



MIDDLE EAST INSIGHTS

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A DEAD-END PURSUIT NOT WORTH PURSUING: SYRIA AND THE QUESTION OF INTERVENTION

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This Insight is based on a presentation given at the Arab American Institute in Washington, D.C. on 13 February 2013.

The question of intervention in Syria is a hotly debated topic largely due to the insistence of the dominant elements within the opposition that it should take place. Of course, had the regime not answered to peaceful calls for reform with criminal and excessive force nearly two years ago, and unrelentingly ever since, no one would be counting more than 70,000 killed, 700,000 refugees, two million displaced, or the pros and cons of intervention. By intervention, I am referring to the prospect of outright intervention such as no-fly zones and air defense, cross-border exercises, and/or the deployment of foreign troops. Yet the situation on the ground is in fact already characterized by other de facto forms of intervention, including the arming and funding of rebels, the provision of technical and “non-lethal” support, and the presence of foreign fighters. As opposed to the pursuit of intervention, the most important objectives at this point of the conflict should be to bring the bloodshed to an end and to pursue a negotiated transition toward democracy. A negotiated transition will require a willingness from both sides to engage in a political settlement. Neither side has shown genuine interest in pursuing this end. My focus is on one side—the opposition—and its strategic failures in the pursuit of intervention, in addition to the negative trajectory based on path dependence into which intervention would lead Syria.

Realism and Strategic Choices

The dominant elements of the opposition have largely failed in their attempts to achieve intervention externally, militarily, and internally. On the world

stage, they have continued to squander money, time, diplomatic energies, and political capital on the question of intervention, despite appealing for it for over a year. The Obama administration is not choosing intervention.

President Obama opposes even the limited forms of intervention supported by some U.S. allies and members of his own administration. In his recent articulation of views on Syria to the *New Republic*, he explained, “How do I weigh tens of thousands who’ve been killed in Syria versus the tens of thousands who are currently being killed in the Congo?”¹ The significance of this statement is in its apparently blunt articulation that the United States will not intervene on humanitarian bases. This is because states act on their interests, not their emotions. Hence one must question the interests of the states that are advocating intervention and recognize the distinction between their motives and those of activists and opposition members. While the opposition and some outside states are both interested in the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad, intervening states are much less interested in the development of a democratic Syria. Rather, they are intent on removing a hindrance to their quest for power against the Iranian regime, and many of them are keen on the emergence of a Sunni-dominated government. Thus they are not in it to quell the humanitarian crisis nor to promote democracy.

Although the United States is not choosing intervention, its ambivalence has put off any meaningful alternative political initiatives. Other powers, however, are less ambivalent. In October 2011, China and Russia vetoed the UNSC resolution that might have opened the door to intervention. As unsavory as their motives might be, the reality is that they are both powers with significant influence in world affairs. For the dominant elements of the opposition to believe that they are righteous enough to ignore the major world powers (not only China and Russia but an ambivalent United States and a UN advocating a political solution) is to ensure that any new Syrian government enters an international arena with little political capital. In addition, the United States seems to be becoming less ambivalent of late and seems more eager to pursue a political solution (see postscript below). The administration was obviously excited by Moaz al-Khatib’s offer of negotiations with the regime, and it is itself in talks with the Russians and the Iranians. If the United States can talk to its rivals then the opposition can do so as well.

¹ Franklin Foer and Chris Hughes, “Barack Obama is Not Pleased: The President on His Enemies, the Media, and the Future of Football,” *New Republic*, 27 January 2013.

Militarily, the record already shows that political opposition groups do not and will not have control over the distribution of arms. I anticipate the response that if only U.S. intervention and support were increased, then these military activities would be better directed and controlled. However, it seems that most of the moderate groups the United States might choose to support do not themselves have robust support on the ground. Further, selective arming is already among the factors dividing the opposition; more selective arming will mean more fissures. If the dominant elements of the opposition want to exhibit their moderation, they should distinguish themselves from the armed and violent regime and the armed and violent extremists by not being armed and violent.

Internally, the dominant elements of the opposition are failing strategically as well. By advocating foreign intervention they are forgoing a broad coalition of support across Syrian society. There are two segments of society that the opposition is neglecting to bring into a broad-based coalition because of their focus on intervention: the “silent majority” (or perhaps we should call them “silent minorities”) and the disparate elements of the opposition—including Kurdish opposition groups, secular regime opponents, minority regime opponents, and much of the educated and liberal class. It should not have been hard to unite a society against a regime like al-Asad’s, but the dominant elements of the opposition have failed to do so, in no small part thanks to their narrow focus on foreign intervention.

The Future and Path Dependence

Path dependence is a concept in social science that simply means: history matters. The events and circumstances that occur at a point in time are determinant of the institutions and norms that follow. Path dependence is a critical concept in transition periods.

Foreign intervention in Syria will set the country on a course of path dependence that gives outside powers undue influence in its affairs and severely diminishes its sovereignty and unity. In the best-case scenario, in which foreign intervention “goes well,” al-Asad is overthrown. And then what? Those who have intervened from all sides will vie for their proxies to come into power so as to see the country fall into their preferred regional alignment. If anyone “wins” in this struggle it will be to the loss of all other groups. (Even if it happens through elections, it would most likely be a more

pronounced version of Egypt's current political turmoil in which one dominant group has managed to malign and marginalize all others.)

But foreign intervention is hard pressed to be surgical in a country with the demographic diversity and population densities of Syria. If further control is lost and anarchy increases, the proliferation of arms and heavy weaponry will create the circumstances in which war lords, extremists, and covert foreign interference thrive. We can expect to get used to the sectarian attacks that dog Iraq and Pakistan daily and to the sounds of drones in Syrian skies. It is not hard to envision these violent struggles—buoyed by easy access to arms—leading to the physical breakup of the country along ethnic and/or sectarian lines. We can also expect that further violence will be ignited in neighboring countries, with the easy movement of arms across borders.

Yet foreign intervention is neither the only nor even the most important factor that will set Syria on a negative course of path dependence. The very way in which this uprising is being conducted—that is, violently—is anathema to a peaceful, just, and democratic future for all Syrians. The al-Assad regime came into power and maintained it through the constant threat and occasional use of force. That is why it answered peaceful calls for change with force. To have another government come into power through force will severely diminish the chances of success for democracy and regular peaceful transitions of power. It could potentially make Syria an unwelcome place for its minorities and any segments of society that diverge in their views from the dominant power. Further, it will be nearly impossible to restrict the most extreme *jihadi* elements for years to come.

After all these years, Syria deserves better. There are many elements of the opposition that are pursuing peaceful and nonviolent means of change and are preparing for a transition. They recognize that Syria's problem was a failed political regime, are working toward a better political future, and thusly are pursuing political solutions to the crisis. Calls for intervention on the part of the opposition are evidence of a failing strategy that portends more violence and bloodshed; instead, the opposition should focus on achieving a democratic and just future. That is, after all, what I have always understood to be the purpose of the uprising—not merely the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad.

Postscript: Since these remarks were given, the number of Syrian refugees has been revised from 700,000 to one million. Furthermore, John Kerry

began his tenure as Secretary of State, replacing Hillary Clinton. Kerry has indicated that he prefers to find a political solution to the Syrian war, stating that the United States' "first priority" is to "have a political solution. We would like to save lives, not see them caught up in a continuing war."² In this vein, he has pledged more non-lethal aid to the rebels but not arms.

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² "John Kerry Holds Talks on Syria Crisis in Ankara," *BBC News*, 1 March 2013.