Losing Hope: The Strain of Civil War

An estimated 470,000 men, women, and children have lost their lives since the start of the Syrian Civil War on May 15, 2011 (Barnard). Following the Arab Spring, a wave of revolution that pushed through the middle-east in early 2011, the Syrian population found themselves at odds with President Bashar Al-Assad and his regime. In an unprecedented series of events, peaceful protests involving tens of thousands of people calling for the resignation of Assad backfired when the regime opened fire on those publicly demanding his removal. Since that day nearly six years ago, the war in Syria has escalated to its boiling point, with various hands playing roles in a power struggle that has claimed the lives of countless innocents. The economic cost of the war in Syria was placed at $255 billion as of February, 2016, a figure comparable to the nation’s total wealth before the war (Barnard). More so, Syrian infrastructure continues to crumble as Assad’s forces lay siege to cities like Homs and Aleppo, reducing them to rubble (Noack). Assad’s war tactics are not limited to bombings, however. The regime is guilty of both war crimes and consistent violations of human rights, most notably their use of chemical weapons on civilians (Warrick), the torture of innocents (Taub), and the bombing of displacement camps within Syria (Noack). Each day the war rages on, thousands are displaced within the country and hundreds of people die. 6.6 million individuals are currently displaced within Syria, and another 4.8 million have left the country in search of better lives as refugees (Long). As the estimated death toll nears half a million, new efforts must be made to protect those within Syria, as well as to help those struggling to escape a warzone. Two actions which the United States could take to save thousands of lives are the establishment of a no-fly zone stretching across the Northwestern Syrian-Turkish border, encompassing the Bab Al-Hawa displacement camp, and the establishment of three surge facilities to better facilitate the
acceptance of refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan on par with the Obama administration’s April 2016 Amman surge program.

The introduction of a no-fly zone over the Bab al-Hawa displacement camp at the border of Turkey could mean all the difference to those fleeing Syria. The camp, which lies west of Aleppo, was subject to bombing on November 26, 2014. Fifty structures were obliterated following shelling by the regime (Noack). The next month, seventy-six civilians were killed when two barrel bombs full of nails, shrapnel, and explosives were dropped on another displacement camp, the Abedin camp in Idlib, dismembering and charring the bodies of men, women, and children alike (Reuters). State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki commented, “We are horrified by the reports that the Assad regime barrel bombed the Abedin displaced persons camp in Idlib and the images we saw of the carnage against innocent civilians…the attack on the Abedin camp was nothing short of barbaric.” (Reuters) Although the U.S. condemned these attacks, nothing was done to prevent further bombings. These targeted attacks on civilians are not fringe incidents, and they are not accidental. They showcase the gruesome atrocities Assad is willing to commit. In May, 2016, airstrikes killed at least thirty people and left dozens injured in the Al-Kammouneh displacement camp near Sarmada; seven of those killed were children (Shaheen). The Al-Kammouneh camp is only twelve miles from Reyhanli, Turkey and is a shelter to many who flee Aleppo, a city now on the verge of a humanitarian crisis (Shaheen). Alaa Fatraoui, a journalist who saw the aftermath, reported, “There are many martyrs and body parts. I saw with my own eyes nearly thirty dead. It’s a very bloody scene. It’s revenge against civilians. There are absolutely no armed men there, they’re all civilian refugees, homeless people living on the street.” (Shaheen) The White House commented, calling the strike “indefensible.” “There was no justifiable excuse to target civilians who had already fled their
homes from violence,” White House spokesman Josh Earnest said, calling the situation “heartbreaking.” (Shaheen) Again, nothing was done. The city of Ankara has repeatedly called for safe zones in the area to protect refugees from airstrikes, but the proposals have been met with a shrug by western powers involved in the conflict (Shaheen). It’s as if the world has become desensitized to news of massacres in Syria. If Assad and his regime are allowed to get away with the murder of innocent people, the attacks will only get worse. The fact that world leaders do not consistently pressure Assad and Russia over these war crimes every day is incredibly troubling. Coupled with the inaction in setting up measures protecting the people of Syria, the situation is locked in a standstill where innocent families in Syria pay the price with their lives. The existence of a no-fly zone is crucial to the survival of innocent civilians who’ve become a target of Assad’s regime.

There is enormous controversy surrounding the installment of a no-fly zone in a country like Syria. The situation couldn’t be more volatile when considering the Russian backed regime and tension between Putin and world leaders. In a meeting held on September 22, 2016 by the Senate Armed Services Committee, General Joseph Dunford was asked what it would take to control all of the airspace in Syria (Doe). Dunford replied, “right now… for us to control all of the airspace in Syria would require us to go to war against Syria and Russia.” (Doe) His comment drew a rebuke from Senator John McCain (R-Arizona), who argued that a no-fly zone was possible without war (Doe). Senator McCain has a point; a no-fly zone without war would be a humanitarian’s dream come true. However, if a no-fly zone was established and a Russian jet were to encroach on the airspace, that jet would eventually have to be grounded by force. The world in its current state would be stressed to handle a war between the U.S. and Russia, but where do we draw the line? Is it enough to say that we fight for liberty, democracy, and freedom,
yet we accept that a major world power is supplying a dictator with weapons used to slaughter civilians daily? General David Petraeus, former director of the CIA shared his insight regarding no-fly zones. “Yes, there are risks,” Petraeus said, “and those risks have increased and gotten more complicated. But if you don’t show you are doing something to prevent them [Russians and Syrians] from carrying out a war crime … there is considerable risk in not taking action.”

(Wood) The Syrian Coalition shared a similar sentiment; they said, “The Syrian Coalition condemns the international community’s silence, which represents direct complicity in Assad’s war against civilians in Syria as it has been interpreted by the regime as a green light to kill more and more Syrians.” (Shaheen) Petraeus offers an interesting perspective in saying there is risk in not taking action, acknowledging that the problem will only get worse the longer it is left to steep. The Syrian Coalition’s angle is much more direct, as they identify the immediate consequences of apathy in regards to the Syrian Conflict and Assad’s war crimes. It is clear that something needs to be done. What everyone seems to be missing, however, is a clear course of action.

The Syrian Civil War has become a crisis of epic proportions. Measures must be taken immediately in order to guarantee the safety of innocent men, women, and children struggling to survive in this war-torn country. The first step in ensuring the safety of civilians in Syria is the establishment of a U.S. backed no-fly zone, the cost of which was detailed in a letter sent by General Martin Dempsey to the Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Carl Levin (D-Michigan). In this letter Dempsey explained that “establishing a no-fly zone over Syria to ‘prevent the regime from using its military aircraft to bomb and resupply’ would cost ‘$500 million initially … [and] as much as a billion dollars per month over the course of a year.’” (Memmott). This figure would account for a no-fly zone covering the whole span of Syria, and
would result in the “near total elimination of the regime’s ability to bomb opposition strongholds and sustain its forces by air.” (Memmott) This option would inherently protect hundreds of thousands from the bombs dropped by the regime every day, however, the cost of enforcing such a widespread no-fly-zone both financially and logistically is too large for the U.S. to undertake on its own. Arguably, this feat could be accomplished if a large group of UN countries engage in a joint effort to ground the regime’s air force, but the likelihood of such an effort is low. More so, there are risks associated with completely shutting down the air space over a country. One such risk is facilitating the rise of extremist groups as the threat of regime bombardment decreases, as detailed by General Dempsey in his letter to Chairman Levin (Memmott). Another risk that comes with a widespread no-fly zone is the introduction of ground troops. In order for a zone of this magnitude to function, thousands of soldiers would have to be deployed in or around Syria, a move that the U.S. will undoubtedly avoid at all costs (Memmott).

While the establishment of a no-fly zone over all of Syria, an area of 71,000 mi$^2$ (Long), is unlikely due to its great cost and risk, a no-fly zone stretching for 100mi x 20 mi along the northwest border of Syria and Turkey would provide displaced persons, especially those fleeing Aleppo and Idlib, a safe stretch where they wouldn’t be targeted by the regime’s aircraft. This strategy would save countless lives as displaced Syrians would finally have somewhere relatively safe to wait out the war. The safety would give way to a host of positive changes including the possibility of schooling, attending to displaced person’s medical needs, and a decrease in the stress placed on other countries due to refugee influx. Economically, this zone would require a fraction of the cost of the no-fly zone proposed by Gen. Dempsey due to its decreased area and ease of monitoring. More so, since the no-fly zone is located on the border, all monitoring and necessary ground work could be done from the Turkish side in cooperation with the Turkish
military. This zone would not require American soldiers to be deployed into Syria. The clear priority in establishing this no-fly zone is saving the lives of civilians trying to escape the war. The no-fly zone is located along a border, not near any major cities or strongholds the regime may find strategic. In this sense, the regime and Russia would have no business flying near the border unless their intentions were to bomb civilians. The establishment of a no-fly zone of this size is reasonable, but would require public support in order to incite government action. The first steps of this process would begin with the education of the American public on the topic of Syria. A campaign would be launched that brings the horrific tragedies that occur in Syria every day to the public eye. There could be a range of educational methods used to reach the public, including social media, TV commercials, and radio broadcasts. Each commercial could showcase a tragic event that took place and conclude with a brief message asking the American people to call their congressmen regarding the establishment of a no-fly zone in Syria. The graphic content of each message could vary, but the end-goal is the same: “If you wish to help these people, call your government officials in support of a no-fly zone.” With enough pressure and support from the public, the government would have no choice except to address the possibility of creating such a safe zone.

Although a no-fly zone would ensure the survival of thousands of Syrian civilians, it is not a long-term solution to the immense quantity of people currently being displaced within Syria. In order to accommodate the waves of Syrian refugees leaving the country and to help alleviate the strain that currently falls on the shoulders of Turkey and the EU, the U.S. must begin to open its borders to increased refugee immigration.

In the fiscal year 2016, the Obama administration accepted just over 10,000 Syrian refugees for resettlement in the United States (Long). With millions displaced within and without
Syria, however, this number is but a drop in the bucket when compared to the number of lives affected by the war. The United States, on average, accepts just under 85,000 refugees from various countries around the world each year (AIC). Over the past forty years, the U.S. has accepted over 3 million refugees from across the globe (Long). As a world leader in freedom and human rights, it’s strange to think the U.S. has only accepted 10,000 Syrian refugees when 4.8 million have fled the country and 6.6 million are still internally displaced within Syria, surviving under the iron fist of Assad (Long). There are many limiting factors that contribute to why the U.S. does not accept more refugees, the most significant of which is the lengthy vetting process, followed by Congressional disapproval of Syrian refugees.

The current vetting process takes 18 to 24 months from initial referral to arrival in the United States (U.S.). The amount of time required for refugees to be vetted takes far too long, and is frankly out of touch with the enormity of the crisis. Turkey, a country with far less in terms of resources has accepted 2.7 million refugees since the start of the war (Long). A large part of the two year process is spent conducting extensive security checks. All refugees go through both biographic and biometric security checks, regardless of their home country (U.S.). "These checks are interagency processes which require coordination between the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the FBI, and the Department of Defense. In addition, all Syrian refugees must undergo additional checks as part of a Syrian Enhanced Review process.” (Long) These additional checks are classified, but are thought to involve heightened levels of scrutiny, including review by the Fraud Detection and National Security Unit, as well as additional interviews with refugees (Long). In order to effectively accept more Syrian refugees, the two year vetting process must become far
more efficient, and processing must be completed at an accelerated rate in order to accommodate the incredible amount of Syrians in need of resettlement.

The Obama administration was successful in meeting their goal to accept 10,000 Syrian refugees by the end of September, 2016, due largely to Obama’s surge program that began in Amman, Jordan on April 8th which cut down the time involved in vetting refugees to a mere three months (Segal). The program, which ran until the 28th, focused on interviewing 600 refugees per day and recommending the most vulnerable cases to the USCIS for consideration (Segal). This accelerated vetting process proved incredibly successful for the short span of time that it was employed. The same vigorous vetting process was followed, and the rate at which people were vetted seemed to match the severity of the situation in Syria. Applying this same strategy to vet refugees today on a somewhat larger scale could mean the difference between the life and death of refugees yearning for new beginnings. This process, like the establishment of a no-fly zone, would require vast public support. The awareness of the American public on the war in Syria would have to increase immensely. More so, people would have to call their local government officials in a widespread movement promoting increased refugee immigration from Syria. The most integral component of this process would be refugees who have already immigrated to America. A TV or radio program could easily be started with the support of public contributions where refugees could be interviewed regarding not only the tragedies they endured and the companions they lost, but the hope that moving to America has given them. When the public is able to interact with the Syrian people and listen to their stories, they will be far more likely to help, and far more likely to call their local officials.

The results of the 2016 election will directly affect the possibility of these two goals being reached. On her campaign trail Secretary Hillary Clinton vocalized her wishes to accept
more than 75,000 Syrian refugees into the U.S. by the year 2018. Whether Presidential elect Donald Trump will carry on with this endeavor to any extent is doubtful, as his campaign politics have leaned towards isolationist policies, and his rhetoric towards bigotry and racism. While a surge program with three centers located in major cities surrounding Syria would save tens of thousands of lives, it is a far better fit for a campaign like Hillary Clinton’s. The likelihood of its introduction under the Trump presidency is close to none. Donald Trump has repeatedly spoken out on freezing the acceptance of Syrian refugees into the U.S. and has preached misinformation regarding the vetting process. One such statement he made at a speech in Phoenix, AZ: “We have no idea who these people are, where they come from,” Trump said, “I always say, Trojan horse. Watch what’s going to happen, folks. It’s not going to be pretty.” (Gambino) The reality is that since September 11, 2001, of the 784,000 refugees that have been accepted into the U.S., only three were arrested for planning terrorist activities, two of which were not planning an attack in the U.S. and a third whose plans were “barely credible,” according to a report issued by the Migration Policy Institute in 2015 (Gambino). The U.S. has yet to encounter significant issues with refugees admitted into the nation. If President Elect Trump denies Syrian Refugees entry into the U.S., he would be breaking a decades-long tradition of accepting those in need tracing back to World War II (Gambino). Although Trump may not be receptive towards accepting refugees into our country, the establishment of a no-fly zone on the northwestern border of Syria would cost little in terms of compromising security, and would provide a population with the safety they need in order to survive this war. The economic cost of this no-fly zone is feasible, the motivation is saving innocent lives, and the drawbacks are close to none; all that is missing is public support.
The atrocities the people of Syria face every day are horrific, now more than ever they need our help. It is clear that Assad is willing to do anything to ensure his regime maintains power, even if it means killing his people and turning Syria to dust. As one of the world’s most powerful countries, the U.S. cannot watch idly while an entire population is massacred by their government. Assad’s abhorrent neglect of human rights is exemplified in his continued bombing of displacement camps. If Assad is allowed to continue committing war crimes without intervention, the atrocities he commands will only get worse. We must reexamine ourselves as American citizens and consider our core principles. Are we a nation that will stand up against injustice that preys on the weak, or are we a country that will turn a blind eye to the massacre of children for fear of starting a war with those fueling the slaughter? Each day this conflict drags on, more innocents die. As the world’s most powerful nation, the time has come to plant our feet in the ground and stand up for the individual rights that we would die to protect. The establishment of a no-fly zone on the northwest border of Syria, fueled by public outcry and pressure on officials, could provide much needed refuge for Syrians within their own country, and would serve as a testament to the values of liberty, justice, and freedom that we so firmly believe should be available to all.
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