Why U.S. must step carefully in Syria
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(CNN) -- The popular uprising in Syria against the Alawi-led minority regime of Bashar al-Assad poses a serious challenge to U.S. national security in the Middle East. As it fights for its survival amid escalating violence, the Syrian regime risks not only the deepening of civil strife in the country, but also provoking sectarian strife in the region, potentially drawing in U.S. military involvement. Washington has thus far been cautious in dealing with Syria, favoring strong words and sanctions against the regime and supporting Arab efforts to stop the violent military crackdown. But this could change as conditions in Syria deteriorate.

The recent arrival in Syria of Arab observers, as part of a Syrian-endorsed Arab League plan to stop the violence, has been met with mixed emotions. Syrian opposition members rejected the plan, which was mediated by Iraq, on the grounds that it will give the bestial regime another chance to continue its brutal policies.

Burhan Ghalioun, the head of the Syrian National Council opposition movement, emphasized that the observers cannot do their work because "they cannot go where the authorities don't want them to go." The Arab League's initiative is further tainted by the contemptible presence of Sudanese Gen. Mohammad Ahmed Mustafa al-Dabi, who heads the mission. Al-Dabi held high military intelligence and security positions in the government of President Omar al-Bashir, who is wanted on international charges of genocide in Darfur.

Meanwhile, Syria continues its slow, steady descent into sectarian strife. There is the militarization of segments of the opposition, as manifested by the creation of the Free Syrian Army, and the targeted sectarian murders committed in mixed towns, especially in Homs. Indeed, the recent twin suicide bombings in Damascus, regardless of the identity of the as-yet-unknown culprits, could well be a portent of what may happen in the multireligious, multietnic country. This premonition of escalating violence is shared by many in the region, including those within the ranks of the Syrian opposition. Syria is tightly linked both to the evolving Arab politics -- as influenced by the past year's Arab popular uprisings -- and to the ongoing shifts in the Saudi and Iranian-led regional axes of powers that have resulted from withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq.
To be sure, it is the Arab League mission that reflects more the deep divisions splintering the Arab world: The Arab League, led by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, initially determined to pressure the autocratic Syrian regime into submission, but this resolve was weakened by Iraq questioning the League's apparent double-standard policy. Its stance on Syria contrasts sharply with its position on Bahrain.

Saudi Arabia, along with other Gulf Cooperation Council countries, sent troops to Bahrain to help quash a Shi'a majority-dominated uprising against that kingdom's Sunni monarchy. Similarly, the government of Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, acting apparently in concert with Iran, has not concealed its desire to keep the Syrian regime in power. Iran has described the violence in Syria as part of a Western-Israeli conspiracy against the regime. And pro-Iranian forces in Iraq and Lebanon, such as the Sadrists and Hezbollah respectively, have expressed their readiness to support the Syrian regime.

Beyond this, the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq has apparently boosted the confidence not only of Iran and its proxies but also the Syrian regime.

Iran and Hezbollah laud the "resistance" for forcing the Americans from Iraq, and Syria no longer fears an American interference from Iraq. In fact, the regime believes that Iraq now affords Syria another strategic buffer with regard to a potential anti-Syrian military intervention; the other being offered by Lebanon.

This will undoubtedly leave the international community facing neither an Arab nor a Russian solution. Russia recently introduced a draft resolution the U.N. Security Council on ending the violence in Syria. However, Russia, along with China, has had serious disagreements with other members of the Security Council, who favor sanctions against Damascus, including an arms embargo.

Washington will most likely confront urgent Arab and Syrian opposition requests for direct involvement in Syria. Already, Ghalioun has called on the Security Council to adopt the Arab initiative; at the same time some Arab and Syrian opposition leaders have vocally called for a no-fly zone and NATO involvement to protect civilians.

But a word of caution. The danger of this kind of involvement lies in the grave and complex reality that Iran still considers the security of the Syrian regime as part of its own security, and that, while both Tehran and Damascus have been preparing for a conflict with United States since its invasion of Iraq in 2003, including supporting proxy forces in the region, Washington has thus far pursued policies more reactive in nature to regional developments. Washington should be careful about falling into the duplicitous trap of Middle Eastern politics.

Washington must act within the context that Syria is already in the throes of civil strife, which can only intensify and possibly spill over into Lebanon or Iraq, and that the Arab states are fighting two wars. One is over the nature of future power in their capitals and the other is over which regional axis they will support.
Washington should also disabuse itself of the notion that the terminally ill Syrian regime will collapse soon. The regime has life support from Iran, Iraq and Lebanon, and thrives on terror and Arab schisms. This makes any reactive or reflexive American involvement in Syria fraught with uncertainties and serious risks.

Washington’s policies should focus now on expanding and organizing its cooperation with Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which have deep interest in a change of power in Damascus; supporting the Free Syrian Army through Saudi Arabia and Turkey; strengthening sanctions against Syria in concert with regional and international allies, including placing sanctions on Sunni merchants closely associated with the regime.; maintaining and supporting a strong diplomatic presence in Iraq and Lebanon; seeking out Alawi and Christian political and military figures with the objective of reassuring them with the promise of political inclusion in the future of Syria.

Most importantly, Washington should not lead a campaign in Syria designed in the imperial corridors of the American capital itself.