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NEWS

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Op-ed: What's Next in Syria

Human rights expert Mark Ensalaco says any strategy in Syria should include American diplomatic and humanitarian might, too.

Mark Ensalaco is the director of research in the University of Dayton Human Rights Center. He has studied political violence, terrorism and human rights for more than 25 years. He is the author of Middle Eastern Terrorism: From Black September to September 11. The views expressed in any University of Dayton faculty op-ed do not reflect the views of University of Dayton.

What's Next?: Trump's Strategy in Syria Needs to Include American Diplomatic and Humanitarian Might, Too

The Trump administration's decision to retaliate for the Bashar al-Assad regime's chemical weapon attack on civilians may represent the strong leadership Trump promised on the campaign trail and probably gives him a political boost. It probably diverts attention from alleged Russian interference in the presidential election. And it runs counter to Putin's support for the al-Assad regime and thus distances Trump from Putin.

But a cruise missile attack on one airfield does not a policy make.

In addition to showing U.S. military might, any Trump administration policy or strategy needs to show American diplomatic and humanitarian might to address Assad, Russian involvement in the conflict and the continued humanitarian crisis in Syria.

First, the diplomatic front, addressing Assad and Russia. President Trump's statements about Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian involvement in the Syrian conflict, both as candidate and as president, have been dangerously naïve. Trump is loath to criticize Putin and has stated he would welcome Russian cooperation in defeating the Islamic State. The president fails to see Russian intervention in Syria has made the situation worse. In December, the Syrian army, with support of the Russians, captured Aleppo, causing a mass exodus and humanitarian crisis. Russian warplanes have attacked civilian targets, including hospitals. Putin has not seen through his pledge to compel Syria to destroy its chemical weapons or appear interested in dissuading Assad from using them against civilians. U.S. Secretary of State Rex

Tillerson must raise the issue of Russian complicity in war crimes in his upcoming meetings in Moscow and President Trump must publicly call out Putin.

On the humanitarian front, the Trump administration's positions on Syrian refugees and humanitarian assistance are deeply flawed, both strategically and morally. In the first days of his administration, the president issued an executive order indefinitely suspending entry of Syrian refugees into the United States. These people are fleeing the very atrocities that outraged the president yesterday. Candidate Trump likened the flow of Syrian refugees to a “Trojan horse.” Yes, a few ISIS fighters have managed to sneak into Europe hidden among millions of Syrian refugees. But Syrians who manage to gain asylum in the United States undergo a lengthy and comprehensive vetting process. Syrian refugees do not pose a danger, they are fleeing it. In ordering the attack, president Trump intended to punish Assad and deter him from conducting future attacks against innocent Syrian civilians. There is a technical terms for this — humanitarian intervention. President Trump must show the same humanitarian concern for victims of Assad’s inhumanity, by offering them refuge.

In addition to the ban on Syrian refugees, the president has proposed deep budget cuts to the State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development and other agencies that provide humanitarian relief. These are the agencies that exert American “soft power” critical to American influence. Presumably the proposed cuts are meant to fulfill the president’s campaign promise to put America first. But the Trump administration is terribly mistaken if it believes the U.S. can “win” in Syria by exercising American military power alone. In proposing these cuts without regard for their impacts, the administration is signaling its intention to abdicate the United States’ global leadership in providing humanitarian assistance. The United States has spent hundreds of billions of dollars to conduct military operations in Syria in the nearly three years since President Obama authorized U.S. military intervention. As I have argued before, the U.S. should devote comparable humanitarian resources to provide relief to the millions of Syrians caught between the cruelty of the Assad regime and depravity of ISIS.

President Trump campaigned to Make America Great Again. His next step toward his goal should be a clear, firm, unwavering diplomatic and humanitarian strategy to support any military operation in Syria.

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