

US Options in Syria

David S. Sorenson

ABSTRACT: This article considers the military choices for the United States as it seeks both to terminate the Syrian civil war on favorable terms and to contain the conflict within Syria's borders. However, few military options promise a reasonable chance to influence the Syrian civil war itself. Thus, America should focus its military and other policy instruments on containing the crisis. That is also a complex problem, but a worse one would be the Syrian civil war spreading to the larger eastern Mediterranean region.

The United States has important interests in the Eastern Mediterranean region and because Syria is a pivotal country in that area, American national decisionmakers must consider whether and how to use military power to defend those interests. The horrifying moral costs of the Asad regime, and the danger of a failed or jihadist Syrian state, make the ongoing Syrian conflict harmful to US and regional partner country interests. The other danger is the possibility the conflict will increasingly spread to Syria's neighbors. The human cost alone is staggering: over 117,000 dead, hundreds of thousands wounded, over six million displaced, ruined cities, half the population in need of food, and two instances of chemical weapons use. However tragic the war is, there is very little assurance the United States could, through direct intervention in the Syrian civil war, stop or slow the destruction. Given the intensity of the civil war, smaller military measures may not only fail to make much difference, but may initiate escalation. The United States should rule out direct intervention to stop the fighting, and instead, concentrate on holding the fighting to Syria proper, as much as possible.

American Interests

US eastern Mediterranean security objectives include sustaining regional stability, avoiding havens for terrorists, preventing weapons of mass destruction (WMD) proliferation, supporting Israeli security, encouraging economic growth, and promoting democratization, though many would quibble with the exact order.¹ The United States must try to prevent the Syrian civil war from extending beyond its source and destabilizing the region. Moreover, as the conflict between Islam's largest sects, Sunna and Shi'a, escalates, it is clearly important to limit religious conflict, which can spread rapidly, and cause poles of religious authority, such as Iran, to gain influence. It is also in America's interest to terminate major internal wars in the region if it has the means and ability to do so, and at an acceptable cost.

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¹ Given the fate of fledgling democracies in the Arab world, democracy advocates may well reconsider its desirability as an early outcome of a political transition.

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Ending the Civil War

Given the importance of regional stability, the White House must work to prevent a pivotal country like Syria from collapsing entirely. The human and physical costs are already staggering, and the longer the conflict lasts, the more the human suffering and post-war recovery periods. Thus one possible, indeed likely, outcome of the Syrian civil war is a failed state that becomes a haven for terrorists and criminals, which would obviously harm regional US interests.² No matter which side (or sides) “wins” the war, the damage done thus far may doom Syria to decades of painful recovery, with large areas of lawlessness and suffering. Moreover, the chances of a favorable outcome for the United States are remote; either the Asad regime prevails over a broken country, or Sunni jihadists gain the upper hand, but the most likely outcome is continued fighting until mutual exhaustion. And even if a secular democratic-oriented group or groups prevail in Syria, the cost and difficulty of reconstruction may doom Syria to decades of instability.

While there are clearly moral implications for the United States (and the world), it is highly unlikely a major American military intervention would succeed in dislodging the Asad regime or in ending the fighting. This is because the conflict is widespread throughout Syria’s populated areas, is waged by diverse groups, and is driven by not only the stubbornness of the ruling regime, but also by religious motives beyond simple revolution. Unlike other Arab “spring” countries, the ruling elite, and the approximately 15 percent of its Alawi population, have nowhere else to go; for them the civil war is a fight to the death. Some of the radical Sunni opposition declared the war to be jihad, and appear willing to fight to the death. It is, in short, a deeply embedded war that may well continue even if the Asad regime ends, with the fighting shifting to religiously aligned purposes and fueled by outside actors. Yet the United States does have a vital interest in containing the war, and this is where US decisionmakers must place their emphasis.

Reducing the Shi’a-Sunni Divide

One of the key dangers of the Syrian civil war is its effect on the Shi’a-Sunni schism that has rapidly accelerated since 2003.³ While the sources and nature of the division are too complex to detail here, the Syrian civil war embeds the Shi’a-Sunna conflict. The majority of Syria’s population is Sunni while the Asad regime’s key leaders adhere to the Alawi sect, which is approximately 12 percent of the total population.⁴ While the Alawi ties to the Shi’a are theologically tenuous, Alawi Syrian president Hafez Al-Asad, after taking power in a 1970 coup, received a *fatwa* from Lebanese cleric Musa Al-Sadr stating that the Alawi were a community of Shi’a Islam, and Asad’s decision to side with Shi’a Iran over Sunni-ruled Iraq in the 1981-88 Iran-Iraq war, cemented his position as

2 Andrew J. Tabler, “Syria’s Collapse: And How Washington Can Stop It,” *Foreign Affairs* 92 (July/August 2013): 90.

3 The schism dates to the succession debate following the Prophet Muhammad’s death in 632, and while that schism has flared up over the centuries, it rarely became the basis of a sustained conflict (the 1981-88 Iraq-Iran conflict was much more about two despotic leaders in a struggle for power and possession than it was about religious differences, for example).

4 While a majority of the Alawite support the Asad rule (a few do not), support also comes from some Syrian Christians, who fear that one outcome of the Syrian civil war would be a radical Islamist regime that might persecute Syrian Christians.

a member of the Shi'a world, which passed on to his son Bashar, Syria's current ruler.⁵

For the United States, it is vital the intra-Muslim schism not grow and exacerbate intra-faith fighting in other regional countries, particularly Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and the Arabian Gulf countries; currently the Shi'a-Sunni fighting in Iraq has already reached post-US departure levels and threatens to undo the fragile post-Saddam state the United States tried to reconstruct. Fighting in Yemen, Bahrain, and Lebanon could spread to US regional partners.

WMD Issues

A core US regional interest is to prevent proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, though the concern has focused more on nuclear weapons than on chemical or biological weapons. While an Israeli airstrike obliterated Syria's reported embryonic experiment in nuclear research in September 2007, Syria retains deliverable chemical weapons, and the United States has warned them several times about both moving or using them. In June 2013, the United States claimed it had proof of Syrian chemical weapons use against anti-regime forces, and in August, the regime renewed its chemical attacks. While the Obama administration stated that Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons would cross a "red line," the initial response to the June attack was an announcement that the United States would offer some lethal military equipment to rebel forces.⁶ The second use of chemical weapons resulted in a mix of military threats and diplomatic activity, though none of this directly involved the threat of the proliferation of chemical weapons outside Syria. There are multiple avenues for trafficking these weapons: the regime could transfer them to a third party (Hezbollah, in Lebanon, or to an Iraqi Shi'a groups, or the Iraqi regime), or the Syrian opposition could capture Syrian chemical weapons and transfer them itself. In the latter case, the al Qaeda-affiliated Syrian rebel groups could transfer these weapons to be used in the Middle East and beyond.

Containing the Civil War

The Syrian conflict may spread beyond current limited incursions by all sides over the Lebanese, Turkish, Jordanian, Israeli, and Iraqi borders. A significant spillover across any of those borders would seriously threaten regional stability. Syria shares porous borders with these countries, and all have refugee camps with tens of thousands of Syrian refugees who could be swept into an expansion of the Syrian civil war. Such camps may become centers for resistance outside Syria, and Syrian security forces may cross borders to curb any anti-regime activity stemming from such camps. Even a small incursion into neighboring countries could provoke escalation, either by invading forces who push refugees out of the camps and deeper into the country, or by defending forces, who might pursue Syrian security forces back over their border.

5 Fouad Ajami, *The Vanished Imam: Musa Al Sadr and the Shia of Lebanon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 174.

6 Benjamin J. Rhodes, *Text of White House Statement on Chemical Weapons in Syria*, June 13, 2013. "Following on the credible evidence that the regime has used chemical weapons against the Syrian people, the President has augmented the provision of non-lethal assistance to the civilian opposition, and also authorized the expansion of our assistance to the Supreme Military Council (SMC)"

The expansion of the conflict beyond Syria would imperil US regional interests. Should the Syrian civil war escalate over borders, it will likely worsen the growing regional Sunni-Shi'a dispute.

Reviewing US Military Options

Washington faces a challenging environment in the Middle East; there is clearly political and military exhaustion after years of inconclusive engagement, and US defense expenditures will decline sharply over the next decade. Thus, any military options will be constrained. Still, policymakers must generate feasible options, which Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey offered in his letter to Senate Armed Services Committee Chair Senator Carl Levin (D-MI) on 19 July 2013 (his categories italicized):⁷

- *Train, advise, and assist the opposition*, to include supplying logistics, weapons, and intelligence. The troops required could range from several hundred to several thousand, with a cost estimate of \$500 million annually, according to General Dempsey.⁸ The letter did not specify where the troops would deploy, but presumably in “safe zones” in neighboring countries.
- *Conduct standoff attacks and assist the opposition*, by air weapons against high-value regime targets, including bomb-carrying aircraft and missiles. The purpose would be to decimate targets the regime values or needs to maintain its grip on power. Such targets might be similar to those in Libya or Serbia: regime leadership living quarters, the homes and businesses of regime supporters, military and supportive militia targets, communications capability, supply lines (possibly including flights from outside Syria supplying the regime), for examples.
- *Establish a no-fly zone*. For General Dempsey, a no-fly zone would be limited to combating Syrian air assets in their attacks against anti-regime elements and their supporters. Dempsey noted US rescue personnel would have to enter Syria to retrieve downed aircrews, and the no-fly zone costs could average \$1 billion per month because of high force requirements and operating costs.
- *Establish buffer zones*. This option would create areas along borders (most likely Turkey and Jordan) where anti-regime forces could train, heal, and resupply, and where wounded civilians could receive treatment. It would require protection from air and ground attacks, though the size of such a protective force would depend on the size and location of the buffer zones.
- *Control of chemical weapons*. The United States and possibly allied forces would destroy or seize Syrian chemical weapons and, presumably, their delivery vehicles and supporting equipment. Attacking chemical weapons is difficult and potentially dangerous as only very high heat can destroy poison gas, thus blowing up a warhead can spread its lethal effects for miles. Finding the launchers is also problematic; there is doubt over the location and number of tactical ballistic missiles

⁷ Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Martin E. Dempsey, *Letter to The Honorable Carl Levin*, July 19, 2013.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

(SCUDs), not to mention the smaller missiles.⁹ Seizing them can also be problematic; they must be moved quickly out of enemy territory without leaks, detonations (some may be equipped with a detonating device), or theft by other forces. Finding chemical weapons is also very difficult; they are small and easily hidden.

United States' strategic planners must consider all these options as possible force application packages, as General Dempsey noted, but all require careful calculation of costs and benefits relative to American national security interests. Planners must also calculate the most likely outcomes of these actions, singularly, or in a package: will they hasten the complete collapse of the Asad regime or further fragment Syria into fiefdoms, each dominated by a sectarian warlord. Paradoxically, they might empower the Asad regime, allowing it to argue that it is now fighting the Americans, pushing some Syrians to commit to the regime. Planners must also recognize there are very few discrete options, once the United States strikes (as punishment for Syrian chemical weapon use). It becomes much more difficult to abstain from further engagement.

While General Dempsey offered force package options, he did not offer his perspective on desirable end states, or how military force might accomplish them. The following section links these force options to possible conflict outcomes.

Ending the Civil War on Favorable Terms

While the White House has not had a hostile relationship with the Asad regime in the past few decades, its behavior in the civil war, including its attacks on civilians, its links with Russia and Iran, and its alliance with Hezbollah, which the State Department lists as a terrorist group, might justify an end state of terminating that regime in favor of a stable government. But experience alone suggests the likelihood of success is low. While the United States has used force (usually with allies) to facilitate regime change, it ended relatively well only in the campaign to end the Serbian Milosevic regime. In Libya, Iraq, and Afghanistan, unstable countries remain after decades of war, at the cost of thousands of Americans killed and wounded, and trillions of dollars spent.

Moreover, no feasible military scenario offers much chance of stemming Syrian violence. The most-often suggested policies are either a no-fly zone, as used in Libya, Serbia, and Iraq before 2003, or a off-shore strike with missiles against select targets like chemical weapons delivery systems, or assets highly valued by the Asad regime. If a no-fly zone is limited to striking air assets, it can degrade enemy capacity to conduct counterinsurgency air operations, and if the United States conducted such an operation with standoff weapons, it could be done at an acceptable cost for both lives and dollars, using precision-guided munitions from naval platforms and naval and Air Force planes with air-launched missiles. Attacks on airfields, munitions, fuel, and aircraft might limit Syrian ability to use air weapons to attack insurgent and

⁹ Mary Beth Nikitin, Paul K. Kerr, and Andrew Feickert, "Syria's Chemical Weapons: Issues for Congress" (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service 7-5700, August 30, 2013), 4-5.

civilian targets.¹⁰ Targeting helicopters is much more difficult, as they do not require runways, and can quickly land and hide after striking targets.

Yet, while Syria has certainly used aircraft to bomb civilians, most of the civilian attacks by regime forces usually involve ground units, either military or militia, and if the US or other-nation air forces vigorously patrol Syrian skies, it will only drive the Asad regime to shift more effort to ground forces, and especially artillery.¹¹ And while a no-fly zone can evolve into a “no-tank” zone, targeting ground force weapons like tanks and other heavy vehicles, such operations are difficult in urban areas. Striking a tank from the air can easily cause civilian casualties; tanks filled with fuel and ammunition can devastate entire neighborhoods when they explode. Even with advanced targeting systems, misses are possible. Even a no-fly or no-vehicle zone destroys most if not all of Syrian air weapons and military ground vehicles, the death and damage from smaller weapons will continue to climb.

The other US option is sending arms and other supplies to the opponent forces, but the numbers and types of equipment are not likely to make a difference against a regime armed by Russia and supported by Hezbollah. Fears that sophisticated arms would make their way either to jihadists or the regime have limited the supply, leading to a growing belief that the United States is only trying to prolong the fighting and ensure no side wins.¹² Whether or not that is a true intention may not matter, because arming rebels will still produce only more inconclusive fighting, whatever the US motive.

The Syrian use of chemical weapons in June and August 2013 drove the Obama administration to declare the actions had crossed a “red line,” though the line itself was unclear.¹³ The president indicated that he planned a limited strike both to punish Syria for using chemical weapons and deter future use in Syria or beyond. The president appeared aware of the limited impact of a strike: “That doesn’t solve all the problems inside Syria, and it doesn’t obviously end the death of innocent civilians inside of Syria.”¹⁴ A limited strike (not conducted at the time of this writing) would not only fail to be decisive, but also provoke a predictable response from the Asad regime. It would continue its campaign in a show of defiance, perhaps using chemical weapons again, thus forcing the United States to consider striking again. America stands to lose either way; should it fail to respond, it appears weak, but should it attack, it steps into a cycle of escalation that it is unwilling to pursue. The Asad regime has much higher stakes than the White House; it is fighting for its life, while the United States is trying to reduce or terminate the war on terms it favors. Even a successful attack in response to a chemical

10 Christopher Harmer, *Required Sorties and Weapons to Degrade Syrian Air Force Excluding Integrated Air Defense System (LADS)* (Institute for the Study of War, July 31, 2013).

11 This is also the conclusion reached by Karl P. Mueller, Jeffrey Martini, and Thomas Hamilton, “Airpower Options for Syria: Assessing Objectives and Missions for Aerial Intervention,” *RAND Center for Middle East Public Policy*, RR-446-CMEPP (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013), 2-3.

12 Ann Barnard, “Deal Represents Turn for Syria; Rebels Deflated,” *The New York Times*, September 15, 2013.

13 As of this writing, proof of Syrian chemical weapons use is not available, though the evidence appeared to indicate that some side in the war used some kind of chemical agent against civilians. Whether or not the agent was also lethal (though not banned) was unclear.

14 Michael R. Gordon, “Aim of U.S. Attack: Restore a ‘Red Line’ That Became Blurred,” *The New York Times*, August 30, 2013.

weapons attack may propel the Asad regime to decide it is in a game of chicken with Washington, and dare it to continue to respond as it launches more chemical weapons attacks. The United States is likely to lose this game of chicken.

Containing the Civil War

If the Syrian civil war spills into neighboring countries, it directly affects key US regional partners and, in the Turkish case, a NATO ally. Says Cordesman, “America’s real strategic interests are tied to the destabilizing impact of the civil war on Syria’s neighbors, the growing role of Iran and Hezbollah in Syria, and the pressure on Iraq to join with Iran and Syria if Syria remains dependent on Iran.”¹⁵ Small incursions have occurred, and will most likely continue. However, a major breach of borders would clearly threaten US regional interests. It is one thing to have one country in violent conflict; it is quite another to have the fighting spread to four or more countries which have ties to the United States. It could threaten the Lebanese, Jordanian, and Iraqi governments, it could spill into Israel, it could disrupt the flow of commerce in the eastern Mediterranean, and it could expand into countries weakened by the “Arab spring” movements. Should jihadists in Syria expand their operations into the Sinai, or Libya, for example, joining other jihadi already there, and bringing weapons captured from the Syrian military, those countries will become much more unstable than they already are. The new aggressiveness of the Syrian Kurdish rebels could bolster their kinfolk’s efforts to gain more power and to resist the regimes in both Turkey and Iraq.¹⁶

The Syrian civil war could expand in several ways. The Assad regime could expand the conflict if refugee camps outside Syria become staging and training areas for anti-regime forces, or if the regime should try to halt the flow of weapons to insurgents. These weapons come into Syria by land and sea routes (smuggled into Mediterranean ports). Insurgents could attack weapons ships, thus forcing the conflict into the eastern Mediterranean. The United States Navy, and allied and friendly navies, would thus have a role in containing the maritime aspect of the conflict, though containment could also become more active, with those navies seizing vessels carrying arms to the Syrian regime.¹⁷

A major movement of Assad’s forces into Turkey or Jordan would quickly embroil those countries in the civil war, as a Syrian incursion into the Golan would generate an Israeli response. Turkey, Jordan, and Israel have capable militaries, and Syrian leadership might be reluctant to challenge them. But an intrusion over Lebanese borders is more problematic; Syrian forces long occupied Lebanon, and it remains in the Syrian sphere of interest (Syrian maps do not show an independent Lebanon, instead showing Lebanon as a part of Syria). Several Syrian incursions into Lebanon, either by government forces or by rebels, have already occurred and might certainly happen again. The Lebanese army

15 Anthony H. Cordesman, “U.S. Strategy in Syria: Having Lost Sight of the Objective...” (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies), September 12, 2013.

16 Emile Hokayem, *Syria’s Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies), 129.

17 This would obviously be a high-risk option, and would likely exempt Russian-flagged ships due to the potential for quick and dangerous escalation.

is lightly armed, designed much more for domestic policing than in repelling an outside invader.¹⁸ Iraq faces a similar problem; its military is still rebuilding in the post-Saddam era, but US assistance and training has improved its quality. While there is always the danger that further American help might get into the wrong hands, the United States should still increase its military assistance and other ties to Iraq's military as a part of a ring of Syrian containment.

The United States has experience implementing containment—it was the core strategic doctrine during the Cold War, but the lessons from that experience may be difficult to apply in containing the civil war within Syrian borders. Cold War containment relied heavily on the threat of punishment against the former the Soviet Union or the People's Republic of China for spreading their influence, along with supporting alliances and friends, supplying partners with arms, training, and jointly operated military bases on the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) rimlands. However, neither the USSR nor the PRC was waging a war against its own people; rather the perceived danger was expansion. Still, though the United States would construct it differently, containment should be seriously considered as the primary military response to the Syrian civil war. While it needs an element of threatened punishment, it will have to rely more on efforts to seal Syria's borders.

America could threaten targets valued by the Syrian regime by air, or by stealthy penetrations should Syrian forces cross borders; through assassinations of key officials; or inflicting widespread damage against regime supporters. Attacks in Serbia focused on assets held by Milosevic's supporters, and the same could hold for Syria. However, the regime has already suffered considerable punishment; and punishment attacks are very likely to include civilian casualties, which the regime can blame on the United States, solidifying its argument that it is resisting American influence in the region. Trying to surround Syria with a containing ring of bases would be expensive, time-consuming, and not popular in any of the potential hosting countries. Most of the border areas are difficult to police and easily crossed through mountain areas or large swaths of desert. These areas have long been smuggler's havens. "Volunteer" fighters, many of them jihadi-oriented, are also sneaking into Syria, with popular transit points being northern Lebanon and the Turkish-Syrian border, partly because of the ease of flying into Beirut and Turkish cities from other countries.¹⁹

Containment against physical incursions over borders is difficult enough, but even if such monitoring works to prevent physical border incursions from either side, it cannot stop the flow of information and ideas that may inspire supporters of any side in the conflict to carry out retaliation outside Syria. Lebanese opponents of Hezbollah, outraged over Hezbollah actions in Syria, could bomb a Hezbollah neighborhood in Beirut, for example, or Shi'a Iraqis, angered over a Sunni action in Syria, could attack a Sunni neighborhood somewhere in Iraq. Still,

18 Oren Barak, *The Lebanese Army: A National Institution in a Divided Society* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009); David S. Sorenson, *Global Security Watch: Lebanon* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2009), Chapter 6.

19 Jeremy M. Sharp and Christopher M. Blanchard, "Armed Conflict in Syria: Background and U.S. Response" (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service 7-5700, September 6, 2013), 14.

the United States must attempt to contain the civil war by supporting friendly countries, sharing information, and maintaining forces (air and naval forces in particular) proximate to Syria, to threaten the Asad regime with unacceptable damage to its military capacity should he attempt to expand the conflict. The “red lines” must be real, and the White House must prepare to carry out threats, because the other core element of containment must be its credibility. Announcing a chemical weapon “red line,” and then hesitating to enforce it, places American policy in a credibility deficit.

Containing the flow of material into Syria is difficult enough. Sudan is reportedly shipping arms, paid by Qatar, to some rebel groups, which complicates Sudanese declared policy to support both Sunna Islamist movements while maintaining good relations with Shi’a Iran.²⁰ Containing such land bridges to the Syrian combatants would be very difficult, and even if Washington and other parties can slow it, weapons to the Asad side will still likely flow from Russia. The United States should, however, put as much pressure as possible on suppliers to both Asad and the jihadist groups opposing his rule to curtail weapons supplies. If Qatar is actually supplying jihadist groups in Syria, either directly or indirectly, the United States needs to exert quiet but firm diplomacy to curtail the supply chain, including the threat to remove the US presence in Qatar that the emirate relies on for defense. Iran is flying in weapons, reportedly through Iraq, though the Al Maliki government denies the charges.²¹ Iraq and Iran are more difficult, but Iraq still needs US military assistance, which the United States can threaten to curtail (though it is in America’s interests for it to continue), while Iran’s new president, Hassan Rouhani, might be at least approachable on the question of mutual restraint on arming Syrian civil war factions.²² While Iran may derive limited benefits from supporting Shi’a and their affiliates in Syria and elsewhere, Iran and the United States have a mutual interest in containing intra-Islamic conflict in general. Should diplomacy not work, there are few additional nonmilitary instruments available as the United States and most other countries are already observing strict diplomatic isolation and economic sanctions on Iran for its nuclear activities. There may be a few military options, though, such as harassing Iranian flights to Syria, or demonstrations of regional military power (large combined exercises, for example); but those have both dangers and limited impact. There are no simple solutions.

To implement containment, the United States must bolster its regional forces, and quickly augment regional friendly forces. American forces are now in Jordan, providing Patriot batteries and F-16 combat aircraft; and Jordan has requested additional US assistance in securing its border with Syria to stem the flow of smuggling and illegal weapons.²³ The United States has stationed forces in Turkey for decades, and recently moved Patriot batteries to the Syrian-Turkish border after Syria

20 “Arms Shipments Seen from Sudan to Syrian Rebels,” *The New York Times*, August 12, 2013. Sudan officially denies shipping arms to Syria.

21 Michael R. Gordon, Eric Schmitt, and Tim Arango, “Flow of Arms to Syria Through Iraq Persists, to U.S. Dismay,” *The New York Times*, December 1, 2012.

22 The Iranian president has limited influence over Iranian foreign and security policy, which is largely the responsibility of the Supreme Leader.

23 Thom Shanker, “Jordan Asks for Assistance in Securing Syrian Border,” *The New York Times*, August 14, 2013.

launched Scud missiles near that border. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) air base at Incirlik is only 100 km from the Syrian border. American forces have largely evacuated Iraq, but Iraqi president Nuri Al-Maliki has requested US assistance to deal with the estimated 30,000 al Qaeda fighters, many from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.²⁴ Maliki suspects this group of carrying out a spate of bomb attacks against oil infrastructure and civilians, and while such bombings have been too much a part of Iraqi life since 2003, their escalation may be related to the fact that many of the 30,000 al Qaeda members are from Syria.²⁵ Here US surveillance would be useful in containing the flow of such insurgents over the Iraqi-Syrian border, as it would on the other borders Syria shares. Some of the surveillance may be armed as well, and though attacks from drones are controversial, the unknown danger of a lurking drone may deter some insurgents from border crossings.

The Obama Administration faces a strategic quandary relative to Lebanon; it has intervened in Lebanon before, in 1958 and 1982-84, though it has shown relative indifference to Lebanon's tragic quarrels, as in the 1975-90 civil war, and the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel. Previous engagement history does not clarify the strategic value of Lebanon and its political status for the United States. However, should the Syrian conflict begin to embroil Lebanon in a significant way (large-scale border crossings, shelling of Lebanese targets, engagement with the Lebanese military, for example), the risk is high the conflict will escalate further. So while neither the United States nor Lebanon would want American forces on Lebanese territory, the United States Navy could maintain a posture of "off-shore balancing," ready to support the Lebanese army in attempting to repel any Syrian attack on Lebanese soil. A complicating factor, however, is the possibility that forces beyond those of the Asad regime might cross into Lebanon; for example, Hezbollah and Lebanese Sunni jihadist forces could fight in northern Lebanon (there have already been skirmishes), and while the fighting might relate to the Syrian civil war, it would be very difficult for the United States to intervene in such a fight. Still, the Obama administration is bolstering its military assistance to Lebanon, increasing training for Lebanese military in particular.

Conclusions

The Syrian civil war has produced a considerable dilemma for American policymakers. How do we respond to a crisis where there are no clear choices? It is in US interests to see the Syrian civil war end, but 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. Like some other protracted wars (Lebanon's civil war, Somalia, Rwanda, for example), the Syrian civil war may end only when the participants are exhausted, or when their outside patrons stop supplying them with the means to fight on. While the Asad regime has committed moral outrages (as have some opposition groups), the United States does not have the ability to terminate or reduce the Syrian regime's behavior, and probably a greater chance to worsen the fighting. As noted earlier, al Qaeda and its associated radical groups could be the

24 Salah Nasrawi, "Iraq Eyes US to Fight Insurgents," *Al-Ahram*, August 21, 2013.

25 Ibid.

real winner in a post-Asad Syria, though the United States does not have the means to shape the Syrian conflict. The clear danger to American regional interests is in containing the civil war within Syria, and though containment of it will be difficult under the best of circumstances, it is on this mission that the United States must commit its military forces. The White House must aid regional countries to keep the fighting contained within Syrian borders, must study the lessons of Cold War containment, and must quickly implement it, while at the same time living with the consequences of several decades of costly military engagements. The United States must also avoid entanglement in the growing intra-sect conflict within regional Islam because errors here could only fan religious passion and extend the fighting. One core reality is that none of the regional countries benefit from the spread of the Syrian civil war, regardless of their relationship with the United States, other regional countries, or religious orientation. If the fire spreads, everyone gets burned. Containment is in the interests of all countries bordering Syria, and the White House must stress and build on that point in its own policy. While containment never offers easy choices, and does not offer them now, it should still be the central emphasis for the United States as it confronts the Syrian civil war.

