

## **LESSONS FROM THE BERLIN AIRLIFT APPLICABLE TO HUMANITARIAN AID IN SYRIA**

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It is well past time for the United States, other well-resourced nations and, above all, the United Nations to give up the erroneous supposition that there is nothing that one can do—short of direct military intervention—to stem the horrors now being perpetrated in Syria by the Assad regime with the complicity of Russia and Iran. In fact, as will be demonstrated below, there is at least one workable option and a moral obligation to intervene under the “responsibility to protect” (R2P) doctrine, unanimously adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2005.

What are now needed are the wisdom and the courage to act. In doing so, one should be guided by lessons from the magnificently successful, unarmed Berlin airlift of 24 June 1948 - 12 May 1949. Though that epic undertaking has faded from the consciousness of most persons who were then alive and is little known and insufficiently appreciated by subsequent generations, it broke the draconian Soviet blockade of the three Western sectors of Berlin, the intention of which was to starve West Berlin to a point when its people would seek unification with the East and which was imposed in the belief that the Western occupation powers would supinely acquiesce in that surrender. The thinking of Bashir al-Assad and Vladimir Putin in respect to their opponents in Aleppo and elsewhere in Syria follows a similar scenario. The response of the United States and its allies should be similar to the one that worked so effectively against Stalin in 1948.

Apart from achieving its immediate objective, the Berlin airlift also helped promote the unification of a democratic [West] German Federal Republic, humiliated the Communist regimes in East Germany and the USSR, cemented the nascent Western alliance, helped sow the seeds of what would ultimately become the European Union and enhanced the global prestige of the United States and its allies. Done well, a Syrian airlift could reap comparable benefits.

To launch a successful humanitarian airlift in Syria, in the present toxic political climate, a number of conditions would have to be satisfied. First, given the widespread, deep and justifiable skepticism in regard to US policies in the Middle East, going back at least as far as the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the operation must not be perceived as an American, or Western, attempt at regime change disguised in humanitarian garb. While regime change will remain a legitimate objective in the case of Syria, the more pressing need is to bring relief to millions of beleaguered innocent civilians in areas not controlled by the Assad regime. The operation must, therefore, either be legitimized by the UN Security Council or, if that cannot be negotiated, by a “uniting for peace” resolution by the UN General Assembly. (Such a resolution was first used to legitimize armed opposition to the North Korean invasion of South Korea in 1950 and was subsequently used in the Suez crisis of 1956 and on nine additional occasions).

Second, the operation would have to be under UN command and be open to participation by all concerned and capable nations. In practice, however, one can expect the US to play a leading, if not the leading, role.

Third, as in the Berlin airlift, the supply carriers (airplanes and helicopters) will have to be unarmed. This will counter the notion that the operation was essentially military and make a Security Council veto harder to rationalize.

Fourth, the operation would have to be maximally transparent, with unarmed observers (preferably civilians) from the UN, the Western bloc, the Arab League (including Syrians) and Russia aboard transport aircraft. This would minimize the prospect of armed attack and ensure that armaments are not being shipped to rebel forces.

Fifth, as in the Berlin airlift, complex logistic details will have to be worked out. This will require the recruitment of skilled personnel (ideally civilian volunteers) to make the operation technically feasible.

Finally, and most important, the participating nations and staff must have the determination to stay the course (probably several months). A clear show of resolve to provide needed humanitarian assistance via an airlift should lead to additional UN-endorsed measures (either by the Security Council or by the General Assembly, should a “uniting for peace” resolution prove necessary) to establish safe havens for internally displaced persons and to improve the political climate for creative diplomacy.

The proposed airlift would not be cheap and would probably require special levies on the world’s wealthier nations. However, its total cost would surely be a small fraction of the likely cost of the ill-advised military intervention advocated by many political hawks in this country and elsewhere. As in investment in peace-building, it would pay major dividends.

For those who, understandably, doubt the workability of an airlift in Syria, some comparisons between the situation in regard to Berlin in 1948 and in Syria today are in order. In the former case, the United States, which had dismantled the greater part of its armed forces in the wake of World War II, faced the military might of the Soviet Union under the rule of Josef Stalin, whose ruthlessness far exceeded that of Syria’s Assad. Nevertheless, there was never any Russian attempt to fire upon the transport aircraft of the US, France, the UK and other Commonwealth nations taking part in the airlift. The Communist regime prudently recognized that force was much too risky and would not be necessary. They wrongly assumed that the cost of the airlift would soon prove to be too great a burden for the West to sustain. (The only Western fatalities suffered in the eleven months of the operation—101 in all— were from crashes due to poor weather or flying accidents.) Today, notwithstanding Putin’s bluster, the balance of power, both worldwide and in the Middle East is much more favorable to the West than it was in 1948. And Putin is not foolish enough to pick a fight with Western powers in opposition to a demonstrably humanitarian operation authorized by the UN.

Logistically, the situation today in regard to Syria is far better than it was with respect to Berlin in 1948, when, at the start of the blockade, the West could muster only a few dozen transport airplanes (a deficiency that was corrected with remarkable speed). The present capability of the United States alone is many times greater than in 1948-49; but, even then, the Western Alliance was able to fly more than 200,000 supply flights bringing a daily average of almost 9,000 tons

of food, coal and other necessities to the then population of roughly two million West Berliners. (Coal accounted for more than half the total tonnage.)

Fortunately, there were three airports in Berlin at which freight could be swiftly unloaded with the aid of skilled German personnel. But there is no usable airport in east Aleppo and, quite likely, in other parts of Syria that are not controlled by forces loyal to Assad. Thus, the delivery of many items would have to be by parachute from low-flying airplanes, while heavy-duty helicopters (the abundant Chinook can carry a payload of 12 tons) would be relied upon for the delivery of personnel to oversee distribution and costly items (e.g., medicine) and strategic infrastructural necessities. The operation would be complex, but doable.

While the authorizing resolution would apply to the whole of Syria, the operation would begin with the relief of East Aleppo (assuming it is not yet subdued and/or obliterated), where the need is greatest, and could be extended to other locales on an ad hoc basis as circumstances might warrant.

Provisions in the enabling resolution should address the question of risk. While, as in the Berlin airlift, it is unlikely that Syrian, Russian or Iranian forces would be stupid enough to try, by violent means, to down UN-authorized aircraft or otherwise impede the relief operation, one cannot rule out that possibility or some sort of rogue attack (say by ISIS-launched ground-to-air missiles). Syria is, after all, a risky place. But humanitarian activities over much of the world are fraught with risk. With or without an airlift, ISIS and the many militias opposing the Assad regime will remain a problem. To do nothing often proves riskier, in the long run, than carefully considered engagement. Should attacks occur, the commander of the operation would be obliged to bring them to the Security Council along with a recommendation for an appropriate response, including the use of carefully measured military force.

Finally, we must consider the question of time, which is of the essence. Unfortunately, in this heated election season, the probability of action by either major party in the United States is close to zero. There is no reason, however, why France or the UK should not take the lead or why the newly elected UN Secretary-General should not set the planning wheels in motion, even before he takes office on January 1, 2017. Waiting even that long may be too late for Syrians now under withering attack in Aleppo, in which case the initial aid would go to other besieged locales. But action somewhere will still be needed and a template for rendering needed humanitarian aid in the 21<sup>st</sup> century must be established.

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