

Syria Chemical Weapons Crisis II

Background

The U.S., Russia and Syria experienced a crisis in April 2017, triggered by Syria's use of chemical weapons in its civil war.

On August 21, 2013, a gas attack in the Syrian capital of Damascus killed over 1,400 civilians within the city (see Crisis 470). An intelligence report released by the United States alleged that the Syrian government, led by Bashar al-Assad, used rockets filled with sarin gas and other toxic chemicals against its own people. U.S. President Obama had issued a stern warning to the Syrian regime in 2012: any use of chemical weapons against the Syrian people would be crossing a red line necessitating probable military intervention. After facing stiff resistance both from within the U.S. and abroad, Obama tabled any potential military strikes against the state. Instead, the U.S. settled for an agreement with Russia to jointly dismantle the chemical weapons programs of the Syrian regime. The Syrian government, however, continued developing its chemical weapons program covertly, partly due to expectations of Russian cover in the event of future detection of Syrian violations.

In January 2017, Donald Trump became President of the U.S. As a candidate, Trump had indicated hesitancy toward military intervention against the Syrian regime. Even as far back as 2013, Trump was a vocal supporter of non-interference in the Syrian civil war.

Crisis

On the morning of 4 April 2017, Syrian government forces carried out an airstrike in which they released toxic chemical gases on the town of Khan Shaykhun in northwestern Syria. The attack killed more than 80 people and injured hundreds more, triggering a crisis for the U.S. because of its interests in enforcing the 2013 agreement that committed Syria to dismantle its chemical weapons program. The Assad regime denied that it had used any chemical or toxic gases. Russia concurred, claiming that the attack had been fabricated by the West. A UN fact-finding mission later confirmed the use of chemical weapons.

On the evening of 6 April, U.S. President Trump informed Congress of his plans for airstrikes. U.S. authorities warned several countries, including Russia, of the coming attack. On the morning of 7 April (6 April EST), the U.S. launched 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles at Shayrat Airbase from two warships located in the eastern Mediterranean, triggering a crisis for Syria and Russia. The attack lasted three to four minutes. There were no Russian aircrafts on the base at the time of the attack due to the U.S. warning.

Syrian officials reported that the attack killed seven people and injured nine. They strongly condemned the U.S. attack and accused the U.S. of fabricating the chemical weapons attack to justify its airstrike. Russia echoed that the West had fabricated the attack and threatened to sever its deconfliction communication line – used to alert both militaries of operations in Syria - with the U.S. The Russian military also promised to help Syria strengthen its air defenses after the strike to help protect Syrian infrastructure.

On 24 April, the UNSC voted on a resolution to sanction Syria, although Russia vetoed the resolution. The same day the U.S. announced its own sanctions against 271 Syrian researchers and employees for participating in the development of the weapons. The Russian veto and U.S. sanctions terminated the crisis for all actors. NATO and the EU also condemned the Syrian airstrike but did not take any action during the crisis period.

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