

RELEASE IN PART
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From: H <hrod17@clintonemail.com>
Sent: Wednesday, August 22, 2012 1:50 PM
To: Oscar Flores
Subject: Fw: view from the field on emerging arguments for a Syria no-fly zone

Pls print for me.

From: Sullivan, Jacob J [mailto:SullivanJJ@state.gov]
Sent: Tuesday, August 21, 2012 04:48 PM
To: H
Subject: FW: view from the field on emerging arguments for a Syria no-fly zone

Worth a read.

From: Tom Malinowski [mailto:]
Sent: Tuesday, August 21, 2012 2:21 PM
To: donilonte@state.gov; McDonough, Denis R. []; Rice, Susan E (USUN); brhodes; Burns, William J; Sullivan, Jacob J; Blinken, Antony J. []; derek.chollet []; ssimon []; spompe []; spower []; bmckeon []; Ford, Robert S
Subject: view from the field on emerging arguments for a Syria no-fly zone

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Dear all,

For the last several weeks, we have had a team in northern Syria, documenting government attacks, monitoring opposition conduct, and establishing relationships with rebel commanders. Unlike in Libya, we've not been able to do this until recently, which is why we have been cautious in making recommendations to you. But now that we've spent some time on the ground, I wanted to convey some of our team's initial conclusions on what is to be done. In short, they went in extremely skeptical about the merits of any sort of military intervention, but have come to believe that the situation is evolving in ways that argue strongly in favor of establishing a no-fly zone.

First, as we've all seen, the regime has significantly increased its use of air power. It has done so not just to hit FSA positions on the front lines in cities like Aleppo. Of even greater concern, while our team was there, they recorded daily strikes on smaller towns and villages in the countryside across northern Aleppo province, as well as Idlib, Homs, the Lattakiya mountains, etc. These strikes kill scores of civilians (see our report on the strike in Azaz, in which jets used extremely heavy ordnance and flattened a residential block the size of a football field) and do not give government forces any immediate, direct military advantage. Their aim appears to be to draw FSA fighters away from front line positions in places like Aleppo city – all of them have families in the countryside, and when bombings happen the fighters rush back home to help.

Second, though of course we cannot be certain of this, it is our team's assessment that the rebel forces are now strong enough, due to their numbers, growing experience, and sheer determination (despite disorganization and lack of heavy weapons) that they could hold significant amounts of territory in northern Syria if regime air power – and air power alone -- were taken off the table. Air power – fixed wing and helicopter – is allowing the regime to strike in places behind the front lines that its ground forces for now cannot penetrate. Many strikes have targeted opposition "headquarters" that are in fact buildings used by newly established civilian administrations, relief committees, courts, prisons, etc. They are making it harder

for the opposition to establish governance over territory it would otherwise securely control. And as mentioned above, they divert rebels from front line positions, so that air strikes in one location potentially allow regime ground forces or militia to move in for the kill elsewhere.

A few weeks ago, we would have said that a no-fly zone alone would be useless in Syria; that any military intervention, to be effective, would at least have to establish a no-drive zone, taking out artillery and tanks being used to besiege opposition strongholds. Having spent time with numerous opposition leaders, and seen how rebel forces have held out in Aleppo neighbourhoods despite constant pounding, our team came away with the sense that this has changed – that taking out air power alone could allow the opposition to establish and consolidate a true safe area in the north. This would bring tremendous benefits – protection from atrocities, security for humanitarian aid (of which we've seen virtually none), space for the opposition to come together politically, with international support, on Syrian soil, and a place for IDPs from other parts of Syria to go.

Third, the window for establishing a healthy relationship with the emerging rebel leadership in the north is now very much open, but won't be forever. A while back, when they were advancing in Aleppo, the rebels were feeling that they could win on their own. They realize now, in part because of the regime's use of air power, that it won't be that easy, and that they need help. At the same time -- indeed, as a result -- anti-American sentiment is growing, much more now than at the start of the uprising. One of our folks reports: "We could feel this in all our meetings with them over the last weeks. When we were talking to the head of the Revolutionary Council in Northern Aleppo about the Geneva Conventions, he cut us off, saying 'don't come here offering us your western values after you haven't done anything to help us.'" We were still able eventually to get on more reasonable grounds with this commander, and others – these guys are still willing to listen and to learn, in part because they still haven't given up on western support. But any hope of persuading them on this or other issues we all care about will diminish if help is not forthcoming; they'll listen more to the Saudis and Qataris, and, yes, to the jihadis. BTW, our team reports that the jihadi influence is minimal for now – the FSA is using them "because they are crazy fighters," but they agree with the general assessment that the longer this goes on, the stronger radical forces will become.

My own sense is that nothing would more effectively establish American and international support for the opposition, and the influence that will bring, than a no-fly zone. You can send in all the comms equipment, or guns and ammo, in the world, and still not get credit, given the hands that stuff passes through – not to mention that you can't control where it all goes. Planes in the sky, as we saw in Libya, would send a dramatically stronger signal (in addition to tangible force), while allowing the Syrian rebels to retain ownership of their struggle on the ground. This should be accompanied by working with rebel authorities in the protected area on institution-building, justice, and humanitarian assistance. Whoever will deliver this combination will have influence over Syria for years to come.

I recognize that the cavalry is not suited up and ready to ride, and that the mission would be far from simple or cost-free, even if limited to no-fly. But in the meantime, even maintaining a credible threat of action would have a positive impact. Our team reports that Secretary Clinton's visit to Turkey produced not just hopes on the rebel side, but also apprehension on the gov't side, including a lull in air attacks (indeed, our folks used this window to move around more freely). But then the attacks – especially aerial bombing – seemed to spike again after Secretary Panetta said that a no-fly zone was not on the front burner. Local activists and leaders we work with were upset – not so much by the substance of this statement (they don't expect immediate action), but by the fact that he made it publicly, which, they felt, suggested to government forces that they could carry on.

In conversations with many of you in the last year, you have understandably expressed concern about taking any dramatic action to intervene in the Syrian crisis without knowing what would come next. I can't chart a definitive path from the establishment of a no-fly zone to a political transition in Damascus and a stable Syria. But one might also ask: Could a limited military intervention (in this case more limited than what you carried out brilliantly in Libya) achieve limited objectives that would do more good than harm in Syria, consistent with American interests, even if it had to be sustained over time? I think that the answer to that question is more likely to be "yes" today than it was a few weeks or months ago, because of the evolution in the conflict described above. A safe zone, protected by grounding Syrian air power, would bring immediate and tangible benefits for hundreds of thousands of threatened people and secure U.S. influence with the rebels and in a post-Assad Syria. And every scenario we can imagine for finishing the job – whether an agreement brokered by the UN or the Russians, or accelerating defections leading to a regime collapse, would at least be more likely if there were a dramatic shift in the balance of forces on the ground. The alternative is to hope for the same outcome, but with less chance of success in the foreseeable future, and far greater loss of life and of U.S. influence over what Syria will become.

Best,

Tom