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Kerry Offers More Aid but Still Lacks Sound Strategy on Syria

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Secretary of State John Kerry has embarked on his first official trip abroad, traveling to the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Italy, Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar. Although NATO and European issues have been featured prominently in Kerry's early stops, much of his agenda will focus on containing the destabilizing spillover effects of the intensifying Syrian civil war.

Kerry's trip has been billed as a listening tour, and the new Secretary of State has already received an earful of complaints about the shortcomings of the Obama Administration's Syria policy from Syrian opposition leaders and U.S. allies concerned about the Administration's passive "leading from behind" approach to Syria's worsening crisis. Kerry's challenge will be to chart a more effective

course for salvaging a stable post-Assad Syria that does not threaten U.S. national interests and those of U.S. allies.

Needed: Actions, Not Words, on Syria. After 22 months of intensifying conflict that has claimed the lives of more than 70,000 Syrians, the Obama Administration has failed to come up with an effective policy on Syria. Although President Obama belatedly called for Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad to step down from power in August 2011, the Administration has done little since then to back up these words. It supported former U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan's stillborn 2012 peace plan long after it had obviously failed. Since then, the White House has pushed a doomed diplomatic effort to broker a political settlement between the ruthless Assad regime and a fractured opposition that will tolerate no compromise with its oppressors.

Syria's opposition leaders complain that they have received little meaningful support from the Obama Administration and briefly threatened to boycott the "Friends of Syria" conference that Kerry will attend in Rome on Thursday, which was billed as a highlight of his trip. This was an embarrassing signal that the

Administration's Syria policy was on the verge of a disastrous failure. The opposition leaders subsequently agreed to attend after being assured that Kerry would do more than merely listen to their plight but would discuss the prospects for increased American and international aid.

British Foreign Secretary William Hague warned, on the first stop in Kerry's tour, that more support for the Syrian opposition was urgently needed: "In the face of such murder and threat of instability, our policy cannot stay static as the weeks go by. It will have to change and develop." Britain and France have pressed for a lifting of the European Union's arms embargo on Syria to permit greater support for the opposition.

White House Policy Doomed to Fail. Kerry, who shared Hillary Clinton's misconceptions about President Assad being a reformer, should reverse the Administration's unrealistic course, which depends on Russian help in convincing Assad to negotiate the fall of his own regime. Not only is Assad unwilling to comply, but Syria's long-suffering opposition has made it clear that it will not negotiate with him. Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah back Assad to the hilt with arms, money, and advisers, and Moscow has blocked three U.N.

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Security Council resolutions that would impose greater sanctions on Syria.

Meanwhile, Washington provides only humanitarian aid, communications equipment, and diplomatic support for Assad's victims and vainly calls for "mutual restraint" from bitter enemies locked in a fight to the death. This feckless policy is doomed to failure. Assad will not relinquish power until much greater military pressure is applied on the ground inside Syria, regardless of what promises Russian diplomats whisper into his ear.

The longer the conflict persists, the more it boosts the power of Islamist extremists who have played a growing role in the fighting, in part because they have enjoyed the lion's share of arms provided by private donations from Islamist organizations in the oil-rich Arab gulf states. The intensifying conflict has increasingly taken on sectarian overtones, as the predominantly Sunni Muslim opposition struggles to overthrow the Alawite-dominated regime. Tens of thousands of refugees, as well as some of the fighting, have spilled over Syria's borders and threaten the stability of neighboring Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq.

What the U.S. Can Do. Under these circumstances, clinging to the mirage of a diplomatic settlement brokered by Moscow is wishful thinking. To keep the Syrian crisis from spinning 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 who are committed to building an inclusive post-Assad government and directly provide them with economic aid, food, medical supplies, communications equipment, and technical advice on how to set up an effective alternative government in areas liberated from the regime.

Strengthening nationalist and secular leaders can also help contain the rising influence of Islamist extremists and reassure Syria's nervous Christian, Kurdish, and Druze minorities—many of whom are sitting on the fence—that they will have a welcome role to play in a post-Assad government.

The Obama Administration has wisely ruled out a direct U.S. military intervention, but it could do much more to boost the military capabilities of the Syrian opposition. It should work with allies, especially Turkey and Jordan, to channel rocket-propelled grenades, small arms, communications equipment, ammunition, and supplies to effective non-Islamist military commanders in the Free Syrian Army that can give ironclad guarantees that the arms will not fall into the hands of terrorists.

Bolster the Syrian Opposition. Last year, President Obama reportedly overruled his own Secretary of

State, CIA director, and Secretary of Defense, who had recommended U.S. military aid to the Syrian opposition. This was a major mistake given Russia and Iran's continued support for the Assad regime, the mounting civilian death toll, and the rising influence of Islamist extremists in the absence of effective Western aid for the opposition.

Like it or not, arms are the coin of the realm for influencing Syria's future and halting its slide into an Islamist dictatorship or failed state. Maintaining a failing soft-power strategy against a hardened regime that launches air strikes and Scud missiles against its own people will only prolong the conflict, empower extremists in the opposition at the expense of moderates, and contribute to dangerous spillover effects that threaten Syria's neighbors.

Secretary of State Kerry's first overseas trip will ultimately be considered a success only if he can convince President Obama to offer stronger support for non-Islamist groups within the Syrian opposition to hasten the fall of Assad and offset the power of Islamist extremists in post-Assad Syria.

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