

Viewpoints
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U.S. Policy toward Syria: Making the Best of a Bad Situation?

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The Obama administration's policy of non-intervention in Syria has been criticized both for permitting the ruling minority Alawite regime there to continue oppressing the Sunni Arab majority as well as for allowing the radical jihadist opposition to grow in strength vis-à-vis the moderate opposition. Several important domestic political and foreign policy concerns, though, have impelled President Obama to pursue this non-interventionist policy.

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There have been many criticisms of the Obama administration's policy toward Syria ever since fighting there between the Assad regime and its opponents began in 2011. Many have argued that strong Russian, Iranian, and Hezbollah support for the Assad regime while the United States has done little for its opponents has allowed Assad's minority Alawite regime to remain in power and continue oppressing the Sunni Arab majority as well as other communities in Syria. Additionally, some have argued, U.S. unwillingness to aid the moderate Syrian opposition has only served to strengthen the radical jihadist opposition there, thus reducing the prospects for a cooperative (much less democratic) government to arise if and when the Assad regime does fall.

Further, the Obama administration's recent threat to respond militarily to the Syrian government's use of chemical weapons against its opponents in August 2013 struck many as misplaced, considering that the Assad regime has killed far more Syrian citizens with conventional weapons. Also, the Obama administration's embrace of a Russian proposal to place Syrian chemical weapons under international control has baffled many who fear that the Assad regime is unwilling to fully implement it and that Moscow is either unwilling or unable to force Damascus to do so. Finally, many fear that the Obama administration's failure to stop the Assad regime from continuing the slaughter of its citizens has not only allowed this humanitarian disaster to continue, but may well serve to encourage other dictators into thinking that they too can massacre their internal opponents with impunity.

These are all serious criticisms of the Obama administration's Syria policy. There are, however, several highly important considerations that have impelled the Obama administration not to intervene in Syria – and which are highly likely to continue doing so.

First among these are President Obama's own preferences. He has withdrawn American forces from Iraq and is in the process of withdrawing them from Afghanistan. He came to view both of these interventions – initiated by the George W. Bush administration – as quagmires whose costs far exceeded their benefits. While he did permit U.S. intervention in the Libyan conflict in 2011, Obama kept this limited. Further, Libya's continued political turmoil and violence after the downfall of the Gaddafi regime – including a devastating attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi in 2012 – has done nothing to encourage Obama to believe that U.S. intervention in the even more complicated Syrian conflict is likely to produce better results.

In addition, it is now clear that Congress and the American public oppose any sort of U.S. intervention in Syria. When Obama did call for a U.S. military strike against Syria (in response to the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons) if Congress approved, it soon became clear that Congress would not do so because of overwhelming constituent opposition across the political spectrum. Obama, of course, could authorize the use of force without Congressional approval, as previous presidents have frequently done. Unless the Assad regime does something egregious such as unleash another chemical attack on its opponents, though, it seems highly unlikely that the president will do this.

Concern for Israeli security has also served as a motivation for the Obama administration not to intervene in Syria. With the Assad regime being closely allied to two of Israel's strongest adversaries (Iran and Hezbollah), Israel hardly regards Damascus as a friend. Israel, though, has valued the fact that the Assad regime (both under Hafez and his son Bashar) has kept the Syrian-Israeli border quiet ever since the end of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. While definitely wanting to see Syria stripped of its chemical weapons, Israel fears that if the Assad regime falls, it might well be replaced by one far more hostile toward the Jewish state, and that conflict along the Syrian-Israeli border might well re-emerge. The Obama administration shares this concern—as would any other U.S. administration.

Yet another factor militating against U.S. intervention in Syria is the Obama administration's concern for ties with Russia. Simply put: Washington does not want to alienate Moscow by intervening in Syria at a time when it is seeking Russian cooperation on several issues of major importance to the Obama administration, including the Iranian nuclear file, the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan via Russia and/or Russian allies in Central Asia (due to the breakdown in Pakistani-American relations), and more recently, securing Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles. Making progress on each of these will be difficult enough even with Russian cooperation, but could be far more so without it.

Finally, the Obama administration's hopes for improved Iranian-American relations may also motivate it not to intervene in Syria. U.S. intervention in Syria could well weaken President Rouhani and his allies who have indicated a desire for improved Washington-Tehran ties. An improved Iranian-American relationship, by contrast, could serve to motivate Tehran to distance itself from Assad.

Some may argue that some of these benefits from American non-intervention in Syria—such as improved relations with Russia and Iran—are chimerical aspirations that are unlikely to be achieved. This, of course, is debatable. What is not is that the Obama administration is seriously pursuing them.

There have, of course, been some costs resulting from U.S. non-intervention in Syria for the Obama administration. The governments of France, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar have all sought to persuade Washington to play a more forceful role in Syria, and have been disappointed at Obama's unwillingness to do so. There is reason to believe, though, that the costs of disappointing them may be limited. As the British Parliament's refusal to authorize the use of force against Syria after its use of chemical weapons showed, top-level government support for military action against Syria does not guarantee public or legislative support for it. Public opposition in France and Turkey to the use of force in Syria, then, may limit how much their government leaders are able to support the American use of force against the Assad regime (much less participate in it).

The Saudi and Qatari governments have been especially eager for a greater U.S. military role in Syria, and were offended when Obama announced this would be forthcoming but then called it off. Indeed, this appears to have resulted in even more voices than usual in the Gulf Arab states talking about how disappointment with American foreign policy will lead them to seek other allies. But since it is highly unlikely that there are any other states that are both willing and able

to replace the United States as a security provider – let alone be more aggressive about supporting the Syrian opposition – it is doubtful that Washington is terribly concerned about the prospect of losing influence in the Gulf Arab states to some other power.

Besides, no government that wants to see the downfall of Assad wants his regime to be replaced by a radical Sunni jihadist one either. Indeed, this really is the basic common interest that all governments concerned – whether pro-Assad, anti-Assad, or neutral – have in Syria.

However, then, the morality of Obama’s policy of non-intervention in Syria might be judged, it is certainly a rational, pragmatic one that responds both to the domestic political constraints as well as the international situation that the Obama administration faces. Yet, while it is understandable that the Obama administration does not want to intervene in Syria and either get bogged down in a quagmire or bring about the violent downfall of the Assad regime in a way that provides an opportunity for Sunni jihadists to seize control of much or all of Syria, the prolonged continuation of the war is neither in the interests of America nor any other concerned government (whether pro- or anti-Assad) – especially Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon, which are experiencing serious difficulties in caring for the increasing number of refugees flooding across their common borders with Syria.

If Damascus does indeed surrender its chemical arsenal as the UN Security Council has now ruled that it must, this may help convince the Assad regime (if not Assad himself) that it cannot prevail militarily against all of its many opponents. If so, there may be an opportunity for American diplomacy to bring about an agreement between pragmatic elements of the Assad regime on the one hand and their more moderate opponents on the other, which serves to marginalize the hard-liners on both sides. The United States would, of course, need the support and cooperation of several other governments to accomplish this difficult task. It is highly unlikely, though, that this could be achieved without American leadership.

It is understandable, then, why the Obama administration sees a policy of non-intervention as being very much in America’s pragmatic interests. It is to be hoped that it can also transform the international cooperation that has arisen concerning Syrian chemical weapons into a broader conflict resolution effort – something that would serve not just the Obama administration’s pragmatic interests, but also its ideals.



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