

On “US Options in Syria”

Nathan K. Finney

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This commentary is in response to the article “US Options in Syria” by David S. Sorenson published in the Autumn 2013 issue of Parameters (vol. 43, no. 3).

In a time when interservice rivalries seem to be only growing (see the Autumn issue’s Commentaries and Replies between Major General Charles Dunlap and Dr. Conrad Crane, for instance), I was pleased to read the thoughtful and balanced article by the Air War College’s Professor David Sorenson, “US Options in Syria.” His realistic and knowledgeable approach to the region and its largest internal conflict was refreshing.

Professor Sorenson’s analysis and description in this article reflects well on the war colleges. He begins by detailing American interests in Syria and the region, including ending the civil war, reducing the Shi’a-Sunni divide, addressing WMD issues, and containing the adverse effects of the civil war on allies in the region. While these are all admirable interests, Sorenson does not discuss whether these interests are vital, important, or only peripheral. He does state that our interests in the region are important and Syria is a pivotal country, but he does not elaborate. Additionally, Sorenson states that, “It is also in America’s interest to terminate major internal wars in the region if it has the means and ability to do so, and at an acceptable cost.” Why is this the case? I would argue (and did in a recent article in the *Infinity Journal* on Syria) that our interests in Syria are peripheral at best and that it is not always in our interest to meddle in internal wars, whether they are in the Middle East or other less strategically important areas like Africa.

After describing American interests in Syria, Sorenson discusses US options developed to date by our national security apparatus, most clearly articulated in the memo by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Dempsey to Senator Carl Levin. These options are the anticipated ways available to the United States, including everything from training the opposition in Syria to establishing a no-fly zone and punitive strikes by stand-off weaponry.

Using these options as a framework, Sorenson describes end-state conditions that could be achieved in both winding down the civil war and preventing its violence affecting neighboring countries. His analysis is a great elaboration on the obstacles that face the development of options to address Syria. In ending the civil war, Sorenson recognizes many truths, to include the fact that the Assad regime is fighting an unlimited war for its own survival, while the United States is fighting a limited war to achieve the best outcome in a bad situation. He also recognizes the view that American support is not designed to bring the conflict to a conclusion, but rather to prolong the fighting to exhaust all parties. Why is this a bad approach? As strategist Edward Luttwak stated

MAJ Nathan K. Finney, USA, is a member of the *Infinity Journal*’s Special Advisory Group and has written on issues that involve strategy, building partner capacity, security sector reform, and security force assistance. He holds a Master’s in Public Administration from both Harvard University and the University of Kansas, as well as a B.A. in Anthropology from the University of Arizona.

in *The New York Times* in August, “There is only one outcome that the United States can possibly favor: an indefinite draw.”

Discussing the obstacles to contain violence to prevent affecting neighboring countries, Sorenson approves of a containment of Syria, recognizing the differences between the Cold War era containment, which was focused on keeping the USSR (and to some extent China) out, while containment for Syria would require keeping the actors in. This aim would typically call for sealing Syria’s borders, threatening the regime by air, assassinating regime officials, or inflicting damage to regime supporters. Sorenson admirably acknowledges that this kind of coercion by punishment would be too costly and difficult—largely given the asymmetric value of a peaceful solution, and providing Assad little incentive to give up power.

This brings Sorenson to his solution: containment of the violence in Syria through the support of neighboring countries. His ideal approach would be to support neighbor militaries, share info, maintain air and naval forces proximate to Syria, and threaten Assad for any moves outside of Syria. A part of this approach would be to stop the flow of weapons to both sides of the conflict. Even if it were feasible, stopping the flow of weapons to Syria removes one of the few points of leverage we have in the region. In order to create a balance between the belligerents, our support, or lack thereof, can help ensure each party is balanced, ultimately exhausting all parties—from Assad to Iran, or Hezbollah to Sunni extremists. This was the core argument made by Luttwak in *The New York Times* op-ed referenced earlier.

Finally, while Sorenson postulates that our best approach is through the support of neighboring states, he barely addresses one of our most potent military capabilities—security force assistance. He does mention military assistance to Lebanon, but does not address what we should do to ensure the ability of Turkey, Jordan, Israel, and Iraq to contain Syria. Granted, most of these nations already have security assistance programs with the United States and possess some capacity to secure their borders, but this is an aspect I think could have used more elaboration.

Overall, I was very impressed with “US Options in Syria.” Sorenson’s realistic approach to an intractable problem was reinforced with expert analysis. Despite a few disagreements on the value of our interest in the region and ways to achieve them, I agree that “Containment is in the interests of all countries bordering Syria, and the White House must stress and build on that point in its own policy.” This policy should be focused on containing instability and violence from leaving Syria through support to its neighboring states. On this, the author and I are in violent agreement.