

A Warchest for Syria's Rebels

By David Ignatius
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Left on its current course, America's sensibly cautious policy toward Syria is unfortunately going to come to an unhappy end: The jihadist wing of the opposition will just get stronger and gain more power to shape Syria's future.

But what's the right alternative? How can the United States help the Syrian opposition while avoiding another costly military intervention in the Muslim world?

I've been puzzling over this dilemma since traveling into Syria two weeks ago with the Free Syrian Army. "Be careful" still seems like the right watchword for U.S. policy in an unstable, revolutionary situation where order could collapse like a Levantine version of "pick-up sticks." But caution doesn't mean inaction, and some modest changes in U.S. policy could make a big difference in outcome.

The bedrock of U.S. interests in Syria is preventing any use or spread of its chemical weapons. President Bashar al-Assad is said to have relocated some of the weapons, and it won't be easy monitoring them — or keeping them out of the hands of al-Qaeda terrorists, who would love to grab some free weapons of mass destruction if Assad should fall.

To deal with this problem, the United States needs better intelligence on the ground. And that's where the hard calculus of U.S. interests meshes with the quixotic challenge of helping the Syrian rebels. Right now, the United States reportedly has a limited program to supply nonlethal assistance. This program should be tweaked so the rebels get more help building a stronger chain of command.

If the United States helped coordinate funding, the Free Syrian Army would have several advantages: A better-organized opposition might defeat the regime, it would be better able to govern a post-Assad Syria and it could help the United States control Syria's chemical weapons. That's a trifecta — three good things in one.

The Obama administration took a small step in this direction last summer by authorizing the Syrian Support Group to help the rebels. Leaders of the group fanned out inside Syria, looking for army defectors who could establish new military councils to coordinate the flow of weapons and money. When I was inside the country, I met the councils' commanders for Aleppo, Hama and Idlib, who seemed like solid military leaders. They just didn't have enough guns or money to distribute.

Closer links with the rebels have helped fill the intelligence gap. For example, a Free Syrian Army representative sent a report to the State Department in late September that warned: "What we were worried about a few months ago is in the process of happening

right now; extremists are more visible. . . . This is due to lack of support to moderate groups.”

The funding situation has improved slightly this month. About two weeks ago, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are said to have created a small “Gulf Fund,” to be disbursed by the military councils. The commanders will be paid \$150 for each named fighter (including the serial number of his weapon). Col. Abdul-Jabbar Akidi in Aleppo is receiving about \$2.5 million under this program; Col. Afif Suleiman in Idlib is getting about \$4.5 million. The United States should consider adding money for nonlethal assistance, including training, communications and intelligence.

Syrian jihadist battalions continue to raise their own money directly from wealthy Saudis, Kuwaitis and Qataris. The report to the State Department explains how this works. “The battalion rep or commander travels to Turkey, where he meets Gulf individuals or Syrians who live in the Gulf. The battalion presents ‘projects’ that need sponsorship, for example: targeting a checkpoint costs \$20-30K, while targeting an airport cost \$200-300K. . . . A video taping . . . is required to provide evidence of the operation.”

How can the United States break this downward cycle? The right next step is to gather into one pot all the official contributions, lethal and nonlethal, from the United States and its Arab and European allies. Then let the Free Syrian Army commanders distribute the money and weapons to fighters, in ways that will build discipline.

The Free Syrian Army has a long shopping list. It claims “minimum” needs of 1,000 rocket-propelled grenades to attack tanks, 500 SAM-7 surface-to-air missiles to destroy Syrian helicopters and jets, 750 machine guns, 50,000 gas masks, 250 vehicles Commanders claimed they are forming special units that would operate the anti-aircraft missiles, perhaps under supervision by contractors from the Gulf countries.

You don’t have to sign off on this whole war chest to agree that it’s time for the United States to experiment with strategies that could produce something other than the bad outcome that’s now ahead.