



Transcript

Syria: The International Response

Dr James D Boys

Visiting Senior Research Fellow, King's College London; Associate Professor of International Political Studies, Richmond University

Dr Alan George

Senior Associate Member, St Antony's College, Oxford; Author, *Syria: Neither Bread Nor Freedom*

Dr Patricia Lewis

Research Director, International Security, Chatham House

Rt Hon Sir Malcolm Rifkind MP

Chairman, Intelligence and Security Committee; UK Foreign Secretary (1995-97)

Chair: Philippe Sands QC

Barrister, Matrix Chambers; Professor of International Law, University College London

5 September 2013

The views expressed in this document are the sole responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of Chatham House, its staff, associates or Council. Chatham House is independent and owes no allegiance to any government or to any political body. It does not take institutional positions on policy issues. This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s)/ speaker(s) and Chatham House should be credited, preferably with the date of the publication or details of the event. Where this document refers to or reports statements made by speakers at an event every effort has been made to provide a fair representation of their views and opinions, but the ultimate responsibility for accuracy lies with this document's author(s). The published text of speeches and presentations may differ from delivery.

Philippe Sands:

Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to Chatham House. My name is Philippe Sands; I'm professor of law at University College London and a barrister here in London. We're here to discuss the international response to the current situation in Syria.

To my right is Dr James Boys, who is a visiting senior research fellow here in London, at King's College, and also an associate professor at Richmond University. He is author of the book, *Clinton's Grand Strategy*. To my immediate right and speaking second is Dr Patricia Lewis, who is the research director on International Security here at Chatham House. To my immediate left is Dr Alan George, who for the next month at least is a senior associate member of St Antony's College, Oxford, and author of the book, *Syria: Neither Bread Nor Freedom*. Then to his left, Sir Malcolm Rifkind, who is currently chairman of the Intelligence and Security Committee and a former British foreign secretary.

I, as chair, express no views; my job is to facilitate the process. We will have half an hour of presentations and then we will have half an hour of questions from the floor. We will invite the questions to be tight and narrowly put.

I would only say this: I have just come back from a month's holiday in the United States, followed by four days of work in Washington. I got back this morning. I signed off on Monday on a long profile of a neighbour of mine here in London who is a former intelligence person. His name is David Cornwell; he writes under the name John le Carré. The profile will appear in this Saturday's *Financial Times Magazine*. My editor on Sunday said: in light of what is happening in Syria, could you please ask him for his views on the situation right now in Syria?

Because I was in the United States and had no access to a telephone I simply sent an email, and the following came back – and I read this without adopting it but, if you like, to set the context of a reasonable person's view of the current situation.

"If you bomb it, you own it," he wrote. He was profoundly relieved and, for once, proud of the House of Commons for its landmark of belated political maturity, a moment of self-recognition that Britain was not where it once was. and that it was not allowing a knee-jerk accommodation, as he put it, to the wishes of our political masters. "Punitive raids," he wrote, "when you don't know who you are punishing and who you are unwittingly supporting, and whether one raid will do the trick or a few more might be necessary, are sheer insanity at any time but now more than ever."

Just to be clear, that is not my view; that is a view that will appear on Saturday. But it sets the tone for an observer's view of the situation. Against that background, I begin by inviting James to speak for a few minutes on the area that he is going to lay out.

James Boys:

Thank you very much. Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, it's a pleasure to be here at Chatham House. In the six minutes I have, I'd like to try and address three central points, if I may: What is the Obama administration up to? How have these events impacted US-UK relations? And what can perhaps be expected from Congress in the coming couple of days?

It's understood that when John F Kennedy was president, he uttered the rather pragmatic expression, 'We have a problem making US power credible, and the place to do so is Vietnam.' Clearly, Kennedy didn't live to regret saying that, but I believe that President Obama has a similar problem now. On 20 August 2012, he told Chuck Todd of NBC News, 'We have communicated in no uncertain terms with every player in the region: there is a red line for us and that would be enormous consequences if we start seeing movement on the chemical weapons front.'

I believe this cuts to the heart of a major problem with Barack Obama as president. He gets himself into a corner when he starts going off the record and ad-libbing. This, of course, was a statement made at the height of a presidential campaign and one wonders whether in retrospect it may be seen as a bigger problem, in terms of rhetoric, than Gerald Ford's famous slip suggesting that there was no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe. Jay Carney, the press secretary, has been called into having to do a number of semantic somersaults ever since trying to get him out of that. Some of you may have seen overnight that upon arriving in Stockholm, the president has now said, 'First of all, I didn't set a red line.' Some of us might take issue with that.

I believe that what the Obama administration is doing is comparable in many ways to what the Clinton administration did in the mid-1990s, when it refused to endorse the idea that genocide was occurring and instead referred semantically to 'acts of genocide'. But more on Bill Clinton very shortly.

I think we're seeing a semantic shift in the second Obama team. We've seen the new appointments, Samantha Power coming in and Susan Rice, and I believe that what you are seeing is an interesting shift. It's possible, I think, to

suggest that the administration has jumped into a new phase and perhaps the advisers are now putting their agenda ahead of the president. Let me give you two very quick quotes from Samantha Power: 'American leaders don't act because they don't want to' and 'one mechanism for altering the calculus of US leadership will be to make the leaders publicly or professionally accountable for their inaction'. I think you can see from the statements of John Kerry and others that the advisers' rhetoric is now ahead of the president and that rhetoric is ahead of policy, and that by doing so we risk, if we're not careful, green-lighting and advancing US advances to the potential enemy, allowing them to move human shields into place.

Clearly, the spectre of Iraq is everywhere. It's responsible for the current administration in Washington. There were clear parallels, however, not with Iraq but with Bosnia in the 1990s. Then, as now, we see Western powers seeking to intervene on humanitarian grounds only to be blocked at the UN Security Council by the Russians. Of course, this was something that occurred during John Major's time, at a time when our esteemed panellist was foreign secretary. However, at that point there was a real dip, perceived at least, in UK-US relations. Some people have talked about the impact upon the 'special relationship' so let me turn to that briefly now.

Clearly, there are challenges at the moment but the threats to the US-UK special relationship are overstated dramatically. They make for nice headlines but they have little bearing upon reality. It's constantly written off; it has more comebacks than Sinatra. We can remember tensions before, in Grenada, in regard to Northern Ireland. Some of you might recall that the reason the White House is white is to cover the scorch marks from 1812, so I think we can say that the relationship between the US and the UK has been worse. There is no great problem at this time, I think. The prime minister has shifted the UK national security apparatus to bring it in line with American thinking. One thing I think we can say is that regardless of what everyone says about the UK-US relationship, no one at this point is accusing David Cameron of being Barack Obama's poodle.

What can we expect in the next couple of days as we move forward? It's remarkable, I think, that the president has turned over the running – supposedly, at least – of US national security to Congress. We've seen missile strikes launched by the US previously: by Reagan, by Clinton, just to name two – a Democrat and a Republican, neither of whom felt the need to subordinate US foreign policy to Congress. It is an interesting move, if there is nothing else planned except air strikes – which obviously raises the question of what else is on the agenda.

If we think about the individual House and the Senate, you may have seen overnight that the Senate Foreign Relations Committee approved a move to put to the full Senate. This is being suggested as being a triumph for the Obama administration. It's important to note, however, just on that one committee alone, two Democrats opposed, one Democrat showed up and voted 'present', and only three Republicans voted in favour. It's been suggested that if there were a vote in the House and the Senate today, neither would vote in favour.

Clearly, the vote is going to be seen in the context of the 2016 presidential election, just as Iraq was and had implications for John Kerry and Hillary Clinton – both negatively. The House, of course, is strongly controlled by the Republican Party. The Democrats control the Senate but do not have a supermajority and so could not prevent a filibuster. So anybody suggesting that this is a 'slam dunk', to use George Tenet's term, is overstating the fact. Congress reconvenes on Monday and will be voting upon this over the 9/11 anniversary, which is of no small impact, I think.

Public support for this is currently nine per cent, with 60 per cent overwhelmingly opposed. By all accounts, and I quote, 'the word from members of the House and the Senate is that the numbers back home fail to support intervention. Calls and letters are coming in, in overwhelming opposition, and the president is doing very little to change that.' Just to put that in context, 47 per cent of Americans supported intervention in Libya.

The fundamental problem here, therefore, is we have an administration that appears disinclined to act, a Congress disinclined to act, and White House proposals have already been rejected by the Senate already. Who would have thought that Ed Miliband, someone most Americans would never have heard of, would have had such a fundamental impact upon the direction of US foreign policy?

Patricia Lewis:

First of all, I want to start by thanking you all for being here. What we're talking about really matters and I think it's great that everybody's here and wants to engage in the issue. I'm going to talk about three things: why chemical weapons are different, why we need due process and what the options are, other than military options.

So first of all: why chemical weapons are different. It's not just about mass killing. It's a horrific way to die: loss of consciousness, convulsions, paralysis,

respiratory failure. And it's also about those who do not die or do not die immediately: the suffering, the inhumanity, the nerve damage, the sight damage, breathing difficulties. With certain other types of chemical weapons as well, sometimes passed on down the generations and leading to cancers later in life, depending on the actual gas. Over 150 years there have been attempts to differentiate between the very worst type of weapons, the weapons and methods of warfare of a nature to cause superfluous injury or unnecessary suffering. Such weapons are, we think, against the dictates of the public conscience. Chemical weapons leave the injured marked for life, and we learnt this a hundred years ago in the First World War.

Now, other weapons do as well, and there have been attempts to ban those. Some of them have been very successful attempts – dum-dum bullets, blinding lasers, anti-personnel landmines, and more recently, cluster munitions – which, by the way, have also been used in Syria, and in addition to chemical weapons are the focus for human rights groups. Biological weapons have been banned, including anthrax and smallpox. They were banned completely in 1972. The ban on the use of chemical and bacteriological weapons was far earlier, part of the Treaty of Versailles, and became the 1925 Geneva Protocol, which prohibits the use in war of asphyxiating, poisonous or other gases, liquids, and materials justly condemned by the general opinion of the civilized world, and states that 'to this end, this prohibition shall be universally accepted as part of international law, binding alike the conscience and practice of nations'.

These things matter. These laws were adopted because of horrific experiences. When Iraq used them against Iran in the 1980–88 war, few spoke out against Saddam Hussein for doing so, and that was a mistake. When he used them against the Kurds in a month-long attack as part of the Anfal campaign, culminating in the atrocity of thousands dead at Halabja, again few spoke out, and that was a mistake. The secretary-general's mechanism was invoked, as we have seen just now. Inspectors reported that chemical weapons had been used, and there was no significant action against Iraq. That was a mistake.

During the Cold War, Russia and the US built up their stocks of chemical weapons. The UK made a decision to abandon its offensive chemical weapons programme in 1956 and worked hard from then on, along with many other countries, to eliminate chemical weapons entirely, which was done in 1993. The Chemical Weapons Convention entered into force in 1997. Almost every country in the world is a member of that treaty. Russia and the US have destroyed almost all of their stocks and they're on track for complete

elimination within the next few years. The few countries that have not joined include Israel, which has signed but not ratified, and Egypt and Syria, which have never signed.

This treaty matters and it exists because chemical weapons are abhorrent. They're an inhumane way to kill and civilization demands that they be unusable and gone. Any entity that would use them, by definition, is not civilized and is inhumane. Doing nothing in the face of chemical weapons in Syria is not a civilized option.

But in our response, we also have to be civilized, and so we need due process. Syria is a member of the 1925 Geneva Protocol and it has to be held to account. So after the accusations of low-level chemical use over the last few months in Syria, where each side has blamed the other, the UN inspectors were brought in to investigate. Despite months having passed, the investigation was still worth doing because chemicals persist in soil and in body tissue, and their breakdown products are well known and can be traced. Indeed, chemical signatures of sarin were found in contaminated soil from bomb craters in northern Iraq four years after the warplanes had dropped clusters of bombs there. The international team of UN inspectors were drawn from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and the World Health Organization. They've now collected and processed the samples and they're sent to three certified laboratories around the world who are now conducting rigorous tests. The report will go to the secretary-general as soon as possible and he will report to the UN Security Council.

What's interesting is the Security Council resolution of 1988, Resolution 620, which condemned the use of chemical weapons in the Iran-Iraq war and the violation of the 1925 Protocol, sets out a decision by all the members of the Security Council to consider immediately appropriate and effective measures in accordance with the UN Charter should there be any future use of chemical weapons in violation of international law, wherever and by whomever committed. So states now do have to act immediately once those UN inspectors report. I think that's very important, because many countries are saying that they do not have to wait for the inspectors' results because they already know who committed the atrocity. And it is true that the inspectors are not mandated to discover who committed the atrocity, but what they find out will tell us quite a bit. We'll find out the composition of the gas, we'll find out its concentration, we'll find out whether it contained dispersal agents and stabilizing agents, and therefore we should find out whether it's a gas made by a government force or part of an improvised device.

The intelligence agencies of the US, UK, France, Germany and others may indeed be correct, but if we do not wait they may not be believed. That's important. Ten years ago when inspectors went into Iraq to discover the WMD that the US and the UK went to war on, they soon discovered that the intelligence had been wrong on this matter. This is hard to recover from. Once trust is broken it takes a lifetime to re-establish it, and rushing now will be folly.

Oh, I've got loads more to say – can I just say a couple of options, please? We could get P5 unity if we wait. Mr Putin has said that he's prepared to consider force if it's proven. We should involve the League of Arab States and we should all provide all the intelligence we have to the Security Council. And I think as well that we could call a meeting of the Geneva Protocol in Geneva.

Alan George:

Thank you very much, and good evening. It's an honour and a privilege to be addressing such an audience. At the outset, I've got to say that predicting the consequences of what looked like imminent military strikes is fraught with difficulties. Just on Sunday, the International Crisis Group issued a statement warning that 'to precisely gauge in advance the impact of the US military strike by definition is a fool's errand'. Well, that's the errand I've got today. I hope I can handle it in a way that is not too foolish.

It would be hard enough to predict the consequences of an attack even if one knew more about what it's going to be like, what its nature is. But what is meant by 'limited, narrow strikes', to use Obama's phrase? Will it just be the US that acts or will France and Turkey also take part? Will their role also be limited? What about Israel? What will the targets be, given that the declared intention will be to degrade the regime's ability to use chemical weapons? Theoretically, all Syria's airports could be targeted, thereby denying the regime not only the ability to deliver chemical weapons by air but also the general dominance of the air that has been such a headache for the rebels.

The consequences of the strikes will be moulded by their nature, and the latter is simply unknown. In those circumstances, realistically, all that can be done in advance is to lay out a series of possible consequences. In doing this, I'm assuming that the strikes really will be limited in scope.

Okay, let's look at the possibilities. A really clever response by the Assad regime would be not to react at all. Since the start of this year, Israel has bombed Syria three times. In 2007, the Israelis bombed a Syrian alleged

nuclear site; in 2006, they overflowed Assad's palace in Damascus; and in 2003, they bombed a militant training camp near the Syrian capital. Damascus swore revenge but did nothing. So no reaction really is a possibility.

If the Assad regime decided to retaliate, it's unlikely to do it overtly and directly, in my view. On past form, the Syrian-allied Hezbollah might fire missiles into Israel from Lebanon, albeit risking heavy retaliation in return. Westerners in Lebanon might be kidnapped by Syrian agents or Syrian-allied factions, in a rerun of the 1980 hostage crisis. Another possibility could be a further use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime, assuming it was the regime that perpetrated the attacks – something I believe to be the case. Such a response would be a political nightmare for Obama given that the use of chemical weapons was supposedly a red line for Washington and that the strikes were intended to deter any repeat. Having insisted that the strikes were limited and narrow in scope, it would be difficult indeed for Obama to do nothing and equally difficult to take any further military action.

There has been talk of some reaction from Iran. I discount that. I see no reason why Tehran would feel a need to become any more involved in Syria than it already is, although I wouldn't rule out some covert Iranian involvement in retaliatory attacks against Western interests elsewhere.

What about the impact of the strikes for the Assad regime's security and stability? I see no reason at all why Damascus need be unduly troubled, assuming that the attacks really will be limited in scope and that's largely symbolic. There has been plenty of time to relocate military assets to safe locations. Assuming they really are narrowly focused, the strikes will not alter the fundamental balance of power between the regime and its opponents.

Indeed, they could even provide political succour to the regime. Street-level anti-Western sentiment has been a constant in this region since the end of the First World War. The regime will have no difficulty pointing to the double standards at play: the West's support for a nuclear-armed Israel bent on colonizing the occupied Palestinian lands and so on. President Obama, politically wounded since the outset of his administration by his inability to secure any Israeli concessions on Palestine, speaks of the need to protect America's credibility. But the reality amongst the Syrian public is that the US had no credibility to start with. The reality is that the strikes could play straight into the regime's narrative that it is an anti-imperialist bastion fighting an international terrorist conspiracy. It's a narrative as intellectually dishonest as

the West's equivalent – the 'war on terrorism' – but it has considerable support within Syria.

Opponents of military action, not least in the UK parliament, have asserted that military strikes could discourage the Assad regime from engaging in negotiations with its opponents domestically. Supporters of the strikes argue the precise opposite. I have to say that both demonstrate a misunderstanding of the very nature of this regime. It is just not in the business of concession and negotiation. It never has been. It's just not that sort of animal. In my view, military action will have no effect one way or the other on the prospects for a negotiated settlement of this conflict.

My last two points leave a profound question hanging in the air: if narrow, limited strikes are unlikely to achieve anything, is there any point to them?

Sir Malcolm Rifkind:

The unexpected decision by the House of Commons to reject the government's proposal has obviously resulted in a great deal of angst and concern as to the implications for the United Kingdom, its foreign policy and its relationship with the United States. There's already been reference to the fact that the United States president referred to France as the United States' oldest ally. Well, I don't think we should be too worried about that. It is indeed the case that France is the oldest ally because they helped the United States defeat the United Kingdom during the war of independence, so it's hardly likely we could have ever had that particular title.

It's worth thinking as to why what happened in the House of Commons did happen. It would be a mistake to believe there was one single reason. A significant number of members of parliament of all parties were opposed to a response regardless of the evidence. Even if the evidence was overwhelming – which I happen to think it is – but even if they accepted that it was overwhelming that the Assad regime were responsible for these chemical attacks, they just believe – for some of the reasons that have been mentioned just now – that it would be counterproductive and wrong to respond in the way recommended.

But that was not the position of the official opposition. I sat opposite Ed Miliband in the chamber and he said not once, not twice, but four times I think it was in his opening remarks that the Labour Party, the official opposition, could support a military response outwith the Security Council if certain conditions were met. And it's because of the extraordinary similarity between

the opposition amendment and the government proposal that there has been such confusion as to what it might mean for a longer-term United Kingdom policy.

I don't think this is a dramatic sea change in the attitude either of parliament or of the British people. A few months ago I spoke in the Oxford Union on the 80th anniversary of the notorious motion that 'this House would not fight for king and country'. When that motion was passed in 1933, it is recorded that Mussolini assumed the British were decadent and Hitler concluded that they would never fight. Of course, history judged otherwise.

Let me go to the heart of the issues that have been raised this evening. Of course, much of the concern arises from Iraq. I was strongly against the Iraq war. I think it was a very foolish mistake. But it needs to be repeated again and again that what's being contemplated at the moment bears not the slightest resemblance. Saddam Hussein didn't have nuclear weapons and even if he had been planning them they were certainly nowhere near possessing them or using them. The Syrian government admit to massing stocks of chemical weapons, and the only issue for which some people still want further evidence is whether they were responsible for an attack that we now understand killed up to 1,400 men, women and children.

Now if there is a military response, there is a purpose behind it. It is not simply to punish the Syrian government, punishment though they may very much deserve. It's much simpler than that. It is: how else does anyone think they are going to be deterred from doing it again, and again, and again, in increasing amounts? They have these stocks. They have no ethical objection to them. No regime that has already slaughtered tens of thousands of its own citizens by random artillery attacks and bombing has any compunction about doing it if they think they can get away with it. There is evidence that they have used it in small amounts over the last few months, and they will conclude that they have got away with it.

Let us assume that there is no military intervention over the next few weeks. Do we genuinely believe, does anyone remotely think, that Assad and his colleagues, whenever they think there is a military rationale – and the military rationale a week or so ago was there. They were trying to recapture a suburb of Damascus that was controlled by the opposition. It was proving much more difficult than they had anticipated, and by using chemical weapons which indiscriminately remove all live human beings from the scene, that gave them a significant tactical military advantage. Since then they have been waiting to

see, have we got away with it? If they conclude that they have got away with it, then it will be repeated.

Now, I can't guarantee – no one can guarantee – that a military strike over the next few days to seek to deter them will succeed. Of course we can't be sure of that. But there's one thing we can be sure of: that without any military response then they certainly will continue that behaviour.

Let me just say a word about the United Nations, because anyone who has any sense believes in the desirability of the Security Council being the forum which determines matters of military activity. But let's not turn that into an unalterable icon. Let me quote in support of what I'm saying not some American neo-con but Nye Bevan, the idol of the Labour Party; he could be a very wise man. He said: 'If there's one thing I detest more than "my country, right or wrong", it is "the United Nations, right or wrong".' What he meant was that of course the United Nations doesn't have a corporate identity – it can be prevented from acting by one country using its veto, and you cannot use that as the means which prevent any attempt by the international community to respond in a meaningful way. Before the Second World War we had the League of Nations. It was destroyed because of the ability of Germany and Italy, in various ways, to thwart its use, and we know what that led to.

So I conclude, in the very short introduction we are all making, simply saying this: I don't pretend that these things are straightforward. I don't know any more than anyone else here exactly how the Assad regime will respond. But I do know that over a few weeks and months they probably were responsible for killing a few dozen people, and then it became a hundred or so, and last week it was 1,400. What happens if we don't respond and in a month's time it's 5,000 or 10,000? That's the ethical question, not just the political question, we all have to ponder. Thank you.