Negative Brief: Syrian Rebel Aid – bad idea

By “Coach Vance” Trefethen

***Resolved: The United States federal government should substantially reform its foreign aid.***

Summary: AFF Plan reverses Status Quo policy that has stopped US aid to rebels attempting to overthrow the government of evil dictator Bashar al-Assad in Syria. NEG position will be that the rebels can't win, and the aid we give them gets diverted to radical terrorists like ISIS and Al Qaeda. And even if Syria with Assad is bad, if the rebels win, Syria without Assad will be worse.

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Negative: Syria Rebels

INHERENCY

1. Status Quo is the best policy

All the bad guys are fighting and killing each other. Let 'em have at it!

Michael Hirsh 2019. (senior correspondent at Foreign Policy) 8 Jan 2019 "The Problem With America’s Syria Policy Isn’t Trump. It’s Syria." FOREIGN POLICY https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/08/the-problem-with-americas-syria-policy-isnt-trump-its-syria/

This is America’s unspoken (and largely bipartisan) Syria policy. It’s the best that Washington can muster, many analysts say, and in the coldest of national interest calculations it hasn’t produced the worst of outcomes. For the last several years, various U.S. enemies have been knocking each other off in great numbers there: Sunni jihadis in Syria, joined by Iraqi Sunni insurgents across the border, on the one hand, and Iran-backed Hezbollah Shiites, as well as the Assad government, on the other.

SIGNIFICANCE / HARMS

1. Syria is irrelevant

U.S. has no actual interest in Syria – they're just not important

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“We want to protect the Kurds,” he said. “But I don’t want to be in Syria forever.” Trump said again: “It’s sand. And it’s death.” “That’s totally the truth,” said Joshua Landis, a Syria expert at the University of Oklahoma who was one of the few to accurately predict Assad’s long-term survival in power. “It’s just not an important country for the United States.”

2. A/T "Loss of US influence" – Doesn't matter

Nothing to lose – US desire for "influence" that motivated us to aid rebels in 2013 doesn't matter any more

Sam Heller 2017. (Fellow with The Century Foundation and a researcher and analyst focused on the Syrian conflict; bachelor's degree in Political Science from Yale University and a master's degree in Arabic) 21 July 2017 America Had Already Lost Its Covert War in Syria—Now It’s Official https://tcf.org/content/commentary/america-already-lost-covert-war-syria-now-official/?agreed=1

One fear has been that, absent the United States’ convening power and direction, regional states and other opposition backers will start doing destructive things without American supervision. The covert program was originally established in 2013—in part to give Washington a veto on which arms were provided, and to corral opposition backers who had been unilaterally and indiscriminately spreading around money and weapons, including to jihadists. This concern strikes me as overblown. The United States played a key logistical role in the covert program’s weapons pipeline, [sourcing arms from eastern Europe](https://www.buzzfeed.com/aramroston/the-death-of-a-us-contractor-has-exposed-americas-failures?utm_term=.br6wWKe0y#.xhErva3VQ). It’s not obvious that anyone else can take America’s place; in America’s absence, the arms program as a whole seems likely to suffer. Moreover, it’s not clear many opposition backers will be willing to continue with this or a similar effort absent America’s political cover and leading role. Opposition sponsors—including most of the Gulf states—are exhausted, if not checked out on the opposition entirely.

SOLVENCY

1. No-win situation

Helping rebels or not-helping them, it doesn't matter: America loses either way

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There’s a reason why two such disparate presidents have suffered this common dilemma: For Washington, the Syrian civil war is a no-win situation. If you want to back the rebels, you end up supporting radical Islamists who could exploit yet another dysfunctional Arab state and harbor anti-American terrorists. If you seek to support the only force capable of defeating the rebels, you end up backing a war criminal and Iran’s close friend, President Bashar al-Assad.

2. Rebels can't win, even with our aid

Rebel military aid was never going to work: It had no chance of winning and thinking they could topple Assad was a fantasy

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But it is also a concession to reality, and an acknowledgement that America’s covert military program in Syria was misconceived from the start. The covert arms program was going to end—this was inevitable, even if its precise timing was a surprise, and its execution appears haphazard. By the time Trump took office, the program no longer made sense, if it ever did. The United States couldn’t just keep fueling a war that had no definable end and feeding a rebel host body from which al-Qaeda could suck blood. The program was intended to build a moderate rebel force that could apply serious enough military pressure on the regime to force Assad to step aside as part of a negotiated political settlement. But the latter part of that objective, a compelled transition, was always fantasy. As for the “moderate rebel force,” for the last several years much of America’s support has gone to “Free Syrian Army” (FSA) factions that have functioned as battlefield auxiliaries and weapons farms for larger Islamist and jihadist factions, including Syria’s al-Qaeda affiliate. The problem with the program, which was reportedly [running the CIA nearly a billion dollars a year](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/lawmakers-move-to-curb-1-billion-cia-program-to-train-syrian-rebels/2015/06/12/b0f45a9e-1114-11e5-adec-e82f8395c032_story.html?utm_term=.d25c5345f7d0), was not that it was under resourced or “[insufficient in scale.](https://twitter.com/Charles_Lister/status/888091185583190016)” The problem was that its logic was wrong and out of sync with the basic dynamics of the insurgency.

3. Not effective at fighting terrorism

Syrian rebel aid was never effective at fighting terrorism – may have even made it worse

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The covert program was premised on a regime change logic that didn’t make sense and of which, in latter years, the United States was no longer really convinced. As counterterrorism became America’s main, overriding policy priority in Syria, Washington pursued counterterrorism aims mainly through overt means: its air campaign, its support for the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, and its parallel train-and-equip program for Arab forces. The covert Syria program did not help with counterterrorism. And rather, by indirectly feeding the Nusra Front, it arguably hurt.

4. Not effective at protecting US allies or innocent civilians

Rebel arms aid was supposed to be "defensive" but the only thing they were defending were jihadis (Islamic radicals / terrorists)

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By 2017, the best, most compelling argument for continuing the covert arms program was defensive. In the mountainous rebel north—home to [more than two million residents](https://twitter.com/AbuJamajem/status/855009979375509508), including almost a million vulnerable displaced people—CIA-furnished anti-tank weaponry would have been key to deterring a ground offensive by the regime and its allies. But to what end? It was apparently impossible to uproot the Nusra Front from within the northwest—certainly, CIA beneficiaries whose entire raison d’etre was fighting the Assad regime would not try it. And Turkey was unwilling to mount a full-scale intervention against Nusra, [Turkish officials told me](https://tcf.org/content/report/turkeys-turkey-first-syria-policy/). Continuing with the covert program, then, meant sponsoring the ongoing defense of a jihadist safe haven.

5. Mismanagement & bungling

CIA and Pentagon Syrian rebel aid programs are mismanaged and incompetent

Matthew Purple 2017 (*fellow at Defense Priorities, a think tank launched in 2016 that advocates for foreign policy restraint*) LOS ANGELES TIMES 31 July 2017 https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-purple-arms-for-syrian-rebels-20170731-story.html

The impossibility of the Syrian project was only compounded by bureaucratic ineptitude, perhaps best revealed when the Pentagon's counterpart program managed to train so few rebels that the [price tag was calculated](http://www.politico.com/story/2015/07/price-for-syrian-rebels-4-million-each-119858)at $4 million for each fighter. The CIA's initiative was assumed to be more effective, but even then plenty of [red tape-tangled muddling has been documented](https://www.wsj.com/articles/covert-cia-mission-to-arm-syrian-rebels-goes-awry-1422329582).

DISADVANTAGES

1. Radical Islamic terrorism

Link: US rebel aid ends up in the hands of radical terrorists, like Al Qaeda

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But it is also a concession to reality, and an acknowledgement that America’s covert military program in Syria was misconceived from the start. The covert arms program was going to end—this was inevitable, even if its precise timing was a surprise, and its execution appears haphazard. By the time Trump took office, the program no longer made sense, if it ever did. The United States couldn’t just keep fueling a war that had no definable end and feeding a rebel host body from which al-Qaeda could suck blood. The program was intended to build a moderate rebel force that could apply serious enough military pressure on the regime to force Assad to step aside as part of a negotiated political settlement. But the latter part of that objective, a compelled transition, was always fantasy. As for the “moderate rebel force,” for the last several years much of America’s support has gone to “Free Syrian Army” (FSA) factions that have functioned as battlefield auxiliaries and weapons farms for larger Islamist and jihadist factions, including Syria’s al-Qaeda affiliate.

A/T "We aid moderate factions, not radical terrorists" - Terrorists and radicals bought or stole the US military aid from the "moderates" (if there ever were any)

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By last year—arguably earlier—CIA-backed northern rebels were mostly backfilling for either the Nusra Front or Ahrar al-Sham, an Islamist movement-opposition faction and Nusra’s erstwhile ally. U.S.-backed factions had to put their weapons stocks and supply lines under Islamists’ protection, or to pay jihadists a portion of their material support as a sort of toll. (Some also just sold ammunition on the local black market.) And when the Nusra Front—[now called Hayat Tahrir al-Sham](https://tcf.org/content/commentary/syrias-former-al-qaeda-affiliate-leading-rebels-suicide-mission/)—got hungry, it pillaged these smaller factions. It seized their storehouses, often without a fight, and then showed off their U.S.-supplied weapons in glossy photo releases.

Link: US weapons aid to Syrian rebels ends up in the hands of Al Qaeda and ISIS

Matthew Purple 2017 (*fellow at Defense Priorities, a think tank launched in 2016 that advocates for foreign policy restraint*) LOS ANGELES TIMES 31 July 2017 https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-purple-arms-for-syrian-rebels-20170731-story.html

From the start, American weapons shipments had a curious habit of ending up in the hands of Al Qaeda and Islamic State fighters. Among numerous examples, the Pentagon admitted in 2015 that U.S.-trained Syrian rebels had voluntarily [forked over their American-provided equipment](http://thehill.com/policy/defense/255055-us-trained-syrian-rebels-gave-weapons-to-al-qaeda-pentagon-admits), including half a dozen pickup trucks, to the Al Qaeda offshoot Nusra Front. Islamic State soldiers have been documented [running around with our anti-tank missiles](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/06/islamic-state-uses-us-made-anti-tank-missiles-in-hasakah-offensive.php). Even early on, when training-and-arms efforts were being carried out through the Saudis and Qataris, one U.S. official [admitted](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/15/world/middleeast/jihadists-receiving-most-arms-sent-to-syrian-rebels.html), "The opposition groups that are receiving the most of the lethal aid are exactly the ones we don't want to have it."

Impact: More terrorism. Growth of jihadi groups increases the risk of becoming internationalized and spreading terrorism

Sam Heller 2018. (Senior Analyst for non-state armed groups with The Crisis Group; bachelor's degree in Political Science from Yale University and a master's degree in Arabic 12 Dec 2018 Rightsizing the Transnational Jihadist Threat https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/rightsizing-transnational-jihadist-threat

Jihadist manpower may be a sort of proxy measure for jihadists’ broader appeal, and even purely local fighters may be the basis for future dispersed networks and transnational mobilisation. For those concerned about international terrorism – what jihadists themselves call “external operations” – a mass force that is locally manned and motivated could potentially harbour or incubate an international terrorist capability.

2. Prolongs the Syrian civil war

Link: Aiding the rebels prolongs the war (with no benefit)

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So Trump canceled a government program that wasn't working. What's wrong with that? Especially when the alternative was to keep fueling a barbaric conflict with weapons that could one day be turned on us. The Syrian civil war is a deeply intricate battlefield with numerous factions acting on myriad motivations. It is impossible to siphon it into a facile, cable news-ready, black-and-white narrative. Trump's decision was about far more than capitulation to Russia — it was the right call for American interests, regardless of whether it aligns with Russian intentions. The Syrian civil war needs to be ended, not furthered by another round of fruitless arms shipments.

Impact: More death and destruction

Human Rights Watch 2018 (international human rights advocacy non-profit organization) SYRIA – EVENTS OF 2017 https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/syria

More than 400,000 have died because of the Syrian conflict since 2011, according to the World Bank, with 5 million seeking refuge abroad and over 6 million displaced internally, according to UN agencies.

3. Fall of Assad would be worse

Link: If, by some miracle, the plan works, the rebels will topple Syrian president Bashar al-Assad

That's the whole point of the rebel movement. Assad is what they are "rebelling" against.

Link: Propping up Assad (not helping the rebels) means more radical Islamic terrorists get killed

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On the whole, U.S. policy through both Obama and Trump has become one of tolerating Assad over the alternative while not saying so and looking the other way. Certainly one could argue the United States should be supplying more humanitarian aid, but there is not much else Washington can do. If the Russians and Iranians have no compunctions about propping Assad up, then they’re essentially doing America’s dirty work**—**killing radical Islamists (along with many thousands of innocents, tragically)**—**and at little cost to the United States, except in terms of its image as a global benefactor.

Brink: Assad is the only thing blocking rise of Islamist takeover in Syria. He's bad, but better than the alternative

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Then, after Libya largely fell into Islamist hands after Muammar al-Qaddafi’s U.S.-aided downfall**—**which Obama later called the biggest regret of his presidency**—**and it turned out that Assad would survive and was the only thing standing in the way of an Islamist takeover in Syria, Obama had a realist reckoning: The Arab world still needed its strongmen.

Impact: Religious persecution. Without Assad, Christianity will be persecuted by whatever regime takes over

Bastian Berbner 2011. (journalist) " Syria's Christians Side with Assad Out of Fear" 30 Nov 2011 http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/the-tolerant-dictator-syria-s-christians-side-with-assad-out-of-fear-a-800450.html

From the archbishop's perspective, it's possible to live well in Syria. The president guarantees religious minorities' rights, Christians are allowed to practice their faith freely and churches are protected. Assad generally hands out important government and army posts to members of his own group, the Alawis, but Christians also hold a number of senior positions in important institutions such as the presidential guard and intelligence services. The head of the country's central bank is a Christian, as is the new defense minister. Many Christians belong to the ranks of the privileged within the system, and few have yet dared to take the step of joining the opposition, not when they are held so closely in the president's embrace. Assad not only allows Christians influence, he also fans their greatest fears: Islamists, Sharia law and the prospect of burning churches. The bishops would probably prefer a brutal dictator who lets them pray in peace than the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood, who would demand a share of power in a Syria without Assad.

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