

Ten Ways the Syrian Opposition Can Help Fight Extremism

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Brief Analysis

Amid international efforts to rid Syria of chemical weapons, opposition leaders are offering advice about how to prevent extremist groups from gaining a permanent foothold.

Reports are growing of a sharp increase in the number of extremist groups operating in rebel-dominated areas of Syria. This has raised eyebrows in Washington, where policymakers continue to grapple with the question of how to support the opposition without inadvertently helping jihadists expand their destabilizing impact across the Middle East. These concerns are growing among Syria's neighbors as well.

During a recent visit to Syrian border regions from southern Turkey, I spoke with armed and civilian opposition leaders about the extent to which extremist groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) have penetrated their ranks. I also asked them what kinds of measures the opposition should take to prevent these groups from gaining a permanent foothold or exploiting the current crisis over the regime's use of chemical weapons (e.g., by disrupting international efforts to destroy those weapons). As enumerated below, their answers indicate that mainstream rebels have a number of options for reining in extremism while bolstering the overall effort to force Bashar al-Assad's departure. And many of these options offer good opportunities for U.S. engagement.

1. **Accept the extremist problem.** Unlike in the past, opposition leaders now recognize that extremism is a growing problem in "liberated areas" under their control. Their main beef with groups such as ISIS and JN lies in their increasingly foreign nature and their methods of governance and operation; the only reason the rebels tolerate these factions is that they are effective fighters. At the same time, opposition leaders point out that the majority of rebels are not al-Qaeda, and that JN is more nationalist in orientation than ISIS. Yet the groups are better viewed as two heads of the same threat.
2. **Develop a national political and military strategy.** Both civilians and armed groups are adamant that they need to

formulate a political and military strategy to deal with the growing extremist threat. Planning has been the Achilles' heel of the opposition (and the Assad regime) for decades, but the rise in extremism has convinced many rebels that ISIS and similar groups are a foreign threat that does not have the Syrian people's best interests at heart. The extremists counter that ISIS and JN are the country's best option given the West's recent decision not to follow through on threats to punish the regime militarily for using chemical weapons. Thus, if mainstream opposition groups want to maintain the uprising's nationalist bent, they should develop a coherent national plan for containing extremism among their ranks and drawing clearer lines between themselves and the jihadists. In return, the United States and its allies would be much more willing to fund the rebellion.

3. **Don't join multiple groups.** The Syrian opposition historically sees no conflict of interest in joining multiple alliances at the same time. On September 24, for example, a number of groups whose leaders are in or linked to the Western-backed Supreme Military Council (SMC) announced the formation of an "Islamic coalition," atop which is al-Qaeda affiliate JN, which aims to establish an Islamic state in Syria based on sharia. Opposition members' tendency to join multiple alliances at once may perhaps be seen as a way to keep options open with an array of patrons, but it also reinforces the view that the Syrian opposition has no foundation and is therefore not worth investing in. All the same, if these groups adopt principled stances, the United States and its allies could be in a position to back them.
4. **Go local, hold elections.** Many, if not most, oppositionists openly admit that their desperate situation makes them ripe for manipulation by outside patrons with agendas too extreme for most Syrians. These patrons take advantage of ego-related and ideological rivalries among opposition members, creating a cycle that only leads to more fragmentation and subnational agendas. To counter this trend, opposition leaders should accept the criticism by actual fighters who argue that local leaders should have much more authority. To avoid manipulation in the choosing of local leadership, opposition members should emphasize the relative success of elections in selected areas of Syria as a mechanism for establishing authoritative leadership structures. These votes would be held in Syrian nahawi (districts equivalent to townships), manatiq (areas equivalent to counties), and muhafazat (governorates equivalent to states). Such a step would help solidify Syrian regional and national identities, making opposition members less susceptible to foreign patronage.
5. **Start by peeling off extremists.** Given the relative strength of extremist groups in Syria today, clashing with them openly only strengthens Assad's hand. So while nationalist/nonextremist groups should always defend themselves in the face of aggression by extremists, the former probably should wait before going on the offensive. Instead, opposition members should develop plans to peel off members of extremist groups with incentives, such as financial and other support. Many civilian oppositionists believe that dialogue programs between members of nationalist or moderate Islamist battalions and Salafist groups further right on the spectrum will help peel away members and undermine the overall support of extremists. This approach to undermining extremists, of course, would require progress on item two of this list: the development of a national military and political strategy. Still, for international donors, such a program would likely be much more attractive than first providing weapons. And increased support in other forms -- including weapons -- could follow from the United States and other Western countries.
6. **Emphasize that extremists only benefit the regime.** The opposition uses *cui bono* arguments to assess who benefits from the fighting and who actually supports extremist groups. Many in the opposition thus believe that ISIS is actually supported by the Assad regime. In a strategic sense, ISIS actions to capture areas such as Azaz play into the regime's hands. The opposition should emphasize the cumulative negative effect of ISIS and other extremist groups on both the opposition's effectiveness and its efforts to gather support from abroad.
7. **Use clerics to undermine extremists' religious authority.** Many extremist and al-Qaeda-linked groups follow equally extremist clerics who are not widely followed inside Syria. As such, the mainline opposition should work with well-known national clerics to undermine those followed by al-Qaeda and other extremists, as part of an overall effort to

control the religious message within the opposition.

8. **Take a hard look at the SMC.** At present, the SMC encompasses both nationalist and Islamist brigades, with their ideological orientations often much more divergent than the range within Salafist and jihadist/extremist brigades on the far right. Therefore, opposition leaders need to look closely at the SMC, with the goal of identifying which groups remain aligned with the national agenda and which have lurched toward the extremists.
9. **Think through the assassinations dilemma.** Some opposition leaders maintain that extremist groups can be so ideological that only dramatic steps, such as assassinations, will work to displace them from Syrian and nearby territory. While assassinations may be necessary in some cases, they can end up strengthening the hand of extremists if used at the wrong time.
10. **Accept that chemical weapons make the situation much worse.** One might conclude that the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons against civilians could justify their seizure by opposition groups and use at key times against the regime and its supporters. A number of extremist groups operating in Syria even claim chemical weapons use is justifiable as an act of revenge. But the reality is that pursuing chemical weapons stockpiles will only make the opposition's long-term trajectory that much more difficult, ultimately strengthening the regime's hand and possibly drawing punitive measures from the international community. Enhancement of conventional weapons capabilities represents a much more productive approach for the opposition.

While implementing these measures will take time, starting now will help the Syrian opposition maintain its national character and create an environment conducive to containing the influence of extremist groups. Drawing clear lines between al-Qaeda affiliates and the mainline nationalist opposition will also make the latter much more attractive to the international community if and when a military or political settlement to the crisis emerges. Perhaps most urgent, however, is the need to remove the Syrian chemical weapons stockpile from the scene. This will help avoid the killing of more Syrians and prevent the conflict from widening any further than it already has.

Andrew J. Tabler is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute and author of [In the Lion's Den: An Eyewitness Account of Washington's Battle with Syria](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/in-the-lions-den-an-eyewitness-account-of-washingtons-battle-with-syria) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/in-the-lions-den-an-eyewitness-account-of-washingtons-battle-with-syria>). ❖

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