

# A Syria of Redlines and Red Faces



*By Mitchell Belfer*

There may be reason to doubt the sincerity of President Trump's commitment to Syria's embattled civilian population. After all, throughout the presidential campaign, his rhetoric focused on defeating ISIS even if it meant tacitly pairing up with Damascus. Yet the US's missile attack against a Syrian airbase as punishment for a regime gas attack however, left little to the imagination. It is a game-changer and the Trump Administration has shifted gears. Where it had taken a wait-and-see approach, it is now adopting a robust set of policy options and has reset its priority list. Trump, it seems, will enforce the Obama-era redlines against the use of chemical weapons...and perhaps more.

The US may have pulverised one of Syria's numerous airbases, but it hardly dented the regime's capacity for war-fighting. Reinforced by Russia, Iran and Hezbollah has meant that Assad remains very capable of inflicting pain on Syria's rebels and the communities that support them. Yet, coupled with the announcement that the Trump administration does not see a future role for the Assad regime in governing Syria and this missile attack may signal the beginning of a new chapter in US engagements in the region. And, it sends an important message to Damascus, to Moscow and, importantly, to Tehran.

Russia is scrambling to save face as this is a strategic embarrassment after establishing detente with the US and, on the back of that arrangement, promising Assad protection. Russia clearly cannot deliver. With impunity Israeli and now US air power strikes deep in Syria interrupting Hezbollah arms shipments, target assassinating key personnel and now destroying a military facility. Russia may have sailed a warship to challenge the US in the Mediterranean but it was an act of desperation, a sabre-rattle to cushion its inability of preventing US retaliation. The Tillerson-Putin meeting that followed quickly defused that aspect of their growing tension. Russia may display force, but it clearly will not exercise force against the US. It deescalated after signalling its resolve. But lessons are being learned that Trump is not Obama and, perhaps, the age of US deference to Russian power (in Syria, in Ukraine) may be drawing to an end.

And it is not only from the US that Russia is suffering embarrassment--it is from Syria as well. In 2013 Russian diplomacy had prevented US and French air strikes (following yet another chemical weapons attack) by guaranteeing the destruction of Syria's chemical and biological weapons programme. An agency even won a Nobel Peace Prize for that objective. Why then is the regime still in possession of such weapons? Did Russia not succeed in disarming Syria's WMD or did Syria not disclose its WMD to Russia. In either case, Russia may not be as respected in Syria as many believe.

Trump certainly generated surprise with his response but as the dust settled it is clear that NATO stands behind the US. Turkey and Israel are welcoming the measures while the Gulf Cooperation Council countries are actively encouraging more actions in order to tilt the balance of power back to the secular Syrian rebels with the hope of regime change in Syria both to end the brutal ethnic cleansing of Sunni Muslims in the country and to stonewall Iranian expansionism.

How this will all end is impossible to predict. Russia will not abandon its ally and the US will no longer cower behind the banner of strategic restraint. While they may not directly confront each other, it seems that their allies are in it to win it and they will be more difficult to restrain. What started as a Syrian civil war has evolved into a World War with few good options. But in a world in which retreat is not possible only aggression is rewarded. 100 years removed from the worst of World War One and one would think that we have learned our lessons. We have not.

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