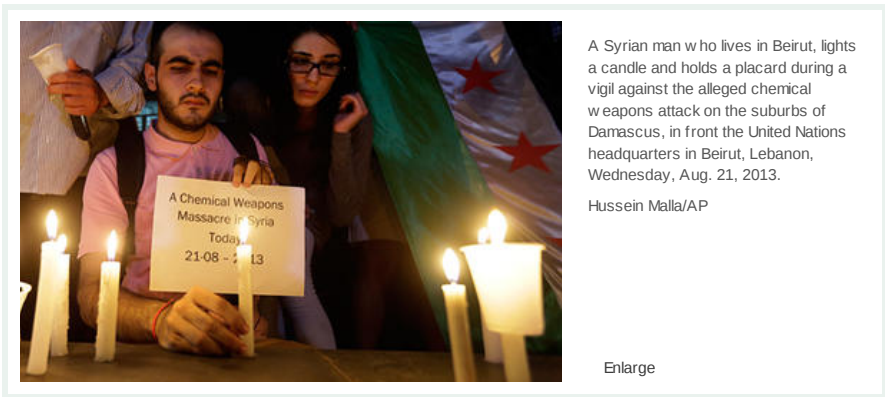


Syria crisis: Could chemical weapons claims prompt Libya-style intervention?

The US has joined other countries in demanding that a UN team investigate Wednesday's suspected chemical weapons attack in Syria. But experts are quick to list reasons why a major US intervention is unlikely.

By Howard LaFranchi, Staff writer / August 22, 2013



WASHINGTON

The calls for forceful action from France and other Western powers in the wake of suspected large-scale chemical weapons use in Syria are prompting comparisons to the Western intervention in Libya two years ago.

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In that case, the United States opted for “leading from behind” as European-led NATO forces toppled Muammar Qaddafi.

But tough rhetoric aside, a repeat of an intervention with America in a supporting role is very unlikely, say regional and transatlantic diplomatic analysts.

No Western intervention will occur unless proof emerges that the forces of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad unleashed some of the regime's fearsome chemical weapons on the Damascus suburbs this week, they agree. But even if proof eventually emerges – at this point a big “if” – the complexities of the Syrian conflict and the likelihood that any intervention would not see quick results would almost certainly require the US to take the lead.

And despite President Obama's “red line” of a year ago concerning chemical weapons use in Syria, no one should expect a large-scale US intervention in Syria under any circumstances,

the analysts add.

“Were there to be some kind of direct Western intervention in Syria, the US would be out front, not behind,” says Charles Kupchan, an expert in transatlantic relations at the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington. Europe’s two major defense powers, Britain and France, don’t have the “assets” to lead such an intervention, Syria is farther away from them than is Libya, and the international and regional complexities mean the US would have to take the lead.

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“The likelihood of a repeat of Libya is low,” Mr. Kupchan says.

But that reality has not stopped France and others from assuming a more aggressive and out-front position toward the Syrian conflict.

That forcefulness was on display again Thursday, as French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius demanded a “reaction of force” if the use of chemical weapons is proved.

Turkey also called for immediate action, saying “all red lines have been crossed” by Mr. Assad in his fight with rebels seeking his ouster. And Britain warned that “we cannot rule out any option,” even though it said a “political solution” to Syria’s civil war remains preferable.

All this has a familiar ring, Kupchan says.

“This is not the first time that US allies have been more forward-leaning on some kind of intervention in Syria than the US,” says Kupchan, who is also a professor of international affairs at Georgetown University in Washington. “The British and the French have been steadily out front in wanting to provide arms to the opposition and on other more-forceful measures. But at the end of the day,” he adds, “the allies are rhetorically more out front of the US than in reality.”

The Obama administration was quick to join France, Britain, and 34 other nations in demanding that a United Nations chemical-weapons team already in Syria be allowed to investigate Wednesday’s suspected large-scale use of chemical weapons – possibly the nerve gas sarin, which Syria stockpiles – against rebel strongholds in the Damascus outskirts.

The White House demanded Thursday that Syria grant the UN team “immediate and unfettered access” to the attack site. But the administration has shied away from the interventionist language emanating from other Western capitals.

At the State Department Thursday, spokeswoman Jen Psaki said Mr. Obama has directed US intelligence agencies to work on determining if chemical weapons were used. The president has a range of options for action if an assessment finds the use of chemical weapons, she added.

Russia and China, both supporters of Assad, thwarted UN Security Council passage of a statement that called on the UN to “urgently investigate” the latest attack. Rebel sources claim up to 1,300 Syrians, including many women and children, were killed.

Instead, the approved, watered-down statement expresses a desire to clarify what happened in the attack, which it deems a “serious escalation” of the Syrian conflict. On Thursday, the UN sent the Syrian government a formal request that its team in Syria be

allowed to investigate the attack site.

Arriving at the facts about just what happened Wednesday won't be easy, weapons experts say. Photo and video evidence suggests some kind of chemical contact. But some point to videos showing people administering some kind of antidote via syringe to victims – adding that improper injection of some nerve-gas antidotes could have been deadlier than what might have been misconstrued as a chemical attack.

Another complicating factor: Syrian forces continued Thursday to bombard the areas affected by Wednesday's attack, effectively putting the area off limits to any inspection and almost certainly destroying evidence that might be gathered.

Yet even if some proof of a chemical attack by Assad's forces is forthcoming, the Western response is not likely to be on the scale of the Libya intervention, Kupchan says.

“Even if in the short term the Libya intervention was seen to have gone relatively well – Qaddafi was toppled – over the long term it's seen as having had some questionable effects,” he says.

At the top of that list for Americans is Benghazi, the eastern Libyan city and cradle of the Libyan opposition where a year after Qaddafi's death, a terrorist attack on the US mission left US Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other Americans dead.

But the list of “questionable” long-term effects of the intervention also includes the post-conflict flow of Qaddafi's unsecured arms into Mali – where the French eventually intervened against pro-Al Qaeda militants – and mounting evidence of Libya turning into a “failed state,” Kupchan says.

Obama will come under intense pressure to intervene in Syria in some form if his “red line” was definitely crossed by a large-scale chemical attack, analysts say. But a leader who is already cautious about military intervention will probably be even more so after Libya, they add.

Syria's volatile mix of moderate nationalists, jihadists, and foreign fighters in the opposition to Assad is just one reason that “getting more deeply involved in Syria is more complicated and dangerous than it was in Libya,” Kupchan says.

Other factors: Syria's complex sectarian divide and the inability of Syria's opposition to develop into a coherent fighting force on the ground.

Even with proof of a large-scale chemical weapons attack, US airstrikes on Syrian government buildings and military installations are the extent of what Kupchan would expect to see.

Even then, he adds, he'd anticipate “standoff attacks,” perhaps by cruise missiles launched from ships, which would send a message to Assad without putting US forces in harm's way.

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