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Why Did the Syrian Opposition Falter?

In hindsight, should the United States have intervened in Syria, specifically by backing up the Free Syrian Army with airpower? Murhaf Jouejati believes so. Washington's inaction emboldened the Assad regime, Iran and Russia to precipitate the crises that are now overwhelming Ukraine and the Middle East.

By Murhaf Jouejati for ISN

During the past two years, the Obama administration came under increasing pressure to provide more adequate support to the moderate Syrian opposition, the Free Syrian Army, in its struggle against the Assad regime. Would arming the FSA more adequately have allowed it to defeat the Assad regime, or prevented the emergence of the Islamic State? The evidence shows that, in the struggle between state and society in Syria, the FSA did not falter because it consists of [militarily untrained] "farmers and dentists," as US President Obama famously argued. It faltered because US assistance to it was, at best, reluctant. By contrast, Russia, Iran, and Hizbullah provided the militarily superior Assad regime all the help it needed to survive, and then some. Had Washington equipped the FSA with the necessary military hardware, like anti-aircraft guns and anti-tank missiles, and had US airpower backed the FSA as it currently is the Kurdish "Peshmerga" in northern Iraq, the Assad regime would have collapsed long ago. However, other than verbal support, humanitarian assistance to Syrian refugees, and diplomatic and economic sanctions against the Syrian government, Washington refused to provide the FSA, at least initially, with more than nonlethal aid -- vehicles, food and medicine -- hardly the kind of equipment needed to bring down the Assad regime. During that time, FSA fighters depended on the light weapons and ammunition they could get from defected soldiers, from the black market, from smuggling through Lebanon, and from captured regular army depots.

Assistance from Russia, Iran and Hizbullah

By contrast, Russia and Iran did all they could to save their Syrian client. Other than vetoing along with China four Chapter Seven UN Security Council Resolutions condemning the Assad regime, Russian assistance to Assad included providing refurbished MI-25 helicopter gunships. Russia transferred to Syria the Buk-M2 air defense system; the Bastion Coastal defense missile system; and Yak-130 combat jet trainers. Russian shipments of fuel have also assisted Assad. So have an unspecified number of military advisers. Furthermore, Russia upgraded the Syrian air force's fleet of Mig-29 to MIG-29SM, supplied drones, and sent to Syria dozens of Antonov 124s transporting armored vehicles, surveillance equipment, radars, electronic warfare systems, spare parts for helicopters, and various weapons including guided bombs for planes. When former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton pointed out the tension between Moscow's continuous supply of arms and its alleged neutral

stance in the conflict, the Russian government defended its sales by pointing out that they did not violate arms embargoes – only to be reminded by Human Rights Watch that, under international law, “providing weapons to Syria while crimes against humanity are being committed may translate into assisting in the commission of those crimes.”

Not that Moscow was ignorant of the Assad regime’s bloody ways. On 11 June 2013, just two weeks following the Houla massacre in which a hundred civilians were shot at close range by pro-Assad thugs, Russian President Vladimir Putin acknowledged that Assad’s misrule had led to the current situation in Syria. Putin stated on Russian state media that: “Syria ... was rife for some kind of change. And the government of Syria should have felt that in due time and should have undertaken some reform. Had they done that, what we’re seeing in Syria today would have never happened.” Nor was Moscow’s support to Assad premised on its navy’s privileges in the Syrian port of Tartous. As it turns out, Putin was enraged at NATO for exceeding its UN Security Council mandate regarding Libya (rather than help Libyan rebels protect civilian lives, NATO forces helped them topple the Ghaddafi regime), especially coming as it did at a time when Putin was gearing up to restore Russia’s position as a world power.

Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moallem’s letter to his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov (on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the opening of diplomatic relations between the two countries) testifies to the fact that Moscow was instrumental in saving the Assad regime. In his letter, Moallem asserts that “Syria’s unwavering confidence in its victory is thanksto the support of its friends, especially Russia.”

Iran was no less instrumental in saving its Syrian protégé. Iran sees the survival of the Assad regime as crucial to its regional interests. In light of this, and in addition to the billions of dollars Iran spent on propping up Assad, Tehran deployed hundreds of military specialists to Syria, including senior commanders from the elite “Quds Force” -- the external arm of the powerful “Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps,” as well as IRGC fighters. Although Quds Force commanders did not participate in the fighting, they did direct and advise Assad’s military commanders and otherwise train Syrian forces. They also assisted in the gathering of intelligence. Revolutionary Guard fighters directed battles on the instructions of the Quds Force commanders. These personnel were also backed by thousands of Iranian paramilitary “Basij” volunteer fighters.

The involvement of Hizbullah was also crucial to saving the Assad regime. Hizbullah began to take on a direct combat role in Syria as the Assad regime began losing control in the Qalamoun area adjacent to the Syrian-Lebanese border in 2012. Hizbullah supported the Assad regime with well-trained, battle-tested fighters whose involvement in Syria’s domestic conflict aligned with Iranian strategic interests, as Hizbullah Chief Hassan Nasrallah acknowledged on April 30 in Tehran.

Iraqi Shiite militants also fought in Syria in support of Assad. Their presence became overt in 2012 with the formation of the “Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas” Brigade, a pro-Assad militia that includes Syrian as well as non-Syrian Shiite fighters, including members of Lebanese Hizbullah and Iraq-based “Asa’ib ahl al-Haq” and “Kata’ib Hizbullah.” Like other paramilitary forces operating in Syria, these militants escalated their involvement as the conflict descended into civil war.

A missed opportunity for Washington

Paradoxically, assisting the FSA in a meaningful way would have been in the US national interest. Washington would be well served by an FSA victory over the Assad regime and the emergence in Damascus of a democratic state, and, by extension, the containment of Iran’s hegemonic ambitions in the region. The Arab Spring-related uprising in Syria was the opportunity to “flip” Syria, to wean it away from Tehran’s embrace, a policy Obama pursued (and failed to achieve) during his first term

(through then *Senator Kerry*). Yet, one year into the crisis, and despite the advice of his then top national security advisors to assist the moderate Syrian opposition (these included former secretary of state Clinton, former defense secretary Panetta, former CIA director Petraeus, and Gen. Dempsey, chief of the joint chiefs of staff), Obama chose to sit on his hands.

It is only following increasing pressure – both from domestic American critics and major US allies – that the White House acquiesced to assisting the FSA, although still in a limited way. Other than training some elements of the FSA and allowing regional allies to equip them with a limited number of TOW anti-tank missiles, the Obama administration requested Congressional authorization for \$500 million in the training and equipping of 2300 FSA soldiers. If it passes, the project would need almost a year to take off – a case of too little and too late.

In sum, if the FSA was unable to sustain its early victories against the Assad regime, it was not because its fighters were an unorganized rag tag army unable to stand up to a determined tyrant. Rather, the FSA lost the momentum on the battlefield because US reluctance and hesitation aggravated an already lopsided balance of power. While the FSA's initial high hopes in the US, the beacon of freedom, were function of Washington's harsh anti-Assad rhetoric, those hopes were dashed when no meaningful American assistance was forthcoming.

In fairness, however, many of Washington's concerns regarding the Syrian crisis are legitimate: the fear of being sucked into a morass similar to that in Iraq and in Afghanistan, and the fear of supplying the FSA with equipment that might fall into the "wrong hands." More broadly, there was also the fear of 'owning' the Syrian problem and having to fix it later.

That said, while caution in international politics is often a virtue, too much caution can also be dangerous. Within this context, Washington's inaction sent the wrong message to the Assad regime, to Iran, and to Russia. The Assad regime's negative stance during the Geneva talks last December is one case in point. Iran's recent hardening stance in the nuclear talks is another. Russia's Ukrainian adventure is yet another. Moreover, by not assisting the FSA at the right time and in an adequate manner, the "wrong hands" – namely, the Islamic State – were able to take over most of the territory the Assad regime lost and the FSA was unable to hold.

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