

An Interview with Ambassador Frederic C. Hof

President Obama has announced a program of military support to the Syrian opposition, which may have been a great idea one year ago. Is it actually too late to support the opposition in Syria, and if not, how will it play out?

Hof: Whether or not it is too late to do anything in Syria is a very interesting analytical question. Unfortunately, it is not really the kind of question that can be the basis for policy in government. As things stand right now, with the regime provoking certain kinds of reactions in the opposition, Syria is on a one-way trip to state failure. The implications for 23 million people and all of the countries surrounding Syria are enormous and negative. Even if we wonder if things should have been done a year ago, we as a government are obliged to act and try to minimize the damage in Syria; to try to shape developments as best we can in spite of our skepticism.

Can you please elaborate the idea of state failure in Syria? What would that look like and what would be the implications in the region?

Hof: What it would look like is difficult to describe in detail; there are scenarios, potentially involving warlordism, with local leaders assuming almost feudal-like powers in certain localities. There is speculation of Syria actually being partitioned into several different statelets. It's difficult to pinpoint an exact scenario, but it is pretty clear this is the path we're on. Right now, Syria quite literally does not have a government whose rule extends over the entirety of the country. The consequences of this are very serious and we have a humanitarian catastrophe that is not likely to stop anytime soon.

What are the implications for stability in Iraq? Does the Kurdish angle, combined with the sectarian Sunni/Shi'a conflict spiking, present a risk of spillover? Do you think this potentially runs the risk of undermining the U.S. contributions to stability in Iraq?

Ambassador Hof is a senior fellow with the Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East at the Atlantic Council. Before joining the Atlantic Council, Ambassador Hof served as the U.S. Special Advisor for Transition in Syria and previously served as the Special Coordinator for Regional Affairs in the U.S. Department of State's Office of the Special Envoy for Middle East Peace.

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Hof: I think it runs the risks of undermining whatever progress was made to bring Iraq back together. Iraqis themselves have a major role to play in all of this. The dynamic between Prime Minister Maliki and his opponents may not be entirely independent of developments in Syria. The implications for all of the neighbors are very serious and one of the great ironies here is that elements that continue to do a tremendous amount of damage in Iraq are among those whose presence in Iraq was facilitated and expedited by the Assad regime. These groups have now done a U-turn back into Syria in an effort to eclipse and take over the armed opposition. They are taking the sectarian bait that the regime has thrown out there as part of its own survival strategy. Sectarianism is probably the greatest danger to Syria now, and obviously the implications are similar to places like Iraq or Lebanon – countries where even on the best of days, sectarianism and confessionalism are major challenges.

Who would stand to win? Who gains by Syria's descent into further chaos?

Hof: I suppose there are various local actors of one kind or another that could always find a way to capitalize, whether monetarily or in some other way. I think Syria's demise as a state might constitute an essential part of an Iranian "Plan B" for the country (Iran's "Plan A" for Syria is of course to preserve the Assad regime). President Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez al-Assad, was really the senior partner in the Syrian-Iranian relationship, in particular when it was mostly focused on Saddam Hussein. Now you have Bashar al-Assad taking the role of junior partner to Tehran, and the appearance and prominence of Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, as well.

Preserving that link to Hezbollah is a transcendent national security goal for Iran. There are plenty of Quds force people urging Nasrallah to put people into the fight. Iran's best case scenario is keeping the regime in power, at least in Damascus and the Homs area, and putting the genie of protests back in the bottle. The second best scenario is basically collapse and a degree of chaos, but some ability to maintain a land link to Hezbollah in Lebanon through the Homs area or perhaps through the Alawite area in the northwest region of Syria. The one thing I don't think Iran is interested in – because I believe both Kofi Annan and Lakhdar Brahimi tested this in good faith – is the idea that Iran could somehow be part of the solution, rather than part of the problem in terms of cooperating with a peaceful transition to a different kind of government away from (Assad) family rule. I think the Iranians have concluded accurately that any coherent replacement to the Assad regime would fundamentally change Syria's relationship both with Iran and Hezbollah in ways that Tehran would not like.

Is a possible "Plan B" for them to continue supporting the Assad group as an insurgency in a post-Assad country?

Hof: Definitely and this is the way it is going. In effect right now, Bashar al-Assad and the combination of his security forces – loyal military units, intelligence units, and militias trained by Hezbollah and Iran – are helping to form the armed gangs known as shabiha. All of these things combined have the effect of making Bashar al-Assad the strongest, most coherent militia leader in the country right now. For 43 years, the Syrian government has been an instrument of the ruling family in

which the family has occupied the presidency, and that is where all of the executive power has resided in Syria. However, now we are at the point where even the pretense of government has disappeared and the prime minister is busy dodging car bombs.

So it has devolved into a situation where Assad is the most-powerful feudal chief?

Hof: I think so and for the family itself to play this role, it's important that it holds on to Damascus. Right now, Assad's principal strategy is to bind the minorities, especially his own Alawite group, to him and to the survival of his family. He is having some luck with that because of the rise of *Jabhat al-Nusra* and *Ahrar al-Sham* and these other jihadist groups. Their rise is a gift to Assad, and their presence in the country is a lifeline to the regime.

The Alawite community over the years, starting with the French mandate, has been quite militarized.

Even though it (the regime) is disorganized, the one thing that Hafez al-Assad did when he took power in 1970 was to make sure there were no rival power centers within the Alawite community. Everything Assad had gone through in the 1960s in his steady climb to power taught him that this is the one thing you must nail down. You are always going to get opposition within the Sunnis. If the Christians aren't happy, they'll emigrate to the U.S. or Canada, but keeping the Alawite community absolutely under the thumb is essential.

Now if Bashar loses Damascus, I believe there will be people in that community, maybe military commanders, who will begin to look at this family and say, "Aha! Are they really protecting us or are they a liability?"

Our impression from recent field interviews inside Syria is that people don't see an alternative to supporting Assad and they aren't happy to be put in this position. If they did have an alternative or if he didn't seem to be delivering anything of value, they may be willing to jettison their support of him. Is that accurate?

Hof: My closest Syrian friends remain grudgingly supportive of the regime; these are people I have known for nearly fifty years. I got started as an exchange student in Damascus when I was a teenager. People I have known from that time, like Christian families, are sticking with the regime – not because they like Bashar, nor because they have any illusions about the incompetence, the corruption, and the brutality of the regime. Half of their relatives are in the U.S., Canada, France, or Australia. There is a reason for that and yet they look around at potential alternatives and are not seeing anything that gives them comfort. I think this is going to be inevitably the case until an alternate government is established on Syrian territory.

Is the Syrian opposition, as it is currently constituted, a viable alternative?

Hof: Not as currently constituted. The challenge for the U.S. and others right now is that we can't just sit back, point fingers at the opposition and say, "How inadequate! Look at their divisions," and so forth. Once the decision was made in December 2012 to recognize the opposition coalition as the legitimate representatives of the Syrian people, we gave up the option of being full-time skeptics and critics. Right now you have a spectacle of the mainstream opposition being largely divided

not only because of its own tendencies to divide but because this is a country coming out of a 50 year political coma. They are also being divided by rivalries among key Arab states, such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia in particular. This is a situation where the U.S., whose initial inclination was to let the local actors take the lead on this, doesn't want to get involved in everything around the world. Syria looks particularly like a bad hornets' nest; however I think it has become clear that the subcontracting of the Syrian revolution to others is not working. The U.S. really needs to exert itself and this is one of the things that U.S. Secretary of State Kerry is taking on, and it is one of the themes of this steady stream of visitors coming to Washington to visit President Obama. They are all saying that enough is enough and we need a unified effort here. If we are going to make something of this opposition we have to vector assistance through it and to it.

Over the last 18 months, we have seen civilian secular democracy activists get sidelined and the political space for a strong, secular opposition government become increasingly fragmented. Given the DNA of Jabhat al-Nusra – its close affiliation to Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) – it is strange to us how different they are from AQI. Al-Nusra is conducting social programming, charity work, political organizing, and they are not targeting civilians in the same way that AQI did. It is almost as if they have learned from the mistakes of AQI. Are they some kind of hybrid between AQI and Hezbollah? Are we looking at a different class of jihadists here?

Hof: We may well be, and what has to be taken into account is actual Syrian input into

all of this – the actual influence of Syrians who may be attracted to these groups. Because these groups have arms, ammunition, and military experience, it's possible that the actual Syrian membership is having something of a leavening influence on how they operate inside Syria as contrasted to certain practices in Iraq

The narrative certainly has changed in the last several months. The opposition seems to be increasingly dominated by jihadist or radical groups. Is there anything that the U.S. can do to prevent a government or regime emerging out of this conflict that is jihadist, Salafist, and hostile to the U.S.?

Hof: I think the main thing to be done – and assistance is a big part of this – is on the military side. In order to establish direct relations with the Supreme Military Council's Salim Idris (Commander of the Free Syrian Army), the administration is in the process of twisting Saudi, Qatari, and Turkish arms, saying that every last thing goes through this guy. It is a similar situation with the Coalition (Syrian Opposition Coalition); I think our objective needs to be the establishment of an alternate government on Syrian territory, not something that just consists of exiles that are currently based in Cairo. The opposition coalition needs to work with the Supreme Military Council and they need to work with the local committees. There are lots of difficulties with establishing an alternate government in Syria but at the end of the day, if you are looking to throw a spanner into what seems to be the natural course of things, this is the way to do it.

To be honest with you, I'm not sure to what extent the Jabhat al-Nusra domination, in terms of the armed opposition, is real as

opposed to information operations. But unless and until we get behind an alternative that consists of credible people operating a decent program from a decent platform on Syrian territory, to people like my Syrian friends, there is not going to be a credible alternative worth looking at.

That probably has some kind of Alawite component, right?

Hof: It should. It needs to be a government based on certain standards, such as citizenship, rule of law, and civil society. Ultimately, it should be a government that refuses to take this sectarian bait, which is increasingly difficult. I think all Arab leaders would recognize the truth of what I am saying about the necessity of having an on-the-ground alternative to family rule. The problem for the U.S. is that getting behind this kind of development requires a fundamental strategic shift. We would most certainly need to get out of the subcontracting business at that point. We would be taking the lead in rounding up resources. It doesn't mean that Syria suddenly becomes the ward of the American taxpayer. We'd be the ones with the tin cup out there, meaning we would have to make some basic decisions about defending the new government that is established. Because what we see is a consistent pattern; whenever the regime loses a populated area to the opposition, that area – whether a residential neighborhood, city, village, or town – gets subjected to all kinds of bombardment from various sources. You can imagine what would happen if a government was suddenly proclaimed.

Can you give us some detail about how a military operation would be organized? Our understanding is that the regime is protecting a north-south land corridor, making the central Homs-Hama area critically important. The regime's east-west air bridge coming in from Iran is also vital for the regime's sustainment as is territorial control over portions of all the major cities. So the outlines of the strategy could be: 1) knock out the air bridge in an air operation; 2) deny some of the Syrian government's control of the central Homs-Hama area; and, 3) help the opposition gain territorial control of major city centers like Aleppo. However, the starting point has to be a viable political strategy; you can't just jump right into a military solution. Could you react to that?

Hof: I think the greatest problem we're facing right now – a problem that would intensify were an alternate government established on Syrian territory – is the regime terror campaign aimed at civilians. Its goal may be to convince the civilians that the Free Syrian Army is more trouble than it's worth. This is a classic tactic, but what it is doing is running up the body count and leaving people seriously maimed. It is driving people towards the borders and into internal displacement, becoming a real catastrophe. I think the objective you have to aim for in a case like this, is to certainly have the effects of a no-fly zone because you want the results of a no-fly zone. The question is, would you go about it tactically in a way parallel to what we did in Iraq? There seems to be considerable Department of Defense resistance to that, which is understandable. They have continuing responsibilities such as Afghanistan and a boatload of contingencies concerning Iran. They are not

looking for a particularly heavy lift in Syria. One thing that perhaps ought to be looked at is the use of standoff weaponry to neutralize Syrian air, missile, and even artillery assets.

What would be your strategy for building a new viable Syrian government? Should the approach be focused on nation-building and institutional development as in Afghanistan or should it have a different focus?

Hof: First of all, it is very important to identify the proper people, platform, and program. I think that the government is going to need a great deal of technical and advisory assistance; this is something that the U.S. and its European allies could certainly be involved with. I also think they are going to need a great deal of financial support. The Friends of the Syrian people, now under the leadership of a Dutch diplomat, are in the process of trying to put together a reconstruction fund, which is a financial tool we would want. I'm not sure that I would categorize this as a nation-building exercise in the sense of Afghanistan.

What you want to do is set up, on Syrian territory, a structure that has an opportunity to succeed in serving as an alternative to the Assad regime. Perhaps, along the line of the President's objective, it can also serve as an interlocutor with that regime. Perhaps Assad will decide at some point, whether on his own or under Russian persuasion, to engage in a negotiations process consistent with what was agreed to by the P5 (permanent five members of the UN Security Council) in Geneva back in June 2012. We're not looking for perfection here nor the ideal government structure, but something good enough. It is not as if Assad is doing any governing right now; there is no government in Syria. Getting this set up as an

alternative is important, and as long as the opposition is simply an opposition, it is not going to serve as an alternative. Moaz al-Khatib, who recently resigned as head of the opposition coalition, wrote a beautiful letter to the Christians of Syria; the problem is that nobody paid attention to it. I was in the Vatican some time ago and asked their chief Syrian diplomat, "What do you think of Sheikh Khatib's letter to the Christians?" His response was, "what letter?" This is always going to be the problem: as long as an opposition is an opposition, no matter what it says or does, it is going to have a basic credibility deficit. That problem goes away if you have a government proclaimed on Syrian territory that is actually recognized by the U.S. and other key countries as the Syrian government. This is not going to be perfect, nor a Scandinavian model of functioning government, but it could and must be good enough.

So we are dealing with multi-confessional rule of law. What are the other characteristics that you could see as essential for that potential government?

Hof: To me the most essential part in terms of any ideology is citizenship in the context of national identity or the idea that, in terms of political identification, citizenship trumps everything else. The one thing I would really regret seeing in Syria, unless it is the only way that a tourniquet can be put on the bleeding, is that the country devolves in the direction of a big Lebanon. This would be with various functions assigned on the basis of confessional politics. I know there is a big debate over the extent to which national identity has really taken root in Syria since its

independence in 1946, as opposed to underlying confessional tensions and so forth.

What about the problem of purging? Do you think as this plays out that there will have to be a purging of at least senior level officials from the Assad regime, and how far down would that go?

Hof: It's hard to tell. I think the one principle that the U.S. government has tried to adhere to in all of this is that ultimately accountability is in the hands of Syrians. I know there have been some efforts within the opposition to try to answer that question precisely.

How far down does it go? One can think notionally about the "family" and some sort of inner ring of enablers whose future participation in the governance of Syria is absolutely inadmissible. Basically, it would be inadmissible under the terms of Geneva, given the fact that a nationally unified government would be created by mutual consent between the opposition and the government. I think one thing that does occur to the mainstream opposition is that, to the maximum degree possible, the institutions of state should be preserved during a transition. As badly in need of reform and rejuvenation as they may be, you don't want to have the Iraqi-style army of the unemployed and disaffected. Now this is a matter of debate in Syria, and this is going to be one of the real tension generators in any kind of a transitional scheme because I am sure there is a large constituency in Syria for the "throw the bums out" approach, which is perfectly understandable. As we discuss with the opposition coalition the procedures for establishing a government on Syrian territory, there are some demands that we're going to be making in

return for the support we're going to render for this. I think acceptance of the notion of continuity of state institutions to the extent possible is something that we would insist on.

What else would we insist on?

Hof: I think the general nature of this government's program is to envision the future governance of Syria as a unified country. I don't think we would get into the business of positively identifying people that ought to be in the government. We are not going to say, "Ahmed so-and-so needs to be Minister of the Economy." I think we are going to insist on, without naming names, some figures who are obviously divisive and threatening in terms of their public profile who ought not to be playing a role in this government.

Do you think we would insist on a regime based on representative democracy?

Hof: I think what we should insist on is Syrian governance that moves seriously toward the standard of government deriving its powers from the consent of the governed. There is a history here; you have the word "democracy" that means something to us, but the way it has been applied to certain Middle Eastern political situations by the West, particularly the U.S., sometimes evokes a negative reaction. I hope that the main import of the Arab Spring is that Arabs themselves, whether in Syria or elsewhere, are finally coming to grips with the age-old question of what really follows the Ottoman Empire. This is in terms of a source of political legitimacy and what follows the Sultan and the Caliph. I think the answer is out there, but getting to the end result is not going to be easy. The answer that is out there

is that rule must come from the consent of the governed. Some other approaches were tried, such as colonial high commissioners, big Arab leaders trying to capture the magic of Pan-Arab nationalism, and people that actually purport to know the will of God in contemporary political affairs, all of which I think are transient.

Is this the War of Ottoman Succession, phase two?

Hof: It is! One of the things I remember from college is a professor who said that in major parts of the Middle East, especially the Levant, the key question is what follows the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman Empire's passing was, in historical terms, the blinking of the eye; 90 years ago – that is nothing. In that system, all political legitimacy flowed through the Sultan-Caliph. It was a 400-year experiment in political Islam. The Sunnis were the big shots of the empire, the Christians and Jews had official protection while everybody else had no status.

Finding a more or less stable, permanent replacement for that – does it necessarily involve the redrawing of boundaries? This is the current fad and it's a question of legitimacy. I suspect in the end Syria is probably going to continue to exist as a political entity of some kind within its current boundaries. That is not going to be easy, and there are going to be a lot of challenges to that, but the real issue is going to be finding the source of political legitimacy. I think even Assad's friends and allies within Syria, many of whom were western educated, would probably acknowledge privately that there is just no way that Bashar can rule legitimately in this country. Even if he wins every battle from here on

out, there will be a significant portion of the population, probably a majority, that will have the view that he doesn't have the right to serve as President of the Republic. That is what we are talking about when we are talking about legitimacy.

Has the State Department approached this particular conflict or crisis any differently than you would have imagined 10 or 15 years ago?

Hof: That's a tough question. I think it was not commonly believed that the wheels would come off in Syria really to the extent that they have. It was a little surprising at the beginning that Bashar al-Assad, a person who really understood the whole communications revolution – he was Chairman of the Syrian Computer Society - would react to a peaceful protest the way he did, in light of what he knew about social media. I think the Department of State from the beginning, has done a reasonably good job of teeing up options and alternatives for the White House. In terms of that kind of process, the State Department behaved now as it would have 10 or 20 years ago faced with a parallel crisis. I don't see any particularly startling new departures.

With respect to former Secretary of State Clinton's focus on the "three Ds"—defense, development, and diplomacy—planning and executing jointly, have we achieved interagency collaboration for Syria?

Hof: I think the challenge for this administration has not been physically located in the Department of State in this respect. I think every administration has its own methodology for managing the interagency. In a crisis like

the Syrian crisis, it is much more than the Department of State. The DOD has enormous equities; the intelligence community is very important in all of this, both analytically and operationally; and the Treasury Department has played a big role in unfolding American policy. How the White House manages this, how it sets up its national security system under the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, varies from administration to administration. I think for this administration, it has been difficult and a real challenge to come up with a system that reliably produces options and alternatives for presidential decisions. It is the president himself who sets the tone for all of this. Probably the best and most functional system we have had in recent history is the one run by General Brent Scowcroft for President George H.W. Bush. That seems to be the model. Scowcroft was very systematic about getting the input of all the relevant actors and making sure that the president of the U.S. had all the information that he needed to make a decision. I think in this administration, there has been more of a tendency toward insularity by the president and a relatively small circle of advisors. It certainly is not a system that General Scowcroft would recognize. I think if you are looking at ways that the U.S. government has handled this crisis and contrast it with other crises at different times, look at the National Security Staff that used to be referred to as the NSC staff. Take a look and see how that is run.

It sounds like the White House took away some very clear lessons from the Iraq experience. Do you think those were the right lessons?

Hof: No. I think the President's inclination is to look at Syria through the prism of Iraq. I think one of his guiding assumptions is, "if I do anything in Syria beyond providing humanitarian assistance and technical assistance to the opposition, I am going to be sucked in just like the U.S. was sucked into Iraq. And if you do one thing you wind up in the end, occupying the country." This is the slippery slope model. I think what has been counter-intuitive for him, but is nevertheless true, is that holding Syria at arm's length would seem on the surface a very risk-averse, conservative policy. Given what is happening now, however, it is the most risky policy of all. He may be slowly coming to that decision, but it is counter-intuitive, especially when he has people advising him to stay away from getting involved. Unfortunately there is no staying away from it. One way or another, we are in the middle of it. **PRISM**