

Partner with the Syrian Rebels

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

In his speech on Wednesday, President Obama announced that the United States will increase training and arming for the moderate Syria rebels. Given the threat posed by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), that is the correct move: Syria's moderate rebels are as important as ever. Much like the Kurdish Peshmerga in nearby Iraq, they could serve as a strategic partner for the Obama administration and its budding international coalition in Syria. In fact, since any serious attempt to counter the self-styled Islamic State will require sustained military action inside Syria. The moderate and militarily effective Syrian rebel groups, such as Harakat Hazm or the Syrian Martyrs' Brigade, are uniquely positioned to be of assistance. And, importantly, they are eager to do so.

Since the start of the Syrian revolution, the opposition has sought a strategic partnership with the United States. But after years of broken promises, many are dubious of the Obama administration. They do not want to be used in the fight against ISIS, then left to fend for themselves against Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and the country's other jihadist groups. Nor do they want to be latter-day sahwa fighters, the Sunni tribesmen in Iraq who aligned with the United States to oust al-Qaeda but were then left to confront the sectarian machinations of Nouri al-Maliki, Iraq's prime minister at the time, on their own.

Therefore, in order to overcome this crisis of trust between the Syrian opposition and the United States, the Obama administration must view the rebels as allies in the battle to bring stability back to the Middle East—which is in the interest of the United States and other Western powers. The Obama administration could, for example, ensure that the rebels can protect their areas from aerial bombardment by the Assad regime, or perhaps provide them with advanced weaponry to push back against pro-Assad militias from Aleppo to Damascus and southern Syria. Absent such measures, Syria's moderate rebels will continue to fare poorly on the battlefield. More concerning, however, is that defections from the Free Syrian Army to groups like ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate will continue unabated and may even increase.

However, if the Obama administration does in fact enlist the rebels in its newest effort to destroy ISIS, then this could swing the momentum on the battlefield in their favor. Once they start taking real control of areas -- at present, the rebels hold comparatively less territory than the Assad regime and ISIS—then the Syrian Opposition Coalition can begin to carry out its political duties by working with local councils, helping provide social services, and eventually organizing local elections to bring some semblance of stability to rebel-controlled areas. Admittedly, that is quite a

ways off, but the first step in stabilizing Syria is remembering that what is left of the moderate opposition is not a burden to America, but rather an important ally. ❖

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