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E-NOTES

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SYRIA: TIME FOR INACTION?

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This essay is drawn from his American Interest blog of February 28. His blogs are here: <http://blogs.the-american-interest.com/garfinkle/> His FPRI essays can be found at <http://www.fpri.org/contributors/adam-garfinkle>.

Is the new, very marginally more muscular, U.S. disposition toward the Syrian opposition a good idea? To answer this question properly, we have to take a step back about two years to get some perspective on where we are, as opposed to where we could've been.

When the mayhem started in Syria back in March 2011, the Obama Administration's attitude was to stay as far away from it as possible. An administration spokesman proclaimed that the United States would supply no equipment of any kind to the opposition, for fear that it would intensify the violence, and that weapons might end up in the hands of terrorists. These were plausible arguments, but they hid the real reason for the Administration's passivity, which was the fear that any involvement would drag us into a level of commitment the President thought unwise. Here was a case where even leading from behind was judged to be too bold.

Unwise why? Why such passivity? It was over-determined by two central factors. First, by any measure, Syria is hard to do both militarily and politically compared to a place like Libya, which from a military point of view is an island (i.e., every target in the country worth attacking can be attacked from the sea). And second, the prospect of action was far too close to the election to be worth the risk; whenever U.S. troops get kinetic, gasoline prices spike, and White House politicians wanted none of that. The more I behold the behavior of this Administration and this President, the more I conclude that political concerns outweighed concerns about political and military prudence. But as I say, either way, this was over-determined.

Since it is not possible to have no policy on any subject as telegenic as the Syrian civil war, the Obama Administration dutifully came up with what it claimed was a policy. This policy, so-called, shifted with time, but it basically consisted of a hope that Bashar al-Assad would emerge as the great conciliatory reformer of Syria, and that the medium for parlaying his conciliation into a broad political settlement would consist of the good offices of the Russian government. Thrown into the mix was a robust fantasy that a United Nations mediation effort could do more good than harm.

Now, I sympathized with the difficulty of the issue from the get-go, but already more than a year ago I was concerned that inaction could well make the situation much worse. In a post titled "The Wisdom of Sheikh Zubar," I did my best to cobble together a plan that could drive the situation in Syria toward closure without putting American boots on the ground in the process. My concern was that if the situation were left to fester, several bad things would happen.

First, the toxins of Syria's civil war would spread, to Lebanon, to Jordan, to Iraq, and to Turkey among the Kurds there and in other countries.

Second, as I and others warned, the longer the civil war went on, the more radical-Islamist the opposition would probably become, opening the way for an invitation to al-Qaeda and like-minded groups to thrive just adjacent to three U.S. allies (Turkey, Jordan and Israel).

Third, given the under-institutionalization of the Syrian state under a Ba'athi regime, a protracted civil war would destroy that state to a point that the country could split into pieces. And as we know from the Humpty Dumpty school of historical analysis, a country once split into pieces is hard to put back together again.

Looked at from a cold-blooded strategic perspective rather than the ever popular meliorist-humanitarian one, that latter outcome might not be entirely negative. But at the very least it constituted a form of playing with fire given the first two likely consequences of U.S. passivity.

And so here we are a year or so later, and all of this has come true. Toxins have spread, the opposition has become more Islamist, and the future of Syria as an integral state looks dimmer every day. So much for the idea that boldness should always be relegated to a last resort. If you like a metaphor, this notion is a little like advising a cancer victim to wait until the last minute for surgery.

It has been said many times before, including by me, but politics is ever the domain of unanticipatable irony. A year ago, for reasons I have just laid out, I believed that an effort, prudent but practical, to bring the civil war in Syria to a close (with Assad and the Ba'ath gone as a result) was the best of all possible alternatives. Now, just as U.S. policy has become more muscular, I'm not so sure.

First of all, while toxins have spread, so have defenses against them. Second, while the opposition has become more Islamist, it has not driven out other factions, and in recent months those factions have gained additional incentive to stop bickering among themselves. Third, some rearrangement of the borders in the region that date from the post-World War I settlement could be a good thing. I am thinking specifically of the establishment of a viable Kurdish state, with its core in the Kurdish Regional Government in northern Iraq—already an independent entity in all but the formalities. Having such a basically pro-Western, non-Arab entity in that region might have its advantages (although I do not for a minute underestimate the amount of broken crockery it might take to bring such an entity into being).

And there is even a fourth reason why a continuation of the fighting, at least for a while, might bring benefits. The Islamist core of the Syrian opposition is called Jabhat al-Nusra, and it is ultra-radical Sunni in inspiration, along the lines of al-Qaeda. Rising rapidly to contend against it from the west, staging now in Lebanon's Beka Valley, is a wing of the Iranian military in Syria in the form of an expeditionary arm of Hizballah—and it is ultra-radical Shi'a in inspiration. To put it in an historical analogy, we seem likely soon to witness a replay of the Battle of Karbala¹.

Let me try to put this delicately, although it's not easy. We have before us the prospect that a large number of men (and even some women) who hate the United States of America and all it stands for are preparing to slice each other from dimple to duodenum. The latest reports tell us that volunteers from Saudi Arabia are now headed to Syria to help their radical Sunni comrades. Most of these fighters, both those native to Syria proper and "guests," are not the least wary of fighting, and they are by any realistic measure we're familiar with not afraid of dying. So why not let them? There have been many fights in history in which, for practical purposes, both sides have lost. This could well be another in a series. I know this will sound harsh to some, but consider it this way: We have stood aside for two years with our thumbs up our you-know-what while more than 70,000 mostly innocent people have been killed; so why not stand aside for a little longer so that some hateful, armed and dangerous people can get killed, too?

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¹ The Battle of Karbala, which took place in October 680 and is commemorated to this day, pitted a grandson of Muhammad against the caliph of the time in the first of a series of succession crises that shaped the historic split between Sunni and Shia Muslims.