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## The Crisis in Syria:

### Washington's Options in the "Long Winter of Arab Discontent"

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***After nine months of protests, escalating violence, and an estimated 5,000 civilian deaths, it appears that government and anti-regime forces have reached a stalemate. Though on the brink of a "slow motion collapse", the Assad regime is determined to remain in power, and will continue its bloody campaign against dissenters at all costs. In the interest of stability and the regional balance of power, the United States and the international community have several potential policy options to address the growing turmoil. The urgency of the situation grows daily, as actors settle in for a "long winter of Arab discontent", amidst signs of an emerging civil war.***

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After nine months of protests, escalating violence, and an estimated 5,000 civilian deaths at the hands of Syrian security forces, it appears that government and anti-regime forces have reached a stalemate.<sup>1</sup> Amidst increasing political and economic pressure to end the violence, Bashar al-Assad has few cards left to play, as multilateral sanctions deplete state resources and military force remains the only option for ensuring his continued survival. Though the army has failed to subdue the unrest, it has remained largely unified and loyal to the al-Assad family, complicating prospects for an internal collapse of the regime. At the same time, the growing influence of the Syrian National Council and the nascent Free Syrian Army have improved the cohesion of the greatly fractured Syrian opposition movement, but it still lacks the organization, resources, and manpower needed to overthrow Assad without external assistance. Though the regime may be in a state of “slow motion collapse”<sup>2</sup>, one thing is certain- the Assad family is determined to remain in power, and will continue its bloody campaign against dissenters at all costs.<sup>3</sup> The urgency of the situation in Syria grows daily, as actors settle in for a “long winter of Arab discontent”<sup>4</sup>, amidst signs of an emerging civil war.

## **Washington’s policy vis-à-vis Syria**

US foreign policy towards Syria has been “painstakingly slow” to evolve.<sup>5</sup> The beginning of anti-regime protests in March provoked little response from Washington, but as opposition grew in the face of ever-increasing state violence, the Obama administration began to articulate the need for democratic reform. As the humanitarian crisis escalated, US efforts targeted Syria through diplomatic pressure at the UN and public statements denouncing the regime’s suppression of its people. Executive orders concerning humanitarian crimes and human rights abuses were passed, as well as the Syrian Accountability Act, which dealt with US exports to Syria, imposed sanctions on Syrian banks, and implemented a ban on American purchases of Syrian oil products, which accounted for a third of Syria’s national revenue in August.<sup>6</sup> On August 18, President Barack Obama called on al-Assad to step down. Washington’s actions have been complemented by efforts to engage with the Syrian opposition, culminating in the meeting of Secretary Clinton with key opposition leaders.

Characterized as a policy of “masterful inaction”<sup>7</sup>, Obama has generally resisted demands for a more proactive Syria policy. American campaigns in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya have drained US resources and exhausted public support for war, and in the midst of upcoming elections, no aspiring presidential candidate would promote yet another military operation. US-led initiatives thus far have focused on imposing increasingly harsh unilateral and multilateral sanctions on Syria, which have dealt a psychological and economic blow to the Assad regime.<sup>8</sup> However, the efficacy of sanctions is debatable; while economic isolation will inflict serious damage on the Syrian economy, the true victims are the Syrian people, who already face a sharp deterioration of purchasing power as the price of food and heating oil skyrockets.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, in the face of thousands of deaths, and tens of thousands of detentions, tortures, rapes, and human rights violations, many question the policy of merely “waiting for the thing that will crack them”, as one Obama administration official recently stated.<sup>10</sup>

## **Alternative US Policy Options**

### **Military Intervention**

The conflict in Syria presents Washington with the opportunity to undermine Iran's expanding regional presence by ridding itself of one of its key Arab supporters and establishing US-friendly forces in post-Assad Syria. However, there is limited support for military intervention for the following reason: Syria is not Libya. Coupled with a much larger population density, and over three times as many people, Syria's entrenched ethnic and sectarian tensions render it likely that external intervention would exacerbate the prospects of civil war by solidifying sectarian lines: anti-regime Sunnis backed by external military forces versus the Alawite, Christian, and Druze populations.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Syria's internal divisions reflect regional conflict lines, thus events in the former will have serious repercussions for the stability of its neighbors.

Foreign forces would also face a greater military adversary in the Syrian army, and an attack would require much more planning and resources than the campaign in Libya.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, external forces lack a well-funded, cohesive dissident movement with which to ally against the Assad regime, making an invasion even more difficult. Even the imposition of a no-fly zone would be no easy feat; due to the close proximity of heavily populated urban centers to strategic military targets, targeted airstrikes would likely cause as many casualties as Assad's military campaign.<sup>13</sup> In short, the above factors serve as significant deterrents to conduct another major military intervention.

### **“Covert” Assistance to opposition forces**

Another policy route for the US involves providing covert support for the Syrian opposition. Assistance could include the provision of information, food, equipment, medical aid, training, advice, and even plots targeting key Syrian officials and strategic landmarks. Indeed, there is already evidence that suggests external support, exemplified by an increasingly better armed and organized opposition movement. Recently, Syrian army defectors killed 27 soldiers in a seemingly coordinated, three-pronged attack, while the Free Syrian Army claims to have orchestrated various attacks in previous weeks.<sup>14</sup>

There are several issues to consider before actively supporting anti-regime elements. Due to the fractured and furtive nature of the movement, it is uncertain who comprises the opposition. Therefore, policy-makers cannot be certain if these forces will be capable of maintaining stability in post-Assad Syria and preventing the country from descending into civil war. What is potentially more worrisome is the unknown ideological make-up of the movement. If US assistance to the “opposition” during the Soviet-Afghan war incurred one hard-learned lesson, it is that an ally in the short-term can prove to be a detrimental foe in the long-term, and well-intentioned resources and support could be used to threaten Washington and its allies if placed in the wrong hands.

### **Installation of a humanitarian corridor/ buffer zone**

Academics and policy-makers are considering the installation of a humanitarian corridor along the Syrian border with Turkey to provide a refuge for Syrian refugees and anti-regime dissidents. Similarly, proposals for a Turkish buffer zone have been put forth to

serve the same ends.<sup>15</sup> However, even these efforts require military support in order to suppress Syria's air defense network, eliminate security threats from missiles, and neutralize the air force, notwithstanding the possibility of future engagements with pro-Assad ground forces.<sup>16</sup> Turkey would be a crucial player in the establishment of either initiative, but Ankara has yet to demonstrate a willingness to send its military to the border.<sup>17</sup>

## **Concluding Remarks**

There is no shortage of creative solutions to the problem of Syria. Rather, what is lacking is a unified, cohesive international effort to ameliorate the predicament of the Syrian people. Through Russia, China, and the BRICs have opposed initiatives condemning Assad at the UN Security Council, efforts to incorporate them into an international peace plan should be increased. The participation of Russia and China in particular is essential not only to facilitate Assad's cooperation, but also to present a united front against Syrian intransigence; if one country continues arms sales to Damascus and purchases Syrian oil, the efficacy of multilateral sanctions is subverted. As an ally of Assad, Russia proposed a peace initiative last week to the Security Council, and proved instrumental in encouraging Syria to sign the Arab League deal allowing observers into the country.<sup>18</sup>

Policy-makers should also be wary of Syrian reactions to international actions. Specifically, initiatives of a military nature may provoke Assad to pursue strategies that increase prospects of regional destabilization in order to dissuade local and international adversaries.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, it is uncertain how Syrian allies such as Iran and Hezbollah will respond to threats to the Assad regime, further endangering the stability of neighboring countries.

Finally, any solution must work towards promoting an integrated Syrian society, devoid of ethnic and sectarian divisions. This would not only hasten the fall of Assad by lessening the consequences of desertion, but it could also diminish prospects for future sectarian violence.

# NOTES

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