

# POLICY NOTES



The Washington Institute for Near East Policy • No. 18 • May 2014

## BETWEEN NOT-IN AND ALL-IN U.S. Military Options in Syria

Maj Chandler Atwood, USAF  
Col Joshua Burgess, USAF  
Lt Col Michael Eisenstadt, USAR (ret.)  
Col Joseph Wawro, USA

Syria's civil war has sparked a wider sectarian conflict that is transforming the geopolitics of the Middle East and poses major challenges to U.S. interests in the region and beyond. It has led to the creation of al-Qaeda enclaves in the eastern Mediterranean and the consolidation of a pro-Iran axis in the Levant (consisting of Syria, Hezbollah, and Shiite fighters from Iraq and elsewhere). Tens of thousands of Sunni and Shiite foreign fighters who have flocked to Syria from across several continents will almost certainly create new problems when they go home or migrate to other trouble spots. And the humanitarian crisis spawned by the mass flight of refugees from Syria has produced destabilizing spillover effects in neighboring states that are likely to worsen with time.

Meanwhile, fresh reports that the Assad regime continues to use chemical weapons (CW), even as Syria holds on to the remnants of its *declared* chemical weapons stockpile, indicate that its accession to the Chemical Weapons Convention last year may not signal an end to this problem.

In light of the inability of diplomacy and sanctions to halt these dramatic developments and to staunch the bloodletting (which has so far left well over 150,000 dead and 9 million displaced), the Obama administration is reportedly once again reviewing its policy alternatives in Syria—including military options.<sup>1</sup> This paper, and the associated briefing, provides an overview of U.S. military options, evaluates the pros and cons of each—without

being prescriptive—and highlights the choices, tradeoffs, and dilemmas that U.S. decisionmakers face in grappling with this latest “problem from hell.”<sup>2</sup>

### Means and Ends

Washington could undertake military action, unilaterally or with a coalition, to achieve a number of objectives. It could try to influence the course or outcome of the civil war—and thereby avert a victory by the Bashar al-Assad regime and its allies (Hezbollah and Iran) that would be seen by many friends and adversaries as a strategic defeat for the United States. To this end, Washington might work to strengthen the moderate opposition and weaken

---

*Major Atwood, Colonel Burgess, and Colonel Wawro are visiting military fellows at The Washington Institute, and Michael Eisenstadt is director of the Military and Security Studies Program. The conclusions and the opinions expressed in this document are those of the authors; they do not reflect or indicate an official position of the U.S. government, U.S. Department of Defense, U.S. Army, U.S. Air Force, Air University, or the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. The authors would like to thank James Jeffrey, Dennis Ross, Andrew Tabler, Jeffrey White, and the other members of the “Syria team” at The Washington Institute for their comments on an earlier version of the text and briefing slides, and Washington Institute colleague Lt. Col. Alon Paz, IDF, for his insights regarding various issues dealt with in this paper.*

the regime with the aim of convincing the latter that it faced a ruinous stalemate or defeat if it did not pursue a negotiated solution.

Conversely, it could try to mitigate the effects of the civil war. The United States could seek to deter adventurism by an increasingly confident Damascus regime that believes it has won the war and might therefore be tempted to even scores with its many enemies. Or it could mitigate the suffering of the Syrian people by establishing humanitarian safe havens protected by no-fly zones and ground troops.

Alternatively, the United States could act to secure a narrower set of interests. If Washington were to obtain credible evidence that Syria had not declared its entire CW stockpile or had once again used chemical weapons, the United States might threaten military action to compel Syria to give up the remainder of its CW program, or it might launch strikes to degrade or neutralize Syria's remaining CW capabilities.<sup>3</sup> And, if Syria-based al-Qaeda affiliates were to attack the United States or its interests in the region, Washington might undertake drone strikes to disrupt and deter further attacks, as it has done in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia.

### Military Options

A variety of options are available to the United States to achieve these objectives. (For a more detailed assessment of each, see the accompanying briefing.) Some rely on nonkinetic activities, while others depend mainly on kinetic action; nearly all attempt to alter the psychological environment and risk-benefit calculus of the Assad regime, and to isolate it by driving a wedge between the regime and its domestic and foreign supporters. Hence, robust information activities play a vital role in each. Moreover, some can be employed as stand-alone options, while others are best used together to create synergies. Finally, they can be categorized by the amount of force and degree of risk entailed, from least to most, as follows:

► **Deny Assad regime access to financial assets.**<sup>4</sup> Cyberoperations and sanctions targeting the assets of key regime insiders could exacerbate tensions within the regime and between the regime and its supporters. It is not clear, however, that such measures would succeed in a society polarized by sectarian warfare where fear of massacre unites the various minority groups making up

the regime's base of support. And cyberattacks would run counter to the administration's policy of cyber-restraint, adopted due to U.S. vulnerabilities in this area.

► **Pose a credible threat of force to pressure the regime.** The deployment of intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance (ISR) and strike assets to the region could signal American resolve, enhance U.S. situational awareness, and enable opposition military operations, while forcing the regime to divert resources from ongoing operations to deal with a possible U.S. strike. And it could induce Syria to speed up the elimination of its residual CW capabilities or deter the regime from further CW use.

► **Train and equip the opposition.** Intensified efforts to train and equip moderate opposition groups and to provide them with intelligence could strengthen their position vis-à-vis more extreme opposition elements and reverse the regime's battlefield momentum, setting conditions for a credible diplomatic process. Such a step has the potential to alter the trajectory (if not the outcome) of the war, though much will ultimately depend on the opposition's ability to enhance its military effectiveness, act with unity of purpose, and get its political house in order. This last point is key, as a moderate opposition that embodies the principles it claims to fight for could better compete against extremist opposition groups and draw uncommitted Syrians and disaffected regime supporters to the opposition ranks. Moreover, this option can be scaled up or down, as the opposition's performance, battlefield dynamics, and U.S. interests dictate.

► **Disrupt regime arms supplies.** Standoff strikes against key Syrian airfields to disrupt Iranian and Russian resupply operations could complicate regime efforts to sustain the current pace of operations and to fight a protracted war of attrition. Likewise, attacks on assets and airfields critical to the resupply of Syrian forces could compel the latter to rely on limited overland supply routes that could be interdicted by the opposition.

► **Strike/secure residual CW capabilities.** The United States could launch standoff strikes to degrade or neutralize Syria's remaining CW stockpiles and facilities in order to deny their use by the regime, while U.S.-trained personnel could secure stockpiles and facilities

where feasible. Such a course might gain traction if it were shown that Syria did not declare its entire CW stockpile or once again used CW, despite having committed to eliminate its chemical stockpile.

► **Strike key tactical military units.** The United States could launch standoff strikes against units that have spearheaded the regime's military effort against opposition forces and the civilian population—including the Fourth Armored Division, Republican Guard, Scud units, and select fixed and rotary-wing aviation units. Such strikes could degrade the regime's combat power and alter the course of the war, and for that reason might prompt retaliation by Syria and Hezbollah, along with an escalation of tensions with Iran and Russia.

► **Conduct drone strikes on al-Qaeda affiliates.** In response to an attack on the United States or its interests by AQ affiliates based in Syria, the United States could launch drone strikes against these groups to disrupt and deter future operations, and alter the balance between moderate and extreme members of the Syrian opposition. (Drone operations would be limited to areas lacking air defenses or areas where the regime's air defenses had been degraded by suppression operations.) Reports that AQ affiliates in Syria have been planning such attacks make this an increasingly plausible scenario.<sup>5</sup>

► **Strike key strategic military and economic targets.** The United States could launch standoff strikes against the Syrian military's infrastructure (including intelligence facilities, critical command, control, and communication nodes, and fuel oil stockpiles), vital components of the country's industrial infrastructure (especially dual-use facilities and industries owned by Assad associates), and radio and TV outlets used by the regime to communicate with its supporters. Such strikes could alter the course of the war, and might therefore lead to retaliation by Syria and Hezbollah, along with increased tensions with Iran and Russia.

► **Establish no-fly zones/humanitarian safe havens.** U.S. and coalition forces could establish narrow no-fly zones along the borders of Turkey and Jordan using Patriot SAMs located in these countries, or broad no-fly zones following the suppression of nearby Syrian air defenses. This would enable the creation of humanitarian

safe havens secured by coalition ground forces in northern and southern Syria. Such an effort, however, would be manpower and resource intensive, would require "boots on the ground" (to protect the safe haven from regime or proxy ground attacks), and could lead to an open-ended commitment, since many internally displaced persons no longer have homes to go back to.

### **The Adversary Has a Vote: Risks for Retaliation**

Syria has threatened to lash out if attacked, so the United States must be prepared for such a possibility.<sup>6</sup> In fact, however, Syria has repeatedly absorbed Israeli blows without retaliating—including the strike on its nuclear reactor at al-Kibar in 2007 and the more than half-dozen airstrikes on military targets in Syria (mainly weapons earmarked for transfer to Hezbollah) since the start of the civil war in 2011. Thus, Assad would probably not retaliate militarily for a U.S. attack if his forces remained preoccupied with the opposition and if he believed he would pay a significant military price for doing so. If he were to retaliate, he would more than likely do so via a proxy (in much the same way Syria previously facilitated Hezbollah and Hamas operations against Israel, rather than risk a direct confrontation). However, Syria's options here are limited, as many of the proxy groups it formerly relied on are no longer effective or no longer exist.

Much the same goes for Hezbollah. With several thousand fighters engaged in combat in Syria, the group could ill afford to open another front, against the United States. Moreover, its ability to conduct overseas terrorist attacks has atrophied in recent years and has been constrained by dramatically improved U.S. and Israeli counterterrorism capabilities since 9/11. However, Hezbollah would see a threat to the Assad regime's survival as a threat to its own existence, since it would likely be the next target of many Sunni jihadists. It might therefore seek a way to deter American action without itself becoming a U.S. target.

Iran has likewise repeatedly avoided direct confrontations and potentially costly foreign military adventures when its vital interests have been threatened; all the more so, it will avoid a confrontation with the United States on behalf of its Syrian ally. (Indeed, when the Assad regime previously appeared doomed, Tehran put out feelers to members of the opposition—though some Iranian hardliners will undoubtedly argue for doing everything

necessary to keep the Assad regime afloat.) And if Iranian personnel were killed in a U.S. military strike on Syria, Tehran would certainly feel a need to respond, though a variety of considerations would influence such a decision, and prudence might dictate that it defer retaliation.

To a great extent, then, the potential for retaliation and escalation by Syria and its allies would depend on how preoccupied they are with the opposition, their perception of U.S. resolve, and the degree to which U.S. action directly threatens their vital interests. Accordingly, indirect or incremental American action would be less likely to prompt retaliation. For these risk-averse actors, retaliation in cyberspace might be the preferred response to U.S. military action. Indeed, the Syrian Electronic Army has already attacked news and social media outlets in the United States and elsewhere.

## Conclusions

Although diplomacy and sanctions have not yielded the desired results in Syria, the administration remains concerned that even limited military action could draw the United States into another Middle East war, violating one of its core foreign policy principles. It is also concerned that military action could scuttle its two signal foreign policy achievements: the deal to eliminate Syria's CW and the ongoing nuclear negotiations with Iran. These overarching considerations will continue to constrain U.S. options in Syria. How new reports of Syrian CW use—if verified—will affect this calculus is unclear.

The impulse to refrain from military intervention in Syria, while understandable, is increasingly fraught with risks: an al-Qaeda foothold and expanded Iranian influence in the Levant; a new generation of jihadists who will seek new opportunities elsewhere; social tensions and political instability in neighboring states (including several close U.S. allies); growing sectarian conflict in the region; and doubts about U.S. credibility by friends and adversaries alike that could prompt tests of U.S. resolve elsewhere (see Russia in Ukraine). Moreover, by not acting, Washington risks consigning itself to a spectator role in a conflict with far-reaching implications for its interests.

Should Washington seek to more proactively shape developments in Syria, it has a range of military options entailing varying degrees of commitment and risk that fall far short of full-scale invasion—albeit with no guarantees of achieving what most might define as “success.” In a conflict where there are no good outcomes (with so many dead and displaced, it is too late to speak of such), acting to avert even worse outcomes—for the peoples of Syria and the region and, more important, for U.S. interests—may be the best that can be hoped for. How Washington mediates the tension between the increasingly evident risks of nonintervention, and the inherently uncertain risks of intervention, may very well determine the future of Syria, the Middle East, and the U.S. role there and beyond for years to come.

## Notes

1. Ernesto Londoño and Anne Gearan, “Obama Soliciting New Policy Options for Syria from Top Aides as Peace Talks Flounder,” *Washington Post*, February 14, 2014, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-soliciting-new-policy-options-for-syria-from-top-aides-as-peace-talks-flounder/2014/02/14/6a8386fe-95b2-11e3-afce-3e7c922ef31e\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-soliciting-new-policy-options-for-syria-from-top-aides-as-peace-talks-flounder/2014/02/14/6a8386fe-95b2-11e3-afce-3e7c922ef31e_story.html).
2. Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).
3. Barbara Starr, “U.S. Intelligence Suggests Syria May Hide Some Chemical Weapons,” *Security Clearance* (blog), CNN, November 5, 2013, <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2013/11/05/first-on-cnn-us-intelligence-suggests-syria-may-hide-some-chemical-weapons/>.
4. Although not military options per se, cyberoperations and sanctions are included here because the cyber component would likely be implemented by a Department of Defense agency (United States Cyber Command) in conjunction with one or another military course of action.
5. Kimberly Dozier, “Clapper Says Syrian al-Qaida Wants to Attack U.S.,” Associated Press, January 29, 2014, <http://news.yahoo.com/clapper-says-syrian-al-qaida-wants-attack-us-164720271--politics.html>.
6. Fars News Agency, “Assad Warns to Set Fire on Middle-East in Case of U.S. Attack,” October 4, 2011, <http://english2.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9007100300>.

