

# SYRIA WHODUNIT

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*The US cruise missile attack on a Syrian air base has spread fears of immediate escalation of Syria's conflict into a US-Russian confrontation. How real are the risks of a war involving these powers?*

First of all, a word of caution. The parties involved in the Syrian quagmire pursue incompatible objectives which shift according to imprecise and confused criteria. *Prima facie* analyses of the attack speak of a “decisive shift” in the conflict thanks to President Trump’s snap decision to shoot. Reality though is different. There are unanswered questions about the timing and purpose of the attack. There is little information about how the decision-making in the White House worked against the backdrop of intensifying personality conflicts within the Trump inner circle. And last but not least, those who understand the dynamics of such crisis situations see strong words with Russia as a “natural” corollary in the inevitable mutual muscle flexing, especially at a time when US power is questioned by many potential adversaries after the failures of the Obama years. As things stand now, a broadened conflict involving the US and Russia appears low on the risks dial.

*Still, public opinion is unsettled and the language of government leaders in the West is belligerent. War by mistake is a possibility, isn't it?*

The degree of instability in Syria has surpassed the “assessment” comfort zone long ago. Yet, the mere fact that the Syrian *civil war* has come to involve **dozens** of countries, directly or indirectly, may be the unlikely and unexpected “stability” variable in this conflict: every action in Syria triggers multiple re-actions by actors who do not necessarily communicate with each other or agree on mutual objectives. Thus, the main protagonists, i.e. the US and Russia, have established “back channels” to assess the situation and inform each other on **how they wish** to confront this lack of communication and the ability (or inability) to receive and interpret signals from an

environment that is a nightmare even for the toughest veteran intelligence interpreters. It is clear, for example, that the US [warned](#) the Russians of its intention to strike. This is hardly the behavior of an actor wishing to catch the “enemy” by surprise. US Secretary Tillerson spoke with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov immediately following the strike. They [agreed](#) to continue deliberations in person. By any criterion, this is not behavior heralding the widening of the conflict.

***During the election campaign, President Trump repeatedly promised to curb US involvement in foreign wars. What happened now?***

Campaign promises and the harsh realities of government are two different things. Furthermore, the Trump presidency faces unprecedented hostility from a liberal political establishment which had come to believe it was impervious to reversals of the orthodoxies it has imposed on the country. The shock of election 2016 has barely subsided as the Democratic party rides dead in water, confused and divided upon itself as to what to do next. The new president is taunted daily in the social media jungle and by a “mainstream” press owned and directed by the “deep” liberal state. A good guess is that the Syria retaliatory attack is part of a *developing pushback policy* centered on displaying the requisite resolve in times of crisis demanded by established US political patterns and precedents. Initial indications suggest that the ruse worked, with many “mainstream” commentators, intensely hostile to Trump until yesterday, expressing their effusive [approval](#) of the new president. Not to be outdone, the defeated, and still sulking, Mrs. Clinton sped to demand the US [bombs](#) **the entire Syrian air force** out of existence.

Politically, therefore, the raid (of which the Russians received ample warning) has accomplished three important tactical targets: (a) it has forced many Trump liberal opponents to congratulate him lest they appear “less determined” in the eyes of public opinion -- and it has served to confront Trump’s critics inside the Republican party (b) it has imposed further confusion upon the disarrayed Democrats, with the progressive wing of the party, which coalesced around Sen. Bernie Sanders, outraged at what it sees as warmongering of a bankrupt septuagenarian party congressional leadership, and (c) it satisfied the demands of key NATO European governments, like those of the UK and Germany, for a potentially destabilizing Cold War-style “robust response” to Russian meddling in Syria.

***There has been speculation that the gas attack upon the town of Khan Sheikhoun was a “false flag” operation staged by the jihadis. Any reason to believe this scenario -- or any other scenario beyond official statements?***

There are several components of this incident which do not add up. Already, there are plenty of convoluted online analyses of what the raid truly represents, like [this one](#). The primary question, always, is “who benefits?” from a given action. It appears illogical the Assad regime would attack its own people when the US government has expressed no urgency to topple the Syrian dictator, something that was unequivocally [repeated](#) *after* the raid as well. The US has also confirmed as fact that Syria’s poison gas arsenal [was destroyed](#) in 2014.

Moving to the scene of the gas attack, first responders appeared in photographs wearing no HAZMAT suits as it is the strict protocol when accessing areas contaminated by such deadly CW agents like [sarin](#). Treating sarin victims without gloves and wearing dust masks is almost certain to result in death or irreparable injury of those doing the assisting. The Syrian forces [“appeared to anticipate”](#) the strike and moved personnel and equipment outside the danger zone before the missiles struck, but there is *no explanation* of how the Syrians “anticipated” the attack with such remarkable precision. Also, there is no obvious explanation of how an anti-Assad journalist [tweeted](#) about the gas attack *24 hours before it happened*. “Authoritative” media reports claiming Russia and Iran have threatened the US with military action, if US forces continue to attack Syria, are being [dubbed “fake news”](#) by some online sources. To say the least, this swirl of questions [casts doubts](#) upon all official claims associated with the attack.

***What’s the next step then? Where’s the US administration headed in the Middle East and elsewhere as crises develop?***

It would be premature to decide that President Trump has abandoned his noninterventionist beliefs so often repeated during his pre-election campaign. Changing the tenor of campaign promises, however, is not unusual in American politics (just like it is not elsewhere). It would be sounder to distinguish between Trumpism’s obvious “restrictionist” tendencies, as in the case of uncontrolled immigration and various issues of “tolerance,” which have caused severe political fissures domestically, and his “interventionism” when it comes to developing foreign crises. It would be also premature to predict what the next four years will bring as Trump policies evolve and adjust, just like it would have been premature, and indeed impossible, to predict the direction of previous presidents so early into an administration’s life.

Above all, President Trump is a businessman accustomed to the number-crunching-profit-and-loss way of thinking. As in all things, this behavior has pluses and minuses. A strong plus, we might argue, is the tendency to seek not necessarily the best but, rather, the most “doable” option at any given moment, something that is likely to minimize risk. A minus, on the other hand, could be looking at complex international issues through the narrow lenses of [Trump: The Art of the Deal](#). International diplomacy and “crisis management,” if previous experience is any yardstick, aren’t issues which could be fixed by the “cosmopolitan” commercial attitude of a high business stakes dealer since the *real stakes* in such circumstances are infinitely higher. In the end, and to the grief of pundits searching for the “real deal” **now**, time will tell.