SYRIAN INTERVENTION
Policy Guidance

The crisis in Syria has evolved from the brutal repression of a small anti-government resistance into a conflict that increasingly resembles a civil war. Some in Washington have called for direct American military intervention. The Truman National Security Project believes in the principle of humanitarian intervention – but only in situations where our military action preserves more lives than it costs, and where we have the staying power to ensure a positive outcome.

In the case of Syria, we believe that most military intervention—from the establishment of safe havens to the provision of surface-to-air missiles—either directly risks civilian lives due to co-location of Syrian material with civilians, or through the risk of chemical weapons attacks by the Syrian regime. We also believe that the chances of post-Assad sectarian warfare are high enough to limit U.S. provision of weapons that could be instruments of ethnic cleansing. Finally, we are aware of the security risks of providing weapons that can then be turned against U.S. troops and allies: Afghanistan and Libya are both cases of such activity. However, we believe it is important to end the civil war as quickly as possible to reduce loss of civilian life, and to put America’s thumb on the scale in favor of the non-extremist rebel groups.

Therefore, the Truman National Security Project calls for:

- Provision of anti-tank weaponry to vetted Syrian rebels, of a caliber that is strong enough to enable rebel forces to fight the Syrian army, but less capable of penetrating U.S. armor;
- Enhanced provision of non-military equipment to rebels, such as communication equipment;
- Continued diplomatic action to assist the rebels in forming a transitional government with a viable plan for transition;
- Diplomatic action with regional allies to develop a unified plan for a post-Assad Syria;
- Continued and more public assistance to help the Syrian people fleeing to Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey with humanitarian relief and other assistance, including the establishment of a functional, legitimate post-war justice system.

The U.S. should work with the rebels, whenever possible, to marginalize extremist elements and empower the Syrian people. The toppling of Assad started organically in Syria; the future must also be Syrian-led.
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The United States should hasten the end of the Assad government by aiding the rebels—and helping to avoid a protracted civil war. We should provide non-lethal support, including medical supplies, rations, clothing, communications systems, basic battlefield command and control systems (including counter-battery radar that can help locate the sources of artillery fire), and intelligence as appropriate. By providing communication tools and opportunities, we can ensure that moderate groups stay empowered as the leaders of this revolution, and that their political voices are heard in post-Assad Syria.

We should provide the rebels with anti-tank weapons, which would give the opposition recourse against one of the government’s chief advantages: tanks and other heavily armored vehicles, and which would be of limited application in post-war sectarian violence. These should be of a caliber to penetrate Syria’s largely Russian-based tank armor, while not of a high-enough caliber to penetrate U.S. and allied armor.

We should not provide small arms or other “kinetic aid” to rebel forces. Though the Syrian government’s brutality makes arming the rebels a tempting option, this sort of aid could make the U.S. party to inter-Syrian violence that will likely follow the fall of the Assad regime, and could even prolong and intensify such violence. The rebel groups are fractured. An unknown percentage of these groups have been infiltrated by Islamist extremists, including possibly al-Qaeda (though promised Saudi and Qatari support for the armed rebels might have encouraged groups to posture as more Islamist in order to receive arms shipments). Significant differences exist among the armed opposition groups and could lead to prolonged conflict. Arming these factions might reduce the strength of the government’s war against its civilians, but increase the risk of ethnic cleansing in a post-Assad Syria.

The U.S. should not employ air power to enforce a no-fly zone or safe havens. Enforcing a no-fly zone without undue risk to NATO aircrew would require strikes against Syrian air defense systems, which are often located in close proximity to population centers. This means that a no-fly zone may cause as many civilian deaths as it prevents.

Using air power to establish—and defend—so-called “safe havens” within Syria presents even greater moral hazards. Encouraging civilians to seek refuge in an area that cannot be defended by the armed opposition alone invites the type of disaster that occurred in the Srebrenica “safe area” in 1993 during the Yugoslav Civil War. It is unlikely that the Free Syrian Army is capable of defending a safe haven against committed attack by heavily equipped regime forces. NATO air power could help with enforcement, but absent U.S. or allied ground forces capable of providing tactical control for supporting aircraft, there would be very high risk of unintended civilian casualties and incidents of friendly-fire.

Also, we believe Syrian threats to use chemical weapons in the case of foreign aggression are believable. The Syrian government has stated publicly that they possess chemical weapons and they would use them if “Syria is exposed to external aggression.” This could be interpreted as in
the event of traditional military intervention, or in reference to the armed opposition forces, which the regime has categorized as foreign-backed terrorists.

**The U.S. should be prepared to intervene if other options are exhausted in order to secure Syrian chemical weapons.** The Assad regime is reportedly in possession of one of the world’s largest stockpiles of chemical weapons, including Sarin, Tabun nerve agent, and VX gas. Delivery systems reportedly include gravity bombs, tube artillery and a variety of Surface-to-Surface missiles with effective ranges up to 600 km. Delivery systems, stockpiles, and manufacturing facilities are distributed across Syria, and media reports indicate that at least some weapons have been moved and prepared for possible deployment.

While there is no indication that the use of chemical weapons is imminent, it is not certain whether the Syrian regime will use them in the future. Clearly, pinpointing the locations of Syrian chemical weapons stockpiles and preventing those weapons from being used or leaving regime control must be a top U.S. priority. We must take all reasonable steps, including direct military action, if necessary, to ensure that chemical weapons do not fall into the hands of terrorists.

**The United States should work with relevant opposition groups to formulate a plan post-Assad transition.** The goal of American diplomacy should be to help the opposition plan to politically transition from the Assad regime to a legitimate, representative government inclusive of all Syrian communities. The U.S. should work with Syrian political stakeholders from across factions—civilians abroad, as well as the armed opposition inside the country—and encourage all parties to form a representative government that could sustain a post-Assad peace. The U.N. plan, led by Kofi Annan, has failed to stop the violence, but the U.S. cannot—and should not—be the sole arbiter of mediation. Regional states also have a long-term stake in Syria’s future. The U.S. should continue working to convene Syrian and international partners, especially Turkey through NATO, and the Arab League.

**The United States should continue to play an active role in mitigating the humanitarian crisis that this conflict has created.** As of June 2012, approximately 90,000 refugees had registered with the U.N. High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq. The London-based Strategic Communications and Research Centre (SCCR) put the figure at over 108,000 refugees since March 2011.

In the past year, the U.S. has committed approximately $52 million in assistance through U.N. agencies and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). In addition to ensuring these funds are delivered, the U.S. should continue to work with the governments of neighboring countries, especially Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey, to keep their air and land borders open to vulnerable Syrians. The U.S. should help these countries build the capacity necessary to deliver services throughout each country, including a tracking system to identify and protect targeted populations, especially children and women. The U.S. is offering Temporary Protective Status to Syrians through September 2013. Under this program, Syrians already residing in the United States will not be removed, and may request employment authorization. Finally, the U.S. should
offer asylum to victims of egregious human rights violations, such as rape and torture, as identified by U.N. agencies.

**Critical to this goal of a peaceful post-Assad transitional period will be the establishment of a functional, legitimate post-war justice system.** The U.S. should help Syrians devise a post-conflict system of justice that demonstrates a commitment to human rights and respect for international law. Such a system could deter war crimes and reprisals against minority communities.

**U.S. should increase political and economic pressure on the Assad regime,** including coordinating sanctions with international partners and imposing travel bans on members of the Assad family, the regime’s inner circle, and senior government officials. While the U.S. has significantly increased sanctions against the Assad government and regime elites, more should be done to ensure members of the Assad cabinet and other senior officials are currently applied, or individuals are designated as soon as they are appointed by Assad. This should extend to Syria’s two most prominent holding companies—Cham Holding and Souria Holding—and focus on investors, members of the Boards of Directors, subsidiary companies, and other relevant entities. The latest round of sanctions, enacted on July 18, 2012, included 25 cabinet ministers and other senior regime figures yet to be designated.

**SITUATION OVERVIEW**

**Recent rebel bombings and territorial seizure in Syria have given the Syrian conflict many of the characteristics of a civil war.** Pro-Assad forces are stretched thin, and the momentum seems to have shifted to the rebels, but so far anti-government forces have been unable to capitalize on successes. This suggests the situation is set for a protracted civil war. While it is widely believed that the collapse of the Assad regime is inevitable, this situation could continue for years, and destabilize neighboring countries, such as Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq. Meanwhile, as the fighting increases in the urban centers of Aleppo and Damascus, so does the death toll. If the conflict continues, and especially if a greater portion of the population becomes militarized, we can expect casualties to climb at an even faster rate. This is especially true if sectarian and ethnic divisions begin to play a greater role in the fighting.

**The Syrian military and security services have used indiscriminant violence and state-sanctioned brutality to eradicate the opposition.** Since March 2011, it is estimated that between 17,000 and 20,000 Syrians have been killed. The number of Syrians detained since March 2011 is estimated by the London-based Strategic Communications and Research Centre (SCCR) to be as high as 220,000. Human Rights Watch has identified 27 detention centers across Syria where intelligence agencies practice systemic torture, including against women, children, and the elderly. A July 3, 2012 Human Rights Watch report stated that these practices of abuse “clearly point to a state policy of torture” and constitute a “crime against humanity.”
While Syrian rebel groups have achieved significant tactical successes, the military balance remains skewed in the regime’s favor. The Free Syrian Army and associated groups are equipped with small arms and an assortment of rudimentary anti-tank weapons, primarily the RPG-7. These weapons are not sufficient to protect against tank attacks, if and when the regime decides it wishes to deploy them. However, tanks also have sight-line problems that reduce efficacy and maneuverability in cities. Therefore, forces are at a stalemate: rebels can control areas but cannot hold them should the regime decide to attack or encircle with tanks; the regime has difficulty deploying tanks within cities which the rebels can hold, but not leave. This analysis cannot account for morale and equipment maintenance issues, but it does set the stage for a prolonged war.

Calls for unilateral U.S. military action do not reflect American public opinion. A June 2012 Chicago Council survey indicates that 81% of Americans oppose sending U.S. troops into Syria. Meanwhile, Senators McCain, Graham, and Lieberman, along with prominent foreign policy groups, have called for unilateral U.S. military action. The Chicago Council poll shows that U.S. opinion is confused: 58% of Americans supporting a no-fly zone over Syria, but only 22% support bombing Syrian air defenses, a necessary prerequisite to enforcing a no-fly zone or conducting airstrikes against heavy weapons. The toppling of Assad began as an internal Syrian movement, and so too must Syria’s future be determined by Syrians.

Other leaders, in and outside the Beltway, are embracing a Realist approach, suggesting that Syria “isn’t our problem.” This cynical attitude is antithetical to America’s legacy as a defender of human rights. It also ignores the very real threats that Syria poses to American security. The Assad regime is an ally of Iran, a terrorist supporter, and is reportedly in possession of one of the world’s largest stockpiles of chemical weapons, including Sarin gas, Tabun nerve agent, and VX gas. If these weapons fell into the hands of radical elements in Syria, it could lead to disaster for Syria, regional allies, and the United States.

However, no unified political entity is set to replace the Assad government. Forces opposing the Assad regime hail from multiple ethnic, geographic, and religious groups which are at times in violent disagreement regarding the country’s future. Syria is a majority Sunni Muslim country, but President Assad and many senior government figures are Alawites, a minority sect of Islam. This includes senior figures in the military and security establishment and many business elites tied to the regime. There is also a sizable Christian minority, comprised of various denominations, that is an important pillar of the traditional merchant class in both Damascus and Aleppo, Syria’s second largest city and commercial center. These geographic differences and local affinities are important fault lines in Syrian society, creating isolated pockets such as the pro-regime Alawites on the northwest coast. A unified vision for Syria that represents and respects the aspirations of these constituencies has yet to emerge. Absent a political consensus among such a diverse opposition, there is a high risk of prolonged fighting between constituencies to determine the future of Syria.

This Policy Memo reflects the views of the Truman National Security Project and does not necessarily reflect the opinions of Truman National Security Project Members.