



# Obama's Syria Moves Threaten Foreign Policy Legacy

*Ramped up Syrian involvement carries political risks*

By: Rebekah Metzler- June 14, 2013

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By ramping up involvement in the ongoing Syrian conflict, President Barack Obama risks involving the United States in yet another prolonged Middle East conflict and undermining the foreign policy legacy he has tried to create, experts say.

Obama campaigned on ending U.S. involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan and railed against the policies of President George W. Bush for being interventionist and irresponsible. He largely lived up to his rhetoric during his first term. But after proclaiming the use of chemical weapons a "red line" not to be crossed, Obama finds himself in a difficult position now that the administration has – somewhat belatedly – acknowledged they have been used in Syria.

"There needs to be consequences for a regime that uses chemical weapons," said Ben Rhodes, deputy national security adviser for strategic communications, during a press briefing Friday. The administration announced it would ramp up support for rebel forces seeking to overthrow the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad late Thursday, ahead of the upcoming G8 summit where European allies are sure to bring up the issue.

"This president understands that the way to wreck his presidency is to get actively involved in another war in the Middle East. That's why he's been so reluctant and that's why two years in, they are only now talking about providing light weapons," says Doug Bandow, senior fellow at the Cato Institute. "The problem is it's not at all clear that America getting involved will stop any of this."

The conflict is increasingly deadly, with the United Nations recently estimating the war has caused about 92,000 casualties.

Ilan Berman, vice president of the American Foreign Policy Council, says by waiting so long to insert itself, the U.S. has created some difficult challenges.

"It doesn't mean we shouldn't get involved, but waiting until now you really have to temper your expectations about how good the outcomes can be even when we do get involved," Berman says. "You're going to see [the administration] do just enough to satisfy the internationalist wing without doing too much and risking the ire of their constituency."

Domestically, public polling shows voters oppose involving the United States in another prolonged overseas war, but Michael Singh, managing director of the Washington Institute, a non profit focused on Middle East policy, says that's partially because Obama hasn't made a case for it.

"There has been some domestic pressure – obviously the polls are not in favor of the U.S. getting involved in Syria, but in part I think that's a reflection of the fact that President Obama has not made a strong public case for why this is important," he says.

The move to take a stronger approach to Syria may hurt Democrats in the 2014 midterm election among war-weary voters, but only if it escalates further, says Bandow.

Despite the potential political consequences, the confluence of humanitarian concerns, the breach of the so-called red line and global political pressure to increase involvement forced Obama's hand, says Singh.

"They don't want to see Assad and Iran victorious in Syria because that would be a real regional coup for the Iranians and Hezbollah. At the same time, they also want to see the killing stop because as long as the conflict goes on, the threat of reverberations in the region is high," he says. "What they need to do to achieve any kind of victory for U.S. interests is to stop the conflicts and leave in place a government that is neither Iranian-allied nor jihadist dominated."

But, Singh adds, the announced action to provide light weapons won't get the job done.

"I don't think it's going to have a dramatic impact," he says. "My guess is this is at the margin. This is not enough to topple the Assad government."

Part of the seemingly slow-footed and haphazard approach to Syria could also be the result of a lack of leadership.

"It really isn't clear to me who in the administration is the point person on this," Singh says. "This comes at a time when there really are quite unclear lines of responsibility inside the administration."

Berman says former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had "a lot of settled opinions about what the Middle East should look like" but now the administration appears more adrift.

"My sense is from in the second term, the cabinet appointments you see – John Kerry, Chuck Hagel, Susan Rice, Samantha Power – this is not intended to create a band of rivals so that they thrash out policy internally," he says. "This is intended to essentially create an echo chamber effect. My sense is that the guy in charge is the president. They may inform his decisions, but I don't think they are going to steer them."