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Next Steps for U.S. in Syria Crisis

James Phillips

Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime, which has made war on its own citizens, has lost whatever legitimacy it once had. The United States correctly has called for Assad to step down from power. His regime has supported numerous Palestinian, Lebanese, Iraqi, and Kurdish terrorist groups in attacks on Americans and U.S. allies; has subverted Lebanon's independence, assassinated its leaders, and blocked Arab peace efforts with Israel; and remains both a state sponsor of terrorism and Iran's most important ally. Tehran has dispatched members of the Quds Force, an elite element of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, to help crush dissent within the country. This raises the question of what role the United States and other nations can play to help bring freedom to Syria.

The U.S. can play a constructive role in the conflict by supporting efforts to deliver humanitarian aid. The U.S. should also be working closely with regional partners, especially Turkey, both to help speed the transition to a new, legitimate government and to continue diplomatic pressure and international sanctions against the Assad regime.

Direct U.S. military intervention, however, is not warranted. At this point, an outside "peacekeeping" force would only become embroiled in the conflict as a combatant. That might increase the suffering of the Syrian people, which is sure to continue as long as Assad remains in power.

Violence Is Escalating. In recent days, the Assad regime has launched brutal military attacks against opposition strongholds—particularly the city of Homs—but appears to be losing ground against Syria's burgeoning opposition movement. Syria's internal security forces are stretched thin, and its army is hemorrhaging as thousands, primarily Sunnis, have defected. The regime is increasingly dependent on the Republican Guard and the elite 4th Armored Division, which is commanded by Assad's brother, Maher. Although the regime has killed more than 7,000 people

(mostly unarmed demonstrators), jailed more than 10,000, and "disappeared" thousands more, the opposition is not backing down from its demands that President Assad resign.

The 22-member Arab League dispatched an observation mission to Syria that was withdrawn after the Assad regime failed to keep commitments to ease its repression under an Arab League peace plan. The Arab League summit in Cairo early this week issued a vague proposal for a joint Arab League/United Nations peacekeeping force to be deployed in Syria.

But there is little peace to keep in Syria. As long as the Assad regime and the myriad of opposition groups that it has spawned are locked in a power struggle, no outside force is likely to bring peace. Moreover, Russia repeatedly has wielded its veto in the U.N. Security Council to block U.N. action on Syria. Although Moscow has promised to "study" the proposal, it is unlikely to abandon its only remaining major ally in the Middle East.

A Regime on Borrowed Time. Although the Assad regime can depend on its fearsome internal security and intelligence services, the vast majority of the Syrian military is becoming increasingly

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The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

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unreliable. As loyalist forces are spread thin and Arab states seek to counter Iranian support for Assad with their own support for the opposition, Assad's grip on power will grow tenuous. The Free Syrian Army, which consists of defectors from the Syrian military, has been trying to establish itself as an organized fighting force.

As Assad's hold on the country slips, there will be opportunities to engage with and evaluate the efforts of those who are seeking to replace the regime. Right now, little is known about many of the diverse opposition groups that have emerged in recent months. Although they share the goal of overthrowing Assad, they appear to draw support from different political, sectarian, ethnic, and ideological constituencies and often operate independently of each other. The Syrian National Council, an umbrella group based in Istanbul, and the Syrian Coalition of Secular and Democratic Forces, based in Paris, have sought to unify the many disparate groups with uneven results. The Free Syrian Army has sought to provide an overarching chain of command for the increasingly militarized opposition, but most opposition efforts continue to be led by a decentralized network of Local Coordination Committees that operate in an ad hoc manner.

In addition to a wide variety of domestic groups that represent Syria's mosaic of minority religious sects, Syria has attracted a growing number of foreign Islamist militants. Iraqi officials report that Sunni Iraqi jihadists are streaming across the border to join the fighting. Al-Qaeda has opened up a new front and has conducted bombings in Syria, according to U.S. officials. Syria's Muslim Brotherhood, which was crushed by Assad's father, Hafez, after an ill-fated uprising in Hama in 1982, has made a comeback and may emerge as the single most powerful group in the constellation of opposition forces.

It would be a mistake to provide arms to groups that seek to replace Assad's secular Baathist dictatorship with a totalitarian Islamist dictatorship. If such groups were to consolidate power, they could pose an even greater threat to the United States and its allies in Israel, Jordan, Iraq, and Lebanon than the weakened Assad regime does. Moreover, providing arms would feed into the Assad regime's propaganda that its domestic opposition is made up of puppets controlled by foreign powers.

Diplomatic, Humanitarian, and Economic Support for the Opposition. For now, Washington should provide humanitarian aid in close cooperation with Turkey,

which has given sanctuary to Syrian refugees and opposition groups on its territory, to ease the suffering of Syrians. It should give diplomatic support to the broad opposition coalition through the Friends of Syria international contact group that will meet in Tunisia next week to formulate an agenda for international support for the opposition. The United States also should give economic support to inclusive opposition groups that support freedom, religious tolerance, and a pluralist democracy in post-Assad Syria.

Washington should support efforts to escalate sanctions and international pressure on the Damascus regime. If Russia modifies its policy and withdraws its veto on stronger U.N. action, then the United States could support greater U.N. pressure on the regime and help for the Syrian people. But the United States should rule out committing U.S. troops to any U.N. peacekeeping operation in Syria.

—*James Phillips is Senior Research Fellow for Middle Eastern Affairs in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.*