

Should the U.S. Support the Free Syrian Army?

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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The international community's inability thus far to stop Assad, as well as its reticence to intervene on the ground, means that more and more Syrians are looking to the Free Syrian Army not as an alternative to the protest movement, but as a way to support the overall revolutionary effort.

Last weekend's sharp spike in death tolls in Syria has come hand in hand with the rise of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) -- opposition members who believe armed struggle is the most efficient way of deposing the Assad regime.

Over the past two weeks, as Arab League monitors visited Syria, the FSA has expanded the scope and scale of their operation, wresting control of towns - and for a time neighborhoods of Damascus - from the Assad regime.

While the FSA is largely a franchise rather than a centrally commanded militia, it now represents a major force within the Syrian opposition that Washington is struggling to reckon with.

The FSA emerged last summer as a collection of Syrian military defectors who fled to Turkey. Once dismissed as a mere Internet phenomena, the FSA and other domestically based groups of armed defectors joined forces to carry out attacks against regime forces throughout the country.

Anti-regime protestors braving live fire have earned the respect and diplomatic support of the international community, but not a military intervention akin to Libya. Without a light at the end of the protest tunnel, local Syrians (many with military backgrounds) calling themselves the FSA began picking up arms to defend protesters from regime fire.

While many operate outside of a central command, this loose association of armed oppositionists, with weapons smuggled over from neighboring Lebanon (as well as Turkey and Iraq) or weapons seized from Assad regime depots, have captured and held the border town of Zabadani and (until the Assad regime moved in full force) neighborhoods

on the outskirts of Damascus and into the Ghouta in the countryside of the Syrian capital. The FSA is active in Idlib, Homs and Dera governorates, amongst others.

The question Washington is now wrestling with is: What to do with the FSA?

For months, U.S. policy has been to support non-violent means of opposing the Assad regime as, quite rightly, the opposition has much more political leverage keeping the high moral ground and the regime has the armed opposition heavily outgunned. Nevertheless, the international community's inability thus far to get Assad to stop shooting his way out of the crisis, as well as its reticence to intervene on the ground like Libya, means that more and more Syrians are looking to the FSA not as an alternative to the protest movement, but rather as a way to support an overall revolutionary effort.

Will Washington follow suit? What kinds of assistance can and should the United States and its allies provide the FSA as part of an overall strategy of helping to achieve President Obama's goal outlined last August to get Assad "to step aside"? Or should Washington subcontract that such support to regional allies who may share our short term goal of changing the Assad regime, but differ significantly on what political forces should rule a post Assad Syria? What do you think?

Andrew J. Tabler is a Next Generation fellow in the Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute and the author 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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