

Trump Weighs More Robust Military Strike Against Syria



President Trump receiving a briefing on Monday from military leaders at the White House after a suspected chemical weapons attack that killed dozens of Syrians. Credit Tom Brenner/The New York Times

WASHINGTON — President Trump and his advisers on Tuesday weighed a more robust retaliatory strike against Syria than last year's missile attack, reasoning that only an escalation of force would look credible and possibly serve as a deterrent against further use of chemical weapons on Syrian civilians.

A pair of Navy warships in the eastern Mediterranean Sea were capable of launching the same sort of missile barrage that Mr. Trump ordered against a Syrian air base a year ago in response to a chemical attack then that killed more than 80 civilians.

But White House and national security officials worried that an operation of the same scale, as punishment for another suspected and deadly attack that killed

dozens over the weekend, would not be effective at curbing the Syrian military's war effort.

Administration officials said they expected any new strike to be more expansive than last year's, but the question was how much more. Possible options included hitting more than a single target and extending strikes beyond a single day.

But even so, Mr. Trump remained reluctant to deepen American involvement over a longer term.

Mr. Trump and his team enlisted support for action against the government of President Bashar al-Assad. American officials expressed confidence that they would have the backing of France, which has been vocal about the need for a strong response, as well as Britain, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, all of which called for Syria to be held accountable for the suspected chemical attack. It remained unclear, however, whether any of the allies would participate.

Mr. Trump canceled a trip to Peru and Colombia that was scheduled to start Friday to oversee the response to the Syria attack, but as of early evening, had made no comment about Syria on Twitter or in his public appearances on Tuesday. Instead, he left it to a guest, the visiting emir of Qatar, to express determination to stop atrocities in Syria.

"We see the suffering of the Syrian people," Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani said with Mr. Trump in the Oval Office. "And me and the president, we see eye to eye that this matter has to stop immediately. We cannot tolerate with a war criminal, we cannot tolerate with someone who killed more than half a million of his own people."

Mr. Trump spent part of the day huddled with John F. Kelly, his chief of staff, John R. Bolton, his new national security adviser, and other officials. But his spokeswoman declined to discuss the deliberations.

"As we've said, all options are on the table," said Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the White House press secretary, "but I'm not going to get ahead of anything the president may or may not do in response to what's taken place in Syria."

Heavily backed by Russian air support and Iranian ground forces, Syria is in a different league than adversaries in other places where the United States is at

war. Unlike the Islamic State in various parts of the Middle East, the Taliban in Afghanistan or the Shabab in Somalia, the Syrian government has extensive air defense and missile systems capable of shooting down foreign planes.

Sending bombers and fighter jets, with American or French pilots, to strike Syrian airfields or other facilities is considered risky because it could deepen the conflict if a pilot was shot down. That is why the Pentagon is looking at the same sort of retaliation used last year when two Navy destroyers unleashed a fusillade of 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles at Al Shayrat airfield that was believed to have been used to launch chemical attacks.

But less than 24 hours after that strike, Syrian warplanes were again taking off from the damaged airfield, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a monitoring group. Beyond Al Shayrat base, Syria still had numerous others from which it could launch flights. While Mr. Trump's advisers argued last year that the strike affected Mr. Assad's calculations, in the end its limited nature ultimately did not thwart the Syrian government's ability to launch chemical attacks.

"There's a tension between the desire to do something bigger than last time and the president's clear desire not to stay engaged in sustained operations," said Michèle A. Flournoy, an under secretary of defense under President Barack Obama. "Conceivably, they could design a larger one-off strike or a series of smaller strikes."

"But at the end of the day, it's sustained pressure on Assad that's going to change his calculation about whether to use chemical weapons," Ms. Flournoy said.

David F. Gordon, policy planning director at the State Department under President George W. Bush, said Mr. Trump was almost certainly looking to punish Mr. Assad more severely while limiting American engagement.

"What they're probably searching for is: What can we destroy that weakens this guy?" Mr. Gordon said. "He has to do more than he did last time, and I think he does want to disrupt their capabilities. But I think it's basically still the one shot — it may be in two waves or something, but I don't think there's an ongoing response to this."

Already, there were indications that Mr. Assad was moving key aircraft to a

Russian base near Latakia, a port city on the Mediterranean Sea, and taking pains to secure important weapons systems.

The Pentagon does not have an aircraft carrier in the area at the moment, which focuses attention on the U.S.S. Donald Cook or the U.S.S. Porter, two Navy destroyers already in the Mediterranean. The Donald Cook departed Larnaca, Cyprus, on Monday after completing a scheduled port visit, Navy officials said.

The Donald Cook is one of four Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyers that generally serve Europe and are part of a NATO rotation, officials said. The United States can use the Donald Cook or the Porter to launch multiple Tomahawk cruise missiles at sites in Syria similar to last year's operation.

Since last year's strikes, the United States Central Command has been updating lists of possible military and government targets in Syria, including aircraft hangars, ammunition depots and command headquarters. Defense officials said one possibility was to render certain Syrian airfields incapable of being used in the future to launch chemical attacks.

Last year's strike destroyed a number of aircraft and their hangars, the Pentagon said at the time, but did not hinder the base's ability to launch aircraft for long. The American missiles used in the attack, BGM-109 Tomahawks, have a range of around 1,000 miles and carry a warhead that weighs half a ton.

The Donald Cook and the Porter are likely loaded with roughly two dozen Tomahawk cruise missiles each. The U.S.S. New York, an amphibious landing ship and part of the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit, is also nearby. The New York can launch transport helicopters and landing craft loaded with Marines, but sending in ground forces is highly unlikely, officials said.

In coming days, the U.S.S. Harry S. Truman, a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, is scheduled to head to the region. While part of a regularly scheduled deployment, the Truman will deploy to the Mediterranean with a complement of strike and reconnaissance aircraft and surface warships sailing alongside.

Whether allied forces would participate remained unclear. President Emmanuel Macron of France said Tuesday that the allies were still discussing a plan and would announce a decision "in the coming days."

“We do not wish for any escalation in the region,” said Mr. Macron, who was hosting Mohammed bin Salman, the crown prince of Saudi Arabia. “But we simply wish that international law, and in particular international humanitarian law, be respected.”

Adel al-Jubeir, the Saudi foreign minister, said that those behind the reported chemical attack in Syria must be “held accountable,” although he did not say whether Saudi Arabia would join any response. “We are discussing with our allies the steps to respond,” Mr. Jubeir told reporters in Paris.

Prime Minister Theresa May of Britain, who spoke by telephone with Mr. Trump on Tuesday, also stressed the responsibility of Mr. Assad’s government for the attack “if confirmed.” In a statement summarizing the leaders’ call, the British government said, “They agreed that the international community needed to respond to uphold the worldwide prohibition on the use of chemical weapons.”

In Washington, most lawmakers remained either supportive of military action or noncommittal, but some liberal Democrats objected. Leaders of the Congressional Progressive Caucus issued a statement calling on the administration to “redouble its efforts to engage our allies and enforce international prohibitions on chemical weapons diplomatically” rather than use force again.

Senator Tim Kaine, Democrat of Virginia, said Mr. Trump needed permission from Congress before action.

“He’s a president, not a king, and Congress needs to quit giving him a blank check to wage war against anyone, anywhere,” Mr. Kaine said. “If he strikes Syria without our approval, what will stop him from bombing North Korea or Iran?”

Aurelien Breeden and Eric Schmitt contributed reporting from Paris, and Ben Hubbard from Beirut.

Follow Peter Baker, Helene Cooper and Thomas Gibbons-Neff on Twitter: @peterbakernyt@helenecooper and @tmgnEFF

Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/10/us/politics/trump-military-strike-syria.html>

[Disclaimer]