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# Beyond the Red Line

**The United States, France, and Chemical Weapons  
in the Syrian War, 2013-2018**

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Chappatte, 2013

## INTRODUCTION

On 14 April 2018, French, UK and US forces led a large-scale intervention against Syria's chemical weapons arsenal and associated targets. This temporarily concluded a sequence of events that had started in 2013.

In the summer of 2013, the Syrian regime had engaged in a large-scale chemical weapons attack against its own people in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta, an event that left many people dead, disturbed France-US relations and reverberated around the world with potentially profound consequences for deterrence.

In the years leading up to the gassing of Ghouta, the United States, France and the United Kingdom had attempted to coordinate their policies toward the civil war that was threatening Syria's dictator, Bashar Al Assad. This included declaratory statements intended to deter the use of chemical weapons.

And yet the response to the attack was disorganized, reflecting the very different paths that led Obama and Hollande to this moment.

The American President Barack Obama had struggled for much of his presidency to articulate a doctrine on the use of force. Obama was able to defeat Hilary Clinton for the Democratic nomination, and then defeat Senator John McCain for the Presidency, in no small part by emphasizing that both candidates had supported the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Yet Obama was not a straightforward anti-war candidate – he had campaigned as pragmatist who would wind down the unnecessary war in Iraq while seeking victory for the necessary one in Afghanistan. Obama used his Nobel Prize address to articulate his doctrine for the use of military force, one that was consistent with his views on just war theory and the constitution. Moreover, Obama, and his close staff, were largely dismissive of a conventional wisdom on foreign policy, which they believed had resulted in the catastrophe of Iraq. Ben Rhodes, the President’s speechwriter and a close confidant, was famously quoted as calling the community of foreign policy and national security experts “the blob.”<sup>2</sup> The term served to dismiss objections to the President’s foreign policy choices – including objections by members of the President’s cabinet – as the sour grapes of a discredited elite.

It was in this context that Obama approached the growing carnage in Syria. He had opposed the war in Iraq, and felt “boxed in” by his generals in Afghanistan. The Administration was also disappointed with the failure to create a stable government in Libya following the 2011 NATO intervention – in public, Obama called Libya a “mess”; in private, he referred to the situation in the country as a “shit-show.”<sup>3</sup> He also blamed the United States’ European allies, specifically the United Kingdom’s David Cameron and France’s Nicolas Sarkozy, for not “being invested in the follow-up” necessary to create a stable Libyan government.<sup>4</sup> As a result, Obama and those closest to him were reluctant to be drawn into the war in Syria, believing that intervention would draw the United States into yet another intractable conflict.

And yet the President had issued a strong warning that his reluctance might change if Assad were to unleash his stockpile of chemical weapons against Syria’s civilian population. Asked about that possibility at press conference, Obama had indicated that the use of chemical weapons in Syria’s civil war would cross a “red line” and change his thinking about the conflict. Obama’s remarks were widely reported around the world, including in Paris, where senior officials, including Hollande, took them seriously.

In August of that year, following a number of incidents where Syrian forces may have used small amounts of chemical weapons, the Syrian Arab Army unleashed a large-scale attack with the nerve agent sarin against the Damascus suburb of Ghouta, which caused the death of several hundreds.

The French President François Hollande, had been far more willing to consider a military intervention in Syria. Hollande, the first Socialist elected President of France in two decades, was an unlikely hawk. And yet shortly after taking office, he had approved an intervention to stop Islamist forces from seizing control in Mali. Acting on the assumption that Obama would enforce his red line, Hollande and the French government began to prepare for a limited use of force to degrade Syria’s chemical weapons infrastructure, damage military units responsible for the attack and ultimately punish Assad’s regime.

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<sup>2</sup> David Samuels, “The Aspirant Novelist Who Became Obama’s Foreign Policy Guru”, *The New York Times*, 5 August 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/08/magazine/the-aspiring-novelist-who-became-obamas-foreign-policy-guru.html>

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine”, *The Atlantic*, April 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>

<sup>4</sup> Catherine Treyz, “Obama: Europe distraction led to Libya ‘mess’”, CNN.com, 11 March 2016, <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/03/11/europe/obama-cameron-europe-libya/index.html>

In the United States, too, preparations were underway for what US officials to one believed would be a strike – until Obama began to waver. After the conservative government of David Cameron lost a vote in the House of Commons, Obama announced that he would seek an authorization from Congress to use force, a step that appeared to many as a transparent effort to avoid a strike while laying the blame upon the President’s opponents in Congress.

At the last moment, a Russian initiative to persuade Syria to abandon its chemical weapons and accede to the international treaty prohibiting their possession ended the crisis.

But the manner in which the crisis played out was deeply unsatisfying. In Paris, Obama’s decision was seen for a cynical attempt to avoid enforcing his red line, while shifting the blame to his opponents in Congress. Although comparisons to tensions over Suez in 1956 or even the Iraq War in 2003 may be overblown, the President’s actions alienated an ally in Paris. President Hollande was described as “stunned” by Obama’s turnabout, while outgoing Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius would publicly blame Russia’s annexation of Crimea and intervention in Ukraine on the Obama’s failure to follow through in Syria.<sup>5</sup> For his part, President Obama and most of the people working in his administration were unrepentant about the decision to refrain from using force. Obama told Jeffrey Goldberg, in a widely publicized interview, that departing from the “Washington playbook” was among his proudest moments. In other parts of the interview, he referred to US allies, including Britain and France, as “free-riders,” a depiction that angered many in Paris.<sup>6</sup>

Five years later, it is now possible to take a dispassionate look at what happened – and what went wrong – in 2013. Whether one believes the ultimate course of action to be wise or not, the execution was bungled and resulted in a severe and unnecessary strain to the US-France relationship. As Trump and Macron attempted to repair the damage and restore deterrence, it is useful to ask what lessons we might learn from the “red line” incidents, both for deterring WMD weapons attack but also managing crisis coordination among allies.

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<sup>5</sup> Xavier Panon, *Dans les coulisses de la diplomatie française*, Paris, L’Archipel, 2015, p. 183.

<sup>6</sup> Goldberg.

## THE CRISIS

### *The First Phase: Drawing Red Lines*

In the spring of 2012, intelligence began to suggest that Syria might unleash its chemical weapons stockpile in an effort to win the civil war that had erupted following the Arab spring. Over the course of 2012, there were reports of very small-scale uses of chemical weapons, including Sarin. The US, France and the UK increased mutual consultations and worked on possible common options. The new French president, François Hollande, was personally inclined to take a hard line on the Syrian question as soon as he was elected.<sup>7</sup> By the summer, he ordered contingency planning to be moved forward.

In August, the intelligence strengthened, reportedly including signals intelligence ordering troops to prepare for the use of chemical weapons, and images of technicians mixing of binary agents in preparation for their use and units the loading of trucks used to transport the weapons. The possibility that Syria might be preparing for a large-scale chemical weapons attack was apparently in the back of Obama's mind when he surprised his national security team in August with an unscripted remark that appeared to commit the United States to a Syrian intervention in the event that the Assad government used chemical weapons – a remark that came to be known as the “red line.”

“I have, at this point, not ordered military engagement in the situation. But the point that you made about chemical and biological weapons is critical. That's an issue that doesn't just concern Syria; it concerns our close allies in the region, including Israel. It concerns us. We cannot have a situation where chemical or biological weapons are falling into the hands of the wrong people. We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is *we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized*. That would change my calculus. That would change my equation. (.). We have put together a range of contingency plans. We have communicated in no uncertain terms with every player in the region that that's a red line for us and that there would be enormous consequences if *we start seeing movement on the chemical weapons front or the use of chemical weapons*. That would change my calculations significantly.”<sup>8</sup>

Later reports would suggest that the indications over the previous forty-eight hours factored into the President's surprising statement.<sup>9</sup> “The idea was to put a chill into the Assad regime without actually trapping the president into any predetermined action,” one senior official told the New York Times. But, another official explained, the remark was unscripted and the problem, officials said, was there was growing evidence of the small-scale use of chemical weapons. The red line was intended to deter a mass chemical

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Wieder and Nathalie Guibert, “Comment François Hollande a choisi l'option militaire”, *Le Monde*, 10 September 2013, [http://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2013/09/10/comment-francois-hollande-a-choisi-l-option-militaire\\_3473857\\_3210.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2013/09/10/comment-francois-hollande-a-choisi-l-option-militaire_3473857_3210.html)

<sup>8</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps”, 20 August 2012. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/08/20/remarks-president-white-house-press-corps>

<sup>9</sup> Peter Baker et al., “Off-the-Cuff Obama Line Put US in Bind on Syria”, *The New York Times*, 5 May 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/05/world/middleeast/obamas-vow-on-chemical-weapons-puts-him-in-tough-spot.html?pagewanted=all>

weapons attack (and as the remarks indicated, perhaps even more importantly at that time, the transfer of such weapons to terrorists, for instance Hezbollah), but the “nuance got completely dropped” and the Administration spokespeople struggled to recast the remark as a reference to the international norm against chemical weapons use.<sup>10</sup>

Presidential utterances, however, are not such an easy thing to reframe. Over the coming days, the statement would be repeated to create precisely the trap the President sought to avoid. On 24 August, President Obama and UK Prime Minister David Cameron made it clear that they had a common position: they “both agreed that the use – or threat – of chemical weapons was completely unacceptable and would force them to revisit their approach so far”.<sup>11</sup>

In France, a few days later, at the occasion of his annual address to the ambassadors, Hollande drew his own red line: “I am stating it with the appropriate solemnity: with our allies, we remain very vigilant to prevent the employment of chemical weapon by the regime, which would be for the international community a legitimate cause of direct intervention”.<sup>12</sup> At that time, Hollande already saw the possibility of Western reprisals as a possible way to alter the political situation in Syria. At this point, the question of Syrian CW use was the topic of a Defense Council meeting every two months. Hollande ordered “maximum cooperation” with the United States on the topic.<sup>13</sup> He later reported that finding chemical sites was done in liaison with the United States and Israel.<sup>14</sup> This even though some of his closest advisers were reluctant to adopt the very concept of red line. (“Red lines are for pajamas”, one of them derided.<sup>15</sup>)

In this period Obama made a second statement, a statement no more nuanced than the previous: “The use of chemical weapons is, and would be, totally unacceptable and if you make the tragic mistake of using these weapons, there will be consequences and you will be held accountable.”<sup>16</sup> Then he clarified his warning about chemical weapons being “moved” as meaning “transferred to terrorist groups” or “being prepared for use.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Press Gaggle by Principal Deputy Press Secretary Josh Earnest en route Columbus, OH, 21 August 2012. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/08/21/press-gaggle-principal-deputy-press-secretary-josh-earnest-en-route-colu>

<sup>11</sup> David Hughes, “David Cameron and Barack Obama warn Syria over chemical weapons”, *The Independent*, 23 August 2012. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/david-cameron-and-barack-obama-warn-syria-over-chemical-weapons-8075650.html>

<sup>12</sup> François Hollande, Address to the French ambassadors, 27 August 2012. <http://discours.vie-publique.fr/notices/127001575.html>

<sup>13</sup> Wieder & Guibert.

<sup>14</sup> Fabrice Lhomme & Gérard Davet, ‘Un Président ne devrait pas dire ça...’, Paris, Fayard, 2016 (electronic version).

<sup>15</sup> Interviews former senior French officials, Paris, January-July 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Matt Williams & Martin Chulov, “Barack Obama warns Syria of chemical weapons ‘consequences’”, *The Guardian*, 4 December 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/dec/04/barack-obama-syria-chemical-weapons-warning>

<sup>17</sup> David E. Sanger & Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Shifting Its Warning on Syria’s Chemical Arms,” *The New York Times*, December 6, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/07/world/middleeast/syrias-chemical-weapons-moves-lead-us-to-be-flexible.html>

In the spring of 2013, reports of chemical weapons attacks multiplied. In April, France and the United Kingdom sent letters to then-United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon stating that soil samples and witness interviews provided credible evidence of CW use by the regime in multiple locations. The United States intelligence community, however, seems to have been reluctant to reach a conclusion. Then-Director of National Intelligence James Clapper was non-committal in Congressional testimony on the subject<sup>18</sup>, with an anonymous senior U.S. official explaining to Reuters that “More review is needed.”<sup>19</sup>

In this period, the Administration then formalized the red line in a letter to Congress:

“The President has made it clear that the use of chemical weapons – or the transfer of chemical weapons to terrorist groups – is a red line for the United States of America. The Obama Administration has communicated that message publicly and privately to governments around the world, including the Assad regime. ... [T]he Administration is prepared for all contingencies so that we can respond appropriately to any confirmed use of chemical weapons, consistent with our national interests. The United States and the international community have a number of potential responses available, and no option is off the table.”<sup>20</sup>

Eventually the review would determine that Assad had, in fact, “used chemical weapons, including the nerve agent sarin, on a small scale against the opposition multiple times in the last year.”<sup>21</sup> The finding was released in June, along with an announcement of additional assistance to Syrian rebels, including limited amount of arms that would arrive in September. This had been the preferred option of the Obama Administration all along. While it represented a modest escalation of commitment, it represented continuity, not change, in Obama’s calculus. Overall, the emphasis remained on diplomacy backed with almost no force. Far more emphasis, was placed on demanding that the Syrian government provide access to the UN fact-finding team investigating the claims. French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius made public its conclusions. Hollande then choose to “give everything to UN experts”.<sup>22</sup> The threat of force was to remain a deterrent against a larger attack.

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<sup>18</sup> US Senate, Committee on Armed Services, Hearing to receive testimony on the current and future worldwide threats to the national security of the United States, 18 April 2013, <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/13-24%20-%204-18-13.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> Phil Stewart, “US looks into possible chemical weapons use in Syria”, Reuters, 19 April 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-syria-chemical/u-s-looks-into-possible-chemical-weapons-use-in-syria-idUSBRE93H1D920130418>

<sup>20</sup> Letter by Miguel E. Rodriguez, Assistant to the President and Director, Office of Legislative Affairs, 25 April 2013.

<sup>21</sup> Text of White House Statement on Chemical Weapons in Syria, 13 June 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/14/us/politics/text-of-white-house-statement-on-chemical-weapons-in-syria.html>

<sup>22</sup> Wieder & Guibert.

## ***The Second Phase: Reacting to the Ghouta Attack***

But Bashar al Assad was not deterred. Assad may have calculated that Obama was unwilling to engage in another Middle East war. Or perhaps he simply concluded that the advantage of the attack was worth the risk.

On Wednesday, 21 August gruesome videos surfaced of a mass CW attack against civilians in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta, perpetrated by the Syrian regime. This attack stood out from previous ones in both its scale and the ease with which it could be verified: thousands of people were affected, videos of the attack surfaced immediately, and there was consensus among humanitarian groups on the ground and intelligence entities around the world that the Assad regime has used sarin against the civilian population as part of a military offensive in the area.

The attack on Ghouta was the first indisputable case of CW usage by the Assad regime to occur since the US “red line” had been drawn almost exactly a year earlier.<sup>23</sup> French intelligence assessed total fatalities to be anywhere between 281 (confirmed) and 1,500 (probable), the latter number being close to the US official estimate (1,429).<sup>24</sup>

Although Obama had not committed himself to a specific course of action should Assad cross the red line, the power of presidential utterances is such that most observers believe the red line would be enforced with military action. Indeed, the United States, France, and the United Kingdom began to prepare for military strikes. London called an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council (UNSC). The Syrian regime offered to allow UN inspectors access to the site of the alleged attack in order to investigate, while Assad vehemently denied that his government was responsible for the attack and blamed Syrian opposition forces instead.

In Paris, the Ghouta attack was perceived as a “turning point”; the Foreign Ministry set up a task force; Laurent Fabius consulted with John Kerry.<sup>25</sup> On 22 August, Fabius mentioned the use of force on French radio. Images of Syrian casualties broadcasted on August 23 bolstered Hollande’s resolve. “We cannot let this happen”, he reportedly said.<sup>26</sup> He pushed the issue personally, overcoming some reservations in the defense and foreign ministries. At the same time, remembering the controversy about Iraq’s WMD, the French were keen to have an independent technical evaluation and in addition to analyses of photographs and films, had Syrian casualties exfiltrated to Amman for analysis.<sup>27</sup> On the 25<sup>th</sup>, samples from the attack began to be analyzed by the French: they were disconcerting: the product was a deadly mix, but one that contained only 1 nanogram of sarin by milliliter. However, the tactics used by the Syrian forces showed clear intention, and the UK and US samples showed concentrations many times higher. Moreover, French intelligence had evidence that the order had been given at a “very high level”, and that

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<sup>23</sup> Given that the regime denied any responsibility, it seems unlikely that the choice of dates was more than a coincidence.

<sup>24</sup> The Syrian Network for Human Rights put the total to 1,127.

<sup>25</sup> Benjamin Barthe et al., “Chroniques syriennes (1/3): A l’été 2013, le choc de l’attaque chimique en banlieue de Damas”, *Le Monde*, 13 février 2014. [http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/international/article/2014/02/13/chroniques-syriennes-1-3-a-l-ete-2013-le-choc-de-l-attaque-chimique-en-banlieue-de-damas\\_4365000\\_3210.html](http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/international/article/2014/02/13/chroniques-syriennes-1-3-a-l-ete-2013-le-choc-de-l-attaque-chimique-en-banlieue-de-damas_4365000_3210.html)

<sup>26</sup> Panon, p. 176.

<sup>27</sup> Barthe et al.

Assad had at least tacitly approved, even if perhaps in retrospect, the strike.<sup>28</sup> Whether or not the deadly mix had been overdosed by mistake – a hypothesis suggested by German intelligence, and deemed credible by the French – was thus politically irrelevant.<sup>29</sup> French officials noted that no military official had been fired.<sup>30</sup>

Over the week-end, there were intense transatlantic consultations, with Washington, London and Paris discussing “possible responses”.<sup>31</sup> French sources claim that a common response was agreed upon either on the 25<sup>th</sup> or the 26<sup>th</sup>.<sup>32</sup> They believed that the British were on board, and that the United States could not let this happen without a reaction.<sup>33</sup> On 27 August, in his annual address to the French ambassadors, Hollande publicly raised the question of CW use and said that Paris was “ready to punish” the Syrian regime.<sup>34</sup> The next day, on 28 August, a Defence Council formalized the presidential decision. The minutes of the meeting allegedly referred to “the reality of a chemical attack now recognized by all parties”, the “responsibility of the regime”; it was decided “to prepare a punitive strike coordinated with the Americans and the British, that could be launched on short notice on the basis of an air raid from the national territory, delivering cruise missiles on Syrian regime’s military targets linked with its chemical capabilities”.<sup>35</sup> Hollande reportedly affirmed that “under no circumstance should we appear as auxiliaries in a possible use of force as a response to this chemical attack. In this regard, any military action will have to be commonly and simultaneously decided and conducted with our allies, notably our American allies”.<sup>36</sup> This was to be a “firm and proportionate response against the Damascus regime”.<sup>37</sup> The possibility of terror attacks against French territory or interests (such as the French UN military contingent in South Lebanon) in reprisal was taken seriously.

Also on August 28, Obama announced that the U.S. had conclusive evidence of the Assad regime’s guilt. Over the next few days, all three countries would release intelligence dossiers to demonstrate Assad’s culpability. At this stage, a military strike on Syria seemed inevitable. The strike was to involve a large number of cruise missiles fired from

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<sup>28</sup> Laurent Fabius, *37 Quai d’Orsay. Diplomatie française, 2012-2016*, Paris, Plon, 2016 (electronic version).

<sup>29</sup> Ian Black, “German intelligence: Syria chemical attack may have been an overdose”, *The Guardian*, 4 September 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/on-the-middle-east/2013/sep/04/syria-assad-obama-germany>

<sup>30</sup> Interviews with former senior French officials, Paris, January-July 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Chris Good, “President Obama’s ‘Red Line’: What He Actually Said About Syria and Chemical Weapons, ABC News, 26 August 2013. <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2013/08/president-obamas-red-line-what-he-actually-said-about-syria-and-chemical-weapons/>

<sup>32</sup> 25 August: Panon, p. 178; 26 August: Fabrice Lhomme and Gérard Davet, “Le jour où... Obama a laissé tomber Hollande”, *Le Monde*, 24 August 2016. [http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2016/08/24/le-jour-ou-obama-a-laisse-tomber-hollande\\_4987167\\_823448.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2016/08/24/le-jour-ou-obama-a-laisse-tomber-hollande_4987167_823448.html)

<sup>33</sup> Barthe et al.

<sup>34</sup> François Hollande, Address to the French ambassadors, 27 August 2013. <http://discours.vie-publique.fr/notices/137001975.html>

<sup>35</sup> David Revault d’Allonnes, *Les Guerres du président*, Paris, Seuil, 2015, p. 62.

<sup>36</sup> Revault d’Allonnes, p. 63.

<sup>37</sup> Interview du Président de la République au quotidien *Le Monde*, 31 August 2013. [http://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2013/08/30/francois-hollande-au-monde-il-ne-s-agit-pas-de-renverser-le-dictateur-syrien\\_3468865\\_3210.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2013/08/30/francois-hollande-au-monde-il-ne-s-agit-pas-de-renverser-le-dictateur-syrien_3468865_3210.html)

the Mediterranean.<sup>38</sup> The plan was apparently significantly larger than the 2017 strike would be, involving about 100-150 cruise missiles against several tens of targets, though not the CW stockpiles themselves for fear of dispersal. “Our finger was on the trigger,” recalls then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Martin Dempsey, “We had gone through the targeting plans and the targeting solutions. The crews were alerted. And so we had everything in place, and we were just waiting for instructions to proceed.”<sup>39</sup> According to Philip Gordon, the goal was “to deter [Assad] from ever using chemical weapons again, to degrade his capacity to do so”. It was “a targeted strike to increase the cost to having used chemical weapons. It was not a decision to go to war and change the regime in Damascus”. The model was the US-UK Desert Fox operation against Iraq (1998).<sup>40</sup> Though the plan involved much less than the 600 munitions dropped during Desert Fox (including 415 cruise missiles), it was clearly not the “unbelievably small, limited kind of effort” announced by John Kerry.<sup>41</sup>

It was decided that the strikes would take place between August 30 and September 2.<sup>42</sup> The timeframe was dictated by the need to wait until the UN inspectors left Syria and the planned G20 Summit (September 5). The French insisted that time was of the essence, arguing that waiting for the UN inquiry would take time and that a UNSC decision was improbable due to Russian obstruction.<sup>43</sup> Also, there was a risk that Syrian targets would have been relocated if the operation was delayed. “We need to act fast, for operational and political reasons”, recommended diplomatic adviser Paul Jean-Ortiz.<sup>44</sup> Accordingly, the strikes would begin as soon as the UN inspectors returned from Syria, on August 31. The strikes were planned for the night of Saturday to Sunday, August 31 – September 1.<sup>45</sup> The French target selection received final presidential approval on August 30: it focused on units and command centers “closely connected” with Syrian CW use.<sup>46</sup>

Regarding France, according to an official document, the presidential order was to be given at 2000 CET; aircraft were to take off at 2240 CET (from Abu Dhabi and Djibouti); and the strike was to take place at 0300 CET the next day – as to minimize possible civilian casualties.<sup>47</sup> The French contribution was modest: while the exact number

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<sup>38</sup> Dan De Luce, “Hagel: The White House Tried to ‘Destroy’ Me”, *Foreign Policy*, 18 December 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/12/18/hagel-the-white-house-tried-to-destroy-me/>. This source mentions 50 targets, but a French source (Bromberger, *infra.*) referred to about 20.

<sup>39</sup> PBS, Frontline, Obama at War, 25 May 2015. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/obama-at-war/transcript/>

<sup>40</sup> Interview of Philip Gordon by Antoine Vitkine for his documentary “Bachar : Moi ou le Chaos” (2016). This was material unused for the documentary.

<sup>41</sup> Jonathan Karl, “John Kerry Promises ‘Unbelievably Small’ US Strike Against Syria”, ABC News, 9 September 2013. <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2013/09/john-kerry-promises-unbelievably-small-u-s-strike-against-syria/>

<sup>42</sup> Revault d’Allonnes, p. 63.

<sup>43</sup> Interview du Président de la République au quotidien *Le Monde*, 31 August 2013.

<sup>44</sup> Fabrice Lhomme & Gérard Davet, ‘Un Président ne devrait pas dire ça...’, Paris, Fayard, 2016 (electronic version).

<sup>45</sup> PBS, Frontline.

<sup>46</sup> Dominique Bromberger, “Syrie 2013, ces frappes annulées”, *L’Express*, 11 April 2018, [https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/proche-moyen-orient/en-syrie-ces-frappes-qui-n-ont-jamais-eu-lieu\\_1999618.html](https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/proche-moyen-orient/en-syrie-ces-frappes-qui-n-ont-jamais-eu-lieu_1999618.html)

<sup>47</sup> Davet & Lhomme.

remains classified, most testimonies report a dozen Scalp-EG cruise missiles.<sup>48</sup> They were to be fired on targets in and around Damascus, targeting, *inter alia*, chemical weapons brigades and CW-related command centers, as well as Scud missiles sites. French sources insist that operations were to be strictly limited to sites connected with CW, in order to avoid escalation and signal that this was not about regime change.<sup>49</sup> Hollande would later describe the goal as “to destroy chemical installations, as well as administrative centers from which we know that the orders had been given”.<sup>50</sup> The CW stocks themselves would not be targeted as to avoid creating a risk of agent dispersal.<sup>51</sup> Aircraft would strike from the Mediterranean, avoiding overflying Turkish territory (in order to not appear making Ankara an accomplice). They were limited to Western Syrian targets due to the limited range (250 km) of the Scalp-EG missiles.<sup>52</sup> Hollande ordered to “study the planning of follow-on strikes to respond, if needed, to response or retaliation by the regime”.<sup>53</sup> Such a follow-on strike could have taken place 72 hours later.<sup>54</sup> Planning was coordinated with USCENTCOM in Tampa, FL. The Americans and the French shared “everything” with each other in terms of military planning.<sup>55</sup> An adviser to Le Drian would later say: “We had planned everything together, the Americans had opened all their books to us. For the first time, it was just the two of us in the bedroom”.<sup>56</sup>

For the French, three goals appeared:

One was to “punish” the regime. There was unquestionably a moral dimension in the operation the way the French saw it. Hollande mentioned a “crime against humanity”.<sup>57</sup> “It was about showing that, when one crosses a number of lines, one has to pay a bitter price”, said an adviser.<sup>58</sup> For Hollande, this was an important dimension – including perhaps because his distant predecessor Mitterrand (the convener of the 1993 meeting) was always an unspoken reference in his foreign and defense policy. The word “punish”,

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<sup>48</sup> Interviews with former senior French officials, Paris, January-July 2017. A reliable defense correspondent detailed the planned French raid as involving a total of 17 aircraft including 8 for strike (thus potentially 16 missiles) and 12 targets (Jean-Dominique Merchet, “Il y a un an, 17 avions français devaient effectuer un raid contre la Syrie”, *Secret Défense*, 1er septembre 2014 <http://www.lopinion.fr/blog/secret-defense/il-y-a-an-17-avions-francais-devaient-effectuer-raid-contre-syrie-15832>). Another French source mentions about 20 missiles (Bromberger).

<sup>49</sup> Interviews with former senior French officials, Paris, January-July 2017. A key adviser claims that “the Scalp missiles were also to target sites directly connected to Bashar” (quoted in Panon, p. 184).

<sup>50</sup> Nathalie Guibert & Marc Semo, “Le testament syrien de François Hollande”, *Le Monde*, 12 April 2017. [http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/international/article/2017/04/12/francois-hollande-en-syrie-nous-avons-su-saisir-la-faute-de-l-adversaire\\_5109957\\_3210.html](http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/international/article/2017/04/12/francois-hollande-en-syrie-nous-avons-su-saisir-la-faute-de-l-adversaire_5109957_3210.html)

<sup>51</sup> Interviews with former senior French officials, Paris, January-July 2017.

<sup>52</sup> Vincent Jauvert, “Objectif Damas”, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, n° 2551, 26 September 2013.

<sup>53</sup> Revault d’Allonnes, p. 63.

<sup>54</sup> Lhomme & Davet.

<sup>55</sup> Barthe et al.

<sup>56</sup> Thomas Hofnung & Lorraine Millot, “Une nouvelle lune de miel militaire”, *Libération*, 12 February 2014. [http://www.liberation.fr/planete/2014/02/11/une-nouvelle-lune-de-miel-militaire\\_979528](http://www.liberation.fr/planete/2014/02/11/une-nouvelle-lune-de-miel-militaire_979528)

<sup>57</sup> Interview du Président de la République au quotidien *Le Monde*, 31 August 2013.

<sup>58</sup> Revault d’Allonnes, p. 63.

however, attracted criticism within the Hollande government itself, since it could not convince French public opinion of the legitimacy of the reprisals.<sup>59</sup>

A second goal was to reduce the threat, by neutralization of some capabilities and by deterrence. “It was [first] about deterrence”, but also about “reducing its ability to inflict harm”, said a high-level military official.<sup>60</sup> At one point, Hollande mentioned “an act of international self-defense”.<sup>61</sup> The French believed one had to see the bigger picture of WMD proliferation and use – committed as it was to the negotiation of a deal with Iran. The congratulations telegram sent by Damascus to Kim Jong-Un on September 6, at the occasion of the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Korean Republic, would not go unnoticed in the Elysée.<sup>62</sup>

A third one was about changing the politics of the Syrian conflict through symbolic but determined military action. This was not a clearly articulated goal, but still one the French reportedly had in mind as early as 2012.<sup>63</sup> Considerations reportedly included “to create a stress effect in Moscow, put them in a situation of uncertainty”, according to a Hollande adviser<sup>64</sup>; as well as “to stop the process of jihadi recruitment”, according to the Elysée.<sup>65</sup> However, at no time was a Libya scenario of open-ended engagement possibly leading to regime collapse considered in Paris.<sup>66</sup> This was explicitly stated by Hollande on August 31.<sup>67</sup> Fabius confirmed in his memoirs that they did not want to trigger the dislocation of the regime.<sup>68</sup>

Additionally, France wanted to be “in the game” as early as possible: memories of the initial shots of Operation Enduring Freedom on October 8, 2001 (of which France was excluded, partly because it did not have cruise missiles at the time) were still present. “Never again!” was reportedly a motto at the French ministry of defense.<sup>69</sup>

Legally, the French were unsure of their position. Hollande reportedly referred to the “Responsibility to Protect”, but had few realistic options to legitimize the action. Still, French authorities publicly stated that the absence of a UN resolution should not be allowed to be an obstacle.<sup>70</sup> An attempt to get a majority of the UN Security Council

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<sup>59</sup> Panon, p. 178.

<sup>60</sup> Revault d’Allonnes, pp. 63-64.

<sup>61</sup> Lhomme & Davet.

<sup>62</sup> Wieder & Guibert.

<sup>63</sup> See Panon, Revault d’Allonnes.

<sup>64</sup> Panon, p. 179.

<sup>65</sup> Wieder & Guibert.

<sup>66</sup> Barthe et al.

<sup>67</sup> Interview du Président de la République au quotidien *Le Monde*, 30 August 2013.

<sup>68</sup> Fabius.

<sup>69</sup> Jean Guisnel, “Syrie : La France ne renonce pas à l’option militaire”, *Défense ouverte*, 21 September 2013. [http://www.lepoint.fr/editos-du-point/jean-guisnel/syrie-la-france-ne-renonce-pas-a-l-option-militaire-21-09-2013-1733715\\_53.php](http://www.lepoint.fr/editos-du-point/jean-guisnel/syrie-la-france-ne-renonce-pas-a-l-option-militaire-21-09-2013-1733715_53.php)

<sup>70</sup> Interview du Président de la République au quotidien *Le Monde*, 31 August 2013; Déclaration du ministre des Affaires étrangères Laurent Fabius au Parlement, 4 September 2013. <http://discours.vie-publique.fr/notices/133002017.html>

members to agree to a resolution (which took place on Thursday 29), forcing Moscow and Beijing to veto it, failed.<sup>71</sup>

### ***The Third Phase: UK and US Backtracking***

If the previous phase of the crisis was marked by a sense of inevitability, the next ones were chaotic.

The third phase of the crisis began on the evening of August 29 when David Cameron's conservative government unexpectedly lost a vote in the House of Commons, which had been called to authorize the UK strikes. The memories of the Iraq war were still present in London, and the Libyan operation of 2011 was considered by many a dubious success at best. The British vote unnerved Obama. Moreover, on the same day, he received a letter by 186 US Representatives requesting a vote on any use of force in Syria. "This is the day that Obama really became plagued by doubts", says Jeffrey Goldberg.<sup>72</sup> The House of Commons vote (a "cold shower" for the French<sup>73</sup>) forced a readjustment of targeting, with Paris and Washington taking over the former UK targets.<sup>74</sup> But US State Secretary John Kerry assured the French that it did change the US position.<sup>75</sup> On Friday 30, he publicly confirmed the US resolve and flattered the French by recalling their status as "America's oldest ally". He reportedly told Fabius that Obama had asked him to "prepare (US) public opinion for strikes".<sup>76</sup>

But the signals from Washington were mixed. During a conversation with French presidential diplomatic adviser Paul-Jean Ortiz, US National Security Adviser Susan Rice told his counterpart that Obama was "almost ready to go ahead"; but overall, the conversation left Ortiz with the impression that the US commitment was no longer fully assured.<sup>77</sup>

Late in the morning of August 30 (at 1805 CET), a 45-minute conversation between the two presidents began. According to Hollande, Obama told him that he was also exploring several options. "There are two solutions", he reportedly said, "either we go very fast, or we wait" after the G20 Saint-Petersburg Summit.<sup>78</sup> The French president, for his part, pressed his US counterpart for acting as early as possible – to ensure that intelligence would still be valid – though he acknowledged that without UN support, their political position was not fully assured. His target was right after the return of UN inspectors (scheduled for the evening of the next day).<sup>79</sup> Obama reportedly concluded by saying "We

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<sup>71</sup> Jauvert.

<sup>72</sup> "Obama's 'Red Line' That Wasn't", *The Atlantic* (video), 16 March 2016. <https://www.theatlantic.com/video/index/473025/syria-red-line-that-wasnt/>

<sup>73</sup> Barthe et al.

<sup>74</sup> Interviews with former senior French officials, Paris, January-July 2017.

<sup>75</sup> Barthe et al.

<sup>76</sup> Jauvert.

<sup>77</sup> See Revault d'Allonnes, p. 65; Panon, p. 182; Jauvert, *op. cit.*

<sup>78</sup> Lhomme & Davet.

<sup>79</sup> Davet & Lhomme.

have these two options, we have to think about them, I'll call you back on Sunday".<sup>80</sup> The conversation confirmed to Paris that the White House was not 100% committed. Still, Hollande was confident: "Obama is slow to make decisions", he told journalists that day, adding he understood that after Iraq, it was not easy for him to launch a WMD-related operation in the Middle East.<sup>81</sup>

That day (August 30) was supposed to be dedicated to refining the military plans. But in the afternoon, following a long National Security Council meeting, Obama took an hour-long walk with his Chief of Staff, Dennis McDonough – "the Obama aide most averse to U.S. military intervention".<sup>82</sup> When he returned, he had decided that he would seek Congressional support for a strike.<sup>83</sup> Around 1900, he gathered senior White House staff and told them he had a "big idea" he wanted to run by them.<sup>84</sup> This touched off a "vigorous" debate that lasted two hours, most of his staff having negative reactions, but Obama had made up his mind.<sup>85</sup> The President notified cabinet officials as well as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, by telephone on Friday evening. After Kerry talked to the President, he reportedly told a friend "I just got fucked over."<sup>86</sup>

On Saturday 31 at 0800 CET, Ortiz learned that the White House had called during the night (at 0300 CET) to schedule a presidential phone call. It was assumed by the presidential team that Obama's call was about the go-ahead for the operation. A call was scheduled for late afternoon, then its timing moved forward by one hour by the White House. The French expected Obama to say he wanted to move the timing forward: signals from the White House on that day were interpreted as positive.<sup>87</sup> The Defense Council was convened in the next room in order for the decision to be immediately formalized after the call.

At 1600 CET, a few minutes before the scheduled presidential conversation, Rice called Ortiz, who could feel something was wrong.<sup>88</sup> Still, French refueling aircraft took off. When the call came, Obama began with assuring Hollande of his "determination" and "solidarity".<sup>89</sup> He had "decided to go ahead".<sup>90</sup> But he then reminded his French

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<sup>80</sup> Lhomme & Davet. Another version has Obama saying « OK, let's think about it and talk again on Sunday" (Panon, p. 181).

<sup>81</sup> Davet & Lhomme.

<sup>82</sup> Goldberg.

<sup>83</sup> Goldberg.

<sup>84</sup> Quoted in Adam Entous et al., "Inside White House, a Head-Spinning Reversal on Chemical Weapons", *The Wall Street Journal*, 15 September 2013. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/inside-white-house-a-reversal-on-syrian-arms-1379298924>

<sup>85</sup> Roberta Hampton & Jeff Mason, "Obama's Syria decision: a walk, a debate, and a new approach", Reuters, 1 September 2013. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-obama-decision-idUSBRE98001520130901>

<sup>86</sup> Goldberg.

<sup>87</sup> Barthe et al.

<sup>88</sup> Panon, p. 182.

<sup>89</sup> Fabius. The exact time of the presidential conversation is unclear: 1630 (Fabius), 1700 (Panon, p. 182), 1800 (Revault d'Allonnes, p. 66), 1815 (Wieder and Guibert, who claim that the timing of the call had been moved forward by one hour by the White House). See also Vincent Jauvert, "Objectif Damas", *Le Nouvel Observateur*, n° 2551, 26 September 2013.

<sup>90</sup> Jauvert, *op. cit.*

counterpart of the trauma of recent US military involvements and that he had been elected to stop wars, not to begin them. He also argued that two elements had changed the perspective: the British vote, and the impossibility to get consensus at the UN Security Council. In light of all this, he preferred having Congressional support to ensure the legitimacy of the operation.<sup>91</sup> (The need to have such backing was also useful in case the operation was unsuccessful or backfired.<sup>92</sup>) The intervention was “neither cancelled nor stopped”, only “postponed until the vote of the US Congress”.<sup>93</sup> Hollande insisted that it would be difficult to strike later, due to the forthcoming G20 summit (and the perishable nature of intelligence). However, when asked, Obama mentioned a “fifteen days” timeframe. This was, for the French president, tantamount to giving up.<sup>94</sup> The call lasted about half an hour.<sup>95</sup>

Despite the warning signs before that fateful phone call, most French officials were aghast. Some Defense Council participants – who were sitting in the next room and were immediately informed – understood right away that there would be no operation. They had the impression to be “left alone and naked in the fields”, according to an adviser, or to be “struck down [as if by lightning]”, according to another.<sup>96</sup> Hollande was reportedly “stunned”.<sup>97</sup> However, he did to show his disappointment, and told the Council that he understood the US position.<sup>98</sup> (“I think he was looking for a solution, not a pretext”, he would later say.<sup>99</sup>)

Later in the morning (US time), president Obama announced his dual-track decision in the Rose Garden, with Vice-President Biden on his side. He first explained all the reasons why it was necessary to act: the importance of maintaining the taboo on CW use; the risk of terrorist acquisition; the need to avoid broader WMD proliferation, including Iranian acquisition of a nuclear weapon. But then, he stated:

“After careful deliberation, I have decided that the United States should take military action against Syrian regime targets. (..) I'm also mindful that I'm the president of the world's oldest constitutional democracy (..) and that's why I've

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<sup>91</sup> Lhomme & Davet.

<sup>92</sup> Interview of Philip Gordon by Antoine Vitkine.

<sup>93</sup> Revault d'Allonnes, p. 67. A Hollande adviser summarized the Obama point of view as “There is no international coalition (...), no majority at the UN Security Council, no public opinion support, so I need to at least have Congressional approval, because I'm not George W. Bush” (quoted in Barthe et al.).

<sup>94</sup> Lhomme & Davet.

<sup>95</sup> 40 minutes according to Wieder & Guibert.

<sup>96</sup> Revault d'Allonnes, p. 69; Christophe Boltanski & Vincent Jauvert, « Hollande, chef de guerre », *L'Obs*, n° 2663, 19 November 2015.

<sup>97</sup> Panon, p. 183. In retrospect, speaking to journalists in early October, he said that he had not been surprised that Obama needed more time, but that he had been « astonished » by his decision to consult Congress, given the UK vote (Davet & Lhomme).

<sup>98</sup> See Nathalie Guibert & Marc Semo, “Le testament syrien de François Hollande”, *Le Monde*, 12 April 2017. [http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/international/article/2017/04/12/francois-hollande-en-syrie-nous-avons-su-saisir-la-faute-de-l-adversaire\\_5109957\\_3210.html](http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/international/article/2017/04/12/francois-hollande-en-syrie-nous-avons-su-saisir-la-faute-de-l-adversaire_5109957_3210.html)

<sup>99</sup> Lhomme & Davet.

made a second decision: I will seek authorization for the use of force from the American people's representatives in Congress.”<sup>100</sup>

The House and Senate were in recess at the time, meaning that a formal bill to authorize the use of force would not be submitted until a special session of the Senate could be convened on September 6. The Administration appeared to make a sincere effort to win support in the Congress, although the over the next week it became increasingly clear that the vote in the Senate would be close and the House would be unwilling to support any measure.

A few French officials thought – or wanted to believe – that since US credibility was on the line, the White House would mobilize and get Congressional support: had not Barack Obama stated that he had “decided” to strike? The government decided to put pressure on both French and international public opinion by publicizing on September 2 a dossier prepared during the week-end, composed of declassified French intelligence elements on the responsibility of the Syrian regime for the 21 August strike.<sup>101</sup> The publication was also designed to build the image of France as a leader, not a US follower.

Hollande asked his advisers if he would get a majority if he decided to ask for parliamentary support: he was told it would be a small one – at least not one that would show overwhelming support and legitimacy. He thus discarded this scenario and decided instead to fully take advantage of the power invested in him by French Constitution as the executive, arguing in particular that speed was of the essence.<sup>102</sup> Nevertheless, at a time when it was believed the strikes would have taken place, a parliamentary debate had been set up for September 4. The Hollande administration made its case as if nothing had changed. Fabius addressed the National Assembly.<sup>103</sup> According to him, “refraining from acting” would mean: (1) “tolerate that massive chemical weapons use would remain unpunished” (*punishment*), (2) “send Bashar el-Assad and the Syrian people a terrible message: chemical weapons can be used tomorrow, against Damascus, against Aleppo, perhaps in an even more massive way (*CW deterrence*), (3) “endanger regional peace and security altogether, but also, beyond that, our own security. Because – we have to ask the question – what credibility would then have international commitments against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons? What message would we send to other regimes, I’m thinking of Iran and North Korea? This message would then unfortunately be very clear: feel free to carry on; the possession of these weapons gives you impunity and the division of the international community protects you” (*dissuasion re: broader WMD concerns*), (4) “close the door to a political settlement of the Syrian conflict. (...) Let us look at reality upfront: if we do not put a stop to such acts by the regime, there will not be a *political* solution. For what would be the point for Mr. Bashar el-Assad to negotiate, if he can (...) ‘liquidate’, his own words, his opposition, notably by weapons that disseminate terror and death?” (*broader political goal*). For

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<sup>100</sup> Roberta Rampton & Jeff Mason, “Obama’s Syria decision: a walk, a debate, and a new approach”, Reuters, 1 September 2013. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-obama-decision-idUSBRE98001520130901>

<sup>101</sup> Available at [http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/IMG/pdf/Syrie\\_Synthese\\_nationale\\_de\\_renseignement\\_de\\_classifie\\_le\\_02\\_09\\_2013\\_cle01b7e8.pdf](http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/IMG/pdf/Syrie_Synthese_nationale_de_renseignement_de_classifie_le_02_09_2013_cle01b7e8.pdf)

<sup>102</sup> Davet & Lhomme.

<sup>103</sup> Déclaration du ministre des Affaires étrangères Laurent Fabius au Parlement, 4 September 2013, <http://discours.vie-publique.fr/notices/133002017.html>

Paris, there were few domestic political benefits to be gained – the prospect of an intervention in the Syrian conflict was not relished by public opinion, and Hollande had already gained his credentials as a war leader due to his widely-applauded intervention in Mali in January 2013.<sup>104</sup>

At the Saint-Petersburg G20 meeting of September 6, Obama and Hollande met for 45 minutes. The US president kept his cards close to his chest (“It’s difficult”, he reportedly said about the prospect for Congressional support<sup>105</sup>), but Hollande was left with the impression that action was still possible. When asked about a new date for the strikes, Obama replied “let our chiefs of staff work together”.<sup>106</sup> Hollande was also vindicated by EU-wide support for a “strong and clear” international reaction at a defense ministers meeting in Vilnius on September 5, as well as by John Kerry’s strong words – the inevitable reference to “Munich” – two days later in Paris.<sup>107</sup> At this point, he reportedly still believed that US Congressional support would come, and anticipated support from the forthcoming UN technical report on the Ghouta event, expected by mid-September.

### ***The Fourth Phase: The Russian Surprise***

The crisis entered its fourth and final phase on September 9.

At the time, it appeared that an off-the-cuff remark by Kerry in London prompted the Russian proposals for a CW disarmament plan. Kerry was asked “Is there anything at this point that his government could do or offer that would stop an attack?” He responded rhetorically:

“Sure. He could turn over every single bit of his chemical weapons to the international community in the next week. Turn it over, all of it, without delay, and allow a full and total accounting for that. But he isn’t about to do it, and it can’t be done, obviously.”<sup>108</sup>

Despite the caustic tone of the remark, some reporters took Kerry’s remarks as a serious proposal. The State Department sent reporters a statement stating that “Secretary Kerry was making a rhetorical argument about the impossibility and unlikelihood of Assad turning over chemical weapons he has denied he used.”<sup>109</sup>

Yet by the end of the day in Washington, Russia had proposed precisely such a deal and Administration officials had begun to embrace it. Moscow announced a proposal to avoid

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<sup>104</sup> In late August, 64% of the French were against French military intervention in Syria. *L’Express*, 31 August 2013.

<sup>105</sup> Barthe et al.

<sup>106</sup> Barthe et al.

<sup>107</sup> Panon, pp. 188-189; Barthe et al.

<sup>108</sup> John Kerry, “Remarks With United Kingdom Foreign Secretary Hague”, 9 September 2013. <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/09/213956.htm>. Kerry claims that Obama and Putin had talked about a similar proposal in St. Petersburg a few weeks earlier.

<sup>109</sup> “Kerry speaking rhetorically over Syria turning in weapons: State Department”, Reuters, 9 September 2013. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-weapons/kerry-speaking-rhetorically-over-syria-turning-in-weapons-state-department-idUSBRE9880GE20130909>

further conflict: if Syria agreed to dismantle its chemical weapons and place them under international control, the US would forego a military strike.

However, far from being completely improvised, the chemical-weapons disarmament plan was an Israeli idea which had been conveyed to the US administration. On August 22, Minister for Intelligence and Strategic Affairs Yuval Steinitz had told Israel Radio that they believed the Syrian regime had used chemical weapons in Ghouta the day before.<sup>110</sup> A Russian official had then requested a meeting with him and his staff to confirm the information. Moscow wanted to avoid a US intervention but did not trust US assertions that Damascus had used sarin. During the conversation, the Israelis suggested the disarmament plan, an idea they had imagined beforehand. Given Russian interest, the Israeli government immediately informed the White House. The Israelis thought that Obama had boxed himself in an intractable situation and were eager to help Washington. They also thought that the implementation of such a plan would significantly reduce the Syrian chemical threat.<sup>111</sup>

With the measure to authorize the use of force likely headed toward defeat in the Congress, Obama agreed to consider the proposal – and to postpone airstrikes – as did Syria. Over the next several days, the US and Russia worked together to draft a full proposal. The measure to authorize the use of force was never brought to a floor vote. Russia and the US announced a plan to eliminate Syria’s chemical weapons stockpiles, known as the Framework for Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons, on 14 September.

For the French, this was a second major surprise – and a second time in less than ten days that they felt let down by the Americans.<sup>112</sup> Views in Paris were mixed. A key Defense minister adviser said he was convinced that the French had been “duped” by the US administration (especially since there was no call by Defense Secretary Carter to his counterpart Le Drian); but the Elysée team thought that it all had been improvised, and the US had been sincere.<sup>113</sup>

On September 10, Hollande and Obama had another conversation which, according to the French president, concluded with an agreement to “keep all options open”.<sup>114</sup> The next day, Hollande thus ordered the Defense Council to keep planning in order to “maintain pressure” on the new diplomatic process and to “stand ready” in case the situation evolved; it was also important for France to “signify its doubts about the [Russian]

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<sup>110</sup> “Steinitz: Israeli Intelligence believes Assad gassed civilians”, Israel Hayom, 22 August 2013, <https://www.charismanews.com/opinion/standing-with-israel/47046-israeli-intelligence-assad-gassed-syrian-civilian> <http://www.israelhayom.com/2013/08/22/steinitz-israeli-intelligence-believes-assad-gassed-civilians/>

<sup>111</sup> The Israeli origin of the plan was revealed by former ambassador Michael B. Oren in his memoirs (*Ally : My Journey Across the American-Israeli Divide*, New York, Random House, 2015), then confirmed by Steinitz (Judi Rudoren, “Israeli Helped Inspire US-Russia Weapons Deal With Assad, Memoir Says”, *The New York Times*, 16 June 2015 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/16/world/middleeast/israeli-helped-inspire-us-russia-weapons-deal-with-assad-memoir-says.htm>)). We obtained additional details in conversations with a former senior Israeli official (October 2017) and an Israeli researcher (e-mail conversation with Ely Karmon, January 2018; Mr. Karmon had suggested in March 2013 that Syria gives up its CW arsenal disarms in return for the creation of an “Alawi State”. See Ely Karmon, « Time to put an Alawi State on the Map », *Haaretz*, 20 March 2013. <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/premium-time-for-an-alawite-state-1.5234941>).

<sup>112</sup> Barthe et al.

<sup>113</sup> Panon, p. 190.

<sup>114</sup> Panon, p. 192.

proposal”, “avoid appearing aligned on the US renouncement”, and “avoid despairing Gulf countries and Syrian opposition”.<sup>115</sup> At the same time, he admitted that “the probability of a strike is now weaker”.<sup>116</sup> There was a risk that the Syrian regime would have dispersed its assets, or even prepared for a strike by using “human shields” tactics.<sup>117</sup> He had studied the option of going alone: France could technically do it, but he refused to go down that road for political reasons.<sup>118</sup>

With little or no hope of getting an authorization from Congress, US officials embraced the Russian proposal. The focus of US efforts then turned to the mechanics of eliminating Syria’s stockpiles of chemical weapons and precursors, a long and complex task that involved failed efforts to enlist Albania and ultimately a decision to eliminate some materials aboard a ship at sea.

The French continued to make the best of a situation whose evolution now, by and large, escaped their control: they presented a strong draft UN resolution under Chapter VII of the Charter. They thought that they could at least influence and strengthen the diplomatic process. As late as mid-September, French planners were still preparing target packages in liaison with CENTCOM.<sup>119</sup>

On 21 September, Syria started to comply with the US-Russian Framework by submitting a declaration of its chemical weapons stockpiles and agreeing to give them up. By September 27, a resolution was adopted; it was, unsurprisingly, toned down due to Russian objections. On 14 October, Syria formally accessed the CWC. In mid-2014, the OPCW indicated that the destruction of these weapons was largely on schedule despite some hiccups. In July 2015, the OPCW reported successful destruction of over 90% of the weapons that were supposed to have been eliminated.

The United States had stumbled into the crisis, then stumbled out of it.

## IMPACT AND LESSONS

### *What Impact on Deterrence?*

Former US administration officials are adamant that Obama made the correct decision and that the outcome was a good one, regardless of how the process to get there looked from outside. “Far from a failure, the ‘red line’ episode accomplished everything it set out to do—in fact, it surpassed our expectations,” Derek Chollet has argued. “But the fact

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<sup>115</sup> Revault d’Allonnes, p. 70. He added that maintaining French credibility “in case of a similar scenario with Iran” was important.

<sup>116</sup> Panon, p. 193.

<sup>117</sup> Interviews with former senior French officials, Paris, January-July 2017.

<sup>118</sup> Nathalie Guibert & Marc Semo, “Le testament syrien de François Hollande”, *Le Monde*, 12 April 2017. [http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/international/article/2017/04/12/francois-hollande-en-syrie-nous-avons-su-saisir-la-faute-de-l-adversaire\\_5109957\\_3210.html](http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/international/article/2017/04/12/francois-hollande-en-syrie-nous-avons-su-saisir-la-faute-de-l-adversaire_5109957_3210.html). Some French officials were more dubious: they believed that a follow-on strike could only have been executed with US or UK support (interviews with former senior French officials, Paris, January-July 2017).

<sup>119</sup> Jean Guisnel, “Syrie : La France ne renonce pas à l’option militaire”, *Défense ouverte*, 21 September 2013.

that it appeared to occur haphazardly and in a scattered way was enough to brand it as a failure in Washington’s eyes.”<sup>120</sup>

Obama has gone further, suggesting that the problem was that “There’s a playbook in Washington that presidents are supposed to follow. It’s a playbook that comes out of the foreign-policy establishment,” Obama told Jeffrey Goldberg. “But the playbook can also be a trap that can lead to bad decisions. In the midst of an international challenge like Syria, you get judged harshly if you don’t follow the playbook, even if there are good reasons why it does not apply.”<sup>121</sup>

In retrospect, it seems that Obama’s decision to refrain from acting was triggered by two different sets of factors.

Obama felt “trapped”, to use the words of Jeffrey Goldberg. He resented being forced to following the Washington “playbook”.<sup>122</sup> And yet it was he himself who set the trap, repeatedly committing himself to changing his preferred course of action in the event of a large-scale use of chemical weapons. Obama was reluctant to use force in Syria in the first place, convinced that it would not make a difference to the outcome of the civil war. We now know that arming of the opposition was the U.S. administration’s initial preferred response. The conclusion in June 2013 that Syria had used chemical weapons was used not to change course, but to justify a program to send small amounts of weapons to rebels that seemed calibrated to turn the tide in Washington rather than Syria.<sup>123</sup> Obama wanted to avoid escalation, believing that military action would not deter Assad. Central to Obama’s conclusion was that the chemical stockpiles themselves could be struck, leading Assad in a stronger place.

“We could not, through a missile strike, eliminate the chemical weapons themselves, and what I would then face was the prospect of Assad having survived the strike and claiming he had successfully defied the United States, that the United States had acted unlawfully in the absence of a UN mandate, and that that would have potentially strengthened his hand rather than weakened it”.<sup>124</sup>

Some of the President’s political opponents have also argued that Obama may have avoided acting in Syria for fear of undermining secret negotiations then underway with Iran in Oman, although it should be added this view is not widely held in Paris.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Derek Chollet, “Obama’s Red Line, Revisited”, *Politico*, 19 July 2016. <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/07/obama-syria-foreign-policy-red-line-revisited-214059>

<sup>121</sup> Goldberg.

<sup>122</sup> Goldberg.

<sup>123</sup> Mark Mazzetti et al., “US is Said to Plan to Send Weapons to Syrian Rebels,” *The New York Times*, June 13, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/14/world/middleeast/syria-chemical-weapons.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>.

<sup>124</sup> Goldberg.

<sup>125</sup> According to author Jay Solomon quoted in Pamela Engel, “Obama reportedly declined to enforce red line in Syria after Iran threatened to back out of nuclear deal”, *Business Insider*, 23 August 2016. <http://www.businessinsider.fr/us/obama-red-line-syria-iran-2016-8/> The French did not think that avoiding provoking Iran was a key reason for US caution (see Barthe et al.).

A second and perhaps even more important set of factors related with the domestic legitimacy of military action – and this is where the UK vote may have had a critical impact. An August 24 Reuters poll 60% of US voters opposed a strike (with only 9% supporting it).<sup>126</sup> Barack Obama often stated that he had been elected by the American people to end wars, not to start new ones. While many observers saw the decision as a transparent ploy to avoid using force while shifting the blame to Congress, senior officials and Obama himself are adamant that the President was motivated by deeply held beliefs about the President’s war powers. “This falls in the category of something that I had been brooding on for some time,” he would later tell Jeffrey Goldberg, “I had come into office with the strong belief that the scope of executive power in national-security issues is very broad, but not limitless.”<sup>127</sup> While Obama’s advisors admit that they were surprised, most now claim that once the shock wore off, the decision was very consistent with the man they knew. As Philip Gordon reflected, “this was consistent with the President’s view of presidential use of military power for a long time, he’s a constitutional scholar, and he felt in this case, consistent with his longstanding view, we would be on firmer ground if it had congressional support.”<sup>128</sup> According to a then-senior State Department official, the unexpected UK vote was critical because “we not only lost a key partner but also saw political leaders at home suddenly remembering Congress’s hasty 2002 acquiescence in what became an unwise march to military action in Iraq”.<sup>129</sup> A vote in the House of Representatives seemed impossible to win.<sup>130</sup>

A case might be made that Russia’s intervention was less a “deus ex machina” than the outcome of deliberate moves by Obama toward a military strike. Perhaps the mere process of seeking Congressional authorization provided sufficient coercive leverage to force Damascus to giving up its chemical weapons arsenal. This is the defense offered by many—including Obama himself – who claim that the US president’s approach had been a success, no matter how disorganized it may have seemed at the time.<sup>131</sup> While Syria’s accession to the Chemical Weapons Convention does seem to have denuded Assad’s chemical weapons arsenal, deterrence has not held. The Assad regime continued to use chemical weapons, initially in the form of improvised “barrel bombs” filled with chlorine. While chlorine is a common industrial chemical that one could not reasonably expected to be eliminated, its use as a chemical weapon is nevertheless prohibited by the CWC. Moreover, the Syrian government did not entirely eliminate its chemical weapons stockpile, maintaining a covert stockpile of Sarin. Had deterrence held, the Obama Administration might have been justified in saying that the removal of the vast majority of stockpiles was at least an improvement. But the regime used Sarin against civilians again in 2017.

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<sup>126</sup> Lesley Wroughton, “As Syria war escalates, Americans cool to US intervention: Reuters/Ipsos poll”, Reuters, 24 August 2013. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-usa-poll-idUSBRE97O00E20130825>

<sup>127</sup> Goldberg.

<sup>128</sup> Interview of Philip Gordon by Antoine Vitkine.

<sup>129</sup> David Eckels Wade, “Lessons From the ‘Red Line’ Crisis”, *The Atlantic*, 10 April 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/04/obama-red-line-syria/522402/>

<sup>130</sup> Aron Lund, Red Line Redux: How Putin Tore Up Obama’s 2013 Syria Deal, The Century Foundation, 3 February 2017. <https://tcf.org/content/report/red-line-redux-putin-tore-obamas-2013-syria-deal/>

<sup>131</sup> See in particular Frank P. Harvey & John Mitton, *Fighting for Credibility. US Reputation and International Politics*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2017.

To say that the partial elimination of Assad's chemical weapons stockpile represented an improvement is to ignore the broader negative impact that arose from the failure to reestablish deterrence after the attack on Ghouta.

The manner in which the agreement for Syria's accession to the CWC was handled also had the unfortunate effect of re-legitimizing Assad's rule without establishing a firm norm against chemical weapons use. After all, the implementation of the agreement consolidated his position as the legitimate ruler of Syria.<sup>132</sup> It also allowed regime troops to access areas controlled by the rebellion.<sup>133</sup> Moreover, the regime, as well as the opposition and population understood that the Syrian regime would not face any significant military action under Obama. The possibility that accession to the CWC would "strengthen Assad's hand", seems to more readily explain Syria's willingness to accede to the CWC.<sup>134</sup> After all, the Administration was at pains to convey the symbolic nature of the strike, with Kerry stating that it would be "unbelievably small" and president Obama himself stating that the object of a strike would fall short of weakening the regime because he did not "think we should remove another dictator with force".<sup>135</sup> This interpretation is now of course bolstered by the use of Sarin again in 2017.

The bungled process that played out of the summer of 2013 may have been a turning point in the Syrian war. As an observer later noted, "By early 2014, opposition hopes in a Western-backed military victory were deflated Syrian government loyalists seemed to feel a new sense of security, and the US intelligence community had begun to worry more about jihadi segments of the opposition than about Assad himself."<sup>136</sup> In France, there is a strong sense that an element of causality is at play: the rise of jihadi forces was partly caused by the sense of abandonment by the West. Hollande, in particular, is "convinced" that the history of Syria would have been different had the West carried out a substantial strike.<sup>137</sup>

Having witnessed Obama's abandonment of the Hosni Mubarak regime in Egypt, Gulf allies saw the US administration as feckless and unreliable (something the French soon benefitted from politically and commercially). The US's own National Intelligence Council noted in a report that "unenforced red lines" had damaged US influence in the Middle East.<sup>138</sup> Secretary Kerry – who had lobbied in 2013 for action partly in the name of US "credibility" – admitted as much.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> See Michelle Bentley, *Syria and the Chemical Weapons Taboo: Exploiting the Forbidden*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2016.

<sup>133</sup> Bentley.

<sup>134</sup> Bentley.

<sup>135</sup> See Eric Sterner, "Dictators and Deterrence: Syria's Assad, Chemical Weapons, and the Threat of US Military Action", *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 33, n° 5, p. 413.

<sup>136</sup> Lund.

<sup>137</sup> See Guibert & Semo.

<sup>138</sup> Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Paradox of Progress*, January 2017. <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/nic/GT-Full-Report.pdf>

<sup>139</sup> Natasha Bertrand, "Kerry: Not enforcing Obama's red line in Syria 'cost' the US considerably in the Middle East", *Business Insider*, 9 December 2016. <http://www.businessinsider.fr/us/kerry-says-not-enforcing-syria-red-line-cost-the-us-in-mid-east-2016-12/>

There are broader, but unanswered questions about whether this affected Western deterrence at large. Was Vladimir Putin encouraged to act in Ukraine? Did Iran and North Korea feel that they could continue resist the West because Obama failed to act, thus giving the impression that US threats were hollow? Many believe so.<sup>140</sup> Three former Obama defense secretaries have stated that US credibility was damaged.<sup>141</sup> This also includes the French. Hollande reportedly thought that “if Obama did not strike, how can one believe that he will help Israel in case it was attacked by an Iran that crossed a red line?”<sup>142</sup> French leaders expressed the view that the 2013 US abstention encouraged aggression elsewhere. “President Obama had said that it was a red line and that ‘if he did that, I would react’. We were ready to react, then there was no reaction. From then on, Mr. Putin decided that he could intervene in several territories, like Crimea and Ukraine”, said Fabius.<sup>143</sup> “This signal has been interpreted as weakness by the international community. That is what provoked the Ukraine crisis, the illegal annexation of Crimea and what is happening right now in Syria”, said Hollande.<sup>144</sup> “I am connecting what did not happen in Syria with what happened in Ukraine”, he would later say.<sup>145</sup> Interestingly, President Macron has adopted the same line (see below).

Our purpose here is not settle the long-running dispute between policymakers who believe as an article of faith that credibility matters and the many scholars who cannot find, in their datasets and models, evidence to demonstrate a role for credibility matters.<sup>146</sup> We share the concerns of others that the role of reputation is often poorly specified in many models.<sup>147</sup>

What we note is that many policymakers, feel strongly that credibility matters and assert that it did alter their judgment about the reliability of the American President. This was a test that US officials often set from themselves. The decision was, after all, taken by a president whose own Vice-president and Deputy National Security Adviser had both flatly stated that great powers “don’t bluff”.<sup>148</sup> Russian officials, for their part, obviously

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<sup>140</sup> See for instance Yoel Guzansky, “Thin Red Lines: The Syrian and Iranian Contexts”, *Perceptions*, Vol. 16, n° 2, August 2013; Bill Hoffman, “Sen. Ron Johnson: Obama’s ‘Red Line’ Gave Putin ‘Green Light’”, *NewsMax*, 6 March 2014. <http://www.newsmax.com/Newsmax-Tv/ukraine-ron-johnson/2014/03/06/id/556548/>; Anne-Marie Slaughter, “Stopping Russia Starts in Syria”, Project Syndicate, 23 April 2014. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/anne-marie-slaughter-on-how-us-intervention-in-the-syrian-civil-war-would-alter-vladimir-putin-s-calculus-in-ukraine>

<sup>141</sup> Glenn Kessler, “President Obama and the ‘red line’ on Syria’s chemical weapons”, *The Washington Post*, 6 September 2013. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2013/09/06/president-obama-and-the-red-line-on-syrias-chemical-weapons/?utm\\_term=.ae0155188445](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2013/09/06/president-obama-and-the-red-line-on-syrias-chemical-weapons/?utm_term=.ae0155188445)

<sup>142</sup> Wieder & Guibert.

<sup>143</sup> Remarks on RTL Radio, 11 February 2016.

<sup>144</sup> Interview in *L’Obs*, n° 2170, 13 October 2016.

<sup>145</sup> Guibert & Semo. See also Revault d’Allones book.

<sup>146</sup> Harvey & Mitton; John Mitton, “Selling Schelling Short: Reputations and American Coercive Diplomacy After Syria”, *Comparative Security Policy*, vol. 36, n° 3, 2015; Daniel W. Drezner, “Ten Things to Read about Reputation in International Relations,” *Foreign Policy*, May 17, 2009. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2009/05/27/ten-things-to-read-about-reputation-in-international-relations/>

<sup>147</sup> Harvey & Mitton.

<sup>148</sup> Biden: Goldberg. Anthony Blinken: Adam Entous, “Behind Obama’s About-Face on Syria”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 15-16 June 2013. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324049504578545772906542466>

deny that there any connection between events in Syria and subsequent actions by Moscow in Ukraine.<sup>149</sup>

### ***The Impact on US-French Relations***

The Summer of 2013 event was a seminal moment in US-French relations. It has left a deep mark in Paris. Some have compared it to the 1956 Suez crisis, with the Americans refraining from acting and the British leaving the French hanging out to dry, or to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, albeit in reverse. These analogies are, in many ways, unsatisfying.

The crisis was in many ways the culmination of a series of disagreements that arose as American and French perspectives on the use of force steadily diverged. The Obama Administration was feeling lingering resentment over French actions in Libya, from 2011 onwards. Obama had been inclined to approve an intervention partly because failing to do so would “have consequences for US credibility and leadership” – a comment that in retrospect reads as a reluctant admission of having been ensared in a trap. French president Sarkozy was then seen as forcing the US hand and taking personal advantage of the operation, including by allegedly “preempting” the coalition.<sup>150</sup> For the French, the attack on Ghouta came on the heels of White House reluctance to immediately assist Paris in their operation in Mali a few months before, something which deeply shocked the French defense establishment.

While the growing estrangement had little to no impact on day-do-day cooperation between the two countries – a marked difference with the Iraq war – resentment deepened in the Elysée. Obama tried to mend fences by hosting a State visit for the French president in February 2014 – the first since 1996. And following the deadly attacks in Paris in November 2015, United States provided full intelligence cooperation allowing France to quickly strike Syria-located targets. Yet, a bitterness about US policy in Syria remained among French officials.

Hollande has public said that he understood Obama’s decision, that Obama “wanted to be faithful to his campaign promise to no longer commit the United States on foreign military theaters.”<sup>151</sup> But his resentment seems to have lingered. Hollande genuinely believe forceful action would have turned the tide of the Syrian war.<sup>152</sup> And that resentment expressed itself in small ways. In 2016, the US requested authorization for US aircraft to use the Corsican air base of Solenzara for operations in Libya. Hollande insisted that Obama call him personally to make the request.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Daniel Larison, “Syria Hawks Were Completely Wrong About the ‘Red Line’ and Ukraine, *The American Conservative*, 11 March 2016. <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/larison/syria-hawks-were-completely-wrong-about-the-red-line-and-ukraine/>

<sup>150</sup> David E. Sanger, *Confront and Conceal. Obama’s Secret Wars and Surprising Use of American Power*, New York, Crown Publishers, 2012, p. 345, pp. 347-348.

<sup>151</sup> Interview in *L’Obs*, n° 2170, 13 October 2016.

<sup>152</sup> Davet & Lhomme.

<sup>153</sup> Nathalie Guibert, “Un quiproquo prive les avions américains de base corse”, *Le Monde*, 5 October 2016. [http://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2016/10/05/un-quiproquo-prive-les-avions-americains-de-base-corse\\_5008440\\_3210.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2016/10/05/un-quiproquo-prive-les-avions-americains-de-base-corse_5008440_3210.html)

### *What caused the crisis?*

It would be easy to blame the crisis on Obama's last minute decision to seek Congressional authorization, which surprised even his own advisors. And yet that would be too simple. After all, much of Obama's national security team came around to his viewpoint and the President himself seems to have few doubts in hindsight about the course he chose. A poor decision made well remains a poor decision – and Obama clearly believed striking Syria was the wrong course of action. There are few officials in France who do not understand that in some cases, the interests of close allies may differ.

The 2013 crisis is unlike previous crises in the Franco-American partnership. Unlike 2003, there was no difference in the intelligence assessment. Both parties believed that the Assad government had conducted a large-scale chemical weapons attack using Sarin. There were significant difficulties in communicating and discussing assessments between Washington and Paris, for technical and legal reasons.<sup>154</sup> But this was not a cause of the crisis.

Nor can we say that the parties failed to communicate their strategic intentions as occurred in 1956 between the UK and the US, for instance.<sup>155</sup> The lines of communication between the United States and France were strong and positive through the month of August, as both the US and French side clearly believe that their respective President's were moving toward a military reprisal. French participants are confident that, despite Obama's last minute reversal of policy, their American interlocutors "never fooled us."<sup>156</sup>

Yet there were subtle differences in the American and French perspectives, differences that were perhaps not always well-understood.

The first, and most important one, is that American and French policymakers had dramatically different expectations for what a use of force might have accomplished. Hollande and his team expressed belief – and still believe today – that military action would have altered the course of the war. The French president claimed later that "the regime would have been weakened, the opposition stronger, and Daesh would not have [taken the importance it now has in Syria]."<sup>157</sup> "By not intervening early, we have created a monster", said Prime minister Valls.<sup>158</sup> "The main collateral victim of the American flip-flop," one of Hollande's advisors said, "was (..) the Syrian opposition coalition."<sup>159</sup> A former high-level defense adviser claimed that France "had told the White House, and the Pentagon agreed: 'if we do not intervene, in three months from now these people will join Al-Qaeda'"<sup>160</sup>.

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<sup>154</sup> Conversation with a former US official, Washington, DC, November 2016.

<sup>155</sup> Alex Von Tunzelmann, *Blood and Sand. Suez, Hungary and Eisenhower's Campaign for Peace*, New York, HarperCollins, 2016.

<sup>156</sup> Barthe et al.

<sup>157</sup> Lhomme & Davet.

<sup>158</sup> Goldberg.

<sup>159</sup> Panon, p. 195.

<sup>160</sup> Boltanski & Jauvert.

Obama, by contrast, believed that nothing he did would alter the course of the war in Syria. A major, unexplored aspect of this discussion is that the two parties seem to have drawn radically different conclusions from the conflict in Libya. Among Hollande's team, the intervention in Libya was largely seen in terms similar to the intervention in Mali – a successful use of force to achieve specific objectives, despite the ongoing chaos in the country. For Obama, though, the intervention in Libya is seen as a failure – a limited use of force that failed to result in a comprehensive settlement that creates nothing but pressure to throw good lives after bad in an unending effort to govern ungovernable places.

There is a second factor, one that has largely been submerged by an accident of history. France's presidential system creates an extraordinarily strong executive branch, especially so on questions of foreign policy and national security. This system, central to the design of the Fifth Republic, emerged from the political crisis that accompanied decolonization. France's humiliation in Vietnam and Algeria led to a constitution which, on security matters, empowers the French President with extraordinary power. In the United States, however, the humiliation of Vietnam has triggered a long-running and unresolved debate about the extent of the President's War powers. To some extent this difference has been masked, because American Presidents have taken an expansive view of the power of the President to make war and Congress has chosen to resist only occasionally. Obama is perhaps the first modern President to take the narrow view of his executive power, arguing that it was "broad but not limitless."<sup>161</sup>

A third difference may have been France's particular sense of responsibility to maintain the taboo on chemical weapons use, which arises from France's history as the first country attacked with modern chemical agents during World War I, the single depository of the 1925 Geneva Protocol, and the convener of the 1993 meeting which led to the 1997 CW convention. There is a kind of national commitment to upholding the taboo against chemical weapons in France that simply does not exist in the United States.

### *Could it have been avoided?*

One is however left to wonder: would the Obama decision have been the same in case of a positive vote in the UK House of Commons? John Kerry, for one, believes the UK vote was key. He later stated: "The President decided that he needed to go to Congress because of what had happened in Great Britain"<sup>162</sup>. In retrospect, the domestic political mismanagement of the crisis by Prime Minister David Cameron may have been a critical factor to explain the sequence of events that happened later. Perhaps even the equivalent of the fabled "nail" in the poem quoted by many "what if"? scenarios.

Obama's decision appears inexplicable to many French analysts who cannot see in the decision to seek Congressional approval anything other than a transparent ploy to avoid the responsibility to enforce a red line set and then repeated voluntarily by the President in a cynical effort to place the blame for inaction on the Congress. But Obama himself has repeatedly argued that he was correct from both a constitutional and practical

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<sup>161</sup> Goldberg.

<sup>162</sup> Raf Sanchez, "John Kerry blames British Parliament for derailing US plans to strike Syria", *The Daily Telegraph*, 6 January 2017. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/01/06/john-kerry-blames-british-parliament-derailing-us-plans-strike/>

perspective to seek Congressional approval for any use of force. And to a significant extent, those close to Obama have largely defended this decision, arguing that the final outcome was positive and it is an important principle that the use of force must have public support as expressed through the Congress. In retrospect, it seems unlikely that any events in Syria during 2013, not matter how horrific, could have moved President Obama to do what he plainly he did not want to do.

The *severity* of the US-French crisis, however, might have have been lessened. The improvised and uncoordinated nature of various statements created a false sense of resolve and unity. In particular, the Obama Administration sought avoiding ownership of the red line by gradually recasting it as an international norm.<sup>163</sup> This particular rhetorical gambit, however, have the effect of drawing Washington’s closest allies into the commitment. Instead of allowing Obama to escape the consequences of his remark, casting it as an international norm – and seeking statements of support form the United Kingdom and France – had the effect of drawing in others, creating the essential condition of trilateral commitment that would make the President’s refusal to act so much more costly.

Second, the very public nature of the high-level presidential commitments made by the two Presidents raised the stakes for back-tracking. While burning bridges can be a useful strategy for parties that want to discourage back-tracking, in this case it is clear that the President wanted greater flexibility. Had the two parties worked through a more regular crisis coordination mechanism that was responsible for issue deterrent statements, the parties might have been understood better the difference in their level of commitment. This would have allowed Hollande to be less vocal and the French to consider alternative courses of action.

Third, there was a “double-whammy” effect in that Obama’s decision to seek Congressional authorization was followed by the surprise announcement of the US-Russian plan for Syria to accede to the Chemical Weapons Convention. US officials have admitted that the process by was messy, but argue that the most important factor is the final outcome. But in the case of France, there was some suspicion that the messy process was not disorganization, but deliberate – a decision to exclude France because of tensions over their collective approach to Iran. There is very little evidence that American policymakers were deliberate in this way, but the lack of communication naturally resulted in suspicions on the French side. The news was even more dispiriting to French officials for, having watched UK Prime Minister David Cameron fail to secure parliamentary support for military action, they found themselves alone in league with the United States. French officials briefly felt pride that while London had abandoned Washington, but Paris had not.

### *Lessons drawn*

Within France, the 2013 crisis underscored the commitment to an independent foreign and defense policy. As stated, this came on the heels of the initial refusal by the White House to assist the French in Mali. (Other episodes are remembered by the French, such

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<sup>163</sup> “Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Reinfeldt of Sweden in Joint Press Conference”, 4 September 2013. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/04/remarks-president-obama-and-prime-minister-reinfeldt-sweden-joint-press->

as the 1995 US refusal to assist France in striking Serbian positions to avoid the fall of the Srebrenica enclave). In particular, the episode reinforced doubts about US credibility. “We rightly complained about the risks of a US hyper-power, but isn’t the risk [now] of a power that is not exercised?”, asked Hollande.<sup>164</sup>

But in the United States, the episode is seen differently – at least among Democrats. They reject, categorically, concerns about credibility as a trap that is to be avoided. For instance, former Obama administration official Derek Chollet believes that a “mythology” now exists about the episode.<sup>165</sup> They believe that Obama’s decision was ultimately correct and dismiss objections about process as the wonkish nitpicking by foreign nabobs. In particular, they are convinced that the limits to American power are far greater than is generally admitted and worry that the United States will be drawn into one commitment after another on behalf of allies that will not live up to their commitments to invest in winning the peace.

Despite France’s emphasis on the ability to pursue an independent course, it must be noted that in Paris, there was never, at the time, any question of acting without the United States. Hollande realized that “From a military standpoint, we are bound to the United States, but totally independent, we could have struck alone. From a political standpoint, it was impossible”.<sup>166</sup> As stated, France never considered going alone: “diplomatically, it was way too risky”.<sup>167</sup> As Hollande said on August 30, “we would risk being put in a difficult situation, domestically and externally”.<sup>168</sup> For France, the concerns were similar to those expressed by Obama – that the mission must have both international legitimacy and domestic support. And yet for Hollande what might confer international legitimacy – collective action by allies -- was quite different than for Obama, which believed that he needed Congress. The result is a leadership dilemma for Paris: efforts to play an active and leading role exposed France to isolation when the domestic situation in the United Kingdom and United States turned. In some ways, the failure of the UK and US political systems to follow through on an international commitment was a harbinger in the unrest exposed in recent elections in both countries.

While the Trump Administration has taken a different approach to the use of force, similar themes exist among Republicans who opposed authorizing Obama to use force and who have criticized NATO members for not meeting defense commitments. The apparently durable French consensus that force can be used in a limited way in support of diplomatic goals is far more contested in the United States, where partisanship and strands of isolationism color any discussion of meeting commitments.

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<sup>164</sup> Panon, p. 192.

<sup>165</sup> Derek Chollet, “Obama’s Red Line, Revisited”, *Politico*, 19 July 2016. <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/07/obama-syria-foreign-policy-red-line-revisited-214059>

<sup>166</sup> Revault d’Allonnes, p. 69.

<sup>167</sup> Lhomme & Davet.

<sup>168</sup> Davet & Lhomme.

## ***Trump and Macron: Repairing the Damage?***

In the years following Syria's accession to the CWC, the Assad regime has continue with low-level chemical weapons attacks. According to reports, Syrian helicopters dropped some 100 chlorine bombs between 2014 and 2017.<sup>169</sup> And then, the regime used sarin again, attacking first Al-Lataminah, near Hama, on 30 March 2017 (no fatalities reported) and Shaykhun, a small town in the Idlib Governate, on 4 April 2017, killing nearly 100 people. Some noted that this came simultaneously as US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley stated on 30 March that Washington “cannot necessarily focus on Assad the way that the previous administration did”, and “our priority is no longer to sit there and focus on getting Assad out”.<sup>170</sup>

The Trump Administration, explicitly criticizing the failure of its predecessor to enforce its red line (even though Donald Trump in 2013 had opposed Obama's red line), responded during the night of 6-7 April with a strike using 59 cruise missiles against the Shayrat airbase, from where the attack originated. Even though President Trump had not been inclined to strike, the pictures of dead children reportedly made a difference to him. This attack was followed by a threat to use force again, reportedly after intelligence indicating that Syria might be preparing a second attack.<sup>171</sup>

A few weeks later, newly-elected French president Emmanuel Macron unexpectedly drew his own red line during a press conference with Vladimir Putin:

“A very clear red line exists on our side, the use of chemical weapons, whoever does it. (...) Any use of chemical weapons will be met with reprisals and an immediate response, at least from the French”.<sup>172</sup>

Macron's statement was remarkable in two ways. Firstly, it implied that the red line applied to any state or entity that might use chemical weapons, not only the Syrian government. Second Macron signaled for the first time that Paris would be ready to act alone if needed.<sup>173</sup> For Macron, the statement was more than a matter of shoring up his credentials as a military leader and differentiating himself from Hollande, who had refused to act unilaterally, for political reasons. It was also a matter of ensuring that the non-use of CW remains a taboo – especially by a country which, contrary to the situation in 2013, was now a party to the CWC. The new French president developed his thinking

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<sup>169</sup> Antony Deutsch, “Special Report: How Syria continued to gas its people as the world looked on”, Reuters, 17 August 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-chemicalweapons-idUSKCN1AX107>

<sup>170</sup> Quoted in Michelle Nichols, “US no longer focused on removing Assad from power in Syria, ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley says”, *The Independent*, 31 March 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/us-assad-syria-ambassador-un-nikki-haley-a7659266.html>

<sup>171</sup> Michael D. Shear et al., Syria Will “Pay a Heavy Price” for Another Chemical Attack, White House Says’, *New York Times*, 26 June 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/26/us/politics/syria-will-pay-a-heavy-price-foranother-chemical-attack-trump-says.html>

<sup>172</sup> “Syrie, droits de l’Homme, accusations d’ingérence... ce qu’il faut retenir de la conférence de presse Macron-Poutine”, *Le Monde*, 19 May 2017. [http://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2017/05/29/syrie-droits-de-l-homme-accusations-d-ingerence-ce-qu-il-faut-retenir-de-la-conference-de-presse-macron-poutine\\_5135644\\_3214.html#km2Ah9ZIWfU6bW8T.99](http://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2017/05/29/syrie-droits-de-l-homme-accusations-d-ingerence-ce-qu-il-faut-retenir-de-la-conference-de-presse-macron-poutine_5135644_3214.html#km2Ah9ZIWfU6bW8T.99)

<sup>173</sup> Macron would later clarify that “[he] had put himself in an operational situation to do so before I stated it”. François Clémenceau, “Ses confidences au sommet”, *Le Journal du Dimanche*, 16 juillet 2017. <http://www.lejdd.fr/politique/exclusif-ce-quemanuel-macron-a-dit-a-donald-trump-3390056>

in a major foreign policy interview to several European newspapers. When asked if France would be ready to strike alone in case CW were used in Syria, he replied:

“Yes. When you set out red lines, if you are unable to enforce them, then you decide to be weak. Such is not my choice. If it is proven that chemical weapons are used on the ground and that we know how to trace their origin, then France will proceed with strikes to destroy the identified chemical weapons stockpiles. What stopped the process in 2013? The United States fixed red lines but eventually chose to not intervene. What weakened France? To draw a political red line and not draw the consequences of it. And what did, in turn, [liberate] [freed] Vladimir Putin on other theaters of operations? The fact that he saw he had in front of him people who had red lines but did not enforce them. (...) I have two red lines: chemical weapons and humanitarian access. I told Vladimir Putin very clearly that I would be inflexible on these matters. And thus the use of chemical weapons will be met with responses, including from France alone [if needed]. In this regard, France will be perfectly aligned with the United States.”<sup>174</sup>

A few days later, Macron and Trump agreed, during a phone conversation, on “the need to work on a common response” in case of a new chemical attack in Syria.<sup>175</sup> In August, Macron somewhat cryptically claimed that regarding the goal of “ending the use of chemical weapons”, France had obtained “concrete results” since his June meeting with Putin.<sup>176</sup>

At a minimum, the US-French agreement was a welcome, and frankly somewhat surprising, sign that despite disagreements on many strategic issues, Macron and Trump seemed to have found a common purpose.

This left the United Kingdom out -- a reverse of the situation before the invasion of Iraq when Washington and London acted together, with France on the sideline. The United States and France seemed to have concluded that, for the moment, the United Kingdom was out of the picture as it deals with the fallout from the Brexit referendum and clear signs that a parliamentary motion to support air strikes against Syria in response to a chemical weapons use would likely fail.<sup>177</sup>

But was deterrence re-established? Some former US officials believe the strike may have helped in this regard.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Isabelle Lasserre, “Emmanuel Macron: ‘l’Europe n’est pas un supermarché’”, *Le Figaro*, 21 juin 2017. <http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2017/06/21/01003-20170621ARTFIG00333-emmanuel-macron-l-europe-n-est-pas-un-supermarche.php>

<sup>175</sup> “Syrie: Trump et Macron parlent ‘réponse commune’ en cas d’attaque chimique”, *Reuters*, 27 June 2017. <http://fr.reuters.com/article/topNews/idFRKBN19I2CK-OFRTTP>

<sup>176</sup> Discours du Président de la République à l’ouverture de la Conférence des ambassadeurs, 29 August 2017. <http://www.elysee.fr/declarations/article/discours-du-president-de-la-republique-a-l-ouverture-de-la-conference-des-ambassadeurs/>

<sup>177</sup> See Crispin Blunt MP & Johnny Mercer MP, How Britain Should Respond to Chemical Weapons Attacks in Syria, European Council on Foreign Relations, July 2017, p. 2. <http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/how-britain-should-respond-to-chemical-weapons-attacks-in-syria-7307>

<sup>178</sup> Hisham Melhem, “How Obama’s Syrian Chemical Weapons Deal Fell Apart”, *The Atlantic*, 10 April 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/04/how-obamas-chemical-weapons-deal-fell-apart/522549/>

In early 2018, in the light of Russian lack of support for maintaining and enhancing the UN's ability to enquire about CW use in Syria, France took the initiative to set up an "International Partnership Against Impunity for the Use of Chemical Weapons". Its aim is to share information and publicize the names of parties (States, groups, individuals) involved in CW attacks, with the objective of "naming and shaming", as well as prosecuting.<sup>179</sup>

However, chlorine attacks resumed in late 2017 and early 2018. Secretary of Defense Mattis had stated on February 2: "You have all seen how we reacted to [Khan Sheykhoun], so they'd be ill-advised to go back to violating the CWC".<sup>180</sup> But he seemed to refer only to sarin, not chlorine.

In mid-February, when asked by the press whether he would uphold his commitments, Macron said:

"We will strike the places from where these strikes originated or where they are being organized. The red line will be upheld. (...) But as of today our intelligence services do not have proof that treaty-banned chemical weapons have been used against civilian populations. (...) As soon as the proof will be established, I will do what I said I would do".<sup>181</sup>

By early March, there had reportedly been at least seven recorded chlorine attacks in 2018 alone, with a small number of casualties. In the United States, reports of discussions at the White House about possible military action began to emerge. Some in the US government hypothesized that the Syrian regime thought they could "get away with" limited use of CW.<sup>182</sup> At the same time, it was becoming clear that the issue was becoming a hot one in Paris. After a phone conversation between Macron and Trump, the Elysée issued a communiqué that stated:

"The President of the Republic underlined his utmost vigilance on the question of chemical weapons and reminded that a firm response would be applied in case of proven use of chemical means causing civilian fatalities, with perfect coordination with our American allies. France and the United States shall not tolerate impunity."<sup>183</sup>

This communiqué – which was not accompanied by any significant other public statement – suggested that, in effect, only major lethal attacks would be punished.

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<sup>179</sup> See "Launch of the International Partnership Against Impunity for the Use of Chemical Weapons", 23 January 2018. <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/disarmament-and-non-proliferation/events/article/chemical-weapons-ending-impunity-23-01-18>

<sup>180</sup> Quoted in Joshua Keating, « What Happened to Trump's Own Red Line on Syria ? », *Slate*, 28 February 2018, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2018/02/what-happened-to-trumps-own-red-line-on-syria.html>

<sup>181</sup> Quoted in "Syrie: la France 'frappera' en cas de 'preuves avérées' d'armes chimiques, *Le Monde*, 13 February 2018.

<sup>182</sup> Karen DeYong et al., "After reports of chemical attacks, White House considers new military action against Syrian regime", *The Washington Post*, 5 March 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/after-reports-of-chemical-attacks-white-house-considers-new-military-action-against-syrian-regime/2018/03/05/d5d2de2e-1d7a-11e8-b2d9-08e748f892c0\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/after-reports-of-chemical-attacks-white-house-considers-new-military-action-against-syrian-regime/2018/03/05/d5d2de2e-1d7a-11e8-b2d9-08e748f892c0_story.html)

<sup>183</sup> Communiqué de la Présidence de la République, 2 March 2018.

One year after the Khan Sheikhoun attack, the three foreign ministers issued a solemn joint statement, but refrained from clearly restating deterrence. They only said “We are committed to ensuring that all those responsible [for their] use are held to account”.<sup>184</sup>

Three days later, a massive gas attack caused several tens of deaths in Douma, near Damascus. This was proof that, whatever Western leaders thought, they had failed to re-establish deterrence.

Hence the action taken on April 14 by US, UK and French forces against several sites involved in CW production and use. The scope of the intervention was designed to ensure that deterrence was restored without provoking Russia. Importantly, the unity of the P3 was also restored. 105 missiles were launched – an operation of almost exactly the same scope as had been planned but not executed in later August 2013 (85 US missiles, 12 French and 8 British missiles).

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In Syria-like situations, we would recommend that, in addition to publicizing national intelligence assessments for domestic reasons, the three countries would make a joint announcement summarizing their consensus on facts, and supporting military action if needed, though leaving decisions of national actions to each country according to its constitutional procedures, political traditions and preferences.

At the minimum, what happened between 2013 and 2018 suggests that deterrence needs to be continuously nurtured by statements and actions – what Israelis sometimes cynically call “mowing the lawn”. In any case, a lesson of the Syrian war is that red lines should always be carefully drawn – and of course never be improvised.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Joint Statement on First Anniversary of Chemical Attack on Khan Sheikhoun, 4 April 2018, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/04/280205.htm>

<sup>185</sup> Bruno Tertrais, *The Diplomacy of Red Lines*, Recherches & Documents n° 2/2016, Fondation pour la recherche stratégique, February 2016, <https://www.frstrategie.org/publications/recherches-et-documents/the-diplomacy-of-red-lines-02-2016>