

Alan Grayson: ‘They have no smoking gun that the attack was ordered by Assad’

By Ezra Klein, Updated: September 7, 2013

Alan Grayson is a Democratic congressman from Florida and a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. He’s also one of the House’s most vocal skeptics of striking Syria. We spoke on Friday. A transcript of our conversation, edited for length and clarity, follows:

Ezra Klein: Let’s begin at the beginning. Give me your broad thoughts on intervening in Syria.

Alan Grayson: The great uncovered story at this point is there’s no practical way for military action to significantly deter the use of chemical weapons. What I’m hearing from other members is that the efficacy isn’t there. There’s no connection between what’s being proposed militarily and what’s happened. This is weighing heavily on internal discussions among members. For people who have to vote on this, it’s another mismatch between means and end.

The ideal attack would be some kind of magical-wand attack where you eliminate the chemical warfare capability. But there is this practical fact that if you blow up a chemical weapon, you spread poison gas in the immediate vicinity. It’s even worse than an attack on a nuclear facility: Then there’s some risk radioactivity will spread. If you attack a chemical stockpile, it’s guaranteed it will spread.

EK: But the Pentagon knows that, right? My understanding of the target plan is that it focuses on military infrastructure: Things like rocket launchers and runways and aircraft. In theory, the idea is this is the infrastructure that delivers chemical weapons, but in practice, it’s punishing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad by degrading his general military capabilities.

AG: Well, first you can see that’s not ideal. Talk to people in the public about this and say we’re not going to do anything to prevent a future chemical attack but do this other thing; you’ve lost them. But there are other problems:

One problem with that scenario is he has more-than-adequate resources. He completely controls Syrian airspace. He has enormous staggering stockpiles of ammunition collected over 41 years. He and Saddam Hussein were in some kind of competition to see who could roll up the biggest supply of munitions. Enormous resources there have been devoted for decades to

getting the latest weaponry from the Russian. It's actually a significant source of foreign exchange for the Russians at this point! So, there's so much there that the idea that you can eliminate it with a few missiles and bombs is not right.

Then you run into the second problem, which is that the Russians will replace the weapons immediately. They've said it on the record. They've suggested they might even replace it with better stuff.

Third, the administration won't do anything that will degrade Assad's capability to the point where he'd be unable to withstand the attacks from al-Nusra, the radical fundamentalist group composed of al-Qaeda graduates. [President] Obama and [Secretary of State John F.] Kerry have specifically said in public that the purpose is not regime change. They're not going to hit Assad so hard it would change the result of the war. Despite the fact they were backed into a corner by [Sen. John] McCain [R-Ariz.] to change the language of the resolution, it has not in any way altered the military plans. So, a) Assad has so much stuff, b) the Russians will replace it, and c) we don't want to weaken him too much. Sometimes there is no solution to the equation.

EK: It seems to me that “c” is the biggest problem there. The kind of calibration required to hit Assad hard enough that he won't use chemical weapons again and maybe will come to the negotiating table, but not so hard that he's actually weakened in his civil war, seems to suggest you can use military force, which is a very blunt object, in a very precise way.

AG: It's beyond calibration. It's more like [titration](#). You can't do that in warfare. It doesn't work that way. The one thing you can be sure of in warfare is you can't be sure of anything. This is reminiscent of President [Lyndon B.] Johnson picking out individual bombing targets in the war in Vietnam.

Also there's a substantial amount of hubris here. They think they know where the targets are, they think they know how to hit it with enough force but not too much force, they think they know how the Russian and the Iranians will react. We cannot determine all this. On some level, we're assuming the reaction from Russia and Iraq and Syria will be zero: We'll carry out this attacks, and there'll be no response.

This is a bit of a sensitive subject, but the administration has been honest that they have no smoking gun that the attack was ordered by Assad. The evidence of his involvement is circumstantial. We're two years into a civil war that he's winning. The Russians and Iranians have told him not to use chemical weapons. Hezbollah has told him not to use chemical weapons because their fighters are at risk. So he's winning, there's scant and circumstantial evidence that he ordered the attack. Why are we gaming out his incentives when we don't know he ordered it?

EK: So you're saying that you don't question the idea that a chemical weapons attack happened, just the idea that Assad himself gave the order.

AG: The administration has said there's no direct evidence, only circumstantial evidence. I

know what that circumstantial evidence is, and I'm not impressed. The whole discourse is, 'how do we change his incentives?' But they may not be relevant here. If there were direct evidence that Assad ordered it, it would be quite meaningful to say Assad ordered it and how do we change his incentives in the future. But if we assume he's a rational, calculating person, why would he have ordered the attack in the first place?

EK: An argument that your colleague [Rep.] Brad Sherman [D-Calif.] made to me is that this is about changing the incentives for future dictators, too. The idea is that a tyrant looking back in 2030 would see what happened in Syria and choose not to use chemical weapons. If that's the aim, then on some level, does it even matter whether Assad or rogue elements of his regime did it? The lesson would be the same.

AG: That's ridiculous. I'm not questioning Brad specifically, but that's ridiculous. The last dictator that did something like this was deposed by an invasion of his country that lasted 10 years. He literally lives in a hole in the ground for months on end. He's taken out of the hole, captured, and hung. After all that effort, we're worried about whether we've done enough to deter chemical weapons? Give me a break. In comparison to that effort, how does anyone think this has any significance whatsoever?

EK: I'm not sure I buy that. Whatever the war in Iraq was about, it wasn't a direct punishment for Hussein's past use of chemical weapons.

AG: If there's any lesson from the war in Iraq that's relevant from a dictator's perspective it's that if the American government thinks, even wrongly, that you might deploy WMDs, you're subject to invasion.

EK: Then there's this argument that I've come to think of as the "meta-case" for bombing Syria, which is that, for better or worse, the president drew a "red line," and now that that's done, America's potency on the world stage will be greatly harmed if we permit the red line to be clearly crossed without serious reprisal.

AG: That's ridiculous: Every country in the world understands that upon the president's command, we could turn it into a field of molten glass. There is simply no need for that kind of analysis. And by the way, if that kind of analysis was a real thing, we wouldn't talk about red lines or purple lines or green lines. That's vague. You'd say if you do X, we will do Y. The president didn't say that, and that unfortunately has led us into another ambiguous situation.

EK: Are there other things we should be doing in Syria? Or is this simply a conflict we should be staying out of entirely?

AG: I would vote for humanitarian aid for refugees, within reason. We're already providing that aid on the basis of a budget I voted for by voting for the CR [continuing resolution]. Nobody is saying we should do nothing. But the reason why the administration won't go to the U.N. is because they'd lose the vote. Even [President George W.] Bush took a stab at getting U.N. authorization for the war in Iraq. The president isn't doing the same even as he claims to be acting on behalf of the international community. Syria hasn't violated international law, and it can't be in violation of a convention it hasn't signed.

EK: Do you think the White House can win the vote in the House?

AG: No. The count is 40 in favor and 220 against. That understates it. I've spoken to people publicly saying they're undecided. They're not undecided. They're saying they're going to talk to their constituents, and we know how that's going to go. Constituent mail is running 100-1 against. So this is just ritual. Once they speak to their constituents and get an earful, they'll vote against it as well. The White House will be lucky to even make it close.

EK: The White House's argument is that those whip counts don't tell you much, that no one is a "no" until they actually vote that way. So do you think any of the briefings the White House is doing, or the possible prime-time speech, might change the numbers dramatically?

AG: When has the White House ever — ever — been able to turn around a vote? It hasn't happened in the entire Obama administration; much less happened when the constituent mail is running 100-1 against. When nobody is paying attention, anything is possible. The president can offer you favors or employ moral suasion or enlist lobbies. But the public is watching and is extremely angry about the president's position. In that kind of environment, the president doesn't even have the tools.

Related:

- [Sen. Chris Coons on the U.S.'s three missions in Syria.](#)
- [This is why there is no enthusiasm for intervening in Syria.](#)
- [10 things that could go very wrong if we attack Syria.](#)
- [Rep. Brad Sherman explains how the White House could win the Syria vote.](#)