

Sep 6 2013

Might Assad Want US Intervention in Syria?

LSE IDEAS

By Dr Nicholas Kitchen, Research Officer in Global Power and the Gulf and Editor in Chief of LSE IDEAS.



“We don’t know exactly why it happened,” a US intelligence official told [Foreign Policy](#). “We just know it was pretty fucking stupid.”

A week on, and despite some [claims to the contrary](#), US intelligence seems pretty clear that Bashar al-Assad’s forces were behind the [chemical attacks in Syria](#). But the motive for the attacks [remains unclear](#), with [William Polk writing](#) that he ‘could not see what Assad could have gained from this gas attack.’ But assuming the Syrian leader did sign off on the use of chemical weapons, what was his calculus in choosing to pursue a tactic that would heap international opprobrium on his regime, engender greater sympathy for the rebels both inside and outside of Syria, and that could have only limited military impact?

I don’t think Assad is ‘pretty fucking stupid’, even if Western expectations of him were overly optimistic when he succeeded his father Hafez in 2000. The Syrian President has defied predictions that he would prove unable to manage the relationship with the Syrian military – one Israeli diplomat thought Bashar had no chance of long-term survival because Syria’s generals would “never come to terms with this “kid” ruling over them” – as well as more [general scepticism](#) that he could successfully consolidate his power.

Nor would most observers have said that Assad was the type of leader likely to end up at the Hague. An autocrat, yes, but not a monster. So it warrants real consideration as to why – as even [President Putin seems to be giving himself enough room to admit](#) – he sanctioned an attack with chemical weapons?

One possibility is that Assad thought he could get away with it. After all, back in April, the US seemingly allowed Syria to cross its own ‘red line’ when the White House did nothing in response to its [own assessments](#) that the regime had used chemical weapons on a small scale. It may also be that Assad calculated that given such immunity, chemical weapons provided the capacity to instil a sense of fear that would erode support for the rebels.

There is perhaps another option: that Assad is actually seeking to draw the United States into Syria. There are two possibilities here: first, that Assad might be seeking to present himself as a fighter against the imperial Western powers. Assad may make for an unlikely Arab strongman, but opposition to the US and Israel unites public across the region.

A second possibility is that Assad is looking for a way out. In the early weeks of the Syrian revolt Assad rejected the possibility of a managed exit from power, believing he could win. That belief has proved illusory. Assad is embroiled in a civil war from which his only likely exit is assassination; indeed, the [ignoble fate of Muammar Gaddafi](#) may well cross his mind from time to time.

Outside intervention might just reopen Assad’s route to a comfortable exile. The West is [so concerned about the composition of the Syrian rebel forces](#) – and in particular, the presence of significant elements of Al-Qaeda – that a deal with Assad that ensures the security of Syria’s WMD may be an attractive diplomatic option, however ethically unpalatable.

Of course, this may all be too clever by half. Maybe the Syrian leader is just ‘pretty fucking stupid’.

Dr Nicholas Kitchen is Research Officer in Global Power and the Gulf and Editor in Chief of LSE IDEAS.

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