

On Syria, Diplomacy and Coercion Are Not Mutually Exclusive

by [Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](/experts/michael-singh)

May 14, 2013

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](/experts/michael-singh)

Michael Singh is the Lane-Swig Senior Fellow and managing director at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

Increased U.S. support for the opposition and credible threats of military force are vital to altering the calculations of other parties and advancing diplomacy.

When U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry visited Moscow recently to discuss the deepening crisis in Syria, he brought with him the hope that the severity of events in the Middle East would finally be sufficient to spur Russia to reconsider its rigid support for Bashar al-Assad's regime, and plans for a new multilateral diplomatic initiative. What he did not carry with him, however, was leverage; without it, Kerry's latest gambit to bring the Syrian conflict to a negotiated conclusion is bound to fail.

It is right, of course, to prefer a diplomatic resolution of the Syrian conflict over a Western military intervention; and it is imperative, from the U.S. point of view, that whatever resolution is reached leave neither jihadists nor Iranian proxies in charge of Syria. However, successfully reaching this sort of resolution diplomatically depends on the parties to the conflict identifying an outcome that all of them prefer to the alternatives.

No such common ground exists at present, which is why diplomacy has been so unsuccessful and the war has ground on relentlessly. Both the Assad regime and the radical elements of the opposition are externally supplied and believe they can win, and thus be positioned to dictate terms in a post-conflict Syria. More secular elements of the Syrian opposition, on the other hand, are resource-poor and riven by internal differences, and they're unable thus far to mount a sufficient challenge either to the regime or to the extremists.

Outside Syria, Russia and Iran are supporting the Syrian regime, but appear primarily interested in frustrating Western aims, particularly in preventing the emergence of any Western-friendly successor to Assad. America's regional allies are alarmed by the violence in Syria, but are wary of the risks of deeper involvement, are split by rivalries among themselves, and lack the capacity to bring the conflict to a conclusion.

Almost entirely absent from this list of key actors is the United States, despite the vital interests the country has at

stake in Syria. Washington has limited itself to the provision of humanitarian aid to Syria through various channels, as well as "nonlethal assistance" to the Syrian opposition.

U.S. officials from the president down have all but sworn off any further American involvement in Syria. They have variously stated that securing Syrian chemical weapons would take tens of thousands of U.S. ground troops, that providing arms to the Syrian rebels is too risky, and that Syrian air defenses are too formidable to consider airstrikes or a no-fly zone, which in any event would require international legal sanction. Other Western officials have echoed these sentiments.

Those who oppose intervention in Syria and instead support a negotiated resolution might find comfort in this. This reaction, however, is misguided. The absence of any significant U.S. involvement in Syria -- or even the prospect of it -- means that the United States lacks the leverage necessary to support its diplomatic efforts. It is easy to take American influence for granted, but that influence depends on neither goodwill nor esteem. Rather, it depends crucially on how others perceive America's willingness to exercise its power to advance its objectives. If other parties sense that the United States is unwilling to act -- whether to advance their interests or set them back -- they will discount the country in their calculations.

It should be little surprise, in this context, that Russian officials announced a major arms sale to the Assad regime shortly after pledging support for Kerry's peace conference. The move does little to bolster Assad's effectiveness in the fight against opposition forces; rather, it serves to embarrass the United States and undermine U.S. military options while underscoring Moscow's own commitment to its policy, bolstering Russian leverage in advance of any eventual negotiations.

If Barack Obama's administration is serious about achieving a diplomatic resolution to the Syrian conflict that advances U.S. interests, then it must develop leverage of its own. There are two ways to do this. First, the United States could link Syria to other issues in which Russia and other supporters of the Assad regime have stronger interests; for a host of reasons, this is unlikely.

Second, the United States could boost its involvement in Syria and alter how other parties perceive the prospects of even further U.S. involvement. Doing this would require two major changes in policy.

First, the United States must get serious about supporting the Syrian opposition, politically, financially, and militarily. Washington can strengthen the position of secular opposition leaders by channeling assistance through them. This assistance should include funding to allow the opposition to begin governing areas it holds inside Syria, as well as arms to tip the military balance against both the regime and extremists. In addition, Washington should be more hands-on in helping the opposition to overcome its internal rivalries.

This assistance should come, explicitly, at a price. The opposition should offer assurances to the minority groups that fear for their future after Assad's fall, and it should engage meaningfully in a diplomatic process aimed at ending the conflict.

Second, the Obama administration should stop swearing off military involvement in Syria and instead leave the possibility of intervention open. This could decisively change the calculus of the elites surrounding Assad as well as that of Russia and Iran, which may prefer a diplomatic resolution to Western intervention.

These steps would also finally provide U.S. allies in the region a strategy to rally around and a chance to spread the risk of increased involvement in Syria, perhaps finally bringing the policies of countries such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey into greater alignment with one another.

Increased support for the Syrian opposition and credible threats of military force are not steps that should be taken lightly. It would be a mistake, however, to see such steps -- or even more serious actions -- as alternatives to a

diplomatic solution to the Syrian conflict. Instead, they should be viewed as vital to diplomacy's success, insofar as they alter the calculations of the parties to the conflict. Diplomacy and coercion are not mutually exclusive, but mutually reinforcing; there will be little hope of a diplomatic breakthrough on Syria until U.S. actions measure up to U.S. pronouncements.

Michael Singh is managing director of The Washington Institute. ❖

Foreign Policy

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 \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](/policy-analysis/us-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](/policy-analysis/syria)