In this election season in the United States, President Barack Obama is two men in one. The Obama of the Cairo speech of 2009, when he called for a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, has been increasingly eclipsed by Obama the terrorist-slayer, the commander-in-chief who has launched hundreds of drone strikes against Al Qaeda and its affiliates and who ordered the killing of Osama bin Laden.

Commander-in-chief Obama is doing what he thinks is necessary to keep Americans safe, but he is ignoring the deeper roots of US security that the Cairo Obama understood so well. It may well be necessary for other Muslim countries to hold him to account.

Consider Syria. Everything happening there was both predictable and predicted: a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran, increasing sectarianism and ethnic segregation, the polarization of extremes and the silencing of moderates, de-stabilization of neighboring countries, infiltration by terrorist groups, and a bloodbath from which the country could take decades to recover. Syrian opposition groups beg for the kinds of weapons needed to fight President Bashar al-Assad’s planes, defend hard-won territory, provide safety for civilians, and signal to Assad that the world will not stand by as he does whatever it takes to subdue his own people.

Every morning, Obama receives a briefing from men who warn him of every plot and conspiracy to kill Americans. He knows that any weapon capable of shooting down a Syrian warplane could also be used by a terrorist against a US airliner. He believes that he is doing the right thing and following the prudent course in waiting for the Syrian conflict to burn itself out in some way while minimizing the long-term risk to American lives.

Other advisers warn him that any possible action – a safe zone on the Turkish border, for example, that could expand outward – requires taking out anti-aircraft defenses all over Syria. That would mean bombing Damascus, which could harden Syrian support for Assad. And perhaps it would do no good; it might save a few lives, they argue, but, with so many different countries fighting a proxy war via so many different groups of opposition fighters, it would not change the overall dynamic of the conflict.

Moreover, other countries in the region will not use offensive force without approval by the United Nations Security Council, which the Russians and Chinese continue to block. And let’s not forget that US voters have no appetite for more military action in the Middle East, even if the price is years of civil war and the implosion and fragmentation of a country bordering Israel, Jordan, Iraq, Turkey, and Lebanon.

These arguments are advanced in good faith and deserve serious consideration. But the art of leading rests on calculating costs and benefits and exercising judgment when the balance is unclear. No one speaks for the Syrian people in the Oval Office every morning. No one adds up
the costs of betraying, yet again, what America claims to stand for, even while witnessing people willing to march – in the face of bullets – for precisely those universal values: dignity, freedom, democracy, and equality. The cost is yet another generation of Middle Eastern youth who will believe the worst about the US, no matter how far-fetched the rumor or extreme the claim.

No one points out the huge opportunity cost of what could have been and what could still be – albeit barely – if the US took decisive action to save tens of thousands of Syrian lives and possibly tip the balance of the conflict. Consider the contrast with Libya, where one of the outcomes of US intervention was tens of thousands of Libyans marching in the streets with placards declaring their support of the US and their outrage and sorrow at the murder of the US ambassador. And, on the world stage, Russia and China have been encouraged to believe that America will never push past a veto, effectively giving them the final word.

It may well be impossible to get the US to act before its presidential election in November. The only chance, in my view, is if countries in the region – Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates – call openly for US leadership. They should remind Obama of what foreign-policy experts Nina Hachigian and David Shorr have recently called “the responsibility doctrine”: great powers have an active responsibility to uphold global norms and solve global problems.

The Arab League should publicly charge the Security Council with abdicating its responsibility for preserving international peace and security and call on countries with important interests in the region to join with them in taking action. They should specifically call on the US to assume the mantle of global responsibility and, in the phrase that Obama used to describe the intervention in Libya, “create the conditions and coalitions for others to step up.” The League would be asking the US to live up to its values and pursue its interests, while at the same time fulfilling its own responsibility as a regional organization.

The devastating and widening conflict in Syria does not present any good choices, only choices between bad and worse. But a leader must choose, and Obama is making the wrong choice – for Syria, for the region, and for the US.