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American Leadership Needed for Shaping a Post-Assad Syria

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The Obama Administration has failed to provide clear leadership regarding the deteriorating situation in Syria. It naively sought to engage with Bashar Assad's dictatorship before protests erupted last spring. But this myopic engagement policy failed to yield positive results, just as it failed with Iran, Assad's chief ally. Now the Administration is reduced to pleading for Russian cooperation at the United Nations despite Vladimir Putin's cynical efforts to prop up his Syrian ally with arms while denouncing foreign intervention.

Instead of vainly seeking agreement with adversaries with incompatible interests (as with Russia in the recent talks of the "action group" conference in Geneva), Washington should seek to resolve the Syrian crisis by cultivating friendships in the

Syrian opposition and empowering them to win their struggle for freedom. To do this, the United States should lead a group of like-minded allies who are willing to support such a successor government in post-Assad Syria.

Abandon Wishful Thinking.

The Obama Administration came into office seeking to engage the dictatorship of Assad, whom it naively considered to be a reformer. Long after Assad's crackdown exposed this far-fetched notion as wishful thinking, the Administration balked at calling for Assad to leave power until August 2011, convinced that he would somehow negotiate a transition to democracy despite the fact that this would mean the end of his regime.

The Administration then outsourced U.S. policy on Syria to the U.N., which has been blocked from taking effective action by Russia and China. Today it still clings to the stillborn peace plan pushed forward in April by former U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan that Assad violates daily with impunity.

Syria's humanitarian disaster is a product of decades of repression and will continue as long as Assad retains power. But ousting Assad will not by itself end the intensifying civil war, stabilize Syria, or prevent it from

becoming a failed state where al-Qaeda and other Islamist extremist groups could take root and flourish. Washington should work for a resolution of the crisis that ends Assad's rule while minimizing the chances of an Islamist extremist takeover after Assad's departure.

Empower the Opposition. The U.S. should assemble a leadership group of like-minded allies to help support the Syrian opposition and build a pluralist, free, and democratic Syria after the fall of Assad. This group would include Britain, France, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, Israel, and other countries. But it should exclude Russia and Iran, which have made substantial efforts to prop up the Syrian regime.

The strategy would be to empower Syrians to win their own war of independence without putting U.S. troops on the ground inside Syria. Syrian opposition leaders have not urged such a military intervention anyway. Nor is it practical to dispatch peacekeeping troops to a country where there is no peace to keep.

An important goal would be to minimize the influence of Islamist extremists by channeling aid to pragmatic, effective, and cooperative leaders inside Syria. The Free Syrian Army, which has attracted an

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increasing number of defectors from Syria's armed forces, is a growing force that could become an important influence in unifying Syria's disjointed opposition behind a non-sectarian nationalist agenda.

Washington could provide covert arms aid after it has identified reliable, effective, and non-Islamist local commanders who can provide iron-clad guarantees that the arms will not fall into the hands of terrorists. In the meantime, Washington should explore options for providing non-lethal material such as communications equipment, body armor, and medical supplies to the opposition.

Build Regional Support. Syria is a regional problem that needs a regional solution. If any military intervention is required to protect Syrian civilians, then the U.S. should encourage Turkey and individual Arab allies to act. NATO should stay out, and the U.S. should play a secondary role supporting a coalition of the willing if any military intervention, for whatever reason—air strikes, no-fly zones, humanitarian sanctuaries—is required.

The U.S. could provide logistical and air support for humanitarian operations, including the establishment of a safe zone for moving

humanitarian aid inside Syria if it is militarily feasible and has sufficient support from NATO and regional allies and Washington has enough confidence in the opposition groups that would benefit from it.

The U.S. should also develop contingency plans in close cooperation with allies for preventing the leakage of Syrian chemical and biological weapons outside the country if the regime implodes. Washington should establish an intelligence-sharing mechanism to monitor Syrian WMD sites and track the movement of loose weapons or dangerous materials in an effort to intercept them before they fall into the hands of terrorists.

If actionable intelligence is received that terrorists have obtained or are about to obtain WMD materials, then the U.S. should activate contingency plans, if practical, for the rapid insertion of U.S. or allied special operations forces to secure, remove, or destroy the hazardous materials.

Endgame: A Free, Stable, and Inclusive Syria. The U.S. cannot passively wait for the U.N. to find a solution for the Syrian crisis at the Geneva Conference or any other forum. A U.N.-crafted solution is

bound to fail. Russia will leverage its veto power to block any meaningful U.N. actions that would threaten its Syrian ally. Washington and its allies should go outside the U.N. framework to escalate sanctions against the Assad regime, unify and strengthen the Syrian opposition, and shape a favorable political environment for the gradual emergence of a free, stable, and inclusive Syria.

Once Assad has been defeated, Washington should help coordinate international efforts to stabilize Syria, working with European allies, Japan, and oil-rich gulf Arab countries, which should provide the bulk of the economic aid to restore the Syrian economy, put Syrians back to work, and soak up young men who would otherwise remain in fractious militias for economic survival.

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