

What Should U.S. Policy Be in Syria?

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Articles & Testimony

As debate intensifies over how Washington should respond to Syria's escalating crisis, CFR rounded up experts to offer their recommendations. The following is Mr. Tabler's contribution; [read the full roundtable on the CFR website \(http://www.cfr.org/syria/should-us-policy-syria/p29638\)](http://www.cfr.org/syria/should-us-policy-syria/p29638).

For nearly a year, Washington has found new and creative ways of not dealing directly with armed groups in Syria, preferring instead to engage with civilians in exile in the Syrian National Council and its larger successor, the Syrian Opposition Coalition. But with the rapid advances of the various groups comprising the Free Syrian Army, it is now clear that those who are taking the shots at Assad will be calling the shots as he exits the scene.

The only way to help ensure that civilians play a leading role in post-Assad Syria -- to reverse growing anti-American sentiment due to the perception that Washington stood by and did very little while Syrians were slaughtered, and to help the United States shape the political outcome -- is for Washington to transform its covert "light footprint" policy of engaging armed groups through Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey into an overt political outreach to non-extremist groups in the Free Syrian Army.

Once written off as a cyber-opposition force, the groups comprising the Free Syrian Army have made dramatic gains against the Assad regime's forces, driving them out of large swaths of now disputed territory in the east and north of the country. FSA groups, as well as jihadist groups that fight alongside the FSA but are not a part of it, have overrun regime weapons depots from which they have acquired SA-7 shoulder-fired antiaircraft weapons. The Syrian armed opposition is now shooting down regime combat aircraft in greater numbers, leading to concerns that an Assad regime desperate to halt the rebels' advance may resort to chemical weapons. Regardless, the armed opposition is likely to soon transform this disputed territory into "liberated" territory: areas of the country where the regime can no longer project its power in any form.

Given the fragmented nature of the Syrian armed and civilian opposition alike, Washington will soon have to deal with a Syria, or perhaps Syrias, ruled by multiple groups with multiple leaders. The best way to influence this emerging leadership is to abandon the dream of dealing only with civilians and to engage armed groups as well. To accomplish this, Washington needs to determine clear criteria for targeting the groups -- such as extremists -- the United States will not deal with, engage the remainder to find out their immediate needs, and develop a method for

providing this assistance.

Although this would naturally include the provision of weapons in some cases, there are other opportunities as well. Armed groups in the country are already struggling to deal with demands from civilians in areas ravaged by war, and Syrians will need extensive humanitarian and economic assistance as the longer battle begins to build a viable and democratic post-Assad Syria at peace with the region and the world.

Andrew J. Tabler is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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