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Zambakari ADVISORY

Syria: To Bomb Again or Not?

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The Zambakari Advisory

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The conflict in Syria is one of the worst humanitarian crisis in the world today. Since December 2017, over [5.4 million people](#) have fled the war in Syria seeking refuge in neighboring countries such as Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan. Another [6.3 million](#) people have been forcefully displaced inside Syria (IDPs). News broke out suspecting that President Bashar al-Assad's regime had used [chemical attacks](#) to strike the rebel-held suburb of Douma, east of Damascus. This prompted western governments' outrage and pressure began to mount for a forceful response despite lack of a convincing proof that the chemical strike was carried out by the Syrian government. Nonetheless, the French President, Emmanuel Macron, asserts "[proof](#)" that last week the Syrian government attacked with chemical weapons. President Trump, who recently said he wants to pull the United States out of Syria, has more recently declared that the missiles "[will be coming](#)" towards [Syria](#). On April 13th he [ordered strikes](#) on Syrian targets.

As was the case with Iraq, Libya, and now Syria, major western news agencies have fill the papers with justifications for bombing Syria. The enthusiasm for advocating for war wrapped in a moral need for violence, masks obvious consequences, an overt attack on Syria can provoke a greater war in the Middle East and bring the U.S. into direct confrontation with Russia or even [China](#). It is expected that Russia and China will veto any Security Council resolution authorizing force in Syria. Wars that [lack UN authorization](#) are illegal under international law. Where does that leave western powers? The double standard whereby international law is only useful when it legitimizes intervention but an obstacle when it restrains intervention is frustratingly evident.

The Syrian conflict is one of the world's most intense and deadly proxy wars since the end of the Cold War and can potentially unravel into a nuclear war if not peacefully resolved. The term, "Syrian civil war" is a clear misnomer. It is better that it be called a regional conflict with global actors between [two broad coalitions](#): those who support and those who oppose Mr. Assad and his government. Russia, Iran, Hezbollah, Shia Muslim militias (mostly recruited by Iran from Iraq, Afghanistan and Yemen) support the Syrian government. Turkey, Arab Gulf States (money and weapons), Jordan, The US (arms, training, and military assistance) form the coalition against the Syrian regime. The rebels comprise a diverse array of fighters many of whom cooperate with jihadists groups that the United States fights in the region. Other local and regional actors also fight in the conflict—e.g., the Kurds, who profess no support for either the government or the opposition.

In this complex conflict environment, The U.S. government faces four possible solutions for Syria, each posing a different outcome: limited strikes, re-arming anti-government rebels, a full intervention that would existentially threaten the regime, or a negotiated political settlement. The first and second option were attempted by the Obama administration and produced little result. In one instance, the C.I.A. supplied weapons to cooperative rebels that ended up in the hands of rebels linked to Al Qaeda. Upon recommendations by the C.I.A. director, Mike Pompeo, President Trump ended one of America's costliest covert action programs which cost [more than \\$1 billion](#) over its lifetime. More disastrous for the United States were, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the [forcefully engineered regime change in Libya in 2011](#).

In the case of the latter Obama publicly recognized it as the '[worst mistake](#)' of his presidency. No such acknowledgment was made about the invasion of Iraq. In the UK' [report](#) of its own role in Libya, it was noted "The UK's actions in Libya were part of an ill-conceived intervention, the results of which are still playing out today." The lesson of Iraq and Libya are not yet fully learned and before engaging in yet another attempt at regime change in the Middle East we must exercise greater [caution](#) as indicated by U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis. While al-Assad has committed grave crimes against his people, a [survey](#) by Columbia University's Daniel Corstange offers an insight into what Syrian refugees want: slightly over half the refugees support the opposition but a substantial portion (40%), backs al-Assad's regime. Opposition supporters are poorer and more poorly educated "than those who side with the regime..."

The fourth option, which doesn't have as much traction as the military solution, is a political settlement through concerted diplomatic effort that brings together all the key stakeholders. This has been attempted many times, and has failed each time, but it remains the only viable solution. It may not appear as attractive to proponents of the military option; even less attractive to envision a political dispensation in Syria that includes al-Assad's regime, still, it appears that any alternatives without the inclusion of Assad are worse than the current options on the table.

The geopolitical reality that confronted Obama now confronts Trump: i.e., some problems can't be fixed militarily through low-cost, low-risk solutions recommended by advocates of force. Surprisingly, one of Trump's less acknowledged political moves was the recognition of the complexity of the crisis in Syria and his push for an immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops from the region. He recognized the need to work with [key stakeholders](#), especially Russia, to stabilize the country and possibly bring the conflict to an end. Those advocating for bombing Syria forget the violent history behind humanitarian interventions. The tragedy is that they come packaged in good intention without consideration of the voices of those meant to benefit or for the possible

outcomes that follow the intervention. To quote John Milton who knew despair better than most, “the road to hell is paved with good intentions.”

Three essentials seem required for any forward hope considering Syria’s transition: inclusion of all key stakeholders, the participation of the population through popular consultation, and a comprehensive approach that addresses the root causes of the conflict. In the short-term, this includes a ceasefire to pave the way to political negotiations. Thus, a rational approach to this conflict requires a painful acknowledgment that a new Syria will include the active participation of the current regime and its backers. This will open doors for a [genuine comprehensive political solution](#) that can bring both those in power and those out of power to the table to resolve their differences under the auspices of the United Nations. No durable solution is possible unless the process proves comprehensive enough to address the root causes of the issues responsible for the conflict.

About the Author

Christopher Zambakari is a Doctor of Law and Policy, the Chief Executive Officer of [The Zambakari Advisory, L.L.C.](#), Hartley B. and Ruth B. Barker Endowed Rotary Peace Fellow, the Assistant Editor of The Bulletin of The Sudan Studies Association. His area of research and expertise is international law and security, political reform and economic development, governance and democracy, conflict management and prevention, nation and state-building processes in Africa and in the Middle East. His work has been published in law, economic, and public policy journals.