

RELEASE IN PART B6

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Here is my Atlantic column this week. We could do a lot by mobilizing now for growing civilian disaster through assembling public-private disaster relief coalitions and mobilizing the kind of military assistance we used in Haiti, Aceh, etc. Will also send to Jeff Feltman. How the World Can Peacefully Intervene in Syria


By Anne-Marie Slaughter
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Preparing for civil war may be the only remaining way to avert it



A protester faces riot police at Khalidia, near Homs / Reuters

U.N. Ambassador Susan Rice tweeted yesterday, "Most immediate civ. protection issue confronting the #UNSC is #Syria. We will not rest until the Council rises to meet its responsibilities." Civilian protection is going to require a buffer zone and safe routes for wounded Syrians and refugees fleeing violence to reach sanctuary either in that buffer zone or in neighboring countries. According to Salam Hafez, an editor at the Institute for War and Peace reporting, the anti-regime Free Syrian Army (FSA) is protecting "some villages in Dera, Jebal Al-Zawya and Idlib and some districts in Hama and Homs," a strategic belt in northwest Syria close to the Turkish border. That is precisely where the Syrian army is intensifying its assault, likely because if the FSA can hold and expand this area it will have a clear base of operations. The Syrian government is massacring soldiers and civilians in Homs to prevent that city from becoming something like a Syrian version of Libya's Benghazi, the stronghold of the opposition and their base of operations in a country-wide conflict. But such a base could and should also become a safe zone for hundreds if not thousands of wounded civilians who can no longer seek medical assistance in Syrian hospitals, numbers that will increase dramatically, accompanied by massive streams of refugees, if civil war breaks out in earnest.

 On Saturday, the Arab League will meet again in an emergency session called to review Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad's flagrant violation of his agreement to the League's plan to end the violence, a plan that required the Syrian government to withdraw its military from cities and residential areas, release all political prisoners, and allow Arab League monitors, human rights groups, and foreign journalists into the country, none of which he has done. Instead, the Syrian government has ratcheted up its assault in places like Homs. The opposition predicted immediately and correctly that the Syrian government would never abide by the agreement. Ausama Monajed, an adviser to the president of Syrian National Council, said in an interview that Assad had agreed only because he "has realized that Russia and China will no longer protect him at the United Nations. The only thing saving the regime so far has been that Russia and China were prepared to block any resolution against Syria at the Security Council. But now it has become clear that the Arab League will use its leverage with Russia and China to persuade them to back their position and not use their veto power, and it is clear that neither Russia nor China would compromise their position with the Arab League, particularly Saudi Arabia, just to save Assad."

That's an optimistic view; many other commentators argue that Assad likely believes he has the upper hand and is just playing for time while he steadily increases the level of force and brutality necessary to crush the opposition outright. In cities such as Aleppo, much like in many Libyan cities after Qaddafi struck back, supporters of the opposition are sufficiently cowed that they will not take to the streets and start the cycle of protest, killings, and renewed determination to vindicate those deaths. Thus the balance of power that will determine whether the Syrian government will be forced out of power or a full-fledged civil war will break out lies with two major swing institutions: the Syrian business community and the army, whose calculations must largely rest on their predictions as to whether Assad can hold on or not.

That's where U.S. diplomacy can help, by forcing both the members of the Arab League (particularly Syria's neighbors) and Syrian supporters of the regime to confront and absorb what a civil war would mean. The U.S. should encourage the Arab League to ask the UN for a resolution supporting the creation and defense of a buffer zone on the Turkish-Syrian border and the subsequent creation of safe corridors to that zone from cities where the Syrian government has concentrated its assault. Turkey would have to take the lead, along with the FSA, in implementing this resolution, but NATO could provide logistical support. At the same time, the U.S. should immediately begin organizing a medical and disaster relief response. If a government will not protect its own citizens, the doctrine of responsibility to protect allows the international community to step in, but not necessarily with soldiers.

What is happening in Syria is a humanitarian disaster equivalent to any earthquake or flood. Thousands of battered civilians need help in ways that members of the international community -- governments, NGOs, international organizations, militaries, even corporations -- know how to provide. The U.S. navy should prepare to send hospital ships off the Turkish coast. Indeed, Dave Takaki, a U.S. vet, points out that the Global Logistics Cluster, a center of operations for disaster relief and humanitarian assistance endorsed by a UN-sponsored forum of UN and non-UN partners, includes UNHCR, UNDP, United Nations Department of Peace Keeping Operations, WHO, United Nations Department of Safety and Security, Swedish Rescue Services Agency, NRC, Danish Refugee Council, United Nations Institute for Training and Research/Operational Satellite Applications Programme, RedR Australia, Télécoms Sans Frontières, Ericsson Response, Global VSAT Forum, and NetHope, a consortium of 18 international NGOs. The International Red Cross and Crescent are also connected. These partners are already working through the cluster approach in 11 countries ranging from Panama to Sudan to Yemen.

Activating an international humanitarian assistance response now will not only put the international community in a far better place to respond to a Syrian civil war faster and better than we responded in Libya, but it will also force all the parties involved to start thinking through the real implications of what is about to happen. Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq will start seeing streams of refugees and active destabilization of their own politics as ethnic and religious groups connected to different factions in a Syrian conflict take sides. Iran is supporting the Syrian government; the Saudi king has called for Assad to step down. The Iraqi government has supported Assad, albeit tepidly; the Iraqi opposition is supporting the Syrian opposition. At worst, Syria could become the site of a proxy war between Turkey and Saudi Arabia

on one side with Iran and Iraq on the other. Instead of making predictions and placing bets, it's time for all countries involved to start responding and planning based on worst case scenarios.

Preparing for civil war may be the only remaining way to avert it.