

The Logic of the Chemical Attack

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Brief Analysis

The battle for the suburbs of Damascus was nearing its end. The regime units – equipped, backed, and supplemented by Russian and Iranian forces – were on the verge of achieving total victory: the defeat of all rebel factions, the expulsion of a population that had demonstrated its lack of loyalty to the regime, and the plundering of all items of any value in the conquered territory. For the Damascus regime to engage in a chemical attack at such a juncture, provoking international condemnation and risking the derailing of its march to victory may thus appear to be a gross miscalculation. In fact, such an action seems so evidently contrary to the interests of the regime that many reasonable observers may assign some credibility to the successive versions of the Russian apologetic narrative – denying that a chemical attack took place; attributing the spread of chemical agents to their presence in the targeted arsenal of the rebels, or directly blaming the rebels for intentional use of chemical weapons against their own population in order to generate world sympathy.

The careful reading of the long history and track record of the despotic regime in Syria strongly suggests that the regime did indeed undertake the chemical attack, but not for any military purpose. It was instead a fundamental element in the effort of the regime to restore the only formula within which it can survive: caging the Syrian population in a state of despair.

As in numerous previous episodes, the graphic footage of civilian casualties, including infants and toddlers gasping for air, was not leaked or incidental coverage of the collateral damage of a military operation, but the intended product of the exercise. Through it, the messaging of the regime is clear: We will kill you, we will maim you, we will inflict horrible suffering on your children, and you have no recourse; submit and suffer less; resist and be viciously exterminated.

Hidden behind the facade of a modern looking president and glamorous first lady, and framed internationally by the lengthy diatribes of a UN representation presumably versed in the art of argumentation, lies this one consistent message from the Damascus regime to its population since the onset of its uprising in 2011: the world does not care about you; and even if it did, it is incapable of piercing through our obfuscation; and even if it were, it lacks the resources to act; promises of support, from the United States, are hypocritical and meaningless; Europe is impotent; backing from the puppet regimes in the Gulf and the aspiring Neo-Ottoman Sultanate in Turkey is ephemeral and futile; you will be defeated, you will be punished, and, if we spare your miserable life, you will proclaim your absolute allegiance to the President from under the boots of our soldiers.

To communicate this blunt message, the regime has recourse to a four-tier system.

At the top level, it is outrage and indignation at any accusation of any use of chemical weapons; here, the regime relies on the segmented attention span of the multiple intended audiences, and sends distinctly different content tailored to each. The anti-imperialists thus cherish the regime's resistance to Western propaganda aimed at smearing it, while anti-Islamists or even anti-Muslim audiences in some Western quarters sympathize with this presumably secular leadership striving to contain Islamist/Islamic perfidy. To Arabs and Muslims, the conflation of any Israeli action with the accusation is presented as proof of its fallacy. These top-level messages, and the positive reactions they generate are recycled to the Syrian population and neighboring societies as solemn indications of the success of the regime in setting the global narrative — "The world believes us and ignores you".

The second level of communication is directly intended for the local audience. It sets the norm of behavior vis-à-vis the head of the regime. Excess is tolerated, even encouraged in reporting the self-humiliation and debasement of Syrians in their expression of their devotion to their "Leader." Thirsty residents of Ghouta, in the suburbs of the capital Damascus, having suffered a devastating siege and bombardment that left lives shattered and families separated, were ushered on Syrian television to chant their readiness to sacrifice soul and blood for the leader, as a prerequisite to receiving precious few bottles of water. Loyalist fighters competed in their own display of total allegiance by vocalizing their demand that the captive population proclaims submission. The information operation of the regime is a set of variations, some subtle, some crude, on this theme. The leadership is omnipotent, omnipresent, and expects an unqualified resignation.

The effectiveness of this message is a function of the third level, with social media as its means of dissemination. Herein flourishes the dark exchange of horrid video segments of mistreatment, torture, and killings that illustrate the real source of power of the regime: terror. From the quasi-iconic Syrian soldier abusing and stepping on demonstrators while screaming "You demand freedom, here is your freedom," to the more macabre scenes of sexual assault and executions, distinguishable from the polished releases of the "Islamic State" by their poor production quality, but completely equal in depravity. The reaction to this material in the ranks of regime supporters is approval and elation; the main targeted audience, however, is regime opponents, where it is supposed to promote desperation. With the on-going stream of criminal abuse proudly committed by its units, this stealth regime media operation faces no shortage of new material. The periodic introduction of spectacular material, such as the aftermath of a gas attack, is nonetheless essential to maintain the efficacy of the terror effect.

The fourth level, assumed by injected, prompted, or independently generated social media messages serve to confirm the success of the previous pro-active levels and to cement a pro-regime domination of the discourse in cyberspace. The aim of this effort is to maintain a high level of intimidation — through threats and insults — against all expressions of dissent or divergence from the official line.

The calculus of the regime, as well as that of its Russian and Iranian sponsors, is that the West, notably the United States, is unwilling to commit to a devastating action that would destroy the malevolent stability of the Syrian war. Washington will not own a broken Syria. The potential U.S. action would undoubtedly cause a loss in military assets for the regime. With its increased reliance on Russian resources — which would be immune to any damage, such loss is an acceptable price to pay for the regime in its quest for the restoration of its rule by terror. In fact, as long as the U.S. action does not "kill" the regime, it will make it stronger. A strike, however potent, that does not yield a credible strategy for the removal of the despotic regime will only confirm its narrative of an uncaring, unwilling global community only willing to engage in symbolic actions for its own purposes. In that unfortunate case, the Syrians, the regime hopes, have no choice but to submit to their killer. ❖

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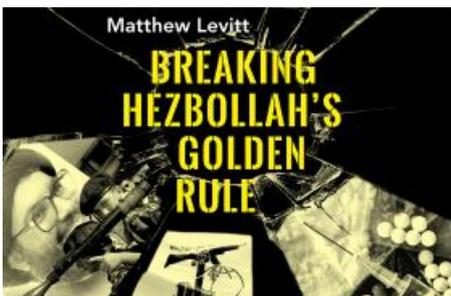
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