

Syria “Red Line” Chronology

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Here is a quick chronology of the Syria “red line” events.

In the spring of 2011, civil war began in Syria after the Syrian military brutally suppressed a series of nonviolent protests. By that August, President Obama called on the President of Syria, Bashar al Assad, to step down.¹ Assad rejected those calls and the violence continued to escalate. Diplomatic attempts to censure Assad and authorize military action were blocked at the U.N. Security Council by Russia and China.²

1. **On August 20, 2012, President Obama laid down a "red line" against Syria's use of chemical weapons.**³

We have been very clear to the (Assad) regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized.

1. **By the following March, there were allegations that the Syrian military carried out small-scale chemical attacks.**⁴ Even after the allegations were confirmed, the Administration did not take punitive action directly against Assad's forces.

Following the White House's determination that chemical weapons were indeed used, the U.S. committed to supplying certain rebel groups with weapons and ammunition.⁵

1. **Then there were reports of larger chemical weapons attacks on the morning of August 21, 2013.** According to the humanitarian group *Doctors Without Borders*, three hospitals in Syria's Damascus governorate reported receiving approximately 3,600 patients displaying neurotoxic symptoms in less than three hours. Of those patients, 355 reportedly died.⁶ Media reports included photos and videos of the dead, including children.⁷

2. **In a CNN interview on August 23, President Obama called the allegations troubling, but made clear that the Administration was still assessing the situation and that U.N. inspectors were on the ground.** The President said that the use of chemical weapons began to implicate core U.S. interests in the region, including preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and protecting U.S. military bases. ⁸

3. **That day, the U.S. began moving warships to the region.** Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel said the Pentagon had presented President Obama with military options and suggested U.S. forces were being repositioned for possible action, although he declined to comment on specific movements or options. ⁹

4. **On August 26th, Secretary of State John Kerry issued a strong message against the attacks, leaving a clear impression that strikes are likely.**

“What we saw in Syria last week should shock the conscience of the world. It defies any code of morality. Let me be clear: The indiscriminate slaughter of civilians, the killing of women and children and innocent bystanders by chemical weapons is a moral obscenity. By any standard, it is inexcusable and—despite the excuses and equivocations that some have manufactured—it is undeniable.

...President Obama believes there must be accountability for those who would use the world’s most heinous weapons against the world’s most vulnerable people. Nothing today is more serious, and nothing is receiving more serious scrutiny.”

1. **Multiple Members of Congress sent letters to the White House demanding answers.** On August 28, 2013, House Speaker John Boehner sent a letter to the White House asking the President to “address on what basis any use of force would be legally justified and how the justification comports with the exclusive authority of Congressional authorization.”¹⁰

Also, Rep. Scott Rigell (R-VA) wrote a more strongly-worded letter to the President, stating “Engaging our military in Syria when no direct threat to the United States exists and without prior congressional authorization would violate the separation of powers that is clearly delineated in the Constitution.” As of August 30, 140 Members of Congress—119 Republicans and 21 Democrats—signed the letter.¹¹

1. **Meanwhile, on August 29th, the British Parliament narrowly defeated a motion seeking authorization in principle for military strikes on Syria.** This was the first time since the 1850s that the British Prime Minister lost a vote in Parliament regarding military action.¹² This also means America will not have its closest ally in any future Syrian conflict.

2. **While a number of military options are on the table, the Administration seems to be contemplating limited strikes without entering Syrian territory.** The most likely military option at this point is to fire Tomahawk missiles from Navy ships in the region against Syrian military targets, but not chemical weapons storage sites.¹³ This approach would have two advantages: (1) no U.S. troops or pilots would have to enter Syrian territory in order to strike; (2) avoiding striking the chemical weapons sites would avoid dispersing the chemical weapons or those weapons falling into unknown hands if the sites were no longer secured.

END NOTES

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