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Will Obama's Aimless Drifting Lead to War in Syria?

Robert W. Merry
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The *Washington Post* headline on October 4 was stark: “Obama administration considering strikes on Assad, again.” The story under it, written by the peripatetic foreign-policy reporter Josh Rogin, was less stark. After the lede, which said military strikes in Syria soon would be “back on the table,” Rogin announced, “But there’s little prospect President Obama will ultimately approve them.”

This dichotomy reflects a central reality of America’s anguish over the tragic Syrian Civil War—and particularly, now, the heart-rending carnage in Aleppo, under siege from Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad and his Russian allies. What we have is an increasingly urgent call for action based on a foreign-policy philosophy—humanitarian interventionism—versus a presidential reluctance to get involved based on political fear, bereft of any foreign policy philosophy at all.

Assad is going for a major strategic victory in Aleppo, and he doesn’t care what the ultimate human cost will be. That inevitably intensifies the call for action from governmental officials and opinion leaders who see a national imperative for action whenever prospects emerge to salve the wounds of humanity and to further the cause of democracy. This is understandable; humanitarian interventionism is a powerful impulse.

Thus do we see, as Rogin points out, officials from the White House, State Department, CIA and military Joint Chiefs of Staff engaging in a flurry of meetings aimed at forging military options to present to the president on how he might strike at the Assad regime and turn the tide of battle.

“There’s an increased mood in support of kinetic actions against the regime,” one senior administration official told Rogin. The reporter even added a humorous touch (though perhaps inadvertently) when he quoted another official as revealing that strategists were pondering ways to get around White House objections to striking Assad without a UN Security Council resolution. One possibility, revealed this official, would be to carry out the strikes covertly “and without public acknowledgement” (not counting, presumably, the prior revelation from this official that such an approach was being contemplated).

The *Daily Beast* reports that many administration officials are expressing concerns about the president’s unwillingness to take action in Syria. One unnamed official said he and his colleagues were worried about how far Russia will go in defending Assad’s regime but feared also “what this is doing to U.S. credibility.” Another official, also unnamed, explained that U.S. actions against Islamic State terrorist forces, or ISIS, would be undermined so long as Assad remained in power. “Anyone who thinks ISIS can be defeated without solving the failed state in Syria is ignoring the last 25 years of American foreign policy,” he said.

That analysis was echoed by Arizona Sen. John McCain in an anguished *Wall Street Journal* piece entitled “Stop Assad Now—Or Expect Years of War.” He advocated military action aimed at “grounding Mr. Assad’s air power.” And if Russia continued its bombing raids in Syria, added the senator, “we should make clear that we will take steps to hold its aircraft at greater risk.” In other words, McCain would have the United States attack a sovereign nation without international sanction and force a military confrontation with the nuclear-armed Russians, all in the interest in destroying a regime that poses no threat to the United States and is fighting one of America’s most threatening enemies, ISIS.

There is much to say in opposition to the impulse of humanitarian bellicosity of the kind expressed by McCain and so many anonymous governmental officials. But first let’s look at the most significant counterforce to that sentiment as applied to Syria: Barack Obama himself.

The president, as Rogin points out, clearly doesn’t want to get the United States mired in another Middle Eastern war, with all the prospects of it turning into the kind of raw chaos seen in Iraq and Libya following U.S. interventions there. Besides, the president knows that public sentiment, as reflected in opinion surveys, remains strongly opposed to more Middle East adventurism.

But Obama offers no philosophical argument in opposition to U.S. action in Syria, because he has no foreign-policy philosophy. His foreign-policy actions have gone in all kinds of different directions at different times. At the beginning of his presidency, he embraced the Pentagon’s recommendation for a troop “surge” in Afghanistan—but also announced a phased timetable for removing the troops, unrelated to whatever success or failure the surge might bring. This is not serious military planning or strategic thinking. Further, by opting for a “nation-building” strategy aimed at squeezing the indigenous Afghan Taliban, Obama embraced a fool’s mission and

guaranteed failure. By January 2016, the Taliban controlled more Afghan territory than it had at any time since 2001.

When Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak came under pressure from street protests in 2011, Obama went to the airwaves to announce that Mubarak must go. Thus did he undermine a longtime loyal American ally and intrude into the politics of another nation without regard to what kind of chaos might ensue when the leadership fell. As it happened, Egypt came under the sway of the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood until the military, which had been Mubarak's sponsoring institution, kicked out the Brotherhood and placed itself once again in power. Thus did Obama's intervention prove feckless and meaningless.

When he decided to intervene militarily in Libya against that nation's leader, Muammar el-Qaddafi, with whom the United States had an agreement to leave him alone if he would suspend his terrorist and nuclear programs (which he did), Obama said that any U.S. forbearance in that turmoil "would have been a betrayal of who we are." It appears that humanitarian interventionism got the better of him on this one.

And when the Syrian Civil War broke out, the president quickly decided Assad also must go and drew a "red line" about the use of chemical weapons, which he later happily ignored when congressional and public opposition to airstrikes emerged. Now in Syria, the president wants to defeat ISIS, which has captured wide swaths of territory in that country, as well as in Iraq, but he also clings to his desire for the downfall of Assad, who is fighting ISIS. But, while he wants the demise of Assad and his regime, he won't take any overt U.S. action to bring about that end.

What we see here is a mishmash of thoughts, desires, actions, counteractions and pronouncements that don't add up to anything approaching philosophical coherence. Sometimes he seems like a humanitarian interventionist; sometimes like a humanitarian interventionist without conviction; sometimes like a realist without conviction; sometimes just confused.

The president's problem is that the only serious counter-philosophy to humanitarian interventionism is foreign-policy realism, and nobody in his circle gives any credence to that particular outlook. But in Syria, the realist view would have guided him away from his halting, feckless approach and toward a far different course of action.

Some fundamental realities would have been incorporated into his thinking, with perhaps different outcomes.

First, he would have recognized that Assad's fate had nothing to do with America's national interest. He would have recognized further that, when Assad's regime and his life were threatened by internal turmoil underwritten by some of his neighbors, the Syrian leader would "try to cling to power by any means necessary," in the words of Harvard's Stephen M. Walt, a leading realist of our time. After all, he had Qaddafi's fate (deposed and killed) vividly in mind to guide his thinking and his actions. Thus, any serious U.S. effort to assuage the turmoil might have required American acceptance of Assad's continuing in power. No other approach offered any avenue for a negotiated settlement.

Second, he would have seen that the United States had one enemy, and only one, in that fight: ISIS. Since ISIS was also Assad's enemy, that argued further against identifying Assad as a U.S. enemy.

Third, he would have recognized that the so-called moderate anti-Assad forces were either under the thumb of the rabid Islamist forces—ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra (formerly an Al Qaeda affiliate, now calling itself the Front for the Conquest of Syria) and others—or actually aligned with those threatening terrorist organizations. Texas's Sen. Ted Cruz has called these so-called moderate Syrian forces a “purple unicorn”—in other words, nonexistent.

Fourth, he would have seen that some of America's presumed allies (Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar) were giving financial and military aid to the anti-Assad forces, including ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra. Further, even weapons from those allies, and from the United States, earmarked for the so-called moderate forces often seemed to fall into the hands of the more radical Islamist forces.

Fifth, he would have recognized that many players in the region—including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, the Kurds of Syria and others—are driven by their own powerful national interests, many in conflict with each other. Better for the United States to avoid this miasma of tension and conflict.

Could these perceptions have opened an avenue for U.S. diplomatic efforts that could have curtailed the tragic bloodshed of Syria over the past five years? Impossible to say, but maybe. As Stephen Walt puts it, “Had Obama listened to realists a few years ago, the Syrian civil war might—repeat, might—have been shut down before so many lives were lost and the country was irretrievably broken.”

That, of course, is a debatable proposition. What isn't debatable is that the humanitarian impulse to impugn and assail this beleaguered dictator certainly didn't serve to lessen the carnage in Syria, or help America in its fight against ISIS, or inhibit the crosscurrents of national and sectarian strife in the region. Obama didn't embrace humanitarian interventionism to the extent of getting America committed to military action in that tragic land, but his insipid leadership, based on the humanitarian impulse, foreclosed prospects for effective diplomacy.

It's worth noting, though, that Hillary Clinton doesn't seem to share Obama's hesitancy. She is a full-fledged humanitarian interventionist, in the mold of Senator McCain, and her election likely will mean a much more aggressive approach to that grim and excruciating conundrum.