

PROTECTING SYRIAN CIVILIANS: THE ROAD NOT TAKEN

Ambassador Frederic C. Hof

During 70 months of chaos in Syria, the United States had protected not one Syrian civilian from the homicidal rampages of Bashar al-Assad and his remorseless regime. Yes, America had come militarily to the aid of Syrian Kurds besieged by ISIS (ISIL, Daesh, Islamic State). Yet the United States had protected no one in Syria from an Iranian client regime's campaign of civilian mass homicide. The consequences were profoundly negative for Syrians, their neighbors, Western Europe, and the United States. And they were avoidable.

The road taken by the Obama administration unintentionally but inevitably facilitated a humanitarian and geopolitical disaster. The road not taken would have required complicating, frustrating, slowing, and perhaps even stopping the mass murder of defenseless civilians. To be sure: it would *not* have been easy. But its avoidance has been catastrophic.

Indeed, *nothing* about Syria has been easy: no silver bullets to fire, no fairy dust to sprinkle, and no magic potions to ingest. Choices between bad and worse have dominated from the beginning. They have grown starker and uglier over time largely because of the road taken.

The policy complexities were legion: the readiness of a brutal regime to militarize and sectarianize the uprising and burn the country to the ground to survive politically; the absence of ready alternatives to Assad; the shortcomings of the Syrian opposition; the corrosively sectarian roles of anti-Assad regional powers; and the total support for the Syrian regime of an Iran being courted by Washington.

Still, there was one slab of solid ground on which to take a principled and practical stand: civilian protection. The road not taken would have *tried* to protect civilians from a regime whose survival strategy rested in part on collective punishment, while avoiding that which President Obama wished to avoid: a military campaign for regime change.

Mr. Obama argued persistently that, in short, nothing short of invasion and occupation could resolve the Syrian crisis on American terms; therefore, actions short of that were futile. He conflated conflict resolution with civilian protection. He sought to avoid action on the latter by fusing it with the former to make the cost appear prohibitive.

Some defenders and explainers of administration inaction have used, as a framework for analysis, their understanding of what the Obama administration *might* have been willing to do to protect civilians. For example, the "unbelievably small" (to quote Secretary of State John Kerry) military strike ultimately mooted by the administration after the regime's August 2013 sarin gas massacre might have been the military equivalent of stirring up a hornet's nest. It is not hard to imagine Syrian civilians paying the price in the wake of something minimalist and virtually invisible.

Yet to accept the Obama administration's meager menu of civilian protection options is to foretell a certain kind of finding: nothing useful could have been done to protect Syrian civilians from a rapacious regime; to do anything at all (within the confines of that menu) would only make matters worse.

But why restrict oneself so artificially? After all, it was the Assad regime's 2013 sarin gas massacre that marked a clear civilian protection fork in the road. Not only had over 1,400 civilians (many of them children) been hideously murdered, but the chemical warfare "red line" declared by President Obama in 2012 had been crossed on a scale too large to ignore.

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This writer, after watching John Kerry's powerful statement in the immediate wake of the atrocity, believed that there would certainly be a highly lethal American military response: not something "unbelievably small." Given that Assad had killed exponentially more civilians with conventional munitions than with chemicals, it seemed reasonable that the United States – relying mainly on unmanned systems – would destroy the regime's air force, neutralize as much artillery as it could locate, and perhaps even target Scud missile storage. There was an opportunity to shrink significantly the inventory of mass murder instruments in the hands of a regime for which no crime against humanity was unthinkable.

Would such an operation – not the "unbelievably small" version - have shielded Syrian civilians from the regime's campaign of mass homicide? Here this writer must confess that his thin knowledge of political science methodology leaves him unable to produce, either graphically or mathematically, anything that 'proves' the following statement: with no air force, with diminished artillery capabilities, and with fewer Scud missiles, the Assad regime would have found it hard to kill, terrorize, maim, and scatter people with the thoroughness, efficiency, and sheer quantity to which it had become accustomed.

Would it have been casualty-free for those conducting it, and for Syrian civilians employed on air bases or residing near other targets? No: one must assume there would have been unwelcomed human costs.

Would it have required subsequent invasion and occupation? Clearly not.

Would it have put Al Qaeda in charge of Syria? No: the Syrian Army would have been left essentially intact, albeit without assets customarily employed against civilians.

Would it have brought down the Assad regime? Perhaps senior Syrian military commanders and intelligence officials would have abandoned the ruling family in the wake of serious strikes and sought common ground with the mainstream, anti-Assad opposition. But the objective would have been to save lives; not bring down a regime.

Would it have caused Tehran to reject negotiating a nuclear accord with the United States? This was, after all, the priority of the Obama administration in the Middle East. The view here is that Iran was intent on pursuing a nuclear accord that would serve its interests.

Iran was and is joined at the hip to Assad, who has subordinated Syria to Iran to sustain Lebanon's Hezbollah: the point of Iran's spear into the Arab world. Still, Tehran calculated that a nuclear agreement could be in its interests, and that it should proceed toward formal negotiations while backing the collective punishment survival strategy of its Syrian client: a strategy it knew disgusted an otherwise passive West. If Iran was surprised by anything in the late summer of 2013, it was (a) its client's resort to chemicals on a massive scale, and (b) the failure of the United States to respond with punishing lethality.

Indeed, having agreed to deliver up chemical weapons and capabilities (whose existence it had denied), the regime retained its entire arsenal of weapons of mass terror. In negotiating with Russia for the removal of the regime's chemical weapons, the Obama administration did not exploit diplomatically the threat of American military force to secure protective measures for Syrian civilians as well.

This diplomatic lapse stirred the hornet's nest vigorously. The months leading up to the ill-fated Geneva conference of January 2014 were marked by a savage escalation of regime attacks on civilian targets, albeit without chemicals: collective punishment that has continued for years and was militarily uncontested by the Obama administration for the balance of its existence.

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The lapse was compounded by a letter from President Obama to Iran's Supreme Leader in October 2014, one which (according to a source of *The Wall Street Journal*) sought (among other things) to reassure Ayatollah Khamenei that American "military operations inside Syria aren't targeted at Mr. Assad or his security forces." Could there have been a more explicit (if inadvertently thoughtless) green light for the Syrian regime to do its worst to civilians? But keeping Iran focused on reaching a nuclear accord was the administration's idea of reaching for the diplomatic brass ring. It did not wish to risk offending Tehran.

Taking the road of civilian protection would not have been a carefree journey. Assad may, over time, have reacquired mass terror means requiring military neutralization to protect civilians. There would have been casualties and costs. Iran (and Russia) would have objected to limits on their joint client's ability to perform state terror. There would have been no certainties beyond the relative safety of civilians *not* subjected to an air force adept at targeting hospitals, schools, marketplaces and mosques, to a field artillery corps willing to fire indiscriminately into densely populated areas, and to a Scud missile capability used to level apartment blocks.

No silver bullets, no fairy dust, no magic potions: nothing risk-free. Welcome to the real world: a world where a superpower able to make a difference for the better, one mouthing the words "Never Again", remained inert as a country of 23 million experienced upwards of 500,000 deaths, witnessed innumerable victims of physical maiming and psychological trauma, watched more than 6,000,000 driven from the country (and a similar number from their homes internally), monitored over a million under siege facing starvation and disease, and saw tens of thousands illegally detained, tortured, starved, and raped. Add to the toll a lost generation of children, some of them perhaps indefinitely recruitable for bad causes inspired by the brutality of a lawless regime.

Indeed, enumerating the risks associated with the road not taken must be coupled with the consequences of the chosen path: the humanitarian abomination in Syria and the immediate neighborhood; the rise of Al Qaeda and ISIS filling vacuums of Assad regime illegitimacy; an emboldened Russia (schooled by the red line fiasco) dismembering Ukraine and intervening militarily in Syria; and a migrant crisis swamping Europe and prompting nativist political reactions? No, this is not 20-20 hindsight. The warnings were loud and clear all along the route taken.

Indeed, some inside the Obama administration tried hard to change the mind of the President. Some were very senior. Others were mid-level, including the 51 State Department officials who signed a dissent cable urging military action to stop or at least slow the slaughter of innocents. There were times when this writer received whispered encouragement from senior Obama administration officials: "Keep it up. We'll change the President's mind yet."

Others, however, claimed that no one ever offered workable alternatives, and there were no such alternatives anyway. Some Obama staffers warned that a stronger response Syria was to invite World War III. Were they surprised when the April 2017 American cruise missile response to the regime's chemical attack on civilians in Khan Shaykhun did not produce Armageddon? Sadly, that strike appears to have been a welcome, but brief detour.

"Never Again" is a moral and a practical imperative. No, the United States cannot always and everywhere save civilians from governmental mass murdering depredations. Yet in Syria there was and is an opportunity to prevent a lawless regime from doing its worst to defenseless people. And to those for whom civilian slaughter in Syria – the vast bulk of which has been accomplished by the Assad regime – arouses no sense of moral outrage, consider the geopolitical consequences of inaction. What happens in Syria does not stay in Syria. And in Syria itself there is something else not reducible to a graph or a

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mathematical equation: there will be no dialogue, no peace talks, and no peace so long as civilians are on the bullseye; so long as someone's constituents are targets for vaporization.

The road not taken in Syria is still open, notwithstanding sentiment in some quarters that the forces seeking to consolidate a crime family's position have 'won.' The road taken has led to humanitarian and geopolitical disaster, both transcending Syria. To say there were no alternatives – that nothing could have made a difference for the better – is untrue. The Obama administration could have had it all: in Syria the protection of human life and a chance for political accommodation; and with Iran, a nuclear agreement that never required the sacrifice of Syrian civilians. But all of that would have required a challenging journey on the road not taken.

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