

1. **Mark your confusion.**
2. **Show evidence of a close reading.**
3. **Write a 1+ page reflection.**

Note: The United States, France and Great Britain launched missile strikes in Syria last Saturday targeting President Assad's chemical weapons. This piece is an analysis of that event.

What Do the US, UK and French Airstrikes Mean for Syria's War?

Source: Nick Paton Walsh, CNN.com, April 15, 2018

It was over in 70 minutes, and changed nothing, but perhaps also everything.

Where is Syria's war now, after Friday's US, UK and French airstrikes, launched in response to a suspected chemical attack on the town of Douma?

Syria's war continues unabated, on the same course.

US President Donald Trump was clear, even as the missiles were launching, that this strike was purely about chemical weapons. Trump did not seek to change the course of the war (neither did his predecessor, really), and he has not. However ghastly and inhumane the current phase of the war, it is all about consolidation -- by the regime, and by Syrian-Kurdish and Turkish-backed rebels -- over various parts of the country.

Unless Syrian President Bashar al-Assad chooses to try and take more territory, the spate of killing could slow in the months ahead. Any serious intervention by the US and its allies now would only serve to intensify the war, and potentially prolong the rebellion for years. That may deliver a sense of justice to those for whom the rebels fight, but it would leave many more dead and displaced. The West doesn't want to own the war, so -- airstrikes notwithstanding -- it may prefer to stay out of it for now.

Moscow and Tehran are probably a little irritated at Damascus.

Given all of that, the last week has shone an enormous spotlight on the brutality of the Assad regime and the role Russia and Iran have played in that -- just when they were winning in Ghouta and the international community did not show any signs of responding. Months of unbearable slaughter from conventional weapons had played out on social media and some cable TV, resulting in no Western intervention at all.

But the images from the alleged chemical weapons attack in Douma, just after the international solidarity shown with Britain over the Skripal case, catapulted the three Western powers into action. Strip away the moral imperatives here: On a purely tactical level, the use of chemical weapons to kill and force out hundreds of holdout civilians in Douma seems to have made no sense. As for Russia, which has been the international guarantor of Syria's commitment to destroy its chemical weapons, it simply didn't need the headache of the past week.

The new 'red line' on chemical weapons is fuzzy.

This may be intentional. The US, UK and France have all claimed that chemical weapons were used in Douma and that Assad's regime was to blame. Nikki Haley, the US ambassador to the United Nations, appeared to speak for all of them at the Security Council when she said all three had "analyzed" the evidence -- but did not say what they had analyzed.

Had they studied the footage of victims that showed symptoms consistent, some say, with nerve agents? Or did they have samples from the field? French President Emmanuel Macron said that "at least" chlorine was used, and US officials have briefed they think sarin was in the chemical mix. But the methodology around the testing of samples is unclear.

So, did the West strike because of the horror of the attack, or because the use of chlorine with such horrifying effects is now a new red line? Or did the US and its allies privately have proof of the use of sarin, the substance determined to have been involved in attacks in 2013 and 2017, to great international outcry? The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, whose inspectors have traveled to Douma, may get a clearer picture.

But for now, the West's new red line may possibly cover the use of chlorine, used often in the war, and sometimes allegedly by the regime's enemies, like ISIS. This puts the regime on notice on the use of all gas, but potentially opens up scope for greater complications down the line.

The US showed militarily that it can do what it likes in Syria.

Strip away the bravado and the claims that 70 per cent of incoming missiles were destroyed: Even after a week's notice, the US still took out exactly what it said it wanted to, when it wanted to. The Russians were warned diplomatically they were not the target before. And on the night they were told via deconfliction channels not to get in the way.

But in short, the Russians were either unable to (or chose not to) get in the way. For all the talk of a resurgent Russian military, both in this and in the recent clash with US forces in February when dozens of Russian mercenaries advanced on a US position and were swiftly killed, the US has twice recently dominated on this battlefield.

That sends an important message to Moscow, who have for years discounted the US as a paper tiger. But it also risks Russia at some point trying to reassert itself, and that could escalate.

Assad is free to continue massacring who he sees fit with conventional weapons.

But the previously accepted wisdom that no horror ever in Syria would be enough to spur Western intervention has been challenged. April 2017's missile attack could have been dismissed as an outlier, in which a new US President was spurred on, reportedly by his daughter's pleas, and disgust at images of dead children.

Now we have concerted and sustained action from three Western powers who have before been content to let Syria unfold with mere rhetorical fury and some aid money as their foil. At the very least, a message has been sent that chemical weapons are not the new norm, and in a war (and sometimes it seems a world) of endless and bottomless horror, many would say that's a red line worth drawing.

Possible Response Questions:

- Share your thoughts on the missile launch against Syria.
- Pick a passage from the article and respond to it.
- What is not said in the article? What else would you like to know?
- Discuss a "move" made by the writer in this piece that you think is good/interesting. Explain.