

American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research



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North Africa on “A Crisis Mismanaged: Obama’s Failed Syria Policy”

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Madam Chairman, Representative Deutch, Members of the Committee, thank you for including me in this important hearing on the question of Syria. I will be brief, as I believe the imperative for the United States regarding Syria is clear.

It is in our nation's vital national security interest to intervene in Syria. It is also in our nation's vital national security interest to ensure that a post-Assad Syria is neither governed nor exploited by terrorist groups.

In March of 2011, during the so-called Arab Spring, the Syrian people took the streets in peaceful demonstrations against the dictatorship of Bashar el Assad. Those demonstrations were met with violence, which escalated to the point that the opposition needed to respond or retreat. After decades of brutal oppression under the Assad family, it should have come as little surprise that the Syrian people would choose to fight. On August 11 of that same year, Barack Obama called on the Syrian dictator to step down, but did little by way of practical measures to ensure he would do so.

Since that time, the situation in Syria has deteriorated dramatically. A fight that once belonged to the people of Syria – including moderates, democrats and local Muslim Brotherhood groups – has now spilled over and includes groups affiliated with al Qaeda fighting on the rebel side with arms from Saudi Arabia and Qatar. On Assad's side, there are reports that Iranian regular army and IRGC forces fight alongside Syrian troops, and significant numbers of Lebanese Hezbollahis are also on the ground supporting Assad. They are armed and regularly resupplied by Iran and Russia. In fact, the only group left out in the cold is the very moderates the United States should support.

The war has spilled over to Lebanon, to Israel and Iraq. The government of Jordan is overwhelmed by hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees; Turkey too has taken on a large refugee population. Regional war is not unthinkable.

On the ground, a battle that has cost upwards of 80,000 and perhaps as many as 120,000 lives has turned once again, with the advantage to Assad. The key town of Qusayr has been the scene of terrible fighting and its loss is a significant blow to the rebels. In addition, Assad has once again reportedly used chemical weapons to attack his own people. The reason he does so is simple: He wishes Syrians – including many women and children -- to pay a terrible price for supporting and harboring rebel forces. Chemical weapons accomplish that job for him.

Where is the United States in all of this? We are providing humanitarian assistance. There are reports we are also providing covert lethal assistance, though I have no reason to credit such reports as true. There are also reports that the CIA is on the ground, already vetting groups in preparation to arm them. Again, I cannot confirm those reports. Secretary John Kerry has taken time off from the urgent diplomatic exigencies of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process to meet with his Russian

counterpart, and a peace conference that was slated for this week will now possibly take place in July.

As for the question of President Obama's demand that Assad step down, and his August 2012 insistence that any use of chemical weapons by Assad would be a "game changer" and a "red line" for the United States, Mr. Obama's approach appears to be to do nothing. This has major implications for the credibility of the President of the United States, not just in Syria, but worldwide. We can only imagine to ourselves how the Iranian regime appreciates the President's failure to act on his own threats.

What we should do now is straightforward:

- Vet and then arm those rebels who embrace democratic norms, have a demonstrated distance from al Qaeda and related groups, and who commit to turning over Assad's illegal chemical weaponry, missiles and other weapons of mass destruction.
- Use stand-off weaponry such as the Tomahawk missile to disable Syrian airfields and render inoperable the air force and resupply hubs that are now facilitating Assad's advance.
- Consider the imposition of a no-fly zone in cooperation with NATO allies and the Arab League. I believe this is not the demanding exercise some have suggested, and many analysts assess Syrian air defenses as far less than their specs would suggest.
- Immediately impose new sanctions on Hezbollah, including broad travel sanctions, freezing accounts of Hezbollah owned companies, related banks and isolate families and supporters of Hezbollah. Ban the entry into the United States of all Hezbollah officials, their immediate families and officers and relatives of banks and companies with substantial Hezbollah holdings.

Without his air force, Assad will be reduced to using far more vulnerable rotary wing aircraft, which the rebels have a demonstrated capacity to bring down. It will also slow the inflow of weaponry from Iran and Russia. And should Russia deliver S300 air defenses, it will be clear to both Moscow and Damascus that the US and our allies have the means and the capacity to take it out.

The reason we should seek to tip the balance in this conflict should be obvious: The collapse of a central nation in the Middle East, the rise of an al Qaeda state, and/or the continued spillover of this conflict into the neighboring states of Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon and Israel is an undesirable outcome. Anyone who believes that a conflagration throughout the Middle East will have no implications for the United States is ignoring history.

There are those who suggest we do not have a dog in this fight. I could not disagree more. The United States has had an interest in the Middle East for more than five

decades. We have allies, troops, resources and interests at stake. Syria is Iran's most important Arab ally – indeed, it's ONLY Arab ally. It is Iran's conduit to the Levant, to the world's most dangerous terrorist group, Hezbollah, and the route through which it arms and manages much of Lebanon. And while some may look at the "stability" of the Assad regime with nostalgia, we should not assume there is any means of stuffing the genie back into the bottle. His regime will never rule all of Syria again.

What we should do once Assad falls is also straightforward, and should reflect lessons learned from Iraq, Egypt, Yemen and other Arab Spring countries. The United States must act to reflect its values, and implement a policy consistent with those values and ideals. What do we support?

- Democratic rule
- Equal rights
- Secularism
- Protection of minorities
- Women's rights
- Free markets

I suspect that as we move away from some of those values here at home, it will be more difficult for us to press for them abroad. Nonetheless, these are the pillars of our nation, tried and true. These are the foundations of opportunity, prosperity and peace.

In each of the countries where a dictatorial ruler has fallen, either by force as with Iraq, or through popular revolutions as in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen, we see a leader similar to the previous secular dictator in his place. Can we stop the popular election of an Islamist? We cannot. But we could have and still can work to support liberals and moderates. We can direct our assistance to benefit those who share those values. We can deny assistance to any regime that fails on these standards. We can support the private sector and starve the public sector. We can end cash transfers. We can vote with our feet and our taxpayer dollars. In each case I have mentioned, we have not.

Congress has an enormous say in who gets what aid, how policies are implemented, who and what we reward and what we punish. Yet in the case of Egypt, just for example, we have failed to follow our own moral compass.

It may be that Syria, like Egypt, will not end well. Had we intervened sooner, it would have been more likely that the better among the Syrian rebels would have prevailed. Now the odds are slimmer. But abdication of American leadership is wrong.

For those who ask why America should care, remember that when we allow extremism and tyranny to flourish without counterbalancing it, we pay a heavy price. For those who believe Syrians should just kill each-other, for shame – both morally and strategically.

The United States still has a chance to help tip the balance in Syria. But if we do not intervene soon, on our terms and without boots on the ground, we can bet on having to intervene later, on terms dictated by others.