

COMMENTARY

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Why Obama's Syria Debacle Remains on Point

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My previous article entitled “Obama’s Syria Debacle” elicited wide-spread positive feedback and just as much criticism about the rationale behind my argument that President Obama must punish President Assad for his use of chemical weapons against his people. I further argued that should President Obama avoid striking Syria, it would severely undermine America’s regional influence and its national security concerns and that of its allies.

Many of those who read the article argue that “the best interests of our society and our citizens must come first to the mind of a President.” It is true that the president must concern himself with the wellbeing of the American people; that, however, does not mean the US can or should live in isolation as US foreign involvement serves the American people as well.

The US’s interest in the Middle East is of paramount importance to its economy and its national security. Many in the Western hemisphere, including the US, still depend on oil; we have substantial trade interests including the sale of military hardware to our allies to deter outside threats, and we have strategic alliances with the Gulf States along with Jordan and Israel.

This does not translate to an economic burden that the American people must shoulder or security obligations that we unnecessarily bear. The US and its regional allies mutually benefit from these bilateral relations.

Every American president since World War II recognized the importance of the Middle East and invested heavily to protect American short and long-term national interests.

Those who equate the Iraq War and the ongoing war in Afghanistan to a limited strike on Syria gravely miss a central point. While I fully agree that the Iraq War was a ‘war of choice,’ unnecessary and wholly misguided, and the war in Afghanistan is badly mishandled and should have ended several years ago, Syria occupies an entirely different place in time.

Only a fool would suggest that we should place boots on the ground, or we should undertake an open-ended military campaign against the Assad regime and get America mired, once again, in a Middle East war at a terrible cost.

Many from the intelligence community and military experts affirm that a limited strike against Assad would not precipitate retaliation by either his military or any of his allies. Israel has struck several Syrian military installations without any response, Assad fearing massive Israeli counter-attacks that could end his grip on power.

Another reader who posed the hypothetical question, “Would you send your son into harm’s way in behalf of rebels you know so little about?” The answer is no, I would not send my son to fight in Syria, nor do I advocate that any other father should send his son or daughter to fight on behalf of the rebels.

The rebels have not asked nor are they seeking American soldiers to fight for them. They are simply asking for weapons with which they can defend themselves and eventually rid the country of a ruthless dictator.

Another reader argued that “You know very well that the so called “rebels” are in fact external warriors coming to Syria.” To my chagrin, this statement in fact explains why there is so much resistance to American “involvement” in any shape or form.

Yes, there are foreign fighters including Islamists and Al Qaeda affiliates converging on Syria who have their own political agenda for the future of country. But anyone who really knows the reality on the ground also knows that they are a minority compared to the indigenous Syrian rebels who are fighting for freedom and for their lives.

Thousands of Syrian military personnel, diplomats, state employees, and internal security officials have defected and tens of thousands of citizens are fighting and dying for what they believe in.

To suggest, as another person wrote, that “You also seem to forget that foreign commandos – including Israeli commandos are in action against Al-Assad. Israel and its commandos are perfectly capable of chemical weapons manipulation and it seems very clear that using chemical weapons in Syria was the best way to open a wide boulevard for American and European intervention in Syria and that is very profitable to Israel,” is nothing short of preposterous.

I have heard many conspiracy theories, but this one tops them all. This reader seems sadly so detached from reality. In fact, Israel was happy with Assad the father and now his son, as both maintained and lived up to the 1974 disengagement agreement with Israel without any violent incidents along their shared borders.

If the Israelis had their druthers they would have liked to see Assad continue to rule Syria, as the status of no peace and no war is exactly what they prefer. Israel will gain nothing if Syria disintegrates and certainly dreads the prospect of Iran and Hezbollah becoming the dominant factor in the Levant.

Another reader who generally agrees with my views said: “But what surprises me is your distorted view of the United States role in the world. Have you forgotten Chile and so many other places where our notion of stability is to destroy democracy and prop up or install dictatorships?”

It is true the US has supported authoritarian regimes around the world. That said, we cannot be oblivious to the massacre of thousands of men, women and children (thanks to the Russians and the Chinese) in the face of the United Nations Security Council’s paralysis, and at the same time claim to walk the moral high ground.

Punishing Assad by striking some of his military installations and degrading his air force while providing the rebels with the weapons they need is and remains what is necessary to accelerate his demise.

Should the continuing civil war be left unchecked, it will inevitably spill over to the rest of the region with horrific regional ramifications. The US simply cannot afford to be passive when the stakes are so high and when America’s rivals, if not enemies – Russia and Iran in particular – are lying in wait to exploit any display of American weakness.

I am also accused by another reader that my argument is weak because I “blame Obama for everything.” No, my argument is that as the commander-in-chief, the president must occasionally take certain calculated risks when such risks serve America best.

National security policy cannot be conducted by public consensus. The general public and many congressmen are not privy to classified intelligence, nor do they have a clear understanding of the nuances of the conflict.

The president has the prerogative to take certain limited military action when deemed necessary without consultation with Congress. Many former presidents have done so, including Clinton in Kosovo and Regan in Grenada.

It is President Obama who established a “red line” and put his personal credibility and that of the nation on the line. It is not that he cannot change his mind. He can. It is the impression that he leaves with friends and foes alike.

A lack of credibility would undermine our efforts at deterrence. Regional powers such as Iran will be encouraged to continue its efforts to develop nuclear weapons to consolidate its regional hegemony with impunity.

The United States does not want its regional allies to act on their own in dealing with conflicts simply because they do not trust America to do the right thing. Like it or not, the US is the Global Power; it has global responsibility both by design and circumstances.

The question is not whether we should get involved in world affairs, but how wisely we chose to be involved and whether or not such involvement serves America’s national interest while meeting our obligations toward our friends and allies.

Certainly not everyone believes that the United States is committed to human rights and that we, as a nation, seek to improve the lives of people far and near. As another reader put it:

“I know you know your history,” he wrote, “but I am curious as to where the United States acts or have acted throughout its entire history for the “betterment of people elsewhere”. And to this day, we only act when it serves the betterment of those who are already sitting quite well.”

I certainly do not believe that the United States always acts out of altruism, and the betterment of humanity is not necessarily first on its priority list. America is far from being perfect, but I challenge anyone to show me another country, large or small, that has the capacity, the means, the willingness and the values to promote the betterment of people anywhere.

No, this is not a note of patriotism. Many of our worst enemies who condemn the US day in and day out send their kids to study in the US, learn about its culture and way of life and experience what America has to offer.

It is these values on which this country was founded that demand the president to act with vision and courage when other nations and the UN are incapable or unwilling to uphold the sanctity of life.

Whether or not the plan to dismantle and destroy Syria’s chemical weapons succeeds, it will take months, nay years, before this ambitious project is completed. Meanwhile, should we wait until an additional 120,000 Syrians die before our conscience is awakened?

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

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