

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Syria: Be Careful What You Wish For

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Calls are growing among both conservatives and liberals for a U.S.-led intervention—including possible military force—in Syria. As in the case of the 2011 Libya intervention, [some advocates](#) insist that the goal is to protect Syrian civilians from the onslaught of President Bashar al-Assad’s security forces. Others, though, are more candid and admit that the real objective would be to overthrow Assad’s regime. An open letter that fifty-six prominent conservative political and foreign-policy activists—including William Kristol, Max Boot, Elizabeth Cheney and other intellectual architects of the disastrous Iraq war—sent to President Obama in mid-February was a prime example. Although that letter cited humanitarian goals, the signers had a much broader objective, [arguing](#) that the Assad government “poses a grave threat to national security interests of the United States.” (Assad’s principal offense appeared to be his links to Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas.) The letter added that “immediate actions” should be taken to “hasten an end to the Assad regime.” Specific measures include establishing “safe zones,” from which Syrian security forces would be barred, and providing a “full range of direct assistance,” including

“self- defense aid” (i.e. weapons) to rebel forces. Proponents also emphasized that the option of direct U.S. military action must not be taken off the table. As the Libya episode demonstrated, the differing rationales are probably a distinction without a difference. Once the UN Security Council passed its resolution authorizing the use of force, the “humanitarian intervention” in Libya quickly turned into a campaign for forcible regime change. One would expect that an intervention in Syria—even one ostensibly for the protection of innocent civilians—would soon evolve in the same fashion.

There is no doubt that the Assad regime is brutal and repulsive. But before we embark on yet another regime-change crusade, it would be wise to pause and consider possible outcomes that might not be to our liking. Previous interventions in such places as Iraq and Libya have been notorious for undesirable, unintended consequences. Skepticism is warranted regarding calls for military involvement in Syria.

Western accounts of the bloodshed there are largely simplistic melodramas, with villainous Assad forces slaughtering innocent advocates of democracy. We’ve seen such grotesque oversimplifications of complex conflicts before, most notably during the 1990s [in the Balkans](#). The actual situation in Syria is murky, with an armed insurgency directed against the Assad government. Given the complex ethno-religious makeup of Syria, we need to be extremely wary about viewing the violence there as a Manichean struggle between good and evil.

Syria’s population is divided among Sunni Arabs (a little over half the population), Christians (about 10-12 percent), Alawites, a Shiite offshoot (also about 10-12 percent), Druze (about six percent), and various, mostly Sunni, ethnic minorities, primarily Kurds and Armenians. The Alawite Assad family has based its power for more than four decades on the solid loyalty of its religious bloc in a loose alliance with Christians, Druze and, sometimes, with one or more of the other, smaller ethnic groups. What we see today may be

largely a Sunni Arab bid to overthrow that minority regime—fueled in part because many devout Muslims consider Alawites to be heretics.

What is especially troubling is that while the Assad coalition is primarily secular, the ideological composition of the opposition is far more opaque. There certainly seem to be Islamist elements, although the extent of their strength is uncertain. The suicide bombings in the city of Aleppo in early February and other incidents also [suggest a possible al-Qaeda link](#).

At a minimum, such uncertainty ought to cause would-be U.S. and other Western crusaders to hesitate. Advocates of the Iraq intervention insisted that Iraqis would greet U.S. and coalition forces as liberators and strew their paths with rose petals. More than 4,400 dead Americans, more than 100,000 dead Iraqis, and some \$850 billion U.S. tax dollars later, it is painfully evident that such predictions were naive. Indeed, it is increasingly clear that even the basic goal of bringing democracy to Iraq is [slipping away](#). The regime of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki [grows more authoritarian by the day](#).

Likewise, the aftermath of helping Libyan rebels overthrow Muammar Qaddafi looks more and more troubling. One of the first actions of the new National Transitional Council was to begin implementing sharia law. [Fighting has erupted](#) in several places [between rival tribes](#), and reports of corruption and brutality by the interim government are on the rise.

Helping to oust Bashar Assad might be morally appealing, but we need to beware of unintended consequences. If the aftermath is a turbulent, unstable Syria with a new government heavily influenced by radical Islamist elements, we are not going to like the outcome. And unfortunately, as in the case of Iraq and Libya, the intellectual architects of such a policy fiasco will avoid taking any responsibility for their handiwork.