

# At Issue:

## *Should the U.S. and its allies intervene militarily in Syria?*



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**“Y**ou break it, you buy it” may have proven true for the United States in Iraq, but great powers are often forced to help clean up conflicts they did not cause but that threaten their interests. If Washington continues its “light footprint” policy of non-intervention in Syria, the American people will likely have to foot the bill for a more expensive cleanup of the spillover of the Syria conflict into neighboring states and the overall battle against international terrorism.

Every indicator of the conflict between the Alawite-dominated Assad regime and the largely Sunni opposition has taken a dramatic turn for the worse, with upwards of 65,000 killed, 30,000 missing and up to 3 million Syrians internally displaced during one of the worst Syrian winters in two decades. The Assad regime shows no sign of ending the slaughter anytime soon, increasingly deploying artillery, combat aircraft and most recently surface-to-surface missiles against the opposition. Reports quoting high-ranking U.S. government officials say the Assad regime has already loaded chemical weapons into bombs near or on regime airfields for possible deployment.

Signs are growing of a sectarian proxy war as well, with the Islamic Republic of Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah backing their fellow Shia at the Assad regime’s core and Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey backing their Sunni brethren in the opposition. Al Qaeda affiliates, as well as jihadists, are now among the opposition’s best-armed factions.

The Obama administration has refrained from directly intervening or supporting Syria’s increasingly armed opposition, based on an argument that neither would make the situation better. But allowing the conflict to continue and simply offering humanitarian and project assistance treats merely the symptoms while failing to shape a political settlement that would help cure the disease: a brutal Assad regime that was unable to reform trying to shoot one of the youngest populations in the Middle East into submission.

The Obama administration spent its first two years encouraging a treaty between the Assad regime and Israel that would take Damascus out of Iran’s orbit and isolate its ally Hezbollah. While the method proved wrong, the strategic goals of containing Iranian influence in the region and keeping it from obtaining a nuclear weapon remain as valid as ever. Helping the Syrian opposition push Assad and his regime aside more quickly would help the United States and its allies achieve those objectives.



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**i**f we learn nothing else from more than a decade of war in Iraq and Afghanistan, it must be that high hopes and good intentions help begin wars but do not help end them. Limited war in Syria is a recipe for mission creep and another long-term U.S. commitment to war in the Middle East.

That is why proposals for increased American military intervention in Syria are unconvincing. Broad-based American military action could tip the scales against the dictatorial Syrian regime but would not resolve the deep political conflicts in Syria. And more constrained proposals for military intervention would be unlikely to resolve the conflict.

The United States has many laudable goals in Syria that could plausibly justify military force: undermining an Iranian ally, eliminating a dictator, safeguarding civilians. Indeed, the United States should never hesitate to use military force when it is necessary to protect U.S. interests, but it must use military force only when the killing and dying that it implies are likely to achieve American political goals. That is not the case in Syria.

Public discussions about Syria were hyper-optimistic after the outbreak of peaceful protests against Bashar al-Assad in early 2011. Bolstered by the successes of the Arab Spring, many hoped the protests would not turn violent; they did. Observers ignored the presence of jihadis in the insurgency for months after it became clear that groups linked to al Qaeda were a major force driving the fighting. Still, today the clear split between Arab and Kurdish elements of the rebel coalition is poorly reported in the American press. And many observers have underestimated the cohesion of the Syrian regime, even as the country collapsed around it.

The situation in Syria is undoubtedly terrible. Al-Assad’s regime limps on with backing from Iran, and al Qaeda has emerged as one of the most powerful militant networks in the country. But the idea that limited military action — a no-fly zone coupled with increased military aid to rebels — will resolve these challenges is more hyper-optimism from well-intentioned people.

Limited military force would not stanch the civil war in Syria but instead commit the United States to “solving” Syria politically. During the 1990s in Iraq, no-fly zones failed to destroy Saddam Hussein’s regime, and military action to depose him in 2003 heralded chaos that empowered al Qaeda and Iran. Advocates of force in Syria have not offered a plausible argument for why we would do better this time.