UNDERSTANDING THE AMERICAN DEBATE OVER SYRIA

One of our objectives at FPRI is to provide training for the next generation of foreign policy analysts and practitioners. FPRI interns – students at the high school, undergraduate, and graduate levels – work with FPRI personnel on a variety of research, editorial and administrative projects. From time to time, we post intern work of unusually high quality on our website. The essay below was written this summer by Alex Costin, a rising freshman at Princeton University. It served as the basis of discussion at our 2nd Annual Summer Gathering of Interns, where FPRI scholars and interns grapple with a complex issue together. Our discussion reviewed the contending points of view on the question of intervening in Syria, and we also examined General Dempsey’s letter to the US Senate analyzing US military options. The discussion focused on the moral and policy dilemmas, the question of what is feasible and at what cost, and the problem of determining the intended outcome of US policy in Syria.

Understanding the American Debate over Syria
by Alex Costin

Whether and how the United States should intervene in the Syrian civil war has been hotly debated in government, academia, the media, and around the dinner table. What makes this debate interesting is that the divide is not between Democrats and Republicans, nor between liberals and conservatives, for both sides are split between interventionists and anti-interventionists. That said, the rationales for the policy inclinations among interventionists differ; and sometimes those differences are a function of the larger political perspective they draw on – the same goes for anti-interventionists. As for President Obama, his policy has been, if not confused, at the very least confusing, and that may be a function of the lack of a clear divide between liberals and conservatives.

There are perhaps four schools of thought concerning the question of American involvement. Conservative “hawks” tend to invoke the geopolitical advantages of intervention, such as the weakening of Iran and Hezbollah; conservative “doves” emphasize the negative aspects, including a drain on America’s blood and treasure already exhausted by regional wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and a recognition of the unintended consequences – citing, for example, the Libyan intervention gone awry. Meanwhile, on the mainstream left, liberal interventionists cite the humanitarian crisis and the encouragement of a democratic transition; while their opponents remain wary of American neo-imperialist tendencies.

Conservative interventionists

Within Congress, conservative interventionists have been led by Senators John McCain (R-AZ) and Lindsey Graham (R-SC). When asked if he was concerned over weapons falling into the wrong hands, Senator McCain responded rhetorically: “Would you rather have these weapons [...] in the hands of the wrong people, or would you rather have Bashar Assad prevail?”1 Along with other Republican senators, he has pushed for the implementation of a No-Fly Zone over Syria to supplement the supply of arms already provided by the United States. Though this No-Fly Zone would constitute, in effect, an act of war, they believe it necessary to ensure the military victory of the rebels. In an appearance on CNN, Senator McCain said: “This isn’t just a bunch of demonstrators being beaten up. This is a regional conflict [...] Jordan is destabilized, Lebanon is about to erupt into sectarian violence, jihadists are

falling in from all over the Middle East [...] Vital national security interests are at stake.”\(^\text{2}\) The consideration of national security interests places this stance within the purview of a realist perspective of foreign policy.

However, not all conservative interventionists support intervention at this scale. Richard Haass, President of the Council on Foreign Relations and an influential figure on the foreign policy stage, for example, admits that most of the opposition groups are “wildly unattractive,” but that with “quite discriminating” detail, supplying limited arms can be an effective solution to the question of involvement. And, on a congressional level, House Intelligence Committee Chairman Mike Rogers (R-MI), supported an engagement somewhere between the levels proposed by President Obama and Senator McCain. He stated that, ultimately, the United States should “assist the Turks and our Arab League partners to create safe zones in Syria from which the U.S. and our allies can train, arm, and equip ‘vetted’ opposition forces.”

Likewise, Andrew J. Tabler, a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, affirms the need for a measured tactic; in an article for Foreign Affairs, he writes that: “the United States needs a new approach, one that starts with a partial military intervention aimed at pushing all sides to the negotiating table.” Like other conservative hawks, he questions the cost of inaction; his own plan includes a No-Fly Zone, the establishment of “50- to 80-mile-deep safe areas within Syria along its borders with Jordan and Turkey,” and working directly with opposition forces on the ground in Syria.\(^\text{3}\)

Michael Doran of the Brookings Institute, takes a more nuanced approach: in a characteristically hawkish article entitled “Obama Needs to Act Now On Syria,” written with Michael E. O’Hanlon, he notes that President Obama’s decision to wait so long to intervene has actually had a beneficial effect – namely, that “it has dramatically demonstrated to America’s allies that the U.S. is indeed the indispensable nation.”\(^\text{4}\) Still, in order to oust Assad, Doran believes that the United States should become both the “strategic brain” that identifies moves on the battlefield and the “guiding hand” that ensures cooperation between rebel elements. Though Doran differs from other interventionists in his view on Obama’s two-year wait, his main standpoint accurately characterizes the conservative interventionist wing.

**Conservative anti-interventionists**

This same concern for American interests in the Levant compels conservative doves to reject intervention. Daniel Larison, a commentator for The American Conservative, asks: “Why do advocates of intervention in Syria so often indulge in exaggerations of the global consequences of avoiding greater involvement?” He then posits a response: “They know very well that Syria’s conflict doesn’t jeopardize American or allied interests, and so they have to find some way to link Syria’s conflict to things that might alarm people in the West.”\(^\text{5}\) Larison, and many other like-minded figures, believe that since the United States has no vested interest in the Syrian conflict, it need not involve itself. These non-interventionists still subscribe to a realist notion of American involvement in foreign affairs. The difference between these conservative interventionists and non-interventionists, then, lies in their interpretation of the effect of the conflict on American interests.

In the mindset of conservative anti-interventionists additionally is the notion of Just War Theory, according to whose doctrines at least one of four conditions must be met to justify intervention in a conflict or a declaration of war: Just Cause, Just Intention, Just Authority, and Last Resort. Just Cause and Just Intention can be met with an attack on the United States or an ally – thus far, neither has taken places; Just Authority demands explicit authority from the United States senate; and Last Resort can only be used as justification is every peaceful option has been

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exhausted. Anti-interventionists who subscribe to this theory note that none of the conditions has adequately been met. James Carden, in an editorial from AntiWar.com, a politically unaffiliated anti-interventionist organization, quotes the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, who warned against the “monstrous consequences of moral complacency about the relation of dubious means to supposedly good ends.” Applied to the Syrian conflict, Carden feels that “no good – despite the best of intentions – will come of the effort [to proceed without paying heed to Just War Theory].”6

Other conservative politicians and commentators take a purely isolationist approach to rejecting increased intervention. In an article on his blog entitled “Obama’s Betrayal on Syria,” Andrew Sullivan, a self-proclaimed conservative, invokes the frightful possibility of Iraq 2.0; he affirms that, as per numerous campaign promises, President Obama was supposed to get the United States out of the Middle East, not back into it. Sullivan notes that the President has caved to “usual establishment subjects who still want to run or control the entire world.” He believes that American national interest lies in not taking sides militarily.7

Within Congress, Republican opposition to intervention has been led by Senators Rand Paul (R-KY) and Mike Lee (R-UT), both of whom sponsored a bilateral bill to prohibit President Obama from involving the United States in the Syrian civil war; the bill would block funds on activities involving military or paramilitary aid, though would not affect humanitarian aid. In response to interventionist claims of national security interests, Senator Paul noted in an editorial for CNN: “The Syria Transition Support Act approved last week by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee […] has the potential to create more problems for the United States than it would solve. It is unclear what national security interests we have in the civil war in Syria.”8 They were joined in introducing their bill by Democratic Senators Tom Udall (D-NM) and Chris Murphy (D-CT).

**Liberal interventionists**

In Congress, Senator McCain’s coalition has included a number of prominent Democratic senators. Most notable among these is Senator Robert Menendez (D-NJ), who chairs the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He has roughly the same view of the conflict as does Senator McCain – namely, full support of increased intervention. In an interview, Senator Menendez referred to the need to “tip the scales” in Syria, “not simply to nudge them;” in direct reference to President Obama’s decision to send limited arms, he affirmed that: “You can’t just simply send them a pea shooter against a blunderbuss […] or else […] our vital national security interests will not be pursued.”9

This final point perhaps distinguishes Senator Menendez from his fellow liberal interventionists; more common in the left-wing approach to intervention is an understanding of the humanitarian obligations possessed by the United States as world superpower. Even within the federal government, there are prominent interventionists. In her final remarks to the United Nations, recently appointed National Security Advisor to President Obama and former United States Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice, called the UN Security Council’s inaction on the Syrian war “a stain” on the body. In her speech, she expressed regret that “the Security Council has failed to act decisively as more than 90,000 Syrians have been killed and millions more displaced.”10 This statement is in line with Rice’s characteristic approach to foreign policy; in the past she has signaled support for intervention on a humanitarian basis. Similarly, former State Department official Anne-Marie Slaughter has been outspoken in favor in intervention.

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http://original.antiwar.com/james-carden/2013/06/30/a-syria-no-fly-zone-and-just-war-theory/

7 The Dish. Last modified June 13, 2013.  
http://dish.andrewsullivan.com/2013/06/13 obamas-betrayal-on-syria/.


10 "Susan Rice: Syria inaction a 'stain' on security council."  
In the New Republic, John Judis notes that the mainstream left compares the President’s arms deal to the invasions of Iraq in 2003, Grenada in 1983, the Dominican Republic, Panama, Lebanon, the former Yugoslavia, and Libya. Yet, according to him, “by identifying Obama’s impulse in Syria with Ronald Reagan’s invasion of Grenada or Bush’s invasion of Iraq, the left rules out any possibility of a benign intervention for humanitarian purposes or for worthy geopolitical ends.” Unlike Iraq, the Dominican Republic, or Grenada, Judis argues, Syria is not a unilateral intervention or an imposition of American will.

**Liberal anti-interventionists**

Indeed, three days prior to Judis’ rebuke of traditional liberal anti-interventionism, John Nichols published an article in The Nation entitled “A Perilous ‘Searching for Monsters to Destroy’ in Syria,” in which he asserts almost no “justification for the wars of whim and casual military engagements that have come to define the United States in the latter part of the twentieth century and the first part of the twenty-first.” Similarly, Kevin Drum notes in an article in Mother Jones that President Obama “caved in to the hawks” twice: first, with the $127 million in “nonlethal” aid, and now with the small-scale lethal aid.

Along these same lines, many liberal anti-interventionists stress caution above all else. Leslie H. Gelb, President Emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations, criticizes President Obama for drawing a red line along the use of chemical weapons; he attempts to expose the hypocrisy of the American narrative concerning chemical weaponry. As he writes in an article for The Daily Beast: “Was it alright for our ally Saddam to massacre his rebels with chemicals, but not OK for Assad? You betcha!”

On Capitol Hill, armed with the understanding that President Obama cannot renege on a public promise to distribute weapons to rebel groups without suffering political repercussions, many congressmen have adapted their approach towards intervention. For the most part, their views have given way to nuance and caution; and many who had once heralded anti-interventionism stress the importance of mere humanitarian aid for rebel groups and refugees. Senator Murphy underlines this notion in a press statement: “Our focus should be on increasing humanitarian assistance to refugee populations and opposition groups instead of injecting more weapons into the conflict.”

Another commentator is Fareed Zakaria, whose own views are far more nuanced than many of his colleagues. Though he affirms his fellows’ interest in the humanitarian aspect of the conflict, he places less emphasis on ending the humanitarian crisis as a primary objective, noting that though “some proponents of intervention say it is to end that country’s humanitarian nightmare,” that is “a negative objective.” Instead, Zakaria understands the Syrian crisis as having broader religious implications. Nearly ninety years ago, French and British rule in parts of the Middle East established three minority regimes in key geopolitical locations: for decades, Christians controlled Lebanon, Sunnis controlled Shi’ite-majority Iraq, and Alawites controlled Sunni-majority Syria; and both Lebanon and Iraq experienced decade-long civil wars, over which time the many years of religious frustration led to frequent massacres and atrocities. On his CNN Global Public Square website, Zakaria predicts that if the

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rebels win, Alawites, Christians, and Kurds would be massacred, and the pendulum would swing sharply to the side of the rebel majority. Though he is on principle opposed to intervention, Zakaria recognizes that were the United States to intervene, victory requires more than the defeat of Assad – the creation of a new, non-sectarian Syria, then, is the goal, and its achievement requires not only a military plan for now, but a negotiated plan for the future.

The Obama Administration on Syria: A Brief Timeline

Amid this confusing set of perceptions and prescriptions stands the Obama administration, which itself exhibits a confusing set of perceptions and prescriptions. The first official recognition of the gravity of the situation came on April 8, 2011; in a statement on the uprising, President Obama called upon Syrian President Assad to halt “the abhorrent violence committed against peaceful protesters.” Two weeks later, on April 22, the President condemned the use of force against demonstrators, calling again upon President Assad to “change course now.” It would take until July 12, 2011, however, for President Obama to declare that President Assad had “lost legitimacy” for failing to lead a democratic transition. On August 18, the administration focused its concerns; and President Obama called on Assad to step down, affirming that “for the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside.”

Even in these initial few months the President was not immune to criticism, primarily over the ill-planned private vacation to Martha’s Vineyard taken by the First Family immediately following the August 18 announcement. Both liberal interventionists and neoconservative hawks had heartily criticized the White House for refusing to call for Assad’s ouster earlier; many compared the months of indecision to the swiftness with which the President had previously called for Egyptian President Mubarak to step down. In an article for The Atlantic, Steve Clemons posits an explanation: “Perhaps Obama believed that Assad’s position would crumble like that of Mubarak… the Obama White House helped through persuasion and diplomacy to tip the scales against Mubarak, a process the protesters in Tahrir Square had put in motion.”

Though not necessarily inspired by any public reticence towards intervention, the Obama administration’s decision to wait nearly five months before officially condemning President Assad in the strongest terms foregrounds the uncertainty with which it has continued to conduct affairs with the Assad regime since. Even in the August 18 speech, President Obama affirmed that any intervention would be minimal. Despite stating that the United States has “imposed sanctions on President Assad and his government,” and has “coordinated closely with allies and partners from the region and around the world,” he affirmed that “the future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way […] The United States cannot and will not impose this transition upon Syria.” The limited financial actions taken by the United States against Syria at this time included: blocking of property of the Syrian government; banning of U.S. persons from new investments in or exporting services to Syria; and banning U.S. imports of, and other transactions or dealings in, Syrian-origin petroleum or petroleum products.

The potentialities of increased involvement are clear from this earliest point, and continued to influence reticence in future decisions. Within months of the beginning of financial support to rebel groups, the Obama administration again found itself on the receiving end of criticism, this time from interventionists of both parties in Congress. On February 8, 2012, Senators McCain, Graham, and Joe Lieberman (I-CT) suggested that the administration begin providing arms to the Syrian opposition. Initially, however, President Obama refused, on June 22 sending Secretary

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21 Obama, Barack H. "President Obama: The future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way." News release. August 18, 2011.
of Defense Panetta to defend the administration’s decision not to arm the rebels. Secretary Panetta noted that “we made a decision not to provide lethal assistance at this point,” though he admitted concern over the possibility that shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles – known as MANPADS – that were stolen from Libya last year could make their way to Syria. Secretary Panetta had been coerced into such a policy defense after a New York Times report said that the CIA had begun the process of overseeing arms supplies to Syrian rebels purchased by Gulf Arab states and Turkey.

Chemical Weapons and the “Red Line”

The notion of a so-called “red line” was first discussed in these same months. As an international plan for peace to be brokered by former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan faltered, White House press secretary Jay Carney was asked whether there was a “red line” for President Assad. Though he did not directly answer the question, he reiterated the vague concern that characterized much of the Obama administration’s stance on the Syrian crisis. According to Carney: “I can tell you that there is very much an urgent need for action to be taken here [...] to make it clear that a transition has to take place in Syria.” By July 13, reports of the Assad regime moving stockpiles of chemical weapons prompted Pentagon press secretary George Little to admit that chemical weapons use would “cross a serious red line.” On July 23, President Obama echoed those sentiments, saying that President Assad would be held accountable if he made the “tragic mistake” of using chemical weapons. Nearly a year later, the Obama administration announced that “the Assad regime has used chemical weapons, including the nerve agent sarin, on a small scale against the opposition multiple times in the last year.”

Small quantities of lethal aid provided to vetted rebel groups began in the following days. Beyond any other point, the decision to mark a red line by the use of chemical weapons has drawn explosive criticism. All sides seem to critique the arbitrary nature of the decision. Estimates put the number of deaths by chemical weaponry at one hundred to one hundred fifty; meanwhile, more traditional means of slaughter have taken the lives of more than one hundred thousand innocents. Why now? The answer lies in the historical context of chemical weapons. The notion of the efficacy of killing with gas emerged from World War I, during which time the British, in an attempt to entice the United States to intervene, emphasized the inhumane aspects of German use of mustard gas over the more traditional machine guns. Since then, chemical weapons - including sarin, the nerve gas used primarily by the Assad regime against rebels - have been identified as weapons of mass destruction. For reference, Saddam Hussein used sarin in 1988 against the Kurdish population of Halabja in northern Iraq. That attack was estimated to have killed more than five thousand people.

The primary reason chemical weapons use proved a “red line” for the Obama administration concerns its existence as a weapon of mass destruction. During the Cold War, the term “Weapons of Mass Destruction” functioned only as a synonym for nuclear weapons or future weapons of comparable destructive capacity. After the Cold War, however, its definition began to expand at an explosive rate: in 1992 “WMD” was codified into American law to include not only nuclear weapons but also chemical and biological ones. In 1993, sarin was banned at the United Nations Chemical Weapons Convention - unsurprisingly, Syria is one of six countries that has yet to sign the convention. And in 1994, radiological weapons were added to the list. Uniquely, the scare over WMDs played a major role in the run-up to the 2003 Iraq War: President Bush asserted that “those attacks [of September 11, 2001] also raised the prospect of even worse dangers, of terrorists armed with chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear weapons. The secret and sudden attack with weapons of mass destruction is the greatest threat before humanity today.”

Undoubtedly, the threat of nuclear weapons frightens American citizens far more than any threat of chemical weapons. Polls from March 2003 show that nearly 60% of Americans supported President Bush’s invasion of Iraq. On the other hand, a June 17, 2013 Gallup poll found that 54% of Americans disapprove of the Obama administration’s decision to directly aid the Syrian rebels with military resources. The difference is thus: with Iraq, there was a perceived threat of nuclear weaponry that could directly impact the United States; meanwhile, the use of sarin is disastrous to innocent Syrians, but it does not pose a clear threat to U.S. civilians. So despite the legal similarities between President Bush’s and Obama’s justifications for increased involvement in Iraq and Syria, respectively, the rhetorical distinction between the threat of nuclear weapons and mere chemical weapons has an influence on public perception and support.

Overall, however, the criticism surrounding the chemical weapons discussion is centered not specifically around Assad’s use of sarin, but on President Obama’s decision to begin providing small arms to rebel groups. Regardless of what constitutes a red line, the provision of lethal aid necessitates a greater involvement in the situation; and with it comes fresh questions of how to get involved, and to what extent.

Small Arms: Too much aid, or not enough?

President Obama was chastised for not personally making this announcement; the shipment of small arms began in the last week of June, 2013 and signaled the end of President Obama’s former policy of “non-lethal assistance” to the rebels. By June 28, 2013, reports surfaced that the Central Intelligence Agency had begun a process of vetting Syrian rebels for receipt of weapons. An article that appeared on the website of the European Leadership Network asserted that the CIA had been stockpiling AK-47s and antitank missiles; and that U.S. officials would oversee a possible Saudi effort to transfer twenty plus portable anti-air missiles to certain rebel forces. The ostensible goal of this vetting process is to ensure that the weapons do not end up in the hands of such groups of the al-Nusra Front or elements of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Yet many analysts, both conservative and liberal, remain doubtful that such a plan can be held to any realistic success. In a report published in the European Council on Foreign Relations titled “Syria: The Imperative of De-Escalation,” Julien Barnes-Decay and Daniel Levy note that it is unrealistic to expect that weapons can be guaranteed into the hands of pro-Western actors; after all, similar goals in Iraq and Afghanistan were unsuccessful. Furthermore, General Salim Idris, the newly appointed leader of the Supreme Military Council, has only limited remit over battlefield groups and has been unable to stop the increasing efficiency of Jubhat al-Nusra.

Primarily, interventionists have called for the implementation of a No-Fly Zone over Syria to further prevent Assad’s armies from maintaining air-strike capabilities. Senator Graham justifies his support of such a plan:

The goal is to end the war. And the only way this war is going to end quickly and on our terms is to neutralize the air assets that Assad enjoys. We can crater the runways. There are four air bases he uses. We can stop the planes from flying. We can shoot planes down without having one boot on the ground.

In Congress, the plan has some degree of bipartisan support. Senator Menendez echoed in the same vein the sentiments of his Republican colleagues, saying that: “If Assad continues to have unlimited air power and artillery, that’s a hard battle to win.”

Senators Menendez and Graham underscore the stance of many that given the Obama administration’s willingness to intervene in some capacity, they should intervene to the fullest extent possible. Micah Zenko picks up this strain in his Foreign Policy article “Obama’s ‘Alice in Wonderland’ Syria Strategy.” Zenko believes that such a combination of maximalist and minimalist goals without any single strategic objective should be troubling; he

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quotes the Cheshire Cat’s imploration to Alice that “if you don’t know where you are going, any road will take you there.”

It is important to note the broad inconsistencies within the Obama administration as to the goals of any intervention. While the President has affirmed the broad need for “a Syria that is peaceful, non-sectarian, democratic, legitimate tolerant;” Deputy NSA Rhodes noted the goal of building “an opposition that can be broadly representative of the Syrian people;” and State Department spokesperson Jen Psaki stated: “to strengthen the opposition on the ground, but also their political organization, increase their effectiveness and their cohesion.” Meanwhile, Secretary of Defense Hagel put the primary goal as assuring “that this problem in Syria doesn’t totally break down and we see the disintegration of Syria;” and Secretary of State Kerry admitted the sole goal of finding “a political settlement.” As such, the Obama administration is operating with no end-game, no uniformity of goal to inform key decisions.

One concern for increased involvement lies in the fact that the Syrian civil war has established itself as a regional proxy war between Sunnis and Shi'ites. Which isn’t to say that the United States has nothing in common with either group; in fact, one of the reasons the Obama administration has supported the Sunni rebels is their affiliation with American allies in the region like Saudi Arabia.

But there is still an argument to be made for waiting out the depletion of an enemy’s resources, either by involvement or non-intervention. Gary C. Gambill, in an e-note on the website for the Foreign Policy Research Institute, compares the Iranian surge in involvement to the Nazi surge of military forces into the 1942 Battle of Stalingrad – “an operationally competent, strategic blunder of epic proportions.”

It is, in fact, the case that Sunnis far outnumber Shi'ites and that the rebels’ sponsors list – Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Jordan – have a GDP that is twice that of Iran. Consequently, the conflict will affect their collective economies to a much smaller extent than it will Iran’s.

Another concern that pervades all parties is the possibility of weapons ending up in the hands of parties who might after the conflict turn them against the United States; the case of the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan rings as the primary example of this phenomenon. For some, the existence of subgroups of the Syrian rebel corps necessitates the stance of non-intervention simply in recognition of the fact that neither side is worth supporting. This concern has manifested to various degrees: while some, like Senator McCain, reject the notion forthright, others see non-involvement as an opportunity to allow belligerents to drain each other’s resources.

The increasing prominence of the al-Nusra Front and the emergence of reports of inhumanity on the part of certain rebel groups are the prime dictators of this policy. A video from May, 2013 showed Abu Sakkar, a commander of a rebel Syrian brigade called the Independent Omar al-Farouq brigade mutilating the corpse of a regime opponent. Sakkar, standing over the body, cut out the heart and liver, proceeded to insult Alawites in strong sectarian language, and then put the corpse’s heart into his mouth and took a bite. The video, which has sparked considerable and understandable outrage from the international community, highlights the essential fact that the opposition to President Assad has neither one face, nor one policy, nor one relationship with the United States. There are certainly elements within the rebels that subscribe to so-called “American tenets” – liberty, freedom, and democracy; and it is those elements that are most palatable to the American public. Yet reports have surfaced of the application of strict Sharia law in rebel-held territory in Syria. June 10, 2013, a fourteen-year-old boy, after being approached for a free cup of coffee he was selling, remarked that “Not even if the Prophet himself returns.”

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29 Ibid.
armed men heard him, threw him into a car, beat him up for half-an-hour, summoned a crowd, and shot him three times. 32

Though the main Aleppo sharia court condemned the murder, it nonetheless reflects the growing influence of religious extremism – even from ostensibly moderate factions that make up the opposition. It is perhaps this wariness of factions and inability to equate American goals with those of the rebels that explains recent polls. A July 2013 Quinnipiac University found that 61% of voters of both parties say that it is not in the best interest of the United States to get involved in Syria. The distinction between this poll and others is the emphasis on the best interest of the United States, a factor that has been crucial to understanding the various views of the political elite on the same question.

Assessing the Administration

On the popular front, debate about Syrian intervention reaches beyond congressional committees or online chatter. A May 31, 2013 Gallup report determined that 68% of Americans believe that the United States should not use military action in an attempt to end the civil war; similar polls have found similar results. 33 However, a CNN/ORC International poll released in May 2013 showed that 36% of Americans are “very concerned” and 43% are “somewhat concerned” about the Syria crisis. Only 19% of respondents were “not very concerned,” or “not concerned at all,” with 2% displaying “no opinion.” This latter poll was released the same day that the United Nations human rights commissioner deemed that the situation had deteriorated to an “intolerable affront to the human conscience.” 34 The American people's ambivalence towards Syria – interest in the conflict yet reticence to intervene – coupled with disagreement within the administration, has left President Obama largely without a mandate for actions moving forward.

Ultimately, the Obama’s administration’s inability to fully commit or disengage has broad policy implications. In their article, Barnes-Dacey and Levy introduce the notions of “intervention-lite” and “diplomacy-lite” to describe policies towards Syria. According to them, the former is based on the belief that, for example, lifting the arms embargo and funneling weapons to rebel groups could force President Assad to capitulate; while the latter is based on the assumption that the diplomatic process at this stage is possible. Unfortunately, according to Barnes-Dacey and Levy, the real choice is “now between two unsavoury paths: a full-scale intervention and a commitment to real diplomacy.” 35 However, for diplomacy to work, the West must make compromises, among which is the truth that Assad’s departure cannot be a precondition for talks, but a subject of negotiation.

The possibility of a negotiated peace between the parties has its obvious advantages: not only will the bloodshed cease, but it could prevent what many fear is a very real possibility should Assad fall soon: a Somalia-type warlord-run state lush with sectarian violence and an influx of weapons. A worst-case scenario could include national fragmentation and a situation in which the Damascus government no longer controls its territory. 36 Regionally, the violence could spread into Jordan, Turkey, and Iraq; and Israel could be forced into the fray.

However, reaching the negotiating table has been excruciatingly difficult. Though Secretary Kerry and his Russian counterpart have met numerous times to organize a formal arrangement, known colloquially as “Geneva II,” neither of the principal parties has yet to express a willingness to participate. Rebel opposition to Geneva II is rooted in a deal-breaking promise of President Assad’s capitulation; meanwhile, President Assad has no real reason to negotiate: foreign fighters and millions in aid from Russia and Iran give his armies a distinct military advantage over the

fragmented Syrian National Coalition. Until both sides agree to negotiate, there is little hope for a Russo-American organized conference that could work to any degree of success.

The Obama administration, then, is caught between the full implications of intervention and isolation. Full-scale, boots-on-the-ground intervention necessitates loss of life for Americans, and carries with it the responsibility to oversee a transition process when President Assad is deposed and his armies defeated; in consequence, a nation-building quagmire the likes of which have been seen in Iraq and Afghanistan seems to quiver on the horizon. In the opposite corner is the now-unthinkable possibility of full-scale isolation, equally as dangerous and volatile.

Even within the realm of intervention there are numerous ways to intervene. Though President Obama declared that shipments of lethal aid to the rebels would commence, he did not specify what quantities of aid would be delivered, and to whom. And so the details of the intervention are left to congressional sub-committees and members of the armed forces to debate, and for the Obama administration to decide. In an open letter to Senator Carl Levin (D-MI), General Martin E. Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, outlined five options on the use of U.S. military force in Syria: Train, Advise, and Assist the Opposition, in which non-lethal forces would be used to train and advise the opposition; Conduct Limited Stand-off Strikes, in which lethal forces would “strike targets that enable the regime to conduct military operations, proliferate advanced weapons, and defend itself”; Establish a No-Fly Zone, in which lethal force would prevent the regime from bombing and resupplying; Establish Buffer Zones, in which lethal and non-lethal force would protect specific areas across border – this plan would require the use of thousands of U.S. ground forces, though, according to General Dempsey, “human suffering could also be reduced, and some pressure could be lifted off Jordan and Turkey”; and Control Chemical Weapons, in which lethal force would “prevent the use or proliferation of chemical weapons…by destroying portions of Syria’s massive stockpile, interdicting its movement and delivery, or by seizing and securing program components.”

Costs for enacting each of the plans range from $500 per year to greater than $1 billion per month. Though the Chairman stops short of prescribing any one solution, the mere multitude of possibilities demonstrates the complexity of the conflict. Yet the last two solutions are ostensibly off the table, as everyone from Senator McCain to President Obama has rejected a troops-on-the-ground approach. And so the President is left with a range of options, from merely sending lethal aid to the rebels to working with Turkey and Jordan to establish No-Fly Zones to limit bombing capabilities of the Assad regime.

To this point, President Obama has established a shaky middle ground. As such, his policy towards Syria acts as a self-perpetuating cycle. It is imperative that the President adopt a sure-footed stance on intervention and stick with it. A continuation of a purely reactionary policy towards Syria could indefinitely prolong the conflict as anger grows on all sides. While we cannot predict precisely what actions President Obama will take, one thing we can be sure of is that, as Woodrow Wilson Center scholar Aaron David Miller puts it, “it’s going to get worse before it gets worse.”