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The Action the US Needs to Take in Syria

By Jared Genser

Late last week, the United States supported terminating the United Nations observer mission in Syria. The unanimous vote by the Security Council was unsurprising because the conditions for extending the mission's mandate — cessation of the use of heavy weapons and reduction in violence from all sides — were far from met.

Yet this decision invokes echoes of another tragic moment in both US and world history. A declassified State Department cable from April 16, 1994, instructed the US Mission to the United Nations to give highest priority to the withdrawal of the UN peacekeeping mission in Rwanda even as the genocide progressed. Key talking points included relaying to the world that “when the parties demonstrate that they are willing and able to work in the interests of the . . . people toward a lasting resolution of their conflict, we will be willing to reconsider whether a renewed role for UN peacekeeping can facilitate and build a lasting peace in their country.”

The parallels between the US and international (in)action in Syria and Rwanda are not precise. They are, however, instructive. The government of Bashar Assad is not killing civilians at the scale of the genocide in Rwanda. But the international community has yet again placed the United Nations in a position of impotence, withdrawing observers just when they are needed most.

Security Council support for robust UN action in Syria is impossible given Russia and China's veto powers. Therefore, the United States must act outside the council to advance our national interests. The Obama administration must recognize the realities of regional instability that will inevitably result from the civil war, which is quickly devolving into a sectarian conflict and is already spreading to Lebanon. The use of unconventional weapons by Assad, or by terrorist groups that might appropriate them, is also a real possibility.

As President Obama recognized Monday, direct US military intervention would be premature without strong indications that Assad intends to use unconventional weapons. The president's remarks are being reported as a “threat” to Assad; however, Assad is likely to see the president's remarks as the “red line” up to which he can act without fear of US action. If the United States can't intervene militarily, Obama must quickly take action to help Syria's opposition forces end the civil war themselves. Unfortunately, the administration's limited actions so far have had minimal effect. This needs to change.

First, the United States should provide targeted weapons, military training, and additional intelligence support to the Syrian opposition. The United States must also ensure the \$25 million of communications aid promised to the opposition this month reaches those in the field. There are obvious risks to providing weapons, as the opposition's commitment to an inclusive Syria remains untested and the opposition is fractured. Without some aid, however, the opposition is

not likely to succeed and Assad will remain in power, prolonging a civil war and atrocities against civilians, and risking the spread of sectarian violence and unconventional weapons.

Second, the United States should identify and support opposition groups prepared to govern a democratic and diverse Syria following Assad's fall. This must involve funding and training on governance, rule of law, and democratic processes. Now is the moment to support a broad, nonsectarian opposition to Assad that can govern a democratic Syria. Waiting for Assad's fall to do so is too late to secure a sustainable transition.

Finally, the United States should build a multilateral coalition to support Syria — before, during, and after the transition from Assad's deadly grip. The Russian Federation and Iran are unwilling partners, but must still be engaged following Assad's fall so as to ensure a sustainable transition. The United Nations must also have an active role. Down the road, peacekeepers on the ground could help stave off sectarian violence as a new Syrian democracy gains footing.

If the United States and the international community wait until “the parties demonstrate that they are willing and able to work in the interests of the . . . people toward a lasting resolution of their conflict,” atrocities will continue against the people of Syria and violence will move beyond the country's borders. The US failure to act in Rwanda is a shameful moment in our history. The United States has an opportunity to prevent atrocities from continuing in Syria while protecting our national interests. We must act now.

Jared Genser is an adjunct professor of law at Georgetown University Law Center.