

US Military Intervention in Syria is Wrong

US military intervention in Syria is wrong, wrong, wrong
by Charles Strohmer

1.) It's wrong because the case for US military intervention has made evasive, juridical moves around responsibilities that the United States (and every state) has for compliance with international law and UN Security Council authorization. To try to trump complying with international law and UNSC authorization, President Obama, Secretary of State John Kerry, Senator John McCain, and other high-level officials and American opinion makers have made arguments within the general category of 'humanitarian necessity' backed by and 'moral responsibility': We don't want to see another Rwanda or the Balkans, so we'd better act. And at times, evocative connotation words heavy-laden with a sense of urgency 'genocide'; 'ethnic cleansing' ? [have been wielded](#) by some advocates of intervention to allude to current Syria. Another highly-emotive image loaded into this line of argument is 'chemical weapons.' In particular, the Assad's regime's use of chemical weapons against its own people crosses President Obama's 'red line' rhetoric, warning Syria in August 2012 that the regime would pay a price if it used chemical weapons.

It's wrong because ? get this ? the United States and al Qaeda may end up fighting on the same side. Certainly no one wants to see the hellish histories of Rwanda or the Balkans repeating themselves anywhere, and it is horrific what the Assad regime is afflicting on the Syrian population. The seemingly imminent missile strikes, however, will do little if anything to deter the regime's use of chemical weapons if it wants to use them. And choose to use them it may, if the regimes sees no middle ground for its future. The regime knows it is fighting for its life against the opposition groups who are being armed and funded by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and others. Either it holds on to its power or it is toast. Apparently, the missile strikes will target the Syrian military. With a badly damaged if not depleted military, what does Assad have to lose by loosing his chemical weapons as a last resort or just to spite everyone? And if the missile strikes also target chemical weapons storage facilities, will not the explosions end up dispersing deadly chemicals into the population?

Further, the mere fact of the missile strikes does nothing to confer them with international legitimacy. Evangelical political commentator [Michael Gerson, however, writes](#) that such legitimacy can be found in the 'norm of international law called [the responsibility to protect](#).'? But he does not also say that acting on that norm nevertheless requires UNSC authorization for military intervention, which so far has not been forthcoming and will likely not be forthcoming due to Russia's and China's almost certain veto of applying it to Syria, at least at this time.

Further still, many are asking why does the sudden killing of hundreds (so far) by chemical weapons count so much more in justifying US military action than does the 100,000 deaths (so far) by conventional weapons? Those asking this question are not being mean. They get it. Dying a chemical weapons death is an awful experience, but as Andrew Bacevich frankly notes, 'bleeding to death from a gunshot wound to your chest or stepping on land mine that blows off your leg is equally awful.' (You can [find Bacevich's view here](#), in an article provided by Religion News Service in which several experts briefly discuss just war principles applied to the US decision to intervene militarily in Syria. My own view is that just war criteria do not currently apply.)

Meantime, if Washington is really serious about helping to relieve the human suffering of the Syrian population, there are immediate non-military means by which it should act more intensely, such as by hugely increasing the already multi-aspected US support to the at least 2 million people who have fled with their families for refuge in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey, and several other countries. Basic services (schools, hospitals, food and water supplies) in these countries, especially in Jordan, are coming under tremendous structural stresses from being good neighbors to the refugees. The billions of dollars that the US would spend on military engagement would be more wisely used to increase aid and personnel to Jordan and these other countries.

2.) It's wrong because ? get this ? the United States and al Qaeda may end up fighting on the same side! If not that, then sworn enemies of the United States may end up killing US troops with US-supplied weapons. Either scenario is likely. Here's why.

Secretary Kerry and Senator McCain, and the still cautious President Obama, have been arguing, each in his own way, for various configurations of "limited" military intervention in Syria for months, backed by official coaxing. In May, for instance, and with bipartisan support, a somewhat utopian-sounding document called the [Syria Transition Support Act](#) was approved by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, authorizing, among many things, "lethal ... assistance to vetted elements of the Syrian opposition." And in July "much hand-wringing among the members being reported" the House and Senate intelligence committees signed off on a [CIA-led weapons shipments](#) and training program to opposition fighters in Syria. The infrastructure for the program, most of it based in Jordan, had already been in place. And now (end of August), US missile strikes in Syria appear imminent.

Stop and consider this "limited" military intervention, now underway apparently, to get US weapons into the hands of selected opposition groups in Syria: The US could nevertheless end up having armed its sworn enemies. The al-Nusra Front, for example, has direct ties to al Qaeda Iraq; it is a large, well-organized, aggressively militant group launching horrific attacks wherever it can in Syria. And consider this. Of the estimated 1,000 different, armed groups in Syria fighting the Assad regime, many are also each other's enemies. There is no viable argument for concluding that US weapons, however much vetted, will not by hook or by crook in the chaos get into the hands of al-Nusra or other militant groups who are fighting the Assad regime but who are also sworn enemies of the US.

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Too, limited military intervention by the US will probably escalate. In his July 19 letter to Senator Carl Levin (Chairman of the Armed Services Committee), General Martin E. Dempsey (Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) wrote: "We have learned from the past 10 years ... that the decision to use force ... is no less than an act of war.... Once we take action, we should be prepared for what comes next. Deeper involvement is hard to avoid."

Washington is not exempt from the ICT-factor (the inherent cussedness of things). Arming the rebels could lead to US troops on the ground, which would, by default, incite the otherwise antagonistic, militant opposition groups to unite and start fighting US troops "with US troops then possibly dying from US-supplied weapons. One wonders how Senator McCain and other advocates of military intervention will reply if US troops in Syria start dying from US bullets.

Keep in mind, too, that Iran and Syria are religiously allied by the bond of Shia Islam, and that Syria is Iran's key strategic ally in the region and the latter's chief conduit to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Also bear in mind that Sunni-majority states such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been arming and funding Sunni-dominated opposition groups in Syria to fight against the Shia Hezbollah in Syria, which is fighting on the side of Assad's troops. It is into that religious conflict that US troops would be deployed.

The real absurdity of the policy, however, would be this tragic irony: A US military intervention that escalated to US troops on the ground could find the United States and al Qaeda on the same side (fighting the Assad regime). The only kind of response to that twilight zone scenario can be found in the blunt wit of writers such as veteran Middle East journalist Robert Fisk: "The men who destroyed so many thousands on 9/11 will then be fighting alongside the very nation whose innocents they so cruelly murdered almost exactly 12 years ago. Quite an achievement for Obama, Cameron, Hollande and the rest of the miniature warlords. This, of course, will not be trumpeted by the Pentagon or the White House "nor, I suppose, by al-Qa'ida" though they are both trying to destroy Bashar." ([This article](#) is worth the read.) (Another absurd scenario, and perhaps the more likely one, would be that of US troops embroiled on two fronts in Syria: fighting al Qaeda and its offshoots amid the internecine religious war and alongside "vetted" opposition groups against Assad's army.)

3.) It's wrong because it will further wall off US "Iran relations at precisely the time when Washington has a rare and significant window of opportunity for constructive, activist diplomacy with Tehran. US military intervention in Syria, for one thing, will waste the very real potential that the Obama administration currently has to engage with Iran's new president, Hassan Rouhani. Known as a moderate, reformist politician, and as the "diplomatic sheik," Rouhani stated in his first news conference after taking office that, while he harbors doubts about what talking with the US at this time might accomplish, Iran is nevertheless seriously interested to talk, especially about its nuclear program.

President Obama, however, is being led to destroy any possibility for constructive talks with Iran by making a mistake not unlike the one the George W. Bush administration made in the spring of 2003. Then, as now, Iran had a moderate president, Mohammad Khatami. Khatami, a reformist politician, whose presidency began in 1997, reached out both to the Arab world and to the West with his "dialogue of civilizations," a peaceable alternative to Samuel Huntington's provocative thesis the "clash of civilizations." Khatami's reachout had been slowly and tentatively returned in kind during the two closing years of the second Clinton administration. Signals sent by both states were noteworthy. Even if they indicated only the possibilities of a new beginning, the wise give-and-take began thawing the bilateral relations.

That trust-building dance continued, albeit not without occasional false steps, into the Bush presidency and for more than a year after 9/11. In fact, it helped then Secretary of State Colin Powell and his team at the State Department to succeed in gaining Iran's crucial help both in ousting al Qaeda and the Taliban from Afghanistan and in the ensuing Bonn negotiations to install a pro-American government in Kabul.

Although huge downsides of US military intervention are becoming publicly understood, none being discussed so far, as far as I am aware, are the worst of the lot: the triggering a US ? Iran war.

By May 2003, Khatami, hoping to see relations further improved, had persuaded the regime in Tehran to take a huge risk ? despite the fact that the previous year President Bush had included Iran in his infamous "axis of evil" remarks. Through the Swiss embassy, the regime sent a formal diplomatic letter to the Bush administration seeking the start of direct high-level talks on a wide array of issues crucial to the relationship between both countries, and to multilateral relations in the region, and to the Israeli?Palestinian situation. The unprecedented reachout was immediately and soundly rebuffed by Vice-President Cheney and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld. The ultrafundamentalists in Tehran quickly exploited the snub to undermine the credibility of Khatami, his team, and other reformist politicians who had been sticking their necks out since 1997 for friendlier relations with Washington. And the rest, as they say, is history, beginning with the election of the radical Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as the president of Iran in June 2005.

The powerful role of Iran's supreme leader must also be considered in this context. Now, as then, the supreme leader has near-absolute control over domestic and international policy, as authorized by the Iranian constitution. Since the supreme leader can make or break any deal, he would be crucial even to the start of any formal Iranian reachout to the US. Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader since 1989, authorized Iran's 2003 diplomatic outreach to the Bush White House. Without that, the White House would have had no reason to take the reachout seriously. But with it, the snub, in my view, may go down as the worst foreign policy mistake in the history of the United States.

Today, Khamenei, who still holds what to him are a pretty good set of historical reasons for seeing the US as an enemy, has shown small signs of wanting to engage diplomatically with the US. In a fascinatingly [informative article](#) in Foreign Affairs about Ali Khamenei, which covers a lot of ground in US ? Iran relations, Akbar Ganji writes that there has been a recent, favorable change in Khamenei's manner toward the US. Khamenei's "discourse depicting the United States as an absolute enemy ... has given way to a discourse about the United States as a potential interlocutor with which it might be possible to discuss acceptable terms of negotiations over such issues as the nuclear program and security in Iraq."

Capitalizing on that potential with the supreme leader in the context of a Rouhani presidency should be a clear and present focus for the Obama administration. But Iran is Syria's faithfully staunch ally in the Middle East. Thinking historically about learned lessons, it is not difficult to understand why the supreme leader will re-harden his attitude and discourse toward Washington as a result of US missile strikes in Syria, especially if this escalates. The ultrafundamentalists will then be able to reassert their authority, Rouhani's moderate presidency will not get a chance with America, and the large majority the Iranian people, who elected Rouhani, will again be frustrated. Are you thinking what I'm thinking? What was it that Mark Twain said about history? It may not repeat itself, but it sure does rhyme.

This too must be considered. Although huge downsides of US military intervention are becoming publicly understood, none of those that are being discussed so far, as far as I am aware, are the worst of the lot: the triggering a US ? Iran war. (Some commentators do

speculate that the US attack on Syria is really intended to harm Iran.) Within the brewing cauldron of intense known unknowns, a US ? Iran war is not unimaginable. The US-arming of the Syrian opposition groups, the missile attacks, a US leadership role in the restoration of Syria, which the Syrian Transition Support Act calls for, or any number of other things, could spark that world-historical event. Any convenient spark would satisfy the many officials, advisors, and opinion makers in Washington who have been itching for the right kind of international incident to justify the US bombing of Iran's nuclear facilities. Escalating US military intervention in Syria that triggered war with Iran would give them their rationale.

4.) The role of the president. Some say President Obama stuck his foot in his mouth when he made his ?red line? remarks last year, and that what he has now taken to calling ?limited and narrow? military action in Syria is a way for him, and by implication for America, to save face and teach Assad, if not also North Korea, a lesson ? Don't use those weapons. Others trot out arguments to support intervention that are in this case based on question-begging American security interests. Still others see arguments for intervention, such as those discussed in this article, as being the moral high ground beyond any need for compliance to international law, just war principles, or UNSC authorization.

Yet poll after poll this year, even after the chemical weapons atrocities, has shown that a strong majority of Americans want the US to stay out of Syria. Never mind. Foreign policy decision making is not democratic. It is superintended by the president, Congressional committees, and the relatively small community of foreign policy elites and advisors, none of which submit their policies to a direct popular vote. Only afterward do we the people get to decide. And so here we are again. The 2012-2013 Syria crisis is being made to rhyme with the 2002-2003 military build-up to the US war about Iraq. It's out of our control. It does not bode well for the people of America, Syria, and the Middle East.

President Obama in the closing years of his second term could take steps to show us all how the artless pragmatism of war can be replaced by the diplomacy of wisdom. What wisdom is it that a large majority of Americans, and much of the rest of the world, have that advocates of intervention eschew? The learned lesson of the recent US experience in Iraq holds the answer. The recent US experience in Iraq is the Great Obstacle that advocates of intervention in Syria needed to convince us to ignore. ?Get over it,? has been the refrain of many name brand editorialists and talk show pundits. Get over Iraq? That's a fool's wisdom.

When the US-led war in Iraq began (March 2003), Iraq had no al Qaeda movement, no insurgency, no car bombings, and little Sunni ? Shia violence. All of that, and more besides, arose with the US military hugely and strongly present in the country. Further, since December 2011, when the full withdrawal of American troops from Iraq was complete, the country seems to be spiraling out of control. Waves of car bombings, reprisal sectarian killings, and gunmen who focus on coffee shops, schools, markets, mosques, and other soft targets took 3,000 civilian lives in March through July this year alone.

Given the US experience in Iraq, how is a policy, even for ?limited and narrow? US military intervention in Syria, wise? Syria is already so disastrously tragic there's not even consensus on what to call it. It is being called a sectarian war, a civil war, a regional war, a proxy war. Thus most Americans understand that current Syria is incomparably worse than Iraq was at its worst - when the US was strongly present. Foresight about US military intervention in Syria comes easily to those who see the clear lesson of Iraq to the US: Stay out of Syria. That's piece of solid, collective wisdom ? a lesson learned at great cost. We don't need to get over Iraq; we need to apply a prudential wisdom to US foreign policy from the experience.

For instance, Congress should stop the forward movement of the CIA arms program after it votes not to approve the missile strikes. The US should greatly increase humanitarian assistance to the refugees. Secretary Kerry should authorize the State Department to pull out all the diplomatic stops necessary for thinking politically outside the box on Syria with US allies and partners. And presidents Obama and Putin need to get past what piques them about each other and make Geneva 2 and other high-level talks work politically to resolve the war(s) in Syria. President Obama could do his part by leading America and the world in such ways.

The president, of course, knows that a strong majority of Americans oppose military intervention. So after failing to win UN support and the support of the British public and its parliament ? which, curiously, he sought before trying to win Americans' support ? our president is trying to make the case for intervention directly to us now, hoping to shift public opinion polls a few ticks in his direction. Concurrently, he will be trying to convince Congress to sign off on the strikes. To his great credit, this unexpected step is

actually quite significant. On August 31, in a move freighted with political implications, the president did an about-face and announced that he would solicit Congressional approval for the strikes.

Because Congress does not return until September 9, slowing down the rush to strike marks a clear turn in the president's direction. Getting Congressional approval, however, even if he also wins more favor for the missile strikes in the polls, still does not confer international legitimacy to the strikes, or somehow magically transformed them to comply with the principles of just war. It still would not gain him UNSC authorization, and it still would be the pursuit of military action sans broad international support ? currently, France is the only nation significantly aboard. Although Congress is somewhat divided on the issue of the strikes, the president may yet get the approval he goes to seek. And the strikes will then commence.

What will be very significant, however, is if he does not get Congressional approval. Will he then order the strikes anyway? (He believes he has that authority.) Or will he be willing to take what would amount to a pretty solid punch to his political credibility and abide by a Congressional "No" vote backed by the strong public opinion against military intervention? That would be wise presidential leadership indeed, hugely commendable, making tentative diplomatic steps with Tehran more likely.

The world would then see a US president who was leader enough take it on the chin, not only to prevent what likely would have become a much worse experience than was set in motion after the US-led invasion of Iraq. It would also be a step toward increasing respect for international law and just war principles. It would be a decision that perhaps represented the kind of humble foreign policy leadership that his predecessor in the White House promised us but did not fulfill. And following that decision, President Obama in the closing years of his second term could then take steps to show us all how the artless pragmatism of war can be replaced by the diplomacy of wisdom.

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