The UN reported last week that almost 100,000 people are estimated to have died in Syria to date, although it notes that the figures is quite possibly much higher. Syrian refugees and activists argue that as many as 250,000 may have died. Roughly two million have been driven from their homes. That is without even beginning to count the life-altering injuries, rapes, and shattering of homes, businesses and communities. Many of the pictures of Syrian towns look like bombed out cities from the second world war.

Americans know all this. But is it our responsibility to do anything about it? It is so easy to say no.

First, as James Baker memorably said with respect to Bosnia when the former Yugoslavia first started falling apart, “we have no dog in that fight”. Our allies in the region, above all Turkey, Jordan and Israel, might beg to disagree, but no one in Syria has directly attacked us, and Syria has no oil. Americans are rightly weary of the human and the economic toll of war. They do not understand why what is presented to them as a vicious sectarian war with Al Qaeda offshoots on one side and a brutal Iranian and Russian-backed regime on the other should be our problem.

Second, political bandwidth is limited and President Obama has his hands full with his domestic agenda. Indeed, he hopes to go down in history for ending wars and nation-building at home, not for getting the U.S. embroiled in yet another conflict in the Middle East. He must recall Lyndon B. Johnson, who said: “I knew from the start if I left a woman I really loved — the Great Society — in order to fight that bitch of a war in Vietnam then I would lose everything at home.”

Third, as Richard Haass argues in a new book, foreign policy begins at home, rebuilding our domestic strength by repairing our economy, rebuilding our infrastructure, reforming immigration, overhauling our education and health care systems so that we can maintain our power and leadership in the world. By exercising prudence and restraint now, Obama is guaranteeing that the US can meet the only country in the world that has the ability to be a genuine peer competitor – China – on equal terms down the road.

Finally, Obama cannot identify a course of action that guarantees both impact and exit. Thus in response to overwhelming proof that Bashar al-Assad is killing his people with nerve gas, and with the full-fledged entry of Hizbollah into the fray, turning the tide at least temporarily for the regime, he has now announced only the barest minimum response, a new commitment to send “lethal” aid to members of the Syrian opposition whom we think we can work with, although not the heavy anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons they are calling for so desperately.

We have heard the counter-arguments many times. The US is weakening itself dramatically in the Middle East with respect to Iran and its ally Hizbollah, both of which are throwing everything they have into keeping Assad in power, even at the cost of fracturing Syria.
completely. People across the Middle East and indeed increasingly in Europe are questioning both the US will and ability to lead.

Worst of all, a wide range of Middle East experts now agree that we are watching the beginning of a regional war between Sunnis and Shiites, spreading into Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, and Jordan. Sunni countries around the region are sending fighters on the side of the opposition; Shiite countries, above all Iran, are digging in on the side of the regime. Even President Morsi of Egypt weighed in this week, authorizing Egyptians to fight with the Sunni opposition forces.

But for me it is simpler. For the past five years Barack Obama has articulated a theory of what it takes to be a great power in the world, a theory that he has applied to the United States and preached to other established powers, such as Europe and Japan, and many rising powers such as China, India, Brazil, Turkey, South Africa and Indonesia. His view has been “with power comes responsibility,” meaning that a nation that wants to be a player on the global stage must exercise its share of responsibility to uphold the norms of world order: norms that protect both nations and their citizens.

As I read it, that means that if a great nation has the power to stop what is happening in Syria – not to resolve the conflict but to do everything possible to stop the killing and force a political rather than a military settlement – it must exercise that power. Working with both NATO and the Arab League under Article 54 of the UN Charter, whereby regional organizations must notify the Security Council of their actions but not necessarily seek approval, the US has the power to decimate Assad’s airforce and heavy weapons and establish no kill zones on the Turkish and Jordanian borders that will provide millions of Syrians safe haven within their own country.

Under US law, a powerful swimmer who watches a drowning child and makes no move to save him is not legally liable. That is the position of the U.S. and other great powers with regard to the Syrian people. But history will render its own judgment on our moral by-standing. Those in power today will hang their heads in shame.