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“We will pay a high price if we do not arm Syria’s rebels”

“When we control Syria, we won’t forget that you forgot about us.” That is how the sister of a dead Free Syrian Army soldier responded when a US journalist told her family that Americans were afraid of getting mired in another Iraq or Afghanistan. She and millions of her fellow Syrians cannot understand why with all the US talk of freedom and democracy, and its air cover for Libyan rebels, it will not send the arms necessary to help the opposition defend itself against Bashar al-Assad’s regime.

Sooner or later some combination of the opposition groups will indeed control Syria. And when they do, their memories of who did what during the struggle to achieve a democratic Syria are going to matter far more to the US and Europe than policy makers presently calculate.

One of President Barack Obama’s goals coming into office was to forge a “new beginning” between the US and the Muslim world. Revolutions such as the one in Syria would seem to afford the perfect opportunity. But he and his fellow NATO leaders are far more focused on the short-term risks than the long-term gains.

Those risks are plentiful. First, becoming enmeshed in Syria could hurt Mr Obama’s re-election chances. Second, sending arms without UN approval would put the US on the wrong side of international law. Third, the US could become tied to the opposition’s fortunes in ways that could inhibit the “rebalancing” toward Asia. Fourth, providing weapons to the FSA risks fuelling the conflict and possibly arming al-Qaeda fighters who are infiltrating Syria. Fifth, providing weapons to the FSA when Iran and Russia are arming the Syrian regime will drag the US into a proxy great power war.

All of these risks are real, though some are more likely than others. For example, the idea that any foreign policy issue will determine the US election in the present economic climate is laughable.

The larger point is that all policies carry risks. Many in Washington would argue that the US policy towards Syria is working. This policy is to squeeze the regime diplomatically and economically; work with expatriate opposition groups to plan for a post-Assad transition; push for UN resolutions against the Assad regime; provide intelligence and communications equipment; and plan for a possible military operation to secure chemical weapons if the regime collapses. The Assad government is weakening; the opposition is controlling more parts of the country and bringing the fight to Aleppo and Damascus. But the consequences of this multi-pronged incrementalism could be devastating.

The arms flowing to the FSA, at least from Qatar and Saudi Arabia, are going to Islamist members of the opposition, many of whom are strongly opposed to the US and could push a future Syrian government in dangerous directions.

And the longer the conflict rages, the more likely revenge killings will turn a revolution into a sectarian civil war that cannot be staunched even by a democratic political transition and the more chance al-Qaeda has to infiltrate and co-opt it.

As the war continues, the risk rises daily of conflict spilling over into Lebanon (via the Alawites), Turkey (via Syrian Kurds), Iraq (via al-Qaeda) and even Jordan (via refugees). The more fragmented the Syrian opposition becomes on the ground, the more chance that a regime collapse will leave chaos and unsecured chemical weapons stocks.

It is time for bold action, of the kind Mr Obama took in deciding to go after Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad and to intervene in Libya. In Syria this would mean putting together a coalition of countries that would commit to providing heavy weapons (and possibly air cover) to all commanders on the ground who sign the “Declaration of Values” supporting a democratic and pluralist Syria put forward by the nine commanding generals of the military council of the FSA. To receive weapons, these commanders must show they control safe zones and admit foreign journalists, civil society activists and the UN to monitor the implementing of the declaration’s principles. They must also allow citizen journalists to upload photographs of what they witness to an official website maintained by the coalition.

The US is consumed with domestic politics. European leaders are focused on the eurozone crisis, the Olympics and August vacations. But the eventual winners in Syria will matter a great deal to the health, wealth and stability of what is still the most geo-strategically important region in the world. Syrians will remember those who remember them, those who cared enough to help save their lives.