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Waging War Against Syria: Madness On The Potomac

By [DOUG BANDOW](#)
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The U.S. faces no serious military threat today, yet is constantly at war. Today U.S. naval vessels are clustering in the Eastern Mediterranean, with Syria the latest target.

Traditionally, Washington did not look for wars to fight. The government's overriding duty is to protect the American people — their lives, liberties, prosperity and nation.

Measured on this scale, there is no cause for entering the bloody Syrian imbroglio. The regime has little capacity to harm the U.S. or to resist the overwhelming retaliation that would occur in response to any attack. Syria's chemical weapons have little more utility than high explosives and nothing close to the killing capacity of nuclear weapons, possessed by Washington in abundance.

The possibility of radical Islamist insurgents gaining control over territory is more worrisome, but is most likely in the event of U.S. intervention against the Assad government. The conflict has important regional overtones, but friendly states should deal with the consequences. Washington should not act as the globe's 911 number, putting Americans at risk whenever someone somewhere calls.

Of course, Syria's civil war is a tragedy. Yet history is filled with awful conflicts. Civil wars may be the worst, often with few genuine good guys.

The rebels are united only by their opposition to Assad. Some groups have ended up at violent odds with one another, and the strongest factions appear least interested in a liberal, democratic future for Syria and most interested in using Syria as a vehicle for attacks on Americans.

Nor is the contest likely to end after the first extended round. If Assad survives, he still might never re-establish control over the entire country. If the rebels win, they're likely to engage in a new round of fighting for dominance. Moreover, there is likely to be even more score-settling with those who backed the regime or remained neutral.

The last argument for intervening in Syria is the regime's apparent use of chemical weapons. "Apparent" because, while Damascus has no moral compunctions about slaughtering its opponents, the Assad regime has no obvious reason to use such small quantities of chemical agents — enough to spark international intervention, but too little to achieve any useful military purpose.

In contrast, insurgents have an incentive to use captured supplies in an attempt to draw in the West.

Assume, however, the regime used chemical weapons. The best U.S. response would be no response. First, President Obama has no legal authority to strike, absent an imminent threat, without congressional approval.

Second, the use of chemical weapons does not justify war. Syria is not a party to the claimed "international consensus" against chemical weapons, having never joined the Chemical Weapons Convention.

Secretary of State John Kerry calls chemical weapons "the world's most heinous weapons." Actually, nuclear weapons, of which America has the largest arsenal, are far more destructive. While classed as weapons of mass destruction, chemical agents are difficult to deploy and not uniquely deadly. At least 99% of World War I's battlefield dead were caused by other means.

The last argument for war is credibility. If the president doesn't back up his threat, who will take him seriously in the future? It's a fair contention, except that U.S. presidents routinely make threats on which they don't make good. To take military action on behalf of peripheral interests would be irresponsible even if doing so marginally enhanced U.S. credibility.

Now might be Obama's last chance to say no before heading down the famed slippery slope. Half-steps will effectively commit the U.S. even without a conscious decision being made.

Washington should erase the chemical "red line" and in the future put U.S. credibility on the line only when substantial U.S. interests are at stake. It is not in America's interest to get involved in a conflict that looks to be a toxic mix of Lebanon, Somalia, Iraq and Libya at their worst. Washington will make far more enemies than friends, and will find it hard to exit no matter how gingerly it enters.

Americans are opposed to intervention. Nor is it in the president's political interest to drag the country into war. George W. Bush's presidency is forever defined by the Iraq war, which sucked the life out of his domestic agenda. So, too, it will be for Obama if he embarks upon another unnecessary war against a Mideast Muslim country.

The possession, and apparent use, of chemical weapons by Damascus reinforces the case against U.S. intervention. The administration should draw only one red line: against involvement in the Syrian civil war.

- Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and former special assistant to President Reagan.