

# Arm the Free Syrian Army Now

by [David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

Mar 8, 2012

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Program on Arab Politics. He is the former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.



Articles & Testimony

---

## Providing arms and other materiel to the FSA stands a far better chance of success than waiting for a silver bullet.

**D**uring the decades of international sanctions against Saddam Hussein's Iraq, successive U.S. administrations yearned for regime change. The hope was that longstanding frustration with international isolation and relative deprivation would inspire some unspecified Baathist general to assassinate Saddam. One year into a popular uprising that has left nearly 10,000 civilians dead, Washington again finds itself waiting for a Baathist general to initiate a "silver bullet" coup -- this time in Syria. "I think it is going to happen," Secretary of State Hillary Clinton predicted optimistically earlier this month.

Perhaps. But absent such providence, as with Saddam, Washington is going to require a more robust policy to dislodge Syrian dictator Bashar Assad from power. Just how much more muscular the policy should be is the topic of some debate. Earlier this week, Senator John McCain made an impassioned plea for immediate military intervention -- in particular, the deployment of U.S. air power -- to help expedite regime change.

Notwithstanding the slaughter in Syria, however, after Iraq and Afghanistan, Americans have little stomach for more U.S.-led military operations in the Middle East. Reflecting this attitude, the Obama administration mantra until recently had been that the military option in Syria was "off the table." In fact, the White House was so opposed to a Syrian redux of the 2011 NATO operation that ousted Libyan strongman Muammar Qaddafi, the administration extended its anti-militarization policy beyond U.S. shores to include the Syrian opposition.

Since the uprising began, the administration has been counseling anti-Assad demonstrators to stay peaceful at all costs. Indeed, in September, U.S. ambassador to Syria Robert Ford predicated American support for the opposition on the protests remaining non-violent. More recently, a State Department spokesman said Washington didn't "want to see the situation in Syria further militarized," lest it give the Assad regime "an excuse for the violence they are perpetrating."

Putting aside the bizarre supposition that Damascus somehow requires a pretext to kill its rebellious citizens, administration policy denies even the fundamental right to Syrians to defend themselves in the face of massacre. Lately, the White House has softened its earlier position, suggesting that all options remain on the table. But President Obama still seems to believe that Assad can -- and should -- be removed from power without violence. Instead the administration is hoping that sanctions and multi-lateral diplomacy spur a palace coup.

A coup, alas, would unlikely end the uprising. After all, the Syrian people are not merely calling for an end to Assad, but to his Alawite minoritarian regime, and would doubtfully be pleased if the dictator was replaced by his brother or brother-in-law.

Still, biting sanctions are having an impact on Assad. It's overly optimistic, however, to believe that these measures will catalyze regime change anytime soon. Meanwhile, waiting for the sanctions to succeed is a recipe for continued slaughter.

Anemic diplomacy on Syria hasn't helped much either. Consider the disastrous Russian veto of a U.S.-sponsored toothless U.N. Security Council Resolution condemning Syria in early February and ongoing ineffective Arab League action to date, which has only emboldened Assad to step up the atrocities. And the administration's latest initiative, the "Friends of Syria" group, focused on providing humanitarian -- but not military -- assistance to the Syrian people, also shows little promise. On February 24, Saudi Arabia stormed out of the first "Friends" conference, protesting the feckless approach to ending the slaughter. It's time, the Saudi foreign minister said, to start arming the opposition.

Riyadh has it right. Short of putting NATO forces in harm's way again, the only way to accelerate Assad's departure is to start supporting the Free Syrian Army (FSA) with both lethal and non-lethal military assistance. This growing band of defectors from the regime has already demonstrated itself to be a resourceful, credible, and deadly force committed to protecting anti-regime protestors and attacking the regime. It would be more effective, however, if it possessed secure communications systems, better medical equipment, additional weapons, sufficient ammunition, and more anti-tank missiles and rocket propelled grenades.

Rather than leading from behind and delegating the task of equipping of the FSA to less-discriminating states, like Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the Obama administration should take a lead role in supplying the FSA and mitigate potential leakage of weapons to nihilistic Islamists. At the same time, by providing materiel to these forces in a systematic manner, Washington can help transform these disparate franchise opposition units into a more disciplined and united force tied to a centralized command. Moreover, working closely with the FSA now will establish relationships that can help avoid a Libya scenario -- where independent militias continue to run amok -- and potentially enable Washington to better shape the post-Assad environment.

Perhaps most importantly, as NATO commander Adm. James Stavridis recently pointed out to the Senate Armed Services Committee, providing materiel support to the FSA would hasten the Assad regime's demise.

While channeling even generous supplies of military materiel to the FSA will not any time soon result in opposition forces marching victorious into Damascus, improved opposition capabilities will demoralize regime forces, fuel more defections, and, over time, degrade the Assad regime. This is not going to be a quick fix, but the longer the status quo persists, the higher the risk that Syria will degenerate to a failed state ripe for al Qaeda inroads and sectarian conflict.

Washington's Syria policy is not working, at least not fast enough. Assad, not surprisingly, refused to comply with the longstanding U.S.-backed Arab League plan that he voluntarily resign. And the administration's current strategy of waiting for a coup is more aspirational than policy prescriptive. To be sure, arming the FSA alone will not end the Assad regime. But the combination of this military option and continued diplomatic and economic pressures on the regime stands a far better chance of success than waiting for a silver bullet.

## RECOMMENDED

### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



### ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

#### [How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

### TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](#)

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Syria (/policy-  
analysis/syria)