

Cutting Through the Fog of War in East Ghouta

by [Andrew J. Tabler \(/experts/andrew-j-tablet\)](/experts/andrew-j-tablet)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Andrew J. Tabler \(/experts/andrew-j-tablet\)](/experts/andrew-j-tablet)

Andrew J. Tabler is the Martin J. Gross fellow in the Geduld Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute, where he focuses on Syria and U.S. policy in the Levant.



Brief Analysis

U.S. backsliding on redlines regarding Syrian chemical weapons only encourages the Assad regime to make choices that increase the likelihood of direct U.S. intervention.

Videos and other accounts of massive death tolls in the East Ghouta area outside Damascus have led opposition elements to blame the Assad regime for once again using chemical weapons (CW) on Syrian civilians. For its part, the regime has dubbed the accusations a fabrication. How to sort through these conflicting claims?

At first glance, the timing of the attack may seem like a cause for pause among those pointing fingers at Bashar al-Assad. Yesterday was the first anniversary of President Obama calling the use of CW a "redline" that would change his calculus in Syria. And a UN team that the regime blocked from entering the country for five months had just showed up in Damascus to investigate past use of chemical agents at three sites. Surely Assad must know that using CW at such a time would be the equivalent of thumbing his nose at the redline of a U.S. president and the UN as a whole?

Yet Assad presumably knows from Obama's past behavior that the White House wants to avoid becoming more involved in Syria. Assad has spent the better part of the past year not only testing Obama's chemical redline, but successfully moving it. The original line was drawn at "use or movement" of CW, then moved to simple "use" after Washington determined the regime was moving them (albeit possibly to secure them). The line now sits at "systematic use" after U.S. intelligence concluded that chemical agents had been employed in small concentrations.

The president may still hope to deliver on his campaign pledge of getting America out of wars in the Middle East, shaping his legacy as something akin to Lyndon Johnson without Vietnam. Yet policy backsliding on Syria only encourages the Assad regime to make choices that increase the likelihood of direct U.S. intervention, as the fight intensifies and the spillover into neighboring countries reaches unsustainable levels. Moreover, given the degree of Tehran and Hezbollah's direct involvement on Assad's side, U.S. backsliding will also likely encourage them to test

Washington's resolve on other redlines, including Iran's nuclear program.

The fight in Syria is far from over, and the threshold of "systematic use" of CW will likely be reached at some point, whether by the number of incidents, the scale of the death tolls, or both. Instead of waiting for that happen, Washington should take two immediate steps to secure its strategic position in the region. First, it should build on its demand that Damascus allow the UN CW team to investigate the latest claims by proposing a Security Council resolution that expands the team's mandate to East Ghouta. Washington should make clear in background discussions that if Moscow vetoed such a proposal, the United States would conclude that Assad was definitely responsible for today's attacks. As a complement, U.S. officials should emphasize that the Syrian government is responsible for controlling all chemical agents in the country and ensuring that they do not fall into rebel hands. Therefore, any use of CW from Syrian stocks -- whether by Assad's forces or rebels -- is the regime's responsibility. Which party used the agents is a secondary issue.

Second, Washington should make clear to Russia and Syria that, absent convincing evidence of the regime exercising control over all CW on its territory, episodes such today's will require the United States and its allies to take military action to prevent future use. Given the practical difficulties of locating and seizing CW stocks and the danger to nearby civilians from attacks on CW storage sites, such a warning would presumably mean airstrikes on regime units responsible for using chemical agents and, perhaps, on CW-related facilities.

Like it or not, the United States still has considerable interests in the Middle East, and the fight in Syria is a rapidly growing threat to them -- particularly in terms of U.S. allies that border Syria, energy interests, and America's overall reputation. Getting out ahead of those threats is key to maintaining Washington's strategic position in the region and beyond. By at least one prominent press account, the president's initial decision to declare a redline on CW use originated from his gut reaction to the Syria crisis rather than a deliberative process. As the crisis grows in scale and complexity, a more assertive U.S. policy based on an overall assessment of the situation will be needed to contain the fighting within Syria's borders and end the conflict -- whether at the negotiating table or on the battlefield.

Andrew J. Tabler is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute and author of [In the Lion's Den: An Eyewitness Account of Washington's Battle with Syria](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/in-the-lions-den-an-eyewitness-account-of-washingtons-battle-with-syria) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/in-the-lions-den-an-eyewitness-account-of-washingtons-battle-with-syria>). ❖

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