Calling Off America’s Bombs

NEW YORK – As the US Congress considers whether to authorize American military intervention in Syria, its members should bear in mind a basic truth: While Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad has repeatedly used extreme violence to retain power, the United States – and other governments in the Middle East and Europe – share responsibility for turning Syria into a killing field.

These governments, led by the US, have explicitly sought the violent overthrow of Assad. Without their involvement, Assad’s regime would most likely have remained repressive; with their involvement, Syria has become a site of mass death and destruction. More than 100,000 people have died, and many of the world’s cultural and archaeological treasures have been demolished.
Syria’s civil war has occurred in two phases. The first phase, roughly from January 2011 until March 2012, was largely an internal affair. When the Arab Spring erupted in Tunisia and Egypt in January 2011, protests erupted in Syria as well. In addition to the usual grievances under a brutal regime, Syrians were reeling from a massive drought and soaring food prices.

The protests became a military rebellion when parts of the Syrian army broke with the regime and established the Free Syrian Army. Neighboring Turkey was probably the first outside country to support the rebellion on the ground, giving sanctuary to rebel forces along its border with Syria. Although the violence was escalating, the death toll was still in the thousands, not tens of thousands.

The second phase began when the US helped to organize a large group of countries to back the rebellion. At a meeting of foreign ministers in Istanbul on April 1, 2012, the US and other countries pledged active financial and logistical support for the Free Syrian Army. Most important, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared: “We think Assad must go.”

That open-ended statement, without any clear means to achieve the goal that it announced, has done much to fuel military escalation and the rising death toll in Syria, while pushing the US repeatedly to defend its “credibility” against a line in the sand that it should not
have drawn.

Then and now, the US has claimed to speak in the interest of the Syrian people. This is very doubtful. The US views Syria mainly through the lens of Iran, seeking to depose Assad in order to deprive Iran’s leaders of an important ally in the region, one that borders Israel. The US-led effort in Syria is thus best understood as a proxy war with Iran – a cynical strategy that has contributed to the massive rise in violence.

The US government’s misguided move from potential mediator and problem solver to active backer of the Syrian insurrection was, predictably, a terrible mistake. It put the US in effective opposition to the United Nations peace initiative then being led by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, whose approach was to call for a ceasefire followed by a negotiated political transition. The US preempted this process by backing the military rebellion and insisting on Assad’s immediate departure.

It is hard to understand this blunder. Even if the US ultimately sought to force Assad from office, its blunt action hardened Assad’s resistance, as well as that of his two allies in the UN Security Council, Russia and China. Aside from seeking to defend their own interests in the region, both countries understandably rejected the idea of US-led regime change in Syria. Russia argued that America’s insistence on Assad’s immediate
departure was an impediment to peace. In this, Russia was right.

Indeed, Russia was playing a plausibly constructive role at the time, albeit one premised on Assad remaining in power for at least a transitional period, if not indefinitely. Russia sought a pragmatic approach that would protect its commercial interests in Syria and its naval base at the port of Tartus, while bringing an end to the bloodletting. The Russians openly backed Annan’s peace initiative. Yet, with the US and others financing the rebels, Russia (and Iran) supplied more – and more sophisticated – weapons to the regime.

Now, with the use of chemical weapons, probably by the Syrian government (and possibly by both sides), the US has again ratcheted up the stakes. Bypassing the UN once again, the US is declaring its intention to intervene directly by bombing Syria, ostensibly to deter the future use of chemical weapons.

America’s motivations are not entirely clear. Perhaps there is no underlying foreign-policy logic, but only carelessness. If there is a kind of logic, however weak, it seems to revolve around Iran and Israel, rather than Syria per se. There are many dictatorships in the world that the US does not try to overthrow. On the contrary, many of them are ostensibly America’s close allies. So why does the US continue to back a deadly rebellion in a civil war that is continuing to escalate dangerously,
now to the point of chemical-weapons attacks?

To put it simply, President Barack Obama’s administration has inherited the neoconservative philosophy of regime change in the Middle East. The overriding idea is that the US and its close allies get to choose who governs in the region. Assad must go not because he is authoritarian, but because he is allied with Iran, which, from the perspective of the US, Israel, Turkey, and several Gulf countries, makes him a regional threat.

In fact, the US has probably been lured into serving these countries’ own narrower interests, whether it be Israel’s unconvincing vision of its own security or the Sunni countries’ opposition to Shia Iran. But, in the long term, US foreign policy divorced from international law cannot produce anything other than more war.

The US should reverse course. A direct US attack on Syria without UN backing is far more likely to inflame the region than it is to resolve the crisis there – a point well appreciated in the United Kingdom, where Parliament bucked the government by rejecting British participation in a military strike.

Instead, the US should provide evidence of the chemical attacks to the UN; call on the Security Council to condemn the perpetrators; and refer such violations to the International Criminal Court. Moreover, the Obama
administration should try to work with Russia and China to enforce the Chemical Weapons Convention. If the US fails in this, while acting diplomatically and transparently (without a unilateral attack), Russia and China would find themselves globally isolated on this important issue.

More broadly, the US should stop using countries like Syria as proxies against Iran. Withdrawal of US financial and logistical support for the rebellion, and calling on others to do the same, would not address Syria’s authoritarianism or resolve America’s issues with Iran, but it would stop or greatly reduce the large-scale killing and destruction in Syria itself.

It would also enable the UN peace process to resume, this time with the US and Russia working together to restrain violence, keep Al Qaeda at bay (a shared interest), and find a longer-term pragmatic solution to Syria’s deep domestic divisions. And the search for a US modus vivendi with Iran – where a new president suggests a change of course on foreign policy – could be revived.

It is time for the US to help stop the killing in Syria. That means abandoning the fantasy that it can or should determine who rules in the Middle East.

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