

## The Syrian Crisis and Superpower Politics: The Way Forward

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### Abstract

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This essay asserts that to effectively degrade and ultimately destroy the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and to topple the Bashar al-Assad's regime, the international community led by the United States ought to put combat forces on the ground and push for instituting a Libya-style No-fly Zone over Syria at the United Nations Security Council. The essay makes the case that the No-fly Zone and the combat forces will not only give meaning to the weapons provided to the moderate Syrian rebel forces to fight ISIS and Assad's regime ouster by protecting them from the regime's air onslaught, but also by quickly ending the stalemate. The international coalition should put pressure on both Russia and China, allies of the Assad regime to do away with superpower politics and support passing a strong resolution in the Security Council on Syria that will facilitate the effective resolution of the Syrian crisis.

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**Keywords:** Syrian conflict; Arab Spring; Democracy; Superpower politics; Middle East; No-fly Zone; Humanitarian intervention; Democratic reforms; International politics; and Responsibility to protect

### Introduction

The Arab Spring or so called revolution began over three years ago. Tunisia, the country where the peaceful democratic revolution burst, is currently redeemed from the decades of autocratic regime and the unforgiving clutches of former dictator Ben Ali. Protests broke out across Egypt and President Hosni Mubarak was forced out of power and office. The Libyan people, particularly Benghazi residents unwilling to still remain under the yoke of Khadafy's dictatorship followed suit in asking for Khadafy's ouster.

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In the latter two countries, the push for democratic reforms, rule of law, respect for human rights and individual liberties, freedom of the media, as well as the clamor for greater economic opportunities and political reforms among other things were met by stringent, crude and cruel security regimes that virtually marred the peaceful demonstrations and ultimately led to protracted violence in Egypt and power struggle in Libya.

In Libya specifically, it took military intervention by the international community to break the backbone of former dictator Colonel Muammar Khadafy. Indeed, France, the United States and Britain led and the rest of the world followed. Not to diminish the role that Italy played in this operation, the country provided a crucial air base that was critical for carrying out the mission. The United Nation's Security Council Resolution 1973 which authorized the "No-fly Zone" over Libya's airspace provided the legal authority and the linchpin or the floodgate for the international community to carry out the specific provisions in the Security Council resolution and act in Libya. The United States orchestrated and led the push for the "No-fly Zone", and also provided unique military capabilities, logistical and technological support necessary for the mission. And as such, myriad of the challenges hitherto thought to be insurmountable were subdued. A critical international principle that informed the institution of the No-fly Zone in Libya is the responsibility to protect civilian populations in Benghazi who were under siege and faced imminent threat of massacre from Khadafy's onslaught, or so I will argue.

### **The Syrian Crisis**

It is important to stress the point that the reasons that underpinned the protest movements in Tunis, Tahir Square, Benghazi and other Arab capitals are the same reasons that characterized the protests, and now the violent-ridden conflict in Syria. The Syrian people just as anyone across the face of planet Earth aspire to enjoy true freedom (democracy or political reform), equal justice and greater economic opportunities. In this context, the solidarity of the United States and the international community ought to be with the Syrian people. These socio-economic and political aspirations of the Syrian people, no doubt, are an embodiment of, or at least, are consistent with what the West vigorously proselytizes across the globe in the form of free market democratic principles either directly or indirectly, overtly or covertly.

Needless to say, transnational financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank and its affiliates, as well as the World Trade Organization (WTO) lead the crusade for political reforms and economic restructuring or liberalization across the globe. The IMF and the World Bank attach conditionality clauses to their loan packages to states in order to compel states to liberalize or reform their economic systems. An important question to pose therefore is this: Are these cardinal twin values of liberal democratic culture and free-market economy that form the bedrock and are an important epitome of Western civilization receptive in Libyan, Tunisian and Egyptian societies and not in Syrian society?

Some International Relations experts and policy analysts have asserted that the Syrian theatre will be extremely difficult and challenging on the account of the country's robust air defensive systems and its geography. Syrian air defensive capabilities may be more robust than those of Libya or perhaps Egypt. But the United States or Europe (Britain and France in particular) or a combination of them can neutralize and demolish Syria's air defenses if they choose to. In fact, trying in vain as it is by some policy experts to separate Syria from Libya or Egypt and therefore put it in a special category as dangerous, difficult and complex situation is nothing more than splitting hair. If the international community recalls, Libya was cast in similar fashion yet when the need to protect civilians in Benghazi (who were given ultimatum by the government that is responsible to protect them) arose, Khadafy's army and armory was no match for the air power of the international intervention.

The United States has no appetite, or so it seems, to again engage the U.S. army in another external military confrontation especially in the Middle East unless the former's vital national security is at stake, and understandably so, due to the protracted wars in Afghanistan and Bush's war of choice in Iraq. In an address on September 13, 2014, President Obama remarked "...we have to avoid the mistakes of the past...the best way to defeat a group like ISIL isn't by sending large numbers of American combat forces to wage a ground war in the heart of the Middle East" (President Obama's Address "We Will Degrade and Destroy ISIL", White House Press Release, September 13, 2014). Perhaps, this could explain Washington's tiptoeing dance about the Syrian conundrum or crisis today. It is about two years since the White House proclaimed that the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has lost the trust and confidence of his people, and as such, should step aside (President Obama's Address to the nation on Syria, September 10, 2013).

In the same vein, President Obama declared that the use of any form of chemical agents or Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) by the Assad regime will constitute violation of international law and amounts to crossing a "Red-line" for which the international community, the United States in particular, would be compelled to exact consequences to the Assad government.

Since the White House's stance, there has been widespread reportage that indeed the Assad regime has used sarin gas on his own people (See Report on the Use of Chemical Weapons in Ghouta on 21 August 2013: Note by the Secretary-General). French and British intelligence agencies also concluded or confirmed that in fact, the Assad forces used the poisonous Sarin gas against the rebel forces. Washington's response? The White House argued the U.S. would have to be cocksure that the Assad regime indeed dispensed Sarin gas. Realistically, no one will begrudge Washington for this position especially in the wake of Bush's war of choice in Iraq that wholly depended on faulty intelligence, and swallowed hook, line and sinker similar intelligence from European sources. With a déjà vu starring the United States in the face, President Obama was reluctant to follow through on his "red-line" threat and did exactly what any president would have. That is, rationalize the non commitment of the U.S. after sarin gas had been employed by President Assad that the United States had to conduct its own thorough investigation into the matter. After conclusive assessment, a government report indicated "The United States Government assesses with high confidence that the Syrian government carried out a chemical weapons attack in the Damascus suburbs on August 21, 2013" (See Government Assessment of the Syrian Government's Use of Chemical Weapons, White House Press Release, August 30, 2013).

After copiously satiating itself that Assad indeed used chemical agents, President Obama in an address to the nation on the Syrian crisis threatened to undertake targeted military action against the Assad regime. The President remarked "...after careful deliberation, I determined that it is in the national security interest of the United States to respond to the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons through a targeted military strike" (See Remarks by the President in Address to the nation on Syria on September 10, 2013). However, Russia, an ally of Bashar al-Assad's government came to the rescue and offered a diplomatic "solution" or bargain to the crisis.

In the agreement reached by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Geneva on September 14, 2013, Syria was required to surrender its chemical stockpiles in order to avoid an impending US military action (See "Framework for Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons", by Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), September 14, 2013; "U.S., Russia agree to framework on Syria chemical weapons", CNN September 15, 2013). Per the disarmament agreement, Syria acceded to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) which makes it incumbent upon signatories or members to the treaty to disarm and destroy their stockpiles of chemical weapons. The US-Russia agreement was enshrined in a UN Security Council resolution on 28 September, 2013 and the provisions of the resolution had two important facets: First, the resolution demanded "the expeditious destruction of Syria's chemical weapons programme"; and second, the resolution required Syria to allow into the country unfettered access to chemical weapons scientists (See UN Security Council Resolution 2118). It should be noted that even though the Security Council resolution could invoke Chapter VII of the UN Charter which authorizes the application of military force, a separate resolution would be required in the event of non-compliance by Damascus. The Syrian disarmament agreement was an important feather in the cap for the Obama administration as deadly chemical arsenals had been removed from the hands of a dictator. Fast-forward today, the United States made it clear, or so it appears that it is considering the option of arming the moderate Syrian opposition rebel forces fighting for Assad's ouster, the Free Syrian Army (FSA). It will also provide training to the FSA as well as lead an international coalition to degrade and destroy ISIS. The primary objective for this change in policy is to bolster the FSA to counter ISIS which has beheaded two American journalists (James Foley, Steven Sortloff) and a British citizen, as well as terrorized both Iraq and Syria and gained large swaths of territory in both countries. Coming as belatedly as it has makes one wonder if this move is to save face or it is to show solidarity with the Syrian freedom fighters and the international community that indeed the United States is committed to the course and freedom of the Syrian people.

By the latest report released by the United Nations Human Rights office, approximately 193,000 Syrian people have been killed since the conflict erupted. Per the U.N. report, about 5,000 people may have been killed on a monthly basis since July 2012. The humanitarian toll is but staggering.

Thousands of people, especially women, children, and the elderly, have been internally displaced, and the fates of many thousands more either hang in the balance or have condemned them into refugee camps in neighboring countries such as Jordan and Turkey, and thereby exerting enormous economic and social stress on these benefactors.

A critical missing link in the US strategy is the fact that the strategy is short of putting US combat forces on the ground. If the United States believes that ISIS poses a national security threat to the US either in the short term or long term, then it cannot sub-contract or sublet the fight against ISIS to the so called moderate Syrian forces. The United States has to do the heavy lifting, and that means there must be US boots on the ground to effectively degrade and destroy ISIS. It is no wonder that Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey pointed out in a testimony to the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee that he would recommend to President Obama that American troops accompany Iraqi forces on combat missions against ISIS if the situation warrants it, or if airstrikes prove to be inadequate in the fight against ISIS (Foreign Policy, September 17, 2014). It is refreshing to note that the U.S. will train and arm the moderate Syrian rebels. One only hopes that such weapon supplies will include anti-tank weapons, anti-aircraft weapons, and surface-to-air missiles. But will these weapons dramatically change the dynamics and status quo of the conflict? Absolutely not, such weapons will only bolster the rebel forces in the short-term and will not change or tilt the battlefield in any significant manner in favor of the moderate opposition forces and against ISIS or President Assad.

As long as the Assad regime commands a complete control of the Syrian airspace, weapons or no weapons, President Bashar al-Assad is in good shape to continue his "holocaust" (genocide I mean) against his own people just as his father, President Hafez al-Assad, did in Hama province over three decades ago with impunity (1982). And if Assad controls the airfields, he wins the war; and if Assad wins, Hezbollah wins; and if Hezbollah wins, Iran wins the war and the Syrian people lose. This trend will constitute a dangerous precedence in the international system. It would also escalate the belligerence of rogue regimes such as North Korea, and blood-thirsty terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda, ISIS and the Taliban. The message this development would send across the globe? That any despotic, corrupt and cruel dictator can perpetuate his rule by any means possible, foul or fair. Important U.S. allies in the region (the Middle East) such as Israel, Jordan, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia may be shaken to the core.

## Conclusion

To impact the dynamics of the conflict, defeat ISIS and push Bashar al-Assad out, the United States and the international community ought to push for instituting a Libya-style “No-fly Zone” over Syria at the United Nations Security Council. This will not only give meaning to the weapons received by the FSA, but also protect the moderate forces from Assad’s air onslaught thereby saving thousands of lives that otherwise might be slaughtered without any tentative control of Syrian airspace. US boots on the ground is also vitally important for a quick ending of the stalemate or crisis. Russia and China which have thus far either vetoed or watered down several UN Security Council resolutions on Syria are not receptive to the idea of militarily leveling the playing field in Syria by arming the opposition forces or the idea of a “No-fly Zone” primarily because of their trade, military and geostrategic interests or ties with Syria. Besides, the United States itself and the international community have not pushed the concept of No-fly Zone forcefully enough in the United Nations Security Council and in the court of public opinion. Lack of proactivism or inadequacy of it, in this regard, has only inured to the benefit of the Assad regime and bought Assad more time.

It is time the United States and its European and Arab allies (or the international coalition) considered a No-fly Zone over Syria before the conflict snowball beyond Syria into a full-blown regional crisis with devastating effects. A development the region does not need at this time especially on top of the instability in Afghanistan and the already turbo-charged Sunni-Shiite ethno-sectarian conflict in Iraq with cascading regional effects. This is a volatile region with highly combustible religious and ethnic affinities underpinned by centuries of ethno-sectarian tensions. The international community should demonstrate that it is on the side of the Syrian people, and on the right side of history. The international community must aim at a no-fly zone in Syria. It is better late than never.

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