

AUGUST 28, 2013

COMMENTARY

Syria and the Responsibility to Protect

By Ambassador Richard S. Williamson

As we seem to be on the cusp of some military action in Syria (limited though it may be), there are many and varied considerations.

Syria has become a proxy war for a rising Shiite Iran seeking hegemony in the region against our Gulf State allies. Syria has become a vehicle for Moscow to get back in the Middle East game with aspirations that will compromise U.S. interests.

The bleed from the ongoing Syria conflict is destabilizing to Turkey, our NATO ally. It also is destabilizing our ally Jordan as well as Lebanon and Iraq. And on several levels it threatens Israeli welfare and security.

By not acting sooner, President Obama allowed a vacuum to linger in war-torn Syria that al-Qaeda and other extremists have rushed in to fill.

And now President Bashar al-Asad has crossed a red line by using chemical weapons against his own people repeatedly, killing over 1,000 Syrians this time. It is not only a self-proclaimed red line for President Obama (though one from which he's backed off before) but it is a red line for the civilized world.

After the horrors from gas on World War I's Western Front, the civilized world made clear in a variety of ways and means that chemical weapons are absolutely unacceptable. Their use is a war crime. Since then two monsters, Adolf Hitler and Saddam Hussein, dared use chemical weapons. Now we have a third, Bashar al-Asad.

The United States and others have no choice but to brutally punish Asad for this trespass, or accept not only that he will use chemical weapons again and again, but that the absolute prohibition has become porous and other monsters will employ it in the future, perhaps with some frequency.

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Beyond these compelling real politik considerations, also there is a serious question about American values as America has sat on the sidelines detached, disengaged and seemingly disinterested as 100,000 Syrians have been killed and countless other casualties have risen.

The president, his team, and sophisticates in the pundit class have pointed out that America cannot dictate events in Syria as if that's an excuse to do nothing. But a shrug of the shoulders here is wrong for U.S. interests and it is wrong morally.

America has never been able to dictate events in distant lands. But we can influence them. America has the largest foreign policy toolbox in the world with a vast array of instruments at our disposal. And when used skillfully we can bend the course of events to protect our interests and project our values.

As Barak Obama said in justifying his military action in Libya, "It is true that America cannot use our military wherever repression occurs ... But that cannot be an argument for never acting on behalf of what's right."

America was the first nation founded on human rights. And America has allowed those values to animate our foreign policy. It is those values and their light guiding America that has made America Exceptional.

In 2005, President Bush joined with other world leaders in endorsing a Responsibility to Protect innocents against atrocity crimes. As President Bush's Special Envoy to Sudan I witnessed his personal commitment to protect in Oval office meetings as he brokered an end to Sudan's North/South war and worked to alleviate the suffering in Darfur.

The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) is a powerful emerging international norm. President Obama has given it lip service and he has taken modest, yet important, bureaucratic steps to give R2P meaning. But the real test is on the ground in situations such as Syria where atrocities towards innocents is a daily occurrence.

On March 28, 2011, in addressing Libya, President Obama said, "To brush aside America's responsibility as a leader and – more importantly – our responsibilities to our fellow human beings under such circumstances would have been a betrayal of who we are. Some

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nations may be able to turn a blind eye to atrocities in other countries. The United States of America is different. And as President, I refuse to wait for the images of slaughter and mass graves before taking action.”

Well, Mr. President, in Syria there have been many images of slaughter, including by chemical weapons. And a token strike by cruise missiles or drones in response to Asad’s chemical weapon use (let alone his mass atrocities) will be PR not real action, it will be posture not policy, it will be a failure of our Responsibility to Protect. It will give the lie to your eloquent words on Libya. It will betray our values and fail in our responsibility and opportunity to lead toward a better world.

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