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Intervention in Syria will only escalate violence

by Stephen Zunes



Syrian soldiers join a march in Damascus April 7 to celebrate the anniversary of the founding of the Baath Party and in support of President Bashar Assad. (Newscom/AFP/Getty Images/Louai Beshara)

Viewpoint

Although the impulse to try to end the ongoing repression by the Syrian regime against its own people through foreign military intervention is understandable, it would be a very bad idea.

Empirical studies have repeatedly demonstrated that international military interventions in cases of severe repression actually exacerbate violence in the short term and can only reduce violence in the longer term if the intervention is impartial or neutral. Other studies demonstrate that foreign military interventions actually increase the duration of civil wars, making the conflicts longer and bloodier, and the regional consequences more serious, than if there were no intervention. In addition, military intervention would likely trigger a "gloves off" mentality that would dramatically escalate the violence on both sides.

Some proponents of Western intervention cite the "success" of Libya as a precedent for Syria. Not only are there still serious questions regarding the necessity of armed struggle and foreign intervention in that

case, Libya hardly constitutes a good model of a democratic transformation. Unlike the peaceful and relatively orderly transition to democracy going on in neighboring Tunisia, where largely nonviolent actions toppled the hated Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali dictatorship in January of last year, Libya is struggling with rival armed militias fighting each other for the spoils when they aren't tracking down and summarily executing suspected supporters of the old regime.

Even if one wants to count Libya as a "success" for foreign intervention, however, there are important differences between the two countries.

Although Libyan dictator Moammar Gadhafi during his final years had largely alienated virtually every segment of Libyan society, the Syrian regime still has a strong social base. A fairly large minority of Syrians -- consisting of Alawites, Christians and other minority communities, Baath Party loyalists and government employees, and the crony capitalist class that the regime has nurtured -- still back the regime. There are certainly dissidents within all of these sectors. But the regime will only solidify its support in the case of foreign intervention.

The Baath Party is organized in virtually every town and neighborhood. No such organization existed under Gadhafi. Unlike Iraq's Baath Party, which Saddam Hussein ruled with an iron fist in a matter reminiscent of Stalin's takeover of the Soviet Communist Party, the Baath Party is far more than President Bashar Assad. It has ruled Syria for nearly 50 years. And with an ideology rooted in Arab nationalism, socialism and anti-imperialism, it could mobilize its hundreds of thousands of members to resist the foreign invaders. Hundreds have quit the party in protest of the killings of nonviolent protesters, but few defections could be expected if foreigners suddenly attacked the country.

The history of U.S. relations with Syria makes the United States a particularly inappropriate advocate for military intervention.

The United States has backed the right-wing Israeli government in its illegal occupation and colonization of southwestern Syria, which Israel invaded in June 1967, despite offers by the Syrian government to recognize Israel and provide security guarantees in return for a full Israeli withdrawal. Indeed, in 2007, the United States effectively blocked Israel from resuming negotiations with Syria from fear that a successful return of the occupied Golan Plateau would strengthen Assad politically.

U.S. Navy jets repeatedly attacked Syrian positions in Lebanon during 1983-84 and U.S. Army commandos attacked a border village in eastern Syria in 2008, killing a number of civilians. While defending Israel's 22-year occupation of southern Lebanon and blocking the enforcement of U.N. Security Council resolutions demanding Israeli withdrawal, Congress used these same resolutions to impose sanctions on Syria because of the stationing of its troops in Lebanon. Even after Syria withdrew in 2005, the United States refused to lift the sanctions until Syria unilaterally halted development of certain kinds of weapons systems already possessed by such U.S. allies as Israel, Egypt and Turkey.

A nearly unanimous bipartisan bill passed by Congress and signed into law in 2003 made the ludicrous assertion that Syria represented a threat to the national security interests of the United States and that Syria would be "held accountable" for what it referred to as "hostile actions" against Americans. Passage of this bill led the late Sen. Robert Byrd, D-W.Va., to warn that Congress was building a case for military action against Syria. As a result, the Syrian regime can claim that the United States has been looking for years for an excuse to invade and that the ongoing repression would not be the reason for U.S. military intervention, but simply the excuse.

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With this kind of history, U.S. military intervention would simply play into the hands of the repressive autocrats in Damascus, who have decades of experience manipulating the Syrian people's strong sense of nationalism to the regime's benefit. The regime can point out that the United States is the primary military supplier to the world's remaining dictatorships, including the repressive monarchy in Bahrain, which brutally suppressed an overwhelmingly nonviolent pro-democracy struggle last year -- with the help of the oppressive and theocratic U.S.-backed Saudi regime, and with few objections from Washington. It would not be difficult for Assad and other Syrian leaders to assert that the United States doesn't care about democracy in Syria anymore than it does about democracy elsewhere in the Middle East but is using the 'promotion of democracy' as an excuse to overthrow a government that happens to oppose Washington's hegemonic designs on the region.

Talk of military intervention can only benefit the regime and weaken the force that is far more likely to end the tragic violence and bring forth a new democratic Syria: that of civil society and the power of nonviolent action. Indeed, it was this kind of power that has brought down scores of brutal dictatorships -- from the Philippines to Poland and from Chile to Serbia -- without the help of foreign military intervention.

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