



Debate on U.S. intervention in Syria exposes clash of worldviews, audience opposition to military action

By [Anastasya Lloyd-Damjanovic](#) • September 23, 2013

Researchers from two think tanks faced off in a debate on Monday over whether the United States should intervene in the ongoing Syrian civil war. The discussion included audience voting to gauge members' progressing reactions. While 43 percent of the audience initially voted against intervention, this number increased to 61 percent by the end of the debate, all while the number of undecided votes decreased.

Benjamin H. Friedman, a research fellow in defense and homeland security studies with [the Cato Institute](#), a libertarian think tank, argued that U.S. action in Syria would exacerbate the country's civil war, promote regional instability and generate domestic pressure at home for ever-more-costly interventions.

His remarks were consistently opposed by Tom Donnelly, a defense and security policy analyst at the conservative [American Enterprise Institute](#), who argued that an American exercise of power, following in the footsteps of the Bush administration's invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, is essential to restore the regional balance of power and to end the slaughter of Syrian civilians.

Audience members were provided with interactive mobile voting devices known as i>clickers. The i>clicker results showed opposition to intervention increased by the end of the debate, handing an easy victory to Friedman.

Friedman cast U.S. military intervention in Syria as a serious policy blunder that could bog the United States down in a doomed democracy-building project and fail to promote political stability or liberalism in the Middle East.

"It will not serve humanitarianism, it will not demonstrate U.S. credibility to carry out threats, to defend important allies or frighten enemies out of building nuclear weapons," Friedman said. "It is more likely

to exacerbate civil war and suffering in Syria, add to regional instability, further encourage Iran to build nuclear weapons and generate political pressure here for more costly action, which is also likely to fail.”

Painting a scene of sectarian discord, violence and fractious infighting among rebel forces, Friedman said the United States lacked the power or resources necessary to install a stable, liberal political regime there and rejected the claim that intervention would improve humanitarian conditions for Syrian civilians.

“U.S. military intervention is more likely to prolong Syria’s civil war than to end it,” Friedman said, noting that civil wars often result in harm to civilians by exposing them to direct violence, disrupting sanitation and health services and eroding national wealth. “And even if the rebels win, the chaotic outcomes I just described will not be conducive to human life in Syria. So I think if you want humanitarianism in Syria, you might advocate helping the Syrian government, because it is a government, and even a government that rules by appalling methods is better for life and health than the Hobbesian alternatives on offer.”

He also disputed the claim — made both by President Barack Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry in speeches earlier this month — that failing to act in Syria would damage U.S. credibility in the eyes of the international community.

“When it comes to reckless military action in that region, the United States’ credibility is strong to a fault, and that’s particularly true since the Iraq War. U.S. credibility also is not as brittle as our foreign policy elite in Washington like to say,” he said. “The credibility of our commitments is unlikely to be enhanced by piling up more dumb ones, especially the unpopular and intentionally, explicitly feckless military action that the president proposes for Syria, which may simply show the limits of U.S. resolve.”

The United States could help Syria in ways other than bombing the country, such as by harboring refugees, brokering a political settlement, pressuring Syrian leaders with sanctions or offering them safety if they do leave the country, Friedman added.

Dismissing Friedman as a “libertarian” in foreign policy matters and attributing current Middle Eastern dynamics to the “non-interventionist” policy of the Obama administration, Donnelly argued that the United States should intervene in Syria with ground forces to restore peace to a region that he claimed was unstable as a result of the ongoing American withdrawal from Afghanistan.

“What I’d like to do this evening is to help you all get over your feelings of hostility toward George W. Bush and to think differently about the Iraq War and the Afghanistan war because if I look at the Middle East today, and I compare it to what it was in 2008, it looked a lot better to me in 2008 than it does now,” he said. “Syria is the poster child for that and the most obvious example of it, but it’s not the only example of it.”

Identifying the restoration of a favorable balance of power in the Middle East as a prime strategic objective, Donnelly said that intervention should involve the removal of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, an extended occupation, reconstruction and efforts to prevent rebel forces from killing the

Alawite Shia minority to which Assad belongs. Such an effort would not cripple the American economy and would be worth the cost, he said.

“I’m not going to tell you that intervening in Syria in a way that would really make things better, make things more stable, is going to be cheap and easy and quick,” he said. “[But] it’s not going to be a disproportionate cost, because the rewards, the benefits, are going to outweigh the cost by a lot.”

In addition to securing U.S. strategic objectives, like general stability and secure energy flows, Donnelly said that U.S. intervention was imperative to preserve American credibility and to prevent Assad’s regime from permitting further atrocities.

“I don’t need to repeat the moral arguments because the Secretary of State made them very well — not simply about the chemical weapons line, but about the original red line, the ‘Assad must go’ red line,” he said. “To allow this portion of the world to witness a slaughter of this magnitude, and to let it go on, calls our moral conscience into question.”

Their remarks, punctuated by two question-and-answer sessions, drew active participation from the audience. The debate, entitled “Should the U.S. Intervene in Syria?” took place in the Whig Hall Senate Chamber and was moderated by Wilson School professor Aaron Friedberg. The event was jointly sponsored by the University chapter of the Alexander Hamilton Society and the American Whig-Closophic Society.