

Syria: The G8 should call for intervention, now

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Western intervention is beginning in Syria, and it is about time. The vast human slaughter in Syria has not been enough to shock the conscience of humanity into acting. But a broader understanding of self-interest has provoked action, albeit limited, because the mounting costs of not acting are becoming clearer. It is, as Prime Minister Stephen Harper said in the U.K. Parliament last week, a grotesque dilemma. But continued Western hand-wringing and procrastination will not solve it.

What is happening in Syria is truly appalling. The United Nations High Commission for Human Rights has documented the violent deaths of 93,000 people since the conflict began two years ago. The pace of killing is now approximately four times what it was in the first two years of the Iraq conflict, judging by the calculations of the organization Iraq Body Count. More than 1.5 million people have fled Syria, and millions more are displaced inside the country. Since January, refugees have been fleeing Syria at the rate of 16,000 a day, putting the survival of Lebanon and Jordan in jeopardy, and fomenting instability in Turkey. The UN has issued an appeal for \$5-billion, the largest in UN history.

The reasons for not intervening militarily are not trivial. In the first place, inside the country and out, Syrians are divided, with no clarity about who would lead if president Bashar al-Assad fell and what would happen to minorities and their rights. Absent a controlling authority, horrific retributions for atrocities already committed are all but guaranteed, no matter which side prevails. Further, the Free Syrian Army is not an army but a collection of militias, some with democratic aspirations and others fundamentalist. Nor is the FSA fully Syrian; foreign *jihadis* have been coming to the fight from other conflicts, hoping to brand their own fundamentalism onto a state that heretofore has been more secular than sectarian. A further reason for not acting is the prudential, Hippocratic concern not to make things worse. In addition, the UN Security Council is blocked by the Russians who are being their usual ruthless selves, willing to fight to the last Syrian to preserve their own mercantile and strategic interests. No legitimizing UN mandate is obtainable.

American leadership is indispensable to successful intervention but the political timing is not right for an administration exiting Iraq and Afghanistan and pivoting towards Asia. Washington has until now shown little stomach for military action in Syria and U.S. diplomacy has mostly spoken softly and brandished a small stick. With the exception of Britain and France, the European Union remains fully absorbed in its endless financial crisis and little interested in rescuing Muslims from each other. NATO too is divided as a consequence. The Arab states are split along sectarian lines, and Turkey, unable to persuade its allies to do more than hold Ankara's coat, faces its own unrest.

On the killing ground, an unfair fight is made more unfair by the one-sided arms embargo that accepts Russian and Iranian resupplies of Mr. Assad while denying equivalent weapons to the insurgency. Meanwhile Syrians die in their thousands. No government, including Canada's, has been prepared to pay the price of intervening, settling for giving humanitarian aid instead, which in effect is doing a little to avoid doing a lot.

But not acting in Syria is far from cost-free, and the price is growing as sectarian conflict spreads and the protagonists regress to the seventh century. The map of the Middle East is redrawing itself and the very idea of a unified nation of Syria may be dying. A failed state on Israel's and Turkey's borders is fragmenting into statelets divided on religious grounds and capable of incubating and launching

terrorism worldwide. Meanwhile Iraq, too, is disintegrating, with incalculable implications for world oil markets, as well as for the security of the neighbours. An Assad victory would strengthen and probably embolden Iran and Hezbollah, with consequences for Israel as well as for the US and allies and for Iran's nuclear program. Russia's reputation as a reliable ally to perpetrators would be strengthened and the US's credibility as a bulwark of democracy correspondingly weakened.

Other tyrants would sleep more soundly, confident that the world would avert its eyes as they turned their weapons on their own people to preserve themselves in power. The Responsibility to Protect doctrine would become as empty a slogan as "never again."

Preventing this spiral into chaos is a strategic interest. A peaceful solution is preferable to endless fighting, but achieving it is easier said than done. The UN secretariat and others are working hard to support the proposed Russian-U.S. sponsored peace conference, for which nonetheless no date has been set. Even if it is held, shifting fortunes on the battlefield and the sheer extent of the killing makes the prospects of success remote. In a literally do-or-die situation, neither side seems likely to settle on terms the other can accept.

After months of indecision, the Americans have evidently decided to arm the Syrians they trust. They are also considering imposing a limited no-fly zone over southern Syria. A larger no-fly zone, like the one that prevailed over north and south Iraq for a decade following the Gulf war, would be still better. The objective now, like the Iraq no-fly zone then, would be the protection of civilians. It would also provide the apparently ascendant Assad regime and its Hezbollah allies an incentive to negotiate. A no-fly zone would not stop the killing in Syria but it would degrade Assad's capability of inflicting vast, indiscriminate damage on his citizens from the air.

Implementing a no-fly zone would require the suppression of Syrian air defences, a significant military task but one that could be eased somewhat by Cruise missiles and other weapons systems operating from offshore. Incirlik, the major Turkish air base in southern Turkey, which is protected by Patriot missile systems, would put much of Syrian airspace within reach of coalition aircraft. A counterpart base in Jordan would cover much of the rest. Because of Russian intransigence in New York, such a no-fly zone or zones would likely have to be imposed by a coalition of the willing without a Security Council resolution as was also done in the Kosovo war a decade ago.

The G8 summit taking place in Northern Ireland today is ideally timed to confront the Russians and to rally the support of key countries to act. As demonstrated in Libya, Canada has the capability to contribute. If Ottawa does not want to do so, it should not impede others who do.

If the sheer scale of the killing of Syrians is not enough to wake the world's sensibilities, the growing dangers to us all should provoke action. Throughout this conflict, the day before was a better day on which to intervene than the day after. And with every passing day, the costs of inaction grow, as does the destruction of the innocent.

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