

Assad's Final Warning

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Since the beginning of the Syrian uprising, Washington has repeatedly demanded that President Bashar al-Assad desist from employing the most brutal tactics against his own people -- only to see the Syrian regime use them anyway. With the assassination of at least three senior Assad regime members coming only days after reports that Syria is moving its chemical weapons stockpile, the U.S. government must now draw a line in the sand for Assad. And this time, the Obama team must stick to it, or risk a humanitarian and national security calamity.

The news that the Syrian regime is moving its chemical weapons has set off speculation within the U.S government about what Assad may be prepared to do with those weapons as his control over the country deteriorates. It would be comforting to think that Assad knows that using such weapons of mass destruction would be crossing a red line -- but unfortunately that would be too optimistic. After all, Assad has ignored every other international ultimatum directed at him since the beginning of the revolt.

The same pattern has held true with attempts to force Assad into a negotiated transition through the U.N. Security Council, where Russia and China vetoed for the third time a resolution that would have imposed sanctions against the regime if it did not end its brutal crackdown.

This must end. Washington and its allies must lay down and enforce red lines prohibiting the use of Syria's chemical and biological weapons (CBW), one of the Middle East's largest stockpiles. To do so, Washington should push for a U.N. Security Council resolution under Chapter VII of the U.N. Charter, which sanctions the use of military action, on mass atrocities in Syria -- including a reference that those responsible for the use of CBW would be held accountable before the International Criminal Court. Washington should not water down the text to make the measure toothless, as it has done repeatedly on Syria over the last year in an attempt to avoid a Russia veto. In the event of further Russian obstructionism, the United States should lead its allies -- Britain, France, Germany, Canada, Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia -- in issuing a stark warning to Assad that mass atrocities in Syria will be met with an immediate military response.

Assad's most recent moves are part of a well-established pattern that test and push U.S. and NATO red lines. The Assad regime has increasingly deployed artillery and combat aircraft to suppress the Syrian opposition, despite Washington's warning not to do so. A few weeks ago, Syria shot down a Turkish F-4 fighter jet, a provocation for

which it received only verbal condemnation by NATO. The Syrian government's history of such reckless moves stretches back years: In 2010, Assad reportedly transferred Scud D missiles and M-600 rockets to the Lebanese militant party Hezbollah, essentially handing strategic weapons to a third party and removing his ability to restrain the self-proclaimed Party of God.

When Bashar was master of Syria, such behavior was seen as an annoyance rather than a threat to U.S. national security interests. Today, all that has changed. The Assad regime is mired in a grinding conflict with the Syrian opposition, in which it is steadily losing control, as the July 18 bombing in the heart of Damascus shows. Furthermore, a number of massacres by Alawite forces in Sunni villages around the cities of Homs and Hama indicate that Alawites and the regime they dominate may be attempting to clear Sunni villages in order to set up a rump Alawite enclave in their historic homeland along the Syrian coast in the event of regime collapse.

The international community therefore faces a dilemma: Should chemical and biological materials be put at the disposal of those running an Alawite rump regime, and those directing the shabbiha "armed gangs" roaming the Syrian countryside, there is much greater likelihood of atrocities or genocide. And it's not only the pro-Assad groups the United States must worry about: As the Syrian regime loses its grip on power, the roughly 45 different CBW facilities and tons of chemical weapons materials that U.S. officials estimate are scattered throughout the country could fall into the hands of Sunni extremists. These groups not only don't share America's long-term interests in Syria, but increasingly resent Washington for standing by and doing little while Syrians are slaughtered. This sentiment is unlikely to improve if Washington and its allies simply watch and hope for the best while the Assad regime moves around its chemical weapons stockpile.

The time to act is now, before disaster strikes. By leading an effort at the U.N. Security Council to warn the Syrian regime about the dire consequences of using its chemical weapons stockpile, and raising the possibility of a military response in the event that effort fails, Washington will be communicating to Assad that he would be sealing his fate if he crosses this last remaining red line.

Until now, giving Assad the benefit of the doubt has only led to more deaths and an increasingly evident U.S. failure to stop the carnage in Syria. The Obama administration has drawn a red line at mass atrocities in Libya and elsewhere in the Middle East. It should do the same in Syria.

Andrew J. Tabler is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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