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Article 1.

The Economist

Syria - Hit him hard

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Aug 31st 2013 -- THE grim spectacle of suffering in Syria—100,000 of whose people have died in its civil war—will haunt the world for a long time. Intervention has never looked easy, yet over the past two and a half years outsiders have missed many opportunities to affect the outcome for the better. Now America and its allies have been stirred into action by President Bashar Assad's apparent use of chemical weapons to murder around 1,000 civilians—the one thing that even Barack Obama has said he would never tolerate.

The American president and his allies have three choices: do nothing (or at least do as little as Mr Obama has done to date);

launch a sustained assault with the clear aim of removing Mr Assad and his regime; or hit the Syrian dictator more briefly but grievously, as punishment for his use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Each carries the risk of making things worse, but the last is the best option.

No option is perfect

From the Pentagon to Britain's parliament, plenty of realpolitikers argue that doing nothing is the only prudent course. Look at Iraq, they say: whenever America clumsily breaks a country, it ends up "owning" the problem. A strike would inevitably inflict suffering: cruise missiles are remarkably accurate, but can all too easily kill civilians. Mr Assad may retaliate, perhaps assisted by his principal allies, Iran, Russia and Hizbullah, the Lebanese Shias' party-cum-militia, which is practised in the dark arts of international terror and which threatens Israel with 50,000 rockets and missiles. What happens if Britain's base in Cyprus is struck by Russian-made Scud missiles? Or if intervention leads to some of the chemical weapons ending up with militants close to al-Qaeda? And why further destabilise Syria's neighbours—Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq?

Because doing nothing carries risks that are even bigger (see [article](#)). If the West tolerates such a blatant war crime, Mr Assad will feel even freer to use chemical weapons. He had after all stepped across Mr Obama's "red line" several times by using these weapons on a smaller scale—and found that Mr Obama and his allies blinked. An American threat, especially over WMD, must count for something: it is hard to see how Mr Obama can eat his words without the superpower losing

credibility with the likes of Iran and North Korea.

And America's cautiousness has cost lives. A year ago, this newspaper argued for military intervention: not for Western boots on the ground, but for the vigorous arming of the rebels, the creation of humanitarian corridors, the imposition of no-fly zones and, if Mr Assad ignored them, an aerial attack on his air-defence system and heavy weaponry. At the time Mr Assad's regime was reeling, most of the rebels were relatively moderate, the death toll was less than half the current total and the conflict had yet to spill into other countries. Some of Mr Obama's advisers also urged him to arm the rebels; distracted by his election, he rebuffed them—and now faces, as he was repeatedly warned, a much harder choice.

So why not do now what Mr Obama should have done then, and use the pretext of the chemical strike to pursue the second option of regime change? Because, sadly, the facts have changed. Mr Assad's regime has become more solid, while the rebels, shorn of Western support and dependent mainly on the Saudis and Qataris, have become more Islamist, with the most extreme jihadis doing much of the fighting. An uprising against a brutal tyrant has kindled a sectarian civil war. The Sunnis who make up around three-quarters of the population generally favour the rebels, whereas many of those who adhere to minority religions, including Christians, have reluctantly sided with Mr Assad. The opportunity to push this war to a speedy conclusion has gone—and it is disingenuous to wrap that cause up with the chemical weapons.

So Mr Obama should focus on the third option: a more limited punishment of such severity that Mr Assad is deterred from ever

using WMD again. Hitting the chemical stockpiles themselves runs the risk both of poisoning more civilians and of the chemicals falling into the wrong hands. Far better for a week of missiles to rain down on the dictator's "command-and-control" centres, including his palaces. By doing this, Mr Obama would certainly help the rebels, though probably not enough to overturn the regime. With luck, well-calibrated strikes might scare Mr Assad towards the negotiating table.

Do it well and follow through

But counting on luck would be a mistake, especially in this fortune-starved country. There is no tactical advantage in rushing in: Mr Assad and his friends will have been preparing for contingencies, including ways to hide his offending chemical weapons, for many months. Mr Obama must briskly go through all sorts of hoops before ordering an attack.

The first task is to lay out as precisely as anybody can the evidence, much of it inevitably circumstantial, that Mr Assad's forces were indeed responsible for the mass atrocity. America's secretary of state, John Kerry, was right that Syria's refusal to let the UN's team of inspectors visit the poison-gas sites for five days after the attack was tantamount to an admission of guilt. But, given the fiasco of Iraq's unfound weapons, it is not surprising that sceptics still abound. Mr Obama must also assemble the widest coalition of the willing, seeing that China and Russia, which is increasingly hostile to Western policies (see next leader), are sure to block a resolution in the UN Security Council to use force under Chapter 7. NATO—including, importantly, Germany and Turkey—already seems onside. The Arab League is likely to be squared, too.

And before the missiles are fired, Mr Obama must give Mr Assad one last chance: a clear ultimatum to hand over his chemical weapons entirely within a very short period. The time for inspections is over. If Mr Assad gives in, then both he and his opponents will be deprived of such poisons—a victory for Mr Obama. If Mr Assad refuses, he should be shown as little mercy as he has shown to the people he claims to govern. If an American missile then hits Mr Assad himself, so be it. He and his henchmen have only themselves to blame.

Article 2.

NYT

Make Assad Pay

Roger Cohen

August 29, 2013 -- Of the chemical weapons attack in Syria last week that left several hundred people dead, President Obama has now said: “We have concluded that the Syrian government in fact carried these out. And if that’s so, then there need to be international consequences.”

There are two presidential voices in that statement on PBS’s NewsHour, the active and declarative of the first sentence, the passive and impersonal of the second. They capture Obama’s oscillating drift over the Syrian conflict, now well into its third year, with more than 100,000 people killed and several million

displaced. The president has had a bad Syrian war.

This is still an American-led and American-protected world. If “there need to be international consequences,” then the United States, in coordination with its allies and where possible with the backing of the United Nations, must deliver them. Obama has drawn and redrawn a red line at the use in Syria of chemical weapons, a scourge that almost all the world’s nations (189 of them) have abjured through the Chemical Weapons Convention and through participation in the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

The credibility of the United States is a precious, already eroded commodity. Its loss would make for a treacherous world. That credibility cannot be compromised in this instance. A world where President Bashar al-Assad thumbs his nose at the U.S. president and where the international taboo on the use of chemical weapons lies shattered is headed in a very dangerous direction.

But don’t the Syrian people deserve better than raining U.S. Tomahawks unaccompanied by a Western strategy for an endgame? They certainly deserve better than the Assad tyranny, three decades after its devastating attack on Hama, and they deserve better than a war that will never end so long as the Assad clan hangs on.

A limited attack that destabilizes Assad, damages his military assets, compromises his air force and dents the ability of Russia and Iran to bring in arms may in the best case bring Assad to the negotiating table or speed his departure. In the worst case it will lead to more of the same (Syria’s gradual dismemberment

through civil war) with greater American “ownership.” As worst cases go, more of the same is acceptable.

The option tried up to now has been inaction: It does not work. Persisting with it and expecting anything to change is feckless and foolish.

While Russia would be angry at any U.S. or allied attack, its anger would not go beyond the rhetorical. (It was angry about the fall of its ally Slobodan Milosevic of Serbia, too, but did nothing.) The Geneva diplomatic path to a negotiated settlement would be set back but has been going nowhere anyway. Jihadist elements in Syria might benefit, but nothing will benefit them more than a prolonged war of the kind that already exists. War fatigue in the United States and Britain is not an excuse for the surrender of a commodity of enduring strategic importance — national credibility — to an ephemeral one — public opinion.

Of course, the Iraq precedent, a story of botched intelligence, is a terrible one. For that reason, before any use of force, U.N. inspectors must complete their mission to Syria, the British U.N. resolution accusing the Syrian government of a deadly chemical weapons attack and authorizing force must be debated (although Russia will block it) and Obama and David Cameron, the British prime minister, must present their evidence that the Assad regime was the author of the attack.

The legitimacy of the case for military intervention can be powerfully made on the basis of the evolving law (post-Rwanda, post-Bosnia, post-Kosovo) of humanitarian necessity and the world’s prohibition on the use of chemical weapons.

The “responsibility to protect” should not be empty words. On

the eve of the 100th anniversary of World War I, whose gas attacks on Flanders fields produced “the froth-corrupted lungs, obscene as cancer” of which the British poet Wilfred Owen wrote, the Assad clan’s gassings cannot go unanswered.

Two other things should happen on the diplomatic front. Obama should invoke the Chemical Weapons Convention and place Syria before its responsibilities in being among the tiny group of nations that has not adhered. (Israel is a signatory but has not ratified the convention; perhaps that is why Obama has been reticent on this front.)

The West should also put out feelers to the new Iranian president, Hassan Rouhani, who has made a powerful call for the prohibition on the use of chemical weapons to be upheld. “Iran gives notice to international community to use all its might to prevent use of chemical weapons anywhere in the world, esp. in Syria,” Rouhani wrote on his official Twitter account this week, recalling how Iran was attacked with chemical weapons by Saddam Hussein (with the West’s open or tacit support) during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war. Rouhani did not support Western military action but did signal a changed Iranian tone.

Rouhani’s Iran, handled right, can help hasten a Syrian endgame. So, too, can the firm military assertion of U.S. credibility.

[Article 3.](#)

The Washington Post

Shamed into war?

Charles Krauthammer

August 30 -- Having leaked to the world, and thus to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, a detailed briefing of the coming U.S. air attack on Syria — (1) the source (offshore warships and perhaps a bomber or two), (2) the weapon (cruise missiles), (3) the duration (two or three days), (4) the purpose (punishment, not “regime change”) — perhaps we should be publishing the exact time the bombs will fall, lest we disrupt dinner in Damascus.

So much for the element of surprise. Into his third year of dithering, two years after declaring Assad had to go, one year after drawing — then erasing — his own red line on chemical weapons, Barack Obama has been stirred to action.

Or more accurately, shamed into action. Which is the worst possible reason. A president doesn't commit soldiers to a war for which he has zero enthusiasm. Nor does one go to war for demonstration purposes.

Want to send a message? Call Western Union. A Tomahawk missile is for killing. A serious instrument of war demands a serious purpose.

The purpose can be either punitive or strategic: either a spasm of conscience that will inflame our opponents yet leave not a trace, or a considered application of abundant American power to alter the strategic equation that is now heavily favoring our worst

enemies in the heart of the Middle East.

There are risks to any attack. Blowback terror from Syria and its terrorist allies. Threatened retaliation by Iran or Hezbollah on Israel — that could lead to a guns-of-August regional conflagration. Moreover, a mere punitive pinprick after which Assad emerges from the smoke intact and emboldened would demonstrate nothing but U.S. weakness and ineffectiveness.

In 1998, after al-Qaeda blew up two U.S. embassies in Africa, Bill Clinton lobbed a few cruise missiles into empty tents in Afghanistan. That showed 'em.

It did. It showed terminal unseriousness. Al-Qaeda got the message. Two years later, the USS Cole. A year after that, 9/11.

Yet even Clinton gathered the wherewithal to launch a sustained air campaign against Serbia. That wasn't a mere message. That was a military strategy designed to stop the Serbs from ravaging Kosovo. It succeeded.

If Obama is planning a message-sending three-day attack, preceded by leaks telling the Syrians to move their important military assets to safety, better that he do nothing. Why run the considerable risk if nothing important is changed?

The only defensible action would be an attack with a strategic purpose, a sustained campaign aimed at changing the balance of forces by removing the Syrian regime's decisive military advantage — air power.

Of Assad's 20 air bases, notes retired Gen. Jack Keane, six are primary. Attack them: the runways, the fighters, the helicopters, the fuel depots, the nearby command structures. Render them

inoperable.

We don't need to take down Syria's air defense system, as we did in Libya. To disable air power, we can use standoff systems — cruise missiles fired from ships offshore and from aircraft loaded with long-range, smart munitions that need not overfly Syrian territory.

Depriving Assad of his total control of the air and making resupply from Iran and Russia far more difficult would alter the course of the war. That is a serious purpose.

Would the American people support it? They are justifiably war-weary and want no part of this conflict. And why should they? In three years, Obama has done nothing to prepare the country for such a serious engagement. Not one speech. No explanation of what's at stake.

On the contrary. Last year Obama told us repeatedly that the tide of war is receding. This year, he grandly declared that the entire war on terror “must end.” If he wants Tomahawks to fly, he'd better have a good reason, tell it to the American people and get the support of their representatives in Congress, the way George W. Bush did for both the Afghanistan and Iraq wars.

It's rather shameful that while the British prime minister recalled Parliament to debate possible airstrikes — late Thursday, Parliament actually voted down British participation — Obama has made not a gesture in that direction.

If you are going to do this, Mr. President, do it constitutionally. And seriously. This is not about you and your conscience. It's about applying American power to do precisely what you now

deny this is about — helping Assad go, as you told the world he must.

Otherwise, just send Assad a text message. You might incur a roaming charge, but it's still cheaper than a three-day, highly telegraphed, perfectly useless demonstration strike.

Article 4.

The Wall Street Journal

A Serious Bombing Strategy

Editorial

August 29, 2013 -- President Obama said Thursday he hasn't decided whether to attack Syria, adding that any strike would be a brief "shot across the bow" in response to the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons. We can't recall another President suggesting his goal was to miss his military target. But assuming he does want to hit something and have a military impact, our suggestion would be to take out the regime's air force.

So far the debate over military intervention has been posed as a false choice: Either do the pinprick attack that multiple White House leaks seem to portend, or do a much larger intervention that means a long campaign and ever-deepening military commitment. The former won't make much difference and might even strengthen Assad, while the latter is intended to frighten

the American public into believing any intervention means another Iraq or Afghanistan.

The latter fear has been enhanced, regrettably, by the Administration itself and especially by the public declarations of Mr. Obama's chief military adviser, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Martin Dempsey. Asked in July by the Senate Armed Services Committee for a possible plan of action in Syria, General Dempsey sent a three-page letter that made any intervention seem both arduous and expensive.

His unclassified overview is so sketchy it's hard to judge it in any detail. But its clear message is that any kind of air suppression campaign would cost about \$1 billion a month, go on endlessly, and lead to a quagmire. Even a limited attack with standoff weapons that operate from a distance would require "hundreds of aircraft, ships, submarines, and other enablers" and "the costs would be in the billions," the General wrote.

The analysis was so one-sided that it left Senators Carl Levin and John McCain notably frustrated. Given that General Dempsey is now planning the limited strike option he didn't include when answering the Senate, it's hard not to conclude that the General wanted to make any strike seem too costly to undertake. This politicized testimony has become a pattern with General Dempsey, who often sounds more like an Administration official than an independent military counsel.

Meanwhile, another analysis making the Pentagon rounds shows there is a more realistic military option. It comes from Christopher Harmer, a former Naval aviator now at the Institute for the Study of War, a Washington think-tank. The plan has

been examined and broadly endorsed by retired four-star General Jack Keane, one of the architects of the 2007 "surge" that saved the day in Iraq.

Mr. Harmer starts with the proposition that the Syrian air force is far from mighty, with only 100 or so planes and perhaps only 50 of them still operational. They fly from only six major airfields controlled by the regime. "The Syrian air force is this close to being defeated," he says, holding his thumb and forefinger an inch apart.

These columns have endorsed a no-fly zone in Syria, but Mr. Harmer says that isn't necessary. Target those six airfields—their runways, bomb and fuel depots, control tower and radars—and you can essentially shut down the bombing raids that have so harmed the opposition. Going after the aircraft would also be desirable but is unnecessary if the Syrians can't sustain flight operations. The U.S. might need to attack the airfields again if the Syrians are able to repair and rebuild, but similar sorties could do the job.

Even better, Mr. Harmer says all of this can be done by using standoff weapons like Tomahawk cruise missiles and air-to-surface missiles like the JASSM. No U.S. pilot would be put in harm's way, since no aircraft would have to enter Syrian air space. The attack also wouldn't require taking down Syria's air defenses, which he says in any case are far less capable than advertised.

Every military operation has risks, and even in this scenario Syria and Iran could hit back at other U.S. targets, such as embassies, or at our allies. But the point of the Harmer analysis,

says General Keane, is that there is a practical and limited military option that does serious damage to the regime's capacity to wage war against its own people.

This in turn would level the battlefield for the opposition. The Syrian military strategy has been to spread terror by dropping bombs indiscriminately on rebel-held territory. The chemical attack in part of Damascus was merely an extension of that bloody strategy. The Harmer bombing plan would have even more impact if it were accompanied by arming moderate rebel groups, as the White House promised in June.

Which brings us back to Mr. Obama's goal in striking Syria. So far, we're told, the U.S. has provided no direct lethal aid to the rebels. We also hear the Saudis have been supplying less military aid than they otherwise would due to U.S. opposition. This suggests the Administration isn't sure it wants to oust Assad from power.

If this is true, then a mere "shot across the bow" attack could leave Assad even stronger. He'll know that he survived the "consequences" that Mr. Obama promised with only minimal damage. He'll also know he can unleash his air force and perhaps even chemical weapons again with little chance of further U.S. military response. All the more so after Assad has watched the debate in Western capitals over even limited bombing, including Thursday's defeat in the British Parliament.

A pinprick attack portends more months or years of civil war, leading to an eventual Assad-Iran victory or perhaps a divided country. The jihadist groups, now a minority in the opposition, will grow as the war drags on and they focus on holding territory rather than fighting the regime.

We'd support a larger military intervention aimed at regime change. Short of that, any U.S. military strike should focus on doing enough damage to the Syrian air force so the rebels can change the regime themselves.

Article 5.

Foreign Affairs

The Legal Consequences of Illegal Wars

David Kaye

August 29, 2013 -- The United States, by all indications, will soon become a belligerent in Syria's civil war. The Syrian government's alleged use of chemical weapons to kill hundreds crossed a redline that U.S. President Barack Obama claimed a year ago would be the game changer, and the game for Washington, London, and Paris has clearly changed. Yet one thing has not: the international law governing when states may use force.

That is not to suggest that government lawyers won't eventually try to offer some sort of legal benediction. News coverage suggests that administration officials are pushing them to do just that. And the lawyers will want to be helpful, particularly if the policy consensus for force is strong and the evidence for the regime's responsibility for the attacks is beyond reproach.

But they should also be clear: It is the lawyers' duty to provide their clients -- senior U.S. officials -- with legal, not moral, advice and counsel. The lawyers' remit is not to say whether attacking Syria is the right thing to do, but to state what the law is, explain the positions adopted by the United States in similar circumstances in the past, and predict what the legal and institutional consequences of law-breaking might be.

So what is the law? The black-letter law on the use of force is quite simple: Under the United Nations Charter, the central treaty of the modern era and largely the handiwork of the United States and its World War II allies, states are generally prohibited from using force against other states unless they are acting in individual or collective self-defense or pursuant to an authorization of the UN Security Council. Over the post-war history of the charter, self-defense claims have proven most controversial. States -- especially the United States -- have sought to expand the situations that fall under the definition of self-defense.

But a case for self-defense in Syria would break the concept of self-defense beyond recognition. What concerns the administration, according to official statements, is the “moral obscenity” of a chemical attack on one's own citizen. As awful as it is, there has been no attack (or the threat of attack) on the United States to justify individual self-defense or on allies to justify collective self-defense as a matter of law.

Given that a Security Council resolution seems unlikely, the United States is left without strong legal arguments for force. Some states, non-governmental organizations, and scholars have sought to craft exceptions to the requirement for Council

authorization, usually under the rubric of humanitarian intervention or its contemporary form, the Responsibility to Protect (or R2P). Both exceptions spring from a moral position that states owe their citizens a duty of care, and when they violate it by committing grave crimes, force should be an available mechanism to halt or deter them. But neither exception has the force of law. The United States itself rejected humanitarian intervention as legal justification for the Kosovo war in 1999 even as the United Kingdom espoused (and still espouses [4]) it, but the UK has few allies on the matter. R2P was blessed by the United Nations in 2005, but even there the United Nations decided that Security Council authorization was necessary for any intervention to qualify as legal.

Obama has also evoked norms against the use of weapons of mass destruction, such as the 1925 Geneva Protocol prohibiting use of poison weapons (to which Syria is a party). This prohibition may be strongly stated, but the treaty itself provides no basis for using force. Like many instruments of its time, it does not talk about the consequences of violation.

So, unless the Security Council authorizes action, the United States and its participating allies would be in violation of international law in using military force against Syria. Call it what you will: “illegal” if you are frank, “inconsistent with international law” if you are a lawyer, “difficult to defend” if you are a diplomat. They all amount to the same thing: No international law supports a U.S. attack on Syria, even in the face of mass killing by internationally prohibited weapons.

The United States will most likely seek some other means of justifying its actions. Its behavior in similar situations, when

officials want to use force but have no obvious legal basis to do so, is instructive. Many commentators are pointing to the Kosovo war, for good reason, as the legal and political precedent in government lawyers' deliberations. In 1999, with the war in Bosnia a very recent memory, the United States and its NATO allies perceived a major humanitarian disaster in the Balkans, with the alleged Serb ethnic cleansing of Kosovar Albanians. But the Russian Federation then, as now, refused to countenance any Security Council authorization of force, which forced NATO to consider an alternative international legal basis.

State Department lawyers, wary of establishing a legal precedent that other states could exploit in future conflicts, refused to give their legal imprimatur. Instead, they worked with policymakers to generate a set of factors that, in the specific context of Kosovo, provided justification (if not legal sanction) for using force. Those factors included the threat of a humanitarian disaster, disruption of regional security, and the paralysis of the Security Council. But they also relied on the former Yugoslavia's failure to meet prior Security Council demands.

In the case of Syria, there are no prior Security Council demands. But it does seem that the United States may be heading toward a renewal of that general approach. Obama, in an interview with PBS, listed a set of factors with specific relevance in Syria, especially the perceived need to uphold the international norm against the use of chemical weapons.

From a policy perspective, the so-called factors approach that applied to Kosovo is attractive; it makes force seem legitimate even when not legal, and many policymakers care more about legitimacy than legality, particularly if there are no concrete

legal consequences to action. But by suggesting that law and legitimacy are oppositional -- or more specifically, that the UN Charter's framework is illegitimate to the extent that it allows some states to shelter and permit atrocious behavior by themselves or their allies -- this kind of legal sleight-of-hand damages the integrity of international law and its institutions, including the Security Council. As some powers grow in strength, such as China, the United States could regret having helped undermine the Security Council's legal control over the use of force.

Finally, there is the question of consequences for this kind of law-breaking. Criminal liability is almost unthinkable. Though the International Criminal Court may have jurisdiction over illegal uses of force in the future, using force unlawfully now does not generate the same kind of criminal culpability under international law as provided for crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocide. States do not generally (if ever) investigate and prosecute such uses of force by foreign leaders under universal jurisdiction statutes. Unlike with claims about Bush administration torture programs, few if any states would be able to address illegal uses of force in their national courts.

Obama administration officials could still vacation in Europe, in other words (though perhaps not Belarus). But policymakers should still be thinking about the legal consequences for the UN Charter system. Would the unlawful use of force against Syria make it more difficult for the United States to complain about others using force outside the doctrine of self-defense or Security Council authorization? Would it contribute to the development of a non-institutionalized norm of humanitarian intervention, under which any state could use force on its own

terms? Or rather, would this kind of law-breaking help reinforce other norms of international law, such as the norm against use of chemical weapons or the targeting of civilians? Since lawyers for the U.S. State Department also work deeply with international institutions, they will want to consider whether the use of force in Syria could complicate other efforts and relationships across the United Nations.

In short, the United States is heading toward an intervention in Syria that administration officials clearly believe to be right, necessary, and humane. Their cause may be just. But it won't be legal, and no creative amount of lawyering can make it so.

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[Article 6.](#)

Bloomberg

Obama Is About to Undermine His Mideast Doctrine

Jeffrey Goldberg

Aug 29, 2013 -- For five years, President Obama has more or less successfully adhered to a very specific, though not

immediately discernible, doctrine when formulating American policy in the Muslim world.

Many foreign policy experts believe that Obama doesn't have a Middle East policy at all -- a clear-cut set of ideas that guide American engagement in the greater Middle East. This, we are told, is a big problem.

But the conventional wisdom is wrong. There is, in fact, an Obama doctrine. And for the first time since becoming president, Obama seems poised to violate it in an irredeemable way.

First things first: the doctrine. I call it the Doctrine of Disentanglement. Barack Obama is President of the United States because his predecessor invaded one too many Muslim countries. Bush's presidency might today be considered a success had he limited himself to the war in Afghanistan. But he is widely thought to have overreached in Iraq, and his presidency foundered, clearing a path for an Illinois politician who, as an unknown state senator, denounced not all wars, just stupid ones.

The crucial first lesson of the Bush presidency for Obama was simple: Disentangle the U.S. from Iraq, and then Afghanistan. He has pursued this policy of disentanglement with great vigor, even in the face of obvious evidence that U.S. withdrawal from these nations could well have consequences that will one day force America to re-engage. Short-term, and particularly domestically, these policies have been successful.

The second prong of the Doctrine of Disentanglement is to avoid new entanglements.

Obama was tempted to try to make peace between Israelis and Palestinians, but quickly thought better of it (the peace process now taking place in fits and starts is the secretary of state John Kerry's idea, and largely John Kerry's problem, should it fail.) Obama participated (from behind, of course) in the liberation of Libya only because it seemed at the time like a clean mission, but, again, he soon learned better: He did not receive the thanks of a grateful America for helping to defeat Muammar Qaddafi, and he suffered personally and politically because of the subsequent attack on the American mission in Benghazi.

There are many legitimate criticisms of the largely passive role Obama played in the various dramas of the Arab Spring -- again, a passivity born of an almost pathological desire to keep away from complicated Middle Eastern messes -- but two things can be said in his general defense. The first is that he has operated from an often appropriate understanding of the limitations of American influence in Arab societies that are undergoing traumatic upheavals (contrast this restrained approach with the remake-the-world philosophy -- one I used to share -- of the liberal interventionists and neoconservatives).

The second is that he has largely succeeded in protecting American life and property during an extended period of disastrous volatility.

Yes, there is a price to be paid for passivity: One is the now-fixed perception among American allies, including Saudi Arabia, Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Jordan, that Obama either doesn't care about them (meaning, in other words, that he is unable to discern his country's obvious interests in the Middle East) or is simply too irresolute to protect them through the

projection of American power.

This fear manifests itself in the anxiety these allies feel about Obama's willingness to confront the Iranian nuclear program, and about Obama's readiness, more broadly, to confront the threats posed by Iran and its allies, the Assad regime and Hezbollah, as well as their friends in Moscow.

Which brings us to the current moment, which threatens to undo once and for all the Doctrine of Disentanglement.

America is poised to strike at the Assad regime in good part because Obama could not resist the urge, last year, to declare publicly the existence of a chemical weapons red line that the Assad regime should not cross. Obama could not resist because the urge was morally irresistible. Like any decent human being, and like anyone with respect for international law and international norms of behavior, Obama was repulsed by the idea that the Assad regime would deploy poison gas against his own people, and he said so.

Obama, by demarcating a red line, placed American credibility on the line. If the world is to maintain the taboo against the use of chemical weapons, then the world's superpower, which does so much to ensure global stability, must act, particularly when its leader has previously threatened to act.

But how to act? The Obama Administration appears to have an answer: Missile strikes of limited duration, meant to reinforce the taboo against the deployment of poison gas, but not to threaten the existence of Syrian regime, because "regime change," of course, is one of those terrible, entangling, Bush-era ideas.

But the only way to ensure that Assad does not again use chemical weapons is to remove him from power. The only way to make the point that, in the post-Holocaust world, it is profoundly unacceptable to use poison gas on human beings, is to help remove the regime that violated the taboo.

If Obama strikes at Syria in a limited fashion, he will still be violating his own core doctrine, but for limited payout. He will simply be signaling to Assad that it is permissible to kill civilians with guns and bombs, but not with gas. If Assad survives an American onslaught, he might very well judge the U.S. a spent force, and continue using gas anyway.

This is why the Obama plan for Syria, as we currently understand it, is inadequate to the challenge. It is better to risk full-scale entanglement, and devise a long-term plan to help the Syrian opposition overthrow the regime, than to fire missiles at a handful of regime targets while leaving the regime itself intact.

This may be one of the toughest moments President Obama has faced in five years: the moment when the behavior of evil men finally forces him to truly engage with the catastrophic Middle East.

[Article 7.](#)

Bloomberg

Destroy Assad's Regime, or Hold Your Fire

Fouad Ajami

Aug 29, 2013 -- Syria is the moral and strategic test that U.S. President Barack Obama neither sought nor wanted. He had done his best to avert his gaze from its horrors. He, the self-styled orator, had said very little about the grief of Syria and the pain of its children. When he spoke of Syria, it often sounded as though he was speaking of Iraq -- the prism through which he saw the foreign world and its threats.

In his first term, his four principal foreign policy advisers -- the secretaries of state and defense, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff -- supported arming the rebellion in Syria: He overrode them. Earlier this year, he himself promised the rebels weapons that were never delivered.

History will record for Obama that it was Bashar al-Assad who dragged him into this fight. Obama had made much of the distinction between wars of choice and wars of necessity. He is said to have pondered theories of just and unjust wars. To this Syrian ordeal, he came late in the hour, after the barbarisms, after the veritable destruction of Syria's nationhood, after the jihadis had carved out their emirates. It doesn't matter much whether this entanglement is one of choice or of necessity. This is only partly a hand that Barack Obama was dealt. To a greater extent, he has shaped the conflict with the passivity he opted for in a standoff with a petty dictator who should have been thwarted long before.

Lawyerly Response

Obama now makes his stand the lawyerly way, on very narrow grounds -- the use of chemical weapons in the Ghouta, east of Damascus. True, the use of chemical weapons was a transgression all its own, the first since Saddam Hussein's campaign of death and ruin in Kurdistan a quarter-century ago. But Assad had sacked and reduced to rubble ancient, proud cities. He had ignited a religious war between Sunni and Shiite Islam; he had sent vigilante squads to maim and kill across a volatile fault-line between Sunni and Alawite towns, with the transparent aim of "cleansing" whole communities. The peace and fabric of an old, settled country has been torn to shreds as its people have fled in terror into neighboring states. A million children, 740,000 of them younger than 11, the United Nations estimates, have been made refugees.

Why indict Assad on the chemical weapons attack on the Ghouta alone? One would think that the use of airpower against civilian populations would have sufficed as a trigger for military intervention. Pablo Picasso immortalized Guernica for the bombing it suffered in the Spanish Civil War. But Guernica was a small market town of 7,000 people, and it was attacked by German and Italian bombers; Aleppo, which endured the brutality of the regime's fighter planes, is a city of more than 2 million.

The Obama administration has already announced an intended strike of limited duration and magnitude, and done even this with an air of doubt and irresolution. The dictator has already been told that his regime is off-limits. From the very beginning of this terrible war, Assad has been smugness itself. He had warned the rebels that no foreign cavalry would ride to their rescue. Borrowing a page from the book of his late father, Assad

has openly proclaimed that America did not have the stamina for tests of strength in the Levant.

Unfaltering Heroes

It is an unfortunate fact of Arab political life that adventurers can walk out of the wreckage of bitter defeats and claim victory before the gullible. Consider the trail: In 1991, the U.S. inflicted an overwhelming defeat on the regime of Hussein, but the Iraqi despot was spared, and the “Arab Street” that had rallied to him was never convinced that their hero had faltered.

Seven years later, during the presidency of Bill Clinton, it was time to go at Hussein again. Operation Desert Fox, an Anglo-American campaign, was meant to punish the Iraqi despot for his defiance of UN inspectors looking into his weapons programs. After four days of strikes, the thing came to an end, and Hussein took it as evidence of the weakness of Western powers.

In 2006, the leader of Hezbollah ignited a war on the Israeli-Lebanese border. He spun his own legend about the “divine victory” that his militia had secured. There had been death and economic ruin in Lebanon, but it was enough that Hezbollah was left standing after the fight.

The Syrian regime must then be denied the dividends of an inconclusive military campaign. The regime itself -- its barons, its secret police, its elite military units and its air bases -- ought to be legitimate targets, and the same is true of Assad’s presidential palace. There should be conviction and courage in this fight with the Assad dictatorship.

The truth of it is that the (Sunni) Arab world is now full of animus toward the Syrian ruler and his cabal. No tears will be shed for Assad. The vast majority of Arabs must dream of an end for him similar to the macabre fate that befell Muammar Qaddafi. The unwillingness of the League of Arab States to support a military effort against Assad's regime is a piece with the moral abdication of that group. That body is a league of despots that has never acknowledged truths known to practically all Arabs. No attention ought to be paid to the Arab League and its pieties. The classic Obama concern about antagonizing the sensibilities of the region can be set aside. This is "the East" and Western deeds play out under watchful eyes, in full view of people with a scent for the resolve and weakness of strangers. Obama has proudly proclaimed that he does not bluff. In his bunker, that petty Syrian dictator has called his bluff.

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Article 8.

NYT

One Great Big War

David Brooks

August 29, 2013 -- What's the biggest threat to world peace right now? Despite the horror, it's not chemical weapons in Syria. It's not even, for the moment, an Iranian nuclear weapon. Instead, it's the possibility of a wave of sectarian strife building across the Middle East.

The Syrian civil conflict is both a proxy war and a combustion point for spreading waves of violence. This didn't start out as a religious war. But both Sunni and Shiite power players are seizing on religious symbols and sowing sectarian passions that are rippling across the region. The Saudi and Iranian powers hover in the background fueling each side.

As the death toll in Syria rises to Rwanda-like proportions, images of mass killings draw holy warriors from countries near and far. The radical groups are the most effective fighters and control the tempo of events. The Syrian opposition groups are themselves split violently along sectarian lines so that the country seems to face a choice between anarchy and atrocity.

Meanwhile, the strife appears to be spreading. Sunni-Shiite violence in Iraq is spiking upward. Reports in The Times and elsewhere have said that many Iraqis fear their country is sliding back to the worst of the chaos experienced in the last decade. Even Turkey, Pakistan, Bahrain and Kuwait could be infected. "It could become a regional religious war similar to that witnessed in Iraq 2006-2008, but far wider and without the moderating influence of American forces," wrote Gary Grappo, a retired senior Foreign Service officer with long experience in the region.

"It has become clear over the last year that the upheavals in the

Islamic and Arab world have become a clash within a civilization rather than a clash between civilizations,” Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies wrote recently. “The Sunni versus Alawite civil war in Syria is increasingly interacting with the Sunni versus Shiite tensions in the Gulf that are edging Iraq back toward civil war. They also interact with the Sunni-Shiite, Maronite and other confessional struggles in Lebanon.”

Some experts even say that we are seeing the emergence of a single big conflict that could be part of a generation-long devolution, which could end up toppling regimes and redrawing the national borders that were established after World War I. The forces ripping people into polarized groups seem stronger than the forces bringing them together.

It is pretty clear that the recent American strategy of light-footprint withdrawal and nation-building at home has not helped matters. The United States could have left more troops in Iraq and tamped down violence there. We could have intervened in Syria back when there was still something to be done and some reasonable opposition to mold.

At this late hour, one question is whether the sectarian fire has grown so hot that it is beyond taming. The second question is whether the United States has any strategy to limit the conflagration.

Right now, President Obama is focused on the imminent strike against the Assad regime, to establish American credibility when it sets red lines and reinforce the norm that poison gas is not acceptable.

But the president does have the makings of a broader antisectarian strategy. He has at least three approaches on the table. The first is containment: trying to keep each nation's civil strife contained within its own borders. The second is reconciliation: looking for diplomatic opportunities to bring the Sunni axis, led by the Saudis, toward some rapprochement with the Shiite axis, led by Iran. So far, there have been few diplomatic opportunities to do this.

Finally, there is neutrality: the nations in the Sunni axis are continually asking the United States to simply throw in with them, to use the C.I.A. and other American capacities to help the Sunnis beat back their rivals. The administration has decided that taking sides so completely is not an effective long-term option.

Going forward, there probably has to be a global education effort to reduce anti-Sunni and anti-Shiite passions. Iran could be asked to pay a higher price not only for its nuclear program, but for its mischief-making around the region.

But, at this point, it's not clear whether American and other outside interference would help squash hatreds or inflame them. The legendary diplomat Ryan Crocker argues in a recent essay in YaleGlobal that major outside interventions might only make things worse. "The hard truth is that the fires in Syria will blaze for some time to come. Like a major forest fire, the most we can do is hope to contain it."

Poison gas in Syria is horrendous, but the real inferno is regional. When you look at all the policy options for dealing with the Syria situation, they are all terrible or too late. The job

now is to try to wall off the situation to prevent something just as bad but much more sprawling.