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Arms and Influence in Syria The Pitfalls of Greater U.S. Involvement

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Executive Summary

In the midst of growing public wariness about large-scale foreign interventions, the Obama administration has decided to arm the Syrian rebels. Those who call for increasing the scope of U.S. aid to the Syrian rebels argue that (1) arming the rebels is the cheapest way to halt a humanitarian catastrophe, hasten the fall of the Assad regime through a rebel military victory or a negotiated settlement, and allow the Obama administration to influence the broader direction of Syrian politics in a post-Assad world; (2) failure to step up U.S. involvement will damage America's credibility and reputation in the eyes of our allies and adversaries; and (3) U.S. objectives can be accomplished with a relatively small level of U.S. commitment in Syria.

These arguments are wrong on all counts. There is a high risk that the decision to arm the Syrian rebels will drag the United States into a more extensive involvement later, the very scenario that the advocates for intervention claim they are trying to avoid. The unique characteristics of alliances between states and armed non-

state groups, in particular their informal nature and secrecy about the existence of the alliance or its specific provisions, create conditions for states to become locked into unpalatable obligations. That seems especially likely in this case. The specific way the administration has chosen to increase the scope of its support to the rebels sets the stage for even greater U.S. commitment in Syria in the future. The Obama administration, therefore, should not have decided to arm the Syrian rebels.

Looking ahead, it is important for policymakers to understand the nature of alliances between states and armed nonstate groups even after the Syria conflict is resolved. Given that Americans are unwilling to support large-scale interventions in far-flung reaches of the globe, policymakers looking for military solutions to political problems may conclude that arming proxy groups may be an attractive policy choice. They should instead, however, avoid committing to conflicts that don't threaten core national security interests.

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Introduction

On June 13, 2013, the White House announced that evidence collected from Syria confirmed that the Bashar al-Assad regime used chemical weapons in its effort to crush the Syrian rebels.¹ At that time, the administration revealed that the United States was beginning a program to provide lethal support to the Syrian rebels. Previously, the United States had limited its aid to the rebels to nonlethal support. In confirming that the Syrian regime used chemical weapons, the administration admitted that Assad had crossed the “red line” drawn by President Obama in August 2012, which he had said would be met with “enormous consequences”—presumably, some form of American military involvement in the conflict.² Indeed, the administration’s June 13 statement invoked these red lines: “The President has been clear that the use of chemical weapons—or the transfer of chemical weapons to terrorist groups—is a red line for the United States. . . . The President has said that the use of chemical weapons would change his calculus, and it has.”³ In the same statement, administration officials linked Assad’s use of chemical weapons with Obama’s decision to “increase the scope and scale of assistance that we provide to the opposition,” and stated that, “these efforts will increase going forward.”⁴

Prior to the decision to arm the rebels, the president faced considerable pressure from advocates of intervention who claimed that Obama’s failure to follow through on his August 2012 threat would irreparably damage U.S. credibility in the eyes of both adversaries and allies. In meetings leading up to the June 13 announcement, Secretary of State John Kerry worried that failure to act in Syria would prompt Iran to doubt the credibility of U.S. threats concerning its nuclear program.⁵ In a joint statement released on April 30, senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham implored Obama to act swiftly, to enforce his “red line” on the use of chemical weapons. Any delay, they predicted, would serve “as an invitation” to Assad “to use chemical weapons again on an even larger scale.”⁶

The Obama administration faced concerted pressure to intervene in Syria on humanitarian and strategic grounds even before the disclosures about Assad’s use of chemical weapons. In a February 2012 *New York Times* op-ed, Princeton professor and former director of policy planning at the State Department Anne-Marie Slaughter argued that the United States should intervene militarily in Syria to establish “no kill zones” adjacent to the Jordanian, Turkish, and Lebanese borders to protect Syrian civilians.⁷ Vali Nasr, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, claimed in an April 2013 op-ed in the *International Herald Tribune* that, “the future of the region hangs in the balance” in Syria and, therefore, “a ‘lean back and wait’ posture . . . is dangerous.”⁸ On May 8, 2013, a *Washington Post* editorial called for U.S. intervention in Syria on the grounds that failure to do so would strengthen the jihadist groups, such as the al-Nusra front, that are already consolidating territorial control in Syria; prompt fragmentation along sectarian lines; spread instability to neighboring states; and result in Assad’s chemical weapons caches being “up for grabs.”⁹ In early June, former president Bill Clinton sided with Senator McCain in criticizing President Obama for his reluctance to act in Syria.¹⁰

Despite the White House’s public linkage between Assad’s use of chemical weapons and the decision to arm the rebels, the change in U.S. policy might actually have been a response to Hezbollah’s increased effort in Syria and the rebels’ defeat in Qusayr. In an article in the *Wall Street Journal*, Adam Entous claims that the administration had been reassessing the scope of its involvement in Syria for the past two months as Hezbollah’s presence in Syria became larger and more public and as the military tides began to turn in Assad’s favor. According to Entous, the Obama administration definitively concluded that Assad had used chemical weapons more than a week prior to its announcement. Around the same time, Entous reports, “in an emergency phone call . . . a top rebel commander warned the administration that a ‘menacing’ buildup of forces

around Aleppo threatened to snuff out the rebel cause.”¹¹ Obama also faced pressure from American allies bordering Syria, especially Saudi Arabia and Jordan.¹²

The Obama administration’s decision to arm the rebels is taking place in a broader context of American retrenchment and wariness about large-scale foreign interventions.¹³ The manner in which the president has chosen to employ force over the course of his administration reflects an eagerness to move beyond the ground-troop-intensive wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Obama has favored more limited, bloodless (for Americans), and relatively inexpensive interventions. He has consistently sought support from, and active involvement by, other interested parties and U.S. allies. While the United States provided crucial precision munitions, air-to-air refueling, and surveillance capabilities to the 2011 NATO campaign against Muammar Qaddafi’s regime in Libya, the Obama administration was careful to publicly stress the limited scope of American involvement and highlight the roles played by European and Arab allies.¹⁴ Similarly, drone strikes in Pakistan and the Horn of Africa are increasingly attractive to policymakers because they expend far less blood and treasure than boots-on-the-ground interventions. The use of drones is likely to continue notwithstanding the president’s recent foreign policy speech suggesting restrictions on such operations in the future.¹⁵

Lacking the political capital required to sell a large-scale American intervention in Syria to a skeptical public, those who call for increasing the scope of U.S. aid to the Syrian rebels argue that arming the rebels is the cheapest way to halt a humanitarian catastrophe. They claim it will hasten the fall of the Assad regime (through an outright rebel military victory or a negotiated settlement), and give the Obama administration influence in a post-Assad Syria. Some have argued that supporting the Syrian rebels is a vital strategic matter for the United States because the Assad regime might transfer chemical weapons to Hezbollah, or because instability could spread beyond Syria’s borders.¹⁶ Others allege

that failure to step up U.S. involvement will damage America’s credibility and reputation in the eyes of our allies and adversaries. Lastly, advocates for arming the rebels assert that U.S. objectives can be accomplished with a relatively small level of U.S. commitment.

These arguments are wrong on all counts. Core American strategic interests are not directly threatened in Syria.¹⁷ Furthermore, it is not clear that a rebel victory would be desirable from the perspective of the United States. The Syrian rebels are hardly paragons of democracy. Ramzy Mardini of the Iraq Institute for Strategic Studies argues, “the Syrian revolution isn’t democratic or secular . . . [and] the rebels don’t have the support or trust of a clear majority of the population.”¹⁸ Additionally, it is entirely possible that chemical weapons could fall into the “wrong” hands if the Assad regime collapses, and that overthrowing Assad could spread instability to Iraq and Lebanon, and threaten Israel’s security.¹⁹

This paper focuses primarily on claims by advocates of intervention about American credibility and the effectiveness of a program to arm the rebels. It argues that providing arms to the Syrian rebels is unlikely to tip the scales to their advantage and, due to misperceptions about credibility, there is a high risk that the Obama administration’s decision will drag the United States into a more extensive involvement later, the very scenario that the advocates for intervention claim they are trying to avoid. A host of factors suggest the Obama administration might be setting the stage for over-commitment in Syria.

Proxy Warfare as a Foreign Policy Tool

Proxy warfare—whereby states agree to provide resources, training, and other forms of support to militant groups in exchange for the latter consenting to fight on the former’s behalf—is a common foreign policy tool. For example, data on nonstate actors in civil wars indicate that, since 1945, 134 of 285 rebel groups enjoyed explicit support from a

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state sponsor, while an additional 30 groups are alleged to have received external state support.²⁰ War by proxy is an attractive policy option for states when they are hesitant to use force directly. The clandestine and informal nature of many of these arrangements allows states to challenge adversaries while providing plausible deniability for actions committed by nonstate allies.²¹ Even when external actors are aware of the existence of state-proxy alliances, the specific provisions of the alliances are almost always kept secret.²² Thus, these alliances are well suited for states that are at a strategic disadvantage relative to their adversaries or that find the costs of challenging an adversary directly exceedingly high.

Furthermore, domestic political weaknesses or constraints—such as when elites have a tenuous hold on power or aren't willing to pay the political costs of mobilizing resources from the population to wage war directly—can make allying with nonstate groups appealing. The secrecy and informality of these alliances create fewer bureaucratic and institutional impediments to their formation. Further, alliances with nonstate groups are cheaper to fund than direct military action. Finally, allying with a nonstate group of a particular ethnic or ideological identity may help a state enhance its domestic political legitimacy.²³ For example, various Arab regimes have used support of Palestinian militants to garner good will from their domestic publics.

States might also find proxy warfare an attractive policy due to the unique skill sets nonstate groups offer. Nonstate groups often have a comparative advantage in knowledge of local networks and terrain. They operate within the borders of sovereign states and in areas that are difficult to penetrate; know the relevant local political actors; have control over networks for the distribution of resources and information; and possess information about government presence, the preferences of local populations, and the shape of the battlefield.²⁴

However, the very aspects of proxy warfare that appeal to states—their covert, indirect and informal nature—also create the conditions for unwanted commitment by states to

conflicts. Traditional alliances between states are usually codified in formal, public agreements that stipulate the mutual adversary or adversaries against which the alliance is directed; the distribution of burdens and commitments among allies; and how and under what conditions force will be applied.²⁵ This, Glenn Snyder explains, creates “specificity, legal and moral obligation, and reciprocity.”²⁶ In other words, formal alliances identify the boundaries of allies’ commitments to one another. Conversely, alliances between states and armed nonstate groups usually involve a large degree of ambiguity and vagueness about commitments precisely because states are highly motivated to keep such alliances secret from their domestic publics and/or other states. In this context, “allies may find it necessary to stand by each other in all situations to prove their loyalty.”²⁷ Furthermore, allies can exploit the ambiguity of alliance commitments and escalate disputes to their advantage.²⁸ According to Princeton’s Thomas Christensen, when uncertainty and poor information dominate intra-alliance politics, “aggressive actors within an alliance are most capable of dragging their partners into conflicts.”²⁹ This accords with Stanford professor Kenneth Schultz’s finding that the provision of state support for nonstate actors is often associated with repeated, costly patterns of interstate violence.³⁰

Proxy warfare also presents states with considerable hazards due to the information asymmetry between state sponsors and their proxies.³¹ States face significant barriers to collecting information about their allies because the latter often reside in the territories of other states (which are not easily penetrable) and operate under conditions of low-level violence or outright war. Furthermore, nonstate groups often lack a public record of their behavior, which makes it difficult for the group to establish a reputation for reliability.

Despite states’ overwhelming material advantage relative to their proxies, the unique nature of alliances between states and armed nonstate groups often makes it difficult for states to influence the behavior of proxies in the preferred direction. Relations between al-

lies involve a mixture of overlapping and opposing interests.³² Disparate interests prompt each to bargain with the other over the particular terms of the alliance, such as the nature and amount of resources being provided; expectations for how those resources will be employed; and the boundaries or limitations of allies' commitments to each other. Whichever actor has a bargaining advantage should be able to negotiate terms of the alliance that more closely match his or her preferences.

Leverage in these alliances hinges on both promises and threats—an actor's ability to promise the provision of resources or capabilities, as well as to threaten to defect from the alliance. Crucially, promises and threats must be believable and responsive to an ally's needs to be effective.³³ By virtue of their enormous material resources, states can retain considerable leverage at the bargaining table because they can promise to offer nonstate allies much-needed support. However, once an agreement has been struck, it can be difficult for a state to credibly threaten to moderate its commitment or, in the extreme, walk away from the alliance if the actions of a proxy are having a negative effect on the state's interests. Sparking the fear of abandonment in one's ally is a crucial source of bargaining power.³⁴ This involves striking a delicate balance between manipulating an ally's perception of her importance, without crossing the critical threshold of making an ally so scared of abandonment that she goes out in search of other allies.³⁵

How the United States Could Get Locked into Syria

Prima facie, it would be reasonable to assume that nonstate actors—often weak and desperate for external support—would almost always be easily influenced by more powerful states. Supporters of arming the Syrian rebels might expect that concerns about the United States being drawn into unwanted levels of commitment are overblown. The United States has no core national security interests at stake and it can pursue alternate policies

to influence the outcome of the conflict. For example, in the lead-up to the Obama administration's decision to arm the rebels, it had the luxury of choosing from a variety of alternative policy options, such as launching missile strikes against Syrian air defense assets or chemical weapons depots; indirectly assisting the rebels through closer coordination with Turkey and the Gulf states; or working with Russia to achieve a diplomatic solution to the civil war. Or, the United States could have refrained altogether from increasing the scope of its commitment beyond the provision of nonlethal support. In contrast to the range of options available to the United States, the rebels have very few. Although they received support from Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, they were desperate for more external backing and, in particular, greater involvement by the Obama administration. At a "Friends of Syria" conference in Amman, Jordan, on May 22, 2013, General Salim Idriss, chief of staff of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), pleaded for Western support, in particular anti-tank and surface-to-air missiles.³⁶ A week prior to Obama's announcement about arming the rebels, rebel commanders again requested American support in the wake of defeat in Qusayr and Syrian government preparation for an assault on Aleppo.³⁷ In general, the rebels are dependent on external backers to continue their military operations against the regime. For example, in August 2012 rebels resisting the regime in Aleppo were nearly forced to stop fighting when they ran out of ammunition.³⁸

Despite the numerous policy options at its disposal and the desperate state of the rebels, the Obama administration could find itself increasing the scope of its commitment to the Syrian rebels following its decision to arm them if it does not take the proper precautions.³⁹ In the wake of the June 13 announcement, the Obama administration sought to reassure the public of the limited scope of American involvement in the conflict, announcing that it would provide small arms and ammunition to the rebels, rather than anti-aircraft missiles, and was not immediately considering imposing a no-fly zone.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, there are two

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ways the United States could become locked into a path of increasing involvement in the Syrian conflict: (1) through the institutional incentives that are present in covert operations; and (2) through erroneous understandings of U.S. credibility and reputation. Both of these would undermine the Obama administration's existing leverage with the Syrian rebels stemming from the latter's weakness and dependence on outside support. In particular, these pathways would render incredible U.S. threats to limit the scope of its involvement in the conflict and the level of its commitment to the rebels.

Institutional Paths to Lock-In

Political leaders often want to keep the precise nature of their involvement with armed nonstate groups hidden from other actors within government for domestic political reasons or concealed from adversaries to avoid drawing them into a conflict. In this way, proxy alliances operate as "open secrets," where the existence of the alliance is known but its specific provisions remain clandestine. In fact, the manner in which the Obama administration has initiated its program to provide lethal support to the Syrian rebels follows this pattern. While the president did not obscure his decision to arm the rebels, the specific parameters of the U.S. intervention in Syria remain vague and underspecified. The June 13 press statement did not clearly stipulate the nature of U.S. support; it merely indicated that the administration would "increase the scope and scale of assistance that we provide to the opposition."⁴¹ Administration officials later clarified that the United States would be providing the rebels with small arms and ammunition, potentially including anti-tank missiles, but would not be equipping them with anti-aircraft missiles. However, Deputy National Security Advisor Benjamin Rhodes did not definitively rule out a no-fly zone; rather, he emphasized the costs associated with it and also said that the Obama administration would assess further policy decisions "on our own timeline."⁴² Susan Rice, who at the time was serving as the

U. S. ambassador to the United Nations but is currently Obama's national security advisor, said regarding a no-fly zone: "We have been clear that we are not excluding options but at this stage no decision has been taken."⁴³

Why would President Obama prefer ambiguity to clarity? Domestic political aversion to intervention in Syria and fears of sparking a wider regional conflagration could have prompted him to conceal the terms of U.S. involvement in Syria. An NBC/*Wall Street Journal* poll conducted just before the president's June 13 statement found that only 15 percent of respondents support U.S. military action in Syria, with only 11 percent favoring providing arms to the rebels.⁴⁴ These numbers are largely consistent with public opinion polls taken prior to the first revelations about Assad's use of chemical weapons. A poll by the Pew Research Center taken during the first two weeks of March 2013 indicated that, "there is no public support in the United States, Western Europe or in Turkey for sending arms and military supplies to the anti-government troops in Syria." An overwhelming majority—64 percent—of Americans disapproved of equipping the rebels with arms.⁴⁵

Strategic concerns also make a more clandestine approach to the United States' role in Syria appealing. Large-scale, overt U.S. intervention in Syria would give states already supporting Assad a pretext for ratcheting up their commitments to the regime. Russia would have a justification for delivering more sophisticated weapons systems to Syria. Particularly worrisome are long-range S-300 surface-to-air missiles that would bolster Syria's air defenses, making a Western air campaign more difficult, and which Assad could use against Israeli targets.⁴⁶ Similarly, Iran and Hezbollah would be able to justify even greater levels of support for Assad. The United States would not want to end up competing with Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah in a cycle of escalating commitment to civil war belligerents, or draw other regional actors into the fray, but would be impelled to do so if others became more involved.

When political leaders want to keep the nature of their relationships with nonstate allies secret from either domestic publics or ad-

versaries, they have to take certain actions to maintain plausible deniability. The most consequential of these is delegating authority for alliance management to special bureaucracies that are kept segmented from normal governmental operations. Politicians will eschew writing down and publicizing mutual alliance obligations, creating ambiguity about burden sharing and commitments and giving both individual bureaucrats and nonstate allies greater leeway to act according to their own proclivities. By design, the bureaucrats in charge of managing alliance relations will have little oversight from, or accountability to, political leaders.⁴⁷ These individuals may not have the same policy preferences as political leaders and, if anything, are likely to be more committed to the ally. In many cases, bureaucrats develop close interpersonal relationships with their contacts. More importantly, they have incentives to make sure their organizations are abundantly resourced and therefore develop vested interests in the perpetuation of alliances.⁴⁸ Similarly, the imperative for secrecy means political leaders will avoid investing in institutions to monitor and collect information about proxies' behavior as well as personnel tasked with managing the alliance. An information gap is created between the political leaders and those groups executing the policy, namely bureaucrats and nonstate allies. The information gap enhances the ability of the latter two actors to take matters into their own hands.⁴⁹ For example, in the lead-up to the Ford administration's decision to begin a program of covert aid to the National Liberation Front of Angola (FNLA) in 1975, the CIA received a substantial portion of its intelligence on Angola from FNLA leader Holden Roberto, who used this information asymmetry strategically.⁵⁰ In the same case, the presidential finding issued on July 18, 1975, that provided the authorization for covert activities in Angola was written in a "deliberately vague and unspecified" manner.⁵¹

The Obama administration's management of its program to arm the rebels is likely to follow a similar pattern. The president's directive to the CIA, which is the agency tasked with managing the arms transfers to the reb-

els, is classified and the specifics of how the program will operate have not been made public.⁵² Some information has already been reported, however: while the president publicized his administration's decision to arm the Syrian rebels on June 13, 2013, Reuters reported on August 1, 2012, that some time in the first half of 2012 Obama had exercised his statutory authority to "[permit] the CIA and other U.S. agencies to provide support that could help the rebels oust Assad."⁵³ Under Title 50, Section 413b of the U.S. Code, the president can authorize covert action, provided he or she informs congressional intelligence committees.⁵⁴ The *Los Angeles Times* published a report on June 21, 2013, claiming that the CIA has been covertly training Syrian rebels in Jordan since November 2012.⁵⁵

The secrecy surrounding aid to the Syrian rebels creates a real risk that the U.S. could get locked into even greater commitments in Syria through the institutional path described above. Delegating authority for alliance management to bureaucrats, the CIA in the case of Syria, and providing them with a broad and ill-defined mandate to execute policies, impinges on political leaders' abilities to use threats to influence the behavior of their nonstate allies.⁵⁶ Specifically, proxies will not take threats to withhold or moderate support seriously if the political leaders making the threats cannot rein in the individuals responsible for executing them. Having bureaucratic interlocutors with their own interests in perpetuating an alliance, and sufficient autonomy to do so, undermines the credibility of threats to defect and, therefore, a state's influence over a proxy. For example, during Amin al-Hafez's tenure as ruler of Syria in 1964, Hafez al-Assad, then commander of the Syrian Air Force, secretly smuggled arms to Fatah bases in Syria, even before Yasser Arafat was given official permission to begin military raids into Israel in 1965.⁵⁷

Credibility and Reputational Paths to Lock-In

States can also become locked into commitments through reputational and credibility mechanisms. In general, states prefer to

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maintain a reputation for following through on their threats and promises; if adversaries and allies doubt a state's credibility, the state might find itself being taken advantage of by adversaries in times of international crisis and abandoned by allies worried about the state's reliability. These concerns dominated U.S. foreign policy deliberations during the Cold War; some policymakers worried that if the United States didn't stand firm in response to Communist aggression in Korea, Vietnam, or elsewhere, the Soviet Union would doubt its resolve to stand firm on more vital strategic issues, such as Berlin.⁵⁸

In some cases, issues of credibility come into play when a state's alliance with a nonstate group is made manifest to other actors in the international system. Despite the manifold incentives for policymakers to keep an alliance with a proxy group covert, there are conditions under which states might prefer to be generally associated with providing support to militant groups. At the international level, states can use proxy groups for deterrent or compellent⁵⁹ purposes: the threat of unleashing a proxy on an adversary can be sufficient to deter that adversary from taking military action against the state (both Pakistan and Iran rely on this vis-à-vis India and Israel, respectively⁶⁰), or it can be used as a bargaining chip to extract concessions from other states.⁶¹ At the domestic political level, leaders worried about regime stability or legitimacy gain from allying with popular nonstate groups. The Assad regime in Syria, for example, long used its support of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Palestinian nationalism to garner domestic political legitimacy. The PLO offered an important ideological asset to the Syrian regime, explains Middle East analyst Aaron David Miller, because "the idea of Palestine and the plight of the Palestinian people [had] enormous emotional appeal at a popular level."⁶²

When states stake their domestic political or international reputations on an alliance, they may find it hard to walk back justifications for that alliance when conditions change.⁶³ For example, because Syrian Presi-

dent Hafez al-Assad tied his regime's legitimacy to its alliance with Palestinian militants, he had to expend considerable political capital to intervene against the PLO during the Lebanese civil war in the 1970s.⁶⁴ In turn, nonstate groups can take advantage of their allies' reputational concerns to extract greater concessions. In particular, proxies may find threats to limit support incredible if they know that political leaders have gambled their political standings on proxy alliances. For example, in the 1980s Angolan rebel leader Jonas Savimbi was able to use U.S. domestic politics and support from conservative elements in Congress and the media to his advantage in negotiations with Ronald Reagan for aid to UNITA.⁶⁵

Publicly known proxy alliances do not always impinge on a state's reputation and, therefore, do not always lock states into bargaining disadvantages. Rather, concerns about credibility should only undermine a state's bargaining power when domestic political audiences care about the issue at hand,⁶⁶ or when the issue is central to a state's strategic interests such that failing to act raises doubts about the state's resolve.⁶⁷ Americans have not been closely following events in Syria and are averse to expanding American commitments overseas.⁶⁸ Concerns about domestic political credibility, therefore, should not have propelled President Obama to decide the arm the rebels, nor should they inform decisions to escalate the level of American commitment. Furthermore, credibility fears at the international level—the idea that Obama's failure to adequately support the rebels would undermine the administration's reputation for resolve in other arenas—are misguided because Syria does not threaten core U.S. national security interests. As Daryl Press convincingly argues in *Calculating Credibility*, other states assess credibility based on a state's power and interests in the issue at stake, rather than past behavior.⁶⁹ Iran, for example, should not infer from Obama's actions in Syria that the United States would not stand firm with regard to its nuclear program.

Nevertheless, credibility and reputational effects could drag the Obama administra-

tion into commitments in Syria beyond arming the rebels because policymakers routinely misunderstand how these mechanisms work.⁷⁰ In the months prior to the administration's decision to arm the rebels, some lawmakers and commentators claimed that the United States was damaging its credibility by refraining from getting more involved in Syria. "The credibility of the United States is on the line, not just with Syria, but with Iran, North Korea," asserted senators McCain and Graham, "all of our enemies and friends . . . are watching closely to see whether the President backs up his words with action."⁷¹ Similarly, Angel M. Rabasa, a senior political scientist at the RAND Corporation, argued that, "if, against all odds, Assad were to prevail, it would be devastating to U.S. prestige and credibility in a critical part of the world."⁷² It is possible that the Obama administration became susceptible to these misinformed arguments about credibility; the president may have come to believe that his domestic political and international reputation rested on arming the Syrian rebels.

These same mistaken concerns about credibility could propel the president to increase the scope of U.S. commitment to the rebels after arming them, especially if the latter policy is not sufficient to change the military balance on the ground.⁷³ Only a day after the president's announcement, advocates of intervention, including the *Washington Post* editorial board, were already clamoring for even greater U.S. involvement in Syria.⁷⁴ On the same day, Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies argued that "the time has come for the United States to take decisive action in Syria" and, specifically, that there was a strong case to be made for imposing a no-fly zone rather than "remain[ing] half pregnant."⁷⁵

Syrian Rebels' Weakness May Beget Bargaining Strength

The rebels' military vulnerability exacerbates the problems detailed above. Following its decision to arm the rebels, the United States could get dragged into increasingly greater lev-

els of involvement because it chose to throw in its lot with the weaker party in a civil war.

In some ways, the term "the Syrian rebels" is misleading because it implies a uniform group when, in fact, the belligerents are highly factionalized and divided across multiple fronts and fighting groups. To date the anti-Assad groups are organized into three primary fronts: the more moderate Supreme Military Council (SMC), which is led by General Salim Idriss and was organized by Western and Arab states but has only a nominal presence within Syria; and two Islamist fronts, the Syrian Islamic Front and the Syrian Liberation Front. There are also at least nine different military groups currently active in Syria, only some of which are affiliated with the SMC: Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, Farouq Battalions, Liwa al-Tawhid, Saqour al-Sham, Ansar al-Islam, Ahfad al-Rasul, Ghurabaa, and the Democratic Union Party.⁷⁶ Currently, U.S. support will be funneled through the SMC.⁷⁷

The constituent groups of the SMC, under pressure from the West, unified in December 2012. As a result, SMC is a militarily and politically weak organization whose ability to effectively transmit arms is questionable.⁷⁸ It lacks a dominant military presence on the ground, is plagued by disunity, and may require significant military training.⁷⁹ The SMC suffers from considerable problems of command and control. It lacks an effective chain of command—while military councils at the provincial level have focused on establishing a chain of command in their local geographic areas, they have been unable to consolidate upwards to formulate a national level command and control.⁸⁰ Further, the SMC has not consolidated sources of external support and therefore cannot use the disbursement of resources to subcommanders to establish its legitimacy.⁸¹ Instead, authority stems from individual commanders.

Conversely, jihadist groups such as al-Nusra have been making steady military gains on the ground.⁸² In particular, these groups have a significant presence in the south, including the Damascus area, and the east and have crowded out more moderate groups.⁸³ The

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As it becomes apparent that U.S.-backed rebels cannot complete the job, the United States will be tempted to escalate its involvement in the civil war to achieve its political objectives.

more radical Islamist groups are characterized by “highly organized, hierarchical network[s]” and are “better resourced and have better tactical knowledge than other rebel groups throughout Syria.”⁸⁴ Al-Nusra is reputed to have 6,000 seasoned fighters.⁸⁵

Therefore, arming the more moderate rebels is unlikely to be sufficient to achieve American political objectives in Syria.⁸⁶ As defined by President Obama in his June 13 statement, the United States’ goals include: “achieving a negotiated political settlement to establish an authority that can provide basic stability and administer state institutions; protecting the rights of all Syrians; securing unconventional and advanced conventional weapons; and countering terrorist activity.”⁸⁷ The immediate objective appears to be to arm the rebels so that they can be brought to the negotiating table as credible partners and revive the Geneva talks.⁸⁸ However, the CIA has already reached the conclusion that equipping the rebels with small arms and ammunition will not have a significant effect on the military balance in Syria.⁸⁹ As retired general Wesley Clark argued in an op-ed in the *New York Times*, the United States will have to be able to credibly escalate American involvement in Syria in order to bring about a negotiated settlement to the conflict.⁹⁰ Rebel military gains are crucial to ensure that they have an upper hand at the negotiating table.⁹¹ Indeed, the Syrian rebels followed Obama’s announcement about arming them with requests for heavy weapons and a no-fly zone.⁹²

While Assad’s military has its share of problems, including old systems, corruption, and a strategic orientation toward fighting a war against Israel rather than a civil war, it is nevertheless a formidable opponent to the rebels. The Syrian army has roughly 50,000 personnel, not including the paramilitary *Shabiha* that operate outside of the conventional military chain of command.⁹³ Assad could also use Syria’s chemical weapons stockpiles against rebel forces in more large-scale attacks, and he retains control of the skies over Syria, allowing the regime to inflict heavy casualties against rebel-held cities from the air.⁹⁴

Assad also benefits from dedicated support from external backers. Syria has become “an arena of strategic competition” for outside powers such as Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah.⁹⁵ Iran and Hezbollah have considerable interests at stake there: Syria is the conduit for Iranian arms and material to Hezbollah and allows Iran to project its influence in the region.⁹⁶ Thus, both have gone “all in” in Syria—they are totally committed to providing decisive support to Assad’s forces to ensure the survival of his regime or, barring that, a viable rump Alawite state that would maintain Iranian supply lines to Hezbollah in Lebanon.⁹⁷ The asymmetry of interests between the United States and backers of the Assad regime means that the latter are willing to apply significantly greater resources to prop up Assad than the former to support the rebels.⁹⁸ This increases the risk that the United States could be drawn into escalating its commitment to the rebels as Iran and Hezbollah pour more into the conflict. While it may not appear rational for the United States to feel compelled to match Iranian and Hezbollah involvement in Syria—U.S. strategic interests there pale in comparison—mission creep can occur even in the absence of a strategic rationale due to institutional incentives and misunderstandings of sunk costs and credibility. In fact, that is what makes the phenomenon so perverse. As Marc Lynch points out, a small effort to arm the rebels “shatters one of the primary psychological and political footholds in a grim effort to prevent the slide down the slippery slope to war.”⁹⁹

The rebels’ military deficiencies raise the question of what the United States should do if they are still unable to achieve and maintain pivotal military gains on the ground after receiving arms from the United States. As it becomes apparent that U.S.-backed rebels cannot complete the job, the United States will be tempted to escalate its involvement in the civil war to achieve its political objectives. In fact, the stage has already been set for a more robust intervention in Syria. The United States, in preparations for an upcoming scheduled military exercise with Jordan, transferred Patriot missiles, 4,000 troops, and F-16 aircraft

to the country, which remained there after the conclusion of the exercise. Having the forces and equipment in nearby Jordan would make it considerably easier for the United States to implement a no-fly zone over Syria.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, the CIA has already begun to train rebels in Jordan. That not only increases the risk of widening the conflict if Syria takes action against training sites, but it also puts the infrastructure in place for a Libya-style intervention that marries airpower with training and arming rebel allies on the ground.¹⁰¹

Enforcing a no-fly zone over Syria would be a significant military undertaking, requiring more resources than the no-fly zone established by NATO in its 2011 intervention in Libya.¹⁰² Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Martin Dempsey points out that, compared to Libya, Syria “has five times more air defense systems some of which are high-end systems.”¹⁰³ Assad has buttressed his air defense assets since the start of the civil war to include the more sophisticated Russian Pantsyr-S1 and Buk-M2 systems, although there are conflicting reports as to whether he has received the promised long-range S-300 missiles from Russia.¹⁰⁴

While it may be tempting to draw lessons from successful aerial campaigns in recent years, such as Operation Noble Anvil in Yugoslavia in 1999 or Operations Odyssey Dawn and Unified Protector in Libya in 2011, the analogies don’t extend well to the Syria case. Yugoslavia offers a cautionary tale about partnering with less than capable allies; NATO felt compelled to increase the scope of its air operations over time as the Kosovo Liberation Army proved unable to penetrate Serbian defenses on the ground.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, the apparent ease of the Libyan campaign is in large part attributable to its unique aspects. Qaddafi possessed relatively unsophisticated air defense assets and a small military. Libya is also within close proximity to NATO air bases in Europe. Further, Qaddafi’s forces were concentrated in the Western half of the country and the open desert terrain was conducive to airstrikes.¹⁰⁶ The Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Brian Haggerty contends that

imposing a no-fly zone in Syria would require a substantial military investment—far larger than the initial stages of the NATO intervention in Libya. In particular, in only the first few series of strikes, Haggerty estimates, the United States, acting alone or in conjunction with allied forces, would have to deploy 200 strike aircraft and 100 support aircraft.¹⁰⁷

Aside from being an act of war—imposing a no-fly zone would require taking out Syrian air defenses—and necessitating a substantial military effort, it is not even certain that a no-fly zone would decisively tip the balance in favor of the rebels. The vast majority of the government-inflicted casualties come from artillery rather than air strikes.¹⁰⁸ Assad could continue shelling urban areas unopposed unless the United States were willing not only to ground Assad’s aircraft but also strike Assad’s forces on the battlefield—an even greater escalation. Additionally, the rebels would still need to be able to take and hold territory from government forces on the ground.¹⁰⁹ An inability to do so might prompt the United States to heighten its involvement still more, to the point of sending military advisors or even ground troops. The U.S.-enforced no-fly zone over Iraq in the 1990s following the first Gulf War illustrates how a no-fly zone absent a ground presence can be ineffective in deterring regimes from crushing organized resistance. The no-fly zone, which was not paired with ground forces, was not sufficient to stop Saddam Hussein from quelling the postwar Shiite uprisings.¹¹⁰ A ground invasion of Syria could be incredibly expensive, costing at least \$200 to \$300 billion annually according to one estimate prepared by scholars at the Brookings Institution.¹¹¹

If nominal, but not decisive, amounts of U.S. aid prolong an already protracted civil war, it is likely that more civilians will die.¹¹² Going “half in” rather than “all in” in Syria will not be sufficient to propel the rebels to victory but might allow them to forestall defeat by the regime for a longer period of time. The United States would be spending treasure, and the Syrians expending blood, for an undesirable political result.

While it may be tempting to draw lessons from successful aerial campaigns in recent years, the analogies don’t extend well to the Syria case.

It is not too late for the Obama administration to reverse its decision to arm the Syrian rebels.

Policy Implications

The United States should not have initiated a program to provide arms to the Syrian rebels and should avoid being sucked into an even deeper commitment. While the humanitarian crisis in Syria is appalling—as of this writing the death toll is estimated to have reached nearly 93,000 people, and millions of Syrians are internally displaced or living in refugee camps in neighboring states¹¹³—this analysis focuses on U.S. strategic interests in the conflict. The absence of clear national security interests in supporting the rebels, combined with the strong potential for the United States to get drawn into unwanted levels of military commitment in Syria, suggests that the Obama administration erred in its decision to arm the rebels.

It is not too late for the Obama administration to reverse its decision to arm the Syrian rebels. As of this writing, there has been no official confirmation that arms have been delivered. The administration should choose to heed the concerns of members of both the House and Senate Intelligence Committees, who have been pressing the administration to refrain from fulfilling its promise to the rebels.¹¹⁴ Bipartisan legislation introduced in both the Senate and House seeking to block the provision of lethal assistance might also tie the administration's hands. These members of Congress are concerned with precisely the issues detailed in this analysis, namely, that arming the Syrian rebels will not be decisive in changing the military balance on the ground and that the United States could become overcommitted to a conflict in which it has minimal strategic interests.¹¹⁵

Issues of how states can successfully influence the behavior of nonstate proxies will continue to remain relevant beyond the conflict in Syria. In the current domestic political environment, where the public is unwilling to support large-scale interventions in far-flung reaches of the globe, policymakers looking for military solutions to political problems will find arming proxy groups a potentially attractive policy choice. There-

fore, it is important to understand how states can protect themselves against committing to conflicts that don't threaten their core national security interests.

Notes

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