



## Obama Struggles With Syria Decision

*Americans aren't eager for new Middle East engagement*

By REBEKAH METZLER

As violence continues to rage in Syria, President Barack Obama faces tough decisions on how to press forward, experts say, but largely lacks public pressure to act.

Though some have criticized Obama for not taking a more overt and aggressive stance in the civil war where more than 100,000 people are estimated to have been killed, his personal reticence is enabled by the American public's war weariness, says Doug Bandow, senior fellow at the Cato Institute. But the conflict still has the potency to damage Obama's legacy. Like many presidents, Obama's White House agenda didn't include involving U.S. troops in new military endeavors in the Middle East.

"I think it could wreck his presidency," Bandow says. "[The idea of] trying to push his domestic agenda and start a war...I think he looks at this with horror. The Iraq War ruined [George W. Bush's] presidency."

Bandow also says Obama committed an error when he claimed the use of chemical weapons was a "red line" that should not be crossed, especially since Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forces are suspected of employing chemical weapons on multiple occasions.

"What has happened is that the president has kind of boxed himself in by talking about chemical weapons as a red line," he says. "This has been a horrendous struggle – so really if someone uses unconventional weapons after so many have been killed by conventional ones, what's the point? On the ground it doesn't look like that line means a lot."

So far, Obama has moved ploddingly to increase the U.S. role in the region and resisted calls from Sens. John McCain, R-Ariz., and Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., to move more aggressively.

"As difficult as the problem is, this is something that is going to require America's attention and hopefully the entire international community's attention," Obama told CNN's Chris Cuomo in an interview Thursday. "But what I think the American people also expect me to do as president is to think through what we do from the perspective of 'What is in our long-term national interests?'"

Obama was an outspoken opponent of President George W. Bush's decision to enter into war in Iraq and has moved to conclude campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan since taking office. Meanwhile, his administration has tried to negotiate turbulent times in other Middle Eastern countries, including in Libya and Egypt and taken criticism from abroad for not being a more active participant in the region, something Obama acknowledged.

"There's a reason why, when you listen to what's happened around Egypt and Syria, that everybody asks what the U.S. is doing," he said. "It's because the United States continues to be the one country that people expect can do more than just simply protect their borders."

But the costs of war weigh heavily upon him, Obama added.

"Every time I go to Walter Reed and visit wounded troops, and every time I sign a letter for a casualty of that war, I'm reminded that there are costs and we have to take those into account as we try to work within an international framework to do everything we can to see Assad ousted...and to try to restore a sense of a democratic process and stability inside of Egypt," Obama said.

Bandow says even though some Republicans are trying to make hay out of his lack of follow-up on the "red line" remark, Obama's domestic political fortunes likely remain untarnished thanks to the public's lack of interest in a new conflict.

"This is a line he should not have drawn and he did. Republicans will continue to bash him, but even on the right, there's not a lot of support for this," he says. "[And] I don't think the Democrats will get hurt at the polls in 2014 if he doesn't go into Syria."

A Gallup survey in June showed 54 percent of U.S. adults opposed the Obama administration's decision to help arm Syrian rebels, with 37 percent approving the move. But an earlier poll also showed that only 49 percent of Americans were paying attention to the conflict.