

# Crisis in Syria: Possibilities and Limits of Military Intervention

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**Now that the opposition Syrian National Council has begun calling for international military intervention and an arms embargo, further military escalation of the crisis appears inevitable. This exacerbates the dilemma for international politics: Either Western governments accept the failure of their efforts to contain the conflict, and allow events to escalate into full-blown civil war with casualties running into the thousands. Or they weigh up the options for military engagement, with all the associated battlefield risks and political uncertainties.**

For a different perspective on this issue see:  
SWP Comments No. 9  
(March 2012) of Muriel Asseburg and Heiko Wimmen:  
»The Violent Power Struggle in Syria: Scenarios and Policy Options for the International Community«

International efforts to secure Security Council condemnation of the Syrian leadership's brutal suppression of the political opposition have failed for the moment, demonstrating once again the limited options to contain the conflict. As long as Moscow and Beijing stand out against a Security Council resolution, the supreme institution of international diplomacy remains powerless to launch any conflict-resolving initiative. That also applies to the latest proposal of sending UN peacekeeping forces (although such a move would anyway be inappropriate for the situation in Syria, where there is neither a cease-fire that such troops could monitor nor the consent of the Syrian government for such a mission).

Appeals by numerous governments to put an end to the bloodshed, recognise the opposition and open the way for a trans-

formation of Syria's political system have fallen on deaf ears, while expectations that the Arab League observer mission would de-escalate the conflict have been disappointed. The sanctions announced by the United States, the European Union and the Arab League are politically symbolic in nature and will do nothing in the shorter term to persuade the leadership in Damascus to change its ways. It also remains unclear what new options are available to the Friends of Syria Group, which met for the first time at the end of February.

## Legal Issues

With Russia and China vetoing Security Council draft resolution S/2012/77 on 4 February 2012, a UN resolution criticising the actions of the Syrian government and mentioning possible consequences is off the

table for the foreseeable future, as is action to restore international peace and security under Chapter VII of the UN Charter.

In the meantime, the number of casualties in Syria grows and the power struggle between government and opposition groups threatens to escalate into civil war along ethnic/religious lines. Consequently, there is rising pressure within Western democracies to intervene militarily even without the legitimization of Security Council backing. In the context of the Libya crisis many Western governments repeatedly – and simplistically – argued that the emerging international legal norm of “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P) conferred an obligation to intervene. If a grave humanitarian emergency were to emerge in Syria, as is becoming ever more likely, it would therefore be difficult for them to reject expectations that they would launch military action with or without a Security Council mandate. Statements by UN officials that the actions of the Syrian government amount to crimes against humanity have increased the pressure to act quickly, if need be without a mandate.

It has been apparent since autumn 2011 that this position has gained momentum among the member states of NATO, on whose integrated command structure such a military operation would surely depend. As representatives of individual governments and NATO itself argue, there are moral principles and international obligations that could compel them to take action, and more broadly they balk at granting Russia and China a veto over Western security policy.

### **The Political Context**

The governments of the NATO member-states have come to a basic consensus on their preferred resolution: President Bashar al-Assad should resign and hand over political power to his deputy, the violence against opposition forces must end, and the opposition should be included in the politi-

cal process through elections and a constitutional referendum.

Whether they have done themselves any favours with the call for regime change and fundamental internal transformation appears dubious. As well as unnecessarily constricting their diplomatic options, any external political and military engagement will now be measured against those ambitious targets.

With an underlying intervention fatigue affecting all Western states, the specific details and goals pursued will be decisive for political consent. This is very obvious in the states that participated in NATO’s Libya operation, where overwhelming public majorities reject large-scale stabilisation operations of the kind attempted in Afghanistan; nonetheless, for example in France, Norway or Canada, the public and the political class largely feel that they basically did the right thing in Libya with the limited-scope Operation Unified Protector, both from the humanitarian perspective and in political terms. Building on that mood, a further escalating humanitarian situation in Syria would allow support for military engagement to be reactivated in those states.

### **Military Options**

From today’s perspective one can only speculate about the precise shape and form of a military operation, which would in any case be defined by the chosen political goal. An array of options of differing intensity are conceivable. They all involve diverse political and military risks and would not be so easy to differentiate in reality as the overview here might suggest.

1) The first option is covert deployment of special forces in Syria to support the Free Syrian Army with training, arms and equipment and weaken the Syrian regime by sabotaging military infrastructure. Such an engagement would also aim to persuade parts of the military leadership to defect, and possibly to enable the ruling elite to choose a face-saving route into exile.

2) The second option is a military operation designed to protect the Syrian civilian population, where the UN reports that at least ninety-five thousand Syrians are internally displaced or have fled the country. Specifically, this approach would seek to create humanitarian safe areas within Syrian territory, along its borders with Turkey and Jordan. They would have to be set up by ground forces and protected against the possibility of attack by forces loyal to the regime, requiring at least some form of aerial surveillance or even air defence. Including all supporting units, an eighty by fifty kilometre protection zone would require a contingent of about forty to fifty thousand soldiers. Considering that this form of military engagement presupposes that the Syrian air force and air defences have been largely disabled, a protection zone on the ground is unrealistic without imposing a no-fly zone over Syria. And Damascus would certainly regard that as an assault on its sovereignty and territorial integrity: the threshold to international armed conflict would have been crossed.

3) A more ambitious option would be to secure areas out of which the Free Syrian Army could operate, and where its fighters would also be trained and equipped by foreign forces. The Free Syrian Army, which claims to comprise fifteen to twenty thousand deserters from the regular armed forces, is still very loosely structured organisationally, so the task of training would be large and time-consuming, and a proper command structure would have to be created from scratch. A comparatively large intervention force would be required. In this option the protection zones possess a more explicit political dimension to the extent that their declared military goal would be to bring about regime change in Damascus. Because it involves external forces clearly taking the side of the opposition, this option contains great potential for escalation.

4) A fourth option would be to set out to weaken Assad's military capabilities of

through an arms embargo enforced by naval forces (including naval and airborne reconnaissance) and ground troops monitoring land borders. The immediate impact and medium-term effect are hard to estimate, for there are ways of circumventing such a blockade. Moreover, Western forces could find themselves confronting Syria's two main arms suppliers: Russia and Iran.

5) Finally, a military invasion could be mounted by individual NATO states together with Arab League governments and external partners. Primarily configured as a major multi-national air and naval operation to cripple the Syrian regime's military assets (air defences, command centres, munitions depots, barracks etc.), this option would inevitably escalate the internal conflict into a full-blown conventional war against Syrian government forces. Alongside the risks to Western military personnel, this option involves particular danger of death or injury to Syrian civilians. The explicit aim would be to bring about regime change in Damascus. Despite the technical superiority of a coalition of NATO states, the scope and course of such a military operation would be difficult to plan, and the political repercussions for the country would be practically incalculable. It must not be forgotten that Syria's armed forces, especially its air defences, have undergone a major modernisation since 2009 that has significantly increased their punch.

In view of the political and military situation, any military intervention by individual NATO members using the alliance's command structure in alliance with other states in the region (Qatar, Saudi Arabia) would probably be located lower down the scale of escalation. Its elements would resemble the Libya operation, starting with covert special operations to damage the regime's military infrastructure and encourage top military leaders to change sides. Training and equipment for the Free Syrian Army would probably be provided via allies in the region rather than directly, and if the humanitarian situation

were to worsen dramatically protection zones on Syrian territory might have to be established and secured.

Each of the operations sketched out here would have to be accompanied by diplomatic initiatives and approaches to the Syrian regime and its allies, seeking possibilities to scale the military escalation back again. In this sense military engagement would not represent the failure or end of politics, but an essential component.

### **For German Participation**

Two principal arguments speak in favour of German participation in a military engagement in Syria and/or the establishment of a corresponding threat scenario.

1) Germany's traditional security partners expect it to assume greater responsibility in international politics, not least where Germany currently holds a non-permanent seat in the UN Security Council. After Germany abstained from joining NATO's Libya operation, alliance politics will make it almost impossible to say no to a possible military engagement in Syria. Symbolic participation will not be enough.

2) In recent months German politicians have repeatedly stated their concern about the humanitarian situation in Syria, while frequent reference to the R2P doctrine as a leading paradigm of German foreign policy has increased the pressure of expectations. In a spiralling humanitarian emergency speed is of the essence.

The German Bundestag and the government should be prepared for a possible military engagement in Syria, and quickly and concretely define the German role. A simple "without us" would massively undermine the moral credibility of German foreign policy and lead Germany's partners to ask (yet again) what international burden Germany is actually willing to shoulder.

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