

Not for distribution

Atlantic Council

Members' Conference Call Series and
the Middle East Peace & Security Initiative:

Intervention in Syria? Considerations and Implications

A discussion with

Barry Pavel

Vice President and Director, Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security
Atlantic Council

And

Faysal Itani

Visiting Fellow, Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East
Atlantic Council

Moderated by

Damon Wilson

Executive Vice President
Atlantic Council

Time: 8:30 a.m. EDT

Date: Wednesday, August 28, 2013

Not for distribution

Operator: The following is a recording for the Atlantic Council on Wednesday, August 28th. Excuse me, everyone. We now have Damon Wilson, Executive Vice President of the Atlantic Council, with Barry Pavel, Vice President and Director of Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security, and Faysal Itani, Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council. Please be aware that each of your lines is now in a listen-only mode. At the conclusion of our guests' remarks, we will open the floor for questions. At that time instructions will be given as to how to proceed if you would like to ask a question. I would now like to turn the conference over to Mr. Wilson, who will offer some introductory remarks and facilitate a discussion with Mr. Pavel and Mr. Itani. You may begin.

Damon Wilson: Thank you very much. On behalf of the Council, it's my pleasure to welcome you to today's member's conference call on the situation in Syria and prospects for U.S. and allied military action against the regime. We're delighted you've joined us to hear what our experts have to say on the recent developments within the administration, as well as European and Arab capitals. We're pleased to have multiple board and corporate members with us today, as well as all of our members. Your support's greatly appreciated. This event, this call reflects the collaborative nature of the Atlantic Council DNA. This call is part of the Scowcroft Center's Middle East Peace and Security Initiative, which serves to provide discussion, debate, and analysis on issues related to security in the region. But it also is in collaboration with the Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, which has been doing great work on the situation in Syria and what it means for the region. This call is part of a broader series of calls that we do with our members and we look forward to joining you on future discussions.

Syria, of course, is a poster child for the Arab Spring gone wrong. Since Bashar al-Assad cracked down on protests in March 2011, civil war has brought Syria to its knees, with over 100,000 dead, 1.7 million displaced internally and around the region, with no end in sight. In August of last year, President Barack Obama responded to calls for action by saying that the use of chemical weapons was a red line for the United States, and if Assad should cross it, it would, quote, change the calculus of the United States and the Administration would consider action. We of course have heard allegations of use of chemical weapons by the regime throughout the year, and the chemical attack last week in Ghouta, which left between 500 and 1,300 Syrian dead, has prompted serious consideration of a military response by the United States and its allies. We all know the president has been on the phone non-stop with allies in the region, as well as European allies and the prime minister of Australia. We heard from U.S. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel yesterday that any action would have to be in concert with the international community, that the U.S. forces are ready to go. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said the use of chemical weapons is undeniable and a moral obscenity, helping to set the scene for debate beginning today as the United Kingdom introduces a resolution at the United Nations Security Council.

Against this backdrop, I would like to introduce our panelists for this call and my colleagues, Barry Pavel and Faysal Itani. Barry is Vice President and Director of The Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security. He served as Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Defense Policy and Strategy at the National Security Council for both George W. Bush and President Obama. He contributed greatly to Obama's 2010 National Security Strategy and led the White House review of several Defense Department policies. Prior to that, he served as Chief of Staff and Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict at the Pentagon. Faysal Itani is a visiting fellow with our Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East. A Canadian-Lebanese scholar, he's a Middle East analyst who focuses on political economy and transition in the Arab world with an emphasis on the Levant. Before I turn it over to Barry, let me just remind everyone that this is an on-the-record session. Please Barry, kick us off.

Barry Pavel: Thanks very much, Damon. And this is a fast-moving train and so I'm sure by the time my remarks are done, at least one thing I've said will no longer be true. But it's clear the decision to launch military operations hasn't been made officially yet, but every message from the Administration, including from the White House spokesman yesterday, leads me to believe a few key parameters, and I'll go through my sense of where this operation currently is in its development.

First, that the operation will be focused on a single mission objective and that appears to be deterring further use of chemical weapons. There's a range of possible mission objectives, from that one at a minimum, but there's at least two or three others that I think are within the realm of the reasonable. And those include taking away or degrading Assad's use of air power to limit further humanitarian suffering, going even further in that direction and establishing and enforcing a no-fly zone, and then, you could even go so far as to seek to change the balance of power in the conflict by, for example, increasing the quality and quantity of weapons being provided to vetted rebel groups. So, those are sort of the— that's the objective escalation ladder as I would put it, but it seems the Administration's very focused on the first one, deterring further use of weapons of mass destruction.

Secondly, it appears that the operation is likely to begin soon. At this point, it looks— a lot of speculation centers on after U.K. Prime Minister Cameron goes to his parliament on Thursday. That's probably the earliest possible time, but others are suggesting possibly after the G20. So, we have a range of possible beginning times but I would say it's more likely to be this weekend, Labor Day Weekend.

And then third, that it looks likely to be very short in duration. We're talking about a few days here. This doesn't look like a campaign that is expected to be of long duration.

And then fourth, that it will be U.S.-led coalition of selected NATO, and Gulf, and other allies, for example, Australia. In other words, I don't see the Administration going to NATO for formal approval of the North Atlantic Council, and I also don't think at this point that the Arab League as an organization is likely to sanction such an operation from the press reporting that I've seen on that. As of last night, it didn't look like they were going to go to the United Nations either, but as Damon mentioned, it looks like the U.K. at least will initiate action to seek a UN Security Council resolution. A lot of the speculation beforehand was focused on U.S. Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power being on vacation as one indicator that the U.S. wasn't going to the UN. That was wrong. So it looks like that will happen. And then we've also heard this morning from UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, that he has asked the inspectors be given more time. And so that is a dynamic that's just beginning to play out this morning.

Now, all of these parameters could change at some point but this is my strong sense of what we're hearing from the Administration across multiple outlets. Let me talk a little bit about the military operation itself that I see being planned and then we'll turn to Mr. Itani. My best guess about likely targets includes military targets, not chemical weapons focused targets. I even heard on CNN last night in Primetime a mistaken suggestion that the United States will certainly try to hit the chemical weapons storage sites. This could be a disaster because you would end up spreading the chemical agents over additional civilian populations. That's not in the cards from what I can tell. But it looks likely we'll go after air defense radars and batteries. Those would probably be first for obvious reasons. Air force bases and aircraft, ground force bases, ground force units, but especially those units that are not mixed in with civilian neighborhoods. And there would be some targets, I would imagine, that would include military-focused command and control facilities. I think the delivery means we'll likely be limited as well, at least in the first few

hours. And those will almost certainly include long-range B2 bombers flown out of either the United States or overseas bases, as well as cruise missiles. We have four U.S. destroyers now in the Eastern Mediterranean, each with 24 Tomahawk land attack cruise missiles. And there's a U.K. ship, is my understanding, in the area now and there's probably submarines as well—although those aren't publically discussed—that can also launch such missiles. So, once Syria's air defenses are suppressed or destroyed, then we might see the use of tactical aircraft launch from bases elsewhere in the region.

Now, my own recommendation on this in light of the circumstances and where we are would be to ensure and to make absolutely clear to the key decision makers in Syria that they will bear severe direct costs for any further use of chemical weapons. I would also want to ensure the degradation of key Syrian military assets during this campaign to limit further humanitarian suffering. So for these reasons, I at least would advocate a longer and more intensive air campaign than that which I think we are about to witness this Labor Day weekend. The U.S. led coalition could strike a range of military targets and to me it would be important to ensure that key Syrian decision makers are directly dissuaded from considering the use of chemical weapons ever again, and that while we are undertaking such an air campaign, we should choose our targets wisely and in a way that has the effect beyond the immediate goal even of just deterring chemical weapons use. This is a debate some press had last evening, but it's continuing to play out in the Pentagon and the White House. And this was in a New York Times article that I would recommend from last night. So, in a way, I've just sort of set the table and the baseline for what we might expect. And certainly in the question and answer session we should address things like what could go wrong. Back to you, Damon.

Damon Wilson: Thank you, Barry. Barry addressed the military options and strategy. I want to turn to Faysal to pick up a little bit more on the local and wider regional implications of action and its impact on various factors and strategies, from Hezbollah, to the Assad regime, etcetera. So please, Faysal, over to you.

Faysal Itani: Thank you, Damon. The main question from a regional perspective to me is how various local actors react to a U.S. strike. I think that depends very much on the nature and scale of the U.S. operations and how regional actors perceive the U.S. intent behind them. If these are, as you said, punitive operations against symbolic targets or a very narrow target set, then I think the regime in Syria will smell hesitation and reluctance, and recognize there's no real U.S. commitment to the war. And I think in that case they probably actually just choose to wait it out and pick up the war where they left off before, but this time without using chemical weapons. There'll be some embarrassment at the perceived inability to defend against the U.S. attack, but the regime will choose to play victim based on that and publicize very highly any civilian casualties that ensue, and therefore create a moral victory having survived the U.S. attack afterward. I think it'll shake them up but not prompt any serious rethinking of the strategy to crush the rebellion militarily, and that means the war will continue on its current trajectory. It will destroy what's left of Syria's economy and institutions, and refugee flows will continue into neighboring countries, placing a severe social and economic burden on them.

I think the greatest spillover effect would be in Lebanon, which is Syria's weakest neighbor. That would take the form of refugees, of course, which now constitute about a quarter of Lebanon's population. Also, sectarian violence as the fight continues to come home to Hezbollah in Lebanon due to their involvement in Syria. Already, the Syrian-Lebanese border has become more of a technicality than a geopolitical fact. As for other regional Arab allies, I don't think they're likely to derive much comfort from a limited campaign. The Gulf States have been particularly desperate for a strong U.S. stand against Syria, Iran, Hezbollah. But actually, the Arab League

Not for distribution

today has come out and rejected a U.S. attack on Syria, and I believe that's because they think that it's not going to achieve what they see as the intended aim. Jordan itself has refused to allow its territory to be used for any attack, or at least they've said as much, and I think that's also from fear of Syrian retaliation and hedging against possible outcomes. As for Israel, I don't anticipate that Hezbollah and Iran would seriously provoke Israel in this scenario. I think that would bring a powerful and determined actor into the equation that they cannot, at this point, afford to fight.

The bottom line I think, in my view at least, is this sort of hesitant, half-hearted operation may actually be worse than no action at all because it will expose a weak U.S. commitment, despite the fact that a clear boundary has been crossed, and a boundary defined by the United States, no less. U.S. allies would contrast this with what I see as Iran's deep and sustained commitment to a regime victory in Syria, and they'll draw the obvious conclusions really. If U.S. operations do shift to seriously degrading the regime's military capability, whether that's by design or by unintended escalation, I think there'll be a different dynamic regionally. It's possible that that could break the Syrian Armed Forces militarily, of course, but also encourage defections within the military and internal divisions within the regime.

I think in this scenario, strong Arab support and assistance would certainly be forthcoming. But that said, Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah do have options to retaliate. Syria does have a proxy military capability in Lebanon, in Turkey, and in Jordan, where they could facilitate terrorist attacks. Iran has the same capability in the Gulf Arab countries, and in those circumstances, government targets as well as U.S. interests may come under attack. Hezbollah may well attempt to preempt the capture of Lebanese state institutions, and an attack on Israel in this scenario, I think, by either the Syrians or Hezbollah would become much more likely.

To sum up, I think the regime at this stage is already more a collection of militias than it is a state, and it simply can't absorb that sort of U.S. attack. But it would take a long time for anyone to consolidate control over Syria. And meanwhile, hostile groups, including former regime elements and Hezbollah, will retain control of parts of Syria and Lebanon, and with that, the ability to cause problems for the United States and its allies. Thank you.

Damon Wilson: Thank you very much for that, Faysal. We'll go ahead now and introduce how the question and answer process works, and then I will get us started here at the Atlantic Council with a question while the audience is getting their questions into the queue. So please note again that this call is on the record. Let me turn it back to the operator to explain the next step.

Operator: Thank you, sir. At this time we will open the line for questions. If you would like to ask a question, please press the 'star' key followed by the '1' key on your touchtone phone now. Questions will be taken in the order in which they are received. Please be sure to introduce yourself when asking your question. If at any time you would like to remove yourself from the questioning queue, please press 'star 2.' Again, that is 'star 1' to ask a question.

Damon Wilson: Perfect. Thank you very much. We've got Michele Dunne here with us at the Council, our Director of the Hariri Center. So let me turn to Michele for the first question and then I'll come into the queue.

Michele Dunne: Thank you, Damon. Actually, I have two questions to ask. The first one is The Wall Street Journal today expresses a lot of concern about the leaks from the Administration about plans for the operation, the limited goals, the duration of the attack, and the signals that these are sending to the Syrian regime, both in terms of how to prepare itself to withstand the attack, and so forth. So, I'm curious what you think, Barry and Faysal, about that, if that's a

concern. If, for domestic political reasons, American officials have already said too much about what's likely to be done.

My other question is about civilian casualties. Barry, you mentioned that if chemical munitions themselves were hit, that could cause civilian casualties. But what about the airstrikes themselves in terms of if the airstrikes target launchers and things like that that may be hidden among civilian populations? What should we be expecting in terms of civilian casualties in Syria during the operations that may happen?

Barry Pavel: Sure. Thanks, Michele. On your first question about leaks and excessive discussion in the press from unnamed government sources, I think this reflects two things. One, in reality just a lack of discipline among those officials involved in the process. There's not much you can do about that except enforce the law. But second, I think this is also deliberate messaging to the domestic policy by key administration officials, including likely those in the White House. And so, I think some of that is useful. I do think it's been excessive, I do think we're signaling it too much, and I think this will ultimately detract from the effectiveness of the operation, because those involved and those in Assad's circle are now aware of what's happening, it can help them play out their next move in a much more skillful and effective way.

On the question of civilian casualties, I imagine that those currently scrubbing the target list, and have no doubt, these are being updated on a pretty frequent basis, I think that this is a key factor, and that there's likely enough military targets that are not mixed in with very heavily populated civilian neighborhoods that the administration can still achieve its limited goals without causing too many civilian casualties. That said, there will be civilian casualties. Things go wrong. Targets that were not really on the target list get hit. That happened in 1999 in Belgrade with the Chinese Embassy. So, you're right to raise this. Stepping sort of back a little bit though, and it's always horrible when an innocent person gets killed, look at what's happened over the last two years with inaction, where we've had over 100,000 civilians being killed. And so, I think these questions, you always have the raise the cost/benefit question of what are the risks of inaction versus the risks action. And the hope, I think, by the Administration and by the coalition is that this limited campaign will actually deter additional mass casualties from another WMD event.

Faysal Itani: Yeah, I just want to say a word about the communications ahead of time about the operations and their scope. In addition to sort of reassuring or shaping this domestic political debate, I also think there's a signaling to the regime itself that there are limits to the aims of this campaign, and therefore that, I think, supposedly reduces the risk of an unintentional escalation by telling the Syrians where this is going to stop and where this is going to begin. The regime is good at reading this sort of thing. They do occasionally overreach. Probably with the chemical attack, they did. They did it in Lebanon with the assassination of Hariri in 2005. But they also know how to pull back, how to cut their losses, and how to keep their heads down, really, until the storm passes. And this is a message that the storm will pass, really.

Damon Wilson: Thank you very much, Barry and Faysal. We've got a lot of questions in the queue.

Q: I'm not at all convinced that the actual take will be nearly as robust as you described. I actually have my doubts that any manned American aircraft will penetrate Syrian airspace. This will be ALCMs and TLAMs at most. Could you elaborate as to why you think it might be more robust, B2s, depression of their defenses, and so on?

Barry Pavel: Well, as I said at the beginning, and I think you raise a very good issue, this is informed speculation. But some sources that I've seen had suggested that we would use such aircraft, at least on a limited basis and at least initially. But you may be right. This may be just more like the 1998 cruise missile attacks on multiple attacks that President Clinton launched in response to the Embassy bombings. So that is not a high-confidence speculative judgment by me and I think you may end up being right. We'll see. It really depends on sort of how the targeting list develops, how the objectives still get developed. And as I said, even as of last night I think there was still not yet, at least according to some reasonably confident press reporting, they're not even clear yet on the mission objectives, on the specific goals of the mission and then how those would flow down to military tasks, and then targets. So, this is still going on. I think you raised an excellent question.

I do, though, question those who are extraordinarily confident that Syrian air defenses are as robust as some say. This war has been going on, and while it's not exactly clear that those manning the air defenses will be as exhausted and attrited as the other units, I can't imagine them being in as good a shape as some would suggest. We heard the same suggestions before Libya, that this would be a very difficult operation, that Libya had air defenses, etcetera, and that didn't pan out. We have the best air force in the history of the world. So, I think this is a mission that can be achievable in terms of the objectives that we've discussed, but I think the question you raise is a good one.

Q: Hello. Presuming the attempt to get a resolution from the UN Security Council does not succeed, is there a basis under international law that the Administration could use to justify a military strike?

Barry Pavel: Sure, this is Barry Pavel. Well, this has been done before. And so, the question you raise is just a central one, I think, for this type of operation. And the question gets to be what is the legitimacy and rationale under international law for such an operation. And if you had gone—if there was formal NATO approval, that would certainly broaden and strengthen the coalition in terms of the question that you raise. If there was Arab League approval and support for the operation officially, that also would suffice. But without any such formal regional or global organization's approval, I think the question you raise is an important one. That said, there are justifications to be made and we'll be hearing these more and more out of the U.K. administration, out of the U.S. administration. I think the first shot about these issues was Secretary of State Kerry's press conference this week where he began to build the case for the international operation based on policy, based on political, based on moral, and based on legal grounds. And I think you'll see more of this elucidated and discussed in public statements in coming days. And there has even been the suggestion which I think is likely, that President Obama himself will give a speech for this operation, outlining the answer to the question that you just raised.

Q: Thanks very much for doing this. What Faysal said about this sort of hesitant, half-hearted action may be worse than nothing at all. (0:24:44 Indiscernible) the Administration (0:24:46 indiscernible) and a lot of the (0:24:48 indiscernible) have been indicating that maybe they're only going to hit at the bases of the units that carried out these attacks. After all of this, will the situation actually be worse than before and is it likely to make it even more violent? And the Administration has been calling the Russians and sending messages to the Iranians that all they really care about is negotiations. Is this likely to make negotiations even less likely?

Faysal Itani: I think it's hard to imagine this getting any worse in terms of the scale of the violence. I think right now, the regime is employing whatever— well, now chemical weapons,

but short of that, even conventionally, whatever means it has at its disposal to win the war. At this point they don't have enough means to win the war. But in terms of the number of people they've deployed, the weapons they've deployed, they're doing their best. Will this make it worse from a political diplomatic angle? I'm a firm believer that a political resolution to this conflict is impossible given that there is a military statement— stalemate in place, rather. Should there be a military decision one way or the other, should the rebellion be seen as making serious gains, should the Alawite community itself be endangered, then I do think then that the regime will either be under severe pressure to negotiate a settlement or would fragment and fracture. But absent that sort of military shift, I don't see any incentive for the regime to negotiate, frankly.

Q: I've got two comments. Firstly, I'm surprised that the North Atlantic Council is not meeting to discuss this. It's not so much a question of their approval, but some strong statements on the use of chemical weapons I think would be appropriate and I think that should be done. Secondly, the issue of the consequences of the use of military action I think needs to be considered. Obviously, to some extent they're unpredictable, but it's very important that those who are going to use force, the U.S. and its coalition allies, should have plans in place to deal with any Syrian reaction, because escalation dominance in this situation is very important. Thank you.

Barry Pavel: Boy, those are two excellent comments and questions. On your first one about why isn't the Administration going to the North Atlantic Council, especially in light of what we hear, that the U.K. is seeking a UN Security Council resolution. I for the life of me don't understand why that's not happening, and indeed, maybe it just hasn't happened yet and everything else will sort of fall into line accordingly. But I do think that's an important critique. And you're right that the consequences of any military operation are unpredictable. I am very confident that, having worked myself in the Pentagon for over 15 years on plans and planning, that they are playing—the planners are playing this out, that they're doing branches and sequels to the operational plan that is being developed for this purpose, and they're red teaming it: what if Syria does this? What if Iran does that? What if Hezbollah reacts in this way? What if Israel then reacts to what Hezbollah does? Etcetera. So these are being played out. But those are not easily predicted themselves. And so, while you can do planning, the real world has a way of surprising us, as we've learned multiple times. So, my main point is while those issues are being addressed robustly no doubt, I do think we should watch for unpredictable second- and third-order effects of this operation.

Damon Wilson: I might just add to that—this is Damon—that there have, of course, been conversations at NATO headquarters about Syria dating back to last fall, some very frank conversations among the ministers and it leaked into the press. As I understand, the NAC is meeting this week in somewhat of an emergency setting to discuss the situation in Syria. And I would expect very much to look to NATO to follow the, at least to let the action be seen as moving forward first in the United Nations where it obviously won't move very far, but I think we can certainly expect statements from Secretary-General Rasmussen, as well as the NAC, even if that doesn't mean that the NATO as such is brought into the operation formally.

Q: Yes, I'm what they call (0:29:49 indiscernible) international relations specialist dealing with Russia. Very little has been said about the Russians in all this. I would assume as a major supplier and supporter of Assad, the Russians have been very vague. It won't do any good. I think if we're going to have any kind of political settlement over there in this thing because it has to end this way, it seems to me the Russians have to be on board. And Trudy Rubin did refer obliquely to the Russians. I'd like some of you to react to the Russian elements in all this, because they have this (0:30:27 indiscernible), and I am concerned about what, if any, leverage the Russians have and would they be willing to use that leverage with Assad, as apparently they have some.

Barry Pavel: This is Barry Pavel. The Russia question is an important one. If you look at the history of the Russian relationship with Syria over the long term and if you look at even their actions even over the last couple of years, one can have very, very little optimism that Russia would seek to use its leverage with Assad to come to a political settlement. Every action that I've seen, every reaction from the Russian government on Syria has indicated a pretty static position. I don't think they think realistically that a political settlement is going to happen. My guess is they think Assad will just destroy the opposition, although it may take a long time and that may be a relatively foolish judgment. But I don't see any hope for Russia to play a constructive role at this point. I would love to be proven wrong.

Faysan Itani: Yeah, I'd just like to add to that Barry that I agree. I don't see why the Russians would agree to that to begin with at this stage. But I also think the more important actor here in actually Iran, which is very heavily invested in the Syrian regime, is a close strategic ally, and the common interests and the overlap of common interest is, I think, much broader than it is between Syria and Russia. And the Iranians will be the ones who have to be involved in a real settlement. And finally, of course, the regime itself has to be on board with that settlement. I don't see how the Russians getting on board, however unlikely that is, without convincing the regime that they cannot win the war they're fighting, I don't see why that would be useful or how it would be conducive to a political settlement.

Q: Yeah, thank you both for doing this. I have two questions. I wanted to start by asking you last week the UN secretary-general said that while inspectors will be able to determine who was responsible for the chemical weapons— while they were able to determine that chemical weapons had been used, sorry, they wouldn't be able to determine who had used them. Are you then convinced that the Assad regime bears responsibility for the August 21st attack? And my second question is that if a Western military operation ends up toppling the regime, do we have a Syrian opposition that's in place that ready to fill in the vacuum the day after? Thank you.

Barry Pavel: Sure. On the question of who actually used those chemical weapons, I personally am convinced that it was the Assad regime. I think within 24 hours we'll have a declassified document coming out of the Administration that, according to press reporting last night, includes intercepted communication among Syrian military personnel, including commanders and units, regarding the use of chemical weapons on August 21st. I think there's also satellite imagery showing activities at Syrian chemical weapon sites associated in time and space with the attack. There's very little reporting that rebels have acquired chemical weapons, etcetera. So, I personally think that Assad and his forces were responsible. And one of the reasons I think they're responsible is because they would have had no reason up till this point to be deterred from using those weapons. They saw Obama make a public statement that said it would change his calculus, and then they've used chemical weapons more than once and there was no response. So, I think after almost a year of U.S. drawing a red line and not actually backing it up, I would see no reason that Assad would shrink from using such weapons. But even if he didn't personally order it, I'm very confident that the Syrian military was the one who used those chemical weapons. And if you can refresh my memory on your second question.

Faysal Itani: Is there an opposition (0:34:56 inaudible)?

Q: The second question was if you do have a Western military operation, as everyone anticipates), and it ends up toppling the Assad regime, do we have a serious opposition that is ready to fill the vacuum the day after?

Faysal Itani: The short answer is no, there isn't that sort of opposition in place. Rather, it's more useful to think of it as several oppositions, each of them controlling different amounts of territory, each of them with different military capabilities, and at the end of the day it's a war, and whoever is fighting the best and has the most ability to pay their soldiers and arm them are going to be the most powerful actor on the ground. That said, there is a case to be slightly more optimistic because at least in the abstract, and increasingly in the concrete level, there is a nucleus to develop in the form of an opposition the United States could possibly work with. And that is represented by the Supreme Military Council, the umbrella of relatively moderate rebel fighting groups which is known as the Free Syrian Army, as well as several other militant groups that are operating in Syria that are not outright international or transnational (0:36:05 indiscernible) groups. So, there is something to work on. Whether or not there's a political intent to develop that opposition is of course a different story.

And I would just like to add to what Barry said about the chemical weapons calculus. I agree that it's not at all unfathomable that the regime would have calculated that they can get away with this. I also think the U.S. Administration, which has been so hesitant to get involved, would certainly not have staked a military campaign on something that, in all likelihood, they probably wish hadn't happened. So, I believe they probably have very strong evidence that it did. And also, the question of who ordered them within the regime, it's probably more accurate to think of the regime as a sort of clique of various influential family as well as security actors. So, even if it did not come from Assad himself, even though he is a sort of first among equals, then it still did come technically from the regime. This is a very tight-knit group of people. They don't always agree about tactical issues but they do agree on broader strategic ones.

Q: There's been no discussion of any consultation with Congress. Is this just not going to happen other than a phone call to the speaker and the two leaders in the Senate, and that's about it? I mean, when we were going into Libya, that turned out to be several months. The intent may be short term but the potential for longer term is there. Where does a Congressional consultation, if any, come into play, and what are the consequences of not doing it?

Barry Pavel: Excellent question. It does strike me that there have been numerous sort of individual consultations between senior White House and cabinet officials and key leaders of the relevant Congressional committees. The issue of whether to go to the entire Congress to authorize the use of military force, I think, tends to be related, although not in law, tends to be related to the sort of scale, duration— expected scale, duration, intensity, and complexity of the military operation. So, I think we're talking about a very focused, very quick operation, and I think for that reason the Administration has chosen to go the consultation route that they've done. That said, if it gets bogged down for some reason or another, then they might have to rethink that, which is, I think, the implicit suggestion of your question.

Q: Well, I don't mean to be debating, but I get the impression the consultation is extremely limited.

Barry Pavel: I think that's a fair characterization.

Q: Yes. Good morning, gentlemen. Thank you for doing the call. Barry, I wondered, you mentioned in your remarks you thought there were some downside scenarios here. I don't know if you felt you've walked through those in some of the answers to questions, but could you discuss that and also talk a bit about Turkey, and maybe more broadly, if this does become a more extended campaign, where we can get bases for aircraft or land-based aircraft in the region. Thanks.

Barry Pavel: Well, on the second question, I think we have a pretty good set of bases from the region and I think we have reasonable permission for use of those bases across the entire Gulf where, as you know, there's an extensive infrastructure. And if you end up using tactical aircraft, which General Hayden rightly questioned, then you could even establish an air bridge, which means a set of refueling and combat air patrol, air orbits, etcetera. So, I'm not as worried about the basing aspect. You know, red teaming though this operation is an important question. What if Iran does bring in— What if the second a bomb hits Syria, either Syria or Hezbollah, or even Iran, launched ballistic missiles or rockets at Israel, Israel is forced to retaliate? There's any number of scenarios we could all come up with that would start to make things a lot more complex a lot more quickly. And so, without going into all of those details, those are things that I would hope the Administration is considering in a very structured and systematic fashion.

Q: Good morning, gentlemen and hello, Barry. And my question is if you were running the red team on this—two questions—how would you shape the response information operation and what would the narrative be coming from Syria? And secondly, what about the lucky shot scenario where an aircraft would be downed or a ship lost? Does that force us into a branch or a sequel of escalation?

Barry Pavel: Well, the response information operation, as you suggest, I think is if the Administration's goals are indeed focused on the use of weapons of mass destruction, whatever you would end up getting out of Syria, which would be a broader information messaging issue I think than just WMD, I think the Administration would continue to just focus on the WMD aspect, how this is a heinous and barbaric act, as Secretary of State Kerry said, a moral obscenity that has shocked us, etcetera. So, I think that's reasonably easy as long as the Administration's goal is focused on deterring further WMD use.

On the lucky shot scenario, that's sort of what I was suggesting in my previous answer in terms of what could go wrong in red teaming, and that could lead to additional escalation. But even additional escalation doesn't mean that you have to broaden the operation in any way in terms of using other means, such as ground forces. It doesn't mean— I mean, it could simply mean an intensification of the tempo and duration of the air campaign. But there could be others that get more complex, so I think it is important to be using our imagination, which for some reason, people tend not to do as much a priori, using our imagination to come up with these things to make sure we're prepared and resilient when something like that happens.

Q: Okay, very good. Yes, for years, I was also head of the Sovereign Risk Unit at Moody's and it's really a follow-up question on Russia. It would appear to me that obviously the U.S. has national interest in the region, but it would appear that Russia has a vital national interest in maintaining a regime that will allow it to continue to use those naval facilities on the Mediterranean. And I've seen reports that the Russians have sent more ships recently to the Eastern Mediterranean. What would stop— why should the Russians not in fact increase their aid if they think the Assad regime may fall and they may lose the use of those vital naval facilities.

Barry Pavel: That is one of the scenarios that could play out in more complex ways for the United States. Recall what happened in the Balkans when there was a standoff at I believe Pristina Airport with the Russians and NATO forces. And so, this could play out in similar ways and possibly even more complex ways in Syria. But I don't— there's a range of issues between the U.S. and Russia. I'm not convinced that Russia sees that port as vital interest. I'm not convinced where Russia currently is and where they're heading, that that's critical for advancing and defending their own national interest. That said, there's prestige on the line. Putin himself

probably thinks that's important. He is the key decision maker, and perhaps what some people tell me, the only real decision maker in Russia. And so, you do raise a very important sort of line of reasoning that we need to be attentive to, which is how does Russia react when we act, how do we react when Russia does something, and how does that all play out. You want to be careful that you're not starting World War III here.

Q: Great. A follow up though to that in terms of it's my understanding, and I may be wrong, that this is really the only genuine naval facility that the Russians have in the Mediterranean that allows them to do refueling and repairs of ships without having to go through (0:45:04 indiscernible). So it seems to me if that's correct, and I may be wrong, that this actually is quite different than the Balkans because this is a really important— may be a military important issue. It's not just fighting about some political statement in the Balkans.

Barry Pavel: Yeah, I agree with you. It's more important in the Balkans in terms of strictly military operational value. And again, I don't want to underplay it. I think the calculus for Putin is how much does he want to risk for this port. I know they have access to other ports in the Mediterranean and let's just face it, Russian power projection of naval forces worldwide isn't what it used to be. So, I think Russia's concerns right now for military purposes are closer to home than the Mediterranean, and I'm not convinced that Putin is willing to sort of go all out and double down to protect this port. That said, that might be the reason why he's holding on to Assad so long and that might be at least one of the major factors why they're sustaining this relationship, even amidst a very, very dicey scenario for Assad even in the near term.

Q: Hi. For the most part, the questions that I had have pretty much been answered focusing on the Iran synopsis. I do want to emphasize I get the sense that we're— this is a vitally important historical decision. This is not Iraq. This is not Afghanistan. The dynamics were much different. So really looking at— again, you've already given your synopsis of Russia, but looking at China, looking at North Korea, and what do you think any reactions might be, and especially with Iran, well beyond what we've seen in the past in history, but the actual deployment from another country opposed to a coalition-led attack against Syria. And again, that's worst-case scenario, and we've already discussed the red teaming, but what do you think?

Barry Pavel: I'm sorry, what's your question?

Q: Well, the question would be is there any, I guess, sense of fear that there might be deployment of forces from Russia or Iran?

Barry Pavel: Yeah. I mean, I think that should be central to potential reactions. Iran has forces in Syria. They have advisors in Syria. Russia has I know at least equipment and they may have advisors, although I think I saw some reporting overnight that they're evacuating some of their people from Syria as we speak. I don't see China playing a role, I think you mentioned them, but I do see Iran sort of. They are all in. And so how do they react? I wouldn't be surprised if their forces were involved but I think they have a broader game to play. And while Syria is a close ally and they have a defense pact, I think they need to be— they'll be really careful, I think, especially with a new president who seems to be moving in a different direction than his predecessor. I think Iran will be cautious but there is a chance that the Iranian military bureaucracy and intelligence bureaucracy will sort of continue to hold sway and act in a way that does take some risks, and we have to be prepared for that. So, I think that question is a very, very important one that we should watch really closely because that's the sort of second-order effect that I see as among the most likely.

Faysal Itani: No, I just want to add I agree that the Iranians are generally very risk-averse in the geopolitics and they will be in Syria as well, as long as they don't perceive that there's an existential threat to the regime, which I don't think the likely sort of operation we're going to see would pose. And I also want to add that their main asset here regionally is not their conventional forces and possibly deploying them in Syria where I think they'd be— well, frankly, they'd be defeated, but their asymmetric assets in the Persian Gulf and in the Levant, and that's where I think you'd see a more likely Iranian reaction.

Q: Hi. Thanks, guys for doing this. I wanted to ask if you had detected any real diplomatic strategy that goes in tandem with this. When we look at the situation we think of Clinton and Bosnia-Kosovo where there were airstrikes and then there were peace talks. I've just written something suggesting that the U.S. should immediately ask Iran to join the Geneva II talks after these strikes and try to bring the Iranians into the diplomatic side of things. So you see that there is any preparation going on for a diplomatic strategy to follow these strikes?

Barry Pavel: I personally see none. The strikes are focused on the deterring further use of chemical weapons. If they had a broader campaign plan, which there are reasonable arguments for suggesting that they do so, if that broader campaign was focused on changing the balance of power in the conflict, if they were upping the quantity and quality of weapons to vetted rebel groups under General Idris, etcetera, then I could see the necessity for a complementary and reinforcing diplomatic strategy that would move the parties towards an endgame that could help resolve this conflict. But this campaign doesn't appear to be focused anywhere near that objective. It's focused on chemical weapons and making sure those aren't used again. So, I don't see that sort of diplomatic effort being played out.

Q: And what about the visit of Jeff Feltman of the UN to Iran just the other day where presumably Syria was discussed and a Geneva conference was discussed?

Barry Pavel: Yeah, what about that? I mean, again, they could be connected. I'm not convinced they are connected. I'm sure there was some discussion of U.S.— of the potential emerging coalition operation, but I don't see anything coming out of this White House that would suggest that their objectives of the campaign are to move this towards an endgame and a resolution.

Damon Wilson: Thank you very much. Thank you, Barry. Thank you, Faysal. I just want to take a moment, we're going to wrap up now, and thank all of you for joining us on this call this morning. This is obviously a quickly-moving, a fast-moving target. It's an issue of incredible importance from our perspective, the Atlantic Council, and how the United States, having to work with its allies and partners both in Europe and in the region, will take steps forward on Syria in the coming days. We already have on our docket an event scheduled for next Wednesday, September 4th at noon, an event on the outlook for Syria. But please stay tuned on our website and our member's list as I'm quite certain we'll have additional programming related as developments unfold. Again, I want to thank Barry, thank Faysal for this morning's session and thank all of you for joining us. We look forward to the next member's call.

Operator: Thank you. Ladies and gentlemen, this concludes today's conference. You may now disconnect.