



Syria's crisis: a credible threat is what is needed

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The escalation of regime violence is not a response to the rise of an armed opposition, but the reaction of the Assad regime to a popular uprising that has demonstrated remarkable resilience. Without a credible threat, ['Weapons vs. Negotiations'](#) [12] is a false choice.

Also in this [oS Analysis](#) [9] debate:

[Mariano Aguirre](#) [13], on why force would intensify the conflict. Read Mariano Aguirre's [response](#) [14] to this critique, and [Richard Matthews](#) [15] on the decades-long consequences of militarization.

About the authors

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UN and Arab League Special Envoy Kofi Annan has sharply criticized the Syrian government for its failure to honour its pledge to implement the UN-backed peace plan for Syria that bears his name. Annan's rebuke to the Assad regime followed similarly critical comments from UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon and many other world leaders who have watched with growing dismay as regime forces continue their massive campaign of violence against peaceful Syrian protesters and deepen the reign of terror they have imposed across the country. Accurate figures are hard to come by, but conservative estimates indicate that more than 700 Syrian civilians have been killed since April 12, the date a UN-sponsored ceasefire agreement was supposed to go into effect. Thousands more have been wounded. Additional thousands have been arbitrarily arrested. Tens of thousands have fled Syria for refugee camps in southern Turkey. Senior officials from the US, Europe, and Turkey

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have declared the Annan plan a failure. Syrian opposition groups have formally requested that the UN Security Council follow suit, and reject any further support for an initiative that has bought the Syrian regime more time to continue its onslaught.

In his article of April 7, [Syria's Crisis: Weapons vs. Negotiations](#) [13], Mariano Aguirre argues that negotiations are the preferred means for bringing the bloody Syrian uprising to an end. He outlines the possible negative effects associated with the militarization of the Syrian opposition, and the potentially destructive consequences of foreign intervention, even if undertaken to establish safe zones. These consequences include sectarianism, the fragmentation of Syrian society, Islamist extremism, the consolidation of militias, the loss of any moral superiority that the opposition might possess as a result of its commitment to nonviolence, and the displacement of diplomacy onto the imperatives of force. He argues that advocates of militarization or intervention (two very different things that have become conflated in Aguirre's article) have blurred the distinction between ending the violence and changing the regime. Our priority should be the first, Aguirre argues, not the second, even if this means accepting that the Assad regime will remain in power into the indefinite future.

We share many of Aguirre's concerns. And so do most Syrians, who continue to confront heavily armed troops with banners saying *silmiyya!* (peaceful). Yet we disagree deeply with his analysis, and with some of his conclusions. Aguirre's article suggests that external actors have the capacity to determine whether the Syrian opposition becomes militarized. He conveys the impression that it is these actors, whether Arab, western, or Turkish, who will bring about the destructive consequences he associates with the militarization of the opposition. He views the opposition as responsible, in its pursuit of the means to defend civilians, for the escalation of violence that the Syrian uprising has experienced over the past year. He has little to say about the Assad regime's use of force and its culpability for the militarization of the uprising. Nor does he address the increasing desperation with which Syrians themselves plead for protection from their government, or the possibility that Syrians might have a different view about the morality of nonviolence having experienced the regime's brutality for the past fifteen months. Instead, Aguirre argues, quite mistakenly in our view, that the regime is looking for a way out, and is open to negotiation if only the right inducements to negotiate can be found, and could be persuaded to agree to a transition that might include the departure of President Assad from power. In several respects, Aguirre's cautions are justified. We also view external military intervention as potentially unleashing a cascade of dangerous consequences, ushering in the open-ended presence of foreign troops in a fraught and politically fragile post-conflict Syria. He captures accurately the risks associated with the establishment of safe zones, risks that responsible advocates of this position widely acknowledge even if they disagree that such a move would inevitably fail. We also accept that external support for the armed opposition could pave the way for an expanded military role, though we differ about the claim that one must inevitably lead to the other. In many other respects, however, we find Aguirre's assumptions and conclusions to be dangerously misguided. The conditions that he views as the effects of external support for the armed opposition are already occurring, including the deepening of sectarianism, social and territorial fragmentation, and the emergence of militias. Indeed, his warnings against civil war are well taken, except that with over 11,000 killed in the space of one year, Syria's plight already classifies as a civil war, however defined.[1] This has resulted not from external intervention, but from the internal dynamics of a popular uprising that has been shaped by the violence and sectarian polarization that are centerpieces of the regime's efforts to divide and defeat its opponents while reinforcing the fears of non-Muslim minorities.

In the same sense, the escalation of regime violence is not a response to the rise of an armed opposition, but the reaction of the Assad regime to a popular uprising that has demonstrated remarkable resilience. The regime's insistence on the asymmetrical use of violence predates the rise of the armed opposition. It has been evident from the first days of the uprising in the regime's attacks on peaceful demonstrators in Dar'a, which reportedly killed 623 persons in the uprising's first three months alone.[2] It has defined the regime's response to every regional and international diplomatic initiative seeking to end the violence and begin some kind of negotiations. Communities that had the temerity to welcome the protection offered by the Free Syrian Army (FSA)

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have paid a heavy price, even though, to be sure, the FSA has not always acted responsibly in its own use of force.^[3] Yet to view militarization as a driver of regime violence rather than a legitimate and, to a large extent, desperate response of vulnerable and cornered Syrian citizens to the brutal acts of an illegitimate regime is an especially blatant case of blaming the victim for the deeds of the perpetrator. Peaceful resistance may in many cases be effective, and is always desirable. But when forces of repression, as in Syria, simply continue their onslaught against peaceful protestors and defecting soldiers alike, armed resistance becomes inevitable, to save one’s own life and that of others, and to stop the regime from wiping out popular demands for change; even the staunchest proponents of “unarmed insurrections” and “nonviolent change” cannot provide guarantees under such circumstances.^[4] Given that defections have not brought about the collapse of security forces or an end to their atrocities,—encouraging soldiers to defect becomes disingenuous, and ultimately ineffective, if it is not accompanied by protections for those who heed such calls, including by armed means if needed.

In taking his line, Aguirre intends, in part, to argue that militarization won’t deter the regime, and may in fact make things worse. Is this true? As long as the opposition remains severely outgunned we will never know. But armed insurrections are not doomed to fail simply because morally we would have preferred them to be peaceful. Given their dire circumstances, all Syrian activists can hope for is that they will be among the 26 percent of militarized challengers who researchers on techniques of resistance worldwide found to have achieved their goals. What we can say with confidence, however, is that the regime has made it adamantly clear that it will not permit Syrians to join the ranks of the 47 percent of unarmed challengers who succeed.^[5] There are good reasons to take seriously the argument that the regime’s willingness to escalate violence is a direct result of the contempt it feels toward regional and international diplomatic initiatives, and the absence of any credible deterrent, including from an armed opposition, in a conflict in which the regime’s external allies—Iran, Russia, Hezbollah, and China—are prepared to sustain its military capacity while its critics have refused to provide the opposition with weapons and have publicly proclaimed that military intervention is “off the table”.

Indeed, it may well be the international community’s failure to adopt a responsible approach to militarization that has contributed to the outcomes about which Aguirre is most concerned. At present, weapons are flowing into Syria through informal and unregulated channels that provide for no accountability in the kinds of weapons provided, to whom they go, and how they will be used. The rise of lawlessness and criminality among poorly-led armed opposition groups, some of which has sectarian overtones, is one result of the unregulated ways in which militarization has proceeded. In addition, the current process of militarization exacerbates the fragmentation of the opposition, undermining incentives for armed groups to accept the authority of the Syrian National Council or other civilian authorities. The question we face at this point, therefore, is not a false choice between non-violence and militarization—which as Syrians have shown us over and over are not zero-sum options—but whether the development of organized and regulated frameworks for the management of militarization offers us some hope of bringing the armed opposition under a degree of command and coordination that would reinforce the principle of civilian control over armed actors, and could require the adoption and enforcement of discipline on and accountability by the armed opposition that would constrain criminality by its members.

Will militarization undermine prospects for diplomacy? Will it displace viable options for a negotiated solution to Syria’s crisis? We are skeptical. Our experience as observers of the Assad regime persuades us that it perceives itself to be winning its current struggle for survival, has no interest in or intent to negotiate, either with the opposition or international mediators, and remains committed to suppressing dissent by any means necessary. In times of authoritarian ‘peace’ and in the midst of today’s unprecedented popular challenge to its survival alike, it has proved itself to be adaptive, imaginative and, thus far, resilient in facing down dissent, in sharp contrast with common perceptions of it being ‘out of touch with reality’ and bound to wither. It has shown no indication that it is prepared to contemplate a political transition. Every diplomatic initiative over the past year that has assumed otherwise has failed because of regime intransigence, including the Annan plan.

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Even proliferating sanctions, although hurting the Syrian economy, have failed to give diplomacy the ‘teeth’ it needs. Until the governments that seek an end to this crisis recognize the limits of diplomacy, they will simply be playing into the regime’s hands. What is missing today is precisely the kind of credible threat that could make diplomacy effective: an armed opposition, acting under civilian control, with accountability and a command structure appropriate to an insurgency.

We share Aguirre’s call for ‘saving lives and infrastructure,’ but it will have to be via managing militarization, and hence by supporting armed groups; not by putting one’s faith in a negotiated settlement unlikely to be reached, even less likely to hold, and certain to allow the Syrian regime to continue its massacres.

[1] One could quarrel about the applicability of the term ‘civil war’ and in reference to the ‘one-sided state killings’ opt instead for ‘state-led massacres’.

See http://www.correlatesofwar.org/COW2%20Data/WarData_NEW/NonStateWars_Codebook.pdf [17]

[2] The estimate is by the opposition website “Syrian Shuhada”. See:

<http://syrianshuhada.com/Default.asp?a=st&st=20>

[3] See Human Rights Watch, “Syria: Armed Opposition Groups Committing Abuses,” 20 March 2012, at <http://www.hrw.org/node/105885> [18]

[4] See e.g. Sharon Erickson Nepstad, *Nonviolent Revolutions: Civil Resistance in the Late 20th Century*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 14-16.

[5] See Maria J. Stephan and Erica Chenoweth, “Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict,” *International Security*, Vol 33 (1), 2008, 7-44.

Sideboxes

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