

After CW Deal, U.S. Must Keep Its Pledge to Aid the Syrian Opposition

by [David Pollock \(/experts/david-pollock\)](/experts/david-pollock)

Sep 21, 2013

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Pollock \(/experts/david-pollock\)](/experts/david-pollock)

David Pollock is the Bernstein Fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on regional political dynamics and related issues.



Articles & Testimony

Arming friendly rebel factions could help curb the slaughter of civilians, maintain pressure on Assad, eliminate the need for U.S. military action, and keep extremists in check, among other benefits.

A version of this article previously appeared on *Fikra Forum* (<http://fikraforum.org/?p=3825>).

In his UN General Assembly address this week, President Obama spoke at length about Syria, but focused almost entirely on one very narrow aspect of the ongoing crisis there. In the wake of the U.S.-Russia deal on Syrian chemical weapons, international diplomatic and media attention is too focused on this one sensational, but very limited initiative. Barrels of ink and hours of talk have been expended debating either the details of its implementation, or its implications for U.S. credibility in Iran, Israel, the Arab Gulf, or elsewhere in the world. What will be the exact language of a UN Security Resolution? Is the option of a military strike really still on the table if this exercise in arms control stalls or fails? How will Tehran or Tel Aviv read these tea leaves, particularly as they might apply to Iran's nuclear program?

Almost forgotten in all this chatter is a tragic truth: whatever the fate of this deal, the Syrian civil war continues, with many more hundreds killed each week, mostly innocent civilian victims of the Assad regime's equally deadly conventional, rather than chemical, weapons. As Syrian opposition leader Ahmad Jarba correctly declared recently: "We don't want see Assad continue to kill hundreds of thousands of Syrians with heavy weapons, with the protection of an agreement allowing him to use all means to kill except chemical weapons." In fact, as soon as the diplomatic deal was reached, Syrian regime forces stepped up their indiscriminate assault, with "ordinary" bombs and artillery, against the very same neighborhoods in Damascus where they had massacred nearly 1,500 people in one night of chemical weapons attacks on August 21.

Therefore, the only way to help protect the Syrian people and deter further regime atrocities is for the U.S. to honor

its repeated pledges, at long last, to arm the Syrian democratic opposition, and in a serious way. This pledge was reiterated by President Obama personally, according to Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham, in the run-up to the expected vote in Congress on the use of force in Syria. It was again repeated by Secretary of State of John Kerry in a joint statement with the British and French foreign ministers just this week.

Some American press reports allege that more arms are finally on their way. Rumors circulate that management of this program may be shifted to the Pentagon from the CIA, ostensibly in order to make it more effective. Meanwhile, however, Syrian opposition spokesmen, political leaders, and military commanders publicly report that they have yet to see much real improvement. Late last week, one opposition representative labeled the latest deliveries as merely "better than nothing." Another spokesman put it this way: "If you compare what we are getting compared to the assistance Assad receives from Iran and Russia, we have a long battle ahead of us." If so, this is, as Napoleon's foreign minister Talleyrand once put it, "worse than a sin -- it is a mistake."

For beyond the declared U.S. and allied goal of defending the Syrian population against its own government's mass murder, there are many good reasons to get much more serious about arming the Syrian opposition, and very urgently so. To begin with, for anyone concerned about American credibility, fulfillment of these promises should be at least as important as any previous "red lines" or other commitments. Nevertheless, by itself, credibility may not be enough to decide the issue; so consider the following four arguments for intensive action on this score.

First, arming the opposition would be the most effective way of achieving any of several other worthwhile U.S. objectives: from simply keeping up the pressure on Assad to meet the terms of the CW deal, and thereby reducing the need for future military strikes; to improving the admittedly slim prospects of reaching an acceptable political solution to Syria's civil war, which President Obama has proclaimed to be the next desirable step; to creating conditions in which, as President Obama used to say, "Assad must go."

Second, stepping up the flow of weapons to the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and other friendly opposition forces is the best way to counter al-Qaeda and related extremists in Syria. The latter are increasing their presence in the country, but are still estimated even by the most alarmist analysts to be a small minority -- probably no more than around ten percent -- of the overall Syrian opposition. The oft-heard argument that aiding the opposition will somehow empower these jihadis has it exactly backwards. In fact, aiding the non-jihadi majority of the opposition forces is actually a requirement for controlling the jihadi minority among them. In several areas of Syria right now, the FSA is already engaged in mortal combat against the Nusra Front and similar extremists who have infiltrated their ranks. The same is true of the powerful Kurdish PYD militias along the Turkish border, and the Kurdish National Council (KNC)-affiliated Kurds further East who have recently agreed to join forces politically with the mainstream Syrian opposition coalition.

Third, increased American aid to the Syrian opposition will greatly help our coordination with our allies, both in Europe and in the region, all of whom have been seriously disconcerted by our sudden rapprochement with Russia on the Syrian front. The EU has already lifted its arms embargo against the Syrian opposition, with France and Britain in the lead. The GCC states and Jordan are openly eager for U.S. leadership on this point. Turkey, increasingly uneasy and at risk of retaliation from Assad and his allies in Iran and Russia, is also looking for solid evidence of American resolve. The U.S. has a compelling interest in providing leadership, both for the sake of our shared interests and values in Syria and for the sake of our much broader alliance relationships.

Fourth, arming the Syrian opposition has strong domestic political underpinnings, despite the common resistance to renewed military intervention in the Middle East. Opinion polls show that a majority of Americans are reluctant to get involved directly in that fashion, but they also show widespread sympathy for the Syrian people and support for humanitarian assistance. Bipartisan support in the U.S. Congress is assured. Leading Democratic Senator Carl Levin and Republican Senator Bob Corker each spoke for that consensus earlier this week. Levin said that "we recognize

[the opposition] as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people and I think we should provide greater military support." Corker was even more specific: "Some people are going to get arms that should not be getting arms. But we still should be doing everything we can to support the free Syrian opposition. Our intelligence agencies, I think, have a very good handle on who to support and who not to support."

It would be nice, given all of the above, for President Obama to add his own voice to this chorus. His UNGA speech this week would have been the perfect opportunity to do so, but that opportunity was missed. But even more important than those words, of course, will be the actions to make them a reality.

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

Fikra Forum

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

[\(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

TOPICS

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

Proliferation (/policy-analysis/proliferation)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Syria (/policy-analysis/syria)