Don't Arm Syria's Rebels

Syria, 2015
From Opposing Viewpoints in Context

"The worst thing that America and the rest of the world could do is to arm the opposition [in Syria]."

Gary Kamiya is a cofounder of Salon, a well-known online magazine. In the following viewpoint, he argues that arming the Syrian rebels will only prolong the Iraq war and cause more death and havoc. He contends that the best possible outcome in Syria is probably for Assad to remain in power while offering some political concessions, and for the war to end quickly. America, he maintains, is reluctant to admit that there are some disasters it cannot avert, but it must recognize this if it is not to create even greater tragedies.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. According to Kamiya, what is the only way that Assad could lose the war?
2. As stated by the author, why does the International Crisis Group say that America's strategy of arming the opposition while pursuing diplomacy will not work?
3. What bad foreign policy decisions does Kamiya attribute to American optimism?

In Syria, the horror has taken a brief break. The [UN secretary-general] Kofi Annan-brokered cease-fire is holding so far, give or take a few government snipers, but no one expects it to last. Within hours, days or weeks, something will break the fragile calm. President Bashar al-Assad's tanks will once again begin firing high-explosive shells into civilian neighborhoods, blowing up houses and everyone in them. Opposition fighters will kill government troops and set off bombs. Mysterious massacres, which each side will blame on the other, will take place. Soldiers will continue to rape women, children will be tortured, and the horrible human toll—9,000 deaths, 42,000 refugees since fighting began 13 months ago [in March 2011]—will continue to climb.

There is a very good chance that this slow-motion blood bath could go on for years. And at the end, Assad could still be in power.

As this dreadful situation festers, calls for America to arm the opposition are growing louder. And they are not only coming from neocons, neo-imperialists and warmongers, proxy warriors for whom defeating Assad is part of a Great Game whose real goal is defeating Iran. No one is surprised that neocons like [US senator] Joe Lieberman, for whom America's foreign policy comes down to "Is it good for Israel?" or his chest-beating partner in imperialist Islamophobia, [Republican senator] John McCain, want the U.S. to arm the Syrian opposition. Nor is it surprising that [American diplomat] Elliott Abrams, Fox News or the Washington Post editorial board have beat the war drums. But these predictable hawks have been joined by an increasing number of liberals and humanitarians who have no ideological ax to grind.

Saying "the basis for any settlement must be a rough equality of forces," New York Times columnist Roger Cohen called for the U.S. to arm the Syrian opposition. Analyst James Traub similarly called for
the U.S. to back what he called a "neo-mujahadeen strategy." Guardian columnist Simon Tisdall blasted [President Barack] Obama's refusal to get the U.S. more involved, saying that the world had a "moral imperative" to intervene. "A shoulder shrug will just not cut it any more," Tisdall wrote. In a column titled "Syria is not Iraq. And it is not always wrong to intervene," Tisdall's Guardian colleague Jonathan Freedland denounced facile left-wing opposition to Western intervention in Syria, writing, "we must not make the people of Horns pay the price for the mistake we made in Baghdad." Oxford economist Paul Collier argued in the Financial Times that Assad's regime was doomed and arming the opposition would push it over the edge.

None of these commentators are neoconservatives or proxy warriors, fans of the "War on Terror," the [George W.] Bush Doctrine [that the USA has the right to attack other countries to secure itself] or the unbridled use of American force. In their different ways, they are driven by simple, and legitimate, moral outrage. That outrage was expressed in its purest form by the Iraqi exile Kanan Makiya, the Iraqi exile whose powerful indictment of [executed Iraqi dictator] Saddam Hussein's tyranny played a large role in convincing liberals like [American journalist and author] George Packer and [American journalist and author] Paul Berman to support the Iraq War. In a largely pro-intervention symposium posted recently by the New Republic, Makiya wrote, "I don't really think there is any kind of a reasonable argument against intervention in Syria. Quite the opposite: There is a moral and a human imperative to act that is larger than any nation's interests and larger than any strategic calculation. That is so obvious it is an embarrassment to have to say it. This is how I thought about intervention in Iraq 20 years ago and it is how I think about what needs to be done in Syria today."

To their credit, most of these observers recognize that their call for the West in general and America in particular to support the Syrian opposition holds considerable risks. For example, after acknowledging the murky and disorganized nature of the Syrian opposition, the looming possibility of sectarian massacres, and the unhappy outcome of America's mujahedin experiment in Afghanistan, Traub writes, "[T]here are no good solutions; only less bad ones ... I'm open to a better suggestion."

So these commentators deserve respect for their intellectual integrity, their good intentions and their moral outrage. All of them find the unfolding carnage in Syria unbearable to behold, and anyone with a conscience would agree.

And yet, we must bear it. For the worst thing that America and the rest of the world could do is to arm the opposition.

This is not a knee-jerk left-wing response. It has nothing to do with Iraq. Nor does it have anything to do with the proxy war between the U.S. and its allies and Iran and its allies. It is not driven by pacifism or opposition to all war. All U.S. wars are not axiomatically foolish, evil or driven by brutal self-interest (although most of them since World War II have been). The airstrikes on Kosovo [in 1999] and the [2011] Libya campaign were justified (although the jury is still out on the latter intervention). If arming the Syrian opposition would result in fewer deaths and a faster transition to a peaceful, open, democratic society, we should arm them.

Every situation is different: There is no one-size-fits-all template for foreign affairs. And in Syria, the truth is that further militarizing the conflict will likely cause it to spiral out of control. Moral outrage alone
is not enough. It must be tethered to a coldly rational analysis.

That analysis has been provided by a number of in-depth reports, most notably a new study by the International Crisis Group [ICG], as well as the excellent on-the-ground reporting of Nir Rosen for [Arabic news network] Al-Jazeera. The bottom line is simple. The war has become a zero-sum game for Assad. If he loses, he dies. But the only way he can lose is if he is abandoned by his crucial external patron, Russia, which is extremely unlikely to happen absent some slaughter so egregious that Moscow feels it has to cut ties with him. Assad has sufficient domestic support to hold on for a long time, and a huge army that is not likely to defect en masse. Under these circumstances, giving arms to the rebels, however much it may make conscience-stricken Western observers feel better, will simply make the civil war much bloodier and its outcome even more chaotic and dangerous.

The key point concerns Assad's domestic support. Contrary to the widely held belief that most Syrians support the opposition and are opposed to the Assad regime, Syrians are in fact deeply divided. The country's minorities—the ruling Alawites, Christians and Druze—tend to support the regime, if only because they fear what will follow its downfall. (The grocery on my corner in San Francisco is owned by a Christian Syrian from a village outside Damascus. When I asked him what he thought about what was going on in his country, he said, "It's not like what you see on TV. Assad is a nice guy. He's trying to do the right thing." ) As Rosen makes clear, Syria's ruling Alawite minority is the key to Assad's survival: Absent an outside invasion, the regime will not fall unless the Alawites turn on it. But the Alawites fear reprisals if the Sunni-dominated opposition, some of whose members have threatened to "exterminate the Alawites," defeats the Assad regime. The fear of a sectarian war, exacerbated by the murky and incoherent nature of the opposition, means that the minorities are unlikely to join the opposition in large numbers. As for the opposition, it has suffered too many losses to stop fighting.

What this means is that neither side has any reason to stop pursuing its present course, and short of a U.S. or NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] invasion—which only barking-mad neocons are suggesting we embark on—the regime will be able to hold on for years. The longer the struggle goes on, Rosen notes, the more radicalized and Islamist the opposition will become. As Rosen gloomily writes, "Syria is crumbling before our eyes, and a thoroughly modern nation is likely to be set back many decades."

The International Crisis Group report argues that America's current posture of talking about arming the opposition while simultaneously pursuing a diplomatic track is a mistake.

"In the meantime this dual U.S. and Arab approach—on the one hand, proclaiming support for Annan and for a diplomatic resolution; on the other, toying with greater militarization of the opposition—arguably is a strategy at war with itself and one that could readily backfire. Some argue that only by dangling the prospect of a stronger rebel force might Assad be persuaded to give in. But a different scenario is more likely: The regime will point to any decision to arm the opposition as a breach of the Annan plan and use it as a reason not to comply and to reinvigorate its own offensive; meanwhile, the military half-measures on behalf of the opposition might satisfy the urge to 'do something'—but these will be woefully inadequate to beat back a regime offensive." The ICG report recommends "a more pragmatic, consensual approach, a controlled, negotiated transition that would spare the country additional bloodshed ... a middle course between chaos without the regime and
chaos with it—a controlled transition that preserves state institutions, thoroughly reforms the security services and puts squarely on the table the issue of unaccountable family rule." To get there, it suggests strengthening some of mediator Kofi Annan's general ideas, including a monitoring mechanism to ensure that cease-fires are not violated, freezing of weapons smuggling across the border, and a pragmatic compromise on demonstrations that would allow them but not in the center of Damascus, where they would become [Egyptian] Tahrir Square-style mass movements that would topple the regime. In the long run, the radioactive issue of the Assad family’s rule and legitimacy and the sectarian makeup of the security forces would have to be addressed. But in the short term, Assad would remain in power.

An Op-Ed piece in the New York Times by two law professors, Asli Bali and Aziz F. Rana, made the same point: The most humane thing for the Syrian people, the authors argue, would be to engage [diplomatically] with Assad—which means leaving him, at least for now, in power.

This means that the best-case scenario is that the fighting winds down, the opposition eventually gives up the armed struggle, contents itself with whatever crumbs Assad throws it, and waits for the political winds to shift enough so that real change can start taking place.

For this, thousands of men, women and children gave their lives?

Such an outcome seems morally outrageous. It’s unthinkable. But the alternative—an all-out sectarian civil war between evenly matched adversaries, both of them fighting to the death—is even more unthinkable.

What America and the world are faced with in Syria, in short, is nothing less than a tragedy. And we are not good at dealing with tragedy.

Americans are not a tragic people. We do not understand tragedy, and we instinctively resist it. Our history has insulated us from it. American exceptionalism, the belief that we are qualitatively different from all other nations and immune to the woes that afflict them, goes back to the Puritans. No American president can avoid paying lip service to it. The Republican Party's foreign policy consists almost entirely of endless variations on it. It is in our national DNA.

The American belief that we live in a city on a hill, that we are immune from tragedy, has not only molded our national character, it has shaped our relations with the rest of the world. Some of its influence has been positive. Optimism and generosity, the benign face of American exceptionalism, drove epochal achievements like the Marshall Plan, which rebuilt a shattered Europe after World War II. That altruistic, engaged approach to the world known as "Wilsonian idealism" or "liberal interventionism" has resulted in some notable achievements, including the ouster of Serbian tyrant Slobodan Milosevic and the toppling of Libyan dictator Moammar Gadhafi. A foreign policy that does not have a moral component, a purely Machiavellian [politically unscrupulous and deceptive] approach to the world, is soulless. Realism is essential, but realism without compassion is deadly.

But America's belief that it is inherently a force for good, that American interventions always have positive results, and that we can shape the world at will, have led us to make a number of appalling
foreign policy decisions—ones that not only failed to advance our own interests, but that harmed the very people and causes we were allegedly trying to help. Vietnam and Afghanistan, our two longest wars, were both driven partly by altruistic motives—and both proved to be disastrous quagmires. George W. Bush's Iraq War was motivated by a bizarre mixture of factors—Zimmerman-style vigilante vengeance for 9/11, a half-baked "grand strategy" to remake the Middle East for U.S. and Israel, a feckless and puerile president's desire to play the he-man—but lurking among them was a myopic, almost drugged belief that because we were the ones dropping the bombs, and God was on our side, everything was going to be OK in the end. Hundreds of thousands of dead Iraqis, thousands of dead American and coalition troops and a wrecked country later, everything did not turn out to be OK.

Our national instinct is to come riding to the rescue. It goes against our character to simply sit on our hands. Our sincere, naive and self-centered belief that America can fix everything, and our equally sincere, naive and self-centered belief that moral outrage justifies intervention, is a powerful tide, pulling us toward getting directly involved in Syria's civil war.

But in the real world, we cannot always come riding to the rescue. Sometimes, we have no choice but to watch tragedy unfold, because anything we do will create an even bigger tragedy.

America is going to have to come to terms with this painful truth, and a lot of similar ones, in the years ahead. We're going to have to accept that Obama's drone war is creating more enemies than it kills and shut it down, even if that means some potential terrorists get away. We're going to have to accept that Afghanistan and Iraq may end up as basket cases, even failed states. We're going to have to learn to live with an Egypt run by Islamists, and an Israeli-Palestinian conflict that can no longer be solved with a two-state solution. We're going to have to give up on the dream of perfect safety from terrorism.

After too many childish illusions, and childish wars that killed too many people, it's time for us to grow up.

Footnotes
1. Florida vigilante George Zimmerman shot and killed Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black teenager, in 2012.

Further Readings

Books


• Marc Lynch The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East. New York: PublicAffairs, 2013.


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


Periodicals


Source Citation

Gale Document Number: GALE|EJ3010923210