

The Limited-Strike Dilemma

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The endless parallels made in recent days between the planned U.S. air strikes on Syria and the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 may actually add to the general confusion more than dispel it.

In reality, the two have little in common. In Iraq, a massive coalition air campaign and a large-scale ground operation were parts of a more classic interstate war that later morphed into a decade-long occupation, coupled with a mounting counterinsurgency campaign. In Syria, the main military option in the offing — the U.S. intervention in the form of punitive air strikes limited in scope and duration — is planned to take place in the midst of the ongoing and increasingly sectarian civil war. This war is quickly becoming regionalized and is drawing in neighbors and other states in the region. If there is an accurate parallel with past U.S. interventions, it is Bosnia, not Iraq.

The administration of U.S. President Barack Obama has now found itself facing a difficult dilemma. But the current focus on the chemical weapons controversy in Syria should not distract from the more fundamental specifics, complexities and scenarios, nor from lessons

to be gleaned from the past U.S. interventions into civil wars.

Even if the U.S.-led surgical air strikes are intense, their effect will be limited. A relatively limited intervention into a civil war may spur serious change if the warring sides are already worn out, which was the case in Bosnia but is not yet the case in Syria. The most U.S. air strikes can change in Syria now is to destroy some of Assad's military installations and perhaps help the rebels to create and defend a stronghold in the south of the country to serve as a base for the opposition government.

But the United States' limited punitive intervention will not deliver a military solution. Nor is it particularly promising as leverage to push Assad into a negotiated solution with opposition forces. A combination of external air strikes with internal military pressure would give a major boost to further sectarianization of the Syrian conflict and the region as whole. Meanwhile, it will also be difficult to convince Syria's rebels to the negotiating table once they are emboldened by overt U.S. military backing.

The limited-strike option may well help the Obama administration avoid the "you break it, you own it" trap, the one that got the U.S. in so much trouble in Iraq and Afghanistan. But this option does not at all address the problems of the transition from war to peace. That will require not only some form of intra-Syrian arrangement, but also a massive international security commitment to oversee the long-term transition to peaceful rule, which promises to be messy, complicated and problem-ridden. To get militarily involved in the Syria crisis and pretend to ignore the aftermath, Libya-style, will clearly not work.

Yet neither the U.S., France or any other anti-Assad power appears to be interested in another long-term security engagement and controversial state-building experiment in Syria. In contrast to post-Dayton Bosnia, there is little chance that a new "coalition of the willing" will want to lead a security campaign and reconstruction efforts on the ground while remnants of the Syrian civil war in Syria are still ongoing. The U.S. regional allies, including Arab states and Turkey, do not have the capacity or international legitimacy to enforce peace. While U.S. air strikes may bring some short-term military results, they will not address any of the real issues at stake and may even further complicate them.

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