

Making the Case: What is America's Best Bad Option in Syria?



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Takeaways

In this guide to the debate, we provide answers to six key questions:

1. What are America's security interests in Syria?
2. Which rebel groups should we support?
3. What are Syria's military capabilities?
4. What is the status of Syria's chemical weapons?
5. What are the international community's options?
6. What are America's options?

The civil war in Syria is one of the ugliest in recent memory. In two years of conflict, over 100,000 people have died, terrorist groups are fighting on both sides, chemical weapons have been used, and numerous cities have been laid to waste. With the Syrian army crushing a rapidly-splintering rebellion in several key urban areas, American policymakers are considering what further action could—or should—be taken.

But “further action” is a broad category. Our options range from supplying lethal and non-lethal aid to deploying troops in Syria.

Syria's civil war has already subjected its people to immense hardship; the battle lines have changed multiple times over

the past two-and-a-half years, and now it is also a source of real risk to our allies in the region.

We want to make sure that we look before we leap and that what we're doing is actually helpful to the situation, as opposed to making it more deadly or more complex.



— Barack Obama, May 3 2013 ¹

Congress plays an important role in reviewing American options in Syria, but before the U.S. becomes more entangled in yet another Middle Eastern conflict, policymakers must carefully consider several questions before deciding on a course of action. These are:

What are America's security interests in Syria?

Despite a recent CBS/New York Times poll that noted a clear majority of Americans do not wish to be involved in the Syrian conflict, ² the U.S. has significant interests in the struggle, primarily because of the regional instability caused by the war.

- Syria borders Turkey—a NATO member with which the U.S. has a military alliance and a mutual defense treaty—and Israel. The fighting could easily spill over into those countries, drawing the U.S. into the conflict.
- Syria also borders Lebanon and Jordan, two countries on already shaky political footing. The war is already causing internal security problems in those nations.

America should try to keep the war from destabilizing the region.

The Syrian conflict is creating a humanitarian crisis both inside and outside of the country.

- The UN estimated in July that over 100,000 people have been killed in over two years of fighting. ³
- The UN further estimated that the war has created 1.4 million refugees, with over a million of those in Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon. ⁴ The refugees are placing enormous pressure on these nations' economies and infrastructure, potentially destabilizing them as summer approaches and water, food, and power resources are strained even further.



Syrian Refugees in the Region as of Summer 2013 (approx.) ⁵

Country	# of Syrian Refugees/IDPs	Country Population	Refugee % of Population
Lebanon	455,000	4,132,000	11.02%
Jordan	448,000	6,482,000	6.92%
Turkey	323,000	80,694,000	0.40%

Iraq	143,000	31,858,000	0.45%
Egypt	62,000	85,294,000	0.07%
Syria (IDPs)*	4,250,000	22,457,000	18.92%
Total external refugees	1,432,000	—	—
Total external & internal refugees	5,682,000	—	—

United Nations, CIA World Factbook, USAID

*Internally Displaced Persons

Which rebel groups should we support?

The rebels remain a fractured collection of disparate groups, fighting Assad's forces and each other. Many of these groups are religiously inclined, as the Assad regime had crushed most secular Syrian organizations long before the war began.

- In December 2012, the U.S. recognized the largest group, the “National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces,” as “the legitimate representative of the Syrian people.”⁶ This group is sometimes called the Syrian National Coalition (SNC), not to be confused with the Syrian National Council.
- The United Kingdom, the European Union, and the Gulf Cooperation Council—a group comprised of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE—also support the National Coalition.⁷

There are other groups inside and outside Syria vying for control. Membership in these groups is fluid.

- The Free Syrian Army (FSA) is a loose umbrella group of fighters and Islamist militants mounting a guerilla war against government forces within Syria. The National Coalition has embraced some FSA factions but has rejected others. In late April, the first direct shipment of U.S. food and medical supplies reached the FSA in southern Turkey.⁸

- Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) spawned Jabhat al-Nusra, commonly known as the Nusra Front, which has carried out many suicide and IED attacks within Syria. The U.S. Department of State in December 2012 labeled it a Foreign Terrorist Organization.⁹ Unfortunately, the Nusra Front also seems to be the most effective military force in the rebellion.
- Syria's Kurdish minority has also carved out an enclave in the northeastern part of the country, and is actively fighting the Nusra Front.

What are Syria's military capabilities?

Over the last two years, the Syrian conscript military has been degraded but remains an effective fighting force. Syria's military (and political) elite are mainly members of Assad's own Alawite minority—a heterodox Shia Muslim sect—but most of the lower ranks are Sunni Muslims.

The shifting nature of the Syrian opposition complicates U.S. involvement.

Since 2011, Syria's armed forces have suffered numerous defections to the various rebel groups, but the defectors are mostly low-level personnel. Some analysts say Assad is winning the war, partly because large numbers of elite officers, or whole armed units, have yet to defect.¹⁰

- While troop strength in the Syrian army has been cut in half, Damascus retains the loyalty of its reliable, capable Alawite Special Forces, the Republican Guard, and the 3rd and 4th Armored Divisions. These troops total about 50,000 men.¹¹

- At the start of the conflict, Syria's air force boasted 365 combat aircraft and 33 attack helicopters, although military analysts believe its capabilities have been significantly degraded.¹²
- To buttress its forces, Syria is secretly sending tens of thousands of pro-regime Alawite and Christian fighters to Iran for training, according to Israel's intelligence chief and a Western diplomat.¹³

Syria is also receiving arms, fighters, and training from abroad.

- Iran is providing Syria with large quantities of weapons and personnel by means of civilian aircraft transiting over Iraqi airspace.¹⁴
- Hezbollah fighters from neighboring Lebanon are also actively engaged in fighting for Assad.¹⁵
- Since 2007, Russia has been building a modern air defense system in Syria, while also providing technical assistance and replacement parts after the fighting began in 2011.¹⁶ As late as November 2012, Russia supplied Syria with advanced air defense components.¹⁷
- The Syrian army, with the help of Hezbollah, in early June retook the strategic town of Qusayr from the rebels. They are currently advancing north and are made significant gains in the city of Homs.

Both sides are receiving assistance from abroad.

What is the status of Syria's chemical weapons?

Syria's widely-disbursed chemical weapons caches—the 4th largest stockpile in the world and the largest in the Middle East—remain a serious security concern.¹⁸ The worst-case

scenario is that no one secures these caches and they fall into extremists' hands.

- According to the U.S. Intelligence Community, Syria “has a highly active chemical warfare program and maintains a stockpile of sulfur mustard, sarin, and VX.” Syria also has a large arsenal of missiles, bombs, and rockets that could deliver these weapons.¹⁹
- A British newspaper reported that rebels have tried to seize a chemical weapons facility near Aleppo.²⁰ These rebel forces included the al Qaeda-linked Nusra Front.²¹

Syria’s chemical weapons must not fall into the wrong hands.

The U.S. Intelligence Community is not fully confident that it could secure the chemical weapons in the event of Assad’s fall; when asked whether the U.S. or its allies could secure the arsenal, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper replied, “I’m not sure I know how to make a call like that...[it] would be very, very situationally dependent.”²²

- The Pentagon estimated in November 2012 that 75,000 troops would be necessary to secure Syria’s chemical weapons stockpiles.²³
- House Intelligence Committee Chair Mike Rogers advocates training Syrian rebels to secure the chemical weapons sites themselves, but given the rebels’ military priorities and the large number of personnel needed to secure these facilities, it remains unclear when or if this could happen.²⁴
- The Pentagon thinks it’ll take more troops to secure Syria’s chemical weapons than we currently have in Afghanistan.

What are the international community's options?

There are several steps the international community could take to begin to halt the violence. Each poses its own set of complications, however.

- The UN could pass resolutions condemning the war in Syria and encouraging the deployment of UN peacekeepers. So far, however, Russia and China have blocked such resolutions. Russian media in April 2013 also said Moscow will vote against any resolution that only blames Assad for the violence. ²⁵
- Secretary of State John Kerry met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in May and agreed to convene an international meeting to help find a diplomatic solution to the conflict. ²⁶ The rebels refuse to participate in these talks, however, since they first demand that Assad relinquish power before coming to the negotiation table.
- Turkey, as a NATO ally, could intervene and then call upon its alliance to help it. However, it remains uncertain whether Turkey has the political will, the military prowess, or the public backing to become deeply involved in the Syrian conflict. ²⁷ Complicating matters is that Turkey is home to half a million Alawites, who generally support Assad. ²⁸
- Saudi Arabia and Qatar, as well as rich Gulf donors, are providing weapons and generally bankrolling the rebels' war effort in Syria. These efforts have supported multiple groups, some of which are Islamist. ²⁹

At the moment, even if the international community could otherwise achieve consensus, Russia and China are blocking efforts at the UN.

What are America's options?

Options for American policymakers remain bleak. Here is a menu of possible efforts in which the U.S. could engage in Syria, organized from least to most intrusive:

Stay the current course. We have already placed Syria under severe economic sanctions while also providing \$250 million of non-lethal assistance to Syrian opposition and civil society groups.³⁰ America is already the largest donor of food and refugee aid, providing almost \$815 million of such backing.³¹

Furthermore, we are sending troops to Jordan to shore up its government³² and are clandestinely consulting with Arab governments to provide arms to the “right” rebel groups.³³ Our efforts, however, have not hastened the end of the war.

Press reporting indicates the White House is considering providing direct lethal aid to certain rebel groups.³⁴ This aid could run the gamut from rifles to anti-tank weapons to sophisticated anti-aircraft missiles. Once weapons are provided, however, they could flow to any group, including terrorist organizations.

Enforce a ground-based no-fly corridor in northern Syria.

Senators McCain and Levin wrote to the White House in March arguing the U.S. could enforce a no-fly zone using Turkey-based Patriot missile batteries to carve out a ‘safe zone’ for refugees in northern Syria—as long as Turkey agreed to using these batteries for this purpose.³⁵ The former National Coalition president requested a safe zone protected by Patriots as well.³⁶ This option, however, would not prevent Syrian ground forces from entering the area.

“American policymakers have few good options, as any decision has serious negative consequences—and no guarantee of success.”

Any action that requires military force within Syria or in the country’s airspace could be considered an act of war that

requires UN or Congressional authorization. These options include:

Enforce a much larger or country-wide no-fly zone. In 2012, Senators McCain, Graham, and Lieberman signed a letter stating the U.S. should work with the rebels to establish safe havens in “liberated” parts of the country and consider a no-fly zone around these areas, including major cities.³⁷

Carrying out this mission also means destroying Syria’s Russian-built air defense network which would, according to Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General Martin Dempsey, require 700 or more sorties.³⁸

“Bombing Syria or enforcing a no-fly zone within Syria probably requires UN or Congressional authorization. It would also put U.S. troops in harm’s way.”

Destroy Syria’s air force through precision airstrikes.

Senators McCain and Levin argued in March that Assad’s air capabilities could be destroyed via airstrikes, although their letter is vague as to who would carry out these strikes.³⁹

It is also uncertain how this effort would end the conflict, as General Dempsey in late April noted that 90% of the casualties in Syria came from artillery and direct fire, and only 10% came from the air.⁴⁰

Deploy international and/or American troops in Syria to secure the chemical weapons stockpile. When asked in March whether he supported putting U.S. troops into Syria, Senator Graham responded, “Absolutely, you’ve got to get on the ground. There is no substitute for securing these weapons.”⁴¹ Senator McCain argued the international community should “be prepared with an international force to go in and secure these stocks of chemical and perhaps biological weapons.”⁴²

Conclusion

America is facing a fateful turning point in the Syria debate, in which we could deepen our involvement in a murderous civil war. Ultimately, the Administration will decide how best to proceed. But Congress has a role and a responsibility in determining how and when our nation engages in conflict. This obligation requires Congress to thoroughly explore these questions before committing American lives and treasure to the Syrian struggle.

TOPICS

FOREIGN RELATIONS 115

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