Analysis of Military Options for Intervention in Syria

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The civil war in Syria is well into its third year with no end in sight. There is a very real possibility of the conflict spreading beyond Syria's borders to engulf the entire region in a catastrophic war. Due to the chaotic and externally influenced nature of the situation, a diplomatic solution to the crisis in the near term appears to be highly unlikely. Moreover, the situation indicates that military intervention would likely require a sustained effort of some kind to have a serious chance at achieving suitable results toward any kind of acceptable resolution and, in the effort, preserving overall U.S. credibility. Yet the intensity of U.S. interests or an overall plan for employment of U.S. military force to achieve credible ends that serve those interests has not been effectively communicated to the American public. In the current U.S. environment of declining defense spending, economic viability concerns, and overall popular strategic skepticism, a significant strategic communication effort and a potential fundamental re-assessment of global priorities could well be necessary to achieve and/or sustain both feasibility and acceptability for the intensity and duration of any suitable military option chosen, even for protracted stand-off operations.

Analysis of Military Options for Intervention in Syria

The civil war in Syria is well into its third year with no end in sight. Over 130,000 people have died, millions have fled their homes as refugees and the use of chemical weapons by Bashar al Assad on his own people has outraged the world. The conflict could easily spread beyond Syria's borders and already threatens the stability of the entire Middle East region.

In a letter responding to a request by the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, written July 19, 2013, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey, outlined several options for military intervention in the Syrian conflict, ranging from training opposition forces to establishing no-fly zones to seizing chemical weapons. Virtually all entailed the need in some degree for use of ground forces, either in or around Syria, and costs for any option were estimated to run into the billions of dollars per year. Conspicuously absent in this assessment were a set of clearly defined objectives toward which any of these options would presumably strive. General Dempsey mentioned this by saying, "It would be better if they were assessed and discussed in the context of an overall whole-of-government strategy for achieving our policy objectives in coordination with our allies and partners."[1]

Thus far, the United States has struggled to find any effective non-military ways to stop the violence and restore stability in Syria. As the war continues to threaten the region's stability, U.S. military intervention remains a serious possibility.

This paper will first attempt to outline the background and scope of the ongoing civil war, its participants, their objectives and the effects and threats imposed on the region. Next it will seek to outline U.S. interests and challenges regarding Syria and the region. Finally, it will provide an analysis on the efficacy of potential military options for

intervention based on an estimation of possible policy objectives as they relate to protecting U.S. interests in relation to Syria's situation.

<div align="center">Demographics of Syria</div>

The Syrian civil war is being fought along sectarian lines and primarily in the more densely populated urban areas; understanding the demographics of Syria provides a foundation for understanding the dynamics of the civil war.

Population

As of the 4 December, 2013 update to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Fact Book, Syria has an overall population of approximately 22,457,000 making it the 54th most populous nation in the world. Ethnically, Arabs make up 90.3% of the population while Kurds, Armenians and others complete the other 9.7%.[2] As recently as 2012, it was estimated that 1.8 million refugees from Iraq lived in Syria as well as substantial numbers of Palestinians and Armenians, although these figures have been thrown into confusion as a result of the war.[3]

Urbanization

Syria is relatively urbanized with approximately 56.1% of the population living in cities and an estimated urbanization rate of 2.36% expected through at least 2015. As of the latest CIA data of 2009, Aleppo was the largest city with 2.985 million, while Damascus, the capital, contained 2.527 million. Homs and Hamah were the two next largest cities containing 1.276 million and 900,000 respectively.[4] While more recent estimates of city size are difficult to obtain due to the civil war it is known that city populations have dropped dramatically as a result of millions fleeing the fighting.[5]

Religion

Islam is the official religion of Syria. 74% of Syrians are Sunni Muslim. Other Muslims, including Alawites and Druze make up 16%, while Christians of various denominations roughly account for the remaining 10%. Tiny Jewish communities have historically lived in Damascus, Al Qamishli and Aleppo.[6] Aleppo has also been home to one of the largest Christian populations in the Middle East. Christians comprise an estimated 12% of the city's inhabitants.[7]

Education

It is estimated that approximately 90% of men and 78% of women contribute to an overall literacy rate of 84.1%.[8] Thus, the Syrian population can be considered reasonably well educated overall and, more importantly, able to take advantage of communication capabilities made possible by today's technological advancements. This played an important role in the spread of the current conflict because the populace was able to stay better informed on what was happening around and to them.

Syria since Bashar al-Assad

Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father, Hafez al-Assad, as president of Syria after the latter's death on July 17, 2000 after a 29 year unbroken term. Ostensibly, Syria is a socialist, democratic republic as described in its 1973 constitution, but in truth it is a dictatorship, evidenced by the fact that Bashar was confirmed to a second seven-year term in 2007 in a referendum where he was the sole candidate.[9] When compared to other nations in the region – as well as the world – Syria had been relatively stable for three decades prior to 2011, due largely to the strong one party rule of the Baathists, a very capable security apparatus, and a veritable cult of personality surrounding Hafez al-Assad and to a lesser extent his son, at least in the beginning.[10]

Early in his rule Bashar began to make significant changes to economic and governance practices in an effort to revive a stagnating economy. He attempted to open markets, attract foreign and internal investors and reform tax laws so as to increase revenue from a newly burgeoning economy. However, he failed to curtail rampant corruption and crony capitalism, much of which involved members of his own family. In addition, due to his political positions and activities within the region, he alienated the very Western investors he needed to attract. These factors caused a steady increase in socioeconomic inequality as the corrupt elites became ever wealthier while middle class spending power and living standards declined. By 2005, 30 percent of Syrians lived near the poverty line and unemployment was 18 percent.[11] At the same time, Bashar was waging an internal struggle with members of the old guard Baathist party leaders. He concentrated power in his presidency and surrounded himself with loyal family members, Alawite security barons and young new economy technocrats while alienating the old clientele networks. Thus, socioeconomic inequality and ruling elite power struggles were major destabilizing factors for the Syrian populace by 2011.[12]

Causes/Drivers of the Civil War

The Arab Spring

The "Arab Spring" began on December 17, 2010 in Tunisia when a fruit seller set himself ablaze in protest against the country's oppressive informal economy. Following this incident, protests raged across the region. Despite governments' efforts to suppress information about the uprisings, modern communications such as cell phones, Facebook, Twitter and the internet enabled the populations to mobilize, signaling the end of the state's ability to monopolize communication.[13]

William Cleveland and Martin Bunton, in their book, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, point out that "some Arab voices indeed looked to the West for models of political liberalization, but the pressing and widespread concerns were for dignity, self-empowerment, and a fairer distribution of national resources."[14] They go on to describe the phenomenon: "Following the dramatic events in Tunisia, journalists from around the world poured into Egypt in late January 2011 to monitor the reverberations there. As the most populous Arab country, Egypt can be a trendsetter. With the ousting of President Mubarak, just weeks after Ben Ali fled Tunisia, observers began to describe the uprisings as a wave of protest sweeping the Arab world."[15]

Syrian Tensions and Protest

By 2011, Syrian society had achieved powder keg status, due to a crumbling economy and a growing sense of disaffection with what was perceived by a plurality of the population as a fantastically corrupt, disinterested and ruthless minority government. By now, Assad had consolidated power into a regime where a minority of Alawite and family elites ruled the country. In the process he had unwittingly dismantled what had been a cross-sectarian base of power which had helped him maintain control over Syrian society. In so doing, when large segments of the disaffected population began to protest against the government, he found himself in a situation where democratic concessions did not seem possible[16]

Rampant corruption and mismanagement, coupled with a severe drought from 2007 to 2009 combined to create a volatile situation where wealth was concentrated with the minority ruling elites and economic survivability became ever more difficult for the majority of the populace.[17] "The president was warned that the people perceived the state to be 'abandoning the poor for the sake of the rich.'"[18]

With the Arab Spring rolling, and given its own internal tensions, Syria's eventual plunge into civil war began in early March of 2011. Some youths were arrested for writing anti-government graffiti on a wall in the rural town of Deraa. "When parents of the children took to the streets to protest their children's harsh treatment, they were fired upon."[19] While intended to intimidate the populace and prevent any further uprisings, the act had the opposite effect as protests erupted around the country and violence quickly escalated. As in previous cases, the regime attempted to control information about the violence in order to regain control over the situation, however, the abundance of personal communications technology, combined with a relatively literate populace again ensured the failure of communication control.[20] The violence in Syria has since spiraled out of control and continues today.

Assad Regime's Options and Drivers of War

For the Assad regime, the ongoing civil war is seen quite literally as an existential struggle. Dr. Richard Winslow, senior professor on Middle Eastern Studies at the U.S. Army War College says of Assad, "If he falls from power I'm sure he thinks he's going to be dead."[21] Cleveland and Bunton go on to explain, "The ability of the Syrian leadership to hang on to power, when others fell, is best understood in terms of its social cohesion. Loyalty to the regime was ensured by filling key positions in the state apparatus with relatives and members of the Alawite community, thus giving them a fundamental stake in preserving the regime. The leadership of the army and multiple security organizations are tightly interwoven with the ruling elite."[22] Thus, the nature of the regime, being largely composed of family members and minority Alawites, has created an ever more sectarian conflict, where the regime stakeholders also see ultimate regime victory as

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their only chance for survival. According to Dr. W. Andrew Terrill of the Strategic Studies

Institute:

> Under such circumstances, many Alawites fear Sunni vengeance for the
> years of Assad misrule and anti-Sunni discrimination, and Alawites are
> correspondingly prepared to fight to the last bullet. They also fear the
> potential emergence of a democratic government in a country where
> Sunni Arabs would outnumber Alawite voters 6 to 1. Other minorities
> which have cooperated with the regime over the years also fear majority
> vengeance. Non-Sunni Islamic groups (Shi'ites, Druze[s]) and especially
> Syria's Christians are terrified that radical Islamist fighters will take power
> after Assad and that they may suffer a fate even worse than Iraq's
> Christians following the collapse of governance after Saddam. These
> groups are desperately trying to oppose rebel groups that might harm
> them, while seeking to avoid appearing so pro-regime that they will
> inevitably suffer the same fate as Alawite loyalists if Assad goes down.[23]

Composition of the Opposition

Perhaps the most enigmatic aspect of the Syrian civil war is the dizzying array of

groups, factions and organizations that make up the forces opposing the regime. In

addition to the Syrian populace, the country continues to experience an influx of

different opposition groups from all around its borders, helping to fuel the conflict. Far

from a homogenous single minded coalition, these groups instead represent a host of

different social, religious and political agendas. Some are apparently sponsored by

outside entities with an interest in the war's outcome. These sponsors range from other

states to non-state actors such as Al-Qaeda. In addition to fighting the regime, several

of these factions have taken to fighting each other as each vies to emerge the supreme

power holder in a post-Assad Syria. It is this complexity of the opposition and their

interactions with each other which significantly impedes any approach to a thorough

understanding of the conflict, much less toward a resolution.

<u>Decline of Moderate Factions</u>

The Syrian National Coalition (SNC), and its armed structure, the Syrian Military Council (SMC) have been considered the most moderate group and have received the most Western backing and attempts at legitimization. They have also been closely aligned with the Free Syrian Army (FSA), a faction composed of Syrian military members who turned against the regime in 2011 after refusing to carry out attacks on protesters.[24] The SNC has continued to claim to represent Syria's opposition politically.[25] However, many of the factions on the ground with effective fighting power have refused to recognize them in this role and in the last several months the SNC's power seems to have waned considerably. Exacerbating matters, many of the SNC's "most powerful explicitly Syrian Salafist groups,"[26] have formed a new faction named the Islamic Front (IF), consisting of at least 50,000 fighters and encompassing "seven of Syria's most strategically important Islamist insurgent factions,"[27] three of whom had comprised some of the SMC's most powerful fighting forces.[28] To date, the IF has acquired one of the most impressive arsenals of any opposition faction in Syria and has publicly declared itself in opposition to the SMC.[29]

In response to the IF, fourteen insurgent groups, largely from the northern Idlib governorate which is a key IF stronghold, formed the "Jabhat Thowar Suriyya, or the Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF) out of apparent fear that the IF would dominate their home region. Since their formation, the SRF and IF forces have clashed repeatedly."[30]

<u>Rise of Radical Factions</u>

Two U.S. designated terrorist organizations active in Syria are Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN) and the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). Both factions are considered to be affiliated with Al-Qaeda, although JAN attempts to portray itself as a purely Syrian

organization with no interests outside the nation's borders as opposed to the internationally aligned ISIS. In addition, both factions have grown in size and influence. They have benefited from SMC and independent insurgents defecting to join their ranks as well as cooperative relations with powerful factions like the IF. These defections, in many cases, have apparently been for the simple and purely pragmatic reason that the defectors wanted to join what they believed to be the winning side.[31] Fueling this trend, ISIS, with their robust and well managed media outlet apparatus, "has managed to portray Syria as the focal battleground for any active or 'wannabe' transnational jihadist. As a result, the number of foreign fighters entering the Syrian theater continues to increase at an exponential rate, potentially having tripled in some areas of northern Syria since the August 21 [2013] chemical weapons attack outside Damascus."[32]

This tumultuous environment of shifting loyalties, opposing ideologies and political agendas which characterize the Syrian opposition has led to widespread inter-factional instability, particularly in the north. Currently, the majority of the military power and strategic potential appears to lie with the ISIS, JAN and IF factions, all of which can be characterized as ideologically extreme and distinctly anti-Western. The Western backed SMC and FSA along with the SRF and a host of other localized independent factions currently appear to be at a continuing disadvantage in the struggle for power within the opposition forces, although the FSA has recently made some resurgent moves.[33] Given the intense and often violent frictions between the various factions, there currently appears to be little chance they will be willing and/or able to unite in any effective way against their common enemy, Assad. Whether any of them alone can overcome the Assad regime is another question entirely, and by no means a certainty.

Three things do appear to be certain about the conflict. First, there does not currently appear to be any realistic chance of bringing all of the disparate factions together for any kind of meaningful negotiations, either with themselves or the regime. Second, regardless of any Western-backed faction's willingness to negotiate an end to the fighting, there will still remain a large number of others, with significant fighting capability, for whom the fighting will end only after the Assad regime is destroyed, and perhaps not even then. Lastly, given the overall intransigence of the opposition on the one side, and the regime's perception of an existential struggle on the other, fighting will likely continue – barring any outside influence to the contrary – until one or the other is utterly destroyed or at least driven outside the nation's borders.[34]

Effects of the Civil War

Syria's civil war has assumed an importance far beyond that of other such currently ongoing conflicts because of its continually growing potential to spread beyond the country's borders and ignite a much larger regional war, whose disastrous consequences can scarcely be imagined. The deluge of refugees, the transformation of what was originally a sociopolitical opposition to the regime into a largely sectarian struggle, the use of Syria as a ready arena by larger powers to fight a proxy war and by violent extremist organizations to pursue their agendas, all combine to create a tremendously destabilizing effect on the region which only continues to grow.

Refugees

As of February, 2014, it was estimated that 2.5 million refugees have fled Syria to other surrounding countries and even as far as Europe and these numbers have continued to grow.[35] Lebanon alone, a country of only four million, has to date, over

800,000 Syrian refugees with which to contend and the number continues to grow. Such an influx places a tremendous strain on the country's infrastructure and Lebanon is unwilling to allow the refugees to build permanent structures out of fear they will stay beyond the conflict's conclusion.[36] In addition to the humanitarian tragedy, this situation creates a fertile ground for more sectarian and desperation-driven violence which seriously threatens Lebanon's stability.[37] Much the same can be said for countries such as Turkey, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt, where, besides Lebanon, most Syrian refugees have fled.[38]

Sectarian and Proxy War

In an October, 2013 interview, General Dempsey said of the Syrian conflict, "At the beginning, the war had religious undertones, but the more appropriate term should now be religious overtones. A conflict that started as a rebellion has been hijacked by extremists on both sides - al-Qaida affiliates on one side and Lebanese Hezbollah on the other,"[39] General Dempsey's statements sum up the fact that what began as a popular uprising against an oppressive regime has in fact become both a sectarian and a proxy war. The conflict has become a magnet for militant Islamists from as far away as Europe.[40] Iran, Iraq, the Arab Gulf states and Turkey all appear to be providing at least some support to organizations fighting in Syria, largely upon sectarian lines. Additionally, Kurdish minorities in the north have fought Assad's forces and are advocating for an autonomous region.[41]

Adding to the complexity, "both Russia and China have significant economic and military relations with Syria. As permanent members of the UN Security Council, the duo has vetoed three resolutions designed to isolate the Assad regime. Analysts say the diplomatic opposition stems from concerns of a Western-backed military intervention

similar to those in Libya and the Ivory Coast. Russia says it remains committed to the Geneva process, but continues to provide the regime military support."[42]

Lastly, Iran, which shares a Shi'a connection with Assad's Alawite ruling elite, continues to be a firm supporter of the regime, providing arms and other supplies as well as supporting fighters from Hezbollah operating inside the country. They have a tremendous stake in supporting the regime because an Assad controlled Syria gives Iran a strategically located ally and significantly helps them strengthen their overall regional influence.[43]

This intertwined complex of outside tendrils supporting the vast array of fighting factions, where everyone seems to have an interest in the outcome, fuels the sectarian violence. As a consequence the fighting continues to produce refugees, increases the threat of weapons proliferation and, in general, greatly heightens the risk of the war growing far beyond Syria's borders.[44]

U.S. Credibility and Chemical Weapons

In addition to the regional and world-wide ramifications presented by the above stated perils, the Syrian civil war also represents a serious challenge to U.S. credibility in the region and the world if the United States is perceived to be unable or unwilling to act decisively to at least help resolve the conflict in a manner that avoids disaster. Moreover, the Assad regime's recent use of chemical weapons directly challenged U.S. credibility as this act crossed a "red line" decreed by the president.[45] Friends and allies have urged the United States to take a more active role, and Saudi Arabia, for one, has openly criticized the administration for "making mistakes" regarding Syria.[46] All of this has placed significant pressure on the United States to take some kind of decisive action to intervene in the conflict.

U.S. Interests and Policies

In a May, 2011 speech, President Obama outlined the nation's core interests in the Middle East. These were: 1) Countering terrorism and stopping the spread of nuclear weapons, 2) Securing the free flow of commerce and safe-guarding the security of the region, 3) Standing up for Israel's security and 4) Pursuing Arab-Israeli peace.[47] Thus far, the administration's policies toward achieving these interests with regard to the Syrian conflict have largely been economic, informational and diplomatic, centered on four primary points. First, sanctions against the Syrian regime continue in an effort to compel Assad to step down. Second, President Obama has overtly stated that Assad must step down.[48] Third, the administration has engaged in highly publicized diplomatic activities with Russia to remove Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles. This served as an alternative to an intended military response to the Assad regime's use of those weapons in August, 2013.[49] Fourth, the Secretary of State has attempted to broker negotiations with the competing factions in an effort to stop the fighting. These negotiations, however, do not currently hold much promise as Assad has made clear he does not intend to step down and there are many opposition factions who remain unrepresented, yet retain significant means and will to continue fighting.[50] Militarily, the United States has provided some arms support to certain opposition factions (primarily the SNC and FSA) and the president has left open the option for military operations against the Assad regime in the future, especially if chemical weapon removal efforts fail.[51]

Unexplained and Unspoken Interests

Perhaps less directly spoken by the administration, but certainly implied, is the interest of preserving U.S. credibility in the region, as well as the world. It permeates every effort the United States makes with regard to the Syrian war. Thus any act U.S.

leaders might take toward Syria which does not show obvious positive results will likely

be perceived by the world as a blow to U.S. credibility. It therefore stands to reason that

before adopting measures to affect the Syrian situation (especially military measures),

national leaders should clearly elucidate the connection between the action being

considered, how it serves a necessary interest and, finally, how the action's probability

of success has been adequately assessed and deemed acceptable for implementation.

The ongoing U.S. activities toward Syria outlined above would certainly seem to imply

some key, if not vital, interest is specifically threatened by the Syrian conflict and

particularly by Assad's continued rule. Yet, thus far, neither the president nor his

administration have clearly explained a U.S. interest directly related to Syria's civil war

which resonates with the American people to the point they would support military

action to protect it. With this in mind, in spite of U.S. attempts to quell the violence

through non-military ways there remains a very real threat of the war spreading to

engulf the greater Middle East which would likely defy all efforts at containment short of

military intervention. Such an eventuality could potentially diminish U.S. security and/or

credibility if the nation took no steps to prevent or stop it. Yet the absence of a clearly

defined and vital interest tied to such an effort render impossible a reasoned evaluation

of which outcome would be worse, potential loss of security and/or credibility from

inaction, or the potentially exorbitant cost of determined intervention. [52]

Compounding this situation, the need to avoid public condemnation of, or serious

opposition to, any plans adopted to intervene in the Syrian war (particularly military

plans) represents another largely unspoken, yet critical, consideration for U.S. leaders.

The U.S. public has thus far demonstrated a distinct lack of will to become seriously

enmeshed in the conflict. This is particularly true regarding direct military intervention.[53]

David S. Sorenson, a Professor of International Studies at the U.S. Air War College

points out, "Washington faces a challenging environment in the Middle East; there is

clearly political and military exhaustion after years of inconclusive engagement, and

U.S. defense expenditures will decline sharply over the next decade. Thus, any military

options will be constrained."[54] This aspect of current public opinion further highlights the

need for, and significant difficulty of identifying a clearly defined vital interest at stake.

Consequently, the U.S. leadership finds itself walking a fine line between effective

engagements to protect what have up to now been poorly defined American interests,

and potentially creating pronounced civil opposition at home to U.S. foreign policy,

largely as a result of this ambiguity.

Other Competing Interests

Further complicating the situation for U.S. leaders in dealing with the Syrian war

are the Obama administration's intent to dramatically reduce military budgets, the

subsequent military drawdown, the policy of rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific and the

potential strain on military assets if the need for military action in the Syrian conflict

becomes a reality. General Dempsey as well as many other military leaders has warned

about looming budget cuts to the military and the negative impact they could have. They

argue that the cuts, if they continue, could ultimately result in a less capable military with

a lower state of readiness.[55] In addition, the president's policy of rebalancing the

nation's focus to the Asia-Pacific region has shifted the priority for allocating future

available resources in an effort to strengthen U.S. influence there.[56] This combination of

factors, combined with public reluctance for involvement, threatens to place a potentially

unsustainable strain on U.S. military forces, budgetary resources and, ultimately, domestic and political order if a decision is made to intervene militarily in Syria.

Potential Triggers for U.S. Military Intervention

Notwithstanding the heretofore presented difficulties and risks, U.S. military intervention remains as a serious possibility. Thus far, the multi-polar nature of the combatants continues to defy any kind of diplomatic solution. That said, if the conflict remains contained within Syria and the status quo, such as it is, can be maintained, the likelihood of overt military involvement appears to be low, even with the abysmally high death toll. On February 11, 2014, the president made a statement to this effect saying, "We still have a horrendous situation on the ground in Syria," but adding "right now we don't think that there's a military solution, per se, to the problem."[57]

However, several very possible developments present themselves as potential triggers which could compel a decision for a military option. Five potential developments appear to stand foremost among these: 1) a large and undeniable spreading of the conflict beyond Syria's borders, 2) attacks on chemical weapons collection personnel, 3) overall failure of the chemical weapons collection efforts, 4) further use of chemical weapons in the conflict, and 5) some other large scale single event atrocity. Any one of these developments could directly and acutely threaten both spoken and/or unspoken U.S. interests and compel the conclusion that some form of direct, immediate and decisive action must be taken. The factors of immediacy and decisiveness within this conclusion, considered against the slow and largely ineffectual nature of diplomatic efforts up to this point, would likely channel decision makers toward some form of military option as the only recourse.[58]

Analysis of Military Options

To date, the national leadership has presented no clear policy objectives for any kind of military intervention in Syria. If one or more of the five trigger developments were to occur and a renewed consideration of military intervention were to ensue, presumably, the objectives for these operations could generally be as follows:

1) Stop the fighting in Syria

2) Prevent further use of WMD

3) Force Assad out

4) Prevent a spread of the conflict

5) Preserve U.S. credibility

The situation thus presented further assumes a scope of crisis which requires the direct use of relatively large-scale overt military operations as opposed to covert use of smaller Special Operations Forces. Based on these assumptions, the following generalized military options will be analyzed:

1) Stand-off operations, both short term and sustained.

2) Overt use of ground forces, to include use of minimal conventional ground forces and full-scale intervention.

The analysis uses the strategic assessment elements of Feasibility, Suitability, Acceptability, and Risk as defined below:

- Feasibility – Can the action be accomplished by the means available?

- Suitability – Will its attainment accomplish the desired effect?

- Acceptability – Are the consequences of the cost justified by the importance of the effect desired?

- Risk – Gap between what is to be achieved and the concepts and resources available to achieve the objective.

<u>Feasibility</u>

Stand-off Operations

The nation possesses a wide range of capabilities to perform a myriad of stand-off operations, from the use of cruise missiles to that of strikes with manned aircraft or drones. The desired effect will determine the type, length and intensity of operations. As indicated previously, the duration needed could affect the feasibility of this option as the requirement for resources and military assets compete with a combination of the U.S. leadership's goal of rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific and diminishing military budgets. Thus, limited stand-off operations such as one-time strikes would likely be far more feasible than any form of sustained stand-off campaign. However, the strain of even sustained stand-off operations would likely be far more manageable than that of any kind of ground involvement.

Use of Ground Forces

As for application of ground forces, the feasibility of limited conventional force involvement will be greatly affected by the size and scope of operations intended. Moreover, many military experts warn that the need for larger ground force involvement will likely grow after it is initiated.[59] Any but the most minor of operations (e.g. escorting WMD inspectors or providing advisors in neighboring countries) would likely require forces which would again place a significant strain on available resources, money and priorities.[60] Therefore the scope of such operations may have to be extremely limited to preserve their feasibility which could greatly diminish their overall effect.

A decision to fully engage ground forces in the style of Afghanistan or Iraq would likely not be feasible without a significant re-adjustment of budget priorities and re-aligning existing forces from other theaters of operation to Syria. Such a commitment could have a serious impact on the policy of rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific region as well as operations still ongoing in Afghanistan.

Suitability

Stand-off Operations

The limited scope of results to be expected from limited stand-off operations render the suitability of this option questionable. It is doubtful this would, in and of itself, stop or even contain the fighting. Nor is it likely to compel Assad to step down or cease the further use of chemical weapons. Failure in these objectives would then lead to a loss of U.S. credibility.

A sustained stand-off campaign may be able to weaken the Assad regime to the point where he either steps down or is defeated, however this is not assured. The removal of Assad would not guarantee an end to the fighting and could actually cause it to intensify as sectarian factions resort to fighting each other. Additionally, there is at least as high a probability as not that this could lead to a widening of the conflict with no ground forces in place to stop it once it began.

Use of Ground Forces

The use of a minimally sized ground force for intervention is very unlikely to be suitable. David Sorenson points out "an American effort to hasten the termination of the tragedy would require a huge force, a long commitment (with few, if any, allies), and no quick exit." [61] Thus, a very large-scale ground force, essentially occupying Syria, would have the best chance of actually achieving suitability in the scenario laid out, although

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only with a tremendous commitment and at exorbitant cost to the nation. Furthermore, it may still not be able to prevent, and could even promote, a widening of the conflict.

Acceptability

Achieving acceptability for any kind of Syrian military involvement represents a supreme challenge. Supporting any side in the multi-polar conflict seems likely to provide at least some aid to groups recognized as terrorists and national enemies. There is also the very legitimate fear that the United States could be drawn into a military quagmire where nothing positive is accomplished and the consequences for the region and the country are dire. Considering the chaotic nature of the conflict, declining military budgets and the nation's overall economic concerns, this fear appears especially valid. The current state of public wariness – stemming from the long operations in Afghanistan and Iraq with what appear to be questionable results at best – add additional impetus to concerns about what could be seen as another "military adventure" in Syria with no clearly defined objectives, interests or exit strategy.[62]

To achieve acceptability for any Syrian military option the national leadership must first convince the public of the vital importance of the interests at stake. In particular, they must demonstrate how a violation of these interests would directly, and negatively, affect the average U.S. citizen. They must also convince the public that the level of intended effort is necessary and justified by the importance of those interests. They must then assure the public – and be sure themselves – that the originally prescribed level of effort will be sufficient for a tangible success that will be readily apparent to the average U.S. citizen. Lastly, they must convince the public that all other non-military options have truly been exhausted and that, under the present circumstances, only military intervention can hope to succeed.

Stand-off Operations

Given these requisites for acceptability, stand-off operations would presumably have the most reasonable chance for achieving it. Such operations enable the establishment of more limited objectives and restrained milestones for success, thus retaining a far greater degree of flexibility regarding disengagement. However, even for stand-off operations the costs of sustained efforts can rise quickly. For example, General Dempsey informed the Senate Armed Services Committee that "no-fly zone costs could average $1 billion per month because of high force requirements and operating costs."[63] Therefore, stand-off operations of a significantly limited scope and duration (i.e. single event strikes and/or limited drone usage inside Syrian airspace) could be considered acceptable, providing such operations can be assured of achieving a tangible success toward protecting a publicly acknowledged vital U.S. interest. Protracted, larger scale stand-off operations, incorporating manned air operations inside Syrian airspace, should be currently considered as unacceptable.

Use of Ground Forces

Employment of ground forces in conflict or war represents the most significant commitment of national power and also the most costly, both in money and ultimately in American lives. Use of ground forces also commits the nation to a largely unpredictable – and potentially lengthy – timeline of sustained effort, the level of which is also difficult to predict. General Dempsey pointed this out directly, warning of spiraling costs and admitting that "deeper involvement is hard to avoid."[64] Lastly, ground force employment tends to restrict options for disengagement short of complete success or failure. Moreover, this success is often more difficult to define than it is for stand-off operations because the public tend to be far less compromising in these definitions due to the level

of commitment represented by ground force employment. This insistence on clarity can generally be tied to the risk of relatively higher casualties ground force employment inherently imposes. Richard A. Lacquement Jr., in his article "The Casualty-Aversion Myth," argues that while the widely held belief in universal public aversion to casualties for virtually any military operation is in fact a persistent myth, public acceptance of the risk of casualties is tied strongly to the importance of the interests involved and the clarity of the objectives to be achieved as explained by the national leadership. He states, "The simplest explanation consistent with the data is that support for U.S. military operations and the willingness to tolerate casualties are based upon a sensible weighing of benefits and costs that is influenced heavily by consensus (or its absence) among political leaders."[65] Thus, it is extremely difficult to achieve acceptability for virtually any form of ground force commitment with ambiguous objectives and/or unclear definitions for their success. It is even more difficult when those objectives apparently strive toward interests not yet publicly endorsed as worthy of such effort in the first place. Such is currently the case with regard to the commitment of virtually any ground forces in or even near Syria. Therefore, overt use of any size ground force for any scope of military intervention inside or near Syria should be considered currently unacceptable. Use of ground forces in support of stand-off operations, based outside of Syria (e.g. providing air base protection) could be considered acceptable as long as their use is strictly limited to and directly associated with the performance of an acceptable stand-off operation.

Increasing Acceptability

To achieve acceptability for more protracted stand-off operations, or for any overt ground operations in or near Syria, national leaders must elevate the intensity of the

threatened national interests to a much higher level in the minds of the public than they are currently. Additionally, they must clearly communicate logical military objectives which will obviously serve these interests. Lastly, they must clearly define the parameters for success and the desired end state to the operation. The intense debate generated in August, 2013 over the consideration of what the Secretary of State referred to as a "ludicrously small" strike to punish Assad's use of chemical weapons, suggests that acceptability for any kind of protracted operation is currently far from achieved.[66]

Risks

Risk of Escalation

Except perhaps in the case of a full-scale ground force intervention, where maximum effort is implied, the possibility of escalation is a very significant risk. Escalation could easily push the scope of operations beyond the points of feasibility and/or acceptability. Assuming the originally prescribed scope of operations approached those limits in the first place, this risk becomes even more significant. This could easily result in dire social and political consequences for the American people. National leaders must therefore be sure to carefully balance the level of effort currently allowed by considerations of feasibility and acceptability against that required to be certain of success. Commitment of ground forces to intervention tend to present the greatest risk for escalation, however, stand-off operations could also escalate if the achievement of objectives proves more elusive than originally estimated.

Additional Risks

Failure to achieve appreciable positive results from any of the military options will most likely diminish U.S. credibility and could lead to an ever deepening U.S. military

involvement. This could also lead to a widening of the conflict and intensified sectarian violence across the region. Additionally, other outside powers, such as Iran and Russia could be drawn into the conflict more directly or could gain significant influence in the region and globally at U.S. expense. This could result in attacks on Israel, thus bringing them into the conflict and further complicating the situation. Lastly, if U.S. military involvement causes the Assad regime to fall, the resulting chaos could further destabilize the region and could also lead to chemical weapons falling into the hands of terrorist groups.

Conclusion

There is a very real possibility of the Syrian conflict spreading beyond the country's borders to engulf the entire region in a catastrophic war. Due to the chaotic and externally influenced nature of the situation, a diplomatic solution to the crisis in the near term appears to be highly unlikely. Moreover, the situation appears to indicate that a decision for military intervention would likely require a sustained effort of some kind to have a serious chance of achieving suitable results toward ending the fighting, unseating Assad, preventing the spread or further use of chemical weapons and, in the effort, preserving overall U.S. credibility. Yet, neither U.S. interests of an intensity to justify such intervention, nor an overall plan for employment of U.S. military force to achieve credible ends that serve those interests have been effectively communicated to the American public. In the current U.S. environment of declining defense spending, economic viability concerns, and overall popular strategic skepticism, a significant strategic communication effort to build and maintain public support and a potential fundamental re-assessment of global priorities could well be necessary to achieve and/or sustain both feasibility and acceptability for the intensity and duration of any

suitable military option chosen, even for protracted stand-off operations. Indeed, to achieve acceptability for even the least intense, suitable option, national leaders will first have to convince the American public the effort required is justified by the importance of the interests at stake, which has yet to be done. In addition, any suitable option will also contain significant chances for escalation and numerous other risks. Therefore, national leaders should be prepared to realign the resources and funding necessary to underwrite those risks and ensure the viability of the operation. This could have serious implications for policies such as the rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific. Above all, one thing appears to be crystal clear. No half measures will work in Syria. This includes engaging in rhetoric the nation is not willing to back with the necessary force.[67] In fact, such an approach will likely only intensify the conflict and worsen the dilemma for the United States.

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