



Towards a Post-Assad Syria:

Options for the United States and Like-Minded Nations to Further Assist the Anti-Regime Syrian Opposition

*A Discussion Paper Prepared by the Foreign Policy Initiative (FPI) and
the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD) for the Syrian Working Group**

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"Despite graphic media coverage, American policymakers, journalists, and citizens are extremely slow to muster the imagination needed to reckon with evil. Ahead of the killings, they assume rational actors will not inflict seemingly gratuitous violence. They trust in good-faith negotiations and traditional diplomacy. Once the killings start, they assume that civilians who keep their heads down will be left alone. They urge cease fire and donate humanitarian aid."

—Samantha Power, now Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Multilateral Affairs in the National Security Council, in *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide* (Harper Perennial, 2003)

With a long history of exporting terrorism beyond its borders, the Syrian government is now waging a campaign of systematic, internal terror against its own people. Officials at the United Nations [conservatively estimated](#) in November 2011 that President Bashar al-Assad's security forces and pro-government militias have killed over 3,500 civilians since the country's anti-regime protests started in March 2011. In addition, the Assad regime [has jailed](#) at least 30,000 Syrians, with human rights groups [reporting](#) that nearly 100 detainees have died in captivity.

The international community, however, remains unable to muster a collective response, as recent proceedings in the U.N. Security Council illustrated. This is unfortunately due in large part to [the way](#) in which the United States and its allies secured Security Council support for NATO's intervention in Libya. On October 4, 2011, Russia and China [vetoed](#) a resolution that would have condemned the Syrian government for its egregious human rights abuses, and demanded an end to its lethal crackdown on the opposition. Months earlier, Russian and Chinese diplomats [similarly shielded](#) the Assad regime from efforts by the United States and Western governments to get the Security Council to consider a resolution that would have censured Syria's controversial nuclear program.

Given the deadlock in the international community, this memorandum examines U.S. options for responding, either individually or in concert with other nations, to the Assad regime's relentless murder of Syrian civilians.

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The current Syrian government is a dangerous enemy of the United States. Over the past decade, the Assad regime has supported terrorist groups across the Middle East, destabilized its neighbors, pursued a secret nuclear program with North Korean assistance, aided foreign militants that have killed American and allied soldiers in Iraq, and served as a key regional ally to the Middle East's most dangerous country, Iran. The United States certainly has a moral obligation to work with others to try and halt the continuing humanitarian crisis in Syria. But it also has a powerful strategic interest in seeing not only the collapse of the Assad regime, but also the emergence of a post-Assad Syria with moderate, representative government that respects human rights, upholds the rule of law, promotes stability in the Middle East, and dramatically weakens the region's Iranian-led anti-American bloc.

This memo proceeds in three parts. Part one summarizes the response of various foreign governments to the Assad regime's mass murder of Syrian civilians and other human rights abuses. Part two highlights statements by Syrian opposition groups calling for humanitarian intervention in Syria. And part three offers a discussion of options for the United States to respond to the Assad regime.

I. Foreign Governments Condemn the Assad Regime.

Inspired by "Arab Spring" revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, Syrian citizens first began peaceful protests against the authoritarian government of Bashar al-Assad in mid-March 2011. But what first began as a small set of disparate, anti-regime assemblies throughout the country quickly turned into a larger movement that has increasingly begun to transcend class and ethnicities, and even gained the support of a growing cadre of Syrian military defectors.

By mid-April 2011, the Assad regime sought to quell pro-democracy demonstrations by promising to end emergency rule, enact political reforms, and release detainees arrested during the prior month's protests. Predictably, however, the regime's promises proved empty. On April 22, 2011—one day after emergency rule was supposedly lifted by the regime—security forces and pro-regime gunmen [killed](#) nearly 100 protestors across the country. One day later, government forces [killed](#) at least 12 mourners at the funeral of pro-democracy protestors in the city of Homs. Over the ensuing months, the Assad regime's systematic targeting of civilians continued. As of October 2011, the U.N. officials estimate that the Assad regime [has killed](#) in excess of 3,000 Syrian civilians and [detained](#) at least 30,000 more since the beginning of the protests. However, the Syrian government has imposed a media blackout that has severely constrained the flow of information, so the actual death toll is likely much higher.

The Assad regime's murderous suppression of Syrian civilians has triggered strong condemnation from countries in the Middle East. For example, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan [described](#) the regime's attacks on civilians as "savagery" in June 2011. And the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) [called](#) for serious political reforms in Syria and "an immediate end to the killing machine" in September 2011.

Broader international condemnation has also been harsh. For example, French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe [charged](#) that "[t]he Syrian regime has committed crimes against humanity" on August 8, 2011. Shortly thereafter, the U.N. High Commission for Human Rights [concluded](#) in a report that the Assad regime was responsible for ordering "human rights abuses, including summary executions, arbitrary arrests and torture." In one passage, the report stated:

"... there were reports that on 1 May in Dar'a, about twenty-six men were blindfolded and summarily executed by gunshots at the football stadium, which had been

transformed into the security forces headquarters for that area. Executions also occurred during the sieges of cities, and during house-to-house searches.”

In addition, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navanethem Pillay, [accused](#) the Syrian government of perpetrating “egregious violations of human rights” in response to the pro-democracy protests:

“These include summary executions, excessive use of force in quelling peaceful protests, arbitrary detentions, torture and ill-treatment, violations of the rights to freedom of assembly, expression, association and movement, and violations of the rights to food and health, including medical treatment to injured persons.”

Although the United States repeatedly condemned the Syrian government for these atrocities, it did not initially call for Assad’s removal. After much internal debate within the Executive Branch, however, U.S. policy changed on August 18, 2011, when President Obama [demanded](#) in a statement that Assad step down:

“The future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way. His calls for dialogue and reform have rung hollow while he is imprisoning, torturing, and slaughtering his own people. We have consistently said that President Assad must lead a democratic transition or get out of the way. He has not led. For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside.”

Reiterating the President’s new posture towards the Assad regime, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton [said](#) on September 2, 2011:

“The violence must stop, and [Assad] needs to step aside. Syria must be allowed to move forward. Those who have joined us in this call must now translate our rhetoric into concrete actions to escalate the pressure on Assad and those around him, including strong new sanctions targeting Syria’s energy sector to deny the regime the revenues that fund its campaign of violence.”

Nonetheless, the Assad regime’s assaults on the Syrian protest movement continued, even into the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. In response, President Obama [said](#) at a speech before the U.N. General Assembly on September 21, 2011:

“As we meet here today, men and women and children are being tortured, detained and murdered by the Syrian regime. Thousands have been killed, many during the holy time of Ramadan. Thousands more have poured across Syria’s borders. The Syrian people have shown dignity and courage in their pursuit of justice — protesting peacefully, standing silently in the streets, dying for the same values that this institution is supposed to stand for. And the question for us is clear: Will we [at the United Nations] stand with the Syrian people, or with their oppressors?”

Despite U.S. calls for the United Nations to act, however, the Security Council failed in a vote to pass a resolution on Syria on October 4, 2011, due to Russian and Chinese vetoes. After the vote, the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Susan Rice, [said](#):

“... the United States is outraged that this Council has utterly failed to address an urgent moral challenge and a growing threat to regional peace and security.... For more than six months, the Assad regime has deliberately unleashed violence, torture, and persecution against peaceful protesters, human rights defenders, and their families.”

Russia's and China's support for the Assad regime should not come as a surprise, however. Russia appears to have no interest in hampering relations with Syria, its fifth-largest trading partner. Indeed, Russia's military maintains a naval base in the port city of Tartus, and its arms contracts with the Syrian military [are currently worth](#) \$4 billion or more. For its part, China likely worries that further uprisings across the Middle East could spur domestic unrest at home. Moreover, Iran, a longtime ally of the Assad regime, has intervened even more directly to prop up the Syrian government. In particular, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has intensified financial and military assistance to the Assad regime.

II. Syrians Call for Humanitarian Intervention.

In the absence of a strong international response to the Syrian government's internal war on the pro-democracy opposition, some previously peaceful protestors have begun to take up arms to defend themselves against the Assad regime's security forces. In addition, several thousand Syrian army troops [have reportedly defected](#) to join with other dissident protestors and form a self-organized resistance group now known as the Free Syrian Army. Armed clashes between government forces and protestors are on the rise, as Syria appears increasingly on the verge of a civil war.

Members of the Syrian opposition have also begun to call for the international community to intervene and prevent further bloodshed by the Assad regime. For example:

- On September 27, 2011, leading Syrian opposition groups—including the Syrian Revolution General Commission, the Damascus Declaration, the Syrian Emergency Task Force, among others—[said](#) that they “seek international intervention in the form of a peacekeeping mission with the intention of monitoring the safety of the civilian population.”
- On October 2, 2011, the Syrian National Council, an opposition organization modeled after Libya's Transitional National Council, [said](#): “The Council demands international governments and organizations meet their responsibility to support the Syrian people, protect them and stop the crimes and gross human rights violations being committed by the illegitimate current regime.”
- On October 4, 2011, Syrian National Council member Radwan Ziadeh [said](#): “The people inside Syria are calling for a no-fly zone and an intervention, but not the activists outside Syria. We on the outside know that the international community is not there yet. But the people inside are very frustrated with the international community.”
- And on October 28, 2011, opposition groups throughout Syria [organized](#) “No-Fly Zone Friday,” a series of coordinated protest rallies to urge the international community to intervene and halt the Assad regime's assault on civilians.

The Obama administration, however, has hesitated to answer these and other calls for international humanitarian intervention in Syria. During an interview with *Fox News Sunday* on October 23, 2011, Secretary of State Clinton [urged](#) embattled Syrian civilians to remain peaceful and inexplicably denied that opposition groups had called for international intervention:

“In Syria, we are strongly supporting the change from Assad and also an opposition that only engages in peaceful demonstrations. And you do not have from that opposition, as you had in Libya, a call for any kind of outside intervention.”

Administration officials have also counseled the Syrian opposition to avoid militarizing the conflict—a morally questionable approach for people facing lethal violence directed against themselves and their families on a daily basis.

That said, regional actors have begun to take initial—albeit limited—steps to respond to the Assad regime. For example, Turkey has vocally criticized the Assad regime for its continuing assaults on protestors; [cut](#) all arms shipments to Syria; and provided safe haven to Syrian refugees and military defectors. Ankara has also long indicated its openness to targeted sanctions on the Syrian government, but has yet to impose them. In an interview with the *Financial Times* on November 1, 2011, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu [did not rule out](#) more aggressive measures such as extending a buffer zone or a no-fly zone into Syrian territory to protect civilians:

“The Syrian regime is attacking the Syrian people, which is unacceptable.... When we see such an event next door to us of course we will never be silent.... We hope that there will be no need for these types of measures but of course humanitarian issues are important... There are certain universal values all of us need to respect and protecting citizens is the responsibility of every state.”

In addition, the Arab League recently put out a proposal for the Syrian government to halt the violence against civilians and begin a dialogue for reforms with the opposition movements. Although the Assad regime [accepted](#) this proposal on November 1, 2011, Syrian opposition members have expressed deep skepticism. Indeed, Syrian security forces subsequently renewed attacks on Homs, the country's third largest city, with *The New York Times* [reporting](#) on November 8, 2011, that an estimated 111 people died over a five-day period.

III. U.S. Options in Syria.

Under the authoritarian rule of the Assad family, Syria has posed and continues to pose a threat to U.S. national security interests. The Syrian government is a state sponsor of terrorism; pursued programs related to weapons of mass destruction; and strengthened ties with rogue states like North Korea and Iran. The State Department [reports](#) that the Assad regime, in addition to its atrocious [human rights record](#), has served as a “key hub for foreign fighters en route to Iraq and a safe haven for Iraqi Ba’athists expressing support for terrorist attacks against Iraqi government interests and coalition forces.” Syria has also served as a critical link between Iran and the Hezbollah terrorist network. Indeed, the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service [quoted](#) a U.S. official on background as saying: “The Syrians are doing things in terms of deepening their entanglement with Iran and Hezbollah that truly are mind-boggling. They are integrating their military/defense systems to unprecedented levels. Hafez al-Assad never would have gone so far and it is becoming hard to see how they can possibly extricate themselves.” Furthermore, numerous Palestinian terror groups—including those listed as Foreign Terrorist Organizations by the State Department—continue to operate within Syria's borders and maintain offices in Damascus.

Many thousands of lives are at risk if the Assad regime continues its relentless assault on Syrian protestors. The Obama administration [has declared](#) the violence in Syria a “humanitarian crisis” as thousands of civilians [have already fled](#) to northern Turkey in efforts to escape the Assad

regime. As the situation deteriorates further, the number of displaced persons and refugees [is expected](#) to rapidly increase. Syrian security forces also [have reportedly pursued](#) Syrian dissidents who have fled to Lebanon, and [planted land mines](#) along the country's border with Lebanon to halt the further flow of refugees. Indeed, the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Susan Rice, [now calls](#) Syria "an urgent moral challenge and a growing threat to regional peace and security."

While President Obama has declined so far to call for direct international involvement in Syria, the United States nonetheless has a vested national interest in preventing the further slaughter and displacement of innocent civilians in Syria. As the *Presidential Study Directive on Mass Atrocities* of August 4, 2011, [states](#), "Preventing mass atrocities and genocide is a core national security interest and a core moral responsibility of the United States." It continues:

"Our security is affected when masses of civilians are slaughtered, refugees flow across borders, and murderers wreak havoc on regional stability and livelihoods. America's reputation suffers, and our ability to bring about change is constrained, when we are perceived as idle in the face of mass atrocities and genocide. Unfortunately, history has taught us that our pursuit of a world where states do not systematically slaughter civilians will not come to fruition without concerted and coordinated effort."

Given that a collective response from the U.N. Security Council is unlikely, what options does the United States have for responding to the Assad regime's continuing atrocities against the Syrian people? In late August 2011, Michael O'Hanlon of the Brookings Institution [identified](#) potential measures, including a maritime operation to enforce stronger sanctions, a Kosovo-style air strike campaign, or even a military invasion to carry out regime change. The United States should not only keep all of those options on the table, but also explore the following intermediate steps.

Option (1): Impose Crippling Sanctions on the Syrian Government.

The United States should work to immediately expand the scope of sanctions on the Assad regime for its mass murder of Syrian civilians and other human rights abuses. So far, the Obama administration has responded slowly to the Syrian government's violent crackdown on protestors, imposing three incremental rounds of Executive Branch sanctions on Syria:

- [Executive Order 13572](#), signed by President Obama on April 29, 2011, targets the property and interests not only of several high-ranking Syrian officials and entities, but also of the Qods Forces, a special unit of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps that is believed to be strongly aiding Syria's anti-opposition activities.
- [Executive Order 13573](#), signed by the President on May 18, 2011, expands the list of Syrian officials sanctioned by the United States for human rights abuses to include Bashar al-Assad himself, as well as Syria's vice president, prime minister, defense and interior ministers, and head of military intelligence.
- [Executive Order 13582](#), signed by President Obama on August 17, 2011, freezes all Syrian assets under U.S. jurisdiction, bars U.S. citizens and companies from participating directly or indirectly in a broad range of transactions with Syrian entities, and blacklists a new set of Syrian individuals and companies.

The United States can and should do more to establish a stronger set of sanctions capable of truly crippling the Syrian government. Indeed, the Assad regime is already economically vulnerable, and could be impacted quickly—perhaps decisively—by more comprehensive

sanctions. Thanks in part to existing sanctions, it appears that Damascus has poor access to hard currency; is depleting its dollar reserves in attempts to maintain its currency and pay its security forces; and faces the prospect of hyperinflation, especially in the absence of continuing financial aid from Iran. As *The New York Times* [reported](#) on October 10, 2011: “The Syrian economy is buckling under the pressure of sanctions by the West and a continuing popular uprising, posing a growing challenge to President Bashar al-Assad's government as the pain is felt deeply by nearly every layer of Syrian society.”

The President and Congress should therefore work to quickly pass legislation for harsher U.S. sanctions on Syria, including extraterritorial sanctions aimed at convincing Member States of the European Union (E.U.), Turkey, and other countries to join the United States in targeting Syria's energy industry, financial and banking system, and other sectors that are funding the Assad regime. Pending legislation relevant to this effort includes:

- The *Syria Sanctions Act of 2011* ([S. 1472](#))—originally introduced by Senators Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY), Joe Lieberman (ID-CT), and Mark Kirk (R-IL)—would penalize, for the first time, foreign entities that aid, contribute to, or invest in Syria's energy sector. Given that American companies are now prohibited from conducting business in Syria, the *Syria Sanctions Act* would impose extraterritorial sanctions to persuade other countries to establish comparable prohibitions by preventing foreign entities that hold financial stakes in Syria's power industry, purchase Syrian petroleum, or export gasoline to Syria, from having access to U.S. government contracts and financial institutions.
- The *Syria Freedom Support Act of 2011* ([H.R. 2106](#))—originally introduced by Representatives Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL) and Eliot Engel (D-NY)—seeks to strengthen U.S. sanctions on Syria, and targets the country's exports, financial transactions, banking, and procurement activities. In particular, the bill contains measures to impede the development of Syria's petroleum resources, and the development and export of its refined petroleum products. The bill also imposes wide-ranging sanctions related to Syria's sponsorship of international terrorism, as well as its weapons of mass destruction and missile programs.

As Reuel Marc Gerecht and Mark Dubowitz, both of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD), [wrote](#) in the Washington Post: “Obama wouldn't necessarily have to lead from the front” in implementing more comprehensive sanctions on Syria. They explain:

“The European Union is slowly but surely developing tougher sanctions. The E.U., which purchases most of Syria's oil, [just passed an embargo](#), effective Nov. 15, on importation of Syrian crude. Implementing further comprehensive measures against Syria's energy sector and central bank and Iranian commercial entities heavily invested in Syria may require the presidential bully pulpit and some arm-twisting of European allies and the Turks. But Bashar al-Assad's bloody oppression gives Washington the high ground. What seemed impossible five months ago is becoming practicable.”

To that end, the United States should further press Turkey, E.U. Member States, and other countries to impose unilateral sanctions on the Syrian government for human rights abuses; to [crack down](#) on Lebanese banks operating in Syria; and to target specific Syrian businessman who collaborate with the regime, but value their ability and that of their families to travel, study, and do business abroad. Travel bans might also be imposed on certain Syrian officials, and actions taken to stop Western airlines from flying to and from Syrian airports.

In addition, Washington should work with like-minded nations to multilateralize sanctions against Syria's controversial nuclear and missile programs and designate the Syrian entities and individuals involved in Syria's covert nuclear program with North Korea. As a first step, the Obama administration should push E.U. Member States to join the United States in targeting Syria's Scientific Studies and Research Center (SSRC). The U.S. Treasury Department [reports](#) that the SSRC "controls Syria's missile production facilities and oversees Syria's facilities to develop unconventional weapons and their delivery systems." The Bush administration [sanctioned](#) the SSRC under the Executive Order 13382 of June 28, 2005. Indeed, given recent revelations that the Syrian government [had reportedly obtained](#) nuclear assistance from Pakistani proliferator A. Q. Khan related to uranium enrichment, the United States should continue to work with international partners to press the Assad regime both for its human rights and nuclear transgressions.

Option (2): Provide Assistance to Syrian Opposition Groups.

To begin with, Washington should immediately intensify its political engagement with the various anti-regime groups both inside and outside of Syria. A key objective would be to help empower the moderate members of the Syrian opposition vis-à-vis the Islamist elements. In parallel, the United States, in conjunction with international partners, should work with the Syrian opposition to craft a strategy for more effective and sustained messaging to key groups (e.g., Alawis, Christians, and the Syrian business community), with the aim of reassuring them and fracturing their ties to the Assad regime and the untenable status quo in Syria.

Besides intensified political engagement with the Syrian opposition, the United States and like-minded nations should explore the full spectrum of options for direct assistance. At one end of the assistance spectrum, is financial aid to the recently formed movements of striking Syrian workers in Deraa and other towns. Indeed, the Assad regime, fearful of the potential of the Syrian strike movements, has taken aggressive measures to suppress them.

Washington should also work with partners should help opposition groups to establish television and radio broadcasting capability into Syria capable of circumventing the Assad regime's signal jamming. They should also supply encryption-enabled portable communications equipment to the protest movement within Syria. As Gerecht and Dubowitz [wrote](#) in the Washington Post, Syrian opposition groups could greatly benefit from a cross-border wireless Internet zone that stretches to the Syrian city of Aleppo, a commercial center roughly 20 miles from Turkey. Such a communications network will require Turkish acquiescence—no longer unthinkable—and financial resources (depending on its range and speed, between \$50 and \$200 million). However, if Washington is unwilling to foot this bill alone, the Obama administration should consider tapping into existing Pentagon and CIA covert funds, and soliciting the remainder from our European and Arab partners.

In addition, the United States and European Union should immediately take actions against telecommunications companies that have reportedly assisted the Assad regime's efforts to monitor and intercept the communications of the Syrian opposition. For example, *Bloomberg News* [reported](#) on November 3, 2011, that an Italian-based company doing just that:

"Employees of Area SpA, a surveillance company based outside Milan, are installing the system under the direction of Syrian intelligence agents, who've pushed the Italians to finish, saying they urgently need to track people, a person familiar with the project says. The Area employees have flown into Damascus in shifts this year as the violence has escalated, says the person, who has worked on the system for Area."

At the other end of the assistance spectrum, the United States could consider providing arms-related assistance—or encouraging the provision of arms-related assistance by partners in the region—that would enable members of the Syrian opposition to better defend themselves against the Assad regime's relentless attacks. Although Syria currently lacks the sort of unified opposition that emerged in the early stages of protests in Libya, military defectors and opposition forces are becoming self-organized and increasingly united. At the forefront of Syria's armed opposition movement is the Free Syrian Army, a group of thousands of military defectors led by former Syrian Air Force Colonel Riad al-Asaad. Over the last few months, the group [has mounted](#) formidable challenges to Syrian government forces in several locations, including Homs, Jabal Zawiya and Deir al-Zour. Defectors [have focused](#) their attention on protecting civilians and protestors in specific neighborhoods.

Precedents for providing self-defense assistance to anti-regime Syrian groups may be found in U.S. efforts to help provide self-defense arms to the Bosnian Muslims in the face of Slobodan Milosevic's Serbian military forces in the 1990s and, more recently, to the Libyan opposition in the face of aggression by the Qaddafi regime. As *The New York Times* has reported, Turkey is now providing assistance to the Free Syrian Army out of the refugee camp on its border with Syria.

It is critical that the United States become actively engaged and involved in shaping this force, rather than exclusively "subcontract" the effort to regional actors. Indeed, if the Syrian protestors want to arm themselves against the regime's depredations, it is morally tenuous for the Obama administration to urge that the Syrian opposition remain non-violent. Concerns about Syria's internecine strife are legitimate, but they should not lead us to disparage those who are trying to protect themselves and their families from the Assad regime's murderous security forces—especially if no one in the international community will come to their defense. Official American rhetoric on this issue ought to change.

Option (3): Limited Retaliatory Air Strikes.

The United States should examine options related to limited retaliatory air strikes against select Syrian military targets. The air strikes could be limited in duration and scope, surgically targeting Syrian air defenses, command-and-control assets, training facilities, and/or weapons depots. Each air strike would contain a narrow and clearly defined military objective, and the United States could enact such strikes intermittently or in response to severe actions by the Assad regime against civilians.

In recent years, limited air strikes have been successfully launched against Syrian assets. For example, several U.S. military helicopters carrying Special Forces [penetrated](#) Syrian airspace undetected in October 2008 to kill Abu Ghadiya, the Al Qaeda leader responsible for funneling foreign fighters and money into Iraq. The raid occurred five miles from the Iraq border in the eastern town of Sukkariya. Also, Israel's Air Force penetrated Syrian airspace in September 2007 and [destroyed](#) a secret nuclear reactor in the Dair Alzour region built by the Assad regime with North Korean assistance.

Limited air strikes could potentially be a more palatable, intermediate military option for the Obama administration and foreign governments. This option would not require a sustained military presence and would involve far fewer military resources. The immediate goal of this option would be to rein in the regime's military operations and make clear the United States and allies will no longer tolerate the Assad regime's continued killing spree. Another goal could be to encourage further defections from the Syrian military.

Limited air strikes pose short-term risks. President Assad has already [stated](#) that the Syrian government would aggressively retaliate if it came under attack by international forces. For example, Assad could order either direct attacks—or indirect attacks through Hezbollah proxies—against Israel. The Syrian government could increase internal violence against the population in an effort to prevent further defections from the military and demonstrate resolve against international pressure. However, such retaliatory threats clearly underscore the dangers of allowing a terrorist-supporting regime to survive. Terrorism becomes a trump card that can be pulled out at anytime against anyone, foreign or domestic, who threatens the Assad regime.

Option (4): Impose No-Fly / No-Go Zones in Syria.

The United States should also consider imposing no-fly or no-go zones to protect Syria's population from further attacks by the Assad regime's security forces. In recent months, opposition groups within Syria [have begun calling](#) for an international intervention on humanitarian grounds.

Efforts to impose no-fly or no-go zones in Syria, of course, will benefit from strong international support. A no-fly zone will likely require air support from both NATO and Arab allies. And as Michael O'Hanlon of the Brookings Institution [wrote](#), under a no-go zone—perhaps in Syrian territory adjacent to its borders with Jordan or Turkey—“[o]ne or two major parts of Syria might be protected in this way, at least reasonably well, by a combination of outside airpower and perhaps a limited number of boots on the ground.”

Syria's air defenses, however, will likely pose a more formidable obstacle than those encountered by the United States and NATO in Libya. Syria's Air Force is comprised of approximately 548 combat aircraft; air defenses [including](#) Russian-made Pantsir S1E and Buk-M2E air-defense systems; and other anti-aircraft weapons. The Syrian National Council recently published a map displaying the location of Syria's Soviet-designed surface-to-air missiles and air defenses.

Any such mission will likely require use of American military assets to defeat Syria's extensive air defenses and air force. While the 2007 Israeli air strike on Syria's secretly-built nuclear reactor demonstrated that those systems can be overcome, they will nonetheless need to be neutralized in order for large-scale air operations to be conducted. The United States presently has two aircraft carriers in the region that could assist with dismantling Syria's air defenses and supporting a no-fly or no-go zone: the U.S.S. John C. Stennis and the U.S.S. George H.W. Bush.

If NATO countries were to join in a no-fly or no-go zone effort, Incirlik air base in Turkey could be used to support NATO air forces (and American squadrons of F-15s, F-16s, and A-10s that are currently based in Europe) in a potential coalition mission, as it was used to support the Northern No-Fly Zone over Iraq during the 1990s. In addition, the British Royal Air Force's Akrotiri base in Cyprus could be utilized, as it was during the NATO-led Operation Unified Protector in Libya in 2011.

Establishment of a no-go zone would strongly benefit from diplomatic support from Middle Eastern governments, especially Turkey and Jordan. As part of a no-go zone, the United States, NATO allies, and regional partners could establish safe havens along the Jordanian and Turkish borders. Already, thousands of Syrian refugees have fled and sought refuge in Turkey. A portion of Syria's Idlib province, along the northern border with Turkey, could provide a defensible option. This would emulate U.N.-mandated safe havens implemented in Iraq following the Gulf War in 1991.

To protect against future attacks the zone would require continuous surveillance, credible retaliatory capabilities, and perhaps ground forces. This level of intervention would require long-term political will by coalition forces. The importance of international support in this effort cannot be understated, as the Assad regime has repeatedly shown its disdain for international boundaries. Syrian tanks and troops have repeatedly [crossed](#) the border into Lebanon to abduct and kill purported deserters. On October 6, 2011, Syrian troops—backed by tanks and armored vehicles—[killed](#) a farmer and shelled an abandoned factory in the Lebanese border town of Arsal. Further news reports show repeated cross-border incursions by Syrian troops near Hnaider and Mouanse.

Syrian opposition members say implementation of no-fly or no-go zones in Syria could provide much needed cover to opposition forces, thereby encouraging mass defections from the Syrian military. In a promising development, leading U.S. lawmakers are now discussing the possibility of no-fly and no-go zones in Syria. For example, Senator Joe Lieberman (ID-CT) [first suggested](#) looking at military options to protect Syrian civilians in March 2011, and [returned](#) to the idea of no-fly and no-go zones in October 2011. And during an October 23, 2011, speech before a World Economic Forum meeting in Jordan, Senator John McCain (R-AZ) [discussed](#) the possibility U.S. military involvement in Syria:

“Now that military operations in Libya are ending, there will be renewed focus on what practical military operations might be considered to protect civilian lives in Syria.... The Assad regime should not consider that it can get away with mass murder. [Libyan dictator Muammar] Gadhafi made that mistake and it cost him everything.”

However, the U.S. Ambassador to NATO, Ivo Daalder, [told](#) a reporter on November 7, 2011, that alliance members are not currently considering intervening militarily to stop the Assad regime: “There has been no planning, no thought, and no discussion about any intervention into Syria. It just isn't part of the envelope of thinking, among individual countries and certainly among the 28 [full NATO members] If things change, things change. But as of today, that's where the reality stands.”

Conclusion: Time for the United States to Lead from the Front on Syria.

Despite gridlock in the U.N. Security Council, the United States nonetheless has options for responding, individually and in concert with others, to the Assad regime's continuing assault on the Syrian people. After months of facing relentless violence, Syrian opposition groups are now increasingly demanding decisive international action to prevent further bloodshed. It's time for policymakers and lawmakers in the United States, Europe, Turkey, and other countries to act.

The Syrian people have shown astonishing fortitude in withstanding the regime's brutal security forces. The Assad regime is now trying to kill its way back to internal “stability.” But such actions, of course, will do the opposite of what the regime intends: Syria will slide further toward civil war, thousands more will die, and the West and Turkey will eventually be forced to intervene—except Syria's ethnic and religious mosaic will likely by then be torn apart, making a humane post-Assad Syria much more difficult to build. Foreign intervention sooner offers Syria, the Middle East, and the West the likelihood of a much better outcome.