

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## No-Fly Zone over Syria: The Wrong Policy at the Wrong Time

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In the aftermath of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's trip to Turkey last weekend, there has been speculation that the U.S. might support the idea of establishing a no-fly zone (NFZ) over Syria. Under the current conditions, an establishment of an NFZ would be a costly and risky action that would do little to stop the killing on the ground while entangling the U.S. in an intensifying civil war.

While the U.S. and its partners have the military capability to establish and enforce an NFZ above Syria if they wanted to, an NFZ is the wrong policy at the wrong time. The U.S. should concentrate on determining which elements inside the opposition want a stable and secure Syria, marginalizing elements inside the opposition movement that promote an extremist agenda, and drumming

up regional support against the Bashar al-Assad regime.

**Syria Is Not Libya.** Other than providing a very expensive psychological boost to the loose alliance of disparate Syrian opposition groupings, it is likely that a U.S.-backed NFZ would have minor impact. Most of the Assad regime's killing is done on the ground. Although the regime has made limited use of fixed-wing aircraft and attack helicopters in recent weeks, most of the death toll is caused by artillery barrages and brutal paramilitary hit squads—all of which, including attack helicopters, an NFZ would have a negligible impact on.

After all, in 1995, while NATO planes were implementing an NFZ over the skies of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bosnian Serb ground forces overran the U.N. safe haven in Srebrenica and killed more than 8,000 Bosnian Muslims.

Comparisons to the recent military operation in Libya are also misleading. What NATO conducted in Libya was much more than an NFZ—it was more like a “no-move zone.” Any part of the regime's security apparatus threatening the civilian population was a legitimate target. What was commonly referred

to as an NFZ by the media was actually robust airstrikes against regime command-and-control centers, military hardware, and supply depots.

There are other important differences between the two countries that cannot be ignored. Libya has a population of 5.5 million people, with approximately 75 percent living within 100 miles of the coast. Syria has a population of approximately 22 million that is not nearly as concentrated. More importantly, Syria's military capabilities are much greater than Libya's and would pose more of a threat to U.S. warplanes enforcing the NFZ. Syria is estimated to have 10 times more anti-aircraft capability than Libya located within one-fifth of the space.

During the uprising in Libya, the fighting developed along relatively clear fronts that represented somewhat of a linear battlefield. The Libyan opposition quickly consolidated control over much of eastern Libya and gradually advanced westward to link up with opposition strongholds in central and western Libya, such as the port city of Misrata and the Nafusa Mountains. These pockets of opposition forces made coalition airstrikes more effective when supporting the opposition

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fighters. Similar conditions do not currently exist in Syria, where there are few clearly discernible front lines.

### **The Opposition Is Fragmented.**

The myriad of Syrian opposition groups are fragmented and disorganized. In Libya, the National Transition Council (NTC) was able to broadly unite various opposition groups to achieve the common goal of overthrowing the Muammar Qadhafi regime. Leaders of the NTC were able to gain international legitimacy and speak for the Libyan people in a way the Syrian National Council, an umbrella group of exiled leaders of rival groups, is currently unable to do.

There is not enough information available on the more than 300 opposition groups to make a reasonable assessment on whether U.S. military intervention would help or hinder U.S. objectives in the region. For example, some of the Islamist extremist elements in the Syrian opposition likely have American blood on their hands from their days of supporting or participating in the cross-border insurgency in Iraq—especially in Al-Anbar province. These are not the type of people the American military should be protecting.

**U.S. Should Place Its National Security Interests First.** U.S.-led airstrikes, especially without adequate regional buy-in from Turkey and other allies, could be the first step in an incremental process that could draw the U.S. into a protracted civil war that could continue long after Assad is gone. The U.S. may be limited in what it can do, but doing nothing will almost certainly yield an outcome that is not in America's interest.

The Obama Administration has outsourced its policy on Syria to the United Nations Security Council,

where Russia and China have used their veto power to prevent effective action against their ally in Damascus. Washington and its allies should start by going 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 stable and secure Syria free of Assad's tyranny or the tyranny of Islamist extremists vying to replace him.

In order to do this, Washington should:

- **Assemble a leadership group of like-minded allies to help support the Syrian opposition.** The aim of this group should be to better organize and strengthen the opposition and assist with building a stable and secure Syria after the fall of Assad. This group would include Britain, France, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, Israel, and other countries interested in a post-Assad government that does not export terrorism and pander to Iran. But it should exclude Russia and Iran, which have made substantial efforts to prop up the Syrian regime.
- **Press Arab countries to take on more responsibility for their neighborhood.** The numerous public statements by the Gulf Cooperation Council and Arab League have led to little action beyond words in a communiqué. It is in the interest of the Arab states, as much as it is in America's, for Syria to be removed from the orbit of Iran's malign influence. They could provide funds for assisting refugees and for rebuilding Syria after Assad is overthrown. Countries in the region should

be using all levers available to apply pressure on Assad's regime instead of hoping that the U.S. will get involved on their behalf.

- **Develop contingency plans for preventing the leakage of Syrian chemical and biological weapons.** In close cooperation with allies, Washington should 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.
- **Explore further options for providing non-lethal material to the Syrian opposition.** This could include communications equipment, body armor, and medical supplies. Washington could explore the possibility of providing covert weaponry only after it has identified reliable, effective, and non-Islamist local commanders who can provide ironclad guarantees that the arms will not fall into the hands of terrorists.

**A Feel-Good Measure.** The U.S. Air Force is not for hire every time there is a popular uprising somewhere in the world. Considering how little the West knows about the Syrian opposition and how fragmented it appears to be, it is currently not worth the amount of resources and manpower required carry out robust airstrikes à la Libya. While establishing an NFZ might be a feel-good measure, under the current conditions, it would likely achieve very little.

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