Syria, U.S. Power Projection, and the Search for an "Equalizer"
By Anthony H. Cordesman
October 9, 2012

Read online here: http://cs.is/SyriaEqualizer

The United States faces critical problems in intervening in Syria, problems that have already proven to be far more serious than intervening in Libya. Committing military forces starts an open-ended process where it is extremely difficult to control the size of the U.S. role and almost impossible to predict the consequences.

The United States now faces dilemmas in Syria that are almost certain to keep reoccurring in the future. On the one hand, the movements the United States aids can begin as allies and liberators but then trigger internal forces that breed new kinds of extremism and civil conflict, and that may ultimately end in aiding our enemies. On the other hand, the situation will often be little better if the United States does not intervene.

Syria is too powerful a military machine for the United States to directly challenge without a massive use of force, and the country presents a host of regional uncertainties if the United States does use direct military force. At the same time, Syria shows every sign of becoming more and more polarized along sectarian lines. The role of Sunni Islamist extremists in Syria is growing, but so is the role of Shi'ite elements like Iran's Al Quds Force and Hezbollah. Every week of extended conflict increases popular suffering and the economic challenges any successor regime will face.

And Libya and Syria are only the start. The political, religious, economic, and social upheavals in the Islamic and Arab worlds are virtually certain to produce a decade or more of instability and similar armed power struggles. The United States will be forced to opt for expeditionary diplomacy and have to make hard choices about the best way to intervene.

Many of these choices will center on politics, regional stability, and the need for civil and humanitarian forms of aid. It seems almost certain, however, that the United States will repeatedly face the same security dilemmas it faced in Libya and now faces in Syria: either finding some way to intervene with military force, or standing by—both with unpredictable and highly negative potential consequences.

There may be a technological solution that can ease—although scarcely eliminate—this dilemma. Much of the ability of ruthless authoritarian regimes to survive depends on their ability to use superior military force. As the United States found in Afghanistan, however, it is possible to offset much of this advantage by transferring "equalizers" like the Stinger man-portable antiaircraft missile (MANPAD).

In a totally different context, Israel suddenly faced massive problems in fighting Hezbollah in Lebanon when Iran gave them advanced man-portable antitank guided weapons (ATGMs) like the AT-4 Kornet. As the United States has found to its cost, even short-range rockets and mortars can make a major difference, as can bombs and explosives.

Whether myth or reality, the Colt Arms Company is reported to have advertised that "God made

man, but Samuel Colt made them equal." Light "smart weapons" can have much the same effect, as can limited transfers of short-range artillery devices and bomb-making materials. The U.S. problem with mortars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Israeli problem with rockets, and the growing challenge of bombs and improved explosive devices (IEDs) are all cases in point.

This helps explain why countries like Saudi Arabia and Qatar have talked to the United States about giving groups within the Free Syrian Army (FSA) franchise and other so-called "moderate" Syrian forces such weapons. A regime-controlled loyalist military force like Bashar al-Assad's will still have the advantage in more advanced weapons, but it would face massive problems in using such force against a better-armed mass popular insurgency.

Such an insurgency could then inflict far more serious casualties with the potential for far less risk of collateral damage and losses on its own side, as well as have far more motivation to persist. It will be able to expand its own safe zones, take advantage of "no fly" or "no move" zones enforced with limited uses of U.S. or allied force, and be able to quickly become far more effective with limited training by U.S. or other Special Forces.

In some cases, even the threat of such transfers—coming from a U.S.-supplied allied or friendly state—could force an authoritarian regime to compromise or leave, knowing it could not win or create stability from in the wake of a more challenging war of attrition. As such, the transfer of "equalizers" could be as much a negotiating tool and deterrent as a method of combat. It also could bring a quicker end to long popular struggles and do so before they are further polarized along ethnic or sectarian lines or gave growing power to the most extreme elements in any given context.

At the same time, the risks of transferred weapons falling into the wrong hands are clear. Iraq, Afghanistan, and the evolving patterns of modern terrorism have shown all too clearly the risks that such weapons could pose in the hands of extremist groups—as has the U.S. inability to control the leakage of Stingers to Iran and outside Afghanistan. The leakage of such weapons to extremist groups in Libya and beyond its borders remains a major ongoing threat.

Another clear risk is that extremist networks centered around al Qaeda or the Iranian Al Quds Force could rapidly transfer such weapons far outside the region in which they were originally supposed to be used: allied territory or that of the United States. The risks that such weapons could be turned on the United States and its allies are critical, and we and our allies are far less willing to bear the political costs or casualties of "incidents" than extremists and dictators if things go wrong.

This is where recent advancements and technological solutions could serve to reduce the risk of transferring such equalizers. As pocket cameras with a global positioning system (GPS) show, a small chip can be inserted into these weapons that could continuously read their location once activated. If such a chip was tied to a device that disabled the weapon if it moved to the wrong area, it would greatly reduce the risk of its falling into the wrong hands.

Advanced encryption chips can be equally small and cheap and could perform a number of additional functions. They could have a time clock to disable the weapon at a given time, with the option of extending the life if a suitable code was entered. Activation codes could be built in so the weapon was never active without a code restricted to moderate elements and timed so that such

elements had to keep entering a different code over time.

The equivalent of an identification friend or foe (IFF) capability could be built into that disabled the weapon in the presence of U.S. and allied forces or civil aircraft. A similar enabling code could be tied to the presence of a U.S. or allied adviser or covert partner.

Given today's solid-state technology, all of these functions could be built into a MANPAD or ATGM. A rocket or mortar might be somewhat more difficult to modify, but building in such capabilities could be possible. The same seems true of remote triggering devices that can be used in bombs or the equivalent of IEDs or in providing anti-armor capabilities like explosively formed penetrators.

This scarcely means that the United States should transfer such weapons casually or give them as equalizers except under conditions of dire need that clearly serve U.S. interests. Sam Colt may have made men "equal," but no one has ever argued he made them "wise." A tool is never a solution; it is only a means to an end.

At the same time, the very fact the United States obviously has such weapons could tilt the balance toward political settlement in some cases, and actually deploying them would make a critical difference in others. Counterterrorism and counterinsurgency do not have to be "classic" and involve the large-scale U.S. deployments as in the past. Such equalizers could reverse the present pattern of asymmetric warfare where cheap, relatively low-cost systems increasingly offset the U.S. advantage in advanced weapons and technology.

Such equalizers could also greatly reduce the need to directly project U.S. power in some contingencies and give our Special Forces and covert operators a whole new range of tools. They could alter the structure of proxy warfare and our ability to work with allies who directly transfer such weapons, without giving up final U.S. protections and controls. They could give friendly and moderate local forces a major advantage over extremists.

One thing is clear. The United States should not remain trapped in the dilemmas it faces in Syria or remain forced into the kind of hollow posturing both U.S. presidential candidates now bring to dealing with this issue. We need practical answers for both the military and political dimensions of what promises to be a decade of "expeditionary diplomacy," and these are tools that would be cheap and often could help to do the job.

Anthony H. Cordesman holds the Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.