

The Syrian Conflict: Where Strategic Interest and Humanitarian Urgency Intersect

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Brief Analysis

A former U.S. ambassador to Syria and a top aid official discuss how Washington and the international community should address the pressing humanitarian and security demands raised by the ongoing crisis.

On April 17, 2014, David Miliband and Robert Ford addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Miliband is president and CEO of the International Rescue Committee and former foreign secretary of the United Kingdom. Ford is a former U.S. diplomat who recently retired after completing four years' service as ambassador to Syria. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks. Institute senior fellow Andrew J. Tabler moderated the event.

DAVID MILIBAND

The Syrian emergency has become the defining humanitarian crisis of our time. The international community's

failure to effectively deal with it has helped create an explosive cocktail of brutal dictatorship, communal sectarianism, and global and regional power plays. Because the country's political and humanitarian challenges are interdependent, the failure to adequately address the latter has dangerous consequences for international law -- not only for the Syrian conflict, but for future conflicts as well. The war's fiercely sectarian nature has blurred the line between civilian and combatant, setting a potentially disastrous precedent.

The International Rescue Committee (IRC), which currently dedicates 20 percent of its budget to the Syrian crisis, was expelled from the country in 2009. Although it is not officially recognized by the Assad regime, it still conducts 60 percent of its work inside Syria via cross-border efforts from Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq. Thus far, the IRC has supplied 1.2 million Syrians inside the country with medical aid, and an additional half million with other forms of assistance.

Yet much like the rest of the humanitarian enterprise, the IRC's campaign suffers from a mismatch between needs on the ground and help provided. Around 9.5 million people are displaced, and 3.5 million live in besieged areas that are completely cut off from aid -- an increase of 1 million over the past two to three months. Moreover, many of the refugees who have flooded neighboring countries are expecting children. This is particularly alarming in light of the fact that 300,000 children have already gone without schooling for three years, and the figure is expected to rise to half a million this year. The arrival of spring and summer bodes even more disaster: the transmission of diseases, including polio and measles, and droughts that threaten to exacerbate food shortages.

Despite all this, the political will needed to sufficiently address the humanitarian situation continues to falter. Western governments have been overly cautious about getting involved in Syria, arguing that intervention would only complicate the crisis. But many of the things they fear would result from direct involvement have happened anyway. For example, the "Afghanization" of Syria's center and east has already transformed areas of the country into cradles for al-Qaeda, while the World Bank recently warned of the war's economic toll on neighboring countries, including an estimated \$7.5 billion in Lebanon and \$6 billion in Jordan.

Going forward, the West should start addressing the crisis by clearly defining a political transition. In the absence of a vision that articulates an endpoint for the conflict, getting both sides to begin developing the underpinnings of a functioning state will remain infeasible.

Moreover, despite the conflict's increasingly violent character, the funding constraint on the humanitarian enterprise is far bigger than the security constraint. The international community continues to place the blame on "humanitarian access," but in reality it can take several more steps to mitigate the suffering. For one, the permanent members of the UN Security Council (UNSC) and interested parties in the region should appoint a humanitarian envoy to Syria. With the support of host governments, this envoy could engage at the international level by increasing scrutiny of abuses on both sides, and at the local level by brokering ceasefires. Second, rather than waiting on UNSC resolutions to facilitate cross-border aid transfers, the international community should instead call on individual governments to ensure access. Finally, various players have not been held accountable for actions that violate UNSC resolutions and the Geneva Conventions, and this must change. In February, the UNSC appeared to achieve a breakthrough on the question of humanitarian aid, but that development failed to produce actual improvement on the ground. The regime continues to obstruct aid delivery in at least twelve of Syria's fourteen governorates, in direct violation of the Geneva Conventions.

ROBERT FORD

The United States, as the single largest donor to Syrian relief efforts, has demonstrated grave concern for the humanitarian crisis. Approximately \$1.7 billion in aid, largely distributed through UN channels, has been used to assist refugees, internally displaced persons, and local communities where the Syrian regime has lost control,

especially Idlib and north-central Aleppo. This aid has helped provide food, rescue equipment, and salaries for police and teachers, among other things. Despite all this assistance, however, the crisis is only getting worse. Today, the Syrians who suffer the most are not refugees, but civilians living in the Damascus suburbs, Homs, and other areas blockaded by the regime in violation of the Geneva Conventions.

The difficulty the regime has faced in recapturing these blockaded areas is mainly the result of a manpower shortage, forcing it to become increasingly reliant on Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiite militias. In many such areas, the only way the opposition has been able to prevent the mass starvation of civilians is to turn over weaponry to the regime. Even then, most agreements between the opposition and regime to let in vital supplies have quickly fallen apart.

The regime will continue to use the deprivation of aid as a war tactic so long as it is fighting for its life. Negotiating with Damascus on humanitarian matters -- a tactic that failed to yield results in the former Yugoslavia -- sets a bad precedent. It should not be up to Bashar al-Assad to decide whether or not to implement the legally binding terms of the Geneva Conventions. Although the opposition has likewise besieged regime-controlled areas in Aleppo (e.g., Zahra and Nubol), its blockades are by no means as complete or brutal as Assad's.

The United States can take several concrete steps to address the crisis. The first is to bring the opposition together and consolidate its ranks. Washington should also make clear that Assad is the root cause of the crisis and a magnet for foreign fighters, and that his upcoming "reelection" campaign will enormously complicate efforts to set up a transitional government. In particular, this means convincing Russia and Iran that Assad's continuation of the war does not serve their national security interests. For example, more Chechen fighters are learning tricks of the trade in Syria, and the war is giving al-Qaeda space to operate on Iran's doorstep. Washington should also find a way to include Tehran in future discussions in a constructive manner. Iran did not have a seat at the most recent talks because it would not accept the Geneva Communique of 2012.

In addition, the Syrian opposition must provide assurances to regime supporters who fear mass retaliation in the event that Assad loses. Such assurances would be more credible if they came from armed rebel groups rather than the unarmed opposition coalition. This makes it especially important to bring the political and armed opposition together during the transitional period. Accordingly, greater efforts should be made to persuade the Syrian Islamic Front to support negotiations.

Without decisive action, the cantonization of Syria will continue. More cities will come to resemble Abu Kamal, an area near the Iraqi border where six opposition groups currently compete for control. The war of attrition will persist inside the country and among various regional players. For its part, the regime will continue to blockade civilian areas while refusing to shell the Raqqa headquarters of jihadist group the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). This in turn will continue to wear down the moderate opposition, which is now fighting a war on two fronts, against ISIS and Assad.

This summary was prepared by Adam Heffez. ❖

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