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Choosing between Two Evils in Syria

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The peaceful protests that first challenged Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria are ancient history. Today, the country is sinking into a brutal civil war. Assad is almost certain to lose, but the conflict will consume many more lives.

Meanwhile, Washington hopes to stabilize the nation once Assad disappears into history's great dustbin. However, this task has been complicated by the rebels' increasing brutality. Civil wars are notoriously hard to contain. Already, reported the International Crisis Group, "Large numbers of regime sympathizers and opponents have been killed." And last week, CNN obtained more videos of anti-Assad forces staging brutal executions of their opponents.

While the regime so far remains to blame for most civilian deaths—it possesses both capability (heavy armament) and will (to resist peaceful or violent change)—the longer the fighting goes on, the more divided the equities are likely to become. Warned ICG: "Over the course of this prolonged struggle, what initially were promising expressions of social solidarity increasingly have been soiled, as the conflict successively unearthed, worsened and became mired in the country's numerous divides and fault lines."

Indeed, fear has driven many of Syria's minorities to back Assad, an Alawite, whose Shia-related faith is seen as heretical by many Sunnis.

Unsurprisingly, Assad's coreligionists perceive themselves at greatest risk and form the core of the regime's support. Although they often have exaggerated sectarian threats, the danger is rising. Some rebel forces have rejected Alawites as recruits and targeted Alawite civilians.

For similar reasons, Christians and Kurds also have been more likely to either aid the regime or remain neutral. The defense minister killed by the recent Damascus terrorist bombing was a Christian. Although claims of violent persecution have been disputed, there is evidence that the resistance has targeted Christians. Moreover, the rising influence of jihadists and Al Qaeda among the rebels offers a frightening portent for the future.

Reported the *New York Times*: “The evidence is mounting that Syria has become a magnet for Sunni extremists, including those operating under the banner of al-Qaeda. An important border crossing with Turkey that fell into Syrian rebels’ hands [in mid-July], Bab al-Hawa, has quickly become a jihadist congregating point.” An increasing number of radicals appear to fight with the Free Syrian Army but for Al Qaeda. Christians look across the border to Iraq and see the disastrous consequences of another celebrated “liberation” from a secular dictator.

As casualties mount, pressure rises on both sides to battle more fiercely. At some point, surrender or coexistence will be seen as impossible. ICG pointed to “the same desperate thirst for revenge, the same determination to fight to the end” on both sides.

The latest rebel atrocities augur a brutal future. The Wall Street Journal reported on the wide circulation of “grisly video images” of the summary execution of at least twenty members of the prominent al-Barre family in Aleppo, which has ties to the Assad regime. The men apparently were captured as rebels overran their neighborhood. Several appeared to have been beaten. All were lined up against a wall and shot with machine guns. Explained Abdul-Jabbar al-Ughaidi, commander of the Free Syrian Army in Aleppo: “The time was convenient to do away with them.” The videos collected many expressions of online support.

Ironically, these actions came after members of the opposition concocted fake atrocities to create what Justin Raimondo of Antiwar.com called “another ‘Benghazi moment’—an incident so horrific that it would spark Western military intervention.” The practice is common. Perhaps the most celebrated modern instance is British propaganda about German conduct in World War I—the bayoneting of babies and rape of nuns, for instance, which never occurred. The Kuwaiti government in 1990 and Kosovo rebels in 1999 made similar claims, even though the egregious misconduct of the Iraqi and Yugoslav militaries was obvious without lying.

In July, Syrian rebels exaggerated their losses in the village of Tremseh to create the illusion of a massacre. The *New York Times* concluded that “the evidence available suggested that events on Thursday more closely followed the Syrian government account.” In May, the opposition promoted allegations of a massacre in the town of Houla with a photo of corpses taken in Iraq in 2003.

Atrocities both true and false should surprise no one. The consequences of civil wars and revolutionary conflicts—which often become civil wars—are rarely genteel. Even America’s revolution resulted in an exodus of Loyalists. The French Revolution turned into something far worse. The most notable twentieth-century revolutionary conflicts—in Russia, Spain and China—tore apart societies and engulfed neighboring peoples. In the multiple Yugoslav civil wars, victories by Croats and Kosovars led to the widespread killing and mass ethnic cleansing of Serbs. The ultimate humanitarian consequences of the Iraqi and Libyan wars remain to be seen.

Syria is looking similarly ugly. Rami Abdulrahman, head of the London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, observed: “Next time maybe more than 100 people killed. By anybody, the government or the rebels.”

The Obama administration and especially enthusiasts for direct military action should take note. If Washington intervenes, it will own the result. The Clinton administration armed Croats against Serbs; the former promptly launched a military offensive and drove tens of thousands of ethnic Serbs from their ancestral homes. President Clinton also cleared Kosovo of Serbian security forces, triggering mass ethnic cleansing of Serbs, Roma, Jews and non-Albanian Muslims. The George W. Bush administration defenestrated Saddam Hussein, unleashing civil strife in Iraq that killed some two hundred thousand people and destroyed the historic Christian community.

What if the U.S. helps blow up Syria? Washington will have no control over the outcome. But if the result is increased regional instability, terrorism and civil conflict, highlighted by brutal revenge killings, murder and ethnic cleansing of Alawites, and mistreatment of other minorities, the U.S. government will bear direct responsibility.

The rebels’ execution video may be the best antidote to the ongoing campaign to stampede America into war. Syria is a tragedy. But military intervention won’t change that. Washington should stay out.

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Image: [FreedomHouse](#)