

by [Stephen Zunes](#) April 7, 2017

## [Trump's Dangerous and Cynical Attack on Syria](#)

Let's not pretend that Thursday night's U.S. missile strike on Syria's Al Shayrat air base has anything to do with concern for the civilian victims of the regime's apparent April 3 [chemical weapons attack](#) on the town of Khan Sheikhoun.

The unilateral military action was ordered by the same President whose [proposed budget](#) would make major cuts to programs that have provided relief to Syrian refugees fleeing the violence of the regime and has tried to bar any of the refugees from entering the United States.

With no direct threat to U.S. national security and with no congressional authorization, Trump's use of force was illegal. By contrast, when President Obama considered authorizing military action against the regime following an even deadlier sarin attack in 2013, he respected constitutional limitations on his power and—failing to receive authorization from Congress—did not do so. This provided time for the Russian-initiated [agreement](#), backed by the United Nations, which led to the destruction of the vast majority of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal.

Trump [recently blamed](#) Syria's chemical attack on Obama, but it was a Republican-controlled Congress, backed by public opinion, that blocked Obama from taking military action. Indeed, Trump at that time tweeted, "The President must get Congressional approval before attacking Syria—big mistake if he does not!" He also tweeted, "Stay out of Syria." Obama's hesitation, Trump [later](#) tweeted, "may have saved us from doing a horrible and very costly (in more ways than money) attack on Syria!"

*"The only reason President Obama wants to attack Syria is to save face over his very dumb RED LINE statement. Do NOT attack Syria, fix U.S.A." — Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) September 5, 2013*

There is [little question](#) that the Syrian regime was responsible for the atrocity in Khan Sheikhoun: As with the 2013 Syrian attack on the Damascus suburb Al-Ghouta, the target of chemical attack was a rebel-held town on a road blocking the Syrian army from advancing to consolidate areas of control. Even if a rebel group had access to chemical weapons and wanted to launch a "false flag" operation to discredit the regime and encourage U.S. intervention, it would have presumably used them somewhere with less strategic importance.

Similarly, the Russian [claims](#) that it was the bombing of a rebel warehouse storing chemical weapons which resulted in the mass casualties doesn't make sense, given that the rebel groups controlling the town have never used chemical weapons, and the likely nerve agent involved uses a [binary](#) mixing process which makes the lethal chemical reaction that took place impossible under such circumstances.

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But the United States has no right to punish Syria. Yes, there is something uniquely horrific about chemical weapons, the use of which has been banned since the Geneva Protocol of 1925, the possession of which has been illegal since the [Chemical Weapons of 1993](#) (belatedly signed and ratified by Syria in 2013.) But since Trump came to office, nearly 1,000 civilians have been killed by U.S. airstrikes in Syria and Iraq—including up

to 200 civilians in Mosul and around sixty civilians in the bombing of a mosque in al-Jena (not far from the site of the chemical weapons attack) this past month.

These deaths raise serious questions as to whether Trump's bombing of the Syrian base has anything to do with protecting civilians. Waving the flag of fighting terrorism, the United States has been bombing Syria since 2014, conducting more than 8,000 air strikes against opponents of Assad, and not only the so-called "Islamic State," resulting in thousands of civilians casualties.

There is little reason to think that Trump's limited strikes will make much of a difference in terms of Assad's behavior. The Syrian government has lost more than 150,000 soldiers and militiamen and countless military assets, and the damage done by the 59 Tomahawk missiles is unlikely to lead to any change in regime policy.

It would not be too cynical to assume that the decision to bomb Syrian government positions was done for political reasons: to distract from the dangerous decision earlier that day to force through the confirmation of the right-wing Judge Neil Gorsuch without the longstanding practice of requiring a three-fifths majority of the Senate, for example. This missile attack may also serve to distance the Trump administration from the Kremlin—a key supporter of the Assad regime—in the face of growing evidence of Russian interference in the 2016 election. As Andy Borowitz observed, "Cruise missiles are specially designed to distract the media with pinpoint accuracy."

The manifold war crimes of the Assad regime, including this latest atrocity, should not be denied or minimized. However, unilateral military action is illegal, unconstitutional, and almost certainly counterproductive. It must be categorically opposed.