

Arming the Syrian Rebels: Sliding Toward Iraq or Inching Toward Stability?

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

On June 28, 2013, Andrew J. Tabler and Marc Lynch participated in a Policy Forum debate at The Washington Institute. Mr. Tabler is a senior fellow in the Institute's Program on Arab Politics and author of the recent Foreign Affairs article "[Syria's Collapse and How Washington Can Stop It.](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/syrias-collapse-and-how-washington-can-stop-it)"

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Dr. Lynch is an associate professor of political science and international affairs and director of the Institute for Middle East Studies at George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

ANDREW J. TABLER

The argument in U.S. policymaking circles that Washington can deal with the symptoms of the Syrian crisis, but not the disease, is becoming less tenable. Given the threat that the conflict poses to the region's security architecture, the question is not if the United States should get involved, but rather when, how, and at what cost. Washington may not be able to completely end the fighting, but through a more assertive approach, the administration can help contain it.

Several U.S. interests are at stake in the conflict. With the official death toll surpassing 100,000 -- around the number killed in Bosnia, but in half the time -- the humanitarian interest has become increasingly urgent. Onerous refugee flows threaten to destabilize neighboring states, particularly Jordan, where Zaatari refugee camp has become the country's fourth-largest city.

A more direct U.S. interest stems from the regime's use of chemical agents, which an otherwise cautious White House has confirmed with "high probability." The fact that Syria contains the Middle East's largest stockpiles of chemical weapons is especially alarming when one considers that terrorist organizations are ascendant in each of the country's three major areas: the regime-controlled west, the Sunni Arab center, and the Kurdish east.

Syria also matters to the United States because of its central geography, bordering strategically crucial (and, in some cases, fragile) countries such as Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq. Unlike Lebanon's civil war -- which was

brought to a close by the Taif Accord after Israel and then Syria were able to contain the fighting -- the current crisis is likely to rattle the century-old regional security architecture established by the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement.

Going forward, Washington should pursue a four-part agenda for containing the crisis:

1. Enforce the chemical weapons redline. Failure to do so harms America's image in the region and signals to Bashar al-Assad that he can escalate further without consequences. Such escalation -- which is already occurring with the regime's use of surface-to-surface missiles against civilian populations -- will cause more displacement and regional destabilization.
2. Establish safe havens in southern Turkey and northern Jordan, enforced through either Patriot missile batteries or more direct action.
3. Work with the opposition to unseat Assad politically and militarily. Given the rigidity of his regime, Assad has lost the opportunity to reform the country and contend with the demographic youth bulge that has overcome the political system since his father's similarly violent crackdown in 1982. Aid to the rebels must be discriminate, however, and aimed at spurring the opposition to establish a political system that accommodates the country's demographics. The Supreme Military Council (SMC) -- the armed affiliate of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC) -- has Salafists among its leadership, raising concerns that nationalist SMC commanders may leak weapons to extremists given that they share the same short-term goal of deposing the regime.
4. Use diplomacy, but more as an endgame strategy to bring Syria's three major areas and noncontiguous cantons into a more decentralized arrangement.

This measured, assertive, but nonaggressive approach can help contain the crisis. The four steps need not be executed simultaneously, and the United States does not have to commit itself to a full-on confrontation.

MARC LYNCH

The Syrian crisis is only beginning, and America does have a moral and strategic imperative to ameliorate its effects. Yet the magnitude of the conflict is well beyond Washington's control. At best, the United States may be able to marginally affect the strategic and humanitarian situation.

While deterrence against chemical weapons is essential, direct intervention requires a vision of the endgame in order to be viable. Otherwise, Washington runs the risk of escalation into another costly, drawn-out quagmire.

From November 2011 to March 2012, much of the conversation about Syria revolved around whether the faceoff should shift from a political uprising to a military insurgency. Assad was weak in the face of nonviolent challenges to his rule, which, in the context of the Arab Spring, would have confronted him with moral charges against his tyranny. The subsequent militarization of the conflict has been a moral and strategic disaster -- one that Assad courted through unspeakable brutality.

Today, the now irreversibly militarized crisis has evolved into a complex, multisided, internationalized insurgency. Comparative experience has shown that supporting such insurgencies tends to make wars longer and bloodier, and make negotiated outcomes more difficult to achieve. The United States has also been deeply and justifiably concerned that weapons and other aid will find their way into the hands of jihadist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra. In addition, some jihadists are opportunists who could be won over through superior weapons, but then reverse their loyalties if the course of the war changes.

The logic of arming the rebels centers on stabilizing the battlefield, preventing the opposition's defeat, and enabling pushback against the regime after its recent victory at al-Qusayr. The idea is that the rebels will fare better in the diplomatic endgame if they are able to bargain from a position of strength, and that Washington would therefore secure a role in post-Assad Syria.

This chain of logic is unconvincing, however. The United States would not have a "first-mover advantage" upon arming the rebels -- Syria's weapons market is already crowded and convoluted, leaving Washington no room to make a strategic impact. Moreover, by joining the Saudis and other rebel funders who do not necessarily act in the American interest, Washington would further decentralize channels of aid to the opposition and increase its fragmentation. A more productive measure would be to build a unified opposition and fortify it with aid through a centralized conduit.

The 1990s war in Bosnia does not provide solid evidence in favor of arming the opposition either. Fortifying Croatia's military is what tipped the balance in the Bosnian conflict, not airstrikes or the creation of unenforceable safe areas. And Croatia's conventional military was very different from Syria's splintered insurgents.

Arming the opposition also rests on the unfounded assumption that Assad's backers -- Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia -- will not respond with escalation of their own. An increase in munitions on both sides would make the conflict even bloodier and allow radicalization to further take root.

Meanwhile, Washington's fear of regional contagion is legitimate but overplayed, since Arab states are more resilient than commonly perceived. The potential for the crisis to proliferate is highest in Iraq, where one finds increased weapon flows and growing integration between the homegrown Sunni insurgency and Syrian extremists.

Finally, Washington has yet to decide whether the Syrian crisis is a civil war or a front in a regional war against Iran that must be won. Defining and articulating a strategic objective first is crucial to determining the requisite response. By arming the opposition now, Washington might gain diplomatic chips and temporarily strengthen the rebel position, but escalation by Assad and his allies would soon bring the conflict back to its current, lethal stalemate.

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

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