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TO: Interested Parties
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RE: Syria Talking Points

What’s Happened So Far in Syria?

In March 2011, Syrian security units loyal to President Bashar al-Assad killed a number of citizens in the southern city of Deraa, sparking a national uprising.

• By the summer, demonstrations had spread to multiple cities and were met with brutal violence from Syrian government forces.
• In August 2011, President Obama called for Assad to leave office. By November, the Arab League suspended Syria and imposed economic sanctions upon Damascus—with little effect.

Other international efforts to stem the violence have failed, as Russia and China have blocked any meaningful resolutions in the UN Security Council.

• They have only endorsed a non-binding (and largely ignored) UN peace plan authored by former Secretary General Kofi Annan in March 2012.
• Meanwhile, the fighting has gotten worse. Massacres of civilians are becoming regular occurrences, such as in the small town of Houla, where pro-Assad forces killed 100 people—mostly women and children.¹

Syrian government forces and rebel belligerents are contesting many major urban areas, including Damascus and Aleppo. Various members of the Syrian military have defected to the rebels, but it remains unclear whether this is indicative of a broader trend or a crumbling of military discipline. More recently:

• Assad’s inner circle was dealt a serious blow in July when a bomb killed a number of top Syrian officials, including the Defense Minister and other top security and intelligence chiefs.²
• Kofi Annan in early August quit his efforts to promote peace, decrying the metastasizing conflict and complaining of the “clear lack of unity” at the UN.³
• Syria’s Prime Minister and his family defected to Jordan on August 6, further undermining Assad’s credibility and capacity to rule.⁴
What Do I Say About Syria?

Syria’s thuggish ruler, Bashar al-Assad, is a murderous tyrant and his regime cannot stand. But America must be careful about rushing into a military intervention without the support of our regional allies, understanding what we’re getting into, and knowing who the rebels are and what they want.

Questions & Answers

Q: Why don’t we send in troops to deal with the bloodshed in Syria?

Syria is quickly drifting toward civil war, and sending in troops without a clear mission, an exit strategy, and broad international support is foolhardy. Furthermore, Syria poses no direct threat to the U.S, so there is little basis for unilateral American intervention.

Q: What exactly is the U.S. doing, then?

The U.S. is allocating $62 million this year for humanitarian aid to handle this crisis. This money is disbursed through existing organizations, such as the World Food Program, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Within Syria itself, the situation is extremely dangerous. Nevertheless, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent—with American funding—has been operating two health clinics, two mobile medical units and four health posts, while also distributing tens of thousands of hygiene supplies, medical assistance and other essentials items.

In late May, the White House press secretary said, “We will continue to work with both the Security Council and the broader coalition of friends of Syria to place pressure on the Assad regime.”

Q: Besides providing humanitarian aid, is America doing anything else to fight Assad?

News reports state President Obama has authorized the CIA to support opposition organizations within Syria. While we are not privy to the inner workings of what the military and intelligence community are doing to fight Assad, we have great confidence in their efforts. Why? Because over the last decade, we have developed the technology, doctrine, and leadership to operate in the most difficult spots in the world. That said, even if we knew all the tactics and strategies, it would be unwise to telegraph them to our foes—and that’s not we’re going to do.

Q: Who are the rebels and what do they want?

It’s hard to tell. The U.S. military reports there are more than 100 separate anti-government groups, such as the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian National Council. Efforts to unify the rebels have thus far ended in failure—for example, a meeting in early July to bring all the rebel groups together ended in shouting and fistfights because the groups could not agree on basic issues besides ejecting Assad from office.
Q: Why don’t we just pound Assad with airstrikes?

U.S-led military options should remain on the table. But airstrikes are only useful in support of larger strategy, and there’s still no regional consensus on how to proceed. Complicating issues is that the rebels are fractured politically. Hence, it’s unclear what bombing Syria would actually accomplish besides creating a power vacuum.

Syria is a densely populated country—two-thirds of Iraq’s population in 40% of the area—and the potential for protracted urban combat and a great increase in bloodshed on all sides remains a real possibility.

Also, Syria is awash in unconventional weapons. Syria has one of the largest chemical and biological weapons stockpiles in the world. Degrading the country’s defenses without simultaneously securing all the stockpiles—which means boots on the ground—will likely lead to catastrophe.11

Q: Is al Qaeda involved in the fighting?

Islamist fighters are definitely participating in the fighting, which is extremely troubling. This is having a real impact on regional affairs—in July the Iraqi Foreign Minister said that al Qaeda fighters are leaving Iraq to fight in Syria.12 And they are tough fighters who want to impose their brutal worldview on Syria and the region.

Q: What about Syria’s chemical weapons?

The Syrian Foreign Ministry in late July publicly revealed that they have chemical weapons and are willing to use it under certain circumstances.13 We do not know the number or capabilities of these weapons, but the Syrian government’s willingness to describe a situation where they could be deployed is an extremely troubling development.

Other Views on the Syria Question

Gov. Mitt Romney: “[The U.S. should] work with partners to organize and arm Syrian opposition groups so they can defend themselves.”14 (May 29, 2012)

Senator John McCain (R-AZ): “We should make U.S. airpower available, along with that of our allies, as part of an international effort to defend safe areas in Syria and to prevent Assad’s forces from harassing them…Once defended, these safe havens could become platforms for increased deliveries of food and medicine, communications equipment, doctors to treat the wounded, and other non-lethal assistance. They could also serve as staging areas for armed opposition groups to receive battlefield intelligence, body armor, and weapons—from small arms and ammunition, to anti-tank rockets—and to train and organize themselves more effectively, perhaps with foreign assistance.”15 (June 18, 2012)

House Intelligence Committee Chairman Mike Rogers (R-MI): “I'm not one that believes that we should be arming the rebels right now…We’re having a difficult time getting a complete picture of who they are.”16 (May 30, 2012)
Speaker of the House John Boehner (R-OH): “[The] situation in Syria is pretty complicated...I think until there’s clear direction as to what’s happening there, involving ourselves at this point in time would be premature.”17 (March 6, 2012)

Henry Kissinger: “Military intervention, humanitarian or strategic, has two prerequisites: First, a consensus on governance after the overthrow of the status quo is critical...Second, the political objective must be explicit and achievable in a domestically sustainable time period. I doubt that the Syrian issue meets these tests...In reacting to one human tragedy, we must be careful not to facilitate another.”18 (June 1, 2012)

Endnotes


6 Ibid.


