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Syria's Chemical Weapons: U.S. Should Engage Syria's Opposition to Defuse Threat

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President Obama yesterday backpedaled away from taking immediate action on the Syrian chemical warfare issue. Caution on the chemical warfare issue is warranted, and Washington should clearly establish the facts to rule out the possibility that the chemical warfare reports are misinformation or disinformation.

But as bad as the reported chemical attacks by Syria's Bashar al-Assad regime are, a much worse threat to the U.S. and its allies would be posed if Assad's chemical weapons fall into the hands of al-Qaeda or Hezbollah, which could use the banned weapons in terror campaigns outside Syria. At this point, the Obama Administration has better options than putting U.S. boots on the ground inside Syria that it has neglected to develop. Stronger support for the non-Islamist Syrian opposition, including facilitating arms transfers and training, would help to accelerate the fall of the Assad regime and cultivate local allies with a strong interest in neutralizing the chemical weapons threat and containing the rising influence of al-Qaeda.

Obama's Policy Failure. While it is sifting through the evidence and contemplating options for enforcing its red line on chemical weapons use, the

Obama Administration should reconsider its broader policy on Syria, which has been a strategic and moral failure. Al-Qaeda and other Islamist groups have been the principal beneficiaries of Obama's passive "hands off" approach to the worsening Syria crisis. While the U.S. and its Western allies have stayed on the sidelines, Islamist militants have become increasingly influential within the disjointed Syrian opposition due to strong support from Islamist networks outside Syria as well as military and financial support from Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

Any U.S. response to the chemical weapons attacks should include increased support, including facilitating arms transfers and training, for the non-Islamist Syrian opposition. President Obama until now has overruled his advisers and rejected such arms aid because of the perceived risks that such arms could fall into the hands of al-Qaeda's al-Nusra Front or other hostile forces. But by withholding support for moderate opposition groups, the Administration has put them at a disadvantage relative to the extremist groups, which continue to rake in external support and expand their military capabilities.

Not only did the U.S. arms embargo fail to prevent al-Qaeda and its allies from acquiring arms and growing stronger, but now they are poised to gain control of much more lethal chemical weapons. *The Telegraph* reported on Tuesday that al-Nusra Front fighters have fought their way to the outskirts of one of Syria's biggest chemical weapons facilities in Al-Safira. As the Assad regime loses control of more territory in central Syria and gets pushed inexorably to retreat to its bastion of Alawite support in the west, it may only be a matter of time before al-Qaeda grabs some form of toxic chemical agents.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at
<http://report.heritage.org/ib3925>

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This threat, even more than the Assad regime's small-scale use of chemical weapons, demands active contingency planning for the possible use of U.S. and allied military force. Washington should calibrate its military response according to the likely costs, risks, benefits, feasibility, and collateral fallout of prospective policy options.

Needed: Non-Islamist Allies Within Syrian Opposition. Regardless of what it ultimately decides to do, the Obama Administration should step up its efforts to cultivate allies within the opposition on the ground inside Syria. Non-Islamist opposition forces within the Free Syrian Army would be valuable allies in helping to monitor the disposition of Assad's chemical weapons, track their movements, and help to destroy or seize them if necessary. Such allies could also help contain and combat al-Qaeda and its allies after the fall of Assad.

Like it or not, providing arms and ammunition is now the coin of the realm in cultivating ties with Syrian opposition groups. If Washington expects cooperation in recovering and neutralizing Assad's chemical weapons stockpiles, then it needs to forge a cooperative relationship with Syrian opposition groups that are threatened by the rising influence of al-Qaeda and other Islamist extremists.

Providing arms to suitable opposition factions may entail taking a calculated risk, but remaining passive on the sidelines would ultimately bring much more risks by enabling Islamist extremists to dominate post-Assad Syria. After two years of fighting, U.S. intelligence agencies have had more than enough time to vet opposition groups and work with regional allies to do the due diligence required to ensure that it is arming the right factions.

Jordan and Turkey are key partners that have supported the Syrian opposition. They both face a

growing threat from the regime and from Islamist extremist forces inside Syria. Both allies have well-trained special forces units and an array of local Syrian allies who could assist military operations, if necessary. In particular, King Abdullah of Jordan, who just met with President Obama at the White House on Friday, is a close ally who has a disciplined military force, good intelligence services, and Bedouin tribal allies inside Syria.

NATO allies on an individual basis could also contribute special operations forces and greater logistical support for Syrian opposition groups that assist in counter-proliferation operations. The goal would not be to seize all of Assad's huge chemical arsenal (an impossible task even if the U.S. had good intelligence on the precise locations of chemical munitions) but to accelerate the fall of Assad by strengthening opposition forces and preparing to move quickly to prevent chemical weapons from falling into the hands of the al-Nusra Front or Hezbollah.

Focus on Al-Qaeda, Not Just Assad. Washington cannot allow al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, or other hostile forces to cart off Assad's lethal chemical munitions for use outside Syria. That threat, more than Assad's limited use of chemical weapons inside the country, is the chief threat to vital U.S. national interests.

The Obama Administration needs to reach out to non-Islamist factions of Syria's splintered opposition in order to better address that threat, accelerate the fall of Assad, and contain the influence of al-Qaeda in post-Assad Syria.

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