

COMMENTARY

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Obama's Syria Debacle

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I am not a war monger; I know the meaning of war, the death toll, the suffering, and the destruction of property along with the spirit of innocent men, women and children. That said, regardless of how appalling the use of force is to achieve any objective, there is a time when force must be used to prevent greater calamities.

For more than 30 months the Obama administration watched with equanimity the systematic slaughter of the Syrian people, who rose up only because they wanted to be free, enjoy basic human rights and have hope for a better future.

These are presumably the values that America stands for, and President Obama in his own words has reiterated time and again the right of every human being to live in dignity. America is committed to safeguarding these rights; as President Obama put it, "that's what makes America different. That's what makes us exceptional."

Yes, this is who we are, but then nearly 120,000 Syrians have been massacred, among them more than 20,000 children under the age of 15. If these children were alive and joined hands, they would form a line 10 miles long. They died helplessly and needlessly, not knowing if they have ever existed.

Throughout this merciless and dehumanizing war, the president has delved into back channel and open diplomatic efforts to stem the violence and oust President Assad from power. Yet thirty months later President Assad is still presiding over his killing machine and no concrete measures have been taken by the United States to precipitate his departure.

Other than humanitarian aid, the White House refused to provide the rebels with any weapons under the pretext that they may fall into the wrong hands. Had such weapons, however, been

provided at an earlier stage to vetted rebel groups, including the Free Syrian Army, they could have changed the dynamic of the war in favour of the rebels.

Moreover, strengthening the hands of moderate rebel groups could have prevented Al Qaeda and other extremist Islamic elements from becoming a significant factor in the civil war and potentially exercising tremendous leverage in the country following the collapse of the Assad regime.

The White House's inaction and continued indecisiveness has further emboldened Assad to test American resolve by using chemical weapons at least eight times and blatantly crossing President Obama's so-called "red line" with impunity.

Reliable sources suggest that the president's national security team knew with certainty about the earlier use of chemical weapons but chose to continue to "investigate" to play for time, which led to more, larger scale chemical attacks.

The gruesome deaths of 1,423 people (including more than 400 children) resulting from the attack has finally forced the president to face the bitter reality.

I agree that the use of chemical weapons is heinous, incomparable in its horror and inhumanity to any other weapons, and must never be tolerated. But then, isn't it fair to argue that the US could have prevented Assad not only from gassing his citizens but also from indiscriminately killing tens of thousands with conventional weapons?

Following weeks of deliberations, the president finally decided to take military action against some of Assad's military installations, only to vacillate and rescind his decision within hours and turn to Congress for authorization.

Weary of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is understandable that the majority of Americans and their representatives do not want to entangle the country in another war, particularly in the Middle East.

The administration failed to explain to the American public the glaring difference between taking limited military strikes against a tyrant to deter him from continuing to slaughter his people, and waging two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan while occupying both countries with thousands of troops at a terrible cost in blood and treasure.

Many congressmen who refused to support the bill authorizing the president to use force have taken this position, not as much because they do not wish to punish Assad, but to express a vote of no confidence in the president.

Regardless of the president's intentions he appeared vacillating and unsure, raising serious questions in the minds of America's friends and allies about his leadership and the US' credibility.

The Obama administration has failed time and again to draw attention to Russian President Putin's hypocrisy as the latter continued to directly interfere in Syria's civil war by openly

supplying Assad with military equipment to crush the rebels and on three occasions preventing the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) from taking any punitive actions against Assad.

At the same time, he vehemently opposed any outside interference while colluding with Iran and Hezbollah to aid Assad with munitions, arms and fighters on the ground to boost Assad's military capability.

Putin's latest gambit suggesting that the international community "must take advantage of the Syrian government's willingness to place its chemical arsenal under international control for subsequent destruction" is just another cynical move designed to buy more time and allow Assad to consolidate his gains against the rebels.

President Obama and his entourage insist that America's credibility to use force prompted the Russians to persuade Assad give up his chemical weapons to avert an American attack.

In truth, many keen observers who follow the grim political reality in connection with the Syrian crisis suggest that the president was only too eager to grab Putin's proposal, knowing full well that that he does not have congressional support to strike Syria.

Moreover, with the exception of France and Saudi Arabia, no other country has openly declared its willingness to join the US in military strikes against Assad.

Putin's proposal is roundly hollow and warrants no serious consideration. To begin with, it would require the passage of a UNSC resolution that would compel Assad to surrender his stockpile under UN Chapter Seven (which authorizes sanctions and even the use of military force to enforce compliance).

If there is even a small chance for the Russian proposal to work, along with the passage of such a UNSC resolution it must include the following provisions: the departure of Assad along with his top military and internal security echelon, an immediate ceasefire to which all rebels and Assad's military must fully adhere, and a recall of all military personnel and equipment to their barracks under UN supervision, a deal which Russia is not likely to accept.

Second, many experts in the field of chemical weapons attest that even with the full cooperation of the Syrian government and under peaceful conditions, it would take months before these weapons are located and sorted out, and after that it would take at least ten years to destroy them.

Third, given the ongoing civil war and the inaccessibility of many locations, it might be impossible to complete such a task which requires hundreds of inspectors who are not readily available.

When asked if there is anything at this point that Assad's government could do to stop an American attack, Secretary Kerry replied, "Sure. He could turn over every single bit of his chemical weapons to the international community in the next week. Turn it over, all of it, without delay, and allow a full and total accounting for that. But he isn't about to do it, and it can't be done, obviously."

But let us assume that contrary to Kerry's scepticism, Assad will fully comply with his demands. Does that mean that Assad can continue to ravage the country and perhaps kill an additional 200,000 Syrians with conventional weapons on the altar of Russian treachery?

While seeking a political solution that must exclude Assad, President Obama must also be prepared to strike. The US Congress has the responsibility to support the president in this case by rising up against tyranny and giving the Syrian people the chance to live free with dignity.

Yes, we must learn from the experiences of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, but we cannot be paralyzed by these experiences.

As witnessed in Libya, Egypt and now in Syria, the Arab Spring will be a long and cruel winter. Every Arab state will be affected by it. It has permanently changed the political landscape in the Middle East where the US has huge economic, military and national security interests.

This calls on the US to develop a new and comprehensive strategy that corresponds to the ever-changing conditions on the ground. Indeed, how the Syrian civil war ends and what role the US plays in ending it will have far-reaching security ramifications on the US and its allies.

The US remains the only global power with the responsibility to act, preserve global stability and foster political and social values for the betterment of people everywhere.

The President of the United States is the face of America. He is expected to lead with courage and vision and stand by the values that made America what it is, while using his best judgment to act in line with the moral responsibility to which America is held.

Note: This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir's web portal. **Web Link:** <http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/obamas-syria-debacle/>

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