

A Better Approach to Geneva: Aid the Syrian Opposition Now

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Brief Analysis

Resuming direct U.S. material support for anti-Assad forces offers the only serious prospect, even if modest, for halting Syria's downward slide and its damage to U.S. interests.

Amidst final preparations for the Geneva II conference on Syria next week, the available policy options are poor. The conference's chances of more than mere procedural or very partial outcomes, such as limited ceasefires and humanitarian-access agreements, are slim. But simply walking away from the Syrian crisis or direct military intervention in it offers even worse prospects.

In this difficult situation, one of the issues worth considering is renewing U.S. nonlethal assistance to the nonjihadist opposition. The U.S. assistance was halted on December 11, after the Islamic Front of opposition militias seized a Free Syrian Army (FSA) warehouse near the Turkish border. The aid had been sparse and slow in coming anyway, but it was, to quote one FSA commander, considerably "better than nothing." American officials are now reportedly reconsidering this decision, and even trying to talk to the Islamic Front directly -- but lingering concerns about possible terrorist diversion of U.S. assistance are apparently holding up a new decision.

Today, however, a crucial new factor in the internal opposition equation has emerged. All across northern Syria, the FSA, the Islamic Front, and the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) militia are engaged in mortal -- and sometimes successful -- combat against the al-Qaeda-affiliated Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) gangs and other extremists. Furthermore, the Islamic Front pointedly excludes Jabhat al-Nusra, the al-Qaeda affiliate and U.S.-designated terrorist organization, even if one Islamic Front militia, Kataib Ahrar al-Sham, keeps up informal contact with it. The best way to reinforce this trend of the opposition standing up to the jihadists is to support those fighting the jihadists.

Providing aid is already the declared U.S. policy, and well within the parameters of action that could contribute at least to modest success in advancing U.S. interests, while addressing Syria's terrible ongoing tragedy. The United States should now resume, accelerate, and expand the scope of these deliveries. Even "nonlethal" aid can help

protect the Syrian people against the regime's assaults, and save many lives.

In addition, providing meaningful aid to the Syrian opposition right now would help achieve several urgent policy goals. First, and most immediately, it would encourage a comparatively credible opposition delegation to go to Geneva, not walk out, and agree to meet again -- the minimal short-term U.S. objectives. Second, by putting greater pressure on Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, aiding the opposition would improve the odds that the regime might agree in Geneva or even before to more tangible steps, such as easing the flow of humanitarian aid. Such pressure is essential; a January 14 UN announcement revealed that the regime continues to obstruct even food and polio vaccine supplies to besieged civilians. Third, by giving more Syrians more tools to sustain and defend themselves, it would probably reduce the destabilizing refugee outflow to neighboring Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Iraq. Fourth, by empowering the less extreme elements of the opposition, it would help marginalize the most extreme anti-Assad fighters. Last, and perhaps most important, resuming aid would help restore the reputation of the United States and its allies for doing something to stop mass slaughter and to uphold its promises.

Besides the impact on developments inside Syria, another set of reasons to resume the support for the opposition is to clarify what is U.S. policy toward Iran. As Iran's support becomes central to Assad's survival, U.S. policy toward Syria will increasingly be read as an indicator of U.S.-Iran relations, especially in the wake of the current tactical nuclear deal with Iran. Resuming U.S. aid to the opposition would help calm apprehensions among U.S. allies, in the Gulf and beyond, that Washington will acquiesce to Iran's regional hegemony in return for Tehran agreeing to a nuclear compromise. In addition, by reinforcing regional U.S. allies and options, the resumption of aid would provide an extra incentive for Iran to negotiate an acceptable long-term nuclear agreement. And solid ties with the Syrian opposition are a good insurance policy to preserve core U.S. regional relations and interests in case the Iran deal goes sour.

In this connection, the constant debate about Iranian participation in the Geneva conference is a distraction. It obscures the true nature of Iran's massive continuing support for thousands of extremist sectarian militiamen, whether belonging to Hezbollah from Lebanon or Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas from Iraq or Iran's own Qods Force, now fighting for Assad inside Syria. Even worse, the endless debate over Iran's presence in Geneva obfuscates the real mandate of this international gathering, as agreed in the "Geneva I" declaration of mid-2012 that Iran continues to reject and as stated in the invitation letter to this Geneva conference: the need for a ceasefire and for humanitarian access and the need for a "transitional governing body" leading to democracy in Damascus.

The last refuge of those against aiding the Syrian opposition is that, whatever the merits, it is now too late to do so with any hope of success. It is true that Assad's regime has temporarily gained the upper hand by its ruthless, scorched-earth, and heavily armed assaults against its own citizens, aided substantially by foreign forces from Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, and even further afield. And it is true that these developments are making the regime more confident, even arrogant. But such propaganda offers no real evidence that this tide cannot be turned again, as it has several times in Syria before.

Earlier this week, Secretary of State John Kerry said that he is determined not just to stanch the Syrian refugee exodus but also "to save Syria." The policy options for doing that are poor. And the one option that offers some modest prospects for halting the downward slide is to resume direct U.S. material support for the Syrian opposition.

David Pollock is the Kaufman Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of Fikra Forum. ❖

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