What Can Be Done in Response to the Crisis in Syria?

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This article is the second in a two-part series. Read part one here.

In terms of responding to the crisis in Syria there are essentially four options available;

1. Do nothing and allow the protagonists to fight until one side is defeated and/or both sides agree a deal.
2. Arm the rebels and hope they force the government to either flee or accept a new democratic political system in Syria.
3. Launch a humanitarian intervention – with or without Security Council approval – aimed at preventing the Syrian government from committing any further attacks
4. Deploy a UN peacekeeping force mandated to enforce a ceasefire, facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid and medical supplies, and oversee an inclusive political process for a new Syrian constitution.

It is my contention that the fourth option is the most preferable, or perhaps more accurately the least worst.

Option 1: Do nothing

The first option has the advantage of enabling external actors to distance themselves from any potentially costly engagement with Syria. It also, theoretically, allows for a more organic process that reflects the distribution of power within Syria and thus the outcome is potentially more reflective of the actual societal structure and, again theoretically, more likely to be sustainable in the long term. These arguments cohere with those who have suggested that the most prudent response to intra-state crisis is to aim for order.[i] The unsuccessful engagements in Somalia, Rwanda and the fact that in certain cases – such as Bosnia – externally imposed compromises have merely "frozen" conflicts that would have been resolved if allowed to evolve naturally, are used to justify this preference for non-intervention. Additionally, an explicit disavowal of intervention would, potentially force the rebels – who lack the capacity to independently defeat the government – to pursue a political path rather than fight on in the hope that external support will eventually come if the situation degenerates to a certain nadir. In the case of both Kosovo (1995-1999) and Darfur (2003-2006) the polices of the insurgents were ostensibly predicated on this belief in the inevitability of external intervention – with obviously varying results – and it is argued this narrowed the non-military options available and contributed to an escalation of the violence.[ii]

The obvious disadvantage of this option is that it potentially enables the Assad regime to crush the opposition and in the process kill and injure thousands of innocent civilians and displace thousands more potentially leading to a mass exodus from Syria. Such a refugee flow could have hugely destabilising effects on Syria's neighbours – especially Turkey – and would doubtless enflame regional opinion especially amongst the Sunni community. Such a scenario would additionally run the risk of discrediting the UN, NATO and "the West" as visual images of the conflict would be readily available to the international media. The Assad regime appears to have no compunction about using deadly force against civilians in an evident attempt to shock his opponents into capitulation and thus the atrocities – such as the murder and rape of children as highlighted by the UN Children's Fund – would likely be committed. If Assad was to be allowed to commit such crimes without censure it would additionally likely embolden other regimes across the world – particularly Iran – to adopt similar measures in the event of future domestic upheaval.

Option 2: Arm the Rebels

As it stands it is clear that arms *have* been supplied to the rebels in Syria both covertly and overtly. It has been suggested – particularly by Saudi Arabia – that this should be the explicit policy adopted as it would enable the oppressed to defend themselves and overthrow Assad. The advantage of this policy, of course, is that external actors would not be directly involved in the violence and the situation would remain in the hands of the Syrians. A significant influx of arms could prevent government forces from committing atrocities against civilians and generating more refugee flows.

The disadvantages of this include that fact that this by definition internationalises the conflict and could provoke a counter-policy by Syria's allies. If Russia – which continues to supply arms to Syria – and more ominously Iran were to increase their support for Assad this could create a mini arms race. Additionally, supplying arms would, by definition, embolden the more radical elements of the opposition to pursue their aims thereby potentially isolating more moderate voices that seek a political solution. There is additionally no guarantee that the arms supplied will be used only to fight Assad's forces; the Allawite community of which Assad is a member, have been understandably associated with both the regime and its policies and thus have been targeted – in many cases unjustly – by opposition forces.[iii] If arms supplied from abroad were demonstrably used to commit atrocities this would clearly provoke international outrage.

More profoundly, supplying arms to the opposition begs the question, "who are the opposition?" Evidence suggests that the "rebels" lack unity of purpose and constitute a loose coalition of various factions. To whom, therefore, should arms be given? Against whom will these arms be used? There is a risk, of course, that armed groups may determine to carve out and defend their own canton thereby leading to the fragmentation of Syria. Additionally, if the opposition were capable of temporarily uniting to overthrow Assad, the post-Assad political process would surely be negatively influenced by a highly militarised society. With the existence of well armed competing militias a new form of civil war could erupt. Libya appears to highlight these dangers with many militias – such as those controlling in Misrata and Zintan – reluctant to give up their weapons or engage with a new democratic political system; the establishment of the "Cyrenaica Provisional Council" and the declaration of autonomy for the Eastern province of "Barca" in Bengazi on the 6th March are ominous signs that the state is fragmenting. If the Libyan Transnational Council had a monopoly over weaponry such policies would be untenable but owing to the influx of arms into Libya these groups appear to believe they can resist the central authority.

Option 3: Humanitarian Intervention

While there have been a number of calls made for a military intervention in Syria this – in addition to being highly unlikely – would be unwise to say the least. The ostensible advantage of this would be that the Assad regime would be prevented from committing any more atrocities, the intervening parties could remove Assad and establish a new political system and ensure the delivery of humanitarian aid and medical supplies. This would additionally demonstrate – if successful – the moral rectitude of the intervening states, and potentially serve as a warning to other leaders not to use egregious force against their people.

The major disadvantage of this policy is first that Russia and China are highly unlikely to support any coercive measures taken against Syria and thus any intervention would have to take place without the Security Council's approval. This would antagonize both Russia and China and potentially escalate the crisis to a dangerously divisive degree. While neither state would likely militarily defend Syria, Russia in particular would likely increase its military support for Assad. Iran would be more likely to take a more direct role in supporting Syria and could potentially target Israel to attempt to unite regional opinion around an anti-Israel/US polemic. Additionally, Syria's allies Hezbollah and Hamas[iv] could escalate their military offensives in Lebanon and Israel respectively. The ever more manifest and destabilizing split in the region between Sunni and Shi'ites would be exacerbated by military intervention and could enflame tensions is those states – such as Bahrain and Yemen – where a fragile stability has been established. In short, whereas Gaddafi was a relatively isolated figure in the Middle East and internationally, Assad can draw on powerful allies and Syria's links with armed groups in volatile situations throughout the region mean that open military conflict with Syria would be potentially catastrophic for regional and international peace and security.

Option 4: Deployment of a Peacekeeping Force

By definition the deployment of a peacekeeping force requires the consent of the host state; at present the Assad regime has demonstrated a determined unwillingness to countenance any form of direct external interference. This does not mean, however, that is impossible to conceive of a situation whereby a peacekeeping force would be acceptable to Assad.

The key determinant here is the position of Russia. Given that Russia has twice vetoed draft resolutions put to the Security Council its position to date does not appear particularly disposed to the peacekeeping option. Nonetheless, by virtue of its vetoes Russia has invested significant political capital in the outcome of events in Syria. So long as the situation deteriorates Russia's association with the Assad regime constitutes an embarrassment. Russia's evident determination to regain its status as a world leader means it is incumbent on it to demonstrate that it more than just a recalcitrant "spoiler". It may well be in Russia's interests, therefore, to pressurize Assad into accepting the presence of a UN Peacekeeping mission mandated to monitor a ceasefire and oversee an inclusive political process. This would allow Russia to portray itself as a world power capable of resolving internal disputes; China would likely support a Russian-led initiative.

As the violence perpetrated by government forces continues to turn international opinion against Assad and the rebel's receive international military and economic aid, the government may be amenable to a peacekeeping mission which at least enables the future of Syria to be determined through a process in which both it and Russia have a role. With some say in the future of Syria – and the influence wielded by Russia – the Assad regime could potentially secure immunity from prosecution and exile, as was the ultimate fate of President Saleh of Yemen. The nightmare scenario for Assad and his supporters is the fate of Gaddafi and Mubarak.

There is a precedent for such a scenario. On 5 September 1999 the 78.5% of voters on East Timor chose independence over autonomy within Indonesia. What followed was described by the UN as '…nothing less than a systematic implementation of a "scorched earth" policy in East Timor, under the direction of the Indonesian military'.[v] While Indonesia's complicity in the violence was widely acknowledged it was clear that no intervention would take place without Indonesia's consent given that both China and Russia stipulated that this was a sine qua non for any action. Eventually, owing to pressure from China and the withdrawal of World Bank and IMF loans to Indonesia, President BJ Habibi agreed to UN-sanctioned peacekeeping force which was deployed to the island – under Australian command – on 20 September.

Therefore, though the idea that Assad could agree to a UN peacekeeping mission may initially seem unlikely, history demonstrates that there comes a point when even aggressive despotic regimes – such as Indonesia in 1999 and Sudan in 2004 – calculate that it is prudent to bow to international pressure and accept the deployment of UN troops. International pressure should, therefore, be targeted on Russia emphasising that the longer the crisis lasts the greater the damage to Russia's status as a credible world power. It should be made clear that the alternative to a peacekeeping mission is the overthrow of Assad – either through rebel victory as in Libya or army defection as in Egypt – and that such a scenario would negate both Russia and Assad's influence over the future of Syria. A peacekeeping force could be designed to accommodate active Russian participation so as to demonstrate Russia's role as a world leader and assuage the fears of the Allawite community. The peacekeeping mission should be mandated to enforce a ceasefire and prevent all parties, including the rebels, from controlling new territory or cities. The political process established in the wake of a peacekeeping deployment could be presented in a way which does not explicitly call for regime change but which naturally encourages such an outcome, especially if it is clear that Assad could secure exile and immunity from prosecution. While this "solution" potentially panders to Russian hubris and facilitates the unedifying spectacle of Assad escaping criminal prosecution, it has the advantage of avoiding further slaughter, the possible fragmentation of Syria and a regional conflagration which could embroil Turkey, Iran, Israel and Saudi Arabia.

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[i] Edward Luttwak (1999) 'Give War a Chance', *Foreign Affairs*, 78: 4, 36-44; Robet Jackson (2000) *The Global Covenant: Human Conduct in a World of States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 291

[ii] Alan Kuperman (2006) 'Suicidal Rebellions and the Moral Hazard of Humanitarian Intervention' in Tim Crawford and Alan Kuperman eds. *Gambling on Humanitarian Intervention* (London: Routledge).

[iii] International Crisis Group, 'Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle east: The Syrian People's Slow-motion Revolution', 6 July 2011, http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/egypt-syria-lebanon/syria/108-popular-protest-in-north-africa-and-the-middle-east-vi-the-syrian-peoples-slow-motion-revolution.aspx

[iv] Hamas has condemned the Assad regime and expressed its support for the opposition. It is doubtful, however, that this would stop the group from using force against Israel in the event that intervention sparked a regional conflagration.

[v] Report of the Security Council Mission to Jakarta and Dili, (S/1999/976), 8 to 12 September 1999, Annex I, para. 1.

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