

Intervention and Non-Intervention in Syria

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As the brutal suppression of opponents of Bashar al-Assad by supporters of his regime in Syria continues, the U.S. and other western powers are faced, yet again, with the question of whether or not to intervene in a violent North African conflict that, absent western intervention, could lead to even more violent deaths and suppression. The similarities between the dilemma facing the U.S. in Syria in 2012 and the one it faced roughly a year ago in Libya is, while not the same, quite similar, at least in some respects.

In Syria, as in Libya in early 2011, an oppressive regime is teetering on the edge of collapse as rebels, about whom the west knows relatively little, are posing an increasingly serious military challenge to the regime. Assad, like Moammar Gaddafi before him, is showing little signs of compassion or willingness to change and is instead using widespread violence to try to put down the rebellion.

One of the most intriguing differences between the two cases is that a year ago, many in the American foreign policy community were calling loudly and aggressively for some kind of U.S. intervention. Much of that came from Republican critics of President Obama. This year, despite it being an election year with the Republican Party anxious to attack President Obama, there has been substantially less of this kind of call for action across much of the American political spectrum.

There are several possible reasons for this. One is that Obama's Republican opponents are focusing on more important, at least for them, issues such as limiting access to contraception and putting colonies on the moon. Moreover, growing tensions between the U.S. and Iran have been the foreign policy issue which has thus far dominated the Republican primary and been the source of most of the recent foreign policy criticism of Obama. Another reason why Syria has not yet become a major issue in the presidential campaign could be that the Obama administration seems less vulnerable on this kind of thing given the intervention the U.S. led in 2011 in Libya, as well as the high profile debates in the UN Security Council where the U.S. actively pushed for a resolution calling for Assad to step down.

Additionally, the policy environment is different now than it was twenty years ago, when the idea of humanitarian intervention began to be developed; and is also different than a year ago when it was last applied. The predictable, and widely predicted, difficulties which most of the post-Arab Spring countries, most notably Egypt, have encountered in genuinely shaking off authoritarianism in one form or another, the reminders from Iraq and Afghanistan that ending wars is often agonizingly difficult and increasing concerns about the financial consequences of this kind of foreign policy have all made the climate for intervention even more difficult in 2012 than had been the case in 2011.

The argument for U.S. intervention in Syria is clear especially as the violence and repression continue unabated. However, the absence of a broader plan for resolving the conflict and phasing out the U.S. role is also clear, and increasingly salient in the minds of policy makers and

Americans generally. The possibility that U.S. troops could be deployed in Iran and Syria in the near future, while still lingering on in Afghanistan and Iraq is a daunting one even for some of the more extreme hawkish critics of President Obama.

Regardless of the course of action the U.S. chooses in Syria, the U.S. needs to approach this decision recognizing that it could be faced with a similar decision in a year, and again in two years. The need to balance effective and ethical humanitarian intervention with the possibility of a string of interventions leaving the U.S. overextended, broke and ineffective is real and cannot be achieved without a more comprehensive approach to this problem which recognizes the perils, as well as the value, of humanitarian intervention.