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## Syria: Not Libya, But Let's Treat It Like It Is Anyway

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### Abstract

The articles by Condoleezza Rice and Simon Adams advance a series of disquieting possibilities for the future of Syria if the US and other states fail to act. While I am sympathetic to the urgency with which both writers advance their claims, there is much strained and stretched logic—as well as outright naiveté—in both authors' arguments, especially Rice's.

### Keywords

Human rights, Syria, Iran, Libya, Karl Marx, United Nations, International Criminal Court

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## Syria: Not Libya, But Let's Treat it like it is Anyway

by Eric A. Heinze

The articles by Condoleezza Rice and Simon Adams advance a series of disquieting possibilities for the future of Syria if the US and other states fail to act. While I am sympathetic to the urgency with which both writers advance their claims, there is much strained and stretched logic—as well as outright naiveté—in both authors' arguments, especially Rice's.

Rice essentially argues that the US and Western allies need to first vet and then arm the Syrian opposition, as well as enforce no-fly zones to protect civilians. Somehow this is supposed to not only hold the region together, but also create a basis for political tolerance, freedom, and stability. There is precious little discussion, however, about how these policies would actually achieve these ends. Interestingly, Rice argues that it is a mistake to define this conflict as a humanitarian one (as in Libya), suggesting that it is better understood as a geo-strategic one that is basically about denying Iranian influence in the region. It is both, in my view, yet the policies Rice advances seem more like ones intended to stave off a humanitarian crisis rather than to preserve state structures in the Middle East and create a basis for democracy. Rice thus seems to commit the very mistake she chides Western diplomats for making over the past year—treating Syria like it is Libya. Arming the opposition and enforcing no-fly zones may indeed have a positive humanitarian impact, but holding the region together and creating a basis for political stability will take much more than arms and no-fly zones. It requires an indefinite political, monetary (and possibly military) commitment that few states want to make and that even fewer would support, including many states in that region.

I would furthermore add that Rice's analogy between Karl Marx and Iran is exceedingly misleading and based on a profound misunderstanding of Marxist theory (or a deliberate misuse of it). Marx indeed argued that national identity was a "false consciousness" of sorts (arguing instead that identities should be based on economic class), but it seems to me that if Iran truly wants to extend its influence beyond its borders, that this requires a sort of (Shiite) nationalism of the variety that Marx was critiquing—that is, as a competing identity to that of economic class. In addition, Marx advocated the idea of a global proletariat as a way for the working class to fight against exploitation and abuse by the bourgeoisie, whereas a transnational Shiite movement would effectively be a tool for Iran to obtain regional hegemony. In essence, the only thing that the Marxist notion of the global working class has in common with this purported "pan-Shiism" is that both would transcend juridical state boundaries, but that can be said of any sort of transnational identity.

Simon Adams' article, by contrast, is much more cautious about the prospects of supporting the opposition, and far more willing to recognize the humanitarian implications of such action and the situation more broadly. For Adams, the danger lies in the likelihood of reprisals against Syrian Alawites, which would be increased if the opposition were to be armed by Western governments. While I doubt that such reprisals would rise to the level of "genocide," Adams is certainly correct to raise this possibility given that reprisals against regime loyalists almost always occur after a regime falls through force of arms (e.g., former Yugoslavia, Iraq).

Yet Adams' advice here strikes me as extremely naïve. He basically argues that any government that provides support to the opposition must "press upon" them to abide by international humanitarian law and ensure that those committing war crimes and other abuses are held accountable at the International Criminal Court. First, the US has a long history of arming opposition groups, and more times than not, these groups go on to egregiously violate humanitarian law (US support of the Contras in Nicaragua comes to mind), with precious little that can be done about it other than halting the support, in which case nothing is achieved other than more war crimes. Second, I am doubtful that too many people in Syria are terribly intimidated by the prospect of ICC prosecutions. As Syria is not a party to the Rome Statute, the only way the ICC would even have jurisdiction there is if the crimes took place in a neighboring country that is a party (say, Turkey), or if the UN Security Council voted to give the Court jurisdiction there, which seems unlikely given Russian and Chinese intransigence.

In short, there are no easy answers as to what to do about the crisis in Syria. And while Rice is absolutely correct that "this isn't Libya," it is strange that she would advocate essentially the same approach that was pursued in response to that crisis—the enforcement of no-fly zones—and even going further in publicly supporting the opposition. It is unclear exactly how no-fly zones are going to prevent the disintegration of the Syrian state (and other multi-ethnic Middle East states), and as Adams notes, some of the opposition groups that would benefit from Western assistance actually advocate fracturing Syria along sectarian lines. I thus conclude that Adams' caution is very much warranted, but the safeguards he proposes are unrealistic. Meanwhile, Rice's prescriptions are confused in their goals, based on faulty logic and evidence, and seem more like political posturing than advancing any new ideas that might stand a chance of ending this crisis and holding the region together.

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