

WORLD

Why Obama Won't Help

Voices for some kind of military intervention in Syria are growing louder in Washington, but the President worries it would do U.S. interests more harm than good

By Michael Crowley/Washington

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Former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who led the U.K. from 1979 to 1990, died April 8. Photograph by Gabrielle Crawford—Sygma/Corbis

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ON THE COVER:

Illustration by Chris LaBrooy for TIME

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WHEN BARACK OBAMA ordered U.S. air strikes over Libya just over two years ago, he said the threat to innocent life in that country's civil war had compelled him to act. "Some nations may be able to turn a blind eye to atrocities in other countries," the President said. "The [U.S.] is different ... I refused to wait for the images of slaughter and mass graves before taking action."

Two years later, the civil war in Syria has claimed some 70,000 lives. The atrocities, slaughter and mass graves have been visible for months. And if anything, the strategic dangers—spreading sectarian violence, stolen chemical weapons—are greater than they had been in Libya. Yet even as some of Washington's leading foreign policy figures, including ones within his own Administration, have urged Obama to take more action, he has firmly resisted. After four years of his presidency, observers still debate whether there is an Obama Doctrine. But in the case of Syria, the President's doctrine is simple: Stay out.

"The voices calling for intervention are certainly shaping the Washington debate," says Marc Lynch, a George Washington University professor of Middle East studies and an adviser to Obama's re-election campaign. "The main person putting the brakes on this is Obama."

Obama certainly hasn't turned a blind eye toward Syria. The U.S. has already delivered \$385 million in humanitarian aid for the country. The CIA is reportedly training rebel fighters in Turkey and is also helping steer arms and supplies delivered by Sunni Arab countries toward moderate rebel factions and away from those with radical Islamic views or ties to al-Qaeda. The President has backed international diplomacy aimed at persuading Bashar Assad, Syria's dictator, to end the violence, give up power and make way for a relatively moderate government.

That approach is looking increasingly ineffective, however. Assad's brutality suggests he is determined to fight to the bitter end. And the influx of weapons from Arab countries has unleashed violence that might not be containable as Sunnis, Shi'ites and other sectarian groups fight for power and survival. As Lynch puts it, "The political track is dead."

That has intensified the debate about

what else America and its allies could do. For months, only reliable hawks like Republican Senator John McCain were calling on Obama to send arms to the rebels or order air strikes against Assad's forces. But recently such calls have come from more surprising quarters. Britain and France have pushed to end the E.U. embargo on arms shipments to the rebels. Democratic Senator Carl Levin of Michigan, a forceful critic of the Iraq war, has joined McCain in urging Obama to create a no-fly zone in northern Syria, possibly enforced with air strikes against Assad's aircraft and missile batteries. "No boots on the ground," says Levin, who has not heard from the White House. But a senior Administration official tells *TIME* the Levin-McCain plan is "no easy fix."

Most striking is the dissent from within Obama's own Administration. Last summer, then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and then CIA Director David Petraeus presented the White House with a plan to vet, train and arm select Syrian rebels. Obama's Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Martin Dempsey and then Defense Secretary Leon Panetta later said they supported the idea. Obama rejected it.

And when John Kerry was a Senator last year, he spoke openly about possibly shipping arms to the rebels, and even conducting air strikes to enforce a no-fly zone. But since becoming Obama's Secretary of State in January, Kerry has spoken exclusively of diplomacy in public.

A White House aide says Obama is "constantly reviewing every possible option that could help end the violence and accelerate a political transition." But critics of Obama's approach warn that the inaction can be as costly as an ill-advised intervention. Some argue that arming some rebels might ensure American influence in the country's uncertain future. "A package of military assistance delivered to the appropriate rebel groups would still allow them to play a more effective role in the coming big battles" around major cities like Damascus and Aleppo that could determine Assad's fate, says Jeffrey Smith, a former military-intelligence analyst now at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. "Once the regime is gone, in whatever situation develops after that, we want to have at least some armed groups in Syria connected to us, to be people we can work with."

Although Obama has never publicly explained his thinking on Syria in detail,



the main arguments against further U.S. action are clear. One is deep anxiety that U.S.-supplied weapons might wind up in the hands of designated terrorists like the al-Nusra Front, "an al-Qaeda franchise with direct connections to the al-Qaeda core in Pakistan," according to Bruce Reidel, a former CIA official now with the Brookings Institution. "I think the Administration is very worried that any arms that do go to the Syrian opposition are going to wind up in the hands of the al-Nusra Front, and it's very hard to prevent that from happening."

Likewise, the use of airpower is riskier than it may sound. Unlike Muammar Gaddafi's military, Assad's has an advanced Russian-made air-defense system, including planes, radar and surface-to-air missiles. American missions in the area would draw heavy resistance.

Even if Obama wanted to take those steps, his lawyers might tell him not to. Thanks to Chinese and Russian resistance, the U.N. has not authorized military action or arms supplies. Without Security Council approval, either step would violate international prohibitions against



Lone gunman A fighter for the Free Syrian Army prepares to fire a rocket-propelled grenade

interfering in the internal affairs of other nations. For the same reason, most U.S. humanitarian aid winds up being distributed by the Assad regime, meaning virtually none reaches rebel areas.

Further complicating matters is Iran. Javier Solana, a former E.U. official who was among the West's negotiators with Tehran until 2009, recently told a Washington audience that he believes Obama has avoided a Syria entanglement for fear of complicating his diplomacy with Tehran, which views Assad as an important ally and has sent him massive aid.

Ultimately, though, Obama simply doubts that the U.S. would really be able to control the chaos. "In a situation like Syria, I have to ask, Can we make a difference...?" he told the *New Republic* in January.

No Distractions

OBAMA'S FIRST PRESIDENTIAL BID IN 2008 was shaped by his critique of the Iraq war, which he called a reckless use of American power. "He's the man elected, not to get the U.S. involved in any more wars in the Middle East [but] to get us out of wars," says

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—MARC LYNCH, PROFESSOR OF MIDDLE EAST STUDIES, GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Kenneth Pollack, a foreign policy expert at the Brookings Institution. "The President's real agenda is a domestic political one. The last thing the American people want is a bunch of distractions in the Middle East." Indeed, a March YouGov survey found that 45% of Americans opposed sending arms to the Syrian rebels, while 16% were in favor.

A wild card is Syria's chemical-weapons stockpile, which likely includes the nerve agents sarin and VX. Obama has declared the regime's use of those superlethal agents a "red line" that would provoke an unspecified U.S. response. It's not clear how or even if Assad's chemical arsenal could be located and secured, but the specter of loose nerve gas might be the one thing that could summon American ground forces to the Levant. For now, Washington is reportedly training trusted rebel fighters in Turkey and Jordan on how to secure chemical-weapons sites.

Of course, it didn't take a red line for Obama to intervene in Libya—a fact not lost on Syrian rebels and opposition leaders. But in justifying his rationale for bombing Gaddafi's forces in 2011, he framed his action narrowly, like a judge trying to avoid setting precedent. He emphasized the specific circumstances, which included U.N. backing and America's "unique ability" to stop the slaughter of civilians.

In Syria, by contrast, Obama is unlikely to persuade Russia and China to support action at the U.N. anytime soon. Even if he did, discerning regime targets in Syria's densely populated cities and villages would be much harder than blasting Gaddafi convoys on Libya's desert highways.

"I think he interprets Syria to be a slippery slope to military involvement," says Vali Nasr, a former Obama State Department official who disagrees with the current policy. Nasr adds that while many consider the Libya action to be a low-cost success, ending with Gaddafi's demise, that may not be Obama's view. The mission unexpectedly dragged on for weeks, and Gaddafi's fall unleashed long-repressed Islamist forces in the region, including the militants who attacked a U.S. compound in Benghazi last September, killing four Americans. "We forget that Libya didn't turn out well," says Nasr. It seems that Obama remembers. ■