

US and EU Must Arm the Syrian Rebels or Watch Assad Destabilize the Region

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May 30, 2013

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Anything short of Assad's defeat would be a setback not only for Syrians, but also for America and Europe.

For much of the past two years, Europe and the United States have taken only diplomatic and humanitarian measures as Syria's Assad regime has killed nearly 80,000 civilians and forced another million to seek refuge in neighboring states. Despite overwhelming odds and this heavy toll, Syrian rebels made some remarkable gains on the battlefield.

Lately, however, opposition forces experienced setbacks as Assad's allies -- Russia, Iran and the Lebanese Shiite terrorist organization Hezbollah -- have reinforced the regime. The European Union's decision to lift the arms embargo will not immediately reverse momentum in favor of the rebels, but it is an important first move away from the ambivalence that has characterized western policy toward the Syrian conflict for too long.

Until now, the EU and the US have done relatively little to suggest they really want the opposition to win. There is no such ambiguity from Assad's allies. Hezbollah is deploying troops to Syria, Iran is sending military advisors and money, and Moscow is delivering weapons, including advanced S-300 anti-aircraft weapons intended to dissuade western intervention. Meanwhile, as Russia, Iran and Hezbollah take steps to ensure that Assad remains in power, the EU and US are pushing for a July peace conference in Geneva.

This week, British Foreign Secretary William Hague issued a statement describing the lifted arms embargo as "a clear signal to the Assad regime that it has to negotiate seriously" in Geneva, warning that, "all options remain on the table if it refuses to do so." Let's hope he's serious, because Geneva II has scant chance of succeeding. More likely, the conference will discredit the opposition's political leadership in the eyes of the rebels, and further fragment an already hapless political opposition.

In any event, Assad has no intention of quitting Syria. Consider his combative response to the news of the lifting of the embargo in the regime organ *Al Baath*: "France, Britain and their US master cannot accept Syria's military victory, because this lets Syria set the rules of the political solution at the Geneva II conference." Should the current trajectory continue -- and with ongoing Russian support -- Assad's assessment will likely prove accurate.

Geneva or no Geneva, the war in Syria will continue; this is not a crisis that will age well. And the dangers of continued western inaction -- including the destabilization of both Lebanon and Jordan, and/or the leakage of Assad's chemical weapons to terrorist organizations -- far outweigh those associated with providing weapons to the rebels.

In fact, more than a year ago, the EU and US essentially delegated the task of arming the opposition to Saudi Arabia and Qatar, states inclined, respectively, toward Salafism and the Muslim Brotherhood. Consequently, many Islamist militias have ascended in Syria, some of which are affiliated with al-Qaida.

The end of the embargo paves the way for Europe -- perhaps as early as August, in the aftermath of the failed Geneva conference -- to start providing weapons to vetted, non-Islamist rebel forces. Well resourced, these units will attract more followers, inflicting more damage on regime forces and acting as a serious counterweight to Islamist militias.

When Assad is eventually vanquished, the changed dynamic on the ground will better enable non-Islamist units to compete in the fight for Syria's future. Moreover, by establishing relationships with these armed elements now, the EU and US may be able to exert some leverage and help forestall the threat of a post-war ethnic cleansing of the minority Alawite community from which the Assad regime hails.

It's true that adding any more arms to the Syrian arena may, in the short-term, help the opposition kill more people. It's also true that some of these weapons could wind up in the hands of Islamists. But Syria is awash in weapons, and the Islamists' arsenal is already substantial. Regardless, no western state is likely to provide MANPADS, an extremely dangerous anti-aircraft weapon that could be re-deployed against civilian airliners. The rebels, reportedly, have been receiving MANPADS from Libyan stocks loosed after the war.

When and if European nations provide weapons to the Syrian opposition, it may cause some friction with Washington. At present, Europe is simply more forward leaning on the Syria conflict. As the spillover from the war continues to wreak havoc on the region -- and after Geneva fails -- the Obama administration will eventually shift toward the EU position.

Absent the highly improbable solution of negotiation, anything short of Assad's defeat would be a setback not only for Syrians, but for Washington and its European allies.

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