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**From:** Mills, Cheryl D <MillsCD@state.gov>  
**Sent:** Thursday, March 29, 2012 5:31 AM  
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**Subject:** Fw: "Syria is Obama's Srebrenica" Ginsberg On HuffPost Front Page

**From:** John Podesta [redacted]  
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**From:** Marc Ginsberg [redacted]  
**Sent:** Wednesday, March 28, 2012 11:12 PM  
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**Subject:** "Syria is Obama's Srebrenica" Ginsberg On HuffPost Front Page



## Marc Ginsberg

Former U.S. Ambassador to Morocco and White House Mid East Adviser

# Syria Is Obama's Srebrenica

Posted: 03/28/2012 5:32 pm

Back in 1992, Serb forces besieged the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo after Bosnia declared its independence. In almost four years of uricide, Washington uncomfortably stayed on the sidelines as Serbs inflicted unspeakable atrocities and hardship on Sarajevo. The well documented U.S. government's paralysis boxed in any hope for a new strategy until 7,000 Muslims were executed in cold blood by Bosnian Serb forces in the refugee enclave of Srebrenica in July, 1995. It took that unspeakable atrocity to finally shock the White House out of its self-imposed box and face the facts that its Bosnia policy was going nowhere.

Flash forward 17 years later, and in this second year of Syria's so-called Arab Spring bloodbath it's déjà vu all over again at 1600 Penn. While Syria is not Srebrenica, there are eerie similarities in how this Obama team is hopelessly caught up in a Bosnian-style policy vacuum circa 1995, characterized by an excessively domineering election campaign apparatus that inexorably trumps national security considerations. That is a dangerous recipe when coupled with the absence of any long-term strategy in Syria.

Why is the White House on such a slippery slope that it claims it is determined to avoid?

First, when the initial violence broke out in Syria in March 2011, the Administration, fresh from its Libyan involvement, deemed Syria the equivalent of foreign policy kryptonite. "Syria is not Libya" trademarked the defensive crouch, and all of those Administration figures crying for humanitarian involvement in Libya fell shockingly silent even as the unspeakable violence in Syria far surpassed anything that took place in Libya. And unlike Libya, Syria was too much of a heavy lift for

an Administration that had seen much of its Middle East policies shredded by events that always seemed to outmaneuver good intentions.

The occasional Administration condemnation of Assad's shocking ruthlessness from the President or Secretary of State was inadequately backed up by biting sanctions or efforts to mobilize international pressure on Assad. And Assad and his cronies cunningly responded with empty promises to reform as cover to escalate the crackdown.

Second, two months into the spreading revolt, and as civilian casualties mounted, the White House fell into a policy trap demanding that Assad either commence reforms or "go." Assad had no intention of doing either, but the Obama team kept telegraphing a preference for "the devil it knows."

Assad read those tea leaves all too well. He interpreted our self-declared "preference" for the known devil as a license to escalate the violence against Syria's civilians knowing that Washington had short-leashed itself against any tangible intervention against his regime.

Third, the Administration is fixated by unsubstantiated fears that the regime's swift implosion would usher in a prolonged period of sectarian strife and the reemergence of the Muslim Brotherhood. It failed to appreciate that the longer the atrocities continue the more bitter the desire for vengeance would become. Now, the contrary may be coming to pass -- there is real fear that the longer the brutality drags on the more likely that extremists will seize power from more moderate Syrians -- not the other way around. Outside experts who contested this assessment were read the "do not disturb" sign nailed to the Situation Room door.

Then in May, Obama demanded Assad once again "either lead a political transition or get out of the way" ... with then a mounting casualty count of 1,600 dead. But none of this was adequately backed up by any firm "or else": no efforts to curb Syria's oil revenue lifeline, no laser-style targeting of businessmen supporting the regime effort to commence humanitarian relief for Syria's civilians, no effort to delegitimize the regime by having its leadership referred to the International Criminal court to marshal a more multilateral approach to compel Assad to choose "either/or." All the while the White House was being deluged by reasonable policy recommendations from nationally known Syrian experts that there were many new sanctions and policies the U.S. could have adopted throughout the summer and fall short of direct military involvement to ratchet up the pressure on Assad, including sanctions on Syria's Central Bank, sanctions on Lebanese banks laundering oil revenue for Assad, quiet outreach to Syria's minorities to coax them away from the regime or political support for the Syrian opposition, just to name a few.

Fourth, as more reports of atrocities trickled out of Syria last summer, the U.S. began subcontracting U.S. policy to Turkey in the expectation that greater coordination with Ankara would create more multilateral support against the regime. At the time, this made eminent sense. Ankara, faced with a growing humanitarian refugee crisis on its Syrian border, and furious with its failed investment in the Assad regime, picked up the mantle. There were bilateral talks of buffer zones and humanitarian corridors and, perhaps non-lethal support to the nascent Free Syrian Army.

But as my able colleague Tony Badran reported in his blog in [www.nowlebanon.com](http://www.nowlebanon.com) (confirming what I picked up during my recent visit to Turkey a few days ago), Secretary Clinton caught her Turkish counterpart off guard during their meeting in Washington last month. Clinton reportedly told Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu that the Obama Administration "preferred going through the Russians" in an attempt to achieve a political solution being shopped by the UN/Arab League's Special Syrian Envoy Kofi Annan.

By unexpectedly dismissing Turkish/Arab League plans to create a buffer zone/or humanitarian corridor as well as organizing and providing non-lethal support to the Free Syrian Army, everything that Turkey thought was on the table with Washington appeared to fall off of it. It seemed to matter to no one in the White House that it had just pushed our Turkish colleagues over the cliff after we had jumped on their bandwagon.

To add insult to injury to the Turks scurrying to come up with a reasonable approach to the humanitarian catastrophe in Syria, Mrs. Clinton inappropriately commended the recently passed UN Security Council Resolution and correlated President's Statement on Syria along lines that the Russians had demanded. There were no deadlines, no credible threat of action if Assad fails to embrace Annan's plan, and as a sop to the Russians, no mention of getting rid of Assad despite that being the cornerstone of Obama's policy. It was the type of hollow UN action akin to dressing a pinstriped pig with lipstick all the while the Russians pour arms into Assad's hands as they buy time for the regime to kill every last Syrian opposing it.

More than any another White House in quite a while, "politics" has been the alpha dog in this Situation Room when it comes to foreign policy (as compared to national security, where the President has excelled). As Badran stated in his piece: "President Obama wishes to nip in the bud any possibility of this happening in an election year.

The trouble with this approach is that there is growing realization in policy circles that Obama's political staff is setting the stage for a bigger problem for the President later on. There are more than enough reasons, aside from the atrocities, to set aside election year considerations and immediately focus on formulating a Syria policy that will prevent Syria from descending into chaos that only will benefit our adversaries.

Just today, the UN declared that over 9,000 Syrians have been killed. A UN Human Rights watchdog also today declared that Assad is committing "crimes against humanity" by targeting, torturing and imprisoning children. And, surprise, surprise, while Assad "agreed" to the Annan cease-fire peace plan on Monday, which required his forces to withdraw from besieged cities and towns, Syrian security forces unleashed an attack on rebel-controlled areas on the Lebanese border in direct violation of his self-declared ceasefire.

On April 1 in Ankara another "Friends of Syria" meeting will be held. Chafing from U.S. backsliding, Turkey and its Arab League allies plan to force Washington to get off its political dime and commit to acting in unison with them -- at least to overtly support the creation of humanitarian aid corridors -- and to put some teeth behind the Annan plan to hold Assad's feet to the fire once and for all to stop the bloodshed. Short of boots on the ground, there is so much more that can be done to help alleviate the human suffering, provide non-lethal support to the Free Syrian Army, and hold Assad's feet to the fire. There have been some reports that belatedly, the Administration may be getting the message.

However, if the U.S. refuses to accede to new ideas from its "Syrian Friends" then, to coin its own phrase with respect to Assad, "it should get out of the way."

Fortunately, our Turkish, European and Arab allies don't have the pretext of a presidential campaign to prevent them adopting beneficial, expeditious policies against Assad which will pay a huge dividend for U.S. strategic national security interests in the Middle East.

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