Syria: The Search for the Least Bad Option

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There are no good options in Syria. No matter what happens, the current civil war has triggered divisions between Sunni, Alawite, Kurd, and Syria's smaller minorities that will take a decade or more to heal and leave lasting anger and hatred between Sunni and Alawite. The war has already spread to involve Lebanon and Iraq, unleashing a rebirth of sectarian tensions and conflict in each country. Worse, it has become linked to a religious war within Islam that increasingly pits Sunni against Shi'ite, and religious extremists against mainstream Islam, across the entire Islamic world.

It has led to Qatari, Saudi, Turkish, Jordanian, and UAE intervention in terms of providing money, training, and weapons to given elements the opposition, and to quiet - but increasingly active - covert support of some of these efforts by the US, Britain, and France. Iran, Russia, and possibly China have supported Assad along with Hezbollah.

The Cost of the Current Conflict to Syria and the Region

The end result is a proxy war without a clear strategic objective for most of the outside powers involved - with the exception of Iran, Iraq, and Hezbollah, which can at least predict that any largely Sunni victory will have a negative impact on them regardless of which mix of Sunnis wins. No one else can really know even the near-term effects of Assad's fall or survival.

The human impact of the conflict has spilled over the borders of Turkey and Jordan and involved Israel in the Golan. A massive refugee problem has developed in every bordering state except Israel, and no one has a meaningful count of the internally displaced persons within Syria or the Syrians who have become the equivalent of destitute and insecure "refugees" in their own homes. There is no practical way to estimate the cost in terms of immediate economic suffering or the future impact on development in every possible area of economic activity and the costs in laying the educational and institutional groundwork for the next generation.

Efforts to unify the opposition and give it moderate leadership are certainly necessary, but no one should have illusions about the probable result. Decades of dictatorship, cronyism, and corruption ensure that today's Syrian opposition has no real practical background in politics, governance, and democracy. It has democratic voices, but these voices have no unity or power in a structure in which combat capability has become the real metric of status and success. Opposition to Assad is the only real element of unity, as factions emerge that range from Sunni Islamist extremists to minor warlords to leaders with the public image of leadership and command, but no real following.

No one can predict which leader will survive, gain real power, or be able to move Syria back towards a pragmatic and unified course once Assad falls - and the odds are against one emerging in the first few years of the post-Assad struggle for power. It is easy to talk about unifying the opposition, human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. There are many Syrians who want this to happen. In practice, however, the odds strongly favor years of instability and power struggles compounded by social fragmentation, widespread conflict, a crippled economy, and outside interference.

The Present "Least Bad" Option is Not Good Enough to Succeed

All of these conflicting pressures, and the current and future divisions within the Syrian opposition, mean there is no good side to pick. The image of unity is not the reality. No one can now predict how deep the divisions in Syria will be once Assad falls, who and what will emerge in power, and what level of stability can be built up over time. The only thing that is now predictable is that the longer Assad lasts, the worse things are likely to get in every possible dimension. Every current element of the present conflict is having a steadily more crippling effect and is more polarizing both within Syria and the region around it.

This confronts the US with having to choose between "bad options" in finding better alternatives. The US can only vaguely hope to shape or influence the post-Assad outcome over time. There is no predictable "end stage," and US leverage will be limited regardless of the level of intervention it supports.

This partially justifies the current US emphasis on working with the Arab Gulf states, Jordan, and Turkey, while aiding Israel in building up its ability to deal with Hezbollah and Iranian proxy attacks. As the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* have now made clear, the US is indirectly providing arms, training, and intelligence support as well as trying to create a more moderate opposition by supporting a "unified" opposition "government," favoring the more moderate opposition forces, and working with its Arab allies and Turkey to limit the flow of arms and money to the more extreme Sunni Islamist factions. In spite of press reports, the US preserves a kind of "plausible deniability" in the process.

The US is also creating a cadre within the State Department that can help the more moderate opposition elements learn how to act as responsible political parties, hold elections, govern, and move toward economic reform and development. The Obama Administration is at least trying to cope with the reality that all forms of major counter-terrorism, counter-insurgency, and civil conflict do in fact involve "nation building" - and must find ways of helping to shape the future of Syria that do not involve the mindless waste and lack of planning and preparation that took place in Afghanistan and Iraq.

But, the current US effort clearly cannot guarantee any rapid end to the worst of the fighting or an end to the Assad regime on a timely basis. The gains the rebels now make are too limited, too slow, and too divisive inside Syria and within the entire region. At their present pace, even an opposition "victory" may have a political and regional outcome that amounts to a strategic defeat.

The "Best" of the Other "Least Bad" Options: Giving the Options More Advanced Weapons

This does not mean the US has "good" military options for dealing with these problems, and it is quite clear that more sanctions and more calls for negotiations are not going to help. There are, however, some "least bad" options.

The quickest and least attributable way of trying to bring a more rapid end would be to allow our regional allies to supply advanced manportable surface-to-air missiles and anti-armored guided weapons to the most moderate elements of the opposition forces.

This could deprive the pro-Assad forces of their ability to use fighters and helicopters as well as reduce much of their advantage in urban warfare, where armored vehicles have to expose themselves at limited ranges. Add in transfers of mortars and tube artillery like the D-30s widely available in the region, and the Assad forces would lose much of their indirect fire advantage, as well.

If these were coupled with providing special forces teams - which would not have to be US - to help ensure such weapons stayed with the "better" opposition fighters, it would reduce the risk they would fall into extremist hands. However, this additional precaution would scarcely eliminate the risk, and the US might well have to live with the fact these weapons would someday be used against the US or its allies.

At the same time, this has been a key option from the start and since no progress seems to have been made in making the flow of such weapons easier to control, it risks the possibility they will fall into the wrong hands. Yet, the US already has to live with the risk the massive numbers of such weapons already in the Syrian forces supporting Assad will fall into extremist hand once Assad falls.

The real issue is the incremental risk in the bad option of using such systems to help the "better" elements of the opposition win versus having the "bad" elements of the opposition takeover without such support. It is not clear that the Obama Administration has really thought this balance of risks out. It effectively means the US may be less damned if it does than if it doesn't.

Using Surface-to-Air Missiles to Create Sanctuaries in the Border Area

A second option is to work with Turkey and Jordan to provide some form of limited sanctuary using long-range surface-to-air missiles like the Patriot and ask Israel to extend such coverage from the Golan. One needs to be careful about acting on this option. It is not clear that it will do more than create uncertain sanctuaries and refugee centers near the borders of Turkey, Jordan, and Israel while triggering a major Iranian, Iraqi, and Hezbollah effort to support Assad. It could also create zones that become sectarian and ethnic or favor different opposition factions.

The Patriot has a maximum range of 160 kilometers at altitude and would have to be deployed in the rear away from the border. The Hawks with Jordanian forces have a maximum range of 25 kilometers. Their low altitude coverage against helicopters is much shorter and very limited where pop-up and ground-hugging tactics can be used. Moreover, even the PAC-3 Patriot has

relatively limited anti-missile defense coverage of around 20 kilometers from the launch unit. The end result could be pro-Assad forces using missiles and rockets against any such "sanctuaries" as terror weapons.

It also could create far stronger incentives for the pro-Assad forces to use chemical weapons unless the US went from talking about vague "red lines" to a clear statement that it would in response use US airpower and cruise missiles to destroy Syrian chemical weapons stocks and the key facilities of Syrian military forces and regime power.

This may prove to be a necessary form of escalation. Even if the US does not choose any new option now, it may have to take such military action later as the opposition close in on Assad. It is not clear that Assad has the slightest willingness to "go quietly into that great night" if he as any option to escalate. However, it is also an option with an outcome that is extremely difficult to predict, and destroying chemical weapons stocks may well mean civilian casualties.

Using US Cruise Missiles and Airpower in a No Fly Zone

There is something to be said for a no fly zone as long as the US has access to Turkish and Jordanian bases, is willing to commit all the air power necessary to deal with the remnants of Syrian air and ground-based air defense, has allied support as political cover, and is willing to ignore opposition from countries like Iran and Russian and the lack of any UN mandate. *Additionally, a "no fly" zone is effective so long as it supports the opposition.*

This option would be easier to recommend in the "least bad" ranking if it was clear that the Syrian air force and Syrian ground-based surface-to-air missile forces had lost enough combat power to be unwilling to challenge US and allied air forces. This is a matter for intelligence assessments and cannot be made from the unclassified indicators, although it seems likely that Syria no longer has anything like its pre-uprising 365 combat aircraft, (including some 80-90 modern air defense fighters) and ability to deploy major SAM forces (including some 150 SAM batteries of SA-2s, SA-3s, SA-5s, and SA-6s.) It is not easy to recommend as long as Syria remains is a far more capable power than Libya and without clear knowledge that the US would have Turkish and Jordanian/Saudi support and allied political cover.

It also might not be enough to make a quick difference if it was a real no fly zone, rather than one of the type implemented in Libya, in that the US and its allies would attack any fighters or helicopters that became active as well as their bases, and effectively prevent Assad's ground forces from deploying armor and major forces. This could require major amounts of US air power if Assad's forces put up significant resistance and comes at a time the US has other areas like the Gulf and North Korea to deal with and already faces major budget constraints.

It is possible that the very announcement of a no fly zone or limited initial activity could cause the collapse of Assad's forces, but it is probably equally likely Assad would escalate to make far more use of artillery, make selective use of air and SAM power to threaten the enforcement of a no fly zone, and seek outside help. Not an option to reject, but one that requires threat and cost-benefit assessments based on the best intelligence available.

Using US Cruise Missile and Airpower in a Major Act of War

A final military option is to take this risk deliberately and use US cruise missile and airpower now to destroy the key facilities of the Syrian military forces and the regime's power directly, using whatever new abuse Assad inflicts on the Syrian people as the rationale. This option probably requires access to Turkish and Jordanian air bases. US carrier forces would not have the numbers to be quickly decisive, and cruise missiles have limits. Any US use of Israel for such actions would be so provocative in terms of Arab reactions that it would be self-defeating and threaten Israel's future security.

Any such US activity would also be a major act of war with only a limited defensive rationale in terms of international law, and one the UN seems certain to reject. It would mean some level of confrontation with nations like Iran and Russia, and more problems with Iraq and Lebanon. The politics of beginning such action also commit the US to the point where the US would virtually have to press on to success once it started and which also fails to offer the US any clear control over which element of the armed opposition actually takes control... Although, once again, the US may have to take such action later if Assad escalates to chemical weapons or some other new attack on the population as the opposition closes in.

Preparing for the Grim Reality of the "Arab Decade" and Broader Clash within Islam

The option of transferring advanced manportable surface-to-air missiles and anti-armored guided weapons seems to be the best of these "least bad" options, although no one should downplay the risks and the uncertainties surrounding such actions. The use of missiles based outside Syria to create "sanctuaries" seems far more uncertain. Any major use of air and missile power presents significant risks, although setting clear "red lines" would lay the groundwork for such an option if it becomes necessary - particularly if the US can get cooperation in setting such red lines from Turkey and Arab states. It could also deter Assad from escalating the conflict.

The US also needs to prepare for the reality that Syria is simply one more example of the fact that the "Arab spring" is in actuality either the "Arab decade" or the "Arab quarter century." Much of the Middle East and North Africa may muddle through the mix of political, economic, factional, demographic, and religious pressures that now threaten the stability of every regional state. However, it seems likely that at least one Middle Eastern state will be in the process of major political upheavals and often internal violence throughout this period. Moreover, Syria now symbolizes the growing level of violence in the broader struggle for the future of Islam that has become an all too real "clash within a civilization".

If Iraq and Afghanistan were not enough, Syria is yet another warning that it is a fantasy to assume that the fall of an authoritarian rule that involves massive economic and political inequalities in nations with deep ethnic, sectarian, and tribal divisions will somehow lead to stable democratic rule and economic development. Factions that fight their way to power violently and with a conspiratorial background with no practical experience in politics, no real unity, and no experience in governance and economics can at best be influenced by patient diplomatic efforts at nation building. Many will turn politics into a blood sport for at least several years after an authoritarian regime falls. These movements are scarcely the reformers that can

bring the "end of history", and the US will face a world of "least bad" options that will exist long after Assad finally falls.