



## Contrary to Theresa May's Comments, the West Is Interfering in Syria's Civil War

Ted Galen Carpenter

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Shortly after the air and missile strikes that U.S., British and French forces launched against the Syrian government's alleged chemical weapons sites, British Prime Minister Theresa May insisted that the goal simply was to degrade the ability of Bashar-al Assad's regime to use such weapons in the future and to bolster the longstanding international taboo. "These strikes are about deterring the barbaric use of chemical weapons in Syria and beyond." May stressed: "This was not about interfering in a civil war. And it was not about regime change."

Her comment simply lacks credibility. There is no such thing as a neutral military intervention by outside powers. Even if the intervenors do not intend to affect the wider political context, the act of attacking one party in a civil war automatically works to the disadvantage of that party and strengthens the position of its adversaries. President George H. W. Bush's deployment of U.S. troops in Somalia in late 1992 did not seem to have an underlying geopolitical purpose. The situation in that fractured country was indeed dire, with tens of thousands of people already starving. Washington's relief effort aimed at using the U.S. military to distribute food and take other measures to ease the widespread suffering. It fit the definition of a truly humanitarian military mission.

Nevertheless, the moment U.S. troops arrived, they inevitably began to affect the balance of power among the contending militias. Some of those factions soon resented the American presence, and sporadic armed clashes erupted between their fighters and U.S. troops. That dynamic culminated an intense firefight in the capital, Mogadishu—the "Blackhawk Down" episode in early October 1993 that claimed the lives of 18 U.S. Army Rangers and more than 300 Somalis.

In the case of Syria, Western officials cannot even invoke the defense of not wanting to meddle in that country's larger political and military struggles. Within months after demonstrations erupted against Assad's rule in 2011, Washington and its allies began to aid the insurgency. Washington helped organize an ad hoc collaboration of some 60 nations (primarily a combination of Western and Sunni Muslim powers) to do so. That group, which became known as the Friends of the Syrian People, met in Tunis in late February 2012 to formulate aid plans, including the provision of "emergency" supplies to refugees and "increased training" for Syrian opposition leaders. In her memoirs, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that although the United States was "not prepared to join such efforts to arm the rebels," she did tell the Saudi-led

coalition that Washington would supplement their efforts by providing nonlethal assistance. By September 2013, the CIA was indisputably providing weapons to insurgent forces.

U.S. support for so-called moderate rebels has increased inexorably since then. In addition to aiding existing factions, the Obama administration asked Congress in June 2014 to authorize \$500 million to vet, train, and equip a new force of moderate fighters. Officials spent all of those funds over the next 14 months, but managed to graduate only a few dozen fighters, most of whom quickly defected or surrendered to more radical Islamist forces.

In light of such a lengthy track record of Western aid to anti-Assad insurgents, it is preposterous for U.S. and Western European leaders to claim that they have no intention of interfering in Syria's internal strife. From the beginning, their goal has been to help oust Assad from power. Interference in the internal affairs of another nation is objectionable on principle, but it also is strategically unwise in the case of Syria. The reality is that there are very few "moderate" Syrian rebels in any Western meaning of that term. The few secular, democratic types who do exist are largely ineffectual militarily. Militant Sunni Islamists dominate the ranks of the anti-Assad insurgents. With the decline of ISIS, the most powerful faction is Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (formerly the Nusra Front, Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate).

By degrading the Syrian government's military assets with the latest attacks, as well as the missile strikes following the earlier chemical weapons incident in early 2017, the West risks enabling the Islamist rebel coalition to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat in the Syrian conflict. Assad is assuredly a corrupt and brutal ruler, but to help empower such a successor regime is hardly in the West's best interest. Yet contrary to May's statements about not interfering in Syria's struggle, a rebel victory still appears to be the goal of the Western powers.

*Ted Galen Carpenter is senior fellow for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute.*