

# The Syrian Conflict

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## SYRIA AND IRAN: THE DANGER OF ESCALATION

As we approach the 100th anniversary of the start of World War I, we ought to remember that this catastrophic event started as a minor engagement in which the Austrian Empire sought to punish a group of Serbian nationalists. No one involved at the outset of this small conflict had any idea that it would escalate into a world-destroying disaster, which still casts a dark shadow over civilization a century later.

Can we not see a parallel to the intention of the United States to punish the Assad regime in Syria for an alleged use of poison gas? The parallel with the start of World War I is particularly disturbing because the intervening century has witnessed the development of thermonuclear weapons with the capacity to destroy human civilization and much of the biosphere.

The following is a report from Information Clearing House, dated August 26:

“As talk and rumors of an impending Western attack against Syria mount, a top Syrian official said Monday that if attacked, his country would react against Israel.

“Speaking to an Arabic-language radio station operated by the United States, Syria's Deputy Information Minister Halaf Al-Maftah said that Israel would face not only Syria in the event that the US, Britain and France attempted to unseat Bashar al-Assad. A coalition consisting of Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria would respond to any attack against Assad with a response against Israel. In addition, terrorist groups in Syria and Lebanon would attack Israel with full force.”

“Al-Maftah added that Syria has “strategic weapons” that it would use in its attack on Israel. He did not specify what those weapons were.”

“Syria is ready to deal with all scenarios,' said Al-Maftah. 'We consider these declarations of a possible attack as a form of psychological warfare and pressure on Syria. We are not worried about them. We hope that those threatening us will listen closely to what we are saying. We believe that the only solution for the Syrian issue is a political one,' he added.”

The Obama administration claims that “the use of poison gas cannot be allowed to go unpunished”, but the report of the United Nations inspectors is not due for another two weeks. It is not at all clear that if chemical weapons were used, it was Assad's government that made the attack. This is especially doubtful because of the fact that the United States tried to persuade UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon not to allow the inspectors to investigate the incident. Also, we can ask what motive Assad could have had in using chemical weapons at a moment when the Obama had declared such use would be a signal for a US attack on Syria. Why should Assad provide Obama with a convenient excuse for greater involvement in the Syrian civil war?

It seems very ironic that the US should take a “moral” position regarding chemical weapons, considering the fact that they provided Saddam Hussein with such weapons, and worked to protect Sadam from international censure when he used them not only against Iran but against his own people.

Both the United States and Britain helped Saddam Hussein’s government to obtain chemical weapons. A chemical plant, called Falluja 2, was built by Britain in 1985, and this plant was used to produce mustard gas and nerve gas. Also, according to the Riegel Report to the US Senate, May 25, (1994), the Reagan Administration turned a blind eye to the export of chemical weapon precursors to Iraq, as well as anthrax and plague cultures that could be used as the basis for biological weapons. According to the Riegel Report, “records available from the supplier for the period 1985 until the present show that during this time, pathogenic (meaning disease producing) and toxigenic (meaning poisonous), and other biological research materials were exported to Iraq perusant to application and licensing by the US Department of Commerce.”

In 1980, encouraged to do so by the fact that Iran had lost its US backing, Saddam Hussein’s government attacked Iran. This was the start of a extremely bloody and destructive war that lasted for eight years, inflicting almost a million casualties on the two nations. Iraq used both mustard gas and the nerve gases Tabun and Sarin against Iran, in violation of the Geneva Protocol.

In 1984, Donald Rumsfeld, Reagan’s newly appointed Middle East Envoy, visited Saddam Hussein to assure him of America’s continuing friendship, despite Iraqi use of

poison gas. When (in 1988) Hussein went so far as to use poison gas against civilian citizens of his own country in the Kurdish village of Halabja, the United States worked to prevent international condemnation of the act. Indeed US support for Saddam was so unconditional that he obtained the false impression that he had a free hand to do whatever he liked in the region.

It is no secret that Israel would like the United States to be more involved in the Syrian civil war, as a means of undermining the influence of Iran in the Middle East. Israel's leaders, Netanyahu and Barak, regard Iran as the real enemy, and they have often repeated the threat that Israel would bomb Iran, with or without US support.

Should the conflict spread to Iran, we can recall a statement by Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh , who is in charge of the Revolutionary Guards missile systems told Iran's Arabic-language television network that should Israel and Iran engage militarily, “nothing is predictable... and it will turn into World War III”

He added that Iran would deem any Israeli strike to be conducted with US authorisation, so “whether the Zionist regime attacks with or without US knowledge, then we will definitely attack US bases in Bahrain, Qatar and Afghanistan.”

An attack on either Syria or Iran would be both criminal and insane. It would be criminal because it would be a violation of the United Nations Charter and the Nuremberg Principles. It would be insane because it would initiate a conflict that might escalate in an unpredictable way. Such a conflict might easily be the start of a Third World War.

A large-scale conflict in the Middle East could lead to the overthrow of Pakistan's less-than stable government, thus introducing Pakistan's nuclear weapons into the conflict on the side of Syria and Iran. China and India, steadfast allies of Syria and Iran, might also become involved.

The destabilization of the Middle East would lead to closure of the the Strait of Hormuz and the price of oil would reach previously unknown heights. The blow of astronomical oil prices could produce a global economic depression of previously unknown dimensions. But the most serious threat of a large-scale conflict in the Middle East remains the possibility of nuclear war.

Must we allow the actions of a few power-blinded politicians to start a conflict that could lead to the deaths of ourselves and our children?

## **SYRIA, DEMOCRACY AND INTERNATIONAL LAW**

The central purpose of the UN organization, when it was set up in 1945, was to make war illegal. The enormous suffering caused by two world wars had convinced the men and women who drafted the Charter that security based on national military forces had to be replaced by a system of collective security.

The fact that the basic purpose of the United Nations is the abolition of war is made clear in Article 2, where Section 2.3 states that “All Members shall settle their international disputes by peaceful means in such a manner that international peace and security, and justice, are not endangered.” Section 2.4 adds that “All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations.”

The abolition of war implies the abolition of the colonial system, in which technologically advanced nations maintain their dominance over less developed regions by means of superior weapons. If the institution of war is abolished, this becomes impossible.

Despite the high aims of the founders of the United Nations, both war and neocolonialism have persisted. Some of the wars that we see today are civil wars, but others are characterized by the use of military force by highly industrialized countries to extract resources from the developing countries on unfair economic terms.

In his book, “Resource Wars: The New Landscape of Global Conflict” (2002), Michael T. Klare shows that many recent wars can be interpreted as struggles for the control of natural resources. For example, many conflicts in the Middle East can be seen in terms of the desire of industrialized countries to control the petroleum resources of the region (“blood for oil”). Are not the efforts of the United States to obtain complete hegemony in the Middle East at least partly motivated by the lust for oil? Syria and Iran resist this hegemony, and therefore they are scheduled for attacks.

But there is a second motive for the US plan to attack Syria and Iran: Israel regards these two countries as threats; and Israel seems to control the United States government. Much of the drive towards a US military attack on Syria seems to come from the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. The American people oppose such an attack; but the government ignores the wishes of its citizens because it has been enslaved by Israel.

Since the United Nations has, until now, failed in its efforts to abolish the institution of war, some people argue that we should let the United States function as a “global

policeman". There are a number of reasons why this is a terrible idea, one of which is that no single country can be an impartial judge in international conflicts. The special motives (oil and Israel) for a US attack on Syria illustrate this point.

Furthermore, whatever system we have for global governance ought to be democratic, with equal rights for all nations. The United Nations, in some form, is the appropriate place for all nations to have their say. If a single bully, "the world's sole superpower", dominates all other nations, we do not have a global democracy but a tyranny of brutal military power.

In fact, the United States has lost its own internal democracy and degenerated into an Orwellian surveillance state. The Occupy Wall Street movement's slogan, "We are the 99 percent", points to the fact that a very small power elite, perhaps only 1 percent of the population, has a hugely disproportionate amount of economic and political power in the United States. In this sense, the United States is no longer a democracy, since neither the economic system nor the government serve the will and needs of the people. They serve instead the interests of the wealthy and powerful 1 percent, who control not only the mass media and the financial system, but also the politicians of both major parties.

Law has always been the protector of the weak against the raw power of aggressors. This is why tyrants hate law and ignore the law. But today, in a world of thermonuclear weapons capable of destroying human civilization and much of the biosphere, international law is our only hope.

A US attack on Syria would unambiguously violate not only Article 2 of the United Nations Charter, but also the Nuremberg Principles. Does President Obama really want to turn himself from a Nobel Peace Prize winner into a war criminal?

Today the world has become a global village. It is no longer possible to regard nations as separated from each other. They are linked together by nearly instantaneous communications and by a shared economy. So nationalism has become anachronistic, and we can no longer afford to have anarchy at the international level; we need to have some sort of global governance. The United Nations fills that role, and its agencies perform extremely important services for the world community. For example, essential work is done by the World Health Organization, the Food and Agricultural Organization, the International Panel on Climate Change, the UN Development Program and UNESCO. Furthermore, the United Nations is a forum and a meeting place where international problems can be discussed and solved.

Rather than undermining the United Nations, we need to strengthen and reform it. A just and democratic system of international law is our only hope for the future.

## NOBEL PEACE PRIZE WINNER AND WAR CRIMINAL?

In 1946 the United Nations General Assembly unanimously affirmed “the principles of international law recognized by the Charter of the Nuremberg Tribunal and the judgment of the Tribunal”. The General Assembly also established an International Law Commission to formalize the Nuremberg Principles, and the result was the following list.

- Principle I: Any person who commits an act which constitutes a crime under international law is responsible, and therefore liable to punishment.
  
- Principle II: The fact that internal law does not impose a penalty for an act which constitutes a crime under international law does not relieve the person who committed the act from responsibility under international law.
  
- Principle III: The fact that the person who committed an act which constitutes a crime under international law acted as Head of State or responsible government official does not relieve him from responsibility under international law.
  
- Principle IV: The fact that a person acted pursuant to order of his Government or of a superior does not relieve him of responsibility under international law, provided that a moral choice was in fact possible for him.
  
- Principle V: Any person charged with a crime under international law has the right to a fair trial on the facts and law.
  
- Principle VI: The crimes hereinafter set out are punishable as crimes under international law:
  - a. Crimes against peace: (i) Planning, preparation, initiation or waging of war of aggression or a war in violation of international treaties, agreements or assurances; (ii) Participation in a common plan or conspiracy for the accomplishment of any of the acts mentioned under (i).
  - b. War crimes: Violations of the laws or customs of war which include, but are not limited to, murder, ill-treatment of prisoners of war or persons on the seas, killing of hostages, plunder of public or private property, wanton destruction of cities, towns or villages, or devastation not justified by military necessity.
  - c. Crimes against humanity: Atrocities and offenses, including but not limited to, murder, extermination, deportation, imprisonment, torture, rape, or other inhumane acts committed against any civilian population, or persecutions on political, racial or religious grounds, whether or not in violation of the laws of the country where perpetrated.

- Principle VII: Complicity in the commission of a crime against peace, a war crime, or a crime against humanity as set forth in Principle VI is a crime under international law.

The Nuremberg Principles are being used today as the basis for the International Criminal Court's trials of individuals accused of genocide and war crimes in the former Yugoslavia and elsewhere.

Notice that under Principle III, Heads of State can be prosecuted for war crimes, and that according to Principle IV, a soldier carrying out orders to commit a war crime is also guilty.

Robert H. Jackson, who was the chief United States prosecutor at the Nuremberg trials stated that "To initiate a war of aggression, therefore, is not only an international crime, it is the supreme international crime, differing from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole"

Perhaps, before initiating a war that could escalate uncontrollably into World War III; a war that could involve Pakistan's nuclear weapons on the side of Iran and Syria; a war that would cause the price of oil to reach unprecedented heights, thus causing a catastrophic global depression; a war that could involve Russia and China, staunch allies of Syria; a war with no end in sight; perhaps before initiating such a war, President Obama should remember August Pinochet who was indicted for crimes against humanity by a Spanish court, and narrowly escaped extradition from the UK.

Does President Obama really wish to turn himself from a Nobel Peace Prize winner into a wanted war criminal by initiating a world-destroying war? Does he really wish to disgrace his name throughout all future history?

## **“HUMANITARIAN” MISSILE STRIKES AGAINST SYRIA?**

The issue of chemical weapons is obscuring the more important issues of legality, and the question of whether an attack on Syria would not greatly increase the suffering of the people of that region because of escalation.

Whether or not the United States Congress approves a US attack on Syria, such an attack would unambiguously violate the United Nations Charter, and it would be a

war crime under the Nuremberg Principles. Both President Obama, ordering the attack, and the military personnel carrying it out, would be war criminals and liable to punishment for the remainder of their lives.

The idea of a “humanitarian” missile strike is an absurdity. What targets would be hit? Chemical weapons depots? This would spread nerve gas throughout the surrounding areas. Airfields and military barracks? What do these have anything to do with chemical weapons? Could the United States avoid killing many civilians? Absolutely not! Does the Obama Administration think that it can save civilian lives by a missile attack which would kill many more of them?

What would be the effect of a US missile attack on Syria? Would it make a political settlement of the civil war more likely? No, it would lead to an extremely dangerous escalation of the conflict, and possibly World War III. The danger of escalation is underlined by the statements by Assad's government and by Iran concerning what they would do in retaliation if attacked, (for example, missile strikes on Israel and on US bases) and by Russian and Chinese warships that are now sailing into the Mediterranean.

A large-scale war in the Middle East might lead to the overthrow of Pakistan's less-than-stable government, bringing that country's nuclear weapons into the conflict on the side of Syria and Iran. Also the closing of the Straits of Hormuz would lead to extremely high oil prices, whose likely effect on the global economy would be to cause a worldwide depression of unprecedented severity.

The proper response to the tragic events now taking place in Syria would be for all parties to refrain from sending weapons to the region, and to support a conference that would seek a diplomatic solution. In the meantime, a sufficient amount of money should be made available to help Syrian refugees who are at present facing a humanitarian crisis. If chemical weapons have been used, the correct response is for an international tribunal to conduct an investigation and trial of whoever might be guilty.

It is strange that the United States is trying to stand on high moral ground with respect to chemical weapons, when its record for using them or encouraging their use is so abysmal. In its article on Agent Orange, Wikipedia states that “Agent Orange or Herbicide Orange (HO) is one of the herbicides and defoliants used by the US military as part of its chemical warfare program, Operation Ranch Hand, during the Vietnam War from 1961 to 1971. Vietnam estimates 400,000 people were killed or maimed and 500,000 children born with birth defects as a result of its use. The Red Cross of Vietnam estimates that up to 1 million people are disabled or have birth defects due to Agent Orange.”



Depleted uranium munitions, which have been liberally used by the United States in its various wars, have caused extremely numerous cases of cancer, especially in Iraq.

Furthermore, the US backed Saddam Hussein's use of chemical weapons: In 1980, encouraged to do so by the fact that Iran had lost its US backing, Saddam Hussein's government attacked Iran. This was the start of a extremely bloody and destructive war that lasted for eight years, inflicting almost a million casualties on the two nations. Iraq used both mustard gas and the nerve gases Tabun and Sarin against Iran, in violation of the Geneva Protocol.

Both the United States and Britain had helped Saddam Hussein's government to obtain chemical weapons. A chemical plant, called Falluja 2, was built by Britain in 1985, and this plant was used to produce mustard gas and nerve gas. Also, according to the Riegel Report to the US Senate, May 25, (1994), the Reagan Administration turned a blind eye to the export of chemical weapon precursors to Iraq, as well as anthrax and plague cultures that could be used as the basis for biological weapons. When (in 1988) Hussein went so far as to use poison gas against civilian citizens of his own country in the Kurdish village of Halabja, the United States worked to prevent international condemnation of the act.

It is not at all clear that it was Assad's government that used chemical weapons in Syria. There are a number of factors that make a "false flag" attack seem more likely. Why would Assad use chemical weapons at the precise moment when Obama had declared that this was the red line which, if crossed, would lead him to attack Syria? Assad does not want greater US involvement in the conflict; Israel wants it. Furthermore, Assad's first action was to invite UN inspectors, while the United States' first action was to try to persuade the UN not to send inspectors. Finally, the US does not have a good record with respect to starting wars on the basis of lies. But let us return to the most important issues:

A large-scale war in the Middle East would cause immense suffering to the people of the region, and it might turn into a Third World War. It would be a criminal act to initiate such a war, violating both the United Nations Charter and the Nuremberg Principles.

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