

A Critical Exchange with Reese Erlich on Syria

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In your book, 'Inside Syria', you highlight the difference in the American reaction to the Libyan and the Syrian civil wars that engulfed both countries in 2011. You convincingly argue that the US' weak response to the Syrian conflict compared to the intervention in Libya lies in the fact that the US did not have a pro-Western leading figure to substitute for Assad.

Is it possible that the same reason is grounding the current American 'prudent' policy in Syria?

The US administration's choice to limit its involvement to training and airstrikes reflects President Obama's long-held desire to limit American military interventionism in the region.

Had the US had a potential pro-western candidate to substitute for Assad, do you think Washington would have adopted the same limited policy? In other words, if such a hypothetical leader existed, do you think the US would consider a ground intervention in Syria as it did in Libya?

I think you have misinterpreted what I wrote about Syria and Libya. I opposed outside military intervention in both countries. In both Libya and Syria, the US has favored strongmen leaders, but they all failed to develop popular support. There is a common narrative that the Obama Administration was weak and indecisive. It was not. In fact, Obama tried all the standard policies that have extended US hegemonism in the past. Washington created two civilian councils that supposedly represented the Syrian people. The Pentagon trained Syrian rebels along the border with Turkey. The CIA did the same with rebels based in Jordan. Combined, they spent over \$1 billion USD, according to documents leaked by Edward Snowden. The US anointed one leader after another, all former Syrian army officers, to be the rebel chief who would bring democracy to Syria. All these plans failed. The top US general admitted to Congress that, despite the training efforts, the US could rely on only five (yes five!) trained rebels. The Obama Administration had a decisive policy, but it was a failure.

Based on my five trips to Syria and numerous interviews in all the surrounding countries, the US policy failed for political reasons. People in the region remain highly suspicious of US

claims that it will bring democracy to Syria. As one Syrian activist told me, "is that democracy like you brought to Iraq or Afghanistan?" We can now add Libya and Yemen to the list of democratic successes. Foreign intervention has failed throughout the region, and the people of the region reject it.

Since 2014 the US has alienated almost all of the Syrian opposition by shifting strategy to attack the Islamic State (IS) and de-emphasising the fight against Assad. Except for the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in the Syrian Kurdish community, all the rebel groups insisted on making Assad the main enemy, and dealing with IS later. That's a huge strategic difference that led to a split between the US and the Syrian Arab rebels it had trained.

Whether the deployment of ground forces in Iraq and Syria could be a successful strategy against ISIS is subject of animated debate. Obama has repeatedly refused to embrace such an option.

Undoubtedly, the Iraqi experience is playing a significant role in defining Obama's reluctance to utilise a military option. One of the arguments he presents in support of his policy is that ISIS 'is not a traditional military opponent'. Indeed, most recent cases of US special forces' deployment in the Middle East have failed exactly because of the inadequacy of conventional military power against irregular armies. Yet, not everyone agrees with Obama's non-ground forces interventionism. Many who agree with the President have added other compelling reasons in support of their stance. Among them, in an article published in Forbes last November, Loren Thompson, Chief Operating Officer of the Lexington Institute, has highlighted five major consequences that would likely result from a ground mission. First, Thompson claims that the deployment of US troops would give the terrorists 'easy targets'; second, he states that sending US troops would 'provide captives for influencing US policy'; third, he maintains that an American ground deployment would 'take the pressure off local forces to perform'; lastly, he points out how 'dropping U.S. troops into this setting will make them unwitting participants in local agendas that have nothing to do with defeating ISIS'¹. Yet, with the US administration's half-measures proving to be largely ineffective, the supporters of a more assertive intervention are growing in number. James F. Jeffrey, the Philip Solondz distinguished fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, maintains 'that defeat of the Islamic State is not going to happen absent a first-class, mobile ground force being launched to mate with overwhelming air power'. He contends that such a ground force should not be 'all American' and calls for a coalition of 'French and other experienced Western troops complementing U.S. forces, as well as effective Iraqi and Syrian formations'. To confute the anti-ground forces criticisms that the 'use of ground forces requires convincing, detailed answers to the "day after" questions, he argues that 'while figuring out the "day after" might be difficult and implementing any solutions costly, it likely would be easier and less costly than dealing long-term with an Islamic State "state"'². A similar, if slightly more moderate strategy than Jeffrey's, has been proposed by Matthew Levitt, Former-Wexler Fellow and Director of the Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute. Levitt writes that a military ground force of 'a few thousands soldiers' made of 'air controllers and other special operators' complementing the current air-strikes strategy is 'necessary to dislodge the Islamic State from its strongholds'. Like Jeffrey, he contends that this armed force should 'include French and other European forces, a NATO component giving political cover to Turkey, and Arab military forces from countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE'³.

To what extent do you agree with the pro-ground forces arguments? Do you believe that such a military intervention might constitute a solution?

Actually, the Obama Administration has now shifted positions and introduced "up to 50" ground troops into Syria, along with 3500 troops in Iraq, to date. Although not classified as combat troops, the soldiers are fully armed, fly helicopters, and will shoot if fired upon. Not combat troops? In addition, the CIA has paramilitaries and contractors operating in both Iraq and Syria. These are the opening steps to a much wider military commitment.

The US could defeat IS and Assad by permanently stationing 200,000 combat troops in Syria and spending over \$1 trillion USD. Of course, the wily enemy would then move to Yemen and Libya, necessitating hundreds of thousands additional troops, and a few more trillion dollars. That tactic has been tried already. The US occupied both Afghanistan and Iraq with tens of thousands of troops at the cost of over \$1 trillion USD. It lost both wars. The prospects of a military/political victory in Syria are even dimmer.

A coalition of western powers with token Arab allies would not enjoy any more success. The fighting would not stop and their respective publics eventually would tire of the death, destruction, and money wasted. Neither the US nor such a coalition can resolve the political question of who can rule Syria if both the IS and Assad are defeated. They most certainly would want to install a pro-western regime, which would be rejected by the Syrian people.

In less than a week, peace talks will begin in Geneva. According to United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution 2254, 'within six months the process should establish "credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance with UN-supervised free and fair elections to be held within 18 months'. According to the agreement "Syrian people will decide the future of Syria". However desirable, this process is unlikely to end successfully. Several factors undermine not only the potential effectiveness of the talks, but primarily the feasibility of the talks themselves. Specifically, I refer to the lack of agreement among the participating powers over which groups should represent the opposition and which should be excluded. Most importantly, however, the absence of a consensus over the fate of Assad grounds the assumption that these meetings will result in failure. It seems that the UN is trying to carry out an idealistic plan without considering the actual situation and the objective obstacles to the viability of such plan. As per the lack of agreement over which groups should represent the opposition, participating countries have markedly different views about the opposition forces to be admitted to the talks. The list submitted by the Jordanian Minister last month showed that the number of groups to be excluded in each country's opinion varied from 10 to more than twenty.

Assuming that an agreement is reached over the groups to include before the talks begin, what reaction could we expect in the short-term from those excluded? Can we expect a rise in radicalism, and possibly in acts of terrorism not only in the Middle East but also in Western countries? Yet, Assad's fate is the most controversial issue. It is paradoxical to expect groups that have been fighting for the past four years to topple Assad to agree to negotiate with their enemy and accept that he could be re-elected for the Syrian leadership. In this regard, the arguments proposed by the Secretary of the Free Syrian Army and Fred Hof are highly significant. The former has stressed 'the dissonance between the Western expectation that opposition would focus on fighting the ultra-radical anti-western organizations and the intent of the opposition to focus in the first stage on fighting the Assad regime'. The latter instead has questioned the viability of a compromise solution 'when one of the parties does not accept the rules of the game and the other's party constituency is being blown away on a daily basis'. With Russia and Iran insisting on Assad being part of the transitional government, and most of the Syrian opposition being unwilling to negotiate with the regime, I cannot see how one could believe that these talks will conclude successfully. In particular, it is hard to imagine how keeping Assad during the transition period could grant 'free and fair elections' as established by UNSC resolution 2254. Overall, it seems that the UN and Western powers are overlooking the core problem of the entire Syrian situation.

What is, in your opinion, the rationale behind the choice to leave the Assad issue pending? Do you believe that the Geneva talks will lead to a compromise?

Ultimately there will have to be a political settlement in Syria, and the UN can play an important role. I support the call for a ceasefire, the rewriting of the Syrian Constitution, and the holding of free elections. Unfortunately the warring factions do not agree with such a plan, at least for the moment. The Russian intervention has bolstered the confidence of the Assad regime. With the exception of the Kurdish areas in northern Syria, the US has not had much success in degrading IS in the rest of the country. So IS leaders still think they can win.

Assuming that dialogue between the talks' parties will succeed, what kind of political agreement do you think could be reached? Many argue against a hypothetical 'Syrian Taif accord' on the basis of the Lebanese experience. However, I believe the idea of Syria becoming a democracy from scratch is more than utopic. Democracy, however desirable, requires a homogeneity that is obviously lacking in Syria. This is the reason why a more gradual approach is much preferable. A consociationalist form of government combining autonomy with centripetal institutions appears to me among the most viable alternatives. In your opinion, is a power-sharing formula close to consociationalism a viable solution?

The Taif accords ending the Lebanese civil war succeeded only when the major players no longer thought they could win militarily. Those conditions do not exist currently in Syria.

Right now, there is a real danger that Syria will fragment into several parts, or become a failed state altogether. In the short run, it will be a huge victory if the fighting stops and Syria remains a unified, stable country. It would not be a democracy. In fact, I do not even use the term democracy. The US has redefined the word to mean any pro-western country that occasionally holds elections. I do support establishment of a parliamentary system that protects the rights of ethnic and religious groups, protects the rights of women, allows for workers to organize and recognizes the freedom of speech and the press, among other guarantees. Such governments existed in the region after the end of colonialism (Lebanon, Iran under Mossadegh), and exist in Tunisia today (although under fierce attack). Such a system could emerge in Syria, but it will take many years.

Is there any policy recommendation you would like to make based on your knowledge and experience?

Right now the debate in Washington, London, and other western capitals is between a little bit of military intervention vs. a lot of military intervention. That is the wrong approach. Expanding US and western attacks only alienates ordinary Syrians, and bolsters IS recruitment. I support active political and diplomatic policies that will stop all foreign interventions, whether from the US, Europe, Russia, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, or anyone else. Why waste thousands of lives and trillions of dollars to find ourselves in yet another Iraq or Afghanistan? It may sound naïve to the august policy makers in Washington, but the Syrian people will have to choose their own government. It cannot be imposed from the outside.

Reese Erlich has been reporting on the Middle East since 1986, and has written five books on foreign policy. The most recent is "Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect." His webpage is www.ReeseErlich.com

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¹Thompson, L. (2015). Killing ISIS: Five Reasons American 'Boots On The Ground' Will Backfire. [online] Forbes.com. Available at: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/lorenthompson/2015/11/20/killing-isis-five-reasons-american-boots-on-the-ground-will-backfire>

²Jeffrey, J. (2015). The U.S. must send ground forces to eliminate the Islamic State. [online] Washington Post. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-us-must-send-ground-forces-to-eliminate-the-islamic-state/2015/11/16/685aff20-8c63-11e5-ae1f-af46b7df8483_story.html

³Levitt, M. (2015). How to Beat ISIL Without 50,000 Troops. [online] Washingtoninstitute.org. Available at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-to-beat-isil-without-50000-troops>