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The Obama Administration and the Civil War in Syria

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Rebel activity against Bashar Assad's regime, which began in March 2011, was initially limited to certain areas, while Syria's large cities remained more or less undisturbed. During the first months, there was noted hesitancy on Washington's part regarding the best course of action for the United States in this crisis. While avoiding making a decision, the administration repeatedly called on President Assad to institute democratic reforms in Syria. When Assad consistently refused to do so, the administration heightened its demands, and on August 18, 2011, President Obama called on President Assad to give up his position "for the sake of the Syrian people."

At the same time, the administration worked intensively on the international arena, especially in various UN institutions, to formulate an international course of action against Assad's regime, and it also took a series of economic steps against Syria. It has been reported that the American administration is almost certainly working with Saudi Arabia and Turkey to help the rebels against Assad. According to one such report, American intelligence personnel are stationed on the Turkish-Syrian border and are assisting in training the rebels and supplying them with information, and perhaps with weapons as well.

On October 4, 2011, the Security Council convened to discuss the situation in Syria. A proposed resolution was presented condemning the "continued grave and systematic human right violations and use of force against civilians by the Syrian authorities." The proposal called for a political process in a violence-free atmosphere, "effectively addressing the legitimate aspirations and concerns of Syria's population." China and Russia voted against the resolution. Brazil, India, Lebanon, and South Africa abstained. The resolution, although it won the requisite number of nine votes, was rejected because of the Chinese and Russian vetoes.

A few months later, on February 4, 2012, the Security Council met again to discuss the situation, and again, on the basis of a proposed resolution, the Syrian regime was called on to refrain from violence against civilians and withdraw the army from the cities, take

down roadblocks, and allow legal demonstrations by civilians. Syria was also asked to “allow unhindered access for all Arab League institutions to determine the truth about the situation on the ground and monitor the incidents taking place.”

Consequently, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon and Arab League Secretary Nabil al-Arabi decided on February 23, 2012 to appoint former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan as special envoy to Syria. After a few weeks, Annan submitted a program for resolving the Syrian crisis to Ban Ki Moon. On April 5, 2012, the Security Council president called on the Syrian regime to adopt the program. Furthermore, both the government and the opposition were asked to hold their fire until April 12, 2012. This call remained unheeded.

On April 21, 2012, the Security Council decided to establish the United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS), consisting of 300 observers who would remain in Syria for 90 days. In mid June 2012, the commanding officer of UNSMIS announced the suspension of activities given the rising incidence of violence there. On July 19, 2012, the Security Council was asked to pressure Syria with sanctions should it fail to stop the violence. The proposal was again rejected because of Chinese and Russian opposition. In early August 2012, Annan announced his resignation as special envoy, and Algerian diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi was appointed in his stead. A few weeks later, the observer force ended its assignment.

Some voices in the United States administration have called for more active American involvement in Syria, including the pursuit of military measures. Various proposals to limit the Syrian air force’s freedom of action have been made by creating safe havens.

At least until the presidential elections in November 2012, the Obama administration will likely avoid any military action in Syria. The civil war in Syria at its current level does not seem to appear to the administration as a high risk to critical United States interests. As a state hostile to the United States, Syria's weakening in the civil war is a clear American interest. Conversely, as Iran's ally, Syria's weakening means the undermining of the Iranian-Syrian axis, which is likewise a welcome development for the United States. Syria is also a close ally of Russia and China, rivals of the US on the international arena. The current reality in Syria is embarrassing as well as alarming to Russia and China. From America’s perspective, this is by no means an undesirable situation.

Syria’s enemies in the region, also allies of the United States – Israel, Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan – share an essential interest in seeing Syria weakened. These states view Syria as hostile and as endangering their interests at varying levels of intensity. The civil war is causing tremendous damage to Syria’s economy and Syrian military power. For Syria’s neighbors, this is a welcome outcome, especially since in the current reality, there is no

clear immediate danger that Syria's civil war will spread to neighboring countries. Thus, the United States does not see the need to heighten its involvement in Syria at this time.

The coming elections in the United States are also a significant constraint for President Obama's administration. Although no administration official will admit it, the Obama administration currently appears driven by a zero-friction policy, at least until the elections. The relative peace and quiet of the present – the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq and the intention to withdraw also from Afghanistan – serves the administration well and improves the chances of Obama winning a second term in office. Any military involvement, even if minimal, is liable to drag the United States into a bloody struggle whose results are impossible to predict, and this in turn could have severe ramifications for America's economy and the elections results.

Finally, the American administration is well aware that the blood-soaked civil war raging in Syria is not a confrontation between the "good guys" and the "bad guys." Both sides operate with brutality and harbor few inhibitions, even if the media presents the Syrian regime in dark colors and the rebels in positive terms. The rebel forces are far from unified and it is hard to control them. The American administration rightly worries about massacres that the rebels could perpetrate during the war. Even if American forces were not to be directly involved, they would almost certainly be tainted by association. Should the rebels win, they will likely seek serious revenge from the Alawites. Here too the United States would not be able to evade responsibility should it step up its involvement now. All of these considerations are almost certainly deterring the administration from intensifying its involvement in Syria at this time.

