

After the Annan Deadline: Options for U.S. Policy on Syria

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Apr 11, 2012

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Brief Analysis

Bashar al-Assad's complete disregard for UN special envoy Kofi Annan's April 10 deadline for withdrawal of regime forces from population centers is only the latest sign that Damascus has no intention of implementing the envoy's six-point plan to deal with the Syria crisis. The fact that the regime's armed forces will remain in and around population centers when a proposed ceasefire takes effect at dawn on April 12 means that peaceful self-expression and assembly -- core tenets of U.S. policy in Syria for the past year -- will be severely constrained. Combined with the regime's other demands beyond the scope of the Annan deal, it now seems that while the UN initiative may at best temporarily reduce some humanitarian suffering, it is unlikely to be able to provide a political solution that would end the crisis. Therefore, the United States would be well advised to expand its support for the opposition "within Syria" through a coalition of the core members of the Group of Friends of the Syrian People that met in Istanbul last week.

Noncompliance with the Annan Plan

Despite Syrian foreign minister Walid Mouallem's assurances in Moscow that the Assad regime is implementing Annan's six-point plan, developments on the ground suggest the opposite. The Assad regime pledged in point two of the plan to "immediately cease troop movements towards, and end the use of heavy weapons in, population centers, and begin a pullback of military concentrations in and around population centers." In the past week alone, the regime has intensified its shelling of villages and neighborhoods throughout Syria, killing more than 1000 people according to opposition sources. On April 6, the U.S. Department of State released satellite imagery showing that military forces have not been withdrawn from population centers, as outlined under the Annan plan, but rather only repositioned near population centers. On April 11, Local Coordination Committees in Syria reported shelling, troop movements into towns, and more than 100 casualties. Damascus has exploited the UN plan to again attempt to impose its "security solution" over the country, squeeze out space for peaceful protest, and dictate terms from above. Given that protests and armed resistance actions continue, Damascus has failed yet again.

The signs of Damascus's noncompliance with the plan have been readily apparent. On April 5, Syria's representative to the UN, Bashar Jaafari, said that the agreement to withdraw military formations did not include "police forces" -- a vague reference to the regime's security forces, which have been major participants in the crackdown. Then on April

8, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Jamal Makdessi announced that it was a "wrong interpretation" to expect that Damascus would abide by its pledge to Annan to withdraw its military forces by April 10. He went on to make further demands outside the UN agreement, including that Annan obtain "written guarantees" from the opposition to halt violence, as well as from Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey to stop "funding and arming terrorist groups" -- the Assad regime's parlance for the Syrian opposition as a whole.

More important, the Assad regime is failing to implement point two of the Annan plan -- withdrawal of forces from population centers -- because it knows it cannot implement point six of the plan: "respect freedom of association and the right to demonstrate peacefully as legally guaranteed." Assad knows well that peaceful protestors, who have continued their activities unabated as the international community has focused its attention on the armed opposition, will fill Syria's main squares and demand Assad's departure or worse. To preclude this scenario, Assad has labeled peaceful protestors as "terrorists" and used live fire to put them down. The only aspect of the Annan plan that may be immediately workable would be temporary cessation of hostilities to provide humanitarian aid, along with admission of journalists and UN monitors.

Working the Problem from the Ground Up

Diplomacy will continue to play an important role as the Syria crisis unfolds. In the end, Russia and China may be important as part of any effort to get Assad to step aside and usher in a Syrian government more responsible to the demands of Syria's youthful population. But Assad's dodging of the Annan plan's deadline, as well as his attempt via Russia to blur the main tenets of the agreement by introducing monitors before a ceasefire, amply demonstrates the limits of diplomacy at this time.

Fortunately, the United States has options. The United States is a member of the Group of Friends of the Syrian People, a collection of eighty-three countries that met for the second time on April 1 in Istanbul to support the Syrian people and prepare for a post-Assad Syria. Washington would be well placed to work with the group's other core members, which include Britain, France, Germany, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, to forge and lead a coalition of countries to more directly support the Syrian opposition within Syria and prepare for all contingencies concerning the Syria crisis. Different countries would play different roles within this coalition. Gulf countries, for example, have already indicated a willingness to help arm the opposition within Syria. Turkey, which had to deal with deadly fire from Syrian forces in the Oncupinar Syrian refugee camp near Kilis this week, is now considering methods to funnel support to the opposition and has reportedly developed a contingency plan to develop border safe havens for refugees within Syrian territory. Thus far, the United States has officially committed to giving nonlethal assistance to the opposition within Syria, which could include communications equipment.

To pressure Assad to end violence against the population and ultimately make an exit will require more U.S. assistance for the opposition within Syria. In the short term, the United States should share limited intelligence with the opposition concerning the deployment and movement of Assad regime forces -- security, military, and paramilitary Shabiha -- within Syria, especially as they approach population centers for an assault. This will help alleviate the effects of Assad's "whack-a-mole" approach to the opposition, in which regime forces attempt to clear areas -- a tactic that drives up death tolls and refugee flows -- but cannot hold them.

Second, the United States should intensify its examination of the opposition within Syria, both those entities practicing violent and nonviolent resistance against the regime. Such study should include ways to support popular self-defense alongside civil resistance, as two sides of the opposition coin. A key first step would be to intensify the process of identifying groups with which Washington could work that not only share Washington's short-term goal of ousting Assad but its long-term goals as well, including a secular post-Assad Syria whose government respects minority rights.

Third, Washington should immediately expand contingency planning about possible direct U.S. military support as part of actions to head off massacres or a humanitarian disaster in the country. This includes supporting the creation, with allies such as Turkey, of safe havens inside Syria.

Conclusion

The implementation of the Annan plan to date demonstrates that the UN process going forward may be able to treat the symptoms of the disease -- the humanitarian fallout from the crisis -- but is unlikely to cure the disease itself -- the minority Assad regime's brutal rule over a majority Sunni population that is the youngest in the Middle East outside the Palestinian territories. Washington should continue to press for UN Security Council resolutions or statements condemning Assad, but to base its approach on the likelihood of international consensus on the Syria crisis would be unwise.

The best means of whittling away at the Assad regime's support base continues to be exposing the regime's brutal response to dilemmas posed by the civil and armed opposition inside Syria. What is going on in Syria is not a civil war but an armed and unarmed insurrection against a regime that responded with extreme brutality to peaceful protest. The Syrian opposition in exile organized under the Syrian National Council may be rife with divisions. But as the conflict in Syria has morphed into a civil and armed insurgency against the regime, coordination among atomized opposition groups inside Syria has intensified for reasons of sheer survival. The United States needs to find ways to promote, assist, and influence that trend.

Andrew J. Tabler is Next Generation Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and author, most recently, of [In the Lion's Den: An Eyewitness Account of Washington's Battle with Syria](/policy-analysis/view/in-the-lions-den-an-eyewitness-account-of-washingtons-battle-with-syria) (</policy-analysis/view/in-the-lions-den-an-eyewitness-account-of-washingtons-battle-with-syria>). ❖

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