

## Is Khan Sheikhoun a Game Changer for Russia?

by [Anna Borshchevskaya \(/experts/anna-borshchevskaya\)](#)

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

### The United States should not expect any change from Putin until Washington changes its approach first.

On April 4, the world woke up to horrific images of the worst chemical attack in Syria against civilians in years, in the rebel-held town of Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib Province. The attack "bears all the hallmarks ([https://url.serverdata.net/?a5NIIoNu6x4W82Y6AmlWmc00DcP2ya900PD1qkHgXQl3g7d3Vo0f9LIUh1ZUfsf26t8-va8AFLZXRWcxMdeeBRsogumFaq6WI07-8zClh0wZJoNgVTkdfkpenpikv7JJR41SBa2Vr3kfgo4KI-gSbRG\\_9\\_KCNZka8c1C470QuOAX4o6exAk50UIwsPNz\\_PqFHv5tF7Yup54EfuW6GFRoA--](https://url.serverdata.net/?a5NIIoNu6x4W82Y6AmlWmc00DcP2ya900PD1qkHgXQl3g7d3Vo0f9LIUh1ZUfsf26t8-va8AFLZXRWcxMdeeBRsogumFaq6WI07-8zClh0wZJoNgVTkdfkpenpikv7JJR41SBa2Vr3kfgo4KI-gSbRG_9_KCNZka8c1C470QuOAX4o6exAk50UIwsPNz_PqFHv5tF7Yup54EfuW6GFRoA--))" of President Bashar al-Assad's government, as US and UK Ambassadors to the UN Nikki Haley and Matthew Rycroft observed. Moscow claims Syrian planes hit a terrorist lab, a highly implausible version of events by [expert accounts \(http://finance.yahoo.com/news/infantile-argument-experts-pour-cold-142850181.html\)](http://finance.yahoo.com/news/infantile-argument-experts-pour-cold-142850181.html). Russia's behavior drew widespread condemnation. Many in the West see what happened as a game changer. Haley said the US will act if the UN doesn't, and President Trump [said \(https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/05/world/middleeast/king-abdullah-jordan-trump.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/05/world/middleeast/king-abdullah-jordan-trump.html) the "unacceptable" attack changed his attitude on Syria and Assad, without offering further details.

But how does this situation look from the Kremlin's perspective? Did anything change?

Moscow's response after the attack doesn't surprise. Since 2013, after Russia brokered a deal with Assad on eliminating his chemical weapons arsenal after Assad killed at least 1,400 people in Ghouta using sarin gas, Assad continued to use chemical weapons against his people, including children, albeit on a smaller scale -- and in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 2118. The London-based [Syrian Network for Human Rights \(SNHR\) \(https://url.serverdata.net/?a5NIIoNu6x4W82Y6AmlWmQuzrRxM9y9CkiteDGeLuiwGQ29kLpQToLBEBoNyQABgcS2lNupfqX9j09qSthNjdMtMogwqIffA89LVnorBWhcYryK3V-48y\\_3QSlxxqoPqkg4NnEuqzPOAy2szkgG219-ep639QsJGLvWnsHowPc-\)](https://url.serverdata.net/?a5NIIoNu6x4W82Y6AmlWmQuzrRxM9y9CkiteDGeLuiwGQ29kLpQToLBEBoNyQABgcS2lNupfqX9j09qSthNjdMtMogwqIffA89LVnorBWhcYryK3V-48y_3QSlxxqoPqkg4NnEuqzPOAy2szkgG219-ep639QsJGLvWnsHowPc-) recorded 139 chemical attacks in Syria since September 2013, and nine attacks specifically in 2017, prior to this week's attack. The [UN also produced \(https://url.serverdata.net/?a5NIIoNu6x4W82Y6AmlWmbSH\\_xJf5fU9gZ4PT42k9plOgvWdZfybVRMJ9VIBstBX2RcnDKqGJ934PDAG4bhdzxsZ7rpxf0kkinGJuN3\\_bmccBe4qIOHmfh0\\_8ataxd1BFQzV7wIBr4Q\\_90TJwhB45qq2tMV4RlxY6WjrGtffrPvLiQqedDM7KuTgFLu1rEbbMZKxgM7UF30i7n3zFrSQ\\_68ku\\_1Uhzwi-MaXH53divwqM1mq-MOFZRI9I-\)](https://url.serverdata.net/?a5NIIoNu6x4W82Y6AmlWmbSH_xJf5fU9gZ4PT42k9plOgvWdZfybVRMJ9VIBstBX2RcnDKqGJ934PDAG4bhdzxsZ7rpxf0kkinGJuN3_bmccBe4qIOHmfh0_8ataxd1BFQzV7wIBr4Q_90TJwhB45qq2tMV4RlxY6WjrGtffrPvLiQqedDM7KuTgFLu1rEbbMZKxgM7UF30i7n3zFrSQ_68ku_1Uhzwi-MaXH53divwqM1mq-MOFZRI9I-) findings confirming Assad's culpability in a number of chemical attacks against his people. The Kremlin stood by Assad through it all. So, from Moscow's perspective, Khan Sheikhoun is just another in the string of many similar events in recent years.

What would get Russian President Vladimir Putin to change his position on Assad? With Trump's election Putin initially hoped for a grand bargain, a lifting of sanctions that punish Putin's aggression in Ukraine, in exchange for military cooperation with Russia against ISIS in Syria. This scenario did not involve Assad's departure. Moreover, Putin no longer bets on this deal, though he continues to signal that he's ready to talk to Trump, and publicly blames US domestic forces for preventing Trump from carrying out his plans to improve relations with Russia.

Earlier this week, a [terrorist attack \(http://www.cnn.com/2017/04/04/europe/st-petersburg-russia-explosion/index.html\)](http://www.cnn.com/2017/04/04/europe/st-petersburg-russia-explosion/index.html) shook the St. Petersburg metro, leaving 14 dead and many more injured. The attack signaled the return of terrorism to Russia after a several years' lull. Following the attack, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov [lamented \(https://www.gazeta.ru/social/news/2017/04/05/n\\_9886175.shtml\)](https://www.gazeta.ru/social/news/2017/04/05/n_9886175.shtml) the lack of international coordination on terrorism. Russian ambassador to the UK Alexander Yakovenko said on the same day, [according \(http://ura.ru/news/1052284201\)](http://ura.ru/news/1052284201) to Russian press reports, that the fight against terrorism could help improve Russian-British relations, and this topic will be on the top of the agenda during UK Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson's upcoming trip to Moscow -- a visit that Johnson postponed in late March, but [according \(https://url.serverdata.net/?a5NIIoNu6x4W82Y6AmlWmTnP2rWAY7xoMLgzcPG54iXhIVFoI883ZLYrquuecjABORWsvL1Esq4aEztG0CKceO\\_G\\_F4rxZDysoJlIZGkILg4aqUYHj-LIHDUyxNUhIgDUnBLkCjnh4wiWUhe7MaY4Acwn3R1jUFML9Ybstbnq1tiezQqQUkW2S2HD89\\_NtceHcbsGUtmnM38tsjhi2RIFpd40Q\\_fvXpZLWsolArbxCURQiTX\\_PVDHvmy43KD9SjW8c8dniRcw2\\_hxgz7M9iSrFSdGf63zMEFJrH-NPRE6mSJVvHwRqHzHTPjMg--\)](https://url.serverdata.net/?a5NIIoNu6x4W82Y6AmlWmTnP2rWAY7xoMLgzcPG54iXhIVFoI883ZLYrquuecjABORWsvL1Esq4aEztG0CKceO_G_F4rxZDysoJlIZGkILg4aqUYHj-LIHDUyxNUhIgDUnBLkCjnh4wiWUhe7MaY4Acwn3R1jUFML9Ybstbnq1tiezQqQUkW2S2HD89_NtceHcbsGUtmnM38tsjhi2RIFpd40Q_fvXpZLWsolArbxCURQiTX_PVDHvmy43KD9SjW8c8dniRcw2_hxgz7M9iSrFSdGf63zMEFJrH-NPRE6mSJVvHwRqHzHTPjMg--) to *The Independent*, will proceed in several weeks. "We have seen in the terrible events in London and St. Petersburg what a common threat terrorism is," [said \(https://url.serverdata.net/?a5NIIoNu6x4W82Y6AmlWmTnP2rWAY7xoMLgzcPG54iXhIVFoI883ZLYrquuecjABORWsvL1Esq4aEztG0CKceO\\_G\\_F4rxZDysoJlIZGkILg4aqUYHj-LIHDUyxNUhIgDUnBLkCjnh4wiWUhe7MaY4Acwn3R1jUFML9Ybstbnq1tiezQqQUkW2S2HD89\\_NtceHcbsGUtmnM38tsjhi2RIFpd40Q\\_fvXpZLWsolArbxCURQiTX\\_PVDHvmy43KD9SjW8c8dniRcw2\\_hxgz7M9iSrFSdGf63zMEFJrH-NPRE6mSJVvHwRqHzHTPjMg--\)](https://url.serverdata.net/?a5NIIoNu6x4W82Y6AmlWmTnP2rWAY7xoMLgzcPG54iXhIVFoI883ZLYrquuecjABORWsvL1Esq4aEztG0CKceO_G_F4rxZDysoJlIZGkILg4aqUYHj-LIHDUyxNUhIgDUnBLkCjnh4wiWUhe7MaY4Acwn3R1jUFML9Ybstbnq1tiezQqQUkW2S2HD89_NtceHcbsGUtmnM38tsjhi2RIFpd40Q_fvXpZLWsolArbxCURQiTX_PVDHvmy43KD9SjW8c8dniRcw2_hxgz7M9iSrFSdGf63zMEFJrH-NPRE6mSJVvHwRqHzHTPjMg--) one Western diplomat according to *The Independent*.

How do these developments relate to Russia in Syria? They suggest that the Kremlin is pursuing largely the same line as before -- trying to draw the West into cooperation on terrorism, painting a picture of Russia and the West fighting the same struggle. And, as before, this picture remains false. But from Putin's perspective, even if he can't strike a grand bargain, he can try to push for a smaller version.

Boris Johnson [blames Assad \(https://url.serverdata.net/?a5NIIoNu6x4W82Y6AmlWmU7wdPZgmRwJLY86mCXlxXpUZ6yVdal6NkFM4PirDwd\\_ZDa1K0Nbh4E9kQPpy5axEkFhW4NmFzYa1PGJpnVvVrGRHBPBU\\_0a1sW00JPgdses5gaPeLvp13psu4x7UBNDQx9Jyx9vXqvOAR6XMX5zK19ljQuG0AWYbSzhHegp1qrPS1gdFbAYx3PLSQJSSGITGLPtB4SISHFDxoKeELKwJqdMC5jZh2-00JANAXfoKClKqQxWfb697SSE-\)](https://url.serverdata.net/?a5NIIoNu6x4W82Y6AmlWmU7wdPZgmRwJLY86mCXlxXpUZ6yVdal6NkFM4PirDwd_ZDa1K0Nbh4E9kQPpy5axEkFhW4NmFzYa1PGJpnVvVrGRHBPBU_0a1sW00JPgdses5gaPeLvp13psu4x7UBNDQx9Jyx9vXqvOAR6XMX5zK19ljQuG0AWYbSzhHegp1qrPS1gdFbAYx3PLSQJSSGITGLPtB4SISHFDxoKeELKwJqdMC5jZh2-00JANAXfoKClKqQxWfb697SSE-) for the chemical attack in Khan Sheikhoun this week. So does Trump. But neither said anything on Russia. Ambassador Haley for the first time suggested that the US may act unilaterally on Syria, but so far no further details are available on exactly how this may happen.

Use of force against Assad, or credible threat of use of force, is the only thing that will show Putin the US is serious, and earn his respect. But Putin can afford to wait. He doesn't care if his citizens die in bombings. He faces no domestic constraints or pressures a democratic leader does. His goals haven't changed. And world silence when Moscow razed [Grozny \(http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/780073.stm\)](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/780073.stm) to the ground in late 1999-early 2000 makes it unlikely that anyone in the international community can expect Putin to condemn Assad. We should expect no change from Putin until the US changes its approach first.

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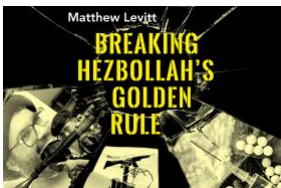
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