

COMMENTARY

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The Friends of Syria Credibility Gap

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Two recent developments illustrate the widening gap between what is needed in Syria and what the Friends of Syria are actually willing to do. On 15 April, the heads of five United Nations agencies—the World Health Organization, UNICEF, the Office of the Coordinator of Humanitarian Assistance, the World Food Program, and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees—issued a joint appeal to the international community to do more to end the “cruelty and carnage” in Syria. Five days later, only eleven delegations showed up for the Friends of Syria meeting in Istanbul, confirming the downward trend for the grouping that had attracted 114 nations and fifteen international organizations in December 2012.

There is considerably more than attendance records to underline that the commitment of the Friends of Syria is waning, or at least has reached its upper limits. At a news conference the day after the Istanbul meeting, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry warned the Syrian regime that it faces its “last chance” to accept a political solution to the conflict, failing which “the Friends of Syria group will step up aid to the opposition.” But in reality there appears to be very little that the Friends of Syria can, or will, actually do.

This is evident in relation to three issues: arming the opposition, importing oil from fields seized by the Syrian rebels, and increasing humanitarian assistance in line with the exponential growth of the number of Syrians in need inside the country or those seeking refuge outside.

Calls to arm the opposition have multiplied as the Syrian conflict has intensified and the human cost has risen. Providing the rebels with more sophisticated anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons would certainly improve their defensive capabilities, if supplied in significant quantities and coupled with training, but their real problem is weak command and control and fragmentation. The most effective rebel groups have been those who attacked regime air bases rather than wait for anti-aircraft missiles that never arrive; usually it is the Islamist brigades that have done the most with what they already have.

The Syrian National Coalition of Revolutionary and Opposition Forces and the allied Higher Military Council have not helped their case by shifting from requesting man-portable anti-aircraft and anti-tank systems to demanding heavy weapons that no external actor is ready to provide and that the opposition is unable to deploy and protect inside Syria. In Istanbul the National Coalition additionally called on the Friends of Syria to “conduct drone strikes on regime missile launch sites, impose a no-fly zone and protect the northern and southern border to ensure the safe return of Syrian refugees,” although they clearly have no intention of doing so.

In reality, arming the opposition is seen as the “cheap option” for external actors who have no intention of intervening militarily in Syria. But even so, the U.S. and the European Union have been reluctant to embark on such a step. France and the UK have led the charge to not renew the European Union’s blanket embargo on arms to Syria at the end of May, in order to allow the arming of the opposition, but this is posturing by governments that know they can neither tip the military balance inside Syria on their own nor persuade their U.S. and NATO allies to do so.

The European Union engaged in yet another public relations gesture on 22 April, by easing its embargo on the import of Syrian crude oil and petroleum products from opposition-held areas. But this would require cooperation among rival rebel groups that have already clashed on several occasions for control of oil fields, and overlooks the fact that the regime maintains control over the country’s two refineries. Exporting oil also depends on secure access to neighbouring countries, and these routes will remain highly vulnerable to regime air strikes or sabotage.

But the most serious shortcoming of the Friends of Syria has been in the area where they can help the most: humanitarian assistance. Although individual countries have steadily increased their contribution—with the U.S. committing US\$385 million by mid-April—actual disbursement has declined relative to growing need. Out of US\$1.5 billion in humanitarian assistance pledged at the January donor conference in Kuwait, only 20 per cent has been disbursed. And virtually none of the assistance that was to be channelled through the National Coalition has materialized.

The Friends of Syria are responding in part to the continuing ineffectiveness of the National Coalition, but their declarations of support have also lost credibility. For example, Kerry stated in Istanbul that “we all committed that the aid and assistance from every country will go through the Supreme Military Command and [its head] General [Salim] Idris,” but there is no indication that it will receive the US\$35-40 million that Idris said it needs each month. Similarly, the opposition’s provincial council for Aleppo estimates that it needs US\$10 million a month to provide basic services for nearly four million people it claims to assist, but even this form of civilian assistance is not forthcoming from the Friends of Syria, despite repeated promises over the past year.

Instead, the Friends of Syria urged the National Coalition to provide guarantees for Syria’s minorities, support political pluralism, renounce terrorism, and safeguard chemical weapons. Though commendable, the first three items are not urgent priorities, whereas the fourth is clearly beyond the ability of the Coalition or rebels to deliver at present. The U.S. announced a doubling of its non-lethal assistance to the Syrian rebels, but this was evidently not enough to dissuade

National Coalition chairman Moaz al-Khatib from confirming his resignation, which had been on hold since late March.

The Friends of Syria appear to be at a crossroads. They have limited means or desire to confront the Syrian regime over its possible use of chemical weapons, and may have to depend on Russia for assistance in this regard. This helps explain the support, announced in Istanbul, to negotiation with the Syrian regime within the framework of the Geneva Accord of 30 June 2012, in a clear move to meet Russian preferences.

Kerry warned that aid to the opposition would be stepped up if the Syrian regime failed to take advantage of this “last chance” for a political solution, but it is the National Coalition that in fact is on notice. The Friends of Syria will not yet abandon the National Coalition openly, but the Coalition might well question the wisdom of having friends like these.

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