

World Public Opinion Sharply Opposed To Syria Strikes

As the Obama administration seeks allies for its as-yet lonely campaign to inflict punitive missile strikes on Syria, those plans are confronting substantial distrust and resistance from citizens around the globe.

A joint report drawn from The Huffington Post's seven international editions finds striking public opposition to military intervention in Syria, with polls showing weak support for a strike in much of Europe as well as in the United States and Canada.

In the United States, only 25 percent of those surveyed in late August in a [HuffPost/YouGov poll](#) expressed support for a military strike in reaction to the lethal chemical weapons attack blamed widely on the regime of Syrian president Bashar Assad.

A poll conducted by the [Pew Research Center](#) and wrapped up Sept. 1 -- almost two weeks after the chemical weapons attack -- found only 29 percent in favor of a strike.

In France, where President Francois Hollande has pledged to join the United States in taking on Syria, public support for military intervention has been running at 45 percent, according to a recent CSA survey for Atlantico. Another poll conducted by Ifop for the newspaper Le Figaro found 55 percent in favor of intervention, yet only 41 percent approved of France joining in a military response.

In Britain, where polls have long shown consistent opposition to any form of intervention in Syria, neither allegations of chemical weapons use by the Assad regime nor the push for action from leaders in London and Washington has altered the opinion of a war-weary public.

A ComRes poll for the Independent newspaper published on Monday found that only 29 percent of people believe Britain should join the United States in launching air strikes against Syria to deter Assad from using chemical weapons, while 57 percent are outright opposed. Four out of five people assert that any military action against Syria requires the approval of the United Nations.

ComRes chairman Andrew Hawkins told The Huffington Post UK that he doesn't believe a forthcoming report from the United Nations weapons inspectors will "move the dials, and neither would further chemical crimes by Assad -- at least on the scale seen so far."

In Germany, public opinion has been running 58 percent against striking Syria, according to public television. And in Italy a recent poll by the IPR Institute found that 52 percent of the public opposed an attack on Syria even absent Italian involvement. About 57 percent of Italians opposed allowing Italian military bases to be used in assisting foreign strikes engaged in strikes.

No polls have been conducted to gauge Canadian opinion on military intervention, but fatigue from involvement in Afghanistan and a few anti-Syrian-intervention protests suggest Canadians are not eager to jump in. Canada has [signaled](#) that it will not offer military support for a potential U.S.-led strike on Syria, while lending voice to calls for action. Signs of public opposition from around the globe resonate as a rebuke to the Obama administration as it presses to unleash weapons on Syria in response to a chemical weapons attack there blamed for the deaths of some 1,400 people.

Public resistance reflects a marked predilection against military intervention following disastrous wars involving foreign forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. This sentiment appears to run especially deep in France, which played a leading role in interventions in Libya and Mali over the past two years.

“In Mali, France went in alone, and in Libya, it was the spearhead,” Jerome Fourquet, who heads the Opinion department at Ifop, told [Le Huffington Post](#). “Public opinion considers it not the job of the French to be the world’s policeman.”

Public opposition also speaks to a palpable distrust of the intelligence touted in Washington as justification for firing on Syria. Memories of the run-up to the Iraq war and bogus claims that then-Iraqi president Saddam Hussein harbored weapons of mass destruction have carried over to the conflict at hand.

Among the British public, the ComRes poll found that 62 percent of voters felt the “experience of the Iraq war means that Britain should keep out of any military conflicts in the Middle East for the foreseeable future.”

Another poll conducted by Survation for the Mail on Sunday newspaper found that 81 percent of people opposed to military action cited Iraq as an influence. Around 40 percent said that calls for air strikes in Syria by former Prime Minister Tony Blair -- a leading architect of the Iraq war -- had weakened, rather than strengthened the British government’s case.

Much of the public opposition to Syria strikes reflects the fact that the conflict there is viewed as a confined event -- a humanitarian disaster, yes, and a potentially dangerous regional crisis, but not a direct threat to people living in the countries being asked to marshal a military response.

Governments in Washington, London, France and Ottawa have portrayed the Assad regime's alleged use of chemical weapons as a threat to humanity everywhere -- the sort of cruelty and incivility that cannot be allowed with impunity. Yet despite [efforts by President Barack Obama to stoke fears of chemical-weapon attacks against Americans](#) and their allies, few people outside Syria fear for their own safety.

Hawkins, the ComRes chairman described "two key requirements" to gaining public support for military intervention abroad -- first, "a credible threat to the security of British citizens" and, second, "a reasonable prospect of success."

Neither appears to apply to the Syria crisis, leaving those leaders pursuing military strikes at direct odds with their publics.

Still, analysts note that public opinion on armed intervention tends to be volatile, with patriotic surges and an impulse to support military forces typically following initial armed strikes.

Such was the dynamic in France in the case of Libya. In early March 2011, the French public was largely opposed to intervention in Libya, with only 36 percent expressing support in polls. But less than a month later, following the first French strikes in Libya, public support surged to 66 percent.

"What we saw was a patriotic reflex with public opinion rallying to the flag," Fourquet said. "All the more so because risks were limited, as the intervention consisted exclusively of air strikes."

And yet this same tendency for public opinion to fluctuate tends to work in reverse when military campaigns drag on: By the summer of 2011, as Moammar Gadhafi's regime fell in Libya, French approval for continued national involvement had just slipped below the 50 percent mark.

Another source of public unease is a sense that the military strikes could provoke an unforeseen regional conflagration, requiring a larger and more perilous intervention. So warns even a former member of the Syrian National Council, the coalition of opposition parties seeking to oust Assad.

"I could theoretically favor targeted and limited strikes, to exercise pressure and relaunch the political process, because there will be no military solution," the former SNC member, Randa Kassis, said in an [exclusive interview with HuffPost Maghreb](#). "But the problem with these strikes is the response of the regime. How will Western countries react then? Have they considered the risk. If one response leads to the next, what will the consequences be? A regional war, perhaps? I am against intervention, because we don't know the consequences."

Goodman reported from New York, Hasan from London and Boudet from Paris. With contributions from Sandro Lutyens in Tunis, Ariel Edwards-Levy and Mark Blumenthal in Washington, Antonia Laterza in Rome, and Mohamed Omar in Toronto.