

Syria Deeply

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Where's a Real Solution on Syria?

By Jared Genser

Washington – For the Assad regime, it's business as usual. In the wake of the U.S.-Russia deal on Syrian chemical weapons, the Syrian regime has stepped up its indiscriminate assault, using conventional bombs and artillery.

On Sept. 29, just four days after the U.N. Security Council adopted a resolution demanding the eradication of Syria's chemical weapons, the regime targeted a secondary school in the city of Raqqa. The air strike, which had a death toll of at least 16, 10 of whom were students, was executed as inspectors prepared to enter the country to begin destroying chemical stockpiles.

The attack brings to life the irony of the chemical weapons deal, which has legitimized Bashar al-Assad by making him the partner of the international community, and has allowed him to continue committing mass-atrocity crimes using cluster bombs, napalm and phosphorous. The Syrian people, meanwhile, remain entrenched in the lethal deadlock of civil war.

There is certainly value in the Security Council having adopted a unanimous resolution requiring Assad to disclose and surrender his stockpile. Removing chemical weapons from his arsenal is a worthy pursuit, and thus far, according to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, he has cooperated in rendering inoperable 21 of the country's 23 chemical weapons sites (although reports suggest that he may have failed to disclose some of the country's weapons).

It's just that the Syrian people, who have suffered for almost 1,000 days with the reality of an increasingly brutal civil war, deserve so much more. They deserve a sustainable political settlement that provides for an inclusive Syria. Instead, the international community has focused on putting a band-aid fix on one relatively small element of the conflict – chemical weapons have killed roughly 1,400 out of more than 120,000 victims – while there are 9.3 million Syrians requiring help from the U.N. and other aid organizations. All the Security Council has been able to muster in response to the humanitarian crisis is a presidential statement

declaring its “grave concern” and requesting all sides provide access. But as long as there is no plan for bringing an end to the war, these numbers will only increase.

Accordingly, in the month and a half since the deal was put in place, the Assad regime has only intensified its brutal assault, with rebel strength eroding as Assad’s forces make slow but gradual gains. Last week, for example, Assad’s forces recaptured the town of Safira, a significant setback for the rebels. And the regime has repeatedly blocked access for the delivery of humanitarian relief.

The next steps forward should be guided by the principle that the U.S. needs a clearly articulated strategy on Syria that is sustainable and protects its national interests in the long term. The time has come to reassure moderate opposition groups, namely the Syrian National Council (SNC) and Free Syrian Army, that the U.S. supports them in their struggle to overcome mounting threats posed by al-Qaida-linked groups, and to work towards a negotiated settlement.

Towards this end, the U.S. should first provide increased resources, including weaponry, food, medical aid and training on governance to vetted opposition groups. Bolstering support for these groups is the only way Assad will feel any pressure to step down. This is only more urgent in light of credible reports of mass atrocities committed by Islamist rebels. In addition, the U.S. should transfer responsibility for these supply routes from the CIA to the Pentagon, which would make its support of these groups more public and allow for greater efficiency in arming them. In addition, by helping to arm the rebels, the U.S. can help rebuild its relations with its Persian Gulf allies, and Saudi Arabia in particular.

Second, the U.S. needs to rethink its approach to the Geneva II peace conference on Syria, a gathering that will reconvene the five permanent members of the Security Council along with the Syrian parties. Originally set for Nov. 23, the conference has been postponed as diplomats failed to agree on a date. Increasingly, it looks as if December is the earliest that the conference could take place, with roadblocks such as whether Iran should be permitted to attend making further delay likely. With this in mind, the U.S. should urge the opposition to form a delegation under the leadership of the SNC and attend the talks with no preconditions. The U.S. can pressure moderate opposition groups to participate by establishing an incentive scheme that offers increased support contingent upon the achievement of key steps in the negotiation process. While the SNC understandably wants a guaranteed political transition as a prerequisite for discussions, any settlement must start by getting all sides to the table.

Finally, millions of Syrians despise Assad, but are still wondering if what might replace him would be better or worse. The U.S. should encourage and support the SNC to establish an alternate and more broadly representative government inside Syria, which would lay the foundation for a transition. Doing so would provide a viable alternative to those who are hesitant to support Assad and allow pro-democracy rebel groups to boost their domestic capacity and international credibility.

The use of chemical weapons in Syria was a defining moment that mobilized the Security Council to address this most visible of threats facing Syrian civilians. But by acting in such a narrow fashion, Assad has by implication been emboldened to continue killing civilians by use of conventional weapons. The time has come for us to protect the Syrian people from further atrocities by bringing a decisive end to this war. We must act before it is too late.

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