

West Can Ill Afford to Get It Wrong on Syria

By [Moritz Pieper](#)

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Clients are not necessarily friends, and they may even become enemies.

This is among the enduring realities of war, and the Syrian conflict is a prime example of why foreign governments need to proceed with caution and restraint.

In March, Eliot Engel, the ranking member of the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs, introduced a measure aimed at providing arms to the Syrian rebels. At the same time, France and Britain have been the leading voices in the EU for lifting an arms embargo on Syria so that weapons can be supplied to the opposition.

But perhaps they will be more circumspect now that the al-Nusra Front, the most effective fighting group in the Syrian opposition, has publicly pledged its loyalty to al-Qaida. Moreover, in early March, and again recently in early May, the rebels took UN peacekeepers hostage in the Golan Heights, of all places, demonstrating a real lack of discipline, awareness, and common sense.

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This must have been quite embarrassing for those, like U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, who asserted that the rebels were being thoroughly vetted before being armed. Russian warnings against the lifting of the embargo on military supplies to the Syrian opposition are to be explained precisely by this blatant lack of controllability. Statements coming from Moscow about the prevalence of international terrorists and drug traffickers in Syria stand indicative of Russia's apprehensions about joining the increasingly fierce Western voices against Syrian President Bashar Assad. The recent Western rhetoric about an alleged use of chemical weapons on the part of Assad's forces has the potential to generate a diplomatic stand-off between such diametrically opposite conceptions of what constitutes a 'red line'.

History need not be distant to provide useful guidance to those who conceive policy and those who implement it. The recent past can also be quite telling. In the case of the rebel groups in Syria, the handwriting has been on the wall for more than 18 months. These are all groups with markedly different command structures, agendas, allegiances, and modes of operation. They are united only in the belief that the continued presence of the Assad regime prevents them from realizing whatever narrowly defined goals they may have in and for Syria.

In effect, the Syrian National Coalition remains a desperately fragmented opposition. And it is rather surprising that many countries in the West have decided to outsource regime change to such a motley crew. They cannot be controlled. They cannot be effectively vetted. General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, iterated recently that the U.S. lacks a firm understanding of the Syrian opposition. Back to the vetting board, Mr. Kerry. And welcome to reality, Mr. Engel.

It comes as no surprise, then, that the U.S. has now shifted its approach and is emphasizing the need to pursue a negotiated political settlement to the conflict. Washington's clandestine support and training of the rebel opposition (via Jordan) has backfired, and in the worst possible way. The extremist elements of the opposition have steadily gained control of more territory, and have given every indication that Syria is not the end game, but merely the next domino. This is surely to be among the principal points of emphasis in the forthcoming peace conference recently announced by the U.S. and Russia following John Kerry's visit to Moscow in early May.

It remains to be seen whether Ghassan Hitto, the provisional prime minister, will be able to effectively manage both the political element of the opposition and those who are fighting on the ground. The longer the conflict endures, the less palatable the rebels and their actions are likely to become. For Russia, Libya set a dangerous precedent of the West overstepping a United Nations Security Council mandate. In this vein, Moscow urges the Friends of Syria group to abstain from pursuing interests that will plunge Syria into a catastrophically

unstable situation, much like Israel's foray into the tangled web of Lebanese politics over three decades ago.

All of this leaves Iran, Syria's last steadfast regional ally, even more isolated. On a broader level of regional power dynamics, Syria has evolved into a proxy issue for fundamentally diverging conceptions of the future regional order in the Middle East. While Shiite Iran continues to support the Alawite minority of the Assad regime publicly, logistically in terms of combatant training it is Saudi Arabia and Qatar that are openly backing the Salafists in the Syrian opposition — despite repeated claims to the contrary. It should indeed provide food for thought that European societies are debating the Salafist threat to their societal cohesion, while Western governments are backing precisely those forces in the Middle East that openly promote the regional diffusion of the very same ideology.

The West and its allies in the region cannot afford to get this one wrong. There is far too much at stake, and politics is perhaps the most insignificant piece of this increasingly complex puzzle.

The spheres of influence and control of the modern Middle East was crafted under the secret Sykes-Picot agreement between the governments of Britain and France, and with the assent of Russia, during World War I. Now is no time to repeat the errors of the past that have both created and sustained the conflicts that have defined this region for nearly a century. This is the end of the Sykes-Picot world.

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