
Obama's Policy Towards Syria

WILLIAM A. RUGH

U.S. President Barack Obama is under pressure to help the Syrian opposition more. Why has he not done so?

Pressure to help the rebels with military assistance comes from several sources and has several rationales. First, Syria is undergoing an almost unique tragedy because the Syrian regime has mercilessly conducted assaults on cities and towns that have resulted in severe suffering of huge numbers of innocent Syrian civilians. More than 100,000 people have died, more than 1.5 million have fled the country, and an even larger number have become internally displaced by the fighting.

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Second, the refugees who have fled to neighboring countries have put serious burdens on them, and at the same time have increased the risk that the conflict will spread beyond Syria's borders. Third, the violence has continued for more than two years

Ambassador Rugh was a U.S. Foreign Service officer from 1964-1995, serving as Deputy Chief of Mission in Syria, Ambassador to Yemen and Ambassador to the United Arab Emirates among numerous other posts. From 1995-2003, Ambassador Rugh served as President and Chief Executive Officer of America-Mideast Educational and Training Services, Inc (AMIDEAST), and since 2003 he has been a member of its board of directors. He has been an Associate at Georgetown's Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, an Adjunct Scholar at the Middle East Institute, and the Edward R. Murrow Visiting Professor of Public Diplomacy at The Fletcher School.

despite active mediation efforts by United Nations envoys Kofi Annan and Lakhdar Brahimi, in coordination with the Arab League. Clearly, mediation has failed so far. Fourth, although the rebels have made gains in taking territory, the government of Bashar al-Assad still has far superior military power, with an estimated 110,000 troops who have remained loyal, and weapons such as aircraft, tanks, and missiles that the opposition cannot match. The rebels are urgently requesting military assistance from outside, saying they can only prevail if they have the appropriate weapons to counter Bashar al-Assad's superiority. Reportedly, some Arab countries are providing weapons to the rebels, and they too apparently want to see the United States do so as well.

For all of these reasons, President Obama is under great pressure to provide American weapons to the Syrian opposition. Obama's domestic political opposition, including such respected veteran politicians as Senator John McCain, have urged the United States to do so.

President Obama has, however, so far resisted these pressures. He has instead taken several steps to try to be helpful to the Syrian opposition without direct military intervention or significant arms supply. First, he has clearly taken sides in the conflict, although it is essentially a stalemated civil war. Since the summer of 2011, he has publicly blamed Assad for

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the continuing violence and called for him to step down. Second, Obama has made an ongoing effort through diplomatic means to bring the conflict to an end. He has fully supported the United Nations and Arab League efforts, and his government has consulted regularly with leaders in the Arab world,

Europe, and elsewhere, with particular emphasis on trying to persuade the Russian government to cease supporting Assad. Third, the United States has provided more humanitarian assistance to the Syrian people and to the opposition than any other country. The assistance is in the form of badly needed food, shelter, medical supplies and—particularly to the opposition—communications equipment and other non-lethal supplies. Fourth, the United States has reportedly provided training in Jordan for some of the opposition fighters, and has announced some limited lethal assistance but without giving details.

But his critics say that President Obama has not gone far enough to help the Syrian people working to oust Assad. They say he could have made a difference and brought the tragedy to an end if he had agreed to

intervene militarily, or had at least provided significant weapons. His critics say he is feckless and should assert American power more boldly. Why has he refused to do so?

Obama's reluctance to provide direct military assistance to the Syrian opposition is based essentially on two reasons. The first reason is the danger that sophisticated American weapons sent into Syria now could fall into the wrong hands and be used against American interests. (In truth, U.S. officials remember well that when the Soviet Union was in Afghanistan, Washington provided Afghan fighters with "Stinger" missiles, but the United States was unable to retrieve them after the Soviet forces left, so they fell into hostile hands.) Today, the Syrian opposition is chaotic and extremely divided; with no single leader taking full responsibility for the entire effort, there is no single potential recipient of American military support. More importantly, for the past several months, the fighters from the so-called Nusra Front (or Jebhat al-Nusra) have joined the opposition in Syria, and the United States is very concerned that they represent a radical Islamist element, with reported ties to al Qaeda. In fact, last December, the State Department designated Jebhat al-Nusra a terrorist organization. Thus, Americans are forbidden to help them or to associate with them in any way, so providing opposition units with American weapons would be illegal if the weapons were used by Jebhat al-Nusra fighters.

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The second reason for U.S. reluctance to arm the rebels is that an escalation of U.S. involvement would run the risk of moving the Syrian conflict into a proxy war between America and Russia. American officials have told me that this has become a serious concern, expressed in deliberations among officials. The Obama administration has significant interests in its diplomatic relations with Moscow that it does not want to jeopardize by its actions in Syria—especially at a time when Washington is undertaking intensive diplomatic efforts to deal with the Iranian threat, in which Russia is a key player. Washington is seeking to work with Russia on both the Iranian and the Syrian problems simultaneously, and does not want its moves on one to jeopardize chances of success on the other.

It is characteristic of President Obama to make decisions like this carefully, deliberately, and with consideration of all the costs and bene-

fits. His critics call this weakness, but his admirers respect his restraint and caution—especially when it comes to committing American military resources. In this, he clearly has distinguished himself from his predecessor. But Syrian developments are painful for Obama and his administration to watch, and they are not over yet.

Washington officials have indicated that their current stance on Syria is constantly under review and could change. There have been press reports that the CIA is clandestinely providing some weapons to the rebels and it is well known that the new Secretary of State would like to do more to help Syria. The United States has not confirmed those reports, but if true, this could be the beginning of a new phase in Obama's effort to balance competing pressures in a very difficult situation. *f*