

How to Support the Opposition in Syria

New Models for Understanding Syria

BY SUSANNA BLUME

Americans' understanding of the current civil war in Syria is firmly rooted in their recent military history: the U.S. experience in Iraq and Afghanistan over the course of the past decade. These conflicts have made U.S. policy makers painfully aware of the costs of the kind of intervention required by modern counterinsurgency doctrine, and of the limits of U.S. ability to create enduring political change in foreign lands. However, another slightly older case exists that may be more relevant to the civil war currently raging in Syria. U.S. intervention during the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan was successful in achieving its proximate goal (Soviet withdrawal), though the consequences of that conflict have been grave and far-reaching.

This article explores similarities and differences between these two conflicts, and offers lessons learned from U.S. intervention during the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. Specifically, to support the opposition in Syria, the United States should: 1) vet and select recipients of U.S. military aid itself; 2) provide military assistance overtly under Title 10 military and Title 22 diplomatic authorities, vice covertly under Title 50 intelligence authorities; 3) carefully consider the type and number of weapons to be provided in order to maximize their accountability and recoverability; and 4) continue to work with Syrian factions as well as other interested parties to develop a lasting political resolution to the conflict. Lastly, this article examines how these lessons might be applied to the current conflict in Syria to achieve the U.S. long-term strategic objective: a democratic Syria with a robust civil society that is a stabilizing force in the greater Middle East.

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Importance of Stability in Syria to U.S. National Security

After a decade mired in Middle Eastern and South Asian conflicts with uncertain outcomes, it is easy to see why so much of the American public, not to mention the punditry and policy-making class, is deeply skeptical of yet another intervention in the region. The conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria can all accurately be described as civil wars, to greater or lesser degrees. What stake does the United States have in these conflicts? Hasn't recent history demonstrated that U.S. intervention only makes things worse for the affected populations? What can the United States really do to resolve these conflicts?

While it is still too soon to tell whether, in the long run, the benefits of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan will outweigh the tremendous costs in both lives and treasure, one can justly describe the outcomes as at best mixed. The U.S. military is extraordinarily efficient at deposing tyrannical regimes such as those of Saddam Hussein or the Taliban, but the U.S. government as a whole is far less adept at the exponentially more difficult task of bringing about lasting political solutions that might allow these countries to flourish post-conflict. Regardless, this mixed track record is not a license to revert to isolationism, nor is it a reason to assume that the United States, along with partners who are equally interested in the stability and prosperity of the greater Middle East are unable to help unstable countries build stable civil societies.

So, why indeed, should the United States care about the now three year old conflict in Syria? The outcome of the current conflict will determine whether Syria will ultimately become a force for peace and stability in the

greater Middle East, or whether it will devolve further into chaos, becoming a haven not just for Hezbollah, but for extremists of all stripes and ambitions, with destabilizing effects to be felt certainly throughout the region, and potentially on a global scale. This instability could manifest itself in countless ways: protracted civil war and ethnic cleansing; continued instability and loss of life caused by terrorist organizations with local, regional or even global ambitions; or worsening prospects for the global economy and the global economic recovery as a result of continued instability in oil markets.

Perhaps even more disconcerting is the fact that the conflict has not been, and will not be, confined neatly within Syria's borders. The massive influx of nearly 525,000 Syrian refugees (and counting) into neighboring Jordan has placed the already precarious Hashemite dynasty, a stalwart friend of the United States and consistent supporter of shared interests, in further peril.¹ Approximately 760,000 refugees have fled to Lebanon, stretching government resources and distorting local economies.² Turkey is host to nearly 500,000 Syrian refugees, as well as the headquarters of the Free Syrian Army.³ Skirmishes across the Syrian/Turkish border, combined with long-standing tension between not only Turkish Kurds, but the Kurdish populations of Syria, Iraq, and Iran, could draw all of NATO into the conflict, at a time and under circumstances not of our choosing. The emergence of a de facto Kurdistan spanning northern Iraq and northeastern Syria could have a profoundly destabilizing effect on Turkey. Finally, the current power vacuum in Syria has resulted in an environment highly permissive of the activities of extremist groups (e.g., Hezbollah, al-Nusra) and their state backers (Iran, and some Gulf

states) whose ambitions, to depose both autocratic and democratic regimes replacing them with highly restrictive Islamic theocracies, extend far beyond Syria's borders.

Parallels between 1980s Afghanistan and Syria Today

Admittedly, the Cold War geopolitical climate surrounding Afghanistan in the 1980s is more different from than similar to the current conflict in Syria. However, there are several relevant common currents worth noting, as they indicate potential to apply lessons learned from U.S. intervention in the Afghan conflict to Syria's current civil war.

Perhaps most obvious is the similarity in the U.S. domestic political climate of the two eras, particularly the public's lack of appetite for foreign policy generally, and costly military commitments in particular. In both cases,

public reticence has been mirrored in a cautious Executive.

When confronted with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, the Carter Administration's response was shaped by a recent history rife with very public foreign policy disasters. The Vietnam War tops the list, manifest in deep reluctance by both the Administration and the public to engage in another large-scale intervention in a far off land. More proximate were the Iran hostage crisis and the storming of the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad, both of which occurred that same year. Made cautious by that history, when first alerted to the fact that the Soviets were becoming involved in the Afghan conflict, the Carter Administration elected to provide only non-lethal aid to anti-communist forces. To avoid openly provoking the Soviet Union, it did so covertly.⁴ It was not until Ronald Reagan was



President Reagan meeting with Afghan Freedom Fighters to discuss Soviet atrocities in Afghanistan

elected in 1980 that the United States began providing arms to the *mujahideen* fighting against the Soviets; at first only Enfield rifles in small quantities. It was not until the intervention of the now famous Representative Charlie Wilson that the United States began providing, through Pakistani intermediaries, the surface-to-air Stinger missiles that would steadily erode Soviet dominance of the airspace over Afghanistan, a contributing factor in the Soviet Union's decision to withdraw from Afghanistan in February 1989.⁵

Mirroring the triple specter haunting the Carter Administration, the Obama Administration is also faced with three cautionary tales from recent history: Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom, and the attack against the U.S. diplomatic compound in Benghazi, Libya. Like the Carter Administration before him, President Obama has exercised caution, initially determining that the safest course of action, and the most palatable to the American public, was to provide only non-lethal aid to the Syrian opposition. And, just as in Afghanistan in the 1980s, this non-lethal aid was not enough to alleviate the suffering of hundreds of thousands of people displaced by the conflict, nor did it appreciably help to weaken the regime. Rather, as reported in the press, even additional military and non-military aid from other supporters such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey, has not prevented the tide from turning against the Free Syrian Army and its affiliates.⁶

Also in both cases U.S. national security interests in the outcome of the conflicts were real, arguably even more so in Syria. But these interests remain profoundly difficult to explain to a deeply skeptical public. This public reluctance was less an issue for the Carter and Reagan Administrations, who provided aid

covertly through Pakistani intermediaries. President Obama has the additional burden of having to convince the American people that the potential harm to U.S. interests warrants intervention.

On a positive note, both conflicts are characterized by a deeply committed indigenous opposition that prefers to fight its own battles, requiring only materiel assistance from foreign governments. Both the Afghan *mujahideen* and the Syrian opposition were/are fighting for the right to control the fate of their country. The existence of these vested local leaders and fighters with robust domestic constituencies indicates that Syrians, like the Afghans before them, currently have and will retain ownership over the conflict now and into the post-conflict reconstruction phase. This state of affairs contrasts starkly with Operation Iraqi Freedom, where the United States led the invasion to depose Saddam Hussein's regime backed by only a handful of Iraqi expatriates. Iraqis did not own the deposition of Saddam Hussein and were thus poorly positioned to create a lasting political reconciliation after his fall.

Unfortunately, both the Afghan *mujahideen* and the Free Syrian Army and its affiliates are also characterized by deep divisions within their ranks, a lack of clear leadership and command and control, and widely divergent political positions ranging from extremist fundamentalists to moderate secularists, and covering much ground in between. The fractured nature of the opposition is one of the primary challenges to foreign governments wishing to aid the rebellion. How can the United States know who it is arming, and what kind of Syria they will create should Bashar al-Assad fall?

U.S. Intervention in Afghanistan

Though the Soviet-backed regime persisted after the 1989 Soviet withdrawal until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, what came after (a protracted period of civil war that resulted in the rise of the Taliban and created a safe haven for al-Qaeda) could hardly be called success, by the Soviet Union, its successors, or the United States. However, it would be revisionist to overlook the fact that U.S. military assistance to the *mujahideen* was successful in achieving its proximate goal: to make the conflict in Afghanistan as costly as possible for the Soviet Union.⁷ U.S. military assistance to the Afghan *mujahideen* is a relatively rare example of a policy that was successful in bringing about its strategic objective, in a relatively short time and with relatively little cost to the United States. The civil war that followed Soviet withdrawal, allowing the Taliban to rise to power in Afghanistan and creating a safe haven for Osama bin Laden and his associates, might have had a less catastrophic outcome if the United States and other interested parties had acted differently in two key instances during and immediately following the Soviet-Afghan War.

First, the U.S. Government did not vet and select recipients of U.S. military aid itself, instead giving U.S. funds and weapons to Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) to distribute to recipients of its own choosing. Doing so allowed the United States to maintain plausible deniability of involvement in the conflict. Unfortunately the ISI's selection criteria diverged significantly from what our own might have been.⁸ Seeking to strengthen and empower extremist elements within the *mujahideen* to be used as proxies against India, the ISI channeled U.S. resources away from

moderate elements in the anti-communist opposition and toward those who would ultimately become enemies of the United States two decades later.

Secondly, U.S., Soviet, and United Nations efforts to create a lasting political solution to the conflict in Afghanistan failed. While the United States did not maliciously abandon the Afghan opposition following Soviet withdrawal, a series of domestic political factors led to decreased interest in the subject in Washington, reduced funding, and a devolution of decision making authority that led to inconsistencies in U.S. policy.⁹ In particular, the United States devoted considerable effort to recovering the Stinger surface-to-air missiles distributed to the *mujahideen* during the Soviet occupation.¹⁰ As the country devolved into a bloody, protracted civil war, the United States continued to fund warlords with interests completely contrary to its own by buying back Stinger missiles under the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) recovery program. As for the Soviets, though they continued to support the communist regime for three years after the withdrawal of Soviet forces, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 derailed the U.S.-Soviet dialogue on Afghan transition.¹¹ Without strong U.S. or Soviet leadership, the UN's peace plan collapsed under pressure from rival Afghan and Pakistani factions.¹² Thus, the fundamentalist cancer that emerged in the 1980s was left to metastasize in the highly permissive environment created by the protracted period of civil war that followed the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Lessons Learned, Applied to the Syrian Civil War

So, what can we learn from the U.S. experience during the Soviet invasion and

occupation of Afghanistan? First, providing arms to a committed, indigenous opposition force can be an effective way to advance mutual interests limited to the scope of the conflict in question (e.g., forcing the Soviets out of Afghanistan; deposing Bashar al-Assad). This model is far less resource-intensive (for the United States) than the counterinsurgency doctrine developed during Operation Iraqi Freedom, and ensures that the local population retains ownership of the conflict, and thus ownership of an eventual political solution. However, there are several key adjustments the United States should make to this model before applying it to the current conflict in Syria: 1) the United States must vet and select recipients of U.S. military aid itself; 2) the United States should provide military assistance overtly under Title 10 military and Title 22 diplomatic authorities, vice covertly under

Title 50 intelligence authorities as was the case in Afghanistan; 3) the United States should carefully consider the type and number of weapons to be provided in order to maximize their accountability and recoverability; and 4) the United States must continue to work with Syrian factions as well as other interested parties to develop a lasting political resolution to the current conflict.

The United States must not rely on regional partners to designate recipients of military assistance; it must vet and select recipients itself. Though U.S. partners in the region, such as Turkey, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, may understand the Syrian insurgency better than the United States does, their interests in selecting recipients of military aid may be different, or worse, contrary to U.S. interests in a democratic Syria. Currently, extremist organizations are receiving the bulk of foreign military aid



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U.S. Airmen with the 386th Expeditionary Logistics Readiness Squadron load pallets of nonlethal aid for the Syrian Opposition Coalition

from individuals, organizations, and even some governments. For example, Qatar's Gulf neighbors have accused it of funding the al-Qaeda-linked al-Nusra Front.¹³ In order to ensure that moderate factions have a robust role in shaping post-Assad Syria, the odds must be evened. Particularly if the United States and like-minded partners wish to have any influence over what shape the political resolution will take, we must ensure that moderates and secularists are strong enough militarily to make their voices heard in the process of developing that political resolution, or, in the worst case, that moderate factions are able to hold their own if a post-Assad struggle for power becomes violent. U.S. envoys must work closely with the Syrian Military Council and collect intelligence independently to ensure that U.S. military aid is put against objectives common to the Syrian opposition and the United States – ending the Assad dynasty and replacing it with an inclusive democratic system supported by a robust civil society.

Second, any military assistance provided should be executed by the Department of State and the Department of Defense under Title 10 military and Title 22 diplomatic authorities, not covertly under Title 50 intelligence authorities. During the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, U.S. military assistance to the *mujahideen* had to be covert; overt assistance would have demanded a reaction from the Soviets, at a minimum resulting in escalation and potentially in contagion of the Afghan conflict. At worst, the result could have been open war between the two superpowers. Conversely, the circumstances surrounding the current conflict in Syria encourage public acknowledgement of U.S. military aid to the opposition. Overt U.S. intervention could have significant impact on the course of the conflict,

potentially altering the decision calculus in the rebels' favor, not only for the Assad regime, but also for Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah. In addition, the transparency gained by working through Title 10 and Title 22 authorities would make it easier to hold recipients of military aid accountable for the whereabouts of weapons, reducing the risk of U.S. military hardware falling into the hands of those who would use it against the U.S., its allies, and partners.

To further mitigate the risk that U.S. weapons could come to be possessed by extremist factions, the United States should carefully consider the ability to account for and recover different types of weapons when deciding what kind and how much military assistance to provide. The Stingers provided to the *mujahideen* were highly effective even in relatively small numbers; the United States only provided between 2,000 and 2,500 in total.¹⁴ Because the Stingers were few in number and rare in the environment in which they were distributed, they could be tracked relatively easily by the CIA using unique serial numbers.¹⁵ The United States should consider these factors when determining what to provide the Syrian opposition, as well as what types of weapons would offer the opposition a decisive advantage over the Assad regime.

Finally, providing military assistance does not obviate the need to work aggressively towards an enduring political resolution to the conflict. As the past decade of war has demonstrated, military victory is not adequate to secure lasting stability. Without reconciliation and an inclusive, representative political system backed by a robust civil society, old patterns of conflict will continue to reemerge, often manifest in violence. Building this kind of a system is exponentially more difficult than achieving military victory, and only the Syrians

can do it. Post-conflict reconciliation and reconstruction is not a process that can be led by outsiders; it must be wholly owned by the domestic constituencies in Syria, with foreign parties in clearly supporting roles. Consequently, the U.S. role is limited to ensuring that moderate factions have what they need, and creating space in the international system for change in Syria to occur. Specifically, the United States must do what it can diplomatically to prevent spoilers (like Russia, Iran, Qatar, and Hezbollah) from obstructing Syria's democratic development. Though the U.S. diplomatic role in this political space is necessarily limited, it is equally if not more important than any military assistance the United States can provide.

Conclusion

There are plenty of reasons to proceed with extreme caution when contemplating military assistance to the Syrian opposition. As the U.S. intervention during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan demonstrates, military assistance to insurgents with weak command and control is a dangerous undertaking. However, failure to intervene can have equally severe consequences. Foreign fighters and arms continue to flow into Syria, further bolstering the capability and capacity of the regime's forces, as well as extremists in opposition. Asking the rebels to come to the negotiating table when they are obviously weak, and moreover when moderate factions within the opposition are weaker still, could have disastrous consequences for the future of Syria as a



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Last Soviet troop column crosses Soviet border after leaving Afghanistan

democratic state supported by a robust civil society. Because of Syria's vital role in the greater Middle East, extremist dominance post-Assad could further destabilize the already fragile region, with significant implications most immediately for Israel's security, but also for the global security environment as a whole. There is some hope that democratic societies outside the region can help avoid this outcome by ensuring that moderate factions within the opposition are militarily strong enough to be credible actors in the political process should the Assad regime fall. In so doing, policy makers should consider both the successes and failures of prior U.S. intervention during the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, and be guided by their lessons. **PRISM**

NOTES

¹ According to the United Nations Refugee Agency, as of September 24, 2013. <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Coll, Steve. *Ghost Wars: the Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*. Penguin Books: New York, 2004.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Sly, Liz. "Syrian Regime Gains Ground." *Washington Post*, 12 May 2013, page 1.

⁷ Grau, Lester W. and Michael A. Gress. *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost*. University Press of Kansas: Lawrence, 2002.

⁸ Bearden, Milt. *The Main Enemy: The Inside Story of the CIA's Final Showdown with the KGB*. Presidio Press: New York, 2004.

⁹ Maley, William. *The Afghanistan Wars*. Palgrave MacMillan: New York, 2002.

¹⁰ Coll.

¹¹ Maley.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Khalafa, Roula, and Abigail Fielding-Smith. "How a Tiny Oil-Rich Gulf State Siezed Control of the Syrian Revolution." *Financial Times Magazine*, 18 May 2013, page FTM12.

¹⁴ Coll.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Barnard, Anne, and Hwaida Saad. "Hezbollah Aids Syrian Military in a Key Battle." *New York Times*, 20 May 2013, page 1.

Bernd Schwabe, Hannover



Gravestone without name symbolizing children killed in the war