

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

What If Arming Syrian Proxies Doesn't Work?

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October 7, 2016

A new poll finds that 55 percent of registered voters want soldiers in Iraq and Syria to fight ISIS while 36 percent are opposed. Support is strongest among Republicans (71 percent vs. 44 percent for Democrats, and 52 percent for Independents) and self-described Tea Party supporters (74 percent vs. 38 percent).

As with most polls, the question asked leads to answers that beget more questions. What exactly would the U.S. military do to fight ISIS in Iraq and Syria? What would it do that it is not doing already? How many troops? For how long? Did respondents know that there are several thousand U.S. troops already engaged in the fight? Probably not, since the Pentagon refuses to divulge the number publicly.

Another complication: the poll question focused on U.S. troops fighting ISIS in Iraq and Syria, but would respondents have favored working with Russia and the Syrian regime of Bashar Assad to defeat ISIS?

We may never know. The prospect of such a collaborative arrangement seems more remote than ever, following the collapse of an abortive ceasefire last month. The fate of the besieged Syrian town of Aleppo has soured U.S.-Russia relations, and it, not ISIS, is now the main focus for many outside commentators.

For the *Wall Street Journal*'s Daniel Henninger, Aleppo has become "Obama's Sarajevo," a humanitarian catastrophe that occurred on his watch, similar to the assault on the predominantly Muslim city in Bosnia in the early-1990s. Henninger concludes "the least we can do is arm people willing to fight to defend themselves."

He attributes Obama's reluctance to provide more assistance to the Syrian rebels to the Iran nuclear deal. That is where the president "spent all [his] political capital" "forestalling a long-term apocalypse in return for near-term disorders in the region."

Henninger doesn't say this, but it is worth noting that those "near-term disorders" include the collapse of the political order in several countries, not merely Syria. And the United States, of course, had a direct hand in fomenting the chaos in neighboring Iraq that ultimately gave rise to a viciously nihilistic group committed to establishing a so-called new caliphate. The emergence of the Islamic State also significantly complicated the situation on the ground in the civil war in Syria, then in its early stages.

Curiously, the words “ISIS,” “Islamic State,” “Daesh,” or “violent extremists,” never appear in Henninger’s column. Instead, he casts the state of play in Syria and the wider region in simple black and white hues. In the case of Aleppo, specifically, the people there are innocent victims, assailed by an unholy alliance between Assad’s teetering regime and Vladimir Putin’s Russia.

This portrayal is accurate – but incomplete. The sickening assault on this rebel city is being carried out using all manner of indiscriminate means, from barrel bombs to bunker busters. Hospitals have been targeted. The relentless wave of attacks has even destroyed, Henninger explains, three of the city’s four main water-pumping stations. The siege has resulted in shortages of food and medical supplies. As with any siege, innocent people are being made to suffer for the mere sin of living in a place that is defying the authority of the central state. The state is determined to crush the opposition, and send a message to any other city or village foolish enough to follow their example. Aleppo is to the Syrian Civil War as Atlanta was to the American Civil War.

If that particular historical analogy doesn’t work to color in the details of a particularly vexing problem for the Obama administration, hearken back to a more recent one. When elements of the nascent Islamic State threatened Iraqi government forces, many of the government troops fled, leaving behind the weapons given to them by the U.S. government. ISIS’s haul in the city of Ramadi in May 2015 included “tanks, armored personnel carriers and artillery pieces.” ISIS then attempted to use these weapons to consolidate its control in other parts of Iraq – including Iraq’s second-largest city of Mosul, which it had seized a year earlier. ISIS also pressed farther into Syria. In other instances, U.S.-armed rebels held onto their weapons, but shifted their allegiances to ISIS or other extremist groups, including the one-time al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra — now Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (Conquest of Syria Front). In other words, weapons handed over to proxies can and may be used against other U.S. allies in the region. Or even against American forces.

The carnage in Syria has claimed nearly a half million lives, and driven millions of people from their homes. No one disputes that the civil war there is a massive human tragedy. But that is no excuse to ignore the complexity of this multi-sided conflict. At a minimum, those calling for arming the Syrian rebels should admit to the risks that such a seemingly simple proposition entails, and also spell out what additional measures they would be willing to take if arming proxies doesn’t produce their preferred ends.

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