



# IN THE NEWS

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## Syria: An Effective Response

### Introduction

On August 21, 2013, a bombardment of poison gas killed over fourteen hundred Syrians, including more than four hundred children, in a suburb of Damascus. The Obama administration said that clear and convincing evidence showed that the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad perpetrated the attacks. President Obama asserted that the Assad regime needed to be punished with a military strike in order to prevent further use of chemical weapons. In a Rose Garden speech on August 31, the president affirmed his authority to order a strike, but announced he would ask for congressional approval. That announcement instigated a spirited debate, with public opinion strongly opposed to military action. On September 9, Russia proposed that Syria turn its chemical weapons over to an international force. Syria promptly agreed to the proposition. President Obama asked Congress to delay its vote on military action and ordered U.S. diplomats to pursue the Russian proposal.

### What Are Chemical Weapons and Why Are They So Abhorrent?

One hundred eighty-nine nations, including the United States and Syria, have signed the Geneva Protocols of 1925, which ban the use of chemi-

cal weapons. The Protocols were adopted after almost 100,000 people were killed by poison gas in World War I. Death by chemical weapons can be particularly gruesome. Sarin gas, which was used in the attack in Syria, is a colorless, odorless version of insecticide. It kills human beings the same way it kills insects. The gas interferes with the functioning of the nervous system and causes nausea, convulsions, eye pain, and asphyxiation. If victims survive, lingering effects can include permanent lung damage. Since chemical weapons are usually in the form of a gas, they are not easily controlled. Even if targeted for enemy combatants, the wind can blow the gas into noncombat areas, killing innocent civilians. The chemicals can also have lingering effects on the environment.

Since the signing of the Geneva Protocols, there has been limited use of chemical weapons. Fifteen thousand people died when Italy used poison gas in 1935 during its war in Ethiopia. In World War II, Japan used chemical weapons occasionally in China, leading to around two thousand deaths. In 1995, the religious cult Aum Shinrikyo released sarin gas in the Tokyo subway, killing thirteen. In the 1980s, Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons in Iraq's war against Iran. He also used them on Kurds and other minorities who threatened his

regime. Saddam's use of poison gas led to over 50,000 deaths. Unfortunately, the Geneva Protocols contain no provision for their enforcement.

## The Situation in Syria

The civil war started in April 2011 when Syrians took to the streets to demonstrate against the authoritarian rule of President Assad. The protesters were inspired by the events of the Arab Spring, which started earlier that year with massive demonstrations against repressive governments in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. The Syrian government responded with force, and the violence escalated into a protracted conflict that has resulted in the deaths of over 100,000 people. More than 2.5 million Syrians have fled their homes and are now refugees in neighboring countries. As many as 5 million more are displaced within Syria.

The United States has long been at odds with the Syrian government. In 1979, it designated the regime a sponsor of state-supported terrorism and initiated limited sanctions. In August 2011, President Obama called for Assad to step aside and increased sanctions against the country. At the same time, the United States has been reluctant to throw its support behind opponents of the regime. The opposition consists of a wide range of groups. There are factions supporting values such as democracy, freedom of expression, and gender equality. There are also factions of radical Islamist groups, some of which are closely aligned with al Qaeda. Fearing that a rebel victory could lead to a regime even more repressive than Assad's, the United States has given modest support to selected rebel groups while calling for a negotiated settlement of the conflict.

In August 2012, Obama was asked what might push the United States to get more involved in the Syrian conflict. He responded, "a red line for us is when we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized."<sup>1</sup> Subsequently there were small incidents where chemical weapons were used. Claiming that the

perpetrators were unknown, the United States did not respond to those events. However, the scale of the attacks on August 21 was such that Obama felt he had to respond.

## What Is at Stake

Supporters of a military strike against the Assad regime say that the credibility of the United States is at stake. If we do not follow up on threats to punish rogue behavior, then our adversaries will not take us seriously. Assad would be emboldened to continue using chemical weapons. Others tempted to use poison gas could do so without fear of reprisal. That could lead to the increased manufacture of the chemicals, which would increase the likelihood of them falling into the hands of extremists who could use them to terrorize civilian populations. North Korea and Iran would feel free to pursue the development of nuclear weapons. The U.S. government says that a military response would be targeted and limited. The attacks would be forceful enough to show Assad that he must pay a price for using chemical weapons, but not extensive enough to destabilize the situation by giving an advantage to the rebels.

Opponents maintain that a military strike may lead to unintended consequences. Assad could use the attacks as an excuse to escalate the war, perhaps even threatening Israel. Or an attack could give an advantage to the rebels. A rebel victory could put Syria and its chemical weapons in the hands of radical Islamists who would be even more of a threat to the United States than Assad. Many fear that a strike could be the first step toward a long U.S. engagement in Syria, something that has little popular support following protracted wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

## Is Military Action Legal?

The United Nations Security Council was formed to make nations accountable to one another when going to war. Unless directly attacked by an enemy, the United Nations charter obliges coun-

tries to take their disputes to the Security Council for arbitration and resolution. The Security Council consists of fifteen member nations. Ten of those nations serve on a revolving basis. Five members—the United States, Russia, China, the United Kingdom, and France (the Allied victors of World War II)—have permanent seats and any one of them can veto an action of the council.

The United States has not asked the Security Council to approve a strike against Syria because Russia, and perhaps China, would veto any action. Russia is an ally of the Assad regime, providing it with weapons. It is through Assad that Russia maintains a critical voice in the Middle East. It is in the strategic interest of both Russia and China to constrain the influence of the United States.

The United States has justified military action in the past without the approval of the Security Council. In 1999 President Clinton ordered air strikes in Kosovo in response to mass killings without UN backing. However, the United States did have the backing of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which meant it was not taking unilateral military action. NATO is not likely to support intervention in Syria. The British Parliament has voted against intervention, and there is little popular support for action in other countries.

With international support for military intervention so weak, President Obama asked Congress for approval before ordering strikes against Syria. Some maintain that the Constitution requires congressional approval. Article I, section 8 gives Congress the power to declare war. Others assert that the president, in his role as Commander in Chief, has the authority to order limited military action. Obama asserts that he is entitled to take military action, but he prefers the backing of the people's representatives.

## Is Military Action Moral?

The president asserts that the use of chemical weapons is such a moral outrage that it demands a response. The just war theory is a criterion for judg-

ing the morality of war that traces its origins to St. Augustine in the fifth century and St. Aquinas in the thirteenth century. Theologians and philosophers, as well as politicians and ordinary Christians, often appeal to this theory when determining the legitimacy of military actions. Listed here are some aspects of a just war and how those criteria might apply to the question of whether or not the United States should take military action in Syria.

### **War should be waged only as a last resort.**

Those who object to military action say that further sanctions should be applied and more diplomatic efforts should be pursued. The Russian proposal of September 9 seems to address this concern by offering the possibility of a peaceful resolution supported by the United Nations.

Those who support military action say that further diplomatic actions are futile and further delay could mean thousands more deaths from poison gas.

### **War must be waged by legitimate authorities.**

Opponents of intervention point out that the United Nations was established to prevent countries from taking unilateral military actions. By virtue of its membership in the UN, the United States is obligated to abide by its charter.

Proponents of intervention say that the use of chemical weapons is such an affront to human decency that the United States, by virtue of being the world's superpower, is obliged to stand up for what is right even if it must do so alone.

### **War can only be waged in order to redress a wrong.**

Opponents say that neither the United States nor its allies has been attacked. We have suffered no direct harm. We cannot be the world's police force, righting wrongs everywhere in the world. Otherwise, we would be engaged in endless war.

Proponents say that we have a responsibility to stand up to crimes against humanity. They point

out that the world stood by during the Rwandan genocide of 1994, and 800,000 people were slaughtered. In his September 10 speech, Obama said, "When, with modest effort and risk, we can stop children from being gassed to death, and thereby make our own children safer over the long run, I believe we should act."<sup>2</sup>

### **There must be a reasonable chance for success.**

Opponents say that success has not been defined. There are no clear plans for what to do if Assad retaliates.

Proponents say that the goal is to degrade Syria's chemical weapons and show that using them brings consequences.

### **Peace after the war must be preferable to peace without war.**

Opponents say that weakening Assad through military strikes could empower the opposition, and that may lead to a repressive Islamist regime. Strikes could also provide a rationale to Russia, China, or perhaps Syria's ally Iran to become more involved in the conflict.

Proponents say that the goal of strikes would not be to bring about peace, but to send a message discouraging the use of chemical weapons. Peace would still be pursued by diplomatic means.

### **Violence used must be proportional.**

Opponents say that once the violence starts, it can easily get out of control. They point out the saying, "In war, the enemy has a voice."

Proponents say that the United States military is sophisticated enough that it can carry out "surgical strikes" that accomplish their objectives with precision.

### **The weapons used must discriminate between combatants and noncombatants.**

Opponents say that civilian deaths are inevitable in any military action. In fact, Assad may be mov-

ing his weapons near civilian centers in order to make it more difficult to discriminate between combatants and noncombatants.

Proponents have confidence in the military's ability to target objectives precisely, thus limiting civilian deaths. They point out that a strike is for the purpose of discouraging the use of chemical weapons, which are indiscriminate in the harm they inflict.

## **Christians Respond**

There has been almost universal lack of support for military intervention in Syria from the world's religious leaders. The General Secretary of the World Council of Churches issued a statement that said, "The crime of using chemical weapons is to be thoroughly investigated and prosecuted. However, an attack from outside Syria is likely to increase suffering and the risk of more sectarian violence, threatening every community in the nation, including Christians."<sup>3</sup> In a statement calling its member churches to prayer, the General Secretary of the World Communion of Reformed Churches said, "However heinous the chemical attacks are, military response is not the answer."<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis said that a military attack on Syria would be "a futile pursuit,"<sup>5</sup> and on September 7 he led 100,000 people gathered in St. Peter's Square in a service of prayer and fasting for peace. The National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon has condemned the use of chemical weapons, but calls on its partner denominations in the United States to encourage Congress not to approve the use of military force in Syria.<sup>6</sup> Church leaders in the United States, including those of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), United Church of Christ, United Methodist Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America have urged their members to contact members of Congress to urge a vote against U.S. military strikes. Russell Moore, head of the Southern Baptist Church's public policy group, says that there are just cause principles

missing “both to justify action morally and to justify it prudentially.”<sup>7</sup>

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## Endnotes

1. [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/08/20/remarks-president-white-house-press-corps](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/08/20/remarks-president-white-house-press-corps).
2. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2013/09/10/president-obama-addresses-nation-syria>.
3. [www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/general-secretary/messages-and-letters/open-letter-to-un-security-council-on-syria/](http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/general-secretary/messages-and-letters/open-letter-to-un-security-council-on-syria/).
4. <http://www.pcusa.org/media/uploads/worldmission/pdfs/calltoprayer-syria.pdf>.
5. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middle-east/syria/10290110/Syria-Pope-warns-Barack-Obama-that-military-strike-would-be-futile.html>.
6. [www.pcusa.org/media/uploads/worldmission/pdfs/national\\_evang\\_synod\\_syria\\_lebanon.pdf](http://www.pcusa.org/media/uploads/worldmission/pdfs/national_evang_synod_syria_lebanon.pdf).
7. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/10/religious-leaders-syria-strike\\_n\\_3895102.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/10/religious-leaders-syria-strike_n_3895102.html).
8. <http://www.disciples.org/Home/WhoWeAre/DisciplesNewsService/tabid/58/itemId/1499/Disciples-join-ecumenical-community-in-prayers-for.aspx>.

# ACTION STEPS

1) Learn more about Syria and the current conflict.

- Go to [www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14703856](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14703856) for a BBC profile of the country.
- Learn more about Protestant churches in Syria at the Web site of the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon: [www.synod-sl.org](http://www.synod-sl.org).
- Find out what your denomination is doing in the region by visiting its world mission Web site.

2) Make Gift of the Heart Kits to assist residents of refugee camps. This is an excellent “hands on” project for youth groups and other groups. Go to [www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/pda/making-gift-heart-kits](http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/pda/making-gift-heart-kits) for instructions on how to make different kinds of kits and where to send them.

3) Write representatives urging support for a peaceful and just resolution to the conflict. You can find out how to contact your representative at [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov). You can contact your senators through [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov).

4) Give to support refugee relief efforts. Go to your denomination’s Web site to find out what your church is doing to provide relief for refugees and give generously in support.

5) Pray daily for peace in Syria and the Middle East. Remind your Bible study or small group to include Syria in its prayers. Lift up the situation in prayer each week in worship. Consider using this prayer offered by several denominational leaders:

We pray for those affected by the fighting in Syria.

Give protection, Lord Jesus.

Give the strength of your Spirit  
and the joy of your comfort.

We pray for all who are working for peace:  
international leaders, politicians, religious leaders,  
and ordinary citizens.

May all of us be strengthened by the hope  
of a future built on love and justice for all.

In your name, we pray.<sup>8</sup>

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# QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Is the death of fourteen hundred by chemical weapons a greater moral affront than the death of 100,000 by conventional weapons of war?
2. Does the United States have a special responsibility to act unilaterally when human rights have been violated? Why or why not?
3. Does a military strike as proposed by President Obama meet the criteria for a just war?