

Should Western Nations Arm Syrian Rebels?

Written by Samer N. Abboud

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SAMER N. ABBOUD, MAY 10 2013

As the 'Friends of Syria' met in Istanbul in late April 2013, one of the questions dominating the meeting was whether Western nations should arm Syria's rebels. Thus far, such a strategy has been resisted by the United States, while countries such as France and Britain have advocated a relaxing of arms embargoes so that arms could begin to flow to Syria's rebels. For its part, the external Syrian opposition has been advocating for arming rebels for some time now, along with calls for a no-fly zone or some other form of military intervention that have been ignored by Western powers. Meanwhile, countries such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia have begun to funnel light weapons and other resources to Syria's rebels. Some evidence even suggests that weapons from Libya are finding their way into Syria. At the same time, Syria's regional allies, mainly Hizballah and Iran, continue to supply it with weapons, and, in the case of the former at least, actively participate in the fighting.

Whether or not Western arming of Syria's rebels will bring about a decisive military advantage for the rebels and collapse the regime is unclear. The arguments in support of such a strategy, however, are problematic and to a large degree betray the trajectory of the conflict and contradict the stated policies of a political, rather than a military solution, of Western states towards the Syrian revolution. Further militarization thus has negative consequences on the possibility of a political settlement to the conflict and, contrary to assumptions, can serve to increase, rather than decrease the duration of the conflict. Such a position against militarizing the uprising is not a popular or an intuitive one under the circumstances of sustained brutality and violence by the regime. Yet, in the long-term, it is a position that is most likely to bring about a political solution that sets Syria on the path towards reconstruction.

Arming Syria's Rebels

The argument for arming Syria's rebels is an appealing one given the evolution of the conflict. What started out as a peaceful, non-violent revolution — that was met at every single turn by the brutality of the regime's violence — has now morphed into a highly militarized conflict between various rebel groups, the Syrian army, and its militia proxies (known as shabiha) that have spread throughout the country. As the conflict is increasingly understood outside of the country in post-political, military terms, there has been a push towards supporting the rebels in an attempt to put "a thumb on the scales of war" and tip the balance in their favor. The argument rests on the assumption that increased militarization will bring about the desired solution, mainly, the downfall of the Asad regime. It also rests on the assumption that a rebel victory is ultimately in the West's geopolitical interests in so far as it ruptures the link between Iran and Hizballah in Lebanon, reduces the possibility of conflict contagion to neighboring countries, and, potentially, can bring about a political authority sympathetic to Western policies toward the region. Finally, some arguments for arming the rebels rest on the presumptive need to counter the growing power of Islamist and jihadist groups on the ground, such as Jabhat al-Nusra, who are receiving weapons and resources from Qatar and Saudi Arabia (one wonders, if this was such a concern, why did Western states not work to cut off the supply route at its source?). In this way, the United States and other Western powers could not only counter growing jihadist tendencies among the armed opposition, but actively shape the rebel groups in their own vision. Under these circumstances the calls for arming the rebels are compelling.

The Consequences of Militarization

Marc Lynch has argued that the Syrian theatre is sufficiently militarized and that any Western support for rebels

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would not make a qualitative difference in the conflict. Similarly, Mona Yacoubian has argued that arming the rebels would generate a range of unintended consequences that would be difficult to contain. While I certainly agree with these arguments, and the range of others against militarization, I strongly believe that the more convincing argument against militarization concerns the political outcomes (or not) that militarization ultimately generates. More specifically, I do not believe that we can divorce the question of militarization from the questions of either the possibilities of a political settlement or its unintended consequences. Clearly, the arguments in favor of the West arming the rebels rely on a 'day after' vision that assumes the complete dismantling of the Assad regime. The consequences of militarization are ignored or downplayed in light of the larger political goal of regime collapse. The problem with thinking in these particular terms is that we preclude the possibility of different political settlements to the conflict, and, by extension, make militarization the main strategy by which an outcome should come about.

The 'day after' vision of total regime collapse demands an arming of the rebels in order to be realized. Yet, this would seem to ignore the political realities on the ground, including the strong military support provided by Iran and Hizballah, the continued support that the regime enjoys in some Syrian quarters (as difficult as this is to fathom from the outside), and the fragmentations within the Syrian opposition, both on the ground and outside of the country. Militarization does not sufficiently alleviate these obstacles.

A greater inflow of heavier, more sophisticated weapons cannot effectively compensate for the lack of organization among rebel groups. Despite numerous attempts to organize and create hierarchies within the Free Syrian Army, there remain weak horizontal linkages between its various units. The problems facing the rebels go beyond the need for more military resources. Similarly, the rebels are not a coherent or monolithic group and weeding out the 'good guys' among them to funnel weapons to will be much more difficult than supporters of this strategy assume. The conflict does not lend itself to such thinking to assume that an increase in weapons by the West for supposedly 'friendly' rebels will generate the desired political outcome. This is especially true if we consider the motivation as simply being to balance the power of the jihadists on the ground. In reality, the lack of coherence among militarized groups has produced an ever-changing, fluid political landscape in rebel-held areas in which many groups compete with each other over resources, community loyalty, service provision and so on. A substantial increase in military resources into these areas could conceivably be used inward toward intra-rebel fighting and further decrease, rather than increase, the possibilities for a solution to the conflict.

Under these circumstances militarization is not likely to have the intended outcomes of regime collapse. We should not forget a fundamental reality of the Syrian conflict, mainly, that the onus of victory is on the opposition and not the regime. All the regime has to do politically is survive even if it is in its current emasculated form. The current dynamics suggest that such an opposition victory, even in the event of further militarization, may be extremely difficult, particularly as the regime clearly has enough support from regional actors to continue fighting. The regime is certainly politically and militarily weaker and has lost all capacity to govern the country, but this, to some extent, is beside the point. There is a core security and repressive apparatus that for now is willing to continue engaging in violence and it is this core that must be dismantled or demobilized in order for an opposition victory to occur.

Further militarization provides one answer to the question of what political strategy can produce regime change, but it does not answer other, perhaps more sober and less ambitious questions, about the possibilities of a political settlement that do not involve complete regime change. Let me be clear for both personal and intellectual reasons: the continuity of this regime in any form is not an even remotely desirable option. Increased militarization assumes a direct outcome – regime change – which may not be achievable in the short-term. At the same time as militarization is unlikely to bring about regime change, the peripheral consequences of militarization are ignored. Most important among these are the ways in which it further fragments, rather than unites, local groups, contributes to warlordism, and structurally embeds violence as part of everyday life and economies of provision. This is not to engage in fear-mongering but to introduce a pragmatic question into the discussion around militarization: what are the undesirable and unintended consequences that cannot be undone?

This raises the question of whether a different political strategy and solution are worth considering. At the crux of this question is whether the conflict is now post-political and is going to be decided purely in the military arena. The Syrian opposition, it must be noted, has not made unrealistic demands on the regime or the international community.

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While it has supported the armed opposition it has displayed political pragmatism in its willingness to negotiate with some members of the regime and their regional supporters. As US Secretary of State Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov meet in May 2013, it is clear that many members of the opposition are willing to accept a political solution that removes Assad from power and includes members of the regime in a transitional government but does not necessarily include de-Ba'athification along the lines of what occurred in Iraq. Such a scenario does not need further militarization to be realized.

Increasingly, the prospects of either opposition victory or regime survival seem unlikely and, at least in the latter case, completely undesirable. In this context, what does further militarization serve other than to deepen the violence and structurally embed the conflict even further? Such a scenario would not likely result in a tipping of scales in favor of the rebels, making a political settlement even more unattainable.

Conclusion

The question of whether the West should arm Syria's rebels should be treated with extreme caution and sensitivity. We should be especially wary of reducing it to a numbers game in which we are led to believe, as Robin Yassan-Kassab argues, that an increase in weapons translates to more liberated territories. While Yassan-Kassab's argument that Syrian territories are increasingly liberated from regime control is factually correct, the claim ignores the territorial and administrative incongruities of that liberation. Syria is not Libya and the conflict has not neatly divided loyalist and rebel forces. Syria's liberated territories remain unconsolidated by opposition forces. Control of key highways continues to shift between rebel and regime forces. The reality here is that a key act such as the liberation of Raqaa is important, but until Damascus falls to the rebels the liberated territory will only increase the potential of political and social fragmentation in the country. The consolidation of territorial enclaves by regime and loyalist forces does not actually bring the country closer toward a resolution of the conflict, but drives further wedges between communities and makes a political solution less likely.

One final note: arguing against militarization should not be equated with supporting the regime. One can be opposed to both militarization and the regime. The more intellectually honest question is not either/or but under what conditions can a political solution be arrived at that paves the way for the removal of Assad and a demobilization of violent actors. This is a profoundly complicated question that has no immediate or obvious answer. One thing, however, seems certain: further militarization of the Syrian conflict will not decidedly tip the balance in favor of the rebels and will contribute to further fragmentation in the country. In turn, such fragmentation can only serve as an obstacle to a political solution to the conflict, which is the stated goal of Western and regional powers. The challenge now is agreeing on the contours of such a solution and bringing to bear the political pressures to realize it.

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