

U.S. Support for Moderate Syrian Rebels and Its Implications for National Security

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WRITER'S COMMENTS: As a political science major and former United States Marine, I have always been captivated by and often concerned with our country's foreign policy. While I had limited knowledge of the Syrian Civil War before taking UWP 104D (Writing in International Relations) with Dr. Lisa Klotz, I used the opportunity presented by the culminating essay to expand my understanding. The assignment was to choose an ongoing crisis and then develop a policy recommendation to advise a given political institution. Dr. Klotz designed the class so that each week we focused on a different aspect of the paper, progressively constructing it with the help of peer-editing and revising. It was a great experience to see everyone's hard work pay off as students presented their policy recommendation to the class. As the Syrian Civil War continues to rage on today, I hope my paper will help not only shed light on some of the key issues facing Syria but also on potential solutions so that a realistic peace agreement can be made.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENTS: Having majored in International Relations here at UCD, I wanted to give students in my Writing in International Relations course a practical experience similar to one they might expect in the field. Hence, students in my course write as if they were interns at an organization or agency of their choice. All the work they do feeds into their major assignment, a policy paper that analyzes a current International Relations issue that their organization would be interested in and that recommends a policy for that organization to adopt. Rather than just support their policy, students must consider

its disadvantages as well. Colin Giacomini chose an extremely complex and volatile issue. In “U.S Support for Moderate Syrian Rebels and its Implications for National Security,” Colin went above and beyond in the depth and breadth of his research, the thoughtfulness of his analysis, and his sophisticated, professional tone and diction. My course provided the opportunity; the accomplishment is all his own.

– Lisa Klotz, University Writing Program

Abstract

This paper examines the effects of U.S. support for moderate rebels fighting in the Syrian civil war, with a specific focus on the Train and Equip (T&E) Program. This analysis explains the origins of the civil war and the history of U.S. involvement in the crisis as of February 2016. The information utilized in this analysis was gathered from a variety of peer-reviewed journals and credible news organizations. To create a viable solution to the crisis, three alternative policies are proposed. After a comprehensive dissection of each policies' implications, this paper recommends to the U.S. Department of State the third alternative, the “Stop and Promote” policy option.

Introduction

The Syrian civil war is one of the most complex and destructive conflicts of the 21st century. Over 100 separate factions and a dozen foreign countries have torn Syria apart, resulting in a catastrophic number of fatalities and the worst refugee crisis since World War II. As the conflict enters its fifth year, it is clear that the U.S. Department of State has failed in creating an effective strategy to alleviate these consequences. This analysis examines the failures of previous policies to construct a realistic and pragmatic approach that will benefit the Syrian people and U.S. national interests.

Origins of the Syrian Civil War

The Syrian civil war officially began in March 2011, as increasing discontent with the Assad regime combined with inspiration from successful Arab Spring revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya to create a perfect uncontrollable storm. Bashar al-Assad had become president of Syria in 2000 following the death of his father, Hafez al-Assad, who had ruled the country since 1971 (Zenko 2015). Bashar al-Assad was welcomed as a progressive leader, introducing a number of liberal policies within his first year that included the release of many political prisoners and repealing laws that limited freedom of speech. These liberal policies became known as the Damascus Spring, but were short-lived, as they were repealed in 2001 and the authoritarian policies that characterized his father's rule continued again (Zenko 2015). Over the next decade, Assad became an oppressive ruler, committing numerous human rights violations and funding the terrorist organization Hezbollah in Lebanon. During this time, Syria's economy stagnated and many citizens grew disenfranchised with the widespread poverty and lack of political representation. After the fall of the authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, limited protests began throughout Syria, but were predominantly peaceful. The turning point occurred in March of 2011, when fifteen children were arrested for anti-government graffiti in the city of Daraa and were killed shortly afterwards while still in custody (Zenko 2015). This sparked nationwide protests and calls for Assad to step down. Assad responded with a brutal military crackdown, killing thousands of citizens in the first few months of the conflict. Protesters began to organize, forming hundreds of separate militarized groups within the first year. Many of these groups consolidated under the authority of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which would become the United States' primary ally in the country, while others coalesced as the al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Nusra Front.

The Opposition

The civil war was initially secular, with rebels fighting for legitimate grievances, but as the conflict continued it attracted the attention of the global jihadi movement. In "Can Assad's Syria Survive the Revolution?" Eyal Zisser argues that "the rebellion took on additional dimensions with

jihadists joining the struggle because of the regime's heretical Alawite nature and because of its alliance with Shi'ite Iran and Hezbollah" (2013). The al-Nusra Front, formed in 2012, was originally an offshoot of the Islamic State of Iraq which was part of the greater al-Qaeda organization (Zisser 2013). After a power struggle in 2013, the al-Nusra Front and al-Qaeda broke away as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi established the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/ISIS). This fracture further complicated the situation as rebel groups engaged in conflict against each other as well as the Assad government, constantly changing allegiances when circumstances called for it. Violence increased dramatically, leaving Syria divided as the FSA took control of central and southern regions and al-Nusra Front and ISIL took the north and east, pushing government forces into the urban areas of the west.

While the United States has aligned itself with the FSA because of their supposed moderate ideology, the group has committed a considerable number of war crimes that are remarkably similar to those of the al-Nusra Front and ISIL. While the U.S. domestic audience has become accustomed to frequent reports and videos of ISIL beheadings and bombings, the crimes of the U.S.-backed FSA rebels have not appeared in the media. Atrocities go unnoted even when well documented, as with the May 2013 video of an FSA commander killing and eating the heart of a government soldier (Abdelaziz 2013). This is just one example of the many heinous acts committed by the FSA, which have included massacres of entire villages loyal to Assad (Holmes 2013). Reevaluation of the descriptor "moderate" - which the U.S. government has adopted for groups that are slightly less fanatical than ISIL - is needed, as this application clearly does not adhere to any universally accepted definition of the term.

Effects of Past U.S. Department of State's Policy Towards Syrian Rebels

At the onset of the Syrian civil war, the U.S. Department of State presumed the Assad regime would be quickly overthrown in accordance with the pattern of the Arab Spring. Therefore, it seized the opportunity to gain influence within the rebel forces by supplying the FSA with intelligence and \$45 million in non-lethal aid (Zenko 2015). However, Assad was able to preserve his regime in the face of vast opposition,

which has proven to be quite problematic for U.S. policy. In August 2013, evidence surfaced of a chemical weapon attack by the Assad government. This triggered the United States to begin supplying the FSA with lethal aid (light arms, ammunition, and surface-to-air rockets) while simultaneously conducting a bombing campaign against ISIL-held positions within Iraq (Zenko 2015). As the situation in Syria continued to deteriorate and fighting intensified, President Obama authorized the use of U.S. military force inside Syria in September of 2014, as well as the commencement of the Train and Equip (T&E) program. The intention behind the program was to create a professionally trained rebel force to represent U.S. interests within Syria against the al-Nusra Front, ISIL, and the Assad government. At a cost of \$500 million, the T&E program was only able to train 54 rebel fighters, who were all immediately killed or captured once they reentered the country (Zenko 2015). In response, President Obama suspended the T&E program in October 2015, replacing it with an almost identical program that would train veteran rebel commanders and funnel military equipment to the opposition forces through them. As the conflict continues into 2016, it is clear that the current U.S. strategy in Syria has failed. Alternative policies must be employed to improve the situation on the ground in Syria.

Description of U.S. Department of State's Revised T&E Program

After the original T&E program was suspended in October 2015, U.S. Department of State envoy Brett McGurk made it clear that, “we are not halting the program, we are just adapting it” (Wong 2015). In addition, Secretary of Defense Ash Carter has stated that, “the Department of Defense will provide equipment packages and weapons to a select group of vetted leaders and their units so that over time they can make a concerted push into territory still controlled by ISIL” (Wong 2015). This “new” program is essentially indistinguishable from the former, as the only difference is a more concentrated focus on rebel leadership. The new T&E program will attempt to better train the upper echelon of rebel commanders so that they have the skills necessary to coordinate their operations with those of the United States. According to Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Christine Wormuth, “the core of the new approach is to work with groups already fighting ISIL on the ground, providing

these capable indigenous forces with training and equipment to make them more effective in combination with U.S. airstrikes.” While this new program focuses on training and coordination, it will still provide these rebel groups (primarily the FSA) with substantial amounts of weapons and munitions - even though such supplies were all seized by the al-Nusra Front and ISIL during the previous T&E program. To create a more effective U.S. strategy in Syria and to avoid a disastrous outcome from reoccurring, we must critically examine the components of the program and gain a better understanding of its potential implications.

Implications of Continued U.S. Support for Syrian Rebels

One of the most unique characteristics of the Syrian civil war is the extensive number of foreign nationals who have traveled to Syria to fight alongside the rebel groups. As of November 2015, the Global Terrorism Index reports that over 30,000 foreign fighters from as many as 100 countries have traveled to Syria since the conflict broke out in 2011 (Taylor 2015). While in Syria, these foreign nationals become battle-hardened and radicalized, then they easily return to their home countries to spread their newly acquired ideologies. While not all of these foreign nationals are Islamic radicals, and while the T&E program seeks association with moderate rebel groups, the experience and training those in the T&E program receive can potentially harm U.S. security interests in the future. During the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the United States supplied tribal leaders with weapons and training, and the experience they received was indirectly utilized against the United States in the September 11th attacks. The United States must prevent this cycle from reoccurring, and this starts with examining policies that might lead to the development of adversaries in the coming decades.

While the objective of the T&E program is to train moderate rebels to represent U.S. interests against Assad, al-Nusra Front, and ISIL, the FSA often work with these groups when faced with a common enemy. The more moderate rebel fighters will “become radicalized as they spend time in the trenches with al-Qaeda linked groups” (Hegghammer 2013). There have been many reports of FSA rebels fighting and coordinating strategies alongside radical Islamic groups against the Assad government. This cooperation facilitates the spread of extremist ideologies as moderate

rebels are absorbed into the more powerful radical campaigns. A rebel commander of Fursan ul-Haq (a group under the FSA umbrella) that received weapon shipments through the T&E program explains that “there is something misunderstood by world powers, we have to work with al-Nusra Front and other groups to fight both the Assad’s regime and the Islamic State” (Gartenstein 2016). This quote represents a fundamental problem with the current U.S. policy towards Syrian rebels: we are indirectly (and in many cases, directly) supporting, training, and equipping the same terrorists that we have been fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan for the past decade. The current U.S. policy is in complete contradiction to its previous anti-terror strategy as we are supporting the rise of groups that spread violence and instability within a sovereign state.

The United States’ enduring support for these rebel groups is also strengthening the ideological argument of groups like ISIL, as popular sentiments in the Middle East view the United States as exporting instability throughout the region. Radical groups rationalize their animosity against the United States using the country’s long record of interventionist policies, military campaigns, and political intrigue in the region. These anti-American militant groups “gain momentum, sympathy and legitimacy from actions carried out by Western forces” (Hussain 2015). Average Syrian citizens who witness violent atrocities committed by U.S.-backed rebels may very likely view the United States as an enemy. They might then align themselves with ISIL or the Assad government, as they are perceived as standing up against Western intrusion.

Policy Alternatives

Policy Approach Option 1: Stay the Course

The first option available to the U.S. Department of State is to continue supporting, training, and arming Syrian rebels through the revised T&E program. This will lengthen the duration of the civil war as the moderate rebels will be supplied with the tools necessary to continue the conflict against Assad and ISIL. The civil war will continue on into the foreseeable future, becoming more complicated and violent. More countries will get involved in the competing factions and the moderate rebels will become increasingly radicalized, as they will depend on fresh recruits from the inflow of international jihadists. According to Ed

Hussain in “Why Al-Qaeda is Winning,” this policy option will likely lead to the fall of the Assad government and the structural integrity of Syria’s institutions, and al-Qaeda will probably gain de facto control of parts of Syria to serve as a new strategic base for jihadis in the Middle East. As Syria becomes a failed state, it will threaten the stability of the region, as well as the security of the international community.

This will ultimately require the deployment of U.S. and coalition troops on the ground in Syria to eliminate the ability of al-Qaeda to continue their operations. A new U.S.-led military campaign “would have little or at best shallow political support in the United States and within key allies. Public tolerance would likely be short lived, and political pressure to cut the U.S. role would grow quickly” (Byman 2015). As in Iraq, the United States would create insufficient change at an enormous fiscal and human cost and would have to withdraw in the face of domestic opposition. In addition, the United States would continue to be seen as a force of negativity in the Middle East, furthering the ideological argument of jihadists groups like al-Qaeda and ISIL.

Policy Approach Option 2: Direct U.S. Military Campaign

The second option available is a direct U.S. military campaign to assist moderate rebels in toppling the Assad government and eradicating ISIL from the country. This will require a drastic increase in airstrikes, as well as an extensive ground invasion that will include the United States and coalition allies. This option will quickly bring down Assad and suppress ISIL’s ability to continue operations. However, “ISIL, Assad loyalists, and other groups would immediately try to spark an insurgency and use terrorism to push the United States out” (Byman 2015). This would be a disastrous scenario and would claim thousands of U.S. and Syrian lives. James Jay Carafano, a scholar with the Heritage Foundation, states “many of the same toxic dynamics that drove the frenzy of violence in Iraq in 2006 are present in spades in Syria” (Carpenter 2013). The United States would be entangled in a complex situation, as it would need to establish a new Syrian government that would require years of direct military assistance to support it during its infancy. As mentioned earlier, the U.S. government would quickly face strong domestic opposition which could lead to a hasty withdrawal, creating a power vacuum similar

to Iraq and Afghanistan. Policy Approach Option 1 and 2 both lead to a broader conflict that would demand considerable U.S. involvement. These options would have a negative effect on the U.S. fiscal resources and domestic support, and they could potentially open up a disastrous conflict if Russia and Iran decided to defend the Assad regime.

Policy Approach Option 3: The Recommendation - Stop and Promote

The third policy option and the recommended approach for the U.S. State Department is to immediately stop all support, funding, and training for the Syrian Rebels. The State Department is then advised to promote a ceasefire resolution between Assad and the Syrian opposition.

Stop: This will have a variety of positive effects that will benefit not only the United States, but the Syrian people and the international community as well. According to Charles Shoebri, a senior anti-terrorism analyst, “the notion that pouring sophisticated weaponry into a war zone already awash with weapons will somehow save civilian lives is a deeply flawed assumption” (Chovanec 2015). Cutting off the inflow of weapons and fighters will significantly reduce violence and curb the increase in Syrian casualties. In addition, ceasing support for the Syrian rebels will bring U.S. policy back into coordination with its previous anti-terrorism strategy. Maintaining a consistent policy will strengthen the U.S. fight against those who wish to spread violence and instability throughout the world. It will considerably eliminate the rationale of jihadist organizations, as the United States will no longer be seen as intervening in the affairs of a sovereign nation. Syrian citizens would no longer be focused on threats of foreign intervention and could thus begin working on real solutions in their own communities to reestablish institutions and security.

Promote: The United States has the power to facilitate a ceasefire resolution that will bring an end to the civil war so that work can begin on rebuilding a more secure Syria. According to Mediel Hove and Darlington Mutanda in “The Syrian Conflict: Challenges and Prospects,” “the great powers fighting for dominance in the Middle East should accept the fact that the Syrian conflict requires a political solution and begin the engagement process rather than stick to conflict-deepening strategies, such as providing weaponry to the rebels and the government.”

The United States has the unique opportunity to end the Syrian civil war, while simultaneously cooperating with Russia against the common enemy of ISIL. The United States cannot continue to fight against both sides of the conflict: “the Assad government does offer a true alternative to both the Islamic State and chaos” (Byman 2015). A ceasefire resolution will allow for a more concentrated effort to eliminate ISIL and create stability throughout war-torn Syria.

In addition, “Assad is pragmatic, the United States could push deals and concessions as the price of cooperation” (Byman 2015). Assad would quickly seize the opportunity of a U.S. promoted ceasefire resolution, and this will give the U.S. the ability to gain critical influence within the Assad government, as well as inject important interests into the conversation to create a more stable Middle East. Cooperating with Assad will help repair the United States’ troubled relationship with Russia, and it will create stronger ties with Iran, which will assist the process of implementing the recent nuclear deal.

However, this policy approach is not without its negative consequences. Choosing the Stop and Promote policy option will likely leave Assad in power and allow Russia to maintain its influence within Syria. Assad has been condemned by the international community for human rights violations that included the possible use of chemical weapons in 2013. However, Assad handed over his chemical weapons to the UN in 2014, and this showcases his desire to cooperate with the international community; this desire can potentially be utilized to gain greater concessions during a U.S.-proposed peace agreement. Former Middle East Advisor to the National Security Council Gwenth Todd has commented on this possible solution by stating, “the Assad regime, whatever one’s personal view of it, is Syria’s best and almost certainly only hope for long-term change—Legitimate political change in Syria must come from a foundation of stability” (Hughes 2015). While allowing Assad to remain in power can be viewed as controversial by the U.S. domestic audience, it is truly in the best interests of the United States. Assad is the only one who can still pull together Syria’s remaining institutions to reestablish Syria and provide a lasting solution to the refugee crisis. If Assad is removed from power, all remaining stability in the country will most likely be lost and radical Islamic factions will undoubtedly be empowered.

Conclusion and the Future of Syria

As of 2016, Syria faces a wide variety of complex issues both internally and externally that make the future of the country difficult to predict. The U.S. Department of State has a range of potential approaches it could employ, but the realistic and effective choice is the Stop and Promote policy option. This option is the only alternative policy that avoids generating a broader conflict that would require the deployment of U.S. troops on the ground in Syria. This approach is consistent with the overall U.S. anti-terrorism strategy as it will terminate the funding and training of groups with direct links to jihadist organizations. It will also prevent Syria from becoming a failed state, and it will strengthen U.S. relationships as the international community comes together in confrontation with ISIL. With the conflict growing increasingly dire, the U.S. State Department must immediately implement the Stop and Promote policy approach to improve the situation in Syria.

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