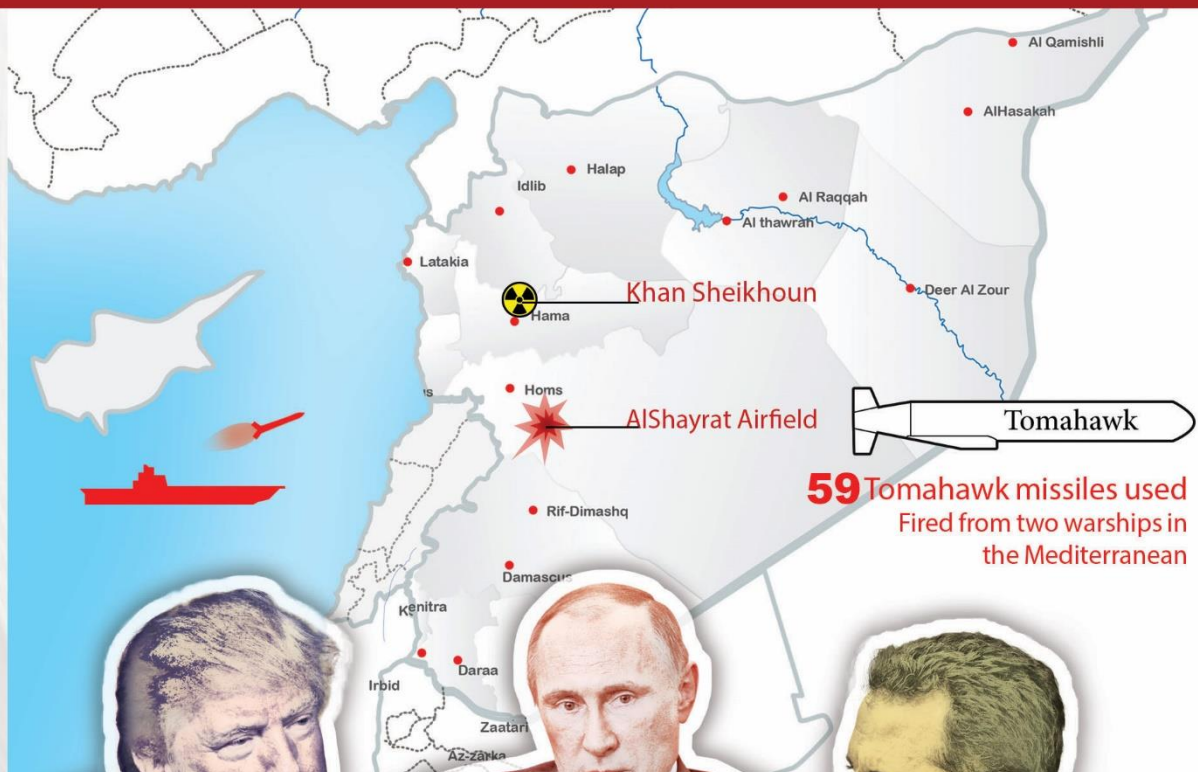


The American strike in Syria

is a symbolic move with strategic dimensions



59 Tomahawk missiles used
Fired from two warships in
the Mediterranean



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Introduction

The American military strike on the Shayrat military airfield in Homs, which belongs to al-Assad's forces, caused the destruction of several aircraft that were stationed in the airfield as well as the death of some civilians. The strike was a political earthquake whose tremors and repercussions are expected to be felt throughout the Syrian political and regional scene, and even on the international scene in the short term.

On Wednesday afternoon, April 5, US President Donald Trump issued an order to the Ministry of Defense to direct 59 Tomahawk missiles from two American missile destroyers, which were ready in the eastern Mediterranean, towards the Shayrat military airfield in the countryside of Homs. Missiles started falling on the airfield, which is considered one of the largest and most important airfields used by al-Assad's forces. It is also believed to be the airfield from which the raids that targeted the city of Khan Shaykhun with poison gas started on Wednesday and Thursday after midnight.

In a speech, the American president commented on his troops' strike against an airfield controlled by al-Assad's forces, saying, "On Tuesday, the Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad launched a horrific chemical attack on innocent civilians". He added, "Tonight, I issued an order to launch a targeted military strike in Syria on the airfield from which the chemical attack was launched. Preventing and deterring the proliferation and use of deadly chemical weapons is part of the vital interests of the United States' national security".

In his statements, Trump expressed his recent position towards al-Assad, saying, "Years of previous attempts to change al-Assad's behavior have failed miserably. As a result, the refugee crisis is still getting worse and the stability of the region is still shaking and still threatening the United States and its allies". The American president called on all civilized countries to join the United States to try to put an end to the massacre and killings in Syria and to eliminate all types and forms of terrorism.

Has the US position towards the al-Assad regime changed?

The strike on the Shayrat airfield in Homs is the first American military action of its kind in Syria. Its importance lies in the fact that it represents the first US military confrontation against the al-Assad regime. Previous US actions in Syria were limited to confronting ISIS and supporting Syrian democratic forces and Arab groups that promised not to engage in a fight against al-Assad or any other entity other than "ISIS".

This strike is also considered to be the first real punitive measure the United States has launched against al-Assad after he committed a massacre, in a unilateral move that did not await a Security Council resolution, whose deliberations would undoubtedly produce a result in favor of al-Assad due to the Russian veto.

The strike formed a radical shift away from the policy of the Obama administration, which focused on consultation and coordination with Moscow concerning all actions related to Syria on the ground and concerning political and security issues.

Despite the symbolism of the strike, it put an end, for the first time, to the silence of the international community on al-Assad's crimes and provided an initial possible means of addressing the violations by the regime and its allies. This will inevitably raise the US political and diplomatic ceiling in order to keep up with this new level.

On the other hand, the American strike restored significance to the American red line concerning the use of chemical weapons after it was lost when Obama stepped back from attacking al-Assad in 2013 following the violent attack by al-Assad's forces on Ghouta in the countryside of Damascus using the deadly sarin gas, which killed around one thousand citizens and injured thousands of others. Obama explained his decision to revoke his decision to attack al-Assad at the time by stating that he had reached a deal to disarm and destroy the chemical weapons owned by the al-Assad regime. However, dozens of attacks with poison gas took place after the deal, as documented by local and international human rights organizations. The International Commission investigating the use of

chemical weapons in Syria has recently confirmed that al-Assad forces used chemical weapons in at least two locations.

This intentional American laxity led to a general impression that al-Assad was authorized to bomb his people using all kinds of weapons with the support of Russian aircraft and foreign militias without any accountability. However, the Shayrat strike has changed this. Even though the previous administration had explained its failure to act by the need to focus on a political solution and not to disrupt the course of the Geneva negotiations, al-Assad's persistence and the failure to provide any adequate international response to his actions affected progress both on political negotiations and on the ground.

Consequently, these factors indicate that the direct US military strike on the Shayrat airfield is considered a turning point in US policy towards Syria. However, it is too early to speculate on how far this new position will be maintained as opposed to the previous course.

Possible motives behind the strike

It can be said that the first military strike against al-Assad forces was driven by an urgent need on the part of the Trump administration more than for Syria. Given the internal US context of the strike, we can conclude that the new president's administration is facing an unprecedented political and judicial crisis.

It is clear that the United States has been deeply divided since Trump won the presidential elections, since he belongs to a populist and racist right-wing current that is rebelling against the traditional right-wing, as represented by the Republican Party and its conservative blocs, which are associated with the elite. This current is influential in American institutions. This populist right wing current is completely opposed to liberal and leftist movements that exert great influence over the media, as well as in the technology and communications sectors.

With the arrival of a president who is against immigration and who does not hesitate to display his prejudices towards minorities and women, as well as his disdain for the role of institutions, American society has mobilized in opposition to Trump, turning every disagreement with him

into a legal, constitutional and media battle. During the first few months of his mandate, Trump tried to reconcile with American institutions, especially the intelligence services, which played a major role in a series of scandals that hit him and members of his administration concerning suspicious relations with Russia and the possible Russian role in the presidential elections.

As Trump's official position on Syria, both during his campaign and after it, is to reconcile with al-Assad, cooperate with Russia and disassociate the US from the Syrian opposition, the American press and Trump's opponents had a field day after al-Assad's chemical attack in Khan Shaykhun, particularly after a series of statements by US administration officials, which clarified the administration's future approach on Syria. Trump may have seen the chemical attack as an opportunity to refute his alleged cooperation with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin, since the election campaign, by asserting a tough and advanced stance. Moreover, his earlier criticism of Obama's retreat from the so-called "red line" in Syria was an additional source of pressure on him to take action in order to distinguish himself favorably from his predecessor and to thwart the expectations of his opponents.

On the other hand, even though Trump's positive stance towards al-Assad has changed, based on his statements after the Khan Shaykhun attack, what has remained clear and constant since the beginning of his campaign is the priority to fight against and reduce Iranian influence in the Middle East, and adopt tougher policies against Tehran after the historic tractability shown by Obama's administration.

It is likely that the US president was counting on al-Assad staying in power and cooperating with him to reach an agreement with Russia that would pave the way to completely exclude Iran from Syria. However, when he saw an opportunity to attack Iran using the pretext of regime violations, Trump did not miss it. Nikki Healy, the United States ambassador to the United Nations, argued at the Security Council session concerning the military strike that "the Syrian regime is not the only one responsible for the deaths of those killed in Khan Shaykhun, but Iran and Russia also bear part of the responsibility because they support Damascus".

Israel's pressure on the Trump administration to take such a tough line is no secret. In fact, the Israeli media and press were concerned about Khan

Shaykhun and Netanyahu expressed his strong condemnation of the attack and the use of chemical weapons. He also expressed great humanitarian sympathy towards the victims.

However, this position was really nothing but a cover to pave the way for the real Israeli position. Netanyahu explicitly said in a statement to the Anadolu agency, "Israel calls on the international community to implement its 2013 promise and to remove chemical weapons from Syria". He also indicated that any party in Syria that threatens "Israel" would be targeted.

The impact of the Shayrat Strike

Whatever the real reasons behind the change in the US' position on Syria, this does not change the fact that the course of events has changed and that the Tomahawk missiles that fell on Shayrat caused tremors that spread from the wings of the aircraft there to Damascus, Tehran and Moscow, and will also be felt in Washington for a long time.

Local parties to the conflict

On the ground, no matter how small the losses suffered by al-Assad, the first American strike cannot pass without impacting on the nature of the military conflict. In fact, the morale among Assad forces has significantly declined, given the huge reliance on Russian intervention to tip the balance of power in favor of al-Assad. The scorched earth policy followed by al-Assad forces, along with their Russian allies and the foreign militias affiliated to Iran - without any accountability – as well as the United States restrictions on opposition factions and reduction in support have given the al-Assad regime the chance to recover and re-capture many opposition-held areas. The regime was also able to turn the course of the confrontations to its advantage and now sees that is only a matter of time before it emerges as the victor from the conflict. This first American strike targeting the regime represents a sharp change in this course, which may not be reversed.

The strike and the subsequent political and diplomatic escalation have had an impact on the morale of the Syrian opposition, restoring some faith in the international community's move to stand against the pro-Assad coalition - hope that had almost disappeared since September 2013.

On the political level, the strike will strengthen the position of the political opposition, based on the moral impact of the strike on the whole Syrian scene on the one hand, and its impact on the situation on the battlefield, on the other, which is expected to head in a new direction. In particular, two important battles were launched after the Khan Shaykhun chemical attack, one in Latakia and the other in the city of Daraa. Information on the ground indicates that the expulsion of the al-Assad forces is a given.

In principle, the openly accusing the al-Assad regime of using chemical weapons and responding by imposing punitive measures would require a formal accusation against the regime of breaching Security Council Resolution 2118 that calls for disarming the regime of its chemical weapons and threatens to respond to any transportation or use of such weapons with action under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. This makes al-Assad more of a target for international justice than before, and paves the way for a more serious deal with regard to the political solution. Statements by US officials following the attack on Khan Shaykhun and the new terms they use in describing al-Assad suggest that he will be dealt with on the basis that he has lost all legitimacy.

Influential international actors in Syria

The American strike has gained wide international support, with its opponents limited to Russia, Iran and some of the countries that support them. Some major countries, such as China, did not voice any official opposition.

The US military strike, which targeted an important military location held by al-Assad forces for the first time since the outbreak of the Syrian war, has exposed Russia and its military intervention in Syria to a new and dangerous test. Russia was unable to prevent the strike despite being briefed on it and despite the fact that it was using the site as a base for its own forces in that area. It stopped at expressing only verbal opposition. The reason behind this is that it is seeking to open the way for Trump to achieve his vision of good relations with Russia, and that any confrontation may make this goal far-fetched, if not impossible. Its lack of response or inability to prevent such a strike, even diplomatically, constitutes a source of significant moral pressure and a blow to its growing influence in the region, exposing it as a temporary and fragile expansion that would not have occurred but for the Obama administration's laxity towards it.

Iran, however, in the short term, appears to be less affected in Syria because of its already diminished influence in the face of increased Russian influence. However, its militias and long-term investment in the al-Assad regime are more vulnerable in the medium and long term. Its interests will be directly threatened from now on. This may lead to its gradual withdrawal from Syria, which would strengthen the position of Hassan Rouhani's reformist government within Iran, pushing it to lead this withdrawal on the basis that the conflict is a dilemma the conservatives placed the country in, particularly as Trump's declared priority of facing up to Iranian influence seems serious so far. It is clear that Iran gives great importance to the continuation of the historic nuclear agreement, which may lead it to negotiate over some of its interests in other areas such as Syria.

In contrast to Russia and Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and "Israel" have breathed a sigh of relief, each for its own specific reasons related to its security and regional role. The common threat posed by the al-Assad regime to these countries is what links together their interests in Syria.

For **Turkey**, Washington is taking - for the first time - a step against al-Assad that is not connected to the war on ISIS, which it uses as a pretext to support the People's Protection Units and strengthen their position and aspirations that are harmful to Ankara. In fact, Turkey's position on al-Assad and its insistence on not prioritizing any other issue in Syria during the past few years have caused considerable damage, forcing Ankara to enter into a complex balancing act in terms of regional and international relations at the expense of some of its own interests.

Turkish officials have hastened to declare their support for the American strike and encouraged the US administration to undertake more similar action and to impose a safe zone. They also called on the Russian side to end their support for the al-Assad regime.

If the US strike is a prelude to a new and considered American position on al-Assad, Turkey will find itself relieved of some of the onerous obligations that have exhausted it, such as some aspects of the relationship with Russia. Washington's tightening of its position on al-Assad will necessarily bring it closer to Turkey and to the axis of countries that see al-Assad as a common foe, like Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

Like Turkey, **Saudi Arabia** declared its full support for the American strike, declaring it "a courageous decision in the interests of the region and the world." Saudi Arabia sees the departure of the al-Assad regime as a fundamental priority, given its transformation into a smokescreen for Iranian influence in Syria and the region. Riyadh has long criticized the Obama administration for its weakness and complacency with regard to the Syrian issue. Saudi Arabia has tried to spearhead the overthrow of the al-Assad regime by mobilizing positions and supporting the global operations of the "Friends of Syria" group but it encountered many obstacles set by the previous US administration. Thus, the new phase launched by Trump through the US strike on a Syrian regime military site is of paramount importance to Riyadh, which at the same time seeks to send strong messages to Iran, on the political level and on the ground, by undermining its influence in Syria and the rest of the Arab countries.

For "**Israel**", the recent American strike in Syria has achieved two main goals. The first is sending a message to the al-Assad regime and all the states in the region not to take the use of weapons of mass destruction lightly or to possess them, regardless of whether Israel has open or covert relations with them. From the very outset, Israel has sought an advantage over other countries by producing and possessing weapons of mass destruction. Evidently, the Israeli government will not, in so far as it can, allow any other government in the region to achieve an equal footing in this area. Thus, Israel probably put major pressure on the Trump administration to react to the attack on Khan Shaykhun in this way in order to achieve this aim. Israel's second objective was to limit Iranian influence and deter Iran's militias in Syria. These militias have recently come close to the Israeli border, which could possibly turn into a confrontation that Iran or the al-Assad regime may need in order to gain international support.

The American domestic scene

While Washington's regional allies have benefited from the strikes on al-Assad, the biggest beneficiary is Trump. External military action against "outlawed" regimes is a conventional method employed by the United States since World War II. Its use was reduced only under the former administration of Barack Obama. Even though it was symbolic, Trump's move was designated to partially restore the United States' image abroad, which American presidents have long sought to maintain. Although

involvement in a long war using ground forces finds very little support among Americans, the recent strike met with approval from the majority among the American public and was supported by many in the press.

The strike also distracted Trump's opposition somewhat from its fight. He has now, at least, taken one action that his opponents did not expect him to take, which they planned to use to compare him unfavorably with Obama. The increased tensions in US-Russia relations generated by the strike will relieve the impact of the scandals haunting the Trump administration due to alleged Russian intervention in the elections in Trump's favor.

What Next?

Regardless of the various indirect causes of the strike analyzed above, especially those related to the domestic US political scene, we cannot overlook the fact that this strike has paved the way for a new phase based on the understanding that the military option is open in the international community's response to the al-Assad regime and its continued insistence on committing massacres using various types of weaponry, and especially those prohibited under international law. Similarly, the strike has undeniably added new dimensions to the Syrian political landscape, as demonstrated in our analysis of the effects of the strike on the parties to the conflict. These new developments are capable of reorienting the entire course of the conflict if they are sustained.

An initial assessment of the incident indicates that the limited strike is a shift in the US position in general and not an improvised move or an exception. It should be noted in this regard that a Reuters report quoted senior officials in the Trump administration insisting that the president had, a few hours before the strike, studied three options for responding to al-Assad's use of chemical weapons in Khan Shaykhun. Among these options was to launch a "decapitation strike" targeting the presidential palace in Damascus. This is a deliberate leak that has clear significance, regardless of the veracity of these statements. Ultimately, this can only be verified through a close examination of the nature of these statements and the US' stance on the Syrian issue in the coming days.

The most important aspect of the strike, regardless of the final outcome, is that it represents the first act by the United States that goes against the

prevailing approach of the Obama administration, which was based on a partial withdrawal from the region and lack of response to Russia's expansion after that of Iran. Hence, regardless of his approach, the US president cannot take such an audacious step without realizing its psychological and moral repercussions on both his allies and adversaries, at the very least. Consequently, he will be preparing to take advantage of this impact, using the usual American approach of focusing on using existing developments to their advantage rather than creating them in the first place.



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