

## ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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### ***What the War in Syria Has Exposed***

The Syrian Civil War is now in its 7th year and shows no signs of ending soon. In my opinion, this war has exposed the depths of human depravity like no other recent conflict. Allow me to defend this proposition.

In 2013, then President Obama backed off his threat to militarily punish Syria for its use of chemical weapons against its own citizens. He did so because Russia promised to help negotiate an agreement with Bashar al-Assad of Syria to remove and destroy all of his chemical weapons. Most now agree that that decision and subsequent agreement was a mistake. By 2016 it was quite evident that Assad had held nerve agents and other lethal toxins in defiance of the 2013 agreement. The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), which destroyed about 1,200 tons of Syria's chemical stockpiles, has concluded that "Syria has engaged in a calculated campaign of intransigence and obfuscation, of deception, and of defiance." Part of the deal Obama and Putin of Russia negotiated stipulated that both America and Russia promised to punish the Syrian regime should it use chemical weapons again. Despite repeated evidence of Assad's use of chemical weapons against its citizens, neither the US nor Russia has honored this pledge. In fact, as foreign policy analyst Robert Kagan has argued, this agreement "not only failed to get rid of Syria's chemical weapons, [it has] allowed the Assad regime to drop barrel bombs and employ widespread torture against civilian men, women and children. It has invited a full-scale Russian intervention in the fall of 2015, which saved the Assad regime from possible collapse." He catalogs several other results of this disastrous agreement:

1. Russia has greatly expanded its military presence in the eastern Mediterranean. The "extensive air-defense and anti-ship systems Russia has deployed have nothing to do with counterterrorism—because neither the Islamic State nor al-Qaeda has planes or ships—and everything to do with threatening US and NATO assets." The result is that Russia has now supplanted the US as a major power broker in the region.
2. Iran has fostered an unprecedented expansion of its power and influence in the region. It has at least 7,000 of its own fighters in Syria and leads a coalition of 20,000 foreign fighters, including Iraqis, Afghans and 8,000 Lebanese Hezbollah.

Therefore, Assad has been able to use chemical weapons against his own citizens with impunity—at least until President Trump launched 59 cruise missiles against the airfield where

the chemical weapons originated. Will Trump's intervention change the behavior of Assad or reduce the influence of Russia or Iran? At this point, that is highly doubtful.

Why has Assad used chemical weapons in the first place? Foreign policy analyst Max Fisher offers several reasons for Assad's brutality:

1. Due to the length of this civil war, Assad has a serious manpower shortage. Unable to retake the territory it has lost in the war, Syria appears to use chemical weapons both on and behind the front lines, simultaneously halting the opposition's advance while devastating its supply lines and staging areas. It has also forced the rebels into concentrated areas where they could be killed in large numbers. It has no other tool to fight the war.
2. Unable to win popular support, Assad has embraced a strategy not unlike the Islamic State of terrorizing its civilians to such an extent that they drop any support for the opposing side, which is now unable to protect them from chemical weapons. Such weapons deny the opposition a victory.
3. Assad views chemical weapons as important to both his battlefield and political strategies. Further, "he is aided by Russian forces who are so well integrated into the war that any deeply damaging strikes would risk killing Russians, potentially creating a wider conflict between the nuclear powers." It seems clear that both Russia and Iran are promoting a total victory over all opposition to Bashar al-Assad.
4. "In waging total war against rebels and his own population, Assad has backed himself into an all-or-nothing conflict. Even if chemical weapons play only a secondary role in his political and battlefield strategies, he faces margins too slim and stakes too high to abandon them without a fundamental shift."

The Syrian Civil War and Assad's use of chemical weapons have fundamentally altered the world order and, in my judgment, demonstrated the depths of human depravity. Major institutions designed to prevent this kind of war and carnage are failing, demonstrating the absence of any clear ethical consensus in our world and a complete absence of any commitment to human justice and compassion. Consider these thoughts:

1. Now in its 7<sup>th</sup> year, this brutal war has killed over 400,000 Syrians and plunged millions more into misery, homelessness, and appalling living conditions. Further, millions have fled Syria to neighboring countries and into Europe. But such butchery also demonstrates profoundly the bankruptcy of the notion that the post-World War II world would no longer permit leaders to indiscriminately kill their own citizens. Syria is normalizing levels of state brutality (state terrorism) not seen since World War II.
2. This conflict has likewise shown the paralysis of the United Nations and the UN Security Council. Russia, and often China, routinely veto any kind of sanctions against or

reprimand of the brutal dictator Assad. Russia demonstrates no shame or contrition in doing so. Vladimir Putin is sanctioning and legitimizing state acts of terror not seen in decades—and doing so with impunity.

3. Worldwide, there is simply no consensus on what to do or how to even go about answering the state terrorism of Assad. Former President Obama bought Russia's lie about neutralizing chemical weapons in Syria. When Assad crossed the now infamous "red line" Obama had set in 2013, he ended all possibility of mustering any credible military challenge to Assad's state terrorism. When Russia rescued Assad in 2015, any ethical response to Assad's state terrorism became more complicated, which led to indifference and apathy on the part of the US.
4. As Anne Barnard of the *New York Times* argues, "The Syrian conflict exposed, and was worsened by, failures of the very systems the right rails against. The European Union and the United Nations were set up in the past century, after devastating wars, to keep peace, prevent persecution, hold leaders accountable and provide aid to the most vulnerable. But confidence in them is ebbing when they are most needed. The Geneva Conventions on protecting civilians in wartime—never consistently enforced—are now openly flouted." The "responsibility to protect" doctrine, a legal justification for military action to stop states from massacring their citizens, was tried in Kosovo and Libya, with deeply disputed results; it died in Syria.

As Assad carries out acts of state terrorism with impunity, he encourages other brutal dictators to do the same thing in their nation. The major institutions created to check such brutality are failing, further evidence of the collapse of the post-World War II order established by the United States and its allies. That Russia and Iran (and to some extent China) are protecting Assad and aiding him militarily further evidences the total breakdown of any sense of decency and order in our world. I can think of no greater example of the depths of human depravity than the state terrorism of Bashar al-Assad and those propping up his monstrously evil regime. The United States and other western democracies that protest what Assad is doing seem impotent in stopping this horror. Syria exposes the world for what it really is—evil, corrupt and capable of committing the most horrific acts of state terrorism—and with impunity. But, my theology tells me that God is watching and at some point Bashar al-Assad, Vladimir Putin and the corrupt mullahs in Iran will have to give an account of their actions before the Great White Throne of God.

See *The Economist* (8 April 2017), pp. 40-41; Robert Kagan in the *Washington Post* (7 April 2017); Max Fisher in the *New York Times* (8 and 13 April 2017); and Anne Barnard in the *New York Times* (23 April 2017).