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Learning from Libya, Acting in Syria

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Abstract

The international community has reached an impasse. The violence committed by Syrian President Assad's government against opposition forces, who have been calling for democratic reform, regime change, and expanded rights, has necessitated a response from the international community. This article explores various ways the international community could respond to the crisis in Syria and the consequences of each approach. It compares the current calamity in Syria to the crisis in Libya and examines the international community's response to the violence perpetrated by Qaddafi's regime. It further analyzes reports, primarily from the UN and news sources, about the ongoing predicament in Syria. The article concludes that the international community should proceed with achieving a ceasefire via dialogue but must begin by conveying newly imposed sanctions that affect the Sunni merchant class and thus threaten Assad's grip on power to make that dialogue more effective. World leaders should also identify a Syrian leader who could replace Assad, who must be removed from power because of the crimes against humanity that have been committed by his regime. Western states must accept that they will have to engage peacekeeping forces in the region to aid the transition of power in Syria.

Introduction

In March 2012, the UN reported that over eight thousand people had died as a result of the conflict in Syria.¹ As monitors and journalists have increasingly communicated the atrocities that have been committed in

Syria—by the government of Assad against protesters—world leaders have felt increasingly compelled to act. Western states and NATO have been faced with a few questions: whether or not to intervene, how to intervene, and to what extent. The situation in Syria is similar to the situation in Libya that precipitated the NATO military intervention to create a no-fly zone, which was authorized by the UN Security Council on March 17, 2011.² Various members of the international community, particularly Russia and China, which both have interests at stake in Syria, have expressed opposition to any kind of military intervention. Russia also has its last major military base outside of the former Soviet Union in the Syrian port of Tartus. The removal of the Assad regime could lead to the end of access to this facility. Russia has also been blocking sanctions against Syria in the UN Security Council in order to protect its oil interests and arms sales in Syria, which were affected in Iraq and Libya after dictators were overturned.³ However, Aleksandr Konovalov, President of the Moscow-based Institute of Strategic Analysis, described Moscow's interest in Syria as based less on economic factors than political factors "because a new Middle East is now taking shape" following the Arab Spring protests, "and Russia is definitely not indifferent to how it emerges."⁴ Syria is Russia's last foothold in the Arab world; the removal of Assad and his Alawite regime will curb Russia's influence in the region.

Beyond the implications of launching an air campaign opposed by other members of the international community, the United States has been reluctant to intervene militarily in Syria because Russia has supplied Syria with advanced air defense systems. And, according to U.S. Central Command chief General James Mattis, there is belief in the United States that the Syrian government possesses chemical and biological weapons. There is also fear that the United States will be involving itself in a messier conflict than Libya.⁵

It is arguable that the conflict in Syria is distinct from the conflict in Libya and thus does not beget the same response. For example, the rebel operations in Syria have not been near the scale of the rebel operations in Libya, and Libya did not have sectarian divisions comparable to those in Syria. Additionally, besides that Syrian government's tanks and artillery have outmatched the rebels' rifles and homemade bombs, the Syrian regime controls an army that is unified and committed to forcefully suppressing the protests and thus cannot be compared to other states such as Tunisia and Libya where the militaries helped topple unpopular leaders.^{6, 7} Another significant factor that differentiates the crisis in Syria from the former crisis in Libya is that the Syrian government continues to be backed by its strong and long-standing alliances with Iran and Russia.

World leaders have been urging Assad to order a ceasefire. Because of the sectarian divisions in the Arab world, Syria's alliance with Iran, and the absence of unanimity in the international community concerning how to respond, the Syrian crisis has not been equivalent to the Libyan crisis, and thus a direct military intervention such as a NATO-imposed no-fly zone has not been seriously pursued. The approach to resolving the crisis in Syria has been to continue pushing Assad to order a ceasefire.

The Arab Spring in Libya

Colonel Muammar Gaddafi was by all accounts eccentric. His strongman rule of Libya lasted for forty-two years, beginning when he overthrew King Idris I with a group of revolutionary officers on September 1, 1969. In theory, Gaddafi's government was based on a system of direct democracy, but in fact the people's committees that held power consisted of regime loyalists. And, though Libya was relevant because of its oil, the state was not strategically important to other countries because Gaddafi never sought the support of a powerful patron like Russia, China, or the United States, and Gaddafi upset many major powers to the extent that few were interested in standing up for Gaddafi.

Gaddafi started making enemies in the international community after the bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988, which killed 270 civilians, and which the U.S. blamed on Libya. A similar bombing of a French airliner took place over Niger in 1989, killing 170 civilians. In response, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) imposed sanctions on Libya, including a ban on military sales, air communications, and certain oil equipment.⁸

The Security Council lifted the sanctions in 2003 when Gaddafi's regime took formal responsibility for the bombing, paying compensation and handing over the suspected attackers. Gaddafi was welcomed back to the international community after he promised to renounce terrorism; Libya was voted into the UNSC as a nonpermanent member in October 2007. France and the United States abstained from voting on the resolution because they did not want to endorse Libya's candidacy but they also did not want to block it.⁹ The U.S. representative said the U.S. sanctions on Libya would remain in full force because there were still serious concerns about Libya's "rejection of democratic norms and standards, its irresponsible behavior in Africa, its history of involvement in terrorism and—most importantly—its pursuit of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery."¹⁰

Gaddafi lost the esteem of the international community again when the Arab Spring protests spread to Libya. Navi Pillay, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, called for an international investigation into what she referred to as "widespread and systemic attacks against the civilian population [that] may amount to crimes against humanity."¹¹

The pro-democracy rebellions in opposition to authoritarianism, which had been triggered across the Middle East by a single man's protest against his treatment by the police, spread to Libya in February 2011. Gaddafi fought the uprisings with an unprecedented level of violence, rekindling enmity in the international community.

Consistently, Gaddafi denied the gravity of the crisis and his loss of control, claiming on February 24, 2011, for example, that the protestors had been fueled by milk and Nescafé spiked with hallucinogenic drugs.¹² And on February 25, Gaddafi disregarded the thousands of protestors demonstrating—demanding better government services, denouncing corruption, and burning buildings—and, referring to himself in third person during a speech in Tripoli's Green Square, said, "the people love him."¹³

The severity of the situation became more apparent to the international community on February 26, when Gaddafi invited foreign journalists to the capitol. They reported seeing bread lines, sections of the city in open defiance, the government painting over anti-Gaddafi graffiti, snipers and anti-aircraft guns firing at unarmed civilians, citizens afraid to talk to the press, and bodies being removed by security forces from streets and hospitals and taken to an unknown location.¹⁴ As a result, on February 27, the UN Security Council passed sanctions against Gaddafi and members of his family, and voted to refer Gaddafi to the International Criminal Court (ICC). Concurrently, Gaddafi persisted in denying the demonstrations against him, saying, "My people love me. They would die for me."¹⁵

NATO Campaign over Libya

In the first days of the uprisings, rebel forces seized control of several eastern oil cities. Gaddafi's forces regained control of the territories in March 2011 and the rebels found themselves outgunned and outnumbered.¹⁶ At the time, Gaddafi's air force was attacking anti-Gaddafi forces. Since the crisis began, air power had been Gaddafi's greatest advantage, allowing his forces to move ammunition and supplies along Libya's long coast and preventing rebels from using bases and planes they had captured in the east. On March 8, 2011, NATO sent surveillance aircraft to Libya and soon after, NATO began its quest for approval from the Arab

League to enforce a no-fly zone, to force Gaddafi's warplanes from the sky and remove the advantage.¹⁷ Simultaneously, Britain and France were pursuing a UN resolution to permit enforcing a no-fly zone over Libya.¹⁸

Discussion in the international community about a no-fly zone was heavily contested. The African Union (AU) had communicated a "deep concern" about the violence in Libya, which they acknowledged posed "a serious threat to peace and security in that country and in the region as a whole."¹⁹ The AU expressed solidarity with Libya but rejected "any foreign military intervention, whatever its form."²⁰ Gaddafi "should not kill his people," said Sam Kutesa, the Ugandan foreign minister, "[but] ought to look at reforms and legitimate demands of his people. "we do not want foreign interference ... we think that there should be an African solution to this."²¹

Where NATO and the EU take into account Russia's disapproval of military intervention, the organizations can easily disregard the AU because it does not have any heft in the international community. None of the AU member states are on the permanent Security Council. Furthermore, considering NATO's headquarters in Brussels is about 1300 miles from Tripoli and AU headquarters in Addis Adaba is about 2300 miles away, from a geographic standpoint, NATO and Western Europe have a more substantial interest in Libya.

Initially Western countries and NATO said they would not intervene militarily without approval from regional organizations such as the Arab League, approval from the AU, and a clear mandate from the Security Council.²² However, on March 12, the Arab League and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) requested the UNSC to impose a no-fly zone over Libya, which paved the way for President Obama and the majority of the Security Council to argue for the use of force to protect civilians in Libya.²³

Division in the Security Council

On March 17, the Security Council passed resolution 1973, which authorized member states to take "all necessary measures" to protect civilians, which was diplomatic code for a call to military action. Ten states voted in favor and five states—Brazil, Russia, India, China, and Germany—abstained from voting on the resolution, which demonstrated the lack of support in the international community for Gaddafi's regime. The abstaining states expressed that they did not want to get in the way of adoption of the resolution, but that there were too many unanswered questions, such as how it would be enforced and by whom, and what the limits of the engagement would be.²⁴

Manjeev Singh Puri, India's ambassador to the UN, and Maria Luiza Ribeiro Viotti, Brazil's ambassador to the UN, insisted that there ought to be a political process to end the conflict. "We must take the greatest care to ensure that our actions douse the flames of conflict instead of stoking them," said Viotti. "We are not convinced that the use of force as provided for in operative paragraph 4 of the present resolution will lead to the realization of our common objective—the immediate end to violence and the protection of civilians."²⁵ Chinese Ambassador Li Baodong said, "There must be no attempt at regime change or involvement in civil war by any party under the guise of protecting civilians."²⁶ While Baodong's statement was more direct, if it were sincere, China would have voted against the intervention, by abstaining, they gave tacit approval.

Despite the reservations of some critics, supporters of the resolution were glad it was passed. Nigerian Ambassador U. Joy Ogwu explained that the grave and dire situation in Libya necessitated the resolution: "The current state of affairs leaves an indelible imprint on the conscience and compels us to act."²⁷

Losing Support

On March 12, in concert with the GCC, the Arab League requested that the UNSC impose a no-fly zone over Libya. However, soon after the NATO campaign commenced, the Arab League expressed its disapproval. On March 20, Amr Moussa, the Arab League Secretary General, said that he would call a league meeting to reconsider approval by the Arab League of the Western military intervention. "What is happening in Libya differs from the aim of imposing a no-fly zone," said Moussa. "And what we want is the protection of civilians and not the shelling of more civilians."²⁸

It was clear to many at the outset that creating a no-fly zone involved taking out Libya's air defenses, including air bases, runways, and helicopter gunships. It also meant that Gaddafi's ground forces would be vulnerable to strikes if they shelled towns and that Libyan naval vessels would be subject to ground attacks and strikes if they were used for bombardment. The violence that would be involved in creating a no-fly zone was not a secret. That the Arab League was upset about the violence that was involved in the NATO intervention demonstrated a shallow understanding of the action that was required to create such a zone—if not outright denial—and undermined the effort. The wavering support from the Arab League was significant because the integrity and legality of the intervention was already being challenged.²⁹

Challenging the NATO Intervention

Even before the resolution had been approved, the legality of the intervention had been put to question. The allegation was that the Security Council and NATO had intervened in a civil war, not genocide, and since Libya had not threatened its neighbors or any other country, the Security Council was in violation of its own charters. Critics also pointed out that NATO, by taking the rebel side in a civil war, had become an armed service provider for the UN and other allies, thus straying from its core mission to protect its members' territory and population. Additionally, because violence was simultaneously being perpetrated in many other countries such as Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria—where Western powers were not intervening militarily—some accused the West of a double standard, and asserted that the intervention supposedly intended to protect dissidents was actually intended to protect oil interests.

The Arab Spring in Syria

The uprising in Syria commenced in March 2011 in the southern city of Daraa, where about fifteen children had been arrested and reportedly tortured for writing on a wall the well-known slogan of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt: "The people want the downfall of the regime." Citizens carried out a peaceful protest, demanding the release of the children. The protesters also called for democracy and freedom. Like in Libya, the government responded with violence, opening fire on protesters marching through the city after Friday prayers on March 18, 2011. The initial crackdown failed to dispel the unrest, and the government has continued to respond to the anti-government protests with violence for over a year.³⁰

As in Libya, the protesters in Syria have demanded that their leader step down. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has not only stated that he has had no intention of stepping down, but he has also rejected allegations that Syrian security forces have committed crimes against humanity. That being said, Assad has offered some concessions and promised reform, but whatever promises he has made are overshadowed by continued violence and as of the penning of this article, he is yet to come through on the promises or give any reason to believe that he will in the future. The situation in Syria had deteriorated rapidly since February 2012, with one UN report indicating "the death toll often exceeds 100 civilians a day, including many women and children."³¹ Rami Abdel Rahman, head of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, cited activists on the ground saying, "Two rockets are falling a minute on average."³² According to monitoring groups, crimes committed by Assad's security forces include but are not

limited to killings, torture, rape, and imprisonment.³³ As of March 13, 2012, the death toll from the crackdown by Assad's security forces was over eight thousand, according to the UN.³⁴ "The nature and scale of abuses committed by Syrian forces indicate that crimes against humanity are likely to have been committed since March 2011," said Navi Pillay, the top human-rights representative in the United Nations. She also said that inaction by the international community had "emboldened" Syria's government to continue subjecting Syrian civilians to overwhelming force and violence.³⁵

Libya Scenario in Syria

As previously mentioned, Syria and Libya are distinct cases. Yet, the situation in Syria is similar to the situation in Libya that precipitated the NATO intervention considering that the citizens have been protesting poverty, lack of democracy, and corruption, and their protests are being violently suppressed by a leader, and thus begging for a response from the international community to interrupt the killings of citizens.³⁶ To demonstrate consistency and refute allegations of operating on a double standard, the West should intervene again in the unfolding crisis in Syria.³⁷ In November 2011, U.S. State Department Assistant for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman insisted that the Arab League put pressure on the Syrian regime. "The regime must be judged by its actions, not by its words," said Feltman. "The killing has continued unabated. And we urge our Arab partners to condemn the regime and assume a greater role in building international pressure, including at the UN."³⁸ Condemnation of the Syrian regime and endorsement of military intervention by the Arab League would not enable the UN to pass a resolution and commit NATO to enforcing a fly zone, but it might put more pressure on the international community, in particular Russia and China, to be more engaged and move forward with a unilateral response.

However for the time being, there is an abundance of international opposition to any kind of military intervention in Syria. In November 2011, NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who had expressed approval of NATO's work for the UN in the Libyan crisis, said that NATO would not act in Syria. "NATO has no intention whatsoever to intervene in Syria. I can completely rule that out," he said.³⁹ Micah Zenko at the Council on Foreign Relations has said that could change when the situation in Syria is portrayed as a major humanitarian crisis in the media; until then, the international community lacks a decision-forcing point to compel action.⁴⁰

In February 2012, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon tasked Kofi Annan with ensuring a ceasefire. Annan met with Assad soon after to discuss a ceasefire. Assad responded to Annan, sounding like Gaddafi, saying that political dialogue could not succeed in his country while "armed terrorist groups" are operating, which has been taken as indication that the military operation and violence will continue.⁴¹

Kofi Annan, the UN–Arab League special envoy to Syria, said on March 8, 2012, that he rejected any foreign intervention in Syria, and that any further militarization of the crisis would only make the situation worse. "We have to be careful that we don't introduce a medicine that is worse than the disease," said Annan. "We don't have to go very far in the region to find an example of what I'm talking about." He added, "The situation in the country is extremely serious for the Syrian people and the region, and I think we should not forget the possible impact of Syria on the region if there is any miscalculation."⁴² Annan noted that the UN General Assembly had published a resolution stating that any intervention should be Syrian led and Syrian owned.⁴³

While Russia and China have expressed opposition to the violence in Syria, insisting on a ceasefire, they have steadfastly opposed foreign intervention because it will ultimately lead to regime change, and both countries have interests at stake in the current regime. Russia and China also both have interests at stake in the country that are threatened by instability. Syria is a longstanding ally of Russia, a purchaser of Russian arms, and home to a Russian naval base. China depends on the region for oil. Western diplomats cited that Russia has been using its close relationship with Syria to put pressure on Assad. And Russia condemned the violence in Syria in its own draft resolution introduced in the Security Council. However, Russia left out from their draft, provisions that Western countries declared non-negotiable so it seemed the draft was presented just to save face.⁴⁴ The fact is China and Russia will not support an armed intervention.

Distinguishing the Situation in Syria from That in Libya

Though on an abstract level, the circumstances in Syria are similar to the circumstances in Libya that precipitated the NATO intervention, the Syrian crisis should not receive the same response. The Arab League, Russia, China, France, and Morocco have expressed that they would not support military intervention in Syria and are pursuing initiation of dialogue between Damascus and the opposition.^{45, 46} Furthermore, Syria is rife with sectarian divisions—74 percent of the population is Sunni, and the significant minorities, Christians, Alawites, and non-Sunni Muslims each

make up about 10 percent. Smaller minorities are the Druze in the mountains and the Kurds mainly in the northeast. The Druze people are described as an isolated community of village and mountain dwellers who are loyal to the country, which governs their land.⁴⁷ The Kurds are an ethnic minority in the mountainous region of Kurdistan, which stretches across Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Syria. The Kurds have often been subjected to discrimination and harassment by the Syrian government. Kurds are not acknowledged by the Syrian government and have been denied basic human rights.⁴⁸ Kurds are committed to democratic reform and a smooth transition of power in Syria, and the Kurdish youth are actively engaged in the protests in Syria.

In the early 1900s, the Ottoman-backed Sunni majority held power in Syria. The fractious Alawite minority originally seized power from the Sunni via a military coup in the late 1966 after the birth of the Baath party in Syria in 1947, which strengthened the Alawites by causing significant fissures within the Sunni majority. In 1970, then air-force commander and Defense Minister General Hafez al-Assad led a bloodless military coup that ended the string of coups. Assad was capable of managing the Alawite sect and wisely built patronage networks in the Druze and Christian minorities as well as Sunni military and business elites, which facilitated his rise to power. The Assad regime also suppressed the religiously conservative Sunnis. Despite obstacles such as an insurgency against the state in 1976 led by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, power has been consolidated among Syrian Alawites for over forty years.⁴⁹

Though the Alawite party is historically fractious, the community is aware that the first indication of splintering among the Alawites in the military or state could lead to a Sunni-led coup and reversal of power. The Alawites are also cognizant of the role of patronage in their rise to power and have strategically put many Christians in key leadership posts to secure the support of that community, though the Alawites dominate key intelligence, military, and economic leadership posts.

Given the tension that exists between sects in Syria, arming the opposition could lead to "a catastrophe even larger than the one that exists today," according to French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe.⁵⁰ "The Syrian people are deeply divided, and if we give arms to a certain faction of the Syrian opposition, we would make a civil war among Christians, Alawites, Sunnis and Shiites," said Juppe. It is the divisions in the Syrian opposition that have prevented them from forming a unified force that the international community could support. President Assad belongs to the

Alawite sect, a small, obscure branch of Shiism. Assad has concentrated power in the hands of his family and other members of the Alawite sect, which also makes up the majority of the Syrian security forces.⁵¹

Syria and Iran

The pivotal difference between Libya and Syria is Syria's alliance with Russia, which has, and will continue to do everything within its power to prevent a military intervention. Another significant alliance is with Iran. Iran is a powerful state in the region that has been at odds with the United States since the ouster of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi during the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Iran suppressed a prodemocracy movement in 2009, has supported militant groups such as Hamas and Hizbollah, and has pursued a nuclear program despite orders from the UN to halt the program.

In mid-February 2012, U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham proposed breaking up the Syrian-Iranian alliance.⁵² However, attempts to break up the alliance between Syria and Iran could push Iran harder to produce a nuclear weapon.^{53, 54} U.S. Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen pointed out in March that "attacks on Syria now could also create a 'domino effect' that could lead to a hot war with Iran, which considers Syria a client state." She said, "I worry the Syria operation may be harder because of its tie-ins to Iran and what will Iran do militarily."⁵⁵ However, Syria could equally consider Iran a client state since the Assad regime enjoys acting as the bridge between the Shiites and the Sunnis. In general, Graham may have been overstating the relevance of the alliance since Iran is only capable at this time to support the Syrian regime with military and intelligence assistance; the alliance that deserves more attention and that is more impactful is the alliance between Syria and Russia.

Rather than trying to break up Syria's alliance with Iran or Russia, the international community should find a way to use the alliances to its advantage during negotiations. A resolution to the crisis where all actors walk away feeling that they got what they wanted would be a step toward building diplomatic relations between Western states and the Arab states, and would likely be a more sustainable solution. For example, leaders from Western states, Russia and Arab states could meet with the Assad regime in unison so everyone feels involved. The objective should be the defense of human rights therefore the discussion should be focused on developing relationships as well as sharing of information and resources.

Iran Is Gaining Ground through the Arab Spring

Some thought the fraudulent reelection of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in June 2009 would ignite a revolution in Iran. Tehran did experience violent street protests, unseen for a decade, after the votes were counted; however, the protests did not amount to anything comparable to the Arab Spring protests. The revolt in Iran was brutally repressed. Compare this with Egypt's successful revolution in 2011, which ignited violent protests in Algeria and Yemen, and drove the king of Bahrain to offer concessions and money to his citizens to deter protests.⁵⁶ And then in 2011, Libya, like Egypt, saw its leader toppled. In this context, it is easy to see why Syrians have been inspired by the successful revolutions, and have been protesting with resilience for over a year. The instability in Syria has posed a threat to Iranian influence in the region, especially in Lebanon and Gaza as Syria is the conduit for Iran's influence in the region. However, the Arab Spring protests for example in Bahrain have provided Iran an opportunity to limit Saudi and U.S. influence.

In general the uprisings in the Arab world have threatened the United States' influence in the region. Despite the fact that the protests are fueled by the desire for democracy and more freedoms, the United States is not gaining allies in the region, and its influence there may be waning. While governments are being overturned and replaced, the United States is withdrawing its forces. *National Post* reporter Peter Goodspeed wrote, "The U.S. and Israel are witnessing their influence and power deteriorate in the Middle East as the Arab Spring robs them of old allies and shatters old assumptions."⁵⁷ While the United States' loss is not necessarily Iran's gain, the United States' loosening grip of power in the region presents an opportunity for Iran to build partnerships and forge the groundwork for alliances.

While the United States might be losing influence regionally, Iran is gaining influence. For example, the United States toppled Iraq's Saddam Hussein in 2003, which benefited Iran since Tehran had sought to do the same thing during the eight years of the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. Without Saddam Hussein in office, Iran has been able to enhance its influence in Iraq and the Middle East as a whole. Since U.S. troops were withdrawn from Iraq at the end of 2011, Iran has been more successful in influencing the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad. Iran has pitched the protests as being to their advantage. Ramin Mehmanparast, spokesman for the Iranian Foreign Ministry, said at an academic conference in November 2011, "The fall of dictators in the Middle East

and Africa means a loss of a foothold for the U.S. and Israel. The Americans are bewildered and confused in their decisions and behavior in the face of regional revolutions."⁵⁸

The United States and Britain responded to the threat posed by Iran's expanding influence with words of warning. In March 2012 at a joint news conference, U.S. President Obama and British Prime Minister David Cameron issued a stern warning to Iran. Obama said, "Tehran must understand that it cannot escape or evade the choice before it. Meet your international obligations or face the consequences. The window for solving this issue diplomatically is shrinking." Regarding the violence in Syria, Cameron said monitors have been sent to Syria's borders to record the crimes. He said, "No matter how long it takes, people should always remember that international law has got a long reach and a long memory."⁵⁹ The United States has responded to the threat of expanding Iranian influence by tightening sanctions, employing covert attacks against Iran, and frequently deploying a second carrier strike group to the Persian Gulf.⁶⁰

Options for Intervention

Ivo Daalder, the U.S. ambassador to NATO, announced in November 2011, when Assad's government had already been committing acts of violence against Syrians for close to a year, that "there has been no planning, no thought, and no discussion about any intervention into Syria."⁶¹ Daalder said, "There needs to be a demonstrable need, regional support, and sound legal basis for action. It's those three things we need to look for before we even think about the possibility of action. None of them apply in Syria."⁶²

The international community will not resort to militarization of the crisis in Syria. However, Assad's regime has resisted resolving the calamity through peaceful political dialogue despite urgent requests from UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.⁶³ The international community must respond and explore options to push Assad to a ceasefire; as Anwar Bunni, a human-rights lawyer in Damascus, said, "[Assad's] regime will continue to kill if nobody stops it."⁶⁴

An Alternative Approach: Coercing a Ceasefire via Negotiations

The international community can coerce a ceasefire to end violence in Syria through negotiations with Assad's regime. For these negotiations to be effective, Western countries need to identify what the Syrian government values, and apply appropriate pressure in these strategic areas such that Assad loses power.⁶⁵ For example, Assad's clout in Syria depends on economic favoritism, bribery, and support from stakeholders in the capital, so economic pressure and loss of support in the capital could push Assad to a ceasefire.

World leaders could work to drive an economic wedge between the regime and stakeholders in Syria through sanctions. Sanctions slowed economic growth in Syria in 2011, when most U.S. exports to Syria were barred, assets belonging to the state security apparatus were frozen, and European imports of oil—making up 20 percent of the Syrian economy—were barred. As Syria receives more sanctions from the international community, it should become more apparent that Assad's regime is unable to keep peace and maintain the economy, which could compel Assad to order a ceasefire.⁶⁶ States would have to impose sanctions individually, because Russia is likely to veto any effort by the United Nations. The long co-opted Sunni merchants have resisted supporting the uprising in Syria because they have a lot to lose economically. However, if the economies of Sunni merchants were impacted by sanctions, they would likely be more willing to pressure Assad.⁶⁷

An alternative approach is win-win negotiations. This approach requires recognizing that all the parties involved have different interests and priorities, and the key would be to identify the solution that gives each party what it values most at the least cost to the other parties. For instance, on a basic level: Assad's interest is power, the oppositions' interest is democracy, and the international community's interests are democracy and stability. An ideal solution would be to persuade Assad to adopt democratic values so that the opposition's demands were met and Assad maintained power. Given Iran's and Russia's friendship with Syria, Assad might be more easily convinced to embrace democratic values if the other two countries embraced them simultaneously. The likelihood of convincing Iran or Russia to collaborate with Western powers—much less embrace democratic values—is minimal, but Iranian leaders might acquiesce if they perceived that the international community needed their support to be effective, especially since Iran craves to be recognized as a regional power.⁶⁸

The optimistic approach is currently being pursued between diplomats and finance ministry officials from Arab states, the European Union, the United States, and others, behind closed doors under the banner "Friends of Syria." The purpose of the talks is to keep pressure on Assad to end the violence in Syria. Juppe said, "Our meeting is itself a message: the Syrian regime must understand that it cannot continue its repression with impunity, and refuse the political transition laid out under the Annan plan and expected by the Syrian people."⁶⁹

The downside to this approach is that it is highly unlikely that Iran and Syria will collaborate in any meaningful way with the United States, especially since the United States has demonstrated a lack of respect for human rights by supporting abusive regimes in Bahrain, Rwanda, Saudi Arabia, Uganda, Ethiopia, and Equatorial Guinea. Furthermore, attempts to collaborate with Syria and Iran could be inefficient and costly. While Tehran and Damascus have a strong relationship, neither has had an interest in relations with the United States. Since the end of the Cold War, Syria and Iran have collaborated in the development of ballistic missiles, arming of Hizbollah and Hamas, and challenging the U.S. military following the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 in fear that either country might become a target of the "War on Terror." Furthermore, Jubin Goodarzi, professor of international relations at Webster University in Geneva, Switzerland, wrote:

"Syria and Iran are the two parties most responsible for spoiling U.S.-backed peace efforts between Arabs and Israel in order to promote their own Arab and Islamic interests. For the United States, they were also the most troublesome countries during the U.S. intervention in Iraq because they aided, abetted or armed insurgents."⁷⁰

Goodarzi also pointed out that since 1979 Syria and Iran have "[thwarted] the regional goals of the United States, Israel and Iraq."⁷¹ However, according to Haytham Manna, the leader in exile of the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change in Syria (NCBDCS), Russia has voiced support for democratic changes in Syria and turning power of Syria's future over to Syrians themselves. While Russia continues to oppose the use of force by Assad's opponents, Abdul-Aziz al-Kheir, a spokesman for the NCBDCS said that Russia's position has been changing since February and "particularly fast over the past two weeks."⁷² The progress is slow but significant.

To be the dominating voice at the table during negotiations or dialogue about a ceasefire, the international community must speak in a united voice, acting in defense of human rights abuses, rather than one or a few countries pushing their agendas forward in order to limit the influence of other countries in the region. The international community must also have a viable threat to Assad's and Ahmedinejad's power. The most powerful weapon would be to remove investment in the oil sector, the revenues from which both Syria's and Iran's economies rely on. Syria's economy has suffered from political unrest, violence, and international sanctions and is threatened in the long term by issues such as foreign trade barriers, declining oil production, and high unemployment.⁷³ Similarly, Iran's economy is burdened with an inefficient state sector, reliance on the oil sector, and unemployment—"underemployment among Iran's educated youth has convinced many to seek jobs overseas, resulting in a significant 'brain drain.'"⁷⁴

The European Union adopted an oil embargo against Iran in January 2012 in response to its nuclear program, and banned all new oil contracts with Iran. The U.S. also issued sanctions with the intention to apply political pressure on Iran to come back to the negotiating table. On February 3, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei referred to the sanctions as "painful and crippling" yet the sanctions have not yet provoked action. Iranian officials have assured the public that they will prevail in spite of the sanctions. Since nuclear programs are symbols of power and national security, it is likely Iran will accept a great extent of economic pain to move forward with nuclear research.⁷⁵ Likewise, despite reports that Syria's financial reserves have been halved as a consequence of international sanctions, and according to French Foreign Affairs Minister Alain Juppe, Syrian authorities "continue to actively seek alternative routes to get around these sanctions."⁷⁶

Military Intervention

Another option is to endorse military intervention, which would upset many members of the international community. Currently some countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait continue to support arms being funneled to the opposition but the efforts are in vain. As previously mentioned, the Syrian military is united and committed to forcefully suppressing the protests so it is highly unlikely that domestic opposition forces will be able to beat Assad's army.

If the West had an appetite for ground intervention and supported opposition forces, the possibility of toppling Assad and his regime is greater. The regime could be replaced with a democratic regime. Syria is predomi-

nantly a Sunni state, so Sunni leadership would be well received by the majority of the population. However, the election of a Sunni would also potentially trigger severance of ties or even conflict with Iran, which is a Shia-majority state.⁷⁷ And if the intention of military intervention is to defend human rights, then the leader should be a person who prioritizes human rights. However, as said by Russian authorities, the Syrians should be in control of their future, with the support of the international community.

Despite the opportunity costs of military intervention, the benefit of installing Sunni leadership would be the possibility of Syria's forging alliances with Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Turkey is a Sunni state, and is striving to be a leader in the Middle East. The opportunity to build a relationship with Turkey is a real possibility given that Turkey has been working to develop a relationship with Syria since before the crisis erupted. Turkey is one of the destinations for Syrian refugees, the others being Jordan and Lebanon. At the time of this penning, the Turkish government had built eight tent cities and one temporary housing city as accommodation for the incoming Syrian refugees.⁷⁸ Turkey immediately opened its doors to thousands of Syrian refugees as soon as Assad unleashed violence against protesters, and Turkey has led an international political campaign to end the atrocities.⁷⁹ The toppling of Assad, the installation of Sunni leadership, and the development of ties with Sunni countries such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia could lead Syria to become a more democratic state.

Conclusion

Discussions about Assad's ouster have been increasing among opposition leaders within Syria as well as in the international community.⁸⁰ Though most states in the international community oppose the violence being committed by Assad's regime against the opposition, the international community has been at an impasse. Toppling Assad is not simple because of the sectarian divisions in Syria, complications introduced by Syria's alliance with Iran, and Russia and China's opposition to military intervention in Syria.

In addition, the opposition is fractious, deeply divided by sects and incongruent goals. The opposition has suffered from the resignations of key members such as Haitham Maleh, who is respected for his work on promoting human rights and democracy in Syria.⁸¹ These two factors—a global impasse and a weakening opposition—have provided some relief to Assad. Nevertheless, as foreign-affairs expert Emile Hokayem, an analyst

at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in Bahrain, has said, "Assad's power is steadily eroding amid a crumbling economy, diplomatic isolation and an insurgency now schooled in sabotage and roadside bombings."⁸²

The international community should continue pressing Assad through dialogue to enforce a ceasefire. To gain an edge in the conversation, new sanctions should be communicated at the outset of the dialogue. Simultaneously, the international community should identify individuals from the opposition, such as Haitham Maleh, who could replace Assad if he were ousted. An acceptable replacement to Assad should have internationally recognized human-rights credentials because the Alawite community is uneasy about the emergence of new Sunni leadership, which the international community fears might lead to propagation of violence against Alawites and other groups supporting the regime; a messy transition of power could lead to an ethnic cleansing. Thus, the leadership that replaces Assad's regime must be able to keep peace and maintain stability given the sectarian divisions in Syria and the region, which is an issue that has not been discussed enough in the international community.

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