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Intervention Temptation

By Doug Bandow

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Is Washington's collective madness pushing America towards war in Syria?

Since the dawn of human history men have warred against one another. The bitterest fights tend to be within political communities, the sort of civil wars that rent America, Russia, China, among many others. Today Syria is going through a similar brutal bloodletting. The result is horrific tragedy.

Administration officials reportedly are debating providing arms to Syria's insurgents. A National Security Council spokeswoman explained: "We are taking a closer look at what we can do to help the opposition."

It's a bad idea. This kind of messy conflict is precisely the sort in which Washington should not get involved. Not everything in the world is or should be about the U.S. or what Washington wants.

In fact, the push to intervene suggests that working in Washington leads to policy madness. Despite the end of the Cold War, the U.S. armed services have spent much of the last quarter century engaged in combat. At the very moment Washington should be pursuing a policy of peace, policymakers are considering joining a civil war in which America's security is not

involved, other nations have much more at stake, many of the “good” guys in fact are bad, and there would be no easy exit.

The starting point for U.S. foreign policy should be peace. Sometimes tragic times require war, but only rarely. Most of America’s wars are hard to justify, with mass death and destruction inflicted for reasons which in retrospect look frivolous or foolish. Military action should not be a matter of choice, just another policy option. War is no humanitarian tool to employ to “fix” foreign societies. The government should not call Americans to arms unless their own political community has something substantial at stake.

No such interest exists in Syria.

Intervention against Damascus means war. Some activists imagine that Washington need only add a finger or two to the military scale and President Bashar Assad would depart. However, weapons shipments, no fly zones, and safe zones would not be enough to oust a regime which has survived two years of combat. Allied airpower was uniquely effective in Libya due to its open terrain and the government’s lack of modern air defenses, and even then the conflict dragged on for months. Intervening ineffectively would cost lives and credibility while ensuring heavier future involvement.

There is no serious security rationale for war. Damascus has not attacked or threatened to attack America. America’s nearby friends, Israel and Turkey, possess powerful militaries and were capable of defending themselves from Syria even before that country descended into civil war.

Intervention has been suggested as retaliation for Damascus either acquiescing in or facilitating attacks on American military forces during the occupation of Iraq. That’s a little old for a *casus belli*, however. Worse, America has routinely aided insurgents against unfriendly regimes and their better armed protectors: Afghanistan, Angola, Cuba, and Nicaragua, among others, with the Soviet Union as a common superpower patron. Washington might do so again. Presumably the U.S. would not want other countries to consider such assistance to be cause for war.

Another concern is the conflict spilling over Syria’s borders. The country has turned into a proxy battleground for Qatar and Saudi Arabia versus Iran. Hezbollah’s intervention to support the Assad regime has sparked demonstrations and violence in Lebanon; the war is inflaming the sectarian divide in Iraq. Refugees have streamed into Turkey. Israel worries about combat flowing south into the Golan Heights.

But none of this warrants U.S. intervention. Maintaining geopolitical stability rarely approaches a vital interest justifying war. It certainly does not in this case.

Attempting to intervene on the cheap might shift the balance of power, but would not yield stability. Attempting to impose stability through actual invasion and occupation would make America part of the ensuing instability. Washington foolishly attempted to sort out Lebanon’s civil war three decades ago and was forced into an embarrassing retreat. There’s no reason to believe joining the Syrian killfest today would yield a better result.

Another claim is that ousting the Assad dictatorship, long allied with Tehran, would weaken Iran. Likely so, but that might not redound to Washington's benefit. Then Iran would have a greater incentive to emphasize ties with Shia-dominated Iraq, which also has been aiding Assad. A chaotic, fragmented, sectarian Syria likely would do more to unsettle Iraq, Israel, and Lebanon, allied or friendly to America, than Iran. Moreover, Tehran's divided elite might close ranks in response to an increased feeling of encirclement. Making war on Syria in order to strike indirectly at Iran would be a bad bargain.

Advocates of U.S. action point an accusing finger at Iran, Lebanon's Hezbollah, and Russia for helping Damascus. However, hypocritical moralizing is no argument for war. After all, Washington asked no one's permission before moving into Iraq next door. Qatar and Saudi Arabia are providing money and weapons to the rebels. Turkey is offering sanctuary for insurgents. And American officials claim the right to intervene for any reason at any time. The international nature of the struggle is a good reason for Washington to stay out.

Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles also argue against intervention. Although called weapons of mass destruction, chemical agents are the least effective and most geographically constrained. "Leakage" is more likely to threaten Syria's neighbors than America. Weakening or overthrowing the Assad regime is more likely to release chemical agents to potentially hostile governments or groups. Air strikes would loose chemicals against surrounding civilians. Boots on the ground would mean regime change, leaving Damascus no reason not to use chemical weapons as a last resort defense.

The most pressing concern is humanitarian. Estimates of the dead in two years of war run 70,000 or more. But Syria is not a case of genocide committed by an armed government against an unarmed people. There are *two* forces ready to kill. Defeating one does not mean peace. Rather, it means the other gets to rule, perhaps ruinously.

In both Kosovo and Rwanda the U.S.-backed victors committed atrocities. Even today the former denies ethnic Serbs the right of self-determination and the latter maintains authoritarian rule. In Syria reprisals are certain whoever wins, unless Washington joined and then stuck around in an attempt at "nation-building." Neither Afghanistan nor Iraq offer reasons for optimism — extended blood-letting, interminable involvement, disappointing outcome. The result in Syria actually could be far worse, because of the rise of Islamic radicalism among the insurgents.

In fact, America's most serious security threat today is terrorism. However, attacks on U.S. civilians rarely occur in a vacuum. Promiscuous intervention around the world has created enemies. It doesn't matter whether Washington believes that a drone strike, air operation, invasion, or occupation is justified. Someone on the receiving end is likely to feel otherwise, and decide Americans are an appropriate target of violence.

While this doesn't mean the U.S. government should never act, it does mean that Washington should carefully count the cost of intervening. Jumping into the Syrian imbroglio would mean taking sides in someone else's conflict, naturally encouraging retaliation, as happened after President Ronald Reagan inserted U.S. forces into the multi-sided Lebanese civil war in 1983.

Those on the receiving end of American firepower bombed both the U.S. embassy and Marine Corps barracks. Others angered by U.S. intervention eventually targeted American civilians.

The Syrian conflict could encourage terrorism in other ways. Overthrowing the Assad regime would simultaneously encourage fragmentation of the country and dispersal of the government's chemical weapons. At the same time, victory would empower Islamist radicals, some linked to al Qaeda. On Sunday in the city of Aleppo these fine folks executed a 15-year-old boy for blasphemy in front of his parents.

Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), perhaps Capitol Hill's most enthusiastic advocate of permanent war, has made the curious argument that insurgents angry about the lack of U.S. support might strike out at America. In fact, if the rebels really were attempting to extort aid in this way it might justify Washington taking action — against them. They would represent a genuine terrorist threat.

But it's a nonsensical claim. No member of the Syrian opposition has issued such a warning. Anyway, the rebels will be busy attempting to survive if they lose and attempting to govern if they win. History is filled with blowback, but it always is retaliation for active intervention. As we see in Washington's wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and drone strikes in Pakistan and Yemen.

The final pitch for war is camouflaged as a call for American leadership. The current mess supposedly shows what happens if Washington doesn't lead. The conflict might look irrelevant to the U.S., warned the *Wall Street Journal's* Bret Stephens, but the rulers of Iran and Russia "are geopolitical entrepreneurs who sense an opportunity in the wake of America's retreat."

If so, it's an opportunity well disguised, as Winston Churchill called his 1945 election defeat. While Moscow and Tehran might believe they lose if Assad loses, that doesn't mean the U.S. wins by attacking Assad. To the contrary, America would lose too. Washington's best opportunities will come from peace.

Although diplomacy looks forlorn after two years of combat, it remains the best hope. Despite recent military gains by Assad's forces, he is unlikely to be able to reassert control over the northern half of the country. The opposition's divisions and Assad's outside assistance make a complete rebel victory equally unlikely. All of the surrounding states have much to lose and little to gain from continuing war. A second best *modus vivendi* might be possible.

Even if diplomacy fails, however, Washington should stay out of the war.

Syria is a tragedy. There is no reason to make it America's tragedy. So far President Barack Obama obviously has been reluctant to intervene. When pressed to act, he should ask: Does he want his administration to be defined by involvement in an unnecessary and unpopular no win war, as was that of his predecessor?