

Published: March 8, 2012 Updated: 4:54 p.m.

Malou Innocent: U.S. should not arm Syria's rebels

Sending weapons to rebels might satisfy the outside world's moral urge to do something immediately, but it also might add to the mayhem, increase the loss of life and push Syria further away from a stable future.

By MALOU INNOCENT / Foreign policy analyst, Cato Institute

With the death toll in Syria now climbing above 7,500, and graphic videos and images of the bloodbath flooding the internet, some in Washington have called for arming the Syrian resistance. That option, compared to other alternatives like a NATO-led no-fly zone, seems antiseptic. But America's arming of rebels will amount to contributing to a worsening situation without a means of reaching a peaceful end state. Restraint, however unpalatable, is the most prudent option in an increasingly intractable situation.

First, there is no clear group in the resistance for Washington to provide arms to, even if that was the policy option chosen. No single group or leader speaks on behalf of Syria's resistance, especially in a country where political loyalty tends to hew to one's ethnicity, religion, sect, or clan. The Damascus-based National Coordination Committee, considered weak by some Syrian activists, is still willing to engage the regime in a power-sharing unity government.

The exile-based Syrian National Council rejects all contact with the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. SNC seeks recognition from the West, but is viewed by some as a vehicle for monopolizing the uprising. The Free Syrian Army, a disorganized mash-up of disparate rebel groups and government soldiers who have switched sides, has declared its allegiance to the SNC.

The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has said it's open to foreign intervention, at first emphasizing Muslim Turkey. Meanwhile, a large portion of Syrian Kurds see Turkey as a primary threat. These rifts persist amid reports of Sunni jihadists entering Syria from Iraq, and fears that al-Qaida may hijack what for many is a struggle for a democratic Syria.

Furthermore, as George Washington University Professor Marc Lynch and others have argued, "boosting rebel fighting capacity" is likely to crystallize Syria's internal polarization, and do little to weaken the Assad regime politically.

Flooding Syria with weapons, in a conflict the United Nations high commissioner for human rights has described as on the brink of civil war, might be used to justify a heavier government crackdown. U.S. assistance to rebels would vindicate Assad's narrative that the revolt is a conspiracy of outside forces, including the U.S., Israel, and the Gulf states. It could also stir Sunni elites in Damascus and the relatively quiescent Aleppo to rally around Assad, strengthening his support, rather than weakening it.

Lastly, the civil war won't end after arming one side. The most infamous instance of backlash was from the U.S. arming rebels in Afghanistan in the 1980s, a country that later turned into an al-Qaida sanctuary.

Today in Syria, the frenzy of foreign weapons pouring in has already resulted in a hot mess. Iranian and Russian arms, along with political support from Lebanon and Iraq, are going to the regime in Damascus and the large portion of minority Shia Alawites who support it. Arms and support from Qatar and Saudi Arabia back the majority Sunnis and other anti-Shia Islamist factions. Whatever this regional and international sectarian proxy war morphs into, Washington would do best to stay out of it.

Syria's deepening slide into civil war looks likely, which can be prevented only by either marshaling international opposition to the Assad regime, something Washington has already attempted to do, or encouraging more defections from within the regime, with the promise of resettlement and amnesty. The current diplomatic policy of waiting for the resistance to congeal and pledge to guard minority rights is prudent and should be pursued.

Sending weapons to rebels might satisfy the outside world's moral urge to do something immediately, but it also might add to the mayhem, increase the loss of life and push Syria further away from a stable future. Restraint is the more difficult choice, but the one that serves both the American and the Syrian people better in the long run.