



US to start arming Syrian rebels, but will it make much difference?

Some senior US military officials question the strategic value of sending small arms and ammunition to the Syrian rebels. But other options – including a no-fly zone – also carry concerns.

By: Anna Mulrine- June 15, 2013

Now that the White House says it has determined with “high certainty” that the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons against its people, the United States is planning to send small arms and ammunition to rebel groups there.

Analysts and high-ranking military officials within the Pentagon, however, are warning that this plan may have dangerous and unintended consequences, including drawing the United States into another war in the Middle East.

Arming rebels may also be of questionable strategic value, some senior US military officials argue, although they add that other military options – notably a no-fly zone – would come with serious concerns as well.

Syria “is awash in weapons,” says one senior Pentagon official who spoke on condition of anonymity. “The main thing is, will it make a difference?”

Rebels have been supplied with arms from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and other neighboring countries vying for influence in the region.

Sen. John McCain (R) of Arizona – one of the most outspoken advocates of establishing a no-fly zone and arming rebel groups with heavy anti-tank and anti-air weapons – acknowledged Friday on Fox News: “Just sending arms, very frankly, although they need them very badly ... is not going to change the situation on the ground.”

However, a no-fly zone would be “quite frankly, an act of war,” Gen. Philip Breedlove, NATO’s supreme allied commander, warned earlier this month.

Senior military officials, for their part, have argued that a no-fly zone would be of questionable strategic value since 10 percent of the casualties inflicted by the Syrian opposition have occurred through the use of air power. “The other 90 percent are by direct fire or by artillery,” said Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, at a Monitor breakfast in April.

Senior military officials are also concerned that a no-fly zone could inadvertently catapult the US into a more complex military operation than it had intended. “The question becomes, if you eliminate one capability of a potential adversary, will you be inclined to find yourself in a position to be asked to do more against the rest?” Dempsey said.

The Obama administration has ruled out a no-fly zone for now.

What might prove more helpful, according to the senior Pentagon official, are supplies like night vision goggles, body armor, and communications gear to help rebel factions coordinate with one another. The US has been considering such a move, but there are no firm plans.

Still, some warn against aiding rebel groups that include large numbers of Islamic fundamentalists and even some members with ties to Al Qaeda.

The Syrian rebel group Jabhat al-Nusra “has declared its affiliation to Al Qaeda and is the strongest military force on the rebel side,” notes James Paul, author of “Syria Unmasked” and the former executive director of the Global Policy Forum, a think tank that monitors the United Nations. “This does not bode well for democracy.”

The best hope for a resolution is a diplomatic push that would bring nonviolent democratic activists within Syria into the peace process, Mr. Paul says.

While such a diplomatic resolution seems like a “long shot,” Syria’s neighbors, including Iran, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, “all have a lot to lose by this continuing to spiral out of control, and none of them have a lot to win,” says Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute.

The decision that the Obama administration has made to arm rebels “is a halfway step,” he says. “I don’t think it’s very likely that providing light armaments will significantly change the balance.”

And in the event that the rebels continue to falter even with US arms, “the pressure comes to do more,” he says. “So it’s no longer a discussion of, ‘Does this make sense?’ It becomes, ‘Well, we’re committed.’ ”

The war in Syria “is awful,” Mr. Bandow adds. “Civil wars are the most awful and horrible kinds of conflict. But if we become involved, we’re looking at a very bad outcome. It’s a horrible situation.

“I don’t think the US can make it much less horrible by providing arms.”