PolicyWatch 1864

Implications of Military Intervention in Syria

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Also available in العربية

October 28, 2011

Although military action in Syria would carry some risks, not intervening in the face of the regime's now fully revealed violent and repressive nature carries its own dangers.

The debate regarding military intervention in Syria will likely grow in the coming weeks given the regime's continued violence, the end of NATO intervention in Libya, and the rise of armed opposition fueled by defections from regime forces. Despite the emotional weight of these and other factors, however, any discussion of intervention must be informed by serious consideration of the key issues involved in the employment of military force: namely, the ends, means, and risks involved.

The Need for Clear Goals

Any military action in Syria should have clear, realistic objectives. A minimal goal would be to establish some measure of protection for the Syrian population, which is currently at high risk. Another goal could be to give the opposition the ability to militarily engage regime forces. At present, the regime has a virtual free hand in acting against the opposition. A more ambitious goal could be outright defeat of Bashar al-Asad, with foreign forces intervening alone or in cooperation with opposition elements. Whichever goals are chosen, they should be clearly understood and agreed upon by those participating in the intervention.

In addition, the goals must be reasonably achievable with the forces available and within a politically viable timeframe (i.e., weeks or months, not years). They must also be legitimately based on the interests of the Syrian people, not merely or even primarily on the needs of the intervening parties. Failure to establish clear, attainable, and legitimate goals prior to intervention could lead to political and public opposition, "mission creep," defections from the intervention camp, and irresolution in the face of setbacks and crises.

Assessing Capabilities

An intervention decision should also rest on a clear understanding of the regime's strength and resilience. Based on its performance so far, the government appears capable of a prolonged struggle.

The opposition's capabilities for a long struggle need to be assessed as well. Will Asad's

opponents be able to endure what is likely to become even greater violence? Can they develop an effective armed component and take advantage of external military assistance? The Libyan opposition demonstrated all of these capabilities and more almost from the beginning of their revolution; in Syria the picture is much less clear.

Determining Means

There are various potential courses of action for achieving whatever goals are chosen. To protect the population, for example, intervening parties could establish "safe areas" on Syria's borders. Alternatively, they could create a sanctuary within Syria, though this option would protect a relatively small number of displaced or at-risk people -- the opposition, while widespread, holds no significant territory. This is very different from the situation in Libya, where large rebel enclaves were created at the outset of fighting and largely retained throughout the war, proving crucial to the outcome.

Syrian resistance forces are only rudimentary at this point, but they appear to have at least some capability to build on. To give them a better means of combating the regime, intervening nations could provide covert military assistance in the form of arms, training, and advice. Then, instead of facing unarmed civilians who can be killed with impunity, Asad's forces would face the increasing prospect of clashes with armed opponents. This approach would increase the cost of military action to the regime, psychologically unsettle its forces, and potentially accelerate the defection rate.

In addition, some combination of "no-fly," "no drive," and "no shoot" zones could be imposed on Syria to constrain regime military operations. As in Libya, this would restrict Asad's ability to conduct offensive operations against the population.

Efforts to topple the regime would represent the most ambitious and complicated course of action. In Libya, NATO operations to "protect the population" ultimately facilitated the fall of the regime, so protection efforts in Syria might have a similar effect.

Executing any of the above approaches would require the commitment of resources. The actual mix of forces would depend on which course was chosen. Perhaps only a small commitment would be required if the intervention were limited to providing military assistance; much greater forces would be needed to impose limitations on regime military action or support regime change.

Assessing Risk

Intervention is inherently risky. In the Syrian case, potential risks include casualties to intervening forces and the Syrian population; possible escalation into civil war or conflict with neighboring states; and the prospect that intervening nations will become wholly responsible for the course of the conflict and its outcome.

Yet not intervening carries its own risks. Violence against the population is likely to increase, as occurred in Libya prior to intervention. The regime could also lash out both internally and externally if it believes it is imperiled by domestic pressure. And the current situation could become a war of attrition with no clear duration or outcome. Perhaps the worst scenario of all, the regime could win by grinding down the opposition.

The Process of Intervention

The Libya case demonstrated that intervention is not a simple or linear path. Various factors drive it, sometimes in unpredictable directions. Regime responses evolve in the face of internal and external opposition, and the intervention mission itself could transform before it is over. External military action, even at the low end, could embolden and enable armed rebels to increase attacks on regime forces, encouraging further defections. And attrition will occur, certainly for the regime and the rebels, and potentially for intervention forces as well. Although Libya was virtually bloodless for NATO, intervention in Syria may not be.

In short, intervention will not go precisely according to plan. The many processes involved will necessarily produce contingencies that challenge the intervening parties. The regime may act on its threats to retaliate, whether against the population, the intervention forces, or even their homelands. The conflict may escalate both within and outside Syria. For example, Damascus has already threatened to strike Israel if it is attacked from outside. Even the normal dynamics of military operations -- including engagements, pursuit, and human error -- could drive events in unintended directions.

Cautionary Lessons from Libya

The Libyan case indicates that limited military intervention can protect the population and help bring down an intolerable regime. It also shows that the risks of such action can be kept to an acceptable level, at least under some circumstances.

Yet Libya also offers some negative lessons. For one, limited intervention means limited influence on the ground and on the outcome. From beginning to end, the Libyan opposition had at least as much effect on unfolding developments as NATO intervention.

In addition, the Libyan case indicates that any intervention in Syria could be protracted. An entrenched regime is a formidable opponent: Muammar Qadhafi's forces fought back with some skill and real determination, enduring seven months of NATO operations coupled with substantial and increasingly capable rebel efforts before succumbing. Syria certainly looks no easier.

Libya also serves as a reminder that the Syrian opposition is complex and may prove difficult to deal with. Its composition, motivation, intentions, and capabilities will never be completely clear and, in fact, will likely change over the course of intervention.

Conclusion

The situation in Syria will continue to evolve with or without external military intervention, and those contemplating such action should be prepared to deal with the attendant uncertainties. The effects of sanctions, the regime's cohesion, and the nature and resilience of the opposition are questions that can only be resolved over time. And inevitably, concerns will arise regarding precisely how, why, and under what conditions to support unarmed or armed opposition elements. Yet waiting for complete clarity before deciding to intervene can lead to paralysis.

Unquestionably, military intervention in Syria on any significant scale would be a complicated and arduous course of action with some risks. But not intervening in the face of the regime's now fully revealed violent and repressive nature carries its own dangers and, likely, adverse consequences. Either way, the United States and its allies should begin discussing the issue publicly now -- a vigorous debate would itself serve as an important signal to the regime.

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