

Will the U.S. Attack Syria? Why It's Time to Help Moderate Rebels, and Get Assad Out



By [Brian Frydenborg](#) September 24, 2013

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This is the fifth in a series of articles on the consequences of U.S. inaction in Syria. The previous three articles can be found [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).



Image credit: AP

Look at the picture above. What you see is an [ethnic Albanian](#) (most of whom are Muslims) kissing an American flag, nearly a decade after [U.S.-](#)

led [NATO airstrikes](#) and the buildup (but not use of) U.S. troops drove Slobodan Milosevic's forces out of Kosovo, ending their murderous campaign of ethnic cleansing. Many of you reading this will have little or no recollection of 1999, but [read up](#): the use of force can [end wars and save lives](#). Not all presidents and not all American interventions are equal: Clinton's interventions in [Bosnia](#) and Kosovo bear little resemblance to Iraq and Afghanistan. Intervention in Syria would be far more like Clinton's interventions [than Bush's](#). This final piece in [this series](#) on the [Syrian conflict](#) will look at how a more robust U.S. intervention would be the most sane, life-saving option available to President Obama, and why the risks are not worth deterring us from doing what will help the most people.

If all of what I discussed in [my last article](#) is undertaken, but in addition if active, coordinated, close air support is given to the moderate rebels against regime forces, the moderates can make gains against the regime more effectively and more rapidly while increasing the territory under their control. A no-fly zone over Syria could be established, with much of Assad's air defenses ([which Israel was able to work around in May](#)) taken out with [relatively little risk, though massive firepower would be required](#). This would help protect civilians and establish humanitarian safe zones, aiding [internally displaced persons and allowing some refugees](#) to come back to Syria, alleviating [pressure on Syria's neighbors](#). The same close air support can be withheld from Islamic extremists, leaving them and the regime to weaken each other. A no-fly zone would also cut off Russian air delivery of weapons, ammunition, and supplies to the Syrian regime, [including the parts that keep Assad's air force functional](#). Ruling the skies over Syria would allow the U.S. and its allies to truly dictate the flow, and choose the victors, of battle. It is hard to imagine regime forces beating back the moderate rebels with U.S. fighters, bombers, and drones (maybe even helicopters?) flying just behind rebel lines should they fall

under pressure, and striking the front lines of Assad's forces during rebel offensives.

Military action should be complemented by a massive increase in humanitarian aid, even more political pressure on the regime (we shouldn't be above bribing Assad here), and the formation of a serious government-in-exile that makes sure to incorporate representatives from the moderate rebels who are on the ground in Syria.

Also, [the risks are minimal](#). All the talk of a terrorist attack is silly. Hezbollah is stretched out, fighting for the Assad regime in Syria and also gearing up for potential conflicts in Lebanon with Israel or Lebanese Sunnis. The terrorism we'd face from them is the same as anything we've been routinely stopping for the past decade. And Assad simply does not have the capability or hardware to hurt the U.S. military past shooting down a handful of planes or partially damaging a ship or two.

As for "boots on the ground," scenarios where the U.S., led by a clearly reluctant Obama, would ever consider ground troops are very far away. The threshold for Western boots on the ground would like involve some combination of the following: major Syrian-originated chemical attacks on key Western allies in the region or on Western nations themselves; multiple governments of Syria's neighbors being overthrown; terrorist havens being successfully used to carry out repeated attacks, or a major attack, in the West; or the number killed approaches a half-million, surpassing the Rwandan genocide. And even then, it is more likely the intervention mentioned in this piece would be tried first. These dire scenarios are some time off, with a much smaller chance of occurring should the interventions from this article or my last happen before them.

Likely results of these actions: With the more robust actions outlined here, the length of the war — and the killing — would be shortened

astronomically. Without the incredible might of U.S. air support, the extremist rebels will make comparatively much smaller gains compared to moderates with such support, and with its own air force destroyed, the Assad regime will lose ground and be on the defensive where and when we choose to strike. The moderates will be in control of much more territory as a result and can fill the Assad vacuum when he finally falls/leaves. If necessary, the no-fly zone can work against Islamist extremists if they opt for violence against the new government. Starting a new nation is never easy ([even for us](#)), but with our help Syria has a shot and won't be [consumed by civil war](#).