PolicyWatch 1992

How to Vet Potential Allies in Syria

Andrew J. Tabler and *Jeffrey White*

Also available in العربية

October 22, 2012

Washington has the means of finding and assisting Syrian opposition factions that meet important political and military benchmarks, despite the risks involved.

Determining the suitability of armed opposition elements as potential recipients of military assistance is complex and challenging. In Syria, such groups are numerous, rapidly evolving, and highly varied in ideology. Nevertheless, they do not pose an impenetrable mystery. Some are longstanding actors in the rebellion and currently hold or are contesting important areas of the country; a number of Free Syrian Army commanders are public personalities and can be contacted with relative ease. Vetting such actors is a critical prerequisite to providing military assistance, based on the recognition that not all armed elements should receive aid, and that some units are more worthy of aid than others.
Moreover, vetting must not be done just in terms of outcomes on the battlefield -- equal consideration must be given to the roles that armed units will play after the regime falls. Given the fragmented nature of the Syrian opposition to date, and the lack of Western intervention to support the protest movement, those who are taking literal shots at Bashar al-Assad now are almost certain to be calling the shots as the regime gives way.

POLITICAL CRITERIA

The United States cannot put itself in the position of providing assistance to units that do not broadly share its values and objectives for Syria and the rest of the region. Given this principle, a number of political criteria for potential aid candidates are discernible:

- *Location on the secular-Islamist spectrum.* Many opposition commanders are concerned about the role of extremists, particularly those influenced by al-Qaeda and similar groups that involve non-Syrians and foreign ideologies. The United States should take advantage of this concern. So far, Washington has been most comfortable dealing with secular, liberal Syrian activists; its traction among armed groups is far less than among the protest movement. In order to gain leverage with

the armed units operating throughout Syria, Washington will have to become better at sorting out their orientation -- determining which commanders are secular figures who came up through the Baath system or observant Muslims, on the one hand, and which are Salafists or otherwise extremist on the other, then developing relationships with the former.

- *Attitudes regarding Syria's political future.* Once the regime collapses, the revolution should be consolidated by elites and the people through elections, not simply meetings among armed men. Washington should therefore support commanders who publicly commit to pluralism, respect for minorities (including Kurds), and an electoral timetable. This means shaping an outcome in which Assad's tyranny is not replaced by a tyranny of the majority.

- *Relationship with civilians* . Although armed groups may be calling the shots after Assad is gone, they are not the only part of the opposition. The United States should channel assistance to units that have deep relationships with local, prominent civilian actors who are capable of leading their communities. Any armed element receiving U.S. aid should have a relationship with a political group that has credibility within Syria (even if only locally) and that is not hostile to U.S. interests. Accordingly, Washington should keep a record of commanders' interactions with civilians in order to judge their suitability for assistance.

- *Shunning extremist funds* . Many groups in Syria receive aid from private individuals and entities in the region that oppose U.S. interests. Washington should therefore avoid assisting groups that are heavily supported by radical Islamist elements, and ask those units it does support to drop aid from regional sources associated with extremism.

- *Attitudes toward the United States and the West* . Armed opposition elements with avowedly anti-American or anti-Western ideologies or goals should not receive any U.S. assistance.

- *Enlist or disband following transition* . To guarantee a civilian order after Assad's ouster, armed groups will need to be folded into a national army/gendarme or be disarmed and disbanded. U.S. support should be contingent on units committing to join whatever national forces replace the regime's army and security services.

- *Commitment to Syria's territorial integrity* . The revolution's current dynamics indicate a growing risk of the country fracturing into a rump regime, sectarian and ethnic enclaves, and warlord fiefdoms. The United States has no interest in an outcome where the Assad regime creates an Alawite rump state from which Iran and its allies can operate. To help ensure that the regime fully collapses, Washington should ask armed groups to commit to Syria's territorial integrity in the short and long term.

- *Willingness to follow rules of war and observe human rights* . The Assad regime has made Syria synonymous with human rights abuses and atrocities. This has to end once Assad departs. Although it may be difficult, opposition units should take the high road in the conflict, following the rules of war and reining in abuses wherever possible. This will not only help them reach out to the public and hasten Assad's

departure, but also set a new standard for a post-Assad Syria.

MILITARY CRITERIA

Meeting U.S. requirements for political suitability is a necessary but not sufficient condition for military assistance -- armed opposition elements should also be militarily effective. Below are several military criteria by which candidate units could be measured. These rules are interrelated but not absolute. Every group will have a mix of strengths and weaknesses -- combat units are always more (or less) than the sum of their parts, and the total picture of a unit is more important than how it rates on any particular criteria.

- *Combat record* . Units that receive U.S. assistance should have a record of actual performance in combat, and the longer the better. To assess this performance, Washington should determine the number and type of actions they have been involved in, as well as their effectiveness in terms of attrition inflicted on regime forces.

- *Quality of leadership and personnel* . Units should also be assessed on the leadership qualities and military skills of their commanders and the proficiency of their personnel. Individuals with a military background are more likely to score high on this basis, but civilians who have taken up arms may also be effective.

- *Discipline and cohesiveness* . These attributes are critical to the long-term performance of any combat element. Subordinate units and personnel must follow orders and be able to accomplish their missions while sustaining the stresses of prolonged combat.

- *Number of personnel and subordinate units* . Generally speaking, bigger is better when it comes to assessing a group's ability to affect the military situation. A unit with 500 personnel and five subordinate elements should be able to control more space and inflict more damage on regime forces than a single unit of 100 men.

- *Amount, types, and quality of weapons* . A unit's weaponry also influences its ability to control space and inflict damage. Those with more and heavier weapons will likely be more capable than those with fewer, lighter arms.

- *Durability* . Candidate units should have demonstrated some capability to sustain themselves over time, including acquisition and absorption of arms and ammunition, care of personnel (housing, clothing, food), and medical treatment of casualties.

- *Recruitment capabilities and patterns* . Combat units incur losses in the course of operations, and they must be able to replace both personnel and leaders. Units that have demonstrated the ability to do so are better candidates for assistance. The nature of replacement personnel is also important -- recruiting from secular or moderate Islamist elements of Syrian society is acceptable, but drawing from Islamist extremist factions is not.

- *Cooperation with other units* . A unit is a better candidate for military assistance if it coordinates its activities with other units. Doing so gives it greater influence on the military situation and indicates a broader view of the war than one driven strictly by

local concerns.

- *Area and scope of operations* . Units fighting in key cities or provinces can have more effect on the situation than those in more remote or less important areas. Supporting the former would allow Washington to get more bang for its buck. Similarly, units that operate in narrowly defined areas will be less influential on the fighting and the transition than those with broader areas of operation.

- *Types of operations* . Good candidates for assistance will have demonstrated the ability to conduct a variety of offensive, defensive, and civil-affairs operations. Units that are limited to defensive actions will have only local influence. Assistance is better directed to elements that provide local security for the areas they control, facilitate humanitarian aid to the civilian population, and work toward the establishment of civilian political authority.

- *Willingness and ability to safeguard weapons.* Providing weapons to Syria's armed opposition is a sensitive issue; Washington must obtain assurances that units will not pass any such arms to elements that the United States regards as problematic. The unit's ability to safeguard and monitor its arsenal must be considered as well. This means establishing and implementing means of tracking weapons and ammunition usage.

CONCLUSION

In general, Syrian candidates for U.S. assistance must fit U.S. political needs and be militarily effective -- or have the ability to be made so. Establishing deeper contact with armed opposition elements is well within the capabilities of U.S. and other intelligence services, special forces, and diplomats. But the task is not easy -- it requires professional assessment on both the political and military level, as well as some risk taking. Given the complexity of the task, mistakes will likely be made, and some allies will likely be a disappointment. But others will prove useful, and they should be found, vetted, and assisted.

Andrew J. Tabler is a senior fellow in The Washington Institute's Program on Arab Politics. Jeffrey White is a defense fellow at the Institute and a former senior defense intelligence officer.

Search the website Go