Center for American Progress

Thinking Through Our Options in Syria

Challenges to Ending the Violence

By Peter Juul March 2, 2012

The situation on the ground in Syria continues to worsen in the weeks following the Russian and Chinese vetoes of a U.N. Security Council resolution designed to support an Arab League plan for ending Syria's bloodshed. Despite efforts by the United States and its partners to organize a collective response to the Assad regime's brutality via the recent Friends of the Syrian People conference in Tunis, some countries and voices within the United States are floating various proposals for military intervention in Syria.

The Arab League has called for a joint peacekeeping mission with the United Nations, while France continues to call for safe zones or humanitarian corridors to be established to ease Syrians' suffering. The conservative Foreign Policy Initiative organized a letter effectively calling for unilateral American military action to establish safe zones in Syria, while Anne-Marie Slaughter, the director of policy planning at the State Department from 2009 to 2011, urged foreign help for Syrian rebels in order to establish such zones.

While calls for safe zones reflect an understandable desire to prevent the Assad regime from inflicting further violence against its population, they do not come to terms with the diplomatic and military challenges of establishing and maintaining such zones in the face of almost certain opposition from a hostile government.

With such opposition the forcible establishment of such areas amounts to the creation of a state of armed conflict—if not a formal state of war—against the Assad regime. To a certain extent the diplomatic and military challenges of establishing safe zones intertwine and would make efforts to build support for a multinational military effort to establish these zones in Syria outside the U.N. Security Council more difficult.

A brief sketch of a hypothetical military intervention in Syria by the United States and a potential coalition of the willing illustrates these mutually reinforcing challenges. We also suggest how the United States and other countries could proceed in light of these problems. Any option will have to include greater coordination between the emerging major players: the United States, France, the United Kingdom, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar.

Practical and logistical challenges to direct military intervention

First, there are the political logistics of supporting the military establishment of safe zones in Syria. There are five potential starting points for a U.S.-led multinational force to enter Syria and then supply those forces protecting safe zones: Israel, Jordan, Iraq, Turkey, and by sea. Iraq is highly unlikely to give the United States permission to deploy large numbers of ground forces to establish safe zones in Syria along with the logistical chain of American military personnel and contractors that would entail just months after the last American troops left. What's more, any multinational force would have to cross the breadth of Syrian territory to establish safe zones in cities and towns under threat like Homs, Hama, and Idlib. Supporting such a deployment from Iraq would create exceptionally long supply lines vulnerable to attack from regime forces, terrorists, and criminals.

Deploying a multinational force through Israel would create obvious political problems for the United States in the region. But geography is an equally large obstacle for any military effort to establish safe zones by staging from either Israel or Jordan.

First and foremost is that the Syrian capital, Damascus, would stand in the way of the intervening force on its way to protect populations under threat. Homs is more than 85 miles north of Damascus, and Idlib and Hama further still. If a multinational force is attempting to reach these cities from Israel or Jordan, it might as well just go directly to Damascus and engage in regime change itself. Safe zones might feasibly be established in locations close to the Jordanian border—Dara'a, for instance, where Syrian security force massacres helped spark the current upheaval and shelling continues—but would require the assent of a friendly Jordanian government managing its own delicate political situation.

That leaves the multinational force to stage from Turkey or ships off the Syrian coast. The former would likely be the least difficult given Turkey's membership in NATO and the secure rear area it would provide. The potential safe zone site of Idlib is only 15 to 20 miles from Turkey's crooked border with Syria, but Homs is between 80 and 105 miles from the border. Staging and supplying an intervention in Homs from Turkey would mean securing this line of communication against regime forces. Of course, staging from Turkey would also require assent from the Turkish government, and while Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu has spoken favorably of establishing an international mechanism to deliver humanitarian aid to Homs and Hama, Foreign Ministry spokesmen have rejected establishing a buffer zone inside Syria for the time being.

Nor does staging from the sea look any more attractive. Homs is just over 40 miles from the Mediterranean Sea, and about 50 from the major port of Tartus on Syria's Mediterranean coast. Homs could be supplied from the air, but depending on the size of

the force committed to the safe zone doing so could prove difficult. Alternatively, multinational forces could attempt to establish an expeditionary port on the Mediterranean coast and supply Homs from there. But the route would pass close to the Lebanese border and create a potential vulnerability to attacks by Hezbollah or other militants. Coalition forces could take Tartus, but doing so would create severe diplomatic problems with Russia given the naval base Moscow possesses there—its only one outside the former Soviet Union.

Defining the mission

Beyond these logistical challenges, there remains the question of what mission a multinational force would have in Syria. Simply directing them to establish safe zones in certain cities under regime threat would not be enough. Clear rules of engagement are needed. Would multinational forces have the authority to fight Syrian forces en route to potential safe zones and clear them out to establish a safe zone? How would multinational forces protect a safe zone once established? How would they be able to defend themselves against irregular forces they could face?

The answers to these questions would be vital to the success of any safe zone mission. Unclear rules as to whether U.N. peacekeepers could use force to protect safe areas in Bosnia helped lead to the Srebrenica massacre in 1995. The humiliating spectacle of Bosnian Serb forces holding U.N. peacekeepers hostage preceded that bloodbath. An unclear mission in Lebanon in the mid-1980s contributed to the failure of the Multinational Force there that culminated in the 1983 Beirut barracks bombing that killed 241 U.S. Marines and 58 French soldiers.

No answers to these critical issues are forthcoming from advocates of safe zone intervention, even though these answers will shape the course and outcome of any potential intervention.

Accounting for Syria's chemical weapons

The other major military issue revolves around Syria's chemical weapons stockpile. It is unclear exactly which chemical weapons Syria possesses, but Damascus is believed to have sarin and mustard agents and is rumored to have developed VX. To deliver these agents, Syria is believed to have chemical warheads for Scud-type ballistic missiles as well as artillery shells and air-dropped weapons containing chemical weapons.

Any international military intervention would have to account for Syria's presumed chemical arsenal in some fashion. The possibility that the Assad regime could use this arsenal either against intervening foreign forces, his own population, or civilian targets in Israel cannot be ignored.

From the very beginning, the threat of Syrian chemical warfare immediately expands the potential scope of any potential military intervention. Accounting for unconventional weapons during a military intervention directed at other purposes is a difficult proposition, as demonstrated by the problems U.S.-led forces faced during and immediately after the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Diplomatic complications

Finally, the diplomatic feasibility of any international military intervention in Syria remains highly uncertain.

As noted above, staging a safe zone mission will probably require using territory of one of Syria's immediate neighbors—and obtaining permission for the use of this territory (or even airspace to support these safe zones from the air) will require laying considerable diplomatic groundwork considering the potential complications. Not to mention there are potential staging areas complicated by their own domestic politics (Iraq) or considerations of regional politics and perceptions (Israel).

Given the lack of consensus on Syria policy even between the United States and its anti-Assad partners, it's exceedingly unlikely the practical diplomatic groundwork has even begun for a multinational military intervention there. But the fact is this sort of diplomacy is a necessary precondition for any sort of military intervention in Syria being contemplated.

Outside the practical diplomatic necessities of staging any sort of safe zone operation in Syria, questions of international legitimacy arise. Given the Russian and Chinese vetoes of a relatively mild U.N. Security Council resolution backing an Arab League proposal to end the violence in Syria, it is near certain that the Security Council would not approve a far more expansive resolution authorizing an international military intervention to establish safe zones.

In theory, the United States and its allies could work around Russian and Chinese vetoes of intervention at the United Nations by invoking the "Uniting for Peace" resolution passed during the Korean War, which would allow the U.N. General Assembly to potentially authorize safe zones in Syria. But taking this route would require greater diplomatic coherence from potential intervening parties—the United States and key allies like the United Kingdom, France, and Turkey as well as critical Arab League partners like Saudi Arabia and Qatar—and a concerted diplomatic effort to win over a majority of General Assembly members.

Assuming Russia and China veto a potential Security Council resolution authorizing intervention in Syria and interveners judge the Uniting for Peace mechanism insufficient, unobtainable, or as setting a precedent they would rather not set, the United States and its anti-Assad coalition could then turn to regional organizations like NATO and the Arab League. While these regional organizations are not necessarily a legal substitute for U.N. authorization (though Turkey could perhaps request NATO intervention under the North Atlantic Treaty if it felt threatened by events in Syria), they would provide greater legitimacy for an intervention in their respective regions if not globally.

Again, however, NATO and Arab League authorization would require far greater diplomatic coherence both from those proposing a safe zone and the organizations themselves. Ideally, NATO and the Arab League would work together to authorize and implement a military safe zone mission—and that adds another layer of diplomatic complexity on top of the already complex diplomacy required to effectively utilize regional organizations such as NATO and the Arab League.

There is currently little consensus within NATO as to potential intervention in Syria. While both France and Turkey have endorsed some sort of mechanism to deliver humanitarian assistance to besieged cities like Homs, they differ on the proper mechanism to do so. For its part, the United States is backing the Arab League plan to end the fighting and get Assad to step down. The Arab League continues to push its plan despite the Security Council vetoes of Russia and China, winning overwhelming but nonbinding support for its scheme in a recent General Assembly vote. Stepping up intra-NATO diplomacy vis-à-vis Syria and diplomacy between key NATO and Arab League members would be necessary to obtain any authorization and material support for a safe zone mission from either regional organization.

Even military intervention by an ad hoc "coalition of the willing" would require the same sort of diplomacy needed to bring consensus to larger, chartered regional organizations like NATO. Beyond diplomacy necessary to obtain permission for staging a safe zone operation, the United States and its potential partners would need to reassure key regional allies like Turkey and Israel of their own security while the United States conducts military operations to establish and defend safe zones in Syria. Determining roles, responsibilities, and missions of different nations within a coalition of the willing would be critical, as would be creating *ex nihilo* a unified command structure for multinational forces in Syria. This task is not impossible, but likely would require more effort than using existing NATO structures for the purpose. The relatively minor command-and-control issues of the pre-NATO phase of the military campaign against the Qaddafi regime in Libya—such as French fighters striking targets outside of Benghazi before the United States unleashed its onslaught against the Libyan air defense system—shows the work required of any true ad hoc coalition effort.

Even if the United States were to decide, for some unfathomable reason, to intervene unilaterally to establish safe zones in Syria, it would still need to overcome critical diplomatic obstacles. Intervening without the cooperation of or even intensive consultations with Turkey could lead to a dramatic rupture in U.S.-Turkey relations when good ties between the two countries are more necessary than ever. Without such cooperation or consultations, Turkish leaders may legitimately feel the United States has put them in the firing line without so much as a second thought.

Turkish buy-in to any unilateral American intervention in Syria would be critical to both its feasibility and ultimate success. And Israel—which is already preparing for potential refugees from Syria—would also require diplomatic consultations in the event of a unilateral American military intervention in Syria.

What's more, any intervention in Syria is bound to create complications for states like Turkey and Iraq with large Kurdish populations. According to State Department figures, 9 percent of Syria's population is Kurdish, and Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government is already preparing for Syrian Kurdish refugees to start arriving. Turkey is still politically wrestling with the problem of its own significant Kurdish minority at the same time it wages a military campaign against the Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK, terrorist organization. Turkish media are already expressing worries that the PKK will take advantage of chaos in Syria to establish bases there or rekindle its relationship with the Assad regime.

Aside from these largely operational difficulties, intervention by either an ad hoc coalition of the willing or a unilateral American effort would in all likelihood lack the international legitimacy provided by either the United Nations or regional organizations like NATO and the Arab League. Despite the good intentions propelling them, the legitimacy of such interventions would likely be seen as more comparable to the war in Iraq than to the wars in Libya or Kosovo. And proposals to arm the Syrian rebels to have them carve out safe zones and then have outside powers protect them, like the one offered by former Bush administration national security advisor Stephen Hadley in the Washington Post, would likely suffer from the same legitimacy deficit as ad hoc coalition or unilateral American interventions. These proposals additionally underestimate the difficulty of obtaining a diplomatic consensus on such a course between key anti-Assad players.

Practical constraints of political geography, an uncertain mission and unclear rules of engagement, and the need for extensive diplomacy to achieve coherence and consensus on militarily establishing safe zones in Syria all argue against safe zones as an option to halt the violence in Syria and depose the Assad regime at acceptable risk or cost. So what should the United States and like-minded countries actually do?

Finding a solution

It has become cliché to say there are no good policy options to solve various international security problems, but with regard to Syria it is a cliché because it is true. It is unclear what impact another layer of more restrictive sanctions will have on the Assad regime's calculations. The regime may decide that it can survive solely on Iranian and Russian economic support. It may nonetheless be worthwhile to make more systematic efforts to go after the Syrian business elite and political allies that provide the bulk of support for the Assad regime in order to make clear their material interests will suffer should Assad survive.

Some have suggested recognizing and arming Syrian opposition forces for various reasons, the most persuasive being the argument by U.S. Institute of Peace scholar Steven Heydemann that doing so allows outside actors to exert influence over a militarization process that is already under way. But as Heydemann acknowledges, arming the Syrian opposition so it does not produced fragmented militias (as the current militarization process has the potential to do) requires "coordinated frameworks." Moreover, helping provide greater political coherence to the Syrian opposition may be a goal that is both easier to achieve and for which it is easier to gain widespread support than supplying arms.

Regardless of the merits of various policy options currently being discussed, the need for greater diplomatic coordination between states opposed to the Assad regime is apparent. There are a number of key players involved—the United States, France, the United Kingdom, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar appear to be the critical nodes pushing current international efforts to end the violence in Syria and oust Assad—but the public coordination between them so far is less than impressive.

Since the veto of the Security Council resolution endorsing the Arab League plan, however, there have been encouraging signs of greater coordination between these players. Secretary of State Clinton and Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoglu met last week in Washington, with consultations about the situation in Syria high on the agenda. And the newly formed Friends of the Syrian People group that recently met in Tunisia, while gathering together states opposed to the Assad regime, appeared to paper over the differences of major players over issues like arming the Syrian opposition more than it unified their efforts to remove Assad from power.

Earlier this week the U.N. Human Rights Council voted to condemn Syria for its "widespread and systematic violations" against civilians. The resolution urged Syria to immediately stop all attacks on civilians and grant unhindered access to aid groups. It also supported gathering evidence on possible crimes against humanity and other serious human rights abuses in Syria. The U.N. Security Council also approved a statement deploring the humanitarian situation and calling for "immediate and unhindered

access," and there are reports that the United States and France are working on a draft U.N. Security Council resolution demanding such access and an end to the fighting. As of Friday, however, the International Committee for Red Cross, or ICRC, was prevented by the Syrian authorities from entering the Homs district of Baba Amro. Turkey's National Security Council had also issued a statement calling for humanitarian access to besieged Syrian cities, an important development. Increasing cooperation and coordination with Turkey should be a key goal of U.S. Syria policy going forward, given the pivotal role Turkey will have in any international involvement in Syria—military or otherwise—and the potential impact events in Syria can have on Turkey's domestic politics and security.

Conclusion

Syria's complicated situation has defied efforts to formulate solutions that would end the bloodshed there while removing the Assad regime from power. In turn, this difficulty in determining how to achieve these objectives has made coordination between international actors even more problematic than usual. While there are hopeful signs emerging that international coordination is improving, the United States should make sure that this coordination produces consensus policy options for which key players can marshal international support regardless of their content. It is not enough for one player to develop a plan—it should consult and coordinate with its partners to push it forward. The United States can and should drive this process forward while remaining cognizant of the risks and costs of direct ground military intervention in Syria.

Peter Juul is a Policy Analyst at the Center for American Progress.