



INSS Insight No. 463, September 3, 2013

**The Chemical Attack in Syria:
Different from Other Aggression against Civilians in the Civil War
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President Obama has decided on punitive action of limited scope and duration in order to deter the Assad regime from making further use of chemical weapons. Many commentators in Israel and abroad are criticizing him for this decision, noting that over 110,000 people, most of them civilians, have already been killed in the Syrian civil war, and the US took no military action whatsoever to stop the slaughter. They assert that there is no reason why the fact that civilians on the outskirts of Damascus were killed with chemical weapons should change the attitude toward the war, when it makes no difference to the dead and their families what killed them. These critics fall essentially into two groups. Some contend that just as there were many good reasons why the US took no military action until now in response to the extensive killing, it should similarly take no military action at present. Others argue that the US should undertake much more extensive military intervention in the civil war in order to overthrow the regime and stop the killing. The purpose of this article is to explain why the use of chemical weapons is indeed a different form of aggression, and why it requires a special response.

The vision of an end to all wars is a noble goal that has motivated a host of international initiatives, beginning with the League of Nations after WWI. Achieving this goal, however, is difficult, if at all possible, and the international community therefore had to restrict its efforts to limiting wars when they occur and establishing norms of behavior that warring parties uphold. This bears some resemblance to regulation in other fields, which aims to restrict the potential damage that can emerge. In warfare, one of the principles underlying this effort is the drive to limit harm to civilians who are not involved in fighting. This principle shapes the attitude to various weapons, and spurs efforts to restrict the use of weapons capable of causing indiscriminate slaughter. It is no wonder that special efforts are made to ban the acquisition and use of various types of weapons of mass destruction. In many cases, the military benefit of such weapons against an organized and well equipped army is doubtful, but it can cause the mass slaughter of civilians.

Chemical weapons are less deadly than biological or nuclear weapons, but they definitely belong in the category of weapons of mass destruction. Their effectiveness against a trained army equipped with protective gear is highly dubious. It is also very difficult to predict the results of their use, which depend on external factors such as weather conditions and circumstantial factors in the area where the weapons are used: whether people are concentrated or dispersed, inside or outside buildings, and so on. There are also indications that in the August 21 chemical attack on the outskirts of Damascus, the regime planned a much more limited attack and was surprised by the number of casualties. Indeed, chemical weapons can cause extensive fatalities among unprotected civilians, as happened in this case.

The international community has scored many achievements in limiting the proliferation and use of weapons of mass destruction, and conventions have been signed regarding chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons. With all the weaknesses of the various conventions, an international norm has been established against these types of weapons, and any toleration of the use of such weapons will deliver a severe blow to the power of these norms. Already early in his first term, President Obama made the containment of weapons of mass destruction, with an emphasis on nuclear weapons, a key goal of his administration. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that he believes that the use of chemical weapons should be handled differently than other aggression in the Syrian civil war.

In deliberating possible military responses, the leading principle of medicine is instructive here as well: first of all, do no harm. The benefits of the action should be compared with its price and the damage that it can cause to those whom the action is supposed to help. Weighing the benefits of intervention against its cost and potential damage, the US administration has decided against intervening in the civil war, despite its declaration that the regime has lost all moral justification and should fall. However, this does not mean that action whose aims are more limited is illegitimate when analysis shows that it can achieve its limited goals, and does not cause damage to those whom it is designed to help.

Limited punitive military action aimed at deterring Assad from further use of chemical weapons is possible, and its potential harm, if any, is small. In order to achieve its objectives, it should deliver a message to the regime that continued use of chemical weapons will lead to further Western military operations that will greatly detract from the regime's ability to survive. This objective can be achieved by an attack against targets important to the regime's survival, such as military units and weapons that play a key role in the civil war. The operation should be effective, so that targets indeed important to the regime's survival are destroyed, but its circumscribed nature means that the regime's ability to survive sustains only limited damage.

One of the advantages of such an operation is that it minimizes the chances that the Syrian regime's response will cause escalation, because its will to survive will prompt it to refrain from responding against the US and its allies. Concern about escalation and sliding into a crisis involving other Middle East countries is one of the reasons why the US administration believes that major intervention in the civil war could eventually do more harm than good. On the other hand, only if the US attack is very ineffective – for example, if it damages several empty sites in an attack using cruise missiles – is significant damage liable to result from such an attack, because American credibility and deterrence will suffer an additional blow.

A limited punitive attack could also be the most comfortable scenario from Israel's perspective. The achievements will be limited, but Israel, which is located in a region with the world's largest stockpiles of active chemical weapons, should also have an interest in strengthening the norm of non-use of chemical weapons. On the other hand, the likelihood that the Syrian response to a limited American attack will drag Israel into an unnecessary military confrontation, and that the Iron Dome, Arrow, and Patriot batteries will be activated in this scenario, is extremely low.

