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EU's move to arm Syrian rebels shows conflict will escalate

By ARIEL BEN SOLOMON
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Political solution unlikely with splintered opposition and the distance between Assad and rebels' positions; France, UK will have to smuggle weapons into Syria, triggering response from the Assad regime.

While US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said after [meeting on Monday](#) that they wanted to hold negotiations for a peaceful settlement to the Syrian crisis, the reality of fighting on the ground made a mockery of their objective.

No peace deal or political solution is coming to Syria soon. The opposition is divided, as outside powers such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey jockey for influence among the various rebel factions, and the distance between the rebels and Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime remains too far to bridge.

Assad has the wind at his back, and with the support of Iran, China and Russia, he feels confident, not to mention the most motivating factor at play – that the Alawite community is fighting for its survival.

Moreover, the [recent visit by US Senator John McCain to the rebels](#) in Syria, of which the White House said on Tuesday it had been informed of beforehand, is likely to raise the rebels' confidence and their will to continue the fight.

Emmanuel Navon, a lecturer in international relations at Tel Aviv University and the IDC in Herzliya, told *The Jerusalem Post* that the French have a history of involvement in Syria and are the main European player in the country.

The French, he said, intervened in Libya mainly because it imports a large amount of its oil from the country, and in Mali it has an interest in the huge uranium deposits for its nuclear energy program.

Navon believes that the French or other European countries will not intervene unless they are accompanied by the US. This is not Libya, emphasized Navon, because he sees Syria as being a much more difficult battlefield.

The Europeans are playing up to public opinion, trying to “do something,” but in reality there is not much they are likely to do, said Navon.

Joel Parker, a PhD candidate at Tel Aviv University who is closely tracking developments in Syria, told the *Post* that any European arms will not have an effect for at least a few more months at the earliest.

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He said that Britain and France will probably favor sending small amounts of arms, and "it is not like they can just show up at the Syrian port of Latakia."

They would have to find a way in through the back door, said Parker, adding that it would take a while to have any impact on the war.

They would probably smuggle the weapons in through Jordan or Turkey, and this could cause a military response by Syria, further enflaming the region.

The Sunni Arab media continues its pessimism regarding the conflict, seeing the toppling of Assad as the only acceptable solution. As the opposition has become bogged down, there have been increasing voices for the US and the Europeans to intervene on their behalf.

A comment by Abdel Bari Atwan, the editor-in-chief of the London-based *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, reflects the mood: "The region has reached a boiling point. The current stalemate is not in the interest of any of the parties involved in the conflict, whether regional or international. And so it is with bitterness and regret I say that the worst is yet to come."

Reuters contributed to this report.



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