

Diplomacy is the only real way forward in the Syrian conflict. Military intervention could make the situation even worse.

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With the failure of the Annan Plan in Syria, the situation looks increasingly bleak. But Syria in 2012 is very different from Libya in 2011, and Western leaders should resist the temptation for military intervention writes [Chris Brown](#). Instead of calling for intervention, leaders like François Hollande need to support the diplomacy of the Arab League and other non-Western countries.



The situation in Syria continues to deteriorate, with daily accounts of massacres by the Syrian army and pro-Government militias, increasing sectarian violence on both sides (with dark rumours of Al Qaeda involvement), and – a real sign of desperation – the UN suspending the activities of its Monitors because of increased levels of violence. Time then for stocktaking and a review of options for Europe and the international community.

The first thing that needs to be recognised is that the Annan Plan is dead – not because the cease-fire has broken down, although that is true, but because the basic premise of the plan is invalid. Annan's proposition was that the two sides should end violence and then get round the table together to sort out the way forward; this might just have worked a year ago, but whatever room for compromise might have existed then is now gone – too much blood has been spilled, the opposition will accept nothing less than the dismantling of the regime, which the regime itself will never accept. This is a war to the death which is currently being fought as a low intensity civil war but which is likely to become ever more destructive unless there is effective international intervention to reverse the dynamic.

At the moment the international intervention that is taking place – Russian and Iranian resupply and support to the regime, Gulf state covert weapons supply to the rebels and the arrival of foreign fighters – is having the opposite effect of ratcheting up the violence. What can be done to reverse this trend? Some unofficial voices on both sides of the Atlantic are calling for NATO to intervene militarily – Senator John McCain has been [particularly vocal](#) – and in Europe both [Britain](#) and, especially, France have repeatedly called for Assad's removal, while leaving open the threat of military intervention. Interestingly President Hollande has proved if anything [rather more hawkish](#) than his predecessor, one more irritant in his relations with Chancellor Merkel.



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The US Administration, on the other hand, has attempted to dial down the rhetoric, arguing, correctly I think, that a military intervention Libya-style could only make the situation worse. There are several crucial differences between the situation in Syria and that in Libya last year which it may be worth discussing. First, in Libya there was a clear geographical divide between the rebel-held east and the Kaddafi-held west, which meant that NATO could protect the rebel base in Benghazi and the East, giving the rebels the space in which to organise their ultimately successful drive to the west. In Syria the rebellion is taking place in many non-

contiguous areas at once, with no obvious equivalent to Benghazi and Eastern Libya – although a limited protected zone on the Turkish border might be a possibility, on which see below. Second, unlike Libya, Syria has an effective air force and air-defence system with modern Russian-supplied equipment; doubtless NATO would win a shooting war, but it would not be the walk-over that it was in Libya. There would be heavy casualties including many civilian dead. When enthusiasts advocate a ‘no-fly’ zone they call up images of patrolling F14s and F18s sweeping the skies clear of enemy aircraft, but an effective ‘no fly’ zone can only be established after a very intensive bombing campaign to suppress air-defences. In March 2011 over 100 cruise missiles and several hundred bombing sorties were needed to crush Kaddafi’s pathetically inadequate air defences. Syria has 850 Surface to Air Missile launchers, 4,000 anti-aircraft guns, effective radar and early warning systems, and several hundred modern combat aircraft, the exact number being a carefully preserved secret (I.I.S.S. figures). Moreover, third, Syria, unlike Libya, has powerful friends and could rely on Russia and Iran to resupply its military and, in the former case, to ensure that international intervention did not have the backing of a UN Security Council resolution.

None of this suggests that a determined international intervention could not be successful, but it is clear that such success would only come at a very high price most of which would be paid by the people of Syria. The first rule of international interventions is – or should be – “don’t make things worse”. A full scale intervention would almost certainly break this rule.

A more limited operation to establish a ‘protected zone’ on the Turkish border is the only military option that is actually worth considering; apart from protecting those civilians who could reach it, such a zone could also provide a base for the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Most of the aid that is getting to the rebels is going to sectarian, Islamist elements and it would be good for more assistance to find its way to the FSA, which is the nearest there is to a non-sectarian opposition to the Assad regime. Moreover, it could be argued that Turkey does not need UN sanction for such an action; under the terms of the Turkey-Syria Adana Agreement of 1998, Syria [promises](#) not to ‘permit any activity which emanates from its territory aimed at jeopardizing the security and stability of Turkey’. Turkey could argue that it is entitled to act to ensure that Syria lives up to its legal obligations – and NATO could support Turkey under [Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty](#). Since Adana was actually about curbing Kurdish terrorism this would be somewhat disingenuous – to put it mildly – but legal cases in support of international action in the past have been built on even shakier foundations. Still, such a limited action would only stay limited if Syria did not challenge the establishment of such a zone, which is why Turkey is undecided whether to act and NATO members have not rallied round this option.

This leaves diplomacy as the only way forward. At the moment European and American diplomacy is directed at persuading Russia either to allow a tougher UN response, or itself to act to undermine Assad. The perception that Russia is the key to avoiding a full-scale civil war in Syria is probably correct, but what is less clear is that the West is going about this the right way. Russia has a lot of political capital tied up in Syria and it is not going to change tack unless the costs of supporting Assad are increased substantially – and Western disapproval cannot achieve this outcome, because Russia automatically discounts Western criticism. However, the Russian government is genuinely sensitive to disapproval expressed by the Global South – thus, Russia sees itself as representing Southern anti-imperialism in the Security Council, and is extremely uncomfortable when it finds itself (with China) on the losing end of a 13 – 2 vote in the Council, as happened in February of this year.

What this suggests is that the best way for the West to get Russia to rethink its position on Syria would be for American and European leaders to step back somewhat and allow the Arab League and other non-Western countries to take centre stage. There is no guarantee that this would work – but confronting Russia directly certainly hasn’t; paradoxically, the best way that the West can help the people of Syria may be by dialling down the rhetoric and being somewhat less vocal in their support. Most of all – and this is something William Hague and François Hollande in particular should note – uttering words about military intervention that you are not actually prepared to back up with deeds is counter-productive and irresponsible.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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