The case against non-intervention in Syria

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**Introduction**

On Monday, March 5, Senator John McCain called for a joint coalition of countries, led by the United States, to intervene in Syria via surgical airstrikes that would facilitate the creation of safe havens “in which opposition forces can organise and plan their political and military activities against Assad.”

The following day, in the course of his first press conference of the year, President Obama ruled out “unilateral” military intervention in Syria (never mind that McCain had mentioned Saudi Arabia, U.A.E., Jordan, Qatar, the E.U. and NATO as preferable allies), saying that his administration was still committed to a diplomatic solution to Assad’s year-long campaign of repression, which has claimed an estimated 9,000 lives, according to the United Nations.

However, Obama appears to have tacitly shifted his approach to Syria somewhat from a day earlier when one anonymous administration official told *Foreign Policy* magazine that Washington was looking to “invest...in a much deeper sense with the opposition” by directly providing humanitarian aid and communications equipment. More crucially, this source added, the US would not “openly oppose direct military assistance” to the Syrian rebels provided it came from other countries. Qatar and Saudi Arabia have both expressed a willingness to supply arms to the rebels, and the semi-recognised Syrian National Council (SNC) has lately created a military bureau to handle the distribution of weapons.

In short, greater US involvement in Syria is inevitable, although the form it will take is not, largely because the attendant debate about the wisdom or legitimacy of a direct military intervention -- a debate argued out in various magazine symposia -- has tended to cloud as much as clarify the nature of this crisis and what awaits if Assad’s campaign of mass murder, arbitrary arrest, torture, rape and dispossession is allowed to continue unchecked. Yet many of the arguments for non-intervention that have been invoked and recapitulated at the highest level of government are either unconvincing or they apply equally, if not more so, if the United States refuses to help hasten the fall of the Assad regime.

**“Remember Iraq”**

Some analysts have twinned the perils of intervening in Syria with those of intervening in Iraq, noting, for instance, that Operation Provide Comfort, which imposed a no-fly zone over Northern Iraq in 1991, was kept in place for over a decade until the 2003 invasion of Iraq finished the Saddam regime entirely. What’s to stop a similar measure in Syria from lasting as long? Left out of this comparison is any context. Operation Provide Comfort was made necessary because the United States had encouraged an armed overthrow of the Saddam regime at the tail-end of the First Gulf War, then failed to support the Iraqis who attempted it. In other words, it was a corrective policy for a duplicitous and half-baked one.

Also, at no point in the interregnum between both Gulf Wars were armed rebels taking the fight to the Republican Guard in and around Baghdad, assassinating top Iraqi army generals or “liberating” key areas of the country on their own which had to be pounded with heavy artillery for an entire month before the Ba’ath regime was able to retake them. Also missing between 1991 and 2003 were mass protest rallies in Iraq demanding the toppling of the regime. All of these conditions now apply in Syria and suggest that a decade-long stalemate is unlikely.

**“The Syrian people don’t want intervention”**

Taking a survey of popular will in a country under siege is impossible, but this canard is rather easily dispensed with using more obvious evidence. Since the Libyan
National Transitional Council invaded Tripoli, but especially since the capture and death of Muammar Gaddafi, the Syrian revolutionaries have signposted their desire to see the West hasten the collapse of the Assad regime. In late November, Riyad al-Asaad, the head of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), called for the aerial bombardment of “strategic targets” and the imposition of a no-fly zone and a buffer zone. Grassroots activists have followed suit. There has been a nationally coordinated Friday day of rage entitled “No-Fly Zone Friday,” countless photographs from revolutionary cities have responded pungently -- and wittily in the case of Kafranbel -- to the latest US policy wrangling over Syria, almost always on the side of seeking US intervention. For instance, in recent weeks a protest was unambiguously titled “Arm the FSA Friday.”

Admittedly, some confusion as to the strategy the revolutionaries are pursuing has been caused by the Syrian National Council, which is mainly comprised of exiles. The SNC has at times adopted contradictory prescriptions, but the motive behind its decision to create a military bureau was its desire to stay relevant to whatever constituency it can still claim for itself inside Syria. Whenever the SNC falls out of step with the will of the “street,” the street makes its frustrations known in a sort of call-and-response exercise. For instance, when it appeared in late December that the SNC President Burhan Ghalioun had struck an accord with a rival opposition group, the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change (NCB), which believes in dialog with the Assad regime and categorically ruled out foreign intervention in Syria, a rally of thousands was held in Homs, Ghalioun's birthplace, where the slogans chanted was: “Burhan Ghalioun, don't you hear? The people want a no-fly zone!”

As it now stands, the SNC has adopted a model for intervention which calls for the establishment of a no-fly zone over the western corridor of Syria (where the regime's air defence systems are located) as well as the establishment of safe zones into which humanitarian aid can be delivered without regime interdiction.

“Let’s not further ‘militarise’ the conflict”

The State Department has stated that it does not want to directly arm the opposition because doing so will only increase the violence in Syria. Implicit in such a stance is that the opposition should disarm and resort to exclusively peaceful means of protest. Quite apart from being innocent to the nature of a brutal totalitarianism, this logic appears trapped in a curious time warp. Six months ago, when the Syrian revolution was exclusively confined to non-violent demonstrations, the regime’s response was to engage in arbitrary arrests, the murder of children and adolescents, house-to-house raids and the forced removal of the injured from ambulances and hospital beds.

For this reason is the armed uprising now mostly a civilian-led one, with ad hoc “militias” numbering in the hundreds all throughout Syria. Were these militias to disarm, what realistic guarantee would they have that they would not be summarily executed as captured military defectors have been? Would protestors, who continue to agitate only under the protection of armed rebels, be allowed to continue to do so in absence of such protection?

Sunday Times photojournalist Paul Conroy said that the Homs neighbourhood of Baba Amr was not so much a war zone as the site of a medieval “massacre”. Days after the rebels withdrew the International Committee of the Red Cross has been denied entrance to Baba Amr by the regime, fuelling plausible concerns of further atrocities. Indeed, countless eyewitness reports have emerged of a killing spree being waged by Assad's security forces who have, according to the activist group Avaaz, beheaded or partially beheaded 17 civilians.
The reality is that militarisation of the opposition is all that stands between civil war and extermination.

“A diplomatic breakthrough is still possible”

In his recent testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Defence Secretary Leon Panetta suggested that Russia held the key toward formulating a diplomatic breakthrough on Syria.

Superficially, this might seem possible because, as some analysts have argued, a strong reason for Russia’s adamantine support for Assad was Vladimir Putin’s own domestic political crisis. Syria came at an opportune moment to rally the Russian electorate around the flag by amplifying anti-Americanism (pro-Putin youth activists have compared the new US ambassador Michael McFaul to a convicted pedophile: McFaul’s appointment to Moscow was itself met by the suggestion on state television that he was an agent provocateur looking to topple the government) and by drawing implicit parallels between Assad’s scorched-earth campaign in Syria with Putin’s own in Chechnya. Why let a good foreign policy confrontation with the West go to waste? However, now that Putin has “won” the election, might he soften his position on Assad?

Assuming Russia were to accede to diplomatic compromise, it would no doubt come at the expense of maintaining much of the apparatus of the Syrian ancien regime in power, if not maintaining Bashar al-Assad himself. Many relatives of Bashar’s inner circle are already in Moscow including, we are told, his brother Maher al-Assad’s wife. A Kremlin-brokered agreement would therefore insist on maintaining the bulk of this criminal hierarchy because at stake is not just the Russian-controlled port of Tartus, which the Syrian opposition has already offered to leave in Russian hands in exchange for dumping Assad, but multimillionaire defence contracts, Gazprom gas pipeline construction deals, and, perhaps most important, a Syrian political and military establishment that views the world reliably a la Rus. There are approximately 18,000 Syrian-Russian bi-nationals capable and willing to maintain a Cold War satrapy in the Middle East. Many of the regime’s elite holiday in Russia and keep their offshore accounts in Moscow banks.

But let’s assume that Putin and the Syrian regime elite could be persuaded to stage a palace coup or implement a transition of “Assadism without Assad.” While such a policy might find favour in Western foreign ministries, there is no indication that it would be accepted by the Syrian people. “Did we suffer just to ensure continuity of Russian influence in the Middle East?” they might well ask. And even if they were able to reconcile themselves to this cynical rapprochement, would they trust the same regime hardcore which has conspired to disappear, torture and kill them since last March 2011?

In the event, it may be easier to cut a deal with the fascists than it is to cut one with its agonised victims.

“Intervention will lead to sectarianism”

A sufficient case has yet to be made for how sectarianism is to be avoided if Syria spirals further into internecine war. The protest movement began as a national uprising for reform, not revolution, motivated largely by discontent with rampant state corruption, and so was largely free of chauvinist or supremacist slogans. In fact, many Alawites on the ground have led protests against the regime, particularly in the wealthy district of Masaken Barzeh neighbourhood of Damascus. Popular Alawite actress Fadwa Soliman (now in hiding) has also joined forces with those seeking to topple Assad.

Nevertheless, the regime has ably exploited the fears of many Alawites, Christians, Druze, Ismailis and —
to a lesser extent the Kurds, who actually started their own demonstrations in January 2011 — that what awaits them is an extensive Sunni-led reprisal campaign. To hedge these bets, the regime has seen fit to staff its sadistic shabbiha paramilitary gangs overwhelmingly with Alawites. As witnessed by one of the authors of this essay, the regime’s security forces have taken care to avoid killing in minority-heavy areas. The most battered cities in Syria have all been predominantly Sunni and, in some cities such as Latakia and jisr al-Shughour, credible allegations of ethnic cleansing have been advanced. Time is not on the side of national unity, and simply leaving the opposition with no lifeline or military assistance will ensure that balkanisation occurs with probable spillover into neighbouring countries.

At this point, as Jeffrey Feltman, the US Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs, told Congress last week, “The longer this goes on, the deeper the sectarian divisions, the higher the risks of long-term sectarian conflict, the higher the risk of [extremism]”, which indicates that the Obama administration realises that a policy of non-intervention carries the same hazards as one of intervention. The difference is, without intervention’s ability to end the regime’s violence sooner, the chance of containing those hazards is slimmer.

“Safe havens/safe zones are not feasible in Syria”

Gen James Mattis, the head of US Central Command, testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee on March 6 that “the terrain in the northern part of the country where McCain proposed to establish ‘safe havens’ for the opposition has no natural barriers to forestall a government attack, unlike the mountainous region of northern Iraq where Kurds held out against Saddam Hussein.”

According to other military experts, including retired Syrian Brig Gen Akil Hashem (now an oppositionist living abroad), this assessment is inaccurate. The terrain in Idlib province close to the Syrian-Turkish border is very rough and has proven extremely difficult for regime special forces to navigate in order to quash rebel activity. Indeed, if Gen Mattis’ assessment were correct, the rebels would not have been able to proliferate so extensively in Idlib even with regime security forces establishing checkpoints and base camps for their mechanised units outside the major cities. Moreover, when the regime perpetrated a massacre in June 2011 in the Idlib town of jisr al-Shughour, approximately 10,000 Syrians — including some military defectors — were able to flee into Turkey unobstructed. If they can move in one direction, then surely Turkish forces can move in the opposite.

According to one US Defence Department official the authors have consulted, the regime is “entirely dependent on a single highway to move supplies and units to the north from its main logistical hub in Damascus on a much overstretched logistical tail that is highly vulnerable to airstrikes. The terrain thus actually favours the rebels and is indeed conducive for the establishment of a no-fly zone and liberated territory in the north.”

“Al-Qaida’s presence in Syria”

The White House has listed as a major disincentive for involving the United States militarily in Syria the presence of al-Qaida in the country and possibly within the ranks of the armed opposition. On February 26, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told the BBC, “And to whom are you delivering [arms]? We know al-Qaida. Zawahiri is supporting the opposition in Syria. Are we supporting al-Qaida? We must be sure. Are we supporting al-Qaida in Syria?” However, following in his Senate testimony, Gen Mattis was strongly questioned about al-Qaida’s alleged role in the Syrian opposition by Sen McCain. The next day, Gen Mattis conceded that al-Qaida infiltrators “do not define the opposition to Assad,” which indicated that top American military
officials are undercutting earlier assessments about the terrorist component of the revolution.

Nevertheless, echoing previous statements made by Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff Martin Dempsey and Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, Mattis also stated that al-Qaeda had carried out a series of “rather spectacular” attacks using improvised explosive devices. Yet, as one of the authors has argued in a previous briefing, the car bombings that occurred in late December 2011 in the Kafarsouseh and Midan neighbourhoods of Damascus have yet to be credibly linked to al-Qaeda, and there is strong evidence that they were staged or tacitly allowed by the Assad regime itself.

While it is true that Zawahiri has pledged al-Qaeda’s solidarity with the Syrian revolution -- as he did with the Egyptian and Tunisian ones -- neither he nor any other al-Qaeda figure has yet to claim responsibility for any attacks perpetrated in Syria. (Compare this silence to how swiftly the organisation took credit for recent bombings in Iraq and Yemen.)

That said, it does seem probable that al-Qaeda has already established some kind of presence inside Syria and will look to take advantage of a devolving conflict or civil war. No doubt Western intervention would also be a strong catalyst for greater al-Qaeda or jihadist infiltration, but non-interventionists have yet to explain how radicalisation will not occur if the regime survives. Wahhabi Saudi clerics and Islamist Egyptian preachers have already begun calling for foreign jihadists to join the struggle against Assad, with images from Baba Amr and Idlib serving as convenient recruitment material. The majority of the opposition, like most Syrians, is made of religiously-minded people with little ideology. They are not fighting to defend secularism (nor is the regime) but they are also not fighting to establish a theocracy. But as the conflict grinds on, Islam is playing an increasing role in the uprising. Others have shrewdly compared the Syrian resistance to the Bosniac one; in the latter case, a fairly heterodox religious population became ideologised by what they saw as a Christian-waged extermination campaign against them carried out with Western acquiescence.

Allowing Syria to become a cynosure for al-Qaeda or likeminded jihadist elements would pose a grave security challenge to neighbouring states Turkey, Israel, Lebanon and Jordan. Syria could also then become, as Afghanistan did before it, a fertile operational hub for planning for future terrorist attacks against Western targets.

“An air campaign in Syria is next to impossible”

Syria’s air defence systems are almost entirely located in the western corridor of the country, on the borders with Israel and Lebanon and, by Gen Dempsey’s own admission, a no-fly zone would encompass only a fifth of the territory that NATO had to cover in Libya. That said, Syria’s air defence systems are more sophisticated, particularly given recent consignments from Russia, designed to forestall Western intervention.

However, it must be noted that Israeli warplanes entered Syrian airspace three times in the last decade and bombed specific targets twice, even managing to “buzz” Assad’s summer residence in the coastal city of Latakia in 2006 so closely that the sonic boom shattered the windows. In 2007, the Israeli Air Force’s “Operation Orchard” effectively destroyed what subsequent UN investigation confirmed was a nuclear reactor in the Deir Ezzor region of Syria, using, as later media reports disclosed, advanced radar and satellite-jamming technology which made it seem first as if hundreds of war planes were in the sky, then made it seem as if none were. No doubt the United States and European powers possess similar technology and any bombing campaign would have to be led by the United
States, as Gen Dempsey made clear in his Senate testimony. The challenges, he affirmed, were great but not insurmountable.

Also, a lesser explored aspect of Syria's air defence systems is how capable, competent and professional the Syrian Air Force truly is. According to retired and active military commanders — active-duty personnel having family connections to the Syrian diaspora and a willingness to talk — the Syrian Air Force is staffed by Alawite loyalists who are not necessarily the best equipped for their positions. Reservists are not routinely called up for training exercises in the Syrian military. Retired Brig Gen Akil Hashem told one of the authors that if it took the regime a month of heavy artillery and rocket bombardment and a phalanx of 7,000 elite Fourth Division soldiers to retake the neighbourhood of Baba Amr in Homs, which had been held by a few hundred rebels, then this clearly does not bespeak a modernised and fully capable army.

Then there is the question of whether or not massive defections from all branches of the Syrian military would occur if the regime were suddenly faced not with poorly armed homegrown insurgents but the collective might of US, Turkish, NATO and European air power.

A more persuasive objection to any air campaign in Syria is the location of the air defence systems: most are in dense urban areas, making the likelihood of collateral damage greater than what was seen in Libya. This would require close collaboration between on-the-ground intelligence, drawn from foreign and domestic sources, and air command.

“Syria’s chemical and biological weapons”

According to Gen Mattis, Syria has a “substantial” WMD capability and thousands of shoulder-launched missiles from which chemical or biological agents can be released. These weapons are kept in a dozen or so sites, mainly in northern and central Syria, including cities currently roiled by the revolution. Although the greater concern, judging from governmental rhetoric, is not that Assad would use these weapons himself but that in any intervention scenario he would allow them to be smuggled out of Syria by non-state actors -- possibly Hezbollah or Iraqi sympathisers. Unfortunately, this contingency applies with or without intervention: regime collapse, now seen by President Obama and US Defence Secretary Panetta as “inevitable,” means that neutralising Syria’s caches of biological and chemical weapons will be a task that falls to some responsible (probably foreign) party sooner or later. Indeed, a recent story in The Wall Street Journal indicated that the Pentagon may already be working with Jordanian Special Operations units to secure the biological and chemical weapons caches in the event that peacekeeping forces are dispatched to Syria under what one senior U.S. official described as a “permissive environment.” As to the likelihood of seeing such an environment emerge organically, the official declined to speculate.

If the United States were to intervene, it at least stands a better chance of working with regional and Syrian allies to avert the export of WMD. As Gen Dempsey put it before the Armed Services Committee, these weapons must stay “exactly where they are” in Syria.

“Intervention will lead to regional instability”

This, too, seems a greater consequence of non-intervention given what has already transpired.

Since June 2011, roughly ten thousand Syrian refugees have been living in tents in the Hatay province of Turkey, just across the border with Syria’s Idlib province, which they fled to avoid one of the regime’s earliest and worst massacres. The presence of these mainly Sunni refugees has led to rising tensions between the pro-Assad Turkish Alevi and anti-Assad
Turkish Sunnis. These tensions were not helped by the fact that a Turkish Alevi intelligence officer betrayed one of the earliest and highest-ranking Syrian military defectors, Lt Col Hussain Harmoush, to the Syrian mukhabarat.

The UN estimates that 20,000 Syrians have fled the country, while 70,000 are now designated as internally displaced. Both these figures are likely much higher as many Syrian activists wanted by the regime have gone into hiding and cannot be accounted for (the Syrian Arab Red Crescent Society has put the figure of internally displaced at 200,000). Many who have fled to Lebanon have subsequently been captured by Syrian intelligence in cross-border raids that are as illegal as they are a reminder of how intertwined are the fates of Syria and the state it formerly occupied.

Lebanon’s political establishment is deeply divided over the slow-burning civil war emerging next door and it is not premature or exaggerated to wonder about the collapse of the current coalition government if the crisis continues, particularly as Hezbollah, an Iranian proxy, shows no sign of repudiating Assad. If anything it has, according to many Syrian rebels, been aiding in the regime’s repression when it hasn’t been emptying its many weapons caches stored throughout Syria.

Lebanon’s Druze community, led almost monarchically by Walid Jumblatt, has now publicly sided with the Syrian opposition and called for the renewal under new conditions of the Taif Agreement, which certified the end of the decades-long Lebanese Civil War.

There have been press reports of the influx of Iraqi fighters into Syria who are either al-Qaida affiliates or “Anbar Awakening” Sunni insurgents who wish to help their brethren in what they see as an increasingly sectarian struggle.

Iran, as has been reported in the Washington Post and elsewhere, is even more heavily involved in helping the Assad regime than was previously thought. It stands accused of importing weapons into Syria via civilian aircraft. According to the former chief auditor of the Syrian Defence Ministry, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Hezbollah agents are being brought in as snipers and paid through a US-dollar slush fund that is replenished by Tehran.

Syria’s Kurds, meanwhile, are now being divided by the Assad regime, which has long hosted members of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK, or PYD as it’s known in Syria) as leverage for use against Turkey, which of course has its own restive and marginalised Kurdish minority. Contrary to what Gen Dempsey told the Senate Armed Services Committee, Syrian Kurds have not felt “protected” by the Assad regime (the majority of them don’t even enjoy citizenship in the country).

Any wariness they have about fully supporting the revolution is calculated to wrest as much political leverage from a post-Assad state as possible and to avoid having the PYD used as a proxy for Kurd-on-Kurd violence. Indeed, anti-Assad Kurds have accused the PYD of cooperating with Syrian military intelligence to assassinate Mishaal Tammo, a member of the Syrian National Council (SNC), several months ago. There are also credible reports that the Kurdish National Council (KNC), an independent opposition umbrella group representing fifteen Kurdish political parties, have been harassed and targeted by the PYD. Kurds represent as much as 15% of the total Syrian population and an internal conflict within their community could well become its own civil war, engulfing not only Syria’s northeast corridor, where Kurds are mainly situated, but, potentially, Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan.

Finally, Palestinian refugees have been dispatched by the regime as minesweepers and border-jumpers in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, and last summer, 5,000 more refugees went “missing” in the coastal city of Latakia after the Syrian Navy bombarded it. At least
one other Palestinian refugee camp in Deraa has been shelled by the regime in recent weeks. A stateless minority already reliant on to its own UN organisation for aid, education and sustenance hardly deserves to be caught up in its host country’s misfortunes.

What in the history of the contemporary Middle East suggests that such a volatile state of affairs will not continue or will somehow contain itself? If a protracted war between Assad's forces and the Syrian rebels persists, as the current policy of passivity indicates it will, and the death toll in Syria rises, what proposals are on offer for ensuring that the regional conflagration promised as a result of intervention doesn't occur as a result of non-intervention?

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**About the authors**


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