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Stay Out of Syria!

David Bromwich

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After the troubling revelations of the May 8 Senate hearing on Benghazi, much remains unclear about the attack that killed four Americans last September. Were the killers aiming to prove the incompetence of American power? Or was the assault directed more specifically against CIA operations? How did the White House, the State Department, and the CIA all agree to say so early and wrongly that the attack could have been the spontaneous action of a crowd infuriated by an anti-Muslim video? Why did the administration delete from its talking points the mention of five similar attacks in Libya, and the fact that al-Qaeda-linked forces were known to be active in the vicinity?



One thing is clear. The Benghazi killings were an indirect but predictable consequence of the NATO intervention that overthrew Muammar Qaddafi. Disorder was a necessary condition of the attack. The “light footprint” of NATO was never going to be sufficient to contain the forces the war released. With the death of Qaddafi and the instability of NATO’s interim arrangements, his troops and weapons moved southward in Africa; and the evacuation of US State Department workers in Mali in January and the attack on international workers in Algeria are now widely understood to have been another fruit of the NATO action in Libya. For Americans, of course, Libya is almost forgotten, but for North Africa and the watching Arab world, it remains a vivid and disturbing memory: seven months of air attacks, with thousands of sorties, 7,700 bombs dropped or missiles launched, and uncounted civilian casualties.

The deepening violence of the Syrian civil war is also in some measure a consequence of Libya: Qaddafi’s disbanded army and unguarded weapons moved southward in Africa, but they also moved eastward to Asia. The state terror of the most “surgical” air war leaves in its wake many thousands of stateless terrorists. As Nancy Youssef pointed out in a penetrating survey on March 14 in the McClatchy newspapers (“Middle East in Turmoil 10 Years After Iraq Invasion”): “The most effective anti-Assad rebel military faction [in Syria], the Nusra Front,” is itself “a branch of al Qaida in Iraq, the same radical Islamist group that the US fought in that country and that the current Iraqi government also is battling.”

The recent past is still with us, if we take the time to look. This is the background against which one must assess the judgment of those persons—well placed in the media and the foreign policy elite—who have lately urged another violent intervention by the US in Arab lands. Three days before the Benghazi hearings, on May 5, Bill Keller published a double-length Op-Ed in *The New York Times*. His column was entitled “Syria Is Not Iraq,” and its moral was adequately conveyed in Keller’s final words: “Getting Syria right starts with getting over Iraq.”

Let us pause to remember Iraq before we follow Keller's invitation to get over it. Almost 4,500 Americans died in Iraq, and 32,000 came home wounded. Of the numbers of Iraqi dead that would be living had the Americans not bombed, invaded, and occupied their country, reliable estimates are harder to come by, but in 2008 *The New England Journal of Medicine* estimated a total of 151,000 violent deaths by June 2006; and the seven years that followed have added many thousands more.

At the time of the Iraq invasion, Keller was an Op-Ed columnist and senior writer at the *Times*. In 2002–2003, when his newspaper's slanted coverage of Iraq played a significant part in leading the country into war, Keller believed the *Times* stories based on forged or dubious evidence circulated by the Bush administration, and threw his considerable journalistic energy into support of the war. Looking back, in his May 5 Op-Ed, he speaks euphemistically of "our ill-fated adventure in Iraq"; his own part in it he calls "a humbling error of judgment" that for a time "left me gun-shy."

But Syria is not Iraq, he says, and he now recommends the deployment of American military might against Syria. Keller's pressing fear is that by inaction, the US may surrender its role as international leader: "Prudence has become fatalism, and our caution has been the father of missed opportunities, diminished credibility and enlarged tragedy." By means of violent intervention, he believes, the tragedy can be made smaller; and he deplores the reticence of President Obama as the evasion of "a president looking for excuses to stand pat."

There follow, in Keller's piece, a series of elaborate distinctions intended to show that Syria presents a more soluble problem than Iraq. "In Iraq our invasion unleashed a sectarian war" whereas "in Syria, [sectarian war] is already well under way." We ought to intervene, then, because things are already bad. The underlying assumption is that American action could not make things worse. "This time," Keller continues, "we have allies waiting for us to step up and lead." We did have allies, and much the same allies, in Libya, but in the thirteen hundred words of this column the word "Libya" does not occur.

The evident self-assurance of Keller's advice on Syria was dismaying in itself; but it also confirmed a tendency that emerged in a series of recent *Times* articles. These news articles by several hands all bore headlines of a consistent tendency, implying that American military intervention had now become the natural upshot of events in Syria.

On April 26, for example, a story by Mark Landler and Eric Schmitt was entitled "White House Says Syria Has Used Chemical Arms." The factual substance of the article was ambiguous, and

its headline might more accurately have read: “Chemical Weapons Used in Syria. US Uncertain of Source.” Again, on May 7 the headline delivered a judgment: “White House Sticks to Cautious Path on Syria.” This would not, in most papers at most times, have qualified as a front-page story at all. That there has been no change of policy is hardly news unless a great many sensible persons are expecting a change. The headline implied that the common sense of the well-informed now favors armed intervention; yet the paper had carried the day before, in a corner of page 9, a Reuters dispatch of some significance. This was a report of a statement by a qualified investigator, Carla Del Ponte of the UN commission of inquiry on Syria, who flatly contradicted the rumors of the use of sarin by the Assad government: “This was use on the part of the opposition, the rebels, not by the government authorities.” UN officials commented that there was “no conclusive proof” about the use of chemical weapons. Astonishingly the Reuters story was neither analyzed nor incorporated in the lead *Times* story of the day’s events.

In April and May, it must be said, the *Times* has been an extreme case. On May 7, when the *Times* played down the public contradiction of its own reports, a *Wall Street Journal* story by Naftali Bendavid confirmed the skeptical judgment about Assad’s alleged use of chemical weapons by testimony from a second non-American source. The secretary-general of NATO, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, was said to acknowledge indications that chemical weapons may have been used but without any “confirmed, consolidated information as to who might have used [them].” On May 6, *The Guardian* reported that the UK defense secretary Philip Hammond “admitted that Western intelligence services would probably have to wait for a further chemical attack before gathering enough information to trace it back to the government.” A week later, on May 12, Robert Gates on *Face the Nation* offered a judgment of the wisdom of American intervention in Arab lands: “I thought it was a mistake in Libya,” said Gates. “And I think it is a mistake in Syria.” That verdict came with a certain authority from the person who, as defense secretary under Bush and Obama, spent much of 2007 keeping America out of war with Iran and much of Obama’s first term withdrawing American soldiers from Iraq.

Meanwhile, within Congress, the voices that led the march to war in 2003 have been clamoring against any hesitation by Obama to take military action. About John McCain, it is no satire but simple truth to say that he cannot have enough wars. On May 8, McCain published in *Time* a characteristic editorial, “Syria: Intervention Is in Our Interest,” which contained a list of practical suggestions. Since the column supplies answers without having asked questions, it may serve economy to list in brackets the questions that naturally occur to a mind less confident and rash:

We could train and arm well-vetted Syrian opposition forces, as recommended last year by President Obama's national-security team. [*"Vetted" by whom and with what expertise?*] We could strike Assad's aircraft and Scud-missile launchers. [*Inside Russian-built air defenses stronger than those in Libya?*] We could destroy artillery and drive Assad's forces from their posts. [*All without ground forces?*]

Yet much of the recent pressure for another American intervention is coming from liberals. Senator Carl Levin, for one, cosigned with McCain a letter to the president on March 21 which urged—among other “limited military options”—the launching of “precision airstrikes” against the Syrian air force, as well as “more robust assistance” to opposition fighters believed to be unconnected with al-Qaeda. One of the tricks of persuasion of the liberal section of the war party, from Iraq through Libya to Syria, has been to aestheticize war. The Iraqi advisers of the Bush administration—Ahmed Chalabi, Kanan Makiya, and others—frequently said that American forces occupying Iraq would be “greeted with sweets and flowers.” The optimism of Bill Keller departs from that pattern to some degree, and offers elevating comparisons to dance and music: “All of this [program of military intervention] must be carefully choreographed and accompanied by a symphony of diplomacy.”

A less sanguine prognosis was suggested by Dexter Filkins in the May 13 *New Yorker*. Looking for reasons to intervene—though, by the end of the article, he does not seem to have found them—Filkins interviewed Fouad Ajami, but quotes him without remarking that Ajami was, as indeed he remains, an enthusiastic endorser of the war in Iraq. The same article quotes Anne-Marie Slaughter without mentioning her close association with Hillary Clinton and the strong position she took in pressing Obama to execute “regime change” in Libya. Slaughter treated Filkins to the inverted aestheticism typical of much war propaganda when she imagined a result of a Syrian chemical attack: “Syrian civilians rolling on the ground, foaming at the mouth, dying by the thousands while the United States stands by.” That fantasy of the future was challenged within days by the assessments from Del Ponte, Rasmussen, and Hammond.

The Obama administration has been strangely tentative in justifying its choice not to arm Syrian rebels: a policy that would need little defense if the president could bring himself to speak it plainly. On the use of sarin, the White House statement told of an ambiguous “chain of custody” of the prohibited chemicals: a phrase that clarifies nothing for most readers. It would have been straighter and wiser to say: “Things are in such chaos in Syria that we can't be sure whether the government or the rebels used sarin.” Filkins himself reflects the same tentativeness: he is drawn to the idea (dimly in the background) that there *should* be a military solution, and if so the US should be equipped to supply it. His article—and there have been others like it—exhibits a

plenitude of military speculations but is void of political analysis. To judge by what he writes, Filkins did not consult Zbigniew Brzezinski, Robert Pape, or any other well-known authorities whose previous warnings have proved accurate. In fact, Brzezinski recently issued a sharp admonition in *Time*:

The various schemes that have been proposed for a kind of tiddly-winks intervention from around the edges of the conflict—no-fly zones, bombing Damascus and so forth—would simply make the situation worse. None of the proposals would result in an outcome strategically beneficial for the US. On the contrary, they would produce a more complex, undefined slide into the worst-case scenario.

Filkins's article closes by quoting a government official who gets away with saying unchallenged that Iraq was "a crisis...that was contained."

Contained at what cost, and for how long? The day of the Boston Marathon bombings saw seventy-five killed in Iraq, and 356 wounded: just one story, which few Americans will have read, out of dozens about the aftermath of the American occupation. Our rehearsals of our own good intentions, in Iraq, in Afghanistan, in Libya, and now in Syria, have swollen to the shape of a rationalized addiction. What then should the US do? Nothing, until we can do something good. But the situation could not be less promising. At present, the main support of Syrian opposition forces comes from Saudis and Qataris. The US has offered help at two removes, but lacks the intelligence to perform much more without strengthening al-Qaeda as we did in Libya. Luis Lema, in a recent editorial in *Le Temps* of Geneva, rightly remarked that the war is becoming "not only less and less 'legible,' but more and more unpredictable."



And each day adds a new reminder of the futility of allegedly pragmatic solutions. A *Times* report on May 15 by Anne Barnard and Hania Mourtada (“An Atrocity in Syria, with No Victim Too Small”) told of the sectarian “cleansing” by pro-government forces of Sunni enclaves, in the village of Bayda and the city of Baniyas, both located in a mainly Alawite and Christian province. Three hundred twenty-two corpses have been identified, many of them horribly mutilated. As a pledge of retaliation, a rebel commander filmed himself “cutting out an organ of a dead pro-government fighter, biting it and promising the same fate to Alawites.” It is a saccharine optimism that says the country has begun to fall apart and a more “proactive” US could hold it together.

Syria has already largely disintegrated. The government and its Alawite and Christian supporters have secured the west, the Kurds are in the northeast, and the Islamist rebels are in the east (where the al-Nusra Front has already begun to enforce sharia law). The grossness of the chatter about intervention is suggested by a recent debate between American advisers on Syria and the “moderate” rebel forces they are best satisfied with. The question in dispute, as Phil Sands revealed in a May 9 report in *The National* (“America’s Hidden Agenda in Syria’s War”), turned on whether the moderates should go into combat first against the Assad loyalists, or against the al-Nusra Front whom they will eventually have to kill.

But the untold story of Syria concerns something beyond the atrocities on both sides. It has also to do with the sinews of war—the financial motive and muscle that keeps it going. A *Financial Times* article by Roula Khalaf and Abigail Fielding-Smith on May 17, “How Qatar Seized Control of the Syrian Revolution,” quoted persons close to the Qatari government who estimate that \$3 billion has thus far been spent bankrolling the rebel groups. Sources inside Syria had guessed only a third of that. But the money must keep coming, since Qatar is buying up the loyalty of networks of rebel forces as an investment in the divided Syria of the future. This is calculated for geopolitical and economic influence, without clear religious or ideological motivation: the rulers of Qatar have no apparent common ground with the Islamist sects they are subsidizing. Nor does their involvement bode a peaceful future order: the flow of money, according to Khalaf and Fielding-Smith, “has already created many enemies inside Syria, and not just among pro-regime supporters.”

Against Qatar and Saudi Arabia stand the Shia powers including Iran and its ally Hezbollah, along with numbers of Iraqi Shiites whom the war of 2003 displaced. All these groups support the Alawites—related to Shia Islam. All of them except the Alawites are outsiders to Syria who for religious, cultural, and political reasons do not believe that they are outsiders. The US, by

contrast, is seen throughout the region as a perfect outsider. The violence has now taken almost 80,000 lives, yet it remains a reasonable fear that disorders sprung from another American war could lead to still more ferocious bloodlettings. Our ally Turkey, which has supported Syrian rebels, is troubled by the prospect of separationist energy driving the Kurds of Syria to form a state of their own; and the International Crisis Group report on Syria's Kurds (issued on January 22) contains an entire section uneasily entitled: "From Arab Uprising to Kurdish Opportunity."

Americans for a long time have tended to think (when we think of other countries at all) that the more new nations spring up, the better. This goes with our relaxed communitarianism but bears little relation to realities elsewhere. Our latest siege of optimism, which followed the collapse of the Soviet empire, has now been given a fair trial over a quarter of a century. It has not always worked out well. Not in the Balkans, not in the former Soviet republics, and not, it seems, in the Middle East.

The high-pressure bid for intervention in Syria may have come to a temporary halt. (The quickness of its start and stop recalls those weeks of March and April 2007 that witnessed an equally sudden press for war with Iran.) On May 7, John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov announced their plan for an international conference on Syria, possibly as early as the end of May. And barring the extreme possibilities—a White House panicked from other causes and desperate to prove its potency; another Israeli bombing of Syria that succeeds in dragging the US in—it might require a breakdown of negotiations to prompt Barack Obama to follow the militarized advice he is getting now from sources that do not include the US military.

An article on the Kerry–Lavrov meeting by Peter Beaumont in the May 5 *Observer* of London made clear, as no American publication yet has done, the extent of the damage to the US from the miscarriage of NATO actions in Libya. The powers outside NATO whom we must rely on—Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa—eventually realized that in Libya the three leading powers, France, Britain, and the US, were all bent on regime change rather than merely the enforcement of a no-fly zone. Those countries, as Beaumont pointed out, felt betrayed and they will be understandably harder to move on Syria.

The difficulty of uniting so distrustful a group will be matched, in any negotiations on Syria, by the disunity of the Arab League. They are divided between Shiite and Sunni loyalties and often further divided within. But theirs is the region that will bear the burden of the nearly one and a half million Syrians who are now refugees, most of them in Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon. Iranian involvement, qualified observers have said, will be necessary for a lasting peace agreement, given the role of Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran in the hostilities; and by

keeping Iran in the outer darkness, Obama's lack of imagination may have served his cause as poorly as his insistence on saying again and again that "Assad must go." A good result of negotiations would be a transitional governing body that offers Assad a slow exit, but the obstacles to such an outcome are formidable.

The refugees of the Iraq war were the great unspoken disaster of the bombing, invasion, and armed occupation of Iraq, during the first five years of our nine-year stay. Two and a half million fled that country, out of a population of 27 million. Thus far the US has admitted as immigrants 64,000: a little under 3 percent. The vast majority of those displaced lives have become the unasked responsibility of Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and other Arab nations. And the scale of the crisis of the refugees from Syria is only beginning to be recognized. Of the nearly one and a half million refugees scattered by the civil war into foreign lands, 500,000 are in Jordan alone, more than half of them under the age of eighteen.

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt wrote about the millions of stateless and rightless persons cast up by the early wars of the twentieth century and the imperialist manufacture of new nations before and after World War I. A whole generation of the displaced were brought into the world so lacking in hope, so without access to elementary rights that, for them, to live within the law presented no advantage over crime and for that matter terrorism. "The calamity of the rightless is not that they are deprived of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," Arendt wrote, "but that they no longer belong to any community whatsoever. Their plight is not that they are not equal before the law, but that no law exists for them." The disasters of the twentieth century, as she judged them, had proved that a globalized order might "produce barbarians from its own midst by forcing millions of people into conditions which, despite all appearances, are the conditions of savages." An end no happier, if we do not take care, awaits us down the road of the "carefully choreographed" violence and the "symphony of diplomacy" conducted by the last of the great powers.