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ARMS FOR PEACE IN SYRIA?

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As the Syrian civil war rages on with no end in sight, many advocates of U.S. intervention are claiming that an infusion of Western arms to carefully vetted rebel factions will help bring about a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Though hardly the first time that tools of war have been recast as instruments of peace, this curious proposition has gained unprecedented currency across the ideological spectrum, from liberal internationalists to conservative hawks.

Unfortunately, the magic bullets theory doesn't hold much water. Arming the rebels might bring the war to a close sooner by helping "good" guys kill "bad" guys more efficiently, but there's no compelling reason to believe it will entice them to stop fighting.

The superficial logic of arms-for-peace is elegant, to be sure, rooted in the classic diplomatic axiom that a political settlement to an armed conflict is possible only when, for all relevant players, the expected utility of a negotiated peace, $E[u(p)]$, is greater than the expected utility of continued war, $E[u(w)]$. There are several arguments as to how a calibrated infusion of arms into Syria will help produce this rare condition (presumably absent from the large majority of civil wars in the modern era that ended in the military defeat of one side or the other). Let's take them one at a time.

DECREASING $E[u(w)]$ FOR PRO-REGIME ACTORS

The most common arms-for-peace argument, frequently [invoked](#) by Obama administration officials, is that arming the rebels will begin shifting the balance of power away from pro-government forces and signal Western resolve to tip it further, thereby diminishing $E[u(w)]$ for the regime, its domestic supporters, and/or its Russian and Iranian backers. "Altering the balance of power on the ground ... is the only way a politically negotiated transition can become possible," [writes](#) Dennis Ross. Negotiations "will amount to little given the current power asymmetry," [concurs](#) Elizabeth O'Bagy.

However, the balance of power is not the only thing influencing $E[u(w)]$ in the Syrian arena. For President Bashar Assad and upper echelon regime elites, Iranian patronage is increasingly a central determinant of $E[u(w)]$, and they have very good reason to believe that Iran will continue financing and resupplying them for the foreseeable future. Even if Damascus falls, they can carry on the fight for quite some time in the coastal heights of northwestern Syria where non-Sunnis constitute a majority of the population, then go into comfortable exile in Tehran if and when continued resistance becomes untenable. Whatever their battlefield setbacks, they will be loathe to abandon Iranian protection at a time of great danger and uncertainty.

For ordinary Syrians who support and fight for the regime (mostly Alawites and other non-Sunni minorities), on the other hand, $E[u(w)]$ is far more dependent on the anticipated outcome and costs of the conflict. However, while American sponsorship of the rebellion may sap their confidence in military victory, the perception that Washington is pulling the strings of the rebels could also raise $E[u(w)]$ for regime supporters if they expect image-conscious American policymakers to balk at green-lighting the horrific violence sure to accompany a successful rebel push on Damascus, or if they assume that Western involvement will mitigate the political consequences of losing the war. In any case, because their $E[u(p)]$ is very low (more on this below) and they have little independent capacity to mobilize, a diminished $E[u(w)]$ is more likely to produce individual defection, desertion, or passivity than concerted bottom-up pressure on their leaders to change course. Lower morale among regime supporters may make it easier to overpower Assad's forces, but this alone won't open a path to peace.

A stronger case can be made that tilting the military balance will diminish $E[u(w)]$ for Russia. However, this may not precipitate a major policy change, as Moscow is bearing few of the war's costs – its economic support for the regime is minimal,¹ while its arms sales would appear to yield a net profit. The reputational expenses of arming murderers loathed throughout the Sunni Islamic world may eventually lead Russia to cut off arms sales to Assad, but Moscow will incur these costs irrespective of whether Washington aids the rebels. In any case, there is little reason to believe that a more enlightened Russian policy will decisively change expected utility calculations for the regime as long as Iran is backing it to the hilt.

Iran, on the other hand, is directly subsidizing pro-regime forces financially (to the tune of 12.6 billion dollars so far, according to one recent [estimate](#)) and mobilizing Iraqi and Lebanese Shiites to fight alongside them. A military escalation precipitated by an influx of Western arms will undoubtedly strain its sanctions-riddled economy. But this doesn't mean, as [some interventionists](#) maintain, that it "will most likely back down when faced with the prospect of confrontation with the United States."

There are many intervening variables that make it difficult to predict $E[u(w)]$ for the Islamic Republic. The intense religiosity of Iranian leaders surely inflates their confidence in ultimate victory. Overt U.S. involvement in the rebel war effort may shift the military balance, but it could also serve to legitimize Iran's Syria policy as a fight against the Great Satan (or otherwise make abandoning it more politically unpalatable). Though it's [difficult to imagine](#) how continued conflict could turn out well for the Iranian regime in the long run, some commentators have suggested that it can use even a losing war in Syria to expand its influence among Shiites in the region.² In any case, if the past is any guide, a major change in Tehran's disposition is likely to drag far behind the changing realities that drive it. Whatever else it might achieve, an arms-for-peace strategy with this aim in mind won't produce peace anytime soon.

INCREASING $E[u(p)]$ FOR PRO-REGIME ACTORS

Of course, even a substantial reduction in $E[u(w)]$ for one or more of the above won't matter if their $E[u(p)]$ is demonstrably lower. For regime elites, $E[u(p)]$ is abysmally low. Rebels have constantly reiterated that Assad and his inner circle must step down and relinquish control of the military-security apparatus at the start of any negotiated political transition. They are unwilling even to negotiate with anyone who has "blood on their hands" let alone offer them a place in the post-war order. Assad and his ilk are being asked to accept a conditional surrender, not a power-sharing arrangement of the kind that brought an end to the 1975-1990 civil war in Lebanon.

Iran's $E[u(p)]$ is also very low. The predominantly Sunni rebels' overt sectarian discourse and frequent denunciations of the Shiite theocratic republic – even before the large influx of foreign Shiite fighters in the first half of this year – leave little doubt that Iran will lose out in any peace settlement that produces a stable post-war majoritarian government. Significantly, both the rebels and Western governments have thus far refused to allow Iranian representatives to attend prospective peace talks in Geneva. While Russia can hope to win some American-guaranteed concessions in post-war Syria in exchange for leaning on Assad (like keeping its naval base at Tartus),

¹ Although Western media reports often allude to Russia's "[deep financial support](#)" for Assad and there have been some [statements](#) by Syrian officials implying as much for public relations purposes, there is little evidence of Russian economic assistance aside from small amounts of humanitarian aid (ostensibly raised through religious charities) and preferential barter agreements (mainly crude oil for fuel).

² See Phillip Smyth, "[Even if Assad loses, Iran gains from its support of Shia militias](#)," The National (Abu Dhabi), August 12, 2013.

Iran will be left squarely in the cold.

Ordinary regime supporters are more amenable to a negotiated settlement than their leaders and foreign benefactors, but they also have deep reservations about majoritarian rule. Though Alawites have dominated Syria's Baathist state for over four decades, they and other sectarian minorities previously endured centuries of socio-political exclusion and impoverishment at the hands of Sunni rulers. Given the pronounced Islamist character of the rebellion, many understandably fear that they will be made to pay for the Assad regime's crimes. Insofar as regime supporters have the capacity to project influence over their leaders, it will not be to support a transition process that leaves them at the mercy of their adversaries.

A second family of arms-for-peace arguments hold that Western patronage of the rebels will increase $E[u(p)]$ for the regime and/or its supporters (particularly lower echelon security personnel and civil servants). One strand of this reasoning holds that American sponsorship of the rebellion will alleviate their fears of Sunni domination and retribution by strengthening moderate rebels vis-à-vis extremists³ and obliging the former to act more responsibly.⁴ A second strand holds that equipping and supplying the rebels will unify their ranks so that they can make credible commitments to possible pro-regime interlocutors (at present, no one has the power to ensure that disparate rebel forces comply with *anything*).

However, it's doubtful that U.S. patronage will produce these effects in sufficient measure to generate much constituent pressure on regime leaders to stand down. While those who receive the weapons will surely pay lip service to American ideals, any Lebanese ex-warlord can tell you that building proxy forces on the basis of patronage doesn't create a culture of civic responsibility. The U.S. experience in Iraq underscores how fleeting are the returns of distributing money and power to Middle Eastern supplicants.

An influx of American arms may increase cohesion among those groups who receive them, but it will surely come at the expense of deepening antagonism between pro-Western and jihadist rebels. This would raise $E[u(w)]$ for pro-regime actors by giving them hope that their adversaries will turn on each other if they keep up the fight long enough.

So long as the rebels have a surrender-or-die attitude toward peace with their adversaries, it's unlikely that they will find many takers. After witnessing the collapse of an eerily similar minoritarian autocracy and its violent aftermath next door in Iraq, regime supporters have little faith that an American-managed transition can protect their core interests. They will not agree to disband (or relinquish to civilian authority) their military forces until the transition process is near completion (if then), a condition that no rebel commander is today prepared to accept.

INCREASING $E[u(p)]$ FOR PRO-REBEL ACTORS

A third arms-for-peace argument posits that Western military aid will raise $E[u(p)]$ for the rebels by giving them the strength and confidence to risk negotiating with an enemy they do not trust. The rebels are unwilling to negotiate at present "because they think that they will be bargaining from a position of relative weakness," [writes](#) Bilal Y. Saab. "We are trying to get the opposition to get involved in a negotiation with people they really don't want to negotiate with ... They need an incentive," [explains](#) Reza Afshar, head of the Syria team at Britain's Foreign Office.

Far from encouraging rebels to negotiate in good faith, however, the Obama administration's decision in June to begin directly providing them with arms appears to have done the opposite. In late July, the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) added new preconditions for talks, such as an advance [commitment](#) by Assad to step down and the [withdrawal](#) of foreign Shiite fighters from Syria. SNC President Ahmed Jarba now even [balks](#) at granting Assad and his family safe exit from Syria if the president gives up power.

The problem is not that the rebels lack confidence. Whatever their current circumstances, most are quite certain of prevailing over the regime in the long run, and for good reason. Syria's Sunni Arab majority, which overwhelmingly

³ For an eloquent elaboration of this point, see Frederic Hof, "[Syria's Time Is Running Out](#)," *Foreign Policy*, December 19, 2012. Hof argues that arming the rebels will ensure "that weapons go to those advocating a non-sectarian, decent political system for Syria and are denied to those seeking a sectarian outcome."

⁴ Emile Hokayem, "[Arm Syrian rebels to make a political solution possible](#)," *The National* (Abu Dhabi), October 31, 2012. Michael Bröning, "[Time to Back the Syrian National Coalition](#)," *Foreign Affairs*, December 17, 2012.

supports the rebels, is five times larger than minority Alawites who comprise the bulk of pro-regime forces. Moreover, outside powers that dwarf Russia and Iran financially and militarily are steadily increasing their support for the cause. Add to that the strong belief of most rebels that God is on their side and it appears likely that more arms will only further embolden them not to compromise.

CONCLUSION

While the Obama administration officially [maintains](#) that its paramount goal in Syria is to bring about a “political solution that ends the violence,” its steadily [expanding](#) role in arming combatants isn't likely to create conditions conducive to a negotiated peace. Indeed, it could make the pursuit of peace more difficult by bolstering rebel confidence in absolute victory, deepening intra-rebel antagonisms, encouraging Iran to double down, and myriad other ways discussed above. As Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham and William Reed recently reminded us, external intervention in civil wars serves, on average, to prolong their duration.⁵

Unfortunately, there is very little the United States can do to bring about a negotiated settlement of the Syria conflict until all of the major players are willing to forgo many of their wartime objectives in favor of a compromise that salvages what is left of Syria's state institutions and economic infrastructure. If that day should ever come, the Syrian people will need a powerful neutral arbiter, not a war-weary external partisan, to provide the necessary guarantees for combatants to make credible commitments to one another.

Of course, that day may never come. All signs indicate that the burgeoning jihadist factions of the rebel alliance will stop at nothing to bring about the kind of oppressive postwar order that many regime supporters will stop at nothing to prevent – as long as that's the case, moderates will be powerless to bridge the gap. Like the large majority of civil wars in history, the conflict in Syria appears destined to endure until someone wins.

In view of this unfortunate reality, the use of American patronage to buy influence and equity in the Syrian arena may be justified. Whatever the strategic merits of aiding and abetting Syria's rebel alliance, however, we shouldn't call it peacemaking or pretend that it isn't going to be a dirty business. No matter how carefully Washington vets potential recipients, it is very likely that rebel groups receiving American arms will commit egregious human rights violations before (and probably after) the smoke clears. When the co-directors of the New York-based Campaign for Peace and Democracy, ostensibly [devoted](#) to promoting a “progressive and non-militaristic U.S. foreign policy,” obliquely endorse the Obama administration's arming of Syrian rebels,⁶ something has gone very wrong in the public debate in this country. Proxy warfare, as Henry Kissinger famously said of covert action, “should not be confused with missionary work.”⁷

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⁵ See Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham and William Reed, "[Arming Syrian rebels may make peace elusive](#)," *The Baltimore Sun*, July 11, 2013; David E. Cunningham, "Blocking Resolution: How External States Can Prolong Civil Wars," *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 47 no. 2 (March 2010), pp. 115-127; Ibrahim A. Elbadawi and Nicholas Sambanis, "[External Interventions and the Duration of Civil Wars](#)," paper presented at the World Bank's Development Economic Research Group (DECRG) conference on "The Economics and Politics of Civil Conflicts," Princeton University, March 18-19, 2000.

⁶ Thomas Harrison and Joanne Landy, "[Syria's fate must not be decided by foreign powers or forces](#)," *Green Left Weekly*, July 9, 2013. They write that they "strongly oppose" any outside diplomatic initiative that "prevents the Syrian people from overthrowing the Assad regime," and that "the democratic opponents of the Assad dictatorship have the right to get guns where they can," while bemoaning "all attempts by those who provide arms to acquire political and military influence in return."

⁷ "Covert action should not be confused with missionary work." Remark in testimony to the Pike Committee in 1975.