



"CENTRAL CHALLENGES OF AMERICAN NATIONAL SECURITY, STRATEGY AND THE PRESS"
(2013)

To: Susan Rice, National Security Advisor

From: J. Comins

Re: Syrian Crisis: Crossing the Red Lines (September 23, 2013)

Issue: Reassessing the strategic options following the use of chemical weapons by the al-Assad regime against the Syrian population.

National Interests: *Vital:* Ensure U.S. allies' survival. *Extremely Important:* Prevent, deter, and reduce the threat of the use of chemical weapons (CW) anywhere; suppress terrorism. *Important:* Discourage massive human rights violations in foreign countries.

Analysis: The recent attacks with CW add a qualitative escalation to the Syrian crisis and cross the red line established by President Obama. As the death toll approximates 100,000, the increasing flow of IDP and refugees (27% of the total population) continues and threatens to destabilize key U.S. allies and other neighboring countries. It is a complex picture which is completed by a military stalemate between loyalists to the Syrian regime and the opposition —really fragmented not only in the battlefield, but also at the political level inside and outside the country. There are fears that extremist groups affiliated to AQ and Hezbollah —very active so far, take advantage of the chaos and instability to acquire weaponry and to establish terrorist safe havens.

Operational Objectives: 1) Halt the massacre of the Syrian population; 2) Provide humanitarian assistance; 3) Prevent uncontrolled movement of chemical weapons around the region; 4) Prevent the formation of terrorist safe havens; 5) Lay the foundation for a peaceful and inclusive political process.

Strategic Options:

1) Surgical Military Intervention. Forming a broad international coalition; conducting limited stand-off strikes, establishing buffer zones and control of chemical weapons; pursue and arrest President al-Assad and his top leadership to be held liable by international crimes; negotiating the establishment of a UN peacekeeping operation; build Arab and European support for the implementation of the subsequent political process. **Pros:** Reaffirms the credibility of the United States before the international community; displays the American commitment to humanitarian values; demonstrates strong defense of the U.S. strategic interests in the Middle East. **Cons:** Retaliatory attacks and collateral damages; extremists could turn secured areas into operational bases; opposition of public opinion; high impact on the U.S. national budget.

2) Conditional Diplomatic Path. Urging immediate cessation of hostilities under the supervision of the UN, the Arab League, the U.S., Russia and the EU. Ratification of the CWC treaty, elimination of the Syrian chemical arsenal and its verification by the international community. Providing a peaceful exit for President al-Assad and his family outside the country. Appointing an interim president and establishing a comprehensive political transition program to finish in free representative elections. **Pros:** Respects international law; no military casualties; greater monitoring of the destination of chemical weapons; lower financial cost than option #1. **Cons:** Slow pace; possibility of al-Assad's reluctance to leave the country; Syrian political opposition's lack of unity.

3) A more Robust Action. Identifying reliable opposition units. Supply lethal assistance and training. Encouraging defections of senior politicians and high-rank military officers. **Pros:** Supported by the bipartisan majority of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee; extremists could gain better access to weaponry and other military capabilities. **Cons:** Escalation of violence; it does not guarantee defeat of al-Assad's forces; transformation of conflict into a sectarian proxy war.

Recommendation and Implementation: #2 Conditional Diplomatic Path, as the best long-term solution which emphasizes the compromise with multilateralism, assures a key role for the regional actors and encourages burden sharing with the U.S. It requires taking the initial steps urging a cease-fire as well as scanning a possible way out for the President al-Assad.