

Syria's Collapse and How Washington Can Stop It

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Articles & Testimony

Washington should pursue a measured but assertive course with Syria, because the longer the conflict lasts, the greater the threat it poses.

Syría is melting down. The ruling regime's attempt to shoot its way out of the largest uprising it has ever faced has killed over 80,000 people and displaced roughly half of Syria's population of 22 million. If the current monthly death tolls of around 6,000 keep up, Syria will by August hit a grim milestone: 100,000 killed, a number that it took almost twice as long to reach in Bosnia in the early 1990s. This a full two years after U.S. President Barack Obama pronounced that President Bashar al-Assad needed to "step aside."

Comparisons to the Balkans do not suffice to describe the crisis in Syria, however. The real danger is that the country could soon end up looking more like Somalia, where a bloody two-decade-long civil war has torn apart the state and created a sanctuary for criminals and terrorists. Syria has already effectively fractured into three barely contiguous areas. In each, U.S.-designated terrorist organizations are now ascendant. The regime still holds sway in western Syria, the part of the country dominated by the Alawite minority, to which the Assad family belongs; and fighters from Hezbollah, a Shiite Islamist group backed by Iran, regularly cross the increasingly meaningless Lebanese border to join Assad's forces there. Meanwhile, a heavily Sunni Arab north-central region has come under the control of a diverse assortment of armed opposition groups. These include Jabhat al-Nusra (also known as the al-Nusra Front), an al Qaeda affiliate, which recently hoisted its black flag over Syria's largest dam on the Euphrates. In the Kurdish north, a local offshoot of the militant Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, which has fought a long guerrilla war against the Turkish government, operates freely.

Look closer, and the picture gets worse. The conflict, whose daily death toll is now above those at the height of the

Iraq war, in 2007, is rapidly spilling over into neighboring countries. The Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan has become that country's fourth-largest city (population: 180,000), stretching the Hashemite kingdom's resources and threatening the stability of its northern provinces. Lebanese Sunnis and Shiites, no strangers to sectarian tensions, are fighting each other across the Bekaa Valley in Syria, and Syria-related altercations occasionally break out within Lebanon. The fact that Lebanon, a country where Palestinian refugee camps are synonymous with misery and militancy, is even contemplating building camps for Syrian refugees is itself a sign of how bad things have gotten. And lest it be unclear how this affects the United States, al Qaeda in Iraq, a terrorist organization that Washington sacrificed an enormous amount of blood and money trying to defeat, has found a welcome home in Syria, announcing in April that it was joining forces with Jabhat al-Nusra to form the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.

The fact that the Assad regime has reportedly dipped into its stockpile of chemical weapons -- the region's largest -- has moved the crisis up several spots on the White House's list of urgent problems. Although public opinion polls suggest that Americans are wary of intervention, avoiding the problem looks less and less feasible, as the situation in Syria shifts from a mostly contained humanitarian catastrophe to a strategic disaster for the United States and its regional allies. A country in a region that is home to 65 percent of the world's proven oil reserves and 40 percent of its natural gas is on the verge of becoming a lawless haven for terrorists where dangerous weapons are on the loose.

Like it or not, the question the Obama administration now faces is not whether to do more to help resolve the conflict but when, how, and at what cost. Las Vegas rules do not apply to Syria: what happens there will not stay there. The massive refugee crisis and the threat that dangerous weapons could fall into the hands of terrorists -- jihadists and Kurdish separatists alike -- directly threaten the security of Washington's allies in Iraq, Israel, Jordan, and Turkey. The meltdown of the Syrian state is empowering terrorist groups and could ultimately give them the freedom to plan international attacks, as the chaos of Afghanistan in the 1990s did for al Qaeda. As complex as the Syrian crisis has become, one thing is clear: the longer it lasts, the greater the threat it poses and the harder it becomes for the United States to do anything about it.

To stop Syria's meltdown and contain its mushrooming threats, the United States needs a new approach, one that starts with a partial military intervention aimed at pushing all sides to the negotiating table. The only way Washington can resolve the crisis is by working with the people "within Syria," as the Obama administration refers to the domestic opposition, instead of without them, that is, at the UN Security Council.

THE COST OF INACTION

The White House's approach to the Syrian crisis so far has been top-down, relying on diplomacy to get Assad out of the way and create the space for a peaceful transition to democracy. But simply pushing the sides to reach a viable political settlement has become less and less likely to succeed. International diplomatic mediation has failed mostly because Washington and Moscow disagree about what the transition should look like. Whereas the Americans demand that Assad and his cronies must leave Syria, Russia insists that he, or at least the regime, stay in place. To this end, Moscow has vetoed three Security Council resolutions on Syria that were sponsored by the United States or its allies and watered down or stymied countless others. Although the two countries recently announced plans to hold an international conference to deal with the crisis, the chances that it will bear fruit are exceeding low given the ambiguity over what the end result of any negotiations among the warring parties would be, the lack of urgency on the part of both the regime and the opposition to come to a power-sharing agreement, and Moscow's and Washington's inability to bring the sides to the table.

In the meantime, Washington has sought Damascus' diplomatic isolation; imposed a raft of oil, trade, and financial sanctions targeting the regime; helped organize a number of hopelessly divided and exiled political opposition groups into the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces; reached out to civilian activists in Syria; and offered \$760 million in humanitarian assistance to Syrian civilians. Fearing that American weapons could

find their way into the hands of extremists, the United States has more or less ignored the armed opposition, which effectively replaced the civilian activists at the vanguard of the effort to topple Assad more than a year and a half ago and already controls large swaths of territory in the country. Washington's hesitation has led many armed groups to seek support elsewhere -- including from private Salafi and jihadist funders in Kuwait, Libya, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia.

The Obama administration has sent a trickle of nonlethal assistance, such as medicine and nearly expired ready-to-eat meals, to the rebel Supreme Military Council, an armed partner of the National Coalition. But this paltry aid will neither force the downfall of the regime nor earn Washington the loyalty of the opposition. Although the White House announced in April, with great fanfare, that it would send bulletproof vests and night-vision goggles to certain vetted armed groups, it appears that this will be too little, too late to win over most of those fighting to oust Assad. Each week, protesters in certain areas regularly berate the United States, and Obama in particular, for doing little for the Syrians in their hour of need. One such demonstration, in Kafr Nabl last April, featured a protest banner asking Obama whether he needed a third term to decide what to do about Syria, and if so, if any Syrians would still be alive then. Since those now aiming shots at the regime will soon call the shots where regime forces give way, Washington should take their growing resentment seriously.

The one thing that Obama has indicated might lead the United States to step in militarily, of course, is Assad's use of chemical weapons. But even here, Washington has vacillated, betraying a deep aversion to getting involved. Obama's redline on chemical weapons has shifted over time. At first, it included any "movement or use" of such weapons. Then, last November, it narrowed to include only their use, after U.S. intelligence detected that the regime had loaded sarin gas into bombs. Then, in late April, the administration seemed to suggest it would act only to stop the "systematic use" of chemical weapons and only when their use could be verified beyond a shadow of a doubt (a tall order, given that Washington cannot itself directly gather the samples needed for such certainty).

The U.S. government says it wants to force Assad from power and check the rise of the extremists in the opposition. But its current approach is furthering neither objective. If Washington keeps pursuing a UN-mediated settlement with Russia while allowing the conflict to deteriorate, Moscow will lose its ability to bring the regime to the table for talks on a real transition of power. As the bitter sectarian war continues, the regime's supporters and the Alawites will have more reasons to fear one day living under Sunni rule and will see a carved-out minstate as preferable to a political settlement -- and thus resist any negotiations. Meanwhile, the United States will have lost whatever diplomatic leverage it might once have had over the opposition forces, who increasingly feel that the Americans abandoned them in their hour of need.

A BETTER WAY FORWARD

Neither the war-weary American public nor the Syrian opposition wants to see a full-scale U.S. land invasion to topple Assad and install a U.S.-backed government; both fear that a massive intervention would mean a repeat of Iraq. But that doesn't mean the United States lacks options. Washington should pursue a measured but assertive course, one aimed at preventing Assad from freely using his most lethal weapons, establishing safe areas for civilians on Syria's borders, and supporting vetted elements of the armed and civilian opposition with weapons, intelligence, humanitarian aid, and reconstruction assistance. The end goal (as opposed to the starting point, as the Obama administration now favors) should be negotiations, led by the UN or another party, that lead to the departure of Assad and his entourage and the reunification of the country. If the United States wants a Syria that is united, stable, and eventually more democratic -- and perhaps no longer allied with Iran -- this is the least bad way to get there.

The United States should start by deterring the regime from using its most lethal tools, namely surface-to-surface missiles and chemical weapons. Such deterrence will require taking out the bombs filled with sarin gas that,

according to The New York Times, were placed last year “near or on” Syrian air bases. Destroying those bombs would allow Washington to signal to Assad that preparing to use his advanced weapons will carry a cost. This would likely reduce the death toll and give Syrian civilians caught up in the fighting fewer reasons to flee their homes, thus helping stem the refugee crisis. If Assad nonetheless decided to up the ante, Washington should launch pinpoint air, missile, or, possibly, drone strikes to destroy or render useless his remaining stockpiles of chemical weapons and the missiles that could deliver them. (Of course, the U.S. military would have to take extra care to avoid harming civilians with nearby chemical explosions.) Should the U.S. military fail to locate or destroy Assad’s most dangerous weapons, or deem it too risky to try, it could instead hit Syrian command-and-control facilities.

Second, to protect Syrians in opposition-controlled territory from attacks by the regime’s Scud missiles and fixed-wing aircraft, the United States should establish 50- to 80-mile-deep safe areas within Syria along its borders with Jordan and Turkey. Critics of intervention often cast the idea of creating a no-fly zone in Syria as too risky for the U.S. pilots and planes that would be involved. But a limited approach focused on border regions would be less perilous, since the regime’s planes and missiles could be shot down using Patriot missile batteries based in Jordan and Turkey or by aircraft flying there. And the safe areas would still allow civilians to take shelter from Assad’s onslaught, keep refugees from flooding into neighboring countries, and enable the international community to funnel in humanitarian aid on a scale that local nongovernmental organizations cannot match.

Carving out these safe areas would also necessitate U.S. air or missile strikes on nearby artillery -- Assad’s tool of choice for killing civilians and a possible method of delivering chemical weapons -- and air defense systems. But these, too, could be conducted from over the border.

To be sure, the United States could not protect the safe areas from ground assaults by Assad’s forces. But by eliminating the threat of death from above, whether from missiles or aircraft, a remote no-fly zone could give the rebels in these areas a fighting chance and the space they needed to safeguard civilians on the ground. Similarly, this over-the-border approach would not be as effective in preventing civilian casualties as sending U.S. aircraft over Syria, but it would carry substantially fewer risks of U.S. planes being shot down by Syrian anti-aircraft batteries. If the conflict markedly worsened or the regime began using its chemical weapons wholesale against the opposition, Washington would also be able to expand the safe areas toward the center of the country and create a larger no-fly zone. But both the limited, remote option and an expanded no-fly zone could be constrained by the introduction of sophisticated Russian S-300 anti-aircraft missile systems, which reportedly could be operational in Syria as early as August -- another reminder of the costs of waiting.

Third, Washington needs to work directly with opposition forces on the ground in Syria (as opposed to just those outside it) to push back the government’s forces, deliver humanitarian assistance, and, most important, check the growing influence of Islamic extremists. This should include the provision of arms to vetted armed groups on a trial-and-error basis, with Washington monitoring how the battalions use the intelligence, supplies, and arms they receive. The initial aid should be funneled through non-Salafi figures in the Supreme Military Council, such as Colonel Abdul-Jabbar Akidi, head of Aleppo’s Revolutionary Military Council and of the armaments committee of the Supreme Military Council’s Northern Front. (It was through Akidi that the United States recently channeled its nonlethal assistance, including the bulletproof vests.) At the same time, Washington should encourage members of the National Coalition to enter liberated areas and work together with the armed groups and local councils to build a new viable political leadership on the ground based on local elections.

None of this work would require American boots on the ground in an offensive capacity, but it could involve Americans wearing other types of footwear. The United States should immediately establish secure offices in southern Turkey and northern Jordan as centers devoted to working with the Syrian opposition, adding to the discussions that are currently taking place between Washington and some rebels via Skype and through periodic

visits of U.S. officials to the border. As soon as their safety can be reasonably well assured, U.S. diplomats and intelligence officers should be sent into the safe areas that the United States has established in Syria, with protection, to meet directly with civilian and armed opposition members, activists, and relief workers. Establishing close relationships with players in Syria would free the United States from having to work through Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, which have in the past directed assistance into the wrong hands; Saudi-purchased Croatian arms, for example, were seen earlier this year in the possession of Jabhat al-Nusra. A more direct approach would, admittedly, put some American lives at risk, so every possible security precaution would need to be taken to avoid an attack along the lines of the 2012 assault in Benghazi that killed Christopher Stevens, the U.S. ambassador to Libya. Still, establishing a presence on the ground would be worth the risks, allowing the United States to work directly with Syrian armed groups to contain the Assad regime and ultimately influence the character of the opposition. One way to exert such influence would be to condition assistance on the opposition groups' political orientations and their respect for civilian leadership and human rights. The United States should also try to influence Syrian politics on the local level to prevent the total collapse of governance in rebel-held territories. Once the opposition fully liberates an area, Washington should require elections to select a civilian leadership. This process would help avoid chaos as the regime crumbles and expose local attitudes and sympathies, allowing U.S. officials to assess the influence of various extremist groups.

Those who oppose increasing U.S. aid to the opposition tend to point to its uglier elements, particularly to fighters affiliated with al Qaeda. But only by getting involved can the United States shape the opposition and support its moderate forces. Although anti-Americanism is growing among the rebels, there is still time for a ground-up strategy to win back their trust. This could be achieved through backing the more liberal, secular, and nationalist battalions and isolating -- and possibly launching drone strikes against -- those extremist forces that refuse to accept civilian authority during the transition.

With U.S. help, there are good reasons to believe that moderates within the opposition can prevail. At its core, the Syrian revolution is a nationalist one. Of the three main currents in the opposition -- secularists, moderate Islamists (including those in the Muslim Brotherhood), and Salafists -- the first two are more nationalist in orientation; their goals are more political than religious, and their agendas do not extend beyond Syria. Several Salafi and extremist groups, such as Jabhat al-Nusra, have transnational goals, such as the creation of an Islamic state or caliphate beyond Syria's current borders. The main reason such groups have come to play such a big role in the opposition is that the anti-Assad forces have had to turn to the Gulf states for weapons and money -- and the sources there have favored the Salafists, which according to some estimates account for up to a quarter of all the opposition fighters. The United States could earn the influence it seeks by providing intelligence, military training, and weapons of its own.

Another factor that will likely check the influence of radicals in the opposition is the diversity of Syria's Sunni community and the country's historic tolerance of minorities. Syria's Sunnis, who make up the majority of the opposition, have long identified with their region or tribe rather than their religion. Whereas Salafists have been able to win some support in the religiously conservative northwest, Damascene Sunnis are more moderate, in keeping with their city's mercantile culture. In the south and the east, affiliations with large families and tribes, even those that stretch into Iraq, tend to matter the most. What this means is that religiously motivated atrocities against minorities throughout Syria are not inevitable and that the Sunnis will need to learn to work with one another as much as with non-Sunnis. To be sure, the prominent role of the Alawites in the regime's campaign could lead to retribution in areas where Assad's forces retreat. But so far, there have been remarkably few cases of opposition forces killing minority civilians en masse. A more active United States could help keep it this way, including by insisting that the opposition follow certain rules of conduct in order to receive U.S. assistance.

Finally, after stepping up its involvement, Washington should seek talks between the regime and moderate

opposition forces, sponsored by either the UN or, given the UN's poor track record, another party, such as Switzerland or Norway. The timing of such talks, which would need to come on the heels of a cease-fire, would largely be dependent on the course of the war and on when Russia and the United States could arrive at a common vision for the transition and an understanding of how to get to that point. Only by raising the costs of diplomatic intransigence for both the Syrian government and Russia, with a clear show of U.S. support for the opposition, is Washington likely to persuade the Kremlin to play a constructive role in the conflict's endgame. By tipping the balance on the ground toward the opposition, Washington could convince the regime -- or at least its patrons in Moscow -- that the conflict will not end by force alone. What is more, such increased U.S. support for the opposition would give the Americans more leverage to bring the rebels to the negotiating table.

At first, any talks would have to focus on getting Assad, his security chiefs, and his top generals to step down and leave the country. The ultimate goal would be the reunification of the country within a democratic and decentralized structure that recognized regional differences. Ideally, Syria's current division into 14 provinces would be maintained. But in areas of the country that are less ethnically homogeneous, such as the province of Homs, the provinces might have to be split along the lines of manatiq (counties) or nahawi (townships). Despite such changes, maintaining the provinces as the building blocks of a democratic system would emphasize regionalism over sectarian identities, encouraging all Syrians to work together toward regional and, eventually, national reconciliation.

Solidifying this order would require Washington to get Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey to cut off support to their clients in Syria, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi groups, in favor of local and regional elected representatives. These countries will no doubt be tempted to continue backing their preferred political fronts in Syria, but Washington should push them to recognize that this approach has failed to bring about Assad's downfall and has allowed for the proliferation of dangerous nonstate actors. The United States now has an opportunity to play the role that these countries have asked it to play from day one of the crisis: to lead a coalition to get rid of the Assad regime and take Syria out of Iran's orbit. In return, Washington should make clear that it expects their cooperation.

STOPPING THE BLEEDING

Taking these steps would help Washington constrain Assad's behavior, address a pressing humanitarian crisis, shape the fragmented Syrian opposition, and keep the conflict from spilling out of Syria's borders. It would also give the United States an opportunity to prevent the division of Syria -- a short-term inevitability -- from becoming a permanent reality. Keeping Syria whole is necessary to prevent its dangerous weapons and its problems, which will no doubt persist for some time, from affecting neighboring countries. A prolonged sectarian civil war risks becoming a broader proxy fight between Iran and the Sunni powers, which would devastate the region as a whole.

Much of what Washington envisages in Syria may not go according to plan. American bullets could find their way into Salafi Kalashnikovs, and American radios could fall into the hands of those preaching hatred. Violence and massacres could delay or prevent elections in some areas. And the conflict could remain a stalemate for years to come, with no side gaining the decisive upper hand. The United States' commitment to any one facet of this plan should not be open ended, and Washington will need to continually evaluate how well it is meeting its objectives.

Despite the many risks, it is important that the United States continue to help parts of the Syrian opposition on the ground take power -- and not attempt to give power to those in exile who promise much but can in fact deliver little. Given the degree of Syria's meltdown and the country's strategic importance, standing idly by is the worst option. Establishing a stronger relationship with the opposition is what will best allow the United States to shape an outcome among the warring parties that suits its interests and those of its allies and provides a better future for the Syrian people.

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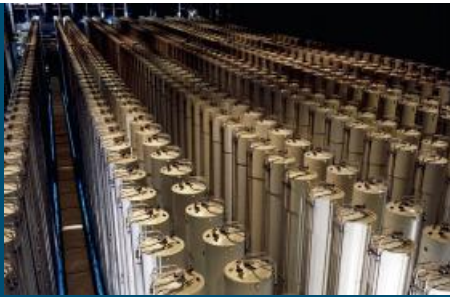


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