

Not Supporting the Opposition "within Syria" Is Supporting Assad

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Brief Analysis

During their March 25 meeting, President Obama and Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan agreed that part of the agenda of the April 1 "Friends of Syria" summit in Istanbul will concern "nonlethal assistance" to the opposition "within Syria." This indicates that the administration is beginning to accept a "tragic truth": without much greater U.S. support for the opposition on the ground, Bashar al-Assad's regime will certainly massacre many more civilians all over Syria, and Assad himself will almost certainly remain in power for the foreseeable future.

Civil Protest and Armed Opposition

The Assad regime's bloody military crackdown in Homs and Idlib governorates has not driven people from the streets, a fact that the daily protest map continues to lay bare. But for Syria's civil protest movement to survive in the long term and consolidate its political gains, it will need to regroup tactically. Instead of relying solely on street demonstrations that make protestors vulnerable to the worst regime violence, they might wish to intensify what civil resistance experts refer to as "methods of dispersion" -- boycotts, general strikes, slowdowns, and other kinds of noncooperation -- to keep out of the line of fire and keep up political and economic pressure on the regime. They could focus on building underground solidarity and working across communities to ensure that vital humanitarian supplies can reach the most vulnerable. Eventually, expanding mass noncooperation to involve key economic pillars, notably in Damascus and Aleppo, could signal to regime insiders that change is inevitable.

In terms of armed opposition, the regime's dilemmas going forward largely concern the methods used to battle opponents and retake "liberated" areas from the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Many predicted that harsh regime "clear and hold" operations using heavier weapons would scare the opposition into surrender. While troops have moved

into Homs and Idlib province, a quick look at videos and reports coming out of both areas shows that the opposition has yet to be cowed, with the regime unable to completely clear the areas, let alone hold them.

In the long term, such operations are likely to spur refugee flows into neighboring countries and increase resentment and anger against the regime. The latter development could lead to more defections from the military, especially if the armed opposition gathers strength and organization. Syrian soldiers participating in the crackdown face the dilemma of whether to shoot their fellow countrymen (and, more often than not, fellow Sunnis) or defect to the opposition. With no sign of international intervention in sight, the protest movement is increasingly turning to local armed oppositionists to defend them from snipers and regime attacks, and an increasing number of protestors, even those most committed to civil resistance, are contemplating taking up arms. The armed opposition will therefore probably play an increasing role in attempts to overthrow the regime and shape post-Assad Syria.

Some FSA members are defectors from the regime based in either Syria or neighboring countries. They have to show a military ID to join the organization, giving it a sense of discipline and organization. Many others operating under the FSA banner are local civilians who watched their neighbors get shot -- and the international community do little as death tolls rose -- and decided to pick up arms and shoot back. To be sure, at least one armed group in Idlib is led by a Salafi sheikh, but that is the exception which proves the rule. Syria's Sunni community is extremely diverse, and it would not be surprising to find pious men with long beards fighting in the conservative northwestern Idlib province, men in more tribal attire fighting in eastern Syria or Deraa, or all of the above around Homs, where the country's cultural mosaic comes together. But that does not indicate they are Salafists, let alone jihadists or al-Qaeda.

A crucial point is that Syria's opposition clearly believes that foreign support, armed self-defense by (and for) protestors, and peaceful civil resistance are all complementary -- not competing -- objectives. Supporting that perception is the pattern of events on the ground: in the outlying provinces of Idlib, Deraa, and Hasaka, in Homs before the full-scale regime assault, and, most recently, in parts of metropolitan Damascus, mass protests and armed operations by the FSA or local militias have tended to coincide. The most visible slogans, placards, and organized demonstrations reinforce this view. For example, one of the most widespread and successful in the long series of Friday demonstrations was publicly dedicated to the FSA, including in Damascus. Banners and signs unfurled throughout the country cry for international aid to its fighters and decry those foreign countries that stand in the way.

Some still argue that supporting the opposition will "militarize" the Syrian crisis, diverting the revolution from a more peaceful and supposedly more effective path. But the reality, of course, is that this crisis is already "militarized." And tangible outside support for the opposition is now a necessary condition for any Syrian's continued ability to resist the regime's all-out onslaught. Without such support, the Syrian people have virtually no chance of maintaining their courageous stand -- whether peaceful or armed for self-defense -- against regime power. For this reason, immediately supporting the opposition is not a diversion from peaceful protest, but rather the only way to preserve an option for civil resistance.

Aiding the Opposition "Within Syria" Best Serves U.S. Interests

To be sure, the United States should take certain precautions to increase the odds that its aid will complement, not contradict, the course of peaceful protest. U.S. aid should include assistance for civil resistance groups operating on the ground, to make them aware of alternative nonviolent methods that, under current conditions in Syria, offer better prospect than mass demonstrations. Stepping up humanitarian assistance to besieged communities and sharing creative resistance ideas from previous antidictatorship struggles would be helpful.

The United States should also make aid conditional on the adoption of an appropriate code of conduct for the opposition, including protection and fair treatment of all minorities, abstention from prisoner abuse or other human rights violations, and avoidance of terrorism or other indiscriminate attacks against civilians. Equally important is prompt and strict enforcement of this conditionality in any cases of infringement, which unfortunately are probably unavoidable. In addition, Washington should help the opposition craft and implement a media strategy to accurately reflect its dual nature: both armed and unarmed, popular and institutional.

Assistance to armed groups could be targeted to specific regions of the country, particularly the border provinces in the north, south, and east, leaving the major urban areas as more favorable arenas for various forms of civil resistance and peaceful protest. Given the fragmented nature of the opposition, such an approach would be both practical and prudent, turning that very fragmentation from a liability into an advantage. This would minimize civilian casualties while offering potential safe havens for civilians in extremis. Assistance, be it lethal or nonlethal, could also be channeled through civilians, creating FSA dependencies on the civilian groups that have made the most gains to date against the regime. Such assistance would likely vary according to which groups are influential in different theaters of the conflict, with local Revolutionary Councils (which organize civil resistance and other antiregime activities) featuring conspicuously in Homs and, to a certain extent, Deraa (where prominent families are also influential). In conservative Idlib province, where Salafists and other Islamists have a presence, Washington will need to find interlocutors with whom Washington shares long-term interests and who support FSA activities in that area.

For months, policymakers have sought broad-based diplomatic pressure to splinter the regime from the top, with Russia and its established relationships with Syria's military elite key to ejecting Assad and his family from the game. Although this would be a much cleaner solution than civil war, the insurmountable problem is that Moscow believes, correctly, that Assad can "hold on" indefinitely unless U.S. policy turns effectively against him. If Washington wants the Assad regime to go (as President Obama has repeatedly declared), and if it hopes to bring Russia on board and help build a new Syria that can end the violence and advance U.S. interests, it must operate from a position of strength and work against the regime from the ground up, just as the Syrian opposition does. To do so, it will have to support the opposition on the ground -- both its nonviolent and violent varieties.

Although the United States, European Union, Arab League, and Turkey are privately helping exiled oppositionists, the main target of such assistance -- the Syrian National Council -- is rife with divisions. To repel the regime's vicious onslaught, groups on the ground such as the Revolutionary Councils and elements of the FSA "franchise" have begun to work together more effectively. Washington could use its aid to help deepen and accelerate the process of increasing unity among opposition elements.

Conclusion

In an ideal world, peaceful protest alone would force Assad from power. In the real world, however, the longer the regime holds on, the bloodier and more sectarian the armed insurgency will become, and the more likely the country will be to slide fully into civil and sectarian war akin to that in 1980s Lebanon. The choice now is brutally clear: either support the Syrian opposition, armed and unarmed, or support the Assad regime.

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