

The Case for Ramping Up EU Intervention in Syria

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Aug 17, 2012

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Articles & Testimony

If Europe wishes to effect true democracy in the wake of the Assad regime, it must stop playing into the hands of the Muslim Brotherhood and start aiding the rebels on the ground militarily.

It has been conventional wisdom that the Syrian opposition is deeply divided, making aid and support from the international community very difficult to send. The lack of "one address" with which to coordinate also makes any thoughts of a more robust military intervention even more unlikely. Add to that the continued refusal of Russia and China to support stronger UNSC resolutions and there is no wonder that the carnage in Syria has gone on for nearly 18 months with the world looking on and wringing its hands.

It may be true that there are a multitude of organizations speaking for the opposition. And it's equally true that several of these organizations and groups are at loggerheads with one another. It can sometimes be a trial trying to sort through the plethora of groups and assess who is a true democrat and who is only pretending to be one. That much became clear during a fact-finding trip to Turkey organized by the European Foundation for Democracy (EFD, an NGO based in Brussels) in early July. Five days of meetings with Syrian groups and individuals (in Antakya and Istanbul), encompassing the full ideological and political spectrum, revealed the divisions and splits within the opposition and to a large extent among the people active inside Syria.

But the trip also revealed something else, and far more important: The opposition may be divided to some extent, but it is not divided in the aim of getting rid of Assad. And it is not disorganized, but de-centralized. Discussions during five very intensive days also made it clear that the violence endured by the Syrian population (very few areas

of the country have been spared the violence) could have been mitigated by more-robust support from the international community. It also became crystal clear that the oft-mentioned fear in the West of a growing Islamist presence in the opposition is due in no small measure to the fact that no one else is stepping up to the plate. The Islamists (groups aligned with or belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood [MB] and more radical Salafist groups) are following age-old tactics and taking advantage of this situation, and in the process managing to sidestep other organizations and groups with no, or very little, Islamist bent.

This trend is perhaps most vividly seen in what for many in the West has become synonymous with the Syrian opposition: the Syrian National Council or SNC. A vast majority of the people we met, regardless of ideological bent, said the same thing: The SNC is solidly infiltrated by the MB and dominated by the brothers. But this conflicts with information coming out of Syria for the past year, underlining the sometimes-deep divisions between the opposition inside Syria and the one organized and based outside, primarily in Turkey. According to our interlocutors, the MB has successfully presented the SNC as the "go-to" group through which to funnel what little aid there is. That this has been achieved under the noses of the EU is certainly due to the fact that the Union has found an address in the SNC, something the skilled operators in the MB have used to strengthen its position. The fact that the Turkish government is close to the MB has made this even easier, and the lack of support from other democratic countries in the West eases the process.

But Islamists are not dominating inside Syria. That much also became clear during our discussions. On the contrary, it was strongly brought home to us that the vast majority of the opposition much preferred the EU, whose democratic structures are the political ideal after Assad. But the lack of support from the West, and continued refusal to help militarily, gives the non-Islamist opposition precious little choice.

Chasing after "one address" has led the EU into to the arms of the MB, and by doing that, the Union has greatly complicated the goal of what a majority of the opposition says it wants, namely a genuinely democratic country with a political and legal structure that mirrors the EU. Instead of putting all the chips in the SNC basket, the international community should diversify and support the many smaller groups that are already doing heroic work in trying to help the Syrians, inside and outside Syria. A decentralized opposition makes for a decentralized response. And there are no problems with finding good people to work with here. Also, the fact that the opposition is decentralized is one very important reason it hasn't been crushed. We in the West, and especially in the EU, should turn this to our advantage and, before it's too late, work on the goodwill we still may retain. The amazing thing is that despite the pitiful support from the EU, the Union is still viewed as the role model for what may come in Syria. The longer we wait, however, the less chance that this will be enough to stop the Islamist trend in Syria and make a truly democratic Syria a possibility.

Fortunately, in the two weeks since we returned from meeting the Syrian opposition in Antakya and Istanbul, several encouraging developments have occurred. Each of these development also poses some new problems – but each of those problems can in turn be remedied, or at least greatly reduced, by judicious outside aid.

First, the EU and the US have stopped insisting -- in their public statements, private meetings, and probably also in their emerging aid plans -- that the SNC is the sole or even primary address for the Syrian opposition. This does not mean abandoning, but rather supplementing, the SNC, with additional, more diverse and hopefully more "inside Syria" groups and individuals.

The problem with this approach, of course, is that it risks further fragmenting an already fractured opposition. On one level, the results are already ironic, with new splinter factions and umbrella organizations sprouting up almost weekly, all in the name of "unifying" the opposition. The solution, however, is simple: Stop even trying to unify the opposition, and instead deal directly with different groups that merit different kinds of outside support. There will be time enough during the post-Assad transition to coordinate and eventually combine them into a functional new

government.

Second, on a related front, the previously deeply divided Syrian Kurds have come together, at least for now, in opposition to Assad's regime and in a promise not to support PKK violence against Turkey. Because Syria's three million Kurds now control a highly strategic strip of territory along the border with Turkey, this helps open Aleppo and other key targets to the opposition, while mitigating Turkish security concerns so far.

The problem here, as we heard at some length on our trip, is that Syria's majority Arab opposition and minority Kurds sharply disagree over "federalism" or some form of Kurdish autonomy in a post-Assad Syria. Yet, even this newly salient ethnic divide within the opposition offers an opportunity for creative outside mediation. The EU and the US should seize the opportunity by actively working with Turkey, the Kurdish Regional Government of Iraq, and others to broker a compromise political understanding between the mainstream Syrian opposition and the major Kurdish parties in that country. Not only will this hasten Assad's fall, it will also help avoid serious ethnic conflict after his departure from the scene.

Third, and most sensationally, Assad's regime has suffered major assassinations and defections in the past two weeks. And Kofi Annan has just resigned, removing the final fig leaf for diplomatic dithering. So far, so good.

The problem here, however, is doubly ironic. So dramatic have these events been that some commentators, and probably some EU and US policymakers, have now hastened to call Assad's demise imminent, or at least inevitable – even without any further foreign intervention. So, for example, the latest leak about increased US aid to the opposition apparently refers to an intelligence "finding" that is actually several months old, that does not include any "lethal" aid, and that therefore seems more like another excuse for inaction than a genuine policy improvement. Yet, in the absence of real, stepped-up outside support for the opposition, the fall of the regime will certainly take much more time, cost many more lives, and produce a considerably less moderate, stable, or democratic outcome than would otherwise be the case.

The solution to this problem is the simplest of all: use recent gains by the Syrian opposition as an opportunity to end this crisis, not as a rationale for prolonging it. In other words, move urgently and decisively to ramp up humanitarian, political, and yes, military aid to the opposition. That means especially the "lethal" but defensive anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons they want and need in order to resist the regime's last desperate murderous onslaughts.

The logic of this position leads to one final, perhaps more counterintuitive, point. Outside Syria, everyone has been waiting for the US to take the lead on this issue, particularly on more advanced arms supplies. But inside Syria, as our own systematic surveys and extensive personal conversations have made clear, the Syrian people themselves are looking first and foremost to European countries, like France or Turkey, to save them. Why, then, don't European countries take this initiative, leaving the US to "lead from behind?" It worked in Libya, last spring. Why not in Syria, right now?

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