A New Approach to the Syria Crisis

by **James Jeffrey (/experts/james-jeffrey)**

Feb 4, 2014

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

The Obama administration seems to be understating the risks of minimalist engagement in Syria and overstating the risks of greater involvement, despite the achievable, worthwhile goals of military assistance and limited use of force.

The conjuncture of Syria-related events over the past two weeks does not bode well for the Obama administration's limited engagement strategy. Some argue that the talks in Montreux and Geneva isolated the Assad regime even more, presented the opposition in a positive light, and might produce progress down the road despite the discouraging short-term outcome. Yet at a time of newly reported regime atrocities, continued inter-rebel fighting, and other problematic developments, there is no evident plan to push Damascus and its supporters to accept even humanitarian actions, let alone a real ceasefire.

The administration's mindset seems to be based on two assumptions: first, that Bashar al-Assad, Moscow, and Tehran will eventually realize "there is no military solution," and second, that the conflict can be managed until then by U.S.-led efforts to ease "symptoms" (e.g., chemical weapons, refugees, al-Qaeda offshoots), contain regional spillover, and address other challenges to America's global security role. Suggesting a more activist policy conjures up the specter of a Libya-like quagmire, empowering powerful al-Qaeda franchises, or, per the administration, launching a new "war."

The administration's minimalist approach is understandable if one truly believes that it has worked for the past two years. But both of the above assumptions are questionable. The truculence of Assad's negotiating team in Switzerland, the unwavering support proffered by Iran and Russia, the recent regime violations of last year's chemical agreement, and the continued waves of Srebrenica-level horrors -- from the February 1 barrel-bombing of civilians in Aleppo to a new report alleging Assad's forces have tortured 11,000 prisoners to death -- together suggest that the war will continue and the damage to any rational world order will grow. Assad and his friends do not appear

to believe that there is no military solution. For some of them (Assad and Hezbollah), the conflict is existential; for others (Iran and Russia), it is strategically critical, and they are doing all they can to achieve at least a messy Chechnya-level victory. After all, while insurgencies are difficult to totally defeat, they can be seriously weakened and contained, as seen in Turkey, Sri Lanka, Iraq, and to some degree Afghanistan. If that is the direction the Syrian conflict is going, then Washington will eventually face a de facto military victory in the very center of the Middle East by an Assad rump state, Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia, on top of the humanitarian tragedy and attrition of U.S. global prestige.

This outcome would call into question the core role the United States has taken in the region since its strategic military and diplomatic engagement began with the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Some observers have argued that the Obama administration -- the first "post-imperial presidency since before World War II," as Robert Kaplan recently described it -- might not be troubled by such a turn of events. Perhaps, but that is certainly not what the administration proclaimed to the world and the American people in the largely traditional, still-engaged Middle East policy laid out by the president in his September UN General Assembly speech. A quasi-victory by Assad would place that policy at extreme risk.

In addition to seemingly understating the risks of minimalist engagement in Syria, the administration has also overstated the risks of serious engagement. To be sure, one can sympathize with this view given the precedent of Iraq and Afghanistan. Nevertheless, this administration, like all since 1945, has successfully conducted several military operations short of war -- in Libya, against al-Qaeda, against Somali pirates, and against targeted foes in Iraq in 2011 -- without sliding down a "slippery slope" or incurring significant casualties, costs, or public outcry. Why not against Syria?

CONSIDERING THE USE OF FORCE

Even the most limited military engagements carry risk, and operating in Syria would pose specific military challenges. But the risks become acceptable when one acknowledges two things: first, that doing almost nothing is the more dangerous option, as argued above; and second, that military action in Syria has an achievable goal. That goal is not an American military victory per se, but rather "supporting diplomacy" by convincing Damascus, Tehran, and Moscow that Washington will do what is necessary to prevent Assad from achieving military victory. The Syrian conflict will not end in a way that is acceptable to U.S. national interests unless Assad and his allies are pressured to the point of realizing that a negotiated compromise is better than continuing the war.

In theory, this should not be a difficult leap for the White House, especially given the president's State of the Union reminder that other diplomatic successes -- on Iran's nuclear program and Syria's chemical weapons -- came about only because of U.S. military threats. Yet the administration seems almost frozen in opposition to using force, however limited, and camouflages this stance by arguing that any military action would be tantamount to waging war on an Iraq scale.

In reality, the United States could take several steps to assist the Syrian opposition militarily with only limited direct involvement. These efforts could begin with a more rapid, larger-scale arming of anyone effectively fighting Assad this side of al-Qaeda, avoiding radical affiliates such as Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). Washington could also bolster the air-defense capabilities of trusted opposition factions, providing them with various MANPAD missile systems and/or taking direct action against regime aircraft and missiles. This could be supplemented by symbolic U.S. military steps analogous to past operations over Bosnia, such as airdrops of food to Homs now that the regime has refused to negotiate relief columns.

As for the administration's understandable concern about the Syrian air-defense network, U.S. forces have successfully operated against similar Russian-equipped networks in Kosovo, Iraq, and Libya, while Israel has

conducted limited air operations in Syria itself. Aside from directly suppressing the network, the United States also has an extraordinary ability to threaten key Syrian military equities if American aircraft are threatened. As in any counterinsurgency, the regime's conventional force is highly dependent on command and communications, mobility, firepower, and airpower, which in turn rely on relatively soft targets such as fuel depots, refineries, airfields, ammunition dumps, electrical infrastructure, radars, radio transmitters, and headquarters, often concentrated to better fend off insurgent raids. U.S. standoff weapons could wreak havoc against these targets if necessary.

Again, any military operation has risks, and the specific details of what would work in Syria must be left to professionals. But once the U.S. military is given an achievable, politically backed mission, it is well equipped and experienced to come up with solutions. In this case, the mission would center on generating enough pushback against the Syrian military to facilitate two diplomatic efforts: first, convincing the opposition and regional supporters to get behind a common policy led by the United States, which would now have "skin in the game"; second, using this renewed military credibility and regional alliance to convince Damascus, Iran, and Russia that they must begin negotiating seriously. The United States would not get everything it wants out of such negotiations, but it would get much more than is likely to emerge from the current effort.

Ambassador James F. Jeffrey is the Philip Solondz Distinguished Visiting Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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