

* CLASS SET *

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Debating the U.S. Response to Syria
Teaching with the News Online Resource

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Option 1: Use the Might of the U.S. Military to End the Assad Regime

The Syrian dictatorship's use of chemical weapons against its own people was terrible. But we must not let it overshadow the larger picture of what is taking place there. While the chemical weapons killed almost 1,500 people, we must not forget that more than 100,000 people have been killed in the fighting over the past two years. Aside from these humanitarian concerns, there are other important strategic issues at stake that threaten U.S. influence and power in the region. Bashar al-Assad's government is allied with the terrorist organizations Hamas and Hezbollah, enemies of the United States and our ally Israel. He is also allied with Iran, a country that is hostile to the United States and is seeking to strengthen its influence in the region. We cannot stand idly by and let this crucial part of the world descend into chaos.

Congress should authorize President Obama to launch a prolonged and devastating military attack against the Assad regime's military forces. We must do more than launch a few cruise missiles, we must strike hard with our air and naval forces and weaken the Syrian army's fighting capability. We should increase support for the Syrian rebels by providing them with training and sending them weapons, like anti-aircraft missiles to fight the regime's airplanes and tanks. We should not put our soldiers on the ground in Syria. We welcome support from any of our allies, but we will not wait for it or depend on it. The United States is the most powerful country on earth, we must not hesitate or show doubt while U.S. interests are threatened by the Assad government.

Beliefs and assumptions underlying Option 1

- U.S. military force has the capability to change the balance of power in Syria and result in an outcome more favorable to the United States.
- The civil war in Syria is crucially important to the United States. It is more than just Assad's use of chemical weapons;

it involves the safety and security of U.S. allies like Israel, ensuring access to oil, and limiting the power of Iran.

- Helping the rebels force Assad from power will end the conflict and the brutal dictatorship experienced by the Syrian people.

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Arguments for

1. This conflict has steadily worsened for two years. Failure to act decisively and tip the balance of power towards the rebels will result in prolonged suffering and fighting.

2. History has shown that the failure to stand up to dictatorships can lead to more violence and bloodshed.

3. Without decisive U.S. action, there is a danger that Assad could win the civil war. This would increase the influence of the dangerous anti-U.S. government in Iran, and strengthen the hand of the terrorist groups Hezbollah and Hamas.

Arguments against

1. The Syrian government has advanced defensive weapons and it is unlikely our attacks will be as effective as we hope. We run the risk of getting dragged into another long war in the region. Iraq taught us that the United States cannot solve the political issues of another country through the use of military force.

2. The use of military force will inevitably increase the suffering of civilians in Syria.

3. The United States cannot and should not take responsibility for solving the problems of Syria on its own. We must use diplomatic cooperation with the international community, including countries we often disagree with like Russia and Iran, to end this conflict.

4. We have plenty of issues here at home that we should be focusing on first, like crime, the economy, and our education system. What Bashar al-Assad does to the people of his own country is not our concern.

5. Some of the Syrian rebel groups are made up of extremists and even groups affiliated with al Qaeda. We must be careful of who we might bring to power in Syria.

6. Using military force without UN Security Council approval violates international law.

Option 2: Carry Out Limited Strikes Against the Syrian Military

A red line has been crossed. On August 21, over 1,400 Syrians, including children, died in a chemical attack carried out by the government of Bashar al-Assad. Hundreds more were rushed to hospitals and barely survived. The United States cannot stand by while Assad and his regime violate international law by using chemical weapons against the Syrian people. We must respond with limited military strikes on the Syrian military to deter future atrocities. Doing so will send a message to Syria and the world that such brutality will not be tolerated. While international backing for these actions would strengthen our message, we will not wait for the approval of the international community before moving forward. The time to act is now.

Congress should authorize a limited use of force against Syria. While we must respond to the use of chemical weapons, we cannot take on the responsibility of ousting the Assad government. For good reason the United States has remained on the sidelines of the conflict in Syria. Our recent involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq has taught us that we must be cautious about how we intervene in the Middle East. The situation in Syria involves a wide range of countries, from our allies (e.g., Israel and Saudi Arabia) to our adversaries (Russia and Iran). That is why we have pursued international diplomacy and indirect aid for the opposition instead of putting soldiers on the ground. This must remain our strategy in Syria. While we believe limited military strikes are necessary, any further military intervention would be detrimental to U.S. interests and national security.

Beliefs and assumptions underlying Option 2

- Limited military strikes in Syria will deter the future use of chemical weapons both in Syria and by other countries.
- Targeted strikes will not escalate our involvement in the war. Our actions will be swift and contained.
- The United States is unable to resolve the conflict in Syria. The conflict will only end when there is agreement among factions within Syria and backing from the international community.

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Arguments for

1. Unless the United States take action, the Assad regime will continue to use chemical weapons to massacre the Syrian people.
2. Any greater form of military intervention will bring the U.S. into a conflict it cannot predict or control.
3. If Assad gets away with using chemical weapons against his own people, other governments and extremists groups will be tempted to test the limits of international law.
4. In the past, in Libya and Kosovo, the U.S. has successfully carried out limited military strikes without escalating the conflict.

Arguments against

1. There is no such thing as limited military intervention. Targeted strikes will directly involve the United States in the Syrian civil war and could lead to long term involvement in the conflict.
2. It is illegal to carry out military operations in other countries without U.N. approval. Acting outside the realm of the United Nations Security Council will lead to greater resentment toward the United States.
3. Targeted strikes will not change the balance of power in Syria and Assad will continue to terrorize his people using other weapons, if not chemical. Greater military intervention is necessary to protect the people in Syria.
4. The United States should focus its efforts and financial resources on domestic policy concerns, such as the economy, education, and health care.
5. The United States should wait until other countries authorize similar military action. Acting alone will only hurt our ability to influence a diplomatic solution in Syria.

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Option 3: Work with the International Community to End the Civil War

For over two years, the Syrian people have experienced widespread violence, displacement, and death as a civil war has raged throughout their country. U.S. military involvement will add fuel to the fire. Bombing Syria or supplying rebels with more weapons will only make life worse for Syrians, and will do little to resolve the complex civil war. The United States has a long history of using military force in the Middle East to assert its power and protect its interests, often at the expense of innocent civilians. U.S. military action in Iraq caused tremendous hardship and devastation. We must not repeat this type of reckless involvement in the region.

It would be a mistake for Congress to approve the use of force in Syria. We should support the work of the United Nations, and allow inspectors on the ground in Syria time to complete their investigation into the use of chemical weapons. Instead of military intervention, the United States should take a new course and lead an international diplomatic effort to resolve the conflict. We should involve Syria's allies and trading partners, such as Iran and Russia, and its neighbors, such as Turkey, in political negotiations to reach an end to the civil war. We should support an international arms embargo to stop the flow of weapons into the hands of the Syrian government and rebel forces. Ultimately, the regime of President Assad must be held accountable for its actions. Individuals that have committed war crimes must be prosecuted in international court. In the meantime, the United States should increase humanitarian aid for Syrian refugees. Over six million people have been displaced from their homes and need assistance.

Beliefs and assumptions underlying Option 3

- Military force is not an effective means of dealing with international problems. An attack will worsen the conflict and harm civilians.

- A political solution is the only way to stop the violence.

- The United States is not capable of solving the Syrian conflict on its own. The situation requires the involvement of Syria's allies and neighbors.

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Arguments for

1. Assad recently warned that military intervention will cause an escalation of the violence. The United States should not take any action that would further harm the people we are trying to protect.

2. Using violence to address the violence in Syria is hypocritical and counterproductive.

3. The crisis in Syria is an international problem—violence has spilled across boundaries, millions of Syrians have sought refuge in neighboring countries, and global concerns about the threat of terrorism persist. An international crisis requires an international response.

Arguments against

1. International organizations and coalitions are slow moving, and diplomacy is ineffective in the face of mass violence.

2. We should not negotiate with the leaders of hostile countries like Syria and Iran.

3. Negotiations and the threat of a trial by international courts will do little to deter dictators like Bashar al-Assad. Military action is the only way to stop him.

4. Anything other than a strong U.S. military response would send a message to leaders around the world that the behavior and crimes of al-Assad are acceptable.

5. The United States should not spend any more resources on humanitarian assistance for other parts of the world. It's time to focus on the wellbeing of our own citizens, and address domestic problems that we are actually capable of fixing.

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Option 4: Stay Out of Syria

The United States does not have a responsibility to intervene in another sovereign country's internal issues. Until our own safety is threatened, we must refrain from conducting foreign policy that creates more problems than it solves. Becoming overly involved will make us the most resented nation on earth. Our most recent experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan cost numerous lives and dollars and have shown us that we are not well-equipped to "fix" problems around the globe. While the use of chemical weapons is horrifying and the Syrian civil war a tragedy, let us put our responsibilities to our own citizens above all others.

Under no circumstances should Congress authorize the use of any military force against Syria. The United Nations and our ally Great Britain will not act. Even if the countries of the region are waiting for us to act, why should we bear the responsibilities and the costs? Syria's neighbors have the most at stake; if they think military action is necessary, let them risk their own people's lives and spend their own resources to deal with this issue. The United States has seen itself as the world's policeman for too long and at great cost. We must reduce our impulse to make the world safe and solve all of its problems.

Beliefs and assumptions underlying Option 4

- The war in Syria is not going to end soon whether the United States gets involved or not. We cannot afford to become entangled in another long war.

- The events in Syria, while tragic, are not a priority for the United States. We have enough issues to deal with here

at home like the economy, crime, and our education system. The people of the region need to solve their own problems.

- The chemical weapons attack in Syria is not an immediate threat to the United States. It is not in our interest to get involved. We, therefore, should not devote our resources to military action.

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Arguments for

1. The United States should not bear the burden of solving the problems of the Middle East. The people of the region need to solve their own problems.

2. Past military involvement in the Middle East has failed to achieve its policy goals and only bred resentment and hatred of the United States.

3. To pursue military intervention in Syria diverts resources from addressing critical domestic policy concerns.

Arguments against

1. As long as the United Nations Security Council remains in a stalemate, the Assad regime will continue to massacre Syrian civilians. As a leader of human rights, the United States has an obligation to intervene even when the international community does not.

2. Allowing the countries of the region (like Iran) to help solve the issues in Syria may lead to outcomes that are unfavorable to the United States.

3. Those who say the civil war in Syria does not affect U.S. interests ignore what is at stake if we do not intervene: the growth of extremist groups such as al Qaeda and a rise in sectarian violence throughout the Middle East, (especially in Iraq).

4. We must take a strong stand against the use of chemical weapons. Only by punishing the Assad government will other countries be deterred from using them.

5. The Assad government will not negotiate a peaceful transfer of power. Only by military intervention will the regime be forced to concede.