

The Case for Organizing a Military Force from Muslim Countries to Intervene in Syria

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Washington needs to devise a well-planned, delicate intervention in Syria: one supported by Russia, executed by Turks and Arabs, and remotely backed by the United States and its European allies.

The ongoing crisis in Syria is that rare international issue that should unite both humanitarians and foreign policy realists. Intervening to terminate the Assad regime is the only way to end the Middle East's bloodiest humanitarian tragedy in decades. It's also the most effective way to get rid of the most anti-American regime in the Levant, a strategic area for U.S. interests. That's not to say that intervention will be simple. Ill-conceived action could escalate the conflict. That's why the intervention in Syria needs to be velveteen in nature, soft to the touch and woven patiently over time.

The U.S.-led intervention in Bosnia in the 1990s is instructive. During the Bosnian War, the United Nations Security Council designated areas liberated by Bosnian civilian-defense units as "safe havens." The Bosnian defense units faced the risk of being outgunned by the superior Yugoslav National Army (J.N.A.) and Serb paramilitaries, so the U.N. then mandated peacekeepers to protect these areas. There was one problem though: In 1995, J.N.A. forces overran the "safe haven" of Srebrenica, and peacekeepers with a limited U.N. mandate could only watch as thousands of Bosnians were executed.

As in Bosnia, forces composed of civilian-defense units are liberating areas of Syria while continuing to be outgunned by the superior Syrian Army. The good news offered by the Bosnian precedent: Give the Syrians well-protected safe havens, and they will likely finish off Assad. But Bosnia also offers another lesson -- don't send in peacekeepers with a limited U.N. mandate. They can't stop the conflict. Intervention needs to be soft in nature and smart, involving not ground troops, but air power to protect the designated safe havens.

Still, a question looms: With little American appetite for overseas warfare, whose air force would protect the safe

havens? In fact, Washington's reluctance to lead an operation may prove a blessing, leaving space for Turkey to take the reins. Over the past decade, Turkey has built a new policy in the Middle East, casting itself as a regional power whose identity transcends Ankara's traditional Western alliances. As a result, Ankara views taking part in any U.S.-led intervention in a Muslim country to be against Turkey's new role in the Middle East.

But Turkey would support an air-based intervention to protect U.N. designated safe havens -- as long as the mission is led by a "regional force," composed of both Turkish and Arab militaries. Qatar and Saudi Arabia, who are funding the opposition, should be happy to work with their new ally in Ankara to protect the safe havens; Washington and European powers could then remotely back the operation, facilitating its success. This might be just what the war-weary United States needs: a military victory in the Middle East without the American military.

There is one more barrier, of course: Russia's veto in the U.N. Security Council. As long as Russia continues to block a U.N. resolution, there won't be any internationally-recognized "safe havens," which means no Turkish-led coalition to protect them. But this is where active U.S. diplomacy, guided by historically-informed sympathy, can make a difference. Moscow's obstructionism isn't because it likes the Assad regime. Rather, Russia fears that by losing Assad, it will also lose its only Mediterranean maritime base, located in the Syrian coastal town of Tartus.

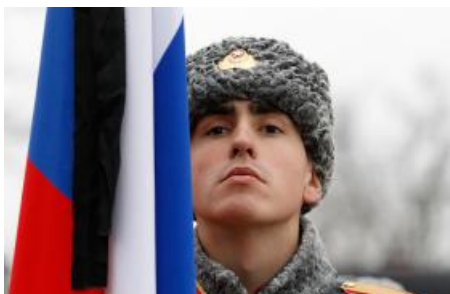
Since the eighteenth century, Moscow has controlled a vast land-based empire. This territory, however, is locked in by frozen seas for much of the year. To tackle this problem, Moscow has always kept a foothold in the Mediterranean, gaining access to "warm" seas. Losing Tartus would usher in a historic Russian lockout of the Mediterranean and the warm seas -- this would be a strategic disaster for Russia. Washington must assure Russia that it will have access to Tartus after Assad leaves. Give Russia their warm water port, and they will not veto the resolution.

Washington needs to devise a well-planned, delicate intervention strategy in Syria: supported by the Russians, executed by the Turks and Arabs, and remotely backed by the U.S. and its European allies -- and last but not least, one involving no ground troops.

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