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The Flawed Strategic Debate on Syria

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Key Points

- **Opponents of forceful U.S. action in Syria have warned of dire consequences, but have generally failed to address the costs of inaction. The results of episodic and ambivalent action are also dire.**
- **Those arguing against robust assistance to the opposition have used Afghanistan and other historical analogies to support their positions, but the arguments frequently employ faulty history and faulty reasoning.**
- **There are options for coherent, effective action with regional support in pursuit of limited, achievable goals.**

Dating from Bashar al-Asad's first suppression of mass demonstrations in April 2011, the war in Syria is now 3 years old, has killed more than 130,000 Syrians, and displaced nine million Syrians, two million as refugees into neighboring countries.[1] Foreign intervention has increasingly shaped the course of the fighting and will continue to have substantial regional consequences. The complexity of this bitter, nominally internal struggle has dampened American enthusiasm for joining the fray or even paying much attention to Syria, notwithstanding the chemical weapon attacks on Gouta, east of Damascus, last August, which captured the attention of the American people, media, and policy community. With an international taboo broken and a Presidential redline crossed, public debate spiked in August–September 2013 over U.S. interests in Syria and the limits on what we will do to secure them. Debate did not result in a consensus for action.

The public remains broadly skeptical on a more forceful role as a result of arguments that have focused on the costs of substantive action.[2] Some opposition has been driven by resource constraints and some by isolationist principles. Other opponents of action of any kind are concerned about precedents that would be set by intervention, and historical analogies that should be heeded in deciding whether to intervene at all. Resources, principles, and precedents are all important enough to deserve rigorous examination. Unfortunately, the national dialogue so far has not done those topics justice, but has been dominated conversely by assumptions, comparisons with other recent conflicts, and outright misconceptions.

This paper critically analyzes the most common arguments against substantive U.S. involvement in the Syrian crisis and generally finds them wanting. Some commentators have relied on misleading or inaccurate historical analogies to describe the current policy challenge. Others have been inaccurate in describing the main players in the Syrian conflict and the range of options available to American decisionmakers. Most dangerously, proponents of remaining aloof to the crisis have ignored the costs of continued inaction in human and geopolitical terms. In

short, policy analysts owe the American public a better strategic debate than the one they have received so far.

Poor Assumptions

There is much to criticize over the past 2 years of U.S. Syria policy, which has largely consisted of strong rhetoric followed by irresolute action. The U.S. response to the Gouta attack provided the most striking example of mismatched words and deeds: public and media outrage prompted stern condemnations and threats of force, leading in turn to a round of Russian-brokered diplomacy, culminating in an agreement that removed the threat of American military action in exchange for the gradual removal of Asad's chemical arsenal.[3] The net effect of the deal was to confirm American indifference to Asad's Iranian-sponsored war for regime survival, as long as he did not use chemical weapons. Some might argue that the United States had an interest in not being forced to act by a single act that energized public opinion and in that sense gained a small victory through inaction after Gouta. That meager gain did little or nothing to serve other possible U.S. interests in Syria, though, such as limiting Iranian influence, punishing a war criminal, supporting democratic change, or empowering the nonextremist Syrian opposition.

Failing to look at our broader interests has been a key failing of U.S. policymaking on Syria to date. So far the debate has focused on the costs of action while ignoring the costs of continued inaction. We need to ask the right questions: who is winning and losing what through our current toleration of the status quo? What might we hope to achieve by means of military force in concert with other strategic tools, and at what cost? How will our rivals and our friends view our actions or inaction? The higher level strategic dialogue that U.S. national interest requires can begin by clearing away the many misconceptions characterizing the debate to date and then providing a framework for strategically significant issues involved. Once we pare the Syrian crisis to a fundamental proposition about American influence and interest, we can come to grips with the glaring gap in U.S. strategy and policymaking that has rendered the United States impotent with respect to Syria and served our interests poorly.

The question of whether the United States should "get involved" in Syria presupposes that we are not already involved. In fact we *have been involved* for some time, just not in a strategically coherent or decisive manner. We have been involved through pronouncements of our leaders, through public and private bolstering of Israel, Turkey, and Jordan, through our encouragement of the Syrian National Coalition and Supreme Military Command, and through our training of elements of the Free Syrian Army (FSA).[4] For the most part, our actions have fallen short of our words; promised military aid has been slow in delivery while the Turks and other potential participants in military action have grown impatient with the slow formulation of a clear U.S. position.[5] Our forces may not be involved in Syria, but our reputation certainly is. Failing to act decisively or effectively after speaking pointedly does not serve U.S. interests in any clear manner. John Mearsheimer, for example, may be right in asserting that the human and economic costs of direct, massive intervention in places such as Syria (or Iraq and Afghanistan) are not worth the possible benefits to our regional or strategic interests. He is certainly right that the United States should eschew "social engineering" in every dangerous place in the world. He is certainly wrong, though, in describing a world in which essential choices boil down to intervention ("global domination") or isolation ("hands off").[6] There are numerous options for providing limited assistance or vigorously supporting the efforts of regional allies that would create U.S. influence on the ground without demanding massive or open-ended commitment. As things stand, the world has increasingly come to doubt American interest and commitment in international affairs, and this serves to undermine both the leadership role the United States has exercised for over 70 years and some of the achievements made possible by that leadership.[7]

Another wrong assumption is that because Syria is in a civil war—a war primarily between two Syrian

sides—the United States has no significant stake in the outcome.[8] Civil wars seldom remain strictly national affairs for long. In fact, they frequently become a means for regional powers to punish a competitor, gain clients, or exercise other forms of geopolitical influence. The Spanish Civil War in the 1930s started out as a civil war, but soon became a testing ground for Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy to try out doctrine, equipment, and personnel. It also became a rallying point for international leftists who entered the fray under Soviet sponsorship in a variety of volunteer units.[9] The Korean War, Vietnam War, and wars in Iraq and Afghanistan all straddled the categories of civil war with two opposed, domestic sides, and international aggression or proxy war. The basis for intervention in Somalia in 1992 was refugee flows that the United Nations Security Council evaluated as a threat to international peace and security; the scale of refugee flight from Syria has been even greater.[10] The deciding factor for intervention has never been whether a war can be described as "civil," but rather whether the stakes of the conflict had direct bearing on U.S. national interests and even vital national interests. Syria, too, is a civil war, but it is also more than that.

The internal dimension of the Syrian civil war has roots in the 20th century; it is by no means an endemic, perpetual, or irreconcilable conflict. In fact, Alawite-Sunni hatred in Syria is largely an unfortunate artifact of two historically recent phenomena: the French colonial policy of divide-and-rule in the 1920s, and 1960s-era Ba'ath Party politics. It is true that the majority Sunni community traditionally has seen Alawites and other minorities as "imperfect Arabs" or even apostates, and has reserved the leading political role for its own majority community.[11] This chauvinism represents little change from the Sunni attitude during several centuries of Ottoman rule and did not previously precipitate large-scale bloodshed or intercommunal warfare.[12]

Political marginalization of the Sunnis began in earnest with the French practice of forming security detachments from the minority communities, which were then used to suppress uprisings in Sunni communities.[13] This policy generated a cycle of privilege and resentment, a process cemented once Bashar al-Asad's father Hafez seized control in 1970. Alawites came to dominate or monopolize most state economic, political, and military institutions.[14] Subsequently, Asad created a brutal, dictatorial, and highly personalized regime that foreclosed the possibility of significant sectarian reconciliation.[15] There are no grounds to conclude that the majority Sunni community, whose grievances derive from the appropriation of privilege and political control by a coalition of minority communities, would remain radicalized or violently anti-Alawite under less authoritarian political and economic conditions than those imposed by the French or the Asads. To the contrary, a post-Asad Syria better tethered to the surrounding political and economic communities would open up new routes for resolving disputes and social competition.[16] Unfortunately, it is also probably true that the longer this conflict drags on, the more deeply entrenched ethnic and sectarian divisions could become.

Viewed from another perspective, the current conflict in Syria is not really about Asad or his Sunni Syrian antagonists. The external dimension of the conflict represents a series of geopolitical gambits by Asad's sponsors, all inimical to U.S. values and interests.[17] Russia seeks to retain naval access via its base at Tartus on the Mediterranean and preserve its most lucrative arms customer. Moreover, Russia wants to frustrate the U.S. policy of leveraging political change in the Arab Middle East to undercut authoritarian regimes and promote democratic development. China is not so closely linked to Asad's regime as Russia, but it certainly shares the strategic goal of constraining U.S. ability to dictate norms of behavior internationally or regionally.[18] Iran, meanwhile, has committed weapons, money, and manpower to preserve Asad's hold on power. It provides this assistance because Syria is a "confrontation state" refusing to make peace with Israel and supporting terrorists targeting Israel and the West. Its support for Asad also aligns with the interests of its Lebanese proxy, Hizballah, which continues to threaten Israel and U.S. interests in the region.

The countries aligned with us over Syria, such as Turkey, the Gulf Arab states, and Jordan, also have their

own geopolitical agendas, but in most cases, these are not inimical to our own. Turkey wants Asad gone, but it also wants to maintain Syrian territorial integrity and ensure democratic rights for Syria's majority Sunni population—outcomes the United States also wants. Other probable Turkish motives include an oil pipeline through Syria to Turkey, prevention of a breakaway Kurdish region in Syria, and enhanced credentials as a regional power.[19] Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, sees an opportunity to weaken Iran's regional client network and help the United States blunt Russia's regional access. It also wants to avoid repeating its mistake during Yemen's civil war in the 1960s when it failed to support its proxy as well as its Egyptian rivals did and as a result lost influence over events in Yemen for decades.[20]

The anti-Asad front has generally remained steadfast but has waited in vain for the United States to throw more of its weight behind the drive to topple the leader. In contrast, Asad's geopolitical backers—Russia, Iran, and Hizballah—have provided massive quantities of money, equipment, and men to Asad. The tide of the war has turned in the past half year not because Asad has become more attractive to his people, and not because his forces have become dramatically more effective—but because foreign patrons have provided equipment, training, and military advice in a more sustained and committed manner than Asad's opponents.[21] To ignore this geopolitical dimension in the public debate is to misunderstand and miscalculate U.S. stakes.

Setting the Wrong Precedents

The war in Syria today can and should be seen as a war to determine the nature of the regional system over the next decade or longer. The way the United States defines and defends its interests will set expectations and shape alliances; if the Nation appears irresolute, allies and enemies alike could ignore U.S. power altogether. Israel and Saudi Arabia, for instance, may take U.S. inactivity against the Iranian proxy regime in Damascus as evidence of U.S. untrustworthiness against the Iranian nuclear threat, and may take the matter into their own hands.[22] In fact, British and Israeli newspapers reported planning efforts between the two countries to prepare a coordinated strike against Iranian nuclear facilities in the event of continued U.S. inaction—planning that presumably continued or accelerated after U.S.-Iran nuclear negotiations in Geneva bore fruit in November 2013.[23]

Turkey is also involved in a geopolitical struggle with Tehran, a struggle playing out in Syria, Iraq, and Central Asia.[24] Turkey has much at stake in Syria and is vulnerable to destabilizing Iranian activity there for several reasons. First, Syria's volatile north affects Turkey's south through demography and ideological ties between insurgent groups on both sides of the border. Second, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has fully staked his credibility on Asad's overthrow. Third, Turkey has become both a base and a target for the opposed sides in the Syrian war. Fourth, the struggle for primacy among Kurdish factions in the region has increasingly become a personal struggle between Massoud Barzani and Abdullah Ocalan; the growing influence of Ocalan-aligned Kurds in Syria's northeast threatens both Barzani and the Turks. The outcome in Syria will condition the U.S.-Turkish relationship for at least as long as the wars in Iraq did, which is to say for several decades.[25] Failure to articulate and implement clear American strategies in Syria can damage the stability of both Turkey and Iraq. Turkey's political class may decide that accommodation with Russia, Iran, and their proxies is more predictable, and therefore preferable, to waiting for the United States to back possible alternatives in the region.

Asad's apparent ability to employ chemical weapons and escape significant, concerted international response likely emboldened him. He has broken the taboo against using such weapons, remained in power, and been treated with sovereign respect by the international community.[26] The Russian-brokered deal for Asad to allow inspection and destruction of some of Syria's chemical weapons neither punishes past nor prevents future employment. In fact, it dignifies and legitimizes Asad's regime. There are many countries that might contemplate their own chemical or nuclear deterrent in the Middle East, especially if they

believe there is no real system to oppose their acquisition or use: Turkey and Saudi Arabia are prime examples. There is the previously mentioned demonstrative effect on Israel, which has been given reason to doubt American will to stop a nuclear Iran and is therefore more likely to contemplate unilateral action.[27] Finally, the narrow American focus on chemical weapons violations shows a troubling ambivalence about the other forms of atrocity and oppression rampant in Syria, and an aloofness that compares poorly with the resolute Iranian and Russian positions.

Faulty Historical Analogies

Some observers oppose robust action in Syria by citing our experience in Afghanistan. The standard assertion is that Syria's social complexity and fractured state structure recall Afghanistan, and that Washington has neither the time, the patience, nor the resources to see through a fight under such conditions.[28] According to this view, such complexity in Afghanistan in the 1980s led us to aid an overwhelmingly jihadist resistance movement (the mujahideen) on the advice of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, without really understanding who they were. Once they took control, they lashed out against us—more or less predictably—since they were extremists to begin with and we accepted them as allies against the Soviets only due to a utilitarian Cold War logic that would come back to haunt us years later. This characterization of Afghanistan and U.S. policy there provides the backdrop for objections against forceful action in Syria today, and in complex struggles across the globe more generally. The analogy relies on lore and speculation more than fact, however—it amounts to a historical myth.[29]

In addition, this version of reality overstates similarities between Afghanistan and Syria on two counts. First, it exaggerates jihadist domination of the Syrian opposition. The opposition's main umbrella organizations—the Syrian National Coalition at the political level and the FSA at the operational level—are internationalist and moderate in outlook. It appears that a significant number of frontline fighting units are drawn from jihadist elements, but no one can precisely quantify proportions, and it would be wild speculation to say that a majority or even a significant minority of the fighters are jihadist. The Washington Institute's Aaron Zelin estimates foreign fighters in the Syrian opposition between 5,000 and 10,000; even if they are monolithically jihadist, this is a minority in an opposition that numbers nearer 100,000.[30] Ken Sofer and Juliana Sofroth have conducted a focused study of the composition and internal dynamics of the opposition forces in Syria and concluded that moderates constitute by far the majority of the total force.[31] Reports that claim jihadi domination without a similar body of substantiating data should be treated with appropriate skepticism.

The jihadist groups are not the only game in town, not by a long shot. An umbrella organization for coordination of opposition military efforts, the Supreme Military Command (SMC), was formed over a year ago and has exercised varying degrees of control over the forces in the field. Since December 2012, four types of forces have operated under varying degrees of SMC control: the Free Syrian Army, Syrian Liberation Front, Syrian Islamic Front, and various independent brigades and regional commands. The table summarizes the nature of the groups and their estimated numbers.[32]

A fifth group, the al Qaeda–affiliated al-Nusra Front, operates outside the SMC framework. These data, which should be taken as orders of magnitude rather than absolutes, suggest that the Syrian opposition is not monolithic or static and can be engaged and influenced. Even if the al-Nusra Front figures have grown significantly in the past year—or even doubled—nowhere near a majority of the rebels come from the jihadist camp. There are signs, moreover, that the more moderate Islamist groups have begun a coordinated campaign to crush the al Qaeda–linked Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and removed the jihadist taint from the global image of the Syrian resistance.[33] The SMC provides a mechanism to channel U.S. assistance to the opposition and to influence the course of events on the ground should such an approach ever be tried.

The greatest risk of radicalization, ironically, may be the prospect that Western indifference and failure to

Syria's Major Actors

Group	Description	Estimated Force Size
Supreme Military Command (SMC)	Umbrella organization	N/A
Free Syrian Army (FSA)	Ideologically moderate; comprised of many small local groups; fully integrated within SMC	50,000
Syrian Liberation Front	Moderate Islamists; supported by Saudi Arabia; partially integrated/ closely coordinated with SMC	37,000
Syrian Islamic Front	Conservative Salafists; funded by wealthy private Arab donors; nationalist; cooperates with SMC	13,000
Independents	Nine separate "brigade alliances"; outside FSA but coordinated with it	15,000+
Al-Nusra Front	Syrian and foreign jihadist fighters; some local cooperation with SMC subunits, increasing friction and fighting between the two	6,000

aid moderates lead to the dissolution of moderate rebel groups and drive the most determined Asad opponents to join the more radical groups. The current disregard of moderate forces evokes the Carter administration's failure to embrace Anastasio Somoza Debayle's non-Communist opposition in Nicaragua in 1979 before the triumph of the Sandinistas became a foregone conclusion. Ignoring warnings from Venezuelan President Carlos Andres Perez that "hands off" meant handing victory off to more radical forces, Carter dithered. The result was a decade of Communist rule in Nicaragua, the devastation of the country in continued civil war, and the Iran-Contra scandal in the United States.[34]

Empowering the SMC begins with unifying the flow of resources to the various rebel groups. As Sofer and Sofroth put it:

> *The competition for limited resources within the Syrian Opposition Coalition and the SMC—exacerbated by informal funding streams and factionalism—poses the most immediate risk to the effort to create a cohesive, national Syrian opposition that could immediately step in and fill the ensuing security vacuum if and when the Assad regime falls. . . .* [I]*ncreased materiel support and lethal aid to the rebels should be contingent on better organization by the opposition in order to limit the potential for a proliferation of weapons. Without a stronger mechanism by the SMC to distribute supplies and arms, it is unlikely that directly arming the opposition will contribute significantly to the anti-Assad effort. But failing to provide the Syrian Opposition Coalition and the SMC with any financial and materiel support will eliminate what little leverage they currently possess over the transition efforts.*[35]

As much as it would be a mistake to ignore the role of radical groups in the fighting, it would be an even bigger mistake to use their presence as a reason to stop supporting the moderates who remain in the field. The SMC represents a channel through which U.S. and Western resources can be assured of reaching groups with both operational effectiveness and reasonable political oversight. Perhaps most importantly, the SMC provides a potential national-level institution for control of armed groups if the Asad institutions collapse altogether.

The second reason Afghanistan-Syria analogies fail is that they rest on a false memory—that the United States gave weapons to radicals to fight Soviet troops, but the radicals targeted us as well. A typical account states,

"It originated with the [Central Intelligence Agency's] decision in the 1980s to arm the Muslim jihadists opposing the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan—the same jihadis, including Osama bin Laden, who morphed into al Qaeda. With the Soviets driven out, bin Laden used Afghanistan as a haven from which to plan and carry out the 9/11 attacks."[36]

What happened in Afghanistan during the 1980s and 1990s was, of course, more complicated than what the sound bites now commonly call "blowback." The Soviets withdrew as a result of war fatigue and a sustained campaign by a broad coalition of Afghan mujahideen groups that were by no means uniformly jihadist and anti-Western. The regime the Soviets left in place survived for 3 years, falling in 1991. In fact, Osama bin Laden and his nascent organization were insignificant players during the 1980s. Only when the mujahideen fell into division and disarray after 1991, and civil governance in effect collapsed, did the extremist Taliban and their al Qaeda allies become the dominant political and military force in the country. A modicum of continued U.S. aid and advice might have prevented the ascendance of the radicals. So the problem was not that our ill-advised proxy turned on us; it was rather that we got what we wanted (Soviet withdrawal), stopped paying much attention, and looked on passively while radical forces gradually seized control. There is real concern that Syria can become "Jihadistan" à la Afghanistan 1990s, but we must remember that it was not our support but the factionalism fueled by its discontinuation that brought the Taliban to power.[37] As Ahmed Rashid succinctly put it:

> *After providing billions of dollars' worth of arms and ammunition to the Mujahideen, the USA began to walk away from the Afghan issue after Soviet troops completed their withdrawal in 1989. That walk became a run in 1992 after the fall of Kabul. Washington allowed its allies in the region, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, free rein to sort out the ensuing Afghan civil war. . . . Washington's policy . . . was stymied by the lack of a strategic framework. The USA dealt with issues as they came up, in a haphazard, piecemeal fashion, rather than applying a coherent, strategic vision.*[38]

The idea that more direct or vigorous U.S. support to the anti-Asad opposition necessarily strengthens the jihadists therefore deserves closer scrutiny. Most of what we know about jihadist groups comes from the fringes of violent conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Caucasus, and the Arabian Peninsula—countries and regions undergoing the chaos of regime change, occupation, and civil war. Jihadism has been a response to particular stimuli in those places, usually a combination of external pressure and internal decline that leaves populations willing to tolerate or unable to restrain gangs of radical or nihilistic entrepreneurs of violence. Jihadism becomes a mobilization tool for resistance to the external stimulus; it is a code for resistance and protest rather than for rule.[39]

Middle Eastern history is replete with examples of groups that have drawn upon radical ideology to resist expropriation, depose despots, or seize power. Once the political question at hand was settled, more traditional patterns of rule and state behavior emerged.[40] In fact, it is the inconclusive, indeterminate nature of the current struggle in Syria that imbues jihadist groups with their appeal to potential jihadists and their tactical value to the opposition. The decay of existing Syrian institutions and the alienation of Syria from international institutions and norms only exacerbate the vulnerability of Syrian communities to manipulation or attack by such groups. If the U.S. goal is *not* to empower jihadists, remaining aloof from the conflict is the wrong choice. Helping the post-Asad Syrian regime from its formative stages will help the process of cobbling together a ruling coalition from an ethnically and politically diverse polity, and rebuilding the norms of responsible state behavior.

Iran, for its part, is leaving nothing to chance in Syria—it has consolidated an impressive level of control over the state and economy that Asad presides over. Iran announced $4.6 billion in credit arrangements for oil and supplies during 2013, and indicated willingness to continue such support in the future. Iran, Russia, and China together have

supported the Syrian economy at a pace of over $500 million per month during the fighting, and facilitated financial transactions to frustrate Western economic sanctions.[41] Iranian trainers have provided conventional and irregular military training to Asad loyalists and have been a driving force behind the creation of a 50,000 strong pro-Asad militia, the Shabiha. Iranian scientists have reportedly helped Asad with his chemical weapons program, while the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps has trained and assisted counterinsurgency efforts. Former Syrian officials state that "Syria is occupied by the Iranian regime. The person who runs the country is not Bashar al-Assad but [Quds Force commander] Qasem Soleimani."[42] As a Hizballah-linked Lebanese analyst assesses, "This counts as a victory for the group of Iran, Syria, Iraq and Hezbollah against the group backed by the United States."[43]

The genuine and quite troubling parallel between the U.S. historical record in Afghanistan and the current situation in Syria is the inherent instability of the U.S. commitment. The strategically salient point is not whether the groups we supported contained some radical elements, but rather that by supporting them tepidly or temporarily, we incurred culpability and future risk without maintaining control. In the words of former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad, "We stopped paying attention. This was a bad decision. Instability and war in Afghanistan provided fertile ground for terrorist groups to train and hide."[44] Ultimately, Afghanistan's dysfunctional internal dynamics generated new threats to U.S. interests across the spectrum from terrorism and international crime to human rights and cultural vandalism. Having picked a side, then proceeding to step aside, served us poorly.

Other equally inapt historical analogies have been used to argue against deepening U.S. involvement in Syria. Some point to regime change in Iraq and Libya as examples of the perils of intervention. Some argue that robust support to Asad's opposition would lead to massive direct intervention and a high bill in American lives and treasure.[45] This ignores the main difference between Syria and Iraq: Syrians already are fighting in large numbers to overthrow their dictator, so there is no call for U.S. or other international troops to do that work for them. Foreign forces and advisors are, on the other hand, fighting against the Syrian opposition on behalf of Asad.[46] In fact, Iran and Hizballah have developed a kind of foreign legion, including Iraqis, local Syrians, and Shia from Gulf countries to fight under their leadership in regional conflicts. Finally, the memory of Iraq is still fresh; neither political nor military leadership in Washington will sign up for a massive ground campaign. This does not mean that there are no options other than fully abstaining from action or invading and occupying as we did in Iraq. We are not limited to the binary options of all-out war or no use of military means at all; the historical effectiveness of limited military force used to deter or punish certain types of actions has a defensible record.[47]

Libya also is fresh in the public memory, and also a poor fit for the situation in Syria. As Juan Cole and Libyan scholar Husam Dughman have argued, the Libyan context was simpler than Syria's today.[48] That complexity can be used to argue against inaction, however, as well as it can be used to argue against action. The protracted nature of the fighting and the absence of pressure against Asad from world powers have helped sustain and sharpen the sectarian dimension of the conflict. Only when Sunnis believe they can achieve majority rule without slaughtering the minorities, and only when the Alawites and other minorities see guarantees against their slaughter should the opposition win, will a possibility for a negotiated solution emerge. Until then, Syria is more likely to look like Lebanon over the decades of civil war than it is to look like the overthrow of Muammar Qadhafi.

More Misconceptions

Misconceptions, errors, and gaps in addition to the faulty assumptions and analogies cited above have marked the debate over the U.S. role in Syria. One such error has been the conflation of al Qaeda with the Syrian opposition due to the fact that the Islamist al-Nusra Front has affiliated itself with al Qaeda's Iraqi branch to become the "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria." To be fair, the Syrian opposition political and military umbrella

groups, the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) and the SMC, could not keep al-Nusra out of Syria even if the country wanted to do so; it would be a useless fight as long as Asad remains in power. For now, al-Nusra fights effectively and shares the same enemies with the broader opposition movement. Those umbrella groups clearly have a political identity and postwar vision that have little to do with the al Qaeda or al-Nusra ideological program. As the leaders of the SNC and FSA, Ahmet al-Jarba and Salim Idris, respectively, jointly wrote in the *Washington Post*, "Dithering by the world's most powerful states empowers not only the vicious Assad regime but also the extremist agenda of the al-Qaeda-style terrorists seeping into Syria from the east. They are fighting not only Assad but, more important, also those who oppose Assad."[49]

The recent breach between SNC and FSA should be seen for what it is, a tension created by the failure of the SNC to parlay diplomatic recognition into additional resources. That incapacity should be a spur to Western action, not another reason for delaying. In the meantime, jihadists continue to work aggressively against more moderate forces, including assassinating secular rebel leaders, driving out their units, and seizing areas they had taken from the regime.[50]

Another misconception is the idea that the only vital U.S. interest that could warrant substantial intervention is an imminent attack or threat of attack by Syria against the United States or Israel. The National Security Strategy of 2010 suggests otherwise. The document identifies values and international order as key interests of the United States, right alongside security and prosperity. It also argues unambiguously that "for those who seek to advance their aims by inducing terror and slaughtering innocents, we say to you now that our spirit is stronger and cannot be broken—you cannot outlast us, and we will defeat you."[51] The historical American willingness to act decisively in support of values as well as narrow security interests has built and preserves the moral authority required to build and lead coalitions. Arguments over "redlines" laid down by the President are missing the point. It is not a single remark that determines that the United States is vested in the international order and affected by wholesale violations of international norms we help set, promote, and preserve. We are the leading power in the international order, and we justify that leadership based on value arguments as well as hard interests. This implies a moral commitment to act. We need not react on an identical scale to every violation of our security or values interests, but must recognize that avoiding substantive action risks our ability to galvanize collective action when the direct threat to our interests is higher. We ignore the world's expectation for coherent, galvanizing American action at our own peril.[52]

Inaction has its price. One can measure the cost in relationships, the balance of power, and changes to the strategic context. Turkey, host to nearly half a million Syrian refugees, has incurred significant financial expense, suffered car bombings along the border with Syria, and has seen its domestic politics roiled and embittered over the continuing crisis.[53] Jordan has more than a million Syrian refugees alongside its own population of six million and has seen a variety of social, financial, and security problems grow in size accordingly.[54] Lebanon has increasingly become a second front in Syria's war since Hizballah broadened its support to Asad to include combat troops, and the polarizing effect on Lebanese politics has been unsettling.[55] The specter of renewed Lebanese civil war as an extension of Syria's own war grows as the latter festers.[56] Israel's senior leadership remains concerned that Syria may attack Israel with conventional or chemical rockets should Asad sense the military or diplomatic fields shifting against him. The threat represents a subtle coercive power Asad has achieved in the region, a troubling precedent.[57] Another hidden cost of continued U.S. inaction or mixed messages on Syria is a possible loss of influence over Israel's approach to the Iranian nuclear program. Israel may well conclude that the United States lacks the nerve or political will to bring a rogue regime to account over weapons of mass destruction, which could remove American influence over the

timing and scope of a potential Israeli strike against the Iranian nuclear program altogether.

Vigorous but Limited Intervention?

It is not too late to reassess the costs and benefits of more robust action on Syria—and to instill more analytical rigor into both the public and closed-door debates on options. Rejection of those options last fall may have emboldened Asad and disheartened the nonjihadist opposition, but it did not decisively swing the war in Asad's favor. In fact, in 2014 we may see the opposition emerge more unified and resolute than during the past 6 months; in what may be an early sign of this, the FSA and Islamic Front have carried out combined attacks on the foreign jihadists of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant in early January.[58] The United States can play a constructive role in forcing Asad to the table, but only if the opposition and its regional supporters have more than token or rhetorical U.S. backing.

It is not a priori irresponsible to intervene or not intervene in a given crisis, but it is irresponsible to do either of these things in a confused or ineffective way.[59] Policymakers and commentators have not been asking the right questions about U.S. Syria strategy in public debate so far. Beyond the headlines and sound bites about jihadists and chemical weapons, we find a fairly simple proposition. Does the United States have a wider range of policy options to effectively influence the outcome in Syria than doing nothing or invading? Can it employ these options without empowering the worst elements of the opposition, without involving U.S. ground troops, and without widening the war? The first element (effectiveness) depends upon proper scoping of the desired effect and proper resourcing of the option. We do have options that are measurable and technically feasible—such as empowering the non-jihadist opposition through arms and funding, or enforcing a no-fly zone over Syria's borders with Turkey and Jordan. The second element (non-empowerment) can be addressed by ensuring that a strike is tied to increased diplomatic and material aid to Asad's opposition in Syria, assisted by neighboring regimes working with them. By empowering the extant non-jihadist opposition, rather than studiously ignoring the problem, can assure no al Qaeda affiliates or other terror groups will inherit the mantle of rule once it passes from Asad. The third element (no ground troops) is entirely within our power because we decide the level of our commitment. On the final element (widening conflict), it may be true that substantive U.S. action against Asad may agitate Russia, but the likely result of that will be pressure from Russia on Asad to cut a deal, not for Russia to come to his aid militarily. The United States should prepare for regional terror attacks in retribution, but that holds true whether or not we increase pressure on Asad. The political strains in neighboring states demonstrate that the risk of a widening crisis is present and potentially worse should we continue to do nothing than in the case of more forceful action. Unfortunately, we have seen neither a coherent proposal publicly articulated nor comparative analysis of the costs of action *and* inaction.

Asad and his patrons in Tehran and Moscow currently have the dominant position in shaping the outcome of the Syrian war. The moderate opposition has sufficient field fighting presence to contest Sunni regions and enough diplomatic presence to participate in international conferences. Without help, though, they will continue to dwindle in size and cede the initiative to more radical groups. Our allies in the region seek to frustrate or reverse Iran's growing power in the region, but will soon despair of concerted or coherent support from the United States. As we abstain, we do nothing to shorten the Syrian war or make its outcome more palatable, but we do ensure that the Syrian regime of 2015 and beyond will not count us among its benefactors.

Niccolò Machiavelli wrote, "A prince must imitate the fox and the lion, for the lion cannot protect himself from traps, and the fox cannot defend himself from wolves. One must therefore be a fox to recognize traps, and a lion to frighten wolves."[60] American strategic debate in recent months has focused only on how to be the fox while our long-term interests lie at the mercy of the wolves. Our strategic leaders and institutions owe it to the public and the national interest to do all possible to avoid prolongation of the slow-rolling disaster in Syria. A reasoned and well-informed debate should lead either to forceful action against Asad and his sponsors or to scaling back

our demands and expectations as we negotiate terms for Asad to stay in power and learn to live with the results. Prudence dictates that we conduct this strategic debate a second time, this time with greater rigor—especially given the very real possibility that Syria will not fulfill its chemical weapons obligations under the agreement reached in late 2013. For as Machiavelli further noted, "irresolute princes, in order to escape present dangers, follow that neutral way most times, and most times come to ruin."[61]

Notes

[1] The anti-Assad Syrian Observatory for Human Rights keeps the most systematic casualty count and is available at <http://syriahr.com/index.php?option=com_news&nid=13274&Itemid=2&task=displaynews#.UtRpCrFOnct>. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) tracker is available at <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>. The higher number on total displaced persons comes from "Treading Water on Syria," *The New York Times*, January 12, 2014, available at <www.nytimes.com/2014/01/13/opinion/treading-water-on-syria.html?partner=rssnyt&emc=rss&_r=0>.

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[4] For U.S. forces training Syrian rebels in Jordan, see Jennifer Griffin, "US training Syrian opposition forces in Jordan for months, sources say," *Foxnews.com*, March 25, 2013, available at <www.foxnews.com/politics/2013/03/25/us-training-syrian-opposition-forces-in-jordan-for-months-sources-say/>. For U.S. support to the Syrian National Coalition, see Anne Gearan and Karen Deyoung, "U.S. embracing new Syrian opposition group," *The Washington Post*, December 10, 2012; and Matt Spetalnick and Erika Solomon, "U.S. to Increase Support to Syrian Rebels," Reuters, June 14, 2013, available at <http://in.reuters.com/article/2013/06/14/syria-crisis-scenarios-idINDEE95D01620130614>.

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[6] John Mearsheimer, "America Unhinged," *The National Interest*, January 2, 2014, available at <http://nationalinterest.org/print/article/america-unhinged-9639>.

[7] The trend toward skepticism about U.S. willingness to do "the right thing" in international affairs comes from polling data, including the latest Pew International Global Indicators Survey. See Willam Wan, "Global Attitudes Reflect Shifting U.S.-China Power Balance, Survey Concludes," *Washington Times*, July 18, 2013.

[8] Doug Bandow, *Time for Congress to Decide on War in Syria* (Washington, DC: The Cato Institute, September 4, 2013).

[9] Ernest R. Dupuy and Trevor N. Dupuy, *The Encyclopedia of Military History*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 1033. Soviet support for the Republic included liquidating its opponents on the Left, perhaps more than helping defeat the Fascists.

[10] According to UNHCR officials, the war in Syria has created nearly two and a half million international refugees to date, with the number projected to climb to four million by the end of 2014. An additional five million Syrians have fled their homes for other parts of Syria, for a total of over nine million affected in a population of 23 million (nearly 40 percent). By comparison, in 1993 roughly 20 percent of the Somali population of eight million either fled abroad or to other parts of Somalia to escape fighting and famine. See UNHCR, "Syria Regional Refugee Response," January 14, 2014, available at <data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>; and *Somalia Human Rights Practices 1993* (Washington, DC: Department of State, January 31, 1994), 1, available at <http://dosfan.lib.uic.edu/ERC/democracy/1993_hrp_report/93hrp_report_africa/Somalia.html>.

[11] Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 1996), 17.

[12] During the several centuries of Ottoman rule over Syria, benign ignorance or prejudiced toleration of the Alawites was the norm. The major exception was Sultan Selim's slaughter of Anatolian Alevis during his 1514 war with the Shia rulers of the Safavid Empire. See Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 329; and Patrick Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries* (New York: Morrow, 1977), 167.

[13] Van Dam, 4.

[14] Lapidus, 653–655.

[15] Itamar Rabinovich, *Syria Under the Ba'ath, 1963–66: The Army-Party Symbiosis* (Jerusalem: Israeli Universities Press, 1972), 217.

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