

ISSUE BRIEF

No. 3939 | MAY 16, 2013

Syria Crisis: U.S. Leadership Needed to Coordinate Allies

James Phillips

One negative implication of the Obama Administration's "lead from behind" efforts on the worsening Syria crisis is that U.S. allies have independently stepped forward to advance their own interests by backing various rival groups within the ad hoc Syrian opposition coalition. These external aid efforts, often pursued with little coordination, have bolstered Islamist extremist groups within Syria, exacerbated tensions between rival opposition groups, and undermined the unity of the rebel forces.

If Washington continues its hands-off policy toward Syria, then Syria is likely to devolve into an anarchic patchwork of warring fiefdoms that will provide fertile ground for al-Qaeda and other Islamist extremist organizations.

Leading from Behind Has Left the Syrian Opposition Behind. The Obama Administration's Syria policy was flawed from the start by wishful thinking about the willingness of Assad to reform his regime or negotiate the end of that regime. This has been compounded by wishful thinking about the willingness and ability of Russia to pressure Assad into stepping down. No transitional agreement is

possible until Assad has been convinced that he cannot survive through sheer brutality.

The Administration's passivity created a leadership vacuum that other countries and Islamist extremist groups have tried to fill by providing financial and arms aid to their favorite factions within the splintered opposition. Turkey and Qatar have favored the Muslim Brotherhood, while Saudi Arabia has favored Salafist extremist groups. Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) has expanded its operations inside Syria, supported by financial contributions from private donors, primarily in the oil-rich Gulf States. Meanwhile, Iran and Russia have propped up the Assad regime, aided by Hezbollah. The Iraqi government has also sided with the Assad regime, while many Iraqi Sunnis have supported the predominantly Sunni opposition.

The cumulative effect of these external interventions is to exacerbate the disunity of the opposition, which is composed of hundreds of local organizations that sprouted independently from various segments of Syria's sectarian and ethnic mosaic. Left unchecked, the welter of aid programs mounted by external actors will encourage the emergence of a balkanized and radicalized post-Assad Syria in which al-Qaeda and Hezbollah could become dangerous fixtures.

Coordination Needed to Contain Syria's Spillover Effects. Washington should become more assertive if it hopes to salvage a stable, nonsectarian, and tolerant Syria after the fall of Assad. It should not only provide greater support for the opposition itself but make stronger efforts to coordinate the aid programs of its allies and reduce the flow of aid to Syrian Islamist extremists. Specifically, it should:

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at
<http://report.heritage.org/ib3939>

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

- **Press Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and other allies to stop providing aid directly to Syrian groups.** Instead, they should channel it through the Free Syrian Army, an umbrella group led by former Syrian army officers who have promoted a nationalist and nonsectarian agenda.
- **Insist that Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and other oil kingdoms crack down on Islamist networks that have supported al-Qaeda and other extremist groups in Syria.** They should understand that if they fail to take stronger action against these networks, they will lose access to U.S. arms sales in the future.
- **Provide more humanitarian aid to Syrian refugees in Jordan.** Jordan is a key ally that has provided limited support to Bedouin tribal forces opposed to the regime in southern Syria. But King Abdullah, the first Arab leader to call for Assad to step down, is reluctant to take more risks on behalf of the opposition because of the threat of attack from the regime, fear that Jordan's struggling economy will be overwhelmed by an influx of more refugees (beyond the 550,000 already present), and distrust of Syrian Islamists who are aligned with elements of Jordan's opposition. Washington should also grant Amman's request for Patriot air defense missiles to be deployed to protect Jordan from Syrian ground-to-ground missiles and air attacks. This would enable Jordan to play a stronger role in helping the opposition to push back regime forces in the south, which in turn would encourage Syrian refugees to return to their homes.
- **Step up pressure on Iraq to halt Iran's airlift of arms and Revolutionary Guards to Syria through Iraqi airspace.** In return, the

U.S. could offer intelligence cooperation in tracking and targeting AQI, which has flourished after the withdrawal of U.S. troops and growing Sunni-Shia tensions. But defeating AQI is unlikely unless Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's Shia-dominated government reverses its hard-line policies that have alienated and marginalized Iraqi Sunni leaders. Washington should try to broker a more equitable power-sharing arrangement that gives Sunnis a stronger stake in Iraq's government and siphons off support for AQI. While Iraq's government may balk at these demands, Iraq's Kurdish leaders would be open to cooperating with the U.S. and Turkey in cementing better relations between Syria's Kurdish minority and Syrian opposition forces, with which they have clashed. Bringing Syrian Kurds fully into the opposition camp would help to break the stalemate with the regime and help stabilize post-Assad Syria.

Leading from the Front. The Obama Administration's Syria policy has been a strategic and moral failure. Although there remain strong reasons to avoid a U.S. military intervention, there are fewer and fewer excuses for failing to give the Syrian opposition the arms it needs to protect Syrians from the regime.

If the U.S. fails to become more supportive of the opposition and more assertive in coordinating the efforts of its regional allies, then Syria's slide toward Islamist extremism will continue to pose growing dangers to the U.S. and its allies.

—*James Phillips is Senior Research Fellow for Middle Eastern Affairs in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.*