

Washington's Strategic Policy Shift on Syria: Edging Closer to Direct Military Intervention?

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Though President Obama last year [rejected](#) a proposal from the State Department, Pentagon, and CIA to directly arm Syrian rebel fighters, his administration is once again edging closer to directly intervening in the Syrian war.

As the *Washington Post* [reported](#) Tuesday, "The Obama administration is moving toward a major policy shift on Syria that could provide the rebels with equipment such as body armor, armored vehicles and possible military training and could send humanitarian assistance directly to Syria's opposition political coalition."

White House spokesperson Jay Carney confirmed the *Post's* reporting Wednesday, [stating](#) that the U.S. is "constantly reviewing the nature of the assistance we provide to both the Syrian people, in form of humanitarian assistance, and to the Syrian opposition in the form of non-lethal assistance."

The exact nature of the additional U.S. assistance is expected to be announced Thursday at a meeting of the "Friends of Syria" in Rome. The U.S. has previously sent [communications equipment and night-vision goggles](#) to rebels fighting in Syria.

John Kerry the Interventionist

The - perhaps - unlikely driver of the reported shift in U.S. policy on Syria has been none other than new Secretary of State John Kerry. The very man many continue to insist on mislabeling a [dove](#).

Speaking as early as February 13, Secretary of State Kerry [proclaimed](#) that there were "additional things that can be done" to force Syrian President Bashar al-Assad aside. And on Monday, Kerry again went on to [reiterate](#) that the West was "determined to change the calculation on the ground for President Assad."

"We are examining and developing ways to accelerate the political transition that the Syrian people want and deserve," Kerry commented further.

Although a policy change for the Obama administration, advocating for a more direct role for the U.S. in Syria has long been Kerry's position. As Kerry [commented](#) in May of 2012: "The concept of a safe zone is a reality and worth the discussion. The concept of working with the Turks and the Jordanians, if everybody is on the same page, there could be some [military] training [of the opposition forces]. If we can enhance the unity of the opposition, we could consider lethal aid and those kinds of things."

In the same interview Kerry went on to voice support – under the right conditions – for “U.S.- or NATO-led airstrikes on the Syrian military.”

This should come as no surprise given Kerry’s previous support for U.S. bombing campaigns in Serbia, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya. Some dove! Of course, the American foreign policy establishment as a whole has steadily veered toward a greater affinity for missile and bomb diplomacy.

“Once war was considered the business of soldiers, international relations the concern of diplomats,” C. Wright Mills wrote of the U.S. over 50 years ago in *The Power Elite*. “But now that war has become seemingly total and seemingly permanent...Peace is no longer serious; only war is serious.”

If nothing else, then, Kerry has proven himself once again to be a rather “serious” man.

Intervention by Proxy

While Kerry helps edge Washington closer to direct military intervention into Syria, U.S. proxies continue to ramp up their campaign to topple the Syrian regime.

As the *New York Times* [reported](#) Monday, Saudi Arabia has recently begun to funnel heavy weapons purchased from Croatia to Syrian rebel groups via Jordan. The Saudi shipments, the paper goes on to note, “have been a factor in the rebels’ small tactical gains this winter against the army and militias loyal to Mr. Assad.”

The U.S. role in the Saudi arms flow, the *Times* reports, “is not clear.” Yet, it is hard to fathom that such shipments were not sanctioned by Washington, given the close military ties the U.S. maintains between those involved. After all, Saudi Arabia remains one of the larger recipients of U.S. foreign aid and one of the [largest purchasers of U.S. arms](#). The Pentagon, meanwhile, [maintains](#) “a robust military-to-military relationship with Croatia,” providing the Croatian military with “training, equipment, equipment loans, and education in U.S. military schools.” And [U.S. military aid to Jordan](#) tops \$300 million a year.

Moreover, the U.S. has had upwards of 150 [military planners](#) stationed along the Jordanian border with Syria since last summer, where the Croatian arms are reported to have passed into rebel hands. It has long been [reported](#) that the CIA is overseeing the arms shipments to Syrian rebels from within Turkey.

The U.S. is thus already well entangled in the Syrian war – albeit if by the use of proxy forces.

Thwarting Dialogue

The push to further enhance the degree of U.S. intervention – from guiding regional proxies to direct military support – comes as the rebel drive to oust Assad appears to be [reaching its limits](#). In fact, Mouaz Mustafa, the political director of the U.S.-based Syrian American Task Force, recently [argued](#) that, “Assad cannot be deposed without the consent of the U.S.”

This realization has even left some in the West to admit that Assad still retains a sizable base of [domestic support](#). As former U.S. diplomat Karen AbuZayd [commented](#) in a recent interview with CBC Radio, “there’s quite a number of the population, maybe as many as half, if not more, who stand behind him [Assad].”

Thus, we see the exiled Syrian opposition – long opposed to dialogue – now hinting at a new willingness to engage in negotiations with the Syrian regime. Yet, the U.S. continues to insist that any political dialogue must be preempted by regime change.

As State Department spokesperson Patrick Ventrell [commented](#) on Wednesday, “the [political] process has to include Assad leaving, but it’s really up to the Syrian people.” Another example of the limits of America’s democratic ideals, as we see that the choice for the Syrian people begins and ends with supporting Washington’s agenda.

Of course, as long as a sizable segment of Syrians stand behind Assad – or at least refrain from supporting the armed rebels – demanding that Assad leaves only portends a protracted military struggle. As Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov was left to [comment](#) Monday, “It seems extremists, who bet on a military solution to Syria’s problems and block initiatives to start dialogue, have for now come to dominate in the ranks of the Syrian opposition.” And the ranks of Washington, it appears as well.

Yet, even as Washington and its European allies antagonize Russia by preparing to heighten their intervention into Syria, they still desperately seek the legitimacy of a United Nations Security Council resolution endorsing a military intervention. And for this they need Moscow.

Cajoling Russia to Pave the Road to Tehran

Writing in *Foreign Policy*, Christopher Chivvis of the RAND Corporation and Edward Joseph, a senior fellow at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, argue that the threat of Western military intervention is what is needed to bring Russia around to supporting the “regime change” line.

“Changing the Russian position means changing Moscow’s calculus on Syria,” Chivvis and Joseph [write](#). “And that means presenting the Kremlin with an alternative that it finds more unpalatable than the status quo: a NATO-backed, Turkey-led military coalition invited by the Arab League to intervene in the Syria conflict.”

And here we have the bankruptcy and hubris of the American foreign policy elite. It’s all rather transparent: capitulate to our demands, or face the brunt of military force. Only war is serious.

Of course, Chivvis and Joseph go on to tout the “blow to Iran and a boon to the United States and its regional partners and allies” a toppled Assad would present. “Israel would be a primary beneficiary, with its antagonist, Hezbollah, having been dealt a serious setback,” they continue.

How all this is supposed to entice Moscow is not exactly clear. What is good for American is good for the world, it appears. Indicative, perhaps, of what Chalmers Johnson once wrote to be the self-aggrandizement of imperial rot.

And so with the typical delusions of grandeur, the U.S. edges closer to direct military intervention into Syria – closer, too, to unleashing a dangerous regional conflagration. In fact, the Iran war drums are already [beating louder](#); for regime change in Damascus only paves the road to Tehran.

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