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## The US in Syria: Hiding behind the CIA

**The CIA is being used to reconcile the inherent contradictions in the administration's approach to the uprising.**

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The sentiment, from Edmund Burke, is a noble one. Surely the self-regarding good should bestir themselves when confronted with evil. And yet the translation of Burke's words into virtuous action, as Burke himself would attest, can be fraught with moral peril. Concern over the legitimate grievances of American colonists might have led him to sympathise with the American Revolution; yet during the French Revolution the depredations of the French noble class were not enough for him to excuse the excesses of the Parisian mob. One wonders, at the end, what a later-day Burke would make of the Syrian Revolution.

For the moment, there appears to be a surprising unanimity of opinion in Washington, among government officials and pundits alike, that the evils of the Assad regime have become sufficient to warrant direct American involvement in promoting its downfall. A growing number of commentators are persuaded that American action should even go so far as to include arming the rebels of the Free Syrian Army. But with a nod to the uncertainties inherent in becoming involved in an increasingly brutal civil war, they are careful to note that the US should only involve itself, in the words of **Martin Indyk**, in a "wise way". In a situation where the path of wisdom is likely to be very indistinct, the burden of choosing that path is likely to fall disproportionately on the CIA.

It probably wouldn't be accurate to say that intelligence leaks have been more common during the Obama years than during other recent administrations. But this administration's profligacy in disseminating what appear to be officially sanctioned intelligence breaches does appear unprecedented. The latest revelations allege that Obama has signed a "Presidential Finding", authorising the CIA to provide intelligence assistance and other forms of non-lethal aid to the

Syrian rebels. In truth, these stories contain little more than was contained in the last round of such leaks in late June, which makes one wonder what domestic political purpose is being served. Whatever the motivations or the provenance of these stories, they really shouldn't surprise us.

It has become axiomatic that for large-scale covert actions of the US government to be politically viable, they must be seen when they come to light, as they invariably do, to be consonant with declared American policy. And declared US policy toward the Syrian government has been very clear. The US government has openly stated that it supports the departure of Bashar al-Assad, whether voluntarily or otherwise, and that it is providing "non-lethal" assistance to the rebels to bring this about. The State Department, we are told, has set aside some \$25m in funding for, among other things, secure communications equipment.

Such equipment would have the dual benefit not only of improving intelligence flow to, and tactical coordination among the armed rebel units, but also of facilitating the flow of information from inside Syria to the providers of this assistance, which would be helpful - among other things - in making judgments as to who should receive it. As these forms of assistance do not deliver themselves in the chaos of a civil war, it should come as no surprise that the CIA has apparently been enlisted in their provision, and would therefore receive the special presidential authorisations necessary to do so.

As the fighting in Syria becomes more desperate and more brutal, as stories of kidnappings and summary killings on the part of the rebels expand in at least limited counterpoint to the gross massacres and large-scale torture being perpetrated by the Syrian army, the US government remains cautious about the extent to which it is willing to directly involve itself in support of lethal actions. Despite the advice of some, administration officials continue to rule out directly providing weapons to the rebels. Such moral delicacy, however, appears to have more to do with form and appearance than with substance.

Given the relative ease with which small arms, at least, can be acquired given the financial means to do so, the recent action of the US Treasury Department in granting a licence to the Washington Syria Support Group to raise funds and to provide financial assistance to the Free Syrian Army is the moral equivalent of arming rebel forces. We are told, moreover, that part of the reason for the supposed involvement of the CIA in working with Saudis and Qataris in **Adana** is to help guide their Arab allies in steering assistance to the more responsible elements of the armed Syrian opposition. As sectarian hatreds harden and become more desperate, decisions regarding which elements of the opposition are more worthy than others are likely to become highly relative.

Clearly, the Obama administration wishes it could have its proverbial cake and eat it, too. In the vale of tears which Syria has become, one can neither aspire to the good, nor attempt to minimise or attenuate evil without running serious and inevitable moral risks. By setting its policy in aspirational terms, and then merely facilitating the actions of others, the White House wishes to avoid the opprobrium that could easily attend the more direct and vigorous actions which it might otherwise have to undertake itself.

Sooner or later, however, the inherent contradictions in the administration's approach to the Syrian revolution will have to be reconciled on the ground. In the American system, this is the unique province of the CIA, which is often left to pay the reputational price which politicians would rather avoid.