

# Syria's Conflict: What Happens If Both Sides Get More Weapons?

by [Andrew J. Tabler \(/experts/andrew-j-tabler\)](/experts/andrew-j-tabler)

Jun 4, 2013

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Andrew J. Tabler \(/experts/andrew-j-tabler\)](/experts/andrew-j-tabler)

Andrew J. Tabler is the Martin J. Gross fellow in the Geduld Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute, where he focuses on Syria and U.S. policy in the Levant.



Articles & Testimony

**T**he PBS NewsHour *blog* Rundown recently published a roundtable discussion on the prospect of more weapons flowing into Syria amid talk of a negotiated settlement. The following is Andrew Tabler's contribution; [read the full discussion on the \(http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/2013/06/syria-conflict.html\) NewsHour \(http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/2013/06/syria-conflict.html\) website \(http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/2013/06/syria-conflict.html\).](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/2013/06/syria-conflict.html)

Russia's supplying of the Syrian regime with S-300 anti-aircraft missiles would make it much more difficult for anyone but the regime to fly over Syria and directly curtail U.S. and allies' options in setting up no-fly or safe zones. It would allow the regime to continue to use the full extent of its arsenal to shoot its way out of this crisis.

The introduction of more weapons to the opposition will be complicated. On the one hand, more light and more sophisticated anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons will make the rebels more effective against Assad's forces and help them push Assad's forces back. The downside risk of this move, of course, is the possibility that such weapons could fall into the hands of Salafist and extremist Islamic groups active in Syria, including Jebhat al-Nusra, an al-Qaida affiliate.

But Washington and Europe are not going into this blind. For the better part of a year, Washington and its allies have evaluated and vetted armed groups in Syria. Many of those groups are included in the list of leaders in the Supreme Military Council (SMC), a collection of commanders and other army defectors organized along five fronts throughout Syria. Had these groups been backed last summer, as was originally proposed by former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, among others, it is likely Assad would be in far worse a position and the more moderate members of the SMC would be in a stronger position.

Unfortunately, Washington dithered far too long, and those on the far right end of the Islamist spectrum grew in stature and capability as they came to the Syrian people's aid when no one else would, at least in terms of lethal assistance. Some of those inside the SMC have shifted toward the right as well and have deepening relationships with Salafists and others who could have closer relationships with Jebhat al-Nusra and groups like it.

So what should Washington do? As I argue in "Syria's Collapse," an essay in the July-August edition of *Foreign Affairs*, Washington should experiment with tried and trusted non-Salafists within the SMC structure, most notably more secular provincial military council leaders who have connections to Washington and have experience dealing with and imposing limits on Salafists and other Islamists. This move, combined with enforcing red lines on Assad concerning chemical weapons and surface to surface missiles and establishing safe zones, is likely to make negotiations with Russia much more fruitful.

It's time Washington realized that the diplomatic track, while important to keep open, is something that is likely to work later rather than sooner in solving the Syria crisis.

*Andrew J. Tabler is a senior fellow in The Washington Institute's Program on Arab Politics.* ❖

*PBS NewsHour*

---

## 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

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

## TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

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

## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Syria (/policy-analysis/syria)