

Indirect Intervention in Syria: Crafting an Effective Response to the Crisis

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Brief Analysis

Indirect intervention in Syria is less sure to succeed than direct intervention, but it may be more doable, giving the people the time and help they need to liberate themselves.

Direct international military intervention could have a decisive impact on the situation in Syria, as it did in Libya, but such an option has seemingly been ruled out by the United States and the international community for a variety of reasons, including the ability of the regime's forces to strike back, the disorganized state of the opposition, fears of the Salafists' influence and ability to exacerbate the violence, and a lack of political will. Indirect intervention -- that is, the provision of military and political assistance to the regime's armed and unarmed opponents -- offers an alternative option that could yield success with less risk and cost.

This type of intervention would require a campaign, either overt or covert, to provide the Syrian opposition with the means to resist the regime, disrupt its military operations, weaken its will to fight, and hinder the state's ability to function. Methods aimed at these ends were used to great effect against Libya under Muammar Qadhafi, in Afghanistan against the Soviets, and against German occupation forces and their collaborators during World War II. The methods and means include armed resistance, sabotage, political warfare, and civil resistance. The Syrian people are already employing such methods, but not in a coordinated, organized, or well-supported way. The United States and other countries are capable of giving the opposition the help it needs to mount a national resistance effort that can bring down the regime.

The Logic of Indirect Intervention

The scope and nature of the intervention must be appropriate to the conflict, the strengths and weaknesses of the regime, and the capabilities and needs of the resistance. The situation in Syria is an insurrection -- a popular uprising against the government -- that has broad, though not universal, support. Resistance elements within Syria,

both armed and unarmed, are connected at the local level and cooperate, but they are not fully integrated or responsive to a single, or coherent, political or military leadership. Resistance elements outside Syria are weak and divided, exerting limited influence on the situation inside the country.

Though facing intense pressure from both inside Syria and without, the regime remains cohesive, with no fatal cracks as yet. It is committed to a "security solution" -- to breaking the unarmed and armed opposition with overwhelming force. In doing so, Damascus counts on the political, diplomatic, military, and economic support of a few allies, namely Russia, Iran, and Hizballah. Its promises of reform, agreements to allow monitoring from the Arab League, and the occasional local ceasefire are simply cynical maneuvers to gain time to crush the opposition and to manipulate regime critics. For President Bashar al-Assad and his inner circle, this is a life or death struggle that they intend to win.

The Strengths and Vulnerabilities of the Regime

For indirect intervention to work the regime's strengths must be attacked and its vulnerabilities exploited. Key regime strengths include the following:

- Determination and cohesion of its inner circle
- Loyalty of minorities (Alawites, Christians, Druze)
- Support of key economic sectors (i.e., the business community)
- Penetration of Syrian society by the security and intelligence services
- Size and heavy armament of the military, security forces, and shabbiha (the regime's militia)
- Ability to plan and coordinate large-scale operations (multi-brigade, divisional)
- Large logistics infrastructure that supports its forces
- Extensive communications infrastructure that allows for effective command and control of its forces

Despite enjoying many of the same strengths as the present Syrian leadership, the Qadhafi government was driven from power. All of these strengths can be attacked by one means or another, and some in Syria are already under attack.

The Assad regime's weaknesses include the following:

- Sunni-majority population and its potential to be mobilized
- Fault lines in the military between Sunnis and Alawites
- Geographic scope of the opposition (armed, unarmed)
- Largely urban nature of the fighting
- Nature of the opposition (diffuse/decentralized)
- Vulnerability of lines of communication and the communications infrastructure to disruption by attack, sabotage, or acts of popular resistance

Attacking or exploiting any one of these strengths or weaknesses alone will not bring down the regime, but addressing them as a set does have that potential.

The resistance has already demonstrated substantial capabilities for engaging in both armed and unarmed opposition. It has produced combat forces in at least seven of Syria's fourteen provinces, with combatants numbering from about seven to ten thousand -- and many more potentially available if provided arms. For its part, the unarmed opposition has shown incredible resilience in eleven months of sustained struggle with the regime. It

can organize hundreds of demonstrations involving tens of thousands of people across the country on any given day, and it conducts an active media campaign exposing the violent actions of the regime. These are capabilities that can be built on. Even so, if the resistance is to remain potent and eventually bring down the regime, it will need considerable help in the spheres of military operations, sabotage, political warfare, and civil resistance.

The United States and others counting themselves among the "friends of Syria" are capable of providing these kinds of assistance. And the sooner these "friends" act, the better, as the Assad regime is taking aggressive measures to end the rebellion.

Enhancing Methods of Resistance

A host of indirect methods have been used in the past to undermine unpopular regimes, all of which require significantly fewer resources than direct military intervention. These indirect methods fall into roughly four categories:

1. *Building effective combat forces.* Strong combat forces constitute the most important aspect of armed resistance. Through indirect intervention, the United States and others could provide weapons and training for resistance fighters, targeting advice and intelligence, and assistance in coordinating operations beyond the local level. Additional small arms would allow for the arming of more personnel and the creation of more resistance combat groups, forcing the regime to spread its already stretched forces even thinner. Antitank weapons and mortars would help reduce the regime's advantage in heavy forces. Overall, stronger combat forces would enable the resistance to oppose regime operations more effectively, prompting further attrition in regime forces and demoralizing those who remain, and permit expanded attacks on the regime's command and control and logistical infrastructure. Resistance combat forces are already engaging in these kinds of acts with some effect. With assistance, they could do more.
2. *Building enhanced capabilities for sabotage operations.* Such operations would be directed against important regime capabilities, including military, security, and economic targets, as well as the personal assets of regime supporters (businesses, homes, vehicles). The beginnings of a sabotage campaign already exist. "How to" instructions have been posted on Syrian social media sites for blocking roads, attacking logistics vehicles -- including tank transporters and fuel trucks -- cutting coaxial communications cables servicing airfields, and destroying telecommunications towers, sabotaging engines of combat and other vehicles used by government forces (by "sugaring" the fuel tank), and attacking railways and pipelines. And evidence suggests that these instructions are being carried out. Sabotage actions could be made more effective through better planning, coordination, explosive devices, targeting, and techniques. Assistance in each of these areas could be provided by any number of intelligence services and Special Forces units. Sabotage inflicts damage on the regime, hampering its ability to rule and forcing it to further stretch its forces.
3. *Supporting a campaign of political warfare.* Such a campaign would be aimed at further undermining the regime's ability to rule. Actions could include information and psychological operations directed at the regime, the jamming of Syrian government communications (radio, television, military), and the undermining of loyalties to the regime through financial or personal security inducements (e.g., exemption from prosecution, visas, and offers of asylum).
4. *Building more effective civil (unarmed) resistance.* At present, civil resistance is mostly involved in media activity and demonstrations. But a coordinated civil resistance campaign could have much greater scope and effect. As with sabotage, such a resistance campaign already has a basis in Syria, including general and local strikes, opposition

media activities, and widespread demonstrations. On February 17, 2012, the Local Coordination Committees organization in Syria counted more than six hundred demonstrations against the regime on that day. The organizations responsible for this activity should be supported with funding, means of secure and reliable communications, and whatever other tools might be useful. In addition, other groups and even individuals in Syria's economic sphere could be activated to organize work slowdowns and strikes, or to disable financial mechanisms, destabilize the currency, and disrupt road and rail traffic. Directions outlining how to take part in these kinds of actions have already been disseminated to the public anonymously over Syrian social media, but more can be done.

The goal of these methods is to wage a coordinated and sustained campaign that creates cascading effects that reinforce one another, making the regime's position increasingly difficult and eventually causing it to break.

Prospects

Even if such a campaign were mounted, the desired outcome could not be guaranteed. Indirect intervention, as outlined here, would take time to work and undoubtedly face setbacks. The usual cautions about unintended consequences must be given, including the possibility of exacerbating the situation in Syria, which could degenerate into a prolonged and bloody stalemate and ultimately a civil war. And those intervening would confront risks: exposure of operations, penetration of activities, losses in personnel and material, and collateral damage to civilians.

But inaction also has costs. In Syria, the war against the people is on. The regime and its allies are fighting to win -- to crush the armed and unarmed opposition, whatever the human and material costs. The international community should not let fear of possible outcomes prevent it from taking action now, given the dire situation.

A campaign of indirect intervention is less sure to succeed than direct intervention but perhaps more doable. It would also likely be slower to achieve effects than direct intervention, but it would essentially enable Syrians fighting the regime to liberate themselves. This type of campaign would allow the United States and its partners to shape, not determine, the conflict's outcome. It would help set conditions for direct intervention if the international community decides such a course is necessary. And in the absolute worst case, if the regime prevails, indirect intervention would provide the means to continue the struggle thereafter.

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