



Americans for Permanent War: Target Syria

By **DOUG BANDOW** on 3.12.12 @ 6:08AM

The case against U.S. military intervention in Syria.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his family have turned his government into an essentially criminal enterprise. For more than a year Syrians have been attempting to overthrow the system.

By some estimates 7,500 people have died. Defections from the military have led to creation of a small "Free Syrian Army." Regime opponents also have turned to terrorism. With no resolution in sight, the country is sliding toward civil war. Like King Louis XIV President Assad might say, "Après moi, le déluge."

In America the usual suspects have begun beating the war drums. Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham urged arming the Syrian opposition. More recently McCain called for air strikes against Syria and berated the military for its caution in "standing on the sidelines." Similarly, the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page urged establishment of a no-fly zone in Syria, waving aside all opposition.

Others have taken up the cry. For example, Matthew Brodsky of the Jewish Policy Center urged military intervention in order to bring about "an end to the violence, the fall of the Assad regime and the creation of conditions for a stable democratic system." Roger Cohen of the *New York Times* called for arming the Syrian opposition and establishing "a rough equality of forces." Steven A. Cook of the Council on Foreign Relations endorsed military action so as not to leave "Syrians to their fate." Former Obama aide Anne-Marie Slaughter suggested protecting "civilians through buffer zones and humanitarian cordons around specific cities, perhaps accompanied by airstrikes against Syrian army tanks moving against those cities."

However, mere possession of the world's most powerful military does not mean that it should be used irrespective of interests, circumstances, and consequences. Observed Marc Lynch on Foreign Policy online, "Risky, costly foreign policy decisions can not simply be taken to express moral outrage."

The *Journal* grandly declared that "the U.S. has a strategic interest in Syria's future," but where is that not the case? A who's who of neoconservative analysts wrote an open letter asserting that "The Assad regime poses a grave threat to national security interests of the United States," but what interests are those? Syrian support for Hamas and Hezbollah is a problem for Israel and Lebanon, not America. Damascus is allied with Iran, but that relationship is inconvenient, not threatening, to the U.S. Assad's collapse would weaken Iran, but making Tehran feel more encircled would increase its incentive to pursue nuclear weapons. Cohen desires "payback" for Syria "allowing al-Qaeda fighters to transit Syria to Iraq." However, the Iraq invasion put U.S. troops on Syria's border with talk in Washington of enforcing regime change in Damascus. The Assad regime responded rather as Washington had by supporting armed insurgents in Cuba, Afghanistan, and Nicaragua. The U.S. might have claimed a *casus belli* at the time, but not now, months after leaving.

Humanitarian instincts urge action. But war is no delicate tool for sculpting new societies. War means killing and destroying. The consequences usually are far worse than expected -- remember Iraq's famous "cakewalk." Even the "best" American interventions are not particularly good, like Bosnia, Haiti, Kosovo, and Somalia, which left ethnic cleansing, violence, instability, and terrorism in their wake.

There is no good answer in Syria. No doubt Assad should go. However, last year's homegrown Egyptian revolution has turned ugly. The military authorities look little different than the Mubarak apparatchiks they replaced, Islamists captured the vast majority of parliamentary seats in recent elections, Coptic Christians have come under increasingly violent attack, and Israel is less secure.

The results of recent Western military intervention are even worse. George W. Bush's "splendid little war" against Iraq wrecked that nation, setting off a conflict that killed perhaps 200,000 people, wounding and otherwise traumatizing far more, forcing as many as half of Iraq's Christians from their homes, many to Syria, and empowering Iran. Intervention in Libya prolonged the civil war, killing thousands of Libyans, and so far has resulted in human rights violations, occasional armed conflict, enhanced Islamist influence, and an international market in stolen weapons, with liberal democracy still but a faint hope for the future.

The outcome could be far uglier in Syria. The Assad regime has real support. Despite some defections, the military and security forces remain largely united. Many Syrians still support Assad as the lesser evil.

The Alawites know that a successful revolution would threaten not just their privileges but their lives. Christians, Druze, and other religious minorities fear increased persecution, as in Iraq and Egypt. Rima Haro, a Syrian Christian and Middle East expert now living in Sweden, said: "It will be Iraq or Egypt all over again."

Kurds are divided, with some tacitly backing the government, which for years supported the Kurdistan Worker's Party and its attacks into Turkey. Many middle class Sunnis, especially in business, back the regime and stability over their co-religionists and revolution. The stage is set for a potentially bloody civil war. American military action would not change that. A no-fly zone would be ineffective against a government that has not used helicopters or aircraft. Washington would have to become a direct combatant, launching attacks on the ground against tanks, artillery, army formations, government installations, and even leadership positions.

U.S. intervention obviously could tip the balance, but Gen. Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, warned that Damascus has a competent air defense system -- five times the air defense of Libya, covering one-fifth of the terrain" -- which could make air action more "challenging." Moreover, the urban warfare that characterizes the Syrian struggle is far less amenable to air strikes than desert combat in Libya. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta warned of "severe collateral damage." Thousands more Syrians likely would die, many as a result of American bombs.

An implosion of the state and military also could have far more serious consequences than in Libya. Damascus possesses abundant supplies of biological and chemical weapons, including cyanide, mustard gas, and sarin nerve agents. The consequences of their use by the regime and "leakage" to terrorist groups could be catastrophic.

Yet foreign jihadists have begun to join the opposition. The Jordanian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood called for holy war against the Assad government. Sunnis have begun organizing in Iraq's west. Karim Emilie Bitar of the French Institute of International and Strategic Studies opined that the proportion of foreigners was "likely to grow now that Qatar and Saudi Arabia have openly announced that they favor militarization of the Syrian revolution." Moreover, al Qaeda head Ayman al-Zawahiri recently called for jihad in Syria and al Qaeda (Iraq) fighters apparently have begun to arrive in Syria. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper

blamed the latter for recent suicide bombings in the cities of Aleppo and Damascus.

Even in "victory" there would be no reason to expect creation of a liberal, democratic regime dedicated to reconciliation and harmony. America rarely likes the results of the Middle Eastern elections it champions -- think Hamas in Gaza as well as recent polls in Egypt and Tunisia. Noted Daniel Larison in the *Week*: "Each time popular, elected governments have replaced authoritarian regimes in the region in the last decade, the new government has tended to be more sectarian, less secular, and generally worse for religious minorities than the one that preceded it."

Nor would peaceful elections necessarily follow U.S. military action. The Syrian opposition is badly divided -- Secretary Panetta pointed to some 100 separate opposition groups -- and liberal-minded humanitarians may lose out to tough-minded soldiers after a long, wearing struggle in which visions of revenge supplant those of sugar-plums in most people's heads. The horrible specters of Lebanon and Iraq beckon.

American forces might not be alone in any conflict. Sen. McCain declared: "Increasingly, the question for U.S. policy is not whether foreign forces will intervene militarily in Syria. We can be confident that Syria's neighbors will do so eventually, if they have not already. Some kind of intervention will happen, with us or without us." None of Damascus' neighbors have signaled their support for direct military intervention but if so why pour U.S. forces into the cauldron? If Syria's neighbors are willing to take out the Assad regime, let them.

Anne-Marie Slaughter understandably fears the spillover effect, a civil war that becomes "a proxy war between Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and/or at least some NATO countries on one side against Iran, Russia, Hezbollah, and possibly Iraq and Hamas on the other." But this is likely to occur even with American involvement. Just look at Afghanistan, where Pakistan has been playing the game for decades, with and without American involvement. This is another very good reason to stay out.

Washington obviously is filled with ivory tower field marshals eager to send others off on glorious crusades. But unleashing death and destruction should not be viewed as just another policy option.

Humanitarian intervention, once touted as necessary to stop genocide, now is routinely proposed to stop even small conflicts. Tragically, deaths in the thousands are common around the world and offer no meaningful standard for intervention. Should Washington have attacked Turkey when it conducted a far more costly and brutal campaign against Kurdish separatists? The slippery slope is slippery indeed.

Moreover, the U.S. would have to act without international sanction. It is one thing to war unilaterally to defend America. It is quite another to initiate another illegal attempt at international social engineering. And every time Washington acts lawlessly it loses credibility to criticize other states -- say China or Russia -- for doing the same.

Finally, Americans cannot afford to continue a policy of promiscuous military intervention. Washington's authority and resources are increasingly limited. The best way to husband them would be to avoid unnecessary wars -- starting with Syria.