

Israelis, Gas Masks and Looming War in Syria

For the first time since we moved to Israel 10 years ago, I felt the need to dust off the gas mask and see how it worked. It was the first time I actually felt this information would be useful.

Having seen the gruesome pictures of the results of chemical warfare coming out of Syria, I pulled the gas mask out of its box and strapped it on. A family friend gave me a quick lesson, but still I could sense that air was seeping through.

After wearing the mask a few minutes, I tried to imagine breathing in this thing for several hours. Knowing the impatience of Israelis, I am sure there are many who will never don such a contraption.

Despite that, thousands of Israelis stood in line last week in near-100-degree weather to get a gas mask. The mad rush revealed a shortage in inventory that enraged Israelis. My cohost of the Maoz podcast went to get one for his new wife and came home empty-handed.

Presently, President Obama has backed away from his threat to bomb Syria without Congress (or the rest of the world)—a wise decision, considering the Constitution declares that the president needs congressional backing before going to war.

And why now? Is this not the same president who criticized George W. Bush for going to war in Iraq because of the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) threat? It would appear that his reasoning (in private) for striking Syria would be to save face, as he threatened over a year ago that using WMDs would be crossing a red line.

Now the world is mocking the president, and he nearly caved in

to that pressure to use military action. Who's the cowboy now, Mr. President? Fortunately, he had a change of heart Friday night.

The U.S. doesn't go to war because our president is offended. That would be Syria, Iran and many of their neighbors. When Obama saw the world was viewing him as weak, losing the support of Great Britain—and now France—and having Putin call him out, he nearly made an unconstitutional blunder. Sometimes it takes more courage to step back.

His big mistake was setting up “red lines” for Syria in the first place. If he intended to retaliate against Syria, he should have already had a Congress-approved plan in place. But going it alone, without even the support of your own country, would have been foolish.

While we here in Israel would love see the people of Syria set free from the dictator Bashar Assad and a democracy rise up in its place, there are many questions to be asked before bombing Syria simply because you want to save face:

- Who will replace him?
- Who are the rebels? There is evidence to suggest that the original freedom-seeking rebels have been overrun by al-Qaida-type radicals.
- Is it worth sending a few missiles into Syria if then Assad is provoked to bomb Israel in retaliation? And if we retaliate, could that not unite Arab nations against us? Does Obama want to risk creating a regional conflict just so he won't be mocked?
- While it seems clear chemical weapons were used, it is possible they were used by rebels to make it appear Assad used them. If indeed the rebels are being led by Hamas-type radicals, their brand of Islam would have no qualms with killing 1,500 Syrians for the “greater good.”
- There is another theory: The Saudis provided the rebels

with chemical weapons. I am not sure how credible it is, but it is backed up by Associated Press correspondent Dale Gavlak. Quoting a well-known leader in Ghouta, Gavlak writes, "They ... used some ordinary rebels to carry and operate this material. ... We were very curious about these arms. And unfortunately, some of the fighters handled the weapons improperly and set off the explosions." If this is true, then the Saudis have pulled off a real coup—although ruthless. Their goal would be for Assad to fall and be replaced with a Saudi-friendly Islamic government. (While this seems plausible, I think there needs to be more verification than just one reporter on the ground. And with France and NATO now claiming "proof Assad was behind chemical weapons attack," this theory seems more unlikely.)

My daughter, who serves the Israel Defense Forces on the Syrian border, asked me yesterday why Assad would use chemical weapons, risking retaliation from the West, especially since he is winning the civil war. I told her there are two reasons that come to mind:

1. He knows (or thinks) Obama won't retaliate, and there is nothing that makes an Arab leader look like a hero more than thumbing your nose at and standing up to America or Israel. Just yesterday the Syrians, after hearing that Obama will take his time in responding, mocked the U.S. president in the Syrian press, giving credence to this theory. As one newspaper put it, "The state-run newspaper Al-Thawra, expressing official thinking, said Obama's turn-about on military action was 'the start of the historic American retreat.'"
2. He is seeking to turn this into a regional conflict between Israel and the Muslim nations to take pressure off the fact that his country is in a civil war that has claimed over 100,000 lives—mostly civilians.

Of course, when dealing with demon-possessed murdering

dictators, it is hard to know what they are thinking or not thinking. Demon-possessed folks don't reason like we do. The good news for us here in Tel Aviv is that we have the promises of God, the best-trained army in the world (and one of the best soldiers, Danielle Cantor) and my trusty gas mask!

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