

Intervention vs Non-Intervention in Syria: Assessing Costs and Benefits for the West

Written by Mark N. Katz

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MARK N. KATZ, SEP 4 2012

The “principle” of non-intervention in the internal affairs of other countries is one that is especially cherished by dictatorial regimes. They greatly prefer being able to oppress the people they rule over without the inconvenience of outside powers attempting to stop—or even criticizing—their doing so.

As the renowned British scholar, Mary Kaldor, observed in her book, *New and Old Wars*, “[T]here is no such thing as non-intervention. The failure to protect the victims is a kind of tacit intervention on the side of those who are inflicting humanitarian or human rights abuses” (2nd ed., p. 125).

But even if democratic governments accepted Kaldor’s analysis, the problem they face is that there are numerous dictatorial regimes “inflicting humanitarian or human rights abuses” at any given time. The West simply does not have the resources that would be needed to stop them all from doing so. And since intervention can be highly costly both in terms of lives and money, the will to intervene in defense of the oppressed is often lacking too.

So how, then, do democratic governments decide when and where to intervene against dictatorial regimes oppressing their own people? However they should do so, how they actually make these decisions is not just on the basis of humanitarian principles, but also—indeed, primarily—through a case specific cost/benefit analysis about whether or not intervention would serve their national interests. But of course, policymakers and pundits often disagree on just what their country’s national interests are and how to best pursue them.

This brings us to the ongoing conflict in Syria, where the Assad dictatorship (based primarily on Syria’s Alawite minority) has been violently and viciously attempting to suppress the powerful opposition movement (based primarily on the Sunni majority) that has risen up against it and seeks its overthrow. The Assad regime has notably failed not only to suppress this rebellion, but also to prevent it from growing larger and larger. The opposition forces though, appear to be nowhere near the point of overthrowing the regime.

In addition, several external actors are already involved in the conflict. Iran in particular has been active in providing the Assad regime with advisers and other forms of support (in collaboration, it appears, with Iraq’s Shi’a-dominated government). Russia has supplied arms to Damascus, while China (along with Russia) has protected it against Western efforts to impose UN Security Council sanctions. On the opposite side, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been particularly active in supporting the Syrian opposition. Turkey and Jordan have provided sanctuary and other support for Assad’s opponents. Egypt’s new president—and Sunni Arab public opinion in general—have condemned the Assad regime and support its overthrow. Some claim that Al Qaeda is supporting the Syrian opposition too.

How, in this highly complex situation, have the U.S. and other Western governments calculated their interests with regard to the costs and benefits of intervention vs. non-intervention? The Arab Spring uprising in Syria has been going on for approximately a year and a half. America and the West oppose the Assad regime, but so far they have done relatively little to help the opposition. Up to now, the U.S. and other Western governments have clearly decided that non-intervention in this conflict better suits their interests than intervention in it.

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Why they have reached this conclusion is fairly understandable. After having devoted so much time and resources on intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq in efforts that proved to be highly unpopular domestically and internationally, the U.S. and those of its allies that joined it in either or both do not want to undertake yet another intervention that might prove to be equally long-term and inconclusive in Syria. True, they did intervene successfully in Libya, but this effort proved much more costly in time and resources than was originally anticipated.

The Assad regime, it is widely believed, will prove even more difficult to dislodge than Qaddafi was. So even if there are elements within Western and Arab public opinion that now call for Western intervention, their support could soon turn into opposition and even condemnation if this did not succeed quickly. And since many believe that the Syrian opposition may be more Islamist than democratic, there is fear that even successfully ousting the Assad regime will merely result in the replacement of one hostile regime by another. With the anticipated costs of intervention being high and the benefits of doing so unclear, it is not surprising that America and other Western governments have so far largely pursued a policy of non-intervention in the ongoing Syrian conflict.

This, however, is not the only way that America and the West could calculate the costs and benefits of intervention vs. non-intervention. If the Assad regime could be brought down, this would deprive Iran of an important ally and would make Iranian support for Hezbollah far more difficult. And Western intervention is more likely than non-intervention to bring about this benefit. Of course, as noted earlier, the downfall of the anti-Western Assad regime could lead to the rise of an anti-Western Sunni Islamist regime. But while this may indeed be a risk, the rise of more moderate Islamic forces in other countries where the Arab Spring revolutions have succeeded (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen) suggests that this may be the outcome in Syria as well. Indeed, if uncertainty about what will follow the downfall of the Assad regime really is a concern, surely intervention on the side of the opposition would give America and the West greater opportunity to influence the nature of the new regime than non-intervention would. And if the prospect that Al Qaeda will gain influence with the Syrian opposition is real, Western non-intervention would surely give this organization a freer hand in Syria than Western intervention there would.

Afghanistan and Iraq have taught America and the West that intervention can have very high costs but produce relatively few benefits. Non-intervention, though, can also impose high costs while yielding few or no benefits. Further, while intervention offers the opportunity to influence the outcome of a conflict, non-intervention does not. What Western policymakers need to focus on, then, is not whether to choose between intervention and non-intervention, but to determine what sort of intervention will minimize costs and maximize benefits. In light of Mary Kaldor's dictum that there is no such thing as non-intervention, this is the only sensible course of action for them to take.

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Mark N. Katz is a professor of government and politics at George Mason University, and is the author of *Leaving without Losing: The War on Terror after Iraq and Afghanistan* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012)

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About the author:

Mark N. Katz is a professor of government and politics at the George Mason University Schar School of Policy and Government, and a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council. He is the author of *Revolutions and Revolutionary Waves* and *Reflections on Revolutions*, and is the editor of *The USSR and Marxist Revolutions in the Third World* and *Revolution: International Dimensions*.