

Is it time the West intervened in Syria?

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It is easy to understand why the US and its NATO allies are desperate to avoid an open military intervention in Syria. The US has been bled by wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Europe is mired in an economic crisis.

NATO's position is unsustainable for three reasons.

First, as a senior United Nations official recently noted, the conflict in Syria has become a civil war, rather than just an uprising. The weapons are getting heavier, the opposition is controlling territory, and the lines of conflict are more pronounced.

As a result, the humanitarian crisis will deepen and become more difficult for the West to ignore. Even if the US can coax President Bashar al-Assad from power diplomatically, Syria's various religious, ethnic and ideological forces will fight on for power.

Second, the longer the conflict continues, the greater the risk it will spread beyond Syria. Already Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iran and, probably, others are funding and, sometimes, arming their allies. In particular, Syria has emerged as a key battleground for Saudi and Iranian rivalry.

But even if these countries only fight through their Syrian proxies, the recent shooting down of a Turkish fighter aircraft by Syria illustrates the danger of accidents or miscalculations sparking a regional escalation.

Third, as the situation becomes more chaotic, concerns about the security of Syria's considerable arsenal of chemical - and possibly biological - weapons will increase. Many Libyan armouries were looted after the regime fell, and there is a risk Syrian chemical and biological weapons might fall into the hands of one of the extremist groups participating in the conflict.

It does not matter that Syria's weapons are under the tightest regime control and would not be easy for extremists to use. The first credible report of an extremist gaining access to Syrian chemical and biological weapon armouries would spark panic in the West and calls for military action.

NATO does not have the will or the money to mount a massive campaign in Syria along the lines of Afghanistan - nor would it be advisable.

But a more limited military or peacekeeping intervention to establish humanitarian safe havens, or no-fly zones, to help contain the conflict within Syria, or to destroy or secure Syrian weapons, has become inevitable.

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