

**Options for Action in Syria:  
A Nonpartisan Statement of Concern by Conflict Resolution Professionals**

President Obama's proposed course of limited military airstrikes is intended to "punish" Syrian President Assad for allegedly using chemical weapons. (The UN inspectors' report verifying whether chemical weapons were used is not yet out.) This is to send a signal that the United States will not tolerate a flagrant disregard of the ban on chemical weapons, from the Geneva Protocol of 1925 to the chemical weapons convention of 1993.

As American conflict resolution professionals working in countries around the world, we understand that the threat of force can be a powerful incentive to change behaviors. However, we are concerned by the prevailing view that violence (and the use of chemical weapons) will decrease by applying greater force and destruction.

Discussions in Washington seem to center on airstrikes as a discrete act, but they are likely part of a longer process. What is the administration's strategy beyond the airstrikes? Will the strikes create incentives to get negotiations back on track or will they fragment the opposition even further and entrench the regime? Will they serve as a catalyst for regional talks or for increased regional conflict? What is our plan if Assad, or the rebels, use chemical weapons again?

Research in our field suggests that interventions to support one side of a conflict prolong wars by 50%.<sup>1</sup> With or without airstrikes, there are other tools that can be useful in "punishing" Assad and minimizing loss of life.

There will be no end to the conflict without a political settlement. Diplomacy is the indispensable tool. The U.S. needs to work with the UN and others in the international community to pursue talks with all stakeholders (including Russia and Iran) as soon as possible. Creative diplomacy by the U.S. that involves the participation of Syrian civil society movements, including women's groups that are currently active in promoting peace and tolerance among communities, is essential.

Second, Assad needs to be held accountable through the public act of shaming and through the international legal mechanism of the International Criminal Court (ICC). We can increase the cost of doing business with Assad by making him an international pariah using these channels. Over 50 countries have supported referring Syria to the ICC, including Security Council members Britain and France. The U.S. should join them and engage the Security Council in intensive diplomatic efforts so that Russia and China will not wield their vetoes to defeat the referral.

Assad can also be held accountable through shaming, an important aspect of Middle Eastern culture. An effective way to do this, for example, is by publicly showing evidence of chemical warfare on Syrian civilians.

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick M. Regan, "Syrian Strike Would Put Peace Further Out of Reach," Special to CNN, September 5, 2013.

Third, we can mitigate the damage to Syrians and to the U.S. by taking actions that help save lives and gain the trust and respect of Syrians and others in the region. A UN resolution for a ceasefire that includes all armed actors would be a start. Other actions include the following:

If Congress approves airstrikes, our military needs to ensure that its maps are accurate to avoid incidents such as the 1999 accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. Our intelligence services need to ensure that we don't fall into the trap of killing innocent civilians. Assad has reportedly emptied the prisons and put prisoners in or near potential U.S. targets.

The U.S. should coordinate with UN agencies to assess the increased humanitarian demands in the case of airstrikes. There are currently 6.8 million Syrians in need of aid in Syria and over 2 million refugees in neighboring countries. The U.S. should make funds available to address existing needs and meet new ones resulting from the airstrikes. The U.S. should help the UN keep these agencies open and secure during airstrikes.

Along with the destroyers now in the eastern Mediterranean, the U.S. should send hospital ships to the region to treat Syrians regardless of their political affiliation or of when or how they became ill or were injured.

We believe that the U.S. will be stronger and safer if we take actions such as the ones described above and we urge our elected leaders to provide the necessary resources and support for this intensive and multi-layered diplomatic effort in Syria.

**Signed by:**

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