

# Multilateralism Breeds Paralysis

by [David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

May 9, 2013

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Program on Arab Politics. He is the former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.



Articles & Testimony

---

## The Obama administration has made intervention in Syria dependent on the Arab League, which is utterly unprepared to act.

**T**he regime of Syria's Bashar Assad has killed nearly 80,000 people to date, and this month, credible reports emerged that the dictator may have deployed chemical weapons against his people. (Those reports are being hotly debated and scrutinized by the United States, the United Nations and others.)

But the 22-member League of Arab States isn't requesting UN intervention as it did in Libya two years ago. Instead, predictably, the organization is condemning Israel for allegedly striking an Assad regime weapons depot as "a dangerous violation of an Arab state's sovereignty."

The Arab League's reflexive obsession with Israel highlights the organization's chronic dysfunction. So why is the Obama administration looking to the very same league for assistance on Syria?

Better known as a forum for grandstanding and invective than consensus-making and action, the Arab League has never been an effective organization or moral authority. Consider that during its 2009 Summit in Doha, the league hosted Sudanese President Omar Bashir, who just weeks earlier had been indicted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes and crimes against humanity in the murder of nearly 500,000 civilians in Darfur.

Notwithstanding its activism on Libya, the league's current paralysis on Syria represents the body's historical norm. Aside from its routine denunciations of Israel, it has for decades been consigned to irrelevancy.

That is, until the Obama administration resurrected the organization and made U.S. involvement in Syria contingent on the Arab League's blessing.

As U.S. Permanent Representative to NATO Ivo Daalder said in November 2011, three criteria had to be met prior to American intervention: "There needs to be a demonstrable need, regional support and sound legal basis for action." "None of them," he added, "apply in Syria."

It's not hard to read between those lines. Irrespective of U.S. interests -- goals that include ending the massacre, dealing Assad's partners Iran and Hezbollah strategic setbacks and preventing the destabilization of Jordan and Lebanon -- the administration effectively allocated the arbiter of "regional support," i.e., the Arab League, a vote on U.S. policy.

The lessons of the 1991 and 2003 campaigns against Saddam Hussein's Iraq are clear. When possible, a multilateral approach to difficult foreign policy issues and military action is preferable.

The problem, of course, is that within the UN Security Council -- and the Arab League -- autocracies continue to exercise veto power.

So even if the hapless Arab League eventually decides to refer Syria to the Security Council, it will likely be of little help.

Russia and China abstained on the 2011 council resolution that ultimately allowed NATO to help topple Libya's Moammar Khadafy, and they regretted it. Going forward, Moscow and Beijing will continue to stand by Assad, and by the principle of nonintervention in the affairs of authoritarian states.

During his first inaugural address, President Obama spoke of the need to meet threats through "greater cooperation and understanding between nations." For the past two years, however, this commitment has resulted in a policy of virtual paralysis toward Syria.

If Washington continues to look to the "region" and the UN for consensus, the paralysis will endure. Meanwhile, the problem in Syria will not age well. Already, the price of inaction has surpassed the costs associated with many types of intervention.

The sad paradox is that the success of liberal internationalists depends on the presence of international liberals. And in the Arab League and at the United Nations Security Council, there just aren't enough.

Washington needn't choose between going it alone and inaction on Syria. Two years on, a change of approach -- including considering a more modest coalition effort -- is long overdue.

*David Schenker is the Aufzien fellow and director of the Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute.* ❖

*New York Daily News*

---

## RECOMMENDED

---

### ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

#### [How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆  
Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## [Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## [Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

[\(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis\)](#)

### TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](#)