

How Syria Is Becoming Bosnia
By David Rohde, New York Times
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Typhoid and hepatitis outbreaks are spreading. An estimated 70,000 people are dead, and another 850,000 are refugees. After covering the battle for Damascus for a month, photographer Goran Tomasevic of Reuters declared the situation a “bloody stalemate.”

“I watched both sides mount assaults, some trying to gain just a house or two, others for bigger prizes, only to be forced back by sharpshooters, mortars or sprays of machine-gun fire,” Mr. Tomasevic, a gifted and brave photographer, wrote in a chilling first-hand account. “As in the ruins of Beirut, Sarajevo or Stalingrad, it is a sniper’s war.”

Many analysts believe the Obama administration’s policy toward Syria is a failure.

Iran, Hezbollah and Russia are funneling more aid, armaments and diplomatic cover to Bashar al-Assad. And Syrian rebels who once hailed the United States now loathe it.

Across the country, pro-Assad forces use airplanes, Scud ballistic missiles and artillery to level rebel controlled neighborhoods. While Syrian insurgents fight with the tragi-comic “D.I.Y. weapons” displayed in this Atlantic slide show.

In an incisive essay published last week in the London Review of Books, Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, a journalist with the Guardian, described the continued atomization of the Syrian opposition.

Mr. Abdul-Ahad, an Iraqi who covered the dissolution of his own nation, freely admits that “we in the Middle East have always had a strong appetite for factionalism.” But then he delivers a damning description of how prevarication in Washington creates deepening anti-Americanism among the rebels.

“Why are the Americans doing this to us?” one rebel commander demands. “They told us they wouldn’t send us weapons until we united. So we united in Doha. Now what’s their excuse?”

In the meantime, hard-line jihadists and their funders in the Persian Gulf are filling the void.

“Maybe we should all become jihadis,” the exasperated commander declares. “Maybe then we’ll get money and support.”

Many believe the time has come for the Obama administration to mount a new policy in Syria. But don’t expect one anytime soon.

In an interview on Thursday, a senior administration official played down a report in the The New York Times that President Barack Obama might reconsider arming Syria’s opposition. The official confirmed that President Obama rejected a proposal last year from four of his top national security advisers that the United States arm the rebels.

But he said a subsequent review by American intelligence officials had concluded that only a large infusion of sophisticated weaponry would tip the military balance against the Assad regime.

“We have to assess what it would take to change the calculus,” the official said, “and hasten the transition.”

Repeating prior arguments, the official said the administration opposed supplying the rebels with anti-aircraft missiles out of concern that the weapons could fall into the hands of jihadists. “God forbid a U.S. weapon be used to strike an Israeli passenger plane or land in Israel,” said the official.

The problem, though, is that jihadists are becoming the most influential and well-armed insurgents in Syria. The London Review of Books essay, "How to Start a Battalion in Five Easy Lessons," begins with a description of a rebel commander withdrawing his fighters from an important rebel defensive position in Aleppo because a donor in the Gulf is willing to provide him with more funds and weapons.

"He says he will pay for our ammunition and we get to keep all the spoils of the fighting," the rebel commander says. "We just have to supply him with videos."

Meanwhile, assistance to the Assad regime is growing. A recent New Yorker piece detailed stepped-up military aid from Hezbollah.

"If Bashar goes down," one Hezbollah commander told the magazine, "we're next."

And the White House official called the extent of Iranian assistance to Mr. Assad "stunning."

"They are all in," the official said. "They are doing everything they can to support the Assad regime and putting in enormous amounts of arms and individuals."

Why, then, isn't the United States even partly in?

In the London Review piece, rebels complained that the United States was blocking countries in the region from providing sophisticated anti-aircraft and anti-tank missiles to them. The White House official denied that was true, saying the armed opposition remained deeply divided and the situation was confused on the ground.

He said the administration was trying to learn from the past, particularly Iraq.

"The United States has a long history of picking winners and losers based on the guy who speaks English well," the official said. "It's just trying to learn the lessons and be humble. We don't have perfect visibility into the situation. Interjecting that forcefully in an armed way has huge risk."

American fear of inadvertently arming jihadists is paralyzing efforts and limiting out options. There are no simple solutions in Syria but the West is missing a strategic opportunity to weaken Iran and Hezbollah.

Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar could be allowed to fully arm the rebels. Supplying them with sophisticated anti-tank missiles and other conventional weapons, not surface-to-air missiles, could help turn the tide. And if the West is serious about a diplomatic effort, it must redouble its efforts instead of deferring to Russian promises that have so far proven hollow.

Two years after the uprising began as a non-violent protest movement, the death toll in Syria is approaching the roughly 100,000 dead of Iraq and Bosnia. While it may not have a political cost in Washington, the White House is sending a clear message across the Middle East: American and Israeli lives matter, not Syrian ones. The figure is 70,000 and counting. That number will come back to haunt us.

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