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The Attack on the Chemical Weapons Targets in Syria:

Doing the Minimum

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Bashar al-Assad's regime has used chemical weapons, mainly chlorine, dozens of times since the American missile strike on the al-Shuayrat airbase in Syria in April 2017. However, the chemical weapons attack on civilians in Duma (apparently chlorine mixed with nerve gas) by the regime on April 7, 2018 was the attack that drove US President Donald Trump to launch a military operation on April 14, in conjunction with Britain and France, to enforce his stated red lines. Two questions that arise in relation to the attack are: What has changed since the last attack? And what are the repercussions of the operation?

According to United States Department of Defense reports, 103 missiles were launched from aircraft and ships. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford said that the attack hit three targets relating to the chemical weapons infrastructure – a scientific research center in Barzeh near Damascus, a chemical weapons storage facility, and a command post and bunker for chemical war materials near Homs – and clarified that Russia's forces in Syria had been warned in time about the attack through deconfliction channels. US Secretary of Defense General James Mattis stressed that "this was a one-time shot, for now." Any further military action will depend on how President Assad behaves and whether he decides to use chemical weapons again. The attack served to demonstrate the international community's determination to prevent the use of chemical weapons, which constitutes a violation of international law, and to send a message of deterrence to Assad: refrain from using chemical weapons against civilians from now on. This comes in the wake of last year's American attack, which failed to convey an effective message of deterrence.

For their part, Syrian military spokesman claimed that Syrian air defense had intercepted a number of missiles that were en route to the attack targets, mainly those targeting military sites (a report denied by the US Defense Department). Furthermore, the key message from Damascus was that the potential major damage was avoided due to defense tactics by the Syrian military, and that "not one strand of hair fell from the President's head." Russia and Iran immediately positioned themselves alongside Assad, denounced the Western aggression, and warned about the negative consequences.

Insights from the Attack

Besides the operational success, the United States scored a clear political achievement, due to its enforcement of the red lines it had drawn and its success in forming a coalition, albeit limited, with Britain and France, which were convinced that Assad's regime was responsible for the chemical attack. However, this ad hoc coalition is focused solely on preventing the use of chemical weapons during the war in Syria, and as Trump administration spokesmen clarified, there is no change in the US policy toward Syria. As such, the United States is threatening neither the Assad regime, nor the growing Iranian presence or Russian dominance in Syria.

As far as Assad is concerned, since the outbreak of the war in Syria, the benefits of using chemical weapons outweigh the cost, and this has not changed. He succeeded in wiping out the rebel strongholds in the outskirts of the capital, Damascus; the Army of Islam organization has laid down its weapons; the regime has completely taken over the entire Eastern Ghouta, and the Sunni population in the region has for the most part relocated to Idlib, within the scope of Assad's plan (and Iran's) to reconfigure the demographic distribution in the country according to a religious and ethnic framework that is more convenient for Assad.

The targets of the attack were selected according to their relevance to the development, manufacture, and storage of chemical war materials, more so than their being targets that, if destroyed, would thwart the attack capabilities of Assad's army against the population and the rebels (aircraft, helicopters, and airbases). The United States and its partners in the attack chose to use weapons for their attack that would minimize the risk to aircraft, and also refrained from attacking targets that were liable to jeopardize Russian forces deployed in Syria. It is highly likely that such an operation would have compelled a Russian military response – by shooting down the assault planes and missiles using air defense batteries deployed in Syria. The broader the set of targets, the greater the risk would have been of collateral damage to Russian soldiers, Iranians, and Syrian civilians, but these were avoided. The long advance warning prior to the attack enabled Assad to evacuate sites and contain the damage, beyond the damage to the buildings. Consequently, it is doubtful whether Syria's stockpiles of chemical weapons and chemical weapons manufacturing capabilities were eliminated.

This attack was not enough to address definitively the violations of the rules of war and the wide-scale attacks on civilians by Assad forces, including the use of conventional weapons, such as massive bombings from the air and barrel bomb attacks from helicopters. The United States and its partners did not present a plan in order to guarantee that the targeted attacks against civilians – and not just chemical attacks – on the part of Assad and the coalition that supports him, will not continue.

Most important, after seven years of war, in which more than a half a million people have been killed and millions have been displaced or have become refugees, the Syrian civilian population deserves more committed international support. A series of supplementary actions are needed, including sanctions against Russia and Iran due to their support of Assad's acts of murder; an alliance among Western countries to put an immediate end to the civil war; and their inclusion in multilateral negotiations about the future of Syria. In the meantime, it seems that in the current international reality, the attack will actually further unify the pro-Assad coalition led by Russia and Iran, notwithstanding the differences in positions between them that became evident recently in relation to the future arrangement in Syria.

Russian and Iranian Responses

According to President Trump's tweets, Assad's repetitive use of chemical weapons is an outcome of Russia's failure to guarantee the fulfillment of the 2013 Syrian chemical weapons disarmament agreement. Trump called on Russia and Iran to cease their support of the murderous Assad regime, and charged that their support renders them responsible for the situation in Syria.

Prior to the attack, Russia's Foreign Ministry threatened "dire consequences" if there were American military intervention in Syria. The Russian Chief of Staff even warned that "if Russian forces are harmed, the armed forces of the Russian Federation will respond and take action to intercept the air and missile attack." After the attack, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said that the Western trio did not heed warnings from Moscow, which is again being subjected to the West's threats, and reiterated that "we warned that such actions will not be left without consequences." However, the Ministry of Defense reported that the attacks did not hit Russian military deployment zones in Syria, and therefore, the Russians did not have to employ their air defense systems.

Moscow is now considering its possible responses. Russia may increase its assistance to the Assad regime in its efforts to take control over territories still held by the rebels, including in southern Syria. The Russian Ministry of Defense announced that it is considering the possibility of equipping the Syrian air defense with S-300-class advanced surface-to-air missile systems. Moscow can also stand alongside Assad and Turkey in their combined efforts against the Syrian Democratic Forces, while seizing control over the Kurdish territory in northeastern Syria and while opening the Iranian overland route to the Mediterranean Sea. Moreover, the attack may strengthen the strategic ties between Russia and Iran, particularly if President Trump exits the nuclear agreement. In that case,

Moscow could supply Tehran with additional weapons, mainly advanced air defense systems, in order to thwart any air strike against nuclear weapons sites in Iran.

Nor does the attack change anything for Tehran. Its objectives remain as they were – to keep Assad in power and to clear all territories in Syria that are still under the rebels' control. It might be that the only source of concern for Iran is the thought of Western solidarity when it crosses red lines relating to the use of weapons of mass destruction, and the repercussions of its realizing its military nuclear program. Actually, the fact that Assad himself was not injured during the attack and that the attack was defined as a “one-shot” deal that did not intend to topple the regime strengthens Iran's restrained approach toward Israel (which has “destructive power” to severely damage the Assad regime and thwart Iran's strategic plan to intensify its influence in the western basin of the Middle East). Iran's principal proxy, Hezbollah, is not looking to jeopardize itself in a military move against Israel, especially just prior to the elections in Lebanon. Furthermore, President Trump's adamant intention to withdraw American troops from northeastern Syria as soon as possible encourages a restrained Iranian policy, which aims to not goad the US into changing its policy or to take action to stop Iran's intention to establish and secure an Iran-Iraq-Syria-Lebanon land bridge. Finally, domestic pressures, the economic crisis (pertaining to foreign currency), and the continuing grass-roots protests constitute additional obstacles to far-reaching Iranian activities against the West, particularly prior to Trump's decision in May with regard to the nuclear agreement.

The Repercussions for Israel

The Western coalition “visited” Syria in the requisite minimum activity, in order to enforce the red lines about the use of chemical weapons against civilians. The limited scope of the attack, the declarations about the focus on chemical capabilities, the meticulous care to not damage Russian assets in Syria, and the non-use of the attack to increase the coalition's involvement in regulating the situation in Syria merely reinforces Russia's and Iran's policies in Syria and their continued support of the Assad regime.

For its part, Israel remains alone in the campaign against the consolidation by Iran and its proxies in Syria. Therefore, it must strictly maintain its strategic coordination with Russia, be sensitive to Russia's reservations about Israeli operations in Syria, and accept the fact that the Assad regime is still standing. Concurrently, Israel needs to prepare for the combined efforts of the pro-Assad coalition to expand and anchor Assad's regime in southern Syria, including in the Syrian Golan Heights – a situation that will compel it to enforce its red lines with regard to the deployment of Iranian proxy forces near the border at the Golan Heights.

Freedom of activity in Syrian air space by Israel and Western countries is a thorn in the sides of Russia and Iran, and therefore one can expect that they will attempt to limit this freedom. There have already been intimations that the response will be to reinforce Syria's air defense capabilities with advanced S-300/400-class surface-to-air missile systems. A far reaching Russian strategy in this context would be to man these batteries with Russian personnel until Syrian personnel are trained.

Iran has an open account with Israel following the April 9 attack on a Iranian UAV flight unit in T-4 airbase in central Syria. In light of the restraints in the Iranian approach before Assad's continued regime is guaranteed, Iran will presumably seek a covert, surprise mode of action against Israel, without leaving fingerprints. It is likely that that is why an Iranian UAV unit armed with assault capabilities was deployed in Syria, but it has already been exposed. Therefore, Israel must stay on high alert for imminent developments, without conveying any sense of pressure or tension. Wide scale war in the northern arena is not inevitable, and Israel's conduct has considerable impact on the escalation scenario.