

Polarized International Reactions to Syrian Chemical Attack

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Brief Analysis

The chemical weapons massacre in Damascus has mobilized Assad's foreign opponents, giving the United States a new reason and new partners for a more serious response.

In sharp contrast to Washington's equivocal reaction following yesterday's chemical attack in Damascus, other governments in the region and beyond have taken much clearer positions either for or against the Assad regime. Among the regime's supporters, Iran's new foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, reportedly telephoned his Turkish counterpart to insist that if there was a chemical attack, it must have been perpetrated by the Syrian rebels, not the government. And in a speech to the Basij militia publicized by the semiofficial Fars News Agency today, Gen. Yahya Rahim Safavi, senior military advisor to Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, proclaimed, "In Syria's military and political conflict, Iran, Syria, Russia, and China are victorious, and America and Israel are the losers."

Similarly, Russian media continue to blame the "alleged attack" on the Syrian opposition, citing the views of various foreign analysts in support of that accusation. And a brief official statement from China noted that any UN inquiry into the incident should be "objective," implying uncertainty about the facts and even potential UN bias in their interpretation. Yesterday, Moscow and Beijing reportedly blocked a formal Security Council call to investigate the attack -- a position that German foreign minister Guido Westerwelle labeled "regrettable" and "incomprehensible."

At the opposite end of the spectrum, the Security Council's two permanent Western European members are taking vigorous positions against the regime. British foreign secretary William Hague took the lead in referring the "shocking escalation" to the council and lining up thirty-five other countries to call for an immediate investigation. And today, French foreign minister Laurent Fabius publicly advocated the use of force (though not "troops on the ground") if the regime is shown to be responsible.

Among Syria's neighbors, Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu was even more direct, dismissing any doubts about regime culpability: "We call on the international community in this situation where the redline was crossed long ago to intervene as soon as possible...If we don't act decisively, even worse massacres will follow." And Turkey's

highest Islamic official -- President of Religious Affairs Mehmet Gormez, head of the Diyanet -- made headlines today by rejecting UN humanitarian funding until the organization does more to stop the slaughter in Syria.

Official Arab reaction is also mostly directed against the regime. Yesterday, Arab League secretary-general Nabil el-Araby called for a UN inquiry into "this deplorable crime." Saudi foreign minister Saud al-Faisal went further, urging the Security Council and EU to reach a "clear deterrent decision" regarding Syria without delay. In addition, the tragedy has been prominently featured in major pan-Arab print and broadcast media outlets today, most of which are funded by Gulf Cooperation Council countries. Coverage is somewhat less dramatic among Syria's immediate neighbors. For example, the headline on one Jordanian paper highlighted the effects on the kingdom, not the Syrian victims: "Alleged chemical attack in Syria triggers mass Syrian exodus toward Jordan."

In Israel, which has been relatively quiet about the civil war on its northern border, Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon publicly asserted yesterday that "not for the first time, the regime is employing chemical weapons." Press reports about the movement of a missile-defense battery to central Israel probably reflect an increased threat perception regarding potential rocket fire from the north -- most likely by Hezbollah, but perhaps by Syrian regime forces as well.

At the moment, the various calls for an onsite inquiry appear unlikely to succeed. When the attack occurred, a UN team was already in Syria to investigate past chemical allegations, but the regime is making it impossible for these inspectors to look into yesterday's incident simply by continuing to shell and bomb the area intensively.

With mounting civilian casualties, European activism, and pressure and apprehension from Arab allies, the United States may find it increasingly difficult to stay on the sidelines, despite the continued UN deadlock. The silver lining (if there is one) lies in the possibility that key U.S. allies are now ready to participate in and help pay for a coordinated international effort to enforce President Obama's redline in Syria.

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