



## ***No to Intervention in Syria***

By [DOUG BANDOW](#) on 6.8.12 @ 6:09AM

America is fighting too many wars already.

The cry for military intervention in Syria is rising to a fierce crescendo. Ivory tower warriors are demanding action. But the U.S. needs peace, not more wars.

Bashar al-Assad should go. Despite his Western education, he obviously inherited his father's repressive genes. Indeed, the regime is a family enterprise, with relatives holding other key positions. Far from being an agent of "reform," as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton once declared, he is willing to destroy his nation to retain power.

So far he is succeeding, despite global condemnation. Presumptive Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney declared that "it is far past time for the United States to begin to lead and put an end to the Assad regime." Naturally, he offered no credible means of doing so. Unfortunately, additional United Nations observers, diplomatic negotiations, and economic sanctions are unlikely to trigger a voluntary departure.

Assad's brutality does not set him apart in the world today. America's Saudi Arabian allies are no less committed to preserving their rule. North Korea has established a murderous system of monarchical communism. Central Asia is filled with despots of one sort or another. Until recently Burma fell into the same category.

While the death toll in Syria is horrid, on an international score it remains modest. The casualties from North Korea's labor camps and Burma's

ethnic wars are orders of magnitude higher. So were the number of dead in Sudan. The slaughter in Iraq --while America was there -- was much worse. Millions died as a result of Congo's agony, and fighting there still flares. Victor David Hanson of the Hoover Institution unkindly asked: "If intervening in Syria is to be a humanitarian venture, why would saving lives there be any more important than saving far more lives from far more dictators in Africa?"

The crisis in Syria unsettles its neighbors, but that, too, is no change. America's invasion of Iraq blew up one of the region's most important countries, sending geopolitical shock waves throughout the Middle East. Washington's threat of war against Iran also is unsettling, as is the Iran-Saudi cold war. Tremors from the Arab Spring have been felt around the Gulf, fostering revolt in Bahrain. U.S. expansion of the conflict in Syria also would be highly destabilizing.

Nor do war advocates have any idea what would follow allied intervention. We've seen this story before. NATO intervenes in Bosnia, leaving an artificial country riven by conflict among three hostile groups little inclined to work together two decades later. NATO intervenes in Kosovo, then stands by as its allies ethnically cleanse a quarter of a million members of the now disempowered minority. NATO intervenes in Afghanistan, where the war continues a decade later. The U.S. intervenes in Iraq, setting off a fratricidal civil war which kills a couple hundred thousand civilians and drives millions of people from their homes. NATO intervenes in Libya, extending the conflict and leaving the country in uncertain transition.

Unfortunately, the region routinely features cataclysmic social breakdowns. Washington's ouster of Saddam Hussein turned Iraq into a sectarian cauldron. Lebanon went through about 15 years of civil war starting in 1975. Yemen has suffered varying degrees of conflict for years. Islamist, ethnic, and other factions have risen in varying degrees in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia. Only Saudi-backed repression holds Bahrain together.

While most of those seeking to overthrow the regime might be moderate in temperament, they may win but not gain power. Jackson Diehl of the *Washington Post* observed: "The problem, as both administration officials and Syrian opposition leaders acknowledge, is that as the fighting

goes on -- and gets bloodier -- democratic liberals in the opposition tend to get pushed aside by Sunni Islamists who are more willing to die for their cause."

Indeed, the armed rebels already are surpassing the civilian opposition in importance. The United Nations reports that rebels torture and execute captured soldiers and government supporters, as well as kidnap civilians to use for prisoner exchanges or ransom. Al Qaeda or other jihadists likely were responsible for recent bombings in Syria -- Director of National Intelligence James R. Clapper warned the Senate Armed Services Committee that al-Qaeda operatives "have infiltrated" the opposition. The Crisis Group reported that the growing separation between armed insurgents and popular opposition "could produce an even more scattered armed opposition (in the absence of a clear collective project) with a more pronounced religious ideological underpinning (for lack of an alternative overarching narrative) and resorting to more extreme forms of violence (in light of the failure of all other options and as the image of a peaceful popular uprising gives way to the reality of a ruthless struggle to the bitter end)." In fact, history is filled with examples of moderate revolutionaries displaced by tougher cadres who possessed more guns -- France, Russia, Iran, and Nicaragua come to mind.

No wonder Assad retains genuine popular support. It is driven more by fear of the future than affection for the past, but it is real. Indeed, the atrocious killings in Houla most likely were committed by a pro-regime militia following an earlier rebel attack on a nearby Alawite village. Alawites have been known to wear *Christian crosses* for protection when going through Sunni villages. With both the regime and opposition increasingly using sectarianism for their respective ends, the situation is likely to worsen. Thus, minorities -- Alawites, Christians, Kurds, and others -- who make up about a third of the population have good reason to worry about their status in a new Syria. And they have no reason to expect that the allies would or even could protect them from hostile revolutionaries. Yet Washington elites continue to campaign for war. Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, observed: "There is always a military option, but that military option should always be wielded carefully." But why should there be a military option in Syria? Why go to war when the likely result is more harm than good?

There is no military intervention-lite. The Syrian government deploys a competent military. Providing more arms to the rebels, who already are receiving weapons through Qatar and Saudi Arabia, probably wouldn't make much difference. No one knows how many civilians want to fight -- the majority of army defectors have gone home, not joined the "Free Syrian Army" -- and the allies would have to train and sustain any large, organized rebel force.

"Humanitarian corridors" and "buffer zones" are all the rage, but would not be self-enforcing. They could be sustained only through military intervention. Nor would this approach resolve the conflict. The Syrian people don't want to leave their homes. They want a new government.

Aerial "shock and awe" isn't likely to work, at least at acceptable cost. It would have to be a "no drive" rather than "no fly" policy, which would be hard to enforce since the fighting in Syria is taking place in cities, not in deserts, as in Libya. Syria's air defenses are good enough take a toll on attacking aircraft.

If the allies didn't want to simply lengthen any conflict, they would have to invade. Although not all Syrian soldiers are loyal to the regime, enough are to guarantee genuine resistance to any ground invasion. The regime likely would use its chemical weapons against foreign invaders.

After unleashing the unpredictable dogs of war, the U.S. would be stuck with another occupation, since the allies could not easily just pack up and go home, irrespective of consequences. With wondrous naïveté *Washington Post* columnist Richard Cohen declared that "one way to avoid a disastrous outcome is for the United States to help organize the opposition and show that America is on the side of the protesters." Yes, that worked so well in Iraq and Afghanistan. Washington should learn the lesson of our previous Middle Eastern interventions: "Those whom we wished to help didn't seem to appreciate it," noted Victor Davis Hanson. Of course, there always are those who see war as a glamorous opportunity to do good. Or, more precisely, for others to do good. However, the U.S. government places Americans in uniform for "defense," that is, to protect American security, not conduct global crusades.

The lives of Americans should not be sacrificed for reasons other than safeguarding their own society. People once talked about making an exception to combat genocide. Now any nation in which some people are killed -- so long as their deaths receive media coverage -- is treated as a potential U.S. military target. Washington elites routinely urge intervention in foreign conflicts of only minimal strategic and modest humanitarian interest to America. There no longer is any serious standard for deploying the troops. The default position is war.

Washington's policy should be peace. America always should be prepared if war is forced upon it. But, as John Quincy Adams warned nearly two centuries ago, the U.S. should not go abroad "in search of monsters to destroy." The U.S. government's principal responsibility is to safeguard the American people -- their lives, constitutional liberties, and country. Washington should stay out of the looming Syrian catastrophe.