



What to do about Syria?

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The violence and danger in Syria have ratcheted up another notch this week. Hundreds of thousands in the rebel-held areas of Aleppo are cut off from food and water while the 1.5 million living in the government-held areas of the city have limited access to aid deliveries. The United Nation's top aid official called Aleppo the "apex of horror."

As the haunting image of the 5-year old Omran Daqneesh continues to circulate through social media, the volume of calls for American intervention to stop the killing has also intensified, coming from a wide range of world leaders, pundits, and editorial boards. What has been missing from these calls, however, has been any sort of discussion about what the American public believes should be done about Syria.

From the beginning of Syria's civil war, most Americans rejected the notion that the United States was responsible for stopping the bloodshed. In a May 2013 Gallup poll 68% of the public said the United States should not use military action in an effort to end the war, despite the fact that a majority also believed that economic and diplomatic means were unlikely to resolve the conflict.

Nor were Americans excited about lesser forms of intervention at that point; just 37% approved of the Obama administration's decision to provide military aid to the rebels fighting the Assad regime. Not even the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons generated widespread American support of military action – just 36% in a September 2013 poll supported the use of force "to reduce Syria's ability to use chemical weapons."

As the civil war morphed into a confrontation against the Islamic State, pollsters again asked Americans what they thought, and again most Americans were wary of getting too deeply involved. Though 60% said they supported the Obama administration's airstrikes against ISIS in a September 2014 survey, only 40% favored the prospect of sending ground troops to Iraq and Syria to fight the group. Over the next year as ISIS displayed its barbarity through beheadings and terrorist attacks and captured significant territory in Iraq and Syria, the number of Americans favoring the sending of ground troops rose only slightly – to 49% in a December 2015 poll (CNN/ORC Dec17-21), with the same percentage opposed. In the most recent available poll,

conducted in April 2016, the Pew Research Center found that 50% opposed sending U.S. ground troops to fight ISIS with 46% favoring the idea.

In short, much of the American public remains unconvinced by the two primary justifications for more aggressive intervention in Syria, despite the steady accumulation of atrocities, casualties, refugees, and calls for American action. As they attempt to build support for future American policies, politicians and pundits would do well to consider why this is so. In a recent article the *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof suggested that public reticence to get involved reflects a “harsh indifference” to the crisis and a failure to recognize the value of human life. The polls, however, suggest to the contrary that opponents of intervention have solid reasons.

In 2013 Gallup asked opponents of military action in Syria to explain their position. Forty-three percent answered either that the civil war was simply “none of our business” or that the United States was already involved in too many wars and needed to stop policing the world. Many also believed that military action was unlikely to work out as planned, that it would lead to more American casualties and could lead to retaliation down the road. Others felt that the United States had other more important priorities on the home front, including the federal debt.

Admittedly, the American public routinely displays ignorance about international affairs – political leaders should take care in taking guidance from public opinion. But at this point, it seems clear that the public’s reasoning reflects not indifference to Syria but instead a very strong reaction to the recent history of the United States in the Middle East. The use of American military force in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere has not only failed to produce peace and stability but has instead helped to unleash chaos and terrorism – all at a staggering cost in human lives and national treasure. Given this it seems entirely reasonable that Americans would be extremely reluctant to support yet another military intervention in the region.

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