



# The Syrian Crisis: A Plan of Action

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## THE RAPIDLY DETERIORATING CRISIS

The United States and much of the international community have tried for over two years to help Syrians achieve a negotiated solution to bring a peaceful end to the crisis with no success; even recent attempts seem destined for failure. Earlier in the conflict, Assad repeatedly refused to negotiate. Now he is carefully avoiding being seen as the spoiler of negotiations, as instructed by his Russian and Iranian advisors.

Assad's increasing reliance on foreign advisors and foreign fighters is turning the Syrian crisis into a regional sectarian war that could precipitate a major conflagration in the region. Hezbollah troops crossed the Lebanese border in large numbers and were the driving force behind the recent fall of Qusair. These Shia terrorist-soldiers now make up the most reliable core of the Assad regime's shock infantry.

Hezbollah, other foreign Shia militants, and Alawi militias now make up an increasing proportion of the deployable manpower available to the Assad regime; these forces had previously supported Syrian army operations, now the weakened Syrian army has been relegated to providing artillery and air support to these various sectarian militias.

Openly deploying Hezbollah in Syria shows desperation on the part of the leadership of both Iran and Hezbollah. Both spent years building themselves up to Arab publics as the axis of resistance to Israel and the West, and now both are attacking fellow Muslims, demonstrating their real interests are much more parochial; they fight to protect Iranian strategic interests.

Hezbollah's victory in the siege of Qusair unites Hezbollah's Bekaa stronghold with the main highway between Damascus and the Alawite coastal areas; this shows an Iranian-sponsored effort to create a zone of influence controlling ports, Hezbollah supply routes, and eventually the border with Israel. Iran and Hezbollah cannot be permitted a dramatic strategic victory on the border of key U.S. regional allies.

Iranian-sponsored Hezbollah intervention in Syria has made waves throughout the Muslim world. Threatened by this dramatic Iranian aggression, senior Sunni clerics have issued

statements calling on Sunni Muslims to fight this aggression, elevating concerns about a regional sectarian conflagration.

While Assad and his Hezbollah allies try to consolidate their hold, opposition fighters are desperately short on ammunition, advanced weaponry, and other supplies. Even the widely-touted combat ability of extremist brigades has yet to check recent Assad/Hezbollah successes. Long-considered lethal support for the FSA could allow the moderate elements to blunt the Assad/Hezbollah advances and reclaim the mantle of most effective opposition fighting force—if such assistance contained the right weapons for the job.

The FSA's Supreme Military Council (SMC) has already made considerable progress with the limited supplies it has been given. It has developed a workable compromise permitting armed civilians and army defectors to work together smoothly; it has increased the coordination and cooperation between brigades in each of its five regional fronts; and it is building its legitimacy throughout Syria. SMC commanders have shared that they will be unable to increase their relatively loose control over the SMC's diverse brigades unless they can enforce the SMC's legitimacy by providing salaries, ammunition, and heavy weapons.

Similarly, civilians in the liberated areas of Syria are desperately short on resources needed to govern and to supply their communities with critical goods and services. This dynamic has created desperate needs that are increasingly being met by extremist organizations. Given this lack of resources, support from the U.S. will help these organic civilian structures fill the political vacuum, marginalize extremists, create stability, and increase U.S. prospects of forging strategic relationships with Syria's future leaders.

## A COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGY

### 1. Exert Political Pressure

- **Cut off the Assad regime: U.S. actions and statements should send a message demonstrating its resolve.** Currently, American inaction is emboldening Assad. The U.S. must demonstrate that it is not hedging its bets and will not allow Assad to play a role in the future of Syria. Without such a clear message, key defections from within the Assad regime will remain unlikely.
- **Empower the alternative government: The U.S. Should support the Coalition** and its interim government to become a credible alternative government established on Syrian soil, as detailed below.
- **The U.S. should work with its allies to target the Assad regime's enablers** and choke off the flow of money, arms, and other resources to Assad and Hezbollah.

- **The U.S. should pressure the government of Lebanon** to do all it can to remove Hezbollah forces from Syria and block any further entry.

## 2. Exert Military Pressure

- **The U.S. should supply weapons and support to the Supreme Military Council.** Build on the SMC's success by giving it the money, technical support, and weapons it needs to succeed. It has done well with limited resources and has proven it can be a trusted partner.
  - Such support will help it to unify the disparate fighting groups by becoming the primary source of logistical support for revolutionary forces.
  - The SMC derives legitimacy from the aid it can provide; the more it can help those on the ground, the more it can function as a unifying force and an effective command and control center.
  - Support will also help it shoulder out extremist militant groups.
  - Support should include training and intelligence sharing.
- **The U.S. should take steps to eliminate the Assad regime's control of the skies.** . This can be done by using U.S. and NATO assets to shield the liberated areas, by imposing a No Fly Zone over Syria, or by providing or permitting the provision of anti-aircraft weapons to carefully vetted elements of the armed opposition.

## 3. Support Civilian Governance

- **Build on the diplomatic successes of Doha and Marrakech** to help the Coalition and its interim technocratic government to overcome recent adversity and become a credible alternative government established on Syrian soil.
- Grant the Coalition full recognition as soon as possible, as many of America's allies have already done.
- **Help the Coalition to obtain the resources necessary to govern**, including providing financial, humanitarian, and technical assistance and spearheading a diplomatic effort to turn over frozen assets to the Coalition so that these funds can be used to help administer the liberated areas and rebuild Syria.
- **Use the Coalition to deliver two kinds of aid:**
  - First, reapportion non-lethal aid so it is distributed primarily through the Coalition. Aid distributed in this manner will help the Coalition and its provincial councils increase their capacity, legitimacy, and effectiveness as a future government. This shift has begun; it must continue.
  - Second, use the Coalition, its Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU), its interim government, the provincial councils, as well as NGOs operating in northern Syria to deliver humanitarian aid. Doing so will:
    - Allow aid to more efficiently reach those in greatest need

- Further support the Coalition as a national institution
- Alter the negative perception of America's role in the eyes of the Syrian people.
- Limit the numbers of refugees entering Turkey and Jordan, thereby decreasing the burden on these important allies.
- **Support the Coalition in the international arena**, including formal recognition and support in its bid for Syria's seat at the United Nations. Such recognition would permit the UN to operate more freely in the liberated areas and more effectively reach those in greatest need.

## WHY INACTION IS UNTENABLE

- The rapidly deteriorating humanitarian and political situations threaten to destabilize the Middle East, without mentioning its staggering cost in terms of lives ended or uprooted by the conflict.
- Permitting Iran, Assad, and Hezbollah to wage war against the people of Syria strengthens Iran, while defeating Assad and Hezbollah will deal Iran a severe blow.
- Defeating Hezbollah will decrease significant threats to America's regional allies. It will also prove to Iran that the U.S. will not permit it to act freely throughout the region.
- Allowing Syria to continue down the path to state failure risks the country becoming a base for extremists and a launching pad for attacks against U.S. allies and assets throughout the region.
- America's allies increasing frustration with U.S. inaction risks straining strategic relationships with them and prevents the U.S. from building similar relationships with the future leaders of Syria.
- A negotiated political settlement is ideal, but Assad remains unwilling to negotiate in good faith. Insufficient or weak action by the U.S and the international community will not pressure him to change his calculation.
- Permitting the crisis to escalate risks a major sectarian conflagration, turning Syria into a Jihadi battleground.
- Any conceivable outcome of an unaided revolution will produce a Syria indifferent or even hostile to U.S. interests, rather than a key geostrategic partner grateful that a helping hand was extended in its time of need.