

# Responding to the Douma attack

## Key questions and considerations

13 April 2018

This month Douma in eastern Ghouta, north west of Damascus, was targeted by the Syrian Government and its auxiliaries. Over the weekend a bomb containing what appears to have been chlorine and a nerve agent was dropped on a tower block. Over 70 men, women and children died and 500 were injured. Douma is now under the control of the Syrian regime.

Her Majesty's Government has said that the attack will not go unchallenged and have committed to working with US and French allies over the coming days on an appropriate response.

The urge to act is understandable. So too is the instinct to be cautious. While there may be no easy answers, there are numerous ways forward that could support the Syrian people. This briefing sets out some of those options.

*Protection Approaches works to assist the UK in better predicting and enhancing its contribution to the prevention of mass atrocities. To discuss this briefing or the issues further please contact Dr Kate Ferguson, Director of Research & Policy on [kate.Ferguson@protectionapproaches.org](mailto:kate.Ferguson@protectionapproaches.org) or on 07715475357.*

## On the question of airstrikes:

Russia's military and political support of the Assad Regime has compromised the UN Security Council's ability to uphold its responsibilities towards Syria and its people. The abuse of Russia's veto has severely restricted the capacity of the UN and the UN Security Council to seek solutions in Syria and to protect civilians.

The actions of Syria and Russia lessen neither the UK's responsibilities towards the Syrian people, nor the responsibilities of the wider international community. However, unilateral action carries the risk of undermining both the spirit and due process of the United Nations.

If the UK undertakes military action in Syria it is essential that the Government commits to the principle that with deeper engagement comes greater responsibility: this means all decisions are made with the primary intention of enhancing protection and preventing future atrocities, as part of a wider, consistent, and transparent strategy, and with the support of Syrians and from the wider international community. Airstrikes alone will never be sufficient to either bring an end to the crisis nor fulfil the UK's responsibilities towards the Syrian people.

## Key questions:

- Will air strikes save lives?
- Will air strikes reduce the future use of chemical weapons?
- Will air strikes contribute to an end of the conflict or prolong it?
- Will air strikes undermine the legitimacy of the rules-based system?
- What is the broader strategy to prevent further atrocities in Syria?
- How else will the UK increase its solidarity for the Syrian people?

## Key principles:

- Parliament be consulted on any UK military action
- Syrian groups in the UK and in the region be consulted
- Efforts are made to secure support from the wider international community
- Any UK military action is part of a wider, consistent and transparent strategy to enhance British contributions to the prevention of and protection from future atrocities in Syria

## Renewing British leadership towards Syria:

Using chemical weapons violates international law and should indeed be seen as breaching a red line but it is important to remember that the Assad Government and its auxiliaries commit violations of International Humanitarian Law on an almost daily basis. The regular use of barrel bombs in civilian areas, including schools and hospitals, forms only part of a deliberate strategy of collective punishment against civilians seen to support the rebels.

Whether or not the UK pursues deeper military engagement in Syria, the chemical attack in Douma must be met by a renewed commitment from all to pursue solutions that will protect people from atrocities and end the conflict.

### Key facts:

- The Syrian state and its auxiliaries have been targeting civilians systematically for seven years; they are responsible for over 90% of civilian deaths in Syria since 2011
- Over half a million people have lost their lives
- Over half of the population is displaced
- It is not a war where civilian deaths are collateral damage but it is a war being waged by a state against its civilians

### Key questions:

- How will the UK use its global leadership to renew efforts to find a political solution to the crisis?
- How will the UK more clearly demonstrate its support and solidarity for Syrians?
- Will the UK give sanctuary to more refugees fleeing atrocities in Syria?
- Will the UK send its teams to the Russian World Cup this summer?

## The need for a UK atrocity prevention strategy:

Mass atrocity crimes diminish us all when ever and where ever they occur. In addition to the appalling human costs, mass atrocities pose one of the greatest threats to global stability, increase the risk of terrorism, and leave a lasting economic footprint; the majority of the world's refugees are fleeing atrocity situations. But these crimes are frequently predicted and can often be prevented.

National mechanisms of mass atrocity prediction and prevention have been integrated by states in Europe, South America, Africa, and perhaps most comprehensively by the US. However, the UK has yet to adopt an atrocity prevention strategy. As a result, at moments like these, the UK finds itself on the back-foot.

A UK national unit, office, or strategy would enhance Government capacity for early prediction and timely response to early warnings, with an emphasis on early and effective non-violent interventions that help address root causes, disrupt harmful processes, and mitigate escalation. Any such mechanism would be tasked with sharing information, assessing risks, communicating with relevant networks, and providing Government and Parliament with policy options.

### Long term recommendations:

- Integrate mass atrocity prevention into existing policy commitments and decision-making processes, on the party level and across Government
- Create a joint FCO-DfID atrocity prevention analysis unit
- Elevate the role of R2P focal point to Ministerial status

**The prevention of atrocities and the protection of the world's most vulnerable are matters of conscience, not partisanship.**