

COALITION *for a* DEMOCRATIC SYRIA



WHO ARE THE REBELS?

We know them and Congress should support them.
Failure to act now could mean U.S. ground troops later.



Mohammed Alaa Ghanem and Shlomo Bolts

URGENT CONGRESSIONAL ACTION IS NEEDED

On Wednesday night, President Obama called upon Congress to authorize arms for moderate Syrian rebels as the "best counterweight to extremists like ISIL." The Coalition for a Democratic Syria supports this request as a necessary step to defend Syrians from slaughter and protect Americans at home. Furthermore, the Coalition believes that Congress should act with urgency; if Congress delays arming the rebels until after a lengthy debate, ISIS might become too strong to defeat without putting American combat forces back on the ground in the region. This policy brief explains why.

WHY ISIS THREATENS EVERY AMERICAN

On May 24, 2014, the Belgian former ISIS fighter Mehdi Nemmouche opened fire on passersby outside the Jewish Museum of Belgium, killing four people. Nemmouche had fought with ISIS in Syria for a year and, according to recent revelations, was also involved in the torture of foreign reporters imprisoned by ISIS. As long as ISIS maintains secure regional sanctuaries in either Iraq or Syria, Westerners like Nemmouche will be able to join ISIS in combat, and then return home as radicalized and proficient killers.

The American version of Mehdi Nemmouche may already be fighting in Syria. Currently, around 100 American citizens are fighting for ISIS, and some have not been detected by U.S. intelligence. Counter-Terrorism Center Director Matthew Olson admitted as much at a Senate Foreign Relations hearing in March, when he stated, "we are working together to gather every piece of information we can about the identity of these individuals."

Judging by recent reports, these American ISIS fighters will have the cultural knowledge to fit in at any shopping mall, sporting event, or tourist site. Abdirahmaan Muhumed, who was recently killed in Syria fighting for ISIS, had previously served as a Delta Airlines employee. Another recently-killed American ISIS fighter, Douglas McAuthor McCain, was described by those who encountered him as funny, nice and respectful of religious differences. Muhumed and McCain were killed, but others will survive their stints with ISIS and return home as vital threats to the homeland -- unless ISIS's regional sanctuaries are eliminated.

WHY SYRIAN REBELS CAN END THE THREAT

To remove ISIS's regional sanctuaries and end the national security threat, America needs partners on the ground in both Iraq and Syria. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel has already assessed that airstrikes in Iraq have only "stalled" ISIS, which remains able to "regroup and stage an offensive." In Syria as well, airstrikes can cause temporary losses, but will not eliminate sanctuaries in the long-term. If America settles for only "pinprick strikes" in Syria, it could even backfire by allowing ISIS to claim it survived a confrontation with America. This would aid ISIS recruitment in the West and compound the national security threat.

To deal a long-term and irreversible blow to ISIS's Syrian sanctuaries, collaboration with Syrian rebel forces is necessary. Syrian rebels are the only forces operating in Syria who can follow up on U.S. airstrikes with ground assaults that rout ISIS from its sanctuaries. Indeed, despite being outgunned and facing ferocious assaults from Assad regime forces, Syrian rebels have a better record against ISIS than either the Iraqi forces or the Kurdish Pashmerga, who have both received extensive U.S. assistance.

THE SYRIAN REBEL RECORD AGAINST ISIS

January 2014: Rebels Push ISIS to the Brink

On January 3rd, 2014, the Syrian opposition launched what some activists have called a "second revolution" against ISIS. Massive demonstrations erupted across opposition areas, in protest of ISIS abuses that included assassinating pro-democracy commanders and kidnapping prominent activists. That same day, a new coalition of moderate rebel brigades was formed explicitly to fight ISIS.

The ensuing rebel offensive pushed ISIS to the brink of a possibly fatal defeat. In one week, rebels expelled ISIS from nearly all of northwestern Syria, which is one of the main rebel bastions. Rebels also fully removed the ISIS presence from eastern Syria, near the Iraqi border. They even made advances in the north-central Syrian city of Raqqah, placing them within striking distance of seizing ISIS's international headquarters. While ISIS counterattacked to hold Raqqah, it has not recovered in northwest Syria until today.

February - May 2014: ISIS Prepares to Storm Mosul

Soon after ISIS's counterattack, the Assad regime launched its bloodiest air raids yet on rebels in northwest Syria without launching a single attack on ISIS in Raqqah. This allowed ISIS to recover in Raqqah and push east toward Deir Ezzor Province, which borders Iraq and where Syrian rebels were dominant. According to rebels in eastern Syria, ISIS transferred roughly 3,000 fighters to the Syrian side of the Syria-Iraq border between February and May 2014. This amounted to a third of ISIS's overall forces, since ISIS then had roughly 10,000 fighters under its command.

In the month before the fall of Mosul, ISIS advances against rebels in eastern Syria accelerated. Rebel Deir Ezzor Military Council head Muhannad Al-Tallaa assessed on May 14th that his position relative to ISIS was "poor" and would worsen "because we are running out of ammunition and ISIS have superior military equipment." By June 6th, the opposition Syrian Observatory for Human Rights indicated that ISIS had been making consistent gains in northern Deir Ezzor, and had acquired control of territory on the Iraqi border. Just 5 days after rebels lost control of this area, Mosul fell.

After Mosul: Rebels Clash with ISIS Across Syria

Initially, the fall of Mosul placed ISIS in control of U.S.-made weapons and facilitated rapid ISIS gains against rebels in Syria. However, rebels have battled back after absorbing the initial blow.

- Eastern Syria (Deir Ezzor Province) -- After Mosul fell, ISIS surged back across the border and routed rebels from eastern Syria. But mass protests against ISIS remain routine, and an insurgency called "White Shrouds" has been targeting ISIS leaders for assassination. One tribe, the Sha'itat, lost 700 people (1% of the tribe) within two weeks after its anti-ISIS revolt was crushed.
- Eastern Damascus suburbs (Eastern Ghouta) -- Rebels fully routed ISIS from the Damascus suburbs in the two weeks after the loss of eastern Syria. The offensive was led by Zahran Alloush, who heads one of the most powerful groups within the rebel "Islamic Front."
- Northern Syria (Aleppo Province) -- ISIS is now targeting the main rebel stronghold of Aleppo City. In mid-August, it drew to within 30 miles of severing the city's main supply lines, but the anti-ISIS rebel coalition "Naharwan" has successfully counterattacked since then. If ISIS cuts the supply line, thousands will likely be massacred and it could prove a deadly blow to the rebels.

INACTION NOW COULD MEAN GROUND TROOPS LATER

Syrian rebels are the only potential anti-ISIS ground presence in Syria. Because ISIS grew into a fearsome regional threat by capturing rebel territories, most areas that ISIS controls today have not seen a single regime troop patrol in two years. The Assad regime mainly bombs from the air and only fights ISIS on the ground in isolated locales. By contrast, Syrian rebels and their local supporters are attacking ISIS in all its Syrian territories, be it through open battlefield clashes, mass protests, or guerrilla insurgencies.

If these rebels are eliminated, and the U.S. still desires to roll back ISIS from all its sanctuaries, a different ground force will be needed to complement American airstrikes. America could face the grim choice of accepting a permanent homeland security threat from ISIS's Syrian sanctuaries, or sending U.S. forces back into the region to root them out. Rebels have fought ISIS to a standstill for the past month, but if ISIS were to break through rebel lines near Aleppo City, this grim hypothetical would suddenly become very real.

Congressional authorization of arms for the rebels can not wait until Aleppo is about to fall; even after approval, there will inevitably be lag time before the program has concrete effects on the battlefield. If Aleppo is pushed to the brink, prior Congressional authorization will also encourage the President to order airstrikes that beat ISIS back and allow the rebels to recover. For these reasons, we urge Congress to authorize a train and equip program for moderate Syrian rebels as soon as possible.