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EDITORIALS

What to do about Syria

The options the Obama administration is considering are inadequate.

IT'S BEEN MORE than six months since President Obama called for the end of the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad. Yet as Mr. Assad's forces escalated their assaults on Syrian cities this week, inflicting scores of deaths every day, his rule appeared far from finished. On the contrary, there seems every chance that the dictator could go on slaughtering Syrians for months or even years — and maybe prevail.

This appalling prospect has prompted an anguished debate about what can be done to help Syrians — particularly the civilians under assault from tanks and artillery who have little or no access to humanitarian assistance. The modestly good news is that there are some measures that the Friends of Syria — a group of Arab, Islamic and Western states to be convened Feb. 24 in Tunis — can agree on. The bad news is that no one believes they will stop Mr. Assad.

What are the consensus steps? First would be an effort to help the Syrian opposition better organize itself and create plausible plans for a post-Assad order. At the moment, the Syrian National Council, based in exile, is not represen-

tative enough of the country's minority communities — including the ruling Alawites — and it has an uneasy relationship with the Free Syrian Army, which was founded in refugee camps in Turkey. Both organizations have, at best, tenuous ties with the popular committees and groups of army defectors who are leading the resistance in Syria.

The council must be pushed to become more inclusive and to prepare a plausible plan for a democratic transition that protects Syria's minorities, including the Alawites. Its reward would be recognition by the Arab League and Western governments, and funding for any humanitarian relief it could organize. Meanwhile, the Friends group could explore other forms of humanitarian aid, beginning with help for groups that are already working in Syria.

On Friday, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton was honest enough to acknowledge the inadequacy of this response. "This takes a large dose of humility to say we don't have all the answers," she said. The bigger ideas being discussed among governments, including "humanitarian corridors" to besieged areas, or safe zones

near Turkey's borders, would require United Nations authorization and a military force to back them up. Such initiatives are worthy of support, but Russia will likely continue to block U.N. action, while both the Obama administration and NATO have repeatedly made clear they have no interest in military intervention.

So how to stop the massacres? The most available and workable solution is tactical and materiel support for the anti-regime forces, delivered through neighbors such as Turkey or the Persian Gulf states. Opponents say that would increase the violence, but violence in Syria will continue to escalate as long as the regime believes it can survive by force. Others worry that radicals among the opposition will be empowered. But what will strengthen extremists the most is the failure of democratic nations to act and the entry of groups such as al-Qaeda into the vacuum.

The assault on Syria's people will end only when the regime's forces are forced to conclude that they cannot win — or when they succeed in their savage campaign of pacification. If President Obama is to uphold his words, U.S. policy must be based on that reality.

The playing field

Home-schoolers on public school teams is not the answer.

VIRGINIA STUDENTS who play high school sports or engage in other public school activities have to meet certain criteria. They have to take a minimum number of courses, maintain a minimum grade-point average and meet other eligibility requirements. If they do so, they have the privilege of participating in their school's organized activities. A bill pending in the Virginia General Assembly would upend that privilege into a right by allowing home-schooled students to join sports teams and other clubs in what would have been their district schools.

We would never question the choice of parents who home-school their children. But, as with any choice, there are trade-offs. Students who opt not to attend the local high school shouldn't expect special treatment, and lawmakers in Richmond should not meddle in matters that are better decided by those who govern the activities that are critical to schools and their communities.

Legislation to allow home-schooled students to play varsity sports at public schools — called the "Tebow Bill" in honor of the Denver Broncos quarterback who played football at his local high school in Florida even though he was home-schooled — passed the House of Delegates and is headed for a hearing in the education committee of the state Senate. The bill, as The Post's Anita Kumar reported, has been introduced since 2005 with little success, but the backing of Gov. Robert F. McDonnell (R) and the newfound strength of Republicans have enhanced his chances. Del. Robert B. Bell (R-Charlottesville), the bill's sponsor, predicts a close vote if it makes it to the Senate floor.

We share Mr. Bell's empathy for home-schooled students who would welcome an opportunity to join teams. But the current ban is the result of the collective judgment of more than 300 public high schools that comprise the Virginia High School League governing high school activities in the state. Many of the requirements devised by this group to ensure a level playing field cannot be met by home-schooled students. "How fair is it," Ken



The home-schooled Wormald siblings, from left, Sarah, Christopher and Katie, of Leesburg play a game of keep-away during a break from their studies last month.

Tilley, the group's executive director, asked, "that a student at the school needs to pass five subjects for credit toward graduation while the home-schooled student simply needs a letter or report card from the parent indicating satisfactory academic progress in just one or two subjects?"

There's also the possibility of abuse by coaches trying to lure the most-talented home-schooled students and the danger of discouraging students who might otherwise stay in school or improve their grades for a shot at a varsity jacket.

We don't fault home-schooling parents for advocating for their children, especially in less populated areas with less school choice and fewer recreational sports leagues. But this bill — no matter the allure of Tim Tebow — is not the answer. Being on a team or in a debate club or working on the yearbook is part of being a member of a school community. Better to work with the Virginia High School League on possible solutions or strengthen the home-school athletic programs already in existence.

LOCAL OPINIONS

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The District needs to spend more on the fight against cancer

News of the District's revised budget projection touched off a great debate about what to do with the newfound surplus of \$240 million ["Gray sets economic priorities in speech," Metro, Feb. 8]. Returning some of it to taxpayers, as some have suggested, makes perfect sense based on the faulty assumptions about a budget shortfall that triggered the recent tax increase.

Similarly, those faulty assumptions caused the District's leaders to trim \$3.5 million from their 2006 commitment of tobacco settlement funds to invest in programs designed to reduce the city's heavy cancer burden. This \$3.5 million reduction from the District's original \$20 million commitment has caused great harm to the District's underserved. That \$20 million represented almost the entire investment that the District has made over the past several years toward one of the city's most severe and costly health concerns. More than 2,700 residents every year receive a cancer diagnosis.

Plans are essential, but they require resources to be realized. The District's leaders understood that logic five years ago. The logic today is the same.

Last March, for example, we helped our grantees document the savings and saved lives from our free colorectal screening program, D.C. Screen for Life. The program offers free colon cancer screening for uninsured residents, among others, especially those in areas of the

District where cancer incidence and mortality rates are alarmingly high. Not only did the program save the lives of several men and women who had colon cancer, it saved thousands of dollars in hospital costs because cancerous tumors were detected at earlier stages. The screening procedure costs about \$800, compared to an estimated \$64,000 in treatment costs per colon cancer patient.

Despite some gains in the past five years, when the council appropriated tobacco settlement dollars, the need for sustained cancer control is evident. Consider the Centers for

Disease Control and Prevention's snapshot of cancer in the District. The District's mortality rate for prostate cancer is higher than that of any state in the country. The city has the second-highest mortality rate from breast cancer, and it ranks No. 7 for deaths for all cancers combined.

Disparities in cancer mortality rates are largely driven by race and income, and these disparities will not disappear until a concerted effort is made. Early detection, access to care, prevention and clinical trials are the keys to making significant progress against cancer rates that are among the highest in the nation.

YAVONNE VAUGHAN, Washington
The writer is executive director of the D.C. Cancer Consortium.

The District's mortality rate for prostate cancer is higher than anywhere else in the country.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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A redistricting resolution

I was overjoyed to read J.H. Snider's commentary about reforming the system of redistricting in Maryland ["It will take a con-con to untangle Maryland's gerrymanders," Local Opinions, Feb. 12]. The writer brought historical facts and thoughtful rationale to an issue that needs public attention if we are ever to emerge from this quagmire that perpetuates itself with each new administration. Gerrymandering is a ludicrous system that makes a mockery of voting.

Mr. Snider mentioned a redistricting jury as well as a constitutional convention. We need lively discussion to understand the complexities of this important issue and any possible solutions. Many states are dealing with efforts to redraw districts to reflect compact, contiguous geographical areas without political consideration. It is time for Maryland to join the movement.

IRMA SHAINBERG SHEON, Montgomery Village

The Israel-Iran quandary

Fareed Zakaria ["Israel's false choice," op-ed, Feb. 16] might have a valid argument regarding the disastrous consequences of a preemptive strike by Israel against Iran's nuclear capability. However, it is naive to state that there "has not been a single suicide attack by an Iranian." Has he forgotten the April 1983 Hezbollah suicide bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, deemed in later years by a federal court to be Iranian-sponsored, or the suicide attack against the Marine barracks in Beirut by the same group just six months later, also sponsored by Iran?

Iran uses proxies for its suicide attacks worldwide; an anomaly was the hapless Iranian in Thailand whose leg was blown off Tuesday when a grenade he apparently had tossed ricocheted back at him.

NORMA FENVES, Rockville

Fareed Zakaria reached back to 1914 Europe and then leaped past World War II to give examples of failed and successful military action. How does he manage to ignore the 1930s, World War II and the Holocaust? He is discussing the state of Israel, the homeland of the Jews. How does he ignore the major cataclysm of the 20th century: the murder of one of every three Jews in the world?

How does he not compare the words of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to those of Adolf Hitler? That's the realistic reference from which to consider Israeli military action against Iran. Israel is, in fact, confronting the sort of choices the United States and Britain confronted in the 1930s. One hopes Israel will be wiser than they were.

LEN BENNETT, Deerfield Beach, Fla.

The birth control battle

Regarding the Feb. 15 letter from Mary Clare Murray of Falls Church:

Ms. Murray stated that contraception, which is a temporary inducement of infertility, "closes the couple off from a full expression of love, which is total self-giving and the commitment to stay together regardless of what life brings." Let's carry this idea through to its logical conclusion. What happens when infertility is biological and permanent, such as when the wife goes through menopause? Are the husband and wife now closed off from a full expression of love? When I went through menopause, some 20-plus years ago, should my husband and I have stopped expressing our love for each other physically because we could no longer have children? I find that notion highly risible.

No, sexual intimacy is not entertainment, but neither does it cease to be "a full expression of love" when it cannot result in procreation, whether temporarily or permanently.

ANGELA CORIGLIANO MURPHY, Bowie

To this lifelong Catholic, the ongoing kerfuffle over "conscience exemptions" from insurance coverage for birth control is misguided. What if a religion rejects blood transfusion, surgery or vaccination?

There is no taxpayer in this land, right- or left-wing, who does not find some government program or policy objectionable. Nuclear weapons, welfare for the poor (or the rich), gun control, public schools paid for by those without children attending them — these all offend someone's conscience. Mine is offended by unnecessary wars and torture of prisoners; yet my taxes help pay for it all, and Catholic bishops have not raised a comparable fuss over that.

I suggest an attitude adjustment: Look on our taxes and other mandates not just as funding those programs we care most about but as the price for living in a pluralistic democracy where we all have a say in government, and nobody wins all he or she would like.

DARYL P. DOMNING, Silver Spring

The benefits of rent control

In his Feb. 16 op-ed column, "Rent control's absurdity," George F. Will depicted property owners as the victims of government regulations that, in his words, "advance no legitimate state interest." However, nobody is forced to own rent-regulated buildings in New York City; few can afford to, and most who do profit from their investments.

I suggest that among the legitimate state interests should be affordable housing for low- and moderate-income workers who provide essential services and for the retired elderly who want to stay in their homes and communities.

Rent regulations help maintain diversity and stability in neighborhoods, which increase property values. Long-term tenants also materially improve and maintain properties and contribute to the preservation of buildings and the increase in property values.

Yes, there are affluent tenants who use legal dodges to distort the original intent of the rules and landlords who abuse regulated tenants who cannot afford to protect themselves. But on the whole the system works.

ANNLINN KRUGER, Silver Spring

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