



DEBATE

Syria: The Wages of Loose WMDs?

By: Doug Bandow – October 22nd, 2012

The tragic Syrian civil war continues. President Bashar al-Assad is the most likely loser, but many more people will die before the conflict ends. Although the usual warhawks are beating the drums for U.S. intervention, Americans have nothing at stake which warrants joining another war in the Middle East. The U.S. military is not an answer to every international problem.

A Syrian implosion almost certainly would be messy. Of particular concern is the Assad regime's stockpile of chemical weapons (it also may have a limited supply of biological agents). However, for Washington the greatest danger would be their use in defending against direct American military involvement. Weapons leakage in the midst of regime collapse would be of much greater concern to Syria's neighbors.

Washington policymakers have trouble resisting the temptation to intervene. However, there is no answer in Syria to the question: how does it end? There's no reason to believe that intervening there would yield better results than in, say, Somalia, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

Nor can the U.S. afford to continue playing globocop. Being prepared to fight everywhere is why America accounts for roughly half of the globe's military outlays. While some conflicts, such as Libya, were relatively cheap, others, most obviously Iraq and Afghanistan, continue to drain the Treasury. Washington must pare back its military role, force structure, and budget.

The Syrian imbroglio, though tragic, has little direct strategic impact on America. Nor is there a compelling humanitarian argument for intervention. Despite significant civilian casualties, the conflict falls far short of genocide. Moreover, U.S. intervention would more likely transform than end the bloodshed, while sucking American forces into another long-term killing ground.

However, fear over Syria's chemical weapons remains. Thankfully, the U.S. would be an unlikely target of any which escaped the control of "responsible" authorities, whoever

they may be. Although classed as WMDs, chemical weapons are less fearsome than either their nuclear or biological counterparts. The former are less destructive, more difficult to use, and easier to counter. Americans probably have more to fear from a terrorist assault using anti-aircraft missiles stolen from Moammar Kaddafi's well-stocked military cupboard than escaped Syrian chemical agents.

Still, if the U.S. could easily sweep up Syria's arsenal, it should do so. But those clamoring for intervention offer no such plan. A ground invasion, the only certain means, is the one scenario under which the Assad regime likely would deploy the weapons—against America. Syrian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Jihad Makdissi warned his nation's WMD stocks "are meant to be used only and strictly in the event of external aggression against the Syrian Arab Republic."

Establishing a no-fly zone over the country or "safe" zones for refugees or fighters, or arming the opposition would only make Assad's fall more likely, *loosening* control over the chemical arsenal. However strong the justification for promoting the regime's overthrow is, Washington could not complain about the consequences if it chose to destabilize Syria.

The better plan would be consider options should the regime disintegrate. That might warrant an attempt to secure Syria's chemical weapons—but it should be launched by those nations which are closest and have most at risk. After all, should Damascus lose control over its WMDs, they are most likely to end up used nearby.

Israel has the greatest fears and capabilities. In fact, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said his nation was "ready to act" to prevent Syria's weapons from falling into Hezbollah's hands. Turkey also has much at stake—imagine Kurdish rebels gaining access to chemical weapons—as well as a competent military. Ankara seeks greater regional influence; it could achieve this end by helping to secure Syria's chemical weapons.

Fans of U.S. dominance or hegemony—usually disguised as general calls for American "leadership"—rue the idea of any nation anywhere acting outside of Washington's control. However, the U.S. has been bogged down by continuous war over minimal stakes for more than a decade. The federal government functionally bankrupt. Rather than attempting to micro-manage the world, Washington must not just allow but expect its populous and prosperous allies to take over responsibility for their own and their respective regions' security.

There is no good solution for the Syrian tragedy. Civil wars typically are the worst of conflicts. Syria's ethnic and religious divisions make the war unlikely to end well. But Washington lacks the ability to make things right.

Syria's possession of chemical weapons merely reinforces that case against American intervention. The problems and solutions primarily lie with regional parties, not the U.S.