



Supporting the Syrian Opposition

Lessons from the Field in the Fight Against ISIS and Assad

By Hardin Lang, Mokhtar Awad, Ken Sofer, Peter Juul, and Brian Katulis September 2014

Introduction and summary

This summer's events in Iraq and Syria were a wake-up call regarding the threat posed by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, or ISIS. The group's capture of territory and its vicious crimes against humanity prompted the Obama administration to take targeted military action in Iraq.¹ These actions achieved tangible results, but they also raised questions about the next steps for U.S. policy in both Iraq and Syria.

The problems of these two countries are now intertwined—as ISIS's destruction of border posts and declaration of a new Caliphate demonstrate. In Damascus, President Bashar al-Assad's regime remains in power more than three years after many predicted its downfall was imminent. During the past year, the regime used genocidal actions to regain limited control in certain parts of western and northern Syria. Yet, its reach is limited in large swathes of the country, particularly in the east.

The forces opposing President Assad are in an alarming state—disorganized, weak, and often at odds with one another. With the United States now more deeply engaged in addressing the threat posed by ISIS in Iraq, it faces a conundrum about what to do about ISIS in Syria. The worst-case scenario—a Syria divided between the Assad regime in Damascus and a terrorist sanctuary in parts of the north and east—has already taken shape.

The weakness of capable and reliable Syrian partners who are poised to fight ISIS and the Assad regime is a central challenge for a U.S. strategy to counter ISIS's rise. The Obama administration has indicated its willingness to increase support for such partners. In his address to the West Point cadet corps in May, President Barack Obama declared that he would increase support for those in Syria “who offer the best alternative to terrorists and brutal dictators.”² On June 26, the Obama administration announced additional assistance to vetted moderate opposition forces that are fighting both the Assad government and ISIS and asked Congress to authorize \$500 million to train and equip these fighters.³ On September 10, President Obama again called on Congress to give his administration the “additional authorities and resources” to support the Syrian opposition.⁴

But a major effort to arm, train, equip, and enable possible U.S. partners inside Syria is no easy task. The Obama administration finds itself in a catch-22. Potential U.S. partners are weak, causing the Obama administration to hold back additional meaningful support. But these “third way” forces—moderate alternatives to Assad and ISIS—remain weak because they do not have organized and well-coordinated assistance.

To better understand the challenges the United States faces as it prepares to ramp up efforts in Syria, a research team from the Center for American Progress interviewed more than 50 Syrian opposition political representatives, military commanders, activists, fighters, and Islamists in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. Those interviewed included members of the Syrian National Coalition, referred to in this paper as the National Coalition; the interim Syrian government; the Supreme Military Council; the Free Syrian Army; the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood; and the Islamic Front. This research and report is part of a four-country study based on in-depth, qualitative interviews conducted in Egypt, Tunisia, and Jordan on the role of Islamist actors in the Arab uprisings that began in 2011.⁵

A central conclusion of this research is that the United States still has an opportunity to build partnerships in Syria as part of the wider effort to combat ISIS and to build a foundation for a transition from the Assad regime. The Center for American Progress previously released a report detailing how a stepped-up effort to support Syria’s opposition fits with an overall regional strategy to combat ISIS.⁶ As the United States prepares to increase its role in Syria, there are five key lessons that policy-makers should keep in mind:

- **The urgency of the situation in Syria requires swifter U.S. action.** This summer’s events indicate how rapidly the situation on the ground in both Syria and Iraq can evolve. The remnants of the third-way Syrian opposition are under siege in Aleppo and elsewhere. Proposed funding mechanisms, such as the \$500 million for vetted Syrian opposition forces, must make their way through the pipeline more expeditiously to have a chance for impact on the ground.
- **Stronger regional coordination is required to make support to the opposition effective.** Competition between countries such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar has helped fragment the non-ISIS opposition. So long as this competition is not moderated, additional U.S. assistance to the opposition is unlikely to result in real unity of effort against ISIS. A sustained U.S. diplomatic effort in the region will be required to insulate the effort in Syria from this competition and maximize the impact of new resources.

- **Additional support to the opposition should prioritize the fight against ISIS.**

The United States should not drop its objective of removing the Assad regime from power as it pursues the defeat of ISIS. However, ISIS presents a more serious threat to the stability of the Middle East and U.S. interests in the region. The defeat of ISIS should be prioritized over the removal of Assad, though the latter should remain a long-term U.S. objective. Additional U.S. assistance to opposition groups should be designed and delivered with this sequencing in mind.

- **The effort to support a reliable and effective Syrian opposition will take time.**

Given their current lackluster state, it will take time—perhaps several years—to turn vetted opposition groups into an effective fighting force capable of taking on both ISIS and the Assad regime. Right now, these groups are unable to fully absorb all the assistance that the United States could offer. But groups within Syria’s opposition that have access to resources exert greater influence over the allegiances of the small local units that make up most of the opposition. Providing access to these resources may help U.S.-backed groups become centers of gravity and speed up the process. The effort will require navigating deep political divisions within the opposition—it should not be viewed as simply a technical security assistance program.

- **Syrian Salafi jihadists, such as the Islamic Front, will remain a long-term U.S. policy challenge.**

The Islamic Front and other Salafi jihadi groups—a self-described Syrian Taliban—will remain a policy challenge for the United States even after the end of Syria’s civil war. Although it lacks the transnational ambitions of ISIS, the Islamic Front is comprised of tens of thousands of conservative Salafi fighters. If the Islamic Front unravels in the face of pressure from ISIS and the Assad regime, these fighters may well defect to ISIS. If the Islamic Front survives, the Salafi fighters associated with it are likely to challenge moderate elements for opposition leadership as focus turns to the Assad regime.

With a little more than two years left in office, the Obama administration has an important opportunity to stabilize the heart of the Middle East through a reinvigorated and reengaged U.S. leadership role that leverages America’s unique capabilities in the military, security assistance, and intelligence arenas. The key to broadening U.S. engagement in Syria is fostering partnerships and providing support to reliable and effective partners. The Obama administration has wisely ruled out putting boots on the ground in Syria. But over the past three years, it has shied away from deeper engagement to support forces that oppose the Assad regime, and this helped create an opening for forces such as ISIS to emerge. This summer’s wake-up call is drawing U.S. policy on Syria into a new phase, and it should move forward with a more focused effort to support Syria’s opposition.

The Center for American Progress is a nonpartisan research and educational institute dedicated to promoting a strong, just, and free America that ensures opportunity for all. We believe that Americans are bound together by a common commitment to these values and we aspire to ensure that our national policies reflect these values. We work to find progressive and pragmatic solutions to significant domestic and international problems and develop policy proposals that foster a government that is “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

Center for American Progress

