

Will the U.S. Attack Syria? It Could Save More Lives Than You Think



By [Brian Frydenborg](#) September 23, 2013

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



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We've seen the epic all-around disaster that would very likely result from the U.S. staying on the sidelines in Syria's conflict. Now it's time to look at the likely result of increased U.S. involvement in the conflict. Chances

are, a lighter yet significant increase in American intervention will lead to a better result than the nightmarish vortex of violence the whole region will very likely become without it.

The CIA, [we've just found out](#), has already begun to directly arm the Syrian rebels with small arms, and this is a significant increase in U.S. involvement in the conflict. [Obama's even considering training them](#). As the [unaided](#) moderates have [lost momentum to Islamic extremists](#) who are receiving robust outside support, waiting to help them threatened to weaken the moderates past the point of resurrection and to turn the conflict into an [Assad regime vs. Islamic extremists war](#), a no-win situation for U.S. interests. Obama was previously "[hesitant](#)" to arm rebel groups because of fears that weapons could end up in the hands of terrorists, but after taking (too much?) time and care to vet certain groups, U.S. support is probably the only shot the moderates have. It's one thing to keep the moderates from going under, but what about having them succeed?

That would require giving the rebels much more than small arms, but if they are given military equipment that is too advanced and sophisticated, that equipment could fall into the wrong hands, whereas the Islamic extremists and the Assad regime have plenty of small arms, so either of those two — who are [supplied by foreign extremists](#) and [Russia](#), respectively — getting U.S.-supplied small arms does would not be a disaster. So rather than tanks and advanced weaponry and equipment that could be eventually turned on the moderates, what moderate rebels really need is U.S. air support. Air support like the types of strikes that were on the table before this latest Russian disarmament plan would have been able to easily hit Assad's deadliest and heaviest weapons. Jets, tanks, and artillery are hard to hide and can be taken out with precision weapons that would inflict a minimum of collateral damage or

civilian casualties, and many if not all could be launched from Navy ships or from airspace over the sea since most of Syria's main population areas — where the fighting is occurring — are not far from the coast.

[These are the weapons that give Assad a huge edge over the rebels](#) and which can kill the most people and kill them more easily and more rapidly. Taking many of these weapons systems out and forcing Assad to hide much of the rest for fear of their being destroyed will obviously lead to far fewer civilian casualties in the long and short runs, and [it will be harder for the regime to kill as many people as easily and as quickly](#). It's arithmetic, to borrow Bill Clinton's phrase: If Assad's forces are killing fewer people less easily and less quickly, that means fewer people are being killed in the same time period than would have been killed if those weapons that the U.S. destroyed were still used.

This means we're *saving lives*. Sure, Assad and his forces can still kill plenty of people. But they will be killing a lot fewer over time, and that counts for something. And these strikes can be targeted to areas where the moderates face Assad's forces, boosting their positions slowly over time, while leaving the Islamist extremists to fend for themselves without our support. Along with all this, the U.S. and its allies could moderately increase [humanitarian aid to Syrian refugees](#) and also to Syria's neighbors, helping reduce their level of destabilization and keeping them from getting sucked into the vortex.

The actions highlighted here would very likely not make things worse, but, rather, would slow, stop, and eventually reverse many of the negative trends outlined in earlier pieces in this series, eventually leading to Assad's fall or a negotiated settlement once Assad sees no hope of lasting in the long run. With this limited U.S. involvement, the war in Syria would grind on for some time, still killing many more people and creating many more refugees and internally displaced persons, but with fewer

deaths, casualties, and refugees than there would be without U.S. intervention. It is the difference between a much longer war — possibly many years long — with a nearly guaranteed unfavorable outcome for the U.S. (Assad or extremist victory), and between a long (yet much shorter) hard slog, the [“grinding war of attrition” predicted by at least one U.S. official](#). Yet this limited, extended-over-time air support, which right now is more than the strike proposed earlier by the Obama administration, would keep the moderate rebels in the game until the fighting stops.

The final article in this series can be read [here](#).