

Arms for Syria's Rebels: Shaping the War's Outcome

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Brief Analysis

Military assistance can make Syrian rebel forces more effective, help shape the post-Assad period for Syria, and increase influence and access for the donor.

On March 25, the *New York Times* reported that the CIA has been helping Arab governments and Turkey sharply increase their military aid to the Syrian opposition in recent months, expanding the "secret airlift of arms and equipment." Indeed, arming the rebels with suitable weapons and providing them with appropriate training and advice can hasten the collapse of the regime, shape the endgame, and give the United States and its allies some influence on the ground after the Bashar al-Assad regime is swept away.

Yet the nature of the rebel forces creates complications for those considering such aid. One difficulty is the proliferation of units whose orientation and effectiveness cannot always be determined. Moreover, weapons in this war are fungible -- they are traded, sold, and used to gain influence, in addition to serving their combat role. As a result, a careful strategy will be needed to limit the risks of outside weapons leaking to undesirable forces. At the same time, any arms provided will only be a part of the rebels' weapons supply. By overrunning regime positions and bases, the opposition has obtained significant quantities of arms -- including some heavy and advanced weapons -- and ammunition, which have given them a degree of self-sustaining capability. While these supplies will enable many groups to stay in the fight, outside aid gives greater influence to select factions.

MILITARY AID AND EFFECTS

Military assistance will be most useful to the rebels if it permits them to fight in accordance with their preferred way of war. The rebels have hammered away at regime forces, causing daily losses of personnel and armored vehicles and losses of combat aircraft every few days. Military assistance to the rebels could push regime forces to the breaking point by:

- Increasing the rate of attrition of regime air and armored forces, thus weakening their capability
- Exceeding the regime's ability to replace losses in men and equipment

- Increasing the regime's reliance on less capable weapons systems, formations, and troops
- Reducing the willingness of regime forces to fight

The rebels have worked continuously to reduce the regime's presence in the provinces by attacking checkpoints, installations, and police and intelligence facilities. The larger actions, such as seizing airfields and other major sites, often require extended sieges and can result in substantial rebel casualties. Military assistance -- in training, intelligence, planning, and use of indirect-fire weapons -- could shorten the time necessary to take these facilities and reduce casualties for the rebels.

The rebels likewise have tried to control or interdict the regime's lines of communication. Though they have experienced increasing success in such efforts, military assistance could make them still more effective. Planning aid (how to act), provision of intelligence (where and when to act), training (tactics and weapons skills), and the right weapons (range and effects) could all increasingly hinder regime efforts to move and resupply its forces.

In general, rebel actions have maintained continuous pressure on regime forces across most of the country, with the war being fought, at varying levels of intensity, in thirteen of Syria's fourteen provinces (only coastal Tartus is essentially unaffected). The broad geographic range of the fighting has strained regime forces, which could be hampered further if the rebels are reinforced with military assistance. Such assistance could both improve the rebels' ability to coordinate their actions and raise their capabilities overall, increasing the likelihood of regime defeat at the local and provincial level.

For the regime, airpower has been a major tool against the rebellion and a primary cause of civilian fatalities. The regime has also used airpower extensively in attempts to defend its positions under siege and attack rebel forces. The rebels, meanwhile, have begun chipping away at this advantage through attacks on airfields in Idlib, Aleppo, Deir al-Zour, Homs, Raqqa, and Rif Damascus provinces, as well as by using anti-aircraft guns and anti-aircraft missiles captured from the regime and acquiring some man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS) from external sources. These actions have destroyed increasing numbers of combat aircraft, but the regime is still capable of mounting a number of strikes daily. Providing the rebels with additional shoulder-fired SAMs and training in their use, tactical advice, and intelligence assistance on regime air operations could result in further weakening of regime air operations.

Military assistance could also help the rebels in the critical mission of defending the civilian population of areas they control -- against threats not only from the air but also from missiles, artillery, and ground forces. Currently, the regime uses these weapons in an unrestrained fashion against civilians, killing and wounding many, creating refugees, and denying essential services. Anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons could go some way toward creating safe zones. Intelligence on regime air and missile operations could provide both warning of attack to civilian areas and targets for rebel offensive actions. Creation of de facto safe zones could also facilitate the emergence of rebel governance in the protected areas.

For the various rebel groups, both in the run-up to the regime's fall and afterward, military effectiveness will remain an important element in the struggle for legitimacy and influence. As suggested so far, military assistance (weapons, ammunition, advice, and intelligence) could provide selected units with a military and political advantage, helping shape the distribution of political power among armed and unarmed groups, endowing effective units with additional prestige and weight, and, if necessary, allowing such groups to wield their advantage against rivals. The most militarily effective rebel units are likely to be the most politically powerful in the immediate post-Assad period and perhaps for some time afterward.

ARMS AND ENDGAMES

In addition to focusing on groups that the United States prefers in the conflict, military aid should be aimed at shaping the war's outcome in a way most favorable to U.S. interests. And some outcome scenarios are clearly better than others. As a general principle, more-capable rebel forces offer a quicker end to the conflict, better prospects for stability, and potentially greater U.S. influence in Syria and the region.

Outcomes that the United States and its allies do not (or should not) want include:

- **Controlled contraction or consolidation by the regime:** the deliberate retreat by regime forces to key areas of the country (including the Alawite coastal areas and perhaps the Damascus area) allowing remnants of the regime to stay around indefinitely
- **Stalemate:** a situation in which neither side is able to gain a clear advantage, fighting grinds to a halt or slows way down, and lines and positions freeze more or less in place
- **Regime recovery:** a scenario in which Assad musters the strength and resources to restore the military situation and force the rebels into retreat

Outcomes more likely to produce a favorable situation include:

- **Provincial dismantlement of the regime:** the rebels wresting areas of the country from regime control, piece by piece or province by province, allowing them to assume political authority more slowly and potentially in a more orderly way
- **Regime collapse:** the sudden breaking of the regime and its forces under the strain of the war
- **A July 1944-type situation (i.e., the attempted assassination of Hitler):** the seizure of power by some elements of the regime's regular forces, and their attempt to negotiate an end to the conflict

CONCLUSION

Western military assistance should have three main objectives:

- To create more-capable rebel forces that can better fight the regime and defend civilians
- To shape the outcome of the war and the postwar situation, positioning those receiving aid to play key roles in the post-Assad period
- To increase access and influence for the United States and Western countries and their allies both during the fight and after the regime falls

The most effective assistance for increasing the rebels' capabilities against the regime is provision of appropriate weapons; training in and advice on how to use these weapons; provision of ammunition and spare parts; and assistance with intelligence on regime dispositions, movements, threats, and vulnerabilities. Such assistance would not guarantee a swift or clean end to the war or the success of forces favorably disposed to the West, but it would make those outcomes more likely.

Jeffrey White is a defense fellow at The Washington Institute and a former senior defense intelligence officer. ❖

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