Military Intervention in Syria: the worst or just one among many bad options?

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Professor Stefan Wolff

“As Western rhetoric and resolve to ‘do something’ over the use of chemical weapons last week in Syria harden, one of the increasingly dominant logics is that with all other means exhausted, a military intervention of some sort is the last resort. Reflecting the exasperation of political leaders and opinion makers in London, Washington, and Paris that nothing else so far has worked, the urge to flex and deploy the West’s considerable military muscle seems to become overwhelming. But what could it possibly achieve?

Some argue that carefully targeted strikes against the regime’s military assets—air defences, command and control centres, and bases of Assad’s elite Republican Guards—could weaken the regime sufficiently to engage in meaningful talks aimed at a political settlement. While this logic may potentially well apply to the regime, the problem is that the opposition is so fractured and often seemingly at the brink of a civil war with itself, that there is no apparent negotiation partner even if Assad were willing to engage in good-faith negotiations. And this is, of course, a big if, as big as whether anyone in the opposition would be willing to trust his intentions.

Another danger of such an approach of using military strikes to promote a political solution is that it will be very difficult to get the balance right between the threat of continuing and escalating military action against the regime and shifting the balance of power just enough to create incentives on both sides to negotiate. In other words, where to draw the line between degrading regime capabilities to make Assad more acquiescent to international demands to negotiate and weakening him too much so that rebels sense that a military victory for them is now possible.

Even if that balance is right, another question arises. Why should the West take any action that directly or indirectly strengthens the hand of a deeply divided insurgency that has become increasingly radicalised and in which hard-line jihadist groups and al-Qaeda affiliates emerge as dominant actors? These are exactly the kinds of groups the UK, US and their various local and international allies are fighting elsewhere, including across the Middle East and North Africa, the Sahel zone, and in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

While the track record of Western-led intervention in civil wars may not be as bad as some critics occasionally make out—the Western Balkans, for example, today are a far cry from what they were 20 years ago—recent experiences clearly indicate the limits of military interventions to produce desirable outcomes. Iraq is experiencing violence at levels similar to the height of its sectarian civil war more than five years ago, Afghanistan remains riddled with violence, and Libya resembles anything but a stable, secure and functioning state.

The trajectory of any intervention in Syria would arguably be worse. Assad’s regime and the Alewite community in which it is rooted perceive the current situation as a struggle for survival. The more desperate the regime would become as a result of military intervention, the more ruthless its response will be. Apart from the obvious danger of really widespread use of chemical weapons, further regional destabilisation would be on the cards drawing Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan and possibly Israel ever deeper into a regional quagmire from which there will be no easy escape and which will be difficult to contain or roll back.

Beyond the region, one might argue that relations with Russia (and China) are already difficult enough so that another round of disagreement over Syria is hardly going to matter. And this may well be so, but in the absence of any likely tangible positive outcome of military intervention, it seems hardly worthwhile to heighten tensions any further.

Moreover, Iran, as one of the main external backers of Assad, would not take kindly to a Western-led military intervention. At a time when there are signs that the new government in Iran is taking some tentative steps towards reducing tensions over its nuclear programme, the cost of military intervention seem to outweigh any potential benefits (of which there are few and far between at best).

So what are the options? Perhaps the best way of thinking about Western military action, which seems almost inevitable now, would be to consider a strictly limited objective of military strikes. This could be defined, and clearly communicated, as punishing the regime for using chemical weapons. It would demonstrate Western resolve and capability not to tolerate the use of WMD, and thus act as a deterrent to their future use.

Such an approach, however, also requires a degree of honesty with ourselves, accepting that it is beyond our ability to manage crises like that in Syria in the absence of a united international community. Undoubtedly, Western interests are at stake in Syria and the region more widely, but we are not going to advance or protect them by unilateral military action—not only because such action would be in violation of international law but also because it cannot achieve desirable outcomes. Containment, backed by credible military threat and as necessary limited military action, sadly remains the best option in Syria for the time being."

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