

BRITAIN'S LAND OFFENSIVE



SYRIA  
THE ALLIES MARCH IN

Should the  
United States  
intervene in  
the Syrian civil  
war?

# STRATEGIKA

CONFLICTS OF THE PAST AS LESSONS FOR THE PRESENT

## **Military History in Contemporary Conflict**

As the very name of Hoover Institution attests, military history lies at the very core of our dedication to the study of “War, Revolution, and Peace.” Indeed, the precise mission statement of the Hoover Institution includes the following promise: “The overall mission of this Institution is, from its records, to recall the voice of experience against the making of war, and by the study of these records and their publication, to recall man’s endeavors to make and preserve peace, and to sustain for America the safeguards of the American way of life.” From its origins as a library and archive, the Hoover Institution has evolved into one of the foremost research centers in the world for policy formation and pragmatic analysis. It is with this tradition in mind, that the “Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict” has set its agenda—reaffirming the Hoover Institution’s dedication to historical research in light of contemporary challenges, and in particular, reinvigorating the national study of military history as an asset to foster and enhance our national security. By bringing together a diverse group of distinguished military historians, security analysts, and military veterans and practitioners, the working group seeks to examine the conflicts of the past as critical lessons for the present.

## **Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict**

The Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict examines how knowledge of past military operations can influence contemporary public policy decisions concerning current conflicts. The careful study of military history offers a way of analyzing modern war and peace that is often underappreciated in this age of technological determinism. Yet the result leads to a more in-depth and dispassionate understanding of contemporary wars, one that explains how particular military successes and failures of the past can be often germane, sometimes misunderstood, or occasionally irrelevant in the context of the present.

## ***Strategika***

*Strategika* is a journal that analyzes ongoing issues of national security in light of conflicts of the past—the efforts of the Military History Working Group of historians, analysts, and military personnel focusing on military history and contemporary conflict. Our board of scholars shares no ideological consensus other than a general acknowledgment that human nature is largely unchanging. Consequently, the study of past wars can offer us tragic guidance about present conflicts—a preferable approach to the more popular therapeutic assumption that contemporary efforts to ensure the perfectibility of mankind eventually will lead to eternal peace. New technologies, methodologies, and protocols come and go; the larger tactical and strategic assumptions that guide them remain mostly the same—a fact discernable only through the study of history.

## **Editorial Board**

Victor Davis Hanson, Chair  
Bruce Thornton  
David Berkey

## **Contributing Members**

Peter Berkowitz, Max Boot, Josiah Bunting III, Angelo M. Codevilla, Thomas Donnelly, Colonel Joseph Felter, Josef Joffe, Frederick W. Kagan, Kimberly Kagan, Edward N. Luttwak, Peter Mansoor, Walter Russell Mead, Mark Moyar, Williamson Murray, Ralph Peters, Andrew Roberts, Admiral Gary Roughead, Kori Schake, Kiron K. Skinner, Barry Strauss, Gil-li Vardi, Bing West, Amy Zegart

# STRATEGIKA

CONFLICTS OF THE PAST AS LESSONS FOR THE PRESENT

April 2013 | Issue 1



THE HOOVER INSTITUTION  
Stanford University

Copyright © 2013 by the Board of Trustees of Leland Stanford Junior University

# CONTENTS

STRATEGIKA · APRIL 2013 · ISSUE 1

---

## BACKGROUND ESSAY

5



### **U.S. Interests in Syria, Past and Present**

By Mark Moyar

## FEATURED COMMENTARY

11



### **The Smart and Right Thing in Syria**

By Kimberly Kagan

14



### **A Recipe for American Disaster**

By Angelo M. Codevilla

## RELATED COMMENTARY

17

### **Presidential Politics and Syria**

By Bing West

20

### **The Wrong Reasons for Bombing Syria**

By Bruce Thornton

24

### **Syria and American Strategy**

By Thomas Donnelly

27

### **An Argument for Containment**

By Kiron K. Skinner

29

### **The Syrian Dilemma**

By Victor Davis Hanson

## EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS

31

### **Suggestions for Further Reading**

32

### **Discussion Questions**

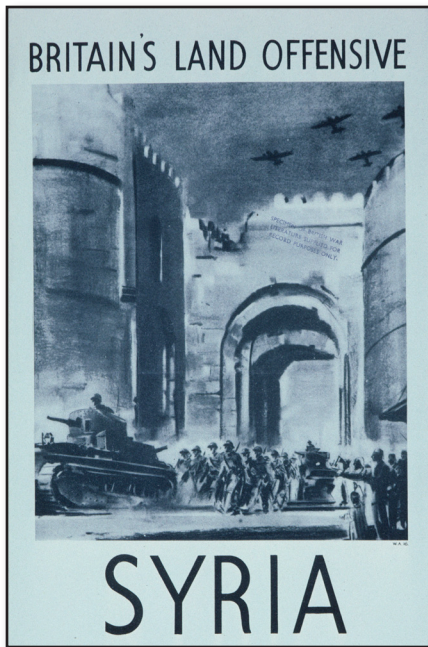
# U.S. Interests in Syria, Past and Present

*By Mark Moyar*

Syria's ongoing civil war has elicited a flood of policy recommendations from American observers, most of them based entirely on perceptions of immediate U.S. interests. Recent developments in Syria and the Middle East have focused American attention on a few considerations of obvious and urgent import, obscuring other considerations that have historically mattered to the United States. Although some geopolitical features of Syria that were critical in decades past are no longer so, others merit the attention of anyone concerned with U.S. policy towards Syria today.

For most of its history as an independent nation, Syria has been a national security concern of the United States primarily because of its relevance to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Syria's government has consistently evidenced hostility towards Israel, abetting its foes and refusing to make peace with the Israeli government as many of its Arab neighbors have. Yet Syria has at times also played a stabilizing role in the Middle East, which is one of several reasons why the current Syrian government's collapse would not necessarily help either Israel or the United States.

When Syria gained its independence in 1946, the United States sought friendly relations with its fledgling government, but President Truman's decision soon thereafter to support the state of Israel turned Syria against the United States. Syria and its Arab neighbors sought assistance from America's arch-enemy, the Soviet Union, in developing effective military forces for use against Israel. Syria collaborated extensively with Egypt during the early Cold War, when Egypt was the leader of the anti-Israeli coalition of Arab nations, going so far as to unite with Egypt in the short-lived United Arab Republic.



Hoover Archives Poster Collection: UK 3297

Despite the acquisition of advanced Soviet military technology, the Arab nations suffered a humiliating defeat to Israel in the Six Day War of 1967, after which Syria lost the Golan Heights. The Syrian military intervened in Jordan in 1970 in support of the Palestinian Liberation Organization against the royalist government, but had to beat a retreat in the face of threats from Israel and the United States. It fared somewhat better during the Yom Kippur War of 1973, in which the Israelis sustained initial defeats at the hands of Egyptian and Syrian forces before reversing the tide with American assistance.

When Syria's erstwhile Arab allies began making peace with Israel in the late 1970s, Syria warmed to the other leading source of hostility to Israel, Iran. During the 1980s, Syria joined Iran in cultivating Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Palestinian territories. Since that time, the transit of Iranian weapons and other support through Syria has been vital to the capacities of Hezbollah and Hamas for harming Israel.

Every U.S. President from Truman to Clinton sought to win Syria's friendship in order to alleviate its hostility to Israel and facilitate a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Syrians have often expressed interest in resolving the conflict, and they have participated in prolonged negotiations. Yet they have always backed away when a deal has neared fruition, even when the Israelis have offered to meet Syria's most important demand of withdrawing from the Golan Heights.

In the decades preceding the Syrian civil war, U.S. policymakers emphasized that Syrian involvement in Lebanon's internal affairs was a critical lever in the stability of the Middle East. In 1976, the U.S. government encouraged Syria to send combat forces into Lebanon to prevent the victory of Islamic radicals in the Lebanese civil war. Within a few years, though, Syrian forces and their Lebanese allies came into conflict with Israeli forces and their Lebanese allies, compelling the United States to intervene in Lebanon diplomatically and, for a short time, militarily. The U.S. forces tried to play the role of impartial peacekeeper, but eventually came to be seen as favoring Lebanon's Christians, which led to the bombing of the Beirut barracks by terrorists linked to Iran and Syria. As a consequence, the Reagan administration decided to withdraw U.S. forces and return to reliance on foreign militaries to stabilize Lebanon. The U.S. position on Syria's military presence in Lebanon subsequently oscillated between support and opposition, until Syria withdrew its forces in 2005.

The departure of Syrian troops was, at the time, widely interpreted as a severe degradation of Syrian influence in Lebanon. Subsequent events, however, showed that Syria retained the ability to shape Lebanese events. In 2006, Syrian and Iranian support enabled Hezbollah to wage a surprisingly effective war against Israeli forces in southern Lebanon. To this day, politicians with Syrian ancestry or a history of close cooperation with Syria occupy numerous senior leadership positions in the Lebanese government.

Syria's value as a partner of the United States escalated in the 1980s owing to rising U.S. fears of international terrorists of Sunni Arab origin. The Syrian government, dominated by secular Arabs whose Alawite sect had only one-seventh as many adherents among Syria's general population as Sunni Islam, shared America's fears of Sunni extremists. Consequently, it collaborated with the United States in countering al Qaeda and other Sunni insurgents during the 1980s and 1990s. This partnership netted numerous extremists who had posed a threat to Israel or the United States.

The still greater U.S. interest in Sunni extremists after 9/11 intensified collaboration between the American and Syrian governments for a short time, but the partnership disintegrated after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. The overthrow of the Afghan and Iraqi governments together with harsh rhetoric from Washington spawned Syrian fears that Damascus would be the next stop on America's regime-change tour. To convince the United States that such an invasion would be costly and to tie U.S. forces down in Iraq, Syria invited Sunni terrorists from around the world to enter Iraq via Syrian territory. Syria's assistance to Iraq-bound extremists led the Bush administration to pursue a policy of isolating and undermining Syria, which involved economic sanctions and aid to Syrian democracy activists whom it envisioned as vanguards of political transformation.

The chaos and bloodletting that came with the democratization of Iraq eroded American confidence that democratization could yield more enlightened and less belligerent governments in Arab countries. When Barack Obama took office, he downgraded democracy promotion as a U.S. foreign policy objective, and sought to "engage" Syria and other authoritarian states. But the Obama administration's efforts to obtain Syrian cooperation in promoting Middle East peace during 2009 and 2010 bore little fruit.

The democratic leanings of some of the Arab Spring protesters in late 2010 and early 2011 led the Obama administration to reverse its position on democratization in the Arab world. After some initial hesitation, it threw America's weight behind the democratic oppositionists in Tunisia and Egypt and backed the opposition in Libya with force. The bloodshed and messy aftermath of the Libyan conflict, however, rekindled some of the earlier doubts about the wisdom of U.S. support for democratization. Those doubts led the Obama administration to shy away from supporting Syria's rebels during 2011.



The growing presence of foreign Sunni extremists on Syrian territory in early 2012 caused yet another shift in the U.S. position on supporting Syrian rebels. The Obama administration slowly increased aid to what it considered the more moderate groups, in the hopes of enabling them to oust the Assad government before extremist groups did. If the extremist rebels gained control over Syria, administration officials worried, they would inherit chemical weapons and advanced conventional weapons that could be used against Israeli or U.S. targets. A victory by the moderate rebels, on the other hand, would improve the prospects for the Middle East peace process and weaken Iran's ability to support Hezbollah and Hamas.

Determining which Syrian rebels to support has, however, proven a very difficult and perilous undertaking. Having paid little attention to the rebel factions until a year ago, the U.S. intelligence community does not have a firm grasp on which groups are moderates and which are extremists. Many of these groups are habitually secretive and deceptive when it comes to their ultimate objectives. The moderate leaders of today, moreover, could be ousted by extremists within the organization tomorrow.

A defeat of the Assad government by Syrian rebels, even the most moderate of them, is far from certain to promote American interests. Iran would likely continue to support militias inside Syria, first and foremost to maintain a coastal enclave that would allow Iran continued movement of materiel and people from Iran to Lebanon. Alawites, Christians, and Kurds, who comprise roughly thirty percent of Syria's population and have largely supported the Assad regime, might well migrate to areas under Iranian dominance out of fear of the Sunni Arab majority. If a new Syrian government shows the same disregard for international human rights standards as the Assad government has shown, which seems very possible, the countries that brought that government to power will incur the blame.

The current U.S. focus on bringing moderates to power in Syria has also diverted attention from features of Syria that have historically helped advance U.S. national security objectives. While Syria's assistance to Hezbollah has caused considerable trouble in Lebanon, the Syrian government's contributions to peace and stability in Lebanon should not be forgotten. A new Syrian government is unlikely to have the knowledge or personal connections in Syria to maintain a stabilizing influence there.

Lastly, a rebel victory is likely to reduce or eliminate the opposition to Sunni extremism that has been a historic characteristic of the Syrian government. Even if the new government were exceedingly moderate, its predominantly Sunni composition surely would prevent it from hunting down Sunni terrorists with the same fervor as its Alawite predecessors. Iraq provides a sobering reminder of the perils of empowering majority Arab groups that were historically governed by autocrats from minority Arab groups. By imposing democracy, the United States enabled Iraq's Shiite majority to gain power, only to find that even the so-called moderates among them demonstrated little appetite for combating terrorists from their own branch of Islam. Some of Iraq's Shiite terrorists are now practicing their craft in other countries—including Syria.



MARK MOYAR is a Senior Fellow at the Joint Special Operations University. His books include *A Question of Command: Counterinsurgency from the Civil War to Iraq* (Yale University Press, 2009); *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954–1965* (Cambridge University Press, 2006); and *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: Counterinsurgency and Counterterrorism in Vietnam* (Naval Institute Press, 1997; University of Nebraska Press, 2007). He is currently writing a book on national security strategy during the Obama administration as well as a book on foreign human capital development. He holds a BA, summa cum laude, from Harvard and a PhD from Cambridge.

# The Smart and Right Thing in Syria

*By Kimberly Kagan*

The United States should fully support the secular opposition to Bashar al-Assad through the provision of funds, weapons, equipment, and training. Syria has long been a major state-sponsor and supporter of terrorist groups including Lebanese Hezbollah, Hamas, and al Qaeda in Iraq. Assad's regime is Iran's principal ally in the Levant and, as Iranian leaders often note, effectively gives Iran a border with Israel. Assad has amassed with Iranian help a large stockpile of chemical weapons intended to deter and also to threaten Israel. It is possible that he has already started to use those weapons against his own people. The security of the United States and its allies would be significantly enhanced if Assad fell and Iranian influence over Syria were removed—unless, of course, his regime is replaced by one affiliated with al Qaeda.

American policy-makers have withheld arms and materiel support from the armed opposition hitherto for fear of inadvertently arming al Qaeda in Iraq's front-group in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra. Other states have not been so fastidious, however. Qatar and Saudi Arabia have until recently sent significant resources to the armed opposition preferentially to Jabhat al-Nusra and other Salafist groups. Consequently Jabhat al-Nusra has become the best-armed force among the opposition groups. It has been at the tip of the spear in operations in Eastern Syria, Aleppo, and Damascus. Its combat proficiency and relatively greater access to materiel and funding have led other opposition groups to tolerate its participation in military operations across the country. This cooperation has been transactional and not always entirely voluntary, since the bulk of the armed opposition rejects al Qaeda's global jihadist view and much of the Salafist ideology as well. America's failure to support the moderate opposition has thus resulted in precisely the outcome policy-makers sought to avoid: the radicalization of the opposition and the empowerment of an al Qaeda affiliate in Syria.

All is not yet lost, however. The relationships between opposition groups and Jabhat al-Nusra remain transactional. Even Salafist armed groups have fought with Jabhat al-Nusra over resources and control of territory, and have articulated their desire in Jihadist forums for a national rather than a global political structure in Syria. The Supreme Military Command of the Free Syrian Army, the leadership body of the armed opposition, supports a democratic process in Syria and sees itself as the seed of a defense ministry. That command does not include participants from Jabhat al-Nusra, although it is relatively inclusive of other fighting groups and important opposition leaders living in exile, giving it credibility and the ability to influence them. The Supreme Military Command's leadership is active. Armed groups respond to its direction. Its influence could grow significantly if it had more resources to offer the many groups looking for help to fight the increasingly vicious attempts at oppression by Assad's armed forces and the militias he has raised with Iranian help. Syria analyst Elizabeth O'Bagy writes in her recent report, *The Free Syrian Army*, "The ability to provide resources and material support to its sub-units is the determining factor in whether or not the SMC will be able to unite rebel forces under its command and establish a level of command and control." America's interests lie unequivocally with increasing the influence of the SMC at the expense of Jabhat al-Nusra, particularly if we want to see the emergence of a re-unified, representative and relatively secular Syrian state.

The Free Syrian Army and its political counterpart, the Syrian Opposition Coalition, have repeatedly asked the United States for assistance with procuring advanced weaponry suited to combating the regime. The White House has resisted so far. Secretary of State John Kerry announced in February that the United States would provide the Free Syrian Army with humanitarian aid, medical assistance, and training, a major shift in the hands-off American foreign policy. The United States is considering whether to provide body armor, night vision goggles, and other non-lethal military equipment. The American refusal to proffer lethal aid serves only to undermine the credibility of the United States with the opposition, while strengthening the hand of

Qatar and Saudi Arabia. And the need for humanitarian aid flowing through moderate umbrella groups will increase as the Syrian opposition gains control of terrain and attempts to govern it. The United States must embrace the Syrian opposition fully in order to strengthen its moderate elements, convert the networks of opposition groups into a functioning hierarchy that can govern the country, and ensure that a moderate, representative state friendly to the United States emerges in the wake of Assad.



KIMBERLY KAGAN is the founder and president of the Institute for the Study of War. A military historian who has taught at the US Military Academy at West Point, Yale University, Georgetown University, and American University, Kagan served in Kabul for fifteen months in 2010 and 2011 as a “directed telescope” to General David H. Petraeus and subsequently General John Allen, working on special projects for these commanders of the International Security Assistance Force. Admiral Mike Mullen, as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recognized Kagan for her deployment as a volunteer during this time with the Distinguished Public Service Award, the highest honor the chairman can present to civilians who do not work for the Department of Defense. She is the author of *The Eye of Command* (University of Michigan Press, 2006) and *The Surge: a Military History* (Encounter Books, 2009) and editor of *The Imperial Moment* (Harvard University Press, 2010).

# A Recipe for American Disaster

*By Angelo M. Codevilla*

Should the United States intervene in the Syrian civil war? No. Intervention in Syria's civil war would not serve America's interests. Although the regime of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad is inherently inimical to the United States and Israel as well as to most of his own people, the other side in the civil war may be even more so. Today, the issues in Syria are pretty strictly about which Syrians will oppress other Syrians, and to what end. Our good intentions toward the Syrian people do not make up for our lack of knowledge of which faction, if any, would best serve their interests—never mind ours—and for our lack of capacity to ensure any particular outcome. The opposition has coalesced into three major groups, the strongest of which are controlled by the Muslim Brotherhood and the Wahabis. To the extent that either side in today's strife secures Syria for itself, American interests will suffer. At this time, humanitarian aid to refugees who make it out of the country is the best we can do for Syria. Nevertheless, Syria's civil war may give us opportunities to serve U.S. interests in the region.

The Assad regime has harmed and endangered America in countless instances ever since its establishment in 1970. The U.S. government could have moved against the Assads in response to any of these, removing a source of trouble and providing incentives for good behavior to other states in the region. We would have been acting for our own sake, in control of the outcome of our initiatives. These missed opportunities for asserting our own interests shed light on the strategies we might employ to deal with whatever might come from the Syrian civil war.

The Assad regime was the Soviet Union's main Cold War outpost in the Middle East, armed with the latest Soviet weaponry. At first acting on the Soviets' behalf, and later on behalf of Iran, the Assad regime became arguably the main host of terrorist organizations, and has waged war on Israel through proxy bands it established as "states within the state" in Lebanon. On two of

many occasions, the trouble it made for America put it in the U.S. government's line of fire. In 1982 the Assads' war on Israel through the PLO in Lebanon led to Israel's alliance with the Lebanese government to eradicate the PLO. After that, the U.S. government sought to help Lebanon re-establish control over its territory. It was then that Syrian agents along with Iranian-backed terrorists truck-bombed the U.S. Marine barracks killing 241 of them. Had the U.S. government responded properly to this act of war, the Assads would never have troubled anyone again. Instead, Republican and Democratic Administrations eased Syria's control of Lebanon.

By 2003 the Assads were exercising that control through the terrorist group Hezbollah, waging war on Israel's northern border, and acting as Iran's main proxy. When the U.S. invaded Iraq, the Assads made Syria into the headquarters of anti-U.S. forces and the main funnel through which suicide bombers as well as sophisticated weapons killed Americans. A weapon from Syria accounted for the only U.S. Abrams tank killed in Iraq. The 150,000 U.S. troops in Iraq in 2003 were more than enough to inspire and support whomever we wished to overthrow the Assads, or simply to overthrow them ourselves. Instead, the U.S. government contented itself with impotent requests for good behavior. By 2006, an emboldened Syria had provoked war between Hezbollah and Israel. Had the U.S. government not stopped the Israelis, they would have finished permanently crippling this arm of America's enemies.

Syria's civil war creates new opportunities for advancing our interests. For example: Hezbollah is occupied trying to support the Assad regime, while that regime is no longer capable of supporting it. These Iranian proxies' control of Lebanon is open to challenge. Their loss of control would weaken Iran significantly. Lebanon's independence from Hezbollah, Syria, and Iran is very much in America's interest. The U.S. government should give up its half-hearted, mostly blind, second-hand, ultimately impotent involvement with the Syrian opposition in favor of open, wholehearted encouragement and support of Lebanese independence. Weakening our enemies is our business, and the current situation offers us another opportunity to mind that business.

Foreigners are likelier to understand actions that we undertake to advance our own interests or in response to harm done to us—provided they are successful—than they are to accept even slight, well-intentioned interventions in their own affairs.



ANGELO M. CODEVILLA, a native of Italy, is a professor emeritus of international relations at Boston University. He was a US naval officer and Foreign Service officer and served on the Senate Intelligence Committee as well as on presidential transition teams. For a decade he was a senior research fellow at the Hoover Institution. He is the author of thirteen books, including *War Ends and Means*, *Informing Statecraft*, *The Character of Nations*, *Advice to War Presidents*, and *A Students' Guide to International Relations*. He is a student of the classics as well as of European literature; he is also a commercial grape grower.



# Presidential Politics and Syria

*By Bing West*

The president is clever, but in a disturbing way:

1. In the heat of an election race a year ago, the president invented a red line where none existed before. No existing treaty requires military action. From 1983 to 1988, Iraq and Iran in their war used hundreds of chemical weapons—and President Reagan did nothing.

2. This is Obama's personal red line. He created it without consulting congress. In 2011, Obama bombed Libya for six months and never asked Congress for permission. Now he demands Congressional authorization.

3. To do what? He has now proposed a strike (~150 cruise missiles) that will kill many soldiers and civilians, but not kill Assad or drive him from power. That is not a strategy; it is an act of pique. You do not initiate war without analyzing moves and countermoves, until you are satisfied that the gains to national security outweigh the risks.

4. It is not convincing that striking some but not all chemical sites protects our allies, who felt no need to act. The Israelis would certainly have acted on their own, had they feared Syrian chemicals. Instead, they are urging the U.S. to act decisively, meaning that we become involved and stay involved.

5. In essence, Mr. Obama is presenting his personal mistake as a matter of national honor. Either we deliver a pinprick strike now, or Iran will develop nuclear weapons with impunity because our word is no good.

As a matter of historical record, whether, why and whom we bomb in the future is not predictable. Countries decide upon actions depending on their interpretation of the facts at the time; they rarely use the past as precedent for what the response to their actions will be.

Arguing that our national honor hangs in the balance is poor strategy but good politics. It has already been accepted as the essential bedrock truth by Senator McCain and other political opponents. The more the precedent argument is preached, the more agonizing the vote. The president has backed our nation into a corner.

6. Several outcomes could follow:

a. The president can appear to concede to his opponents. Both legislative bodies could vote to take military action only as a strategy aimed at removing Assad. This broader goal would require closing Syrian airfields, necessitating repeated missile strikes. This strategy is advocated by Republican Senators McCain, Graham and others.

If the president agrees, he is contradicting his own insistence that any strike would be limited to “a shot across the bow.”

“The options that we are considering are not about regime change,” Obama spokesman James Carney said. “That is not what we are contemplating here.”

b. Conversely, Democratic Senators Leahy and Levin are urging that congress place further limits upon a symbolic strike before taking a vote. If their view prevails, that leaves three outcomes – all with political benefit for the president.

First, if both bodies voted no, he could still strike, posturing as the mature president who accepts responsibility even when other politicians do not. Or he could not strike, shifting the blame to the Congress.

Second, if both bodies voted yes to a limited, symbolic strike, he will emerge with enhanced stature.

Third, if the Senate approved and the House did not, he will strike symbolically while pointing to the House as emblematic of Republican intransigence in fiscal as well as foreign policy matters.

7. In sum, the odds are the president is not badly bruised in domestic politics, and could emerge stronger. In terms of advancing our global interests, however, this episode of a spontaneous red line is a step backwards because it has demonstrated poor planning and wavering leadership.

BING WEST, a graduate of Georgetown and Princeton Universities, served in the marine infantry in Vietnam and later as assistant secretary of defense in the Reagan administration. The best-selling author of eight books on military history, he travels frequently to war zones. His latest book is entitled *Into the Fire: the Most Extraordinary Battle of the Afghanistan War*.

# The Wrong Reasons for Bombing Syria

*By Bruce Thornton*

Whether or not to intervene in the Syrian civil war was a difficult decision two years ago. Today the difficulty has increased geometrically because of the administration's foreign policy incompetence and vacillation. Of the many reasons advanced for doing so, the worst is the notion, articulated in the President's address on August 31, that "international norms" against the use of chemical weapons enshrined in multinational treaties demand that the United States punish Bashar al-Assad in order to uphold those "laws" and deter him and other regimes possessing such weapons from using them again.

This argument fails on two levels. First, as Robert Bork wrote, "There can be no authentic rule of law among nations until they have a common political morality or are under a common sovereignty. A glance at the real world suggests we have a while to wait." Indeed, there do not exist "international norms," universal principles and morals supposedly codified in agreements like the Chemical Weapons Convention. What do exist are the interests—noble or ignoble, good or evil—of sovereign states codified in various treaties that are signed because a state believes doing so will further those interests. If a nation believes the treaty harms those interests, it either will not sign, just as Syria is not a signatory of the Chemical Weapons Convention, or simply violate the treaty when necessary, as North Korea did when it belonged to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. And of course, any nation can leave the treaty whenever it wants.

This suggests "international norms" are always hostage to national interests. The United States has not signed onto the Ottawa Treaty, which bans landmines, or the Convention on Cluster Munitions. Syria may have declined to sign, like Egypt, because it had evil intentions, while the

U.S. did not sign because its global responsibilities require its military to use those weapons in order to fulfill those responsibilities, and because it has a pluralistic government of law and accountability that eventually will act as a brake on violations of our principles and morals. In any case, this choosing among treaties to sign means that "international norms" will be trumped by each nation's particular interests.

Furthermore, if a nation like Syria has not signed a treaty, by what rationale can it be punished for violating the terms of a treaty it did not sign? If some other treaty already proscribes such weapons (as did the 1925 Geneva Protocol against chemical weapons), why do we need the latest law? Or is there some higher morality above a signed treaty that binds all the world's nations? "Common understandings of decency," as Secretary of State Kerry said? And what are the origins of those "common understandings"? One will not find them in the historical record of human behavior, a "tableau of crimes and misfortunes," as Voltaire said, or even in all the major world religions (regarding violence see Koran 9.25, 9.29, 5.38, 5.33, inter alia). They exist only as written in treaties and agreements.

And why are we so selective about which "international norms" we will enforce? Syria is a signatory state to all four Geneva Conventions and Protocol I. Articles 51 and 54 of Protocol I outlaws indiscriminate attacks on civilians and the use of biological weapons. So how come we didn't use force to uphold Assad's violation of indiscriminate attacks on civilians, which he has been engaged in from the beginning of the civil war? And even if, absent such treaties, "common understandings of decency" are so obvious, compelling, and so in need of upholding, why during the Iraq-Iran war did we not punish Saddam Hussein for killing 3-5 thousands of his own citizens and countless Iranians by using poison gas? Or why are signatories to the Chemical Weapons Convention like Russia and China resisting military action intended to uphold and honor the "norms" they presumably believe in? And does anybody believe Russia, China, or signatory state

Iran will not use such weapons if circumstance convince them their security and interests compel them to? The murderous dictators of the 20th century left reams of violated treaties in their wake.

As for deterring future offenders, this argument relies on dubious psychology. Part of the Congressional authorization for the 2003 war against Hussein specified his use of chemical weapons as a reason to destroy his regime. Yet severely punishing that and Hussein's numerous other violations of "international norms" hasn't seemed to deter very many aggressors over the last few decades. One might argue that Libya's Gadhafi is an exception, since he gave up his nuclear program after the Iraq invasion. But his subsequent fate suggests that his brother autocrats will calculate it's better to hold on to their proscribed weapons as their own deterrent against a similar sordid end. Nor is a glorified fireworks show like shooting off 100 cruise-missiles likely to have deterrent power, especially when that action, when and if it comes, has been fenced in with limitations on time, assets, and aims, and telegraphed to Assad so he can minimize the damage. A sizable magnitude of destruction, including killing Assad and his circle, is what will be needed to concentrate wonderfully the minds of our enemies. And even then, they still might weigh the odds and roll the dice.

Finally, talk of punishing "crimes against humanity" is sentimental hypocrisy. Such crimes are as common flies, and pace the President we have "accepted a world in which women, children, and innocent civilians are gassed on a terrible scale." In Iraq, for one. And change "gassed" to "bombed," "fire-bombed," "hacked to death," "machine-gunned," "tortured" and "starved," and the toll soars into the tens of millions. And punishing perpetrators, as the U.S. did to Saddam Hussein in a controversial war, hasn't seemed to deter other murderous regimes.

Taking military action against Syria may be the right thing. But if it is, it will be because doing so serves the national interests and security of the United States as determined by the people of the United States through their elected representatives, based on the principles of the American political order.

BRUCE S. THORNTON is a research fellow at the Hoover Institution. He received his BA in Latin in 1975 and his PhD in comparative literature—Greek, Latin, and English—in 1983, both from the University of California, Los Angeles. Thornton is currently a professor of classics and humanities at California State University in Fresno, California. He is the author of nine books and numerous essays and reviews on Greek culture and civilization and their influence on Western civilization. His latest book, published in March 2011, is titled *The Wages of Appeasement: Ancient Athens, Munich, and Obama's America*.

# Syria and American Strategy

*By Thomas Donnelly*

Whether one thinks that intervention in Syria is a good idea or a terrible one, it's important to consider the issue within a larger, longer-term, and genuinely strategic context. Thinking strategically about the Muslim world hasn't been easy for Americans, but we ought to have recognized that there are consequences for failing to do so.

The right point of departure is to recall that, whether we like it or not, the United States is the guarantor of a global security architecture that was established in the aftermath of World War II but has not been sufficiently redefined since the end of the Cold War. This U.S. role as "guarantor" is not formally recognized, as was that of France and Sweden in the treaties of Westphalia. But the intent, responsibilities and supporting structures of international affairs are not dissimilar to those of 1648, though in ways that are not often understood. Indeed, the series of Westphalia pacts are both the most-referenced and least-understood agreements in modern Western history; what had been agreed then was not so much inviolable sovereignty but the rules of intervention. As Swedish chancellor Axel Oxenstierna understood, his country was to "conserve the equilibrium of Europe," not among states but within Germany, the bone of contention during the Thirty Years' War, itself.

Over the last 30 years the "greater Middle East," the Muslim world, has been the bone of international contention. It is no longer sufficient to keep the Soviets out, but to preserve some form of equilibrium among the nations and the peoples of the region itself. And just as Europeans admitted in 1648, the absence of equilibrium in a central, contested region would unhinge the



entire international system. It is equally folly today to believe that constant conflict in a critical region like the Middle East won't threaten the global great-power peace.

Nor has the United States ever been indifferent to the balance of power in "Eurasia," to invoke the ghost of Nicholas Spykman. We have been sometimes more and sometimes less prudent in expanding or husbanding power, particularly military power, but always taken a global view and seen our purpose—to again paraphrase the guarantors of Westphalia—as preserving the "liberties"—confessional, political and economic—that were seen as legitimating the international system in the first place.

The civil war in Syria may not per se threaten the equilibrium of the international system. On the other hand, it has long been a critical piece of the Middle East puzzle, and the region's equilibrium is almost everywhere in doubt. Much of what roils the Islamic world originates within, yet another analogue to post-Reformation Europe. Syria, like the German principalities, is the front-line in a quasi-confessional but primarily political struggle between Sunni powers, the Saudis and their proxies, and a Shi'a—at least "anti-Sunni" bloc—led from Tehran.

But if the instability originates in the Middle East, its duration and spread also reflect a failure of the system's guarantors, and in particular the United States. Militarily, we are withdrawing rapidly after decades of episodic but steady advance, leaving behind not peace or equilibrium but an opportunity for the most violent and the most extreme. The idea that the tide of war is receding is contradicted by each day's headlines, each moment's Twitter feed. What has receded is our willingness and immediate ability to dam the tide.

Again, reasonable people can disagree over whether Syria is the place to "re-intervene." Syria may not be a domino, but it is an important piece in a greater game. Just as those who intervene

should not promise quick and cheap success, those who would stay out—or resort to “offshore balancing”—must make an argument not only about Syria but the regional and global equilibrium that looks increasingly precarious.

THOMAS DONNELLY, a defense and security policy analyst, is the codirector of the Marilyn Ware Center for Security Studies at the American Enterprise Institute. He is the author, coauthor, and editor of numerous articles, essays, and books, including *Operation Just Cause: The Storming of Panama* and *Clash of Chariots: A History of Armored Warfare*. He is currently at work on *Empire of Liberty: The Origins of American Strategic Culture*. From 1995 to 1999, he was policy group director for the House Committee on Armed Services. Donnelly also served as a member of the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission and is a former editor of *Armed Forces Journal*, *Army Times*, and *Defense News*.

# An Argument for Containment

*By Kiron K. Skinner*

The Obama administration has recently adopted a discernibly more aggressive Syria policy. Its support of the rebels stands at approximately \$385 million in humanitarian assistance and \$115 in non-lethal aid; more is expected. But is this (and related efforts on behalf of allies in the region) sufficient to prevent Jabhat al-Nusra from undermining the rebels who seek to topple President Bashar al-Assad and establish a moderate Sunni government?

Since forming in January 2012, Nusra Front has claimed responsibility for hundreds of attacks. Though only around 9 percent of the rebels in Syria, it is considered to be particularly effective on the battlefield, attracting seasoned fighters from other Middle East battlefields. Jahbat al-Nusra is well funded and has an ample supply of arms.

In December 2012, the U.S. State Department designated the group a surrogate for Al Qaeda in Iraq and placed it on its list of foreign terrorist organizations. Recognition was granted to the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, a newly formed umbrella organization for the majority of rebels.

In Aleppo, among other cities, Jahbat al-Nusra has turned its military victories into acceptance by civilians. By helping to provide flour to the needy, and by encouraging factories to reopen, the group is taming some Sunni moderates who dislike the Sharia courts it is installing.

If the U.S. does not provide arms to the national rebel organization, it may find itself inadvertently standing by as Islamists take a page from Hezbollah in Lebanon, transforming a terrorist organization into a societal arbiter that becomes a leading political force.

KIRON K. SKINNER is the W. Glenn Campbell Research Fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. At Carnegie Mellon University, she is founding director of the Center for International Relations and Politics; director of the Institute for Strategic Analysis; university adviser on national security policy; and associate professor of political science. Her areas of expertise are international relations, US foreign policy, and political strategy. Since 2004, she has served on the Chief of Naval Operations' Executive Panel. In 2010, Skinner was appointed to the advisory board of the George W. Bush Oral History Project. In 2012, Pennsylvania governor Tom Corbett appointed Skinner to his Advisory Commission on African American Affairs. Skinner's coauthored books *Reagan, in His Own Hand* and *Reagan, a Life in Letters* were *New York Times* best sellers. Her opinion pieces appear in leading newspapers and national online outlets..

# The Syrian Dilemma

*By Victor Davis Hanson*

There may be good arguments to enter Syria. But they do not matter much, because neither this administration nor the American public is up to the dirty task.

As in Libya, would we 'lead from behind' the French and British? Would the Obama administration ask permission to intervene from the United Nations and the Arab League, but once more not the U.S. Congress? Would UN Ambassador Susan Rice solemnly assure the Russians and the Chinese a second time that we were only providing humanitarian aid and not actively supporting ground troops?

Are Americans willing to occupy a post-Assad Syria to ensure that its cities do not turn into another Benghazi?

Stripping Iran and Hezbollah of their close ally Bashar al-Assad certainly makes good strategic sense, but are we even sure that subsequent Sunni Syrian 'reformers' would dislike Shiite Iran any more than they dislike us? If American-educated and supported Mohamed Morsi in Egypt, recipient of massive U.S. aid, is either a moderate or a deterrent to an expansionist Iranian theocracy, he sure has a good way of hiding it.

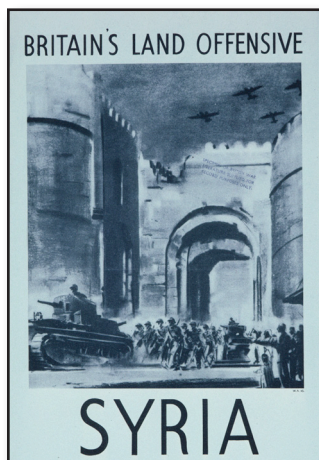
At home, we know that too many Senate grandees, analysts, and talking heads clamor for war when they expect a quick in-and-out moral intervention—only when reality sets in to claim that the ensuing mess was someone else's fault all along.

True, there are humanitarian issues in Syria. But then there are similar ones as well in Darfur, Somalia, and Mali.

In short, collate the recent American past in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya and you could write a script for Syria, from A to Z.

VICTOR DAVIS HANSON, the Martin and Illie Anderson Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, is a classicist and an expert on the history of war. He is a syndicated *Tribune Media Services* columnist and a regular contributor to *National Review Online*, as well as many other national and international publications; he has written or edited twenty-three books, including the *New York Times* best seller *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power*. His most recent book is *The Savior Generals: How Five Great Commanders Saved Wars That Were Lost - from Ancient Greece to Iraq* (Bloomsbury 2013). He was awarded a National Humanities Medal by President Bush in 2007 and the Bradley Prize in 2008 and has been a visiting professor at the US Naval Academy, Stanford University, Hillsdale College, and Pepperdine University. Hanson received a PhD in classics from Stanford University in 1980.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING



## Should the United States intervene in the Syrian Civil War?

Prior to the Syrian civil war, little scholarly research focused directly on Syria's relevance to U.S. national interests, although the topic did receive considerable coverage in broader accounts of U.S. policy in the Middle East. The best book-length history of U.S.-Syrian relations is Robert G. Rabil's *Syria, the United States, and the War on Terror in the Middle East* (Praeger, 2006). Barry Rubin's *The Truth About Syria* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) provides an accessible recounting of Syria since independence, with limited coverage of the U.S. perspective. The outbreak of the civil in 2011 has sparked a flurry of writing on Syria and its strategic importance, of which the most insightful is Fouad Ajami's *The Syrian Rebellion* (Hoover Institution Press, 2012).

—Mark Moyar

- *Syria, the United States, and the War on Terror in the Middle East*, by Robert G. Rabil (Praeger, 2006)
- *The Truth About Syria*, by Barry Rubin (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007)
- *The Syrian Rebellion*, by Fouad Ajami (Hoover Institution Press, 2012)

## RELATED MATERIAL

- *Syria Undercover* (Frontline PBS)
- *Syria Behind the Lines* (Frontline PBS)

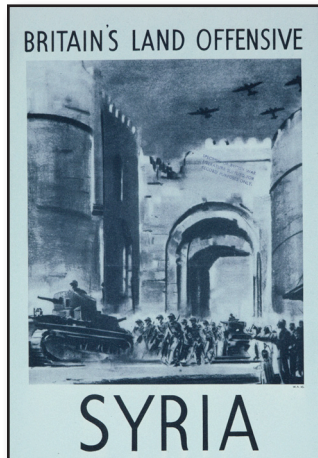
# STRATEGIKA

CONFLICTS OF THE PAST AS LESSONS FOR THE PRESENT

Hoover Institution | Stanford University | www.hoover.org | 650-725-3461  
Copyright © 2013 by the Board of Trustees of Leland Stanford Junior University



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



### Should the United States intervene in the Syrian Civil War?

1. If Syria erodes into chaos (e.g., the trajectory of Libya) or an Islamist government emerges there, whether by plebiscite or not (e.g., Egypt), does either disappointing result offer any improvement, in terms of U.S. interests, over the current Assad regime and its close ties with Hezbollah and Iran?
2. What exactly would the fall of the Assad regime mean in terms of Iran's regional influence and its strategic outlook?
3. Is there any realistic chance that the U.S., through aid, military shipments, or training, can have any influence with moderate anti-Assad insurgents, or do such groups even exist in any number? Is there a reliable way to identify such groups?

# STRATEGIKA

CONFLICTS OF THE PAST AS LESSONS FOR THE PRESENT

Hoover Institution | Stanford University | [www.hoover.org](http://www.hoover.org) | 650-725-3461  
Copyright © 2013 by the Board of Trustees of Leland Stanford Junior University







**THE HOOVER INSTITUTION**  
Stanford University

Copyright © 2013 by the Board of Trustees of Leland Stanford Junior University