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Syrian Uprising: U.S. Inaction Contributes to a Wider Regional Conflict

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American policy toward the Syrian uprising has been an unmitigated failure. President Obama's glacially slow and overly cautious policies that were intended to avoid turning the Syrian uprising into a wider regional affair have had exactly the opposite effect. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's call for new leadership in the anti-Assad resistance is likely to amount to an example of too little too late.

In order to keep this situation from crumbling further, the United States and its allies should work to facilitate government transition when the Assad regime falls. There is still time to rectify this failure, but action must be taken sooner rather than later.

Regional Consequences.

Since the crisis began, instability has expanded, affecting not only

Syria, but the region as a whole. Washington's failure to respond proactively has emboldened the Assad regime and had a detrimental impact on Syria's neighbors.

In the past six months, the Syrian military has repeatedly provoked Turkey, Syria's northern neighbor and a NATO ally. Last April, the Syrian military fired shots across the Turkish border into a refugee camp, wounding five people. Then, last month, Syria shelled a Turkish border, resulting in a days-long artillery exchange.

Iran and Hezbollah have also rushed to the aid of the Assad regime. At the start of the crisis, Iran deployed its elite Quds Force unit of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to bolster the Syrian military, providing it with arms, training, and equipment. Hezbollah is also using its bases in Lebanon as a launching pad for its strikes against Syrian opposition forces.

The U.S.-designated terrorist organization is also responsible for intimidating Lebanese Sunnis to deter them from aiding Syria's predominantly Sunni opposition forces. Last month, a car bomb killed Lebanon's intelligence chief, who was a strong opponent of Syrian domination. While Hezbollah has denied

involvement, the assassination has stirred widespread unrest among Lebanese Sunnis and Christians who resent Hezbollah's domination and its close cooperation with Syria's Alawite-dominated Assad regime.

Even the long-standing Kurdish-Turkish conflict has escalated. Syria's Kurdish population has taken advantage of the power vacuum in the country's North and sought to expand its influence. Since Syria became *persona non grata* with the Turkish government, Assad has reportedly renewed Syria's support for anti-Turkish Kurdish militants and is trying to use them as a proxy force against Turkey.

With the country in disarray, Assad's stockpiles of chemical weapons of mass destruction (WMD) are potentially up for grabs. Assad has pledged that he will not use the weapons against civilians, but there is no guarantee that as the regime becomes more desperate, it will not resort to such means. Furthermore, should the regime fall, these stockpiles will be vulnerable to looting and could fall into the hands of Islamist militants or other potential terrorists.

Caution Should Not Equal Inaction. In a time of crisis, caution is necessary, but it should not lead

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to an abdication of leadership. The Obama Administration's outsourcing of this crisis to the United Nations—where Russia has blocked effective action—has allowed the situation to deteriorate, benefitting extremists at the expense of more moderate opposition leaders. Syria's splintered opposition forces, neglected by the West, have been forced to look east to Saudi Arabia and Qatar for arms and financial resources, which have strengthened Islamist extremist groups. If these actors succeed in overthrowing Assad, they are likely to be hostile to America's interests in the region.

Sadly, even if the regime fell today, the situation across the entire region would still be highly volatile. U.S. regional allies and potential allies inside Syria need leadership and effective support; instead, Washington is offering empty platitudes.

The result is that the perception of the U.S. as a capable regional leader has been severely eroded. Those who have self-selected the position of adversary (Iran, Hezbollah, and al-Qaeda and its affiliates, as well as Russia and China) are emboldened and more prone to act overtly against U.S. interests. Those who are long-term friends (Turkey, Jordan, and

Israel) are disheartened and more likely to feel the need to act alone or to seek help elsewhere. Those who are betwixt and between (Saudi Arabia and Qatar) are following their own dictates and supporting anti-Western components of the anti-Assad movement.

The essence of leadership is setting the course for friends to follow and enemies to avoid. The Obama Administration has created an unacceptable situation of self-inflicted irrelevance.

A Late Response Is Better Than None at All. To keep this crisis from spinning even further out of control, the U.S. should work closely with allies to accelerate the fall of the Assad regime. It should identify key non-Islamist opposition leaders inside Syria that are worth supporting and provide them with effective economic aid, medical supplies, communications technology, and even covert arms aid if they can provide ironclad guarantees that the arms will not fall into the hands of terrorists.

There should be closed-door meetings with U.S. allies in the region to develop a way forward that leverages their strengths and specifically identifies how the U.S. will act to support this plan. Furthermore,

those countries that are resourcing more radical elements need to be told in no uncertain terms to end their support and that failure to comply will have consequences.

Dialogue alone will not be overly helpful. However, direct action will speak volumes and project leadership.

Time Is Running Out. This foreign policy debacle will probably not get much attention until it explodes fully, which is looking more likely than not. The Obama Administration has failed to advance the interests of the Syrian people, America's regional allies, and America's long-term national interests.

Leading from behind means not leading at all. There is an opportunity to rectify this situation and recover some lost ground, but the time to do that is slipping away.

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