

Position Paper

Arming the rebels: preferring a settlement in Syria

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Syrian rebels preparing to launch a mortar during clashes with regime in Aleppo [AFP-Archive]

It is no secret that at the end of the Friends of Syria conference on June 22, the eleven countries that met in Doha took a decision to ease the tension, improve the situation, and arm the rebels. In a press conference with US secretary of state, John Kerry, Qatar's prime minister and former foreign minister, Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabr Al Thani implied that nine countries agreed to arm the rebels, but would do so independently, through actions that each deems appropriate in terms of its political considerations. Only two countries chose to participate through other means, including through training on governance, provision of economic and relief aid, and provision of non-military equipment.

After a long delay, why has the Friends of Syria group, which includes all the major international powers except Russia, and all the major eastern regional powers except Iran, taken such a move? What is its specific purpose and is there a unified purpose among the group? How would the move affect the Syrian opposition?

Supplying arms: The latest on an old resolution

Without a change in the US position, it would not have been possible to arrive at a decision on arming the rebels through the Friends of Syria meeting. A number of countries participating in the conference, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey, have been assisting in arming the rebels since spring 2012, and a number of others, such as Britain and France, announced months ago that they intended to provide arms to the

rebels – but have not yet done so. The US position was constantly complicated by the decision not only to disrupt the British and French moves, but also to regulate the type of arms provided to the rebels. The US position had changed before the Friends of Syria meeting, and not because of it.

The first time that the White House declared Washington's resolve to arm the rebels was on Thursday, 14 June 2013. The administration of US president, Barack Obama, administration emphasised that the respective American authorities had investigated and confirmed the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons, particularly of sarin gas against its own people. Since the Obama administration has consistently considered the use of chemical weapons as a red line, it was logical that it would take a firm step against the Syrian regime. This was discussed during the announcement of the intention to arm the opposition, at least in order to sway public opinion in its favour. The evidence of the use of chemical weapons had become available to Washington many weeks before the announcement, just as it had been to London, Paris and Ankara. Addressing the issue of the use of chemical weapons at this particular time justified the decision. The primary issue is the change in the US policy from avoiding interference and from refraining to arm the rebels, to a resolve to arm them.

This change in the US position occurred during the visit of Turkish prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, to Washington on 16 May 2013. It was not only a result of pressure from Turkey during the long talks between Erdogan and Obama, but was also against the backdrop of US internal pressure and similar western and Arab pressures on the one hand, and significant shifts in the map of the Syrian forces on the other .

From Geneva 2: resolution of arming

Kenneth Waltz, a former professor at Columbia University, and a theorist of neorealism in international relations said: 'Chaos' is not the opposite of 'stability', but rather of 'hierarchy'. In essence, the hierarchy of power in the global system, the emergence of a dominant force, and recognition by the world's countries of this hierarchy, will achieve stability. When a state threatens the agreed upon system, the dominant force should return it to its necessary state, and thus provide peace and stability. This applies not only to the global system, but also to regional systems. To a large extent, this perception of the world and international relations, dominates the decision-making circles in the US capital. This is where a large segment of US policymakers believe that the dominant force must lead, and that giving up leadership is irresponsible. These, in particular, are the convictions that inform the debate on Syria in the US capital.

Senior members of the US Congress, including John McCain, former heads of the national security, and senior writers and analysts who are dealing with the Syrian crisis, are aware that the strategic priorities of their country have changed. The Middle East is

no longer, and nor should it be, America's top priority. The USA also faces the Chinese economic giant in the Pacific Basin that is rapidly becoming a military giant as well. Among these influential Americans, it is unlikely that there is anyone who holds a special sympathy with the Syrian people, or with Arabs in general. Furthermore, they would not necessarily regard the Syrian issue from a moral and humanitarian perspective. Rather, they are saying that there is a major crisis in the Middle East; the Iranian-Russian intervention on the one hand, and the intervention of Arab states and Turkey on the other, is about to shift the Syrian crisis from a local and regional level, to an international level. This may plunge the Middle East into chaos, and America, as a major country in the world, should lead, or the world will deem it irresponsible.

This controversy, emphasised by European countries such as Britain and France, and non-European ones such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and a number of other Arab countries, pressured Kerry to move towards Russia on 7 May 2013 when the sides announced their agreement to hold the Geneva 2 Conference. It is likely that it was Kerry's idea, not Lavrov's, to activate the Geneva Declaration, reached by the two countries on 30 June 2012. It is also likely that it was his idea to hold a Syrian international conference, aiming to reach a political solution. The Obama administration has not wanted to intervene in Syria in any active sense, from the summer of 2011, when the Syrian regime faced defenceless people with force, through armoured military vehicles. During 2011 and 2012, the former secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, and the US president issued statements regarding the absence of legitimacy, and called for Asad to step down. These were merely attempts to morally pressure the Syrian president and his allies, and were not intended to initiate an intervention. Obama's administration chose to avoid direct intervention, leaving the matter to its regional allies and their evaluation of their role. Many factors contributed towards this, including considerations of international strategy, public opinion regarding American withdrawal from the Arab and Islamic world in the first decade of this century, and the complexities of the Syrian situation itself. Furthermore, the Syrian issue does not pose an urgent threat to US interests.

The pressure from within the United States, from its European allies, and from countries in the Middle East to intervene, escalated. It therefore became necessary to provide a convincing response. In doing so, the USA needed to recognise that it could either abandon its position as the most powerful country in the world, or do something. The answer was to initiate the Geneva Declaration and hold the Syrian international conference. Kerry's statement during his press conference in Moscow with Lavrov, is significant. He said the agreement on the conference did not mean that Washington was obliged to take swift action in arming the Syrian opposition.

From the Russian perspective, Syria means something completely different. Russia lost the Cold War, and simultaneously lost the sprawling European-Asian empire. It did not lose the war absolutely, however, and therefore did not lose its huge nuclear military potential. After being subdued in the nineties, oil revenues and Putin's resolute policy to strengthen the state's grip helped restore Russia's self-confidence. Western powers and the United States in particular, did not take Russian power into account, though not even after the heated war waged by Russia against Georgia in the summer of 2008. The United States refuses to recognise Russia's special interests in the North Caucasus, and refuses to negotiate about the anti-missile shield. They are also reluctant to lend a hand to efforts to modernise the Russian industrial sector. Russia is currently in a relatively weaker position in the energy market, while the European countries and the United States are striving to diversify their sources of oil and gas. For this reason, it is the first occasion on the international level, since the end of the Cold War, in which Russia finds that the world takes it seriously with regards to Syria, and that it is regaining its role in global decision making.

The problem, however, is that the Americans and the Russians did not agree in Moscow on a solution to the Syrian crisis. They only agreed on a process for resolving the conflict, leaving a lot of details vague and unresolved material for subsequent negotiations. Kerry and Lavrov did not agree, for example, on how they would give effect to the 2012 Geneva Declaration. It will be difficult to impose a ceasefire, and to persuade the regime to withdraw troops from cities and towns, which will encourage the Syrians to take to the streets in hundreds of thousands again. There is another serious difficulty surrounding the representatives of the opposition and the regime reaching an agreement on a transitional government. More difficult than all this is convincing the Syrian president to hand over his powers to this government. There is no dispute that America, Turkey, and most Arab countries want a transition process leading to the exit of Asad. This is despite the fact that they accepted the ambiguous text on the status of the Syrian president during the transitional period.

The second round of obstacles concerns the supposed framework of the Geneva 2 Conference. Who will represent the regime? Will he be authorised to make key decisions? Who will represent the opposition and the people, the political or armed forces? Will he have the power and influence to make his decisions, legitimate in the eyes of the various political groups, personalities, and the military? Which countries will be allowed to attend the conference, along with the United States and Russia? In particular, there is intense disagreement on whether Iran would be invited to participate. And what would any agreement mean at the level of international law, and on the UN Security Council's ability to act?

During the few weeks that followed the Moscow Agreement between Kerry and Lavrov, it was clear that Obama's Washington refrained from intervention but did not retreat from its goal to overthrow Bashar al-Asad, one way or another. In contrast, and in light of continuing Russian arms supplies to the Assad regime, it is apparent that the Russians are not going to change their policies in Syria. They have been consistent since the Syrian revolution turned into a regional and international crisis. In interviews with American and Russian officials after the Moscow Agreement, it became clear that there is no indication of the Russian side's readiness to make concrete concessions to assist in holding the conference. Thus, the Geneva 2 meeting was postponed from 20 June 2013 to some date in July 2013. Statements were rapidly made, and currently no one knows when it will be held. The Syrian opposition forces, both in the national coalition, in the leadership of the Free Army, and among the leaders of the rebel brigades, are backed by Turkey and Arab countries in favour of the revolution. They have reemphasised their previous conditions. These relate to negotiations only with representatives of the regime who do not have Syrian blood on their hands, and their rejection of any role for the regime's leadership in the transition phase.

As the leaders of the regime, and its allies in Iran and Hizbullah, did not foresee the complexities surrounding the convening of Geneva 2, with Russian support, they rapidly tried to assert the regime's dominance and control of the course of the battle, before going to Geneva. On the ground in Syria, it is no longer a secret that the involvement of Hizbullah and Iran is becoming more profound and widespread. It is well-known that the battle of Qusayr did not start the day the rebels withdrew from it, falling into the hands of the forces of the regime and Hizbullah. It started about a month earlier, during a clear acknowledgement from the leaders of Hizbullah of their involvement in Syria. Since last year, there had also been frequent reports, about the recruitment of young Shi'a in Iraq and other Arab countries, in addition to Pakistan and Afghanistan, to fight in Syria.

In short, against a backdrop of receding optimism relating to the Geneva 2 Conference, the growing signs of the widening scope of the Iranian-Hizbullah intervention in the crisis, the Russian refusal to budge from their earlier positions, and the appearance of signs that the regime and its allies are seeking to change the map of the battle, the pressures have returned to the Obama administration, both internally and externally. The US president had to take a significant step that was politically tangible, even if it was expressed in the decision of reinforcement.

The opposition: Multiple differences

Certain factors were important in persuading western nations and the United States to decide on reinforcement. Among those were the formation of a unified command of the Free Army, the link of a significant sector of revolutionaries brigades and battalions to this leadership, and the selection of General Salim Idris, a professional officer in the

ranks of military defectors, to head the Free Army Staff,. Western and Arab powers fear the role played in the revolution by armed groups linked to al-Qa'ida, and of these powers gaining access to particular types of weapons. It is possible that Idris and his leadership provided adequate assurances to the forces supporting the revolutionaries that such a scenario will not occur, and that as long as the weapons pass through the leadership of the Free Army Staff, they will not end up in unacceptable hands.

Regardless of the size of the support provided to the rebels thus far, the role played by general Idris and the staff of the leadership of the Free Army was strengthened. The confidence that Arab and western countries attached to Idris and his leadership demonstrates that they support the position of the military in the leadership of the Syrian revolution. It is significant that the leadership of FSA, and not the presidency of the National Coalition, were invited to meet with the Friends of Syria in Doha.

For many objective and subjective reasons, and due to a lack of political experience in the last four decades, the coalition could not assert its leadership of the Syrian revolution. The coalition suffered further tremors when its first Head, Sheikh Ahmed Moaz al-Khatib, resigned. In an attempt to catch up with events, the coalition held a marathon meeting in Istanbul that continued for more than a week, from 23 to 31 May 2013. Those in the meeting expressed differences, mostly due to the deeply pluralistic nature of the coalition and the intervention of Arab states that support the revolution. But in the end, the coalition agreed to include fifty-one representatives of the FSA and new groups: eight from the liberal bloc led by Michel Kilo; fourteen representatives of the internal revolutionary movement, fifteen of the Free Army, and fourteen others from different locations. Since its inception this was the most significant move in the course of the coalition's life, and will certainly create more balance in the organisation.

The expansion of the coalition, however, made it difficult to move towards the election of a new governing body before the forces of the movement and the FSA name their representatives. This led to the postponement, for several weeks, of a new presidential election. The Coalition also found it necessary to delay a decision on Geneva 2 or to name a delegation to the conference, until the new structure was completed. The Coalition will tentatively meet on 5-6 July 2013 for the election of the governing body, and resolve its political position on the crisis. Perhaps the current summer will be the Coalition's last chance to assert its leadership over the revolution, and its leadership of the revolutionary movement, as well as the wider spectrum of political groups of the Syrian opposition, the FSA and the armed groups that operate under its umbrella.

A long struggle on the horizon

It is necessary not to expect large military supplies to the rebels from the United States, nor to expect the quick arrival of these supplies. It is clear that, if achieved, the supplies

will not reach all the Syrian armed groups, and will only be sent to those that gained the confidence of the Americans. The resolution of the Doha meeting was clear in providing each country that would like to support the rebels the independence to decide what it offers, how, and to whom. The importance of the decision about arming the rebels raises the possibility of increasing the quality of weapons that would be provided. These countries – such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar – have been playing an active role in supporting the rebels for the past year, at least. It was clear during the final weeks of June 2013 that armed members of the Syrian Revolution, particularly in Aleppo, Idlib in the north, and Dar'aa in the south, have not only been able to cope better with attacks by the forces of the regime and its allies, but also had an improved stance in the launching of concrete attacks on the remaining locations of the regime's forces. Perhaps supplying the rebels with better weapons may have helped to abort the regime's plan of a massive attack against them in Aleppo and its countryside.

It is now certain, however, in light of the growing regional and international complexities, that the battle against Syria will be long, bitter and extremely expensive. It is doubtful, even after the decision of the Doha meeting, that sufficient weapons, in qualitative and quantitative terms, will be supplied to the Syrian rebels to resolve the battle militarily and within a relatively short period. In contrast, during the past two years, Iran and Russia pledged to respond to the military needs of the regime, and there has been no indication of decline in these supplies. The entry into the battlefield of Hizbullah and thousands of Shi'a volunteers helps the regime's forces which had become exhausted over the past two years. In the short term, it is expected that the revolutionaries will make tangible progress in the northern, eastern and southern provinces, and that the forces of the regime will maintain their positions in Damascus and its countryside, in the central provinces and the coast, and perhaps gain some minor progress in these areas.

It does not seem that there is a consensus among the Friends of Syria on how to tackle the crisis. There are countries that believe it is possible to achieve a military victory, and others that believe that the solution will, ultimately, be political. They believe that the military option is not possible, and that supporting the forces of the revolution is a way to improve the political conditions but is not decisive. These countries have jointly decided at this stage, to prevent the regime and its allies in Iran, Russia and Hizbullah. They have also decided to change the balance of forces on the ground, and to help the rebels to militarily pressure the regime, even slightly, to persuade him and his allies of the pressing need for political negotiations that would lead to a fundamental change in the system of governance. On the other hand, in the foreseeable future there will not be direct military intervention, nor will there be a no-fly zone. This is the most that the revolutionary forces will be able to achieve at this stage. It is also the basis upon which

the leadership of the coalition and the leadership of the Free Army need to assess its calculations.

The coalition will never be able to make effective use of this opportunity and engage in a long battle without addressing its slow pace of work, and the relative estrangement between the coalition and the internal revolutionary forces. Similarly, the extreme fragmentation within the ranks of the armed groups, both those that fall under the umbrella of the FSA, and those that stand outside this umbrella, will not assist the Syrians on the battlefield. Both sides face the challenge of moving to expand the coalition, to join the leadership of the FSA within this framework, and to work on the basis that the decision of the revolution will ultimately be political. If the battle of Syria lasts longer, the continuation of the conditions of the Coalition and the armed forces of the revolution will make this fight last much longer. Prolonging this battle is not limited to the intransigence of the Russians and the open intervention of Iran and Hizbullah, but also to the failure of the revolution's forces to rise to the challenges that are posed by this battle.

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