



Former Sen. Richard Lugar stresses diplomatic options in Syria

Barb Berggoetz

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During a debate Tuesday night, former U.S. Sen. Richard Lugar, R-Ind., stressed diplomatic solutions involving other countries with an interest in Syria, rather than U.S. military action, to resolve that country's civil war.

"The future might not be a single state in Syria," the foreign policy leader said on a panel of national policy experts at UIndy's inaugural Richard M. Fairbanks Symposium on Civic Leadership.

Leading diplomatic efforts and offering humanitarian aid offers the greatest opportunity for America to act, said Lugar, a UIndy political science professor. While it is hard to watch 100,000 people die, he said, putting U.S. troops in the country "would be a disaster."

Former U.S. Rep. Lee Hamilton, D-Ind., the moderator for the discussion, called Syria a "chaotic, confusing, challenging country" where a human tragedy has unfolded with more than 100,000 people killed and 6 million displaced.

In a mid-September deal, U.S. and Russian diplomats set a timetable for eliminating Syria's chemical weapons by mid-2014. The agreement came after an Aug. 21 chemical weapon attack that the U.S. thinks was carried out by the government of Syrian President Bashar Assad. The attack killed more than 1,400 people.

Charged with debating whether action in Syria was America's "least bad option," none of the panelists called for American troops on the ground to help resolve the bitter civil war in the country — just twice the size of Indiana but with 3½ times the population. But they differed somewhat on what America's involvement should be.

“We cannot fix Syria,” said Joshua Landis, director of the Center for Middle East Studies and the University of Oklahoma. “America cannot adjudicate the civil war. Staying out of the conflict is probably the best thing we can do.”

But Robert Zarate, policy director at the nonpartisan Foreign Policy Initiative in Washington, D.C., said what worries him the most is the lack of clarity in the U.S.’s mission in Syria now. Arming Syria’s rebels just enough to have them not lose is not a coherent policy, he said.

While Zarate hopes the efforts to destroy chemical weapons will work, he’s not at all optimistic that will happen. If America doesn’t take some steps to help resolve the civil war, he said, the risk is Syria will become more of a magnet for terrorist groups, and that could be worse and negatively impact America’s allies in the region.

Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, where he specializes in foreign policy, urged America to stay away from supporting any particular military outcome and avoid giving weapons to groups and expect a certain result.

“As you commit yourself, it’s very hard to step back,” he said. “This is a geopolitical catastrophe. To stay out is not a good solution, but getting involved is worse.”

While panelists were hopeful the chemical weapons agreement will be successful, they agreed that it will take a long time to completely resolve the situation in Syria and that bloodshed will continue for some time.

“You will have a fractured Syria and continued violence,” Bandow said. “Syria reminds us that authoritarian, multiethnic states are very fragile.”

The two-day symposium continues Wednesday with a series of discussions and presentations on issues facing local leaders and the seemingly lost art of civility in political discourse. The symposium is presented by UIndy’s Institute for Civic Leadership & Mayoral Archives, in partnership with Indiana Humanities and with support from the Fairbanks Foundation.