

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President Emeritus
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska
7 September 2013

War Crimes in Syria: A Test of America's Moral Leadership

The atrocities occurring in Syria defy all comprehension: Over 100,000 killed, over 2 million refugees, and a quarter of the population displaced. On 21 August, in the suburbs of Damascus, the brutal Assad regime killed over 1,000 of its people via rocket-launched chemical weapons. In addition, hundreds were burned by the chemical weapons, while others inhaled the gas with horrific consequences. Many of the victims were children. It is all unimaginable! Bashar al-Assad now joins the ranks of Mussolini, Hitler and Saddam Hussein, barbarians who used poison gas against their own people. The historian Andrew Roberts writes: "There is a long and honorable history of the civilized world treating those dictators who used poison gas as qualitatively different from normal tyrants whose careers have so stained the 20th and 21st centuries. President Obama, who talks endlessly of the importance of civilized values, must now uphold this one."

The case for decisive action is strong and cannot be ignored: (1) Chemical weapons are banned by international agreement, and if the rules of war are to have any force, then the world must ensure they are respected. (2) The world certainly accepts that there are limits to the atrocities that governments may perpetuate on its citizens. After all, as *The Economist* observes, "it was the massacre of 8,000 Bosnians by Serbs at Srebrenica in 1995 that provoked outside powers to intervene decisively in Yugoslavia's civil war." (3) America's credibility is at stake. If President Obama does not act, no American threat will ever be taken seriously. He constructed the "red line" in one of his speeches. Assad has clearly crossed it; Obama must act.

Why has President Obama been so reluctant to act on Syria? When Assad used chemical weapons earlier in the war, Obama said he would deliver weapons to the rebels. To date, no such weapons have been delivered. Walter Russell Mead, James Clarke Chase Professor of Foreign Affairs and Humanities at Bard College, argues that the Obama administration had a grand strategy concerning the Middle East: The US would work with moderate Islamist groups (e.g., Turkey's AK group and Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood) to make the region more democratic. Hopefully, this would neutralize and isolate the radical extremists and spread democracy to more Middle Eastern nations, which would then lead to improved economic and social conditions. It has failed miserably. Mead suggests that the Obama Administration miscalculated in five major areas:

1. It misread the political maturity and capability of the Islamist groups it supported. Erdogan of Turkey is no moderate. He has jailed his opponents, threatened the media because they have criticized him, and has blamed Israel for almost everything wrong in the region. Morsi, deposed president of Egypt, fumbled incompetently with the crumbling economy and governed ineptly and erratically. It was not wise for the US to have aligned itself with these two regimes as paradigms of democracy.

2. The US misread the nature of the political upheaval in Egypt. The administration thought that the overthrow of Mubarak and the election of the Muslim Brotherhood was a “transition to democracy.” Few in Egypt were happy with the Muslim Brotherhood, and the military stood back and permitted Mubarak’s overthrow because he was attempting to engineer the succession of his son. So now, most in Egypt see the military coup as the only protection against Egypt becoming an Islamic state. The Muslim Brotherhood was not a “transition to democracy”; it was a transition to an Islamic state. Most Egyptians do not want that.
3. It misread the impact its strategy was having on our two most important allies in the region—Israel and Saudi Arabia. Neither was happy with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, nor US support of Morsi. Both now enthusiastically support the military coup in Egypt. Most analysts are amazed at how the US misread its two closest regional friends!
4. It has failed to grasp the new dynamics of terrorism in the Middle East. The Obama administration has continually tried to downplay the threat of terrorism and has normally refused to even use the term. But the reality is that terrorists are recruiting more easily, morale is higher and funding is easier to get than in recent years. Terrorism is morphing into newer and more creative manifestations. But terrorism is far from defeated.
5. The Obama administration failed early on to calculate how much it would cost to stay out of the conflict. Mead writes: “As the war dragged on, the humanitarian toll has grown to obscene proportions (far worse than anything that would have happened in Libya without intervention), communal and sectarian hatreds have become poisonous almost ensuring more bloodletting and ethnic and religious cleansing, and instability has spread from Syria into Iraq, Lebanon and even Turkey.” Syria has now turned into a proxy war with Russia and Iran, together with its lackey, Hezbollah. Mead argues that “To hardened realists in Middle Eastern capitals, this is conclusive proof that the American president is irredeemably weak. His failure to seize the opportunity for what Russia and Iranians fear would have been an easy win in Syria cannot be explained by them in any other way.” Obama’s policy has been a boon to both Russia and Iran, but it has been a godsend to the terrorists. The prolongation of the war has allowed terrorist and radical groups to establish themselves as leaders in the Sunni fight against the Shiite enemy.

All of this will hopefully be a wakeup call to the US and to its president. Terrorism is not dead; in fact, the prolonged Syrian war has empowered and reenergized it. The struggle against terrorism will now be harder and more prolonged than Obama had hoped. But even more importantly, the US must now return to a singular focus on Iran. Its power and its influence in the region are totally dependent on what happens in Syria. But if the rebel extremists win, Syria will become a base for al-Qaeda and Taliban-style Salafist fanatics. Absolutely no one would welcome that! US inaction and “leading from behind” have played a major role in the present catastrophe in Syria. Assad is now testing American resolve with his recent chemical attack on his people. The US is going to react and attack Assad with cruise missiles and perhaps very limited bombing. The effect of this limited response is impossible to determine at this point. At the very least, the US must restore deterrence against the use of chemical weapons.

What is the best that the US could hope for in Syria? Ideally, Obama's focused and limited strike will make a diplomatic settlement more possible. As columnist Michael Gerson summarizes, this is the best-case scenario: A negotiated outcome in which Assad departs and other regime elements agree to form an interim government with the non-extremist members of the opposition. The new government would then need to engage in a multi-year power struggle (aided by the US) with the jihadists. But this scenario rests on a key proposition—namely that the Assad regime is convinced it cannot win militarily. A small, limited strike will probably not accomplish this. A more extended air campaign would be needed, but the current politics of the world makes this doubtful. All of this also depends on making the “relatively” secular opposition a more credible force in the conflict. The jihadist opposition, with the support of the Gulf States, possesses better weapons, cohesion, commitment and leadership than the Free Syrian group (the FSA).

Syria has become a proxy war in which Russia and Iran have made significant gains at the expense of the United States, which has desired to disengage from the Middle East—now seen as a veritable disaster. The crisis in Egypt and the absolute catastrophe in Syria have proved that. Whether the US can regain its clout and influence in the region will depend on the next few months. It all begins with how Obama responds to Assad's use of chemical weapons. Let us pray that God will give him wisdom and clarity. Other than Israel, there is no other force for good in the region than the US.

See editorial in www.theeconomist.com (26 August 2013); www.washingtonpost.com David Ignatius (29 August 2013) and Michael Gerson (27 August 2013); Edward N. Luttwack in the *New York Times* (25 August 2013); *Wall Street Journal*: Andrew Roberts (29 August 2013) and Walter Russell Mead (24-25 August 2013).