

The Cost of Non-Intervention in Syria - One Year On

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On the 21st of August 2013, the biggest chemical weapon attack since the tragedy of Halabja, in 1988, occurred in Syria.¹ The US had detailed evidence of strategic planning on behalf of the Assad forces, leading up to the attack. A report released by the White House on the 30 August 2013 stated that the Assad regime was keeping track of all those targeted in the chemical weapons attacks from the East Ghouta region of Damascus, which led to the deaths of 1,400 people.²

When the images of the chemical weapons attack from Damascus hit the news, millions of spectators watched in horror as corpses of dead and wounded civilians were shown on video footages all over the world. Not since the attack of Saddam Hussein's forces against the Kurds in 1991, has the world witnessed such a large scale attack with chemical weapons against civilians.³

International legal instruments, such as the 1925 Geneva Protocol and the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention (OPCW), ban the use of chemical weapons. Syria, however, had not ratified the OPCW at that time.⁴ This event shocked the world, as the use of chemical weapons by a government in any conflict was regarded by President Obama, UN Secretary General Ban-Ki Moon and other statesmen as a red line, not to be crossed in international affairs. US Secretary of State John Kerry and British Prime Minister David Cameron were the first leaders to openly condemn the attacks and called for a military intervention to save the Syrian people from Assad's brutal retaliation. Given this widespread international condemnation there appeared to be a mandate to execute punitive operations by the international community.

In spite of clear evidence that Assad's forces had been the perpetrators, senior Syrian officials vehemently denied any involvement, placing the blame instead on the

¹ 'Syria weapons attack: what we know', September 24th, 2013, BBC, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-23927399>

² Warrick, Joby, 'More than 1,400 killed in Syrian chemical weapons attack, U.S. says', August 30th, 2013, *The Washington Post*, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/nearly-1500-killed-in-syrian-chemical-weapons-attack-us-says/2013/08/30/b2864662-1196-11e3-85b6-d27422650fd5_story.html

³ 'Clear and convincing' evidence of chemical weapons use in Syria, UN team reports', September 6th, 2013, *United Nations News Centre*, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=45856#.VD7WRfmSxI0>

⁴ 'CONVENTION ON THE PROHIBITION OF THE DEVELOPMENT, PRODUCTION, STOCKPILING AND USE OF CHEMICAL WEAPONS AND ON THEIR DESTRUCTION', available at: http://www.opcw.org/index.php?eID=dam_frontend_push&docID=6357

numerous rebel factions operating in the region.⁵ The UN response to the chemical attacks was swift, with UN Secretary General (UNSG) Ban Ki Moon strongly condemning the attacks as a gross violation of international law and calling for an official inquiry.

The Syrian Government also submitted a request to the UNSG to conduct an investigation into the allegations concerning the use of chemical weapons near Damascus. A report released by the office of the UNSG on the 13 of September concluded that surface-to-surface rockets containing the nerve gas sarin had been used in Eid Tarma, Moadmiyah and Zamalka in the Ghouta area of Damascus.⁶ In response, the Syrian government acceded to the Convention against Chemical Weapons and agreed to disband its stockpile of chemical weapons with the help of the Russian government. This decision was reached after a considerable amount of US pressure became evident during the UNSC deliberations in order to compel Syria to respond to this grave violation of international law.

On 27 September 2013, the UNSC passed Resolution 2118 unanimously, which stipulated that Syria had to hand over its chemical weapons arsenal to a joint mission composed of the UN and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons by June 2014. Furthermore, the resolution reaffirmed Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and acknowledged that the proliferation of chemical weapons constitutes a threat to international peace and security. It called for a transitional governing body made up of members of Assad's government and the opposition groups to exercise full executive powers, to help determine the country's future.⁷

In hindsight, it could be argued that whilst the international community was reluctant to undertake stronger, more coercive measures to implement a ceasefire and hold the Assad regime accountable for its crimes, it hoped that diplomacy could still bear fruits through this "strong precedent-setting resolution".⁸

The American and British governments which had called for a humanitarian intervention failed to gain the approval of their national assemblies. France also took a firm position against the Assad regime and was calling for Syria to give up its entire chemical weapons stockpile and allow the inspectors to carry out their mission. Should Syria not be willing to cooperate in this respect, France considered that Syria's unlawful act must not be left unpunished and was ready to undertake military action.⁹ With regard to the US and the UK, the spectre of previous protracted

⁵ Sherlock, Ruth, 'Syria chemical weapons: the proof that Assad regime launching chlorine attacks on children', April 29th, 2014, *The Daily Telegraph*, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10796175/Syria-chemical-weapons-the-proof-that-Assad-regime-launching-chlorine-attacks-on-children.html>

⁶ 'Report on the Alleged Use of Chemical Weapons in the Ghouta Area of Damascus', August 21st, 2013, available at: http://www.un.org/disarmament/content/slideshow/Secretary_General_Report_of_CW_Investigation.pdf

⁷ UNSC Resolution 2118, available at: <https://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2013/sc11135.doc.htm>

⁸ As referred to by John Kerry, during UNSC deliberations leading up to UNSC Resolution 2118

⁹ Angelique Chrisafis and Julian Borger (2013), 'Syria conflict: France to seek tough UN resolution on chemical weapons', *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/10/syria-conflict-france-un-resolution-chemical>

conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, which lead to a decade-long military intervention placed a huge burden on both economies and proved to be extremely unpopular within their respective domestic spheres. Inevitably, the prospect of becoming embroiled in yet another military intervention in the Middle East is now being carefully considered against the backdrop of what transpired in Iraq and Afghanistan. Furthermore, Russia and China staunchly opposed any military intervention in Syria and threatened to block such a UNSC resolution.

Other subsequent peace talks between representatives of the Assad regime and the opposition held in Geneva failed to produce a positive resolution and compelled Lakhdar Brahimi, UN Special Envoy to Syria, to resign.

Many experts warned that the ongoing conflict in Syria is likely to have a spill-over effect in an already volatile region. Today, we are witnessing the magnitude and brutality of these effects as the international community is now confronted with a self-declared Islamic caliphate established over regions in Syria and Iraq by extremist Islamic militants who make Assad look like a more reasonable partner to negotiate with. Once again we are listening to the older rhetoric of “the war on terror”, and have to deal with a network of terrorist groups, scattered across states and regions, which are thriving on the war economy and have access to the latest communication technologies. The latter enables the group to present their violent ideology and war propaganda to the world. This way they gain new recruits, drawn from around the world, whilst provoking the US and its allies to become directly entangled in the current conflict.

The Syrian conflict has led to an escalation of the Shia- Sunni division in the Middle East, and covertly involved several regional and major global powers supporting Assad or the opposition. Moreover, Islamic groupings and militants have migrated from other parts of the world to join the rebels in fighting the Assad regime, whereby many have become members of Islamist groups, such as the IS. This has created more divisions among the opposing forces, which made the establishment of a ceasefire and a reconciliation government even more difficult. Over two and a half years of civil war have left many cities in Syria completely destroyed and created a large number of refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs). The atrocities carried out also made the opposition ever more brutal, alienated and fragmented. The international community is witnessing how a safe heaven for Islamic extremist terrorists is being created under the IS in Syria and Iraq. At the moment any possible transition towards reform and democratization is impossible to foresee. The crimes and atrocities carried out by these Islamic militants seem to overcome those carried out by Assad’s forces in brutality, magnitude and speed. We have recently witnessed the fourth killing of Westerner - the British aid worker, Alan Henning.¹⁰ Previously, American journalists, Steven Sotloff, and James Foley, and British aid worker David

¹⁰ Katz, Andrew, ‘Video Depicts ISIS Execution of British Aid Worker, Threatens American’, October 3rd, 2014, *Time Magazine*, <http://time.com/3462526/isis-execution-iraq-syria-alan-henning/>

Haines have also been beheaded by a masked IS jihadi militant, who is believed to be a Muslim militant from London.¹¹

This proves that recruits from Britain and other Western countries have joined the cause of the jihadists. According to estimates dating from June this year, as many as 3,000 recruits had travelled to Syria to join the fighting, thus becoming militarized and radicalized.¹² More recently, a CIA report stated that more than 15,000 foreign fighters, including 2,000 Westerners have travelled to Syria.¹³ Recently, the UNSC, alarmed by this radicalization of youths across borders, adopted Resolution 2118¹⁴, seeking to tackle this imminent problem.¹⁵ The resolution is binding in character and its successful implementation depends on the efficient enforcement of anti-terrorism laws in individual countries.¹⁶ National governments from Western countries now feel that the enemy is at their doorstep and fear further radicalization of some of their citizens. The anti-terrorism rhetoric circulated by Western politicians in the media is reminiscent of the days in which the Bush administration was involved in fighting Al-Qaeda. Overnight, the conflict in Syria has managed to stretch its arms into Europe, the US and Australia. Even more so, the IS allegedly has recruits drawn from several Asian and African Muslim countries.¹⁷

In Iraq, the Kurds play a crucial role in the fight against the IS as they control oil-rich regions. The UK government, along with several other Western governments such as the US, Australia, France and Germany, has sent military advisors to Iraqi Kurdistan, all part of an operation to arm and train Kurdish forces fighting the IS.¹⁸ Presently, the US and several of its allies are undertaking a bombing campaign against the IS in Iraq or/and Syria.¹⁹

¹¹ Friedman, Dan et.al, 'FBI knows the identity of ISIS 'Jihadi John' executioner who beheaded James Foley, Steven Sotloff', September 25th, 2014 *The Daily News*, <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/fbi-identity-isis-jihadi-john-executioner-article-1.1952806>

¹² McCoy, Terrence, 'How ISIS and other jihadists persuaded thousands of Westerners to fight their war of extremism', June 17th, 2014, *The Washington Post*, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/06/17/how-isis-persuaded-thousands-of-westerners-to-fight-its-war-of-extremism/>

¹³ Sciutto, Jim, Crawford, Jamie, Carter, Chelsea, 'ISIS can muster between 20,000 and 31,500 foreign fighters', September 12th, 2014, CNN, <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/11/world/meast/isis-syria-iraq/>

¹⁴ UNSC Resolution 2118, available at: http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2118.pdf

¹⁵ Factsheet on UNSC Res 2178 on Foreign Terrorist Fighters, September 24th, 2014, <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/texttrans/2014/09/20140924308855.html?CP.rss=true#axzz3EeJ0ecsP>

¹⁶ UNSC Resolution 2178: How easily can it be enforced?, September 26th, 2014, BBC, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29359901>

¹⁷ Foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria: Where do they come from?, October 8th, 2014, Radio Free Europe, <http://www.rferl.org/content/infographics/infographics/26584940.html>

¹⁸ Wintour, Patrich, 'Britain to arm Kurds fighting Isis in northern Iraq', September 4th, 2014, *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/04/britain-arm-kurds-isis-northern-iraq>

¹⁹ Rush, James, 'Syria air strikes: Why can't the US-led coalition stop the march of ISIS?', October 9th, 2014, *The Independent*, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-air-strikes-why-cant-the-usled-coalition-stop-the-march-of-isis-9784481.html>

The leading actors in this regional conflict appear to be extremist and moderate Muslims. However, IS militants are trying to frame it as a global conflict between the West and the Muslim world. In this respect the media, by giving it large global coverage has brought the conflict into the eyes of the world. Presently, it is being framed as the most prescient security challenge the world is facing.

There have even been rumors of a potential alliance between the US and Assad's government to counter IS insurgents. The possibility of a scenario in which the Kurds demand secession from Iraq and thus cause internal strife in other regional countries hosting a Kurdish minority needs to be considered.

The intelligence community will also have a huge stake, perhaps the greatest one, in this concerted military operation, because it will most likely turn out to be a hide- and seek- war, in which the enemy plans his operations and secures his funding in a covert manner. The prospect of having boots on the ground sent to Iraq once again seems less feasible. Countries which have called for a military intervention against IS, such as the US, are unlikely to send troops since there exists limited public support for any military intervention in Iraq or elsewhere for that matter. A survey on US foreign policy from November 2013 indicated that 52% of the population was of the opinion that the US government should 'mind its own business internationally' and focus more on domestic problems.²⁰ According to a recent survey carried out by the Pew Research Center 51% of Americans fear that the US will get too entangled into the military conflict with the IS.²¹ A recent survey on public perception in the US concerning the goals achieved by the long-term war in Iraq shows that half of the American public regards these endeavors as a failure.²² Recently the Kurds have called for the US to send ground troops, as the IS is steadily advancing in enlarging its sphere of influence in northern Syria, which has now reached the city of Kobani, close to the Turkish border.²³ Moreover, many people supporting an intervention doubt that the IS can be defeated by airstrikes alone.

Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu declared during a speech held in late June that it would recognize a Kurdish state, since its establishment is likely to bring stability to the region.²⁴ This of course would have wide implications for the Erdogan administration in Turkey, which is inevitably anxious about the possibility that the current instability in Iraq is offering the Kurdish minority in Turkey an opportunity to create a separate state. Furthermore, the president of Iraq's

²⁰ 'Public sees US Power declining as Support for Global Engagement Slips', December 3rd, 2013, the Pew Research Center, <http://www.people-press.org/2013/12/03/public-sees-u-s-power-declining-as-support-for-global-engagement-slips/>

²¹ Drake, Bruce, '5 Takeaways on how Americans view a world in crisis', 4th of September 2014, The Pew Research Centre, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/09/04/5-takeaways-on-how-americans-view-a-world-in-crisis/>

²² Drake, Bruce 'More Americans say US failed to achieve its goals in Iraq', June 12th, 2014, the Pew Research Center, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/06/12/more-americans-say-us-failed-to-achieve-its-goals-in-iraq/>

²³ Letsch, Constanze et.al., 'Syrian Kurds say air strikes against Isis are not working', October 6th, 2014, *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/05/air-strikes-isis-not-working-syrian-kurds>

²⁴ 'Israel's Prime Minister backs Kurdish independence', June 29th, 2014, the Guardian, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/29/israel-prime-minister-kurdish-independence>

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autonomous Kurdistan Region, Massoud Barzani, recently declared that a referendum on independence is scheduled to take place within the next months.²⁵ As this ever escalating conflict is threatening to engulf the whole region, what is desperately needed is for Middle Eastern states to consolidate a common security framework and show unity in response to the threat from IS. In order to prove that lessons from the past have been learned, it is important to engage all major regional powers in the fight against the IS. Regional actors must take the lead. This will help wade off any criticism on behalf of Muslims which are skeptical about the intentions of this new coalition, that it is yet another neo-imperialist strategy of the US and its allies to interfere in the domestic politics of Middle Eastern countries.

Apart from military efforts, complementary 'soft power' actions are undertaken as well. Muslim communities and their leaders in the UK and elsewhere openly condemn jihadist militants, and emphasize that the actions undertaken by extremist IS militants have nothing to do with the teachings of Islam and that the caliphate they are fighting to create is merely a monstrous aberration of extremist Islamists. Thus, the work of Muslim communities is pivotal to prevent other young Muslims from being lured into this fallacious extremist ideology and from becoming radicalized. Therefore, the real hope lies within the Muslim world, especially neighboring countries, as they are the ones directly threatened by this ongoing regional conflict and its pernicious ramifications. They should establish a common security policy against this terrorist network and vehemently denounce its actions.

The conflict is not between the Western and the Muslim world, as IS militants are trying to argue. This war presents itself as a conflict between extremist Muslim moderate Muslims, whereby regional minorities, such as the Yazidis, have also been trapped in the conflict zone. More resources and prolonged efforts are needed now in order to assist the refugees and stop terrorist groups from claiming other cities and regions. A case can still be made for the use of R2P, the plight of the Yazidis in the face of the IS being the most plausible reason for humanitarian intervention.

Thirteen months after the chemical attacks in Syria and the failure of the international community to act according to the R2P principle, we are seeing a greater escalation of the humanitarian crisis and a spill-over of the conflict into neighboring states.

Perhaps the starting point in fighting the IS would be to stop referring to this terrorist network as the 'Islamic State', as the group's actions neither represent Islam nor does the organization represent a state.

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²⁵ 'Iraq Kurdistan referendum planned', July 1st, 2014, the Guardian, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28103124>

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