

MEMORANDUM

TO: President Obama
FROM: Michael Doran and Salman Sheikh
DATE: January 17, 2013
BIG BET: The Road Beyond Damascus



Syria is standing on a precipice reminiscent of Iraq in early 2006. The regime will likely fall, but the prospect now is one of a failed state that produces a toxic culture of extremism and lawlessness. If the United States does not take on a more active leadership role, the trend toward warlordism and sectarian fragmentation will likely prove inexorable. Syria will become a second Somalia, in the heartland of the Middle East and on the borders of Israel, Turkey and Jordan, the three closest regional allies of the United States. Conversely, through active intervention you can help ensure a more stable transition to a post-Assad order that will provide a better future for the Syrian people and a strategic gain for the United States and its regional friends.

In your first term, when it came to the Syrian revolution, you wagered that the risks of active intervention outweighed the risks of a more cautious approach. Now, however, we believe the massive toll of civilian casualties, the dismemberment of the country, and the intensification of the conflict along sectarian lines dictate a revisiting of your decision.

Recommendation:

To stave off disaster and play a leadership role in shaping Syria's future, the United States should provide lethal assistance to the Syrian opposition, forge a genuine national dialogue that includes Alawis and Christians, and create an International Steering Group (ISG) to oversee and lend support to the transitional process, including the creation of an international stabilization force to provide protection to Syrian civilians. You will need to engage directly with President Putin to overcome already weakening Russian resistance to these essential endeavors.

Background:

A descent into chaos in Syria poses many risks to the United States. In particular, it creates opportunities for Iran and Hezbollah to safeguard

their interests. Perhaps the greatest potential benefit to the United States of the uprising had been the damage that it did to the alliance system of Iran, the strategic adversary of the United States in the Middle East. For a time it seemed that Iran's foothold in Syria would be washed away naturally by the tide of events. But as the conflict has deepened, Tehran has spared no expense to make itself an indispensable partner to a number of groups who seem destined to thrive in the growing chaos.

Secondly, the fragmentation of Syria means perpetual civil war. Violence is already developing along sectarian lines, between Sunnis and Alawis, Sunnis and Christians, and other religious communities; along intra-sectarian lines, particularly between al-Qaeda affiliates and their Sunni nationalist rivals; and along ethnic lines, as Arab-Kurdish violence spreads across the country's north. Furthermore, this violence will increase the risk of spillover to neighboring countries: increasing refugee flows, the growing presence of rival Iraqi factions inside Syria, and growing tensions in Lebanon. Other, more dramatic forms of spillover are looming: direct intervention by Turkey, against the background of Kurdish problems, or by Israel, in an effort to destroy Assad's chemical weapons.

Finally, the chaos is enabling al-Qaeda to gain a significant foothold. Jabhat al-Nusra, the al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, is now recognized as one of the most potent fighting forces in the country.

Until now, the primary U.S. answer to the fragmentation has been to support the newly established Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC), the umbrella organization that is trying to tie together many of the political strands among the opposition. As a result, the SOC has gained significant international recognition as "the sole representative" of the Syrian people. This support is timely and encourages greater opposition unity. But in the absence of a more robust American leadership, it will not stabilize Syria, because the writ of the SOC is limited by its failure to reach a national consensus and by the growing power of the warlords.

It is time to place a new bet on a more active American leadership role, one that seeks to protect civilians, hastens the fall of Assad, and shapes a new political order more amenable to the needs of the Syrian people and to American interests. A greater leadership role does not necessarily mean direct military intervention. Continuous U.S. airstrikes and large numbers of American boots on the ground should not be necessary. However, removing the threat of intervention entirely only emboldens Assad and his chief patron, Iran. If the scale of civilian bloodletting continues to escalate, the United States must be prepared to act decisively, in the spirit of "the

responsibility to protect.” In this regard, we encourage you to communicate to Assad and his allies that the United States is willing to intervene to establish a no-fly zone with its European and regional allies to protect civilians in Syria. We believe this would hasten Assad’s demise, hearten the opposition, and significantly enhance American credibility in the region.

In 1995, President Clinton was forced to intervene militarily in Bosnia and threaten the greater use of military force. He did so after over 100,000 Bosnian men, women and children had been killed over a four-year period. Clearly, Syria is not Bosnia. But after nearly two-years, 60,000 killed (the UN thinks this is a conservative estimate) and the UN-Arab League Special Envoy warning that another 100,000 could be killed in 2013, the United States must not allow Assad’s killing machine to continue the slaughter with impunity.

Today, the United States simply does not possess an effective ground game in Syria. It needs to help the Free Syrian Army (FSA) develop a country-wide military strategy and insist that it forge stronger links with the Syrian Opposition Coalition. Like it or not, the FSA is the nucleus of the post-Assad military, which will be the most significant institution of the Syrian state. If the new Syria has any hope of being stable, more pluralistic, and friendly to the United States, then the effort to shape its institutions must begin now.

The centerpiece of that effort is the provision of lethal assistance by an American-led coalition. To be sure, the fragmentation of the rebels and the presence among them of al-Qaeda fighters present daunting challenges. There is no guarantee, for instance, that some weapons will not find their way to al-Qaeda. Nor will the internal divisions within the FSA be overcome without internecine bloodletting. However, a continuance of the current, hands-off policy will only make al-Qaeda stronger and the conflicts within the FSA more permanent. As daunting as the challenges in Syria are today, if the United States does nothing, it will face even more virulent problems tomorrow.

In addition, a continuation of the status quo will lead to a permanent diminishment of American influence. A reluctance, thus far, to provide lethal assistance has led to a growing sense of betrayal among Syrians. Many of them now argue that your faltering attitude – paired with your perceived responsibility for the inability to overcome the diplomatic impasse with Russia – has played a decisive role in the intensification of the Syrian conflict.

After establishing itself as the single most important player shaping the conflict on the ground, your administration should provide assistance to the Syrian people to forge a genuine national dialogue on the nature of the desired transition. This requires the creation of a national platform that brings together the diverse ethnic and religious communities of Syria – including Sunnis, Shia, Alawis, Christians and Kurds, as well as tribal and religious figures—to discuss the future of the country. Specifically, it should include Alawis who enjoy wide legitimacy within their community but who are also willing to talk about a post-Assad regime in Syria. As an exclusively Sunni club, the Syrian Opposition Coalition is not qualified to win the necessary trust of under-represented minorities and communities.

At the same time, the United States should bring together key international and regional powers to create an ISG for Syria that would work in close collaboration with a legitimate and empowered transitional Syrian executive authority.

The ISG should include Russia, China, Turkey, and key Arab and European states. It should agree on a number of basic goals for the transition and set benchmarks for their effective implementation. The immediate focus: protecting civilians, minorities and vulnerable groups through the creation of an international stabilization force; addressing humanitarian issues; safeguarding chemical and other unauthorized weapons; and supporting transitional governance and transitional justice efforts.

This work should be followed by a longer-term commitment to assisting Syrians on security sector reform, the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) of combatants and supporting a transitional governance roadmap, including preparations for multi-party elections and a constitution-drafting exercise; economic recovery, including planning and coordination on infrastructure and reconstruction; and assisting national reconciliation efforts.

To succeed, this strategy will have to overcome the persistent Russian demand that Assad play a role in the transition. His absence from the process, however, is an equally firm demand of the rebels. In order to overcome this gap, you will need to engage with President Putin in an effort to persuade him that Russian interests are better protected by partnering with you in an effort to promote a stable post-Assad order than by resisting it. In the process, you will need to insist that removing Assad is a fundamental requirement for a successful transition. With reports now reaching President Putin that detail the collapsing control of the regime, he may be coming around to accepting that Assad is finished and may be willing to reconsider Russia's role.

The Syria challenge is difficult. The very intractability of the problems is what made the original bet of avoidance of active involvement an attractive option. But developments since have made it an increasingly dangerous option for American interests; it's time for a reassessment.