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Passing Through Fleeting Words 4, by Salameh Nematt, from the Arab Spring Series

An Unfolding Tragedy

BY ALEXA COURTNEY AND MICHAEL MIKLAUCIC

While world leaders' attention is drawn to nuclear negotiations with Iran, the ISAF withdrawal from Afghanistan, and a host of pressing domestic issues, the human tragedy in Syria continues unabated. Millions of Syrian civilians have been uprooted by the conflict, either as refugees in neighboring countries, or displaced within Syria itself. Villages and neighborhoods have been destroyed. The dead exceed 150,000. In a world grown anaesthetized to the brutality of civil war, the conflict in Syria is especially disconcerting, sending as it has a wave of de-stabilization rippling through concentric dimensions of security.

Syria's heterogeneous population of 22.4 million (2012) has lived under the heavy authoritarian hand of the Assad regime since 1971. The uprising that began in 2011, following similar uprisings throughout the Arab Middle East, had hopeful expectations. It has since devolved into a Hobbesian struggle of all against all. The promise of a moderate successor regime to Assad is all but lost in the emerging sectarian, communal and inter-confessional carnage. The once capable human resource base has been depleted; much of the country's economic infrastructure is destroyed; any social capital that may have bridged between communities is gone. Prospects for resolution of this conflict in the foreseeable future are not promising. Any progress on the destruction of chemical weapons, though welcome, will have limited if any impact on the civil war currently raging.

Syria's neighborhood is perennially volatile. Lebanon though its civil war ended in 1991 remains extremely fragile. Jordan is more robust, but with grave vulnerabilities. The festering wounds of Iraq's insurgency continue to suppurate with casualty rates approaching those of the Coalition Provisional Authority period. Egypt is still suffering the consequences of the removal of its long-reigning dictator Hosni Mubarek and a coup removing his feckless Muslim Brotherhood successor Mohamed Morsi. Even Turkey, an otherwise strong member of the family of states, continues to struggle with a simmering Kurdish separatist movement on its southern – Syrian – border. The influx into these countries of vast numbers of Syrian refugees exacerbates the profound problems already afflicting them. As they struggle to cope with weak economies and their

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own political tensions, the contagion of conflict threatens to engulf them. Cross-border fault lines link these countries inescapably together.

This is the heartland or core of the broader Middle East, North Africa (MENA) region. Rumbling in the core ripples through the entire region, with impact detectable along the entire southern Mediterranean littoral, as well as in the Gulf and further east. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Iran are deeply invested in the Syrian conflict, each supporting their favorite faction. Needless to say the ramifications for the security of Israel and European democracies are profound.

images are significant in international relations, and the image America is currently projecting is decidedly passive.

A larger struggle in the region pits the Islamic Republic of Iran against Saudi Arabia for leadership within the world of Islam. Syria forms the land bridge between Iran and its most prominent protégé, Lebanese Hezbollah. Bashar Assad's Alawite regime is a key element in the Shia coalition that now includes Iraq with outposts in the Arab Gulf countries. Syria is a majority Sunni country – as goes Assad so goes the Shia regime, and the direct link between Iran and Hezbollah. These are stakes both Iran and Saudi Arabia appear willing to go to the mat for.

And how does this all affect the United States? Americans are justifiably exhausted by expeditionary campaigns in far-away places, having spilled vast amounts of blood and treasure in Iraq and Afghanistan with very little apparent return on the investment. What appetite there once was for reconstruction,

stabilization, and counterinsurgency, not to mention state-building, is gone. The problems of Syria seem remote to Americans. They are not as remote as many think though. The humanitarian tragedy in Syria as well as the immediate risk of spillover of the violence into American allies such as Jordan, Turkey, and Israel put Syria irremovably on America's radar.

More significantly American reticence in the MENA region is beginning to look like withdrawal from the region. Though the American administration has protested that the "rebalancing toward Asia" will not come at the expense of other key regions, indeed America appears to be bowing out. American leadership has been absent throughout the region lately – in Egypt, Libya, and now in Syria. America's allies have noticed. There are many explanations for America's strategic decisions, but images are significant in international relations, and the image America is currently projecting is decidedly passive. This comes with a cost as America's allies no longer feel assured of American commitment. It is a slow, but tectonic shift.

Geo-strategy has long acknowledged the fundamental importance of location - proximity, insularity, topography, resources. We must now equally acknowledge the importance of timing. The velocity of political events and processes is such that windows of opportunity open and close in the blink of an eye. Decisive action two years ago, or even six months ago might have incurred risks, or even have failed, but might also have averted the current catastrophe in Syria. A no-fly zone over Syria in 2011 might have enabled the Free Syrian Army to defeat Assad regime forces, thus possibly avoiding the chaos that permitted radical salafi domination of the battlespace. A punitive U.S.

strike against the regime after it crossed the chemical weapons redline might have prevented Syria's further descent into chaos. Those options are no longer available. Officials and analysts now contemplate a deal with the oppressive Assad regime. Others propose dialog with the least radical of the salafi jihadists. However, it now appears likely a protracted struggle will ensue, punctuated by international negotiations removed from the violence in Syria itself. Therefore, an outcome favorable to U.S. national security seems hard to imagine. How did things reach this point? It is incumbent upon us to pose the awkward question, "Was the course taken the best to protect American interests and at what cost to our national security?"

PRISM journal's inaugural supplemental issue explores the complexities of Syria's violent transition through a broad spectrum of Syrian and American voices. The contributions in this edition underscore the complex nexus of political, social, and economic challenges threatening Syria's future, and highlight the profound impact of chronic instability on Syria's citizens and neighbors. Many of the authors cautiously advocate military, diplomatic, or development engagements designed to interrupt the cycle of increasing violence and bring Syria back from the brink of self-destruction. This issue of PRISM offers readers insights into Syria's struggle in an effort to catalyze cooperation across boundaries—between communities in Syria fighting for their survival; and committees in Washington and international capitals charged to develop responsible engagement policies. We hope the perspectives reflected in this issue will ignite readers' creativity and commitment to influencing positive change on the ground in Syria.

This special PRISM supplement dedicated to Syria is the product of a partnership between the Center for Complex Operations (CCO) at National Defense University and Caerus Associates, a strategy and design firm that has been conducting primary research on the ground in Syria since late 2012. PRISM and Caerus collaborated throughout 2013, as the situation in Syria changed by the day. The essays and interviews were submitted and done during the course of 2013, and naturally reflect the evolving circumstances of a highly complex and tragic situation. By joining forces to publish this issue, we amplify the voices of Syrian scholars, advocates, and officials and provide context to the ongoing policy debates highlighted in this issue by American academics, diplomats, and practitioners. The contributions in this edition are diverse and reflect a wide range of styles including feature articles, interviews, opinion pieces, an info-graphic, and a fictitious policy brief from within the Assad regime.

We hope this issue of PRISM will inspire readers' *empathy* for the daily struggles weathered by the Syrian population; *deeper understanding* of the interrelated dynamics fueling the chronic conflict; *imagination* of new approaches to interrupt the violence and insecurity; and, ultimately, *action* for a safe and peaceful future for Syria. **PRISM**



A Diplomat's Perfect Storm: How to Move Forward in Syria

BY THOMAS R. PICKERING

For over two years, we have watched the disintegration of Syria, the shredding of its population and the anguish of a civil war which has now killed over 150,000 - 200,000. A critical country in the heart of the Middle East remains suspended between death by a thousand cuts and a world apparently incapable or unable to come together to attend to even its most elemental needs. It has now descended into a three cornered conflict between the Assad regime and among its opponents – al Qaeda-related fronts against more moderate fighters. Those who two years ago foresaw a short if brutal war have been shown to be wrong. Those who hoped for but saw no signs of a political settlement have been honored only in the failure of their hopes.

This brief article is designed to evaluate where we now find ourselves and suggest some ways forward. A hard task in any such situation it is made even harder by the intensifying conflict inside the country and the competing interests of foreign powers in dealing with Syria.

There is much to write about the history of this successor state (one among many) to the Ottoman Empire. A period of French rule under a League of Nations Mandate ended with Syria's independence in 1946. A period of rotating governments with military rule pre-dominating ended nearly four decades ago with the rise to power of Hafez al-Assad, an Alawite Air Force general, who held on to power for the following three decades until he died and was succeeded by his son, Bashar al-Assad in 2000.

Syria never pretended to be a modern democracy. It was an Alawite minority-ruled, majority Sunni state. It lost the Golan Heights to Israel in 1967 and while small adjustments were made

Thomas R. Pickering served as U.S. Ambassador in numerous countries and retired from the foreign service as the Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs in 2000.



through U.S. brokered negotiations in 1974, the territorial occupation of the Golan has remained a thorn in the flesh of Syria and the Assad family and their supporters ever since.

In 2010, Assad's minority rule was challenged by peaceful demonstrations to replace the regime, largely articulated by majority Sunni groups. The other minorities, Kurds, Druze and Christians in the main, hung on with their long-term Alawite benefactors and protectors or sought to stay out of the conflict altogether. The Alawites, a minority themselves representing only 12 percent of the population, understood the value any ruling minority in the Middle East attaches to aligning itself with the rulers, whether a minority or majority of the population. They played that card skillfully over the years.

Syria has always been impacted by outside players to a significant extent, although the tight hand of the Assads and their rule sought seriously to limit foreign influence. Turkey to the north enjoyed mixed relations with Syria. In times of stress, the Turks knew how important water flowing out of their high plateau hinterland through the Euphrates was to the survival and prosperity of Syria. And when necessary, they were ready and able to shut it off or slow its flow.

To the east, Iraq - an independent fellow Arab state since 1932 - has been at odds with Syria from the time the ruling caliphate moved from Damascus to Baghdad at the beginning of the ninth century.

Saudi Arabia and Jordan, long linked with the families of Damascus, followed their own interests. In the case of the former, generous assistance, especially in times of conflict, made a difference. In the case of Jordan, often presumed by Syria to be a legitimate part of "Greater Syria" built around its capital Damascus, the play has been more careful and balanced. Jordan was attacked by Syria following the conflict with Israel in 1967, but resisted by Jordan with support from Israel and the west. King Hussein enjoyed a longish honeymoon with Hafez al-Assad in the 1970s. He then shifted his interests and sources of income to Saddam Hussein and Iraq in the buildup and following the eight-year war between Iraq and Iran when the military supply and other pipelines to Iraq ran mainly through Jordan.

Israel has always seen Syria as the most recalcitrant and hard-nosed of its enemies in the Arab world. Close links between Syria and Iran made this conclusion even more salient. Iran, a supplier of arms and a defender of Syria's political interests, significantly increased its influence in the region by patronizing the Assads and Damascus. It continues to do so.

To the west Lebanon has always been viewed by Damascus as another legitimate part of “Greater Syria,” that was severed illegally by the French from the organic Syrian state. Occupied at times by the Syrians, the Lebanese have sought to escape Syrian clutches, particularly those parts of Lebanese society, mainly Christians, who see Syria as a natural adversary. In the meantime the Lebanese based Shi’a militia group, Hizbullah, has played an important role in fighting in support of the Assad regime which has undermined to some extent its influence in Lebanon.

Needless to say, each of these players has been deeply engaged in the civil war in Syria and widely impacted by it. Saudi Arabia, joined by Qatar, has supported Sunni opposition elements including the growing number influenced heavily by al-Qaeda and its subordinate Jabhat al Nusra. Iran’s close relationship to Assad and the Alawites, an offshoot of Shi’a Islam, has helped stimulate a wider Shi’a-Sunni sectarian conflict among Muslims in Syria and beyond.

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Crisis in a Region in Crisis

Despite early predictions of military victory, mainly on the part of the opposition, no military victory for them appears in sight on any horizon. While the Assad forces have made some gains, including in some critical pieces of geography, there is also no likely military victory on their side any time soon. The newest subset of the conflict between al Qaeda-linked

fundamentalist fighters and more moderate Sunni opposition fighters has added to the complexity and frustration of all efforts to find a solution. In the meantime, the death toll rises inexorably and uncontrollably. If this is not genocide in one sense, it is a double genocide in another. According to the United Nations both sides are dying at a combined rate of over 6000 per month. The cruelty and deep ideological and theological commitment on both sides seems unalloyed by any sense of respect or mercy for a civilian population largely caught up in the fighting or the nine million refugees who have moved to escape the carnage. The displaced are largely within Syria itself, but well over a million have left, putting tremendous pressure on Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq in roughly that order.

Indeed, both the fighting itself and the proximity and partial involvement of other players, has led to a destabilization of big swaths of the region. Here again, Lebanon and Jordan are perhaps the most seriously impacted. Also, as noted above, inside Syria there is seemingly an inexorable movement toward radicalization, particularly where the opponents of the Assad regime are concerned. Moderate elements among them have been eclipsed in their influence both by the external support for more radical and fundamentalist fighters on the one hand, and by the latter’s reputation as a committed, hard fighting force on the other.

We should not overlook the less visible, but nevertheless important training effort of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). General Qasem Suleimani and his IRGC, now apparently responsible in Iran for the full Syria account, have been training Alawite militias as well as the Syrian Armed

Forces and some of their brutal auxiliary militiamen.

In its own form of radicalization, the major effect of this support from Iran within the Assad regime is to backstop and stiffen its refusal to move toward a political resolution of the problems on grounds demanded by a large part of the international community – the removal of the Assads from power.

A further Iranian training effort is also reported in and around the Alawite homeland in northwestern Syria. Here, the effort appears to be to build up a militia which can consolidate, through “ethnic cleansing,” and defend this “homeland” under any and all future conditions. The Alawites, once oppressed by the Sunni majority before the Assad ascendancy, have now turned the tables for years on their former oppressors. The result is that Syria has become the epitome of a brutal interior conflict with all its outrages and killings.

Syria has long been known to possess a significant capability in chemical weapons, including some modern and highly lethal nerve gases, among them sarin, as well as a missile delivery capability based on Soviet Scud technology and equipment. On August 21, there was a major attack in Damascus from the area controlled by the Syrian Armed Forces, killing over 1500 and using gases known to be in the Syrian inventory. In a seemingly unexpected reversal of objectives after this attack and before the United States could riposte with military force – there were clearly different views in the U.S. public and Congress over what action to take at that point – Russia took the lead in following up a suggestion by Secretary of State John Kerry that the Syrian chemical weapon stockpile be destroyed, thereby shifting the terms of the debate over action in Syria.

Syria rapidly accepted this proposal, and an agreement was worked out by the U.S. and Russia. UN inspectors verified the stockpiles and their locations, production facilities and unfilled delivery vehicles were destroyed, The U.S. agreed to provide a vessel (MV Cape Race) equipped to destroy at sea the 500 tons of lethal agent still in storage under UN supervision in Syria. Free passage within Syria for the lethal chemicals was guaranteed, and Danish and Norwegian naval vessels were committed to transport the material to Italy, where the U.S. will assume custody and responsibility for its at-sea destruction. The apparent rapid shift in developments in Syria has raised a number of interesting questions.

Were the remarks by Secretary Kerry on the destruction of Syria’s chemical weapons impromptu and un-planned? Though this might be the case it has emerged that beginning at least a year or more ago the U.S. and Russia had discussed the need to deal with Syria’s chemical weapons and possibly the option of seeking to remove them entirely from the conflict zone. There were initial doubts both about Russian readiness to actually carry out the destruction that has begun under UN supervision. There were also doubts about Syria’s willingness to go along with a rapid and demanding time schedule for doing so. However, at this point the process is moving ahead with perhaps surprising success.

The question then arises, why did Russia align itself with the U.S. on this issue? The answers here are less clear, but several need to be considered. Russia had no easy answer to the immanent U.S. use of military force in response to the regime’s August 21 gas attack, revealing their inability to meet commitments to the Assad regime. Of even greater concern for Russia was leaving the regime at risk of

destruction and disintegration from which it would be unlikely rapidly to recover as a result of the anticipated attacks by the U.S. and others. Russia has also been concerned by the radicalization of the Islamic elements and the fact that their radicalism and perhaps even the use of chemical warfare on both sides could quickly spread to its own 20 million Muslims beginning in the South Caucasus. Finally, the Soviet Union in the past and today Russia under President Vladimir Putin aspires to great power status which in part is exemplified by joining the United States in the resolution of major conflicts around the globe. Co-equal status in the project of the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons met that aspiration neatly and rapidly.

The third question is whether in fact the U.S. and its public wanted to engage more deeply in Syria through the commitment of military force? The uncertainties here are magnified by President Obama's decision to seek Congressional approval for such military commitment, by public polling data which indicated widespread public opposition to further military engagement in the Middle East and Syria in particular, and by the sense of relief in the U.S. at Russia's acceptance of and cooperation with the program to destroy Syria's chemical weapons arsenal.

A fourth question is whether the chemical weapons agreement represents a victory for the Russians and President Putin in a zero sum contest with the U.S.? Opponents of President Obama sought to describe it as such and felt that a major opportunity was missed by not using military force. The administration understood that the arguments against this view would play out in its favor. Principally, a Russian effort to remove from play in the region Assad's most powerful deterrent against

Israel and others would not be seen as supporting the Syrian regime. Also, subsequent Russian statements about the possible removal of the regime through negotiations have added to the persuasiveness of that argument. Similarly, while Russia gained status and standing in its own search for great power recognition, the U.S. administration sought to use this as an effort to move from the chemical issue to the broader question of a negotiated political settlement in Syria. While Russia and the United States are still not fully aligned on the substance of such an effort, Secretary Kerry was able to persuade Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov to support the resumption of political talks on Syria's future, to begin on January 22 in Geneva.

The ultimate question is, would the use of military force by the U.S. have made a difference? While highly dependent on circumstances, such as the target set chosen for such attacks, it is not clear that such U.S. strikes would have altered the present situation significantly. It appeared that one motivation for such attacks was punishment for Assad's crossing the chemical weapons redline. The dangers of attacking Syrian chemical installations would have been substantial with potentially many more innocent civilian casualties. U.S. administration officials were clear that they would not go in that direction. A punishment option then might involve efforts to remove from play areas where the regime held some particularly strategic advantage over the opposition – missiles, artillery, tanks, fixed and rotary aircraft, etc. Attacks on these military assets might have shifted the balance between the opposition and the regime, and that might in turn have also reinforced the need and the possibility of moving ahead on a political settlement. But that conclusion is based on the

assumption that the targets were all well known, could not be hidden, and were indeed major game changers. Many analysts would have pointed out that stand-off and aerial attacks against artillery presented a large intelligence problem - finding and destroying them before they could be moved involved a much longer engagement and the provision of an air force for the opposition. The risk of mission creep in any broader set of options would have been real.

Finally, over the past year and a half increasing but still sporadic efforts have been made to broker or find a political solution to the conflict. First begun under former Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, these efforts early on produced an agreement on some limited principles to guide the process in 2012. Annan has been succeeded in his leadership role of international efforts to find a diplomatic solution by former Algerian Foreign Minister, Lahkdar Brahimi. A date, January 22, has now been set for the resumption of talks, though it is still unknown whether the Syrian opposition will participate, and if so which factions.

In recent days, the split in the opposition between salafists and moderates has grown with an attack by the latter on supply warehouses in which American assistance had been stored prior to its distribution. The radicals have won and the moderate leadership of the Free Syrian Army has been dealt a serious setback. The U.S. has stopped distributing aid and there are reports of a major rethink going on in Washington, though little indication of what direction that might take.

The Road Ahead

Though all roads ahead appear fraught with peril, there are several possible options or combinations of options available.

While for years there was great distrust and indeed scathing comment about the potential success of any political negotiation, the failure of any faction or side to achieve immediate military dominance on the field, and possibly the growing in-fighting among the opposition, have added to the urgency if not the promise of peace talks. In the meantime, the early high confidence that a military victory was only a few weeks or months away has declined in the face of the hard reality that neither side seems capable of prevailing militarily. In the end, the result will be heavily governed by developments on the ground, and the reaction to those developments of the warring parties and their supporters.

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Most believe that to be effective negotiations must be pursued genuinely by the Syrian parties themselves, including valid representative of all the major factions. Getting them to the table will be the first, and as yet unfulfilled task. Only so many meetings without Syrians can take place without a rapid and serious loss of credibility for the current process.

Enthusiasm for external military intervention - beyond supplying and training the various factions - seems to have diminished; certainly amongst the Western external powers. Such enthusiasm peaked at the time of the

August 21 chemical weapons attack. Negotiation seems now more likely than increased external intervention in the fighting. What might be the course and importance of such an effort?

At rock bottom U.S. and Russian agreement over the general approach and parameters of any negotiations must be reached. That will certainly be necessary if not sufficient. But it could help to persuade others to join in, including Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey and possibly Iran, each of which is a necessary player. With that sort of consensus agreement, it might be possible over time to get the Syrian players on board. Without it, it is highly unlikely the Syrians will engage seriously.

Many will question why they should join in? For Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, it would mean a decision to pursue their objective of regime change by other methods. And right now these other methods may seem slightly to be gaining in credibility, especially as it seems that fractures in the opposition and military gains by the Assad regime are making the early military solution they hoped for appear beyond reach.

While I will briefly examine later some of the process questions in a negotiation, it seems highly likely that the first major task after the Syrians engage, if they do engage, will be to seek a cease fire or regional variants of a cease fire in Syria. Though it will not be easy, three factors press the urgency of a cease fire. The first is the slaughter of innocents and the urgent requirement for greater humanitarian relief. Second, a corridor to move lethal gas to a port, preparatory to its destruction at sea is needed. Finally, the requirement to have some measure of stability during peace talks so they will not be unduly influenced by the persistent ebb and flow of combat.

The first purpose of a ceasefire should be to allow time and space to address the human disaster imposed on the Syrian people by the conflict. Feeding, sheltering and caring medically for their needs should be prioritized and facilitated by such a step and be a primary reason for undertaking it. Clearly, any such effort will also need to consider how to slow down and stop military supply, and confine military forces to areas where they are safe but cannot engage in breaking the terms of the ceasefire.

Any cease fire would have to be monitored by the United Nations or a similar body, but it could not be induced or indeed controlled if major forces in Syria were determined to break it. One important role for the UN in this regard would be to set up stronger contingents in and around the areas dominated by minority populations wherever that can be done. Minorities groups will require some confidence that they will not become the first victims of an agreement, just as the majority will need some confidence that depredations by strong minorities will not serve to create new pretenses for further warfare.

A cease fire will not only provide time for negotiations to proceed without undue external pressure, but also will allow an opportunity to begin to re-build within Syria a legitimate and sustainable Syrian control structure. Here perhaps the gradual training of new and the replacement of old security and police forces by the UN and others could create greater confidence in the future and effect the required change. This was done in El Salvador after the peace there; could it begin in Syria immediately in some areas?

The next task will be to seek a new, temporary, transitional government. The negotiators will have to undertake this task. The best approach for dealing with Assad might well

have to be, "In at the beginning, but out at the end." There are various ways of doing this, including appointing a group of technocrats not closely linked to any of the contesting factions to undertake the initial effort at transitional government. They might immediately replace Assad's current ministers. Later they could move on to building up a new administrative and governmental apparatus that is more broadly and fairly representative through a negotiated time table of steps toward such a change.

Another approach might be to conduct select electoral activities under close UN supervision as part of the process. Local leaders at village and city government level might be selected this way while the appointed technocrats govern at the national level. Over time, elections might also become important in the future definition of national leadership. The UN has strong skills and extensive experience in conducting elections, even in troubled areas. Beginning small in each of these steps would seem wise both to test run the process and to winnow out any mistakes early, but also not to stress this sensitive process, and its participants, prematurely.

A Viable Process

Ambassador Brahimi will naturally have to play the leading role in any initiative, and will most certainly have his own ideas, but some thoughts based on his past success in Afghanistan are worth considering.

The primary parties concerned are Syrians. They should be the centerpiece of negotiations, along with Brahimi and members of his immediate team. However a critical role will be played by those associated with the various Syrian factions who accept negotiations and the Annan plan as its basis. Like the Bonn

Conference of 2001 for Afghanistan, those parties should be invited by Brahimi if, as and when he believes they can bring to bear positive influence in the negotiating process. Most controversial at the present time will be Iran. In the West there is a strong suspicion that Iran wants to cause trouble and prevent the process from succeeding. General Suleimani is not seen as friendly to a result that over time shunts Assad aside. In the past, Iran was helpful in Afghanistan under different conditions. In Bonn Brahimi opened the meetings to all who wished to attend. With discrete German support he then skillfully arranged the lodgings to suit his negotiating purposes - the more helpful participants were lodged nearer the process venue itself and had greater access.

Conclusion

If there is an increasing convergence of views between the U.S. and Russia, and in the end neither wants a radicalized and fragmented Syria to be a permanent condition impacting Muslims around the world as well as in their own territories, there is a reasonable possibility of "something to work with" here. Continued fighting seems unlikely to produce anything but more death and carnage. The beginnings of some common interests in a ceasefire and a stable transition are surfacing which might be exploited to determine whether a political solution can be crafted with the parties and others. This will take sustained and committed diplomacy and may break down from time to time. However a diplomatic negotiating process should be seen overall as a much better result than any other process is likely produce. **PRISM**



The Road to Damascus

Next Steps in Syria

BY JUDITH S. YAPHE

Nearly three years since the start of the Syrian civil war, no clear winner is in sight. Assassinations and defections of civilian and military loyalists close to President Bashar al-Assad, rebel success in parts of Aleppo and other key towns, and the spread of violence to Damascus itself suggest that the regime is losing ground to its opposition. The tenacity of government forces in retaking territory lost to rebel factions, such as the key town of Qusayr, and attacks on Turkish and Lebanese military targets indicate, however, that the regime can win because of superior military equipment, especially airpower and missiles, and help from Iran and Hizballah. No one is prepared to confidently predict when the regime will collapse or if its opponents can win. At this point several assessments seem clear:

- The Syrian opposition will continue to reject any compromise that keeps Assad in power and imposes a transitional government that includes loyalists of the current Baathist regime. While a compromise could ensure continuity of government and a degree of institutional stability, it will almost certainly lead to protracted unrest and reprisals, especially if regime appointees and loyalists remain in control of the police and internal security services.
- How Assad goes matters. He could be removed by coup, assassination, or an arranged exile. Whether by external or internal means, building a compromise transitional government after Assad will be complicated by three factors: disarray in the Syrian opposition, disagreement among United Nations (UN) Security Council members, and an intransigent sitting government. Assad was quick to accept Russia's proposal on securing chemical weapons but may not be so accommodating should Russia or Iran propose his removal.
- U.S. ambivalence has neither helped to shore up opposition to the Assad regime nor quelled the violence. While most observers acknowledge the complexity of the situation on the ground, Syria's civil war is spreading sectarian and ethnic fighting and instability to its neighbors. Religious and ethnic extremists are attacking each other as well as regime targets. Sunni and Shi'a extremists may be few in number, but they are able to draw on financial support from similarly minded individuals in Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and the Persian Gulf, according to a Council on Foreign Relations study and interviews with regional experts.¹ Kurdish

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nationalists in Syria and Iraq focus more on anti-Turkish operations, which the Assad regime encourages. Extremists could grow in size and strength as the violence continues or if the United States intervenes. Fighting Assad or foreign military intervention will draw attention and give them legitimacy, whether religious or ethnic based.

consensus on continuity reflects in part an important lesson learned from the inability of the Shi'a-dominated government in Iraq to win national backing, and the highly diverse population in Syria, where Alawi, Kurds, Christians, and other minorities all seek parity with the Sunni Arab majority.

It Matters How Assad Is Removed

How regime change occurs in Syria is as important as what replaces the current regime. Assad could be removed by civil war or assassination, by a military or party coup, or by an arrangement brokered by foreign powers in consultation with regional partners and with the Syrian regime and/or opposition factions. Most Syrians and Syria watchers expect there will be a degree of continuity in which elements of the regime play a role in whatever replaces the current government. This consensus on continuity reflects in part an important lesson learned from the inability of the Shi'a-dominated government in Iraq to win national backing, and the highly diverse population in Syria, where Alawi, Kurds, Christians, and other minorities all seek parity with the Sunni Arab majority.

The Yemen Option: A Negotiated Exit. Similar to the plan negotiated by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) that removed Ali

Abdallah Salih in Yemen, Russia and Iran would negotiate an amnesty and safe exit for Assad and his immediate family. Officials of the old regime would assume a prominent role in the transitional government, which would be led by a “credible” regime figure with limited authority.

This option has several flaws. First, Russia claims to be interested in an international conference to include pro- and anti-regime factions, but it also continues to insist that an externally imposed solution is unacceptable. Moscow at one point hinted that it could support Syria rather than Assad, a significant shift, but it is unclear if Vladimir Putin’s Syria strategy assumes Assad remains in power. It is also not clear that Russia could deliver Assad should the international community agree on a negotiated outcome that does not include him. It does seem certain, however, that the Syrian opposition would not accommodate a solution that includes amnesty for Assad and inclusion of Baathist loyalists in the new government. Assad’s opponents may lack unity and clarity of purpose, but they do agree on two points: rejection of any compromise with the old regime and exclusion of Baathist loyalists in a transitional authority.

Finally, it is unlikely that Syria’s neighbors most invested in the country’s transition—particularly Turkey and Saudi Arabia—would accept a narrow Yemen-style transition. These countries support the opposition because they prefer a broader strategic realignment that replaces a pro-Iran Shi’a or Alawite regime with a Sunni majority government that looks to Ankara or Riyadh for partnership. The Yemen solution removed Salih but left his family in power and granted him immunity. It was a bargain made by and for elites—not the people. The Syrian opposition is less likely to

accept half-measures negotiated by a few Syrian elites and their international backers.

The Egypt Option: Removal by Coup. This option assumes there is a point at which key insiders decide that the leader's survival is more of a liability than an asset, the examples being the Egyptian army's removal of President Hosni Mubarak and his successor Mohammed Morsi. In a Syrian version of this scenario, senior leaders remain in power and Russia and Iran quickly assert their influence through them to restrict the scope of change. They calculate that the higher the level of continuity from the old regime to a transitional authority, the greater the chance that they will remain influential. A coup, however, may produce less continuity and greater change than anticipated. Assad's successor will be under pressure from many sides to respond to broader opposition concerns and to begin a process of internal negotiation to end the crisis. He will also have to consolidate his base of support and establish his party's legitimacy, which could mean opening opportunities for some actors, including pro-U.S. or Syrian opposition supporters, and closing them for others.

The Lebanon Option: Ongoing Proxy War for Sectarian Solidarity. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and other Gulf states are providing money and arms to the Syrian opposition to fight Assad and Iranian-backed elements. This kind of involvement is a high-stakes gamble for the six GCC countries, which usually shun direct military engagement. They also tend to prefer the stability of a government dominated by a single strong-man military figure rather than the uncertainty of a democratically shaped Islamist government, which may not share their religious or political values. Nonetheless, support for one set of strategies has never prohibited these countries from switching tactics when

their strategy fails to work. The sectarian nature of the conflict and the proxy war that characterizes Saudi and Iranian competition in Syria will ultimately perpetuate a long-term low-intensity conflict as Syrians compete for political power and foreign support along sectarian and ethnic lines similar to those that divide Lebanon.

Iraq since 2003 offers us grim images of what could go wrong in Syria if and when the government collapses. Disbanding the entire Baathist infrastructure and the military could have dire consequences in reestablishing a semblance of security and stability under a transitional government. Iran's ability to stir up local unrest using surrogate militias and other assets in Iraq should serve as a warning of what it could do in Syria if Assad's regime falls. Syria may not be Iraq, but a post-Assad Syria will not receive the same kind of intense scrutiny as post-Saddam Iraq did under American occupation. No matter how Assad departs, a key question remains: who or what will protect Syrian citizens, especially its ethnic and religious minorities, once the state's institutions collapse?

What Do the Neighbors Want?

Syria's neighbors—Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia as well as Iran—all see risk in what is happening in Syria whether the Assad regime survives or falls. The nature of the risk runs from the spillover effect of military confrontation, refugee flows, and expanded sectarian warfare to loss of leverage over key domestic and regional security interests.

Iran: Preserving Influence, Fighting Isolation. The Assad regime's survival has been a top national security priority for Iran. Syria has been the Islamic Republic's strongest regional

ally since the 1979 Iranian revolution. Tehran has provided Damascus with weapons, money, logistics support, and strategic advice on dealing with domestic opponents while stonewalling international critics. Syria is important to Iran for geostrategic reasons: it is a key Arab and Muslim ally in a region that rejects non-Arab and non-Sunni influence; it provides Iran with a platform to support Hizballah, Palestinian extremists, and disaffected Lebanese Christians; and it enables Iran to challenge Israel as a frontline state and disrupt efforts at Israeli-Arab rapprochement. Under former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, support for the embattled Assad and his Alawite-dominated regime was also a symbol of national pride and revolutionary Islamic leadership in the face of American and Western interests.

Iran's leaders have preferred the civil war as an acceptable risk to full-scale regime change in Damascus. Some Iran scholars believe that Tehran will use every asset in its arsenal to save Assad, including support for him against foreign military intervention.² Press sources document the presence of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) from the Quds Force fighting with Syrian and Hizballah forces in northern and western Syria.³ Other experts believe Iran's leaders are more pragmatic; they could accept an alternative to Assad and may even be willing to accede to a transitional government should he be removed by coup, a negotiated settlement, or even outside intervention.⁴ Iran would insist on an interim government that included Alawite and other elements friendly to Iran and recognition of Tehran as participants in any post-Assad negotiations. It would also insist that change in regime not include fundamental changes in Syria's

security and military forces, with which Iran is closely linked.

Enter President Hasan Ruhani. He has made clear Iranians' distaste for Assad's repression of his people, especially his use of chemical weapons, and hinted that the Syrian leader may not be an essential element of Iran's Syrian strategy.⁵ In a speech in mid-September to commanders of the IRGC, Ruhani welcomed a possible deal between Washington and Moscow to reduce Syria's chemical weapons stockpile and warned the IRGC, with units fighting openly in Syria, not to get involved in politics.⁶

Iran does not want to see a Saudi "victory" in Syria or elsewhere in the region, but efforts to improve relations with the Arab states have failed. Egypt under the military transitional authorities and Morsi have been unwilling to improve ties, open the Suez Canal to permit passage by Iranian warships, or allow Iran access to Gaza. Iran has also tried to expand its ties to political allies in Lebanon, offering reconstruction and development assistance as well as military aid to Christian and Sunni communities.

The consequences for Iran should Assad's regime fall will be significant externally and unpredictable. Iran's standing in the Arab world had already been undermined by its denial of the Arab Spring's Arab and secular origins. The Islamic Republic could become more isolated and less able to intimidate its neighbors. It will be more difficult to transfer money and weapons to Hizballah or retaliate against Israel. Iranian leaders before Ruhani's election were also worried that their increasingly unpopular support for Assad could rekindle domestic support for the Green Revolution protest movement of 2009. Foreign military intervention in Syria, however, could also

create opportunities for Iran to minimize its losses and even expand its regional influence.

Iraq: Managing the Syrian Crisis. The conflict in Syria presents a major dilemma for Iraq based on inextricably linked sociopolitical, tribal, ethnic, religious, and security-based ties. Many Iraqis have family, clan, and tribal connections in Syria overlaid with longstanding religious, trade, and smuggling interests. After the collapse of Saddam's regime, Syrian authorities allegedly facilitated the transit of armed Sunni Islamist extremists, including al-Qaeda operatives and renegade Iraqi Baathists, across the border to fuel instability in Iraq.⁷ Press sources indicate that this "ratline" has been reversed as the civil war in Syria expands, with al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia and militia elements loyal to Iran, Muqtada al-Sadr, or Sunni tribal leaders now sending arms and fighters into Syria to fight for the Assad regime or against it.⁸

These linkages complicate Baghdad's policy on Syria and Assad. Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, who spent long years of exile in Iran and Syria, has voiced support for Assad, advised him to accept political reforms to end the crisis, and offered to mediate between Assad and his opponents. In a press interview in late February, he warned that a victory for rebels in the Syrian civil war would create a new extremist haven and destabilize the wider Middle East, sparking sectarian wars in his own country and in Lebanon. Maliki stated:

If the world does not agree to support a peaceful solution through dialogue . . . then I see no light at the end of the tunnel. Neither the opposition nor the regime can finish each other off. The most dangerous thing in this process is that if the opposition is victorious, there will be a civil war in

*Lebanon, divisions in Jordan and a sectarian war in Iraq.*⁹

The issue for most Iraqis is national interest, not sectarian identity. Maliki and most Iraqis see themselves as Iraqis and Arabs first. They criticize the Assad regime's brutality, Baathist origins, and lack of accountability. Their greater worry, however, is that Assad could be replaced by a Muslim Brotherhood-dominated government encouraged by Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar and eager to destabilize neighborhood regimes that are Sunni or insufficiently Shi'a.

Iraq remains too divided by sectarian politics and weakened by its own security challenges to fend off Iranian pressure to support its Syrian client.

Iraq remains too divided by sectarian politics and weakened by its own security challenges to fend off Iranian pressure to support its Syrian client. Over time, however, this calculation may change. Maliki will need to weigh carefully the costs of supporting Iran in Syria against the costs to Iraqi security should Assad's regime fail. Iran will place a much higher value on a compliant government in Baghdad if Assad falls and Iraq becomes Iran's new strategic depth against the United States, Israel, and Western influence in the Middle East. This could have serious security and economic consequences as Baghdad struggles to assert greater power under a centralized government, expand oil production and exports, and strengthen its military capabilities.

Sectarianism as a Unifier and Divider. The Arab Spring permitted long-suppressed grievances among religious and ethnic groups to



Hundreds of Syrian refugees cross into Iraq at the Peshkhabour border crossing in Dohuk Governorate on August 17, 2013

come to light. Sunni and Shi'a, Muslim and Christian, religious and secular, Arab and Kurd were all initially part of the new discourse in Cairo's Tahrir Square and in Baghdad. Muslim Brotherhood parties and more extremist Salafi elements soon replaced the secular-minded moderates of the Arab Spring in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya and began to play a significant role in the opposition to Assad. The initial political success of President Morsi, the Brotherhood, and more radical Salafi elements in Egypt warned Syria's Arab neighbors of what Syria without Assad could become. Morsi appointed Brotherhood members to senior government posts, supported a constitution reflecting the Brotherhood's agenda, and asserted his control over parliament and the supreme court. For many Egyptians, he clearly favored sectarian values and interests over a nationalist or

democratic model. Would he insist on rigid enforcement of shariah law? Would he protect the rights of all citizens, including minorities? Would his party concede power if it lost the next election? Morsi was soon under siege from the military, which he had purged after his election, and from Salafis, who warned that harder-line, anti-democratic elements would come to power. The military's removal of Morsi was a dangerous moment in Egyptian politics, but it was also a warning to the neighborhood of the future under sectarian rule.

Most experts familiar with Arab political history and popular culture discount the idea of a resurgent pan-Arab or pan-Sunni nationalism linking Muslim Brotherhood or other Salafi parties that have come to power or have a significant presence in Turkey, Syria, Egypt, Jordan, and the Maghreb. They note the

differences in national identity, interests, culture, religious custom, and ambivalence regarding total Islamist control of state institutions and political culture. But the issue lies as well with foreign intervention. Much of the responsibility or blame for the Islamist parties' success in Egypt and Syria is credited to Saudi Arabia and Qatar, who sheltered Brotherhood members during their long years of exile from Syria and Egypt. Responsibility for their lack of cooperation is also placed with Riyadh and Doha. Brotherhood and Salafi loyalists have long been at odds, with Qatar backing Brotherhood affiliates and the Saudis favoring more extremist Salafi groups. Iran as a Shi'a state is seen as sectarian, encouraging Shi'a communities in Arab Gulf states to demand a share of power and threatening their Arab rulers for denying it.

GCC Support Is a Mixed Blessing. Saudi Arabia and the smaller GCC states are autocracies whose political, social, and foreign policy behavior is shaped by traditional conservative tribal and religious values. Their reaction to the Arab Spring and the conflict in Syria reflects these interests and values. They worry that Islamists in Syria will encourage domestic critics to demand greater political participation and social change. The GCC states find their best defense in their oil wealth and the ability it gives them to buy off unhappy citizens with promises of more jobs, higher wages, better housing, and subsidies whether they are needed or not. Their wealth, along with citizen acceptance of a benevolent autocracy, allows the ruling families to ignore demands for accountability, greater popular participation in governance, and a more open economy.

The GCC has no uniform political or security policies and foreign relations are tailored mostly to state-specific interests rather than

GCC concerns. They do, however, share a common threat perception: all feel threatened by the Shi'a political takeover in Iraq, the civil war in Syria, and Iran's looming shadow as a militant state whose aggressive regional stance includes using sectarian polarization to spark domestic unrest in their countries. The Gulf states actively confront Iranian interests in the region through careful monitoring of Iranian activities (especially those centered on recruitment efforts and operational planning), security cooperation, and the specter of sectarianism, which is intended to rally popular support and paint opponents and critics as disloyal.

Gulf aid in Syria has gone to a number of factions fighting the Assad regime. There is no set standard for how the GCC states choose whom to support and whom to ignore in the conflict. They probably know little about their clients or their reliability. It is not enough to be a pious Muslim and loyal to conservative Sunni principles. GCC support for proxies to challenge Iran's allies in Syria has proved difficult to confine to those who are trustworthy as proxies or who follow a patron's policies.

The GCC monarchies are playing a complex game in which their influence and ultimate survival are at stake. Yet in all of them few people outside the ruling families and dominant sect are in charge of decision-making on foreign or security policy, and any radical reorientation of policy or institutions that could affect family interests is not to be tolerated. During the events marking the Arab Spring, all of the GCC countries experienced some degree of unrest, and Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) deployed GCC military units to Bahrain to "protect infrastructure" and prevent any threat to destabilize the government. Saudi Arabia,

Qatar, and the UAE provided direct military support against the Qadhafi regime and urged North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces to remove him.

The red line for the GCC states is unrest on the Peninsula itself, in Bahrain or Yemen, but not civil war in Syria. GCC leaders blame Iran for all the unrest in the Gulf, including Bahrain, and they pledge money to many states to keep them “secure.” Their funding of the proxy war with Iran in Syria does not increase the likelihood of military conflict between Sunni Arab states and Iran. They were quick to congratulate Ruhani on his election to the Iranian presidency in June and to recognize and reward the Egyptian military’s removal of Morsi and the Brotherhood from public office.

What Do Russia and China Want?

When the Syrian crisis began, U.S. and European policymakers assumed that armed intervention would lead to fragmentation and civil war. Moscow argued this as well. Its support has been critical in helping Assad hang onto power and many now assume that the longer the Assad regime holds on, the more likely it is that he will survive. What does Russia want? Moscow might be satisfied with a negotiated outcome that would include it, Iran, and possibly China in talks similar to those held in Bonn that produced the Karzai government in Afghanistan. Some even see this as a way to resolve broader issues, including drawing Iran into a process that could then be linked to progress on nuclear issues. It is doubtful that this “Grand Bazaar”-style approach could resolve Syria’s woes quickly or satisfactorily, nor is it likely to convince Moscow or Beijing to come to the table. The Russians would like to delay a resolution in

Syria to maintain as much continuity as possible between old and new governments and to preserve Russian interests and influence. Moscow wants to remain Syria’s great power ally, but a prolonged proxy war could divide the country and limit Russia’s overall influence there.

Similarly, China opposes foreign military intervention in principle but is not likely to do anything to prevent it. China has little economic or strategic interest in Syria. It opposes the use of military force and a declaration of no-fly zones and safe havens for rebels as happened in Libya. China will back Russia in expectation that Russia will support it on matters that are important to China.

The question of whose interests must be satisfied or sacrificed is a primary one. Is it important to offer Russia, China, and Iran inclusion in the process of determining the post-Assad transition? What is the price to be paid for offering them inclusion? Would Syrians, the Gulf Arabs, and Turkey find this kind of bargain acceptable or useful? The cost to U.S. interests could prove too high for a bargain that could not be kept. Finally, what happens if the timetable on the ground in Syria outpaces the slowness of the international negotiating process? Time may not be on the side of international mediation or engagement. As the crisis continues, Russia could become increasingly irrelevant. It could use its veto in the UN, but events on the ground and not in New York will determine what happens in Syria.

What Could Go Wrong?

What could change these assumptions? What are we missing? Several questions need to be addressed.

Do Tribes Matter? Tribes—membership in them, loyalty to them—define political identity and reality in many areas of the Middle East. States observe the geographic boundaries laid out nearly 100 years ago, but several large tribal confederations include constituent parts living and trading in countries that are occasionally antagonistic.¹⁰ These tribes have complex ties to influential families and political leaders that cross borders and histories. According to press reports and interviews with Iraqi political leaders, Sunni Arab tribes of western Iraq support the Syrian uprising in hopes of ending Iranian influence in Syria and Iraq, returning Syria to Sunni leadership and boosting their leverage with Baghdad. Others may be assisting the Assad regime in return for favors from Damascus during the Iraqi surge of 2005–2007.

Tribal constituencies are essential for Assad as well, especially those in eastern Syria and areas south of Damascus. They may be as much as 20 percent of Syria’s population; they are armed (guns, not tanks), have loyal followers, and are situated in the heart of Syria’s hydrocarbon infrastructure. Syria’s tribes are governed by a consultative and hierarchical process, but once a decision is made, it is definitive. Both Saddam and the Assads gave the tribes autonomy in exchange for support, but Bashar al-Assad does not have as substantial a tribal presence as his father had. Military intelligence monitors the tribes but may not be able to contain them. Their influence in Syria and Iraq and the flow of arms to them will probably grow as security conditions worsen and government control weakens.



Michail Kremenber

Russia Wants to Preserve Interests and Influence

Does the Baath Party or Another Political Ideology Matter? Probably not. Neither Iran nor Saudi Arabia is thinking in strictly ideological or sectarian terms. For the Saudis and other Gulf Arabs, stability takes precedence over democracy as a desirable endstate. They offered Egypt's military financial assistance soon after Mubarak and Morsi were removed by the military in hopes that authoritarian rule would secure the stability that eluded political parties, even Islamist ones. Iran under Ahmadinejad wanted to deny victory in Syria to the Saudis and their U.S. backers. Ruhani, however, has put a high priority on rapprochement with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, which could be impeded by Iran's current policy on Syria.

What Do the Kurds Want? Kurds in Turkey, Syria, and Iran watched enviously as Iraq's Kurds made significant gains in getting external protection and ultimately acquiring status as a self-governing province within the new Iraqi state. Kurdish unity is a powerful rallying cry, but the Kurds of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria speak different dialects, follow different leaders, and often set opposing priorities for themselves and other Kurdish factions.

Syrian Kurds belong primarily to either the Kurdish National Council (KNC) or the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, or PYD), a branch of the anti-Turkish Kurdish Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, or PKK) that is based in northern Iraq and operates primarily against Turkish targets. More than one-third of the PKK is Syrian Kurdish. Few Syrian Kurds have joined the Arab opposition to Assad, although a Syrian Kurd was named president of the exile Syrian National Council in 2012 in an effort by the predominantly Arab Sunni opposition to more actively include them. The Kurds give

many reasons for ignoring anti-Assad movements. They reject political groups that are by definition Arab and they distrust the Muslim Brotherhood, which dominates the opposition movement, for its Turkish links. The PYD/PKK uses the Assad regime to sustain its radical Kurdish nationalist agenda and anti-Turkish operations. The Assad government, in turn, encourages—and arms—several Kurdish extremist factions to destabilize Turkey and undermine the Syrian opposition.

Syrian Kurdish political demands can be seen on a spectrum from assimilation into a new Syrian state to self-rule or outright independence. The KNC has said it is interested in federalism and political decentralization, which suggests an autonomous Kurdish government to apply wherever a Kurd is. More inclusively, this would suggest the confessional style of politics in Lebanon, but hardline Kurdish independents may seek the ethnogeographic division of Iraq. Regardless, Syria's Kurds seem unwilling or unable to articulate how their vision for a new state would work in practice. They will probably reject any post-Assad settlement or transitional government in which Turkey has been involved, but they have few alternatives. Encouraged by Ankara, Iraq's Kurdish leader Masud Barzani has tried to woo Syria's Kurds into cooperation, but he has had little success in part because of his ties to Turkey and in part because of his own ambitions to gamble for an independent Kurdish state.

Syria's Kurds are unlikely to play a significant role in ending or rescuing Assad's regime, but they are armed and dangerous and could pose a major challenge to a post-Assad government. Whatever their ambitions or hopes, Turkey will oppose any moves by Syria's Kurds to acquire any form of self-rule. Syrian Kurdish

factions signed an accord in 2012 at the encouragement of Iraqi Kurdish leaders to unify as a means of better attaining Kurdish autonomy in Syria. Despite that, it is unlikely that the PKK/PYD will take orders from Barzani or the KNC. Internal power struggles within Syrian Kurdish groups are likely to continue within Syria's political vacuum.

Should We Worry about Hizballah or al-Qaeda? Hizballah is directly involved in military operations inside Syria in defense of the Assad regime according to press accounts and its leader Hassan Nasrallah.¹¹ Hizballah shifted from a low-profile, high-deniability strategy to high-profile engagement when the Syrian military was unable to hold off rebel advances. Nasrallah's statement acknowledged for the first time that the organization's military wing was fighting on behalf of Assad in Syria. In a virtual declaration of war on al-Qaeda and other Sunni extremist factions, Nasrallah warned, "If Syria falls, the Palestinian cause will be lost," and, he predicted, Israel then will enter Lebanon.

Hizballah is a critical component of Iran's deterrent posture. Preserving Assad is extremely important, but without assistance from Tehran and Moscow, Hizballah probably can do little more to protect him. The costs would be high and their resources are limited. Some experts believe that threats of attack from Israel keep Hizballah from trying to remove advanced weapons or technology from Syria, but no one interviewed would guess the level of fear required to keep Hizballah from smuggling weapons into or out of Syria or the degree of its loyalty to Iran should it be ordered to do so. One military expert said Hizballah's leaders view the possession of chemical weapons more as a hazard or burden than an asset. He believes Iran would have to

direct them to get involved with nonconventional weapons. If Hizballah were to do so and if Israel were to retaliate, then the expert warned, the violence would be hard to contain. "The Syrian crisis," he stated, "would almost be an afterthought."

Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia was once encouraged by Assad to cross into Iraq to launch attacks aimed at destabilizing the country after the collapse of Saddam's government; now it is re-entering Syria to attack government targets.

Sunni extremist factions, such as al-Qaeda, are a small part of the Syrian opposition movement. They operate from bases in Lebanon and Iraq with fighters and weapons crossing into Syria and Syria launching retaliatory attacks on their sites in Lebanon. Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia was once encouraged by Assad to cross into Iraq to launch attacks aimed at destabilizing the country after the collapse of Saddam's government; now it is re-entering Syria to attack government targets. Leaders of the Syrian extremist Jabhat al-Nusra and the Iraqi-based al-Qaeda announced earlier this year that they would unite efforts, but al-Qaeda leader Shaykh Zawahiri and al-Nusra denied this. Al-Qaeda and Jabhat al-Nusra's presence remains relatively small and they must compete with other factions for resources. This could change if violence escalates, if al-Qaeda leaders in Iraq or Yemen see an opportunity to establish a base in ungoverned space in Syria, or if foreign forces intervene in Syria.

Does Assad Have an Exit Strategy? Bashar al-Assad is described as moody, unpredictable, irrational, and Janus-faced. One scholar stated,

“He will say one thing in the morning and another in the afternoon.” Assad himself said in his interview with PBS’s Charlie Rose that casualties, referring to 100,000 dead in the civil war, are irrelevant in a war that is total. Some believe the breakup of Syria is inevitable and that Assad and Alawi allies will eventually retreat to the Syrian coast, possibly to Latakia, an area dominated by Alawis between the coast and the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon.

Similarly, little is known about the probable fate of Alawis and other prominent Syrians supporting Assad should he retreat or be removed. The Alawite minority comprises about 10 percent of the country and is the heart of Assad’s support base. They govern the provinces and control his military-security services. Many are politically radicalized, extremely loyal, and have access to Syria’s non-conventional weapons systems. They are also probably worried about their fate should the Assad regime fall and a Sunni-dominated government take over. Some Alawis might hope for amnesty under a successor regime, but many probably would suspect this as a ploy and join the Shabiha elements used by the regime in local battles to initiate a bloody post-Assad insurgency.

What if a desperate Assad, looking for a way to retaliate or divert attention away from his internal woes, attacks Israel or Jordan as a last gasp? What if Assad decides to attack refugee safe havens in Jordan, Lebanon, or Turkey? Are Palestinians in Jordan and Syria tools that Assad could use to threaten Israel and Jordan? No one knows at what point the Syrian leader may feel the need to resort to extreme measures, but his strategy is survival. He does not appear to have an exit strategy other than winning through military confrontation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

An expert on Syria described the country as “the most begrudging society in the Middle East. It is not like any of its neighbors, with the possible exception of Iraq. It is a minority regime in a country of minorities.” Solutions that recall Syria’s colonial era or an elite-level deal with foreign powers, which allows the Assad regime a role in a transitional authority, probably would not last, he concluded: “Even if you break off a chunk of the regime, you need the people to agree to it or else they will not leave the street. If we have a negotiated exit, who steps in? It’s nothing like Yemen; you can’t get around the sectarian nature of the regime.”

It is difficult to conclude from a few interviews and assessments that a simple, straightforward negotiated settlement of Syria’s political crisis is possible in the short term. Nor is there much evidence to suggest that Syria’s diverse ethnic and religious communities will be able to resolve their differences and successfully manage a post-Assad transitional government. As military confrontations continue, many of these communities are growing increasingly isolated and desperate. Collapse of the regime could magnify the risk of retaliation and blood feuds, tribal warfare, and, as in Iraq, insurgencies fueled by religious or ethnic extremists who are well-armed and ill-disciplined.

Nevertheless, a possible solution may lie in a settlement negotiated and monitored by an international consortium under UN or Arab League monitors that establishes a ruling coalition. This ruling coalition could include bureaucrats and technocrats from the Baathist regime, members of the exiled Syrian opposition movement, and most significantly a

cross-section of prominent Syrian civilian and military leaders willing to work together in a transitional administration. This may preserve institutional integrity and a functional national command authority, but the prospect of a peaceful transition along these lines is doubtful. Like Russia and Iraq after revolution, exiles are unlikely to be welcomed back to run the country. Moreover, the opposition groups thus far appear incapable of overcoming individual differences and internecine rivalries to establish a unified position. This bodes poorly for their ability to govern the country. Iraq's post-Saddam governments survived to a great extent because of the American occupation, but even Americans' obsession with the rule of law and proportional representation could not prevent the rise of militias and insurgency. There seems to be even less international consensus on or in Syria than there was in Iraq.

Syria's neighbors are looking to the United States and the other NATO countries to lead in removing Assad, but no one appears to have the will or courage to assume responsibility.

A Syrian expert who worked on *The Day After Assad Project* for the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) believes the regime is a broader group than just the Assad family and that institutional frameworks, such as the security apparatus, the military, the justice sector, and police forces will survive the removal of the regime. A key challenge will be figuring out what elements of the regime could play a productive role. For other Syria watchers, the key is not the institutional framework but its control by the same elements that ran it under Assad and are complicit in his regime's repressive measures. Syria has long been governed most intimately by multiple branches of the security services, which report directly to the



Odd Anderson

Rebel Fighters Help Syrian Women Crossing the Orontes River to Turkey

Assad family and are complicit in the regime's actions. Should these elements remain, large swaths of Syrian society may reject the entire government, extending the country's instability into the postconflict rebuilding process. Will lessons from Iraq or the recommendations from the USIP study be sufficient to prevent civil war or ethnic cleansing by armed Syrian militias? Probably not.

What to do about Syria is an especially difficult issue for the United States at a time when U.S. forces are withdrawing from the region and the Obama administration is looking to pivot attention toward Asia. President Obama's recent pledge of military aid may be sufficient to create a pause in the fighting while both sides reassess their ability to continue the war or seek a cease-fire, but it is not likely to resolve the basic conflict or bring peace. It is unlikely to weaken either side's resolve to change the regime or save it. Most experts interviewed believed that "these things inside Syria are going to happen regardless, but if we continue doing nothing, many trends will continue to get worse." If Assad leaves power or stays in a nominal role, a large part of society will remain close to his regime, especially among the Alawite community, whose members fear Sunni retribution. Their fight for survival will continue, one scholar observed: "After forty years of ruling the country, the Alawites will not be content with walking away. It will be messy."

The U.S. delay in delivering military aid to the Syrian opposition has probably cost it some leverage in the region, especially with governments seeing Assad's survival as a direct threat to their security. Countries with Muslim Brotherhood members in positions of influence need foreign aid and trade to survive, but their willingness to accept American support

or loans from international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund or World Bank will be tempered by their need to show independence of great powers and refusal to accede to reforms or end subsidies often required by foreign borrowing. They will watch the situation in Egypt most closely to see if the Brotherhood can regain power despite efforts to break it,¹² if the military turns power over to civilian authority and allows free and fair elections, and if the United States and wealthy Arab donors continue to back the military and exert influence on political succession. Whatever happens in Egypt and Syria, the United States will be held responsible. Our victory in Iraq did not ensure a compliant succession or a smooth transition to democratic rule or national reconciliation, both necessary if there is to be hope for an end to sectarian war.

The options for the end of Assad laid out in the beginning of this paper remain the most likely ones. A negotiated exit and settlement may be the most preferable option for the United States and the international community, but the most likely one is some version of the Arab option: a prolonged civil war, whether by proxy or not, fought on sectarian and/or ethnic terms with the patron/sponsor having little influence over the outcome.

Despite its announcement of limited engagement in Syria in support of the opposition, U.S. policy remains unclear and undeclared to many observers. Does America's newfound concern for containing Syria's chemical weapons and promises of military aid to the opposition promise greater engagement if Assad's forces stabilize the battlefield, retake more territory, cross another red line, and rout the Free Syrian Army (FSA)? Or is the U.S. goal to give the FSA just enough support to level the playing field to the point where both sides opt

for a cease-fire and negotiations? If so, the United States may be creating a quagmire in which more, not less, military support and involvement becomes inevitable as the fighting spreads further into Lebanon and Iraq and possibly threatens Israel as well.

Several specific recommendations for U.S. engagement are in order:

Be clear on goals. If the goal is a military victory, then further support to include advanced equipment may become necessary, but the danger will be that the United States slips into backing a full-blown war. If the goal is to equalize the battlefield and bring both sides to negotiations, then the level of military and financial aid must be carefully calibrated to maintain a balance. This, however, requires cooperation from Assad's backers, Russia and Iran, and would come at a cost to U.S. interests.

Decide if the benefits of a broader strategy outweigh a purely Syrian strategy. Trading Russian and Iranian cooperation on Syria for compromise on non-Syrian issues may not be worth the cost of ending the Syrian crisis. Be prepared for this strategy to fail because of Syrian resentment of what will be seen as neo-colonial intervention in their internal affairs and because the Russians lack the influence to deliver the deal.

Promote the Syrian Opposition Coalition¹³ and its military partner, the FSA, and insist they form a government in exile or, if practical, on liberated Syrian territory. Syrians may spurn efforts by exiles to return and join the transitional government, but they need the talent, money and expertise of the exile community. Syrians from inside and outside the country need to be seen participating in their liberation and implementing transitional justice measures to protect civil society

and as a way to create a watchdog on the other side's postwar behavior.

Urge the international community to support an interim government and monitor domestic compliance with international norms of protection to civilians. The Arab League, Organization of the Islamic Conference, and European Union (EU) should support an armed UN peacekeeping mission that would offer assurances of protection to all Syrians, including Alawis and minorities, in a post-Assad Syria. This force would protect the transitional government and offer amnesty to regime supporters, excluding those responsible for crimes against the Syrian people. The benefit for Syrians is no retaliation for past crimes, except for crimes against humanity. Terms would include arrest and trial for violators.

The Arab League, Organization of the Islamic Conference, and European Union (EU) should support an armed UN peacekeeping mission that would offer assurances of protection to all Syrians, including Alawis and minorities, in a post-Assad Syria.

Continue humanitarian aid to Syrian refugees. The aid could extend to the establishment of safe haven zones inside Syria and might require a no-fly, no-drive zone similar to the protection afforded the Kurds in northern Iraq in 1991. U.S. efforts would be strengthened, but not assured, if backed by the UN, Arab League, and EU. The risk would be that extended support to Syrian opposition bases inside Syria would be used by the opposition to bring more international military forces directly into the fighting.

Reach out to Assad's domestic support base. Fear of retribution may outweigh fear of

sanctions for Sunni Arab, Christian, and other minorities, but the United States needs to convince them it is too costly to keep siding with Assad. Syrians may be more encouraged to defect if the U.S. military were engaged in operations and they believed Moscow and Washington were willing to guarantee postconflict security.

Make clear U.S. and international intolerance for religious and political extremism and terrorism. Also make clear that further efforts by terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda to cross borders to disrupt or destabilize any country are unacceptable.

With red lines comes responsibility for monitoring and punishing infractions. Great attention and sympathy are focused on the fate of innocent civilians, but Assad clearly links collateral damage to retribution.¹⁴ Syrians may be reluctant to break with the regime, but the point is to make it more dangerous and costly to support the regime than break with it.

The current political turmoil in Turkey and Egypt is not likely to have much effect on Assad or the Syrian civil war. The election of Hasan Ruhani, a cleric, former diplomat and nuclear negotiator, to the presidency in Iran, however, could present an opportunity to change the course of the civil war. Tehran's support for Assad has raised questions among Iranians, including some officials, who not only see Assad as a dictator but also believe his opponents are "dominated by extremist groups with frightening agendas." He cautions that "Syria is a matter of national security and that's why the president can't solely manage it. It has to be discussed with the Supreme Leader, the Revolutionary Guards and the National Security Council." **PRISM**

Notes

¹ Jonathan Masters, "Al-Qaeda in Iraq (a.k.a. Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria)," Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounder, October 2013, available at <http://www.cfr.org/Iraq/al-qaeda-iraq-k-islamic-state-iraq-greater-syria/p14811>

² Professor Mohsen Milani (University of South Florida), interview by author, July 2012 and June 2013.

³ See Dexter Filkins, "The Shadow Commander," *The New Yorker*, September 30, 2013, available at http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2013/09/30/130930fa_fact_filkins?printable=true&c; see also Farnaz Fassihi, Jay Solomon, and Sam Dagher, "Iranians Dial Up Presence in Syria," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 15, 2013, A1, available at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887323864604579067382861808984.html>

⁴ Iranian scholars, interview by author, February and September 2012.

⁵ Cited by Deutsche Presse-Agentur, September 16, 2013, but not seen in any other press report.

⁶ Jason Rezaian, "Iranian leader responds to Syria weapons deal," *The Washington Post*, September 17, 2013, A20; "Stay out of politics, Rowhani tells Iran Revolutionary Guards," Arab News, September 17, 2013.

⁷ After a car bombing in Baghdad in 2006, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki claimed Syria had trained al Qaeda and other foreign fighters before sending them to Iraq. In 2009, Baghdad and Damascus recalled their ambassadors after the government of Iraq accused Syria of sheltering Iraqis responsible for bomb attacks. See "Syria and Iraq," *GlobalSecurity.org*, October 10, 2013, available at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/syria/forrel-iraq.htm>

⁸ See Jessica Stern, "Iraq: Where Terrorists Go to School," *The New York Times*, March 19, 2013, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/20/opinion/iraq-a-school-for-terrorists> and Masters.

⁹ "Iraq Prime Minister warns of Syria Crisis Spillover," *Al-Jazeera*, February 20, 2013, available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middle-east/2013/02/201322812730766202.html> See also Ned Parker and Raheem Salman, "Notes from the Underground: The Rise of Nouri al-Maliki," *World Policy Journal*, Spring 2013.

¹⁰ The Shammar, a tribal confederation of several million in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Syria, and Jordan, are primarily Sunni but include Shi'a components as well.

¹¹ Anne Barnard, "In Syrian Victory, Hezbollah Risks Broader Fight," *The New York Times*, June 6, 2013, A1; Karl Vick, "The Fall of al-Qusayr: Capture of Strategic Syrian Town Marks a New Phase in the War," *Time.com*, June 5, 2013, available at <http://world.time.com/2013/06/05/the-fall-of-qusayr-capture-of-strategic-syrian-town>

¹² By mid-September, the successor government under General al-Sisi had arrested many of the Brotherhood's and banned the organization. Morsi himself is under arrest and may be tried for crimes allegedly stemming from his 2011 imprisonment. Mubarak is under house arrest but may be retried.

¹³ The exact title of the Syrian Opposition Coalition is the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, which was created from the Syrian National Coalition.

¹⁴ Bashar al-Assad, interview by Charlie Rose, *PBS Newshour*, September 8, 2013, available at <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/2013/09/Assad-tells-pbs-charlie-rose-syria-prepared-to-retaliate-if-hit.html>

ANONYMOUS



Men march during the funeral of Mohamed Ammar, who was killed by the Syrian Army in Al Qusayr, February 28, 2012

The Rise of Syria's Urban Poor: Why the War for Syria's Future Will Be Fought Over the Country's New Urban Villages

BY DAVID KILCULLEN AND NATE ROSENBLATT

The divisions between town and country or between the main cities and the country towns are very old social and cultural divisions and, historically, their interests have tended to be intrinsically at variance. For long the peasants lived at the mercy of the cities.

—Hanna Batatu

Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics

Syria's urban poor fight the Assad regime for the soul of Syria's cities. Syrian government troops have abandoned large swaths of countryside to a fractured opposition, focusing resources on key loyalist leverage points: keeping connected the big four cities Aleppo, Damascus, Homs, and Hama, and maintaining a path to the coast. This intensely urban conflict is a byproduct of over ten years of rural village migrations into the outskirts of Syria's ancient cities. Fueled by economic necessity and a persistent drought, these villagers created vast, insulated neighborhoods of urban poor. Three things characterize these communities: they are predominantly controlled by the opposition, they have been among the hardest hit during the conflict, and their guns and recent political activism mean they will be a key power broker in the post-conflict order.

Syria's ancient cities long reigned over the surrounding villages. Urban elites traditionally wielded significant leverage over villagers: they were the landowners, market-setters for farm produce, and funders of major religious institutions. This balance has shifted over the past decade. Nepotistic economic policies and an ongoing drought fueled unprecedented migrations of rural

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villagers into Syria's cities. An explosion in Syria's population amplifies the effects of this migration. Syria's population doubled over the past twenty-five years, with a disproportionate majority occurring in its main cities. This growth has not only stretched Syria's limited urban infrastructure, but has also forced these once-rural communities to come in near-direct contact with the wealth of the city itself. Long separated from cosmopolitan city life, these urban poor now see the rich beneficiaries of a new economic policy that has tripled Syria's GDP in the past ten years, magnifying their relative deprivation. This acute delta between Syria's "haves" and "have-nots" exacerbated historic urban-rural tensions, as a flood of rural migrants sought assimilation into city life. In Arabic, the word commonly used to describe the countryside is *rif*. The city itself is the *medina*. In Syria today, one can hardly discern where the *medina* stops and the *rif* begins.

No matter how the conflict ends, these groups will have guns and grievances associated with a lack of services, high unemployment, and extreme income inequality in an indebted, post-conflict economy.

Today, the words *rif* and *medina* have developed not just geographic connotations, but social ones as well. The *rif* not only describes village farmers but those urban poor living in the slums sprouting up around Syria's cities. This "village-izing" of Syria's ancient cities has changed the complexion of urban space with the growth of large unplanned, parallel communities of urban poor. Syria's cities are still the gateway to economic and political power, but they no longer have the capacity to

assimilate such large numbers of rural migrants. Today, these vulnerable communities bear the brunt of the conflict: their young male residents are armed and fighting the regime. No matter how the conflict ends, these groups will have guns and grievances associated with a lack of services, high unemployment, and extreme income inequality in an indebted, post-conflict economy. For many armed groups, particularly Islamists, this is an opportunity to build political constituencies. Though the future of Syria is highly uncertain, one thing is clear: the urban poor have risen.

Coming Down the Mountain

Despite the present conflict, rural-urban migration is not new to Syria. Ibn Khaldun recognized this phenomenon seven hundred years ago. "The desert is the basis and reservoir of civilization and cities;" he wrote, "the toughness of desert life precedes the softness of sedentary life. Therefore, urbanization is found to be the goal to which the Bedouin aspires."¹ Six hundred years later, Philip Khoury describes a similar phenomenon after the creation of modern Syria: "With the ongoing settlement of the tribe," he writes, "the shaykh developed a taste for city life... He built homes in Damascus and Aleppo and began to participate in the life and politics of the cities."² Traditionally, the city dominated the country, and was able to assimilate those that decided to settle permanently inside its walls.

Hafez al-Assad lived this rural-urban migration and understood it as the key to social mobility. Assad once described to historian Patrick Seale that, "coming down the mountain," from the northeastern Alawite village of Qardaha was, "the crucial turning point of my life."³ Hafez went to Lattakia in 1945 as

the first member of his family to receive a basic education. "Rich boys didn't bother to work," Hafez later recalled, "but simply gave themselves what marks they wanted at the end of the year, and very few were the teachers who dared to stand up to them." Hafez's now-embattled son, Bashar, was not shaped by this history. He knew nothing of this "toughness of desert life." Unlike his father, who was careful to pay attention to rural provincial capitals like Suweida and Dera'a, Bashar built a state enjoyed by friends and relatives like Rami Makhouf.⁴ This city-centric nepotism marginalized a peasant class frustrated by mismanaged resources and scarce economic opportunity. It also accelerated a decade of mass rural-urban migration. Impressively, Syria's GDP nearly tripled from \$21 billion to \$59 billion under Bashar's economic

"liberalization" policies. But that money was not for everyone.

Nowhere was Syria's expanding wealth more clearly denied than to the residents of its burgeoning suburbs. Mojahed Ghadbian, a young activist now based in the United States, watched the posh developments of rich new Damascus neighborhoods from Al Tal, a northern suburb of the capital. He remembers his parents' childhood stories of raising livestock. Rare then was the trip to the city itself. Today, these burgeoning suburbs bleed into city life. The first protest of the Syrian revolution occurred on February 17, 2011 in the heart of Damascus.⁵ But residents of Douma, a blue-collar Sunni Muslim suburb, not Damascenes, were the participants. "The reality of this revolution," says Mojahed, "is that the people who started it did not have economic opportunities that those close to the regime did. They did



Amr Abd Rabbo

People chant and dance during an anti-regime demonstration in Bustan Al Qasr area in Aleppo, Syria on May 10, 2013

not have the *wasta* (influence) to get a good job, nor did they have the *baksheesh* (bribe money) to buy one, either.”

The lack of economic opportunity in Syria was exacerbated by unprecedented population growth. Despite unreliable statistics, considerable indirect evidence suggests Syria’s recent population boom occurred disproportionately in its cities. Syria’s population almost doubled in the past 25 years, from 10.9 million in 1986 to 20.8 million in 2010.⁶ This population rose predominantly in the slums surrounding Syria’s cities. From 2000 to 2010, Syria grew by 4.92 million people; 3.23 million of whom – or nearly 65 percent – were born into urban areas. Today, Aleppo and Damascus together hold approximately 4.5 million people. This means that these cities have likely doubled in population in the past decade. Al Tal residents used to raise livestock; today, it is a popular destination for Syria’s underground nightclub industry.

The sheer mass of new urban migrants makes them impossible to assimilate smoothly. Instead, they transform large swaths of Syria’s cities into stagnant, transplanted

neighborhoods of urban villagers. Twenty years ago, Charles Glass observed the early days of this phenomenon in his travelogue, *Tribes with Flags*. From Aleppo’s poor eastern suburbs, the section of the city most firmly under opposition control today, he wrote, “Now, I realized the village had come to the city, planting itself outside and growing in. The poor farmers were bringing their customs... to cosmopolitan Aleppo. ...They were turning their apartments into compact versions of their mud houses. It was not poverty, but tradition, that had put a whole family in one room.”⁷ For thousands of years, rural migrants were assimilated into urban life. Today, rapid population growth and unprecedented urban migration have upset the historical balance between village and city life.

The Country and City in the Present Conflict

The relatively ungoverned urban sprawl on the outskirts of Syria’s cities is the breeding ground for opposition activity. Baba Amr, a slum of Homs adjacent to the orchards that once fed the city, is synonymous with the



revolution.⁸ Ghouta, once farmland outside Damascus, is another example of a boomtown now besieged by Syrian government troops. The map of opposition-held neighborhoods in Aleppo is almost exactly that of the blue-collar working class Sunni neighborhoods: densely packed, poorly planned relatively recent urban growth. These areas share similar characteristics in that they are religious, conservative, predominantly Sunni Muslim working class communities with transplanted villagers long ignored by the government and deprived of services and economic opportunity.

These neighborhoods of urban poor are the most heavily contested in Syria. According to Syria Tracker, a collaborative, crowd-sourced effort to document and geo-tag deaths in Syria, there have been 14,125 deaths since the beginning of 2013. Of those 14,125 deaths, over half have occurred in Aleppo and Damascus and their surrounding suburbs. Syrian Martyrs, one of the contributors to this effort, was able to track deaths at the neighborhood level. By December 2012, they estimated that more than half of all deaths in Aleppo occurred in only 15 of 56 city neighborhoods.⁹ In Damascus, 65% of all deaths occurred in only seven neighborhoods.¹⁰ These neighborhoods generally share three things in common: they have grown rapidly over the past decade, they align closely with the opposition (in many cases they are controlled by the opposition), and are predominantly poor, working class city suburbs.

In Tadamon, a neighborhood of Damascus, people were considered criminals and homeless. "These were the projects," said one activist. "You don't start a revolution from these places." For these communities, the Syrian revolution is not about new governments; it is about the economy. Their

frustrations are the same ones that drove Mohamed Bouazizi to self-immolate in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, on December 17, 2010. Civil activists were prominent while the revolution remained peaceful, but they have been sidelined by this mass of urban poor who now drive the violent conflict. "Syria had been emptied of most of its peaceful activists," confirms an anonymous writer in Syria.¹¹ Unlike such activists, Syria's urban poor cannot leave. Armed groups take advantage of neighborhoods like Tadamon by providing residents with jobs, services, and basic necessities. That is how they get them to fight. Today, these groups spend as much time fighting each other as they do the Syrian government, recognizing the economic and political benefit of controlling these neighborhoods. Tadamon could not afford to keep armed groups out.

Nowhere is this divide clearer than in Aleppo. The rebels started the insurgency there in late July 2012, dragging the city's eastern suburbs into the fight. "We liberated the rural parts of this province," said a rebel fighter in the first days of the rebel offensive. "We waited and waited for Aleppo to rise, and it didn't. We couldn't rely on them to do it for themselves so we had to bring the revolution to them."¹² The attack was poorly organized because the rebels thought the city would fall to them easily. "Insurgents went in divided and overconfident," writes International Institute for Strategic Studies scholar Emile Hokayem. "The mostly rural fighters made no attempt at outreach and offered no guarantees to the city's terrified residents and anxious minorities."¹³ Most Aleppans had little interest in the conflict; many came to the city from rural communities and did not know their way around. This only reinforces the reality that the

revolution began with young activists but is now fought by the urban poor.

The neighborhoods that accommodate the rebel fighters do so out of economic necessity. Rebel groups provide cash and arms to neighborhood kids, who often constitute the informal police forces in opposition-held areas. They are then called *Ibna' al-Hayy* ("sons of the lanes"), a loaded term suggesting that foreign-funded militant groups have local concerns in mind. Now, the majority of the money and the training comes from Islamists who provide economic opportunity, social services, and law enforcement that both the regime and the secular opposition fail to offer. The secular fighters once offered an alternative, but infighting and lawlessness among the so-called "Free Syrian Army" has led to its demise. Basic services and honest dealing is how these Islamists gained a foothold in the poor neighborhoods. Today groups like *Jabhat al Nusra* and others are the most respected law of the land.

Unlike rich Syrians, the urban poor cannot rent an apartment in Beirut to wait out the conflict; these are the areas from which many of the one million plus registered refugees flee.

The Future of Syria's Urban Poor

This problem of unmanaged urban sprawl will be even worse after the conflict. Syrian average life expectancy is reportedly 75 years, yet less than 8 percent of the country is over 55. This means that Syria is due for a population bulge despite the deaths of tens of thousands of young men in the past two years. This population growth compounds the damage inflicted on Syria's already dwindling or

destroyed infrastructure. The poorest neighborhoods are home to many refugees – they are among the most vulnerable populations affected by some of the heaviest conflict. Unlike rich Syrians, the urban poor cannot rent an apartment in Beirut to wait out the conflict; these are the areas from which many of the one million plus registered refugees flee. The UN recognizes this, declaring recently that 10 million persons, or more than half of the pre-war population of Syria, will need humanitarian assistance by the end of 2013.¹⁴ If the level of destruction and death in major city suburbs is any indication of need, humanitarian agencies must prioritize the urban poor's needs.

In the absence of effective international efforts to provide relief and security, intense localism blooms. Neighborhood gangs run rampant. Lawlessness is rife. Warlordism is on the rise. Iraqi sociologist Ali al-Wardi observed this phenomenon in Baghdad fifty years ago: the insularity of rural migrant communities means that they continue to rely on group and kinship ties to provide protection. In the absence of state or municipal efforts to provide security and rule of law enforcement, these groups reinforce their position as quasi-governments.¹⁵ Before the conflict, these highly insular communities built their own solutions to basic service provision and, to some extent, even rule of law enforcement. Now these communities are armed. This has major implications for the future of the Syrian state: for when local militias take charge of their own services, they are loath to return them to institutions they do not control. If you are looking for a model for Aleppo's future, Libya's second city of Benghazi is not a bad place to start.

Amid this chaos, one ideological framework overcomes community insularity and

provides workable solutions for providing basic necessities and an effective cross-neighborhood governing structure: religion. Islamist groups thrive in these neighborhoods. They are generously funded, well equipped, highly experienced and the least corrupt organizations among opposition groups in Syria. They also provide a framework for governance that is familiar to each community: though civil society was heavily repressed in Syria, religion was afforded greater leeway to operate. In tapping into this network of frustrated urban poor, Jabhat al Nusra is quickly becoming the Hezbollah of Syria's Sunni Muslims. In Aleppo, four Salafist Jihadist groups, led by Jabhat al Nusra, have set up Sharia Commissions that are to date the only effective law enforcement bodies in opposition-held areas of the city. They have a police force, a judicial body, a religious scholarship network that issues fatwas (legal rulings), and a services branch that even runs public transportation services.¹⁶ Combining armed groups with civilian assistance delivery mechanisms like the Sharia Commission, these religious groups remain the only cohesive structure that protects residents and provides basic services in opposition-held areas. A new civilian council was formed for Aleppo City recently after elections in Gaziantep,¹⁷ but has yet to display the capability to curb pervasive lawlessness or the rigorous self-discipline to avoid local perceptions of corruption. The longer the conflict continues, the more powerful these Islamist groups will grow because they are winning over Syria's urban poor.

This dynamic not only improves the lot of extreme Islamists among the opposition, but also reinforces the appeal of the Syrian government in pro-regime areas. To these residents, the regime increasingly represents order amid

the lawlessness and religiosity of opposition-held Syria. Central Damascus and parts of regime-held Aleppo remain the safest parts of the country. But the fear felt by these loyalists is more visceral than Islamism and the chaos of opposition-led Syria. It is not the Islamists they fear, but rather the cause of Islamism itself that they fear: the uneducated, vulnerable, long-oppressed communities of the Rif who now rise up against them. "There was not one person who demonstrated in Harasta (a Damascus suburb) who could read," one Damascene industrialist explained to Daily Star reporter Lauren Williams in March; "They were illiterate and angry. They would rather see the country destroyed."¹⁸ In Aleppo, an activist in regime-held areas of the city describes the feeling among those still loyal to Assad: "A lot of people are closer to the opposition in these areas (than you think)," he writes, "but after the theft and lawlessness that occurs among elements of the Free Syrian Army, there is major concern among residents over newly freed areas." When the opposition recently took the key strategic neighborhood of Sheikh Maqsoud, he reports, armed elements stole more than 300 cars and looted local shops.

Conclusion

While country towns Dera'a and Baniyas sparked Syria's revolution, their fight quickly metastasized to Syria's cities. The first violent outbreak of the Syrian conflict took place in Homs, where the frustration of the urban poor boiled over into open hostility. Brought on by the grievances of village communities crammed into Baba Amr's unplanned slums, Syria's rebels took a stand. Today the communities of urban poor in the hands of the opposition are the hardest hit during the conflict

Their frustrations and their guns will motivate a key power base in Syria's post-Assad future.

Sixty years before Dera'a, a group of young activists sought to transform similar rural grievances into a revolutionary political movement. Much as now, these activists dreamed of a revolution that would lift the Arab world out of its collective myopia. "Ba'athism" was the term they coined – "renaissance" – to describe their lofty aspirations. But the dreams of Michel Aflaq and Salah ad-Din al-Bitar, the movement's co-founders, required the power of Syria's rural community to channel their ambitions into political power. Enter Akram al-Hourani, a "Syrian Castro," who rallied hundreds of thousands of Syrian workers to the cause of socialism. According to historian Patrick Seale, Hourani "roused the peasants, politicized the army, and gave the theorists of the Ba'ath a cutting edge. The anger of country boys, raging against the entrenched privilege of the cities, was given a sharper focus by his example."¹⁹ In 1953, his socialism combined with al-Bitar and Aflaq's Ba'athism to create the modern-day Arab Socialist Ba'ath party that now rules Syria. The Ba'athist revolution in Syria would not have been possible without the support from the very same communities they fight today.

Unlike sixty years ago, when the countryside rose up against the city during Hourani's time, contemporary urbanization in Syria means the city has risen up against itself. The fight for Syria's future is a fight for the future of its cities, pitting urban-rural tensions in smaller, denser pockets of ungovernable spaces. One remarkable work of recent fiction captures the essence of the deeply-felt suspicions of the city and the country. In *The Dark Side of Love* by Syrian author Rafik Schami, Elias, one of the book's central characters

moves to Damascus from the fictional Christian village of Mala. There, he falls in love with a Damascene girl: "She spoke fluent French," Elias recalls, "which sounded to his ears like civilization, liberation from cow dung and the smell of sweat." In another chapter, Schami writes of a Damascene police officer sent to Mala to resolve a dispute between the village's two main families: "The CID officer knew that by giving away the name he might cause a murder, but he hated peasants and the very smell of them. In the city, he would never have revealed the identity of a man who had laid a complaint, not for all the money in the world."²⁰ Sixty years ago, the peasants rose up and were granted Ba'athism. Today, this pan-Arab socialism is tarred with the brush of Hafez al-Assad and Saddam Hussein.

Today a new order grips Syria and much of the Arab world. Islamism is on the rise. Post Arab-Spring demands for "one man – one vote" push the urban poor into government. Their superstitions and suspicions are channeled into a new, untrained mandate for religious-based government. When the conflict finally subsides, many activists and regime lackeys will have left the country. Picking up the scraps of what remains, Syria's urban poor will try to rebuild it without the knowledge and experience of generations of rich Syrians who have abandoned it for greener pastures. **PRISM**

Notes

¹ Franz Rosenthal, trans., *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 93.

² Philip Khoury, *Syria Under the French Mandate*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

³ Patrick Seale, *Asad, the Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 11.

⁴ See, for example: Oliver Holmes and Suleiman al-Khalidi, "Syria moneyman is target of anti-Assad hatred," Reuters, July 18, 2012, available at <http://reut.rs/173NqFC>

⁵ It was a spontaneous protest outside the famous Souq al-Hamidiyeh market in downtown Damascus. The Interior Minister himself arrived quickly to disperse the protest after police were unable to stop the demonstrators. The first words shouted in the video are "Haramiyeh! Haramiyeh" ("Thieves! Thieves!") in reference to the corruption of the regime, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qDHLsU-ik_Y

⁶ These figures are all courtesy of the World Bank (databank.worldbank.org) and date from before the start of the uprising.

⁷ Glass, Charles, *Tribes with Flags: A Journey Curtailed* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1990), 165.

⁸ See, for example: Erika Solomon, "Syrian army recaptures symbolic Baba Amr district in Homs," available at <http://reut.rs/104zXWO>

⁹ In order from most to fewest: Salah ad-Din, al-Sukkari, Bustan al-Qasr, al-Sha'ar, al-Firdos, Hanano, al-Haydariyah, Sakhour, Tariq al-Bab, al-Marjeh, Qadi Askar, Saif al-Dawla, Karm al-Jabal, Bustan al-Basha, and al-Amriyah.

¹⁰ In order from most to fewest: al-Qaboun, Jobar, al-Hajjar al-Aswad, al-Qadam, Tadamon, Yarmouk, and Sayyida Zeinab

¹¹ An anonymous author from Syria under the pseudonym "Rita" writes "Syrian Activist Communities: The Battle Inside," openDemocracy weblog, April 16, 2013, available at <http://www.opendemocracy.net/rita-from-syria/syrian-activist-communities-battle-inside>

¹² Erika Solomon, "Rural fighters pour into Syria's Aleppo for battle" Reuters, July 29, 2012, available at <http://reut.rs/1dwT1VT>

¹³ Emile Hokayem, "Syria's Battle Royale," Syrian Assistance (Blog post), February 12, 2013,

accessed at <http://www.syrianassistance.com/6/post/2013/02/syriaa-battle-royale.html>

¹⁴ Martin Chulov, "Half of Syrian population 'will need aid by end of year'," *The Guardian*, April 19, 2013, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/19/half-syrian-population-aid-year>

¹⁵ Ali al-Wardi, *A Study in the Society of Iraq*, (Baghdad, 1965).

¹⁶ From a twitter post by reporter Jenan Moussa while in Aleppo, dated April 7, 2013, Available at <https://twitter.com/jenanmoussa/status/320964677851041792>

¹⁷ See the council's active web presence on display here: <https://www.facebook.com/TheLocalCouncilOfAleppoCity> and news about their election here: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/syrians-vote-for-aleppo-council-.aspx?pageID=238&nid=42271>

¹⁸ Lauren Williams, "Damascus Split on Support for Regime" *The Daily Star*, March 21, 2013, available at <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2013/Mar-21/210937-damascus-split-on-support-for-syrian-regime.ashx#ixzz2QySY8aqI>

¹⁹ Seale, Asad, *Op.Cit.*, 49.

²⁰ Rafik Schami, *The Dark Side of Love*, Anthea Bell (trans.), (Northampton, MA: Interlink Books, 2009).

REUTERS/Muzzafar Salman



Abu al-Taib, leader of Ahab Al-Mustafa Battalion, during a military training for female fighters in a mosque in the Seif El Dawla neighbourhood in Aleppo”

Syria's Salafi Networks

More Local Than You Think

BY WALEED AL-RAWI AND STERLING JENSEN

One of the key factors contributing to the success of efforts to defeat al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) was that “foreign” fighters, led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and others primarily from Jordan and Syria, dominated the organization. These outsiders attempted to impose their influence in Iraq, alienating local Sunni communities and turning them against AQI. Will Syria’s extreme Islamists make the same mistakes, or will they build strong local connections? Will they play the role of spoilers in the political process, as suggested by announcements coming from the Nusra Front and others, or can they be convinced to participate in the political process? Reports indicate there are up to 10,000 foreign fighters, many affiliated with al-Qaeda, currently in Syria.¹ In what directions and how far will they pull the Syrian opposition?

Security analysts are raising questions about the organizational structure, ideology and potential unintended impacts of Salafi networks within the umbrella of Syrian Islamist groups fighting the Assad regime in Syria.² Whatever the post-conflict power sharing arrangement, important decisions must be made about these Salafi networks: will they be spoilers or will they be powerful political brokers? There is no question that battlefield heroes will wield significant sway; however the secular opposition groups supported by the West lack discipline, loyalty, and a united overarching vision for a post-Assad Syria. Meanwhile Syrian Salafi jihadists have set themselves apart from traditional armed groups like the Free Syrian Army (FSA), gaining popularity and credibility due to their bravery, guerrilla fighting capabilities, access to arms, financing and uniting ideology.³ As Salafi influence grows, the secular elements of the Syrian opposition still struggle to obtain strategic weapons, training, and international financing to help make tangible military advances on the ground.

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Yet, while Salafists are united fighters, they lack political flexibility and maturity.⁴ They are not like their fellow Islamists in the Muslim Brotherhood who have a deeper history in political Islam and are well structured. Salafists and members of the Muslim Brotherhood share the same historical sources of Sunni jurisprudence, but in the 20th century divisions arose in Egypt during the Nasserist era that led to the radicalization of disillusioned members of the Brotherhood—most notably Egyptian Sayed Qutb.⁵ Sayed Qutb's writings and interpretation of jihad are an important source for contemporary Salafi jihadists. Since the Nasserist era, the Muslim Brotherhood has remained more vertically structured and political than the Qutbists, while the Qutbists have been more clandestine and horizontally structured.

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As seen in Iraq after 2003, Salafi networks were useful when the Iraqi national resistance needed fighters, resources and expertise to fight the U.S. occupation, but they were highly disruptive and divisive when the Iraqi Sunni resistance wanted to get more involved in the political process. Additionally, Salafists lack experience and know-how in international finance and economics, and therefore cannot offer their constituencies a prosperous life once their struggle, whether armed or not, has ended. Egypt recently experienced this with Salafists, who aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood, but have become spoilers in Egyptian efforts to revitalize the economy. Finally, Salafists are generally adverse to non-Islamic state structures, and therefore often

form stronger ties with foreigners sharing similar Salafi views, than with their own national compatriots. This aversion to internationally accepted state structures such as a secular autocracy or democracy becomes an obstacle during times of national reconciliation, especially in a country like Syria, which is multi-ethnic and sectarian.

Much has been written on Salafi groups in Syria; however, this article addresses the wide diversity among Salafists and likely scenarios that might emerge based on lessons learned from Iraq. Whether Syrian or foreign, many of the competent Salafists fighting in Syria have combat experience in Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen and Libya. Each of these battlefields presented new challenges and opportunities that taught jihadists valuable lessons and will likely influence their behavior.

This article is structured as follows: first, a brief background of Salafism in Syria; then a look at the range of Salafists within the Syrian opposition; next, Salafi lessons from Iraq for Syria; and finally, an examination of three scenarios describing how Salafists might react when the Assad regime falls and a transitional government is proposed.

Salafism in Syria

Salafism has deep roots in Syria. Most modern Salafists look to the writings of fourteenth-century Syrian cleric Ibn Taymmyia who taught and was incarcerated in Damascus and wrote about fighting jihad against the Mongol occupation of Muslim lands. Ibn Taymmyia also wrote about those he viewed as heretics, in particular the Shiites, who Salafists do not recognize as Muslims. Additionally, in the last century a few Syrian Salafi scholars have helped shape the actions of Salafi

jihadists and members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and elsewhere.

Following the Iranian Revolution, from 1979 to 1982 Syria endured a brutal crackdown on political Islam.⁶ Inspired by the rise of Islamic revolutionaries across the region, the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood attempted to overthrow the Assad regime and was crushed. Many of Syria's Salafists learned from this failure that they could not rely on political Islam to confront a dictator. To survive they either needed to not threaten the authoritarian or to be better organized, experienced and trained to confront the state militarily. They distanced themselves from the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and sought alternative adaptations of political Islam. Many Syrian Salafists went to the jihad in Afghanistan after the 1982 crackdown partly as a means to gain valuable military experience.

Differences between Salafi camps, as well as their relationships with the Muslim Brotherhood, crystallized in Afghanistan during the fight against the Soviets beginning in 1979. Two main jihadist schools of thought emerged from the Afghanistan experience. The first advocated exporting jihad to countries in which Muslims were repressed, including their own countries. They believed the Afghanistan experience provided a training ground for jihadists to fight any government they deemed un-Islamic, regardless of there being a foreign presence or not. This was popular among the extremist elements such as Ayman al-Zawahiri's Egyptian *Gamaa al-Islamiya*. Salafi jihadists of this school either stayed in Afghanistan with the Taliban or joined jihadist causes in other countries.

The second school of thought, predominantly supported by the Muslim Brotherhood and traditional Salafists, generally argued that armed jihad is not permissible in Muslim countries where no foreign occupation exists. Instead of fighting their own regimes, these jihadists were encouraged to return to their home countries and either be examples of Islamic living in their local communities, or organize politically to prepare, non-violently, for more Islamic governments. Traditional Salafists largely returned to Gulf countries, whereas the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates found modest space for Islamic activism in Algeria and Jordan.

Two prominent Syrian thinkers emerged from the Afghan experience and represent the two different schools of Salafist thinking. The first, Mustafa bin Abd al-Qadir Setmariam Naser, also known as Abu Musab al-Suri, was heavily critical of the Muslim Brotherhood and the role of political Islam. In his 1989 work, *The Islamic Jihadi Revolution in Syria*, then his 2004 opus, *The Global Islamic Resistance Call*, al-Suri argues that the Muslim Brotherhood's approach of political Islam failed in Syria in 1982 and will fail in other countries.⁷ A second prominent Syrian Salafist thinker, Mohammed al-Saroor, developed a niche between the Salafi jihadist camp and the Muslim Brotherhood camp. Born in 1938, Saroor joined many Syrian Salafists in distancing himself from the Muslim Brotherhood after its uprising failed in 1982. After the brutal assault on the religious community, particularly in Hama, Saroor sought refuge in Saudi Arabia then England. Saroor developed an approach to Salafism that is both academic and practical: willing to accommodate Muslim leaders even if they are aligned with Western and secular governments. While followers of Saroor may share the



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Nusra Front fighters in Aziza, near Aleppo in April, 2013

revolutionary fervor and sectarianism of Salafi jihadists, they fall more closely in line with the Muslim Brotherhood approach of a political Islam willing to work within a democratic political system.

The Syrian government has also played a role in developing the Salafi networks in Syria. Despite the Baathist government's distrust of Salafists, after the U.S.-led Coalition Forces invaded Iraq in 2003 the Syrian government nurtured relations with foreign jihadists seeking to fight the Americans in Iraq. This relationship developed through the years and played an important role in the rise of al-Qaeda's offshoot the Islamic State of Iraq, as Syria became its main safe-haven in the region, along with Syria's ally Iran.⁸

The Syrian uprising in 2011 ushered in the "activation" and return of many Syrian Salafists who previously were involved in jihadist adventures abroad. In the past the secular Syrian government has been hostile to Salafists and practitioners of political Islam, therefore

the more active Syrian Salafists have moved abroad, whereas the less active Salafists remained in Syria but supported Salafist causes abroad.

Three Types of Salafi Groups Operating in Syria

Today there are three main Salafi camps operating in Syria: 1) the moderates, 2) the traditional and scientific, and 3) the radical jihadists. Moderate and traditional Salafists largely fall within the school of thought which, like the Muslim Brotherhood, did not advocate revolutionary and violent jihad in their native countries after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. The moderate or *al-muataadhila* or *al-wasitiya* Salafists are now the most liberal of the three camps. Moderate Salafists resemble the Muslim Brotherhood with their adoption of political Islam. These moderate Salafists traditionally do not advocate the use of violence against their governments as the radical Salafi jihadists do, but accept organizing politically

to participate in the political process of their countries. While moderate Salafists are similar to the Muslim Brotherhood in disavowing the use of violence, moderate Salafists compete with the Muslim Brotherhood as the voice of political Islam. The group *Harikat al-Muminoon Yusharikoon* (The Believers Participation Movement) fits the moderate mold: this is a Salafi group that does not support the Muslim Brotherhood, but believes in using the democratic political process to achieve its Islamic goals. Members of this movement are concentrated in the southern Syrian city of Dera'a as well as the outskirts of Damascus. They claim to have 3700 active fighters and 2300 fighters on reserve.⁹ This group is led by Sheikh Louay al-Zabi, a Syrian veteran jihadist from Afghanistan who followed Osama Bin Laden to Sudan as one of his drivers. He also participated in the jihadist fight in Bosnia in 1995. Sheikh Louay joined those within the Salafi jihadist camp who opposed the September 11, 2001 attacks. He was subsequently imprisoned in Syria. In an interview with Asharq al-Awsat in September 2011, Sheikh Louay estimated that 60% of Syria's Salafists support the principle of a democratic political system.¹⁰

Then there are the *taqlidiya* (traditional) and *al-salafia al-elmiya* (scientific) Salafists who share the end goal of other Salafi jihadists, but do not believe in *jama*, or organizing the Islamic community, to overthrow Muslim governments. Traditional Salafists participated in the jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s, but did not continue radical jihadist activities in their home countries or adopt the Muslim Brotherhood's political model. Islamic purists believe the Quran prohibits political parties other than Allah's. Traditional and scientific Salafists support jihadist efforts, but traditionally do not actively participate or organize

themselves because they do not want to be seen as political parties or opposing their government. They generally avoid confrontation with government leaders in Muslim countries. Most believe that a Muslim ruler, even if flawed, must be obeyed. These likely represent the largest group of Syrian Salafists. Many traditional Salafists follow the teachings of Syrian thinker Mohammed al-Sarooreen and are called the Sarooreen. While the Sarooreen don't have an official armed group, their philosophy and interpretation of Islam is spread out in different groups ranging from those oriented toward the Muslim Brotherhood to the radical Salafi jihadists. Sarooreen are well represented in units of the new Syrian Islamic Front (SIF). The SIF was announced on December 21, 2012 and comprises eleven armed Salafi groups working in Syria. These Salafi groups, including the Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham (Liberators of the Levant Brigades), seek the downfall of the Assad regime and a future government based on Islamic principles for all Syrians.¹¹ The SIF is led not by one leader, but by a coalition of different armed Salafi groups seeking the ouster of the Assad regime and a modern Syrian state based on *sharia* law. The SIF plans to organize politically and join the political process of a future government.¹²

Finally the radical Salafi jihadists espouse the revolutionary spirit of Egyptian scholars Sayed Qutb and Ayman al-Zawahiri and strongly advocate the use of violence to bring *sharia* law to Islamic countries, eventually turning them into parts of an Islamic caliphate. The radical Salafi jihadists likely represent the smallest, yet most impactful and noteworthy Salafi group. These are aligned with *Jabhat al-Nusra*, or the Nusra Front. In January 2012 the Nusra Front's leader Abu Mohammed al-Golani claimed responsibility for suicide

bombings in Damascus and announced the formation of the Nusra Front for Syria, which is believed to have originated in Iraq.¹³ The Nusra Front seeks to unite Syrian jihadists, many of whom had previously fought in Iraq, but had since left for Syria or other countries.¹⁴ Al-Golani insists that Syrian veterans of jihad in Afghanistan, Iraq and other countries lead the Nusra Front, as opposed to the foreign fighter-led resistance efforts headed by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi against U.S. forces in Iraq after 2003. Yet, there are reports of some Jordanian leaders in the Nusra Front. The Nusra Front's declared objective is to "restore Allah's Sultan and revenge innocent blood."¹⁵

Radical Salafi jihadists condemn any effort at bringing a political system to Syria other than an Islamic state. They believe not only that a democratic system is un-Islamic, but that it will be compromised by corrupt and Western-backed leaders who will suppress the

Islamic community.¹⁶ A statement by a group of al-Qaeda-affiliated Salafi jihadists on October 10, 2012 highlights differences between the moderate and traditional Salafists who adopt political Islam as does the Muslim Brotherhood, and the more radical Salafi jihadists. This statement, published on the International Jihad Network's website, lambasts the Muslim Brotherhood and its approach of supporting a future democratic Syrian government and constitution based on popular elections. It claims the Muslim Brotherhood does this to appease the West and that they are willing to join hands with the enemies of Allah to gain power. The statement says: "Oh you people of Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia and Iraq, wherever the 'Bankrupt' Brotherhood [Muslim Brotherhood] is found, your choice is either with them where you will receive international support and military and financial aid and only have benefit in this



ANONMOUS

Syrian rebels stand atop Sham II, a homemade armored vehicle

short life [or with Allah] because in the next life you will be harshly punished with the pains of the fire of hell."¹⁷ These radical Salafi jihadists seek to build an Islamic State in Syria, similar to the Islamic State in Iraq. In fact, in early April of this year the head of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) announced the ISI and Nusra Front would be merging into the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.¹⁸ Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri has since clarified that ISI and the Nusra Front should remain separate entities, but that they should cooperate on shared goals. Even though members of the Nusra Front do not expect to be able to control all of Syria's territory, they wish to establish safe havens as ISI has done in Iraq. They will use Syria as a base for future attacks against Israel, as "liberating" Palestine will be a main calling card.¹⁹

Regional Ties to Salafi Groups in Syria

The ongoing conflict in Syria has given local and regional Salafi networks an opportunity to undermine the Alawite-led (Shiite) and Iranian-backed Assad regime. As a result a full spectrum of Salafists is currently rallying in support of regime change. Syria has become their gathering point partly because the international community, including their own countries, is interested in regime change and

condones or turns a blind eye to jihadist efforts against the regime. This has caused a flooding of foreign fighters into Syria. Foreign fighters in Syria are called *muhajereen*, reminiscent of the followers of the prophet Mohammed during the *hijra*, or escape from Mecca to Medina.

Regional support for Salafi networks in Syria is largely non-state sponsored. Support to the Syrian opposition from key state sponsors, such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar and the UAE is primarily monetary and is funneled through Muslim Brotherhood networks, as well as the Syrian National Coalition. To date, the state sponsors are not directly providing arms to Salafists, though their financial support is likely being used to buy arms. However, wealthy Salafists in the Gulf countries, Lebanon and Turkey are giving both financial and armed support to Salafi networks in Syria. These wealthy Salafists also support jihadists from their own countries trying to enter the fight in Syria. Most foreign fighters have to go through Lebanon or Turkey to enter Syria, as it is difficult for them to enter and exit through Jordan and Iraq.²⁰

Salafi groups in Iraq, Jordan and Syria have an interconnected history. These ties began in the 1970s with the rise of the *dawa*, or evangelical Salafists who sought to revive

Table 1: Three types of Salafi groups operating in Syria

Moderates	<i>The Believers Participation Movement</i> led by Sheikh Louay al-Zabi
Traditional & Scientific	<i>The Syrian Islamic Front</i> led by a coalition of armed Salafi groups leaning toward the philosophy of Mohammed al-Saroor
Radical Jihadists	<i>The Nusra Front</i> led by Abu Mohammed al-Golani

religiosity in their communities in response to the rise of Arab Communist parties. Ties between Salafists in these countries were not organized, but groups were nonetheless united by common beliefs. They exchanged pamphlets and recorded sermons of Salafi thinkers. The Salafi jihadist migration to Afghanistan in the 1980s solidified some of these relationships. After the first Gulf War in 1990, a number of Iraqi Salafists moved to Jordan and Arab Gulf countries for refuge and refined their religious thought, mostly as unaffiliated Salafists without a clear political platform. After the 2003 invasion of Iraq, many of Iraq's Salafists moved to and from Syria.²¹

Many Jordanian influences are active in Syria.²² In fact, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's brother-in-law Ayad al-Tubaysi, also known as Abu Jalybib al-Tubaysi, commanded a unit in the Nusra Front until his death. There are over 700 Jordanian jihadist fighters currently in Syria. The Nusra Front's *Shura* council reportedly appointed the Jordanian Mustafa Abdul Latif, aka Abu Anas al-Sahaba, as Emir of the Nusra Front.²³ Salafists organize themselves in *shuras*, or religious councils, because the Quran mentions this as the mode of political leadership. When Zarqawi was in Afghanistan, he concentrated his efforts on bringing jihadists into *bilad al-sham*, or the Levant. When he later formed a shura council in Iraq, he largely did it with like-minded jihadists from the Levant, such as Abu Muslim al-Lubnani, to establish recruitment networks in Lebanon and Syria.²⁴ Establishing a foothold in Iraq after the U.S. invasion in 2003 was a means to increase their depth in the Levant. Zarqawi was named an Emir of al-Qaeda when he swore allegiance to Osama Bin Laden in the fall of 2004 and was given responsibility over Iraq. The Jordanians have since had a prominent role in the *shura*

council that Zarqawi established and in 2011 it ordered the *shura's* affiliate ISI to send resources to aid the fighters in Syria. This same Jordanian-oriented *shura* council has also named the leader of the Nusra Front and is the body behind a new Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. The presence of Zarqawi's close associates—including his former brother-in-law—in the leadership of the Nusra Front suggests that elements within this radical group come from the same highly sectarian line of thought as Zarqawi, and would push for an increase in sectarian violence and possibly forbid political participation.²⁵

Some leaders of the Nusra Front reportedly forged relations with other Arab jihadists in Afghanistan during the late 1980s, then during the reign of the Taliban in the 1990s, and in Iraq after 2001.²⁶ This is where they worked with Zarqawi,²⁷ and likely with other well-known jihadists such as Libyan Abdul Hakim Belhadj who is now commander of the Libyan Military Council. In fact, at the beginning of the Syrian uprising Abdul Hakim Belhadj sent a Libyan combat group with volunteers from members of Libya's Ansar al-Sharia and other Islamic groups to assist fighters in Syria. He sent those fighters with money and weapons.²⁸ Belhadj likely worked and fought closely with Syrian jihadists in Afghanistan where they developed their ideas of political Islam and jihad. Lebanese author Camille Tawil documented similar jihadist ties in his seminal 2010 book, *Brothers in Arms*.²⁹

Another notorious Libyan jihadist group relocated to Syria under the direction of Mahdi al-Harati, a member of al-Qaeda, who commanded the Tripoli Battalion in Libya. In the northern Syrian city of Edlib, al-Harati formed the Military Umma Brigade that provides cover for Libyan fighters.³⁰ Al-Harati is assisted by a

British-Libyan jihadist named Hissam, whose father is Libyan and mother Irish.³¹

One of Osama Bin Laden's former chauffeurs, Sefian al-Kumi, is also commanding a unit in Syria. Al-Kumi commands the Abu Salim brigade, which consists largely of fighters from the Libyan city of Darna.³² The majority of Libya's Ansar al-Sharia fighters who went to Syria joined the Nusra Front.

International assistance for the Libyan revolt provided an opportunity for many disparate Libyan jihadists to come together to fight for a common cause. They used that opportunity to become acquainted and establish ties. These ties are being used in Syria.

Apart from the Libyans and Jordanians, jihadist fighters in Syria also came from Iraq, Lebanon, Tunisia, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Morocco and European countries.³³ Those on the front lines of the Syrian opposition welcome these *muhajereen*, though it is reportedly difficult for them move around in Syria as they fear being captured or kidnapped.³⁴ In the absence of international support to halt Assad's carnage or armed support for the Free Syrian Army, the Syrian opposition has gravely needed brave men with combat experience and skills in urban warfare. It is yet to be seen who these Salafi fighters, both Syrian and *muhajereen*, will follow when and if a transitional government is established. Based on their experiences in Afghanistan, Iraq, Chechnya and other countries, a fundamental issue they will face is whether to accept or reject a pluralistic and democratic political process.

Iraq and Syria

The future of Syria's Salafists can be read in Iraq's present struggle. After Saddam's regime fell in 2003, Sunni resistance fighters

soon fought the U.S. occupation. Foreign fighters, many of them Salafi jihadists, entered Iraq mainly from Syria and joined the resistance. Up until the first Fallujah operation in April 2004, most Islamic and nationalist resistance groups were unorganized, but united in fighting U.S. troops. Both nationalist and religious Iraqi resistance groups welcomed the help of the *muhajereen*. However, as Zarqawi's radical group Tawheed wal-Jihad gained regional prestige and significant financing during the summer of 2004 and later swore allegiance to al-Qaeda in the fall, many of Iraq's Islamists felt sidelined. The majority of Iraq's Islamists, especially affiliates of the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as many Salafists, wanted

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to join the nascent political process while maintaining attacks against U.S. troops. Sunni clerics, including Salafists, also called on Iraq's Sunnis to join the new Iraqi Police and Army in order to protect their communities. However, Zarqawi and his radical Salafi jihadist shura council forbade anyone from joining the political process or the security forces and ultimately targeted any Salafi cleric, tribal leader or politician that openly took a different stance. At the height of al-Qaeda in Iraq's power, in October 2006, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) was announced, bringing together Salafi jihadists who had aligned with Zarqawi.

Today the ISI's survival has largely relied on the sectarian policies of the present Iraqi government, which sideline Iraqi Sunnis and

fuel grievances that provide the ISI safe havens. In 2011 when the crackdown on Sunni protesters in Syria became violent and protestors called for armed opposition, the ISI saw an opportunity not only to help future allies in Syria, but also to rally its base in Iraq. Iraqi Sunnis view regime change in Syria as a welcome relief that they assume will weaken Baghdad's pressure on them. Since 2003, Iraq's Sunnis have felt sandwiched between Shiite Iran to the east, its sectarian ally Syria to the west, and the new Shiite government in Baghdad.

The majority of Iraq's Islamists, especially affiliates of the Muslim Brotherhood as well as many Salafists wanted to join the nascent political process while maintaining attacks against U.S. troops.

The ISI now seeks to exploit weakened Sunni support for the Iraqi government and to assist in whatever ways it can in Syria. Iraqi Sunni demonstrations that sparked in Anbar province after the arrest warrant of Sunni Minister of Finance Rafi al-Essawi's security guards were issued in December 2012 have given ISI new hope for a more established safe haven. While the peaceful Sunni demonstrations have condemned al-Qaeda, some Sunnis are preparing for a "New Iraqi Army" patterned after the Free Syrian Army if the Iraqi government uses the security forces against demonstrators as Assad did in Syria. If the Iraqi Army starts to clash with Sunni demonstrators, ISI will again rebrand itself as the protector of the people, as the Nusra Front has done in Syria, and support a "New Iraqi Army." ISI's rebranding has already started with its attempted

merger with the Nusra Front. It wants the Nusra Front's success in Syria to foreshadow a rebirth for al-Qaeda in Iraq, which was significantly weakened by the Iraqi Sunni Awakening from 2006 to 2009.

Many Syrians now fighting with the Nusra Front have combat experience in Iraq and some witnessed first hand how al-Qaeda overplayed its hand with not only the Sunni community, but with other Salafists in Iraq. Only a few of Iraq's Salafists were radical jihadists. When Saddam's regime fell in 2003, the majority of Salafists were traditional and moderate and many initially did not choose armed confrontation with U.S. forces.³⁵ And the leaders of armed Iraqi Salafi groups, such as units from the Islamic Army of Iraq, Abu Bakr Army and the Saad Army followed the teaching of Syrian Mohammed al-Saroor, not Ayman al-Zawahiri or Osama Bin Laden. These traditional and scientific Salafists did not join the al-Qaeda sponsored Islamic State of Iraq in 2006. Starting in 2005 many Iraqi resistance groups fought against Zarqawi's efforts to create a sectarian war and build an Islamic state. Muslim Brotherhood affiliates such as the Islamic Party of Iraq participated in the Iraqi elections and were active members in parliament because they believed that they could "fight the occupation" through political means. In fact, some Iraqi Salafi jihadists opened political wings of their organizations secretly to be involved in the political process, while denouncing it publicly.³⁶ Traditional Salafists did not prevent affiliates of the Muslim Brotherhood and anti-al-Qaeda Sunni tribes from taking the armed fight against Zarqawi's network in 2006 and 2007. Traditional Salafists generally did not agree with Zarqawi's assassinations of Sunni tribal and religious leaders, nor the slaughter of

Iraq's Shiite communities. While they agreed with Zarqawi on the apostasy of some Sunni sheikhs for working for the occupation, or Shiites being heretics, they did not advocate using violence to confront them.³⁷ While traditional Iraqi Salafists generally did not join the Sunni Awakening, neither did they work against it. The relationships between radical, traditional and moderate Salafists in Syria will likely be tested by similar disagreements and challenges concerning political participation as were faced by their counterparts in Iraq. However traditional and moderate Salafists will have this confrontation with the radical Salafists before the Assad regime falls because those supporting the political process do not want the radical Salafists to be seen as the winners on the ground when Assad leaves power.

It is important to note a significant difference between the post-Saddam government in Iraq and any future post-Assad government in Syria. Many radical Salafi jihadists in Iraq rejected the new Iraqi government because it came through a foreign invasion and subsequent occupation. The prospect of a long-term presence of foreign forces in Iraq united many Salafists with other Islamists to fight the new Iraqi government because there was a clear religious precedent for fighting an occupation. This will not likely be the case in Syria as foreign forces are not expected to occupy Syria in order to change the government. As long as the international community does not heavily influence the new government in Syria, Salafi jihadists will be less effective in violently opposing those Syrians who join the political process as happened in Iraq. Additionally, the prospect of the U.S. striking Syrian chemical weapons capabilities will not be interpreted by Salafists in Syria as a foreign invasion and will likely be welcomed by them because it will

strengthen their positions against the Assad regime—similar to how Libyan Salafists welcomed NATO airstrikes against Gaddafi air capabilities in 2011.

Syrian Salafists post-Assad

How Assad falls will largely determine how Syrian Salafi networks cooperate with or fight against a future Syrian government. Those credited for bringing down Assad and ushering in the transitional government will expect representation in the next government commensurate with their achievement. Before and after the transitional government, radical Salafi jihadists will likely not join coalitions or committees receiving direct assistance from non-Muslim countries. However, they will not bar cooperation with coalitions and committees that do receive this outside assistance.³⁸ The harshness of the radical Salafist response to international assistance will have an inverse relationship to the degree to which Salafists believe they alone brought down the Assad regime. That is, if the international community increases its role in ousting Assad and ushering in a transitional government, whether through a political settlement, limited air strikes or arming the Free Syrian Army with strategic weapons, radical Salafists will be less harsh and violent in their response to an international role in the future government. On the other hand, if the international community fails to reach a political settlement or does not give the FSA a strategic advantage in the armed conflict, then radical Salafists will be much more harsh and violent in response to any international role in the future government. They do not want the international community to benefit from the sacrifices they believe they made to topple Assad. With this said,

there are three post-Assad scenarios for the Salafi networks during the transitional period.

First scenario “equals among many”: Moderate and traditional Salafists of armed coalitions such as the SIF and the Believers Participation Movement align with the Muslim Brotherhood to strengthen the hand of political Islam and use their wide popular Islamist base and backing from Arab Gulf governments to out-manuever the radical Salafi jihadists. This scenario will be somewhat reminiscent of the scenario in Iraq in 2007 during the Sunni Awakening when Salafists aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood with a shared interest of expelling radical Salafi jihadists from Sunni areas. This scenario would not begin with the ouster of Assad, but rather before a transitional government is negotiated. Moderate and tradi-

How Assad falls will largely determine how Syrian Salafi networks cooperate with or fight against a future Syrian government.

tional Salafists would want to prevent radical Salafists from having leverage in the negotiations, which they would clearly reject.

The Arab Gulf countries, in particular Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, are heavily invested in regime change in Syria. Aside from Qatar, these monarchies and emirates are greatly skeptical of the Muslim Brotherhood. For years both the Muslim Brotherhood and radical Salafi jihadists have worked to undermine Arab Gulf governments: they see them as puppets of the West that do not properly use their oil wealth for Islamic causes. However, the traditional Salafists are more in line with the Arab Gulf's foreign and domestic policies because they usually do not have political or revolutionary

agendas. They simply seek more Islamic societies and are more pragmatic in seeking to achieve those goals. As such, the traditional Salafists have received the most financial and armed support from Arab Gulf countries.

Once Assad leaves power and Syria goes through the process of a transitional government, the moderate and traditional Salafists will likely throw their support to political parties that match their ideology and thus align with the Muslim Brotherhood. In turn, these Islamic coalitions will gain significant backing from Arab Gulf countries and will likely be key players in the post-Assad power-sharing dynamic. This scenario would be similar to the coalition, during the Egyptian national elections in 2012, between the Salafi Nour Party and the Muslim Brotherhood. Arab Gulf backing and relative unity between the moderate and traditional Salafists and the Muslim Brotherhood will divide the radical Salafi jihadists. Foreign fighters will likely return to their home countries, or to other regions of conflict, such as Iraq, Yemen or Mali if the Syrian Salafi jihadists are divided. Divisions among Salafists will strengthen emphasis on nationalist loyalties rather than Islamic ones. Some Syrian Salafi jihadist groups will compromise and organize politically, while others, the most radical, will likely leave Syria with foreign fighters. Those who remain in Syria will also look for safe havens in areas of sectarian conflict where the new government's security forces are unable to protect Sunni communities, especially along Syria's eastern coast. They might try to act as spoilers as al-Qaeda affiliates in Libya have done since its transition, but they will not be able to derail the transitional government as long as the traditional and moderate Salafists are actively participating in the political process.

Second scenario “strong Salafi hand”:

Syrian Salafi jihadists organize politically in line with the traditional Salafists, undermine the Muslim Brotherhood and moderate Salafists, and push an Islamic agenda in the transitional government with international consequences. This would be similar to Afghanistan after the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989. While the Taliban was not a Salafi government, radical elements of the Taliban and other radical groups outmaneuvered and fought more moderate voices within the Muslim Brotherhood camp to form a radical government.

In this scenario, elements within the Salafi jihadist community willing to work with a democratically elected government see an opportunity to undermine the Muslim Brotherhood and will align with the traditional Salafists backed by the anti-Muslim Brotherhood Arab Gulf countries. This could occur if a significant number of Syrians credit radical Salafi jihadists with toppling the regime. This Salafi coalition would antagonize minorities or secular coalitions, but it will not dominate the new government. It will merely dominate the Sunni Islamist bloc of government. Through their presence in the government, they will oppose significant Western aid efforts for reconstruction. They will rely on support from the Arab Gulf countries to rebuild communities. Under this scenario, Syria will face less of a threat of radical Salafi jihadist attacks because Salafi jihadists in the government will prevent them from happening. However, Syria's relations with non-Muslim countries will not be smooth. Their interaction with the international community will be purely based on immediate interests and they will not want to support any international initiatives that might make Syria more secular.

Third scenario “inter-Sunni civil war”:

Radical Salafi jihadists remain violent during the transitional period, which causes significant infighting between political Islam and radical Salafi jihadists and derails any hopes for the transitional government. This would basically be an inter-Sunni civil war.

In this scenario, radical Salafi jihadists use the political capital they gained on the battlefield to build the case that only they will protect the Sunni community from corrupting outside influences. They will likely establish safe havens in rural areas, from which they will base future attacks. These extremists will not compromise or participate in a transition government that is facilitated by the international community and will become spoilers. Because of this hard line, they will cause divisions among other Salafi groups and violence will occur between them. The constant fighting between Salafists will destabilize the country and there will be no alternative strongman with credibility in all camps to lead the country out of civil strife. This scenario will likely spark discussions about dividing Syria into separate regions or even states.

Conclusion

The first scenario is the most likely. While there are differences between the moderate and traditional Salafists and the Muslim Brotherhood, they have the largest following among Syria's Islamist groups. They also have significant backing from the Arab Gulf countries and Turkey. Generally, Turkey and Qatar support the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates support the traditional Salafists. Radical Salafi jihadists also receive backing from the Arab Gulf, Iraq, Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan, but their support is not

state-sponsored and is only connected to international jihadists networks. A transitional government in Syria will require tremendous backing from Turkey and the Arab Gulf for reconstruction, rebuilding the economy and ultimately for its political process to succeed.

Radical jihadists currently fighting in Syria are tolerated and in some areas welcomed because of their courage and combat capabilities at a time the Syrian opposition does not receive military backing from the international community. However, Syrians in general, and Syria's Islamists in particular, do not agree with the radical Salafi jihadist revolutionary agenda and rejection of political Islam. Moreover, Syrian Islamists may tolerate the sectarian attacks by radical Salafi jihadists as long as Iran and Hezbollah organize and arm Syrian Shiite militias in areas with Sunnis, Christians and Shiites. Radical foreign fighters, or *muhajereen*, seeking to undermine political Islam through terrorism will find it very difficult to find safe havens in Syria and will have to flee the country once the fighting has stopped and a transitional government is formed. Syria's radical Salafi jihadists will likely compromise by providing tacit support to an Islamic agenda in Syria's new government, partly because they know they will never have a majority voice in the future government. However, they will harp on any violence inspired by revenge, corruption or sectarianism post-Assad to protect and defend Sunni communities in Alawite and Christian areas. Radical Salafists' future in Syria will look like their future in other multi-sectarian and politically diverse countries such as Iraq and Yemen: oppressed Sunni communities without protection will provide them their safe-havens. **PRISM**

NOTES

¹ Nada Bakos, "Terrorist Group Fills Power Vacuum Among Syria Rebels", CNN, January 10, 2013

² Note on terms: there are many types of Islamists, including Salafists, members of the Muslim Brotherhood, Shiites (Lebanese Hezbollah is an Islamist group), Sufis, Ismailis and Islamic-oriented activists.

³ Noman Benotman and Roisin Blake, "Jabhat al-Nusra li-ahl al-Sham min Mujahedi al-Sham fi Sahat al-Jihad: A Strategic Brief" The Quilliam Foundation, January 2013; link <http://www.quilliam-foundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/jabhat-al-nusra-a-strategic-briefing.pdf>

⁴ There is a wide range of Salafists. The term "salafi" originates from the "salaf al-saleh" or "righteous ancestors" who claimed to be companions of the prophet Mohammed. They consider themselves part of the old tradition of Islam and adhere to the Hanbali school of Islamic law. Some self-proclaimed Salafists choose to express their Puritanism simply through outward appearance, i.e., a beard, a shorter dishdasha to keep their clothes clean, and they do not visit religious shrines. Whereas Salafi jihadists, who follow thinkers such as the Egyptian Sayed Qutb, believe that they must be revolutionary in jihad, espouse violence for political change and reject the rise of Islamic offshoots, such as Shiites.

⁵ For more on the difference between the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafists, see March Lynch, "Islam Divided Between Salafi-jihad and the Ikhwan," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 33:6, p. 467-487; May 2010

⁶ Al-Jazeera, "Political Islam and the Syrian Revolution," 10 June 2012, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2012/06/2012610962880192.htm>

⁷ For more on al-Suri see Brynjar Lia's *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al-Qaida Strategist Abu Mus'ab al-Suri*, Columbia University Press; New York; 2008.

⁸ From 2002 to 2005 Iran was an important conduit for jihadist fighters coming from Afghanistan and Pakistan into Iraq. Depending on the temperature of Al-Qaeda rhetoric, the Iranian regime periodically allowed Al-Qaeda members free passage through their country depending on the impact of Al-Qaeda's activities in areas of mutual interest such as Iraq and Yemen. See Waleed al-Rawi's 2012 book

Dawla al-Iraq al-Islamiya (The Islamic State of Iraq) for more information.

⁹ Al-Gad TV Channel interview with Sheikh Louy al-Zabi on its Suriya al-Yum program on February 5, 2013

¹⁰ Asharq al-Awsat, "amin am 'aluminumoon yusharikoon' al-salafiya: al-adu al-haqiqi lana Khamenai thuma Hezbollah fa Bashar al-Assad" September 26, 2011 no. 11990

¹¹ Zvi Bar'el, "World awaits Assad's head, but Syrian president is hell-bent on war of attrition," Haaretz, December 22, 2012. <http://www.haaretz.com/news/middle-east/world-awaits-assad-s-head-but-syrian-president-is-hell-bent-on-war-of-attrition.premium-1.489275>

¹² Aaron Zelin, "The Syrian Islamic Front's Order of Battle," Al-Wasat, January 22, 2013 <http://thewasat.wordpress.com/2013/01/22/syrian-islamic-fronts-order-of-battle/>

¹³ Noman Benotman and Roisin Blake, "Jabhat al-Nusra..."

¹⁴ One source claims the Nusra Front has no formal ties with the Islamic State of Iraq, but that many of its fighters have jihadist experience in Iraq. See Time article by Rania Abouzeid "Syria: Interview with Official of Jabhat al-Nusra, Syria's Islamist Militia Group"

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Shabakah al-Jihad al-'Aleml, October 10, 2012.

¹⁸ BBC, "Syria's al-Nusra Front 'part of al-Qaeda,'" April 9, 2013 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-22078022>

¹⁹ Sterling Jensen interview with Islamist leader in the Free Syrian Army, January 2013.

²⁰ It is easier for Jordanian and Iraqi jihadists, largely with tribal ties, to enter and exit Syria.

²¹ Waleed al-Rawi interview with Abu Wael, Emir of the Iraqi Ansar al-Sunna group, 2007.

²² Taylor Luck, "Over 700 Jordanian jihadists fighting in Syria," The Jordan Times; July 13, 2013.

²³ On December 13, 2012 Al-Jazeera TV reported Abu Anas al-Sahaba as Emir, but then on January 6, 2013 reported he was just a unit commander in the Nusra Front.

²⁴ Rum Online, April 10, 2010 "hafaya jadida min haya abu musab al-zarqawi takshif awal marra"

²⁵ Al-Hayat, January 8, 2013 "jabhat al-nusra," <http://alhayat.com/Details/470180> see English translation: Al-Monitor January 2013 <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2013/01/jabhat-al-nusras-goals-extend-beyond-syria.html>

[al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2013/01/jabhat-al-nusras-goals-extend-beyond-syria.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2013/01/jabhat-al-nusras-goals-extend-beyond-syria.html)

²⁶ Noman Benotman and Roisin Blake, "Jabhat al-Nusra..."

²⁷ Waleed al-Rawi interview with senior Libyan academic, December 2012.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Camille Tawil, Brothers in Arms: the story of Al-Qaeda and the Arab jihadists, SAQI Books, London, 2010.

³⁰ Waleed al-Rawi interview with senior Libyan academic, December 2012.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Noman Benotman and Roisin Blake, "Jabhat al-Nusra..."

³⁴ Sterling Jensen interview with Islamist leader in the Free Syrian Army, January 2013.

³⁵ Sterling Jensen interview with Mullah Nadem al-Jabouri, December 2010.

³⁶ Waleed al-Rawi interview with Abu Wael, Emir of Ansar al-Sunna, 2007

³⁷ Sterling Jensen and Waleed al-Rawi interviews with various leaders of the Islamic Army of Iraq and Ansar Al-Sunna.

³⁸ Al-Hayat, January 8, 2013 <http://alhayat.com/Details/470180> see English translation: Al-Monitor <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2013/01/jabhat-al-nusras-goals-extend-beyond-syria.html>



A close-up view of the Za'atri camp for Syrian refugees as seen on July 18, 2013

Sectarian Conflict in Syria

BY M. ZUHDI JASSER

Syria's civil war is now well into its third year. The international community, including the United Nations, the International Committee of the Red Cross and many non-governmental organizations, largely agree that the Assad regime has committed wide-ranging human rights abuses during the conflict. This includes violating its obligations under the 1949 Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocol I, a 1977 amendment that added provisions that the government has clearly violated, including indiscriminate attacks on civilian populations, and destruction of food, water, and other materials needed for survival. In addition, extrajudicial killings, rape, and torture have been well documented. Most recently, U.S. President Obama confirmed that the Syrian regime has unleashed chemical weapons. There are also groups associated with the opposition who have committed crimes against humanity including extrajudicial punishments as well as targeting Christian clergy. With human suffering and risks to regional stability rising, there is a growing urgency to end the strife and plot a course to ensure stability for all Syrians. As the son of Syrian-American immigrants and a member of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), the violence in Syria is personal. My immediate and extended family in Aleppo and Damascus deal with this war and humanitarian disaster every day.

Healing ethno-sectarian divisions is necessary for ending hostilities and transitioning to a democracy where the rule of law protects fundamental civil and religious liberties. Both current President Bashar al-Assad and his late father, former President Hafez al-Assad, have manipulated inter-communal divisions to maintain power, routinely selecting for favor individual Syrians based on their identity, in addition to their fealty to the national socialist Ba'ath Party. A cessation of current hostilities is necessary, but will be insufficient to stem sectarian differences, first planted by the Assad regime, that have spread like wildfire in Syria. Once the civil war started in 2011, Assad began pitting groups against each other and amplified long quiet ethno-sectarian divisions.

In addition to the issues above this article reports findings from a ten day UNHCR delegation trip in June 2013, in which USCIRF staff visited Syrian refugee communities in Jordan and Turkey. It will conclude with some of the Commission's chief recommendations that are also highlighted in the report released in April 2013, *Protecting and Promoting Religious Freedom in Syria*.¹

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The Conflict

Since the conflict began with the violent repression of peaceful protests in 2011, the Assad regime has targeted majority Sunni Muslim communities with exceptions being made for the few who displayed continued loyalty to the regime. The London-based Syrian Network for Human Rights reported in September 2012 that the regime already had destroyed more than 500,000 buildings, including mosques and churches.² The same NGO reports that the regime targeted 1,451 mosques and that at least 348 have been destroyed. Opposition forces have also attacked mosques and churches, but with far less frequency.

The Syrian regime has created one of the worst humanitarian crises in memory. The United Nations reports that more than 110,000 Syrians have died, more than 1.7 million are now refugees, and 4.5 million have been internally displaced.³ It is estimated that by the end of 2013 more than half of Syria's population - over 10 million people - will need urgent humanitarian assistance. Women and children have been affected disproportionately: nearly three-quarters of all refugees who fled to Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and elsewhere are women and children under the age of 17.

The Assad regime has turned an initially peaceful political protest into an overtly sectarian conflict. By introducing the element of armed conflict, the regime's actions brought in foreign fighters who fuel the sectarian fires of the conflict. Members of the regime, and to a lesser extent the opposition, are supported by foreign military aid and training. Inflows of foreign fighters, some of whom the United States has designated as terrorists, such as Hizballah members, have increased

significantly. Since 2012 the sources of foreign military aid to the opposition and to the regime fall almost wholly along the Sunni-Shi'a divide. The notable wildcard is that the Assad regime has a long history of working closely with terrorist groups like Hamas and al-Qaeda as part of its divide and conquer strategy. It has, in fact, given radical Sunni Islamists even more access to Syria today than they had during the Iraq War, when the Assad regime supported al-Qaeda militants entering Iraq through Syria to kill Americans. In addition, terror elements from Hizballah receive unfettered access to Syrian communities fighting alongside the regime.

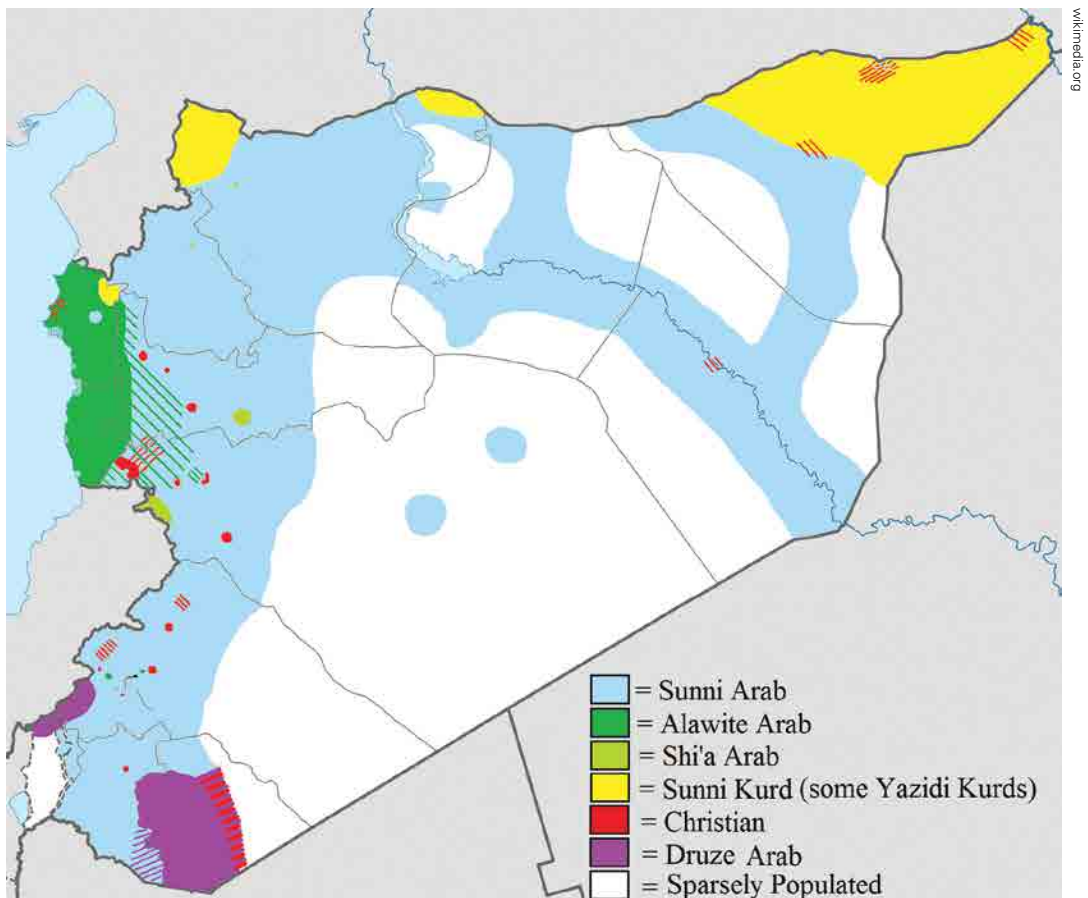
Additionally, U.S. allies like Saudi Arabia and Qatar are supporting various warring parties, providing considerable assistance to the Islamist factions of the opposition. Islamist factions from within Syria and from abroad came not to fight for freedom, but to fight a religious "jihad" against Assad's secular government. Islamist groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) are by definition inherently motivated by sectarian animus and essentially do not believe in the nation state of Syria. Instead they are motivated by a desire to implement Sharia law and establish an Islamic state. The moderate opposition, the spark of Syria's revolution, has slowly lost its prominence on the ground and in the court of public opinion.

A recent story in the Wall Street Journal describes a war being fought on multiple fronts, one of which exists within the opposition itself, between militant Islamists and the Free Syria Army.⁴ As the sectarian nature of the conflict broadens, individuals will be targeted not only because of their perceived or true allegiance to a particular political side, but simply because they follow a particular faith.

Additionally, the massive numbers of refugees fleeing Syria are destabilizing an already unstable region. Economically and politically fragile countries such as Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon have been put under even greater economic pressure by hosting hundreds of thousands of Syrians (Egypt 90,000, Jordan 500,000, and Lebanon 600,000). In these countries already struggling with the Arab awakening and sectarian blowback, an influx of Syrian Sunni Muslim refugees, radicalized by a sense of hopelessness, could have a disastrous impact.

Background

Syria is a multi-religious country, where people have traditionally lived together as Syrians without religious or sectarian animosities. Its prewar population of 22 million broke down generally as follows: 75% Sunni, of which 14% is Kurdish Sunni, 12% Alawite, 10% Christian, 4% Druze, and 1% Yazidi. There are also very small Jewish communities in Damascus, Al Qamishli, and Aleppo. Alawites, which include the Assad family in their ranks, practice an offshoot of Shi'a Islam.



A map showing the ethnic and religious distribution of Syria's sects

The Assad family's 40-year old authoritarianism created the political conditions for the current conflict and its sectarian components. Both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad banned political opposition to the Ba'ath Party, and under each security forces perpetrated egregious human rights abuses against government critics. In response to this repression, dozens of groups emerged to oppose the regime. Some of these groups, including the internationally recognized Syrian National Coalition, espouse democratic reform. Other groups are driven by religious ideologies advocating violence, such as the U.S.-designated terrorist organization, al-Nusra Front. Some are comprised of Syrians – others are made up of foreigners. The varied nature of these groups constrains their ability to work together, further complicating the situation and prospects for human rights and religious freedom in Syria.

Sectarian tensions pervade the conflict. Prior to 2011, both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad selectively permitted or denied religious rights. The country's smallest religious minority groups, including Christians, were permitted to worship freely so long as they did not oppose the regime. Assad restricted Sunni religious freedom in a variety of ways, including controlling the selection of imams. Additionally both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad restricted Sunni participation in government and ability to organize political parties.

A Sunni-Alawite War?

The Assad regime and its most loyal supporters, predominately Alawites associated with Assad's Ba'athist Party, portray opposition forces, predominately Sunni Muslims, as a threat not just to their power but to the very existence of Alawites in Syria. To ensure continued support for the regime, the government

capitalizes on Alawite fears of Sunni rule. The regime spreads rumors of Sunni atrocities against Alawites and depicts the conflict as a fight to prevent Alawite extermination. In late December 2012, Time Magazine reported allegations that the Assad government provided up to \$500 per month to individuals posing as members of the opposition and painting graffiti on buildings or chanting slogans with overtly sectarian rhetoric, including, "the Christians to Beirut and the Alawites to the Tarboot (Grave)."⁵ In response to growing fears, civilian Alawites formed pro-Assad and government-supported domestic militia such as Jaysh al-Sha'bi (The People's Army) and Shabiha (pro-Assad armed gangs). The U.S. government has designated both as terrorist organizations, which have committed gross human rights violations against Sunni communities.⁶

The Assad regime, including its army, security forces and related militias, has deliberately targeted Sunni Muslims. In May 2013, the regime killed more than 200 civilians, including women and children, in al-Bayda, a massacre described by many as the worst sectarian attack against Sunnis during the conflict. On May 25, 2012, in what has become known as the Houla massacre, 108 Sunni Muslims, including 49 children, were killed in two opposition-controlled villages in the Houla region just north of the central city of Homs. The United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS) determined that most of the victims were "summarily executed" and "entire families were shot in their houses," and that regime-supported Shabiha were the likely perpetrators.⁷ Some victims reportedly had pro-Shi'a or regime slogans carved into their foreheads. In July 2012, more than 200 Syrians, mostly Sunni Muslim civilians, were killed in

a village in the opposition-held Hama region. The Syrian army attacked the village with helicopters and tanks, followed by militia forces, which reportedly executed civilians including women and children.

In June 2012, USCIRF staff members travelled to the region to speak with Syrian refugees about religious freedom in Syria. Refugees reported that the regime forced Sunnis to proclaim that Assad is their god, with refusal met by torture and death. A former Syrian officer confided that regime forces only killed Sunnis and that his senior officer said they were fighting Sunni terrorists. When this officer refused to kill women and children who had been deemed Sunni terrorists, he was arrested and tortured for months. The government has also attacked and desecrated Christian churches. In February 2012, for example, regime forces raided the historic Syriac Orthodox Um al-Zennar Church in Homs.⁸ Anti-regime activists have reported that the government plants people within refugee camps and elsewhere, both within and outside Syria, to stoke sectarian fears.⁹

Regime abuses have led Sunnis to view the conflict not as Assad's ruthless attempts to stay in power, but an Alawite-led attack against them. Some Syrian refugees in Jordan and Egypt expressed strong anti-Alawite sentiments, referring to Alawites as "dogs."¹⁰ They apparently opposed Alawites due to, not their faith, but the perception that they were invariably pro-Assad and anti-Sunni. There have been reports of Sunni groups attacking Alawites and Shi'a Muslims. A December 2012 video released by the Saudi-sponsored Takfiri Wahhabi, a Sunni opposition group, shows a Shi'a mosque that was burned down amid dozens of individuals congratulating each other.¹¹ That same month, a suicide bomber

detonated explosives in a Damascus suburb, wounding 14 people and damaging one of Shi'a Islam's holiest shrines, a mausoleum of the Prophet's Muhammad's granddaughter.

The opposition also has targeted religious minorities, including Alawite and Christian civilians. It is unclear who kidnapped two Orthodox Bishops, Yohanna Ibrahim and Boulos Yaziji, or why. This kidnapping reportedly occurred in April 2013 near the town of Kafr Dael, close to Aleppo in northern Syria. Most individuals allege that the kidnappers were opposition fighters, while some opposition groups claim regime affiliates kidnapped the Bishops to further inflame sectarian fears.

Regime abuses have led Sunnis to view the conflict as not Assad's ruthless attempts to stay in power, but an Alawite-led attack against them.

In January 2013, Human Rights Watch reported that opposition forces destroyed and looted minority religious sites in northern Syria. Human Rights Watch also reported that two churches were stormed and ransacked in the villages of Ghasaniyeh and Jdeideh, in the region of Latakia, in November and December 2012.¹² Various reports indicate that the Christian population of the city of Homs—approximately 160,000—almost entirely has fled for safety, with only 1,000 Christians remaining.¹³ In late 2012, opposition forces reportedly attacked churches and used as safe houses an evangelical school and a home for the elderly in Homs.

Religious Minorities in Crossfire

Religious minority communities, including Christians, Druze, Ismailis and other non-Alawite minorities, largely have tried to stay

out of the conflict. But the violence described above is forcing them to choose sides. Regime rhetoric pushes these groups as well. The regime refers to the opposition, and sometimes all Sunni Muslims, as extremists and terrorists who seek to transform Syria into an Islamic state unwelcoming to religious minorities. The regime cites the plight of Egyptian Coptic Christians and Iraqi Christians to show what would happen to Syrian Christians if the opposition prevailed. The presence of foreign terrorists affiliated with al-Qaeda supports this argument.

Outside Forces Fuel Sectarian Strife

A number of outside actors are entering Syria and increasing sectarian divisions. Hizbollah, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards, and Shi'a fighters from Iraq have arrived to support Assad bolstered by financial and political backing from Iran and Russia. The civil war has ripped Syrian communities apart, devolving into a primal, Darwinian battle for survival. The opposition has become more influenced by radical Islamist groups funded by Islamist sympathizers from abroad in Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Al-Nusra Front, an al-Qaeda affiliate originating in Iraq, which the United States has deemed a terrorist organization, has gained fighters and at last esti-

for militant Islamists seeking the thrill of "jihad." They have hijacked the national awakening for freedom of the majority of Syrians. Like the regime, some of the more extremist groups utilize sectarian rhetoric and iconography to perpetuate fear and sectarianism.

While al-Nusra, al-Qaeda, and the other extremists groups are becoming more influential, most fighters in Syria are Syrians and are fighting an inherently decentralized chaotic campaign against the Assad regime. The loosely organized opposition are affiliated with the Free Syria Army (FSA), and number approximately 100,000. Since the United States weighed in on possibly supplying lethal aid to the FSA in April 2013, reports suggest that Saudi Arabia and Qatar have hinted they will then actively back off supporting militant Islamist groups and direct more of their aid also to vetted elements of the FSA. In conversations with Syrian refugees in Jordan and Egypt, all of them Sunnis, USCIRF found that they expressed disagreement with the religiously motivated ideologies of extremist groups. Nonetheless, they supported the shared goal of removing Assad from power.

The Refugee Crisis and Religious Minorities

Religious minorities in Syria are not fleeing the country in numbers as anticipated. The overwhelming majority of the more than 1.7 million Syrian refugees in the Middle East and North Africa are Sunni Muslims. UNHCR reports that, as of the end of April, less than one percent of each minority community -- Christians, Alawite, Ismaili, Mandaean and Yezidi -- is registered in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon.¹⁵ There are reports that upwards of 300,000 Christians are internally displaced.

The civil war has ripped Syrian communities apart, devolving into a primal, Darwinian battle for survival.

mate has as many as 10,000.¹⁴ Additionally, the Syrian Liberation Front, also thought to be dominated by Islamists, has numbers upwards of 37,000. Syria has become a global magnet

Accurate figures for other communities are unavailable.

The small number of minorities in the refugee population reflects two phenomena, which apply to Christians and Alawites in particular. First, Christians and Alawites are moving to their home areas or to regime-held areas because these areas tend to be safe from government bombing. This suggests that Christians and Alawites may be accepting the regime's argument that Alawites and Christians are safer with the government than with the opposition.

Second, evidence suggests that if Christians and Alawites do flee Syria, they are simply not registering with the local UN refugee agency because, as USCIRF staff was told, they fear being associated with the Assad regime. Some refugees try to pass as Sunni Muslims by, among other measures, wearing the hijab. Minority refugees do not return home because they also fear government officials viewing them as disloyal for having sought safety outside of Syria.

Regional Dangers

As mentioned, more than 1.7 million Syrians have fled the country, representing a massive humanitarian crisis and an emerging destabilizing threat to the region. Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey now each host more than half a million Syrians. While Egypt is hosting about 90,000 refugees, it is expecting at least 120,000 more.

These refugees are putting enormous economic and political strains on already-weak governments. In Jordan, 80 percent of the refugees live outside of camps and no Syrian refugee camps exist in either Lebanon or Egypt. Instead, refugees live in cities and towns, competing with Egyptians, Jordanians, and

Lebanese for housing, jobs, and access to services provided by health clinics and schools. Further destabilization of such countries will have negative implications for the region, as well as beyond, including for U.S. national security.

Alarmingly, Syria's sectarian conflict itself now appears to be spreading beyond its borders. In the last few months, Lebanon has experienced fighting between Alawite and Salafi groups. In addition, it is widely argued that Iraq's spike in sectarian violence that has left about 2,500 people dead between April and July is a spillover from the Syrian crisis.

Some analysts have suggested that a significant number of Syrians and current refugees will seek entry into Europe and that European nations need to focus on aiding refugees in current host countries and start planning for inflows to Europe.

Recommendations

Dealing with sectarian divisions, exacerbated by the regime and extremists, is central to any lasting peace in Syria. Healing the sectarian divides of a diverse nation like Syria is not only necessary, but can become a focal point for a future more secure, stable, and democratic region. Protecting religious freedom and human rights for every Syrian is crucial. More detail on ways to heal this divide and next steps can be found in the April 2013 report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) entitled, "Protecting and Promoting Religious Freedom in Syria."¹⁶ Our recommendations for the United States fell into four categories: 1) Promoting Protection for Religious Freedom in Syria; 2) Prioritizing Human Rights in U.S. relations through the Friends of Syria Group; 3) Promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief

through U.S. Programs; and 4) Addressing the Situation of Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees.

Below are seven specific recommendations:

- The U.S. should, where appropriate, assist the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) and any future post-Assad government to provide security to protect likely targets of sectarian or religion-motivated violence. This includes areas where religious or minority communities live or congregate, such as neighborhoods with religious sites and places of worship. The protection of religious minorities is a key element to the possibility of a successful Syrian evolution out of the Assad era and a three-year civil war. Nations which protect the religious freedom of their minorities are far more likely to enjoy security and freedom;
- To offset the influence of extremist groups who are establishing Sharia courts in liberated areas, the U.S. government should provide technical training and support to local councils, courts, lawyers and judges on domestic laws and international standards relating to human rights and religious freedom. The ability to provide viable legal alternatives to Shi'a courts or Assad's authoritarianism in establishing the rule of law in a diverse Syria will be essential to free Syria of the divisions of sectarianism;
- With Saudi Arabia and Qatar vying for influence in Syria against the region's Shia powers behind Assad, the U.S. government should form a special coalition with like-minded partners for a third pathway among the Friends of Syria. This pathway would fund and develop efforts to promote intra- and inter-religious tolerance and respect for

religious freedom and related rights to ensure that a future Syria respects these fundamental freedoms. The ability of countries like Saudi Arabia and Qatar to increase Sunni Islamist influence thus far was due to the vacuum created by the end of regime military control in certain regions. It was also due to the lack of western civil society programs to engage the Syrian population. Without advocates from our democratic allies in the West for genuine liberty on the ground in Syria, the majority of Syrians will continue to be lost in a sectarian battle that gives them two equally distasteful and oppressive alternatives.

- The U.S. government should ensure that all international cooperation with the Syrian opposition leadership emphasizes the importance of ensuring the rights to freedom of religion or belief. It should also ensure freedom of opinion and expression, as well as protection of minority religious communities;
- The U.S. government should direct U.S. officials and recipients of U.S. grants to prioritize religious tolerance and understanding, foster knowledge of and respect for universal human rights standards, and develop the political ability of religious minorities to organize themselves and convey their concerns. Studies have shown that the prioritization of religious liberty provides the necessary foundation of liberty for nations that will then keep them more secure and less torn apart by religiously motivated conflict.
- The U.S. government should establish a refugee resettlement program for Syrian refugees fleeing targeted religious persecution by Syrian government forces, affiliated militias, or non-state actors opposed to the Assad regime. This resettlement will help

prevent the regional destabilization which the over two million displaced Syrians are currently fueling in their host nations;

■ In anticipation of another mass exodus from Syria, this time of religious minorities, who could be targeted for sectarian reprisal attacks in refugee camps, we must encourage UNHCR to make preparations for increased refugee flows of religious minorities, to develop a protection program to ensure their safety in refugee camps, and to sponsor interfaith dialogues among the various refugee communities. A post-Assad Syria which devolves even deeper into a society of retribution will undercut any chance that the revolutionaries had hoped to provide of religious freedom emerging out of the dust of over 42 years of Assad regime oppression.

If post-Assad Syria is ever to heal and move forward, human rights, including freedom of religion, must be woven tightly into the fabric of its new national life. Only by replacing the government's divide-and-conquer approach toward sectarian groups with one that affirms the fundamental identity and rights of every Syrian – irrespective of group membership -- can this deeply fractured land be made whole again. **PRISM**

NOTES

¹ U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), "Protecting and Promoting Religious Freedom in Syria," Special Report, April 2013, [http://www.uscirf.gov/images/Syria%20Report%20April%202013\(1\).pdf](http://www.uscirf.gov/images/Syria%20Report%20April%202013(1).pdf)

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³ United Nations Statistics can be found at the website for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs: <http://www.unocha.org/crisis/syria>

⁴ Malas, Nour, "Rebel-on-rebel violence seizes Syria," *the Wall Street Journal*, September 18, 2013.

⁵ Ajami, Fouad, *The Syrian Rebellion* (Stanford, CA: The Hoover Institution Press, 2012), 111.

⁶ The Alawite community is hardly monolithic on this matter. Some Alawite elites have abandoned the Assad regime for the opposition and denounced the violence perpetrated against civilians. In March 2013, a group of Alawites supporting a democratic alternative met in Cairo to discuss a declaration supporting a united Syria and opposing sectarian revenge attacks.

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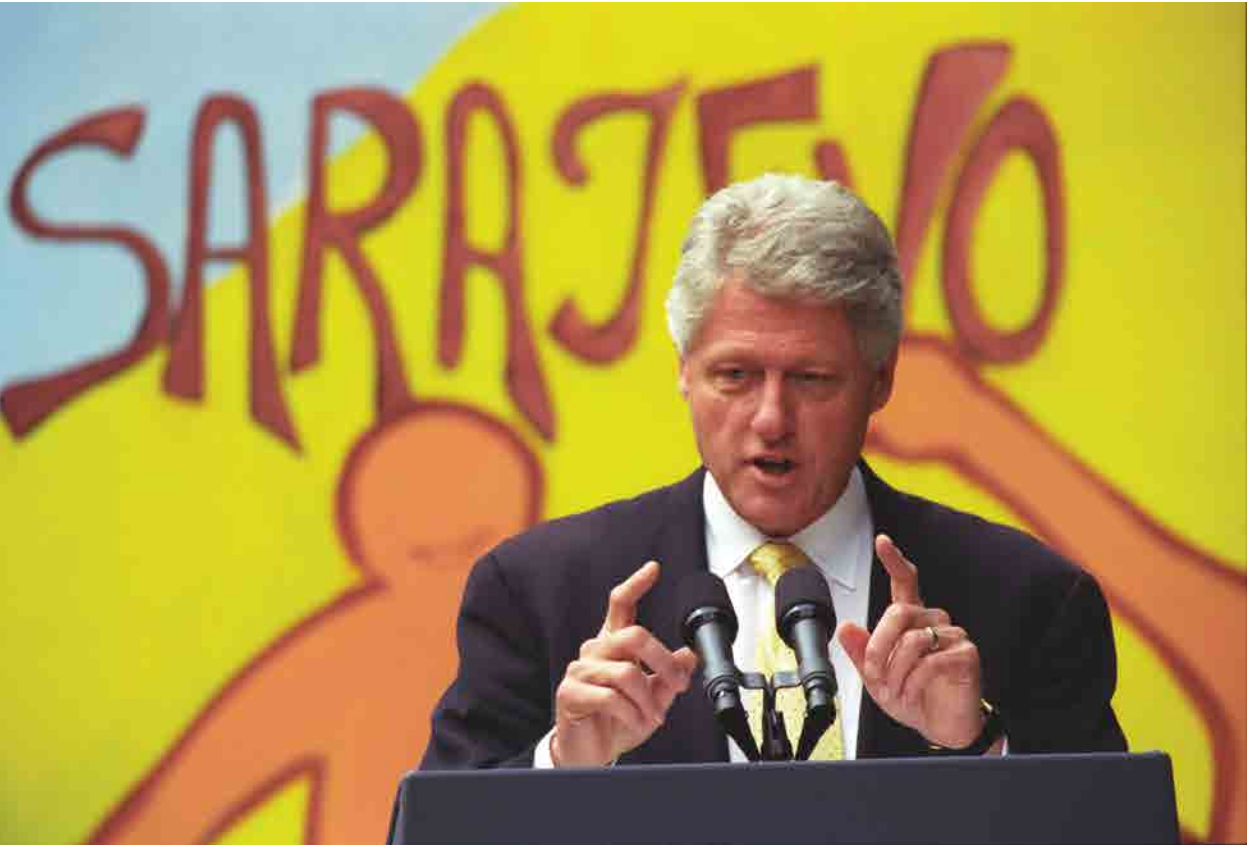
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¹⁴ Ignatius, David, "Al-Qaeda affiliate playing larger role in Syrian rebellion," *Washington Post*, November 30, 2012 http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/post/al-qaeda-affiliate-playing-larger-role-in-syria-rebellion/2012/11/30/203d06f4-3b2e-11e2-9258-ac7c78d5c680_blog.html

¹⁵ UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Syria: <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

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President Bill Clinton addressing the Third High School in Sarajevo

Moving Past the Bosnia Fallacy New Models for Understanding Syria

BY BRIAN KREITLOW

"But [Syria] is not so much like Libya last year, where of course we had a successful intervention to save lives. It is looking more like Bosnia in the 1990s, being on the edge of a sectarian conflict in which neighboring villages are attacking and killing each other so I don't think we can rule anything out." – British Foreign Secretary William Hague¹

"The way Syria is heading resembles the situation in Srebrenica." – Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu²

As the slaughter in Syria rages on, it has become fashionable to look to Bosnia as an analogy for the violent conflict. Statements from foreign ministers, politicians and respected journalists highlight the similarities between the two conflicts. Headlines claim, "Syria Turning into Another Bosnia," and "Syrian Conflict a Haunting Reminder of Bosnia," though reading below the headlines on most articles reveals the true nature of the similarities between Bosnia and Syria. They are more circumstantial than substantive; the actual conflicts bear little similarity. In reality, the conflict in Syria is fundamentally different from Bosnia, making comparisons with Bosnia extremely misleading. Furthermore, prescriptions which call for the formation of enclaves, safe havens or statelets are based on an incomplete understanding of the conflict of Syria, and disregard many of the experiences of Bosnia – and other instances of ethnically based partition, for that matter. As Robert Jervis once noted: historical analogies "are rarely accurate and solutions based on false analogies can be devastating."³ Policymakers and military strategists watching Syria would do well to read past the "sound bite" and embrace the lessons of other, more instructive situations, to help find appropriate approaches to the conflict in Syria.

This paper first seeks to expose the logical fallacy in attempting to make serious comparisons between the situations in Syria and Bosnia, by clearly identifying the major differences between the two conflicts. While Bosnia stemmed from a top-down maneuver instigated by a regime seeking to exploit ethnicity to achieve its political goals, Syria began as a

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bottom-up social revolution aimed at gaining greater freedoms. Despite some reporting to the contrary,⁴ Syria has remained generally free of the intense sectarian fighting that consumed Bosnia, precisely because the politicization of ethnicity has not (yet) become a useful tool.

Second, this paper presents three models for broadening our understanding of the situation in Syria: as a transition towards democracy from a “sultanistic” form of authoritarian rule; as a battleground for competing political ideologies; and as a proxy war between the West and Iran. Each of these models provides a different, complementary lens for evaluating the unfolding situation in Syria and helps us to build a more complete understanding of the crisis. Using models helps us to avoid the pitfalls of individual cases, and understanding what we are dealing with in Syria is a vital step to determining how we deal with Syria, both now and in a post-Assad environment.

As there is no international legal basis for intervention in Syria, this paper offers a handful of recommendations for U.S. policy in Syria. The key elements are; avoiding the politicization of ethnicity before, during and after the fall of Bashar al-Assad’s regime; opposing the creation of ethnic or confessionally-based states and starting the political dialogue between key actors now, to ease the pain of transition; speeding the formation of a relevant interim government; and improving the consolidation of democracy in a legitimate ruling body.

The war in Bosnia had its origins in the collapse of Yugoslavia – which is, notably, also very different from the collapse of Syria. The crisis in Yugoslavia was primarily a crisis of government based on historical states

and territories. Josip Tito’s model for Yugoslavia was based on the Soviet model, favoring full national self-determination for Yugoslav nationalities, while ensuring that the strong, centralized party organization served as the sole political expression of each nation’s will. This arrangement simultaneously strengthened ethnically derived states while ensuring that ethnicity was not politicized. Prior to the conflict, Bosnia was an ethnically diverse society and Muslims were generally well represented in the Bosnian government, though representation was skewed in favor of Serbs and Croats in both the Communist Party and Yugoslav federal government positions. Comprising only 15 percent of the 1981 Yugoslav population,⁵ Bosnian Muslims still retained a voice in the system, aided by Tito’s 1974 recognition of “Muslim” as a separate nationality, which opened up access to positions of influence. It was Slobodan Milošević’s advocacy of Serb nationalism that would politicize ethnicity in Yugoslavia and set the stage for the crises to come.

Milošević was a relative political newcomer in 1987 when he took up the flag of Serb nationalism. Vowing to protect the Serb populace from victimization in Kosovo, Croatia, and Bosnia, he incited ethnic Serbs throughout Yugoslavia by promising the support of the federal government and the Yugoslav National Army. Milošević’s goal was a very deliberate move to bring ethnic Serbs into a Serb state – a move underscored by the 1989 installation of his supporters into key positions in the leadership of Serbia’s two autonomous provinces (Vojvodina and Kosovo) and Montenegro.⁶

Kosovo and Montenegro each had votes in the Yugoslav national council,

strengthening his influence in the federal government and triggering the failure of the government. This ultimately led to declarations of independence by Slovenia and Croatia, and an ill-fated referendum by the Bosnian Muslim leader Alija Izetbegović on an independent state of Bosnia and Herzegovina, precipitating the crisis often referred to as “Bosnia.”⁷ In the same manner as Croatia, Bosnia became a battleground for protecting and advancing the rights of the ethnic Serb population and its territory (and later for expanding Croat territories) – especially as it became clear that a solution would be based on ethnic partition. To cover his political maneuver, Milošević fed the West a steady stream of propaganda – that the conflict was an ethnic clash rooted in historic hatred – effectively presenting the conflict as one with no resolution.⁸ Instead, it was a modern concoction which politicized ethnic differences in order to advance an agenda which served one ethnic group at the expense of others. In short, tensions between ethnic groups in Bosnia were the result, not the cause of the war in Yugoslavia.⁹

In contrast to the top-down political maneuver that instigated the conflict in Bosnia, the Syrian conflict sprung up from the local level. The Syrian uprising began in Deraa, in southern Syria, when locals demanded the release of 14 schoolchildren arrested for graffiti-ing a popular Arab Spring slogan: “The people want the downfall of the regime.”¹⁰ Five protesters were subsequently shot by security forces over the next two days, triggering more protests. The original protestors are likely to have been Sunni, but their outrage had little to do with religion or religious differences and

more to do with restricted social and economic privileges, corruption and the 43 years of emergency rule.

When Assad cracked down on the protests, an anti-regime insurgency erupted, with over 1,000 deaths in the first few months. The spiral of violence has continued and expanded from there. The Assad government promised token reforms in 2012, but the elections were boycotted by the opposition, cementing their position that Assad’s removal from power is their primary goal.

In contrast to the top-down political maneuver that instigated the conflict in Bosnia, the Syrian conflict sprung up from the local level.

Despite the huge divide between the privileged Alawite leadership and the Sunni masses, the conflict in Syria has remained remarkably non-sectarian—in large part due to the Ba’ath Party’s ideology of secular nationalism, which has guided the regime for over fifty years. Alawites rely on this secular nationalism, because they would be marginalized in a Sunni-dominated state which combines political and religious ideologies. The Ba’ath Party’s nationalist ideology allowed for a secular, if autocratic government, and provided an opportunity for both minority Alawites and some Sunnis to rise to prominent government positions.

Former Syrian Minister of Defense Mustafa Tlas (Sunni) served as Syria’s minister of defense for over 30 years; his son, Manaf, was a general in Syria’s Republican Guard until his defection in 2012. Recently slain Sunni cleric Sheikh Mohammed

al-Bouti was also a fervent and long-standing supporter of the Assad regime. The effective result of this strategy is a focus on crushing political dissent rather than religious groups. Hafez al-Assad's infamous 1982 massacre in Hama did not specifically target Sunni Muslims per se; rather it was to blunt an anti-government insurgency by the Ba'ath Party's long-standing political and ideological rival, the Muslim Brotherhood. The growing presence of the Muslim Brotherhood, and other more extremist Islamist groups (such as the al-Qaeda-linked al-Nusra Front) in the Syrian opposition poses ideological and political challenges to the regime every bit as much as it introduces sectarian elements into the conflict. While there is an apparent trend towards "sectarian" violence, it is not overtly

clear that the motive is due to religious, rather than political, differences – as fine of a line as that may be.¹¹ Eliminating challengers to the regime (and their supporters) belies an agenda in which ethnicity and religion take a back seat to domestic politics and clearly differentiates these atrocities from those perpetrated in Bosnia in the 1990s.

After only a quick review, it is readily apparent that there are few actual similarities between Bosnia and Syria. Nonetheless, following on popular comparisons between Syria and Bosnia, the logical next step has been to advance solutions for Syria based on perceived "successes" in Bosnia. A 2012 editorial in the Wall Street Journal offered: "A Bosnia-style air campaign targeting elite Syrian military units could prompt the



U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Brian Schunböhmer

President Slobodan Milosevic of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, President Alija Izetbegovic of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and President Franjo Tudjman of the Republic of Croatia initial the Dayton Peace Accords

General Staff to reconsider its contempt for international opinion, and perhaps its allegiance to the Assad family. Short of that, carving out some kind of safe haven inside Syria would at least save lives.”¹² These prescriptions are fraught with danger, and not only show a lack of understanding of the differences between the two conflicts, but also a lack of understanding of how these strategies “worked” in Bosnia. Most of the solutions proposed to end the conflict in Bosnia failed – even the Dayton Accords have only had limited success in solving the core problems. Where the Dayton Accords succeeded was in implementing a cease-fire – in part by creating two separate sub-states along ethnic lines. These partitions limited the justification for further interethnic conflict and generally served to protect the individuals in each sub-state. In the longer term, though, these features have proven unsustainable and have left behind a permanently crippled country incapable of self-governance.

Introducing partitions in Syria based on ethnic or confessional difference neither resolves nor addresses the core issues of the conflict. Bashar al-Assad has been fighting to maintain his power against an insurgency – ceding territory to the insurgents is an unacceptable solution. Additionally, since the battle is for rightful ownership of the state of Syria and not for protection of ethnic groups, the creation of a rump sub-state led by Assad would be tenuous and prolong the conflict. Establishing ethnically based enclaves or sub-states in Syria is likely to produce one of two results: ethnic cleansing to consolidate power; or the introduction of constant ethnic tensions.

Professor Milton Esman notes that the creation of sub-states does not eliminate ethnic conflicts, as “successor states become new venues for the pursuit and the regulation of conflicting ethnic claims” through both civil and violent means.¹³ At the same time, federations of co-existing ethnic communities, in which collectivities are incorporated through consocietal or power-sharing arrangements (as in Bosnia) have repeatedly failed.¹⁴ In short, ethnic partition in Syria trends toward creating a situation like Bosnia.

Safe havens in Bosnia were poorly defined and poorly enacted, and as a result, generally unsuccessful (Srebrenica was a United Nations-designated safe haven). Most UN bodies and Security Council members did not support the idea of safe havens – safe havens were to be employed only as a last resort – and member nations were not willing to provide the appropriate level of protection to make the safe havens work.¹⁵

Bosnia does, however, offer some useful lessons on the idea of safe havens. First, safe havens must be clearly defined; the international commitment to protecting them must be made clear to both the protected and the aggressors. Second, they need to be defensible and established in a manner that allows for protection of the civilian populace. Massive, inter-confessional cities such as Homs and Hama, situated along main lines of communication are simply not defensible as safe havens. Third, safe havens meant to protect civilians cannot be used as a base for insurgent operations. Doing so removes the impartiality that underpins the sanctity of the safe haven. Fourth, sufficient forces must be in place on the ground to protect the zone and they must not be seen

as combatants in their own right. Finally, any forces charged with securing safe-havens must be granted sufficiently robust rules of engagement (ROE) to protect the area – ROE that UN personnel lacked in Bosnia.

“We need to not lose sight of the fact that this was a populist uprising – to uproot a dictatorial regime – that was faced with the utmost brutality and Bashar al-Assad seems like not giving up, however, we’re not giving up either on our rights to transform Syria into a democratic, civil state.”
– Yaser Tabbara, legal advisor for the Syrian National Coalition¹⁶

One way to view the conflict in Syria is through the lens of scholarship on democratic transitions. Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, who chronicled transitions to democracies throughout Latin America and Eastern Europe, identified five different model types of modern regimes.¹⁷ Based on the models they offered, Syria would be most-likely categorized as a “sultanistic” regime, “where the private and public are fused, there is a strong tendency toward familial power and dynastic succession, there is no distinction between a state career and personal service to the ruler, there is a lack of rationalized impersonal ideology, economic success depends on a personal relationship to the ruler, and, most of all, the ruler acts only according to his own unchecked discretion, with no larger impersonal goals.”¹⁸ This label is often applied to Slobodan Milošević as well as Nicolae Ceaușescu, Saddam Hussein, Moammar Gaddafi, and North Korean rulers since Kim Il-Sung. It is no surprise that the course of events in Syria rings eerily similar to

Romania in 1989 and Libya in 2011, though Saddam Hussein’s sultanistic regime in Iraq offers the best mirror of Syria in terms of religion, ethnicity and political distribution.

In April 2013, Linz and Stepan evaluated the Arab countries and their forms of government, noting that none is truly sultanistic and instead introducing a “continuum of sultanism.”¹⁹ While Gaddafi receives their billing for the most sultanistic of the Arab Spring leaders (Assad, Mubarak, and Ben Ali round out the group), they note that the Assad regime has strong sultanistic features, consistent with those identified above.²⁰ There is (or has been) some internal autonomy in the Syrian business community and state apparatus, though this does not extend to the rigidly controlled Syrian military. Regardless of the degree of sultanism, the resultant political conditions created by the extreme nature of this regime type remain consistent with the original sultanistic model. Lacking political moderates and soft-liners within the regime, democratic transitions from sultanistic regimes do not usually occur through negotiations with the opposition, nor by the leader stepping down—they often end only with the death of the leader through armed revolt, as readily witnessed in Romania, Libya, and Iraq. The precarious position of the Alawite minority in Syria heightens the regime’s resistance to a negotiated solution, achieving the same effective result as a truly sultanistic regime.

The categorization of Syria as a sultanistic regime in transition has two key implications: first, it clarifies that Syria is not a complex and intractable interethnic conflict – it is a revolution seeking control of the state. Second, it gives us a more constructive model for analyzing the situation and

understanding what comes next. Linz and Stepan note the tendency for non-democratic regimes to follow the collapse of sultanistic regimes, and prescribe, “The best chance for democratic transition is if revolutionary upheaval is led by internationally supported, democratically inclined leaders who set a date for elections and allow free contestation of power.”²¹ The evolution of the conflict, however, challenges the focused application of this model. The range of potential motives amongst actors in the Syrian opposition sets the stage for a battle for influence during the transition time frame, potentially “hijacking” the revolution.

Conditions are ripe for a stolen revolution specifically when there is no central driving force or ideology behind the revolution. The revolutions in Romania and across Yugoslavia (1989) were spontaneous, but the style of government had not allowed for the formation of an organized political opposition necessary to push through the reforms the protestors sought. In each case, a motivated social or government actor was able to seize the controls and guide the revolution towards meeting its own needs. In Romania, this was Ion Iliescu, who stepped in to lead the movement and consolidate power, though his supporters were primarily regime officials.²² Similarly, the 1989 anti-government protests in the Yugoslav republic of Montenegro did not advance a particular political actor to replace the government. Instead, Milo Đukanović and Momir Bulatović (members of the regime) crossed over to the opposition and then negotiated their new positions as Prime Minister and President, respectively.²³ Similar circumstances existed in Egypt and in Libya, where

the authoritarian political rule did not allow for the formation of any significant organized opposition. Political opposition was not allowed, and threats to the regime were harshly dealt with. It would not be unfair to suggest the Egyptian Supreme Council of the Armed Forces effectively “stole” the Egyptian revolution in 2011, as it intervened between the protestors and the collapsing regime to protect its interests and shape the post-Mubarak political scene.²⁴ Iraq never experienced a revolution, but the U.S. invasion triggered the same result – a power vacuum with no clear mobilized political movements.

Syria shows these same symptoms, as the lack of opposition movements has opened the door for motivated actors to seize control of the revolution. Foremost among these actors are the Muslim Brotherhood, various al-Qaeda affiliated groups, and the people in the Syrian National Coalition, all of whom are jockeying for position in a post-Assad Syria. The Syrian populace has long been disengaged from political dialogue, in part because there has been no room for dissent with the regime – a belief reinforced by the 1982 Homs massacre and the government’s harsh response to the initial protests in Deraa. After more than two years of war, much of the original revolution seems to have died out, leaving these armed groups to carry on the fight against the regime.

Conditions are ripe for a stolen revolution specifically when there is no central driving force or ideology behind the revolution.

The primary opposition to the ruling Ba'ath Party has been its long-time ideological rival, the Muslim Brotherhood, which Hafez al-Assad ordered into exile in 1980, following an assassination attempt against him. Today, it is the largest and most organized bloc of the otherwise fragmented Syrian National Coalition. The Brotherhood's public statements evince a commitment to a democratic social order, though its motives remain suspect. The Muslim Brotherhood's March 2012 Covenant and Pact called for the "institution of a State that respects human rights as enshrined by divine texts and international instruments, such as dignity, equality, freedom of thought and speech; [a state] where no citizen's beliefs or religion shall be subject to prejudice."²⁵ This should sound familiar – it is nearly identical to Mohamed Morsi's pre-electoral pledges of inclusiveness in Egypt.²⁶ This messaging gave Morsi the political support and international backing to take power – specifically when contrasted against the unrestrained radicalism of the opposing Salafists. Messaging aside, the Muslim Brotherhood likely believes that democracy is a useful tool in Syria, sensing that a democratic election would result in a victory for it, as happened in Egypt.

The prominent role of the Muslim Brotherhood should not, however, be misconstrued as introducing a sectarian component to the conflict; instead, it introduces an important ideological and political component to the dispute. The recent assassination of Mohamed Saeed al-Bouti, the prominent pro-regime Sunni cleric, highlights the importance of politics over religion. The Sunni cleric was a strong supporter of Bashar al-Assad and his father Hafez

al-Assad (both Alawite). In supporting their Ba'athist policies, he was known for actively speaking out against the Muslim Brotherhood. As the Brotherhood gains strength in the opposition, it is likely that members of the movement will seek to expand their political agenda against others, meaning that the victims of anti-regime violence will not only be Alawites or Shi'a, but will include Sunnis and Christians opposed to the Muslim Brotherhood. This ideological dispute should also be borne in mind as a new post-Assad government seeks to form. A dominant Muslim Brotherhood could, as in Egypt, seize the revolution from the hands of secular nationalists and deliver them into the clutches of a competing vision of Syria's future that is no more democratic than the last forty years have been.²⁷

"We most definitely have a proxy war in Syria. At this point of the conflict it is difficult not to say that the international dimension of the Syrian conflict precedes the domestic one." – Ayham Kamel, Eurasia Group²⁸

Threats to transitions do not only come from within. Weak states and states in revolution become battlegrounds for foreign actors seeking to affect the shape of the new state, and Syria is no exception. To a much greater extent than Bosnia, Syria is showing signs as a proxy battlefield for influence between regional power brokers – or more directly, between the Gulf States and Iran. While Western actors are getting much of the attention, there are a number of other actors whose motives deserve to be addressed. Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the Gulf States are heavily supporting the Syrian

opposition. These countries are driving support to the opposition, focused on curbing growing Iranian influence in the Gulf and Middle East, and establishing a friendly government in Syria. The Arab League has recognized the Syrian National Coalition for Revolutionary and Opposition Forces as the legitimate government of Syria, and the Coalition's then-president, Sheikh Moaz al-Khatib, attended the League's March meeting in Qatar. Iran is providing political and material support to the Syrian regime, both directly and via Lebanese Hezbollah. According to Syrian opposition leaders "Iran has dispatched hundreds of advisers, security officials and intelligence operatives to Syria, along with weapons, money and electronic surveillance equipment."²⁹ This support is to ensure that the Alawite regime, a key Iranian ally, remains in power. The loss of the Syrian government would deal a significant blow to Iranian regional aspirations, including the export of its own Islamic revolution. Russia and China, with their own interests in mind, support the Syrian regime in international politics, preventing UN

Security Council resolutions that would condemn Assad in any way.

The inherent danger of a proxy war is that the conflict is restrained only by the limitations of the conflicting parties. In this case, neither Iran nor the West or Gulf States seem overly constrained in the resources they are able to provide to support the regime. This means that Syria will face continued destruction—the citizens and the fighters will never reach a breaking point, for they are now only the venue and the pawns in a larger conflict. At the same time, the proxy war can change not only the nature of the war, but also the constitution of its primary actors. Factions become more or less powerful or coherent often because of foreign incentives, which change the course of eventual compromise within a country.

The point of this paper is not to label Syria as an example of one of these individual models, but rather to give a greater and more accurate understanding of the dynamics at work. Each of the models represents a part of the overall situation, and



Historic photo of National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces members in Doha, Qatar, 18 November 2012

the Syrian civil war is a mixture of all three variants. Each of the proposed models represents a body of theory and discussion, and each has its own formulations, expectations and prescribed actions. Just as importantly, these models do not prescribe a clear path for external actors to successfully intervene in a domestic transition. Libya and Iraq do not provide ideal or convincing scenarios for an international presence; Romania, Tunisia, Egypt, Serbia (2000) were decided from within. In the absence of direct action, the most effective steps the United States and its allies can take are ones designed to prevent the politicization of ethnicity or religion, strengthen the organization of the opposition, and help produce international consensus on a way ahead.

The primary goal of the U.S. and international community must be preventing the politicization of ethnicity throughout the transition. This is certainly easier said than done – especially as neither the United States nor the international community have any role or meaningful presence inside Syria. Instead, efforts must focus on engaging the Syrian National Coalition, the Free Syrian Army and external actors who are involved in the conflict. The effort to prevent the politicization of ethnicity must focus on maintaining a secular, democratic opposition prior to and throughout the transition, while maintaining the territorial integrity of the state.

Should the various opposition forces manage to succeed in overcoming the regime, the disparate goals of the various opposition factions will become more pronounced, raising the likelihood for greater violence, along political, ideological and confessional lines. In part, this will result

from the newfound availability of power, money and benefits as parties look to exploit the vacuum left by the receding state. Greed and traditional loyalties to families, tribes, and more tangible communities will supersede the commitment to the revolution and the vague idea of a Syrian state. These changes open the door for the politicization of religious differences as budding politicians scramble to mobilize support and build power and influence. Retribution against Alawite or Shi'a regime figures is a likely part of this – though it may be difficult to determine if the cause is sectarian or simply anti-regime retribution.

The United States should work to prevent politicization of ethnicity or religion prior to the transition. Thus far, the United States has generally taken the right steps – identifying the Nusra Front as a terrorist group, pressing the Syrian opposition to support democratic and inclusive ideals, working to shut down Iranian shipments to the Syrian regime – though all with mixed results. The Syrian National Coalition has repeatedly selected broad-based ethnic minorities and secular figures for its leadership, such as former Prime Minister, Ghassan Hitto, who was selected over the three candidates fielded by the Muslim Brotherhood. Many of the former Syrian National Coalition Presidents, such as George Sabra and Moaz al-Khatib, are known for their secular political views.

Unfortunately, the Syrian National Coalition has been anything but stable and has little legitimacy inside of Syria. The only real body in the opposition that has legitimacy is the Muslim Brotherhood due to its history of opposition to the Syrian regime. Its philosophical background and endurance

give it a legitimacy that other factions do not have, and (as in Egypt) by presenting a middle ground between radical Islamist parties and secular democratic parties it gains command of the electorate. To this point, the Muslim Brotherhood has wielded its considerable influence to exploit the transitional period to its advantage. U.S. Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford, in a meeting with the Syrian National Council in June 2012,³⁰ made American support contingent upon implementation of reforms recommended by an independent committee.³¹ The committee's recommendations, which were eventually signed by most of the opposition forces, struck at the Brotherhood's monopoly on power by outlining the transitional period, detailing the disposition of armed factions and criminalizing the use of money to buy political loyalty. Despite international opposition, the Muslim Brotherhood succeeded in staving off a follow-up committee and excluding the plan from the Syrian National Coalition's November 2012 founding statements. The United States cannot fight this battle alone – it needs to press the Arab League and other western donors to hold to high standards in ensuring the Syrian National Coalition holds to agreed principles in exchange for international support.

As discussed previously, the United States should oppose the creation of ethnic or confessional-based sub-states in Syria. The formation of ethnic states, such as an Alawite state in the West, a Kurdish state in the northeast and a Druze state along the Jordanian border would be unsustainable and unacceptable to other states in the region. At best, the creation of ethnically or confessional-based mini-states in Syria could undermine U.S. efforts to promote a

tolerant, representative and multi-confessional state in Iraq, as well as in Lebanon and Jordan. At worst, breakaway sub-states could lead to redrawing the entire map of the Middle East. While this is probably a much-needed step towards resolving the larger regional problems, it undermines the integrity of the international system if it is not a deliberate process undertaken by sovereign states. The only way to prevent a disastrous overhaul of the region is to further the mythical state which is Syria, and ensure that minority groups understand that they will have a voice in a future government.

Even if territorial partition is avoided, the new government will become a venue for competition between political actors, and ethnicity is a proven tool for mobilizing and consolidating support. The United States should not support the enshrinement of ethnic, religious or confessional-based differences in a post-Assad government. Rather than leveling representation, the allocation of government positions by ethnicity or religion (e.g., Iraq under the Coalition Provisional Authority or Lebanon under the National Pact) has been historically proven to increase the likelihood of sectarian conflict. While ethnic political parties are not inherently dangerous or violent (their ultimate goal is to advance the goals of their ethnic / religious group); they indirectly (or sometimes directly) threaten those outside of their group. Special electoral processes or arrangements that ensure diversity in government may alleviate the overt domination of one social group, but negatively impact the quality of the resultant democracy.

As a final step, the United States should encourage political dialogue on the future of

Syria now. The transition to democracy will be very complicated and will take time, especially given the absence of political life under Assad. Now is the time for political discussion between the Muslim Brotherhood and secular members of the opposition on the future relationship between state and religions, the nature of the transitional government, amnesty for former regime and Ba'ath Party members (and the status of the Ba'ath Party), and on the desired functions of the new government. Waiting to begin these discussions until Assad falls (or even months later as was the case in Egypt) delays the development of political society and the consolidation of a democratic alternative to authoritarian rule.

Rather than pinning our Syrian forecasts on naïve comparisons with select historical examples, looking to different models provides a rich and diverse backdrop for examining the multiple layers of the Syrian conflict. These models provide us with more relevant examples on the role of ideology, ethnicity and foreign involvement, which are essential ingredients of the current situation. This analysis has also underscored the very important role of the Muslim Brotherhood in “hijacking” the revolution, a continuing development that will have long-lasting impacts on the future of the revolution and the transition to a post-Assad regime. There is no clear way for the United States to control or confront these developments, though efforts to require the Syrian National Coalition to undergo review by an independent committee are a step in the right direction. The United States must continue to push for such efforts which allow the international community to maintain a hand in the oversight of the transition, and

to ensure the formation of a democratic and inclusive government. These conditions must become prerequisites for the delivery of aid and assistance, not only from the West, but also from the Gulf States and other international actors.

Syria is not Bosnia, nor is it necessarily Iraq, Egypt or Lebanon. It is not a foregone conclusion that Syria's day of sectarian infighting is here, or that it is even coming. To help prevent that scenario, the international community must use its leverage to avoid the mobilization of ethnic groups for political purposes, the division of territory based on ethnic or religious identification, and the constitutional enshrinement of consocietal arrangements. Rather than solving problems, these “solutions” only create fresh avenues for conflict, setting the stage for Syria to become another Bosnia or Iraq. Only by understanding and addressing the problem at hand, can we stop solving past problems and focus on preventing their recurrence. **PRISM**

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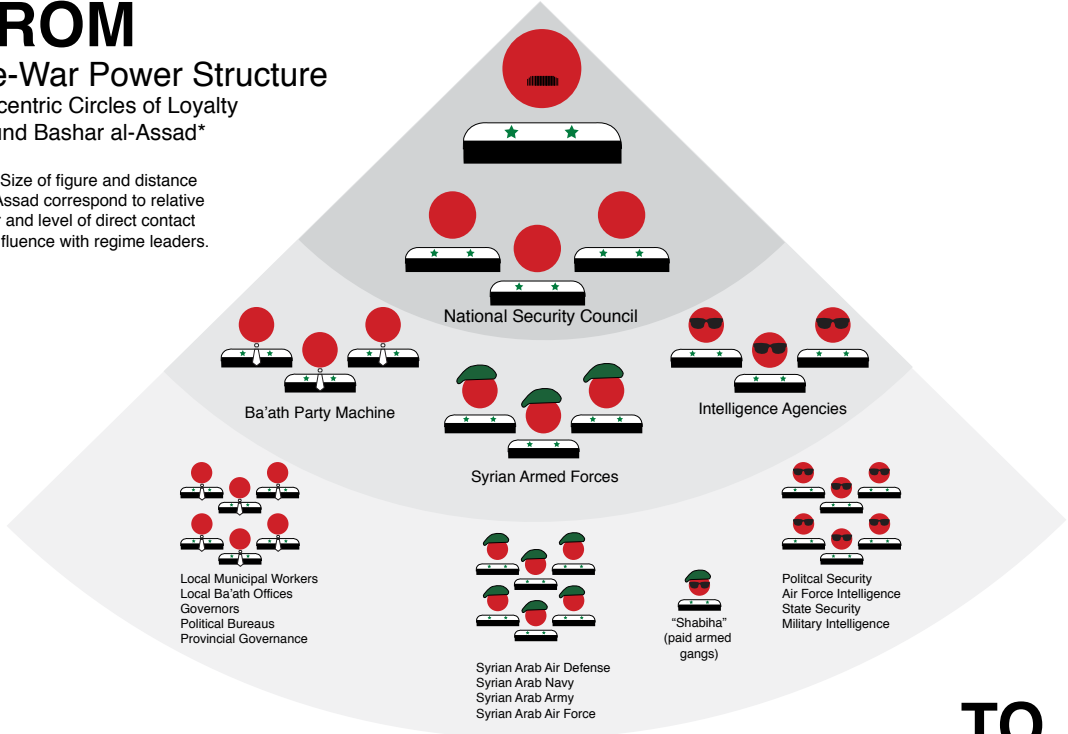
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DESIGNING SECURITY SECTOR

This graphic incorporates information and insights provided by Ambassador Donald Planty

FROM Pre-War Power Structure Concentric Circles of Loyalty Around Bashar al-Assad*

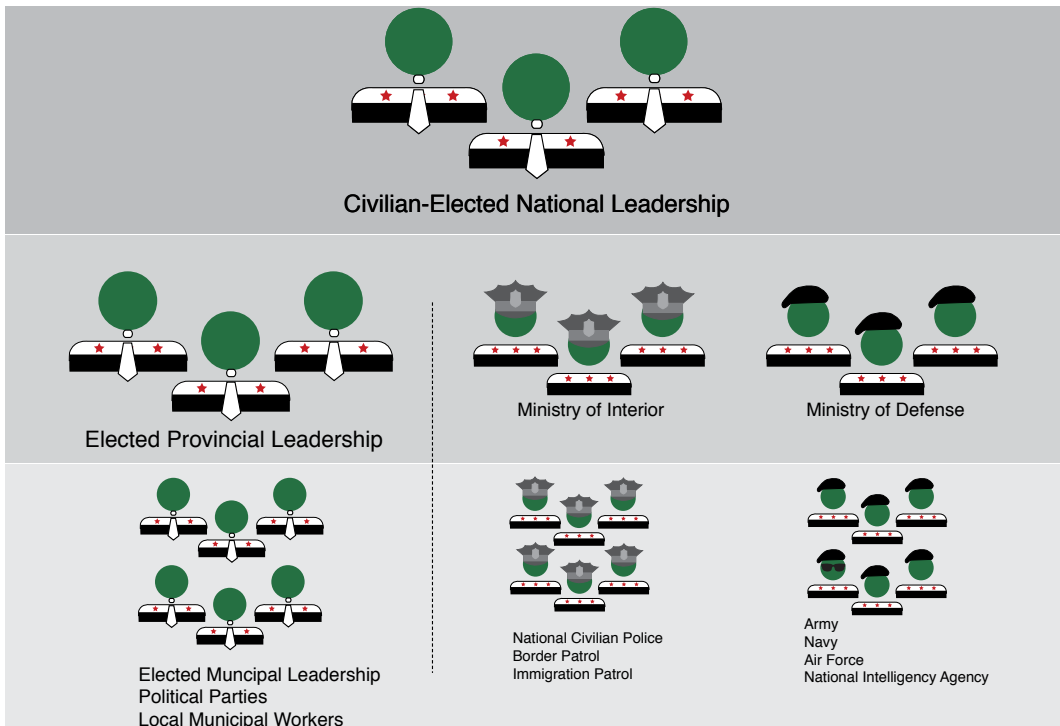
Note: Size of figure and distance from Assad correspond to relative power and level of direct contact and influence with regime leaders.



THE GOAL

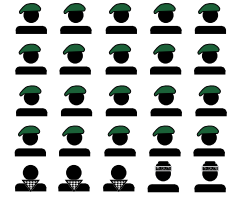
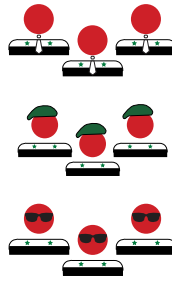
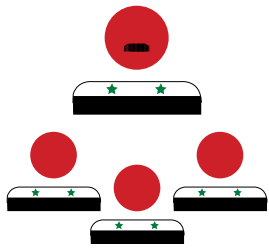
TO Post-War Security Sector Democratic, Institutionalized Separation of Powers

The security sector transition process creates the space for new institutions to succeed. Good habits will be reinforced by an engaged electorate.



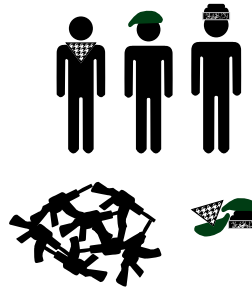
*Hanna Batatu, Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999)

REFORM IN POST-WAR SYRIA

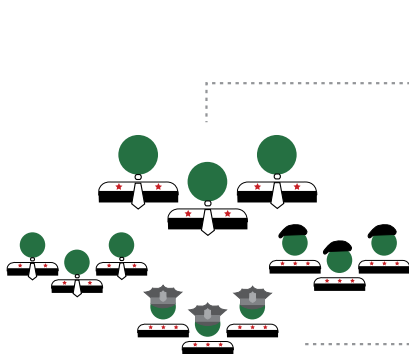
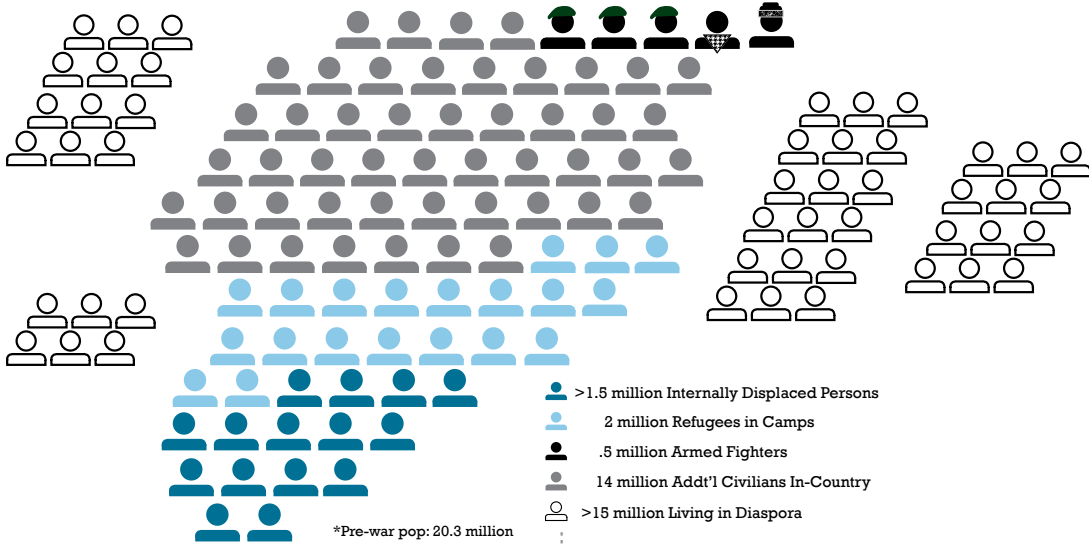


500,000 fighters

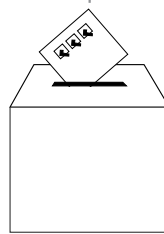
400,000 in the Syrian Armed Forces
70,000 in the Free Syrian Army
30,000 in the Islamic Fronts



THE PROCESS



Newly elected government



Priorities, metrics, and timetable for transition



wikimedia.org



Afghan village destroyed by the Soviets

How to Support the Opposition in Syria

New Models for Understanding Syria

BY SUSANNA BLUME

Americans' understanding of the current civil war in Syria is firmly rooted in their recent military history: the U.S. experience in Iraq and Afghanistan over the course of the past decade. These conflicts have made U.S. policy makers painfully aware of the costs of the kind of intervention required by modern counterinsurgency doctrine, and of the limits of U.S. ability to create enduring political change in foreign lands. However, another slightly older case exists that may be more relevant to the civil war currently raging in Syria. U.S. intervention during the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan was successful in achieving its proximate goal (Soviet withdrawal), though the consequences of that conflict have been grave and far-reaching.

This article explores similarities and differences between these two conflicts, and offers lessons learned from U.S. intervention during the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. Specifically, to support the opposition in Syria, the United States should: 1) vet and select recipients of U.S. military aid itself; 2) provide military assistance overtly under Title 10 military and Title 22 diplomatic authorities, vice covertly under Title 50 intelligence authorities; 3) carefully consider the type and number of weapons to be provided in order to maximize their accountability and recoverability; and 4) continue to work with Syrian factions as well as other interested parties to develop a lasting political resolution to the conflict. Lastly, this article examines how these lessons might be applied to the current conflict in Syria to achieve the U.S. long-term strategic objective: a democratic Syria with a robust civil society that is a stabilizing force in the greater Middle East.

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Importance of Stability in Syria to U.S. National Security

After a decade mired in Middle Eastern and South Asian conflicts with uncertain outcomes, it is easy to see why so much of the American public, not to mention the punditry and policy-making class, is deeply skeptical of yet another intervention in the region. The conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria can all accurately be described as civil wars, to greater or lesser degrees. What stake does the United States have in these conflicts? Hasn't recent history demonstrated that U.S. intervention only makes things worse for the affected populations? What can the United States really do to resolve these conflicts?

While it is still too soon to tell whether, in the long run, the benefits of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan will outweigh the tremendous costs in both lives and treasure, one can justly describe the outcomes as at best mixed. The U.S. military is extraordinarily efficient at deposing tyrannical regimes such as those of Saddam Hussein or the Taliban, but the U.S. government as a whole is far less adept at the exponentially more difficult task of bringing about lasting political solutions that might allow these countries to flourish post-conflict. Regardless, this mixed track record is not a license to revert to isolationism, nor is it a reason to assume that the United States, along with partners who are equally interested in the stability and prosperity of the greater Middle East are unable to help unstable countries build stable civil societies.

So, why indeed, should the United States care about the now three year old conflict in Syria? The outcome of the current conflict will determine whether Syria will ultimately become a force for peace and stability in the

greater Middle East, or whether it will devolve further into chaos, becoming a haven not just for Hezbollah, but for extremists of all stripes and ambitions, with destabilizing effects to be felt certainly throughout the region, and potentially on a global scale. This instability could manifest itself in countless ways: protracted civil war and ethnic cleansing; continued instability and loss of life caused by terrorist organizations with local, regional or even global ambitions; or worsening prospects for the global economy and the global economic recovery as a result of continued instability in oil markets.

Perhaps even more disconcerting is the fact that the conflict has not been, and will not be, confined neatly within Syria's borders. The massive influx of nearly 525,000 Syrian refugees (and counting) into neighboring Jordan has placed the already precarious Hashemite dynasty, a stalwart friend of the United States and consistent supporter of shared interests, in further peril.¹ Approximately 760,000 refugees have fled to Lebanon, stretching government resources and distorting local economies.² Turkey is host to nearly 500,000 Syrian refugees, as well as the headquarters of the Free Syrian Army.³ Skirmishes across the Syrian/Turkish border, combined with long-standing tension between not only Turkish Kurds, but the Kurdish populations of Syria, Iraq, and Iran, could draw all of NATO into the conflict, at a time and under circumstances not of our choosing. The emergence of a de facto Kurdistan spanning northern Iraq and northeastern Syria could have a profoundly destabilizing effect on Turkey. Finally, the current power vacuum in Syria has resulted in an environment highly permissive of the activities of extremist groups (e.g., Hezbollah, al-Nusra) and their state backers (Iran, and some Gulf

states) whose ambitions, to depose both autocratic and democratic regimes replacing them with highly restrictive Islamic theocracies, extend far beyond Syria's borders.

Parallels between 1980s Afghanistan and Syria Today

Admittedly, the Cold War geopolitical climate surrounding Afghanistan in the 1980s is more different from than similar to the current conflict in Syria. However, there are several relevant common currents worth noting, as they indicate potential to apply lessons learned from U.S. intervention in the Afghan conflict to Syria's current civil war.

Perhaps most obvious is the similarity in the U.S. domestic political climate of the two eras, particularly the public's lack of appetite for foreign policy generally, and costly military commitments in particular. In both cases,

public reticence has been mirrored in a cautious Executive.

When confronted with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, the Carter Administration's response was shaped by a recent history rife with very public foreign policy disasters. The Vietnam War tops the list, manifest in deep reluctance by both the Administration and the public to engage in another large-scale intervention in a far off land. More proximate were the Iran hostage crisis and the storming of the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad, both of which occurred that same year. Made cautious by that history, when first alerted to the fact that the Soviets were becoming involved in the Afghan conflict, the Carter Administration elected to provide only non-lethal aid to anti-communist forces. To avoid openly provoking the Soviet Union, it did so covertly.⁴ It was not until Ronald Reagan was



President Reagan meeting with Afghan Freedom Fighters to discuss Soviet atrocities in Afghanistan

elected in 1980 that the United States began providing arms to the *mujahideen* fighting against the Soviets; at first only Enfield rifles in small quantities. It was not until the intervention of the now famous Representative Charlie Wilson that the United States began providing, through Pakistani intermediaries, the surface-to-air Stinger missiles that would steadily erode Soviet dominance of the airspace over Afghanistan, a contributing factor in the Soviet Union's decision to withdraw from Afghanistan in February 1989.⁵

Mirroring the triple specter haunting the Carter Administration, the Obama Administration is also faced with three cautionary tales from recent history: Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom, and the attack against the U.S. diplomatic compound in Benghazi, Libya. Like the Carter Administration before him, President Obama has exercised caution, initially determining that the safest course of action, and the most palatable to the American public, was to provide only non-lethal aid to the Syrian opposition. And, just as in Afghanistan in the 1980s, this non-lethal aid was not enough to alleviate the suffering of hundreds of thousands of people displaced by the conflict, nor did it appreciably help to weaken the regime. Rather, as reported in the press, even additional military and non-military aid from other supporters such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey, has not prevented the tide from turning against the Free Syrian Army and its affiliates.⁶

Also in both cases U.S. national security interests in the outcome of the conflicts were real, arguably even more so in Syria. But these interests remain profoundly difficult to explain to a deeply skeptical public. This public reluctance was less an issue for the Carter and Reagan Administrations, who provided aid

covertly through Pakistani intermediaries. President Obama has the additional burden of having to convince the American people that the potential harm to U.S. interests warrants intervention.

On a positive note, both conflicts are characterized by a deeply committed indigenous opposition that prefers to fight its own battles, requiring only materiel assistance from foreign governments. Both the Afghan *mujahideen* and the Syrian opposition were/are fighting for the right to control the fate of their country. The existence of these vested local leaders and fighters with robust domestic constituencies indicates that Syrians, like the Afghans before them, currently have and will retain ownership over the conflict now and into the post-conflict reconstruction phase. This state of affairs contrasts starkly with Operation Iraqi Freedom, where the United States led the invasion to depose Saddam Hussein's regime backed by only a handful of Iraqi expatriates. Iraqis did not own the deposition of Saddam Hussein and were thus poorly positioned to create a lasting political reconciliation after his fall.

Unfortunately, both the Afghan *mujahideen* and the Free Syrian Army and its affiliates are also characterized by deep divisions within their ranks, a lack of clear leadership and command and control, and widely divergent political positions ranging from extremist fundamentalists to moderate secularists, and covering much ground in between. The fractured nature of the opposition is one of the primary challenges to foreign governments wishing to aid the rebellion. How can the United States know who it is arming, and what kind of Syria they will create should Bashar al-Assad fall?

U.S. Intervention in Afghanistan

Though the Soviet-backed regime persisted after the 1989 Soviet withdrawal until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, what came after (a protracted period of civil war that resulted in the rise of the Taliban and created a safe haven for al-Qaeda) could hardly be called success, by the Soviet Union, its successors, or the United States. However, it would be revisionist to overlook the fact that U.S. military assistance to the *mujahideen* was successful in achieving its proximate goal: to make the conflict in Afghanistan as costly as possible for the Soviet Union.⁷ U.S. military assistance to the Afghan *mujahideen* is a relatively rare example of a policy that was successful in bringing about its strategic objective, in a relatively short time and with relatively little cost to the United States. The civil war that followed Soviet withdrawal, allowing the Taliban to rise to power in Afghanistan and creating a safe haven for Osama bin Laden and his associates, might have had a less catastrophic outcome if the United States and other interested parties had acted differently in two key instances during and immediately following the Soviet-Afghan War.

First, the U.S. Government did not vet and select recipients of U.S. military aid itself, instead giving U.S. funds and weapons to Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) to distribute to recipients of its own choosing. Doing so allowed the United States to maintain plausible deniability of involvement in the conflict. Unfortunately the ISI's selection criteria diverged significantly from what our own might have been.⁸ Seeking to strengthen and empower extremist elements within the *mujahideen* to be used as proxies against India, the ISI channeled U.S. resources away from

moderate elements in the anti-communist opposition and toward those who would ultimately become enemies of the United States two decades later.

Secondly, U.S., Soviet, and United Nations efforts to create a lasting political solution to the conflict in Afghanistan failed. While the United States did not maliciously abandon the Afghan opposition following Soviet withdrawal, a series of domestic political factors led to decreased interest in the subject in Washington, reduced funding, and a devolution of decision making authority that led to inconsistencies in U.S. policy.⁹ In particular, the United States devoted considerable effort to recovering the Stinger surface-to-air missiles distributed to the *mujahideen* during the Soviet occupation.¹⁰ As the country devolved into a bloody, protracted civil war, the United States continued to fund warlords with interests completely contrary to its own by buying back Stinger missiles under the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) recovery program. As for the Soviets, though they continued to support the communist regime for three years after the withdrawal of Soviet forces, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 derailed the U.S.-Soviet dialogue on Afghan transition.¹¹ Without strong U.S. or Soviet leadership, the UN's peace plan collapsed under pressure from rival Afghan and Pakistani factions.¹² Thus, the fundamentalist cancer that emerged in the 1980s was left to metastasize in the highly permissive environment created by the protracted period of civil war that followed the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Lessons Learned, Applied to the Syrian Civil War

So, what can we learn from the U.S. experience during the Soviet invasion and

occupation of Afghanistan? First, providing arms to a committed, indigenous opposition force can be an effective way to advance mutual interests limited to the scope of the conflict in question (e.g., forcing the Soviets out of Afghanistan; deposing Bashar al-Assad). This model is far less resource-intensive (for the United States) than the counterinsurgency doctrine developed during Operation Iraqi Freedom, and ensures that the local population retains ownership of the conflict, and thus ownership of an eventual political solution. However, there are several key adjustments the United States should make to this model before applying it to the current conflict in Syria: 1) the United States must vet and select recipients of U.S. military aid itself; 2) the United States should provide military assistance overtly under Title 10 military and Title 22 diplomatic authorities, vice covertly under

Title 50 intelligence authorities as was the case in Afghanistan; 3) the United States should carefully consider the type and number of weapons to be provided in order to maximize their accountability and recoverability; and 4) the United States must continue to work with Syrian factions as well as other interested parties to develop a lasting political resolution to the current conflict.

The United States must not rely on regional partners to designate recipients of military assistance; it must vet and select recipients itself. Though U.S. partners in the region, such as Turkey, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, may understand the Syrian insurgency better than the United States does, their interests in selecting recipients of military aid may be different, or worse, contrary to U.S. interests in a democratic Syria. Currently, extremist organizations are receiving the bulk of foreign military aid



Public domain photograph from defenseimagery.mil

U.S. Airmen with the 386th Expeditionary Logistics Readiness Squadron load pallets of nonlethal aid for the Syrian Opposition Coalition

from individuals, organizations, and even some governments. For example, Qatar's Gulf neighbors have accused it of funding the al-Qaeda-linked al-Nusra Front.¹³ In order to ensure that moderate factions have a robust role in shaping post-Assad Syria, the odds must be evened. Particularly if the United States and like-minded partners wish to have any influence over what shape the political resolution will take, we must ensure that moderates and secularists are strong enough militarily to make their voices heard in the process of developing that political resolution, or, in the worst case, that moderate factions are able to hold their own if a post-Assad struggle for power becomes violent. U.S. envoys must work closely with the Syrian Military Council and collect intelligence independently to ensure that U.S. military aid is put against objectives common to the Syrian opposition and the United States – ending the Assad dynasty and replacing it with an inclusive democratic system supported by a robust civil society.

Second, any military assistance provided should be executed by the Department of State and the Department of Defense under Title 10 military and Title 22 diplomatic authorities, not covertly under Title 50 intelligence authorities. During the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, U.S. military assistance to the *mujahideen* had to be covert; overt assistance would have demanded a reaction from the Soviets, at a minimum resulting in escalation and potentially in contagion of the Afghan conflict. At worst, the result could have been open war between the two superpowers. Conversely, the circumstances surrounding the current conflict in Syria encourage public acknowledgement of U.S. military aid to the opposition. Overt U.S. intervention could have significant impact on the course of the conflict,

potentially altering the decision calculus in the rebels' favor, not only for the Assad regime, but also for Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah. In addition, the transparency gained by working through Title 10 and Title 22 authorities would make it easier to hold recipients of military aid accountable for the whereabouts of weapons, reducing the risk of U.S. military hardware falling into the hands of those who would use it against the U.S., its allies, and partners.

To further mitigate the risk that U.S. weapons could come to be possessed by extremist factions, the United States should carefully consider the ability to account for and recover different types of weapons when deciding what kind and how much military assistance to provide. The Stingers provided to the *mujahideen* were highly effective even in relatively small numbers; the United States only provided between 2,000 and 2,500 in total.¹⁴ Because the Stingers were few in number and rare in the environment in which they were distributed, they could be tracked relatively easily by the CIA using unique serial numbers.¹⁵ The United States should consider these factors when determining what to provide the Syrian opposition, as well as what types of weapons would offer the opposition a decisive advantage over the Assad regime.

Finally, providing military assistance does not obviate the need to work aggressively towards an enduring political resolution to the conflict. As the past decade of war has demonstrated, military victory is not adequate to secure lasting stability. Without reconciliation and an inclusive, representative political system backed by a robust civil society, old patterns of conflict will continue to reemerge, often manifest in violence. Building this kind of a system is exponentially more difficult than achieving military victory, and only the Syrians

can do it. Post-conflict reconciliation and reconstruction is not a process that can be led by outsiders; it must be wholly owned by the domestic constituencies in Syria, with foreign parties in clearly supporting roles. Consequently, the U.S. role is limited to ensuring that moderate factions have what they need, and creating space in the international system for change in Syria to occur. Specifically, the United States must do what it can diplomatically to prevent spoilers (like Russia, Iran, Qatar, and Hezbollah) from obstructing Syria's democratic development. Though the U.S. diplomatic role in this political space is necessarily limited, it is equally if not more important than any military assistance the United States can provide.

Conclusion

There are plenty of reasons to proceed with extreme caution when contemplating military assistance to the Syrian opposition. As the U.S. intervention during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan demonstrates, military assistance to insurgents with weak command and control is a dangerous undertaking. However, failure to intervene can have equally severe consequences. Foreign fighters and arms continue to flow into Syria, further bolstering the capability and capacity of the regime's forces, as well as extremists in opposition. Asking the rebels to come to the negotiating table when they are obviously weak, and moreover when moderate factions within the opposition are weaker still, could have disastrous consequences for the future of Syria as a



Commons: FIA Novosti

Last Soviet troop column crosses Soviet border after leaving Afghanistan

democratic state supported by a robust civil society. Because of Syria's vital role in the greater Middle East, extremist dominance post-Assad could further destabilize the already fragile region, with significant implications most immediately for Israel's security, but also for the global security environment as a whole. There is some hope that democratic societies outside the region can help avoid this outcome by ensuring that moderate factions within the opposition are militarily strong enough to be credible actors in the political process should the Assad regime fall. In so doing, policy makers should consider both the successes and failures of prior U.S. intervention during the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, and be guided by their lessons. **PRISM**

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¹⁴ Coll.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Barnard, Anne, and Hwaida Saad. "Hezbollah Aids Syrian Military in a Key Battle." *New York Times*, 20 May 2013, page 1.

Bernd Schwabe, Hannover



Gravestone without name symbolizing children killed in the war

Transitional Justice and National Reconciliation

BY RADWAN ZIADEH

In the aftermath of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in the former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda, in 2005 the General Assembly of the United Nations established an initiative known as the “responsibility to protect” (R2P). The R2P concept departs from traditional principles of international relations regarding the protection of national sovereignty, stating that sovereignty is not a right but a responsibility. R2P argues that when a regime commits war crimes and crimes against humanity, it forfeits its sovereignty, and the international community then has the right, indeed the responsibility to take necessary measures to protect civilians and prevent further crimes against them.

This principle has not been applied in Syria, where indiscriminate aerial bombardment has taken the lives of more than 20,000 civilians so far.¹ Bashar al-Assad’s forces have made extensive use of weapons of mass destruction, including SCUD missiles and chemical weapons, against areas of Syria with utter disregard for the lives of Syrian civilians or for the amount of destruction done to residential areas and infrastructure. The fractured Syrian military opposition, which includes extremist radical elements like the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, have also committed crimes, such as kidnapping religious leaders and destroying Shia mosques in pro-Assad communities.

If one compares the conflict in Syria to other conflicts that have occurred throughout the world labeled “civil wars,” it is clear that the term “civil war” is far from the reality of the situation in Syria. In fact, Syria is in the midst of a popular revolution against an authoritarian regime. If we conduct a simple comparison of the number of victims in Syria with the number of victims in countries in which a civil war has actually occurred—in Peru, for example—we can see that the conflict in Peru, which lasted for twenty years, from 1980 to 2000, and had more than 70,000 victims,² is nearly incomparable to the 120,000 victims in Syria during only the past three years. According to U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay, the number of victims has risen from 1,000 per month at the start of the revolution to 5,000 per month today.³ If Assad is

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allowed to continue his war against the Syrian people, the number of victims can be expected to exceed 250,000.

It will not be possible to start a genuine process of transitional justice or a process of political transition toward pluralism, democracy, and reconciliation in Syria without a complete cessation of violence. As transitional justice experiences across the world have taught us, reconciliation is closely linked to the path of political transition, and it depends mainly on the political will and vision of both the actors and the political forces on the ground. The launching of transitional justice processes can let victims feel that those responsible for committing crimes against their children and daughters will be brought to justice and that the time of impunity is over. With the

implementation of a successful transitional justice program, Syrians will feel confident that there is a path toward national reconciliation that ensures adequate pluralism, credibility and legitimacy.

Launching a transitional justice process in Syria will be among the most difficult and complicated processes that the Syrian community will face after the fall of the regime. But considering the division of society currently taking place in Syria, it is unlikely the Syrian judicial system will be ready to launch a credible and effective accountability process. Assad and his militias have through intimidation and provocation set the Syrian people against each other. The recent establishment of the so-called Army of National Defense, which is practically a governmental institutionalization



SANA News Agency

President Assad with his Troops, August 1, 2013

of Assad's semi-regular militias (al-Shabiha) continues this intimidation and provocation.

One option for Syrians is international justice. The crimes of the Assad regime are certainly within the scope of work of the International Criminal Court. However Russia, with its position in the UN Security Council, may prevent the referral of Syrian criminals to the Court. Any future Syrian government formed by the opposition or formed after the fall of the Assad regime should ratify the Rome Statute, which will enable a prosecutor to open an investigation into these crimes. The path of international justice however is not an ideal choice; international justice is slow. Moreover it appears to be subject to the ambiguities of global geopolitics. The Syrian victims need their rights to be guaranteed, not set aside or compromised in the process of political compromise. Therefore, it seems that so-called hybrid courts may be a better option for Syria and Syrians. Such tribunals should be held on Syrian territory and involve the direct participation of Syrian judges supported by international expertise, possibly under the supervision of the United Nations. The necessity of international experts participating in hybrid courts held in divided societies remains the best option, as it will send the message to all Syrians that revenge is not the goal, as well as reassure them that the toughest standards of justice and international transparency will be required, carefully scrutinized and guaranteed.

In preparation for transitional justice programs in Syria, the Syrian Center for Political and Strategic Studies has organized conferences, workshops and discussions in which numerous representatives of political forces, associations, civil society organizations, human rights activists, judges and lawyers, and family members of the victims of the conflict

have participated. Two important initiatives have resulted from these engagements: the Association for the Defense of the Victims of the Syrian Revolution—which will serve as the voice of justice for the victims of the conflict—and the National Preparatory Committee for Transitional Justice, which will develop programs, perceptions, and policies necessary for the future transitional justice phase.

Transitional justice links two fundamental concepts: justice and transition. The semantically accurate meaning of the concept is achieving justice during a transitional period experienced by a state.⁴ During the political transition following an extended period of violence or oppression, a society and its communities often find themselves burdened with the difficult task of addressing pervasive human rights violations. The state seeks to deal with the crimes of the past in order to promote justice, peace, and reconciliation.⁵

The establishment of a culture of accountability, replacing the culture of impunity, gives a sense of security to the victims and sends a warning to those who might commit such violations in the future. It also provides a measure of fairness to the suffering victims, and helps to curb the tendency to practice vigilante justice or retribution. And it provides an important opportunity to strengthen the credibility of judicial systems suffering from corruption and destruction, or that did not function properly in the past.

The National Preparatory Committee for Transitional Justice, a committee of highly regarded Syrian judges, lawyers, human rights activists, and academics (formed to conduct exhaustive research on transitional justice and present specific recommendations for a future Syrian transitional justice program) is currently deeply engaged in an effort to open a

dialogue with civil society representatives in order to make transitional justice a priority after the fall of the Assad regime. The Syrian Expert House recommends that the interim government support the National Preparatory Committee by legally transforming it into a formal institution under the name, “National Commission for Transitional Justice and Reconciliation,” and then build its capacity and facilitate its efforts in every possible way. The next section describes in detail how this commission should function.

The National Commission For Transitional Justice And Reconciliation

The National Commission for Transitional Justice and Reconciliation will focus on

achieving five key objectives: fact-finding and commissions of inquiry, filing lawsuits, compensation, institution building for the future, and memorialization.

1. Fact-Finding and Commissions of Inquiry

The National Commission for Transitional Justice and Reconciliation will gather all databases containing evidence of human rights violations currently maintained by Syrian human rights groups and will form commissions of inquiry for conducting investigations regarding extrajudicial killings, torture cases, prisoners of conscience, and enforced disappearances.

These commissions of inquiry will be capable investigative bodies charged to uncover all the facts regarding conflict-related



Photo by Maha Zimmo

Syria's Supreme Court in Damascus. Will the Syrian Judicial System be able to Provide Justice?

violence, whether perpetrated by the state or non-state actors. The establishment of such committees must follow after efforts have been made to ensure there is an expanded national consultation process, appropriate terms of reference for each commission of inquiry, and the presence of a clear political commitment that will allow independent and effective investigations. The commissions of inquiry that will be created by the National Commission for Transitional Justice and Reconciliation should not be equated with or considered substitutes for trials. The commissions will be non-judicial organizations; therefore, their terms of reference and powers are complementary to those of the courts.

Simultaneously, the National Commission must encourage civil society to carry out transitional justice initiatives and support its work both directly and indirectly. Indeed, many NGOs—such as the Syrian Network for Human Rights, the Local Coordinating Committees, the Damascus Center for Human Rights Studies, and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights—have documented the violations and abuses perpetrated by the Assad regime, often at great personal risk to themselves.⁶

The National Commission for Transitional Justice and Reconciliation should work to achieve the following:

- Seek and establish the truth regarding the grave human rights violations perpetrated by the Assad regime against the Syrian people.
- Hold accountable the perpetrators of human rights violations by providing evidence to courts and tribunals.

- Hold general forums for the victims to encourage a public debate on issues of transitional justice and reconciliation.
- Give recommendations regarding compensation for the victims via direct dialogue.
- Give recommendations for necessary legal and institutional reforms.
- Promote social reconciliation at multiple levels of society, the most important being the grassroots level.
- Help strengthen the democratic transition.⁷

Therefore, the Syrian Expert House recommends that the National Commission for Transitional Justice and Reconciliation organize a number of public hearings, to give the victims a forum to talk about their suffering. These hearings will break the sectarian barrier when they show that the victims are not limited to any single sect, but indeed represent all of Syria's sects. And they will play an important role in social healing, after the intense violence that Syrian society has experienced in the last three years.

2. Filing Lawsuits

The establishment of criminal justice is an essential element of addressing the massive violations of human rights in Syria. Lawsuits must be brought against individual perpetrators, and prosecutions should seek to restore the dignity of the victims and restore Syrian citizens' confidence in the rule of law. Trials must include criminal investigations and other legal proceedings against the perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity that took place in Syria during the revolution. These trials should specifically seek to target the upper ranks of the Assad regime: those responsible for both giving orders to commit

violations, and those who oversaw the execution of those orders. Even members of the armed opposition must be held accountable, and their trials should be conducted according to the same international standards to avoid any challenges to these trials' legitimacy.

There will undoubtedly be some controversy regarding the ability of the domestic Syrian courts to hold perpetrators accountable. If the domestic courts prove incapable of conducting these trials, Syria may have no choice but to conduct judicial proceedings at the international level.

The post-Assad transitional government will invite the international community to assist in the establishment of hybrid courts presided over by Syrian judges and advised by international judges, all operating under the supervision of the United Nations. This hybrid court system will simultaneously uphold both Syrian and international law, resorting to international law only in the places in which the Syrian law code has gaps. The courts can also rely on the provisions of various international treaties that Syria has signed in order to develop their procedures. Mixed courts ensure that the Syrian population feels a sense of ownership regarding judicial proceedings while at the same time bringing international legitimacy to the court's rulings.

3. Compensation

In light of recent pervasive violations of human rights in Syria, it has become incumbent upon governments to not only address the perpetrators of these abuses but also to guarantee the rights of victims. Governments can create the appropriate conditions to preserve the dignity of the victims and to ensure justice, using methods of compensation for the damage and the suffering that victims have

experienced. The concept of compensation has several meanings, including direct compensation (for damage or loss of opportunity), restitution (moral and mental support for victims in their daily lives), and recovery (restoring what has been lost as much as possible). Compensations can be distinguished by their types, physical and moral, and the targeted groups, individual and collective. Physical compensation can take the form of money or material goods. It can also include the provision of free or preferential services, such as health, education, and housing. Moral compensation can be made by issuing a formal apology, by dedicating a public place (e.g., a museum, park, or monument), or by declaring a national day of remembrance.

Post-Assad Syria will need a Committee for Compensation and Reparation as the compensation of Syria's victims perhaps presents the greatest moral, legal, and political challenges, particularly for massive government-run programs. A range of considerations and challenges must be considered during the design of material reparation programs. It is necessary to first clearly define the "victims," or categories of beneficiaries, in order to be able to decide who deserves access to such compensation. Unfortunately, due to the limited nature of state resources, the wider the category of victims, the lower the amount of compensation. Conversely, if "beneficiary" is narrowly defined, the government could be inadvertently excluding a large number of legitimate victims.

A second consideration is to decide whether compensation will be distributed directly to individuals or to groups that have been wronged en masse. It is no surprise that structuring compensation in the form of collective grants often involves political gains that

could include a larger number of beneficiaries, but the value of restitution is minimal in most cases. Usually, these types of programs are viewed as normal social development efforts, and not necessarily as compensation for damage done to victims.

The third challenge is to organize compensation in the form of an integrated set of services (e.g., medical aid, education, and housing), or an exchange of payments, or a combination of the two. Conducting compensation via the provision of integrated services may be more expensive and limits the autonomy of individuals to clearly receive a personal form of compensation. Additionally, the quality of provided services depends directly on the ability of the state to invest in public infrastructure and to conduct the programs in an effective manner.

There are significant challenges that a reparation program might face, including the need to determine the types of damages for which victims can be compensated and how to differentiate compensation from basic welfare. The Committee for Compensation and Reparation will need to decide if compensation will be administered for economic, physical, or psychological damage, and whether compensation levels will be based on the amount of damage, or of need, or both. Another challenge will be how to quantify the extent of the damage (e.g., determining the amount of appropriate compensation to those who have lost their sight, been raped, or psychologically tortured) and then find the resources to fund compensation programs.

Additionally, it will be important for the transitional government to seek to restore victims' legal ownership of property. Examples include performing procedures to assist residents who were forcibly displaced from towns

and villages affected by indiscriminate shelling conducted by the Assad regime's forces. Other examples could include restoring ownership of stolen land or reintegrating victims into previously held jobs within the Syrian government. Second, it may be important in some contexts to develop special programs for the rehabilitation of victims, including psychological support and physical therapy or medical assistance for the many victims of physical and sexual violence. Third, a wide range of actions could be taken to provide redress for other damages, both for individual victims (e.g., finding final resting places for the dead) and victims in general (e.g., the formal recognition by the transitional government of regime-perpetrated crimes to open a new page, or customize public places and street names or care for special exhibitions, works of art, or building memorials and public monuments and museums).

The advantage of symbolic measures is that they are relatively achievable, can reach all parts of Syrian society, adopt a broad definition of victims, encourage the creation of a collective memory, and promote social solidarity. The inherent drawbacks of these measures are that they do not provide any directed financial or other material compensation for the victims.

4. Institution Building for the Future

Syria will need comprehensive reform of its institutions, laws, and policies to achieve its long-term social, economic, and political objectives, and to avoid any civil or democratic collapse in the future.⁸ The general objective of these institutional reforms will be to remove the conditions that gave rise to the recent conflict or the repression that catalyzed it. Therefore, the National Commission for

Transitional Justice and Reconciliation will ensure institutional reform by:

Restructuring state institutions that were complicit in acts of violence or abuse.

Removing any long-standing racial, ethnic, or sectarian discrimination, which some feel was perpetrated by the Ba'ath Party in state institutions, especially within the armed forces and security institutions.

Preventing the former perpetrators of human rights violations from continuing to benefit from positions in public institutions.

It cannot be over-emphasized that without reforms in areas such as the judicial system, Parliament, and the state security services, any accountability process will be almost certainly incomplete, and thus it will fail to build credibility among the general public. It will be difficult for citizens who have learned to look at the police, army, and government with suspicion to believe in the usefulness of any proceedings, or the accountability of those institutions. If they are expected to do so, they should be confident that the institutional cultures that allowed or fueled pervasive violations of human rights have been evaluated and corrected once and for all.

Constitutional and legal reforms should accompany police reform. These constitutional and legal reforms must promote democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. They will be relevant and visible in many areas, such as equity in wages; nomination of judges; fair assigning of positions, promotions, and disciplinary actions; election procedures; the independence of the media; freedom of access to information and the media; affirmative action; disarmament; the funding of political parties; and criminal law and penal procedures. Furthermore, the dynamics within the state apparatus do not allow for a diagnosis of

simple piecemeal reforms, because the reform of the state "security services" requires the reform of the army, police, judiciary, customs, immigration control, intelligence services, and many other related agencies and elements of the state. Thus, an attempt to change institutional structures and sensitivities within any one institution would affect many others, and all the linkages between these different institutions are not always clear. For instance, the reform of the police and the review of their recruitment procedures are both incomplete solutions, whether the goal is to punish violations of human rights or to prevent corruption. These reforms can and must necessarily be accompanied by full, comprehensive reforms and other measures capable of achieving prevention, accountability, and reparations.

Reform of the Security Forces and Intelligence Agencies

During the Syrian revolution, the mission of the police to impose law and order has often apparently been understood as a green light to commit political crimes. Syrian police officers have often colluded with the intelligence services in the commission of gross violations of human rights, including ignoring rights related to inspection, orders of arrest, and detention procedures, leading to beatings, torture, and even murder.

Once the Syrian conflict ends, the focus should shift to mental reforms, realizing that the duty of the police officer is to act professionally, to maintain the rule of law, and to respect the human rights of all citizens. However, the recovery of such a mentality will not be easy. Even if the complex relations among the systems of the state police and the other security agencies were to be disconnected, it is very likely that the required

reforms will collide with resistance from within the system itself from officers and officials who fear losing power, resent the consequences of their actions, and reject the need for any control or external intervention.

A reconstructed police force must be characterized by professional conduct, nondiscrimination, and integrity, which all require following a comprehensive approach to institutional reform (e.g., reform in the areas of employment, retraining, restructuring, and reform of management/reporting and control measures). The Syrian Expert House recommends the following three goals for police reform:

- Restructuring of the police forces;
- Reform through the application of new procedures for training, selection, and certification; and
- A democratic method for establishing a police force that is not subject to political control; is fair, accountable, and

multiethnic; and believes in the principles of a community police force.

This reform should contain a comprehensive, strategic set of elements, including the adoption of an ethical institutional charter; working on public education and retraining the police based on new political procedures; the application of administrative, communications, and management procedures to promote transparency and control; the application of corrective measures to ensure discipline, providing a means of complaint and evaluation; and reviewing recruitment procedures to encourage participation in the police force so that all communities are represented on the force without discrimination.

The culture of impunity institutionalized in Syria during Assad's rule encouraged the perversion of the intelligence agencies, which must be resisted by encouraging a nondiscriminatory employment policy for all Syrians.



Photo by Malia Zimm

Central Security Forces are back and were trying to control protestors but some police officers asked them to leave

More than eighty percent of Syrian security services staff belong to the Alawite sect (nearly the same percentage as in the military), although the proportion of Alawites in Syrian society does not exceed 10-12 percent.⁹ Therefore, the vast majority of Syrians feel that these forces do not represent them nor seek to ensure their safety. So an adjustment of the proportions of representation within the police forces could have a double benefit: first, to preempt further police abuse perpetrated against citizens; and second, to restore public confidence in the integrity of the police force.

Effective and objective control is a prerequisite for ensuring respect for the new procedures. Therefore, the Syrian Expert House recommends the creation of new institutions to achieve this end, including bodies of civilian control, a national committee for human rights, a Supreme Audit Agency, an office of grievances (to receive complaints against officials of the state and to investigate them), and an office for fighting corruption, responsible for the development of effective anti-corruption programs and policies.

Restructuring Institutional Reforms

In the context of reforming abusive institutions, as in all other areas of transitional justice, constraints are imposed by the existing political climate, the available resources, and the need to draft a project with realistic targets. Among the lessons learned from past attempts to reform abusive institutions is that efforts made to achieve reform in quantity and quality should not exceed the local capacity in terms of institutional structure as well as human and financial resources. Making such a mistake could take the reform process backward instead of forward. Another lesson linked to the first, especially in the field of testing, is

to pay attention to the risks that could be involved in isolating people from public office (especially former officials of the police force, the army, and the intelligence services, who often become criminals after they are terminated from state service.) This challenge should be anticipated by allowing the review and inspection body to develop ways to prepare those officials for a new life. Additionally, in the transitional periods in particular, where levels of unemployment and crime are high, vocational retraining and civil participation programs might be considered, as well as other methods for more permanent economic reintegration.

Finally, and perhaps most important, the reform of arbitrary or abusive institutions should be considered a long-term process. It takes many years before the success or failure of new laws and institutions can be discerned.

Cleansing Institutions of Corrupt Officials

The National Commission for Transitional Justice and Reconciliation should develop the necessary mechanisms to remove corrupt and incompetent staff members, along with those who have violated the law, from government service in order to build more effective and trustworthy institutions. A comprehensive investigation and examination of past performance is often a central element in the reform of abusive institutions, and it is adopted by new governments as a way to isolate the individuals responsible for serious abuses of their positions in the public sector.

There is a difference between screening and "cleansing," a term that was used extensively in Central and Eastern Europe and used later in Iraq to refer to laws and policies that include the processes of isolation and dismissal, not according to the records of

individuals but to their party affiliation, political positions, or continued involvement with a repressive intelligence system. There are many pros to the screening process as one of the mechanisms for achieving transitional justice. Screening, for example, helps reduce the risk of new or continued violations, enhances public confidence in state institutions, contributes to removing barriers among prosecutions, and assists in the rehabilitation of officials who have had their reputations damaged unfairly as a result of their names being listed among those of corrupt officials within their organizations.

Screening mechanisms must conform to the basic principles of procedural fairness or legal practice. Efforts to prevent corruption or reform institutions must not resort to wrong practices. Therefore, those to be dismissed from office should have the right to be informed of the accusations against them, to protest against these accusations before a screening committee, to appeal the decision before an unbiased body, and to be informed of these rights in a timely manner. The screening committee should have the authority to impose a range of sanctions. For particularly serious violations, cases might in fact be presented to law enforcement authorities for further action.

5. Memorialization

Memorialization can be accomplished by way of an event, occurrence, or building being used as a tool of remembrance. Moreover, remembrance can entail formal commemoration (e.g., the establishment of a monument) or informal commemoration (building a memorial wall in a community). In other words, remembrance can be done in an official way by the state or voluntarily by citizens.

People seek to commemorate the events of the past for many reasons, including the desire to evoke the memory of the victims and/or to identify them, to educate people about their past, to increase community awareness, to support or amend an historical narrative, or to encourage the adoption of the commemoration / transitional justice process at the local level. Understanding the needs of victims and their families, along with the needs of survivors of mass atrocities and brutal violations of human rights, represents one of the key elements of transitional justice.

The struggle over the control of the

Understanding the needs of victims and their families, along with the needs of survivors of mass atrocities and brutal violations of human rights, represents one of the key elements of transitional justice.

national memory, or “collective memory,” is located in the heart of the accountability process that will ensue following the end of the conflict or the fall of the regime. Two different narratives for the Syrian conflict will exist in Syrian society. Human rights activists and victims may feel deeply aggrieved by the new government or the old (should it survive) if either seeks to create an official final narrative of the past. Sometimes, certain transitional justice strategies—such as the creation of a truth commission—are seen as a necessary step in the direction of remembrance; but at the same time, this step alone is insufficient. The reason for this is that keeping the memory alive is extremely difficult, and the official truth commissions become a rigid part of the new official narrative of the past which competes and

may conflict with the evolving understanding of the past.

The requirement to never forget what happened to victims of human rights violations in the past necessitates a discussion about what to teach in schools, how the victims should be remembered, and whether people will continue to listen to the voices of the victims, even after the publication of the report of the truth commission or the completion of trials of human rights violators. Even if history books ensure the telling of the stories of victims, remembrance must still make people engage in a dynamic, long-lasting dialogue, not only about the past—and events and their implications—but also about how the present can benefit from the past and how the suffering communities can better prepare for the future.¹⁰

Reconciliation represents a culmination of all the phases of transitional justice referred to above, and thus it can enable Syrian society to overcome its deep social and sectarian divisions by creating a national partnership for building a new future.

The Syrian Expert House recommends transforming centers of torture and abuse (e.g., Tadmour and Sednaya) into memorial squares and building memorial walls in public places, such as Umayyad Square in Damascus, Assi Square in Hama, and Jabri Square in Aleppo. All these efforts will commemorate the victims and inspire a continuing and lively discussion of the past.

Transitional Justice and National Reconciliation

The concept of reconciliation has roots far back in Arab-Islamic history,¹¹ however the modern use of the term “national reconciliation” can be traced to French leader Charles de Gaulle. It was later used by Georges Pompidou and François Mitterrand, when the need to take responsibility for erasing debts and past crimes that occurred under occupation during the Algerian war was cemented in their beliefs.¹²

There is no way that Syria will be able to escape from its deep social rifts following the end of the conflict unless a historic decision is made to institute a comprehensive national reconciliation program. Reconciliation represents a culmination of all the phases of transitional justice referred to above, and thus it can enable Syrian society to overcome its deep social and sectarian divisions by creating a national partnership for building a new future.

Recommendations

1. The establishment of a documentation and auditing committee whose main purpose will be collecting and verifying the names of the victims and their families.
2. Training documentation staff to gain knowledge about similar experiences from other countries, such as the Truth and Reconciliation Committee in South Africa, the Equity and Reconciliation Committee in Morocco, and similar entities in Chile and Peru.
3. Achieving community dialogue in Syria regarding general human rights issues by focusing on areas such as accountability,

justice, enforced disappearances, and prisoners of conscience.

4. Revealing the truth about human rights violations committed in the past, seeking to expose the truth to public opinion, and compensating the victims of enforced disappearances and their families both morally and financially.

5. Adopting and supporting political, social, and cultural development programs based on need.

6. Seeking to adopt constitutional and legislative reforms in human rights, security, and justice and endorsing a national strategy against impunity to hold those who committed human rights violations accountable via active participation from the community, while promoting the principle of separation of powers, and protecting the judicial authority from any interference by the executive authority.

7. Prohibiting the enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention, genocide, or any other crimes against humanity, torture, cruel and unusual punishment, racism, insult, or prohibited discrimination, and any incitement of racism, hatred, and violence.

8. Clarifying and disseminating the legal framework and regulatory texts regarding the authority and organization of security forces, limits of intrusion during operations, surveillance systems, and evaluating the performance of security forces, as well as the administrative authorities assigned to maintain order and those who have the authority to use force.

9. Urging civil society, civil organizations, and NGOs to file lawsuits against the perpetrators who committed extrajudicial killings, torture, or enforced disappearances against civilians, while maintaining the privacy of

the victims. Such a process should occur according to the active penal law code. In addition, encouraging civil society organizations and NGOs to report the cases of missing individuals to human rights committees and the Committee on Enforced Disappearances of the United Nations, assisting the families of the victims on how to report their cases while fully explaining to them that such procedures will lead to revealing the fate of the missing person.

Furthermore, families should realize how essential it is to file these cases despite limited resources to close missing persons' files.

10. Filing discrimination lawsuits on behalf victims of torture, prisoners of conscience, and those who were subject to enforced disappearance— especially those who have suffered in the past thirty years and during the Syrian uprising. Such lawsuits must be based on Syrian law and the international human rights standards that the Syrian government has ratified.

11. Working on acquiring the necessary experience to qualify certain individuals and organizations to assist victims of torture, prisoners of conscience, and the families of the disappeared. This process should be based on similar experiences of other countries along with the assistance of the expertise of international organizations.

12. Emphasizing the humanitarian dimension and the suffering endured by the families of the missing individuals during the process. For example, instead of completely focusing on the documentation process and legal procedures, a Web site can be developed to honor Syria's victims. Moreover, the families of the victims can connect with other individuals who have had the same

experience, whether in Syria or in other post-conflict countries.

13. The suffering endured by the families of the victims must be addressed. This includes issuing an apology by the transitional government, providing them with compensation, and establishing a national institution specialized in the field of the psychological and social rehabilitation of victims of torture, prisoners of conscience, those subject to enforced disappearance, and victims of enforced disappearance who were released. Moreover, offering the families of enforced disappearance victims' guidance and advice on how to follow the progress of their case at various levels, and printing and disseminating publications specifically for that purpose. In fact, there has not been any guide for dealing with this issue for the families of missing individuals on which they can rely.

14. Determining the locations of detention facilities and secret prisons so they can be subject to legal observation and control. Also, prohibiting detentions from being conducted by the security intelligence agencies, which are numerous and difficult to subject to any form of control. In addition, holding the security agencies accountable if they are proven to have been involved in enforced disappearances.

Studies show that half of countries emerging from conflict return to conflict within five years. Because of the intensity and intimacy of the violence in Syria, the post-conflict transition in Syria will undoubtedly be extremely tense and subject to repeated threats of the resumption of conflict. Finding the right balances between justice and reconciliation, between compensation and retribution, and between atoning for the past and focusing

on the future will test our skills and ability to learn from the experiences of others. An effective transitional justice program cannot undo what has been done, but will surely mitigate some of the pain allowing Syrians to forge confidently into the future. **PRISM**

Notes

¹ For current numbers of civilian victims of the Syrian revolution, see Megan Price, Jeff Klingner, Anas Qtiesh, and Patrick Ball, "Full Updated Statistical Analysis of Documentation of Killings in the Syrian Arab Republic," Human Rights Data Analysis Group, commissioned by United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, June 13, 2013.

² See Hatun Willakuy, *Abbreviated Version of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Peru* (Lima, 2004).

³ See USAID Fact Sheet, *Syria – Complex Emergency*, January 3, 2013, <https://dec.usaid.gov/dec/GetDoc.axd?ctID=ODVhZjk4NWQtM2YyMi00YjRmLTkxNjktZTcxMjM2NDNmY2Uy&rID=MzM3NDEx&pID=NTYw&attchmnt=VHJ1ZQ==&uSesDM=False&rIdx=NDM3MjM3&rCFU=>

⁴ Neil Kritz, ed., *Transitional Justice: How Emerging Democracies Reckon with Former Regimes*, 3 vols. (Washington: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 1995).

⁵ Alex Boraine, Janet Levy, and Ronel Scheffer, eds., *Dealing with the Past* (Cape Town: Institute for Democracy in South Africa, 1997); D. A. Crocker, "Reckoning with Past Wrongs: A Normative Framework," *Ethics & International Affairs* 13 (1999): 43–61.

⁶ *Mapping Accountability Efforts in Syria*, Public International Law & Policy Group, February 2013, <http://www.dchrs.org/english/File/Reports/mapping-accountability-efforts-in-syria.pdf>

⁷ Robert I. Rotberg, "Apology, Truth Commissions, and Intrastate Conflict," in *Taking Wrongs Seriously: Apologies and Reconciliation*, edited by Elazar Barkan and Alexander Karn (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006), 33–48.

⁸ See International Center for Transitional Justice, *Annual Report of the International Center for Transitional Justice, 2003/2004* (New York: International Center for Transitional Justice, 2004).

⁹ For more on this, see Radwan Ziadeh, *Power and Policy in Syria* (I.B. Tauris, 2011).

¹⁰ Vamik D. Volkan, "What Some Monuments Tell Us about Mourning and Forgiveness," in *Taking Wrongs Seriously: Apologies and Reconciliation*, edited by Elazar Barkan and Alexander Karn, Stanford University Press, 2006, P.115-130.

¹¹ George Emile Irani, "Apologies and Reconciliation: Middle East Rituals," in *Taking Wrongs Seriously*, ed. Barkan and Karn; Abdel Hussein Shaaban, *The Jurisprudence of Tolerance in Arab Islamic Thought: Culture and the State* (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 2005).

¹² See Jacques Derrida et al., *Tolerance and Reconciliation Policies Memory*, translated by Urban Hassan (Casablanca: Toubkal, 2005), 7.37.



President Assad Presides Over Cabinet Meeting

Memorandum for President Assad

BY TIM GRIMMETT, TODD HARROD AND BRYAN HURLEY

This article provides a Syrian regime perspective on the current state of the civil war, regional dynamics, and prospects for ending the civil war on terms it finds acceptable. It takes the form of a memorandum to President Bashar Assad. It is not meant as an endorsement of the regime or its tactics, but to provide an alternative view that captures the regime's optic on the situation it faces.

Memorandum for President Assad
From Syria's Senior Advisory Council (SAC)¹
Date: October 1, 2013
Subject: Tipping Point in Insurgency Masks Long Term Challenges

Mr. President,

With 2013 nearing an end and the September 2013 crisis with the U.S. contained you directed a strategic review of Syria's current domestic and international position in order to frame upcoming deliberations on our strategy for 2014 and beyond that can lay the base for a long-term stabilization of the security situation in Syria. This memorandum summarizes where we stand on three crucial areas: the military's counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy to defeat the insurgency and improve the security situation; an assessment of the domestic political front; and international developments that shape the regional arena. It will conclude with brief observations on areas we can exploit in 2014 and long-term implications for Syria's future.

2013 Was a Good Year

On the military front, the regime made great strides in stabilizing the deteriorating security situation we confronted at the start of 2013. By late 2012, the opposition appeared to have all

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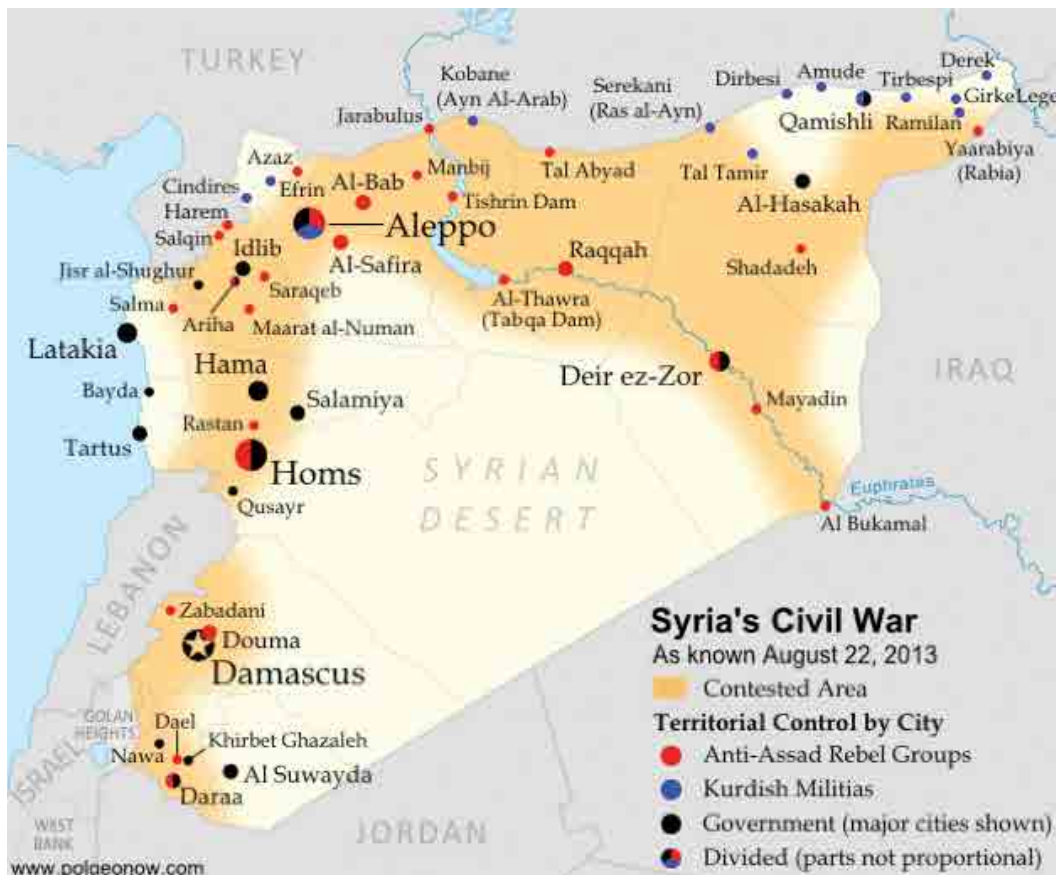
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the momentum with the insurgency's growth in the Idlib countryside, the opposition's seizure of large parts of Aleppo city and attempts to replicate this tactic in Damascus. The regime's fate appeared to hang in the balance.

Nine months later, most of these trends have been reversed; the security situation in Damascus has stabilized and the Army has launched counteroffensives to restore order in Damascus' suburbs and stem insurgent progress in the south near Daraa. In the north, a grinding stalemate persists in Aleppo city and a positional chess game has emerged over towns and villages that control access to Aleppo and our important military installations there that provide a base for our operations.

But the key long-term military gain for 2013 occurred in Homs, where we significantly reduced the insurgency's presence through our efforts in the city and surrounding villages, most notably during June's operations in Qusayr that drew the most attention due to Hizballah's intervention. Control of Homs is pivotal to our strategy of maintaining Syria's "spine", the Aleppo-Hama-Homs-Damascus axis. Homs is the geographic center of the spine, provides the link to the coastal heartland of the Alawi community and straddles opposition supply lines to Lebanon. Aside from Damascus, Homs is the key terrain in this fight. Lose Homs and we all recognize our days are numbered.



On the domestic front, trend lines were also largely positive. The opposition remains politically incoherent and rife with emerging contradictions between forces on the ground, the external arm of the political opposition and the opposition's regional sponsors. The emergence of Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN) and other Islamic extremists as the key armed faction and public face of the opposition, the increased role of foreign fighters, and Gulf support for the insurgents reinforces the Syrian government's narrative about the nature of the uprising and the public's perception that there is no secular alternative to the regime. Strains within the opposition have led to infighting between the Free Syria Army and JAN and these tensions are likely to heighten. To illustrate how the lines between regional events and domestic politics are often blurred, also aiding us was the Muslim Brotherhood's (MB) failures in governance in Egypt and the emergence of secular-religious fissures in Turkey that serve to dilute MB cohesion against us. We are at war with those who primarily identify themselves as Sunnis, and there are a lot of them in Syria, but they are also at war with themselves.

Internationally, the regionalization of the conflict was most pronounced in 2013 and has had unintended consequences for our foes that complicates their domestic politics. This has been most pronounced in Turkey where the rise of Kurdish aspirations in Syria and the emergence of Alevi political consciousness have dampened Erdogan's ambitious agenda. In our view, the prospects of spreading instability via renewed Sunni-Shi'a conflict in Iraq, the threat of renewed civil war in Lebanon, and the rebound of Al Qaeda throughout the Middle East have worked in our favor with our

key allies Russia and Iran. These same factors have resulted in policy paralysis in the West.

What is Working

We believe key tenets of our strategy incorporate all aspects of Syria's national power—the military, control over our national narrative, and diplomacy—and they are working. The common view held in the West, that the regime is alternatively on its last legs or simply shooting its way to victory underestimates our ability to conceptualize and implement a comprehensive strategy.

The military aspect of our version of COIN is unrecognizable to the population-centric COIN that dominates in the West, but it is instantly understood by Russia's President Putin and those who have studied Russia's war in Chechnya over the past two decades. Our military, while committed to Syria's defense, suffers from the same challenges facing Russia at the time—a conscript army with severe limitations on the tactical level that precluded a "sophisticated" COIN approach, government resource limitations to fund programs to address economic grievances, and, if we can speak frankly, a corrupt and abusive police force not subject to the rule of law.²

Our military operations are designed to destroy the armed opposition and physically separate insurgents from the pro-opposition populace. This is accomplished through the destruction of wide swaths of insurgent-controlled towns and a forced population resettlement that leaves behind only insurgents as targets for further military operations. This approach also serves as a deterrent for previously untouched towns and neighborhoods: allow the insurgents in, or turn against the regime by expelling its presence, and you will run the risk of having your homes destroyed.

We continue to hold a decisive firepower advantage over the insurgents. Their capabilities—in terms of size, organization and weapons—are improving, but it will be years before the insurgents are our operational equals.

Our public narrative has largely succeeded in maintaining the support of our base—urbanites, minorities, secularists and committed Arab nationalists. We are under no illusions that we can sway our enemies to our side. Rather, our efforts to shape the regime narrative are aimed at our base and an increasing number of fence-sitters who see the conflict the same way we do—the opposition groups are Islamist terrorists (significantly foreign), abetting a pro-US/Israeli/Saudi takfiri agenda, and ill-suited to lead Syria's diverse society. This has induced enough doubt in Syrian society, especially its minorities, to prevent a decisive shift away from the regime. The recent JAN attack on Ma'loulah, one of the oldest sites in Christianity, will reinforce this message.

At the international level, despite the recent flurry over chemical weapon use, we have succeeded in maintaining crucial international alliances (Russia, Iran and Hizballah) and to a certain extent made progress with Iraq because of increased Sunni-Shi'a tension there. Divisions have emerged in the Saudi-Turk-Qatari regional alliance that dominated 2012 with ripple effects that impacts their support for specific factions within the Syrian opposition. This is negatively affecting opposition cohesion.

Bleak Prospects for Near-Term Resolution

Despite our successes in 2013, the near-term prospects for ending Syria's insurgency soon are grim. We are likely in a protracted

period of political and military stalemate and the question now becomes how to position the regime for the long term. There are three factors to consider.

First, the game changer in our current crisis is for regional state sponsors of the insurgents to cease their support. In this regard Turkey and Saudi Arabia play critical roles as conduits for aid and safe havens for the Syrian insurgency. We judge that breaking up the state sponsor alliance arrayed against us is the center of gravity for this conflict; without foreign support the insurgency will die. The primary focus of our diplomacy, and that of our allies, must be geared toward this goal.

At the same time, we recognize this may take years to accomplish. The rapid regionalization of the Syrian crisis complicates eventual resolution of the conflict by introducing numerous state actors with competing agendas. This is similar to the challenge your father faced in Lebanon in the 80s. It took a region-shaking event—Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990—to break that logjam.

The good news is both Turkey and Saudi Arabia are also increasingly divided societies as well. We have outlined Erdogan's challenges above and we should not anticipate an end to his political career. But for our purposes, Turkey's ardor for deeper involvement in Syria has waned and is likely to wane further.

With the world's focus on Syria and Egypt, Saudi Arabia's domestic challenges—a generational transfer of power within the Royal Family, an increasingly young and restive population, and the Arab Spring's challenge to its role as leader of Sunni Islam in the Middle East—are overlooked. The latter point is especially important; Saudi Arabia cannot afford to stem the "Shi'a tide" only to be swept away by

a Muslim Brotherhood tsunami. In our view, this Saudi sense of insecurity is reflected by its increased sectarian agitation in the region and willingness to promote the military coup in Egypt that sent the MB back into hiding.

Second, while the military's cohesion remains firm and we have mobilized significant sectors of Syrian society, we do not have the means to generate a military solution. To use the American construct, we can "clear", by great effort and tremendous destruction, but we cannot "hold" everywhere and our depleted resource base makes "build" an impossibility. We are also sensitive to the political impact on our base of incurring high casualties. It is not that we are running out of manpower, it is that we must be perceived as using it judiciously. Aleppo is a case in point. Losing Aleppo in its entirety would be a severe blow to the regime and must be prevented, but restoring the city to our control is not worth the prospects of turning it into a Stalingrad that bleeds the regime white. We counsel patience.

Finally, the prospects for reconciliation talks between the regime and opposition over the near term are equally dismal. Our positions are too far apart and neither is ready for compromise due to the carnage both sides have inflicted. This SAC is divided over what course to pursue at Geneva II. One side contends that discussions over a "political transition"-- a phrase malleable enough to include our planned 2014 Presidential referendum that extends your term--- can be a net gain for the regime. Others are less certain of joining an international process that we do not fully control. We do agree that Geneva II may create further exploitable fissures in the opposition. The late September announcement of a new Islamic block and its rejection of the National Coalition illustrate this opportunity. The

delegation we will send to Geneva II will consist of regime Sunnis, non-Alawi minorities and women armed with talking points about the growing Islamist terrorist threat to a secular Syria.

Looking Ahead

With the military situation stabilized, time is again on our side. The lessons we learned during our involvement in Lebanon's civil war still hold true: some foes have to be killed (Syrian and foreign Islamists), some co-opted (Syrian Kurds and Arab Nationalists against foreign intervention), and others divided and played off against each other (all the above).

A war of political and military attrition exploits our strengths in military firepower and the political weaknesses of our opponents. It also preserves our strength for the long haul.

By playing for time we allow the contradictions plaguing the opposition and their regional sponsors to further weaken their efforts. The armed Islamist extremists will overreach in their goal to impose an Islamic-based government, creating a yawning gap between them and the exiled secular opposition and their regional sponsors, armed moderates, and a growing majority of Syrians who want an end to this crisis.

Nevertheless, an attrition strategy is not a passive strategy. Our response to the challenge we face is being played out on multiple levels and requires a clear vision.

The last two years have eroded Syria's social fabric. As a result, we are now as often a stage as an actor in shaping regional events. The concept of Syria and what it means to be Syrian has come under severe stress. We recognize Syria and the regime cannot be restored to the way it was before March 2011.

Nevertheless, the bottom line on our goals for political reconciliation remain unchanged: a controlled opening of the political system with no political party allowed to use religion as its basis for organization; an empowered Prime Minister responsible for local affairs; and a President (you) with primacy over military and foreign policy affairs and the power to dismiss a Prime Minister. This is a well-worn formula for the region.

Repairing Syria's torn social fabric will not just be a political exercise; it will be an economic and institution building one as well. It is bitterly ironic, but now in retrospect not surprising, that a main leg of the alliance that brought the Baath to power in the 1960s, Syria's villages and rural poor, is now the base for the opposition. Our strategy since your assuming the presidency in 2000 was to build a regime-allied business class that would simultaneously allow a degree of integration into the world economy, construct a modern backbone for the long-term improvement in Syria's economy, and provide both you and the regime a firm base in what has historically been a hostile Sunni-dominated urban elite. We allowed Ba'ath institutions—a key component of the government's presence in the countryside -- to further atrophy and a severe drought in the east compounded the rural crisis. Institution building challenges will be exacerbated by basic security challenges. The state's ability to exert regime control in the hinterland has been severely eroded. With no political reconciliation in the offing, we are faced with the prospects of either hundreds of local bargains to reestablish a modicum of security or leaving swaths of Syria to local self-rule as we gradually rebuild the state. Either solution risks a significant devolution of state authority. We have accepted this situation in

the Kurdish areas out of necessity, but are wary of its long-term implications.

The cost to rebuild Syria will be staggering and our limited budgets buffeted by competing demands for economic reconstruction and rebuilding a military that will view itself as having saved Syria. Access to international funds will be curtailed by lingering regional animosity, especially from Saudi Arabia and Western sanctions. A foreign policy pivot to the East, in which the proposed Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline is just a first step, will need to be accelerated, but a host of secondary problems—an accelerated brain drain, refugee return, prolonged capital flight—will hamper our efforts.

A foreign policy shift to the East may dovetail with another larger shift as we rebuild Syria. The challenges outlined above are enormous and the solution that enables us to tackle them while ensuring control over the outcomes is a return to state capitalism as the primary engine of economic growth and political control. Our limited experiment in a pro-West, neo-liberal free market has failed; a Syrian version of the Chinese state capitalism model beckons.

Syria would not have survived the last two years without the military and security investments in the state made over the last 43 years; a robust military and intelligence apparatus, buttressed by a strong air defense and chemical arsenal has kept foreign intervention at bay during this uprising. However, the recent crisis over chemical weapons illustrates that the very means that initially protected the regime from foreign intervention very nearly pushed events in that direction and risked broader conflict.

If, over the long term, Syria must destroy this arsenal, we face a deepening of a strategic military dilemma that has confronted us since

the end of the Cold War and the 1990 Gulf War. The insurgency has further eroded our already aging conventional deterrent and the demise of our chemical arsenal will further imbalance the power relationship between us and our principal regional adversary, Israel. This dilemma is not new; its roots prompted our ill-fated covert nuclear program that the Israelis destroyed in 2007 and the embrace of Hizballah as a strategic deterrent. The solution continues to elude us, but as a stopgap measure the rapid expansion of a large conventional rocket and missile force and robust air defense purchase is likely the most economical and practical course.

The Arab regional scene is in turmoil with major players (including Syria) consumed by internal turmoil. The weakness in the Arab regional system opens the door for non-Arab players—Israel, Turkey, Iran and Russia—to become more involved in the region. This is another case of challenges and opportunities for Syria. The primary challenge is always Israel, and its interest is to weaken the Arab world further by reducing Hizballah’s military deterrence and the de facto partition of Syria. Yet two of the non-Arab players are our allies and that helps balances the equation. Syria’s Arab regional role will be shaped by our continued Cold War with Saudi Arabia, which is entering its second decade, but showing few signs of abating as Riyadh pursues its sectarian-based agenda. Syria’s ability to resume “boxing above its weight” in regional affairs is captive to maintaining its regional allies while rebuilding state power.

We close this section with some observations about the United States. Relations with the U.S. are likely to be frozen for a long period, placing a U.S. role as a sponsor of Israeli-Syrian peace talks in doubt, and

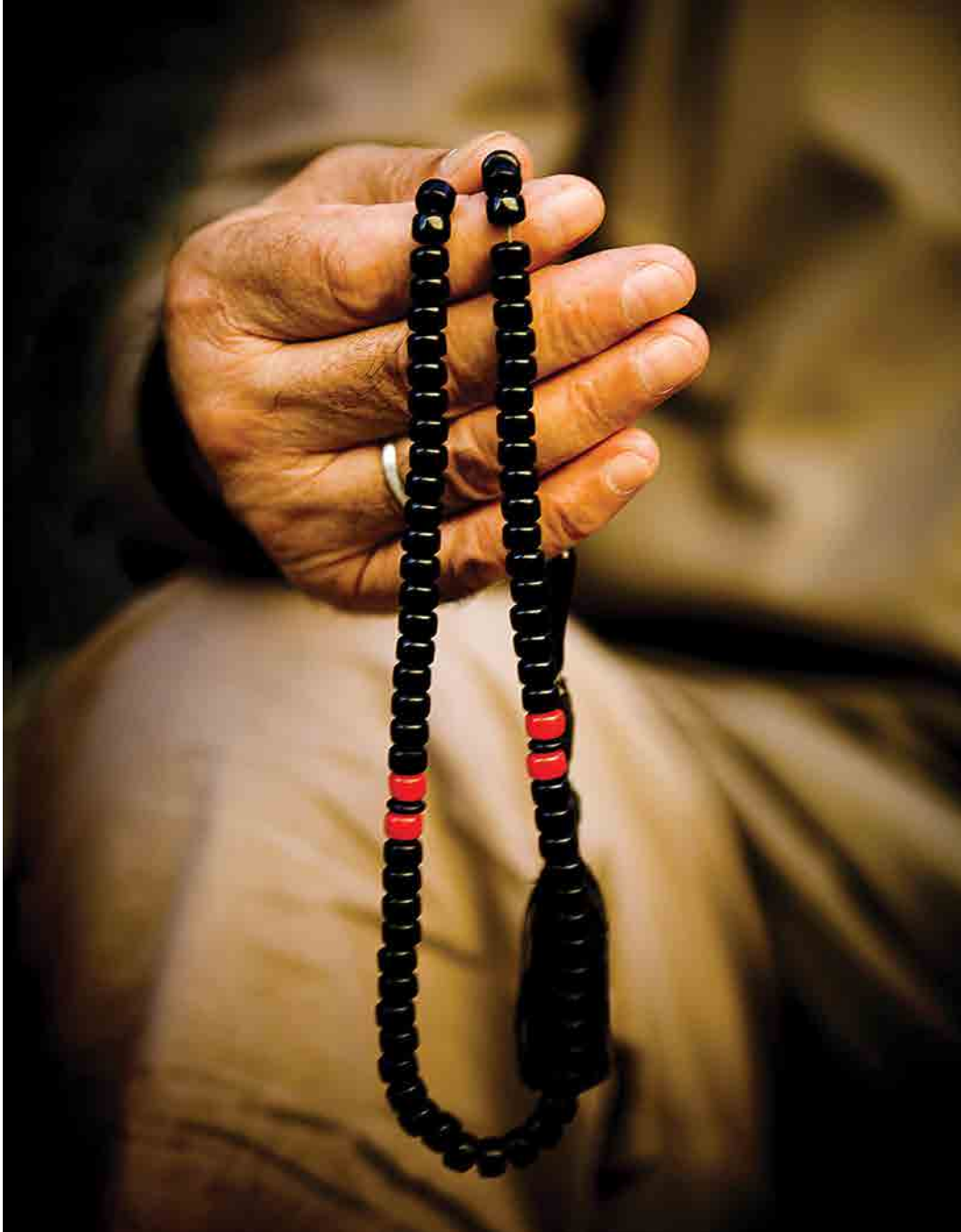
eventual return of the Golan Heights beyond the reach of your presidency. President Obama at his recent UN speech spoke of resolving the Arab-Israel dispute in the narrowest terms—a two state solution between Israelis and Palestinians. Pointedly absent was a reference to occupied Syrian territory. With dim prospects of an regional peace, your focus will be navigating the competing demands of ending the Islamist insurgency, pursuing economic reconstruction in a way that enhances regime survival, preventing the reemergence of another Saudi-inspired challenge to the regime (both in Syria and Lebanon), and checking Israeli hegemonic ambitions. These are familiar challenges and we have faced them before.

Plan A is regime victory; there is no Plan B.

Notes

¹ A fictitious entity meant to represent a conglomeration of senior regime military and political officials

² An analysis of Russian counterinsurgency strategy is discussed in *The Insurgency in Chechnya and North Caucasus*; from Gazavat to Jihad, by Robert Schaefer



At the Umayyad Mosque, also known as the Great Mosque of Damascus

Advice to Policy Makers Who Would Tackle Syria

The Problem with Problem Solving

BY ROBERT RICIGLIANO AND KAREN GRATTAN

While there is not much consensus on the specific way forward in Syria, there is one thing most do agree on; Syria is complex. It is complex in the familiar use of that term: complicated, intricate, and hard to understand. But it is also complex in the technical sense: an interrelated system of diverse components that interact with each other and their environment in ways that are dynamic and difficult to predict.

This distinction and understanding the distinction are critical to the success of policy makers trying to grapple with Syria. As a whole, Syria along with the broadening regional conflict is a wicked problem for policy makers;² presenting challenges similar to those that have frustrated efforts in Iraq, Afghanistan, Egypt, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), among others. These complexity related challenges include: the regularity of unintended negative consequences; situations where one party's solution is another party's problem; "fixes" that work in the short term but fail in the medium term; tactics that are successful in one place but are difficult to replicate; "zombie problems" that do not stay fixed; problems that resist a definitive definition; and the reality that new urgent issues constantly outstrip the amount of resources available to address them. Most importantly, and deeply characteristic of the wicked problem, is the requirement for continuous and adaptive learning, as the "problem" is more deeply understood with every effort to develop or enact its solution.

Success in Syria means that in addition to the content of any individual policy, plan, or decision, policy makers need to change the process by which they engage with Syria and produce a series of decisions over time. The purpose of this article is not to advocate specific policy options. Rather, this piece will highlight four key practices that policy makers can use to maximize their

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ability to generate effective policy for Syria (as well as other complex and dynamic environments). Explained in more detail below, these four practices include:

1. See in “3-D”;
2. Engage Patterns, Not Problems;
3. Align Fast and Slow Variables;
4. Fail Smart, Adapt Fast, and Leverage Success!

See in “3-D”

The sheer volume of important information about Syria that an informed policy maker could usefully know is overwhelming, such as political actors, dynamics among and within rebel groups, clan rivalries, tensions among religious groups, environmental drivers, regional influences, historical wounds, etc. No one, not even those who have spent their whole lives in Syria, have a complete picture of why Syria is the way it is.

And more information is not necessarily better, as a truly comprehensive view of Syria would soon become incomprehensible to our limited human brains. The traditional approach to grappling with this level of complexity is to focus our vision by breaking the problem down into manageable chunks that will readily lend themselves to analysis and most clearly point to a policy solution. For example, when viewed in isolation, purging members of the Baath party from the post-Saddam, transitional government in Iraq seemed like an obvious fix to a broken system. In retrospect, the consequences of this policy were disastrous as many correlate the rise in the insurgency with the rise in disgruntled and newly out-of-work Baathists.

Moreover, this reductionist approach is exactly what not to do in a complex system.

Complexity is characterized by multiple, often counter-intuitive, and constantly evolving interrelationships between parts of the system. A reductionist approach – pulling one factor out of its murky and hard to understand environment – may make it easier to fix that particular piece (e.g., the corrupting influence of political “dead enders” in the post invasion Iraq). However, it often makes it more difficult to deal with the underlying problem (e.g., stabilizing a post-Saddam Iraq).

This leaves policy makers in a bind where (a) seeing the full complexity of Syria is overwhelming (comprehensiveness undermining comprehensibility) and, (b) reducing Syria to seemingly manageable parts is often ineffective or counter productive (achieving comprehensibility by sacrificing comprehensiveness).

The way out of this bind is to change how we see complex systems like Syria, similar to the way seeing a movie in 3-D produces a richer picture than watching in just two dimensions. The way to see a comprehensible, but sufficiently comprehensive picture of Syria is to use a different version of 3-D vision – one that honors the reality that complex social systems are made up of three distinct but inter-related dimensions:

- **Structural dimension:** all social systems have institutions and infrastructures that are meant to meet the basic human needs of those resident in the system. These structures relate to governance, security, economy, human health (food security, public health); environment/natural resources, rule of law/human rights, and civic health (media, education, civil society);
- **Attitudinal dimension:** widely held beliefs and norms as well as intergroup relations that affect the level of cooperation

between groups and within social structures. Attitudinal factors include identity groups, social capital, core grievances, and inter-group dynamics;

- Transactional dimension: the processes and skills used by key people to deal with conflict, solve problems, and manage key structural and attitudinal issues. This is a

sub-set of behavioral factors, but it focuses on the critical role that key people play (e.g., influencers, people who control resources, opinion leaders, etc.). These key people can exist at the local, national or supra-national level.

KEY ISSUE	
<i>Lack of consensus among rebel and opposition groups</i>	
Upstream Causes	Downstream Causes
<p>Structural:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Weak organizational structures within rebel groups; ■ Historically divided civil society; ■ Limited funding to rebels; ■ Pervasive insecurity among rebel groups. 	<p>Structural:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ No structure for future government; ■ Large number of displaced and refugees; ■ Opposition leadership must perpetually fundraise; cannot develop strategic plan.
<p>Attitudinal:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Deep suspicions between secular and religious groups; ■ History of tension and distrust between ethnic and religious groups in Syria; ■ Resentment toward wealthy Syrians who benefit from the current government. 	<p>Attitudinal:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ War weariness, popular feeling of hopelessness; ■ Growing rift between population and rebel/opposition groups; ■ Lack of interest in engaging with large swaths of pro-government Syrians in a negotiated solution.
<p>Transactional:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ No clear leader accepted by opposition and rebel groups; ■ Meddling by outside states/actors; ■ Syrian government systematically eliminates political rivals. 	<p>Transactional:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Weak negotiating position vis-à-vis Assad government; ■ Infighting among rebel groups and opposition politicians; ■ Ineffective opposition leadership.

Instead of narrowing the field of vision and breaking a problem down in order to find a “fixable” piece, complex environments require that policy makers see any specific phenomenon as having an upstream of structural, attitudinal, and transactional causes and a downstream of structural, attitudinal, and transactional impacts.

Consider the fractures among Syrian opposition groups: Policy makers should develop several “upstream/downstream” structural, attitudinal, and transactional (SAT) analyses for the key issues they confront in an environment like Syria. One exercise that can start this process is to ask, “What are the key challenges to peace and security in Syria?” or “What are the key enablers and key inhibitors of peace in Syria?” For each of these key challenges or enablers/inhibitors of peace, it is helpful to do an upstream/downstream analysis such as the one above. Similarly, if one has a potential solution or key action they think will improve Syria, one should do a similar analysis to test their thinking.

For example, if one were considering whether to disarm all rebel fighters after a cessation of hostilities through a gun buy back program, what are all the upstream reasons (structural, attitudinal, and transactional) people have guns/want to hold onto their guns; and what are all the potential downstream impacts (both those we like and the ones we may not like).

The purpose of this analysis is twofold. First, this analysis helps policy makers resist the temptation to grasp at a simple answer to such a complex issue, like assuming the solution to the lack of consensus among rebel and opposition groups is to simply mediate an agreement. An agreement alone might address one of the transactional or structural factors

identified above (as incomplete as this sample analysis is), but would do nothing to address deeper attitudinal factors or other structural and transactional factors. Second, and more importantly, taking a holistic perspective on a key issue, such as the lack of consensus among the armed and the political groups, sets the stage for the next key step in managing complexity; identifying how these structural, attitudinal, and transactional factors are interrelated and form the building blocks of persistent patterns of behavior that hold the key to fostering change in Syria.

Engage Patterns, Not Problems

A vexing characteristic of complex systems is that systems are not broken, even if they produce outcomes that we dislike (e.g., violence, poverty, oppression). In fact, systems contain ever-broadening webs of connected dynamics, many of which will work to maintain the status quo. Because of this, attempting to fix or change individual pieces of the system usually has little impact on the underlying system itself. So, changing even a key piece of the context – such as replacing Saddam Hussein in Iraq or even Hosni Mubarak in Egypt – does not change the underlying system that produced those leaders. Note how the crowds that filled Cairo’s Tahrir Square in 2011 to oust President Hosni Mubarak, looked eerily similar to the crowds assembled in Tahrir Square in 2013 to oust President Mohamed Morsi.

The key is to identify and understand the underlying social patterns that produce the problems that fix our attention (e.g., violence, dictators, crises). Professor George Richardson defines a systems approach this way: “A systems view stands back just far enough to deliberately blur discrete events into patterns of behavior.” It is these patterns that animate and

propel a system and it is affecting these patterns that allows policy makers to have an impact on how systems behave over time. For example, if policy makers want to see a future Syria that is more stable, has greater levels of participatory and accountable governance, and shows greater respect for human rights, then what patterns of behavior affect the presence of these factors, and how might they need to change to produce more desired outcomes?

Understanding key social patterns starts with doing the upstream/downstream SAT analysis as described above. After doing this analysis on several key issues, the analyst will step back and ask two questions: (1) are there key structural, attitudinal or transactional factors that occur often or are given great importance; and (2) what are the interrelationships among these key SAT factors? Based on the

answers to these questions, the next step is to start stringing these interrelated factors into a causal loop, such as the “Splits Among Syrian Rebel Groups” loop on the following page.

What pattern of behavior produces the current lack of consensus among rebel and opposition groups in Syria? How are the upstream and downstream SAT factors identified above related to each other (and to upstream and downstream factors associated with other key challenges or enablers/inhibitors of peace, such as regional meddling, arms flows, etc.)?

The discipline of systems mapping provides a useful way of conceiving of and visualizing these patterns. For example, in relation to the lack of consensus between Syrian rebel and political opposition groups, a simple



Bloomberg/Alamy

“11th of February - A memorable day! Mubarak has resigned! The revolution has succeeded and for the first time in tens of years, Egypt sees hope again!” Fixes that work in the short term but fail in the medium term

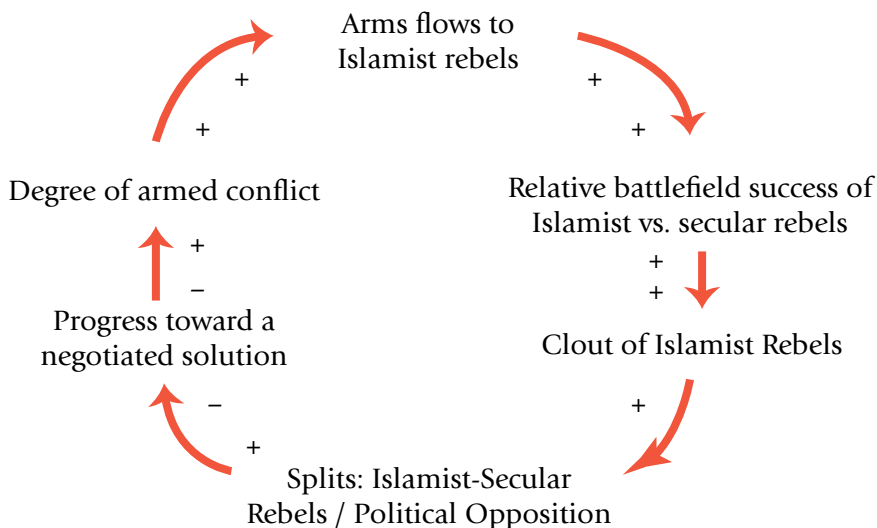
pattern might look like the following feedback loop:

In this loop (reading clockwise from the top), as “arms flows to Islamist rebels” increases (as denoted by the “+” sign), then these groups have more relative success on the battlefield versus less well-armed, secular rebel groups. In turn, this increases the clout of these groups and contributes to greater political splits between Islamist and secular groups.³ As these splits increase, it decreases (as denoted by the “-” sign) the progress toward a negotiated agreement that would stop the fighting. The lack of an agreement then increases the degree of armed conflict which fuels even more arms flows to the Islamist rebel groups. This is a vicious (or reinforcing) cycle because each time around the loop, we see more arms flows, greater splits, and more armed conflict. Likewise, loops can represent dynamics that are virtuous (meaning the situation is getting better over time), as well as stabilizing or stagnating dynamics, which preserve the status quo for better or worse.

Feedback loops are not themselves reality. However, they are a way of improving how we conceive of a dynamic context such as Syria from seeing it as a series of discrete events to understanding Syria as a web of patterns or feedback loops. Further, we can identify the interconnections between feedback loops and build a systems map of Syria. A full systems map is a valuable tool for policy analysis, and can be built up over time. For example, beginning with the single feedback loop above and working out from factors identified, an analyst might ask, what other forces affect the level of splits between Islamist and secular opposition groups? What dynamics impact the level of tension between these groups? What other impacts does the lack of progress toward a political settlement have?

An analysis of key social patterns increases the chances of successful policy making in several ways. First, success in managing complex systems depends on the ability to engage, not fix, these patterns. The general prescription for dealing with patterns or feedback loops is to

Splits Among Syrian Rebel Groups



strengthen stabilizing loops (ones that keep things from getting worse) or virtuous cycles (ones that make things better) and to weaken or disrupt stagnating loops (ones that keep a bad situation from getting better) or vicious cycles (ones that make things worse and worse over time). Second, and more importantly, affecting patterns can be the key to solving the problem of strained or insufficient resources because they introduce the potential to find high leverage strategies. Because complex systems are made up of multiple, interlocking dynamics patterns, change to any one of these patterns will have ripple effects on other patterns in the system. Leverage occurs when an initial positive impact on part of a system is amplified by the interconnectedness and inherent dynamism among the feedback loops which make up the system.

There are indicators of potential leverage points that policy makers can use. Some patterns will seem “frozen in time” while others are changing and evolving organically. These areas, known as “factors in flux,” are potential leverage points because policy makers can work to affect how the system is going to respond to this naturally occurring change rather than try to create change from scratch (a much more resource-intensive undertaking). There are also “bright spots,” or islands of positive news amidst a sea of bad news. Underlying bright spots are positive dynamics that could be strengthened. Lastly, there are also dynamics that have both positive and negative impacts on the wider system. The potential for leverage here comes from the possibility of lessening the negative impact of the dynamic and increasing the likelihood that the dynamic will have positive ripple effects throughout the system.

For example, if the “Splits Among Syrian Rebels” loop, a vicious cycle, could be weakened or interrupted, then the negative impact of this loop on other loops would also be weakened (first ripple). As a result, a weak stabilizing loop may be strengthened and have a positive impact on the system (second ripple). In turn, this might cause another vicious cycle to switch over to becoming a virtuous cycle (third ripple). As a result of this positive chain reaction, perhaps the initial vicious cycle, the “Rebel Splits” loop might be further weakened. One of the most effective ways to engage the system is to build the linkages between dynamics, especially between those that include factors that change much more slowly and those that can be affected in the short term.

Align Fast and Slow Variables

The fundamental impact of engaging patterns instead of trying to fix discrete problems is that it conforms to a basic truism about systems change: that systems change best, when systems change themselves. Working with and through systems is more effective than trying to impose change, but it also means that real change can take longer. For example, deposing Saddam in Iraq gave an initial perception of “Mission Accomplished”, but real change in Iraq (e.g., a stable, democratic, and prosperous society) has proven much more elusive.

In reality, different parts of a system change at different rates. For example, actions directed at attitudinal factors, such as producing a “democratic culture” or improving relations between Hutus and Tutsis, change slowly (e.g., are slow variables). Actions aimed at addressing structural factors, such as building a market economy, improving basic infrastructure, or establishing a system for public health, may take years, but usually change faster than

attitudinal factors. Transactional approaches, such as improving relationships between key leaders, negotiating an agreement, or conducting a dialogue, can happen in relatively short time frames that are measured in weeks or months (hence these are fast variables).

A common pitfall for policy makers is to address fast variables, perhaps because of the political pressure to show short-term results. In the case of Syria, this often means increased pledges of funding that solve the rebels' short-term budgetary issues but fail to help build leadership and vision within the opposition. Unfortunately, actions aimed at affecting fast variables often undermine long-term success by making it more difficult to change slow variables.

The common practice of holding quick elections as part of a transition from an armed

conflict or dictatorship is a good example of this tendency. Holding elections is a relatively fast variable (they can be organized in a period of months). In a stable democracy, elections are the transactional manifestation of both legitimate institutions and the attitudes and values of the citizens. The longer-term goal in a place like DRC, Egypt, or Afghanistan, is to build a stable and well-functioning state. This requires several slow variables, such as the building of democratic culture, legitimate and effective state structures, and higher degrees of social capital in a currently divided society. The problem is that fast elections often have impacts that work against having a positive impact on these slower variables. As we have seen in several cases, election violence, allegations of voter fraud or result rigging, and an increase in hate speech tend to exacerbate



Wikimedia.org

“Nasarwasalam, Iraq (Jan. 30, 2005) - Iraqi citizens come out in masses to vote in the first ever “Free Elections” in Iraq. Security was provided by the Iraqi Security Force and the U.S. Marines. The election was boycotted by Sunnis”

ethnic tensions, de-legitimize state structures, and build popular disillusionment with democracy.

For example in Syria, in a post-violence situation, a major immediate problem is likely to be the lack of a legitimate government. Fast elections might be seen as a near-term fix to this problem. However, Syria will undoubtedly be similar to neighboring Lebanon or Iraq, whose political contours are largely defined by the shape of its different ethnicities and religious sects.⁴ This is an unstable system whose viability relies on preventing deep-seated community grievances from spilling into outright confessional violence. Fast elections on the heels of a traumatic and divisive violent conflict that increased levels of grievance and distrust between these different communities may be the impetus to pre-election violence and/or post-election allegations of fraud (and hence an additional threat of violence).

Further, pushing for a fast election in such an environment may codify identity politics in Syria, preventing progress on long-term issues like national reconciliation. Moreover, holding an election that results in political parties built on ethno-sectarian lines may cement demographic ratios between communities. In a system that rewards power based on the relative size of one's community, this means that relative population size often forms the basis for political power sharing. In Iraq, this relationship is subtler. But in Lebanon, demographics directly determine political power. This erodes basic state functions: Iraq has not held a census in key cities, such as Kirkuk, in over half a century. Lebanon has not held a countrywide census in nearly 100 years. These are two examples of how pushing a fast variable such as elections can work against long-term

strategic goals such as national reconciliation, and even inhibit basic state functions.

It is not that we should not address the fast variables; it is that they must be understood in the context of the broader system and its dynamics. Without such an understanding, efforts are bound to overlook important factors that should be addressed simultaneously to prevent or mitigate unintended negative consequences. This tendency for policy makers to affect fast variables in ways that work against a desired change in slow variables is known as the classic "fix that fails."

Policies that generate better outcomes and more lasting impacts are those that consider the interconnections between fast variables and slow variables. Building and shaping the connectivity between fast and slow dynamics early can both protect against the fix that fails as well as bolster or build momentum for impacts on slower variables within the system. To do this, policy makers can begin cataloging important factors as fast or slow variables and then consider the potential interconnections between them, such as elections and identity politics. The emerging practice of multistep, staged processes for both increasing participation and inclusivity in political transitions while simultaneously undertaking governance reform is an example of how transactional efforts can be linked to efforts addressing the attitudinal and structural dimensions.

In the SAT approach, attitudinal factors are typically the most stable over time and therefore the slowest variables when it comes to change. Further, attitudes tend to be buffered within stabilizing dynamics that reinforce them. Structural factors are less slow to change than attitudes, but changes can still take a long time and be impacted by many other dynamics within the system. Transactional factors are the

most readily changed and can be leveraged in powerful ways to affect broader and more lasting change. This is especially true when policies build the linkages between transactional interventions (such as a mediation process), longer-term processes of change in social structure and social attitudes. An alternative to quick national elections is to start with locally organized governance activity designed to build democratic systems from the ground up and to build a democratic culture through multiple, iterative experiences with participatory governance.

Developing explicit hypotheses linking efforts directed at fast variables to change in slower variables forces policy makers to be more explicit about how short-term actions might best lead to long-term goals. Instead, policy makers all too often have a vague strategy that if “we do something good in the short term (like hold an election), it will necessarily lead to good in the long term.” In turn, the alternative of using iterative strategies that build over time provides more opportunities for course corrections, which is a critical part of the last policy making practice: fail smart and adapt fast!

Fail Smart, Adapt Fast, and Leverage Success!

No policymaker ever sets out to fail in his or her analysis or policy recommendations. Still, no matter how nuanced the analysis or well considered the approach, many policies fail. If failure is not unexpected, then certainly the practice should be to mitigate it, or even better, to fail smart. By failing smart we can minimize the costs of failure and maximize the likelihood that we will learn key lessons from the experience.

When dealing with complex contexts like Syria’s, success should not just – or even mainly be – measured by the immediate ability to meet predetermined objectives. Indeed, many short-term successes are deceptively malignant, as initial success can mask subtle signs of failure. Likewise, from the ashes of apparent short-term failure can raise catalytic change for the better. Critical to policy success in these contexts is learning about the patterns and dynamics of the system in which analysts must be engaging and adapting in a timely manner. This requires policymakers use a version of “shorter product cycles” to organize their policy apparatus so they can plan, act, learn, and adapt in weeks or months, and not years. Planning and acting will be enhanced by the first three practices described above.

Real learning *about* the system and how best to *engage* with it can only be done by policy makers who directly interact with the system over time. Engaging the system of Syria in a way that enables learning and adaptation requires a good bit of humility and a lot of thoughtful preparation. Mapping the system is only part of this process. As philosopher Alfred Korzybski so famously noted, “the map is not the territory.” As such, policy practitioners must be ever prepared to update or change their understanding of the system in which they are operating. In turn, this requires a learning infrastructure. What are the core assumptions about important social dynamics, possible high leverage activities, and the relationships between key fast variables and slow variables? What indicators will you use to test these assumptions and how will you gather, analyze, and feed this learning back into your policy making process?

One way to learn effectively about a complex system like Syria is to frame any policy

approach as a hypothesis and fully explicate what dynamics are expected to be impacted and in what ways. Similar to a logic model or theory of change, a systems hypothesis links policy to key factors and dynamics. It will depict upstream requirements or assumptions, as well as downstream impacts including second and third order effects. Having a hypothesis for system engagement also means that the markers or indicators for systems change are identified and rigorously monitored. Continuous monitoring and sensing of the environment occurs so that hypotheses can be confirmed or refuted. Maintaining a learning stance with regard to the system also increases the likelihood that emergent patterns and the opportunities and/or risks they present will be identified more quickly.

One example applied to Syria would be developing a hypothesis for engaging the system of local administrative councils, or governing structures set up to administer local towns and city neighborhoods in the country's opposition-held areas. Recent analyses of these councils since November 2012 shows the widest discrepancies between "successful" governing structures – those that are able to design and implement basic service provision and assistance delivery programs – and "failures," which often include areas in which councils had existed, but whose collapse precipitated the entry of Islamic extremist groups.

One example of a systemic learning plan for this environment would be to first work with "successful" local councils. A complex environment like Syria presents many unknown challenges. However by expanding the capability of already-successful councils, policy makers can analyze not only *what* works in Syria, but *how* to work in the country. What do these successful councils have in common?

What pitfalls must we avoid? What do local communities desire most from these councils? Framing the system and developing a hypothesis for system engagement is essential, but continuous monitoring and sensing is equally important. In addition to evaluating the approach on its face by asking – does assistance make the council more or less "successful" – one must also understand the *causes* for that success and how it can be applied elsewhere.

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This kind of learning infrastructure can maximize the potential to learn from experience, but failing smart also requires that policy makers minimize the potential costs of failure. Contrasted to policies that take a frontal approach (much bigger fixes), scaled efforts minimize risk (and cost of failure) and maximize learning. One clear way to minimize the cost of failure is to implement policy in strategically placed parts of the system. Often thought of as "piloting" an approach, the idea of implementing a policy on a limited basis before rolling it out across the nation (e.g., working first with successful local councils before trying to improve struggling ones elsewhere) allows policy makers to test their key hypotheses (about critical dynamics and causal relationship among factors) and to test their monitoring framework.

Engaging with the system on a smaller scale not only benefits overall learning, but scaled engagements can be leveraged by building up connections between fast and slow

dynamics. For example, supporting successful governing councils at a local level might allow more time for stakeholder engagement and capacity building. It may also provide faster feedback loops between community concerns and concrete responses by local councils, which in turn can build more trust in new social institutions. Programs implemented in this way can also build civil society and increase dialogue such that intergroup trust and attitudes might improve.

Successful policies (or more likely successful adaptations) need to be leveraged across the system – as opposed to being mechanically replicated. A smaller scale, more precisely designed and monitored project can provide a more nuanced explanation of why a particular policy worked, so that policy makers can sort out which determinants of success are highly context dependent (and hence difficult to replicate) and which are more generalizable (thus easier to replicate in other areas).

In general, the ability to fail smart and maximize learning requires a shift in how failure is understood, and this may require a change in organizational culture. In complex contexts, some significant degree of failure should be seen as expected. Instead of being an outcome to be avoided, negative or unexpected results should be treated as a learning opportunity that can lead to more effective policy. An organizational culture that operates this way understands that to fail smart also means that there must be a “safe fail.” Such organizations assure learning by being transparent and humble in the face of systemic complexity. Organizations structured for learning support the emergence of teams including participation that is self-selecting and cross-disciplinary. They reward learning, even when it is predicated by failure.

Conclusion – Keep Your Eyes On The Prize

These four practices are each ways to help policy makers see and work with systems as a means of improving our effectiveness. These practices are also predicated on defining the ultimate success of policy in holistic terms – in terms of how it positively impacts the evolution of a social system. The goal of policy in Syria is to produce a more peaceful Syria that improves the quality of life for all Syrians. Success is not just defined in traditional, sectorally-bound ways, e.g., holding an election, reducing battlefield casualties, increasing GDP by a few percentage points, or reducing extreme abuses of human rights. The prize is a better Syria.

Success at the systemic level means that we need to think about policy as being about *engagement* not intervention. Measuring the success of an intervention implies that at some point things will be fixed, at least enough so that we can go home. As the famed “Mission Accomplished” photo after the invasion of Iraq demonstrated, often these pronouncements of a successful intervention prove wrong. The hard reality is that we cannot impose change on a system – even with the world’s largest military and biggest economy.

Measuring success in an engagement means that we are looking for signs that we are on the right track and should continue down the path (or have gotten off track and need to find our way back). An engagement implies that there is no “finished by” date because systems are constantly evolving. We may be more or less engaged, but the reality is, there is no artificial end.

This means that the problems in Syria cannot be “solved” in the short-term. Neither

the removal of Assad, nor international control of his chemical arsenal will win the “prize” of transition to stability and peace. Each policy initiative is important, but the transition process will defy any single salutary initiative.

How, then, will we know if we are being successful? First, in addition to the immediate on the ground impact of any policy, we will be more successful to the extent that we learn effectively. If we arm the opposition, what did they do with those arms and why? We need to look at both the intended/predicted outcomes and those we did not predict or intend. What impact did these arms transfers have on the regime and why? What does this tell us about key patterns of behavior in Syria and how we can engage with them more effectively? Second, what impact are we having on fast variables (e.g. negotiations, material support, casualties, etc.) and are they building toward changes in slower variables (improved relations among rebel groups, rebuilding infrastructure, building toward a culture of participatory and accountable governance, fostering respect for human rights, improving strained ethnic relations, etc.).

Lastly, we should constantly strive to evaluate the process by which we are engaging in Syria and using these four complexity practices: that we are seeing any problem or potential solution in “3-D;” that we are engaging important social patterns, not trying to artificially fix problems; that we distinguish between fast and slow variables and are using fast variables to build toward longer-term goals; and lastly that we know how to fail smart, adapt fast, and leverage our successes.

PRISM

NOTES

¹ Many of the ideas in this article are based on Ricigliano, R. (2012), *Making Peace Last: a toolbox for sustainable peacebuilding*. Paradigm Publishers: Boulder, CO.

² Referring to the term coined in the 1973 article by Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber, *Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning*, *Policy Sciences* (4): 155-169 that describes a certain class of problems and the nature of their solution. This class of problems has 10 basic characteristics and are known as wicked problems.

³ Note: even if agreement is reached among the rebels, the presence of an agreement does not mean that these underlying dynamics will have ceased to exist. In fact, in many cases, it is the existence of these dynamics that drive the ultimate breakdown in many peace agreements.

⁴ A similar phenomenon occurred in Syria on its first election after the French Mandate in 1947. Then, a minority government took power in an election that largely broke on ethnic and sectarian lines.

Photo by James Gordon



Roadside mural of Bashar al-Assad on the Damascus/Aleppo highway. Traditional media in Syria have been tightly controlled by the regime

Mapping the Information-Sharing Ecosystem of Syria

BY LARA SETRAKIAN AND ALEX ZERDEN

The duration and danger of covering the Syrian civil war has forced journalists to innovate how they capture, curate, and transmit news from the ground. Activists and Syrian citizens, equipped with mobile phone devices and internet connectivity, have uploaded reams of user-generated content to YouTube and social media channels. In response to an ever more complex information environment, a team of journalists and technologists came together to create Syria Deeply, a single subject news outlet that generates focused coverage of the crisis. Still in its early days as an independent media platform, Syria Deeply employs a modular, dashboard design to capture traditional reporting, social media insight, and data visualization. In doing so, it brings together disparate streams of open source information. The end result is coverage with greater depth and context around an unfolding crisis. This article sketches out how the platform works and the value it provides in monitoring conflicts and complex issues.

The Syrian crisis represents a news and information challenge that foreshadows future global conflicts. The lack of Western journalists deployed to cover the country, due to the physical dangers and financial constraints of the conflict, has resulted in a paucity of facts sourced by professional media. This information gap has been filled by citizen journalists and media activists, creating reams of user-generated content on media sites like Facebook, Twitter, Skype and YouTube. The result is a detailed but flawed picture of events in theater.

The complexity of global events and the hyper-connectivity of an online world pose challenges and opportunities for professional newsgatherers. The proliferation of locally sourced content overwhelms traditional newsrooms. There are substantial new data streams to track – more voices that need to be listened to, accounted for, fact-checked, and understood. More detailed focus and specialized knowledge becomes a pre-requisite to effectively and accurately cover today's complex stories. Whether we examine conflicts such as Syria's, or global trends like food and energy security, global issues require consistent attention and a capacity for greater sense-making. One must make better use of all the information available.

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Syria Deeply arose to meet that challenge. Though barely one year old (founded in December 2012), the platform grew out of a recognized need for more consistent reporting on the Syrian conflict than was available in mainstream media outlets. The platform functions as a specialized, issue-specific news source, benefiting from deep knowledge and earned insight on Syria. The dedication of Syria Deeply's experienced editorial leadership to covering one story in depth has combined the benefits of deep domain expertise and focused attention to Syria's dynamic information ecosystem.

The internet is a parallel press, dominated by young voices and inclusive of content and conversations heretofore shunned by an often state-controlled mainstream media.

Syria Deeply benefits from the technological innovations of social media and digital storytelling, but is firmly rooted in the belief that the future of news lies in its past. In the spirit of traditional journalism, it pursues newsgathering as a public service and a means to provide the best and most complete information. That approach has yielded positive feedback not only from readers, but from storytellers, all of whom appreciate an unwavering commitment to producing high-quality, fact-checked content from carefully vetted and curated sources.

The Rise of a New Media Middle East

Syria Deeply's founding mirrors the rise of new media in the Middle East. Arab millennials, classically defined as those under the age of 30, comprise more than half the population

of the Middle East. Their use of the internet, specifically social media tools like Facebook and web broadcasting platforms like YouTube and Bambuser, has fundamentally reshaped political life in the Arab world. The internet is a parallel press, dominated by young voices and inclusive of content and conversations heretofore shunned by an often state-controlled mainstream media.

The Middle East's transition to the internet introduced unfamiliar paradigms in capturing and conveying regional events to the outside world. The "Green Movement" of protests against former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's 2009 re-election challenged the Islamic Republic and ushered in the tools of revolt we recognize today. During that uprising, one of the authors worked with sources inside Iran who used YouTube, Facebook, and email to convey what was happening around the country – far from the reach of any foreign news outlet. Confidential sources would provide digital dispatches, which could be synthesized and shared on Twitter, and occasionally included in television and radio reports for ABC News.

Despite overwhelming evidence that suggests a new era of information consumption, it is worth noting that the impact of technology on news coverage is not universally accepted as game-changing. Evgeny Morozov, for example, has argued that social media can cut both ways: it enables activists but at the same time leaves them vulnerable and exposed to authority. Malcolm Gladwell has sparred with others over the true impact of technology on political change in the Arab world, arguing that the impact of Facebook and Twitter has been overplayed and cannot replace personal contact. As journalists who have witnessed the impact of social media in accelerating Arab

political movements, Syria Deeply aligns with those who claim that internet technology has revolutionized society and its interaction with news. As Clay Shirky, a professor at New York University, wrote in the March/April 2011 edition of *Foreign Affairs*:

Do social media allow insurgents to adopt new strategies? And have those strategies ever been crucial? Here, the historical record of the last decade is unambiguous: yes, and yes.

The Arab Spring has demonstrated that whole political systems can be changed or overturned by the disruptive actions of less than 10 percent of their population. This 10 percent of the population was mobilized online, spurred to protest offline, and then returned online to self-report their protests in amateur videos and voices from the ground. From open protests in Tehran to Cairo, to more subtle forms of dissent in Riyadh and Rabat, connectivity has unquestionably been the catalyst.

In the Syrian context, the tools are similar to Iran's Green Movement, with some new developments. The ground war in Syria leans heavily on an information network built over Skype, whose voice over internet protocol (VOIP) technology serves as the frontline of Syria's information war. As an alternate to government-monitored telephone and mobile phone connections, Skype allows activists and rebel groups to use private chat rooms for sharing information and posting real time battle updates. Many of these updates are posted to activist accounts on Facebook, which often sparks heated debate among Syrian users. Some of the information posted on Facebook is shared on Twitter to reach a wider,

international audience. By starting at the root of the information chain, in Skype chat rooms, savvy newsgatherers can access information hours or sometimes days before it emerges in the mainstream press.

With hundreds of thousands of citizen journalists in Syria, the challenge is to identify, vet, validate, and convey a carefully cultivated stream of information that provides a clear picture of the complex conflict. Syria Deeply works to mix digital tools with the human element to build an online situational awareness capacity whereby the most relevant information can rapidly be woven into a narrative about the conflict at large. With the growing influence of "data journalism," we may soon find a greater realm of tools available to automate and curate these information streams. At the moment, we believe the best results are achieved by a dedicated team that covers the story consistently and applies focus and rigor to information that emerges from traditional sources and from users on the ground.

Filling the "Information Gap"

With unprecedented information-sharing vectors, the Syrian conflict represents the growing divide between accessible news and what gets reported. The information gap can be bridged by accommodating new forms of news while remaining true to time-tested journalistic standards, maintaining rigorously vetted and fact-checked sources. We see three challenges – or gaps – for news coverage of the Syria crisis:

First, the Syria crisis is a complex global issue in an under-resourced news environment. Similar past conflicts would have seen more reporters dedicated to covering the latest developments. In Lebanon's Civil War, major networks and newspapers had full-time crews

and fully staffed bureaus continuously covering the conflict. Today, a patchwork of occasional pieces from the theater provides only limited snapshots into what is happening on the ground. Exceptions exist, such as Nour Malas of the Wall Street Journal and Rania Abuzeid, a regular contributor to the New Yorker and Al Jazeera America. Their consistent reporting spans the life of the conflict, but their coverage is the exception and no longer the rule.

Second, the security situation for journalists, both foreign and local, remains especially concerning. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), the 2012 death toll in Syria for journalists was on par with Iraq in 2006 and 2007. Nearly thirty journalists were killed. The toll on journalists continues with the death of French photographer Olivier

Voisin in early 2013. CPJ's latest report in August 2013 suggests at least 14 journalists have gone missing in Syria, though they expect that number to be a significant underestimate.

Local knowledge, when well-utilized, offers a crucial perspective and mitigates the operational risk of deploying foreign journalists. To this end, we have developed reporters who are based on the ground in Syria and are supported by a senior editor who rotates into opposition-held territory. We supplement this physical presence with assistance from Syrians located elsewhere throughout the country. While we temper our on-the-ground reporting to protect our team and our sources, local knowledge offers an important perspective to our audience.

Third, freelance foreign journalists have attempted to fill the void left within this fluid



SYRIAN OFFICIAL NEWS AGENCY SANA

Syrians standing at the scene after a blast occurred in the Mazzeh al-Jabal district of the Syrian capital Damascus – no place for timid journalists

media environment. This development creates security and reporting accuracy concerns, especially as freelancer reporters often cover their own expenses until a media outlet decides to publish their content. Such an arrangement often rewards less experienced journalists willing to take greater risks to develop a reputable byline. This arrangement endangers lives and degrades the quality of coverage in Syria and elsewhere. While we may be seeing a change in this trend - as several British outlets began refusing freelance submissions, including the Sunday Times, The Guardian, Observer and Independent - however, the perceived rewards will still likely outweigh the risks for many freelancers interested in covering the Syria conflict.

These three challenges are naturally inter-related: the greater the strain on traditional news outlets, the less they can steadily fund reporters to consistently cover key issues. Often, freelance reporters fill this void, with consequences in terms of content and, in conflict zones like Syria, enormous risk.

Syria Deeply's position is to mitigate these challenges by developing relationships across networks in the digital and physical domains. We cultivate information exchange with activists and Syrian citizen journalists, who reach out to us to share their perspectives. This combination of focused reporting using carefully developed sources through traditional and new media methods is not only the core of Syria Deeply's effort, but increasingly resembles the key for translating information into reporting in the new media environment.

The human element of our coverage improves our ground knowledge. For instance, during January 2013, one of our senior editors covered fighters with the Tawhid Brigade, a large FSA-affiliated militant group, at an

opposition captured infantry school near Aleppo. Having native Arabic fluency and familiarity with the area, he was able to provide striking insights into the composition and sensibilities of the fighters.

In another example, a group of fighters were escorting journalists through the school grounds by attempting to maneuver some cars through a narrow corridor. A young fighter, an auto-mechanic before the conflict, had an uncanny confidence in judging the width needed to maneuver the vehicles without damaging them on the compound walls. As our editor observed, blue-collar workers like this auto mechanic were increasingly forming the core of the Syrian rebels. Middle-class professionals, such as doctors and lawyers, had mostly left Syria. This level of insight helps interested followers see the bigger picture of the conflict's trajectory while understanding the human elements that drive it.

This human element guides our focus on amplifying civilian voices, often underreported in a war zone where more concentrated attention is usually paid to powerful stakeholders like Islamist rebel groups and their rivals in the Syrian government. Yet the day-to-day dynamics of survival will shape the future of Syrian society. We summarized our findings in a Foreign Policy article in January 2013:

"Chaos is tearing apart Syria's social fabric. We've written about how Syria's young women face forced marriage for the sake of the bride price, their families desperate to live off their dowry. Funerals, a solemn but sacred tradition in Aleppo, have devolved into a stock dumping of bodies, devoid of religious ritual. Profiteering has left citizens disgusted and distrustful of each other as they witness price gauging of food and basic necessities the haves ripping off the havenots."

Accounting for the civilian story, the impact of the conflict on everyday Syrian life, is an essential storyline. It provides us a sense of the Syria that will emerge from the rubble, and it helps us build relationships - not only predicated on the activities of fighters but also the sentiments of civilians.

Information Sharing Dynamics Inside Syria

Like most Arab countries before the 2011 revolutions, Syria's information sharing dynamics were limited and opaque as a function of the reality of life under Ba'ath Party rule. A lack of economic development and heavy censorship slowed the spread and penetration of communications technology in Syria.

Until the early 1990's, there were only two television channels widely available, Syria 1 and Syria 2, both of which were state owned and operated. By 1993, satellite dishes were available on the black market for the high price of roughly \$600-700 USD, but they were technically illegal. According to our senior editor, who grew up in Aleppo, intelligence officers ran extortion rackets whereby they would routinely go house to house removing receivers and fining residents, only to resell the receivers for profit.

In addition to satellite television, Syria was late to embrace cell phones and the internet. A year after inheriting Syria from his father in 2000, Bashar Assad reigned over a country with one percent cell phone penetration rates and only one third of one percent with internet access. By the end of 2011, according to Freedom House, cell phone penetration had reached 63 percent of the population and internet use increased to 20 percent.

Yet phones and internet connections were widely believed to be monitored by the government, a perception bolstered by Bashar al-Assad's well-publicized former position as head of the Syrian Computer Society. Furthermore, Rami Maklouf, Assad's cousin tightly controls Syria's telecommunications market; he is the largest single shareholder of SyriaTel and also has an interest in its only competitor, MTN-Syria.¹

This historical relationship to communications technology is quite different from many parts of the Arab world. According to Freedom House, Syria had one of the least developed telecommunications infrastructure in the Middle East at the outset of the 2011 revolution. When social media debuted in Syria, even to a small audience, it bridged a major connectivity gap, creating affinity groups of like-minded activists who had never before realized they had allies around the country. It also connected Syrians at home to those in the diaspora, catalyzing what would become a key pipeline of support for the Syrian rebels.

Today's Information-Sharing Ecosystem

Social media has been a key tool for activists in all countries involved in the Arab Spring,² as a means to circumvent authorities and organize and mobilize dissent. Social movements coalesced online, becoming the connective tissue that allowed protesters to organize and publicize their demonstrations. Given the significant restrictions on freedom of the press, the freedom of the digital domain was a quantum step in terms of greater organizational capacity. Social media was used to circumvent authority, serving as an enabler in countries with a previously weak capacity to organize. It brought down the transaction cost

for protest – one that had been prohibitively high for activists in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya.

In the case of Syria, the cost of dissent and political association was even more extreme, and the impact of connective technologies even more marked. Facebook and YouTube had been blocked for years before the March 2011 uprising, but the Syrian regime suddenly lifted this restriction in the heat of the Egyptian revolution. In what some see as a tactical ploy, the move gave Syria's *Mukhabarat* – the government intelligence service – greater freedom to monitor and penalize online activists on government networks. This temporarily exposed activists, who now access Facebook through a proxy server, which circumvents the government block and masks their digital movements.

It is worth noting that Facebook penetration rates at the start of Syria's uprising were not high. In Syria, they represented roughly one percent of the population according to a 2010 Dubai School of Government report. This fact may explain three things: one, that Facebook alone was not the source of widespread influence; two, that a small number of well-networked activists can start a monumental information movement using Facebook and other digital tools; and three, that Facebook use has evolved and grown significantly over the course of the conflict. Now it is a forum for civic discourse, through popular discussion pages and threads that tear down or transcend long-standing taboos on political dissent.

The Syrian uprising did not begin online, but it was accelerated through online platforms. The spark of the revolution was lit in Deraa on March 18, 2011, when mothers protested the detention of their teenage sons for writing anti-Assad graffiti. Protests continued,

and videos of those protests soon surfaced on YouTube. The organizers of what would become Shaam News Network, an anti-regime outlet, began collecting videos of protests in Syria and organized a countrywide network of photographers designed to give the world a view from inside Syria. It was dramatically different from the Syrian government narrative, represented by news outlets such as al-Dounia News and the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA). In addition to presenting its own narrative of the crisis, the government severely restricted foreign journalists from entering the country. But once they did, news media technology allowed these reporters greater freedom than ever before. For instance, an American journalist working for Reuters, Suleiman El-Khalidi, went to jail and reported about his incarceration. The narrative/counter-narrative information war continues in Syria today and poses a significant challenge to ground-truthing news.

When social media debuted in Syria, even to a small audience, it bridged a major connectivity gap, creating affinity groups of like-minded activists who had never before realized they had allies around the country.

Our experience is that the dominant information dynamic within Syria is decidedly low-tech. Word of mouth is a primary vehicle, especially in more remote parts of the country and areas where violence occurs frequently. We have repeatedly encountered “fog of war” challenges while reporting in Syria, cases in which some interviewees do not know with clarity what is going on three or four towns away. To combat this, rebel groups collect equipment to



Photo by James Gordon

Word of mouth remains a primary method of transmitting news in Syria; in mosques, souks, and street bazaars

communicate via radio, but even they may not know what is going on 15 to 20 kilometers away from their location.

Despite this low-tech environment, satellite stations have popped up to beam stories into pro-opposition communities, such as Syria al-Ghad and Aleppo News. National Public Radio's Deborah Amos, a senior advisor to Syria Deeply, covered the use of Aleppo News. This satellite channel broadcasts YouTube videos and includes social network updates as a ticker at the bottom of the screen. While the approach appears rudimentary, for people without a computer or internet, it is their only way to get real time news about events unfolding inside Syria.

Those with internet, such as the rebels and activists, access information satellite internet cards. U.S. distributed communications

equipment has limited bandwidth. Instead of using such equipment, those inside Syria who receive enough money from other foreign governments and foreign activists buy more expensive and capable devices, with a wider reach inside the country. Diesel generators are the preferred means for generating the electricity to power such devices.

One private satellite internet provider used in Syria is Tooway, a European company. The receiver can download data at up to 20 megabytes per second, a speed comparable to high-speed service in the U.S. The service is expensive, costing approximately \$2,000 (U.S. dollars) for the initial set-up, plus \$200 per month for a 50 gigabyte usage fee. This 50 gigabyte allotment is often insufficient for uploading High-Definition (HD) video, so some users purchase two or more packages.

One Syria Deeply reporter noted a recent rise in Tooway satellites in early 2013, with five devices seen in three villages near Idlib. These devices were likely brought through Turkey, though it is unclear who paid for such expensive equipment.

The Syrian Information Ecosystem: Getting Ahead of the News Cycle

By understanding the Syrian information ecosystem, Syria Deeply has been able to more effectively monitor and package information coming out of the country. Our reporting is founded on traditional methods: reaching trusted sources quickly with the right questions. But translating this process to the digital domain requires fluency in social media communication and the ability to regularly pulse trusted online news sources.

In the fall of 2012, Syria Deeply had been hearing multiple reports in social media about a breakthrough among the Syrian opposition groups – primarily through Skype chat rooms, but also on Twitter and Facebook. Combing Arabic-language social media using vetted, trustworthy contacts means that stories can be captured 24-48 hours before they appear in international news reports. The chatter we were hearing in social media quickly crystalized around the emergence of Riad Seif, a respected Damascus businessman, whose plan to reorganize the Syrian opposition was embraced by the U.S. in October 2012. News of his plan was being discussed in Arabic language Facebook groups at least 48 hours before Josh Rogin broke the story in his blog on Foreign Policy.

As this incident illustrates, much of the information now coming out of Syria originates on Facebook and Skype through activists on the ground. In the typical supply chain,

activists will record a bombing or another incident on video. They will then take it to Skype and disseminate it to a select group of other activists. Subsequently, they will upload it and share with a Facebook community group. Occasionally it will be shared on Twitter.

We have found these activist groups to be well-organized to serve larger strategic organizational goals. They often try to build relationships with Arabic-language satellite channels such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, which both have high viewership across the Arab world. In this respect, the methods employed resemble very traditional mechanisms used to gain visibility among large audiences.

A profit motive may exist for some activists and local journalists to cooperate with pan-Arab and international media outlets. Fixers in places like Antakya, Turkey, have exclusive contracts with specific media organizations. Such non-competition agreements have made it increasingly difficult for freelancers and incoming news organizations to find sources in northern Syria.

On February 22, 2013, Syria Deeply profiled Mohamed Masalmeh, a reporter from Deraa who was killed on January 18, 2013. Mohamed originally reported for Sham News Network before taking a contract with Al-Jazeera. Other local journalists have received offers but want to remain independent. These journalists create and sell video packages, but are not beholden to any one specific media outlet.

Paradoxically, the evolution of information dissemination occurs in a relatively egalitarian manner. Everybody gets the information at almost the same time. People who are actually in the Skype chat rooms get it first, but even something as simple as signing up for an activist Facebook page provides access to

information that often precedes by two days what is reported on television and print. For journalists, this provides a helpful service, generating information hours before wire services like Reuters, Agence France-Presse (AFP), and the Associated Press (AP) are on the story. Even the New York Times now runs a curated YouTube video feed with analysis.

Accuracy and Reliability In The New Environment

Syria Deeply navigates an information-rich but analytically poor environment to report its stories. We employ tried and true methods of traditional journalism: building contacts, nurturing relationships, and developing trust with our sources. However, unlike in other contexts, we rarely, if ever, have a chance to meet those sources in person. As we advance digital newsgathering, new methods to vet sources and fact check reports must be used to ensure the accuracy of our reporting: Who introduced us to this contact? Do they have any other digital footprints we can verify for their identity? How accurate was their previous reporting? Over time, we have been able to answer these questions through a large network of personal contacts and the ability to quickly review digital signatures of new contacts. This vetting process allows us to build reliable sources.

Our commitment to the Syria story improves the quality of our network of like-minded mission-driven individuals. This differentiates Syria Deeply from other media outlets. We can better serve our users by staying with the story over time and using the best of technology in concert with traditional journalism that educates and informs its audience to evaluate complex issues. The fact is that with more content, there is an opportunity for

deeper and better knowledge. To harness this capability, the Syria Deeply team has reviewed many web outlets and met with many activists. Some activists will lie to bolster their own narrative, as they may be desperate to advance their cause or receive funding. Syria Deeply takes this into account as we cultivate sources and consider their input.

Moreover, acknowledging and reporting the Syrian government view allows us to provide our readers a more complete rendering of the conflict to make their own conclusions about a given issue. We incorporate Syrian government narratives through state-owned media outlets, state press conferences, along with allied narratives from Russia and Iran. Throughout the course of our reporting, we have to do an extremely diligent job of getting this perspective. This approach also allows us to remain outcome neutral as to the events unfolding in Syria.

Many start-up news outlets focusing on the Syrian crisis pursue agendas to influence user opinions and attitudes. In contrast, Syria Deeply aspires to be a platform that rests on an objective goal to increase understanding of the conflict, in a collaborative and intellectually honest approximation of the truth. Our readers recognize and appreciate our multi-leveled focus – from militant groups to civilian stories.

Covering the entire story is a central aspect of traditional journalism that provides our readers with the necessary information to make conclusions based on our reporting. It also fits into our model to be outcome neutral. Other online and new media sources often shed this objectivity, endangering their reporting and reporters. Syria Deeply is committed to being an information platform, not an advocacy organization.

Conclusion: How “Deeply” Platforms Can Advance Conflict Monitoring

Syria Deeply was founded to provide content with context on the unfolding humanitarian and political crisis in Syria and its spillover effect in neighboring countries. We leverage digital tools, like real time Twitter feeds, Google Hangout chats, and innovative data visualization techniques, with the time-tested skills of traditional journalism. We then incorporate a rigorous editorial review process with curated content, blending original reporting from the ground with the best of the web to create a new user experience for complex foreign news issues and crises like Syria.

This experiment has not only become an important source for understanding the Syrian conflict, but also represents a methodology for understanding complex issues using 21st century tools. It is meant to evolve with user feedback and technological innovations. Rather than a traditional newspaper online, the Syria Deeply platform is a dashboard for a range of users to immerse themselves in the issues of the conflict to leave with a fuller and more accurate view of the facts. Rather than a blog, Syria Deeply is a platform focused on growing as a trusted destination, fusing the ease and accessibility of digital media with the rigor of traditional news reporting. We remain committed to the story, to cover the evolution of Syria’s conflict and eventual recovery.

Syria Deeply is an innovative, replicable model for conflict monitoring and reporting, with myriad applications in the modern digital information environment. The model that Syria Deeply refines and iterates can be expanded to cover a range of global issues – imagine an Iran Deeply, Pakistan Deeply, Egypt Deeply, or Mali Deeply. Such an

expansion is already under consideration. Platforms on transnational issues such as Climate Change Deeply, Drug War Deeply, or Malaria Deeply, are also under consideration.

Whatever the topic, the methodology and the value proposition remain the same. The combination of news, knowledge, and insight, delivered in an accessible format, can deliver a significant edge to the user – an open-source opportunity to grasp and track what is going on. Those who navigate issues through a “Deeply” design can emerge with a more robust picture and more complete understanding, for an enhanced ability to operate in an ever more complex world. **PRISM**

NOTES

¹ For additional information on Syria’s cell phone penetration, see <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/pdfid/502a0c520.pdf> along with the 2012 Freedom House “Freedom on the Net” report, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2012/syria>

² It is worth noting that many voices in the region prefer the expression “Arab Awakening” over the term “Arab Spring,” considering the latter to be a sanguine misnomer.

An Interview with Ambassador Frederic C. Hof

President Obama has announced a program of military support to the Syrian opposition, which may have been a great idea one year ago. Is it actually too late to support the opposition in Syria, and if not, how will it play out?

Hof: Whether or not it is too late to do anything in Syria is a very interesting analytical question. Unfortunately, it is not really the kind of question that can be the basis for policy in government. As things stand right now, with the regime provoking certain kinds of reactions in the opposition, Syria is on a one-way trip to state failure. The implications for 23 million people and all of the countries surrounding Syria are enormous and negative. Even if we wonder if things should have been done a year ago, we as a government are obliged to act and try to minimize the damage in Syria; to try to shape developments as best we can in spite of our skepticism.

Can you please elaborate the idea of state failure in Syria? What would that look like and what would be the implications in the region?

Hof: What it would look like is difficult to describe in detail; there are scenarios, potentially involving warlordism, with local leaders assuming almost feudal-like powers in certain localities. There is speculation of Syria actually being partitioned into several different statelets. It's difficult to pinpoint an exact scenario, but it is pretty clear this is the path we're on. Right now, Syria quite literally does not have a government whose rule extends over the entirety of the country. The consequences of this are very serious and we have a humanitarian catastrophe that is not likely to stop anytime soon.

What are the implications for stability in Iraq? Does the Kurdish angle, combined with the sectarian Sunni/Shi'a conflict spiking, present a risk of spillover? Do you think this potentially runs the risk of undermining the U.S. contributions to stability in Iraq?

Ambassador Hof is a senior fellow with the Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East at the Atlantic Council. Before joining the Atlantic Council, Ambassador Hof served as the U.S. Special Advisor for Transition in Syria and previously served as the Special Coordinator for Regional Affairs in the U.S. Department of State's Office of the Special Envoy for Middle East Peace.

This interview was conducted on May 1, 2013.

Hof: I think it runs the risks of undermining whatever progress was made to bring Iraq back together. Iraqis themselves have a major role to play in all of this. The dynamic between Prime Minister Maliki and his opponents may not be entirely independent of developments in Syria. The implications for all of the neighbors are very serious and one of the great ironies here is that elements that continue to do a tremendous amount of damage in Iraq are among those whose presence in Iraq was facilitated and expedited by the Assad regime. These groups have now done a U-turn back into Syria in an effort to eclipse and take over the armed opposition. They are taking the sectarian bait that the regime has thrown out there as part of its own survival strategy. Sectarianism is probably the greatest danger to Syria now, and obviously the implications are similar to places like Iraq or Lebanon – countries where even on the best of days, sectarianism and confessionalism are major challenges.

Who would stand to win? Who gains by Syria's descent into further chaos?

Hof: I suppose there are various local actors of one kind or another that could always find a way to capitalize, whether monetarily or in some other way. I think Syria's demise as a state might constitute an essential part of an Iranian "Plan B" for the country (Iran's "Plan A" for Syria is of course to preserve the Assad regime). President Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez al-Assad, was really the senior partner in the Syrian-Iranian relationship, in particular when it was mostly focused on Saddam Hussein. Now you have Bashar al-Assad taking the role of junior partner to Tehran, and the appearance and prominence of Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, as well.

Preserving that link to Hezbollah is a transcendent national security goal for Iran. There are plenty of Quds force people urging Nasrallah to put people into the fight. Iran's best case scenario is keeping the regime in power, at least in Damascus and the Homs area, and putting the genie of protests back in the bottle. The second best scenario is basically collapse and a degree of chaos, but some ability to maintain a land link to Hezbollah in Lebanon through the Homs area or perhaps through the Alawite area in the northwest region of Syria. The one thing I don't think Iran is interested in – because I believe both Kofi Annan and Lakhdar Brahimi tested this in good faith – is the idea that Iran could somehow be part of the solution, rather than part of the problem in terms of cooperating with a peaceful transition to a different kind of government away from (Assad) family rule. I think the Iranians have concluded accurately that any coherent replacement to the Assad regime would fundamentally change Syria's relationship both with Iran and Hezbollah in ways that Tehran would not like.

Is a possible "Plan B" for them to continue supporting the Assad group as an insurgency in a post-Assad country?

Hof: Definitely and this is the way it is going. In effect right now, Bashar al-Assad and the combination of his security forces – loyal military units, intelligence units, and militias trained by Hezbollah and Iran – are helping to form the armed gangs known as shabiha. All of these things combined have the effect of making Bashar al-Assad the strongest, most coherent militia leader in the country right now. For 43 years, the Syrian government has been an instrument of the ruling family in

which the family has occupied the presidency, and that is where all of the executive power has resided in Syria. However, now we are at the point where even the pretense of government has disappeared and the prime minister is busy dodging car bombs.

So it has devolved into a situation where Assad is the most-powerful feudal chief?

Hof: I think so and for the family itself to play this role, it's important that it holds on to Damascus. Right now, Assad's principal strategy is to bind the minorities, especially his own Alawite group, to him and to the survival of his family. He is having some luck with that because of the rise of *Jabhat al-Nusra* and *Ahrar al-Sham* and these other jihadist groups. Their rise is a gift to Assad, and their presence in the country is a lifeline to the regime.

The Alawite community over the years, starting with the French mandate, has been quite militarized.

Even though it (the regime) is disorganized, the one thing that Hafez al-Assad did when he took power in 1970 was to make sure there were no rival power centers within the Alawite community. Everything Assad had gone through in the 1960s in his steady climb to power taught him that this is the one thing you must nail down. You are always going to get opposition within the Sunnis. If the Christians aren't happy, they'll emigrate to the U.S. or Canada, but keeping the Alawite community absolutely under the thumb is essential.

Now if Bashar loses Damascus, I believe there will be people in that community, maybe military commanders, who will begin to look at this family and say, "Aha! Are they really protecting us or are they a liability?"

Our impression from recent field interviews inside Syria is that people don't see an alternative to supporting Assad and they aren't happy to be put in this position. If they did have an alternative or if he didn't seem to be delivering anything of value, they may be willing to jettison their support of him. Is that accurate?

Hof: My closest Syrian friends remain grudgingly supportive of the regime; these are people I have known for nearly fifty years. I got started as an exchange student in Damascus when I was a teenager. People I have known from that time, like Christian families, are sticking with the regime – not because they like Bashar, nor because they have any illusions about the incompetence, the corruption, and the brutality of the regime. Half of their relatives are in the U.S., Canada, France, or Australia. There is a reason for that and yet they look around at potential alternatives and are not seeing anything that gives them comfort. I think this is going to be inevitably the case until an alternate government is established on Syrian territory.

Is the Syrian opposition, as it is currently constituted, a viable alternative?

Hof: Not as currently constituted. The challenge for the U.S. and others right now is that we can't just sit back, point fingers at the opposition and say, "How inadequate! Look at their divisions," and so forth. Once the decision was made in December 2012 to recognize the opposition coalition as the legitimate representatives of the Syrian people, we gave up the option of being full-time skeptics and critics. Right now you have a spectacle of the mainstream opposition being largely divided

not only because of its own tendencies to divide but because this is a country coming out of a 50 year political coma. They are also being divided by rivalries among key Arab states, such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia in particular. This is a situation where the U.S., whose initial inclination was to let the local actors take the lead on this, doesn't want to get involved in everything around the world. Syria looks particularly like a bad hornets' nest; however I think it has become clear that the subcontracting of the Syrian revolution to others is not working. The U.S. really needs to exert itself and this is one of the things that U.S. Secretary of State Kerry is taking on, and it is one of the themes of this steady stream of visitors coming to Washington to visit President Obama. They are all saying that enough is enough and we need a unified effort here. If we are going to make something of this opposition we have to vector assistance through it and to it.

Over the last 18 months, we have seen civilian secular democracy activists get sidelined and the political space for a strong, secular opposition government become increasingly fragmented. Given the DNA of Jabhat al-Nusra – its close affiliation to Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) – it is strange to us how different they are from AQI. Al-Nusra is conducting social programming, charity work, political organizing, and they are not targeting civilians in the same way that AQI did. It is almost as if they have learned from the mistakes of AQI. Are they some kind of hybrid between AQI and Hezbollah? Are we looking at a different class of jihadists here?

Hof: We may well be, and what has to be taken into account is actual Syrian input into

all of this – the actual influence of Syrians who may be attracted to these groups. Because these groups have arms, ammunition, and military experience, it's possible that the actual Syrian membership is having something of a leavening influence on how they operate inside Syria as contrasted to certain practices in Iraq

The narrative certainly has changed in the last several months. The opposition seems to be increasingly dominated by jihadist or radical groups. Is there anything that the U.S. can do to prevent a government or regime emerging out of this conflict that is jihadist, Salafist, and hostile to the U.S.?

Hof: I think the main thing to be done – and assistance is a big part of this – is on the military side. In order to establish direct relations with the Supreme Military Council's Salim Idris (Commander of the Free Syrian Army), the administration is in the process of twisting Saudi, Qatari, and Turkish arms, saying that every last thing goes through this guy. It is a similar situation with the Coalition (Syrian Opposition Coalition); I think our objective needs to be the establishment of an alternate government on Syrian territory, not something that just consists of exiles that are currently based in Cairo. The opposition coalition needs to work with the Supreme Military Council and they need to work with the local committees. There are lots of difficulties with establishing an alternate government in Syria but at the end of the day, if you are looking to throw a spanner into what seems to be the natural course of things, this is the way to do it.

To be honest with you, I'm not sure to what extent the Jabhat al-Nusra domination, in terms of the armed opposition, is real as

opposed to information operations. But unless and until we get behind an alternative that consists of credible people operating a decent program from a decent platform on Syrian territory, to people like my Syrian friends, there is not going to be a credible alternative worth looking at.

That probably has some kind of Alawite component, right?

Hof: It should. It needs to be a government based on certain standards, such as citizenship, rule of law, and civil society. Ultimately, it should be a government that refuses to take this sectarian bait, which is increasingly difficult. I think all Arab leaders would recognize the truth of what I am saying about the necessity of having an on-the-ground alternative to family rule. The problem for the U.S. is that getting behind this kind of development requires a fundamental strategic shift. We would most certainly need to get out of the subcontracting business at that point. We would be taking the lead in rounding up resources. It doesn't mean that Syria suddenly becomes the ward of the American taxpayer. We'd be the ones with the tin cup out there, meaning we would have to make some basic decisions about defending the new government that is established. Because what we see is a consistent pattern; whenever the regime loses a populated area to the opposition, that area – whether a residential neighborhood, city, village, or town – gets subjected to all kinds of bombardment from various sources. You can imagine what would happen if a government was suddenly proclaimed.

Can you give us some detail about how a military operation would be organized? Our understanding is that the regime is protecting a north-south land corridor, making the central Homs-Hama area critically important. The regime's east-west air bridge coming in from Iran is also vital for the regime's sustainment as is territorial control over portions of all the major cities. So the outlines of the strategy could be: 1) knock out the air bridge in an air operation; 2) deny some of the Syrian government's control of the central Homs-Hama area; and, 3) help the opposition gain territorial control of major city centers like Aleppo. However, the starting point has to be a viable political strategy; you can't just jump right into a military solution. Could you react to that?

Hof: I think the greatest problem we're facing right now – a problem that would intensify were an alternate government established on Syrian territory – is the regime terror campaign aimed at civilians. Its goal may be to convince the civilians that the Free Syrian Army is more trouble than it's worth. This is a classic tactic, but what it is doing is running up the body count and leaving people seriously maimed. It is driving people towards the borders and into internal displacement, becoming a real catastrophe. I think the objective you have to aim for in a case like this, is to certainly have the effects of a no-fly zone because you want the results of a no-fly zone. The question is, would you go about it tactically in a way parallel to what we did in Iraq? There seems to be considerable Department of Defense resistance to that, which is understandable. They have continuing responsibilities such as Afghanistan and a boatload of contingencies concerning Iran. They are not

looking for a particularly heavy lift in Syria. One thing that perhaps ought to be looked at is the use of standoff weaponry to neutralize Syrian air, missile, and even artillery assets.

What would be your strategy for building a new viable Syrian government? Should the approach be focused on nation-building and institutional development as in Afghanistan or should it have a different focus?

Hof: First of all, it is very important to identify the proper people, platform, and program. I think that the government is going to need a great deal of technical and advisory assistance; this is something that the U.S. and its European allies could certainly be involved with. I also think they are going to need a great deal of financial support. The Friends of the Syrian people, now under the leadership of a Dutch diplomat, are in the process of trying to put together a reconstruction fund, which is a financial tool we would want. I'm not sure that I would categorize this as a nation-building exercise in the sense of Afghanistan.

What you want to do is set up, on Syrian territory, a structure that has an opportunity to succeed in serving as an alternative to the Assad regime. Perhaps, along the line of the President's objective, it can also serve as an interlocutor with that regime. Perhaps Assad will decide at some point, whether on his own or under Russian persuasion, to engage in a negotiations process consistent with what was agreed to by the P5 (permanent five members of the UN Security Council) in Geneva back in June 2012. We're not looking for perfection here nor the ideal government structure, but something good enough. It is not as if Assad is doing any governing right now; there is no government in Syria. Getting this set up as an

alternative is important, and as long as the opposition is simply an opposition, it is not going to serve as an alternative. Moaz al-Khatib, who recently resigned as head of the opposition coalition, wrote a beautiful letter to the Christians of Syria; the problem is that nobody paid attention to it. I was in the Vatican some time ago and asked their chief Syrian diplomat, "What do you think of Sheikh Khatib's letter to the Christians?" His response was, "what letter?" This is always going to be the problem: as long as an opposition is an opposition, no matter what it says or does, it is going to have a basic credibility deficit. That problem goes away if you have a government proclaimed on Syrian territory that is actually recognized by the U.S. and other key countries as the Syrian government. This is not going to be perfect, nor a Scandinavian model of functioning government, but it could and must be good enough.

So we are dealing with multi-confessional rule of law. What are the other characteristics that you could see as essential for that potential government?

Hof: To me the most essential part in terms of any ideology is citizenship in the context of national identity or the idea that, in terms of political identification, citizenship trumps everything else. The one thing I would really regret seeing in Syria, unless it is the only way that a tourniquet can be put on the bleeding, is that the country devolves in the direction of a big Lebanon. This would be with various functions assigned on the basis of confessional politics. I know there is a big debate over the extent to which national identity has really taken root in Syria since its

independence in 1946, as opposed to underlying confessional tensions and so forth.

What about the problem of purging? Do you think as this plays out that there will have to be a purging of at least senior level officials from the Assad regime, and how far down would that go?

Hof: It's hard to tell. I think the one principle that the U.S. government has tried to adhere to in all of this is that ultimately accountability is in the hands of Syrians. I know there have been some efforts within the opposition to try to answer that question precisely.

How far down does it go? One can think notionally about the "family" and some sort of inner ring of enablers whose future participation in the governance of Syria is absolutely inadmissible. Basically, it would be inadmissible under the terms of Geneva, given the fact that a nationally unified government would be created by mutual consent between the opposition and the government. I think one thing that does occur to the mainstream opposition is that, to the maximum degree possible, the institutions of state should be preserved during a transition. As badly in need of reform and rejuvenation as they may be, you don't want to have the Iraqi-style army of the unemployed and disaffected. Now this is a matter of debate in Syria, and this is going to be one of the real tension generators in any kind of a transitional scheme because I am sure there is a large constituency in Syria for the "throw the bums out" approach, which is perfectly understandable. As we discuss with the opposition coalition the procedures for establishing a government on Syrian territory, there are some demands that we're going to be making in

return for the support we're going to render for this. I think acceptance of the notion of continuity of state institutions to the extent possible is something that we would insist on.

What else would we insist on?

Hof: I think the general nature of this government's program is to envision the future governance of Syria as a unified country. I don't think we would get into the business of positively identifying people that ought to be in the government. We are not going to say, "Ahmed so-and-so needs to be Minister of the Economy." I think we are going to insist on, without naming names, some figures who are obviously divisive and threatening in terms of their public profile who ought not to be playing a role in this government.

Do you think we would insist on a regime based on representative democracy?

Hof: I think what we should insist on is Syrian governance that moves seriously toward the standard of government deriving its powers from the consent of the governed. There is a history here; you have the word "democracy" that means something to us, but the way it has been applied to certain Middle Eastern political situations by the West, particularly the U.S., sometimes evokes a negative reaction. I hope that the main import of the Arab Spring is that Arabs themselves, whether in Syria or elsewhere, are finally coming to grips with the age-old question of what really follows the Ottoman Empire. This is in terms of a source of political legitimacy and what follows the Sultan and the Caliph. I think the answer is out there, but getting to the end result is not going to be easy. The answer that is out there

is that rule must come from the consent of the governed. Some other approaches were tried, such as colonial high commissioners, big Arab leaders trying to capture the magic of Pan-Arab nationalism, and people that actually purport to know the will of God in contemporary political affairs, all of which I think are transient.

Is this the War of Ottoman Succession, phase two?

Hof: It is! One of the things I remember from college is a professor who said that in major parts of the Middle East, especially the Levant, the key question is what follows the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman Empire's passing was, in historical terms, the blinking of the eye; 90 years ago – that is nothing. In that system, all political legitimacy flowed through the Sultan-Caliph. It was a 400-year experiment in political Islam. The Sunnis were the big shots of the empire, the Christians and Jews had official protection while everybody else had no status.

Finding a more or less stable, permanent replacement for that – does it necessarily involve the redrawing of boundaries? This is the current fad and it's a question of legitimacy. I suspect in the end Syria is probably going to continue to exist as a political entity of some kind within its current boundaries. That is not going to be easy, and there are going to be a lot of challenges to that, but the real issue is going to be finding the source of political legitimacy. I think even Assad's friends and allies within Syria, many of whom were western educated, would probably acknowledge privately that there is just no way that Bashar can rule legitimately in this country. Even if he wins every battle from here on

out, there will be a significant portion of the population, probably a majority, that will have the view that he doesn't have the right to serve as President of the Republic. That is what we are talking about when we are talking about legitimacy.

Has the State Department approached this particular conflict or crisis any differently than you would have imagined 10 or 15 years ago?

Hof: That's a tough question. I think it was not commonly believed that the wheels would come off in Syria really to the extent that they have. It was a little surprising at the beginning that Bashar al-Assad, a person who really understood the whole communications revolution – he was Chairman of the Syrian Computer Society - would react to a peaceful protest the way he did, in light of what he knew about social media. I think the Department of State from the beginning, has done a reasonably good job of teeing up options and alternatives for the White House. In terms of that kind of process, the State Department behaved now as it would have 10 or 20 years ago faced with a parallel crisis. I don't see any particularly startling new departures.

With respect to former Secretary of State Clinton's focus on the "three Ds"—defense, development, and diplomacy—planning and executing jointly, have we achieved interagency collaboration for Syria?

Hof: I think the challenge for this administration has not been physically located in the Department of State in this respect. I think every administration has its own methodology for managing the interagency. In a crisis like

the Syrian crisis, it is much more than the Department of State. The DOD has enormous equities; the intelligence community is very important in all of this, both analytically and operationally; and the Treasury Department has played a big role in unfolding American policy. How the White House manages this, how it sets up its national security system under the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, varies from administration to administration. I think for this administration, it has been difficult and a real challenge to come up with a system that reliably produces options and alternatives for presidential decisions. It is the president himself who sets the tone for all of this. Probably the best and most functional system we have had in recent history is the one run by General Brent Scowcroft for President George H.W. Bush. That seems to be the model. Scowcroft was very systematic about getting the input of all the relevant actors and making sure that the president of the U.S. had all the information that he needed to make a decision. I think in this administration, there has been more of a tendency toward insularity by the president and a relatively small circle of advisors. It certainly is not a system that General Scowcroft would recognize. I think if you are looking at ways that the U.S. government has handled this crisis and contrast it with other crises at different times, look at the National Security Staff that used to be referred to as the NSC staff. Take a look and see how that is run.

It sounds like the White House took away some very clear lessons from the Iraq experience. Do you think those were the right lessons?

Hof: No. I think the President's inclination is to look at Syria through the prism of Iraq. I think one of his guiding assumptions is, "if I do anything in Syria beyond providing humanitarian assistance and technical assistance to the opposition, I am going to be sucked in just like the U.S. was sucked into Iraq. And if you do one thing you wind up in the end, occupying the country." This is the slippery slope model. I think what has been counter-intuitive for him, but is nevertheless true, is that holding Syria at arm's length would seem on the surface a very risk-averse, conservative policy. Given what is happening now, however, it is the most risky policy of all. He may be slowly coming to that decision, but it is counter-intuitive, especially when he has people advising him to stay away from getting involved. Unfortunately there is no staying away from it. One way or another, we are in the middle of it. **PRISM**

An Interview with Murhaf Jouejati

In your op-ed in Al-Monitor on September 2, you emphasize the merits of military intervention by the international community in Syria. Please tell us more about why and how you'd like to see the international community involved in a military engagement.

Jouejati: First, let me explain what I mean by a more vigorous engagement: what President Obama is proposing is that US engagement be limited in time and in scope, with no “boots on the ground.” I think everybody agrees with no boots on the ground; not only in terms of American public opinion and American policymakers, but Syrians and the Syrian opposition itself do not want any foreign boots on the ground. Syrian rebels believe they can do it themselves. But when Mr. Obama talks about a limited operation against Assad, he is saying publicly that all Assad needs to do is turn on the news and know a strike is coming. So all Assad needs to do is hunker down, absorb the blow, declare himself a victor, and continue in his murderous ways against the Syrian people.

What I think the Syrian opposition would prefer by far is the kind of campaign that would degrade Assad’s ability to kill at will. What has been most successful in Assad’s killing machine has been the Syrian Air Force. Assad has been flying bombing sorties, including against bakeries and people waiting in breadlines.

He has also successfully used his surface-to-surface missiles. He is launching SCUD missiles into civilian neighborhoods. If the United States were to take these out, and, simultaneously, were to arm the moderate elements within the Free Syrian Army (FSA) that would then create a balance of power. Right now, there is a lopsided balance of power. Assad has the advantage, given assistance from Hezbollah, Iran, and Russia. Assad believes that it is still possible to crush the rebellion militarily, especially when the international community is reluctant and hesitant to get involved. When I talk of a more vigorous American engagement, I do not mean any boots on the ground, but I do mean a no-fly zone. I do mean a campaign that takes out his air force.

Murhaf Jouejati, Professor of Middle East Studies, National Defense University Near East South Asia (NESA) Center for Strategic Studies is also Chairman of Syria’s “The Day After” organization.

This interview was conducted on September 3, 2013, four days after U.S. President Barack Obama’s speech on the U.S. response to chemical weapons attacks in Syria. A bill authorizing the use of force against the government of Syria, introduced by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid on September 6, would not pass.

The boots on the ground would entirely be Syrian, provided that they are equipped. Because until now, the world has been saying, “we will not arm you, Oh Syrians, nor will we defend you. Go out and die.” These conditions are impossible. The Syrians can do it themselves, but they do need the assistance of the international community. But the international community will not act without U.S. leadership, and thus far, we have not seen that.

Please elaborate on the risks of international engagement in Syria.

Jouejati: The international community claims they fear that arms would fall into the wrong hands. However, I don’t buy this because relevant U.S. authorities have vetted the FSA. They know who the good guys are, who the bad guys are, and they have been satisfied with guarantees provided by the leader of the Supreme Military Council (SMC), General Salim Idris. The radicals have shown themselves to be far better-armed than those moderate elements that we need to support. I think this fear is mostly used as a justification by the international community to do little.

The U.S. [is also worried that it] could be sucked into the morass in Syria. Here, what looms very large, is the Iraqi shadow. However, I challenge the basic premise of this [fear]: Syria is not like Iraq. The difference between the situation in Iraq and that in Syria is that the case in Iraq was an external invasion. In Syria, the populace of unarmed civilians is screaming for outside help. As a result, in Syria the degree of receptivity for the United States will be different than it was in Iraq. I am no Ahmad Chalabi, and I am not pretending that the Americans will be received with roses. This is one reason why most Syrians don’t want

boots on the ground. There is always the danger of miscalculations along the way, and this may take longer than I am claiming here. But again, I think these fears, or potential pitfalls are, for the most part, justifications in order to do as little as possible.

Given the chemical attack in the eastern suburbs of Damascus on August 21, 2013 and the subsequent lack of international response, what do you think is the reaction within Syrian communities who have been victims of these attacks?

Jouejati: Let me paraphrase a refugee that I saw yesterday on TV--he was asking the reporter whether America was drunk or on drugs. Here is a chemical attack against a civilian population, and America, who is a guarantor of international peace and security and a signatory to the convention banning chemical weapons, is debating what to do. Expectations of an intervention rose dramatically after the attack, when word spread that the Obama administration was going to employ force in response. Expectations went through the roof until Saturday, August 31, 2013, when they heard the announcement that the President was seeking congressional authorization before acting. As I wrote in my op-ed in Al-Monitor, congressional consultation has its upsides and its downsides. I respect America’s democratic process, but in the Middle East, the step back was taken as a major sign of weakness. In fact the Syrian media was referring to the decision as a “historic American retreat.”

We should not brush this aside lightly; the decision has very grave implications. Some of Assad’s supporters were ready to jump ship because America was going to strike. Now they see this American weakness and there is really

no need for them to defect. And this is what makes the Assad regime strong—the loyalists who are fighting with him - the cronies, the barons, the generals - see a determined Hezbollah-Iranian-Russian effort on their behalf contrasted against an America that is seeking justifications to do as little as possible. Given that situation, they are not going to jump ship.

President Obama, speaking from the Rose Garden on August 31, said that a military strike didn't have to happen immediately. It could happen two weeks to one month after the chemical weapons attack. Given that, he wanted to seek Congressional approval and have a rigorous debate in the United States about what a military strike would mean for U.S. policy in the Middle East. Do you disagree with his sense of timing?

Jouejati: The evidence is not in what I think, it is in what happens. I speak to Syrians on the ground every day. There are certain neighborhoods in Damascus where tanks are going into private garages, the mukhabarat, the intelligence services, are identifying apartments and houses that are empty and are relocating senior officers there. All this gives time for Assad to strengthen his defenses. And in addition to strengthening his defenses, he is continuing on his killing spree in the hope that by the time of a military strike, he would have [taken full control] of the Damascus suburbs. So when one is in Washington, one finds the words about the timing of a strike in a day, in a week, in a month, in a year to be very reasonable and rational. But, when you are in Syria, and you see the redeployment of Assad's army, and the fact that prisoners are moved to targets that are likely to be hit as human

shields, then you know that this announcement about the timing of an attack has concrete consequences.

One could argue that Assad's defensive preparations for a U.S. strike would limit the Syrian government's offensive ability to launch more devastating attacks on civilian targets. Please comment on the tradeoffs you believe Assad is making between defensive preparations and offensive attacks against civilians within Syria.

Jouejati: What we've seen from Saturday, August 31, until today [September 3, 2013], is both the hunkering down of the regime and simultaneously the continued attacks. On September 2, there were at least 29 sorties over the Damascus suburbs. And the town of Qudsaya, right outside Damascus, has nearly been leveled. This is happening while the regime is also hunkering down [and preparing defensively for the attacks]. It is a large army that Assad has so he can employ some of his forces to kill, and others to hunker down.

We regularly hear about the tragedies of the past two and a half years in Syria, but do you see any "bright spots" or positive news we should note?

Jouejati: It is very, very difficult to talk about anything that is bright in the last two and a half years. There is one very important element that I think has been missed by the Western media, and that is that Syrians have shed their fear. That is remarkable. I have lived in Syria for a long time, and I know the degree of fear that the people have of the Assad regime. A fear that is not one or two or three

years old but goes back to the early 1960s, with the takeover of the Ba'ath party in Syria. You have nearly half a century of accumulated fear by the citizenry and now they have shed it, now they are coming out, even at the price of their lives. There are a lot of very tragic stories throughout the two and a half years and, although there is increasing sectarianism, and increasing militarization and so on, simultaneously, you have a lot of areas where there is an increased political awareness across sects that Syria will never go back again to dictatorship. And we are seeing this, in those areas that are "liberated" and that are controlled by the extremists – Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – where the citizenry there, as a result of their freedom from the Assad regime, are demonstrating against the strict rules of these religious extremists. So there is an increased political consciousness. But other than that, I really do not see any bright spots whatsoever. All I see is death and destruction.

Looking toward the future and to an eventual political transition, what do you think will happen to the Syrian military and its intelligence apparatus after the conflict ends? Specifically, please comment on how the future of the security sector will be affected differently, depending on how the transition happens (i.e. with or without international assistance).

Jouejati: This leads me right into The Day After Project (TDA) and I will distinguish between the theoretical, the rosy, the practical, and what may happen. TDA consists of 45 Syrian intellectuals who come from all walks of economic life and represent all religious and ethnic sects in Syria, including Kurds,

Arabs, Armenians, Assyrians, Circassians, and so on. We come from all political persuasions on the ground, from the far left to the far right. TDA drew on all of us for a period of 6-7 months to explore different issue areas: Transitional Justice, Security Sector Reform, Economic Reform, Constitutional Reform, Electoral Law Reform and the Rule of Law. The objective of these meetings was to come up with a vision for a future Syria. And all these different people, from different walks of life, from different political forces, agreed on the establishment of a civil and democratic state in Syria in which the rule of law rules without discrimination over all of its citizenry. All of Syria's citizens would be equal before the law.

Under the TDA project, I personally focused on security sector reform. This group pressed the need to have a civilian authority over the military. We need a military that is apolitical and whose function is the protection of Syria's territorial integrity and national sovereignty. The same is true of the police force. With regard to the intelligence services, we advocate their elimination as they are now. In the future, we suggest the establishment of new intelligence services that are apolitical, that answer to civilian authority and are overseen by Parliament, together with the military and the police. The intelligence services that we would recommend for the future are military intelligence for external threat assessment and an internal intelligence service to fight drug trafficking, white-collar crime, corruption, etc.

Now, with regard to de-Ba'athification, we have tried to take several lessons from other countries like Libya, Iraq, and others. From Iraq we have taken a major lesson that we should not and will not "de-Ba'athify," because when you "de-Ba'athify," you paralyze state

institutions. That is because there are many Ba'athis--some of them are genuine in their ideological purity, but others are opportunists and just need to get a better job. Regardless, if you de-Ba'athify, you are going to paralyze the state. So there will be no de-Ba'athification. There will be intelligence services that are apolitical. A national police force committed to enforcement of the law. A law that is stipulated by Parliament, and an army that is also apolitical and under civilian rule, and whose budget comes from Parliament.

This is theoretical; in reality, it's not going to be that easy and that is because you are going to have factionalism within the army. You are going to have some factions that are going to want to be superior to other ones. The idea of civilian authority over the military so far is working with the Supreme Military Council. But at the end of the day, if the military takes over power as a result of the Assad regimes collapse, it may well be that the military would want to protect their interests and to dominate society. If Assad is overthrown with international assistance, I think there would be some oversight over this military, which is a good thing. But the bad thing is, and we see it already today, that different states are pushing their different agendas onto different factions. And they are financing these different factions, which exacerbates the divisions already existing in the opposition.

Finally, what if Assad is ousted through a negotiated outcome? The Geneva initiative sounds very nice, but at the end of the day, it is initiated by two sponsors who do not see eye-to-eye. The United States is of the understanding that the outcome would be the establishment of a transitional government with full executive authority, which means without Assad. The Russians understand it to be with

Assad. So already there is a problem; the sponsors don't agree. You also have to get the two conflicting parties to the table, and Assad is of the view that he could crush this militarily, so he is in no mood to negotiate with anyone and he is in no mood to share power with anyone. If he does go to a potential Geneva conference, it is only to save the face of his Russian mentors. But he will not negotiate in good faith. The only way to have him negotiate in good faith is to level the playing field, that is, to equalize the balance of power.

In the absence of a resolution, extreme Islamic groups are taking over large swaths of territory, particularly in the areas that are held by the opposition. And they will certainly be spoilers in whatever develops next. How are the Assad regime and the opposition – the Etliaf- addressing the challenges posed by Islamic extremists' influence? Can you tell us where these extremist groups are particularly popular and where they are less popular?

Jouejati: This may surprise you but the Assad regime has not carried out many battles against the extremists thus far. The areas bombed by the regime are [mostly] under the control of the moderates. And that is because Assad has every interest in portraying this fight to the West as a battle against extremist terrorism and a battle between secularism and fundamentalism instead of a popular uprising against him. Let us not forget that al-Nusra is the product, first and foremost, of jihadis who were arrested by Syrian authorities during the war on Iraq. The Syrian government released them under the guise of “presidential pardons” specifically to justify that their fight was against terrorists. And later they were joined by jihadis that came from Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon,

and then from Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Chechnya. The extremists are getting stronger all the time. They were getting stronger in the first six to seven months when this was an unarmed protest against Assad. The international community did not lift a finger to defend the civilian population that was already under brutal attack by the Assad regime.

That vacuum was filled by these extremists who became increasingly stronger, especially since the international community would not help what was, or what became, the Free Syrian Army, which consists of defectors from the Syrian army plus civilians that want to protect their families and homes.

Today, about 60-70% of Syrian territory is controlled by the opposition, but Assad controls around 70% of the population. Assad controls the major cities, whereas the opposition controls the provinces. I can tell you that I am hearing from inside that there is not a lot of happiness with these extremists because they are altering the way of life of Syrians who, in their nature, are not extremists. Islam in Syria is neither Salafi nor Wahabi. It is more like Turkish Islam, a moderate form of Islam, so there have been many demonstrations against the extremists. But at the same time, these extremists are disciplined, they are incorruptible, and they are very good at providing services: bread, water, health care, and so on. So the population tolerates them, uneasily though.

The Assad regime will not go to war against them, because it wants to show that this is a fight against terrorism. The Etilaf, and within it the SMC, has distanced itself from extremism and has condemned many of their acts. This goes back to the TDA in Transitional Justice and the Rule of Law. We are in favor of prosecuting in a court of law anybody who

commits abuses and violations against human rights. The SMC distances itself from the activities of the extremists. However, these extremists are militarily more powerful. The SMC doesn't necessarily want to pick a fight with them directly, although many battles have already taken place.

People say that the extremists fighting in Syria are very well funded. However, the international community has provided hundreds of millions of dollars through the secular opposition for life saving humanitarian assistance and capacity building efforts for good governance. What are the relative impacts of these funding flows on the capacity and effectiveness of the recipients?

Jouejati: The extremists receive money from Sheikh A, Sheikh B, and Sheikh C, and other wealthy individuals in Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The moderate opposition, however, is receiving money for refugee relief. The United States thus far has spent almost a billion dollars for emergency relief. To the best of my knowledge, extremely little has been allocated to military requirements, though cell phones, night vision equipment, and communications equipment were also provided. Recently, the Obama administration announced it was going to provide more than non-lethal assistance. But Congress jumped in. Here we are now with the Free Syrian Army having received very, very little, if anything, from the United States other than non-lethal assistance. Other assistance has been provided from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and from Turkey. But again, these countries are helping those factions that best suit their national agendas. However, Saudi Arabia recently took over the dominant role in assisting the Free Syrian Army.

There is talk of creating a fund in which all donors would channel their money to be distributed by the SMC. If that happens, that would be very good news because the money going to humanitarian relief is not supporting the fight, whereas the jihadis are getting large amounts of money that they do not need to account for. It's just a question of channeling the funds effectively and where and how these funds are distributed. Right now, it's mostly to relief efforts and the SMC is getting very, very little. The newest president of the coalition, Mr. Ahmed Jarba, has taken the task upon himself to try to acquire as much funding for the SMC as possible. These funds would go toward the creation of a national army, whose tasks would be to bring down the Assad regime, but also to integrate some of the loose elements out there, and to defeat the extremists.

One of the biggest frustrations that the international community has had with the Etilaf, the Syrian Opposition Coalition, is that it has been so divided. What are the driving forces behind those divisions and what possible strategies can the Etilaf adopt to overcome them?

Jouejati: Originally, the Syrian National Council (SNC), the opposition group established before the current Coalition, was dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood. We have a dynamic here that is very similar to Egypt; the revolution against Mubarak was a young and secular revolution, but the Muslim Brotherhood quickly jumped on its back and hijacked it. It's really the same thing in Syria: it was a young and secular revolution and the Muslim Brotherhood jumped on the back of the SNC to dominate it. That created a lot of

resentment with the secularists, like myself, within the opposition. In both Egypt and Syria, secularists are very disorganized, because authoritarian governments long discriminated against secular, pro-democracy political parties. However, the Muslim Brotherhood is a political party that dates back to the 1930s. Although illegal and operating underground since the 1960s, it is very disciplined, organized, structured, and hierarchical. The secularists faced a very formidable opponent in the Muslim Brotherhood.

Secondly, bear in mind that Syrians have been deprived of the art of politics for the past 50 years. Now, they have been parachuted into a situation where they have to organize politically in order to save a country, which is no easy feat. Additionally, Syrian opposition leaders are scattered all over the world--some inside Syria, many in jails; other are outside Syria living in exile. So, organization is lacking.

In addition to this, the opposition has been courted by many different states, each with its own interests and agenda. Turkey and Qatar support the Muslim Brotherhood. Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E and Jordan are opposed to them. As a result, funds are channeled to different factions, which has exacerbated the divisions within an already-divided opposition. Enter the United States, who says to the Syrian National Council, "you need to expand to include more political forces on the ground," which it does. Now we have the Coalition, but I think it is facing the same problems as the former SNC, which is now embedded in the Coalition. In the Coalition, there is a lack of hierarchy, a lack of structure, a lack of discipline, a lack of organization, a lack of know-how, and a lack of professionalism. Add onto this the personal [ego] factor--the aggrandizement of this person or that person at the

expense of this person or that person—and you start to see the formation of factions. As a result of this infighting and of the opposition's inability to get into Syria to act on the ground, the Syrian body politic is less enthusiastic about the opposition today than it was at the start.

In addition, there are divisions between opposition activists living inside Syria and those outside the country. It is a very artificial division, because many who are outside Syria were very recently inside the country. This coalition is manned by representatives of local forces on the ground, like the Local Coordination Committees, the revolutionary committees, and the SMC, so they are represented in the Coalition. When the Coalition takes a position, it is as a result of a consensus of those representatives who are represented on the ground. So, while I agree that the Coalition is weak and divided, I would not go to the extent that the Western media has been portraying it. The opposition can, and should, do a much better job though.

If you were to give Ahmed Jarba, the current head of the Etilaf, one piece of advice in overcoming some of these challenges that you explained, what would that be?

Jouehati: A very short time ago I was with him and we spent a few days together during the first meeting between the Coalition and the United Nations Security Council, so I got to know him. I was impressed by the fact that he was far more comfortable with Saudis, Qataris, and other Arabs than he was with Westerners, though one needs a balance. I was very impressed with the fact that he is a good listener, he takes advice, and he understands his limits. But it is very difficult to build

institutions and for people to understand their tasks and their chain of command and to be disciplined enough to perform their functions. Right now, there is a lot of overlap and a lot of wasted energy. If I had any advice for him, I would say, "do not just lobby the Saudis, Americans and the French for support. Go to Syria's liberated areas and build a solid, sustainable institution. Try not to depend on any foreigners – you can do it yourself. If there is outside assistance, that would be complementary, but at the end of the day, you need to work in an institutional fashion to be effective."

Surveys on the ground in Syria have revealed Syrians' impressions of the Etilaf. Over time, their perceptions have become more and more pessimistic. One of the frustrations that Syrians note is that the Etilaf acts more like a foreign ministry focused on external affairs than it resembles a national, political opposition with an internal focus. Can you react to that sentiment?

Jouehati: I don't blame them because they are sitting inside Syria, experiencing a whole lot of violence, and when they turn on their TV, they see a delegation of the Etilaf going to Paris, Istanbul, Washington or London. They see the Etilaf more like a travel agency than a Foreign Ministry. I don't blame them. Syrians need to see concrete results on the ground. But what they don't understand is, to have concrete things on the ground, you do need to build institutions, and this is no small task.

Within the TDA, I am working hard as its chairman. So people on the inside say, what are you doing? You are going from one 5-star hotel to another, because they haven't yet grasped the fruits of the labor. And I think this

is a normal phenomenon. Take any administration that comes to power, see the public opinion ratings with regards to how they view the President or the administration, and take the same survey three years later and you will find, almost inevitably, a drop. And this is not only in the United States; it is true across the world. And it is again the same thing with the Coalition, there is excitement at first, and then, as time goes by, when they still don't see much on the ground, then their enthusiasm drops. So I don't blame them that they are saying this in Syria. First, the coalition has not delivered satisfactorily, I admit that readily. But two, they do not know how much work is going into this.

Do you think the Etilaf should build offices inside Syria?

Jouejati: The Etilaf should have a presence in Syria. The advantage is that you are together with the people and you show them that you can have an alternative government to Assad. If Assad collapses, the sky is not going to fall over the heads of Syrians. Show them that there is an alternative. On the negative side, this would be a great target for Assad's forces. If there was a government headquarters in any one of the towns that have been liberated, before too long it's going to be targeted by SCUD missiles. But I do believe firmly in the need for the Etilaf to have a presence on the ground and I can tell you that the Etilaf is now working on forming such a government. Its headquarters may or may not be inside Syria but it will have people on the ground providing basic services

Tell me how you think this all ends.

Jouejati: It all depends on what Washington does right now. Washington is the key. It is really the key. If it provides the necessary assistance to the moderate opposition and if it engages seriously against the Assad regime, then the moderates within the opposition are in a position to come out of this with a Syria that is hopefully united. If, however, the United States simply does limited actions in order to show the international community that it has done something, then I think the extremists will be in a dominant position in certain areas of Syria. I don't think the Kurds would want to break away from Syria, but the already-existing fragmentation would certainly increase. I think the Alawis would want a corner of their own. We are talking about the fragmentation of Syria, and I think sectarianism would increase. So everything, or most things, is a function of what Washington does, not in six months or in a year, but right now.

What do you think the news headlines about Syria will be in early 2014?

Jouejati: If things are as they are now, the headlines will be about the deepened fissures in Syria and the consequences of deeper fragmentation. These divisions are spilling over into the rest of the region. Readers of these headlines might say to himself, "if only we had done something at the very beginning, we would have had a totally different picture now." **PRISM**

An Interview with Osama Kadi

Tell us about your role within the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC).

Kadi: I am not a Coalition member, but I was nominated to head the Friends of Syria (FoS) platform addressing Economic Recovery and Development. I also lead the Syrian economic delegation in all conferences and meetings with the FoS. I am the president of Syrian Economic Task Force (SETF), which is in charge of publishing the Economic Roadmap for a New Syria.¹

In addition, I am the head of the Economic Section at the Syrian Expert House that published the Syria Transition Roadmap. This is an initiative of the Syrian Center for Political and Strategic Studies (SCPSS), a think-tank affiliated with the Syrian opposition.

What is the greatest challenge facing the Syrian economy? Most immediately and in the longer term?

Kadi: Security comes first, and then the challenge of reconstruction and the return of refugees. After close to three years of revolution, it is vital to transition from a militarized society to a civil one. That will take funding, effort, and political will from an incoming technocrat-led transitional government.

What will be the economic policies of the SOC to address Syria's economic challenges after the conflict?

Kadi: My main recommended economic policies for consideration by a post-conflict transitional government are the following:

- Continue paying employee wages in the public sector.
- Secure temporary housing for refugees until they can return to their homes.
- Provide the basic services of food, clothing, and medical care for all refugees.
- Secure protection for basic humanitarian needs and public utilities.

Dr. Osama Kadi is Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs in the Syrian Interim Government and CEO of Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU).

This interview was conducted by email on September 10, 2013

- Prepare for the restructuring of the public sector and the state's administrative structure.
- Work on acquiring frozen Syrian assets and funds from abroad.
- Freeze and confiscate the Ba'ath Party's movable and immovable assets.
- Establish a committee to study the contracts made by the Assad regime with states and international organizations.
- Issue a decision to terminate all the contracts made by the regime between March 2011 and the date on which the transitional government is formed.
- Start a Syrian support and reconstruction fund.
- Enact a law to return all nationalized assets to their rightful owners.
- Change the current Syrian currency to seek stability (which may be impossible to achieve in the short term).
- Make an effort to lift the economic sanctions against Syria.
- Face an anticipated global inflation.
- Create an atmosphere to generate capital investment in Syria in a gradual and deliberate manner.
- Protect the currency from collapse using approaches such as continuing to pay public-sector wages and securing the basic needs of the citizenry. The role of the government should be to control the size of the collapse by adjusting the currency cycle and carefully monitoring the release of hard currency into the Syrian market before the Central Bank starts a forced corrective policy.
- Promote and activate economic relationships with neighboring countries and the rest of the world, especially Syria's friends, in order to generate investments.

- Work on raising the competence of the Syrian labor force in various fields.

What do you believe are Syria's greatest assets?

Kadi: Syria's greatest assets include:

- Human resources, including local and Syrian expatriates;
- Syria's geostrategic location, including its Mediterranean port at Tartus;
- It's pre-existing industrial capital;
- Syrian investors, particularly from abroad; and
- It's natural resources, such as rich farmland in the west and natural gas in the east.

What has happened to them during the war?

Kadi: Syria's human capital has been decimated during the war. The atrocities of the Assad regime diverted or destroyed most professional, trained human resources. For example, most agricultural workers are now involved in the revolution, so they are either fighters, captured and jailed, or dead.

The crisis also alienated a high percentage of industrialists, traders, and businessmen. Because of the weakening centralized management of the country, we also lost control over oil wells and other natural resources.

How can they be restored?

Kadi: Syria needs a strong, technocratic transitional government to uplift the country and to recover its security by restructuring stability and armed forces to form a new National Syrian Military. On the economic side, Syria needs to rebuild its infrastructure. It was

considered weak before the revolution, and the massive level of destruction means exceptional efforts must be quickly mobilized to enable displaced persons and refugees to live normally. Rebuilding trust in the Syrian economy should be on the top of the agenda of the transitional government in cooperation with the Syrian business community.

One of Syria's greatest problems before the uprising was its unsustainable subsidies program. How do you plan to address this issue?

Kadi: We discussed this issue in the economic section of Syria Transition Roadmap. The government should deal with such a delicate issue by carefully taking into consideration the world's best practices to serve the Syrian people and to uplift the Syrian economy. It should be dealt with as part of a complete economic package.

The transformation of Syria's economy to a free market economy will need to be a gradual process because of the conflict's severe effects on the economy—the dramatic increase in poverty, the complete halt of production, a double-digit unemployment rate, and the collapse of the Syrian lira. This step is closely related to price liberalization, even though it has its own policy. The state can abandon its policy of paying a percentage of the value of certain goods or services that are usually considered a necessity for citizens, such as foodstuffs including flour, bread, sugar, and rice, in addition to fuel, electricity, water, and others. Eliminating subsidies on goods and services can be harmful to individuals, but it is in fact a step that must be taken to build a strong economy.

The process of removing subsidies will provide substantial savings, which will in turn help in rebuilding priority services and projects. Furthermore, lifting subsidies and liberating the market from the state's daily control can be the key step on the path to transforming Syria into a free economic system. The citizens will be more independent if other measures of reform are taken, such as removing certain tax breaks and voiding customs tariffs. Though critical, the subsidy removal process should be analyzed carefully before being gradually implemented.

How are Syrians earning a livelihood and making money today?

Kadi: The public sector employs almost one third of the Syrian labor force, and the regime is still paying salaries to most of them. Syrian remittances and support from relief organizations help Syrians survive during the crisis. Syrian economic activity has declined to less than one-third of its pre-war capacity. Some Syrians are working in very basic services, such as running food stands, to make a living after having lost their jobs. Unemployment has reached more than 70 percent in Syria, many have lost their savings, and many factories of Syrian industrialists have been robbed, looted, and/or destroyed.

What new black markets have emerged? And how will SOC prevent corruption in the post-war environment?

Kadi: We have to distinguish between two areas in Syria one: The semi-liberated areas (north and north eastern Syria, which counts more than half the country's land area), and

two: areas which are completely under regime control.

In liberated areas there is no central administration. It is a stateless area, and there is a very open market with no control by any government of any kind. However, in the other areas controlled by the Syrian government, there is a black market emerging because of the pressure of controlling the Syrian currency. The Syrian Central Bank is keeping the Syrian Pound under its market price by jailing most workers in unauthorized currency exchanges. People will naturally look for a black market in this field that can meet their demands for foreign currency that the government's banks cannot meet.

What can be done to reverse capital flight, prevent potential hyperinflation, and protect the Syrian currency?

Kadi: The Syrian Economic Task Force published a detailed report about fiscal and monetary policies in post-conflict Syria. It outlines an emergency plan for the first six months, a mid-term plan, and long-term plan. Most importantly, the transitional government should take important measures in its fiscal and monetary policies. For example, it should continue to pay public-sector wages and secure the basic needs of the citizenry. The role of the government here should be to control the size of the collapse by adjusting the currency cycle and carefully managing the pumping of the hard currency into the Syrian market. Then, the Central Bank can start on a corrective policy.

It is important that Syrians should understand that getting the Syrian currency back to its normal price - as before March 2011 - will be very difficult. So any effort should manage

Syrian expectations of any coming transitional government, because rebuilding trust in the Syrian economy and its currency after the abnormal destruction of this prolonged crisis might take 5-10 years.

What other country or countries provide economic models that we can use to understand Syria's current economic situation? What country or countries provide a model for Syria after its conflict subsides?

Kadi: Each country is unique. The ability of Syrians to overcome the crisis and rebuild its economy is different than countries to which it is often compared, like Libya or Yugoslavia. It is neither Iraq nor Afghanistan, nor any African countries that have undergone internal conflicts.

I am more optimistic. I believe Syrians will surprise the world if they are able to come up with a technocratic transitional government that works day and night with full transparency to uplift its economy within less than a decade. The Syrian economy will benefit from studying successful economic development cases, such as UAE, Turkey, and Singapore.

Syria will have a significant debt once the conflict subsides, and will likely need international assistance. Given that, what do you think of the turmoil in Egypt over accepting a loan from the IMF?

Kadi: We tried to avoid any borrowing in the SETF plans for economic reconstruction by empowering the local and international private sectors, and by receiving grants and assistance from allies. I expect that Syria might need financial support from the Friends of

Syria, because our foreign reserves have been depleted by the Assad regime.

Please describe the regional economic impact of the Syrian crisis.

Kadi: The spillover of the Syrian crisis has reached all neighboring countries including Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, Egypt, and Lebanon. Millions of refugees went to these countries looking for safe havens for their families. That migration impacted their economies by increasing real estate prices and the cost of health care. It puts their economies at great risk, especially with the Syrian regime threatening instability through violence, such as the bombings in Tripoli, Lebanon and Reyhanli, Turkey.

What role do you foresee for the international community in post-conflict reconstruction in Syria?

Kadi: I believe that the coming transitional government will give priority to the real “friends” of Syria. It will favor Arab and international companies that belong to those countries and provide them with a good governance business climate. The business community will be welcomed in Syria, particularly to avoid borrowing to rebuild and reconstruct Syria.

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Notes

¹ See here for the printed article: www.syrianeconomic.org

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