

# Beyond the Redline: U.S. Opportunities with Syria's Armed Opposition

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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**Experts discuss the nature and capabilities of Syria's various rebel groups and assess U.S. options for shifting the strategic landscape beyond punitive strikes.**

On August 28, 2013, Andrew J. Tabler, Jeffrey White, and Michael Eisenstadt addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Mr. Tabler is a senior fellow in the Institute's Program on Arab Politics and author of the 2011 book [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>). Mr. White is a Defense Fellow at the Institute and a former senior defense intelligence officer. Mr. Eisenstadt directs the Institute's Military and Security Studies Program. Tabler and White discussed the findings of their soon-to-be-published report on the Syrian opposition, while Eisenstadt spoke on the potential for U.S. punitive strikes in response to the regime's latest chemical attacks. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

## ANDREW J. TABLER

Criticism of the Syrian opposition tends to center on its lack of cohesion. An often overlooked problem is the grandiose personalities of opposition leaders, a number of whom focus on individual rather than collective aspirations. But this unfortunate characteristic, which follows their emergence from decades of suppression under tyrannical rule, is not exclusively a weakness. Bashar al-Assad has been unsuccessful in unseating these strong personalities, which in part accounts for the opposition's continued survival.

During the uprising's initial months, the Syrian National Council (SNC) attempted to bring together the opposition's four prevailing political currents: liberals, Muslim Brotherhood cohorts, Salafists, and Kurds. Dominated by exiles and plagued with personal and ideological differences, the council was unable to gain traction inside Syria. Resentment of the SNC mounted as it failed to marshal Western support in fall 2011, when it became clear that the regime's crackdown had to be met with force. In November 2012, an SNC summit in Doha resulted in the formation of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC). Yet the SNC took 40 percent of the seats in the new body, and while representation from inside the country increased, it did not increase enough. Delegates were handpicked rather than elected from individual districts, and Western and Arab patrons failed to provide adequate support.

Meanwhile, a parallel meeting was held in Doha to increase cohesion within the armed opposition. This was followed by another meeting in Antalya, Turkey, the outcome of which was the formation of the Supreme Military Council (SMC) headed by Gen. Salim Idris. The SMC's structure is a hybrid between a Qatari and Saudi provincial model, based on "five fronts" (Northern, Eastern, Western/Central, Southern, and Homs), each subdivided into five departments (Operations, Intelligence, Supplies/Equipment, Administration/Finance, and Transitional Justice). The council is influenced by outside powers, particularly Western and Arab intelligence agencies; its main goal is to serve as a unified conduit for channeling weapons and other assistance to the opposition.

Even with this clearly defined structure, the varying political orientations of SMC departmental chiefs have fostered a climate of disarray. Intentionally formed as a collection of battalions from all points on the ideological spectrum, the SMC was first viewed as an opportunity to co-opt Salafists and moderate them over time through collaboration with nationalists. Had the council been better armed and financed from its inception, it would not have had to rely on extremist groups and their patrons for support.

Despite the SMC's shortcomings, Washington should not reject it as a vehicle for supporting the opposition. Rather, policymakers should discriminately support the council's secular-nationalist members. Syria is a political game played with military means, and the United States will have to play along if wants to prevent the situation from deteriorating further. Two years ago, Syria was a single "state sponsor of terror," but it is now essentially three cantons: the regime in the west, the Sunni center, and the Kurdish east. U.S.-designated terrorist organizations are ascendant in each of these cantons. Accordingly, a careful, midway approach is needed -- one that is more assertive than the present course and does not let regional adversaries continue to shape the outcome unchallenged.

## JEFFREY WHITE

Syria's military opposition has evolved greatly over the course of the rebellion and will evolve further as the war continues. From little more than isolated bands of poorly armed defectors, the rebels have become a force capable of seizing and holding territory and challenging the regime's very existence. By this spring, they were undertaking something like real operations, not just fighting local battles. Offensively, they have laid siege to major regime facilities, isolating, bombarding, and eventually assaulting them. Defensively, they have proven to be skillful and determined fighters.

The current military situation is broadly characterized by several features: the increasingly sectarian nature of the forces themselves; increasingly important foreign involvement on both sides; mounting use of heavy weapons by both sides; continuing regime use of air, artillery, and missile forces to strike military and civilian targets; the ability of both sides to sustain relatively high levels of combat; and increasing combat casualties all around. The regime's advantages include greater firepower, the ability to deploy forces and coordinate their firepower, the ability to raise, train, and employ irregular forces in conjunction with regular units, and the entry of significant allied forces into the war. Assad's very large and effective artillery forces appear to have suffered only minimal losses.

The rebels themselves hail from all strata of Syrian society and represent a broad ideological spectrum. Some units, particularly the Islamic militants, appear to have courage, high motivation, aggressiveness, cohesion, discipline, and a degree of military skill; they have given the rebels an edge in combat and played a key role in the seizure of regime facilities. Many rebel units now have heavy weapons, including heavy machine

guns, anti-aircraft guns, mortars, recoilless rifles, and artillery rocket launchers. Some also have tanks, BMP infantry fighting vehicles, anti-tank guided missiles, medium field artillery pieces, and shoulder-launched surface-to-air missiles. Most of these weapons were captured from regime stocks, and the rebels are employing them with increasing effect.

The precise rebel order of battle remains unclear. Their combat formations appear to number in the hundreds and are subject to various processes that make it difficult to determine their size, organization, areas of operation, and ideological alignment. Lacking an overall logistics system, the rebels are dependent on multiple sources for weapons and ammunition, including outside benefactors. To succeed, they will have to contend with the regime's firepower advantage, seize its major strong points, respond to its offensives, and adapt to its new "way of war." This means planning and executing larger and more complex operations, both offensive and defensive. Above all, they must establish the political and military unity needed to develop and execute an effective strategy for bringing down the regime.

## MICHAEL EISENSTADT

A U.S. strike on Syria could seek to accomplish a range of objectives: signaling the regime that it will be held accountable for its actions, deterring future chemical attacks, tipping the military balance (to pave the way for a diplomatic settlement or an opposition victory), and/or changing the regime. Given the Obama administration's desire to avoid a protracted commitment, however, it will most likely choose the minimal objective of a limited strike to restore U.S. credibility and deter future use of chemical weapons.

Because such a strike is unlikely to degrade the regime's military capabilities in a significant way, it should focus on changing the regime's risk calculus. This means targeting elements of the most loyal and capable units -- those that have spearheaded regime operations and are the most deeply implicated in the use of chemical weapons, namely, the 4th Armored Division, Republican Guard, and Special Forces. While degrading their combat power by destroying tanks and artillery would be helpful, it is more important to maximize casualties among these units, whose members are related by blood and marriage to the regime's leadership. Such a strike would convey the message that the use of chemical weapons could jeopardize the regime's ability to prosecute the war and threaten the safety of its most stalwart supporters.

Under the current circumstances, however, this could prove an elusive goal. By telegraphing its intentions, Washington has given the Assad regime time to evacuate headquarters and disperse and conceal its forces. Also, Tomahawk missiles alone will not be able to produce the desired effect. A couple hundred Tomahawks cannot deliver a sufficiently heavy blow against a regime that has been bloodied in more than two years of desperate fighting. Airpower is generally more effective at hitting mobile and relocatable targets; Tomahawk attacks are often based on intelligence that is several hours old, while pilots overflying the battlefield can pinpoint targets in real time. Moreover, Damascus is likely to perceive U.S. intervention as a one-time event that it can ride out. Accordingly, Assad will likely violate President Obama's redline again in the belief that limited, intermittent use of chemical weapons will not spur new strikes.

Fears that Syria will attack Israel in the event of a U.S. strike are overplayed. Israel has struck at targets in Syria four times this year without prompting a response, and Damascus does not want to encumber itself by opening a second front. The regime's most likely response would be to continue testing the redline with limited use of chemical agents. Likewise, Hezbollah, already entangled in a shadow war with Israel, would be unwilling to incur significant additional risk on behalf of its Syrian allies. And Iran, which has historically tried to avoid direct conflict with the United States, would likely respond by doubling down on its support for Assad, though more risky and provocative responses cannot be ruled out.

Washington should not try to manage this crisis on the cheap; that would be a formula for an ill-conceived action that does not achieve its objectives and thereby invites new challenges to the United States. A more expansive strike than the one apparently being considered is the only way to ensure Assad will not dismiss U.S. intervention as a one-off. At the same time, U.S. policymakers should not labor under the illusion that a single strike, no matter how effective, will solve the problem -- Assad will likely continue testing the redline in any case. Finally, military action must be accompanied by diplomatic maneuvers to strip away the regime's Russian and Iranian enablers, no matter how difficult this may seem. In the end, doubts about the reliability of his allies could have as great an impact on Assad's calculus as military action.

*This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Adam Heffez. ❖*

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