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Syria: The Only Red Line Should Be to Stay Out

Doug Bandow

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The Syrian civil war lurches on, adding new casualties every day. The campaign to push the U.S. into the Syrian civil war also marches on, threatening to add American casualties to the human toll. Possible use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government is another reason to stay out, not to get in.

Washington's foreign policy should be one of peace. There are tragic times when war becomes necessary, but thankfully not often. Especially for America, which enjoys a privileged international position.

Today the U.S. is without peer. Terrorism is the most serious security threat facing the country, but it is only exacerbated by promiscuous intervention in conflicts not America's own. Bombing, invading, and occupying other nations creates enemies who want to hurt Americans.

Nor do wars, against even seemingly weak opponents, such as Iraq, usually turn out the way one expects or wishes. Inadvertent and unintended consequences are the rule rather than the exception.

Syria stands out as a conflagration in which the U.S. should play no role. There is no threat to America. President Bashar al-Assad is evil, not stupid. He wouldn't attack the U.S. or an allied government, such as Israel, before; he certainly wouldn't do so now with his regime under siege.

Damascus may have facilitated attacks on U.S. forces during Washington's occupation of Iraq, but it's late to use that as a *casus belli*. Moreover, Americans should pause before treating such action as a cause for war: Today the U.S. is actively aiding Syria's rebels and during the Cold War Washington armed insurgents against the Soviet Union and its Afghan ally, as well as Nicaragua. America may well do the same again in the future against other nations viewed as hostile.

Syria is a civil war, not genocide. The killings are awful, but that is what happens in low-tech conflicts. Two sides, with the military balance steadily equalizing, are battling for control of the country. Such a struggle is unlikely to have a good outcome, whoever prevails.

Indeed, Syria's two sides reflect the stark choice that Washington has faced throughout the Arab Spring. One side is stable dictatorship. The other side is a messy mix of democrats and authoritarians, in which the most radical elements are gaining influence if not control. Even if regime opponents win, the fighting would not likely stop. Rather, Assad's ouster would merely trigger combat over control of the Syrian government, and whether the Syrian government would control the entire country. Reprisals against regime supporters and religious minorities would be likely.

Claims that early American intervention could have imposed a simple and clean settlement are illusory. After all, at the beginning the Syrian military was relatively unbloodied and could have resisted more fiercely. Even some of those who hated Assad may have resisted a U.S. invasion. And only an invasion likely could have ousted the regime and suppressed conflict.

Anyway, that option, even if it once existed, no longer matters. Whatever America's interest in the stability of Syria -- which certainly is less than America's interest in peace -- there no longer is any stability to keep. Intervention today would mean joining a fratricidal conflict in which neither side is pure and future rounds of killing are likely. Americans would die for no good purpose -- and probably keep on dying as part of an interminable occupation force.

Some analysts apparently believe that starting America's third war in a Muslim country in a dozen years would enhance the nation's reputation in the Middle East. Wrote Princeton's Anne-Marie Slaughter, a failure to act means Barack Obama "will be remembered as a president who proclaimed a new beginning with the Muslim world but presided over a deadly chapter in the same old story." Actually, the war in Iraq was supposed to make Muslims the world over love the U.S. Unfortunately, something went wrong along the way.

Having lost the argument for intervention in Syria on its merits, the pro-war crowd is pointing to claims that Damascus recently used small amounts of Sarin gas. If true, it was an atrocious act, but more for symbolic than practical reasons.

The *Financial Times*, a British newspaper which is demanding U.S. military action, opined that "Syria is the inverse of the Iraq conflict. This time, there is no doubt that we face a gangster who really does have WMD -- and who is threatening international security."

Chemical agents are classed as WMDs, but are not nearly as dangerous as nuclear or biological weapons. The former are less destructive, more difficult to use, and easier to counter. More than 70,000 people have died in Syria, demonstrating that the combatants already have manifold ways to kill each other. Chemical weapons merely offer a substitute means to kill.

Moreover, intervention would ensure their widespread use and use against Americans. The U.S. could not easily destroy, disable, or capture the entire, widely-dispersed Syrian arsenal, and if not, Damascus could be expected to use everything in its defense. After all, Washington's intervention would mean regime change. Assad and his chief lieutenants already face death or war crimes trials if they lose. They have no reason not to go all-in, perhaps even transferring some agents to terrorists in hopes of causing further damage.

Finally, the weapons could leak. Loss of regime control over existing stockpiles likely would lead, as apparently in Libya, to some chemical agents escaping into the active regional arms (black) market.

Then there is the credibility argument. The president seemed to pledge to respond if chemical weapons were used (a "game-changer that could trigger military action"). However, he promised no specific response and actually spoke of "a bunch of chemical weapons." Still, in this case perception may have become reality.

The administration is promising a thorough investigation of the allegation, not easy in a war zone. While the claim is widely assumed to be true, it is not obvious why Damascus would risk U.S. intervention by using chemical weapons in quantities too small to make a difference in the ongoing fighting. Chemical weapons expert Keith Ward, who has worked for the U.S. government, said, "It's not a smoking gun, at least so far." And the U.S. has made mistakes before. A false laboratory result led the Clinton administration to destroy a Sudanese pharmaceutical plant wrongly thought to be a chemical weapons site.

Then there is Iraq. As one unnamed Defense Department official told the *Washington Post*: "We have seen very bad movies before when intelligence is perceived to have driven policy decisions that, in the cold light of day, have been proven wrong."

Yet if Washington doesn't act, it is claimed, U.S. credibility will suffer. No surprise, this argument is being advanced most vigorously by those who want to push the U.S. into war elsewhere. John McCain and other neocons and Slaughter and other liberal hawks are leading the charge. One suspects that some of them care less about saving Syria than promoting the principle of promiscuous American intervention.

No doubt, reputation matters. George Washington University's Amitai Etzioni worried that "if the Obama administration continues to dillydally, it will further undermine the credibility of the United States as a super power, a position already shaken by its failing engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan." Rep. Peter King (R-NY) insisted: "If we don't take action, a red line is meaningless." Slaughter warned of "lasting damage done when the gap between words and deeds becomes too great to ignore."

But then, U.S. officials routinely make promises and threats -- drawing red lines, if you will -- which they do not back up. Washington has deemed many of Iran's and North Korea's actions "unacceptable," without effect. Advice to Egypt and Bahrain has been frequently offered and just as frequently ignored. The U.S. has cajoled and threatened both China and Russia on issues big and small with little impact.

The world has come to expect the U.S. to act militarily when the latter presents an issue as affecting vital American interests. But it also is widely recognized -- overseas, if not in Washington -- that even the U.S. lacks sufficient military strength to constantly remake the world.

Appearing to promise unspecified action if Damascus deployed chemical weapons was a mistake, but no different than many others made by U.S. officials. Failing to act will merely reinforce a reputation already forged. This experience should cause the administration to curb its rhetorical excesses in the future, not one to join Syria's tragic killfest.

Nothing about Syria is easy. The Pentagon estimated that 75,000 troops would be necessary to secure Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles. More would be required to defeat the regime, restore order, and enforce peace. Even limited steps would entangle America without resolving the conflict, making additional U.S. action likely.

Lionel Beehner of the Truman National Security Project claimed that "Syria is a textbook case of what happens when there is a vacuum of American leadership on an issue," as if the U.S. ever was in a position to prevent the conflict or reestablish the peace. All Washington could have done is added Americans to the ever lengthening casualty list.

Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel understands. He observed last month:

Military intervention at this point could hinder humanitarian relief operations. It could embroil the United States in a significant, lengthy, and uncertain military commitment. Unilateral military action could strain other key international partnerships, as no international or regional consensus on supporting armed intervention now exists. And finally, military intervention could have the unintended consequence of bringing the United States into a broader regional conflict or proxy war.

Moreover, legally President Obama cannot act alone. The Constitution does not empower any president to start wars on his own authority. Explained Walter Pincus of the *Washington Post*: "There's no [UN] resolution for Syria. Without one, or without Congress approving a Syrian resolution, there is no legal basis for U.S. forces striking Syrian targets." But why would legislators facing multiple domestic crises want to plunge America into another unnecessary conflict?

The Syrian civil war will end badly. Unfortunately, the U.S. can't make it end any better. Washington should stay out of the conflict.