
Evaluating Counterfactual US Policy Action in Syria, 2011-16

A Review of Empirical Evidence from
Related Cases

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Overview¹

In public and policy debates about the US response to the conflict in Syria, comparisons to past responses to international cases of mass atrocity have become a fixture. In these debates, analysts use lessons from those past responses to forecast the likely consequences of US policy action in Syria or to speculate about the counterfactual consequences of actions not taken at various junctures. Comparisons to historical cases of international response provide important mental models for policy makers seeking to use specific tools and strategies to respond to the risk or occurrence of mass atrocities.² For example, Barack Obama has said that his unwillingness to pursue military action against the government of Bashar al-Assad in response to its use of chemical weapons in August 2013 resulted in part from his dismay at the instability that followed the military operation that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) led against Muammar Gaddafi's forces in Libya in 2011.³ For Obama, the risk that even limited military action in Syria could become "another Libya" was enough to remove a range of possible military options from consideration.

Which counterfactual US actions, if any, might have prevented or mitigated violence against civilians in Syria? This paper uses a systematic review of empirical studies of international responses to mass atrocities and related phenomena to evaluate these contemporary debates about US policy action in Syria.⁴ The purpose of this review is to evaluate plausible alternative avenues the US may have taken to prevent or mitigate mass atrocities against civilians in Syria. This analysis centers on "minimal rewrite" counterfactuals, in which a different policy action at a specific, time-bounded juncture in the US policy process on Syria might have led to a different outcome in violence against civilians. "Minimal rewrite" counterfactuals are opposed to so-called miracle world counterfactuals, which would require significant changes to the structural or contextual conditions that shape US policy.⁵

¹ I thank Ben Denison, Idean Salehyan, and Lawrence Woocher for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper. I am also grateful for the feedback I received from participants in the "Missed Opportunities for Prevention? A Study of US Policy and Atrocities in Syria since 2011" research workshop, organized by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide, Washington, DC, June 2017.

² For an overview of the role of analogical thinking in foreign policy decision making, see Yueng Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); Deborah Welch Larson, "The Role of Belief Systems and Schemas in Foreign Policy Decision-Making," *Political Psychology* 15, no. 1 (1994): 17–33; and Jack Levy, "Learning and Foreign Policy: Sweeping a Conceptual Minefield," *International Organization* 48, no. 2 (1994): 279–312.

³ Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *Atlantic*, April 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

⁴ Multiple studies since 2011 have used select lessons from the political science literature to explain specific characteristics of the conflict in Syria. For example, see "The Political Science of Syria's War," POMEPS Studies no. 5, Project on Middle East Political Science, Washington, DC, December 2013; "Monkey Cage: Syria," *Monkey Cage* (blog), https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/category/syria/?utm_term=.3210f2455916; and "Political Violence at a Glance: Syria," Political Violence at a Glance website, <https://politicalviolenceataglance.org/tag/syria/>.

⁵ Jack Levy, "Counterfactuals, Causal Inference, and Historical Analysis," *Security Studies* 24, no. 3 (2015): 378–402.

The paper centers on three policy actions that the US government debated—and in some cases implemented, to a limited degree—at various junctures since the conflict began in March 2011: (a) lethal support to the armed Syrian opposition, (b) limited strikes against Syrian government targets, and (c) no-fly zones. Although those US officials sometimes debated these options during overlapping junctures, the paper addresses opposition support and the direct military options as separate phenomena. The paper uses a review of historical, qualitative and quantitative studies of related cases and policy actions to assess the extent to which these actions may have affected the scope and severity of subsequent atrocities in Syria.

Identifying the Appropriate Reference Class

Much disagreement exists among social scientists about how scholars should infer general findings and forecast expected outcomes from a universe of historical case studies. Proving counterfactual events with absolute certainty is impossible, but a more structured analysis may clarify the assumptions, causal mechanisms, and contexts that make policy outcomes more or less likely to occur.⁶ Of course, this analysis confronts its own challenges. The small universe of contemporary cases relevant to the Syrian civil war is characterized by extensive heterogeneity. Even where relevant cases share some similar characteristics, diverse endogenous and exogenous factors interact to produce unanticipated causal effects. Imperfect qualitative and quantitative data can lead to unintended errors of observation or causal inference.

This paper confronts these challenges by laying out the available evidence about international responses to mass atrocities and related events and by assessing its relative applicability to the Syrian case. Especially in quantitative studies of violent conflict, much evidence about international responses is concerned with the average likelihood that a particular outcome will take place. Using average effects to predict the likely outcomes of counterfactual policy actions guards the counterfactual analysis against errors of inference that may emerge from a relatively small universe of heterogeneous cases. Even cases that appear similar to the US response to Syria, in regime type (personalist authoritarian regime; Libya, 2011), conflict type (internationalized civil war; Democratic Republic of Congo, 1997–2003), intervention type (biased military intervention; Iraq, 1991–2003), or temporal or regional proximity (Yemen, 2015–present), differ on other critical factors.⁷

Our confidence in the likelihood that any given counterfactual outcome will occur should vary according to the consistency of empirical evidence. We may be more confident in the likelihood

⁶ Robyn Dawes, “Counterfactual Inferences as Instances of Statistical Inferences,” in *Counterfactual Thought Experiments in World Politics: Logical, Methodological, and Psychological Perspectives*, ed. Philip Tetlock and Aaron Belkin (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 301–8.

⁷ For reflection on average effects and statistical inference, see Stephen Morgan and Christopher Winship, *Counterfactuals and Causal Inference: Methods and Principles for Social Research*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

of a counterfactual result where the average findings tend toward a common outcome. Where evidence is less consistent, however, additional analysis of “closest fit” cases may be required to assess the relative importance of specific causal factors. Differentiating between causal factors of greater and lesser importance will help specify the conditions under which a counterfactual outcome is more or less likely, respectively.

Before drawing comparisons between the US response to the conflict in Syria and other cases of international action, it is important to understand the appropriate reference class for the Syrian case;⁸ that is, which categories of events describe the conflict in Syria, and which do not? Much coverage of the conflict implies that Syria is an outlier in the contemporary history of violent conflict and mass atrocities. And yet a broader historical view suggests that different stages of the conflict in Syria bear comparison to four main categories of conflict: (a) nonviolent civil resistance, (b) state repression, (c) internationalized civil wars, and (d) state-led mass atrocities. Describing how the Syrian case relates to these categories of conflict is necessary to forecast the likely consequences of counterfactual policy actions. The section that follows describes the similarities and differences between stages of the Syrian case and observable categories of nonviolent civil resistance, repression, civil war, and state-led mass killing.

Nonviolent Civil Resistance. In the first half of 2011, organized dissent against the Assad regime remained generally peaceful in the face of growing regime violence. In February and March, protests began to pop up in urban areas along Syria’s borders with Lebanon, to the east, and Turkey, to the north. Hokayem attributes the direction of this spread to pre-uprising networks of anti-regime opposition, who were emboldened by the gradual collapse of the patronage networks that the Assad family had used to sustain support for the regime since the era of Hafez, Bashar’s father.⁹ In many cases, these local networks were the driving force behind the uprising, providing protest groups with mutual aid, such as emergency medical care and funds for food, gasoline, and other essential goods.¹⁰ These organizational origins are a common feature of nonviolent civil resistance.¹¹ Some cases of retaliatory violence against Syrian security forces occurred during this period, but many leaders of the formal opposition made clear that nonviolent resistance against the regime was a tactical, strategic, and moral imperative.¹² The coalition of groups that banded together in September 2011 to form the Damascus-based National

⁸ *Reference class forecasting* is a term adapted from the field of management science; it is intended to ground “intuitive prediction” in more rigorous methods of statistical analysis. See Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, “Intuitive Prediction: Biases and Corrective Procedures” (sponsored by Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, Arlington, VA), June 1977, <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA047747>.

⁹ Emile Hokayem, *Syria’s Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant* (London: Routledge, 2013).

¹⁰ Hassan Abbas, “The Dynamics of the Uprising in Syria,” Arab Reform Brief no. 51, Arab Reform Initiative, October 2011. For the pre-crisis history of the opposition networks, see Joshua Landis and Joe Pace, “The Syrian Opposition,” *Washington Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (2006–7): 45–68.

¹¹ For a comparative analysis of different modes of nonviolent organizing, see Kurt Schock, ed., *Civil Resistance: Comparative Perspectives on Nonviolent Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

¹² For more on the strategic disagreements between the National Coordination Committee and other wings of the Syrian opposition, see Yezid Sayigh, *The Syrian Opposition’s Leadership Problem* (Beirut, Lebanon: Carnegie Middle East Center, 2013).

Coordination Committee were especially ardent advocates for peaceful protest. Like many practitioners of nonviolent resistance, these groups argued that political progress in Syria would only result from a nonviolent assault against the repressive state.¹³

Repression. Poe and Tate define *repression* as synonymous with state terrorism, “a category of coercive activities on the part of the government designed to induce compliance in others.”¹⁴ Other definitions specify the means and context of repression, but the agent and subjects of repressive action—that is, the state and those whom the state seeks to influence, respectively—are common to all.¹⁵ According to this literature, the state uses a range of coercive activities to repress threats to its authority or the authority of influential elites. This definition encompasses the Assad regime’s early response to the political crisis in Syria. In keeping with past regime responses to organized protest, Syrian security forces responded swiftly to the new dissent with a heavy hand; reports of mass arrests, disappearances, and extrajudicial killings became more frequent as the protests spread.¹⁶ The severity of the regime’s response was informed in part by the broader wave of uprisings that emerged that year across the Middle East and North Africa. From the first days of the Syrian uprising, the fate of the regime’s regional counterparts shaped its own repressive strategies.¹⁷

The formal opposition’s collective commitment to nonviolent resistance began to fade as 2011 wore on. The regime’s escalating abuses and the fragmentation of the formal opposition both precipitated the gradual shift from heavy-handed repression to outright civil war. The Syrian conflict caused the deaths of more than 5,000 civilians by the end of 2011, most at the hands of regime security forces.¹⁸ The regime and pro-government paramilitary forces adopted a strategy of indiscriminate violence against protesters early on, using heavy artillery and aggressive “shoot-to-kill” operations to disperse crowds and discourage fearful dissidents from returning to the streets.¹⁹ Syrian intelligence also detained, tortured, and killed known and suspected protest leaders.²⁰ The combination of mass violence and targeted repression chipped away at the

¹³ See Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), for a discussion of the strategic effectiveness of nonviolent resistance.

¹⁴ Steven Poe and C. Neal Tate, “Repression of Human Rights to Personal Integrity in the 1980s: A Global Analysis,” *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 4 (1994): 854.

¹⁵ For a discussion of these various definitions, see Christian Davenport, “State Repression and Political Order,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 10 (2007): 1–23.

¹⁶ Amnesty International, *Deadly Detention: Deaths in Custody amid Popular Protest in Syria* (London: Amnesty International, 2011). For a detailed analysis of the Syrian regime’s repressive strategies and tactics before the 2011 uprising, see Human Rights Watch, *No Room to Breathe: State Repression of Human Rights Activism in Syria* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2007).

¹⁷ See Steven Heydemann, “Tracking the ‘Arab Spring’: Syria and the Future of Authoritarianism,” *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 4 (2013): 59–73; and Abbas, “Dynamics of the Uprising in Syria.”

¹⁸ US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2011: Syria*, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2011/humanrightsreport>.

¹⁹ Human Rights Watch, *“We’ve Never Seen Such Horror”: Crimes against Humanity by Syrian Security Forces* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2011).

²⁰ Amnesty International, *Deadly Detention*.

organizational architecture of the protest movement, even as demonstrations persisted in urban areas throughout the country.²¹

Internationalized Civil War. In the summer of 2011, grassroots activists, Syrian diaspora members, and other opposition forces began to band together to form a new coalition, the Syrian National Council (SNC). Around the same time, a new contingent of defectors from the regime security officials came together to create the Free Syrian Army (FSA), then the largest organization of rebel insurgents. Within months of their creation, the SNC and the FSA became the main political and military representatives of the Syrian opposition, respectively. However, dysfunction plagued both organizations from the outset. The SNC faced a daunting set of goals: to gain and maintain popular legitimacy and purchase inside Syria, while mobilizing support for the Syrian opposition among sympathetic foreign governments and members of the Syrian diaspora.²² No simpler were the FSA's efforts to establish a significant military challenge to both the regime and the new assortment of jihadi rebels that had begun to take up arms against Assad. Despite a veneer of organizational coherence, both the SNC and the FSA struggled to gain a foothold within Syria, to undermine the regime's political and military authority, and to forestall new and escalating repression by security forces.

Human rights reports suggest that the Syrian regime bears primary responsibility for the severe uptick in violence in late 2011 and early 2012.²³ A deteriorating economy, quick initial gains by the FSA in major urban centers with histories of regime support, and anxiety among Assad's ethnic Alawite base led some, including officials inside the regime itself, to question its longevity.²⁴ With the regime's survival arguably at stake, Syrian security forces stepped up military operations against both protesters and the new insurgency in the first months of 2012. The tactics used during these operations hinted at the brutality to come, including artillery shelling and systematic house searches in large population areas in Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Hama.²⁵ The first large-scale massacres of Syrian civilians also took place during this period.²⁶

These atrocities begat new violence against the regime. Two major dynamics drove the emergence of the armed Syrian opposition: (a) the creation of the FSA in summer 2011 and (b)

²¹ Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising*.

²² Sayigh, *Syrian Opposition's Leadership Problem*.

²³ See, for example, Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic* (Geneva: Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2012),

http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session21/A-HRC-21-50_en.pdf.

²⁴ For analysis along these lines, see "Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VII): The Syrian Regime's Slow-Motion Suicide," Middle East/North Africa Report no. 109, International Crisis Group, Washington, DC, 2011.

²⁵ See *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*.

²⁶ For example, see the description of the Karam Zeitoun massacre in Homs in March 2012 in "Syria's Phase of Radicalisation," Middle East Briefing no. 33, International Crisis Group, Washington, DC, 2012.

the rapid growth of jihadi groups in the first months of 2012.²⁷ In addition to combating government forces, the FSA also had to contend with an impressive constellation of new jihadi fighters, led by Jabhat al-Nusra. Jabhat al-Nusra began to take form in the early months of the Syrian crisis as an offshoot of the Islamic State of Iraq, the al-Qaeda cell formed in response to the US occupation of Iraq. Although the FSA coalition included ideologically diverse members from left-wing secularists to Syrian Islamists, Jabhat al-Nusra's emphasis on jihad—rather than on the transformation of the Syrian state—was anathema to much of the FSA's core base. Jabhat al-Nusra's commitment to anti-regime violence, however, was decisive from the start: the group's official launch in January 2012 was accompanied by a series of high-profile suicide attacks against regime security sites. In April, the group proved its worth on the battlefield during an anti-regime offensive in Damascus. The relative strength of Jabhat al-Nusra and its ideological peers grew throughout the spring, as the FSA's recruitment efforts faltered and new foreign fighters from across the region swelled the ranks of the Syrian jihad. By the end of 2012, a diverse network of jihadi organizations had overwhelmed the political influence and military strength of the so-called moderate opposition that the FSA had struggled to represent.²⁸

The Assad regime's battlefield losses throughout 2012, together with the rise and fragmentation of the armed opposition, were the spark that broadened the conflict beyond Syria's borders. An international dimension to the conflict in Syria had informed the regime's repression and the opposition's response since the beginning, but 2012 was marked by a dramatic increase in the number and degree of involvement of foreign actors providing support to the regime. With the size and strength of its military dwindling, the Assad regime turned to familiar allies in Russia, Iran, and Lebanon's Hezbollah movement for new military personnel, training, technology, and funds. The full extent of this support is unclear, but by mid-2013, the assistance allowed the regime to rebuff rebel gains in the country's west.²⁹ For the opposition, foreign support was a central goal of the political organizations in exile. Regional intelligence services and private donors in the Gulf States were responsible for much of the early assistance to the FSA and its affiliates. Turkey's willingness to grant FSA leaders a base of operations near Syria's northern border was also critical to the establishment of the organization.³⁰ As Lister observes, these early networks mutated along with the distribution of power within the opposition: "Several of the Kuwaitis," some of the FSA's earliest financiers, "went on to exploit the contacts they gleaned in 2012 to begin financing more extremist organisations."³¹ Although they withheld direct financial

²⁷ For a discussion about the use of the term *jihadi* to describe a general category of Syrian opposition members, see Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaida, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016).

³⁰ For the relationship between Gulf sponsor networks and the Syrian opposition, see Elizabeth Dickinson, *Playing with Fire: Why Private Gulf Financing for Syria's Extremist Rebels Risks Igniting Sectarian Conflict at Home* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2013).

³¹ Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 70.

and military assistance during this period, the United States and EU countries provided the Syrian opposition with a measure of diplomatic support through the Friends of Syria process.

State-Led Mass Atrocities. In addition to an internationalized civil war, the Syrian crisis has become a clear episode of state-led mass atrocities. Mass atrocities consist of “large-scale, systematic violence against civilian populations,” comprising egregious abuses, such as torture, sexual violence, and mass killing. Mass atrocities often occur in the context of state repression or civil war, but their severity and extreme consequences for the society in which they occur merit separate attention.³² Scholars suggest that governments use mass atrocities, like broader forms of repression, in response to real and perceived threats to their authority. This explanation for mass atrocities is especially apparent in the context of civil wars, in which the costs of rebel victory are extreme.³³ Since 2011, the Assad regime has been the principal perpetrator of atrocities in Syria, most against known or suspected members of the opposition and the broader rebel insurgency. Various factions of the armed Syrian opposition have also perpetrated intentional, large-scale violence against civilians, but at exponentially lower levels than the regime. Those concerned with the consequences of international efforts to mitigate or halt these atrocities must contend with the perceptions of existential risk behind the regime’s most severe abuses.³⁴

Evaluating the Likely Consequences of US Policy Action

The following section discusses the likely consequences of three major policy actions that the US government considered, but did not adopt, at specific junctures in the Syrian conflict: (a) lethal support to the armed Syrian opposition, (b) limited strikes against Syrian government targets, and (c) no-fly zones. Each of these three actions received much attention in public debates about US Syria policy, including in the opinion pages of national newspapers and magazines, in expert reports at policy think tanks, and during national political campaigns. In each case, the prevention of new mass atrocities by the Assad regime was a consideration for US officials, although other US strategic priorities often overtook this focus.

For each action, I describe the policy deliberations that occurred and the arguments that advocates inside and outside the US government advanced in support of the action. I then summarize the empirical evidence and proposed mechanisms that explain that action’s likely effect on the risk and occurrence of repression, violent conflict, and mass atrocities and evaluate the extent to which those findings help assess competing claims about the likely effects of counterfactual US action in Syria.

³² See Scott Straus, *Fundamentals of Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention* (Washington, DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2016), for a definition of *mass atrocities* and a discussion of the differences between mass atrocities, conflict, and other forms of severe violence.

³³ Benjamin Valentino, Paul Huth, and Dylan Balch-Lindsay, “‘Draining the Sea’: Mass Killing and Guerilla Warfare,” *International Organization* 58, no. 2 (2004): 375–407.

³⁴ See Matthew Krain, “International Intervention and the Severity of Genocides and Politicides,” *International Studies Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (2005): 363–87, for the interaction between these motivations and different models of international intervention to mitigate or halt atrocities.

External Lethal Support to the Armed Syrian Opposition

Background

Internal discussions about direct, lethal US support for vetted members of the armed Syrian opposition began in the summer of 2012. That spring, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had begun vetting fighters and funneling operational intelligence to a loose network of FSA affiliates.³⁵ According to press reports from the period, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and CIA Director David Petraeus presented President Obama with a plan to provide vetted members of the opposition with arms in coordination with regional partners.³⁶ The plan received wide support from other members of Obama's cabinet.³⁷ The president rejected the plan, although he signed an intelligence "finding" around that time that authorized new nonlethal assistance—such as communications equipment—to the Syrian rebels. Among the criticisms opponents of the plan offered was the questionable makeup of the opposition, which some administration officials and public commentators believed was vulnerable to jihadi influence.³⁸

Supporters of lethal US support to the armed Syrian opposition observe that the administration's eventual actions were both too late and too limited in scope to have a tangible positive effect on either the armed opposition's relative strength or on the risk and occurrence of mass atrocities in Syria. Regarding the latter factor, advocates argue that earlier and broader support to the opposition would have led to two main outcomes. First, large-scale support would have allowed the FSA and other "moderate" opposition groups to achieve military parity with the regime, thereby imposing extreme costs for new violence against civilians.³⁹ A corollary outcome suggests that lethal support would have created the conditions for political negotiations about Syria's future.⁴⁰ Second, lethal support would have given the United States and its partners greater influence over the makeup of the opposition, allowing moderate groups less likely to perpetrate atrocities an upper hand over jihadi factions.⁴¹

³⁵ David Cloud and Raja Abdulrahim, "U.S. Has Secretly Provided Arms Training to Syria Rebels since 2012," *Los Angeles Times*, June 21, 2013, <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/jun/21/world/la-fg-cia-syria-20130622>.

³⁶ Michael Gordon and Mark Landler, "Backstage Glimpses of Clinton as Dogged Diplomat, Win or Lose," *New York Times*, February 2, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/03/us/politics/in-behind-scene-blows-and-triumphs-sense-of-clinton-future.html>.

³⁷ Michael Gordon and Mark Landler, "Senate Hearing Draws Out a Rift in U.S. Policy on Syria," *New York Times*, February 7, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/08/us/politics/panetta-speaks-to-senate-panel-on-benghazi-attack.html>.

³⁸ For a discussion of the challenges of vetting rebel proxies, see Idean Salehyan, "The Delegation of War to Rebel Organizations," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 54, no. 3 (2010): 493–515.

³⁹ For example, see comments from Tony Badran in Zach Silberman, "As Syria Crackdown Intensifies, Debate Rages over U.S. Options," Jewish Telegraphic Agency, February 21, 2012, <http://www.jta.org/2012/02/21/news-opinion/israel-middle-east/as-syria-crackdown-intensifies-debate-rages-over-u-s-options>; and from Jeffrey White in Gordon and Landler, "Senate Hearing Draws Out a Rift."

⁴⁰ For example, see Michael Doran and Salman Shaikh, "Arm the Syrian Rebels. Now," *Foreign Policy*, February 8, 2013, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/arm-the-syrian-rebels-now>.

⁴¹ For example, see Emile Hokayem, "Arm Syrian Rebels to Enable Political Solution," *IISS Voices* (blog), October 31, 2012, <https://www.iiss.org/en/iiss%20voices/blogsections/2012-6d11/october-2012-9f2f/arm-syrian-rebels->

Key Empirical Findings

Studies about external support for rebel groups center on two outcomes related to the risk and occurrence of mass atrocities: (a) conflict duration and (b) the extent and severity of atrocities committed by rebel groups.

External support to rebel groups is associated with longer civil wars. However, external support provided in the early years of a conflict increases the likelihood of both rebel victory and a negotiated end to the conflict.

- In his study of 150 civil wars from 1945 to 1999, Regan finds that external military intervention, including weapons assistance and intelligence support, increases the likelihood that a conflict will endure.⁴² Regan defines *civil war* as an armed conflict with at least 200 battle-related deaths in a year. He underscores two competing scenarios in his analysis: (a) without intervention and (b) with military intervention. Without intervention, the probability that an average conflict in Regan’s data set lasts into its fourth year is about 37 percent; with military intervention, that probability increases to about 60 percent.
- Sawyer, Gallagher Cunningham, and Reed’s study of 133 intrastate conflicts from 1989 to 2011 finds that external financial and weapons support—more fungible forms of assistance, contra military advisors or intelligence support—decreases the probability that the conflict ends during the year that the support is provided.⁴³ They use the Uppsala Conflict Data Program’s definition of *conflict* as an armed dispute between two parties, one of which is the government, that results in at least 25 battle deaths in a year. Their study finds that the likelihood that an average conflict ends during a given year in the absence of external financial support is 23 percent; in the absence of weapons support, the probability is 24 percent. The probability that an average conflict ends when rebels *do* have access to external finances is about 11 percent; in circumstances where they have access to weapons, the probability is 10 percent.
- In his study of 154 civil wars from 1944 to 2007, Jones finds that external support provided to rebel groups within about 3.5 years of a conflict’s onset increases the likelihood of a negotiated settlement, whereas support provided after 3.5 years has no

6d8d; and Marc Lynch, “Roundtable: Arming the Syrian Rebels,” *Foreign Policy*, February 21, 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/02/21/roundtable-arming-the-syrian-rebels/>.

⁴² Patrick Regan, “Third-Party Interventions and the Duration of Intrastate Conflicts,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46, no. 1 (2002): 55–73.

⁴³ Katherine Sawyer, Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, and William Reed, “The Role of External Support in Civil War Termination,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53, no. 4 (2015): 570–97.

significant effect. External support also makes rebel victory more likely when provided early in the conflict.⁴⁴

External support to rebel groups is associated with greater likelihood and severity of atrocities by its recipients.

- Salehyan and others find that external support increases the likelihood of abuses by recipient groups.⁴⁵
- In a study of 160 rebel groups from 1989 to 2009, Wood finds that foreign sponsorship increases rebel abuses only after the group achieves 18 percent of the regime's military capabilities.⁴⁶

External support to rebel groups by democratic governments is associated with lower levels of rebel violence against civilians than external support by autocratic governments. The larger the number of external patrons, however, the less democratic sponsorship constrains rebel abuses.

- Salehyan and others find that the relative effect of this support on the recipient group's violence against civilians varies by both the patron's regime type and the quantity of patrons.⁴⁷ In their study of more than 200 rebel groups from 1989 to 2009, they observe that rebel groups that received support from democratic patrons are approximately half as likely to use one-sided violence against civilians as those who receive their support from autocracies. However, the effects of democratic support decrease as the number of external patrons increases. To illustrate this relationship, Salehyan and others compare the relative impact of additional democratic support for the average group with six sponsors. For a group with six sponsors, the number of expected incidents of one-sided violence in a given year drops by 70 percent with one democratic patron, and by 66 percent with two democratic patrons.

Hypothesized Explanations for the Findings

Scholars attribute the empirical findings about the relationship between external support to rebel groups and conflict duration to the relative military parity that the support encourages. Regan argues that external support forces a stalemate between conflict parties, because a decisive victory by one side becomes less likely as rebels overcome their initial disadvantage against

⁴⁴ Benjamin Jones, "Altering Capabilities or Imposing Costs? Intervention Strategy and Civil War Outcomes," *International Studies Quarterly* 61 no. 1 (2017): 52–63.

⁴⁵ Idean Salehyan et al., "External Rebel Sponsorship and Civilian Abuse: A Principal-Agent Analysis of Wartime Atrocities," *International Organization* 68, no. 3 (2014): 633–61. See also Jeremy Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁴⁶ Reed M. Wood, "Opportunities to Kill or Incentives for Restraint? Rebel Capabilities, the Origins of Support, and Civilian Victimization in Civil War," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 27, no. 2 (2013): 107–28.

⁴⁷ Salehyan et al., "External Rebel Sponsorship and Civilian Abuse."

government forces.⁴⁸ However, Jones observes that government perceptions of the strength of a rebel group that receives foreign support in the early stages of a conflict may make negotiations *more* likely, as governments will seek a bargain to avoid the costs of continued war.⁴⁹

Sawyer, Gallagher Cunningham, and Reed note that fungible forms of external support, in particular, create uncertainty among conflict parties that decreases the likelihood of a negotiated settlement.⁵⁰ Scholars also suggest that external intervention, writ large, prompts counterinterventions that create further obstacles to conflict resolution, but the extent to which this relationship applies specifically to external support to rebel groups is unclear.⁵¹ In most cases, prolonged conflict results in more atrocities, because a greater number of atrocities will occur over time than might have otherwise occurred had the conflict ended more quickly.⁵²

With regard to the severity of rebel abuses, Salehyan and others hypothesize that rebel groups that are less reliant on the financial rents or political support of civilians in areas under their control will confront lower political costs for predation or more severe forms of physical abuses against civilians.⁵³ This relationship also emerges from Weinstein's study of four rebel groups in Uganda, Mozambique, and Peru, which finds that the material resources that rebels use to fund their operations influence relative levels of violence against civilians.⁵⁴ According to Wood, external support also increases a relatively strong, foreign-sponsored group's ability to commit atrocities at scale, with regard to weaponry, intelligence, and other military capabilities.⁵⁵ These studies suggest that together the sources of rebel financing and a group's military capabilities explain varying levels of violence against civilians during conflict.

Salehyan and others attribute the moderating influence of democratic support to domestic constraints in democracies. Domestic sources of accountability like human rights organizations limit the range of rebel groups that these governments deem acceptable recipients of their support.⁵⁶ These organizations also impose political costs on patron governments when recipient groups commit abuses against civilians. However, this accountability mechanism becomes less effective as rebel groups receive assistance from more and more autocratic patrons. Autocratic support allows rebels to shop around for funds and other forms of assistance, instead of relying only on more discerning democratic patrons.

⁴⁸ Regan, "Third-Party Interventions." See also Dylan Balch-Lindsay and Andrew Enterline, "Killing Time: The World Politics of Civil War Duration, 1820–1992," *International Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (2000): 615–42.

⁴⁹ Jones, "Altering Capabilities or Imposing Costs?"

⁵⁰ Sawyer, Gallagher Cunningham, and Reed, "External Support in Civil War Termination."

⁵¹ Balch-Lindsay and Enterline, "Killing Time."

⁵² For conflict as a risk factor for the onset of state-sponsored mass killing, one specific type of mass atrocity, see Jay Ulfelder and Benjamin Valentino, "Assessing Risks of State-Sponsored Mass Killing," Political Instability Task Force, Washington, DC, 2008, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1703426.

⁵³ Salehyan et al., "External Rebel Sponsorship and Civilian Abuse."

⁵⁴ Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion*.

⁵⁵ Wood, "Opportunities to Kill or Incentives for Restraint?"

⁵⁶ Salehyan et al., "External Rebel Sponsorship and Civilian Abuse."

To What Extent Do These Findings Apply to Syria?

To examine how these findings apply to the Syrian case, it is necessary to outline the major implicit assumptions behind the arguments advanced in favor of arming the Syrian opposition. To believe that external support to the Syrian opposition would have mitigated or prevented subsequent atrocities, the following three conditions must be true. First, these arguments assume that the United States was prepared to provide Syrian rebels with enough support to change the military balance of the conflict and force the regime to the negotiating table. Second, they assume that significant counterintervention by the Assad regime's patrons was not a major likely consequence of US action. And third, they assume some measure of US influence over rebel tactics, operations, and strategy, including the use of violence against civilians. Below, I describe the lessons of key empirical findings for the Syrian case and demonstrate the extent to which these assumptions hold in light of these findings.

The empirical evidence from other cases appears to contradict the first argument in favor of arming the opposition—that the military parity between the regime and the opposition that followed from external support would have decreased regime atrocities and increased the likelihood of a negotiated settlement. No negotiated solution to the Syrian crisis has emerged, despite fluctuations in the military balance between the regime and rebel groups. Capable and operationally savvy jihadi groups, who have become the regime's strongest opponents following the FSA's collapse in 2013, have played a key role in repelling regime advances. But the regime has shown no appetite for a negotiated settlement, even in the periods of greatest opposition strength. In fact, the Syrian government has actively interfered with international efforts to lay the groundwork for conflict resolution, such as the short-lived deployment of a small United Nations (UN) peacekeeping force in 2012. The result has been an ever-increasing number of atrocities against civilians.

In keeping with Jones's study, there is some evidence that earlier US support might have signaled to the Syrian government the possibility of a costly stalemate and forced the regime to the negotiating table. The strength of this signal, however, would have depended on the extent of US support. The more limited the scale of US support, the less credible the signal would have seemed. It is not clear that, in the context of the Clinton-Petraeus plan, the US would have been willing to offer sufficient support early in the conflict to tip the balance against the regime and prompt good-faith negotiations from Assad. In 2015, press reports found that the US had provided Syrian opposition fighters in northern Syria with a small fraction of the arms that the CIA program had guaranteed. Additionally, the CIA's stringent counterterrorism vetting procedures meant that the CIA's arms reached only a limited population of rebel commanders.⁵⁷ The US government's lagging support meant that many of these opposition commanders defected to better-resourced jihadi groups, according to these reports. These logistical obstacles

⁵⁷ Adam Entous, "Covert CIA Mission to Arm Syrian Rebels Goes Awry," *Wall Street Journal*, January 26, 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/covert-cia-mission-to-arm-syrian-rebels-goes-awry-1422329582>.

would likely have emerged in any prior version of the program, given the legal and political scrutiny that follows from US assistance to armed groups in any active conflict.

Iran's and Hezbollah's respective actions since the early days of the conflict suggest that they both would have responded to significant US support with an additional surge of support for the regime. The dire strategic consequences of the Assad regime's potential fall have drawn extensive support from these two patrons and, later in the conflict, from Russia. In 2012 and 2013, Iran and Hezbollah went to great lengths to buttress the Syrian government against rebel advances, including through the deployment of ground forces fighting alongside Syrian military and paramilitary units. Although it is difficult to estimate the size of this military and financial support, Phillips offers an illustrative passage to demonstrate the relative scale of Iran's assistance: "Such was the extent of Iranian military involvement that by 2013 oppositionists claimed [the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps] Quds Force commander Qassem Suleimani had more power in Syria than Assad."⁵⁸ This support has continued—indeed, expanded—even as Iran's and Hezbollah's regional adversaries have deepened their direct and proxy efforts against the Syrian regime. Research about external military interventions in civil wars, including external support to armed groups, finds that these counterinterventions are an expected fixture of internationalized conflicts.⁵⁹

Findings from other cases do offer some support for the second argument—that new US leverage over the armed Syrian opposition would have constrained some rebel abuses. In the Syrian case, legal and congressional scrutiny rather than influential human rights constituencies were the more salient constraints on US support to the Syrian opposition. However, contributions from official and private donors from Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf autocracies have dwarfed relatively limited US contributions.⁶⁰ The relative imbalance in US and Gulf support for the opposition suggests that the latter's ambivalence toward opposition abuses has muted any potential moderating influence from the United States.

Based on a review of the relevant empirical evidence, the most likely consequence of greater and earlier US support to the Syrian opposition would have been an increase in atrocities against civilians. However, it is also plausible that the quantity and scale of other regional support would have reduced the effect of US actions to negligible levels.

⁵⁸ Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, 150.

⁵⁹ Balch-Lindsay and Enterline, "Killing Time."

⁶⁰ Frederic Wehrey, "Gulf Calculations in the Syrian Conflict," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC, June 9, 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/06/09/gulf-calculations-in-syrian-conflict-pub-55865>; Mark Mazzetti and Matt Apuzzo, "U.S. Relies Heavily on Saudi Money to Support Syrian Rebels," *New York Times*, January 23, 2016.

External Military Intervention: Limited Strikes on Government Targets and No-Fly Zones

Background

In August 2013, Syrian government forces used sarin gas, a chemical weapon prohibited under international humanitarian law, in an attack on a rebel-held area outside Damascus. US intelligence reports found that the attacks killed almost 1,500 civilians.⁶¹ A year earlier, Obama had threatened a “red line” in response to the Syrian government’s threatened use of chemical weapons against Syrian civilians.⁶² In the direct aftermath of the Ghouta attacks, public commentators pressed the US government to make good on the president’s threat and launch limited strikes against the Syrian government targets responsible for the attack. Obama and his advisors were publicly wary of these plans, not least because of congressional opposition to new US military involvement in Syria.⁶³

After multiple weeks of public debate, Obama opted for a diplomatic route instead of the strikes. An offhand remark by Secretary of State John Kerry questioning the Syrian government’s willingness to give up its chemical weapons supply gave way to a joint US-Russia initiative to achieve this goal. By September 2013, the Syrian government had acquiesced to a UN Security Council–authorized mission of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). During the subsequent year, the OPCW mission removed and destroyed the Syrian government’s existing supply of chemical weapons; in January 2016, the OPCW announced the complete destruction of Syria’s declared supply.⁶⁴

The creation of no-fly zones in Syria emerged as a separate subject of public discussion in both the United States and Syria after NATO-backed Libyan rebels toppled the Gaddafi regime in the fall of 2011.⁶⁵ Press reports since 2011 indicate that senior US officials only seriously debated plans for no-fly zones of varying scope in 2012, 2013, and 2015.⁶⁶ Calls for a no-fly zone were

⁶¹ Joby Warrick, “More than 1,400 Killed in Syrian Chemical Weapons Attack, U.S. Says,” *Washington Post*, August 30, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/nearly-1500-killed-in-syrian-chemical-weapons-attack-us-says/2013/08/30/b2864662-1196-11e3-85b6-d27422650fd5_story.html?utm_term=.6a4a57005a62.

⁶² James Ball, “Obama Issues Syria a ‘Red Line’ Warning on Chemical Weapons,” *Washington Post*, August 20, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-issues-syria-red-line-warning-on-chemical-weapons/2012/08/20/ba5d26ec-eaf7-11e1-b811-09036bcb182b_story.html?utm_term=.45f0e6434d3e.

⁶³ Mark Landler and Jonathan Weisman, “Obama Delays Syria Strike to Focus on a Russian Plan,” *New York Times*, September 10, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/11/world/middleeast/syrian-chemical-arsenal.html>. See also Derek Chollet, *The Long Game: How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America’s Role in the World* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2016).

⁶⁴ “Destruction of Declared Syrian Chemical Weapons Completed,” Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, The Hague, January 4, 2016, <https://www.opcw.org/news/article/destruction-of-syrian-chemical-weapons-completed/>.

⁶⁵ Micah Zenko, “More Syrians Are Calling for a No-Fly Zone—Should We Take It Seriously?” *Atlantic*, November 1, 2011 <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/11/more-syrians-are-calling-for-a-no-fly-zone-should-we-take-it-seriously/247637/>.

⁶⁶ For 2012, see Hadeel Al Shalchi, “U.S., Turkey to Study Syria No-Fly Zone,” Reuters, August 11, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-idUSBRE8610SH20120811>. For 2013, see Mark Landler and Thom Shanker, “Pentagon Lays Out Options for U.S. Military Effort in Syria,” *New York Times*, July 22, 2013,

especially prominent as Assad's counterinsurgency made greater use of aerial bombardment, although one analysis of Syrian fatality data finds that this tactic has represented a relatively small fraction of total conflict fatalities.⁶⁷ Both supporters and detractors of a no-fly zone in Syria drew lessons from NATO's Libya operation, so much so that "Libya-style intervention" became a common term of reference on both sides of the debate. For its supporters, the force that NATO used to deter a potential massacre in the eastern Libyan city of Benghazi could be mustered in a similar fashion against Assad. For its detractors, NATO's eventual support for the grisly fall of the Gaddafi regime in October 2011 suggested that a limited operation against Assad, whose rule was even more entrenched than Gaddafi's had been, would not be possible.

For advocates of both the initial strikes in the fall of 2013 and a no-fly zone in 2012, 2013, and 2015, the actions would have led to two common outcomes. The first projected outcome was a matter of deterrence: both US strikes against Syrian government targets and a protracted no-fly zone would have demonstrated to the regime the significant costs of further atrocities.⁶⁸ The other logic—which the Trump administration advanced in support of its own decision to strike Syrian government targets in April 2017—was material: the strikes in 2013 and the no-fly zone would both have degraded the regime's military ability to carry out new atrocities.⁶⁹ No-fly zone advocates also projected a third outcome, an extension of the first: by signaling military costs in response to continued regime violence, the United States and its regional partners would grant anti-regime forces an upper hand in diplomatic negotiations. In so doing, the no-fly zone would precipitate a negotiated settlement to the conflict and an end to its atrocities.⁷⁰

Key Empirical Findings

"External military intervention" describes a broad category of third-party participation in intrastate conflict, from limited operations to protracted campaigns. Empirical evidence finds that military intervention is a blunt, ineffective instrument by itself. In his study of 36 discrete US military operations since the end of the Cold War, Zenko finds that only 2 such operations

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/23/world/middleeast/pentagon-outlining-options-to-congress-suggests-syria-campaign-would-be-costly.html>. For 2015, see Barbara Slavin, "US Still Considering No-Fly Zone for Syria," *Al-Monitor*, March 3, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/03/syria-crisis-us-intervention.html>.

⁶⁷ Micah Zenko, "Responsibility to Protect? Why None of the Plans for Intervening in Syria Actually Tries to Save Civilians," *Foreign Policy*, September 17, 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/09/17/responsibility-to-protect/>.

⁶⁸ Anne-Marie Slaughter, "A No-Fly Zone for Syria," *Project Syndicate*, August 25, 2015, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/no-fly-zone-syria-by-anne-marie-slaughter-2015-08?barrier=accessreg>.

⁶⁹ Christopher Harmer, *U.S. Options for a Syria No-Fly Zone* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2015). For the Trump administration's reasoning, see "Dozens of U.S. Missiles Hit Air Base in Syria," *New York Times*, April 6, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/06/world/middleeast/us-said-to-weigh-military-responses-to-syrian-chemical-attack.html>.

⁷⁰ Nicholas Burns and James Jeffrey, "The Diplomatic Case for America to Create a Safe Zone in Syria," *Washington Post*, February 4, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-diplomatic-case-for-america-to-create-a-safe-zone-in-syria/2016/02/04/f3c7c820-caa9-11e5-88ff-e2d1b4289c2f_story.html?utm_term=.407288483c1a.

achieved all of the political objectives associated with the use of force.⁷¹ Regan's study of 138 intrastate conflicts from 1944 to 1994 finds that external military intervention is more effective in ending conflict when paired with economic interventions like the provision or cessation of financial assistance to conflict parties, rather than on its own.⁷² Regan and Aydin find that this is also the case for diplomatic intervention, indicating that a multifaceted strategy of external pressure is more effective than a strictly military approach.⁷³ In a more positive assessment, Sullivan and Koch's study of 126 cases of military intervention by "powerful states" from 1945 to 2003 finds that the United States was successful in achieving its political objectives in 23 out of 35 cases, or 66 percent of the time.⁷⁴ Sullivan and Koch also find that out of ten interventions aimed at "social protection and order" during that time period, 50 percent were effective in achieving their political objectives.

In contrast to the strategic studies literature about coercive strategy, most studies about the relationship between military intervention and civil war outcomes distinguish between specific intervention strategies only insofar as they constitute different logics of conflict.⁷⁵ For example, Jones differentiates between indirect forms of intervention intended to strengthen rebels and direct intervention intended to damage a government's military capabilities.⁷⁶ He does not, however, separate operational forms of the latter. I follow this pooled approach to the study of external military intervention and discuss the two major military options considered by US policy makers as a common phenomenon. I also do not differentiate between the timing of the two intervention options. Although interventions during different periods in a conflict probably affect the associated policy outcomes, most studies also do not differentiate between early-stage and late-stage interventions.

Like studies of external support to rebel groups, empirical evidence about external military intervention points to (a) conflict duration and (b) the extent and severity of government atrocities following the intervention as the two main outcomes related to the risk and occurrence of mass atrocities.

⁷¹ Micah Zenko, *Between Threats and War: U.S. Discrete Military Operations in the Post-Cold War World* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010). On page 2, Zenko defines a *discrete military operation* as "a single or serial physical use of kinetic military force to achieve a defined military and political goal by inflicting casualties or causing destruction, without seeking to conquer an opposing army or to capture or control territory."

⁷² Patrick Regan, "Conditions of Successful Third-Party Intervention in Intrastate Conflicts," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 40, no. 2 (1996): 336–59.

⁷³ Patrick Regan and Aysegul Aydin, "Diplomacy and Other Forms of Intervention in Civil Wars," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 50, no. 5 (2006): 736–56.

⁷⁴ Patricia Sullivan and Michael Koch, "Military Intervention by Powerful States, 1945–2003," *Journal of Peace Research* 46, no. 5 (2009): 707–18.

⁷⁵ See, for example, the scholarly debate about air power coercion that followed the NATO bombing campaign in Kosovo: Daniel Byman and Matthew Waxman, "Kosovo and the Great Air Power Debate," *International Security* 24, no. 4 (2000): 5–38; and Michael Horowitz and Dan Reiter, "Does Aerial Bombing Work? Quantitative Empirical Tests, 1917–1999," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 45, no. 2 (2001): 147–73.

⁷⁶ Jones, "Altering Capabilities or Imposing Costs?" Jones also criticizes the extent to which earlier studies underestimate the heterogeneity of different intervention strategies.

One-sided military intervention is associated with shorter conflicts. External military intervention by multiple sides in a civil war, however, prolongs conflict and decreases the likelihood of a negotiated end to conflict.

- As noted earlier, Regan’s study of 150 conflicts from 1945 to 1999 finds that external military intervention prolongs conflict.⁷⁷
- Mason, Weingarten, and Fett’s forecasting model of civil war duration—based on a data set of 57 civil wars from 1945 to 1992—finds that the average duration of civil wars with some form of external military intervention is more than three times as long as the average duration of those without.⁷⁸
- In their study of a sample of 213 civil wars from 1816 to 1997, however, Balch-Lindsay, Enterline, and Joyce find that pro-rebel interventions increase the likelihood of a negotiated settlement and shorten the average time until a decisive victory by rebel forces.⁷⁹ Balch-Lindsay and Enterline also observe that direct interventions against government parties decrease the average length of the conflict.⁸⁰
- In an analysis of 152 sample cases of civil war from 1820 to 1992, Balch-Lindsay and Enterline find that balanced external intervention—that is, the intervention of multiple external actors on opposite sides of a civil war—increases the duration of a conflict almost interminably. The study finds that only one civil war, the conflict in Chad from 1980 to 1988, ended following a balanced intervention.⁸¹ Additionally, Balch-Lindsay, Enterline, and Joyce find that balanced interventions decrease the likelihood of negotiated settlement.⁸²
- Cunningham’s study of external military intervention from 1945 to 2004 finds that interventions by parties whose explicit or implicit preferences differ from those of their internal allies prolong civil wars. He observes that fully independent interventions result in longer conflicts than those in which the preferences of external parties and their internal allies more closely align.⁸³

External military intervention is associated with a near-term increase in the severity of violence against civilians during civil wars. Direct intervention against perpetrators results in less severe atrocities, according to studies of a narrower set of cases of genocide and politicide.

⁷⁷ Regan, “Third-Party Interventions,” see n. 46.

⁷⁸ T. David Mason, Joseph P. Weingarten, Jr., and Patrick J. Fett, “Win, Lose, or Draw: Predicting the Outcome of Civil Wars,” *Political Research Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (1999): 239–68.

⁷⁹ Dylan Balch-Lindsay, Andrew J. Enterline, and Kyle A. Joyce, “Third-Party Intervention and the Civil War Process,” *Journal of Peace Research* 45, no. 3 (2008): 345–63.

⁸⁰ Balch-Lindsay and Enterline, “Killing Time.”

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Balch-Lindsay, Enterline, and Joyce, “Third-Party Intervention.”

⁸³ David Cunningham, “Blocking Resolution: How External States Can Prolong Civil Wars,” *Journal of Peace Research* 47, no. 2 (2010): 115–27.

- Kathman and Wood’s study of external military intervention in armed conflicts from 1955 to 2005 finds that all types of military interventions—neutral, pro-government, and anti-government—increase the likelihood of mass killing during the first year after the intervention. Interventions against government parties or in support of victim populations increase the likelihood of more severe atrocities by 49 percent.⁸⁴ They find that of the three interventions, only neutral actions such as UN peacekeeping operations lead to a reduction in the likelihood of mass killing after the first year.
- Wood, Kathman, and Gent’s study of external military intervention in 80 armed conflicts from 1989 to 2005 finds that intervention results in more severe violence against civilians by the intervening party’s opponent: anti-government intervention leads to more atrocities by the government, whereas anti-rebel intervention leads to more atrocities by rebel groups.⁸⁵
- Peksen finds that external military intervention against government targets increases levels of political imprisonment but not levels of extrajudicial killing, disappearance, or torture.⁸⁶
- In his study of external military intervention in genocides and politicides from 1955 to 1977, Krain finds that interventions against perpetrators or in support of targeted populations reduce the severity of atrocities.⁸⁷
- In his study of 17 cases of humanitarian military intervention in six countries during the 1990s, Seybolt finds that 9—a little more than half—of the military operations were successful in saving lives.⁸⁸ By humanitarian military intervention, Seybolt refers to four types of operations: (a) humanitarian aid delivery, (b) humanitarian aid protection, (c) civilian protection, and (d) perpetrator-targeted operations. Regarding the latter two, Seybolt finds that only two out of seven civilian protection operations were successful or mostly successful in saving lives, and four out of five perpetrator-targeted operations succeeded in saving lives.

Hypothesized Explanations for the Findings

Wood, Kathman, and Gent conclude that the relationship between external military intervention and the severity of atrocities during conflict results from the intervening party’s perceived threat

⁸⁴ Jacob Kathman and Reed Wood, “Managing Threat, Cost, and Incentive to Kill: The Short- and Long-Term Effects of Intervention in Mass Killings,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 55, no. 5 (2011): 735–60.

⁸⁵ Reed M. Wood, Jacob Kathman, and Stephen E. Gent, “Armed Intervention and Civilian Victimization in Intrastate Conflicts,” *Journal of Peace Research* 49, no. 5 (2012): 647–60.

⁸⁶ Dursun Peksen, “Does Foreign Military Intervention Help Human Rights?” *Political Research Quarterly* 65, no. 3 (2011): 558–71.

⁸⁷ Krain, “International Intervention,” see n. 34.

⁸⁸ Taylor Seybolt, *Humanitarian Military Intervention: The Conditions for Success and Failure* (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2008).

to the target government's authority.⁸⁹ In this scenario, the logic of new government atrocities mimics that of atrocities perpetrated in the course of a counterinsurgency campaign, albeit following an external rather than internal challenge to the regime.⁹⁰ Kathman and Wood note that nonneutral intervening parties are unable to communicate a sustained commitment to intervention, meaning that the intervention's target perceives only the possibility of existential threat without knowing the costs associated with confronting that threat.⁹¹ For Kathman and Wood, the potential threat from the intervening force combined with the intervening party's muted signaling mechanism will lead to more severe atrocities by the target of the intervention.

Evidence from a smaller universe of military interventions in genocides and politicides since 1955 yields contradictory results: both Seybolt and Krain find that anti-government interventions to save civilians result in less severe atrocities. Krain observes that "challenging interventions"—those that target government perpetrators of genocide or politicide—momentarily increase the costs of mass violence, as the target regime finds itself combating a larger number of threats than before the intervention.⁹² In his qualitative study of humanitarian military intervention during the 1990s, Seybolt concludes that successful military interventions are the result of an alignment between political objectives and military strategies.⁹³ To successfully save lives, the strategies must vary according to perpetrator capabilities, plans, and intentions.

Regarding conflict duration, Balch-Lindsay and Enterline⁹⁴ and Balch-Lindsay, Enterline, and Joyce⁹⁵ conclude that one-sided external intervention in support of the opposition leads to what Zartman terms a *hurting stalemate*.⁹⁶ That is, in the presence of external support for its opponents, a government will perceive the costs of continued conflict as greater than the costs of acceding to a negotiated settlement, leading it to choose the latter. Indeed, Balch-Lindsay and Enterline conclude that an intervention that targets the government in a civil war will cause its leaders to "capitulate." Balch-Lindsay and Enterline observe, however, that one-sided interventions rarely stay one-sided for long. They assess that counterinterventions are a common consequence of one-sided interventions, resulting in balanced interventions that prolong conflict. According to Balch-Lindsay and Enterline; Mason, Weingarten, and Fett; and Regan, balanced interventions generate stalemates that encourage continued violence.⁹⁷

⁸⁹ Wood, Kathman, and Gent, "Armed Intervention and Civilian Victimization."

⁹⁰ Valentino, Huth, and Balch-Lindsay, "Draining the Sea."

⁹¹ Kathman and Wood, "Managing Threat, Cost, and Incentive to Kill."

⁹² Krain, "International Intervention."

⁹³ Seybolt, *Humanitarian Military Intervention*.

⁹⁴ Balch-Lindsay and Enterline, "Killing Time."

⁹⁵ Balch-Lindsay, Enterline, and Joyce, "Third-Party Intervention."

⁹⁶ William Zartman, *Ripe for Resolution: Conflict and Intervention in Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), as cited in Balch-Lindsay, Enterline, and Joyce, "Third-Party Intervention."

⁹⁷ Balch-Lindsay and Enterline, "Killing Time"; Mason, Weingarten, and Fett, "Win, Lose, or Draw"; Regan, "Third-Party Interventions."

To What Extent Do These Findings Apply to Syria?

The implicit assumptions behind pro-intervention arguments are similar to those related to external support for the Syrian opposition. First, these arguments assume that the United States was prepared to use force on a large enough scale to credibly demonstrate the costs of new Syrian government atrocities. Most scholarship about external military intervention does not differentiate between small-scale and large-scale intervention strategies. Second, they assume that the United States was prepared to use force on a *small* enough scale to avoid further escalating the conflict. Third, they assume that any diplomatic efforts that followed an intervention would have a reasonable chance of success. As above, the following section describes the lessons of key empirical findings for the Syrian case and demonstrates the extent to which these assumptions hold in light of these findings.

The empirical evidence from other cases appears to offer some support for the first two arguments in favor of US military intervention—that both the limited strikes and the implementation of a no-fly zone in Syria would have signaled the costs of new regime atrocities and degraded the regime’s ability to perpetrate those abuses. To the extent Syria can be characterized as a politicide, both limited US strikes in 2013 and a protracted no-fly zone should align with Krain’s pattern of effective “challenging interventions.” Following Krain’s logic, both forms of intervention would have diverted regime resources away from burdensome assaults on civilian-dense opposition areas. Balch-Lindsay and Enterline’s finding concerning regime-targeted “militarized disputes” also indicates that a large enough intervention would have led to Assad’s capitulation. To this point, country experts observe that even the possibility of a US strike in 2013 led some leading regime supporters to put in motion contingency plans for Assad’s eventual fall.⁹⁸

Despite these findings, the likely severity of atrocities following either counterfactual US intervention hinges on the degree of force applied, and the extent to which US leaders could have effectively signaled the scope of that force to senior Syrian officials. Per Kathman and Wood, there would have been no way for the United States to credibly signal that its intervention would have remained constant over time, even in the case of a protracted no-fly zone.⁹⁹ As Zenko observes, the universal application of coercive airpower in the context of a no-fly zone is even more difficult to sustain.¹⁰⁰ Firsthand accounts of US no-fly zones indicate that the relative success of those operations relied in part on a strategic expectation that the conflict and related atrocities would not increase in severity.¹⁰¹ In Iraq, these conditions did not hold up: Saddam

⁹⁸ Lister, *The Syrian Uprising*.

⁹⁹ Kathman and Wood, “Managing Threat, Cost, and Incentive to Kill.”

¹⁰⁰ Zenko, *Between Threats and War*.

¹⁰¹ Stephen Wrage, ed., *Immaculate Warfare: Participants Reflect on the Air Campaigns over Kosovo and Afghanistan* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003).

Hussein's forces committed grave atrocities in Kurdish areas of northern Iraq throughout the decade in flagrant defiance of US no-fly zone operations, with only limited US response.¹⁰²

There is no reason to believe that US resolve would have been stronger in the case of Syria. Before the diplomatic breakthrough with Russia, congressional opposition to the Obama administration's military plans left the president uncertain about the possibility of intervention. Between the authorization debate and Obama's post-Libya discomfort with large-scale military intervention abroad, the Assad regime had significant grounds to question the strength of the administration's resolve. The Syrian government, backed as it was by Iran and Hezbollah, likely would have perceived any US intervention as a threat to its authority, but not a significant enough threat to force the regime's capitulation. As a result, a near-term increase in atrocities was the most likely consequence of either counterfactual military action.

The empirical evidence appears to contradict the third argument for US military intervention—that a show of US power would have forced the regime to the negotiating table. As noted above, a purely one-sided intervention is a rare occasion. Given the significant support that Iran and Hezbollah were already providing to the regime, any US intervention at scale would have resulted in a scenario of “balanced intervention,” with multiple opposing actors continuously competing for parity. As Balch-Lindsay and Enterline observe, this scenario leads to longer conflicts and decreases the likelihood of negotiated settlement.¹⁰³ Even if good-faith talks *had* begun in the aftermath of an intervention, previous attempts to mediate between pro- and anti-government forces suggest that the regime's survival instincts and the opposition's intransigence would have remained significant obstacles to success.¹⁰⁴ Given these outcomes and the questionable prospects of subsequent diplomacy, both forms of military intervention would likely have resulted in a greater number of atrocities over time than might have otherwise occurred.

Conclusion

Both advocates and opponents of a more assertive US response to the conflict in Syria have confidently asserted that if only the United States had acted differently at key points since 2011, violence against civilians would have followed another course. In fact, the counterfactual scenarios that these commentators propose are characterized by a high degree of uncertainty. Methods scholars have proposed a range of analytic approaches for addressing this uncertainty.

¹⁰² Zenko, *Between Threats and War*.

¹⁰³ Balch-Lindsay and Enterline, “Killing Time.”

¹⁰⁴ Walter's study of 41 civil wars from 1940 to 1990 finds that negotiated settlements are more likely to bring a durable end to civil wars when external actors provide security guarantees to conflict parties. Barbara Walter, “The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement,” *International Organization* 51, no. 3 (1997): 335–64. For analysis of the failure of UN mediation efforts in Syria, see Salman Shaikh and Amanda Roberts, “Syria,” in *The Security Council in the 21st Century*, ed. Sebastian von Einsiedel, David M. Malone, and Bruno Stagno Ugarte (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2016), 717–40; and Richard Gowan and Tristan Dreisbach, “United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS),” in *The Oxford Handbook of United Nations Peacekeeping Operations*, ed. Joachim Koops et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 843–54.

This paper has demonstrated the potential utility of one such method, a systematic review of empirical evidence about related policy options. Through the paper's survey of empirical studies of external involvement in civil wars, I have underscored the analytic value that this method presents for assessing counterfactual policy options in the Syrian case, and for the broader study of mass atrocity response.

This review has important implications for policy officials working on Syria and mass atrocities, writ large. First, past cases of external involvement in civil wars demonstrate that the effect of US action on the duration, severity, and extent often hinges on the response of other external conflict actors, not just the direct targets or beneficiaries of US intervention. In the Syrian case, the support that the Syrian government has received from Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia has been critical to the regime's strategic calculus. Any effort to forecast or anticipate the likely consequences of policy action in response to mass atrocities must account for the plausible responses of these other conflict parties.

Second, the empirical evidence indicates the importance of multifaceted action in response to mass atrocities. This paper has demonstrated that contradictions in the empirical evidence about external support to rebel groups and external military intervention make it difficult to forecast the impact of either action on its own. Evidence from qualitative and quantitative studies, however, indicates that military intervention is more effective in reducing the duration of conflict and increasing the likelihood of negotiated settlement when accompanied by different forms of economic pressure and diplomatic mediation. The importance of a multifaceted strategy contradicts arguments, commonly expressed in the context of Syria, about the independent signaling power of military force. In considering the potential use of force in response to mass atrocities, policy makers should only pursue these efforts alongside robust strategies of diplomatic engagement and economic statecraft. Without a fuller strategy of mass atrocity response, policy makers may exacerbate or prolong the same crises they hope to resolve.

The Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide

of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum works to prevent genocide and related crimes against humanity. The Simon-Skjodt Center is dedicated to stimulating timely global action to prevent genocide and to catalyze an international response when it occurs. Our goal is to make the prevention of genocide a core foreign policy priority for leaders around the world through a multi-pronged program of research, education, and public outreach. We work to equip decision makers, starting with officials in the United States but also extending to other governments, with the knowledge, tools, and institutional support required to prevent—or, if necessary, halt—genocide and related crimes against humanity.

The assertions, opinions, and conclusions in this occasional paper are those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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