"The situation in Syria ... means arming people, many of whom we don't like and who don't like us, to reduce the likelihood of a dangerous increase in the power of people who consider themselves at war with us."

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. According to Mead, what probable policies of a new Syrian government will the United States dislike?
2. What does the author say is the worst case for the United States in a post-Assad Syria?
3. What does Mead say distracted the United States from the conflict in Libya?

Greg Scoblete at RCW [RealClearWorld] takes us to task for advocating arming a faction among the Syrian militia as an advisable course of action:

This is a common lament, both among pro-interventionist Western commentators and among Syrian rebel forces themselves. But how true is it? Let's presume the U.S. arms the rebels—but only the Good Ones Who Share Our Values—and they're able to fight more effectively against [Bashar] Assad's forces. Will the jihadists decide to quit the battlefield? Why would they do that? Are we supposed to assume that the Syrian forces fighting the Assad regime will instantly turn their guns on the jihadists in their midst if and when they succeed in overthrowing Assad? Won't they have bigger fish to fry at that point?

The Post-Assad Syrian Government

These are valid concerns. U.S. support for rebels in Syria is very unlikely to produce a post-war Syrian government that we like. In fact, what we need to understand in all of this that we aren't going to like the new Syrian government very much. It's probably going to be less free, more anti-Israel, and significantly more Islamist than we would want. It's likely that there will be revenge killings and even bloodbaths along the way.

Syria is a lot like Lebanon's bigger, uglier, and meaner brother. The ethnic and religious tensions that produced decades of civil war in Lebanon are also present in Syria. The Assad dictatorship imposed a rigid order on Syria, but as the dictatorship crumbles the divisions are coming back into public view. Unless we were willing to put tens, maybe hundreds of thousands of troops in Syria and keep them
there for a long time, often fighting bad guys and getting attacked by suicide bombers, we don't stand much chance of building an orderly and stable society there, much less an open and free one.

I don't think the United States has the will to do this right now, and beyond pure humanitarian grounds it is hard to see that such a course would serve the national interest. However, even if our Syria policy isn't about achieving something good, we should still be thinking about what we can do that reduces the chances of things getting catastrophically worse.

**Al-Qaeda in Syria**

The worst case for the United States in a post-Assad Syria would be that groups linked to al-Qaeda become dominant players either in the country's government as a whole or in control of significant regions in a country that fragments. Such groups would be nests of terrorists acting to destabilize not only Syria itself but Iraq, Lebanon, and the wider Middle East. They would certainly be active in Russia and, through extensive ties with the Arab diaspora in Europe, add considerably to the security headaches the West faces. They would be actively working to destabilize governments across the Arab world as well and providing shelter, training, and arms to terrorists from all over. In a worst, worst case scenario, they get hold of Assad's WMD [weapons of mass destruction] stockpiles and start passing them out to their friends.

The United States does not want any of this to happen. We could not long stand idly by if it did.

Aiding the less ugly, less bad guys in the Syrian resistance, and even finding a few actual good guys to support, isn't about installing a pro-American government in post civil war Syria. It's about minimizing the prospects for a worst-case scenario—by shortening the era of conflict and so, hopefully, reducing the radicalization of the population and limiting the prospects that Syrian society as a whole will descend into all-out chaotic massacres and civil conflict. And it's about making sure that other people in Syria, unsavory on other grounds as they may be, who don't like al-Qaeda type groups and don't want them to establish a permanent presence in the country, have enough guns and ammunition to get their way.

This is not a plan to edge the United States toward military engagement in Syria; it is aimed at reducing the chance that American forces will need to get involved. And, by accelerating the overthrow of Assad, it's also a strategy for putting more pressure on Iran, pressure that represents our best hope of avoiding war with the mullahs [Iranian clergy who govern that country] as well. The whole point here is to keep our troops at home.

**Preventing the Worst Case**

If the United States hadn't gotten itself distracted by the ill-considered intervention in Libya [in 2011], we might have acted in Syria at an earlier stage, when there were some better options on the table. But we are past that now; the White House humanitarians did what humanitarians often do—inadvertently promoting a worse disaster in one place (in this case, Syria) by failing to integrate
their humanitarian impulses (in Libya) with strategic reflection. This kind of strategic incompetence is the greatest single flaw in the humanitarian approach to foreign policy. It has led to untold misery in the past and will likely lead to many more bloodbaths in the future. Unfortunately, warm hearted fuzzy brained humanitarianism is one of the world's greatest killers.

The situation in Syria now isn't about doing good or preventing bloodbaths. The bloodbath is here and there is not a lot of good that can be done within the range of our capacity and will. This is now all about trying to prevent the worst rather than promoting the best. It means arming people, many of whom we don't like and who don't like us, to reduce the likelihood of a dangerous increase in the power of people who consider themselves at war with us and our friends.

One option people are talking about is to assist defected Syrian officers in a military council to oversee the rebels. Manaf Tlass and his colleagues might be able to establish some kind of unified command that could funnel weapons from the Gulf to certain rebel brigades, marginalize the terrorists, and, if Assad falls, maintain some semblance of order to prevent even worse chaos and bloodbath from erupting across the country. We don't have the intel here at Via Meadia that would let us judge whether Tlass and company are our best bet—but something like this may need to be tried.

There is nothing nice or pretty about this, and we don't expect much good to come out of it. But bad policy decisions in the past combine with the increasingly dangerous situation on the ground to paint us in a corner where we don't have much choice.

Further Readings

Books

- Marc Lynch The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East. New York:


• Carsten Wieland Syria—A Decade of Lost Chances: Repression and Revolution from Damascus Spring to Arab Spring. Seattle: Cune, 2012.


Periodicals


• Noel Sheppard "WaPo's King: Congressional Defeat on Syria 'Would Diminish Obama's