009) and *Militarism and Israeli Society* (Indiana University Press, 2010), both with Gabriel Sheffer, and of *Nonstate Actors in Intrastate Conflicts* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013) with Dan Miodownik. His articles have appeared in journals such as the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, *Journal of Peace Research*, *International History Review*, *Middle East Journal*, and *Security Dialogue*.

[1] See: Oren Barak, “Dilemmas of Security in Iraq,” *Security Dialogue* 38, 4 (2007): 455-475.

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About the author:

Oren Barak teaches at the Department of International Relations and the Department of Political Science at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel, and is currently an Israel Institute fellow at the Government Department of Cornell University. He is the author (with Gabriel Sheffer) of *Israel's Security Networks: A Theoretical and Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).