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Article 1.

The Economist

Bombing Iran

Feb 25th 2012 -- FOR years Iran has practised denial and deception; it has blustered and played for time. All the while, it has kept an eye on the day when it might be able to build a nuclear weapon. The world has negotiated

with Iran; it has balanced the pain of economic sanctions with the promise of reward if Iran unambiguously forsakes the bomb. All the while, outside powers have been able to count on the last resort of a military assault. Today this stand-off looks as if it is about to fail. Iran has continued enriching uranium. It is acquiring the technology it needs for a weapon. Deep underground, at Fordow, near the holy city of Qom, it is fitting out a uranium-enrichment plant that many say is invulnerable to aerial attack. Iran does not yet seem to have chosen actually to procure a nuclear arsenal, but that moment could come soon. Some analysts, especially in Israel, judge that the scope for using force is running out. When it does, nothing will stand between Iran and a bomb. The air is thick with the prophecy of war. Leon Panetta, America's defence secretary, has spoken of Israel attacking as early as April. Others foresee an Israeli strike designed to drag in Barack Obama in the run-up to America's presidential vote, when he will have most to lose from seeming weak. A decision to go to war should be based not on one man's electoral prospects, but on the argument that war is warranted and likely to succeed. Iran's intentions are malign and the consequences of its having a weapon would be grave. Faced by such a regime you should never permanently forswear war. However, the case for war's success is hard to make. If Iran is intent on getting a bomb, an attack would delay but not stop it. Indeed, using Western bombs as a tool to prevent nuclear proliferation risks making Iran only more determined to build a weapon—and more dangerous when it gets one.

A shadow over the Middle East Make no mistake, an Iran armed with the bomb would pose a deep threat. The country is insecure, ideological and meddles in its neighbours' affairs. Both Iran and its proxies—including Hizbullah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza—might act even more brazenly than they do now. The danger is keenly felt by Israel, surrounded by threats and especially vulnerable to a nuclear bomb because it is such a small land. Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, recently called the "Zionist regime" a "cancerous tumour that must be cut out". Jews, of all people, cannot just dismiss that as so much rhetoric. Even if Iran were to gain a weapon only for its own protection, others in the region might then feel they need weapons too. Saudi Arabia has said it will arm—and Pakistan is thought ready to supply a bomb in exchange for earlier Saudi backing of its own programme. Turkey and Egypt, the other regional

powers, might conclude they have to join the nuclear club. Elsewhere, countries such as Brazil might see nuclear arms as vital to regional dominance, or fear that their neighbours will. Some experts argue that nuclear-armed states tend to behave responsibly. But imagine a Middle East with five nuclear powers riven by rivalry and sectarian feuds. Each would have its fingers permanently twitching over the button, in the belief that the one that pressed first would be left standing. Iran's regime gains legitimacy by demonising foreign powers. The cold war seems stable by comparison with a nuclear Middle East—and yet America and the Soviet Union were sometimes scarily close to Armageddon.

No wonder some people want a pre-emptive strike. But military action is not the solution to a nuclear Iran. It could retaliate, including with rocket attacks on Israel from its client groups in Lebanon and Gaza. Terror cells around the world might strike Jewish and American targets. It might threaten Arab oil infrastructure, in an attempt to use oil prices to wreck the world economy. Although some Arab leaders back a strike, most Muslims are unlikely to feel that way, further alienating the West from the Arab spring. Such costs of an attack are easy to overstate, but even supposing they were high they might be worth paying if a strike looked like working. It does not. Striking Iran would be much harder than Israel's successful solo missions against the weapons programmes of Iraq, in 1981, and Syria, in 2007. If an attack were easy, Israel would have gone in alone long ago, when the Iranian programme was more vulnerable. But Iran's sites are spread out and some of them, hardened against strikes, demand repeated hits. America has more military options than Israel, so it would prefer to wait. That is one reason why it is seeking to hold Israel back. The other is that, for either air force, predictions of the damage from an attack span a huge range. At worst an Israeli mission might fail altogether, at best an American one could, it is said, set back the programme a decade (see [article](#)).

But uncertainty would reign. Iran is a vast, populous and sophisticated country with a nuclear programme that began under the shah. It may have secret sites that escape unscathed. Even if all its sites are hit, Iran's nuclear know-how cannot be bombed out of existence. Nor can its network of suppliers at home and abroad. It has stocks of uranium in various stages of enrichment; an unknown amount would survive an attack, while the rest

contaminated an unforeseeable area. Iran would probably withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, under which its uranium is watched by the International Atomic Energy Agency. At that point its entire programme would go underground—literally and figuratively. If Iran decided it needed a bomb, it would then be able to pursue one with utmost haste and in greater secrecy. Saudi Arabia and the others might conclude that they, too, needed to act pre-emptively to gain their own deterrents. Perhaps America could bomb Iran every few years. But how would it know when and where to strike? And how would it justify a failing policy to the world? Perhaps, if limited bombing is not enough, America should be aiming for an all-out aerial war, or even regime change. Yet a decade in Iraq and Afghanistan has demonstrated where that leads. An aerial war could dramatically raise the threat of retaliation. Regime change might produce a government that the West could do business with. But the nuclear programme has broad support in Iran. The idea that a bomb is the only defence against an implacable American enemy might become stronger than ever.

That does not mean the world should just let Iran get the bomb. The government will soon be starved of revenues, because of an oil embargo. Sanctions are biting, the financial system is increasingly isolated and the currency has plunged in value. Proponents of an attack argue that military humiliation would finish the regime off. But it is as likely to rally Iranians around their leaders. Meanwhile, political change is sweeping across the Middle East. The regime in Tehran is divided and it has lost the faith of its people. Eventually, popular resistance will spring up as it did in 2009. A new regime brought about by the Iranians themselves is more likely to renounce the bomb than one that has just witnessed an American assault. Is there a danger that Iran will get a nuclear weapon before that happens? Yes, but bombing might only increase the risk. Can you stop Iran from getting a bomb if it is determined to have one? Not indefinitely, and bombing it might make it all the more desperate. Short of occupation, the world cannot eliminate Iran's capacity to gain the bomb. It can only change its will to possess one. Just now that is more likely to come about through sanctions and diplomacy than war.

America's Alibis for Not Helping Syria

[Fouad Ajami](#)

February 23, 2012 -- There are the Friends of Syria, and there are the Friends of the Syrian Regime. The former, a large group—the United States, the Europeans and the bulk of Arab governments—is casting about for a way to end the Assad regime's assault on its own people. In their ranks there is irresolution and endless talk about the complications and the uniqueness of the Syrian case.

No such uncertainty detains the Friends of the Syrian Regime—Russia, Iran, Hezbollah and to a lesser extent China. In this camp, there is a will to prevail, a knowledge of the stakes in this cruel contest, and material assistance for the Damascus dictatorship.

In the face of the barbarism unleashed on the helpless people of Homs, the Friends of Syria squirm and hope to be delivered from any meaningful burdens. Still, they are meeting Friday in Tunis to discuss their options. But Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad needn't worry. The Tunisian hosts themselves proclaimed that this convocation held on their soil precluded a decision in favor of foreign military intervention.

Syria is not Libya, the mantra goes, especially in Washington. The provision of arms to the Syrian opposition is "premature," Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recently stated. We don't know the Syrian opposition, another alibi has it—they are of uncertain provenance and are internally divided. Our weapons could end up in the wrong hands, and besides, we would be "militarizing" this conflict.

Those speaking in such ways seem to overlook the disparity in firepower between the Damascus ruler with his tanks and artillery, and the civilian population aided by defectors who had their fill with official terror.

The borders of Syria offer another exculpation for passivity. Look at the map, say the naysayers. Syria is bordered by Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, Turkey and Israel. Intervention here is certain to become a regional affair.

Grant the Syrians sympathy, their struggle unfolds in the midst of an American presidential contest. And the incumbent has his lines at the ready for his acceptance speech in Charlotte, ■■■■. He's done what he had

promised during his first presidential run, shutting down the war in Iraq and ending the American presence. This sure applause line precludes the acceptance of a new burden just on the other side of the Syria-Iraq frontier. The silence of President Obama on the matter of Syria reveals the general retreat of American power in the Middle East. In Istanbul some days ago, a Turkish intellectual and political writer put the matter starkly to me: We don't think and talk much about America these days, he said.

Yet the tortured dissertations on the uniqueness of Syria's strategic landscape are in fact proofs for why we must thwart the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah nexus. Topple the Syrian dictatorship and the access of Iran to the Mediterranean is severed, leaving the brigands of Hamas and Hezbollah scrambling for a new way. The democracies would demonstrate that regimes of plunder and cruelty, perpetrators of terror, have been cut down to size.

Plainly, the Syrian tyranny's writ has expired. Assad has implicated his own Alawite community in a war to defend his family's reign. The ambiguity that allowed the Assad tyranny to conceal its minority, schismatic identity, to hide behind a co-opted Sunni religious class, has been torn asunder. Calls for a jihad, a holy war, against a godless lot have been made in Sunni religious circles everywhere.

Ironically, it was the Assad tyranny itself that had summoned those furies in its campaign against the American war in Iraq. It had provided transit and sanctuary for jihadists who crossed into Iraq to do battle against the Americans and the Shiites; it even released its own Islamist prisoners and dispatched them to Iraq with the promise of pardon. Now the chickens have come home to roost, and an Alawite community beyond the bounds of Islam is facing a religious war in all but name.

This schism cannot be viewed with American indifference. It is an inescapable fate that the U.S. is the provider of order in that region. We can lend a hand to the embattled Syrians or risk turning Syria into a devil's playground of religious extremism. Syria can become that self-fulfilling prophesy: a population abandoned by the powers but offered false solace and the promise of redemption by the forces of extremism and ruin.

We make much of the "opaqueness" of the Syrian rebellion and the divisions within its leadership. But there is no great mystery that attends this rebellion: An oppressed people, done with a tyranny of four decades,

was stirred to life and conquered its fear after witnessing the upheaval that had earlier overtaken Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen.

In Istanbul this month, I encountered the variety, and the normalcy, of this rebellion in extended discussions with prominent figures of the Syrian National Council. There was the senior diplomat who had grown weary of being a functionary of so sullied a regime. There was a businessman of means, from Aleppo, who was drawn into the opposition by the retrogression of his country.

There was a young prayer leader, from Banyas, on the Syrian coast, who had taken up the cause because the young people in his town had pressed him to speak a word of truth in the face of evil. Even the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, Riad al-Shaqfa, in exile for three decades, acknowledged the pluralism of his country and the weakness of the Brotherhood, banned since 1980.

We frighten ourselves with phantoms of our own making. No one is asking or expecting the U.S. Marines to storm the shores of Latakia. This Syrian tyranny is merciless in its battles against the people of Homs and Zabadani, but its army is demoralized and riven with factionalism and sectarian enmities. It could be brought down by defectors given training and weapons; safe havens could give disaffected soldiers an incentive, and the space, to defect.

Meanwhile, we should recognize the Syrian National Council as the country's rightful leaders. This stamp of legitimacy would embolden the opposition and give them heart in this brutal season. Such recognition would put the governments of Lebanon and Iraq on notice that they are on the side of a brigand, lawless regime. There is Arab wealth that can sustain this struggle, and in Turkey there is a sympathetic government that can join this fight under American leadership.

The world does not always oblige our desires for peace; some struggles are thrown our way and have to be taken up. In his State of the Union address last month, President Obama dissociated himself from those who preach the doctrine of America's decline.

Never mind that he himself had been a declinist and had risen to power as an exponent of America's guilt in foreign lands. We should take him at his word. In a battered Syria, a desperate people await America's help and puzzle over its leader's passivity.

Mr. Ajami is a senior fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution and co-chairman of the Working Group on Islamism and the International Order.

Article 3.

NYT

After a Year, Deep Divisions Hobble Syria's Opposition

[Neil MacFarquhar](#)

February 23, 2012 -- BEIRUT, Lebanon — [Syria](#)'s downward spiral into more hellish conflict in cities like Homs has provoked a new surge of outrage around the world, with Arab and many Western countries searching for new ways to support protesters and activist groups coming under the government's increasingly lethal assault.

But as diplomats from about 80 countries converge on [Tunisia](#) on Friday in search of a strategy to provide aid to Syria's beleaguered citizens, they will find their efforts compromised even before they begin by the lack of a cohesive opposition leadership.

Nearly a year after the uprising began, the opposition remains a fractious collection of political groups, longtime exiles, grass-roots organizers and armed militants, all deeply divided along ideological, ethnic or sectarian lines, and too disjointed to agree on even the rudiments of a strategy to topple President Bashar al-Assad's government.

The need to build a united opposition will be the focus of intense discussions at what has been billed as the inaugural meeting of the Friends of Syria. Fostering some semblance of a unified protest movement, possibly under the umbrella of an exile alliance called the [Syrian National Council](#), will be a theme hovering in the background.

The council's internal divisions have kept Western and Arab governments from recognizing it as a kind of government in exile, and the Tunis summit meeting will probably not change that. Russia, Syria's main international patron, is avoiding the meeting entirely.

The divisions and shortcomings within the council were fully on display last week when its 10-member executive committee met at the Four Seasons Hotel in Doha, Qatar — its soaring lobby bedecked with roses and other red flowers left over from Valentine’s Day.

The council has been slow on critical issues like recognizing the transformation of the Syrian uprising from a nonviolent movement to an armed insurrection, according to members, diplomats and other analysts. Aside from representing only about 70 percent of a range of groups opposing Mr. Assad, the council has yet to seriously address melding itself with the increasingly independent internal alliances in Homs and other cities across Syria trapped in an uneven battle for survival, they said, warning that the council runs the risk of being supplanted.

“They were in a constant, ongoing struggle, which delayed anything productive and any real work that should be done for the revolution,” said Rima Fleihan, an activist who crawled through barbed wire fences to Jordan from Syria last September to escape arrest. She was representing Syria’s Local Coordination Committees, an alliance of grass-roots activists, on the council until she quit in frustration this month.

“They fight more than they work,” Ms. Fleihan said. “People are asking why they have failed to achieve any international recognition, why no aid is reaching the people, why are we still being shelled?”

Even by comparison with Libya, where infighting among rival militias and the inability of the Transitional National Council to exert authority fully created turmoil after the successful uprising there, Syria’s opposition appears scattered.

Well before NATO intervened in Libya, groups hostile to Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi leveraged the huge chunk of eastern Libya they held around Benghazi into the attempt to claim the whole country. A unified focus on the rebellion submerged most overt political differences for a time.

The United States and other Western governments are also wary of the uncertain role of Islamists in Syria. The Muslim Brotherhood and other organized Islamist groups were more thoroughly suppressed in Syria than in Egypt, and their leaders are less well known. Some diplomats fear that Syrian Islamists could ride to power amid the turmoil, imposing an agenda that might clash with Western goals.

That may be one reason the United States is hoping the Syrian National Council can overcome its divisions and shortcomings. [Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, in a press conference in London](#), moved the United States a step closer to recognizing the council.

“They will have a seat at the table as a representative of the Syrian people,” Mrs. Clinton said. “And we think it’s important to have Syrians represented. And the consensus opinion by the Arab League and all the others who are working and planning this conference is that the [REDACTED] is a credible representative.”

Council members describe opposition divisions as a natural result of trying to forge a working organization that encompasses wide diversity from a complex society that has known only oppression.

Indeed, the men at the Four Seasons in Doha ranged from the various Islamist representatives with suits, ties and neatly trimmed beards to the one Christian on the executive committee, a longtime university professor in Belgium who wandered around in flip-flops.

The council members contend that progress has been made among a group of people who were virtual strangers when they first gathered in Istanbul in September, and that sniping about their unrepresentative nature is mostly a disinformation campaign by Damascus.

“This is a manufactured problem,” said Burhan Ghalioun, the council president, in a brief interview outside an executive committee meeting last week. “Some independent people don’t want to join the [REDACTED], but there is no strong opposition power outside the national council.”

He said lack of money was the group’s most acute problem. Although the Qatari government picked up the bill for the Doha meeting and for frequent travel, council members said that no significant financial support from Arab or Western governments had materialized despite repeated promises, so they must rely on rich Syrian exiles. They hope Friday’s meeting in Tunis will begin to change that.

After communicating via Skype with activists in embattled cities like Homs, Hama and Idlib, council members admitted sheepishly that those activists just flung accusations at them, demanding to know why they seemed to swan from one luxury hotel to the next while no medical supplies or other aid flowed into Syria.

The bickering takes place in plain sight. “Is this any way to work?” yelled Haithem al-Maleh, an 81-year-old lawyer and war horse of the opposition movement, as he came barreling out of one Doha meeting, only to be corralled back in. “They are all stupid and silly, but what can I do?” The 310-member council remains Balkanized among different factions; arguments unspool endlessly over which groups deserve how many seats. The mostly secular, liberal representatives and those from the Islamist factions harbor mutual suspicions.

No one from Syria’s ruling Alawite community, the small religious sect of Mr. Assad, sits on the executive committee, despite repeated attempts to woo a few prominent dissidents. The fight over Kurdish seats remains unsettled even though Massoud Barzani, a leading Kurd in neighboring Iraq, tried to mediate.

The council has also not reconciled with members of another opposition coalition, the Syrian National Coordination Committee, some of whom remain in Syria and who have generally taken a softer line about allowing Mr. Assad to shepherd a political transition.

“Time is running out for the Syrian opposition to establish its credibility and viability as an effective representative of the uprising,” said Steven Heydemann, who focuses on Middle East issues at the United States Institute of Peace, a research group financed partly by Congress.

Even the council’s diplomatic efforts remain troubled. The council has yet to appoint an official envoy in Washington, and jockeying over who should lobby the United Nations Security Council earlier this month was so intense, diplomats and analysts said, that the council sent an unwieldy delegation of some 14 members who continued arguing in New York over who would meet which ambassador.

The key issue the council is grappling with right now is how to coordinate an increasingly armed opposition. The council says it supports the defensive use of weapons.

But exiled Syrian Army officers who formed the Free Syrian Army, based in Turkey, have stayed aloof from the council, and even they do not really control the many local militias that adopt the army’s name alone.

Steven Lee Myers contributed reporting from London, and an employee of The New York Times from Beirut.

How to Halt the Butchery in Syria

Anne-Marie Slaughter

February 23, 2012 -- FOREIGN military intervention in [Syria](#) offers the best hope for curtailing a long, bloody and destabilizing civil war. The mantra of those opposed to intervention is “Syria is not Libya.” In fact, Syria is far more strategically located than Libya, and a lengthy civil war there would be much more dangerous to our interests. America has a major stake in helping Syria’s neighbors stop the killing. Simply arming the opposition, in many ways the easiest option, would bring about exactly the scenario the world should fear most: a proxy war that would spill into Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Jordan and fracture Syria along sectarian lines. It could also allow Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups to gain a foothold in Syria and perhaps gain access to chemical and biological weapons.

There is an alternative. The Friends of Syria, some 70 countries scheduled to meet in Tunis today, should establish “no-kill zones” now to protect all Syrians regardless of creed, ethnicity or political allegiance. The Free Syrian Army, a growing force of defectors from the government’s army, would set up these no-kill zones near the Turkish, Lebanese and Jordanian borders. Each zone should be established as close to the border as possible to allow the creation of short humanitarian corridors for the Red Cross and other groups to bring food, water and medicine in and take wounded patients out. The zones would be managed by already active civilian committees.

Establishing these zones would require nations like Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Jordan to arm the opposition soldiers with anti-tank, countersniper and portable anti-aircraft weapons. Special forces from countries like Qatar, Turkey and possibly Britain and France could offer tactical and strategic advice to the Free Syrian Army forces. Sending them in is logistically and politically feasible; some may be there already. Crucially, these special forces would control the flow of intelligence regarding the government’s troop movements and lines of communication

to allow opposition troops to cordon off population centers and rid them of snipers. Once Syrian government forces were killed, captured or allowed to defect without reprisal, attention would turn to defending and expanding the no-kill zones.

This next step would require intelligence focused on tank and aircraft movements, the placement of artillery batteries and communications lines among Syrian government forces. The goal would be to weaken and isolate government units charged with attacking particular towns; this would allow opposition forces to negotiate directly with army officers on truces within each zone, which could then expand into a regional, and ultimately national, truce. The key condition for all such assistance, inside or outside Syria, is that it be used defensively — only to stop attacks by the Syrian military or to clear out government forces that dare to attack the no-kill zones. Although keeping intervention limited is always hard, international assistance could be curtailed if the Free Syrian Army took the offensive. The absolute priority within no-kill zones would be public safety and humanitarian aid; revenge attacks would not be tolerated.

Syria's president, [Bashar al-Assad](#), is increasingly depending on government-sponsored gangs and on shelling cities with heavy artillery rather than overrunning them with troops, precisely because he is concerned about the loyalty of soldiers forced to shoot their fellow citizens at point-blank range. If government troops entered no-kill zones they would have to face their former comrades. Placing them in this situation, and presenting the option to defect, would show just how many members of Syria's army — estimated at 300,000 men — were actually willing to fight for Mr. Assad.

Turkey and the Arab League should also help opposition forces inside Syria more actively through the use of remotely piloted helicopters, either for delivery of cargo and weapons — as America has used them in Afghanistan — or to attack Syrian air defenses and mortars in order to protect the no-kill zones. Turkey is rightfully cautious about deploying its ground forces, an act that Mr. Assad could use as grounds to declare war and retaliate. But Turkey has some of its own drones, and Arab League countries could quickly lease others. As in Libya, the international community should not act without the approval and the invitation of the countries in the region that are most directly affected by Mr. Assad's war

on his own people. Thus it is up to the Arab League and Turkey to adopt a plan of action. If Russia and China were willing to abstain rather than exercise another massacre-enabling veto, then the Arab League could go back to the United Nations Security Council for approval. If not, then Turkey and the Arab League should act, on their own authority and that of the other 13 members of the Security Council and 137 members of the General Assembly who voted last week to condemn Mr. Assad's brutality. The power of the Syrian protesters over the past 11 months has arisen from their determination to face down bullets with chants, signs and their own bodies. The international community can draw on the power of nonviolence and create zones of peace in what are now zones of death. The Syrians have the ability to make that happen; the rest of the world must give them the means to do it.

[Anne-Marie Slaughter](#), a professor of politics and international affairs at Princeton, was director of policy planning at the State Department from 2009 to 2011.

Article 5.

The Independent (London)

US raises alert over possible chemical weapons arsenal as world leaders meet

Charlotte McDonald-Gibson

February 24, 2012 -- World leaders struggling to force Syria's President from power will gather in Tunisia today armed with fresh evidence that his regime ordered crimes against humanity, including the killing of children, but calls for military intervention remain firmly off the agenda.

Despite a growing body of evidence that President Bashar al-Assad is personally culpable for the atrocities inflicted upon his own people - the rationale for military intervention in Libya - William Hague, the Foreign Secretary, said yesterday that a repeat of the Nato action that helped topple Colonel Muammar Gaddafi was unlikely.

His comments come amid rising concern that the splintered, disunited opposition may be infiltrated by extremist Sunni and al-Qa'ida fighters. American officials are also concerned that President Assad is sitting on a cache of chemical weapons that could wind up in extremists' hands if his regime fell.

"We are operating under many more constraints than we were in the case of Libya," Mr Hague told BBC Radio 4's Today programme. "Syria sits next to Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq - what happens in Syria has an effect on all of those countries and the consequences of any outside intervention are much more difficult to foresee."

Instead, he said, world leaders including the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and leaders from the Arab League meeting under the Friends of Syria banner in Tunis today would focus on "tightening a diplomatic and economic stranglehold" on the regime.

A new UN report on Syrian atrocities made public yesterday said that 500 children had been killed in the violence. The panel of UN human rights experts has also compiled a list of Syrian officials who could face investigation for crimes against humanity, which will be passed to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. The experts have indicated that the list goes all the way up to the President himself.

Any move to refer Syrian officials to the International Criminal Court in The Hague, however, would be likely to face opposition from Russia and China, who on 4 February vetoed a UN resolution calling on President Assad to step aside. Activists hope this is one area where the Friends of Syria group could have some influence, even though Russia is not sending a delegate.

"They need to think of how to exert more pressure, not just on Syria, but on its allies," said Nadim Houry, the Human Rights Watch deputy director for the Middle East. "I would hate to think the option is whether to bomb or not to bomb."

So far, just a small fraction of the many armed and unarmed opposition groups has openly called for intervention, and many military analysts believe it would be disastrous.

"The great risk is that the situation in Syria resembles that in Iraq and the entire government force and government authority disintegrates," said Shashank Joshi, an associate fellow from the Royal United Services

Institute. "You are already seeing international actors start to enter Syria from Iraq and other places, many of them are Sunni fundamentalist and have links to al-Qa'ida."

Yesterday CNN cited a US military report speculating that 75,000 ground troops could be needed to secure Syria's chemical weapons sites. But unlike Iraq, where the alleged presence of chemical weapons and al-Qa'ida was used as a rationale for going to war, in Syria these factors are being used to make the case for caution. "If the ulterior motive would be to justify some sort of intervention, it is operating in completely the other direction - it has been suggested that the presence of al-Qa'ida means that any intervention could see the situation worsen and we would be trapped in a civil war from which we couldn't escape," said Mr Joshi.

WHAT NEXT? THE OPTIONS

Military intervention

FOR: Assad so far appears immune to diplomatic pressure for him to hand power to his deputy and stop his brutal crackdown. Military strikes could take out the tanks that are causing dozens of deaths in the opposition stronghold of Homs.

AGAINST: Even Syrian opposition groups are largely against any Libya-style air strikes in Syria. The country still has powerful backers including Russia and Iran and military action without international consensus could spark a broader conflict that would spill into the nation's already unstable neighbours such as Iraq and Lebanon.

Arming the rebels

FOR: The armed opposition groups are mostly made up of defecting soldiers, but they are out-gunned by Assad's forces. Giving weapons to the rebels and providing training would help them take on Assad's army and get around the minefield of direct military intervention.

AGAINST: The rebel groups are divided and there are reports that Islamist extremists have infiltrated the opposition. The West remains scarred from its experience in Afghanistan in the 1980s, when some of the men they armed to fight the Soviet occupation turned their weapons and training on the West.

Humanitarian corridor

FOR: Temporary ceasefires and the creation of a humanitarian corridor from neighbouring countries would allow aid to get to the worst-hit areas such as Homs and facilitate the evacuation of the injured. This will be a key issue discussed at the Tunisia summit today.

AGAINST: The Syrian regime would need to adhere to any ceasefire or humanitarian workers would be put at grave risk. It is also very difficult to enforce such safe passage without foreign military boots on the ground for protection - something Assad is unlikely to agree to unless under pressure from Russia.

More economic sanctions

FOR: Many analysts say that as the regime is gradually squeezed by sanctions including an oil embargo, the business community and middle class will turn against Assad as they are hit in the pocket. One Western diplomat said yesterday that the regime's foreign currency reserves will run out in three to five months.

AGAINST: As with any sanctions, some argue that it is the people of Syria that are hurting the most, with crippling inflation and power cuts every day. Thousands more civilians could also be killed as diplomats wait for the sanctions to work even as the regime continues its slaughter.

Article 6.

Agence Global

Russia's Return to the Middle East

Patrick Seale

21 Feb 2012 -- After a long absence, Russia is now demanding a seat for itself at the top table of Middle East affairs. It seems determined to have its say on the key issues of the day: the crisis in Syria; the threat of war against Iran; Israel's expansionist ambitions; and the rise of political Islam across the Arab world. These were among the topics vigorously debated at a conference at Sochi on Russia's Black Sea coast, held on 17-18 February in the grandiose marble halls of a 22-hectare resort -- with its own elevator to the beach below -- once the playground of Soviet leaders.

Attended by over 60 participants from a score of countries, the conference was organised by Russia's Valdai Discussion Club on the theme of "Transformation in the Arab World and Russia's Interests." Among the Russians defending these interests were Mikhail Bogdanov, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Vitaly Naumkin, Director of the Institute of Oriental Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences, Alexei Vasiliev, Director of the Institute of African and Arab Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and Andrey Baklanov, head of the International Affairs Department of Russia's Federal Assembly.

Seen from Moscow, the Middle East lies on its very doorstep. With 20 million Muslims in the Northern Caucasus, Russia feels that its domestic stability is linked to developments in the Arab world, especially to the rise of Islamist parties. If these parties turn out to be extreme, they risk inflaming Muslims in Russia itself and in Central Asia. Professor Vitaly Naumkin -- the man who sits at the summit of oriental studies in Russia -- declared that "I believe democracy will come to the Arab world by the Islamists rather than by Western intervention." He admitted, however, that we would have to wait to see whether Islamist regimes in Arab countries proved to be democratic or not.

Moscow's first reaction to the Arab revolutions has tended to be wary, no doubt because it suffered the assaults of the Rose Revolution in Georgia, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan, and so forth. Yet it is now fully aware of the need to build relations with the new forces in the Arab world. Events in the Middle East may even impinge on Russia's presidential elections, giving a boost to Vladimir Putin's ambitions. Ever since his historic visit to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf in 2007 -- the first ever by a Russian leader -- Putin has claimed to know how to handle Middle East affairs.

The situation in Syria is a subject of great preoccupation in Moscow. Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov was very firm, issuing what seemed like a warning to the Western powers: "Russia cannot tolerate open intervention on one side of the conflict," he thundered. It was wrong to force Bashar al-Asad, "the President of a sovereign state" to step down. Russia was seeking to institute a dialogue without preconditions. It was continuing its contacts with the opposition. But, in the meantime, he cautioned, the opposition had to dissociate itself from extremists. In thinking about Syria, the Russians are clearly much influenced by what happened in Libya. The Western powers, Bogdanov charged, had made many mistakes in the violent overthrow of Qadhafi. "There is a need," he insisted, "to investigate the civilian casualties caused by NATO airstrikes." Professor Naumkin explained: "Russia feels that it was cheated by its international partners. The no-fly zone mandate in Libya was transformed into direct military intervention. This should not be repeated in Syria." Arming the opposition would only serve to increase the killing. There was now the threat of civil war. Reforms had to be given a chance. The majority of the Syrian population did not want Bashar al-Asad to stand down. External armed forces should not intervene. Although Naumkin did not say so, there were rumours at the conference that Russia had advised Asad on the drafting of the new Syrian Constitution, which strips the Ba'th Party of its monopoly as "leader of State and society." The Constitution is due to be put to a referendum on 26 February, followed by multi-party elections. As was to be expected, several Arab delegates at the conference were critical of Russia's role in protecting President Asad, in particular of its veto on 4 February at the UN Security Council of the Resolution calling on him to step down. Professor Naumkin put up a vigorous defence. "We are seeking a new strategy of partnership between Russia and the Arab world," he declared. "We are determined to take up the challenge against those who do not respect our interests." He stressed that Russia's interests in the Middle East were not mercantile. It had no special relations with anyone (by this he seemed to mean the Asad family); it had no proxies or puppets in the region. Russia was a young democracy. It listened to public opinion. It was defending its vision of international relations based on respect for the sovereignty of states and a rejection of foreign armed intervention.

Of all the Arabs present, it was the Palestinians who, not surprisingly, were most eager for Russian support in their unequal struggle with Israel. Now that Russia was returning to the international arena as a major player, they called for it to put its full weight in favour of the peace process and of Mahmoud Abbas, “the last moderate Palestinian leader.” America’s monopoly of the peace process had merely provided a cover for Israeli expansion.

Speaker after speaker deplored the ineffective peace-making of the Quartet (the United States, European Union, Russia and UN). Indeed, an Israeli speaker reminded the conference that the discovery of large gas reserves off the Israeli coast meant that Israel -- soon to be “a major partner in the energy market” once gas started to flow next year -- would be less motivated to talk peace. The world would be confronted, he seemed to be saying, by a “Greater Israel with gas!”

Some Palestinians called for the toothless Quartet to be dismantled altogether and replaced by enhanced UN involvement. Some Israelis conceded that their country had made strategic errors in expanding West Bank settlements and laying siege to Gaza. Nevertheless, the Israel public had turned against the peace process, while the goal of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was to rule out the possibility of a two-state solution. This prompted Ambassador Andrey Baklanov to argue for the need to re-launch a multilateral Middle East peace process to replace the failed bilateral talks.

Indeed, perhaps the clearest message of the conference was the appeal for a greater role for the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) in establishing a new multilateral mechanism for regional security. To halt the killing in Syria or to ward off a U.S.-Israeli war against Iran, would Russia sponsor a mediation process in conjunction with its BRICS partners? Would it seek to revive the moribund Arab-Israeli peace process by sponsoring an international conference in Moscow? These questions remained unanswered.

Russia’s ambition to play a greater role in international affairs is clear. But can it deliver?

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book is The Struggle for Arab Independence: Riad el-Solh and the Makers of the Modern Middle East (Cambridge University Press).

Article 7.

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AIPAC and the Push Toward War

Robert Wright

Feb 21 2012 -- Late last week, amid little fanfare, Senators Joseph Lieberman, Lindsey Graham, and Robert Casey introduced a resolution that would move America further down the path toward war with Iran. The good news is that the resolution hasn't been universally embraced in the Senate. As Ron Kampeas of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency [reports](#), the resolution has "provoked jitters among Democrats anxious over the specter of war." The bad news is that, as Kampeas also reports, "AIPAC is expected to make the resolution an 'ask' in three weeks when up to 10,000 activists culminate its annual conference with a day of Capitol Hill lobbying." In standard media accounts, the [resolution](#) is being described as an attempt to move the "red line"--the line that, if crossed by Iran, could trigger a US military strike. The Obama administration has said that what's unacceptable is for Iran to develop a nuclear weapon. This resolution speaks instead of a "nuclear weapons capability." In other words, Iran shouldn't be allowed to get to a point where, should it decide to produce a nuclear weapon, it would have the wherewithal to do so.

By itself this language is meaninglessly vague. Does "capability" mean the ability to produce a bomb within two months? Two years? If two years is the standard, Iran has probably crossed the red line already. (So should we start bombing now?) Indeed, by the two-year standard, Iran might well be over the red line even after a bombing campaign--which would at most be a temporary setback, and would remove any doubt among Iran's leaders as to whether to build nuclear weapons, and whether to make its nuclear program impervious to future American and Israeli bombs. What do we do then? Invade?

In other words, if interpreted expansively, the "nuclear weapons capability" threshold is a recipe not just for war, but for ongoing war--war that wouldn't ultimately prevent the building of a nuclear weapon without putting boots on the ground. And it turns out that the authors of this resolution want "nuclear weapons capability" interpreted very expansively. The key is in the way the resolution deals with the question of whether Iran should be allowed to enrich uranium, as it's been doing for some time now. The resolution defines as an American goal "the full and sustained suspension" of uranium enrichment by Iran. In case you're wondering what the resolution's prime movers mean by that: In a letter sent to the White House on the same day the resolution was introduced, Lieberman, Graham and ten other senators [wrote](#), "We would strongly oppose any proposal that recognizes a 'right to enrichment' by the current regime or for [sic] a diplomatic endgame in which Iran is permitted to continue enrichment on its territory in any form."

This notwithstanding the fact that 1) enrichment is allowed under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty; (2) a sufficiently intrusive monitoring system can verify that enrichment is for peaceful purposes; (3) Iran's right to enrich its own uranium is an issue of strong national pride. In a [poll](#) published in 2010, after sanctions had already started to bite, 86 percent of Iranians said Iran should not "give up its nuclear activities regardless of the circumstances." And this wasn't about building a bomb; most Iranians said Iran's nuclear activities shouldn't include producing weapons.

Even Dennis Ross--who has rarely, in his long career as a Mideast diplomat, left much daylight between his positions and AIPAC's, and who once categorically [opposed](#) Iranian enrichment--now realizes that a diplomatic solution may have to include enrichment. Last week in a New York Times op-ed, he [said](#) that, contrary to pessimistic assessments, it may still be possible to get a deal that "uses intrusive inspections and denies or limits uranium enrichment [emphasis added]..."

The resolution plays down its departure from current policy by claiming that there have been "multiple" UN resolutions since 2006 demanding the "sustained" suspension of uranium. But the UN resolutions don't actually use that term. The UN has demanded suspension as a confidence-building measure that could then lead to, as one resolution puts it, a "negotiated solution that guarantees Iran's nuclear program is for exclusively peaceful

purposes." And various Security Council members who voted on these resolutions have made it clear that Iranian enrichment of uranium can be part of this scenario if Iran agrees to sufficiently tight monitoring. Indeed, that Iran's right to enrich uranium could be recognized under those circumstances is, Hillary Clinton has [said](#), "the position of the international community, along with the United States." If the Lieberman-Graham-Casey resolution guides US policy, says George Perkovich of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, that would "preclude" fulfillment of the UN resolutions and isolate the US from the international coalition that backed them.

The Congressional resolution goes beyond the UN resolutions in another sense. It demands an end to Iran's ballistic missile program. Greg Thielmann of the Arms Control Association notes that, "Even after crushing Iraq in the first Gulf War, the international coalition only imposed a 150-kilometer range ceiling on Saddam's ballistic missiles. A demand to eliminate all ballistic missiles would be unprecedented in the modern era--removing any doubt among Iranians that the United States was interested in nothing less than the total subjugation of the country."

On the brighter side: Maybe it's a good sign that getting significant Democratic buy-in for this resolution took some strong-arming. [According to](#) Lara Friedman of Americans for Peace Now, the resolution got 15 Democratic supporters only "after days of intense AIPAC lobbying, particularly of what some consider 'vulnerable' Democrats (vulnerable in terms of being in races where their pro-Israel credentials are being challenged by the candidate running against them)." What's more, even as AIPAC was playing this hardball, the bill's sponsors still had to tone down some particularly threatening language in the resolution.

But, even so, the resolution defines keeping Iran from getting a nuclear weapons "capability" as being in America's "vital national interest," which is generally taken as synonymous with "worth war." And, though this "sense of Congress" resolution is nonbinding, AIPAC will probably seek unanimous Senate consent, which puts pressure on a president. Friedman says this "risks sending a message that Congress supports war and opposes a realistic negotiated solution or any de facto solution short of stripping Iran of even a peaceful nuclear capacity."

What's more, says Friedman, the non-binding status may be temporary. "Often AIPAC-backed Congressional initiatives start as non-binding language (in a resolution or a letter) and then show up in binding legislation. Once members of Congress have already signed on to a policy in non-binding form, it is much harder for them to oppose it when it shows up later in a bill that, if passed, will have the full force of law." No wonder Democrats who worry about war have the "jitters."

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