



## Stay Out of Other Nations' Civil Wars

*America knows that's the lesson of Syria.*

By: Doug Bandow – March 27, 2013

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The long-standing Syrian dictatorship is an abomination. The ongoing Syrian civil war is a tragedy. America should stay out.

A decade ago another administration began another war with a promise of enshrining Pax Americana on the Euphrates. Unfortunately, the result was a wrecked Iraq, empowered Iran, and discredited America. With the decade-long attempt to implant liberal democracy in Afghanistan finally coming to a close, Washington should reject proposals for another unnecessary war of choice.

It has been two years since a peaceful rising began against the government of President Bashar al-Assad. Despite hopes of former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and others that he was a reformer, Assad responded with brute force.

Even then the Assad family and many of his fellow Alawites were too invested in power to yield gracefully. Now, after an estimated 70,000 deaths, surrender is inconceivable. Noted Joseph Holliday of the Institute for the Study of War: "Fears of retribution have pushed conventional and paramilitary loyalists to converge upon the common goal of survival, resulting in a broadly cohesive, ultra-nationalist, and mostly Alawite force."

As the conflict grinds on the Assad regime is the likely loser, but the fractured opposition — whose competing groups have begun targeting each other — does not appear close to victory. Many more people will die before the fighting ebbs. And then the peace is likely to be anything but, as endless scores, ancient and new, are settled with blood.

This is precisely the sort of conflict America should stay out of. The case against joining the Syrian fratricide is simple yet overwhelming: Americans have nothing at stake that warrants going to war. War should be a last resort, employed for interests that are truly vital. War should not be just another policy choice for impatient internationalists and frustrated social engineers.

First, there is no impartial intervention. Entering the conflict is to take sides. Ronald Reagan, 241 Marines, and 17 American embassy personnel learned that lesson in Lebanon in 1983. Washington had proclaimed its commitment to peace by aiding one force in a multi-sided civil war. By becoming a de facto combatant the administration turned Americans into targets. Aiding Syria's opposition means becoming a participant in that conflict.

Paradoxically, aiding the resistance could drive some Syrians who desire a negotiated solution toward the government. The Financial Times recently reported: “As the civil war becomes ever dirtier, rebels’ actions are starting to mirror those of the regime.” In fact, opposition fighters increasingly kill regime soldiers and supporters, and have turned to crime, including kidnapping, to raise funds.

Second, there is no magic elixir that combines riskless intervention with speedy conquest. In Libya the allies provided the rebels with air support, but only enough to drag out the conflict for five months, during which time thousands, and perhaps tens of thousands, of Libyans died. By being prudent and cost-conscious the allies were not humanitarian, their professed objective.

The Obama administration has promised an additional \$60 million in non-lethal assistance to resistance forces, a palliative that offers only a modest boost to rebels. Some, including House Intelligence Committee Chairman Mike Rogers, House Foreign Affairs Committee ranking minority member Eliot Engel, and Senate GOP rising star Marco Rubio, advocate providing the rebels with weapons, which several Arab states and Turkey are doing already.

Doing so would require deploying personnel to ensure the arms get to their intended recipients. After all, who receives weapons now will help determine who has them when a new government is established. Even if the arms don’t go directly to bad guys — Washington has designated the increasingly important opposition group Islamist Jabhat al-Nusra as a terrorist organization because of its ties to al Qaeda—they still could leak to dubious groups, as in Libya. This prospect worries Gen. James Mattis, commander of U.S. Central Command, who testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee earlier this month.

Further, there would be pressure to train as well as arm combatants. And if doing so failed to accelerate a rebel victory, calls would grow for more aggressive intervention. Every additional “investment” would create increased demand for results lest American credibility suffer.

Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Carl Levin has joined the chorus for establishing a “no fly zone.” However, in Syria’s urban landscape such a step would be of only limited utility. It might satisfy the urge to “do something,” but would not materially change the balance of power on the ground. At the same time it would be an act of war that would expose allied planes to missile fire.

Those most serious about intervention, Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham, want to do everything. Their joint statement demanded: “provisions of arms to vetted Syrian opposition groups, targeted strikes against Assad’s aircraft and SCUD missile batteries on the ground, and the establishment of safe zones inside Syria.” Graham also argued that “you’ve got to get on the ground” to seize chemical weapons stockpiles.

Third, intervening would give Washington ownership for the conflict’s outcome without control. Americans have no moral obligation to support either warring side in an increasingly complex conflict — think Spanish Civil War, for instance. However, helping one side win would make Washington accountable for the winner’s conduct.

In Kosovo NATO went to war to stop ethnic cleansing and stood by as the victorious ethnic Albanians defenestrated a quarter of a million Serbs, Roma, and others. In Syria the potential for a violent breakdown if the rebels triumph is even greater. Warned Holliday: "The remnants of the Syrian military and the powerful pro-regime militias are likely to wage a fierce insurgency against any opposition-led Sunni government in Syria if the Assad regime collapses." At the extreme, imagine Iraq redux.

Fourth, concerns over regional stability do not compel U.S. involvement. The war already is spreading violence and refugees to surrounding states. The conflict has become a Shia-Sunni proxy war in which Iran and Iraq (theoretically an American ally) are arrayed against Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey. Israel has struck inside Syria to prevent weapons shipments to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Instability already is here.

The good news is that the Middle East routinely muddles through despite persistent instability of this sort. A fractured Syria is a mess, but not as threatening as Iran. Israel and Turkey certainly can cope. Lebanon is in greater danger, but maintaining its equilibrium cannot justify making Syria's instability America's own. The duty of the U.S. government is to protect the stability of this nation, which means not jumping into irrelevant and unpredictable wars.

Fifth, taking out Assad would not solve the problem of Iran. Assad's fall would be a blow to Tehran, but would not be fatal for a regime that has survived internal political dissension and external economic pressure. In fact, embattled Iranian leaders may escalate the Shia-Sunni battle elsewhere, such as in Bahrain. Moreover, the loss of its ally could increase Tehran's determination to create nuclear weapons as the final weapon for self-defense.

Sixth, contrary to the conventional wisdom, Syria's chemical weapons offer no meaningful "red lines." (For instance, Rep. Rogers advocated that "we respond with swift and devastating military force" to any use or planned use of chemical weapons.) Despite their fearsome reputation, chemical weapons are difficult to use, especially by terrorists in faraway lands. Weapons leakage if the Assad regime lost control would pose a greater worry for Syria's neighbors, but that is primarily their, not America's, problem. In fact, this prospect warrants serious contingency planning among Israel, Turkey, and Jordan.

Nothing would change if Assad used chemical weapons against rebel forces. Chemical agents only seem more horrific than simpler killers: Bullets and explosives already have killed some 70,000 Syrians. It is not in America's interest to give Damascus an opportunity to deploy chemical weapons against U.S. military forces by intervening.

Seventh, undermining the regime makes weapons leakage of all sorts more likely. If the status of Syria's chemical arsenal greatly concerns the administration, the latter should rethink its commitment to Assad's overthrow. U.S. officials might decide the benefits of his ouster outweigh the risks, but Washington must set priorities.

Eighth, the steadily rising death toll in Syria is a warning against, not an invitation for, American intervention. The human cost is horrid, but still far below those in Liberia, Rwanda, Burundi, Congo, or Sudan, conflicts which the West watched without ever

seriously considering action. Or in Iraq, which the U.S. invaded, ultimately leading to mass carnage: estimates of civilian casualties vary widely but over 200,000 seem likely.

Moreover, U.S. intervention would more likely transform than end the bloodshed. If the victors started killing the losers, would Washington intervene? And what if Syria cracked open as religious and ethnic minorities sought to create their own statelets? With the rise of radical Islamist factions the violence could transcend the borders of traditional Syria. In fact, the Los Angeles Times reported that the CIA already is considering Islamist Syrian opposition leaders for possible drone strikes. Long experience demonstrates that war is a dubious humanitarian tool.

Ninth, Washington has no idea how the conflict will end. There are a number of possible outcomes, most of them bad. Yet the U.S. government has done a bad job of late predicting the results of similar conflicts. There's no reason to believe that Washington would be more successful in manipulating events in Syria than in Somalia, Kosovo, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

Like good trial attorneys who only ask questions to which they know the expected answers, statesmen should only intervene in wars for which they know the expected outcomes. That may not be possible in a genuine war of necessity, but the last one of those for America, and the only one in the 20th century, was World War II. Syria doesn't come close.

There is no good outcome in Syria. More people will die before the war comes to a close. However, the Obama administration should not compound the tragedy by intervening in another conflict not America's own. The worse it gets there, the more reason for Americans to keep their military here.