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Obama's catastrophic Syria folly

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President Obama has broken lots of promises on foreign policy. Guantanamo Bay is still open. We're fighting in Iraq again, at least from the air. And now, contrary to [promises made](#) in years past, the president is sending (a very limited number of) ground troops to support and advise rebel groups in Syria.

The president's approach to the Middle East is hardly one of shirking cowardice, as his opponents often cast it. Instead, it is one of dangerous, thoughtless intervention. Obama has engaged U.S. forces in needless wars of choice, like the one in Libya, that have empowered extremists. He also decided on that particular course of action unilaterally, without Congress (another broken promise). And now he has done the same in Syria, making what had been our obvious covert help there more obviously overt.

This broken promise — this increased intervention in Syria — is the most stupid and potentially ruinous foreign policy decision of Obama's presidency. Syria is becoming a sand-pit for America's reputation.

By sending special forces in this open way, Obama is involving America ever more deeply in the outcome of a civil war, where America's supposed allies — rebels who we are assured are "moderate" — have almost no chance of winning. It is a civil war in which Russia has involved itself on the side of an ally who *can* win: Syria's longtime dictator Bashar al-Assad. Obama has announced no other goal in this conflict beyond providing assistance to people we like. *The New York Times* also reported that Americans were sent not to win a conflict, but to [bolster diplomatic efforts](#). How can this possibly be the rationale for risking American blood, treasure, and honor?

If U.S. forces are not there to help win the war, then they are there only to prolong it — an immoral act that will exacerbate the refugee crisis already putting intolerable pressure on European political settlements. Perhaps the president has the intention of giving the Free Syrian forces a better showing in the coming months, expecting the conflict to wind down and devolve into peace operations. That is a fool's errand and invites escalation by Russia and Assad going into peace talks at Vienna.

Worst of all is this possibility: Obama is just putting Americans in a few strategic spots to discourage the Russian military from targeting rebel groups there. It makes the potential costs of a mistake, or a gamble by even one Russian pilot, catastrophic. Things can escalate very, very quickly when the wrong person is killed amid a web of entangled alliances. Just ask Archduke Franz Ferdinand.

If Obama had wanted to inaugurate a new era of American foreign policy, this Nobel Peace Prize winner should have avoided needless conflict and earned his reputation for helping to create a peaceful world. Instead, he has tried, by half-measures, to shape complex events in the Middle East. He has failed, and the backlash has been fierce. It comes from a public who see America's efforts as feckless, and from hawkish Republicans who get to promise clarity and victory in contrast to Obama's broken promises and unimpressive record of military engagement.

If Vladimir Putin's dramatic move into Syria inspired Obama's half-hearted adventure, then Russia can move again to enhance its position, encouraging Obama to escalate in return. Since the game for the U.S. in Syria is merely the projection of relative power, the upside is no better than getting a marginally more positive deal against Assad for a post-civil-war Syria. The downside is that Russia or Assad escalate the conflict, and America cuts its losses in a humiliatingly public way. That would be a major stain on Obama's presidency, and a major blow to American honor.

Russia, being on the side of a plausible victor, is playing with house money against the United States, which is on the side of the perpetual losers of this civil war, the "moderate" rebels who were regularly getting trounced by Islamists in al-Nusra before Russian bombers came in for the finishing move.

President Obama certainly inherited a mess in the Middle East. But his foreign policy has never broken decisively with the fatal conceit of the Bush administration: that America has the final and decisive say on the nature of the regimes in the Middle East. Obama has kept the imperial premise of American politics, without the will to commit the strength needed to actually make them effective.

To protect that premise and his legacy, Obama is backing himself into a proxy war with Putin, when Putin's Syrian ally is the most likely victor. It's a disaster. Obama will likely hand his successor a bigger mess than he was handed.