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Boots on the Ground in Syria

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IT'S TIME TO HEAL THE WOUNDS OF WAR, INSTEAD OF INFlicting THEM

Instead of choosing sides in the sectarian conflict in Syria, the United States should side with the war’s millions of victims by providing massive amounts of food, medicine, medical supplies, equipment and other forms of humanitarian aid.

The crisis in Syria presents an opportunity for a significant reframing of American leadership. The United States should eschew military intervention in the name of humanitarianism; instead, we should concentrate exclusively on providing humanitarian aid to all victims of the conflict.

By all means, let’s put “boots on the ground.” Let’s deploy an army of nurses and physicians with a decade of experience in treating battlefield trauma, humanitarian aid professionals and others.

This is not a call for appeasement of the Assad regime. The Syrian rebels need massive amounts of advanced weapons, but the United States does not need to provide them. After a decade of dying and killing in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is time for a new approach to the region and the world.

The calls for a more assertive U.S. involvement in the Syrian crisis are driven by two intersecting arguments.

One is strategic — the U.S. will lose influence over the course of events in Syria if it fails to intervene, to the detriment of America national security. Some senators already have called for direct military intervention comes with a caveat — “no boots on the ground.”

Make no mistake. Direct intervention will mean “boots on the ground.” Military intervention is impossible without the presence of American military personnel and CIA paramilitary forces. The boots may not be on Syrian soil, but they will be deployed in bordering countries. Americans may not be killed in military operations in Syria, but it is absolutely certain they will be called upon to kill in what is now a sectarian conflict rather than a straightforward armed insurrection against the Assad regime.

Syrians and others will not forget or forgive the killing of Syrians by the U.S.

The second is humanitarian — the death toll in Syria is rapidly nearing 100,000. Failure to intervene would diminish America’s moral standing in the international community.

Syrians, and others, also would never forget or forgive the United States for failing to halt the slaughter of Syrians.

Both arguments rest on a simple premise: American leadership, strategic and moral, is indispensable in the world as well as the region. But even if one accepts the premise, the question remains: Is direct military intervention the best way to exercise U.S. leadership?

An ancient proverb warns that a fool will always return to his folly.

Those who are calling for direct military intervention seem not to have learned the lessons from a decade of war in the Arab and Muslim worlds, Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. The use of military force has not strengthened our nation’s strategic or moral standing. The U.S. has diminishing influence over events in Iraq and Afghanistan, despite the enormous cost in blood and treasure. So, it’s folly to think arming the Syrian rebels, many of who have ties to al-Qaida, will yield good will towards the United States.

Anyone who regards this proposal for humanitarian "boots on the ground" as hopelessly naïve should reflect on the past decade of war. Dying and killing gained the United States almost nothing.
Instead of inflicting the wounds of war, the United States should devote itself to healing them. In this way, when the history of this cruel conflict is finally told, it will say that this time at least the United States did not bloody its hands.

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