

Obama and the Syrian Civil War

Written by Mark N. Katz

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MARK N. KATZ, MAR 29 2013

Should America help the Syrian rebels fighting against the dictatorial, Iranian-allied Assad regime? In an article published in the *New York Times* on March 24, 2013, C.J. Chivers and Eric Schmitt revealed that the U.S. has actually been doing so...sort of.

According to them, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has helped facilitate the airlift of arms by Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Qatar to Syrian opposition groups through Turkey and (to a lesser extent) Jordan. The CIA's involvement began in 2012, and greatly expanded after the American presidential election in early November. In addition, Chivers and Schmitt reported that the CIA has helped Arab governments procure weapons from Croatia, and has sought to determine who among the Syrian rebels should receive them.

Washington, though, is not willing to provide arms directly to the Syrian opposition. As *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius noted on March 27: "Obama won't make the all-encompassing commitment in Syria that some want because he fears it would devour the remaining years of his presidency." In other words: the Obama Administration does not want to get deeply involved in Syria, but it doesn't want to be seen as doing nothing either. So it is doing a little bit to help the Syrian opposition avoid being defeated and slowly make gains against the Assad regime, but not overcome it.

However prudent this compromise position may be for Obama in terms of American domestic politics, it is not good foreign policy. Now over two years old, Syria's violent civil war threatens to destabilize neighboring countries through massive refugee flows to them that they are ill-equipped to deal with and/or through the Syrian conflict interacting with ongoing conflicts in neighboring states and drawing in opposing sides from them.

It is not in the interests of America, Europe, Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Arab states, or of Israel for the Syrian conflict to develop into a larger regional conflict that none of them—or anyone else—can control. In order to prevent this, as well as stop the continued slaughter of the Syrian population, the Syrian conflict needs to be brought to an end. And since it is the brutality of the Assad regime that is the cause of the conflict, a necessary (though probably not sufficient) condition for ending the Syrian conflict is through bringing about the downfall of the Assad regime.

While it is understandable why Obama—or probably any American president—would not want to undertake a large-scale, inconclusive military intervention like in Afghanistan or Iraq, the U.S. could at least do something similar to what it did in Libya in 2011: lead an international effort including European and Arab countries to neutralize the forces of the regime, aid the opposition, and help establish a new government once the old one is destroyed. While it would not be possible to get UN Security Council approval for this, joint action by NATO and the Arab League is a possibility. Russia and China would object, but both would act—as they have with Libya—to establish good relations with the new regime once the old one fell.

Further, the clearer the U.S. is about its intention to bring about the downfall of the Assad regime, the more likely it is to accelerate defections from within its ranks or even encourage Assad's own officers to oust him. However it comes about, of course, the downfall of Assad is likely to be accompanied by violence between the winning Sunni majority and the losing Alawite minority as well as between rival factions among the Sunni victors. But while this probably

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cannot be avoided, an America that is actively aiding the opposition to Assad can more easily help support moderate Sunni forces, isolate extremist ones, and arrange some sort of protection for the defeated Alawites than an America that insists on limiting its role in Syria.

Finally, it is certainly understandable why President Obama fears that an “all-encompassing commitment to Syria” would “devour the remaining years of his presidency.” Unfortunately, though, his presidency is going to be preoccupied by Syria so long as the conflict there continues as well as negatively impacts neighboring countries. Increased American involvement may not bring about a quick, clean end to this conflict. But the limited American involvement that Obama has recently been willing to countenance will certainly not do so.

A worsening situation in and around Syria will eventually force the U.S. to become involved there in order to prevent truly catastrophic consequences for its allies in the region. Surely it is better for the U.S. to do so now when the situation is admittedly bad than later when it is even worse and may require far more from the U.S. than just providing arms.

Mark N. Katz is Professor of Government and Politics at George Mason University (Fairfax, Virginia, USA), and is the author of *Leaving without Losing: The War on Terror after Iraq and Afghanistan* (Johns Hopkins University Press).

About the author:

Mark N. Katz is a professor emeritus at the George Mason University Schar School of Policy and Government and a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council.