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The Washington Post

Syrian rebels feel abandoned, betrayed by U.S.

By Liz Sly

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As the Arab world's bloodiest revolt continues to maim, kill and ravage lives on an ever-escalating scale, anti-American sentiments are hardening among those struggling to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad, in ways that could have profound consequences for the country and the region in a post-Assad era.

America, once regarded by the Syrian opposition as a natural friend in its struggle for greater freedoms against a regime long at odds with the West, increasingly is being viewed with suspicion and resentment for its failure to offer little more than verbal encouragement to the revolutionaries.

In the nearly 17 months since Syrians joined the clamor for change that swept the Middle East last year, Tunisians, Egyptians and Libyans have voted in elections, chosen new leaders and embarked, however messily, on democratic transitions.

Syria, by contrast, is hurtling ever deeper into an all-out conflict with no end in sight, "and all we get is words," said Yasser Abu Ali, a spokesman for one of the Free Syrian Army battalions in the town of al-Bab, which lies 30 miles northeast of Aleppo.

The rebels say they don't want direct military intervention in the form of troops on the ground. But they have repeatedly appealed for a no-fly zone similar to the effort that helped Libyan rebels topple Moammar Gaddafi last year and for supplies of heavy weapons to counter the regime's vastly superior firepower, say rebels and opposition figures.

When the regime falls, as the rebel battalion spokesman assumes it eventually will, Syrians will not forget that their pleas for help went unanswered, he said.

“America will pay a price for this,” he said. “America is going to lose the friendship of Syrians, and no one will trust them anymore. Already we don’t trust them at all.”

It is not entirely accurate that the United States is doing nothing to help the Syrian opposition, nor is it clear what more it usefully could or should be doing, analysts say. A debate is raging within the Obama administration over whether it is prudent to step up support for the rebels now that the effort to promote a diplomatic solution through the United Nations has failed.

President Obama has already authorized the provision of nonlethal aid to the opposition, including communications and satellite equipment. The State Department has been reaching out to Assad opponents inside Syria with a view to identifying potential allies and recipients of assistance.

Syrian opposition figures say they have received some financial help to buy arms from U.S. allies Saudi Arabia and Qatar. NATO member Turkey is also facilitating rebel movements across its 550-mile border with Syria, including, some Syrians say, the transfer of arms.

But the assistance has been small-scale, intermittent, and dwarfed by the demands of an expanding battlefield that now covers all corners of the country and has escalated to include the use of air power by the government. If some of the weaponry deployed against Assad’s forces has been provided with outside help, most rebel commanders seem unaware of its provenance.

“We get no help from anyone. We are relying only on ourselves,” said a Free Syrian Army commander in al-Bab who identified himself as Capt. Abdul Razzaq. His assertion is widely repeated by rebels from many parts of the country.

Indeed, the bulk of the rebels’ arsenal comes from supplies they have bought on the black market or, more often, from weapons captured from the government, said Joseph Holliday, who monitors Free Syrian Army activity at the Institute for the Study of War in Washington.

At the same time, the rebels have already gone a long way toward fulfilling another of their key demands: a haven free of government forces. An 11-year-old boy, Abdel Rahman Sabha, whose left leg was severed at the knee, was one of the last victims of the battle for control of al-Bab, whose fighters drove out government forces last week to join a string of “liberated” communities stretching south from the border with Turkey toward Aleppo.

“America and the West could have prevented this,” Omar Sabha, 21, said as his younger brother lay weakly under a bloodstained sheet, his face twisted with pain and incomprehension. Abdel Rahman had been struck the previous day by a missile apparently fired by a helicopter outside his home, and the loss was only now beginning to register. “They are able to help us, but they don’t want to,” the older brother said. “They don’t have the courage or the intention.”

The areas that have fallen under rebel control remain within reach of the government's artillery and air force, however, and the Syrian opposition is still trying to persuade Turkey and its NATO allies to impose a no-fly zone that would enable rebels to safely congregate and organize there, said Louay Miqdad, a coordinator for the Free Syrian Army based in Istanbul.

But the clamor for international intervention that erupted after Gaddafi's fall last year, when Syrian protesters carried banners appealing for NATO help, has abated, replaced by a grim sense of self-reliance.

"After everything we've been through, we don't want any help from the West," said Ahmed Dosh, 24, an Aleppo university student who is on a waiting list for a gun so he can join the Free Syrian Army. "We know only God can help us. We have great faith in God, and only God will end this."

Dosh described himself as an Islamist, though not an extremist. But at a time when al-Qaeda-influenced jihadis are trying to establish a presence in Syria, there is a risk that a virulently anti-American form of Islamism could take hold among disillusioned Syrians, said Andrew Tabler of the Washington Institute of Near East Affairs, who believes that the United States should selectively arm rebel groups identified as supporting America's interests.

If Washington continues on its current path, "ultimately the political entity that comes to power is not going to be in U.S. interests," he said. "A secular and democratic Syria is what we're going to lose big-time."

For some Syrians, offers of help now would be too late. With the rebels holding ground in the commercial city of Aleppo and making inroads in Damascus, hope is growing that they may be able to finish what they started unaided, said Barry Abdul Latif, 30, an activist in al-Bab. "These days I thank God that nobody supports us, because now I think it will be easier for us to build a new Syria on our own, without the agendas of others," he said.

"We called for help and nobody came. It is better this way."