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Can We Break the "Cycle of Horror" over Syria?

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Recent reports of a sarin gas attack against the Syrian civilian population in the rebel-held province of Idlib has the world, rightfully, horrified. With political leaders around the world loudly condemning the targeting of civilians and the reliance on internationally proscribed weapons, the international debate echoes the tones of the aftermath of the brutal August 2013 sarin attack against the opposition-controlled Ghouta suburb, in the outskirts of Damascus.

In addition to eliciting international condemnation over the use of chemical weapons, these two episodes represent moments of collective outrage in a war where systematic and brutal violations of international humanitarian law have been met with reactions ranging from mild indifference to embarrassed resignation.

Since the beginning of the conflict in Syria in 2011, the international community has gone through a number of these moments of indignation in response to atrocities committed against the civilian population. These include, among others, the expression of outrage over the siege of the Palestinian refugee camp of Yarmouk—aptly described as the "deepest circle of hell;" the horror elicited by reports of mass executions and systematic torture in the Syrian regime's prisons; and the more recent horror sparked by the enclosure of eastern Aleppo and the humanitarian crisis that ensued. These are all moments of collective outrage in Syria's recurrent "cycles of horror:" gruesome atrocities that are met by collective shock; followed by a feeble international response; and then by prolonged times of relative silence, until news of the next large-scale atrocity breaks out.

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