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The Hastening the End to the Civil War in Syria

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The uprising against Assad's regime that began more than two years ago has so far taken a toll of more than 70,000 dead, over one million refugees who have fled Syria, and a larger number of refugees within the country, and there is still no end in sight, whether through political or military means. On the ground, the situation seems to be at an impasse. The regime, still in control of the large cities, the coastal region, the mountainous Alawi area in the west, and the transportation arteries between them, faces divided rebels who have managed to take charge of most of Syria's territory, especially the rural areas in the northeast and south. Assad's army continues to rely on foreign political, military, and economic aid, especially from Russia, Iran, and its protégé Hizbollah, as well as China, which offers Syria primarily political support. The rebels receive aid from Saudi Arabia and Qatar in the Gulf, Turkey, and apparently several NATO members, but they lack a unified command and there is no unified control of the aid. The result is that every nation assists the element(s) close to it politically. Thus, Qatar provides support to the Muslim Brotherhood, Saudi Arabia to the Salafists, and Turkey to the Muslim Brotherhood and the Free Syrian Army, and the West provides limited support to the Free Syrian Army, consisting of the less Islamic nationalist elements. The Arab League decision to recognize Moaz al-Khatib, the leader of the National Coalition, as the Syrian representative was a symbolic act, important in the attempt to discredit the Assad regime, but it is doubtful the move can do little more than boost morale or effect any decisive change in the balance of power on the ground.

Absent a decision, the humanitarian disaster will only worsen as the numbers of dead, wounded, and displaced spiral. But beyond the humanitarian aspect, there are also some important strategic implications. The longer the civil war lasts, the stronger the jihadist Islamists among the rebels grow, thanks to the influx of foreign jihadists, some of whom have extensive combat experience, good organizational skills, and high motivation. This will have ramifications for Syria's future in the post-Assad era. The continuation of the crisis and its becoming an ethnically based civil war will make it all the more difficult to reestablish a strong central government, and increases the possibility of Syria's collapse and its becoming a failed state where various active factions are a permanent fixture. In

such a situation, the likelihood that chemical and other strategic weapons will fall into extremist hands also increases.

Nor is the crisis not contained within Syria's own borders: it is spilling over to neighboring countries, placing them before growing economic, military, and political difficulties with the potential for undermining stability in those regimes and thereby destabilizing the region as a whole. The refugees are burdening Jordan and Lebanon, deepening ethnic tensions, and taking a heavy economic toll on already fragile economies.

Israel has so far done all it can to avoid involvement in Syria, justifiably so from its perspective. Israel has no real ability to affect events within Syria; furthermore, Israeli involvement carries the risk of generating the opposite of the intended result, thereby increasing the threats emanating from Syria. However, certain situations might force Israel to intervene, for example, the attempt to transfer strategic weapons to Hizbollah, which according to foreign sources resulted in an attack on a convoy within Syria, and repeated fire, apparently unintentional, toward the Golan Heights. The regime is losing control over the Syrian-held Golan Heights, resulting in a risk to UNDOF, the UN force observing the disengagement. Some of the UN units have already left, leading to the possibility UNDOF will collapse altogether. Thus Israel could find itself in a very different reality than the one extant since 1974, and the Syrian-held Golan Heights could become a base for jihadist and Palestinian extremist attacks on Israel.

Some in Israel may feel that the current civil war in Syria serves Israel's interests because it keeps Syria from representing a serious military threat. However, Syria stopped being a significant military threat to Israel some time ago, whereas the ongoing civil war can only increase the risk of military threats of a different kind, if Syria becomes a failed state, which would impact negatively on regional stability. Thus, it is in Israel's interest that the civil war end as soon as possible and that a central, moderate Islamic regime take control of the country. The question then is: how does one break the military stalemate between the regime and the rebels in favor of the moderate rebels, thereby creating an opportunity for a decision in the military struggle or, alternately, promoting a political resolution? While Israel cannot do this, it is important that decision makers in Israel understand the options and deliberate them with allies in the international community.

In order of escalation, the options for breaking the stalemate are: lifting the West's embargo on supplying the rebels with arms, establishing no-fly zones for the Syrian air force, and providing the rebels with aerial support.

Despite the counter-arguments, it appears that lifting the embargo on weapons shipments is the least problematic of the options. The claim that weapons are liable to fall into the

wrong hands, i.e., to jihadists, because no one can distinguish definitively between the groups of rebels and control the weapons' final destination is a weak argument. In the current reality, the Islamist rebels already enjoy weapons supplies from the Gulf states, whereas the other groups have no regular sources of weapons. In addition, over time there is better information on the different groups and with an appropriate intelligence effort a much better picture can emerge. It has also been argued, including by a senior European diplomat, that "lifting the embargo would give Russia, Iran, and perhaps other nations an excuse to increase their weapons deliveries to the regime and thereby contribute to more fighting." However, these nations hardly need any more excuses to supply arms to the Syrian regime, and instead, the supply of high quality arms such as anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons designed to compromise the areas in which the regime enjoys superiority could effect an essential change in the current balance of power. The objection to lifting the embargo apparently has less to do with the stated reason and more to do with the fear of a slippery slope created by the commitment to help the rebels militarily. There has already been some erosion of the West's objection, but the call issued by France and Britain to the EU to lift the embargo has not (yet) received sweeping support from other EU members. (In a recent interview the French President qualified the French call to lift the embargo.) Conversations with European diplomats suggest that as a unit, the EU is in no rush to lift the embargo.

In a speech at an Arab League summit in Doha, al-Khatib called on NATO to expand the geographical defense area provided by the Patriot batteries deployed in southern Turkey to Syria's northern regions now under coalition control. A favorable response on NATO's part to al-Khatib's request would be the first step in establishing no-fly zones for the Syrian air force. But NATO's objection to such a step without a Security Council resolution granting it international legitimacy remains firm, and there is little chance that Russia or China would rescind their opposition to such a resolution.

Given the reluctance to implement no-fly zones, the option of more active military intervention to support the rebels is obviously not on the table. Burned by the experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States in particular and other NATO members in general are cautious about involvement in yet another military endeavor without a clear exit strategy and a low risk assessment.

In conclusion, the extension of the fighting in Syria does not serve Israel's interests. Lifting the embargo on supplying the moderate factions with weapons would seem to be the only realistic option for breaking the military stalemate, thereby helping bring an end to the crisis that is not yet in sight.