

# Trump and a New Cold War in the Middle East

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**Trump Administration statements after the missile strike on Syria indicated a broad change in policy regarding the future of the Assad regime in Syria. Whether this is followed by other military, economic, or political actions remains to be seen. But, we have entered a new era in the Syrian civil war, which signals a subtle but important change in the new Cold War in the Middle East.**

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The Trump administration's change of course on Syria, highlighted by a fifty-nine Tomahawk cruise missile strike on a military airfield, raises the question of what happens next in the long-running Syrian civil war. The missile strike, taken in response to the Assad regime's most recent use of chemical weapons on its civilian population, was limited in scope and impact on the course of the multi-sided war in Syria. The strike was justified by the Trump administration as a limited and proportional attack designed to deter the future use and spread of chemical weapons. However, statements after the strike indicated a broader change of policy by the Trump administration as regards the future of the Assad regime in Syria. Whether this rhetorical change is followed by other military, economic, or political actions remains to be seen. Similarly, key state actors involved in the Syrian civil war have weighed in condemning the strike, but what they do in the longer term is up in the air. A quick review of the players, their goals, and their likely actions after the U.S. attack are as follows.

The Assad regime chose to again use sarin nerve gas after several years because it believed that it would not pay a price and because it felt that it would advance its fight against the rebels. The U.S. attack, while a minor setback for the regime in terms of damage to its limited air assets, will not change the Assad government's pursuit of its war aims. For the Assad regime, the war is one of personal and regime survival. The regime likely believes that its political and military relationship with Russia will keep the Trump administration from escalating beyond very limited strikes. The Syrian government indicated that it has both the will and ability to continue the fight after the strikes – launching conventional air operations from the airbase that was struck within forty-eight hours of the attack. It is highly unlikely that the Assad regime will attempt any direct attack against U.S. aircraft or troops on the ground in Syria.

Similarly, the Syrian government's ally, Iran (and its proxy force, Hezbollah) is unlikely to directly attack U.S. forces in the region. Iran wishes the Assad regime to stay in power, and it does not see the U.S. strike as changing the fundamental balance in the Syrian civil war. Tehran may bluster and threaten, but it is unlikely to cause problems. At the moment Assad appears to have achieved a stalemate or is making headway against the rebels. The U.S. is doing part of Iran's work in both Syria and Iraq by attacking Sunni-radical groups such as ISIS and Al Qaeda affiliates – groups that consider Iran as evil as the apostate West. This does not mean that there could not be mistakes, miscalculations, or a clash with an Iranian proxy force in Syria. However, despite condemning the U.S. attack and warning about its own "red lines," it is not clear that Iran needs to change anything about its approach to the Syrian civil war.

Russia is in a similar situation – not having its preferred outcome changed much by either the U.S. attack or the apparent change in position by the Trump administration. Russia can still back up the Assad regime militarily, and it could easily escalate its support for Syria without much risk of the U.S. being able to respond as quickly or effectively without a direct confrontation with Moscow. The one significant increase in risk after the attack, however, is Moscow's dropping of the deconfliction channel between the two militaries operating in the region. With both Russia and the U.S. flying combat missions in close proximity to one another and with Russia operating sophisticated surface-to-air missiles in Syria, the chances for an inadvertent clash that could escalate are now significantly greater.