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“It is time for the Obama Administration to acknowledge what is obvious and indisputable in Syria: the Annan Plan has failed.” This declaration by Senators Lieberman, McCain and Graham on April 19, 2012, came only one week after a United Nations-backed ceasefire came into effect, and two days *before* the passage of a unanimous United Nations Security Council resolution authorizing a 300 member team to monitor the ceasefire. The urgent, and admirable, imperative to do something to help the people of Syria should not rush the United States into a poorly conceived military intervention. The painstakingly constructed international consensus in support of diplomacy and pressure should not be abandoned before it has even had a chance.

Nobody expects the current diplomatic path to quickly or easily end the conflict in Syria, but military intervention does not offer a compelling alternative. There are no cheap or easy forms of military intervention which would quickly bring down the regime of Bashar al-Assad or effectively protect Syrian civilians. Military half-measures, including safe zones, humanitarian corridors and arming the Syrian opposition, would likely spread the violence and increase the numbers of Syrian dead without increasing the likelihood of regime collapse. An initially limited intervention would most likely pave the way to more direct and expensive involvement comparable to the experience in Iraq.

Rejecting military action does not mean doing nothing. The United States has effectively taken the lead in constructing an international consensus in support of diplomatic efforts, including two unanimous Security Council resolutions and ever-tightening economic sanctions. The Six Point Plan presented by UN Special Envoy Kofi Annan offers a plausible, if still far from certain, path towards a demilitarization of the conflict and political transition. The ceasefire for which the United Nations called has not ended the killing, but it has substantially reduced the violence even before the entry of the full international monitoring mission. What is more, the number of peaceful protests across Syria has significantly increased in the two weeks since the ceasefire began. Economic sanctions are taking a real toll on an increasingly isolated Syrian regime.

It is far too soon to give up on a diplomatic process which has just begun. Rather than rush into a risky, costly and potentially counter-productive military intervention, the United States should give the current plan time to work. It should continue to lead international efforts at the United Nations, promote the demilitarization of the conflict, continue to increase the pressure on the Assad regime, build on the efforts underway with the “Friends of Syria” group, support the political development of the Syrian opposition, and prepare the ground for future accountability for war crimes.

Limited Military Options

The calls for U.S. military intervention in Syria reflect an understandable frustration with the ongoing crisis and with President Assad's defiance of international consensus. But we must not forget the lessons of the poorly conceived military intervention and occupation of Iraq, with its vast human cost and unintended consequences. Even a limited military involvement in Syria risks embroiling the United States into a far longer and more extensive intervention than currently imagined, without protecting the Syrian people from further atrocities or quickly changing the regime in Damascus. I discuss the problems with limited military intervention in detail in *Pressure Without War: a Principled and Pragmatic Strategy for Syria*, published by the Center for a New American Security on February 21, 2012. I summarize here some of the key points.

It is not enough to demonstrate that the cause of intervention is just. The available military options do not have a reasonable chance of improving the situation at an acceptable cost, and could easily make matters worse. Syria is not Libya, where the United States acted with a clear mandate from the UN Security Council and could use air power in support of a well-organized opposition which controlled territory. Syria's demographics, geography, divided population, strategic location, military capabilities and international alliances pose a far more daunting target. We should not rely on overly optimistic assumptions about the efficacy of an intervention, the response of the Syrian regime and its international allies, or our ability to manage the conflict. There are vanishingly few historical examples of entrenched regimes embroiled in a civil war suddenly collapsing after a symbolic show of force from outside. Most likely, limited military intervention would alter but not end the dynamics of a long conflict, embroiling the United States directly in a protracted and bloody insurgency and civil war.

There are at least four different, and potentially conflicting, objectives for military action against Syria which have been articulated: civilian protection; regime change; weakening Iran; and political credibility. These goals are not necessarily mutually compatible. Arming the Free Syrian Army, for instance, would likely lead to a dramatic increase in lost civilian lives and have only dubious hopes of speeding regime change, but increase the chances of embroiling Syria in a long crisis which would harm Iran. Those hoping primarily to change the regime in Syria oppose diplomatic efforts which might reduce civilian deaths.

Finally, the United States must not intervene without international legal authority. Acting without a UN Security Council resolution would undermine the administration's efforts to restore international legitimacy to the center of global politics, and would risk deeply undermining both international institutions and American relations with Russia, China and the developing world. A UN authorization of force against Syria is exceedingly unlikely, however, barring a dramatic escalation of violence. The support of Arab regional organizations and of NATO is important, but does not substitute for the UN.

All forms of limited intervention would likely begin with significant initial air strikes to eliminate air defenses, establish control of the skies and allow freedom of action by the

forces involved. Syrian anti-aircraft capabilities may not be particularly formidable, but no country would risk flying in Syrian air space until these capabilities are destroyed. Yet many Syrian anti-aircraft capabilities are located in or near urban areas, which means that significant civilian casualties could result from any attempt to eliminate them. There is little doubt that the U.S. military could do this if called upon, but it would not be a costless enterprise and would not alone likely end the conflict.

More likely, a no fly zone would pave the way towards a more expansive air campaign targeting Syrian regime ground forces or defending designated safe areas. Many argue that a bombing campaign might force the regime to the bargaining table, boost the morale of the opposition and demoralize regime supporters. Perhaps, but this would be a risky gamble with fleeting benefits, and would likely evolve into a longer-term commitment. There is little reason to believe that the regime would quickly crumble, or that more opposition would rally, in the face of such strikes. What is more, significant civilian casualties or easily-stoked nationalist anger at a foreign bombing campaign might well rally Syrians around the regime rather than turn them towards the opposition.

Using air power to protect civilians and defend the opposition within safe areas or humanitarian corridors is even more complex. Such safe areas could most easily be established and protected along the Turkish border, but most of the threatened civilians live in other parts of Syria. Humanitarian corridors would be extremely difficult to protect, and could create a new refugee crisis if desperate civilians rush into designated safe zones or neighboring countries. Protecting either would require a serious commitment of resources. Declaring a safe area without defending it effectively would only repeat the painful mistakes of history. In Bosnia, thousands of people were murdered in Srebrenica and other designated safe areas when peacekeepers lacked the means to protect them. Even historical “successes” are sobering. Operation Provide Comfort, established in northern Iraq after 1991, was envisioned as a short-term crisis response, but turned into a 12-year commitment that ended only when the United States invaded Iraq in 2003. Creating and protecting a safe area in Syria would therefore require a significant and lengthy investment of troops and resources, and would not likely hasten Assad’s collapse.

The United States and its partners could conduct an extended tactical air campaign, becoming a de facto air force for the FSA, targeting Syrian regime forces and evening the military balance in favor of the opposition. But in contrast to Libya, there are no front lines to police, few tank convoys to destroy on desert highways and no offensives by rebel armies for which an air campaign would clear a path. Regime forces and the opposition are primarily clashing in densely packed urban areas. Civilian casualties would inevitably result from a bombing campaign against ill-defined targets in urban areas with extremely limited human intelligence. And such a campaign in support of a fragmented and weak opposition would almost certainly escalate.

Finally, some are calling on the United States government to arm the opposition, providing advanced weapons, communications equipment and other support to even the balance of power and would enable the Syrian opposition to defend itself and take the

fight to Assad. This is often presented as the least intrusive path. But in fact it might be the worst of all the options. Providing arms to the opposition would not likely allow it to prevail over the Syrian military. The regime would likely discard whatever restraint it has thus far shown in order to avoid outside intervention. What is more, the Syrian opposition remains fragmented, disorganized and highly localized. Providing weapons will privilege favored groups within the opposition, discredit advocates of non-military strategies, and likely lead to ever more expansive goals. It could further frighten Syrians who continue to support the regime out of fear for their own future, and make them less likely to switch sides. Arming the FSA is a recipe for protracted, violent and regionalized conflict. It would be foolish to assume that an insurgency once launched can be easily controlled. It should also be sobering that the best example offered of historical success of such a strategy is the American support to the Afghan jihad against the Soviet Union, which led to the collapse of the Afghan state, the rise of the Taliban, and the evolution of al-Qaeda.

In short, limited military options do not have a reasonable chance of ending Assad's regime quickly or at an acceptable price.

Give Annan Plan a chance

Military options therefore do not offer a magic bullet for protecting Syrian civilians or forcing a change in the Assad regime. The current diplomatic strategy faces long odds as well, but does at least have at least some prospect of success and should not be abandoned prematurely. It is highly unlikely that Bashar al-Assad or his regime will voluntarily comply with a ceasefire, and even more unlikely that they will surrender power. But international diplomacy does not depend on Assad's good intentions. Instead, it aims to demilitarize the conflict and create the political space for change driven by Syrians disgusted by the destruction of their country. Demilitarization through a ceasefire and political opening would undermine Assad's survival strategy, not save him from an otherwise certain defeat.

Syria today remains deeply divided between a growing and resilient opposition and a still substantial pool of regime supporters. The violence, relentless propaganda, and deep fears about the future have polarized the country and helped to keep significant portions of the Syrian population on the side of the regime. At the same time, the resilience and spread of opposition protests despite massive regime violence clearly demonstrates that the regime has lost legitimacy with an equally significant portion of the population. Assad has proven unable to kill his way to victory, but his regime's survival is at the same time well-served by a violent and polarized arena.

The ceasefire, as American officials have consistently noted, is only one part of the Annan plan, but it is an extremely important one which will test whether the regime can survive de-escalation and demilitarization of the conflict. Unsurprisingly, Assad has complied only partially with the ceasefire. Deaths dropped significantly after the ceasefire came into effect on April 12, but killing has continued at a lower level and there have been many reports of violations and attacks. But the pressure to comply will

continue. The expanded UN monitoring team now entering the country may have a restraining effect, though their limited numbers and mandate will not alone be sufficient. There has been a noticeable upsurge in peaceful protests across Syria since the ceasefire came into effect. The focus of its efforts must still be to increase the odds of a “soft landing” after the fall of the Assad regime, one which avoids a chaotic state collapse and instead produces an inclusive and pluralistic political alternative.

The United States should continue to support these efforts to demilitarize the conflict. It should continue to maintain the hard-won international consensus at the Security Council and push Syria’s allies who have supported the current track to pressure Damascus to comply. It should also continue to support parallel efforts to pressure Assad and to help strengthen the fragmented and weak Syrian opposition. Economic sanctions and the civil war itself have combined to badly hurt the Syrian economy and to increasingly isolate the Syrian elite. Such efforts should continue and expand, with more targeted sanctions at both unilateral and multilateral efforts. These should be tied to the other elements of the Annan plan beyond the ceasefire, including a strong push towards a genuine political process. The Syrian opposition should continue to reach out to and attempt to reassure minority communities and those still supporting Assad out of fear that they will be included and protected in a new Syria.

Should the ceasefire take effect, the U.S. should not allow a decrease in deaths to cause international focus on Syria to lag. There should be constant, daily diplomatic pressure and the mobilization of international condemnation. It should continue its effective efforts to disseminate credible information about regime violations of the agreement, such as the satellite images posted by Embassy Damascus. It should push for the regular release of the reports of the UN monitors and accountability for violations of the mission’s terms, and also insist on other elements of the plan such as access for journalists. It should make a particular effort to convey credible information about regime violence to audiences inside of Syria and to break through the propaganda which sustains the regime’s hold on core constituencies.

The U.S. should also continue to collect information about regime atrocities for future war crimes trials. The “Syria Accountability Clearing House” proposed at the recent meeting of the “Friends of Syria” is an important starting point for future accountability. If it is unable to secure Security Council support for a referral to the International Criminal Court, the U.S. should push for the creation of an independent war crimes tribunal for Syria.

Overall, it is easy to share the frustration with international efforts to respond to the atrocities in Syria. Many thousands of Syrians have died as the world has struggled to find an adequate response. There are no guarantees that the current UN plan will succeed either, but it must be given the opportunity to develop. There are no good alternatives. Limited military intervention is unlikely to either protect civilians or hasten Assad’s fall, and would signal the end of the diplomatic alternatives currently unfolding. For now, the United States must stick with “Plan A” and give diplomacy a chance to succeed.

United States House of Representatives
Committee on Foreign Affairs

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