

Forget the Red Line and Engage in Syria

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There is ample justification for intervention in Syria once U.S. strategic interests are factored into the equation, regardless of the chemical red line.

On Wednesday, Aug. 21, Bashar Assad's regime in Syria all but certainly used chemical weapons to kill hundreds of civilians, including dozens of women and children. That was just one day after the first anniversary of President Obama's warning that Assad's use of chemical weapons was a "red line" that would "change my calculus."

The red line has proved to be a hollow threat. Both prior to and after Obama's August 2012 statement, credible reports gave strong reason to think that such weapons had been used. Indeed, after this latest outrage, the administration has not only refused to blame Assad, it announced that it would bring the matter to the United Nations Security Council, a time-tested recipe for further inaction.

The administration's reluctance to get involved in Syria is wholly understandable. Such an arbitrary humanitarian trigger for military involvement makes little sense. After all, to date more than 100,000 Syrians have been killed, mostly by bullets, artillery and missiles. Why should Washington change its policy just because the Assad regime altered its modality of killing? Is the murder of 1,000 innocents with sarin gas worse than that of 100,000 with conventional weapons?

The United States did not intervene in much worse situations in Africa, including Congo, where more than 5 million were killed between 1998 and 2008, and Rwanda, where the 1994 genocide claimed the lives of some 1 million Tutsis. The sad fact is that Washington cannot intervene in every slaughter of innocents. After a decade in Iraq and Afghanistan, Americans are fatigued.

At least in part, this has contributed to a U.S. policy that for the better part of two years has been narrowly focused on "cauterizing" and avoiding involvement in the Syrian conflict. To be fair, two months ago -- after another less lethal chemical weapons attack -- the President did authorize sending weapons to Syrian rebels. As of mid-August,

however, rebel leaders still complain that "nothing has come through yet."

Today, for the U.S. to deploy military assets abroad -- to risk blood and treasure on foreign soil -- there must be a demonstrable and pressing national interest. For Washington, the Assad regime's slaughter of civilians with chemical weapons does not yet fit that criterion.

But what Obama and others in Washington fail to understand is that there is ample justification for intervention in Syria -- if America's strategic interests are factored into the equation.

The longer the war in Syria continues, for example, the higher the threat of destabilizing spillover in a region that holds much of the world's oil and gas reserves. Bad scenarios are already playing out in Iraq and Lebanon, two sectarian countries that are sending combatants to fight in Syria, and increasingly, fighting one another at home. Meanwhile, Jordan, one of Washington's leading Arab allies, is hosting nearly 1 million Syrian refugees while facing an economic crisis and daily protests.

At the same time, the Syrian opposition is becoming increasingly radicalized, replete with Al Qaeda-affiliated militias. If the rebels win, the state faces a long struggle for hearts and minds. Along the way, these groups could acquire some of Assad's chemical weapons.

Worse, perhaps, is if Assad prevails, then Iran -- Syria's longtime strategic ally, which is on the brink of attaining a nuclear weapon -- will be emboldened. To wit, if the United States did not mean to draw a red line about Syrian chemical weapons, Tehran may reasonably conclude that Washington is not serious about enforcing its often repeated red line about Iran acquiring nuclear weapons.

The debate in Washington is focused on how to respond to the recent chemical weapons attack. But instead of fixating on the type of weapons Assad is using, the administration would be better advised to start concentrating on U.S. interests in the Middle East. The war in Syria -- and Washington's passive Syria policy -- threatens them.

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