

The least-bad choice

Step up the campaign for a diplomatic solution—and back the rebels more strongly

NOTHING in recent years epitomises foreign policy's "damned if you do, damned if you don't" dilemma more bloodily than Syria. All options for the West—and especially Barack Obama—are fraught. Do nothing, and the civil war could become twice as murderous, spill into fragile neighbouring states, and even result in victory for the loathsome regime of Bashar Assad. Do everything, from arming the rebels to attacking Mr Assad's forces directly, at least from the air, and America could be dragged into a quagmire reminiscent of Afghanistan or Iraq. Yet doing something hesitantly in-between, by helping the rebels a bit, but not enough to bring down Mr Assad, may be the worst of all worlds. It risks emboldening potential waverers around Mr Assad to cling on at the same time as prolonging the catastrophe while extremists come to dominate both sides on the battlefield. This middle course is the one that Mr Obama has chosen.

The Economist has long argued for setting up a no-fly zone on humanitarian grounds. That is an imperfect solution. But the cost of doing nothing is ever more evident for both Syria and the region (see article). The level of savagery means that even Mr Obama cannot look away, but it also makes it harder for him to intervene. If they will not set up a no-fly zone, America and its allies should at least arm their chosen rebels overtly, so as to speed up the removal of Mr Assad, yet also organise a peace conference with all the main parties, including Russia.

The situation inside Syria has gone from dire to catastrophic. In the past few weeks Mr Assad's forces have regained the initiative in some areas. Part of the president's plan is for an iron axis to run from Damascus north-west through the pivotal city of Homs and on to the coastal and mountain heartland of the Alawites, his minority sect. Hence the beginning of a sectarian cleansing of Sunnis from some coastal towns. If the regime manages to entrench itself in that zone, it may be able to strike back at the rest of the country, where the rebels still have the upper hand. At the same time the regime's allies, Iran and Hizbullah, the Shia party-cum-militia from neighbouring Lebanon, are training and arming Mr Assad's Alawite militias. Russia may bolster his air defences.

Britain and France are keen to tip the balance back towards the rebels, but are locked into a European Union embargo against providing them with arms. Mr Obama, meanwhile, seems determined not to let the United States be sucked in, even to the limited extent of supplying American weapons. Given recent failures in Iraq and Afghanistan, this is understandable. But it is also wrong.

Syria used to be a tolerant place, but the longer the conflict drags on the more likely it is that the nastiest of the rebels, who owe allegiance to al-Qaeda, will come to the fore. Should Mr Assad's regime fall, the extremists might even precipitate a second civil war. That would threaten an outright al-Qaeda victory—which would be just as bad as the stalemate now favouring Mr Assad.

The West's minimalist approach is strengthening the extremists because Saudi Arabia and Qatar (helped by the CIA, no less) are funnelling money to the most radical groups. Meanwhile the more moderate rebels are stuck in a chicken-and-egg situation. The longer the West vacillates, the weaker the moderates become; and the stronger the extremist rebels, the higher the regime's hopes of survival. The argument against arming the rebels—that doing so would pour fuel on the fire—does not stand up. Arms are bound to intensify the violence in the short run, but the country is already in flames and the regime is doing most of the burning. The more moderate rebels need help. Europe should therefore lift its embargo and Mr Obama climb off the fence.

Fight but also negotiate

Support for the rebels can improve the chances of usefully holding the conference that Russia and America recently agreed to in principle. Every sort of pressure, military included, must be

exerted on Mr Assad in the run-up to talks—just as the rebels should be persuaded to drop their insistence that he must vanish before negotiations can begin.

The Russians have hitherto sounded happy to let Syria stew, in the hope that America will look impotent and incompetent. But Vladimir Putin does not want Islamic fundamentalists to end up running Syria, nor does he like the idea of chemical weapons on the loose. Negotiations should start in earnest as soon as possible, probably in Geneva, with a view to agreeing on a ceasefire, a transitional government and an internationally overseen election. That would still be the best way to save what is left of Syria from utter ruin.



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