



Written by [Charles Scaliger](#) on March 5, 2012

## McCain Urges War on Syria

Saying that “the time has come for a new policy in Syria,” McCain [called](#) Monday for the United States to “lead an international effort to protect key population centers in Syria, especially in the north, through airstrikes on Assad's forces.” Lest anybody mistake his intent, the Arizona senator and one-time presidential aspirant further clarified that “this will require the United States to suppress enemy air defense in at least part of the country,” with the ultimate goal of U.S. airstrikes being “to establish and defend safe havens in Syria” where enemies of the Assad regime “can organize and plan their political and military activities.”



Given the situation in Syria, McCain averred, there is no longer any question of whether foreign interests will intervene to support the Syrian opposition. The only question is whether the United States will have a stake in [shaping post-Assad Syria](#):

Some kind of intervention will happen, with us or without us. So the real question for U.S. policy is whether we will participate in this next phase of the conflict in Syria, and thereby increase our ability to shape an outcome that is beneficial to the Syrian people, and to us. I believe we must. However, it is not clear that the present policy can succeed. If Assad manages to cling to power — or even if he manages to sustain his slaughter for months to come, with all of the human and geopolitical costs that entails — it would be a strategic and moral defeat for the United States. We cannot, we must not, allow this to happen.

For those who haven't been staying abreast of events in Syria, the country is now in a state of civil war, with government forces determined to wipe out opposition at any cost. Widespread massacres are apparently being committed and thousands of Syrians, many of them unarmed protesters, have been slaughtered since resistance to the regime began a year ago. Last week government forces overran the city of Homs after a four-week siege of indiscriminate shelling that cost hundreds of civilian lives, including several Western journalists who had managed to gain access to the city.

Let us be clear: The Syrian regime under Basher Assad (and before that, his father Hafez) is one of the most appalling tyrannies on the face of the Earth. Like the Gaddaffis in Libya, the Assads (whose party, the Ba'ath Party, is essentially the same organization that kept Iraq's Saddam Hussein in power) have ruled Syria with a dynastic iron fist for decades, filling government and military posts with family members. Back in 1982, Hafez Assad razed the Sunni Syrian city of Hama for rebellion, slaughtering as many as 40,000 Syrians. For the next three decades, terrified Syrians submitted to the yoke of the Assads' “security forces” (the dreaded secret police, known as the mukhabarat). When Hafez Assad's Western-educated son Basher assumed the mantle of leadership, many outsiders hoped that he would prove to be a reformer. Syrians, emboldened by the events of the Arab Spring, dared to hope the same.



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But Assad the Younger proved to be cut from the same murderous cloth as his father, and appears determined to make a desolation of Syria rather than give up power or institute meaningful reforms.

The bloodbath taking place in Syria right now cannot fail to inspire sympathy from those of us who take our freedoms for granted. Countless YouTube videos of unarmed Syrians (some merely guilty of trying to cross a street covered by government snipers) being gunned down in cold blood suggest that tales of government atrocities are not mere propaganda. The emotional desire to “do something” to help innocent Syrians is certainly understandable.

But Syria has committed no offense against the United States, atrocious though the Assad regime is. Although Damascus has sponsored terrorism in the past (and continues to give support to groups like Hamas and Hezbollah), it has not – unlike Libya’s Gaddafi — generally supported terrorist groups who attack Westerners. The regime in Damascus has no ties to al-Qaeda, and has proscribed the organization as a terrorist group. Syria does support anti-Israel terrorist activities — but the Israelis are more than capable of dealing with Syria by themselves, as they demonstrated in October 2007 with a strike on what later proved to be a Syrian nuclear site.

Nor is there any clear idea of who the Syrian opposition may consist of. Alongside the thousands of doubtless sincere demonstrators working for what they believe will lead to a free Syria, there are others — like al-Qaeda itself — who have thrown their lot in with the opposition and have a rather different vision for Syria’s future than idealistic, sign-waving youths.

Syria, like its neighbor Lebanon, is a mishmash of different feuding ethnic groups and Islamic factions, many of which appear still to support, or at least not yet actively oppose, the Assad regime, especially in the political and mercantile capitals of Damascus and Aleppo, respectively.

Finally, Syria’s geography — her hilly terrain and dense population — would require a full-scale military invasion and occupation to effect regime change. And we all remember how well that approach worked with Iraq.

Even if none of the above were true, it would be very difficult to justify yet another war on a vile regime that has done us no harm. America has been waging war nonstop in the Middle East for two decades, at a cost of many thousands of lives (ours and theirs) and incalculable national resources. But the promised flowering of liberty and eradication of tyranny have yet to materialize — just ask the Iranians, the Saudis, the Bahrainis, the Syrians, the Yemenis, and the Egyptians (who, more than a year after their own nearly bloodless revolution, are still ruled by a military dictatorship). How many more unconstitutional “wars of choice” do we need to embark upon before learning that we cannot remake the world by force of American arms?

In the Middle East especially, America has a very shallow understanding of the broils, intrigues, allegiances, and counter-allegiances of that fascinating but ultimately fathomless region whose culture is so alien from our own. If there is to be intervention in Syria, let it be perpetrated by those who understand Syria best — her Arab and other Islamic neighbors.

As for the suffering masses of Syrians, we cannot but wish them well, but — with John Quincy Adams — resolve to reserve American arms for vindication only of our own liberty.

*Photo of Senator John McCain: AP Images*



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