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The President is Right to Intervene, but Then What?

By Richard Fontaine

President Obama is right to take action in response to the Assad regime's chemical attack on Syrian civilians. Yet in the absence of a strategy that aims at ending the broader humanitarian catastrophe in Syria, the impending attacks will raise as many questions as they answer.

Bashar Asad's creeping brutality for two years successfully forestalled Western intervention in the Syrian civil war. His gas attack on civilians outside Damascus represents the most significant such use of chemical weapons since Saddam Hussein's notorious massacre of Iraqi Kurds in 1988. Asad's attack may well prove his "Srebrenica moment," akin to the galvanizing effect of that massacre on Western sensibilities.

It certainly warrants an American response. In employing chemical weapons against civilians, Asad has violated an international norm that the United States and others have worked laboriously to enforce. Should the Syrian regime face no consequences for the use of such weapons, it would likely be emboldened to do so again – as might other militaries in the future.

For this reason, President Obama established a red line that he repeatedly suggested would elicit an American response. Credibility matters in foreign policy, and by demonstrating that its words are backed with action, the United States can telegraph resolve that will matter in other areas, such as the effort to forestall Iran's development of a nuclear weapon.

Yet, when this engagement is over – and by all accounts it will be a highly limited attack – a raging civil war in Syria will endure, one that has left 100,000 dead and millions displaced. The war has flooded Turkey and Jordan with potentially unsustainable numbers of refugees while exporting instability to Iraq, Lebanon and elsewhere. And should the limited military strikes fail to turn the tide,

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Asad – backed by his Iranian, Russian and Hezbollah supporters – may well retain the momentum.

There are contradictions today in American policy: the President has said that Asad's fall is inevitable, but his spokesman suggested yesterday that regime change is not in the cards. The administration announced months ago that it would arm the rebels, but no weapons have yet made their way into rebel hands. The Secretary of State raised the possibility of a political settlement to the war in Syria, but no diplomatic process is in place. The coming military action will represent punitive strikes, but what if Asad uses chemical weapons again?

It is time to align the impending campaign with a strategy that seeks to accomplish key American aims – namely, the defeat of the Asad regime and its Iranian and Hezbollah allies and an end to the humanitarian destruction in Syria. The United States can change the equation in Syria by weakening the Asad regime or strengthening the rebels, or both. Despite the obvious difficulties, the United States should take real steps to enhance the training, communications and equipping of moderate rebels. And Washington should begin consulting with its partners on the shape of a post-Asad Syria. The impending military strikes may be limited in scope and duration, but American interests in Syria will endure long afterward.

Richard Fontaine is the President at the Center for a New American Security.

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The Danger of Strategic Distraction

By Shawn Brimley

The United States will respond to the horrifying use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime. It is in America's interests to be seen as leading the charge against such an abomination, and in the process help accelerate a dictator's departure. We should be under no illusions however that any use of force opens the door to a brighter future for Syria's oppressed and vulnerable population. Assad's departure will not end the civil war – it may even make things worse.

If President Obama feels he must employ U.S. military forces against aspects of the Syrian regime – so be it. I am confident that his advisors are seeking a way to maximize the pain on the regime without being drawn into a prolonged war. That will be a tough challenge but those are the likely contours of decision-making around the conference table in the Situation Room.

The larger danger of the United States being drawn into yet another war in the Middle East is that it consumes any possibility of seriously advancing an affirmative foreign policy agenda for the president's second term. Right now the basic foreign policy accomplishments of this administration are three: ending the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; killing Bin Laden; and rebalancing to Asia. The first two are major accomplishments but they essentially involved navigating through inherited challenges. Rebalancing to Asia is really the only affirmative foreign policy accomplishment that is likely to resonate beyond the daily headlines into the history books.

In the blink of an eye the first year of the second term will be over. Three years is not a lot of time to create new affirmative opportunities in foreign policy, reorient U.S. tools of statecraft in a meaningful way, and lock-in lasting accomplishments. Therefore any decision to use force in the Middle East needs to be considered as possibly

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obviating any chance to make substantial further forward progress in rebalancing to Asia.

As pressing as the challenge in Syria seems to be, it is not the long game. The story of the first fifty years of the 21st century will be the rise of China and India as major global players – superpowers even – affecting the very fiber of the international system in substantial ways simply by their rates of growth coupled with newly outward-looking foreign policies and national security interests. Closely intertwined with this fifty-year story will be whether or not President Obama and his successors husbanded and nurtured U.S. sources of economic, diplomatic and military power in ways that helped secure American security and prosperity in a very competitive international environment.

The pain and suffering of the Syrian people affects the dynamics of the Middle East in powerful ways, and the United States shouldn't turn a blind eye to them or the broader region. But no one should be under the illusion that war in Syria will position the United States for the real geopolitical challenges to come. The danger of strategic distraction is real.

Shawn Brimley is Vice President and Director of Studies at CNAS.

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How Does This End?

By LTG David W. Barno, USA (Ret.)

President Obama is poised to launch a military strike designed to “deter and degrade” Syrian President Bashar al-Asad’s ability to deliver chemical weapons against his own people. The strike will reportedly be limited in scope, aimed at smashing elements of Asad’s rockets, artillery and headquarters capable of launching chemical attacks. It will ostensibly come without risk to American lives, launched from U.S. Navy guided missile ships in the eastern Mediterranean.

But before the first U.S. cruise missile leaves its launcher for a Syrian target, the American people deserve to know the answer to David Petraeus’ famous question from the Iraq war: “Tell me how this ends?”

If the United States chooses to launch a limited strike, the most optimistic result is that Asad is chastened by U.S. military power, and deterred from further use of his chemical weaponry. In this scenario, the U.S. then steps back out of the conflict and Asad’s forces and the Syrian rebels go back to killing each other with conventional weapons.

In the real world of unintended (and unwelcome) consequences, all manner of unpleasant alternative scenarios could rapidly materialize. A limited U.S. strike could just as easily provoke Asad. The narrow scope of most likely U.S. action would still leave the bulk of Syria’s large and potent military untouched. Asad could next decide to strike civilians and rebels even more ruthlessly – to include even wider use of chemicals – daring the U.S. to escalate further. In this scenario, Asad emerges even stronger, having successfully faced down U.S. military power.

Reactions to a U.S. strike could include problematic regional and international responses as well. The Iranians would likely ramp up deliveries of military supplies and weaponry to Damascus. Teheran could also up the ante and prompt its regional ally

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Hezbollah to undertake terrorist attacks against U.S. and Israeli targets in the region.

The Russians, a key Syrian supporter, are also unlikely to be intimidated by American military strikes. They are more likely to lash out, increasing both their public and covert support for the Asad regime. Russia could also be expected to make even more trouble at the United Nations, rousing an anti-western coalition of countries who are deeply opposed to foreign interventions in other nations' internal affairs.

The problem with limited military strikes is that they almost never remain limited. The most likely outcome of such a strike now in Syria is that the war goes on with the regime emboldened, the region further inflamed, and continuing pressure on Washington to do more as the bloodshed continues. Asad will not back down; his survival is at stake. There is simply no good end in sight. The slope inevitably leads quickly downhill to deeper and deeper U.S. involvement. By initiating military strikes against Syria, the United States inevitably becomes a party to this vicious conflict. In doing so now, it will inextricably take on some responsibility for its resolution. Better to make a reasoned judgment to deliberately refrain from action than to enter a conflict from which an exit is impossible to fathom.

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Where is Asia?

By Patrick M. Cronin

American military action in Syria will not divert the United States from rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific region, but it will spotlight the need for Asian governments to step up their contribution to global security.

First, giving Asad a free pass to repeatedly use chemical weapons may embolden others, including North Korea's leadership, which has invested heavily in both chemical and nuclear weapon capabilities. Remember, too, that thanks to North Korea, Syria had its own clandestine nuclear program – at least until Israel took unilateral action to neutralize that program.

Second, the instability inside Syria has already affected neighboring countries, and wider instability in the Middle East could affect the energy resources upon which so much of Asia's economic growth depends. To argue that U.S. military action would only hasten broader regional conflict assumes that mass gassing of civilians is somehow more stabilizing than limited external intervention to rein in the atrocities of the Damascus regime.

Third, Syria matters for Asia because sovereignty is no shield against barbarity. Our global economy and transnational information age creates knowledge and builds connections that were unthinkable in past eras. The future course of the 21st century may be unknowable, but Asia and the rest of the world will be forced to pay more rather than less attention to stories about starvation, torture and public executions in North Korean prison camps, for example. The dead children of Syria command global, not just American, condemnation and action.

For America's allies and partners in Asia, the U.S. message should be not only that Syria matters for all nations, but that we will empower you to shoulder more burdens to buttress international peace and security. Some countries, such as Japan, should be applauded rather than castigated for trying to become greater security providers. Meanwhile other major countries, notably China and Russia, should recognize that impeding action in Syria weakens rather than

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preserves the United Nations Charter by demonstrating that even atrocious actions have no consequences.

While many in Asia may wish to use U.S. military engagement in Syria to launch a new debate about America's rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific, they should instead be mulling over an alternative glaring question: what is the purpose of growing Asian power? Is the rise of China and Asia's historical moment merely about self-aggrandizement, greed, and self-preservation?

The United States long ago realized that great power status brings great power responsibility. When a government flagrantly violates international norms with the use of chemical weapons against innocent civilians, it is unbecoming for other major powers to feign blindness and shirk responsibility. When you pass a mugging in the street, what does it say about you if keep on walking?

Many regional actors trumpet "the Asian century." But devoid of values backed by actions that advance the rule of law, the 21st century will be a throwback rather than an advancement for international peace and security. Actively impeding the actions of others or simply casting aspersions on those undertaking action push us all backwards. Self-aggrandizement fueled by global resources without global concern highlights the 'small Asian' problem – when a rising, dynamic region punches below its weight, thinks inwardly, and assumes that international security is as free and plentiful as oxygen.

Syria is not likely to affect the U.S. pivot. Great powers must be able to engage more than one region at a time. But the Syrian problem should stir debate about the Asian global responsibility deficit.

Patrick M. Cronin is a Senior Advisor and the Senior Director of the Asia-Pacific Security Program at the Center for a New American Security.

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International Law Constrains U.S. Action in Syria

By Phillip Carter

Two basic legal principles animate our current international system: states are sovereign, and they shall not, generally speaking, attack each other.

The United Nations charter reflects these two principles, and recognizes just two exceptions in its text: action taken pursuant to a UN Security Council resolution, and individual or collective self-defense. As the U.S. weighs action against the brutal Syrian regime, it must decide whether to abide by these laws, or abandon them in pursuit of some greater good to be gained through an arguably unlawful intervention in Syria.

For all its wanton disregard for the law, including but not limited to the use of chemical weapons and slaughter of civilians, the Syrian regime has not abdicated its sovereignty in a way that invites attack. Syria remains a sovereign state, which maintains relative control over its borders, economy, and population. As a matter of international law, the conflict within Syria is also an internal conflict. Despite its obvious horrors, the Syrian Civil War itself does not justify armed attack by outside states, anymore than the U.S. Civil War justified direct intervention by the British.

The first exception to the rule covers actions taken pursuant to a UN Security Council resolution. The US had this mandate in Libya, and for its recent actions in Afghanistan, Somalia and the first Gulf War, among others. However, because Russia and China plan to veto any intervention in Syria that comes before the Security Council, there appears to be no chance of obtaining UN sanction to act in Syria.

The second exception applies to cases of individual or collective self defense. Under this principle, Turkey, Jordan, Israel, Iraq, or Lebanon could respond directly to Syrian belligerent acts, as could their allies (such as NATO and the U.S.). However, despite the Syrian Civil War's spillover effects, and the occasional skirmish on the Turkish or Israeli borders, the war has arguably not yet created a *casus belli*.

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States have also long claimed a right under international law to pre-emptive self defense in cases of imminent attack. If the Syrian government indicated (by words or deed) that it planned an imminent attack on another state, that *could* justify an armed intervention. However, this theory suffers from a troubled past, not least because an extended version was used by the US to justify intervention in Iraq. This argument also relies heavily on proof of imminence and intent, which have been historically very hard to show.

Without a hard, legal justification under the UN Charter or another treaty, what remains is a softer, amorphous justification under the emerging legal norm of humanitarian intervention, or what some frame as the “responsibility to protect.” Under this theory, the U.S. will likely stitch together a case based on the horrors inside Syria, the need to enforce the Chemical Weapons Convention (which, problematically, Syria never signed), and the adverse regional security impacts of the Syrian Civil War, including refugee flows, weapons movements, and border instability. At best, as in Kosovo, this argument produces a war that is arguably unlawful but justifiable as a policy and political matter.

It may be tempting to dismiss these laws as undue constraints on American power and interest. However, doing so would be a mistake. Law has utility in foreign affairs beyond its mere codification of normative values. There are few slopes more slippery than that between peace and war. International laws, treaty obligations, and international institutions act as brakes on this slope, forcing nations to more carefully weigh the enormous costs and consequences of war, seek the consent and participation of stakeholders, and consider the broader principles and precedent at stake before embarking upon war. The Obama administration should slow the drumbeat for war, and more carefully build a legal foundation for armed intervention in the Syrian Civil War.

Phillip Carter is a Senior Fellow, Counsel, and Director of the Military, Veterans, and Society Program at the Center for a New American Security.

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The Limits of a Limited Strike

By Nora Bensahel

We now know a great deal about how a military strike against Syria might unfold – but it is far less clear what broader strategic objectives such a strike would achieve, if any. The reported details of the planned strike strongly resemble Operation Desert Fox in Iraq in 1998 – a limited four-day bombing campaign that had virtually no strategic effect.

According to administration officials, the strike would aim to degrade and deter the ability of the Asad regime to use chemical weapons again by targeting the headquarters, units, and delivery systems that may have been involved in last week's attack. The strike would apparently last for only a couple of days, using Tomahawk missiles and other weapons that can be launched safely beyond Syrian airspace, against an initial target list of less than 50 sites. White House spokesman Jay Carney stressed yesterday that any military action would respond solely to the use of chemical weapons in Syria and would not be "about regime change."

Yet such a limited strike would probably not achieve either objective. A strike would not directly target any chemical weapons sites – a wise choice, since otherwise Asad would further disperse these weapons around the country and make them even harder to locate. Yet this choice also limits the effects that a U.S. strike would have on those capabilities. Destroying the infrastructure surrounding Asad's chemical weapons is a much less direct route that would make it harder, but far from impossible, for the Asad regime to use its chemical weapons again, particularly since they can be launched from artillery pieces that cannot be easily destroyed by long-range standoff weapons.

Deterring Asad's regime from using chemical weapons again may be even more difficult. Asad is clearly a murderous dictator locked in a bitter struggle for survival, who will do whatever it takes to retain power. But we do not know why he conducted a significant chemical weapons attack last week – a question that both supporters and opponents of the regime are asking – and it is very hard to

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deter something from happening again when you don't know what caused it in the first place. If Asad believes, for whatever reason, that using chemical weapons can help him survive, then he will do so again, and the pain inflicted by a limited strike will not change his mind. And if deterrence fails in this way, then the United States may well feel compelled to respond more strongly next time, or begin to contemplate more invasive forms of intervention that may lead to regime change. This would start the country down the slippery slope towards the larger-scale intervention that administration officials clearly want to avoid.

Although some administration officials see Kosovo as a precedent for air strikes in Syria, it is actually much more likely to resemble Operation Desert Fox. For four days in December 1998, U.S. and British forces conducted air strikes against Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) facilities after the latest crisis over U.N. weapons inspectors. This limited campaign, conducted mostly with cruise missiles and bombers, failed to achieve its objectives because it had no clear effect on Iraq's WMD program and left all of the key strategic issues unresolved. A similarly limited campaign in Syria may well generate a similar outcome.

Dr. Nora Bensahel is a Senior Fellow and Deputy Director of Studies at the Center for a New American Security.

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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

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.

Ambassador Richard S. Williamson is an Adjunct Senior Fellow at the Center for a New American Security and a principal in Salisbury Strategies, LLP, a consulting firm.

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Consequence Considerations of a Syrian Strike

By LtCol Gordon D. Miller, USMC

President Bashar al-Asad's use of chemical weapons on his own people is a tragedy. If the United States conducts strikes in Syria, it is imperative that U.S. leadership at all levels be keenly focused on the intended objectives. Before any authorization is to attack Syria given, it is necessary to contemplate and take appropriate action to mitigate any negative consequences from the strikes. There are at least three potentially devastating consequences for the Middle East that could come from the strikes in Syria: Asad uses chemical weapons again, an Iranian military response, and Israeli involvement.

Part of the rationale for the strikes is to punish President Asad's use of chemical weapons and deter other nations from doing the same. If President Asad were to absorb the strikes and use chemical weapons again, this would be a significant blow to the United States' credibility and it would be compelled to escalate the assault on Syria to achieve the original objectives. Further escalatory attacks on Syria would result in more international criticism and could entangle the United States in the Syrian internal conflict. It is critical that the strikes are perceived by President Asad as threatening his interests. It would be prudent to have a detailed plan for follow-on actions in case the Syrian regime doesn't take the first round of strikes seriously.

The overt Iranian support for the Asad regime has the two countries intimately linked. With the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force on the ground in Syria, the strikes could be seen as a step towards offensive operations against Iran. This potential for a proxy war between the United States and Iran could sour the burgeoning relationship with the new Iranian President Hasan Rouhani. Further, the strikes might precipitate a military reaction by Iran against Israel or American assets in the region. Escalatory military action in the Middle East would be a global worst case scenario. Proactive messaging with all parties involved is necessary to support stabilization of the Middle East during this time of crisis.

The influence of Israel in the region cannot be underestimated. Encouraging Israeli restraint in the current situation should be a key aspect to the construction of the coalition. The stressed relationship between the United States and Israel might embolden them to execute their own military actions. The Arab League already has condemned the use of chemical weapons but has not provided support for military action against Syria. Any Israeli involvement in the strikes, however indirect, would further erode any pan-Arab support for military actions against Syria. Israeli military strikes against Syria could lead to retaliatory attacks on Israel by state or non-state actors in the region, detrimentally destabilizing the Middle East. Extraordinary restraint by Israel during this crisis is a paramount to maintaining stability in the region.

United States leadership at all levels must conduct prudent crisis management planning to ensure the current situation doesn't generate adverse reactions. There is a possibility that responses by Syria, Iran, and/or Israel could turn the situation into a regional catastrophe. It is imperative that proper targeting and prudent messaging be thoroughly in synch with each other to prevent unintended consequences. Although these worst case scenarios have a low probability of occurring, they must be included in the planning for the impending operations to help prevent the potential for a catastrophic situation in the Middle East.

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COMMENTARY

Refugees and Regional Security Interests

By Katherine Kidder

Asad's decision to use chemical weapons on his own civilian population evokes a strong sense of humanitarian outrage – and rightfully so. Yet the toll of conflict on the civilian population began well before the use of chemical weapons. Since conflict broke out in 2011, the official civilian death rate continually registers in at 5,000 per month – likely a low estimate, given the difficulty of data collection in the war-torn country. At least 6,561 of those deaths were children; 1,729 were children under 10 years old. For many, the risks associated with staying in their homes is deemed too high.

Humanitarian impulse aside, any long-term strategic plans for a response in Syria must take into account the impact of the conflict on the civilian population, and--more importantly – subsequent implications for regional stability. Of particular importance is the increased flow of refugees throughout a region already wracked by conflict and unrest. Approximately 2 million Syrians have fled the country since the beginning of the war; 1 million of them in first half of 2013, with projections of another 1.5 million by year's end. The five largest recipients of Syrian refugees are Lebanon (708,046), Jordan (520,287), Turkey (440,773), Iraq (155,258) and Egypt (109,845). The financial burden on the host countries tops out at \$5 Billion USD--a difficult amount to absorb, even if host economies were thriving. Within host countries, tensions run high among the refugee community due to scarce housing and unemployment; within U.N.-run refugee camps, depleting food rations create an environment of insecurity.

The impact of refugee flows on regional stability is measurable, particularly in the case of Iraq.

Since August 15, more than 50,000 Syrians have sought refuge in Iraq. The cross-border movement masks a more menacing trend: the

influx of Syrian al Qaeda forces into Iraq. The state of chaos in Syria provides a degree of sanctuary to al Qaeda, who is able to attract jihadi recruits, train them in Syria, and send them into Iraq. The result is a 300-600% uptick in sectarian violence within Iraq, threatening hard-fought gains in stability.

The reality is that the decision to intervene- or the decision not to intervene- has significant ramifications on regional dynamics and stability. Continuing with the status quo essentially guarantees that the mass exodus throughout the region will persist. An intervention-particularly an intervention that is not nested within a larger strategic context- poses the risk of increasing chaos and displacement without a plan for reintroducing stability to Syria or the region. A beneficial intervention can only be accomplished with clear end goals and a roadmap with which to achieve them. The Obama administration must articulate a sound strategy before implementing operations; our interests – and the Syrian people – depend on it.

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