

Syria: The Case for Intervention, Now, by Paul Heinbecker*

Western intervention is beginning in Syria, at last. The vast human slaughter in Syria has not been sufficient to shock the conscience of humanity into acting. But the mounting costs of not acting are generating a broader understanding of the stakes.

The UN has documented 93,000 violent deaths since the conflict began two years ago. The pace of killing is now four times what it was in the Iraq war. Millions of people are displaced inside Syria and over 1.5 million have fled the country. Since January, refugees have left at a rate of 16,000 a day. The UN has issued the largest humanitarian appeal in history, \$5 billion dollars.

The reasons for not intervening militarily are not trivial. First, there is a Hippocratic concern not to make things worse. Further, there is no clarity about who will lead if Assad falls and what will happen to opponents. Horrific retributions for atrocities already committed can be expected whichever side prevails. Also, the Free Syrian Army is not an army but a collection of militias, some far from liberal in their aspirations for democracy. Nor is the FSA fully Syrian; foreign Jihadis have joined the fight, hoping to brand their own fundamentalism onto a previously secular state. Meanwhile, the Russians, as self-interested and ruthless as ever, are willing to fight to the last Syrian, and to block a legalizing Security Council mandate just as they did in Kosovo a decade ago. As PM Harper observed, President Putin is supporting the thugs of the Assad regime to preserve Russia's own mercantile and strategic interests.

The political timing is not right for intervention by a US administration exiting Iraq and Afghanistan and pivoting towards Asia. With the exception of Britain and France, the EU remains fully absorbed in its endless financial crisis and little interested in rescuing Muslims from

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each other. Like the EU, NATO members are divided. 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, a one-sided arms embargo prohibits arming the insurgency but accepts Russian and Iranian resupplies of Assad. 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. The map of the Middle East is redrawing itself and the very idea of Syria may be dying. A now failed state on Israel's and Turkey's borders is fragmenting into sectarian statelets capable of projecting terrorism worldwide. Iraq too is disintegrating, with incalculable implications for its peoples and world oil markets. An Assad victory would strengthen and probably embolden Iran and Hezbollah, with consequences for Israel as well as for Iran's nuclear program. Russia's reputation as a reliable ally to perpetrators would be ~~strengthened~~ enhanced and the US's credibility as a paragon of democracy weakened. The Responsibility to Protect would become as empty a slogan as "never again", as other emboldened despots also felt free to turn their weapons on their own people.

Preventing this spiral into chaos is a strategic interest. Doing so peacefully nonetheless is exquisitely difficult. Russia and the Rest agree on the need for a peace conference in Geneva, but on little else, and the protagonists prefer the uncertainties of the battlefield to the vagaries of negotiating. In a literally do-or-die situation, neither side seems likely yet to settle on terms the other can accept.

In what looks too little, too late, the Americans have apparently finally decided to arm the Syrians they trust. A better idea would be to establish "no-fly zones", like those that protected the Kurds and Shia in Iraq for a decade following the Gulf war. They would not stop the killing but they would diminish Assad's capability to visit vast destruction on his citizens from the air. It would also provide the currently ascendant Assad regime and its Hezbollah allies an incentive to negotiate.

Because of Russian intransigence in New York, no-fly zones would likely have to be imposed by a coalition of the willing without a Security

Council resolution, ~~as was done in the Kosovo war~~. Implementing no-fly zones would require the suppression of Syrian air defences, a significant military task but one that could be ~~significantly~~ substantially aided by Cruise missiles and other modern weapons systems. Incirlik, the major Turkish air base in southern Turkey, which is protected by Patriot missile systems, puts much of Syrian airspace within reach of coalition aircraft. A Jordanian base would cover the rest. As demonstrated in Libya, Canada has the capability to contribute. If Ottawa ~~does~~ 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~~ has been a better day on which to intervene than the day after. And with every passing day, the slaughter of the innocent increased s, and the costs of inaction growgrew.