[USDA Foreign Agricultural Service, Commodity Intelligence Report, May 9, 2008]
In considering the complex and painful question of whether to intervene in Syria, policymakers should take a close look at the memorandum published Monday on the Atlantic Monthly's website by William R. Polk, a State Department Policy Planning Staff member during the Kennedy Administration. I don't agree with everything Polk says, but it is one of the most thoughtful analyses I have read so far.

Of particular interest is Polk's assessment of environmental factors — in particular, a devastating drought — as the proximate cause of the Syrian civil war. He claims that

> Syria has been convulsed by civil war since climate change came to Syria with a vengeance.

This is a touch overstated: we don't know whether climate change actually caused the Syrian drought. But only a touch: climate change will cause more frequent and more serious droughts. The Barry Bonds principle applies: you can't say any one home run was caused by steroids, but steroids certainly caused more and longer home runs.

As the planet warms, there will be more Syrias. In wondering whether we can afford to combat climate chance, the old cliché applies: can we afford *not* to?

Here is the relevant portion of Polk's piece, including after the jump:

> Syria has been convulsed by civil war since climate change came to Syria with a vengeance. Drought devastated the country from 2006 to 2011. Rainfall in most of the country fell below eight inches (20 cm) a year, the absolute minimum needed to sustain un-irrigated farming. Desperate for water, farmers began to tap aquifers with tens of thousands of new well. But, as they did, the water table quickly dropped to a level below which their pumps could lift it.
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> In some areas, all agriculture ceased. In others crop failures reached

75%. And generally as much as 85% of livestock died of thirst or hunger. Hundreds of thousands of Syria's farmers gave up, abandoned their farms and fled to the cities and towns in search of almost non-existent jobs and severely short food supplies. Outside observers including UN experts estimated that between 2 and 3 million of Syria's 10 million rural inhabitants were reduced to "extreme poverty."

The domestic Syrian refugees immediately found that they had to compete not only with one another for scarce food, water and jobs, but also with the already existing foreign refugee population. Syria already was a refuge for quarter of a million Palestinians and about a hundred thousand people who had fled the war and occupation of Iraq. Formerly prosperous farmers were lucky to get jobs as hawkers or street sweepers. And in the desperation of the times, hostilities erupted among groups that were competing just to survive.

Survival was the key issue. The senior UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) representative in Syria turned to the USAID program for help. Terming the situation "a perfect storm," in November 2008, he warned that Syria faced "social destruction." He noted that the Syrian Minister of Agriculture had "stated publicly that [the] economic and social fallout from the drought was 'beyond our capacity as a country to deal with.'"…

[T]he Syrian government made the situation much worse by its next action. Lured by the high price of wheat on the world market, it sold its reserves. In 2006, according to the US Department of Agriculture, it sold 1,500,000 metric tons or twice as much as in the previous year. The next year it had little left to export; in 2008 and for the rest of the drought years it had to import enough wheat to keep its citizens alive.

So tens of thousands of frightened, angry, hungry and impoverished former farmers flooded constituted a "tinder" that was ready to catch fire. The spark was struck on March 15, 2011 when a relatively small group gathered in the town of Daraa to protest against government failure to help them. Instead of meeting with the protestors and at least hearing their complaints, the government cracked down on them as subversives. The Assads, who had ruled the country since 1971, were not known for political openness or popular sensitivity. And their action

backfired. Riots broke out all over the country, As they did, the Assads attempted to quell them with military force. They failed to do so and, as outside help – money from the Gulf states and Muslim “freedom fighters” from the rest of the world – poured into the country, the government lost control over 30% of the country’s rural areas and perhaps half of its population. By the spring of 2013, according to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), upwards of 100,000 people had been killed in the fighting, perhaps 2 million have lost their homes and upwards of 2 million have fled abroad. Additionally, vast amounts of infrastructure, virtually whole cities like Aleppo, have been destroyed.

Despite these tragic losses, the war is now thought to be stalemated: the government cannot be destroyed and the rebels cannot be defeated.