

**The Security Situation in the Syrian Arab Republic:  
Implications for U.S. National Security and U.S. Policy Options**

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the House Armed Services Committee, for inviting me to speak this morning. I very much appreciate this opportunity to address the complex topic of the security situation in Syria and its implications for the United States. The timing for this important hearing could not be better as the situation in Syria continues to deteriorate, and U.S. policy makers face a series of extraordinarily difficult questions on how to respond.

In preparation for this hearing, I was asked to consider a number of key questions revolving around the issue of whether the U.S. military should be further engaged in Syria and if so, to what end. The current discussion in Washington has focused on a number of military options including the enforcement of a no-fly zone, the creation of a humanitarian corridor or buffer zone, and the arming of Syrian rebels.

In addressing potential benefits and limitations of various military options currently under consideration, I was also asked to elaborate on the strategic objective that would be achieved through greater U.S. military engagement in Syria as well as to articulate why the situation in Syria is significant to U.S. national security interests.

**The Security Situation in Syria**

Before tackling these thorny questions, I would like to first offer my assessment of the current security situation in Syria. Now well into its third year, Syria's uprising is by far the most brutal of the Arab revolts. It rapidly evolved from a peaceful protest movement to an armed uprising in the face of brutal government repression. The Syrian regime has spared no effort to put down the uprising, including the use of airstrikes and ballistic missiles against civilians and the alleged use of chemical weapons. Unfortunately, Syria's crisis has now morphed into a sectarian civil war with significant spillover effects on Syria's neighbors, particularly Lebanon and Iraq.

The conflict has resulted in a humanitarian catastrophe. More than 100,000 Syrians have been killed, primarily civilians. The United Nations estimates nearly 2 million refugees have fled Syria, while more than 4 million Syrians are internally displaced. Even larger numbers of Syrians are in need of humanitarian assistance including food and medical aid. Concerns over the spread of disease and malnutrition are mounting. Syria has witnessed significant devastation, including widespread destruction of public infrastructure, schools, mosques and homes.

As the conflict grinds on, the military situation on the ground suggests that Syria's civil war could endure for years. Over the past few months, the Syrian army has succeeded in consolidating its control over some key strategic areas. Assisted by a doubling down of military support from Iran and the Lebanese Shiite militant group Hezbollah, the Syrian regime secured an important military victory in Qusayr. It is now waging a battle to re-take Homs, Syria's third largest city. The regime has also worked to root out rebels from the Damascus suburbs. It may also seek to re-take Aleppo, mired in a brutal stalemate for nearly a year. Taken together these

gains would mark an important consolidation of regime control over Damascus and the strategic corridor leading to the Mediterranean coast where Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's Alawite sect has established a secure area.

However, Syria will not return to the status quo ante. Vast swathes of Syrian territory remain largely out of the regime's control. While the armed groups have not managed to seize control of any of Syria's major cities, they do control large areas of the countryside as well as the provincial capital of Raqqa on the Euphrates River. The Kurdish region of northeastern Syria is increasingly autonomous, while Sunni-dominated areas north and east of Aleppo are under the sway of armed rebel groups. It is difficult to envision how the Syrian army would be able to re-take all of this lost territory.

At the same time, rebel groups remain unable to coalesce and continue to lack unified command and control structures. Indeed, if anything armed groups inside Syria are growing *more* fractious and have increasingly started to turn their arms on each other – a deeply concerning sign for the future. In addition, numerous reports suggest an increasing number of foreign fighters are entering the Syrian arena. Arab jihadists from North Africa, Egypt and the Gulf, as well as fighters from as far afield as Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Caucasus are joining the battle.

From the uprising's start, the Syrian opposition, both armed and unarmed, has been riven with personal and ideological rivalries. Unfortunately, they have not managed to unite around a clear vision of a post-Assad Syria. Moreover, the external opposition lacks significant support inside Syria. Meanwhile, the political opposition inside Syria has been eclipsed by the armed groups as the country descends deeper into civil war.

Three emerging trends among the armed groups suggest a deepening and protracting of Syria's conflict, with dim prospects for a resolution any time soon.

- **First, radical elements among the armed groups—particularly those espousing a Salafi-jihadist ideology, appear to be gaining ground and imposing their ways on the civilian population.** This trend was brutally illustrated in an episode last month when Islamic extremists tortured and then publicly executed a 15-year-old boy for allegedly committing blasphemy. The incident is perhaps the most egregious, but not the only such example. Increasingly, civilians are chafing at the strictures of hardline jihadists whose harsh interpretations of Islamic rule collide with the more tolerant approach that has long characterized Syria.
- **Second, as ideological divisions and competition for control among armed groups intensify, rival rebels are increasingly fighting each other.** Sporadic episodes of intra-rebel fighting have been reported over the past several months in various areas of rebel control. In Raqqa, for example, members of the al-Nusra front, an al-Qaeda aligned group, have engaged in battles with members of the Farouq brigade which is allied with the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Last week several FSA fighters in Idlib province were killed in intense fighting with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), another Al-Qaeda affiliated group. The jihadist extremists beheaded the FSA battalion commander and his brother. In another episode last week, a senior FSA commander was shot dead by ISIS elements in the coastal governorate of Latakia.
- **Third, even among “moderate” armed groups, acts of sectarian extremism have been documented.** The most egregious case concerned an atrocity committed by a

commander (since renounced by the group) with the Farouq Brigade, considered among the more moderate of the armed groups. In a widely viewed video, the commander cut out and ate the heart of a slain Syrian soldier. The episode underscores Syria's deepening sectarianism and legitimizes fears among Syria's minority community that there would be no place for them in a post-Assad Syria. As the Sunni-dominated armed opposition increasingly resorts to sectarian violence, Syria's Alawite and Christian communities will likely adhere to their reluctance to disavow the Assad regime which increasingly may be perceived as the lesser of two evils.

### **Implications of Syria's Military Stalemate**

The net effect of both regime and rebel actions on the ground suggests that Syria is entrenched in a protracted military stalemate that could last years. In this scenario, the regime would maintain its control of Damascus, perhaps Homs, and possibly other key cities, as well as the ancestral Alawite homeland in western Syria. Proliferating armed groups would continue to battle both the regime and, increasingly, each other. Yet, neither the regime nor the rebels would emerge victorious.

As the fighting continues, Syrian civilians will suffer the greatest toll. Refugee flows are already projected to grow to 3.5 million by year's end. Jordan's resources are already stretched thin from hosting nearly half a million Syrian refugees and additional inflows could tip the country into a period of significant instability. Lebanon will also bear a significant impact should its Syrian refugee population—currently one million—continue to swell, particularly given its delicate confessional balance.

The conflict's sectarian aspects will likely grow more acute, with destabilizing consequences for the region. Syria is increasingly an arena of competition for regional proxies of Iran and the Sunni Gulf states. This proxy dimension further complicates the conflict, deepening its sectarian aspects. Already, Lebanon and Iraq, have witnessed a notable escalation in sectarian strife related to Syria's fallout. Iraq has been plagued with the worst spate of sectarian violence in five years. Enflamed sectarian tensions in Lebanon could further deteriorate into prolonged instability. Indeed, as the Syrian conflict's boundaries grow more blurred, a dangerous sectarian dynamic is sweeping the region from the Mediterranean to Baghdad and beyond.

In this scenario, which I believe to be the most likely, no military solution exists to the Syrian conflict. Neither the regime nor the rebels will be able to gain a sufficient military advantage to vanquish the other side. If a military victory is to be had, it would come at a huge price, nothing less than the country itself. The pursuit of all-out military victory would in essence lead to the complete destruction of Syria.

Instead, the resolution will have to be political and will need to come as the result of negotiations. History suggests that it could take some time before the parties are ready to come to the negotiating table. Lebanon's civil war endured for 15 years before it ended via the Ta'if accord. The key questions for U.S. policy makers center on whether levers exist which can accelerate the path toward negotiation. Can the strategic calculus of the Syrian conflict's key protagonists be shifted toward favoring a political outcome? How do we get there? What leverage can be used by the United States and other external actors to shift the paradigm toward negotiation? Can military intervention play a role in shifting the calculus?

## Syria's Significance for U.S. National Security Interests

Syria's geostrategic location in the heart of the Arab world, its growing importance as a jihadist arena, and its vast chemical weapons stockpile endow it with important strategic significance for U.S. national security interests.

- **Geostrategic location.** Syria borders several countries in which the United States has significant equities: Israel, Jordan, Turkey, and Iraq. As such, the Syrian conflict's outcome could *directly* impact the stability of countries holding crucial importance to the United States. It has already adversely affected stability in Iraq, Jordan, and Turkey. Moreover, the Syrian conflict's sectarian spillover has the potential to destabilize the entire region, with the possibility of cascading crises in Jordan, Iraq and even further into the Gulf. In addition, Syria borders Lebanon, home to Hezbollah, a potent U.S. adversary.
- **Jihadist arena.** Certain aspects of the Syrian arena make it particularly attractive to jihadists, perhaps even more than Iraq. First, unlike Iraq, the majority of Syria's population is Sunni Arab (65%), living under the harsh rule of an Alawite minority for more than four decades. Salafi jihadists consider Alawites to be apostates and have long called for the overthrow of the Assad regime. Second, the particular brutality of the Assad regime's repression of the Sunni opposition, unleashing ballistic missiles and even chemical weapons on its civilian population, has deepened jihadist rage against the Assad regime, making the imperative of its overthrow even more urgent. Third, Syria shares a border with Israel, bringing the jihadists even closer to their goal of a transnational caliphate that includes Jerusalem. While Iraq provided an opening to bring the jihadist struggle more directly into the Arab world than Afghanistan, Syria affords the opportunity to fight the battle at the region's heart.
- **Chemical Weapons (CW) stockpiles.** Syria is reported to have one of the largest chemical weapons stockpiles in the world. It possesses stocks of sarin, mustard gas, and possibly the nerve agent VX. U.S. and other intelligence agencies report with a high degree of certainty that the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons, namely sarin, on a small scale against armed opposition groups, possibly on multiple occasions.

The combination of these three elements: geostrategic importance, jihadist arena, and CW stockpiles comprises a potent mix that could dramatically threaten U.S. national security interests. In particular, the specter of jihadist elements or Hezbollah gaining access to chemical weapons would constitute a key threat to U.S. national security interests. Similarly, Syria's descent into all-out chaos, given the presence of jihadists and chemical weapons in the heart of the Arab world, would pose a threat of significant magnitude to U.S. regional allies.

## Assessing U.S. Military Options in Syria

While it is important to keep all options on the table, I do not believe the U.S. military should become further engaged in the Syrian crisis at this point. Syria's complexity cannot be overemphasized, and our "on-the-ground" knowledge of the conflict is deeply limited. The downside risks of various military options under consideration—from arming to enforcing a no-fly zone—are considerable. Syria's growing chaos—marked by deepening rivalries among the armed groups and growing influence of jihadist extremists—is not propitious for U.S. military engagement. Indeed, the use of force—whether direct or indirect—could exacerbate rather than improve the situation on the ground, with dire consequences for the United States and the region.

**Arming the rebels.** I will focus primarily on the question of arming the rebels, currently a topic of fierce debate. While arming is perhaps the least expensive option and requires the lowest level of U.S. commitment, it is fraught with risk for U.S. national security interests and would further endanger Syrian civilians rather than enhance their protection. Among the key risks inherent in arming:

- **Effective vetting is very difficult.** Despite our growing relationship with certain elements of Syria's armed opposition, ensuring that weapons do not end up in the wrong hands is a difficult proposition at best. First, our understanding of these rapidly proliferating and evolving groups remains limited given our absence on the ground inside Syria. Moreover, arms are fluid; they are the currency of war, moving seamlessly from hand to hand. Youtube videos already attest to sophisticated weapons purchased from Croatia by Saudi Arabia ending up in the possession of al-Qaeda militants in Syria. In addition, recent press reports indicate that Iranian-backed Shiite militias fighting for the regime have U.S. weapons, perhaps captured, stolen, or purchased on the black market. Both examples highlight that it is virtually impossible to guarantee that U.S. arms flowing into a chaotic Syrian arena could not one day end up with those who would do harm to the United States or our allies.
- **Arming will further escalate the conflict.** Arming necessarily accelerates the Syrian conflict's dangerous escalation by provoking a commensurate (or possibly disproportionate) increase in arms flows to the Syrian regime by its allies. The past few months have already witnessed a dramatic increase in Iranian and Russian military support to the regime, likely spurred by earlier rebel gains. The pursuit of a military "edge" over the regime is an illusory quest that will more likely lock us into an escalatory dynamic, further protracting the conflict. As an increase in arms to the rebels is met by heightened arming of the regime, urgent rebel requests for greater and more sophisticated U.S. weapons will undoubtedly follow. Moreover, with intra-rebel fighting gaining prominence, U.S. arms could also end up fueling these battles rather than the fight against the regime.
- **Syrian civilians will suffer.** The understandable moral outrage over the suffering of the Syrian people has prompted urgent calls for the United States to "do something." Yet, from a civilian protection standpoint, arming is possibly the worst option. In a February 2013 [report](#) evaluating the impact of various military interventions on civilians, the Center for Civilians in Conflict noted that arming "presents the greatest risk of civilian harm" mainly due to misuse and unintended proliferation. While not on the same scale as the Syrian regime, Syrian rebels are increasingly accused of committing human rights abuses and war crimes. Civilians have been caught in the middle of a widening conflict, suffering the greatest casualties. Sending more arms into the conflict will likely only increase the harm done to civilians.
- **Taking sides in a sectarian civil war heightens threats.** Syria has now evolved into a sectarian civil war with regional spillover. By funneling arms to one side, the United States is explicitly taking sides and potentially exposing U.S. interests to a wider range of threats. The United States paid a high price for engaging in Lebanon's civil war in the 1980s, most notably with the embassy and marine barracks bombings.
- **Post-conflict challenges.** Flooding Syria with arms today will make post-conflict stability and re-construction significantly more difficult. Previous conflicts, including

most recently in Libya, have demonstrated that recovering arms in a post-conflict zone is challenging at best. Arms proliferation increases the likelihood for militias to remain in place post-conflict, dramatically reducing the possibility of establishing peace and the rule of law. Arms may also flow out of Syria to other conflicts, fueling instability elsewhere.

**Enforcing a no-fly zone/creating humanitarian corridors or buffers.** This subset of options necessarily requires a much more significant investment of U.S. resources. It would also entail the cooperation of Turkey and Jordan whose national security interests would also need figure into the arrangements, adding yet another layer of complexity.

The potential for unintended consequences would be high. The direct use of force in Syria would constitute an act of war, directly exposing the United States to a far more significant set of risks. Such options also entail far more severe repercussions should they fail. I am not a military strategist, but my basic understanding is that enforcing a no-fly zone or creating humanitarian safe zones would necessarily demand a significant commitment of U.S. force, could be long and messy, and still not guarantee civilian safety. Indeed, civilians would likely be casualties as part of these operations. Syria reportedly has one of the most sophisticated air defense systems in the world. Neutralizing Syria's air defenses would require a major commitment of force, with a high likelihood of collateral damage.

Moreover, the potential for "mission creep" is extremely high. Numerous questions arise surrounding the extent and duration of these options. What would be the end goal? What if it is not successful? What are the next steps? Regime change in Syria could emerge as a necessary follow-on option, dramatically increasing the stakes for the United States. In essence, engaging the U.S. military more directly via the enforcement of a no-fly zone or the creation of humanitarian safe zones stipulates a far deeper U.S. commitment with a greater likelihood that the United States ends up "owning" the Syria problem, at a potentially significant cost of U.S. blood and treasure.

**Use of force as part of a broader negotiation strategy.** While I remain skeptical about the effectiveness of military options in the current environment, a bigger strategic question concerning the use of force as a means to reach negotiations is worth considering. Circumstances could arise in which the limited use of force, specifically targeted airstrikes, may alter the strategic calculations of key players on the ground and pave the way toward negotiations. Such circumstances are not easy to discern, but could revolve around a confirmed, large scale chemical weapons attack killing a significant number of civilians. Other egregious acts resulting in either large-scale civilian casualties and/or major spillover into one of Syria's neighbors could also serve as a platform for the limited use of force.

Of course, the risks of targeted airstrikes are also significant. To minimize these risks, the use of standoff weaponry, likely ship-borne missiles, would be in order. Such strikes would need to be undertaken in concert with key allies. Equally important, the use of surgical military strikes should necessarily be embedded in a well-conceived political and diplomatic strategy that seeks to resolve the conflict through negotiations. Target selection should aim to both strongly signal US. and allied resolve and also to prompt key actors on the ground to shift their calculus. An effective strategic communications strategy would also be a necessary component of this option. While the potential for "mission creep" also exists with limited surgical strikes, the risk could be

minimized if this option is undertaken with clearly-defined objectives that seek to directly address an egregious act and alter the cost-benefit analysis of key actors on the ground.

## **Conclusion**

The United States cannot afford to ignore Syria. Yet, there is no “silver bullet” for resolving Syria’s conflict. Military options are not likely to be successful unless embedded in a well-conceived political and diplomatic strategy. While this hearing’s focus is on the pros and cons of greater U.S. military involvement in Syria, the political and diplomatic dimensions of U.S. strategy toward Syria should take precedence. To the extent possible, the United States should work to help bring the Syrian conflict toward resolution by working through international and regional channels to find a political solution to the conflict. Understanding that this could take time, the United State must work to assuage the human suffering that has accompanied the conflict, leveraging support from both regional and international actors to address Syria’s growing humanitarian crisis. As well, the United States should seek to insulate regional allies from Syrian spillover and help tamp down regional tensions.

U.S. military options should be evaluated in this broader context. Ultimately, U.S. military options should be deployed in the service of a broader political and diplomatic strategy. A more aggressive U.S. military posture in the absence of a deeper, coherent strategy is unlikely to bring Syria closer to resolution, improve humanitarian conditions, or minimize regional spillover. In fact, such involvement could exacerbate the situation.

Moreover, greater U.S. military involvement in Syria must be assessed not only in terms of whether it would bring Syria closer to resolution. The impact of military engagement must also be measured on an Arab world that is fraught with tension and in the midst of destabilizing change. Across the region—from North Africa to Egypt to the Levant and the Gulf—U.S. engagement has been met with suspicion and at times, outright hostility. Policy makers and military planners therefore must also assess the impact of greater U.S. military engagement on this volatile region more broadly.

Finally, the American public has also expressed deep skepticism about the merits of greater U.S. military engagement in Syria. While respondents appear to be supportive of humanitarian assistance, even the most limited of U.S. military options –arming the rebels – has been met with disapproval. Americans have no appetite for U.S. engagement in a third Middle Eastern war.