



The MENA Initiative

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Policy Brief

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Intervention in Syria Needs to be Tied to a Larger Strategy

By Bradley Bosserman

During this week's Senate hearing on the use of force in Syria, Senator Corker expressed a hope that the conversation would move beyond the narrow issue of chemical weapons and expand to include a broader discussion of regional strategy.ⁱ The Obama Administration's decision to submit this action to Congressional authorization creates an important opportunity to answer these wider questions and to place Syria in its proper context of America's diverse interests and policy options in the Middle East. The White House has experienced significant pushback against its plan for "tailored and limited airstrikes." The American people and their representatives in Congress are justified in their skepticism – fearing a rerun of other less than successful Middle East missions. If the President truly does believe that Syria is different, the mission is just, and the objectives attainable, he needs to make a much more convincing and broader case about America's role in the region. Legalistic and moral appeals about chemical weapons and international norms will not assuage concerns about the futility of U.S. action.

President Obama's position on Syria is that "Assad must go," but that military intervention is not the appropriate path.ⁱⁱ The problem is that negotiated settlements to prolonged and deeply rooted conflicts do not come to pass as a result

merely of moral suasion. Force serves "to enhance the negotiating position of one side against another, forcing through blood and toil acceptance of a political end" that was previously too objectionable to adopt. It is a political end to the Assad regime's grip on Syria that is the stated goal of U.S. policy, yet the narrow operation being put forth by the White House is explicitly designed to avoid achieving that result.ⁱⁱⁱ Moreover, the assertion that these proposed strikes are somehow divorced from the ongoing civil war is laughable. The U.S. has already rightfully chosen sides in this conflict, sending aid, training, weapons, and logistical support to the rebels. Decoupling this latest action from these ongoing efforts to support the opposition and from the stated policy aim of regime change simply makes no sense. If the administration is going to convince the Congress, the country, and the world that military intervention is now the proper response, they must address this fundamental dissonance by articulating a cogent vision of American involvement in the region that ties the ongoing – and proposed – actions in Syria to American values and concrete U.S. interests. Only then will the President be able to make a compelling case for not only his Syria policy, but also a broader agenda of engagement. There should be at least three components to this argument:

Preventing nuclear weaponization of Iran and constraining its foreign policy adventurism is a legitimate aim of U.S. policy.

While President Rouhani has signaled renewed interest in some degree of rapprochement with the west, there can be no doubt that the Iranian government both directly and through the proxy groups they support, represents a force with regional ambitions decidedly at odds with those of America and our allies. In this light, the President can justifiably argue that we should be hastening the fall of Assad, one of Tehran's key allies, and strengthening the opposition enough to ensure that Iran doesn't move in to fill the vacuum. This, along with a strategy to continue isolating their regime and stemming their influence, would constitute a positive development on its own terms.

We need to encourage more constructive engagement from our Gulf partners.

Qatar and Saudi Arabia are often characterized as U.S. allies simply filling the financial void left by American stinginess in the region, but it is important to understand that they are themselves competitors driven by their own interests, and that their actions on many of these fronts have worked against, rather than in support of, American aims. The Qataris, for example, have been channeling arms, ammunition, and support to more radical Sunni groups in Syria through their own propriety networks, making it much more difficult for the more moderate, U.S.-backed Free Syrian Army to unify and consolidate gains.^{iv} Similarly, Qatar was funneling weapons to ideologically-sympathetic militia groups in Libya who operated outside NTC structure.^v If the United States continues to cede regional leadership to the Gulf states, we should expect to see the promotion of Sunni autocracies, not peaceful inclusive democracies.

We need to help empower more modern and pluralistic forces vis-a-vis violent and radical groups who seek to destroy the emergence of open, tolerant, and prosperous societies.

Doing this must recognize the vitally important role of helping transitioning countries build civil society infrastructure and widely spread economic opportunity. Keeping this goal in mind has implications not only in places like Egypt and Tunisia, but also provides an important lens through which to view the conflict in Syria and elsewhere. Experience has demonstrated that the longer sectarian civil wars in the Middle East are left to burn, the more radicalized and anti-western the opposition becomes. Protracted conflicts attract foreign fighters sympathetic to the goals of groups like al Qaeda and turn weekend warriors into hardened fighters. Over time, more liberal forces become increasingly marginalized, those who remain open to western-friendly values become disillusioned by the lack of western support, professionalized militias become much more difficult to reintegrate peacefully into post-conflict institutions, and the scope of helpful policy options available to America and our allies dramatically narrows.

The problem is that the President seems to think that he can overcome opposition to his plan by making it sound as narrow as possible, but that is exactly the wrong instinct. He needs to sell the country on a much larger vision of American interests. We need to hear once again from the President who spoke so powerfully in 2011 about human aspirations and shared values.^{vi} About the moral and strategic necessity of being a force for openness and freedom in the world. A vision that translates and embodies American values abroad can be genuinely inspirational, but it has to be so much more than bombs and rockets. It must represent a much broader set of tools and the strength to apply them persistently over time. That is the vision the President needs to sell to a hesitant nation. Repeating talking points about "limited strikes" won't get it done. ■

About the Author

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About the MENA Initiative

Since the Arab Spring began in early 2011, NDN has recognized that this unique convergence of globalization and democratic transition provides a real opportunity for the U.S. to form new and powerful relationships with the 300 million people throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), helping them develop their economies, institutions, and human capital in ways that can empower them to move toward more open, prosperous, and egalitarian societies.

We believe that aiding this region requires a sustained commitment on the part of the U.S. government, corporations, non-profits, and civil society to develop robust economic and diplomatic ties. The purpose of the MENA Initiative is to support that vital work with programming, events, research, advocacy, and media engagement.

Notes

ⁱ “Full Transcript: Kerry, Hagel and Dempsey testify at Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on Syria,” The Washington Post. September 3, 2013

http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/running-transcript-senate-foreign-services-committee-hearing-on-syria/2013/09/03/35ae1048-14ca-11e3-b182-1b3bb2eb474c_story.html

ⁱⁱ President Obama first called for Assad’s resignation in August, 2011 – a position that has been consistently reiterated by the President and Secretary of State Kerry.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kelsey Atherton with Joshua Foust, “How to Lose the Game of Thrones.” June 6, 2013. <https://medium.com/state-of-play/56f3cb13fae4>

^{iv} Elizabeth O’Bagy, “The Free Syrian Army,” Institute for the Study of War. March 2013. From pg. 13:

“Two of the rebels’ most important patrons, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, are competing with each other for power and influence by supporting different groups inside of Syria. Although they initially agreed to unite support behind the Joint Command, a rift surfaced by late October 2012, when Saudi representatives working with the Joint Command believed that the Qataris had designed the structure to enhance their influence at the expense of the Saudis.

This perception prevented Saudi and Qatari sponsors from uniting their support behind the Joint Command, instead leading them to select individual allies from inside and outside the organization. This significantly contributed to the failure of the Joint Command by bypassing its distribution mechanisms and creating rivalries within the organization.”

^v Senior Administration officials have recounted that both President Obama and Mahmoud Jibril had attempted to confront Qatar about arming radical militias in Libya. See reporting in The New York Times. “U.S. –Approved Arms for Libya Rebels Fell Into Jihadis’ Hands.” December 5, 2012.

^{vi} “Barack Obama’s speech on Middle East – Full Transcript,” The Guardian. May 19, 2011.

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/may/19/barack-obama-speech-middle-east>