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Sent: Sunday, June 3, 2012 3:53 AM
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Subject: Zakaria oped

The Case Against Intervention in Syria

Regime change is overdue, but a slow squeeze is a smarter solution than war

June 1, 2012

TIMEBy Fareed Zakaria

In Syria, the brutal regime of Bashar Assad is testing the proposition that repression works. The massacre of civilians in Houla is only the latest example of what appears to be a strategy of making no concessions and using maximum force. To the Assad regime's way of thinking, Egypt's Hosni Mubarak and Libya's Muammar Gaddafi erred by hesitating, emboldening the opposition and sowing doubts among their supporters. So far, Assad's strategy has worked. Kofi Annan's mission, which appears to be based on the idea that Assad will negotiate his own departure, seems utterly doomed. The U.S., the Western world, indeed the civilized world, should attempt instead to dislodge the Assad regime. Is there a smart way to do it?

For a number of reasons, military intervention is unlikely to work in Syria. Start with the geography: unlike Libya, Syria is not a vast country with huge tracts of land where rebels can retreat, hide and be resupplied. Syria is roughly one-tenth the size of Libya but has three times as many people. Partly for this reason, the Syrian rebellion has not been able to take control of any significant part of the country. Nearly half of all Syrians live in or around two cities, Damascus and Aleppo, both of which seem to remain under the regime's grip. Sporadic night attacks in other places recur, but they don't expand.

Nor is it clear that the Syrian opposition is capable of unity. Popular opposition to Assad is neither broad-based nor organized. The Syrian National Council, the umbrella group of organized opposition, appears unable to unify behind a leader, agenda or set of goals. Rima Fleihan, a grassroots activist who escaped from Syria to organize the opposition, quit the council, telling the New York Times, "They fight more than they work."

The geopolitics of military intervention is also unattractive. Whereas in Egypt and even Libya, all the major and regional powers were on the side of intervention or passively accepted it, in Syria that is not the case. Iran and Russia have both maintained strong ties to the Assad regime. Were the Western powers to intervene, it would quickly become a proxy struggle, with great-power-funded militias on both sides. That would likely result in a protracted civil war with civilian casualties that would dwarf the current numbers. To many observers the situation in Syria looks less like Libya and more like Lebanon, where a decades-long civil war resulted in over 150,000 deaths and a million displaced people.

Also absent in Syria is any sign of high-level dissent. Major defections from the army, intelligence services or business community are so far nonexistent. The regime was set up by Bashar Assad's father, Hafez Assad. The family is Alawite, a Shi'ite sect that represents only 12% of Syrians, and the key military and intelligence posts belong to Alawites. These loyalists stick with the regime because they know that in a post-Assad Syria, they would likely be massacred. But Assad has also been able to stop defections among the Sunni and Christian members of the ruling elite, presumably with a mixture of threats and bribes.

That's where the regime might be vulnerable. Syria is not an oil state; the regime does not have unlimited resources with which to buy off elites. Were truly crippling sanctions to be put in place, including an embargo on energy, it is likely that the regime would begin to crack. That might result in a brokered exit for the Assad family or a full-scale collapse of the regime. It seems unlikely that the regime could persist without some source of cash.

The Obama Administration is rightly trying to approach this problem with as many allies as possible. It is also correct in trying to persuade Russia, if not to join the coalition, then at least to ease its objections to sanctions. -Moscow is unlikely to take that step until it concludes that the Assad regime is doomed and that Russia is better off positioning itself for whatever comes next. But even without Russia and Iran, real sanctions and embargoes will slowly bankrupt the Syrian regime—and hasten its end.

It would be morally far more satisfying to do something dramatic that would topple Assad tomorrow. But starving his regime might prove the more -effective strategy.