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Syria Bombing Reveals Weakness of Theresa May



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Political leaders in power generally like small wars. It enables them to stand tall, wrap the flag around them, pretend they hold the fate of the nation in their hands, and denigrate their opponents as unpatriotic softies.

Theresa May is behaving in keeping with this stereotype since ordering four British planes to join the very limited air attack on three Syrian facilities on Saturday morning. Her performances are low-key but resolute, occasionally aping Elizabeth I at Tilbury defying

the Spanish Armada, but more usually recalling a stern-faced Judi Dench as M, sending 007 on some dangerous but necessary mission to thwart the plots of the enemy. The trick is to appear weighed down by a terrible sense of responsibility, but not afraid to take decisive action in defence of our nation.

The media likewise enjoys a short sharp [military](#) conflict. It is good for business because people have a stronger imperative than normal to find out what is happening in the world. The first newspapers were born out of the wars at the end of the 16th and beginning of 17th centuries. Military conflict is exciting and provides plenty of melodrama that can be reported as a simple conflict between good and evil.

On this occasion, the minimalist nature of the [strikes](#) left news anchors and their caste of reporters all dressed up but with nowhere to go. Their sense of disappointment and anticlimax at not reporting a real war was ill-concealed. Suddenly, there were too many actors on stage without enough lines to speak, though each, from [Washington](#) to [Moscow](#) to [Beirut](#) (few seem to have made it to Damascus, presumably because of an absence of visas), had to have their say even when they had nothing of interest to report. Coverage was consequently tedious and unrevealing since even those correspondents with something original and interesting to say did not have the time to say it.

But the air strikes on Saturday morning should not be dismissed simply as a glorified PR stunt. They have a very real significance, though one that is diametrically the opposite to that claimed by [Donald Trump](#), Theresa May and [Emmanuel Macron](#). What we saw was not a demonstration of strength by the US, UK and France but a demonstration of weakness.

The evidence for this, reflecting the real balance of power in Syria, is the list of targets that were not attacked rather than the three that were. Tremendous efforts were made not to kill or injure any Russians, as the dominant political and military force in Syria. The Iranians and [Hezbollah](#) of Lebanon were evidently out of bounds. So too was the Syrian army, including its elite divisions, heavy equipment and ammunition dumps. Unlike Baghdad in 1991, 1998 and 2003, there were no cruise missiles striking empty but iconic sites like the presidential palace or defence ministry buildings in Damascus.

Theresa May and Boris Johnson argue that the air strikes were simply “humanitarian” in intent and to prevent the “normalisation” of the use of poison gas. Johnson speaks as if Assad were the first to use gas since the First World War, ignoring the tens of thousands

of Iranians and Kurds gassed in the [Iran](#)-Iraq war by [Saddam Hussein](#), who was supported by the US, UK and France.

Suppose that the threat of renewed air strikes does deter [Assad](#): this is not necessarily great news for the Syrian people because less than 1 per cent – some 1,900 people out of the half a million Syrians who have died violently in the wars since 2011 – have died by gas. If foreign leaders showed any real concern over seven years of butchery in Syria, they would have made greater efforts in the past to bring this horrendous war to an end.

The restrained nature of the air strikes was sensible and realistic, reflecting the real balance of power in Syria. Assad is backed by [Russia](#), Iran, Hezbollah and [Shia](#) forces from Iraq and has largely won the civil war. This is not going to change without an open-ended campaign of mass bombing in support of rebel ground troops like that which [Nato](#) conducted in Libya in 2011.

A similar campaign could not be conducted against Assad because, unlike Isis, he has powerful foreign allies in the shape of Russia and Iran. As the US discovered to its cost, the only determined and experienced anti-Assad fighters available, aside from the Kurds, belong to Isis and [al-Qaeda](#). Remember how, in 2016, an embarrassed Pentagon admitted spending \$500m to produce just five trained moderate pro-US fighters, rather than the 5,000 it had expected?

The point is that even far more extensive air strikes would not have changed the outcome of the Syrian war, though they would certainly have escalated it and killed a lot more people. There is a myth, lately adopted by President Trump, that [President Obama](#) lost a real opportunity to weaken or get rid of Assad in 2013, but the factors that restrained Obama then apply today with equal force to Trump: it is not possible to get rid of Assad without a wider war and, even if he went, the outcome would be a collapse of the state, as in Afghanistan, Libya and Iraq, producing chaos in which Isis and al-Qaeda will flourish.