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Crisis in Syria: The View from Washington

Passion to Perform

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The crisis in syria



Syrian President Bashar Al Assad's alleged chemical weapon attack on the Damascus suburb of Ain Tarma last week has sparked an international outcry and pressure on the White House to react militarily. In the following pages we seek to provide the following:

- A breakdown of the events in Syria over the last week that led to today's crisis and what we might expect in coming days and weeks.
- A background on the role of Syria in international relations and the Middle East in particular
- The role of Russia and Iran in the Syrian conflict – which significantly complicates any allied response – and what to expect from each of them should the allies intervene militarily.
- An outline of the military options the allies may take and their potential consequences both for Syria and for global markets.

Syria: understanding the basics



Understanding the basics of where and why the chemical attack took place are critical to understanding why the civil war has now become an international crisis:

- Why did the Syrian government use chemical weapons now? There is no clear answer to this question but our analysis suggests two reasons:
 - 1) An attempt to assassinate Assad several weeks ago that rattled the president badly and;
 - 2) The attack took place in a suburban area of the Syrian capital of Damascus. Assad, fearing a growing threat so close to the capital, was seeking to “lay down the law” and scare population into submission.
- This action, if confirmed, would be a clear cut violation of the ‘red lines’ outlined by the Obama administration in coordination with US allies months ago.
- Russia has openly opposed any Western intervention in the Syrian civil war and continues to stand behind the Assad regime. Moscow’s opposition, possibly alongside the Chinese, would prevent any use of force from being sanctioned by the UN Security Council.



Downtown Damascus versus Ain Tarma (where the chemical weapon attack took place).

Syria: Even bad guys need friends



Complicating the situation in Syria is the role of three key allies of President Al Assad: Russia, Iran and the militant group Hezbollah. All three have much to lose if Assad loses power. Here's why:

Syria has unique place in the Middle East ethnography:

- Syria, a majority Sunni country, has been ruled by the Alawite Assad family since 1971. Alawites practice a branch of Shi'a Islam. The Shi'a Syrian government is closely allied with (Shi'a) Iran and, since the 1970s, has supported Shia' interests in Lebanon, specifically the Shi'a militant group Hezbollah. From 1976 to 2005 Syria militarily occupied large parts of Lebanon. **Thus you see anomaly of Syria, an Arab state, propped up by a non-Arab state, Iran. These two are in turn the driving force behind the Shi'a militants Hezbollah.**

Syria plays a unique and often overlooked Geopolitical role:

- Syria has fought numerous wars against Israel and still maintains its claim over the contested Golan Heights border region. As a result of this and its role as a conduit of Iranian support of Hezbollah (which controls Lebanon), Syria is critical to supplying and supporting many of Israel's opponents. Additionally, Syria has allowed Russia to use the deep water naval base in Tartus, Syria – a critical asset in Russian military and geopolitical strategy. **Thus, Syria is vital strategic staging point for Russia and Iranian foreign policy in the region.**

Thus, survival of the Assad Regime is critical importance to Iran, Russia role in the region as well Hezbollah's continued control of Lebanon.

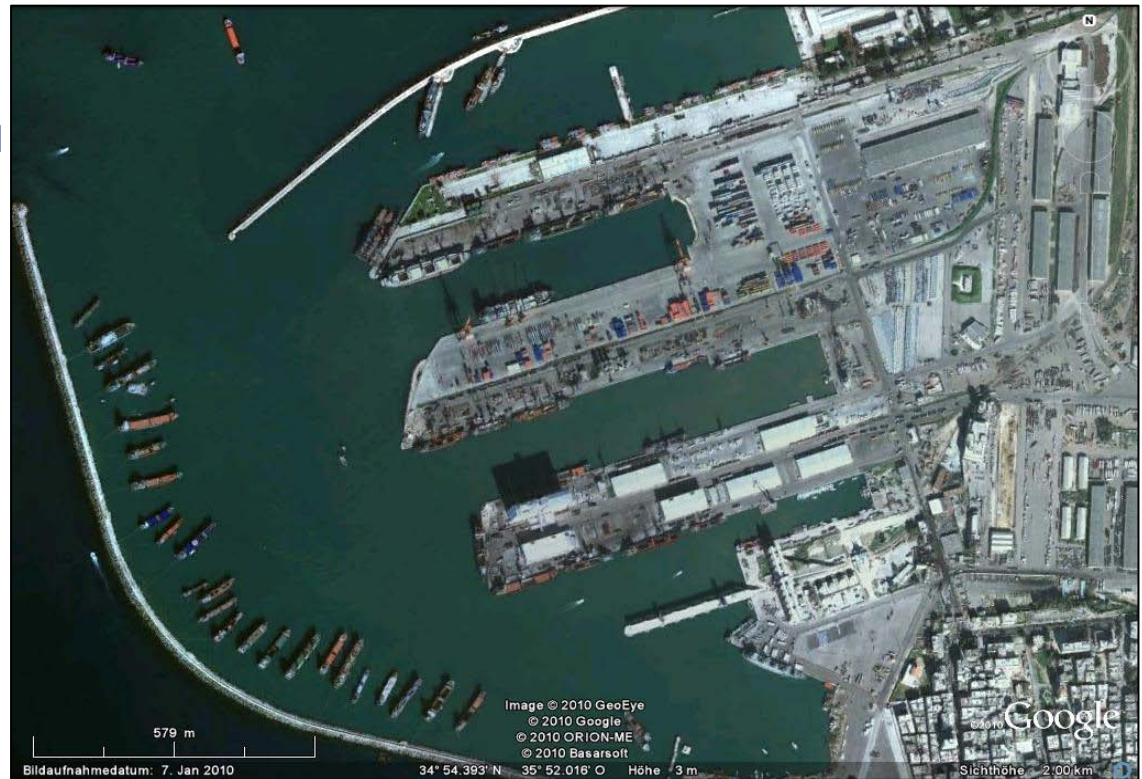


Clockwise from left: Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, Iranian Supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei, Russian President Vladimir Putin

The Russian-Syrian dynamic explained



- For centuries, a key geopolitical objective of Moscow has been access to a war, deep-water port. Additionally, they have wanted one outside of the Bosphorus which could give them access to the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Ocean.
- Despite having 110,310 km of coastline, Russia does not have a single territorial port that is free year round from ice or the constraints of another power (its Black Sea ports depend on Turkey (NATO) allowing Russian ships to pass through the Bosphorus).
- Earlier this year, due to the escalating violence in Syria, Russia was forced to withdraw her naval forces from Tartus – a naval base granted to Russia by the Syria.
- Coupled with the loss of influence in Cyprus earlier this year due to the financial crisis, Russia is deeply concerned about the loss of influence in the region.
- They have reportedly made approaches recently to Cyprus to have port access as well as to Egypt. However, the US and NATO have quietly made it clear they would not approve.
- Additionally, there are hundreds of thousands of Russian expats living in Syria today. Many stayed after Russian/Syrian educational exchanges and have married Syrians.



The Russian Naval Facility in Tartus, Syria. Note the docks are empty as Russian ships have left due to the civil war.

The US/Allied response: what to expect in the coming days and weeks



- First, watch for the Obama Administration to reach out and create a new variation “The Coalition of the Willing” that will include the UK, France and several other smaller players – possibly several of the Gulf States already publicly involved in supporting the Syrian rebels.
- This coalition will provide the US the legally defensible and globally credible “mandate” necessary to mitigate US risk (i.e. the US is not doing this all alone but in concert with other outraged countries).
- The White House is well aware of the Clinton Administration’s failed use of cruise missiles in the Sudan and Afghanistan in response to terrorist activities.
- With this in mind, our sources in Washington tell us we should think back to the Clinton Administration's sustained attacks on Slobodan Milosevic’s Belgrade in 1999 – specifically, a combination of intensive cruise missile strikes and sustained fixed wing aircraft attacks by US – along with UK and French – forces.
- The targets will include Syrian Air Force bases, field command headquarters, communications centers, electrical facilities, etc. They will NOT hit Syrian chemical/biological storage sites.

- The Coalition will not seek to kill President Assad or his senior leadership nor decapitate the Assad government but rather severely weaken it and also give the clear signal that no further chemical/biological weapon attacks will be tolerated.

What are the risks of US/Allied military action?



There are a number of risks the US and Western Allies face if and when they take the actions described above. They include:

- Iran cuts off negotiations with the US/EU on nuclear issues. There has been a significant uptick in (unreported) back-channel talks between Washington and Tehran in recent weeks (**high risk**).
- US/Allied naval ships are hit by sophisticated anti-ship missiles - Russian made Yakhonts anti-ship missiles which the US military consider highly sophisticated and very dangerous. (**unknown risk** as US does not know how many of these the Syria possess).
- The Russian Navy could show up and attempt disrupt the strikes by physically interposing themselves amongst US/Allied ships and/or use sophisticated jamming techniques to severely hamper cruise missile strikes (**low risk**).
- Loss of US/Allied pilots and crew (**medium risk**).
- Iranian military action against US/Allied forces (**low risk**).

The ultimate risk, however, is what happens if and when the Assad government is toppled. US policymakers are deeply concerned about who would take power.



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