



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on April 30, 2013

McCain Urges War From a “Safe Zone” in Syria

Syrian rebels allied with al-Qaeda have seized government oil fields, control the power plant in Aleppo, the nation’s largest city, and run courts that apply Sharia law, according to the *New York Times*. The leading military force among the rebel units fighting for the overthrow of the Bashar al-Assad regime is the al-Nusra Front, whose leader, Abu Mohammad al-Goliani, boasts of having fought alongside al-Qaeda in Iraq and who recently announced the union of Nusra with al-Qaeda in “the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant.” While foreign jihadists have joined with Nusra, a prominent Syrian group, Ahrar al-Sham, is said to be ideologically aligned with them. Though the oft-stated policy of the Obama administration has been to provide assistance to “moderate” secular forces within the coalition of rebel groups, the *Times* [reported](#): “Nowhere in rebel-controlled Syria is there a secular fighting force to speak of.”



While the United States has arranged for shipments of light arms like rifles and grenades to Syria from Saudi Arabia and Qatar, much of the weaponry has ended up in the hands of [jihadists](#). [Direct U.S. military aid](#) has been in the form of “non-lethal” assistance such as armored vehicles, body armor, night-vision goggles, and communications equipment. Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and other Senate Republicans have renewed calls for a stronger U.S. role following White House confirmation last week of intelligence reports, “with varying degrees of confidence,” of the use of a chemical weapon by the Assad regime against rebel units. The small amounts of sarin found in soil and blood samples were likely loosed by Assad’s forces, a White House official said, but the “chain of custody” has not been established. President Obama has said he wants further confirmation, while critics of his Syria policy have been urging him to act now on his previous warnings that use of chemical weapons by Assad would cross a “red line” and bring serious consequences.

McCain called on the president to “take the measures that a lot of us have been arguing for all along,” including the establishment of a no-fly zone to prevent aerial assaults by the Syrian government, the creation of a “safe zone” for the rebel forces and civilians and providing offensive weapons to the “right people” in the two-year-old civil war that has killed an estimated 70,000.

Given the heavy presence of al-Qaeda allies and other extremist elements in the rebel coalition, finding the “right people” to arm is by no means a certainty. At least some of the U.S- approved shipments of arms from Qatar to Libyan rebels two years ago went to jihadists now entrenched among the anti-Assad forces in Syria. And the United States has been fighting for more than a decade in Afghanistan against



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Taliban forces who were the “right people” to arm when they were fighting the Soviet occupation in the 1980s.

Establishing a no-fly zone with unmanned bombers, as McCain recommends, would pit U.S. drones against Assad’s world-class air force, described by U.S. military and intelligence officials as “one of the most advanced and concentrated barriers on the planet,” according to the *Wall Street Journal*. General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has advised the Obama administration that mobile missile launchers, located in population centers, would be difficult to find and destroy, and the effort would likely result in civilian casualties.

“They should make sure that [the rebels are] not attacked from the air — and provide them with the weapons [and] training that they need, and the ability of their revolutionary council to organize and to govern — the same way that the Libyan consulate did in Benghazi,” McCain said in an [interview](#) on Newsmax TV “That way, they can prevent these weapons from falling into the wrong hands.”

Yet a number of the rebels and civilians the United States had protected from the forces unleashed by Libyan ruler Moammar Gadhafi became the mob that attacked and destroyed that very consulate in Benghazi, killing the U.S. ambassador and three members of his staff. It seems a strange example for McCain to cite in support of a similar intervention in Syria.

Under no circumstances should we put boots on the ground,” said the Arizona Senator and 2008 Republican presidential nominee. Patriot missiles could protect the “safe zone,” while cruise missiles could destroy much of Assad’s air defenses. “We could just establish a zone along the border where they can organize, operate, govern, and train and equip and that would be enough to tip the scales.”

With or without “boots on the ground,” dropping bombs and firing missiles into a sovereign nation to “tip the scales” in favor of rebels trying to overthrow the government constitute acts of war. Obama did that in Libya two years ago without authorization from the Congress of the United States. McCain is now urging him to do the same in Syria, despite the fact that any threat, real or imagined, that the Assad regime might pose to the United States appears small compared to what might come from al-Qaeda’s allies in power in Damascus.

If the president may, on his own initiative, invade with bombs and planes a nation that has neither attacked nor threatened the United States, then the power of Congress to declare wars has become a nullity and the president has become a law unto himself. Obama demonstrated that in Libya. McCain wants an encore in Syria.

Photo of Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.): AP Images



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