

The Unbearable Lightness of Syria Policy

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Free Syrian Army fighters outside Maaret al-Numan, November, 2012.

“Arming the rebels — that’s an option.

You look at and rethink all options. It doesn’t mean you do or you will. . . . It doesn’t mean that the president has decided on anything.”

Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, May 2, 2013

But deciding on something is what presidents get paid the big bucks to do. Obama is right to find the available options unappealing, but the problem remains. Declining to choose is no solution; it simply leaves it to others — including those most hostile to America — to call the shots.

Two years ago, Syrians fed up with Bashar Assad’s Iranian-aligned dictatorship began to peacefully protest. Assad responded with brutality. Before long, a civil war was raging. Since then, more than 75,000 men, women, and children have been killed in a catastrophe of major proportions. Curiously, this carnage is not a priority for either the Arab League or the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, as even a cursory look at their websites makes clear.

About 600 days ago, Obama declared that “Assad must go.” When an American president wills ends, the best practice is also to will means. The president’s secretary of state, secretary of defense, and director of central intelligence advised him to support moderate and secular opponents of Assad. He didn’t take their advice. Would the situation have turned out differently if he had? It’s a reasonable supposition, though we’ll never know for certain. Call that the unbearable lightness of foreign policy.

Here’s where we are now: Assad backed to the hilt by Iran’s Shia jihadists; Hezbollah, Iran’s terrorist foreign legion; and Vladimir Putin’s Russia, the autocrat’s friend is fighting insurgents whose most lethal combatants are non-Syrian Sunni jihadists, some of them joined at the hip to al-Qaeda.

As Henry Kissinger reportedly said during the Iraq–Iran war: “It’s a pity both can’t lose.” And that is the puzzle that Obama and his advisers should be working overtime to solve. Is there a way to ensure that neither Iran nor al-Qaeda emerges from this conflict strengthened? The other day, a group of Syriacs visited my offices. Syriacs are members of an ancient ethnic group, some might say an ancient nation. They have lived in the land now called Syria; it is from them that the name derives since before the advent

of Islam and the subsequent Arab invasions. They are Christians whose native tongue is Aramaic, the language spoken by Jesus and other Jews of that era.

They told me they do not support Assad, nor do they support the Sunni jihadists fighting him. They have no love for the Muslim Brothers also vying for power. What the Syrians do want is to survive in their homeland. They favor toleration and substantial autonomy not only for themselves but for Syria's other minorities, for example the Kurds, the Druze, the Armenians, the Turkmen, and even the Alawites, Assad's people. My Syrian friends said they believe there are millions of urbanized Sunni Syrians who also do not want to live under the domination of an Iranian viceroy, jihadists, or Islamists.

The Syrians are not asking that American troops intervene. They aren't asking for sophisticated arms that could fall into terrorist hands. They would appreciate simple weapons they can use to defend themselves, their villages, and their families from Assad's forces, jihadists, and bands of thugs. Humanitarian aid would be useful, too.

I would argue that it is in America's interest to support such people in Syria, in Egypt, in Iraq, in Afghanistan, pretty much everywhere. Such people should not be orphans while terrorists, totalitarians, and tyrants of all stripes receive abundant support from Iran, Russia, Gulf petro-princes and, more often than not, the United Nations. What kind of people are we if we take more pains to save snail darters than Syrians?

If Assad survives, Iran's rulers will pop the pomegranate juice a battle won in a war they've been waging since 1979. By contrast, Assad's fall would set back, perhaps permanently, Iranian attempts to spread their Islamic Revolution to Arab and Sunni lands. For this reason alone, "Assad must go." A strategy to help him on his way is long overdue.

What comes after Assad is probably not peace and prosperity. So it makes sense to begin, albeit belatedly, bolstering those willing to resist the foreign jihadists, as well as those who, post-Assad, would favor a federalized Syrian government, one in which no individual or faction can dictate to the others.

I'm not saying that is a good option. I am saying that it's less bad than the others. It's certainly better than playing Hamlet while those who seek to diminish us (e.g. Putin), and those who seek to destroy us (e.g. Iran's rulers and their jihadist rivals) shape the future for Syria and the Middle East.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This piece has been amended since its original posting.