

Fighting Assad's War Is None of Russia's Business

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The Syrian crisis exposes the limits of Russian power and tests the Russian leaders' sense of the nation's interests.

The commendable effort by Kofi Annan to bring about an international settlement in Syria comes too late and is unlikely to be implemented. There is little prospect of the Syria Action Group forcing the warring parties to stop the violence and initiate a political transition. There is no enforcement mechanism to put an end to fighting. Nor will there be an exit by President Bashar Assad, an unachievable outcome for Russia.

Assad may have concluded that there is no viable exit strategy for him. He will take his chances destroying the opposition by force. He is gambling that there will be no Libya-style intervention led by NATO as long as the United Nations Security Council action remains blocked by Russia and China. He is betting that President Barack Obama, Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Francois Hollande have no stomach to launch a war in Syria outside

the framework of the UN. Establishing a safe haven on the border with Turkey protected by Turkish ground forces and U.S. airpower would not end the violence or endanger his regime.

Assad would not relocate to Moscow even if President Vladimir Putin begged him to. Moscow cannot deliver his ouster, which partly explains Russian obstructionism in Geneva. Only a sustained bombing campaign might change Assad's mind, and this is not in the cards.

The most likely scenario is for the West and the Gulf states to provide direct military aid to the Syrian rebels. Small arms are already funneled with Arab cash through Turkey, while the Saudis are now paying the salaries of the Syrian Liberation Army. This is a setup for a war by proxy.

The sense of geopolitical impotence might tempt Moscow to provide military aid to Assad. There are already calls to send the Navy and the marines to protect the Russian base at Tartus.

This should be avoided. We have more important things to do than fight Assad's war. Russian interests in Syria are marginal compared to the loss of investment and technology from the West.

The thing to do would be to announce a halt to all arms shipments, provide humanitarian aid and organize the evacuation of Russian citizens from the war-ravaged country. The rest is not Russia's business.

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