

# Linking Targets to Political Objectives in Syria

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Brief Analysis

## If the United States strikes, it needs to choose targets and weapon systems based on a strategic plan that is well explained to the world.

**A**s Washington moves toward punitive action in Syria, the resultant military operation will presumably take one of two forms: either token strikes aimed at restoring the credibility of U.S. "redline" statements, or a serious attempt to shape the Assad regime's intentions and military capabilities. If the latter unfolds, the target selection process needs to be informed by a rigorous discussion of strategic objectives and intended effects. At minimum, the most likely intended outcome of U.S. and allied action will be to deter future use of chemical weapons (CW). Yet a whole range of broader effects might also be sought while the U.S. military is engaged, such as reducing regime attacks on civilians generally, interdicting support from Iranian-backed Shiite proxies (e.g., Hezbollah), or even halting government offensives and fostering a ceasefire.

## STRIKING CW TARGETS ONLY?

**T**here are advantages to maintaining a clean focus on CW-related targets in any strike operation, including the clear linkage between punishment and crime in the eyes of the regime, the international community, and the U.S. public. Yet the ideal option -- taking away the regime's ability to conduct CW attacks by eliminating chemical stockpiles or delivery systems -- is probably not practical outside general war conditions.

For one thing, the regime is likely still carrying out defensive measures such field dispersal and frequent movement

of stockpiles, making it extremely difficult to find and target them without a full U.S. air campaign to gain complete freedom of movement for persistent intelligence collection in Syrian airspace. Definitive proof of CW eradication would also require U.S. boots on the ground or unrestricted international inspections. In addition, efforts to destroy most or all of the regime's CW delivery systems would probably be stymied by the vast numbers of artillery pieces, rocket launchers, missiles, and aircraft in Syria, which together constitute a very complex, geographically dispersed target set.

## **STRIKING MILITARY UNITS**

If the United States cannot take away the Assad regime's CW capability, all of the alternative options exist in the murky domain of coercive targeting intended to deter future CW use. For example, Washington could seek to shape the regime's calculus by directly retaliating against the Damascus-based 4th Armored Division, the force responsible for the August 21 CW attack. Specific targets could include the division's headquarters, vehicle parks, and CW delivery systems (missiles, artillery, and rockets).

An attack on such a dispersed target set would be difficult, but still well within U.S. capabilities, and at low-to-medium risk. Syria's air defense network seems robust on paper and would appear to offer a significant degree of protection, but this is not necessarily the case in reality. Over the past few months, Israel launched four airstrikes within Syria that surprised the regime and were effectively unimpeded, including attacks on 4th Armored facilities near Damascus. Although the United States has already lost strategic surprise, its fourth-generation fighter aircraft and other assets are capable of achieving local air superiority, destroying enemy air defenses, and interdicting fielded forces and CW systems in defined areas. These aircraft carry very high-resolution targeting pods and numerous small-diameter satellite-aided bombs that are ideal for "plinking" individual enemy missiles, rocket launchers, vehicles, and bunkers at extended ranges, outside of surface-to-air missile engagement zones. Of course, the possibility of collateral damage and civilian casualties cannot be dismissed given that some 4th Armored elements are stationed in urban settings on the outskirts of Damascus.

Washington could also touch a nerve in the regime by decisively striking one of Assad's most prized units, the 155th Brigade led by his brother Maher, located in the center of Damascus. U.S. resolve would be underlined by a substantial strike on Damascus using manned strike assets rather than just cruise missiles. Such an approach would show the leadership that U.S. forces are willing to "go downtown" into the regime's most heavily defended centers from day one. It could also encourage regime elites to flee the capital, bolster rebel morale, and open new avenues for rebel advances around Damascus.

## **BROADER TARGETING**

If the U.S. government were willing to broaden its target list, it could signal U.S. areas of concern while facilitating follow-on strikes if necessary. Although leadership targeting would likely inflict the greatest shock, it is extremely difficult to do with precision. For example, it could result in accidental (but intentional-looking) decapitation of the leadership or a notable failure that creates a "rally around the flag" effect, making the leadership appear heroic and U.S. strikes seem weak. Elements such as regime propaganda outlets may also be too difficult to suppress, as was the case during Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Allied Force in Kosovo.

Yet some symbolic targets linked to regime attacks on civilians may be worth addressing, notably Air Force Intelligence headquarters, military airbases at Dumair, Saiqal, Tiyas, and Hama, and the new Iran-financed, Hezbollah-trained "People's Army" units. Various air defense systems and secure-communication facilities may also be worth striking in order to make follow-on attacks less risky for U.S. forces.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY**

If a strike is to be more than a token move, U.S. leaders need to approve targeting that sends the most menacing message possible to the Assad regime. Success is more likely if Washington surprises the regime by accepting greater risks than anticipated, or by causing unexpectedly heavy damage that shifts the local balance of power against Assad on a crucial battlefield. A strike would also stand a better chance of influencing the regime's behavior if it opens the way for follow-on operations.

Post-attack information operations will be as important as the strikes. Clearly explaining the rationale for hitting certain targets is crucial if Washington hopes to influence the regime. For instance, by signaling that they want to give Syrian civilians greater protection in general, U.S. officials may convince the regime to regard certain tactics (e.g., chemical attacks) as out of bounds. Evidence of coalition-building for larger follow-on strikes would also be valuable, since a full air campaign -- a key threat to develop -- would require extensive airbase availability from a multitude of allies.

In sum, the Assad regime needs to understand that U.S. attacks may not unfold in a linear or predictable fashion. Put another way, Washington should prevent Assad from concluding that he can selectively trade occasional CW attacks for limited U.S. strikes -- a ratio the regime may be willing to bear. Instead, Assad must be convinced that any U.S. strike is the opening move of a broader campaign that only the regime has the power to arrest by changing its behavior.

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