Syria is not a problem from hell

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Nothing to be done. It's impossible. Stalemate at the United Nations. These are the mantras that continue to accompany ever more violent and wrenching pictures of massacres and daily killings in Syria. The country has been "sliding toward civil war" for months now without any meaningful change in the international response. The Russian government originally seems to have calculated that President Bashar al-Assad could crush the opposition the way Vladimir Putin crushed the uprising in Chechnya, but that degree of brutality would have brought international intervention for sure. The "Annan Plan" is becoming a synonym for hypocrisy and inaction. The Friends of Syria diplomatic strategy of choking the Syrian economy ever tighter is paying off in food shortages and rising prices, but has offered no evidence that the Sunni business class has the will or the means to effect a coup. And the Alawites appear to be closing ranks; indeed, massacres like last week's slaughter in al-Houla guarantee an increasingly bloody retribution if and when the tide finally turns.

I say "if" and not just "when" because Lebanon teaches us that an even more violent and chaotic version of the present conflict can endure for years, but with the added dimension of growing radicalization of many opposition forces and the provision of a new cause and new territory for Al Qaeda-linked or inspired insurgents from Iraq, Yemen, and even Pakistan. These elements truly are the "foreign terrorists" Assad inveighs against; their presence and their IED and car-bomb tactics will solidify support for Assad in Damascus and Aleppo and drive Syria's Alawites ever more deeply into the arms of Iran. At the same time, trouble spills over into Lebanon as Syrian government troops chase Free Syrian Army (FSA) forces across the border, a scenario that could be replicated in Jordan and Turkey. All the while, Syria's Kurds are freer to unite with their Iraqi cousins, with dreams of an expanded Kurdish autonomous zone that is a nightmare for the Turkish government. Add chemical weapons, and the designs of Iran, Israel, Qatar, Russia, and Saudi Arabia into the mix and long-term destabilization of the region's security and economy looms.

An alternative exists, one that grows clearer and nearer every day. Three months ago, I proposed in the New York Times that the Arab League and Turkey, backed by NATO members, should provide a limited number of specialized anti-tank and anti-mortar weapons to Syrian towns willing to declare "no kill zones" -- call them NKZs -- in their towns, meaning no attacks by the Syrian army, sectarian shabbiha militias, the FSA, or anyone else. Public safety, including for peaceful protesters, would be paramount. I suggested the United States provide communications and intelligence to enable the town authorities and any members of any military willing to enforce the NKZ to allow them to track the movements of Syrian government troops. And I suggested that drones from Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United States could fire on Syrian government tanks approaching NKZs.

This proposal was widely met with derision, particularly in the security community. But three months later, the United States has announced that it is providing intelligence and communication support to the FSA and openly countenancing the provision of arms by Qatar and
Saudi Arabia. Near the Jordan-Syria border, the U.S. military has just finished a massive military exercise with Jordan and 18 other countries. Ambassador Susan Rice told CNN's Wolf Blitzer Wednesday night that as a last resort "we," presumably meaning the Friends of Syria, must "look at options outside the U.N." Robert Baer, who spent more than two decades as a CIA case officer in the Middle East, said on another CNN program that it would be possible to use drones to take out tanks in Syria. And the Times of London came out in support of no-kill zones on its editorial page.

What is still missing is a plan. It is time to stand neither for the Syrian opposition nor against the Syrian government but against killing by either side. To tell any Syrian local officials willing to stand against killing -- whether a Local Coordinating Committee or simply a municipal government -- that they will receive weapons and air support against tanks, support that will be withdrawn if killing begins or continues, by anyone. All citizens of such towns should be instructed to photograph violence by anyone against anyone and upload it to a central website maintained by the U.N. or by the Friends of Syria, so that they become peace monitors.

Legally, the Friends of Syria can proceed without the U.N. Security Council's approval if the Arab League is willing to declare a threat to regional peace and security resulting from the ongoing violence in Syria. Given the current refugee situation and the clear potential for destabilization of neighboring countries, the league would be amply justified in doing so. Arab states are also entitled to ask for assistance from Turkey and any other countries. NATO could make the same move at Turkey's request, but need not do so for individual NATO members to assist the Arab League. International lawyers will debate the point, but Chapter VIII of the U.N. Charter governing regional arrangements arguably allows such action as long as the Arab League informs the Security Council of the measures it is taking for the maintenance of international peace and security.

Baer, the former CIA officer, also said on CNN that it was quite possible that the international community would not intervene in Syria until the level of killing reached Rwandan proportions. That is a horrific message to send both to the Syrian people and the Syrian government, not to mention similarly brutal governments around the world. Surely mass murder in the tens of thousands is enough for action, on both moral and strategic grounds. Many if not most readers will have objections to the plan proposed here. To them, I say: Either accept the status quo and recognize how much worse it is likely to get, or propose a plan of your own.