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## Recognizing Disaster: Please, Mr. President, Don't Intervene in Syria

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When it comes to the grueling civil war in Syria, it's been a while since the relevant question was whether the regime of Bashar Assad would fall. It's only a matter of time until it does. The more pressing policy choice has been whether the United States would actively hasten its demise. When President Obama announced on Tuesday evening—a full 21 months after the first protests erupted against Bashar al-Assad's rule—that the United States government would officially recognize the Syrian opposition, that question seems to have been answered in the affirmative.

To the extent that this announcement signals a plan for deeper intervention into the Syrian crisis, it will no doubt be cheered by the growing chorus of commentators eager for Washington to assume a larger role. The rest of us, however, have good reason to be concerned. Simply put, it would be a mistake for the United States to intervene any further than it already has in Syria. The costs and risks simply do not justify it.

What's currently playing out in Syria is essentially the worst case scenario contemplated a year ago. The war is now estimated to have claimed over 42,000 lives, and it has destroyed the social fabric of the country. Meanwhile, the violence and chaos has spread to neighboring countries, especially Turkey, which has clashed with the Syrian military, and bolstered its defenses along its long border. Other of Syria's neighbors, including Jordan, and Lebanon, already straining under the flood of refugees unleashed by the U.S. war in Iraq, have now had to accommodate

hundreds of thousands of additional refugees fleeing the violence in Syria. The situation in parts of the country already resembles anarchy, and all of these problems could worsen in the event of total regime collapse.

But the worst case for the countries in the region, and for the Syrian people, does not imply a worst case for the United States. The Assad regime poses no credible threat to either the physical security or the economic fortunes of the United States, and its successor won't either. Syria is a second-tier player in a region that has consumed thousands of American lives and several trillion dollars, to no good effect. Americans are now wisely turning their attention to Asia, and to domestic economic problems. Overt U.S. intervention at this late stage would deliver few tangible benefits, at the risk of dragging the United States into a conflict that doesn't affect our vital security interests. Unsurprisingly, a Chicago Council survey found that 81 percent of Americans oppose sending U.S. troops into Syria. A separate poll by the Brookings Institution's Shibley Telhami found that just 13 percent of respondents support a military mission in Syria.

Nevertheless, some commentators are nearly overwhelmed by the desire to do something—*anything*—even though they don't have reasonable confidence that the parts of the fractious opposition that they suggest we support will ultimately be the ones to prevail. Likewise, they can't be sure that such people will advance U.S. security interests even if they do eventually take power in Damascus. That should have been another one of the lessons learned from our ill-fated intervention in Iraq. After all, the Iraqis who Washington helped install in power following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein are not even cooperating with international efforts to isolate Assad.

Humanitarian considerations aside, advocates for intervention cite yet another justification: the present and future status of Syria's sizable stockpile of chemical weapons. If the Assad regime does collapse, or perhaps even before then, some of these materials might fall into the hands of non-state actors more inclined to use them than the leaders of governments with return addresses that can be targeted for retaliation.

But there are alternatives to a massive invasion force tasked with securing every possible chemical weapons site in Syria—a nearly impossible mission, as was shown by the U.S. military's inability to do the same in Iraq. A targeted carrot and stick approach deserves consideration. Syrians willing to cooperate with us in securing and, preferably, shipping out such weapons for safe disposal could be rewarded with money and material support in the ongoing battle with the Assad regime. The mere threat of force could then be used to help seal the deal: If any of our Syrian interlocutors have notions of retaining Assad's stockpile, the message should be "think again." Given that the United States and other governments could certainly outbid any extremist organization, we could easily sort out the true believers. Those who demur our offer would be painting a giant bull's-eye on their chests.

Refusing to pick sides in the Syrian civil war isn't the same as hoping for the war to continue, however. At least one commentator has suggested that U.S. interests would be served by an interminable conflict. "Protracted civil war," wrote Dan Trombly at his popular blog Slouching

Towards Columbia, “would present the opportunity for Iran’s enemies to bleed the country as Iran bled them in previous conflicts.” That seems both cynical and short-sighted. It's true that a distracted, weakened Syria could become a burden on Iran, and, ultimately, Moscow. But the United States (and others) have been undermining Iran for years through a variety of means that do not entail the deaths of tens of thousands of innocent people. And if the Russians aren’t smart enough by now to jettison this security client, then it seems unlikely that even more violence and chaos will convince them to change course.

The best outcome would see Assad step down, and the Syrian opposition quickly come together after his departure. If that new government provides protections for the religious minorities and factions formerly allied with Assad and the Baathists, it would significantly reduce the likelihood of a relapse into civil war. Though highly unlikely, that is certainly an outcome worth hoping for. Worth hoping for, but not worth risking the lives of American troops for.

That bottom line might strike some as cold-hearted, but the alternative—advocating military intervention when no U.S. interests are engaged, without a reasonable expectation of success, and without the support of the American people—is worse. Pretending that our military power is limitless, or that the public’s distaste for quixotic nation-building crusades can be reversed by a skillful public relations campaign, doesn’t make it so.

But while *our* interests are not sufficiently engaged in Syria to merit our direct involvement, other countries’ are. Restraint by Washington should induce those countries to step forward. And a more aloof posture won’t preclude the United States from intervening at a later date, if conditions warrant it.

Colin Powell’s Pottery Barn principle—If you break it, you own it—is one other reason for caution. Though Powell might never have said it, the sentiment is wise. If Washington presumes to engineer an outcome in a distant land where we can’t tell apart the major players, all Americans will be implicated in whatever comes after—for good or for ill. So while most Americans are sickened by the loss of life in Syria, the experience of the past 15 years expresses some unmistakable lessons. What happens in Syria should and will be decided by Syrians, not Americans.