



# Safe Area for Syria

**An Assessment of Legality,  
Logistics and Hazards**

Prepared by  
**Michael Weiss**

Reviewed by  
**Brigadier General Akil Hachim (Ret.)**  
Military Advisor to Syrian National Council

Edited by  
**Ausama Monajed**

Transitional  
Period Policy  
Research



STRATEGIC RESEARCH AND  
COMMUNICATION CENTRE

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Strategic Research & Communication Centre  
Office 36, 88-90 Hatton Garden, Holborn  
London EC1N 8PN, United Kingdom

Email: [info@strescom.org](mailto:info@strescom.org)  
Telephone: +442030868989  
Website: [www.strescom.org](http://www.strescom.org)

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# I. Introduction

The Syrian National Council (SNC) is entering a critical phase in the Syrian revolution whereby the hope of a continued campaign of passive resistance to an exceptionally brutal and unrestrained regime is becoming more and more akin to a suicide pact. United States (U.S.) and European Union (E.U.) sanctions on Syria have indeed begun to take a serious economic toll on President Bashar al-Assad regime's ability to finance the state apparatus of repression. They will, in the long run, seriously impact the regime's ability to sustain its hold indefinitely over key elements of society. But sanctions have not stopped or slowed the murder, arrest, child-rape and torture of ordinary Syrians. Ten months of peaceful protests have been met with unremitting barbarism the likes of which have not been witnessed elsewhere in the Arab Spring. More than 5,000 people have been killed, over 50,000 declared missing, another 59,000 incarcerated and upwards of 16,000 dispossessed by the Assad regime.

Assad bears full culpability for the mass killings being committed daily by his paramilitary, special security, and armed forces. All orders, planning and decision making behind what the United Nations (U.N.) Human Rights Council has termed "crimes against humanity" are derived directly or indirectly from Assad and his inner circle. International efforts to weaken the regime must thus be part of strategic effort to bring Assad and his senior loyalists to justice immediately.

The failure to secure a United Nations Security Council resolution that would impose comprehensive international sanctions, the lack of international consensus on enacting more robust measures to protect a vulnerable populace, the regime's incitement of sectarian violence and its decision to launch multiple full-scale offensive military campaigns against civilians all suggest that prolonging decisive action to topple the Assad regime could very well plunge the Syrian state into a devastating and protracted conflict. Failed statehood is one outcome. A humanitarian catastrophe on par with the 1994 Rwandan genocide is another very real likelihood.

In the interest of assessing all suggested options for hastening the end of a totalitarian dictatorship and/or averting a mass humanitarian catastrophe, this paper examines the way in which foreign military intervention could work for Syria. It does not advocate a policy but rather offers options while examining necessary political preconditions, legal rationales, logistics and possible hazards..

## II. Preconditions for Intervention

On 19 December, the SNC formally endorsed foreign military intervention for Syria, calling on the “Arab League, the United Nations, and the international community to take urgent action with regard to the protection of Syrian civilians and activists by creating safe havens and protected zones.” This represents a significant about-face from the institution’s founding National Consensus Charter, which categorically rejected such a contingency. Moreover, after initially ruling out “armed resistance,” in contrast to the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the SNC has now also “pledged to support” the FSA as a military custodian of the revolution.

These developments, while clarifying, nevertheless do not resolve two outstanding challenges that the SNC must overcome before it can make a convincing case for any form of foreign military intervention: its lack of international legitimacy as a government-in-exile, and its disunity with other oppositional elements in Syria, most notably the “independent” brigades of rebel soldiers.

### a. Lack of Legitimacy

The only government to formally recognize the SNC as Syria’s government-in-exile -- or the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people -- is Libya. Other governments have established official representatives to liaise with the SNC, but thus far have not taken the step of full recognition. Furthermore, Western countries have repeatedly stated that recognition will not be granted until more internal organization takes place. The SNC must ensure that its legitimacy derives from a demonstrated willingness to respond to the needs, interests and demands of the Syrian people, who face the daily consequences of standing up to the regime’s brutality. The legitimacy required to make any demands upon the international community, including intervention, on behalf of the Syrian people must be based on a consensus reached among the activists and communities who suffer under the ongoing crackdown.

### b. Disunity

The Syrian opposition continues to suffer from disunity, most importantly in the political movement’s lack of control over the armed component of the revolution – the ex-Army forces now fighting the Assad regime. The current structure of the insurgency is atomized, hapless and beholden to no decisive authority. Many of these forces are housed in dozens of independent “brigades,” named either for historical figures or recent victims of the Syrian uprising, e.g., the “Hamza al-Khatib Brigade” or the “Salaheddine Al-Ayoubi Brigade.” In Western media portrayals, however, the Free

Syrian Army (FSA) is presented as the encompassing organization under which all rebel soldiers operate. Estimates for the total number of forces under the FSA's direct command range from 1,200 to 17,000, although senior FSA spokesmen claim the larger figure is correct.

There is still much ambiguity regarding the FSA's true capabilities and whether the high-profile attacks against regime targets are actually being ordered from this group or are being conducted by independent brigades. The surprise raid on the Air Force intelligence complex in Harasta (6 miles from Damascus), said to have been carried out by an independent brigade, and other attacks on Ba'ath Party paramilitary forces in Damascus, said to have been carried out by a brigade loosely affiliated with the FSA, suggest that while defectors are well-armed, organized and not afraid of taking the fight directly to the regime's armed forces, they are largely running their own insurgency policy in Syria.

The approximately 30 commanders headed by Col. Riyad al-Asaad who claim to control the Free Syrian Army from their safe haven in Antakya, Turkey, have thus far declined formal partnership with other coordination committees opposition groups, and have even formed their own rival political apparatus, the FSA Military Council, which seeks to topple the regime, provide cover for civilian protestors, protect public and private property and safeguard against reprisal actions once the regime has fallen. The Military Council has also announced its intention to liaise directly with foreign governments in order to build support and (most likely) secure direct financial or material assistance. FSA representatives recently travelled to Washington, D.C., to lobby the U.S. State Department for support, but were rebuffed due to their lack of organization and insufficient numbers.

At the last meeting between the FSA and SNC, the only outcome was a rhetorical promise by the FSA to order defectors to engage in exclusively "defensive" operations to protect civilians. Yet, as stated, it is unclear to what extent the FSA even controls the high-profile "offensive" operations being carried out in Syria. Moreover, this guarantee seems increasingly irrelevant in light of the escalating atrocities being committed by the regime, particularly in the battleground city of Homs.

The revolution must be father to the post-Assad nation. If a rebel army is to prove effective and not work at cross purposes with a potential international military intervention, it will need to be brought under the joint command of a civilian-led military transitional council, which will liaise directly with the intervening power(s). The SNC and FSA must therefore begin direct talks to form just such a council, with a clear operational strategy and chain of command. Ideally, SNC chairman ought to be seen as commander-in-chief, with an FSA-appointed military advisor to answer to the SNC's Executive Council.

### III. The Legal Case for Intervention

Article 2(4) of the Charter of the U.N. prohibits the “threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence” of a member state. The first exception to this prohibition is the authorization of force by a U.N. Security Council (UNSC) resolution. The clearest path toward intervention, a UNSC resolution would condemn the Assad regime for its 10-month-long violent suppression of civil protests, impose punishing sanctions upon Syria, refer key members of the regime to the International Criminal Court (ICC) for investigations into war crimes and crimes against humanity and seek international military assistance in protecting the people of Syria.

A resolution simply criticizing the Assad regime could still be used a pretext for intervention

A resolution simply criticizing the Assad regime could still be used a pretext for intervention. This was the justification for Operation Provide Comfort, the campaign begun in April 1991 which offered humanitarian aid and military protection to the embattled Kurds of Iraq. This was undertaken despite the fact that UNSC 688 did not authorize intervention per se, but called upon Member States to “contribute to...humanitarian relief efforts.”

The American, British, French and Turkish governments interpreted this text to license the deployment of both ground forces and aircraft to jointly defend Kurds fleeing Iraq for the Turkish border. The operation was coordinated at the NATO-leased Incirlik Air Base near Adana, Turkey. Operation Provide Comfort was followed by Operation Northern Watch and Operation Southern Watch, the 1991 no-fly zones imposed on the Kurdish north and Shi’ite south of Iraq.

#### a. UNSC Resolution

Because of the purported fear of “mission creep,” the UNSC route has failed in Syria’s case, most recently in October 2011 when a much-diluted resolution threatening only sanctions was vetoed by permanent UNSC members Russia and China. The Kremlin has been far more vocal in opposing international sanctions against Syria, and even more vocal in opposing military intervention. “It is not in the interests of anyone to send messages to the opposition in Syria or elsewhere that if you reject all reasonable offers we will come and help you as we did in Libya,” Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said recently. Although there was previously some suggestion that if the Arab League renounced Assad, Russia and China would be persuaded to support some form of censure and penalty, neither Eastern powers have shown any willingness to accede to a UNSC resolution (in fact, Russia in particular has only increased its hostility to one since the League suspended Syria’s membership and passed sanctions against the regime). Having abstained from UNSC 1973, which

authorized a no-fly zone in Libya, Russia claims that NATO overextended its remit in that conflict by continuing operations unto the fall of Gaddafi regime. To safeguard against another Western intervention in the Middle East, and to certify its \$4 billion arms contract with the Assad regime, Russia's last aircraft carrier, the Admiral Kuznetsov, the Admiral Chabanenko destroyer and two submarines, are all reportedly en route to the Russian-controlled naval base in Tartus. The Russian Federation continues to supply the Assad regime with weaponry.

### **b. "Uniting for Peace": the UN General Assembly**

One theoretical way to spearhead a legitimate intervention without a UNSC resolution is for the UN General Assembly to invoke the "Uniting for Peace" resolution (377 A), a measure established to circumvent continued deadlock at the Security Council. Very rarely invoked, and with no guarantee of success, "Uniting for Peace" famously did succeed in 1950 under the so-called "Acheson Plan" (named for U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson). In this case, it served as a way of authorizing "collective measures" including the "use of armed force" during the Korean War, despite consistent Soviet vetoes in the UNSC. An Emergency Special Session (ESS) of the General Assembly can be called either by a procedural vote in the UNSC or within 24 hours of a majority of General Assembly members requesting one of the UN Secretary-General.

If a resolution were passed for Syria similarly authorizing the use of force, this would provide a legal justification for intervention. The main difficulty, of course, would be convincing the majority of the General Assembly members to support it, a contingency that seems remote without strenuous lobbying from the Arab League and the Organization of the Islamic Cooperation (OIC), which has 57 member states drawn from the Muslim-majority and Arab countries.

Another basis for an exception to Article 2(4) in the Charter of the United Nations is a reasonable invocation of self-defence, which is stipulated in Article 51: "Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations." There are two ways in which Article 51 may be invoked vis-à-vis Syria.

The first is to have foreign powers petition that the Syrian crackdown and gross human rights violations perpetrated by the regime represent a grave risk to regional peace and stability (the escalating Syrian refugee crisis, the descent of the country into a de facto state of civil war, etc.). Accepting that any intervening power has neither the annexation of Syrian territory nor the political control of the Syrian people in mind, that power could then undertake a humanitarian mission to preserve peace and stability.

Turkey clearly has the strongest case to make in this regard, as it is currently hosting more than 10,000 Syrian refugees on its border as well as the senior command corps of the FSA, which is

in a de facto state of war with the Assad regime. Additionally, the recent assault on the Turkish embassy in Damascus and its consulates in Aleppo and Lattakia, or the attack on the Turkish bus convoy of pilgrims en route from Mecca, can be read as Assad-underwritten hostile acts against a neighbouring state. The risk of Turkey being drawn into a regional conflict is high, although the Turkish government will likely require Western and Arab League consensus and matching political or material commitment prior to pursuing a course of intervention. Ankara has not yet engaged in direct acts of "active opposition" that would seriously threaten the survival of the regime in the near term.

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's fierce denunciation of Assad and the gross human rights violations of his security forces is an encouraging sign that the Turkish government could further take steps that would hasten the transition from totalitarianism to democracy.

Another strategy for invoking Article 51 could be for Western powers to recognize the SNC as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people, and for the SNC to then request international military assistance in self-defence of Syria, arguing that the Assad regime constituted an illegitimate "invading" power. International human rights law solidly backs this option; the Assad regime's claim of sovereignty cannot provide a pretext for perpetrating mass atrocities against the civilian population nor depriving citizens of their fundamental human rights, as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine clearly applies in this case, and could be invoked as grounds for international intervention as was the case in the 2011 Libyan intervention. The actions by the U.N Human Rights committee to bring forth a resolution denouncing the Assad regime for its "terrible atrocities" further lend credibility to this track.

## IV. A Syrian Safe Area

Since the fall of Tripoli, and especially following the capture and killing of Muammar Gaddafi, calls within Syria for a “no-fly zone” have increased in volume. Photographs show activists brandishing signs asking for NATO fighter planes over Damascus; there is even a social network group titled “NATO4Syria.” And yet, calls for a “no-fly zone” connote *some* form of international military assistance, not necessarily the one described. Even in the Western press, references to a no-fly zone or to the “Libyan model” go unexamined in terms of their applicability to Syria, even though any sensible or feasible intervention in Syria would be *sui generis*. Turkey has been mulling the imposition of a “buffer zone” for months, to little tangible effect. Yet if ever a moment to intervene in Syria presented itself to Turkey, it should have arrived in mid-June, when more than 10,000 refugees from Jisr al-Shoghhour fled to Antakya, or after the recent regime-sponsored raids on the Turkish embassy in Damascus, consulates in Aleppo and Lattakia and *hajj* pilgrims in Homs. It has become clear that Ankara is not going to launch a unilateral military operation against a neighbouring country that, less than a year ago, was being hailed as its great commercial and diplomatically. Turkey has never conducted a humanitarian intervention on its own and is unlikely to begin one now.

Therefore, a multilateral intervention similar to Operation Provide Comfort and either led by NATO or by an Anglo-French-American-Turkish coalition would be the most feasible option for military intervention in Syria. At present, the most achievable option would be to establish a “safe area” in the country to provide refuge for embattled civilians from other cities and towns, a base of operations for the designated political leadership of the Syrian opposition as well as a military command centre -- in other words, a Syrian Benghazi. Without such a domestic hub for a transitional government, the opposition will find it incredibly difficult to formulate a long-term strategy, much less adaptable tactics, for toppling the regime. A cohesive physical space for freedom of movement within Syria is a necessary precondition for toppling the regime, if only to facilitate communication between the SNC and FSA as well as within the opposition more generally. A safe area would also house an encryption-enabled communications directorate featuring unobstructed

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wireless access and satellite transmission signals for broadcasting "Free Syria" television and radio programs to the rest of the country.

There is currently a favourable window of opportunity for this option. The regular army has been exhausted due to its prolonged deployment in multiple urban and rural areas throughout the country. Morale among regular troops has plummeted and the ability of the regime to logistically sustain units other than the Special Forces and *shabbiha* militia is increasingly tenuous. The risks associated with the most robust option -- an aerial campaign matched by a small ground operation -- are mitigated in part by the relative weakness of Assad's regular forces and military assets. Offering the regime additional time to consolidate and explore alternative means to shore up their resources will enhance risk for future intervention.

Although the psychological and strategic impact of a safe area cannot be quantified, it should not be dismissed nor underestimated. The boost to activists' morale in knowing that a part of Syria has been unalterably liberated is likely to be significant, particularly in light of the fact that after nine months of facing brutality and traumatising, the activists are still protesting daily. For similar reasons, the rate of military defections will likely increase if soldiers discover that, rather than living in exile in Turkey or Lebanon or Jordan (where their fate is uncertain), they have the option of returning to a revolutionary headquarters. Because the Syrian Air Force might attempt combat sorties and try to obstruct the establishment of a safe area, a pre-emptive aerial campaign would have to be waged to neutralize the regime's air defence systems, particularly in Aleppo and Latakia and in and around Damascus.

Given the dynamics on the ground, the best location in which to establish a safe area would be Idlib province in Jisr al-Shoghour, near the Turkish border and Mediterranean shore. Not only are the bulk of defecting soldiers located there already, but the devastation wrought by a multi-pronged invasion of Jisr al-Shoghour last June has resulted in high anti-Assad sentiment in this province. Additionally, Jisr al-Shoghour is sandwiched between mountainous terrain, with a valley region that extends northward into Turkey and southward into the rest of Syria, making ground offensives by the regime from east or west difficult (this was one of the reasons that attack helicopters were used in June). A supply corridor from Turkey into Jisr al-Shoghour would benefit from the natural fortification of Syrian topography.

An air strike could be waged by U.S., British, French and Turkish aircraft, facilitated by support aircraft from the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Jordan, all of which participated in enforcing the Libyan no-fly zone. U.S. Special Forces, the Special Air Service and Turkish and Qatari Special Forces could coordinate on the ground with rebel Syrian soldiers to establish an 11-square-kilometer perimeter around Jisr al-Shoghour. Training of additional defectors could be conducted at Incirlik Air Base and other regional bases or at a makeshift rebel base in the safe area itself.

One incentive for launching a preliminary aerial campaign to secure a safe area is the proven weakness of Syria's air defence systems. In 2007, the Israeli Air Force was easily able to bomb the Syrian nuclear facility at al-Kibar, first by jamming the regime's radars to make it seem as if no planes were in the sky, then by creating "phantom" blips of hundreds of planes seemingly everywhere within Syrian air space. The U.S. has similar technology. In short, with multilateral support, and the coordination of rebel units on the ground, an aerial campaign can prove strategically decisive, while meeting U.S., Western and regional security aims -- including the stated desire of regional Arab and Western leaders to see Assad gone.

Creating an internationally protected zone on partitioned land in Syria is indeed a form of military intervention

As with Operation Provide Comfort, logistics of an aerial assault could be coordinated from Incirlik Air Base, the key NATO Southern Region base, which currently houses over 1,161 U.S., 215 British and 41 Turkish personnel and which the U.S. has used to run missions into Iraq. Additionally, the U.S. Sixth Fleet is stationed in Naples, Italy, and the UK's Sovereign Base Areas of Akrotiri and Dhekelia in Cyprus have more than sufficient capabilities to enforce a naval blockade of Syria, while countering any Syrian naval offensives. (Despite Russia's positioning in the Mediterranean, the chances are exceedingly slim that the Kremlin would engage U.S. or UK vessels in direct combat.)

Creating an internationally protected zone on partitioned land in Syria is indeed a form of military intervention. The creation and success of a safe area or partitioned zone should include Arab or Turkish participants as a matter of legitimacy (much the way Qatari intelligence was a part of the Libyan intervention), but it will nevertheless require the technical expertise, sophistication and expertise of major Western powers.

## V. Regime Military Capabilities

Note: *The following figures are estimates based on a variety of sources, including the Institute for National Security Studies and the U.S. Library of Congress. These figures may have changed since the outbreak of the Syrian uprising.*

### a. Numbers

The Syrian Army has an estimated 304,000 personnel on active duty, with a reserve force of 450,500. There is credible evidence to suggest that the regime has been unable to call back more than 60 percent of its reserves, and that regular army units deployed to suppress unarmed protests inevitably face huge defections. Although these figures are exaggerated and do not represent the regime's actual capability, what is more important than the aggregate number of army personnel is the number of ground troops currently engaging in the massacre and repression of the Syrian people. Credible insider accounts estimate that this figure does not exceed 100,000.

At present, the regime is heavily dependent on the Fourth Armoured Division, its *shabbiha* militants, 17 intelligence bodies, and the Republican Guard. These units have been responsible for the sieges on Daraa, Hama, Deir Azzour, Jisr al-Shoghour and Homs. Their transport route is the M1 highway that runs north-south through Syria. Whoever controls this highway controls the country.

Furthermore, the above-cited figure of Syrian reserve forces is also likely exaggerated and does not accurately reflect a fit and able fighting capability. Reservists are typically counted as part of the regular military force and train as if part of this contingent. Reservists have their own bases, supplies, equipment and chain of command. They are routinely called up for exercises in preparation for their call-up during a national emergency. Reservists in Syria, however, are subject to no such discipline or rigor, rendering them at best insufficient and at worst useless in a conventional military conflict.

The regime has further hobbled itself since the uprising began by doubting the cohesion of its army regulars and instead entrusting the task of entering and besieging urban areas to die-hard loyalists. It is to be expected that some, if not all, loyalists will rally around the regime in the event of a foreign intervention, but based on the evidence of defection rates during the intense and high-risk preceding period, there is a strong likelihood that this rallying force will not be significant.

If demoralized and exhausted regulars are faced with such a prospect and perceive the inevitability of the regime's downfall, the chances of mass defections are high. The lure of a safe area inside the country to which army regulars and reservists can repair will also attract mutineers.

## **b. Weaponry**

Most of the regime's surface-to-air missiles are Soviet-designed S-25, S-75, S-125, S-200 and S-400. All are stationed up and down the western corridor of the country to guard against Israeli attack, although the east is almost entirely unguarded by air defences. There are also three clusters of the 2K12 "Kub" missiles stationed in and around Damascus, the Golan Heights border and Homs and Hama. S-75s and S-125s in Aleppo are the northernmost positioning of Syrian air defence systems.

The Syrian Air Force is thought to have between 357 and 611 combat / reconnaissance / operational conversion unit aircraft, including MiG-29 (Fulcrum), MiG-25 (Foxbat) and (the outdated) MiG-23 ML/MF. The Air Force also has between 70 and 84 rotary wing aircraft, either the Mi-25 Hind or SA-342 Gazelle. So far, the regime has yet to deploy fixed-wing aircraft against civilian protestors, but attack helicopters have been used on occasion, particularly in Idlib province.

According to Syrian military experts, the number of Syrian Air Force units is not only exaggerated, but the units' constrained fighting capabilities in any conventional theatre render them more of a liability than an asset. The Air Force lacks regular maintenance of its materiel or trained personnel to operate its equipment and suffers from rampant mismanagement in its command structure, owing primarily to the patronage system through which important appointments are made by the regime. Loyalists to the Assad family were given preference, despite any evidence of their expertise or talents. (Hafez al-Assad began his career in the Air Force and the filial hold on this arm of the military has persisted ever since.) In short, there is every indication that the Syrian Air Force will crumble in the face of the first Western strikes against its infrastructure and personnel.

The Syrian Navy is relatively limited in size and scope, with approximately 29 vessels in total, most of them Soviet-made MFPB-Ossa I/II missile boats. Syria has no aircraft carriers, destroyers or submarines, and her navy bases are in Lattakia, Tartus and Minaa al-Baida. The coastal defence system is also limited, with C-802, SSC-5 (P-800) Yakhont/Bastion, SSC-1B S and Scud B/C/D missiles guarding Syria's coastline.

Syria's military airbases are scattered throughout the country in Afis, Qasir, Nasiriya, Suwayda, Dumayr, Hama, Jerah, Khalkhalah, Marj As Sultan, Marj Ruhayyil, Qabr as Sitt, Saiqal, Shayrat and Tiyas.

## VI. Hazards of Intervention

Any military campaign carries risks apart from incurring civilian casualties, but none more so than an intervention into a strategically vital state of the Middle East. Regime threats to foment regional war or, as Assad put it, create “another Afghanistan,” are not only bluster aimed at forestalling intervention, they also reflect credible scenarios for regional destabilization through the use of conventional armaments or proxy terrorists as well as increased criminality and extremist activity within Syria.

### a. Hezbollah

Syria has reportedly supplied Hezbollah with at least eight Scud D missiles, each with a range of 700 kilometres, which could be fired at any target on the ground as part of a rearguard campaign to protect the Assad regime. These missiles are accurate within tens of meters and, if fired from the north of Lebanon, could easily hit any part of Israel or Jordan and large parts of Turkey. Although it is true that Hezbollah has already begun planning for the post-Assad era, its ability and incentive to wage a proxy war -- either at the behest of Damascus or Tehran -- cannot be dismissed. The strategic nexus that runs from Tehran through Beirut and into Damascus will likely result in an asymmetric response by Hezbollah, organized and directed by the Assad regime and Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QC).

Hezbollah needn't even fire missiles. The Syrian-Lebanon border is an easy access point for militants pouring in and out of Syria. Reports of Syrian refugees being kidnapped in broad daylight from the streets of Beirut by Syrian security forces who easily sneak back into Syria means that Lebanon risks being plunged into a secondary military conflict.

Hezbollah is in no position either politically or militarily to mount a conventional campaign against an intervening Western army

However, Hezbollah is in no position either politically or militarily to mount a conventional campaign against an intervening Western army. The group already faces mounting international pressure to hand over four of its agents, indicted by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon for their involvement in the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005. Nor would Hezbollah risk its position in the current Lebanese government to become, in effect, Assad's rearguard army. Rather, it will likely confine itself to terrorist operations or to the continued facilitation of the regime by bussing in Lebanese militants or providing rooftop snipers to shoot Syrian

army regulars who refuse to open fire on unarmed civilians. For this reason, the Lebanon-Syrian border will eventually require guarding, most likely by a trained phalanx of Syrian rebel soldiers, with logistical assistance from Western intelligence assets.

## b. Jihadist Groups

According to U.S. Ambassador Robert Ford, the number of Jihadists currently operating within Syria is in the “tens,” not the hundreds. However, with an imminent U.S. troop withdrawal from Iraq commencing and due to be complete by no later than 31 December 2011, the chance for Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia or other Jihadist groups to exploit a conflict in Syria -- particularly one with Western participants -- is very real. Sponsorship of transnational terror groups has long been a reliable tool of the Syrian security forces.

The regime has in the past proved shrewdly willing to strike transactional alliances with Al Qaeda elements that operated across the border into Iraq. Syrian military intelligence would likely provide the necessary platform and encouragement for such elements as either a retaliatory measure or in order to bolster the regime’s propaganda narrative that it is fighting extremist elements rather than a popular rebellion. The regime leverages its capacity to destabilize the region while recklessly sponsoring transnational terror groups as a way to blackmail the international community from taking resolute action.

There is also the threat posed by Ansar al-Islam, a home-grown Jihadist group that the regime dispatched into Iraq to kill coalition forces in the mid-2000s. Similar to Saddam Hussein’s “Blessed July” plot, which sought to unleash a wave of terrorist attacks against Western targets in the event of international intervention in Iraq, Ansar al-Islam, backed and supported by elements of Syrian Military Intelligence, could be activated to conduct suicide bombings or IED attacks against both rebel forces within Syria and Western targets abroad.

However, this long-tended marriage of convenience between Assad’s special intelligence and Al Qaeda-affiliated groups only further underscores the strategic imperative of toppling a dictatorship which uses terrorism as a tool of statecraft.

Neither Hezbollah nor Jihadist groups should have any effect on the military operation to create a safe area inside Syria adjacent to the border with north-west Turkey. Rather, the risk from these elements lies in the final stages of the fall of the regime when they can seek to prevent the establishment of law and order by a transitional authority. Again, see the devastation wrought by Al Qaeda and various sectarian terrorist gangs in Iraq after the U.S.-led invasion to topple Saddam Hussein.

Neither Hezbollah nor Jihadist groups should have any effect on the military operation to create a safe area inside Syria adjacent to the border with north-west Turkey

### c. Released Criminals

A likely scenario is a “doomsday” situation whereby the regime releases its criminal prisoners (murderers, rapists, smugglers, drug dealers and thieves) in order to wreak havoc and disorder among the population post-liberation, again in a manner reminiscent of Saddam’s terminal stratagems in Iraq. There are already plausible reports that these elements have been released, although how their savagery will compare with what has been inflicted upon Syrian people by the regime’s own security forces and *shabbiha* death squads remains to be seen. Syrians might consider the state practice of raping young boys in front of their fathers evidence that psychopaths are already in their midst.

### d. Iran and Iraq

Iran remains the Assad regime’s only stalwart regional ally. Western intelligence -- not to mention Western sanctions -- suggests that the IRGC-QF has been advising the Assad regime on its method of repression since the start of the Syrian uprising. In Iraq, the IRGC-QF has carried out terrorist attacks against U.S. forces in Iraq as well as run guns to affiliated militants there.

There are mildly encouraging signs that the Iraqi government is already taking the appropriate countermeasures to secure its border with Syria, if not to sign onto the broader Arab League initiative to condemn and sanction the Assad regime. In Anbar Province, a new “Anbar Faction” has formed to show solidarity with the Syrian revolution and to block the importation of Shi’ite militants into Syria to aid in the crackdown. Washington must use all of its remaining influence with the Iraqi government to further secure the border in the event of military intervention in Syria. Iran’s controversial influence in Baghdad as well as Iraq’s own simmering sectarianism will mean that any rebuff of the Assad regime is interpreted as a Sunni provocation against a Shi’ite ally. But the alternative is not just the destabilization of Syria but the recrudescence of a conflict it has taken a decade to contain in Iraq.

The recent U.S. Justice Department exposure of a complex IRGC-QF plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the United States -- via a Mexican drug cartel -- shows that Iran is growing bolder in its attempts on Western targets. There should be every expectation, then, that the IRGC-QF

will play a destructive role in any Syrian intervention, either by launching and coordinating attacks against rebel forces in country, plotting terrorist operations abroad against nationals of intervening powers, or both.

The Hezbollah-IRGC-QF-Assad nexus strongly indicates that weakening and toppling the Assad regime could be linked strategically with efforts to curb Iranian hegemony. Already Tehran has threatened to cut off its funding of Palestinian Hamas if Hamas’s political bureau abandons its headquarters in

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Damascus. Enabling regime change in Syria therefore has the added benefit of destabilizing Iran's relationship with its own proxies.

As severe as Iran's meddling could be, it is unlikely that the mullahs will risk direct military intervention in Syria, particularly at a time when their own military and intelligence installations are subject to mysterious and lethal attacks and when they are marshalling their own resources to avoid or prepare for a large-scale strike on Iran's nuclear weapons program.

### e. Russia

The Kremlin uses the Syrian regime as both a military trading partner and as a regional buffer against the West. While Russia abstained from a UN Security Council vote authorizing the deployment of NATO forces into Libya, it has grown increasingly recalcitrant about any similar action in Syria, judging the 10-month uprising and its suppression according to the Assad propaganda of a Western-backed "terrorist" insurgency that requires "dialogue." Russia opposes regime change categorically and will exert every diplomatic and soft-power effort to ensure Assad's survival.

Vladimir Putin will not, however, put himself in a position to engage an international military force, much less the far superior U.S. Sixth Fleet stationed at Bahrain (assuming the U.S. is involved in a Syrian intervention). Quite apart from his own political troubles at home, embodied by his United Russia party's lacklustre showing in the December 4 parliamentary election, Russia's naval presence in Syrian ports and waters is more of a symbolic gesture designed to accomplish three goals: rally internal Russian support for Assad; scare off NATO or Western powers with protective "encirclement" of a regional ally; and provide a convenient excuse for critics and sceptics of intervention that any campaign would cause a geopolitical rift or return Western-Russian relations to Cold War lows. The more likely outcome is that of geopolitical unpleasantness, but this has always been a defining characteristic of dealing with Putin's Kremlin, as Obama's White House has lately discovered.

Nevertheless, an extensive military relationship between Moscow and Damascus, worth an estimated \$4 billion, will mean that Russian hardware will continue to flow and possibly increase in a bid to secure the regime's survival against either a growing insurgency or international military forces. Russia may flout sanctions and continue to outfit Assad with materiel, but that hardly means that its flotilla should be allowed to offload tanks directly from the Mediterranean. American, British and European pressure should be exerted on the Kremlin to withdraw its naval presence from Syria.

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## f. Chemical Weapons

The regime has amassed a proven chemical weapons cache and there have been rumoured, albeit unsubstantiated, reports of chemical agents used in some of the artillery fired on protestors. A recent news story found that Greek authorities captured almost 14,000 anti-chemical weapons suits from a North Korean ship that may or may not have been headed for Syria.

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If the regime were to use chemical weapons, either against the Syrian people or against an intervening military force, it would instantly transform the case for a safe area into a more exigent legal case for regime change. While this would certainly be a self-annihilating act on the part of a regime seemingly set on survival at all costs, totalitarians have always planned for apocalyptic options when faced with imminent defeat. Again, the Iraqi example of burning oil fields in retreat from Kuwait in 1991 is instructive. Though it should be added that without a viable air force or missile system, which will have to be neutralized in the inaugural stages of intervention, the Assad regime will have difficulty deploying chemical weapons against its preferred targets.

## g. Land-to-Land Missiles

The regime's land-to-land missiles will all be targeted during the aerial bombing as part of the imposition of a no-fly-zone or safe area. Rather than be limited to the area of that region and the neighbouring boundaries of no more than 20 kilometres, an initial aerial campaign will include the entire Syrian territory. Furthermore, the launching positions of the missiles, particularly those equipped with warheads fixed with half a ton of TNT and designed to be launched from fixed positions, are known quite accurately by Western intelligence agencies, and thus can be destroyed very easily by cruise missiles of Tomahawk-level precision. Moreover, the regime's missiles target expansive areas and have a probability of error in the hundreds of meters: any intervening military force will have advanced anti-missile capabilities with high precision and effectiveness.

## h. Destabilization of the Golan Heights / Conflict with Israel

In order to distract from international attention on Syria, the Assad regime used Nakba and Naksa Day to encourage Palestinian refugees to raid the Golan Heights, where many were killed by Israel Defence Forces (IDF) soldiers or blown up by land mines. There is every reason to assume that the regime would similarly attempt operations in the Golan or by launching army or missile attacks at Israel to draw an IDF response and thereby turn a domestic crisis into an Arab-Israeli one.

The Assad regime has been planning and preparing to embroil Israel in the internal Syrian conflict to divert international attention and to legitimate the conspiracy theory that the Syrian uprising

was a Western intelligence- or “Zionist”-concocted affair. This theory may have duped some credulous observers in the early weeks and months of the uprising, but the chances are slim that it will be taken seriously after almost a year of documented atrocities, countless eyewitness testimonies, coupled with a decisive shift against the Assad regime by an overwhelming majority of Arab opinion, and the Arab League’s suspension of Syria and imposition of sanctions.

Nevertheless, in order to avoid turning the Syrian revolution into exactly the kind of regional conflict the regime has been hoping for, Western powers should persuade Israel not to be goaded into responding if the regime launches missile attacks on Israeli territory or again provokes raids onto the Golan Heights. Forbearance is morally and physically difficult, but it worked during the First Gulf War.

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## Conclusion

Any military intervention option would result in the loss of life in Syria while likewise helping to stem current and future mass-scale killings at the behest of the regime's leadership. Although these losses are impossible to quantify hypothetically, they can be minimized given the technological and strategic superiority of Western powers.

Popular support is a critical element of the success of any future campaign to weaken and collapse the regime's security infrastructure, whether by conventional rebel means or via a combination of irregular warfare supported by Western-backed air cover.

Legitimacy for such a campaign can only come if the objectives are clearly articulated from the outset, and if they are publicly endorsed by other Arab and Muslim-majority nations as well as by the bulk of the international community. It is no minor development that Navi Pillay, the U.N. High Commissioner on Human Rights, noted recently, "In light of the manifest failure of the Syrian authorities to protect their citizens, the international community needs to take urgent and effective measures to protect the Syrian people."

Furthermore, the regime's systematic attacks against local communities in Daraa, Deir Azzour, Homs, Hama and the Damascus suburbs strongly indicate that any attempt to hasten the end of the regime's barbarism is likely to be met with gratitude. Although it is impossible to poll a people under siege, there is credible evidence that suggests a large percentage of on-the-ground activists support foreign intervention, especially after the fall of Tripoli and the death of Gaddafi. The Syrian people have amply demonstrated a heroic willingness to risk more bloodshed to secure their freedom and a marked indifference to regime accusations that they are the hirelings of Western "imperialism."

This outline of strategic options and associated risk assessment of military intervention in Syria uses the most likely methods for building a legal case and the most feasible course of action for establishing a safe area, as judged solely by the author. Nothing herein aims to be exhaustive, least of all the list of hazards. Ultimately, the decision of how to rescue Syria from the Assad regime lies with the Syrian people and with the SNC, should it gain international and internal recognition as the sole legitimate representative of that people.



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