

The Washington Post

Take away Syria's chemical weapons

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Published: May 9

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The use of chemical weapons in Syria has increased pressure on President Obama to arm the opposition. Earlier in the conflict, I [endorsed such a step](#). But circumstances have changed. Instead, the United States should focus on working with Russia to disarm Syria. A U.N. Security Council resolution mandating an inspection and disarmament process for Syria could open the door to wider negotiations on a political resolution.

I have long advocated arming opposition movements that resist dictatorships and aggression. The strategy yielded major gains during the Soviet-Afghan war, in Bosnia, in Afghanistan in 2001 and during the Libyan revolution, all without unduly exposing the United States. There is good reason to believe that Washington erred in withholding more lethal assistance from the Iraqi opposition to Saddam Hussein. And arming friendly non-state actors may prove prudent in dealing with the fallout of the Arab Spring in some contexts.

In Syria, however, failure to arm the opposition when the uprisings began two years ago has allowed extremist forces to gain the upper hand. Liberal and secular movements have largely gone into exile, leaving a vacuum that extremists are exploiting. Obama, so keen to internalize the lessons of the Iraq war, should have understood that protracted conflict was unlikely to favor moderates. Bashar al-Assad's brutality has radicalized the Syrian people, who only recently were committed to nonviolent resistance to his dictatorship. Islamist forces — some with ties to al-Qaeda — have become the key element of the opposition, if not its backbone.

At this stage, arming the opposition would not serve U.S. interests. A military escalation would probably invite chemical attacks by Assad's forces. Unless the United States can ensure that arms supplies would be transferred only to like-minded factions of the opposition — and it cannot — the risk of sectarian tensions spilling across the region will increase. Disintegration of the Syrian state will threaten its territorial integrity as well as Iraq's, particularly given each country's restive Kurdish populations.

The most immediate U.S. interest is disarming Syria of its weapons of mass destruction. As long as the Assad regime retains stockpiles of chemical weapons, it will be tempted to use them. If the opposition is victorious, these weapons could fall into the hands of extremists, considering their dominant role in the opposition's military wing.

Russia is unlikely to enable the opposition's goal of routing the Assad regime. In fact, Moscow is reportedly close to [selling advanced arms to Damascus](#). Yet Syrian disarmament through a U.N. framework would

broadly facilitate Moscow's goal of bolstering its global stature without undercutting the regime's position in the civil war.

The decision by Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov [to convene an international conference](#) is a positive first step. The conference should prioritize an agreement on disarmament issues, which would lead to a Security Council resolution authorizing a disarmament plan that includes a robust inspections regime.

Gaining support for Syrian disarmament will require inducements. Washington should be open to far-reaching initiatives that will encourage Alawite cooperation with the international community. Although U.S. credibility demands the ouster of Assad, U.S. acceptance of an Alawite region in a decentralized Syria would be reasonable.

The strategy can work only if the United States signals that the alternative to disarmament is not the status quo of lackluster American leadership. The Obama administration can point to bipartisan calls in Congress for arming the opposition as evidence that its threats are not idle. Domestic agitation for intervention will only grow as casualties mount.

The most obvious options to curtail the bloodshed in the near term could have problematic consequences down the line. Strikes against Syrian air defenses and the enforcement of a no-fly zone would boost the extremists in the opposition. A tougher line against Russia and Iran, which are stoking the fighting, could preclude their buy-in for a longer-term understanding to keep the conflict from spreading.

A U.S.-Russia deal on the relatively low-hanging fruit of disarmament could generate momentum for a broader political settlement. But if Moscow will not advance even an agenda as mutually beneficial as chemical weapons disarmament, the United States will need to consider next steps on the assumption that Russian assistance will not be forthcoming until battlefield realities change decisively.

With or without Russian assistance, any realistic plan to stabilize the situation will require far greater U.S. coordination with allies and regional partners. Even a tenuous settlement needs humanitarian relief to prevent refugee flows from destabilizing Jordan. Moderate political-military forces within the Syrian opposition need to be strengthened so they could eventually receive American arms. And regional talks on a settlement should explore the possibility of turning Syria into a federation with Sunni Arab, Kurdish and Alawite autonomous zones.

A strategy of Syrian disarmament dependent on a partner as unreliable as Russia is hardly ideal. But for now, it beats the alternatives.