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<http://theweek.com/bullpen/column/244145/there-is-no-good-reason-for-the-us-to-intervene-in-syria#>

There is no good reason for the U.S. to intervene in Syria

But there sure are a lot of bad ones.

By Daniel Larison

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A mosque after shelling in Aleppo, Syria, on May 13.

Despite increasing demands for U.S. military involvement in the Syrian conflict, there is still little chance that the Obama administration will commit the U.S. to a new war in the region. That's a good thing.

Still, that there is *any* chance is a measure of how obsessed with trying to direct and "shape" events on the other side of the world many American pundits and politicians are. If the last 12 years of war should have taught Americans anything, it is that other nations are not interested in being "shaped" or "built" by us, and that we are remarkably unsuited to the task of refashioning the political order of countries that we don't understand very well.

One thing we hear all the time from Syria hawks is that "Syria is not Iraq." Bill Keller of *The New York Times* made this argument just [last week](#). On one level, this is an obvious but not very meaningful observation. No two countries and no two conflicts are ever going to be identical, and some of the things that made the Iraq War a debacle may not be relevant to the Syrian case. However, military intervention in Syria would suffer from many of the same flaws as the Iraq War, and it would also have its own set of complications and unintended consequences that might prove to be just as bad or even worse than the Iraq War's.

Like the Iraq War, a U.S. war in Syria would be unauthorized and illegal under international law, and America would have even fewer allies than it had in Iraq. Like Iraq, the costs and duration of a Syrian war have been minimized to make it appear to be a quick, easy, and cheap intervention. Unlike Iraq, there wouldn't even be the pretense that the U.S. was acting to eliminate a potential threat to our security. Instead, the U.S. would be fighting solely for the purpose of overthrowing another government. While the Iraq War was mostly limited to that country, U.S. intervention in Syria would draw us directly into a proxy war with Assad's patrons that would likely not remain confined to Syria. Finally, a Syrian war would be waged with the knowledge of all the things that went so horribly wrong in Iraq, which makes the impulse to intervene in Syria both inexcusable and inexplicable.

While there has been a surge of op-eds and editorials in recent weeks declaring that U.S. "credibility" is in jeopardy because of the president's ill-advised "red line" remarks about chemical weapons use, evidence of that use is sketchy at best. And U.S. interests elsewhere in the world are not endangered by refusing to start a new war in Syria. It seems unlikely that the U.S. is going to go to war for the sake of "credibility" that isn't even at risk. Weak evidence involving unconventional weapons is being used as a pretext for hawks that want the U.S. in the Syrian conflict one way or another. Following through on a vague threat by taking unnecessary military action in Syria would be a declaration to the world that the U.S. is incapable of staying out of foreign conflicts.

Finding some mechanism for a negotiated resolution to the conflict would be ideal, but to date none of the warring parties in Syria has been prepared to accept a compromise that could lead to a cease-fire. Skeptics of military action sometimes suggest trying to gain Russian cooperation that could help end the conflict, but this overestimates Russian influence over the Syrian government and the ability of Western diplomats to persuade Moscow that its position should change. Nonetheless, the administration continues to try to do just that. Along those lines, a joint

U.S.-Russian-led Syrian peace conference will reportedly take place in June in an attempt to bring the warring parties to the negotiating table.

While it is doubtful that this conference will have much success by itself, it could create a structure for future negotiations that will eventually be needed when both sides of the conflict grow exhausted from fighting. Until both sides accept that neither of them can win by force, any negotiations will be fruitless. In the meantime, the U.S. must resist the urge to wade deeper into a conflict that secures no U.S. interests, especially when intervention would in all likelihood make the conflict more destructive and destabilizing than it already is.