



ARAB UPRISINGS

# The Syria Crisis

February 27, 2012

POMEPS BRIEFINGS **9**



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The escalating bloodshed in Syria has rapidly become the center of regional and international attention. While the United States and its allies struggle to find ways to effectively help the Syrian people, the body count mounts and the prospects of a negotiated transition grow dim. Meanwhile, a growing chorus calls for a military intervention to protect Syrian civilians or to accelerate the fall of the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The response to the Syrian crisis is shaped by its unique combination of humanitarian crisis and strategic significance. The horrifying death toll and the political failures of the Syrian regime are real, urgent, and undeniable. So are the strategic stakes of a potential regime change in a long-time adversary of the United States and its allies, and the key Arab ally of Iran. The Syrian crisis has revealed and exacerbated the profound tension between the narrative of “Resistance” which has long shaped regional discourse and the narrative of the Arab uprisings. This briefing collects recent analysis and commentary from the Middle East Channel on these urgent questions.

The Syrian uprising caught many observers off guard. Many, including Assad, seemed to believe that Syria would be protected from internal challenge either by its popular alignment with the “Resistance” camp or by its willingness to use extreme force and repression. Both assumptions proved incorrect. Indeed, the massively disproportionate violent response to the initial challenges in March 2011 likely triggered exactly the popular outrage that it had been meant to forestall. And, despite the ongoing support of Iran and Hezbollah for the regime, the “Resistance” card has proven to be of little interest to most Syrians or Arabs outside the hard-line anti-Imperialist Left.

The Syrian uprising struggled to remain non-violent in the face of the attacks by regime security forces. A cycle of violence and mobilization set in, ratcheting upwards toward civil war. The Assad regime failed to offer meaningful political concessions, which might have broken that cycle. The Syrian opposition, for its part, remained dangerously divided and fragmented, unable to put together a coherent political alternative that might reassure or attract the many Syrians who remained with the regime or unwilling to commit. International pressure contributed to the isolation of the Assad regime, as demonstrated by the remarkable 137-22 vote in the United Nations General Assembly in support of a transition plan. Sanctions, along with the effects of the violence, devastated the Syrian economy. But despite the worsening conditions, the core of the regime seems to remain intact and significant portions of the Syrian population appear to still support it and to accept its narrative of being targeted by a foreign, imperialist conspiracy.

Syria has thus become the focal point for rapidly shifting regional norms and power politics. The Arab League has taken an unusually strong role in condemning regime atrocities in Syria, suspending its membership, sending a (poorly executed) observer mission, and leading the charge for action at the United Nations. Qatar and Saudi Arabia have been particularly active, with their media empires blanketing the airwaves with the Syrian opposition’s narrative, vocal attacks on the Assad regime from top leaders, and alleged (though unproven) flows of money, guns, and material support to the opposition. Many Arabs have noted

the difficulty of taking seriously the calls for democratic change in Syria emanating from a Riyadh which took the lead role in crushing the Bahraini uprising and treats Shiite protestors in its own Eastern Province as foreign conspirators to be crushed with an iron fist. Turkey has struggled to deliver on its promises, despite its vaunted influence in Damascus. Iran and Hezbollah remain staunch supporters of Assad, which seems to have undermined Hezbollah's regional appeal. But cracks in the Resistance axis have appeared, with Hamas turning against the Syrian regime, the Muslim Brotherhood strongly supporting the Syrian opposition, and even Iraq voting with the international consensus against Iran's wishes.

Still, the Security Council could not act over the objections of Russia and China, and last week's "Friends of Syria" meeting struggled to find a workable path forward. The limitations of international diplomatic efforts have driven the rising calls for military intervention. It is difficult to watch the deaths of so many Syrians, and frightening to envision the internal and regional consequences of an extended, full-scale civil war. But none of the proposed military actions seem likely to either protect Syrian civilians or hasten the regime's fall. International military action at this point seems more likely to fuel even worse fighting, while helping the Syrian regime to rally domestic opposition to a foreign intervention. Arming the Syrian opposition, the most popular current proposal, is a potential nightmare given the disunity of the Syrian opposition, the immense military advantage enjoyed by regime forces, and the likely impact on those Syrians still backing the regime.

But what then can be done? Some argue that the current levels of bloodshed outweigh any fears about the future and demand military action now. Others warn that an expanding proxy war inside of Syria is currently unavoidable, and argue that since the militarization of the Syrian opposition is inevitable it must be managed. Others argue for enhanced diplomatic pressure, sanctions, and the mobilization of the instruments of international justice. And some argue that Assad is still likely to survive and should be engaged in renewed dialogue about a political transition. These debates will continue to rage as the crisis grinds on. But whatever policy is adopted, the focus must be on protecting Syrian civilians and accelerating progress toward a meaningful political transition that includes all of Syria's communities.

*Marc Lynch, Director of POMEPS  
February 27, 2012*

## Unite Syria's opposition first

By Randa Slim, February 23, 2012

There is a near-consensus among those grappling with the crisis in Syria on the urgency of unifying the Syrian opposition. But 11 months into the uprisings, the Syrian opposition remains divided and fragmented. Such disunity complicates military and non-military strategies alike, makes arming the Syrian opposition a daunting proposition, and strengthens the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Amidst growing calls in the U.S. Congress for arming the Syrian opposition, General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff pointed out that "I would challenge anyone to identify for me the opposition movement in Syria at this point." There is no more urgent task for the international community today than working to help Syrians overcome their internal divisions.

There are a number of major groupings within the Syrian opposition, with new trends still emerging. The Syrian National Council (SNC) remains the best constellation of the different political currents making up the opposition. But to this point, it has failed at pulling the various factions in the opposition under its umbrella. The SNC has been unable to exert control over the armed factions that operate under the rubric of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), and is by many accounts losing credibility and influence on the ground as the conflict grows more militarized. The much trumpeted coordination between the FSA and the SNC remains an aspiration rather than a *fait accompli*. The SNC is internally fragmented, with various components mistrusting each other, and has struggled to formulate a coherent strategy.

The other political opposition group, the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change (NCC), has not fared much better. Many of the youth activists, the true heroes of the Syrian revolution, consider its leaders as people who have worked for regime change for years but failed. They particularly resent the NCC's insistence on advocating for dialogue with the regime, even if that dialogue is conditional on the regime abandoning

its "security option" by withdrawing all of its military personnel and hardware from the streets, and releasing all political prisoners. After the thousands killed by the regime forces, and the indiscriminate shelling of restive cities like Homs and Hama, the Syrian street has moved beyond dialogue with Assad.

The Free Syrian Army has emerged on the Syrian street as the latest hope for an opposition leadership. But it remains more a collection of small disparate groups than an army. It lacks a command and control structure. The FSA does not have regular access to military supplies. The defectors either take their weapons with them when they defect, purchase them on the black market, or buy them from corrupt military officers or from officers who are sympathetic to their cause but chose not to defect. The FSA has also suffered from its own internal divisions. Recently, General Mustapha Sheikh, an officer who defected from the Syrian Army, formed a new organization the "Higher Military Council" claiming to lead armed defectors inside Syria. There are increasing reports of independent, local armed groups now taking the lead in defending the protesters and fighting the regime forces. These groups are neither beholden to the FSA nor to the SNC.

All of these groups have failed in reaching out to minority groups including Christians, Alawites, and Kurds and the business community.

Despite that not all Alawites have benefited from the Assad rule, Bashar al Assad has succeeded in convincing the great majority that their physical survival is tied to his political survival. Two fears motivate their behavior: fear of marginalization and fear of retribution in a post-Assad Syria. The absence of leading Alawite dissidents in the SNC executive leadership helps reinforce the first fear. That the FSA is majority Sunni, with some of its brigades named after historical Islamic figures well known for fighting Imam Ali and his descendants, revered figures among

Shiites and Alawites, does not assure Alawites that the FSA will be able or willing to protect them against retributions if Assad is ousted.

The Syrian Kurds are fragmented politically with many distrusting the SNC as much as Assad. In October 2011, 10 Syrian Kurdish political parties banded together and formed the Kurdish Syrian National Council (KSNC) declaring their commitment “to finding a democratic solution to the Kurdish issue” and emphasizing that they are part of the Syrian revolution. So far, they have not joined the SNC ranks. Their misgivings about the SNC are varied ranging from the SNC increasing dependence on Turkey to their mistrust in the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, which is ideologically opposed to their demand for federalism.

As for the business community, the disunity in the opposition ranks reinforces the regime narrative — *Après moi, le deluge*. Syria’s traditional merchants struck a devil’s bargain in the 1970s with the late Hafez al Assad trading their political freedoms and role for the stability his regime provided. While it is clear to them that Bashar al Assad is no longer in a position to deliver security and stability, a disjointed opposition does not strike them as able to do so either. Their motivation now lies more in their fear of the devil they don’t know more than their support for Assad’s leadership role.

Given this state of disarray in the opposition ranks and their failure to date to get their act together on their own, it is time to consider outside assistance to unite the Syrian opposition movement. The “Friends of Syria” group set to convene Friday in Tunis provides the best platform to launch an Arab-led mediation initiative aimed at creating a new coalition of the different Syrian opposition groups as a pre-condition to recognize them as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people and to provide them with material and financial assistance.

An A3+1 group consisting of Tunisia, Qatar, and Iraq assisted by Turkey working in conjunction with the joint United Nations and Arab League envoy to Syria, should be

asked by the participants in the “Friends of Syria” to work with the different groups in the Syrian opposition to bring them under one organizational umbrella and agree on a joint political and action platform. Tunisia, as the convener of the “Friends of Syria” meeting, brings to this mediation team the revolutionary credentials and the credibility of an unbiased mediator that is accepted by the opposition groups. While Qatar and Iraq are at opposite ends of the intra-Arab debate on the need for an international role in the Syrian crisis, each has already attempted a mediation effort to bring the Syrian crisis to a negotiated settlement and has its own connections with different Syrian opposition groups. The Iraqi leadership, in particular its Shiite and Kurdish components, are best positioned to reach out to leadership figures in the Alawite and Kurdish minorities and make the case for the need for a united opposition to the Syrian regime. This would also provide an opportunity for the Iraqi government to play a leading role in the Arab bloc. Being the host of the Syrian National Council and of the Free Syrian Army leadership and considering its long-standing relations with the leadership of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, Turkey adds to the mix its own understanding of the dynamics inside these groups and leverage over their respective leadership.

This coalition-building process should not be left to the SNC. Instead it should create a framework where all significant Syrian opposition groups have an equal weight in the decision-making process. This effort would aim at putting in place a larger opposition council, “a network of networks,” composed of the SNC, the FSA, the NCC, the grass-roots activists leadership councils including the Local Coordinating Committees (LCCs), independent activists like Aref Dalila and Michel Kilo, Kurdish political parties that have embraced regime change including the KSNC, and leading business figures who are sympathetic to the opposition cause. Only a united opposition movement that provides a credible alternative to the Assad regime will hasten its demise.

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# Managing militarization in Syria

*By Steven Heydemann, February 22, 2012*

The most prominent and most troubling of the trends that have shaped the Syrian uprising over the past year is the militarization of the uprising and its transformation from a largely peaceful protest movement to a low-level insurgency dominated not by citizen activists but by a dangerous and uncoordinated array of armed opposition fighters. Dealing with this trend is the most urgent task facing the United States, the Arab League, the European Union, Turkey and the rest of the “Friends of Syria” group scheduled to meet in Tunis on Friday. If the militarization of the Syrian uprising is not managed, the hope for meaningful change in Syria may be lost.

The emergence of an armed opposition is hardly surprising, and is probably too late to prevent. It is an understandable response to the violence and brutality the regime of Bashar al-Assad has unleashed against peaceful protests. U.S. policy has thus far been sharply critical of militarization, encouraging Syrians to use peaceful means to achieve their political aims. Militarization, they point out, plays to the Assad regime’s advantage. It justifies the regime’s narrative that it is defending Syria from armed gangs, and provokes regime escalation, on vivid display in its recent onslaught against Homs, Zabadani, and other centers of protest and resistance. The growth of an armed opposition, they point out, also weakened the hand of regime critics in the United Nations Security Council, where Russia criticized the text of resolutions on Syria as unbalanced in their focus on violence committed by the Syrian government.

As militarization has expanded and deepened, however, these concerns have become increasingly counterproductive. External warnings have had no effect on the pace of militarization, which has accelerated steadily over the past six months. Even as peaceful demonstrations have continued, Syrians are determined to defend themselves and fight back against a ruthless regime. Instead, current approaches leave the United States and

other supporters of political transition without the tools that might mitigate the worst effects of militarization, and potentially, channel it to support rather than undermine diplomatic efforts aimed not only at the end of the Assad regime, but to the emergence of a peaceful, stable, post-Assad Syria.

The troubling consequences of unmanaged militarization are already beginning to emerge. In the political vacuum left by the disarray of the exile opposition, many Syrians now view the armed opposition as more legitimate than the civilian opposition led by the Syrian National Council (SNC). Nominally grouped under the banner of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), and loosely commanded by officers who defected from the Syrian military, the armed opposition poses a significant political challenge to the SNC’s efforts to consolidate its standing as a credible and legitimate alternative to the Assad regime. While the FSA does not openly position itself as an alternative to the SNC, its visibility and the prestige it has acquired by providing Syrians with a measure of protection give its leadership grassroots support that the SNC has struggled to achieve. Its success casts a long shadow over the civilian opposition, and raises important questions about where the balance of political influence lies, with the civilian leadership of the SNC or the armed leadership of the FSA.

Despite its growing popularity, however, it would be a mistake to view the FSA as having control over the militarization of the Syrian uprising. Not only is the FSA a diffuse and highly decentralized force, including many small bands of fighters who barter their allegiance to FSA commanders in exchange for weapons, supplies, and cash, but the armed opposition extends well beyond the FSA to neighborhood and tribal militias that operate largely outside its control. Nor does the FSA have the capacity to regulate the flow of weapons into Syria. Small arms are now entering Syria from every neighboring country. They

are moving through networks that are tribal, sectarian, and regionally based, reinforcing the segmentation of Syrian society. Influential Syrian tribes, for example, especially Sunni tribes, have longstanding kinship ties that extend into Iraq and south to the Gulf. These transnational tribal networks have already been mobilized to support the flow of arms into Syria.

The demand for weapons also provides opportunities for the regionalization of the conflict, as governments and non-state actors exploit Syria's uprising to cement their own influence by equipping armed groups as local proxies. These efforts are undertaken with no accountability and little regard for the consequences. Unregulated militarization has fueled revenge killings, kidnappings, including by "uniformed" members of the FSA, and a wave of criminality that has amplified the erosion of public order caused by the regime's response to the uprising. Should the Assad regime fall, these trends virtually ensure that Syria will be left, like Libya, with dozens if not hundreds of local militias able to disrupt the transition to a stable post-Assad democracy.

These trends are already well entrenched, and will prove difficult to control. With the emergence of the Friends Group, however, there is now a chance for the United States and its partners to shift course and begin to build frameworks for managing the militarization of the Syrian uprising. Rather than sidestep the tough choices that such an approach requires, and allow the unregulated flow of weapons from a wide array of self-interested parties, the Friends Group, with U.S. support, needs to develop strategies that recognize militarization as a reality to be managed, rather than imagining it as an outcome that can be avoided.

To check the uncontrolled militarization of the Syrian uprising, the Friends Group should move quickly to establish a single, centralized body overseeing the training and equipping of the armed opposition. Inevitably, this will involve a significant role for Turkey, which currently hosts the FSA in areas along the Syrian border. By vesting authority over this effort in the civilian

leadership of the SNC, which now includes some senior former officers, the Friends Group will contribute to the consolidation of the civilian opposition and enhance its legitimacy as the de facto representative of the Syrian people. With such a framework in place, governments in the region will have the incentive to more effectively control unregulated flows of weapons into Syria. The FSA will become more professionalized, develop more effective command and control, and extend its authority, under civilian oversight, over what is now a fractious and fragmented armed opposition. Managing militarization thus increases prospects for reigning in the criminality that has accompanied the growth of the armed opposition and imposing a measure of accountability on fighters. It gives the civilian opposition a chance to begin building the infrastructure for the interim security arrangements that will be urgently needed in the event the Assad regime collapses.

The intent of such a framework is not to feed the ambition of some in the armed opposition to become a force capable of challenging the Syrian army head-on or to seize control over territory. Rather, it is to provide the SNC with the military capacity it needs to ensure the protection of civilians, support the political objectives of the uprising, and to put in place the foundations for a smoother transition to a post-Assad Syria. Regulating militarization may make it less likely that Syria will follow in Libya's footsteps, struggling to contend with hundreds of local militias that resist demilitarization long after the old regime is gone.

The shift to managing militarization will be controversial. Yet in weighing the trade-offs involved, the costs of permitting it to continue along its current course need to be taken into account. The aim of U.S. policy is not simply regime change, but support for the aspiration of Syrians to create their own democracy after a half-century of corrupt authoritarian rule. By weakening civilian authority, deepening social fragmentation, leaving Syria vulnerable to external intervention, and consolidating the power of strongmen who could easily become local warlords, the process of militarization as it is unfolding today poses

extraordinary threats to Syria's future. While the success of efforts to manage militarization is far from certain, and the challenges it will face are not small, the potential payoffs that can result if it reduces prospects for the fragmentation of a post-Assad Syria and smoothes the path to a future Syrian democracy, more than justify the risks.

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## When Assad Won

*By David Kenner, February 22, 2012*

It was a massacre. On June 16, 1979, Capt. Ibrahim Yusuf ordered some 200 cadets at the Aleppo Artillery School to attend an urgent meeting in the mess hall. Once they were assembled, he opened the door to a squad of gunmen who opened fire on the defenseless crowd. At least 32 cadets, most belonging to then President Hafez al-Assad's Alawite sect, were cut down in the hail of gunfire and grenades.

The civil war that raged in Syria from 1976 to 1982 was — until the past 11 months of unrest — the most severe threat to the Assads' grip on power. The uprising would be crushed, brutally and infamously, with the Hama massacre in 1982. But even before the bloody assault on Hama, the long guerilla war had claimed the lives of thousands of Syrians, and resulted in the imprisonment of at least 10,000 more. The events leading up to the final confrontation should provide the current generation of protesters with a blueprint for how *not* to overthrow the Assad regime.

The Aleppo attack was not only the bloodiest strike to date against the government, it raised disturbing questions for the Damascus political elite about the fundamental pillars of their power. Yusuf, a Sunni officer, was himself a member of the ruling Baath Party. Assad's enemies, it seemed, had not only risen through the ranks of the army — they had penetrated into the political heart of the regime.

As the shadow war between the Alawite-dominated security forces and their Sunni opponents continued, Assad's opponents formed an umbrella organization called the Islamic Front in Syria. In November 1980, the front published a manifesto that noted the Alawite community "cannot [indefinitely] dominate the majority in Syria," and that "the [Alawite] minority has forgotten itself and is ignoring the facts of history." It ended with an appeal for the Alawites to abandon "the imposed scourge Hafez al-Assad and his butcher playboy brother [Rifaat] ... [in order to] participate in preventing the tragedy from reaching its sad end."

The campaign of assassinations against leading Syrian officials and Alawite personalities was also gaining steam — in August 1979, Assad's personal doctor, Muhammed Shahada Khalil, was killed. Other victims included the head of the military's garrison in Hama, the rector of Damascus University, and the prosecutor of the Supreme State Security Court. "Assassination is the only language with which it is possible to communicate with the state," said one of Assad's opponents during his trial in September 1979, according to Nikolaos van Dam's *The Struggle for Power in Syria*.

The winter of 1979 might have been the most perilous time for the regime: Its leading lights were slowly being

snuffed out, its support within key segments of the army and broader population was in doubt, and even its top officials were beginning to breaking away. On Dec. 27, Syrian ambassador to the United Nations Hammud al-Shufi abruptly resigned, due to what he termed “the anti-democratic and repressive methods and corruption of the Assad regime.” (No Syrian ambassadors have yet defected during the present unrest.)

The chill of civil war even fell across cities that were not at the center of the violence. Samuel Pickering Jr. — an acclaimed English professor who would later go on to serve as the model for Robin Williams’s character in *Dead Poets Society* — taught as a Fulbright scholar in the city of Latakia from the winter of 1979 until the summer of 1980. “The good are silent, and violence has spiraled as the government’s secret police have viciously repressed dissent or potential dissent,” he wrote in a memoir of his year in Syria. “At times during the year, Aleppo and Hama seemed foreign countries brought back under Damascus’s rule only by tank law. ‘You don’t know,’ a student told me with tears in her eyes. ‘The people die like rain.’”

History is written by the victors, and the story of Syria’s civil war is no exception. The Assad regime painted the revolt as a terror campaign waged by “the Muslim Brotherhood,” a catch-all phrase that it would wield against its many opponents during the crisis. The story is more complicated than that — not all opposition to Assad was expressed through violence, and the insurgents did appear to enjoy substantial latent support among segments of Syrian popular opinion. What does appear clear, however, is that the revolt was driven by a wide array of groups that resented the Alawites’ rise to preeminence and believed that the Sunnis, which account for roughly 75 percent of the population, were Syria’s natural rulers.

Drawing on interviews from Baathist officials in Aleppo, Patrick Seale’s *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* estimates that more than 300 leading supporters of the Syrian regime were killed in the city from 1979 to 1981. The violence soon prompted Assad to take a more radical course: In the Seventh Regional Congress, held in

December 1979 and January 1980, Assad’s younger brother Rifaat won Baathist support for a war to exterminate the Sunni terrorists once and for all. To end the insurgency, he promised to fight “a hundred wars, demolish a million strongholds, and sacrifice a million martyrs.”

Rifaat made good on his promise. In March, 30,000 troops of the Third Army Division, under the command of Gen. Shafiq Fayadh, moved from Damascus and Lebanon to seal off Aleppo. They were soon joined by Rifaat’s Defense Brigades, a paramilitary force of Assad loyalists that echoes today’s *shabbiha*. According to the Human Rights Watch (HRW) report “Syria Unmasked,” which surveyed human rights abuses under the Assad regime, Fayadh stood on a tank turret in the early days of the operation to proclaim that he was “prepared to kill a thousand people a day to rid the city of the Muslim Brother vermin.”

The violence wielded by the Syrian military far exceeded anything that the Sunni insurgents could muster. In the year-long occupation of Aleppo, HRW estimates that Assad’s security forces killed between 1,000 and 2,000 people — “some at random, many in summary executions” — and arrested 8,000 more.

Resistance to the Assad regime was not expressed solely through military means. In March 1980, the same month the military moved on Aleppo, the opposition convinced the markets in Aleppo to strike for two weeks — a tactic that soon spread to centers of unrest such as Hama, Homs, and Idlib, threatening to destroy Syria’s already battered economy.

Trade unions and professional associations also represented a thorn in Assad’s side. In early March, they organized street demonstrations in which thousands of people took part across the country, with the striking exception of Damascus. On March 31, the Syrian Bar Association led a number of other professional groups — such as the Medical Association, the Association of Engineers, and the merchant class — in a nationwide strike.

Assad's response was as cunning as it was ruthless. He retaliated by dissolving the associations and arresting their leaders. By mid-April, according to HRW, the regime had imprisoned hundreds of doctors, engineers, and lawyers — many of whom were tortured, and some of whom were summarily executed. Meanwhile, he found allies in the Damascene merchant class and was able to weather the economic storm. According to Seale, the merchants' support for Assad at this critical juncture cemented the regime's relationship with the Damascus businessmen — an alliance that has persisted through the present day.

Having cut off all avenues of dissent but violence, the Assad regime then moved to ensure that its enemies had no hope of winning through armed revolt. After a failed assassination attempt against Assad on June 26, 1980, the regime's strongmen determined to make the Muslim Brotherhood pay. Less than 24 hours after the attack, Rifaat's Defense Brigades were helicoptered to the desert city of Palmyra, where they were joined by members of the army. In the early morning hours of July 27, they were let loose in Tadmor Prison, one of the primary detention centers for Islamists at the time. They gunned down an estimated 500 prisoners in cold blood. "The operation lasted about half an hour," an Alawite soldier who took part in the operation told HRW. "During it, there was a terrible tumult, with exploding grenades and cries of 'Allah Akbar!'"

The Sunni insurgents responded by escalating their campaign of terror in Damascus. In 1981, they bombed the prime minister's office in August, the Air Force headquarters in September, and a military recruitment center in November. In February 1982, the "Islamic Revolution Command in Syria" claimed credit for bombing the Damascus offices of the regime's *al-Baath* newspaper, killing at least 76 people. "It was a great accomplishment to be added to the series of tremendous explosions carried out by the *mujahidin*," the statement read. "We draw attention to the fact that all the Syrian information media are nationalized and that the explosion was timed for all the authority's hirelings to be present."

For all the stresses put on the Syrian regime, the sharp and unbridgeable sectarian rifts that the conflict had opened made it virtually impossible for the Alawite ruling class to do anything but fight to the death. "[The Muslim Brotherhood] has succeeded in widening the distance between the government and the majority of the people, but not in destabilizing the regime," wrote the historian Hanna Batatu in December 1982. "Instead of splitting the 'Alawis and thus weakening their foothold in the army, they have, by their anti-'Alawi practical line, frightened the 'Alawi community into rallying behind Asad."

With the military remaining largely loyal, nothing could stop Assad from crushing the opposition's strongholds. By the time the city of Hama rose in open revolt in February 1982, the stage was set for a final confrontation between Assad's opponents and more than 10,000 well-equipped Syrian security forces — a battle the Sunni insurgents could not hope to win. The Hama massacre, which claimed the lives of anywhere from 10,000 to 25,000 Syrians, according to an Amnesty International report from the period, may have permanently stained the reputation of the Assad dynasty in the eyes of the world, but it also crushed the organized Islamist insurgency in Syria and paved the way for three more decades of relatively unchallenged rule by the Assads. In the end, the Sunni insurgency of the late 1970s and early 1980s was too focused on Sunni revivalism, too shadowy — simultaneously too violent to attract widespread support and not violent enough to pose an existential threat to the regime.

Could the modern-day opponents of Bashar al-Assad, Hafez's son, suffer the same fate as the insurgents of years past? Luckily for today's opposition, it is no carbon copy of the movement in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Most notably, popular nonviolent protests have been a mainstay of the effort to topple Assad. In major cities such as Hama, Homs, and recently Damascus, Syrians have taken to the streets to call for the end of the regime — lending the opposition a degree of popular legitimacy it never achieved in the 1980s. Defections from the Syrian military are also higher than they ever were under Hafez al-Assad's watch, and by all accounts are growing more numerous and

effective. And the opposition's political representatives, such as the Syrian National Council, may have myriad problems — but they are still savvier than the underground “Islamic Front” that guided the opposition to Hafez.

But at the same time, Syria's revolutionaries have not been able to make a complete break with the past. After months of largely peaceful protest, the effort to topple Assad is increasingly defined as a struggle between Syria's security forces and an armed insurgency. According to activists' own figures, the past two months have seen a higher proportion of Syrian soldiers killed than at any other point in the revolt — totaling roughly 25 percent of the total

deaths. This surge in violence has also been marked, in the past two weeks, by devastating car bombings in Aleppo and the first assassination of a Syrian general — tactics that carry an echo of the dark days of civil war.

This new generation of Syrian revolutionaries has brought the Assad regime closer to collapse than it has ever been in its four-decade history. But if they are to push it over the edge, they would do well to learn from the cautionary tale of their elders.

*David Kenner is an associate editor at Foreign Policy.*



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## Helping Syria Without War

*By Marc Lynch, February 21, 2012*

How should the United States, and the international community, respond to the escalating bloodbath in Syria? Over the last two months, the overwhelming weight of editorial and op-ed commentary has been in the direction of calling for military action of some sort — especially to arm a Free Syrian Army. The calls for military action span the spectrum: from John McCain and Lindsey Graham and the FPRI-FDD group of conservative hawks to liberal interventionists and even...FP bloggers. For people desperate to do something to help the Syrian people, and at the same time for people keen to deal a blow to Iran or bring down a long-hated regime in Damascus, the time seems right for some form of military intervention.

I was a strong supporter of the intervention in Libya. But the diversion of the debate about Syria toward military options has been counterproductive. None of the military options on offer, including arming the Free Syrian Army, are likely to significantly help the Syrian people and most

risk making things far worse. But the recent display of a broad-based international consensus, including the 137-12 vote in the United Nations General Assembly condemning the regime's violence, and the first meeting of the “Friends of Syria” group on Friday in Tunisia make this a crucial time to seriously explore non-military options which have a more realistic chance to be adopted...and to succeed.

In a new report released today by the Center for a New American Security, I argue that if the goal is to help the Syrian people and not just to hurt an Iranian ally then the international response to the Syrian crisis must focus less on whether to use military options than on ways to improve the prospects for a “soft landing” after the fall of the Assad regime. The report lays out a number of concrete suggestions for mobilizing diplomatic pressure and breaking the intensifying polarization between two Syrian communities in order to push for a political transition. I can't offer any guarantees that this strategy will work

quickly or cleanly... but neither can those now recklessly calling for poorly conceived military action.

I am not going to summarize every detail of the report in this post — please download it [here](#). The first half of the report assesses in some depth each of the major military options which have been put on the table: No Fly Zones, Tactical Air Strikes, Safe Areas, Armed Observers, and Arming the Opposition. For each of the first four, I argue that the military means would not respond effectively to the violence, would be far more complicated than advocates acknowledge, and would likely soon pave the way to further escalation upon failure.

I spend the most time arguing against the currently fashionable idea of arming the Syrian opposition (about whom, as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Martin Dempsey noted this weekend, little is really known). It is unlikely that arms from the outside would come close to evening the balance of power, and would only invite escalations from Syrian regime forces. While advocates assume that a better-armed opposition would encourage a wave of defections from the Syrian army, it is just as plausible that growing militarization will harden the polarization in Syrian society and the resolve of Syrian troops. Those currently on the fence, disgusted with Assad but afraid of the future, could well be frightened back onto the side of the regime and move even further away from any kind of realistic political solution.

Finally, there is the reality of the deeply divided, fragmented nature of the Syrian opposition, which is more than just an inconvenient point to be noted and then waved away. Most enthusiasts for arming the FSA preface their call by insisting that it is necessary that the Syrian opposition first unify. But it hasn't, and shows no signs of unifying politically any time soon. There is quite simply no prospect that the Syrian opposition will unify politically in the time frame envisioned by those who hope to rush weapons to the front lines to protect civilians in besieged areas like Homs. But this reality doesn't seem to actually blunt their enthusiasm for arming the Syrian opposition anyway. This waving away of supposedly "necessary"

conditions reminds me all too clearly of those who insisted that COIN must have a legitimate national partner to work with but then insisted on carrying it out in Afghanistan anyway despite the manifest absence of such a leadership in Kabul.

But the report is not only a brief against military options. It tries to lay out a political and diplomatic strategy to increase the pressure on the Assad regime while building the conditions for a political transition. Those grappling with the Syria crisis too often do not take seriously enough that Syrians remain sharply divided over the crisis. Many Syrians continue to support the regime, some out of genuine fear of the future, some out of true commitment, some out of sectarian solidarity, some because they believe the narrative which the regime has crafted about foreign conspiracies. Ignoring or scoffing at their beliefs, or lobbing propaganda across a hostile divide, isn't going to help. No post-Assad Syria is going to be stable if it can't include and command the loyalty of that sizable portion of its population — and so a political strategy must be designed to engage them in a plan for transition.

That does not mean engaging Assad or accepting his farcical reform proposals. The report argues that the time for negotiations with the top levels of the Assad regime has passed, and if they refuse to engage immediately then they should be moved toward indictment at the International Criminal Court. A real choice should be given to lower level state officials, who should understand that their window is rapidly closing to defect or be indicted. Targeted sanctions should increase the pressure on the top of the regime. The Friends of Syria group should coordinate international activity, and every possible international forum should be mobilized to isolate and shame the Syrian regime.

But pressure is not enough. Efforts should be stepped up to reach out to the broad base of the regime's remaining political support and to persuade them to take a frightening, risky leap into the unknown of a transition. Particular attention should be paid to breaking through the polarized narratives which have Syrians increasingly

living within mutually isolated narrative bubbles. The international community should work to bring credible information about regime atrocities to those Syrians who doubt their reality, and to reassure them about their place in a post-Assad Syria. To the latter end, I lay out some proposals for drafting a political pact with international guarantees to which the Syrian opposition would commit itself as a way of reassuring those key parts of the Syrian fabric. This may still be possible, despite the increasing polarization and hardening divide...but not if military options are chosen or major arms flow in to the various groups fighting under the banner of the Free Syrian Army.

The choice is not between political options which won't work and military options which will work. The hard truth is that the available military options have little chance of quickly or decisively turning the tide against Assad's regime. They are more likely to simply ratchet the violence up to a higher level, while badly harming the chances of any kind of political transition which could create a stable, inclusive Syria. I hope that this political proposal will be given a chance, even if its success is far from assured. Please download the whole report here for more details, and I look forward to discussing the ideas.



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## Finish Him

*By Daniel Byman, February 2, 2012*

As world leaders huddle at the United Nations to debate whether to demand Bashar al-Assad's ouster, the smart money is already betting that his time is short. The president of Syria is a "dead man walking," according to one U.S. diplomat, a view shared by Israel's military and predicted by a surveyed group of foreign policy experts. Reports of Assad's death, however, appear greatly exaggerated. The Syrian president has survived almost a year of demonstrations and growing violence, and if not pushed by outside actors he may yet cling to power.

It's easy to see why many think Assad's time might be up. Despite the deaths of over 5,000 protesters and the arrests of thousands more, Syrians have bravely defied the regime, which seems unable to intimidate them into submission. As the protesters have stood strong, Assad's international support has plummeted. Although the world initially did little while Syria gunned down its own people, President Barack Obama declared in August, "The time has come for President Assad to step aside." The European Union joined the United States and imposed comprehensive

sanctions against the Syrian regime, including over its oil sales. Meanwhile, the Arab League has repeatedly called for a ceasefire and tried to broker a deal for Assad to hand over power, and some Arab leaders — like Jordan's King Abdullah II — have taken the unprecedented step of demanding that a fellow head of state must go. Assad scorns these calls for regime change, but the collapse of trade and investment and massive capital flight are souring many Syrians on the government, and the cash-strapped regime will soon find it harder to pay its security services. Rather than kill their own people, thousands of soldiers have defected from the Syrian army. The pace is escalating, and many more are confined to barracks because the regime doesn't trust them. The Free Syrian Army, apparently composed largely of defectors, has gotten stronger and is operating freely in more of the country.

Each blow has hit the regime hard, but Assad has neither bent nor broken — and he still has a number of serious assets on his side of the equation.

Look first to the loyalty of the military and security services. The opposition army is getting stronger, but it lacks tanks and other heavy weapons and can't hold its own in an open battle. Without mass defections, the regime is still stronger than the opposition. The officer corps in particular is still loyal, and Assad's relatives hold key positions. The overwhelming majority of the officers come from the president's minority Alawite community, and most Alawite families have at least one member in the security service. And the Alawites — a religious minority, often scorned by mainstream Sunni Muslims for their supposedly deviant religious practices — have a visceral reason to resist regime change.

Although only a tenth or so of Syria's population is Alawite, this community is a strong base for the regime: It is armed, mobilized, and fearful that the fall of Assad might mean a brutal death, not just a loss of perks. The regime has mobilized Alawite militias along with military forces, using them as thugs and snipers against their Sunni fellow citizens. As the violence escalates, sectarian killing increases too.

Sunni Arabs dominate the opposition, but Assad has long tried to co-opt other minority groups, such as Christians, Druze, and Kurds — as well as leading Sunni families — in order to prevent a united front against the regime. None of these are as loyal as the Alawites, and none has as much to lose — but that doesn't mean they will go over to the opposition. Minorities look fearfully at Iraq, in particular, and worry that the collapse of the regime and civil war will lead to massacres.

Sanctions are dealing blows to the regime's popularity, but when the pie shrinks access to the government becomes even more important. Those with guns eat first; the opposition eats last. Saddam Hussein's Iraq endured crippling sanctions for over a decade: It found work-arounds and used the scarce revenue to reward supporters while denying aid to enemies. And the humanitarian toll was a particularly effective public relations tool to discredit those who would isolate it internationally. Remember, it took a foreign invasion to topple that dictator.

Nor is Assad standing alone. Iran looks to be doubling down on Syria, its only Arab ally. Tehran, though it is under pressure itself, can give the regime an economic lifeline and enough bullets and shells to keep shooting down protesters — resources that can make all the difference. Next door, Assad's and Iran's partner Hezbollah offers the Syrian regime another ally and an economic lifeline for smuggling through Lebanon. Iraq's regime, which may be eager to do Tehran a favor, may also turn a blind eye to smugglers bringing goods and weapons into Syria from Iraqi territory. And then there's Russia — an arms provider and the veto-wielding immovable obstacle at the United Nations, blocking international efforts to isolate the regime.

Perhaps the biggest hope for Assad is the disorganization of the opposition itself. No charismatic leader unites the opposition. Syria has strong local and regional identities, and the opposition Syrian National Council's factionalization reflects this on-the-ground reality. How many Syrians the SNC speaks for is an open question, and critics claim it is dominated by Islamists and does not speak for many Syrians. In contrast to the Libyan rebels, the SNC operates largely in exile, because it doesn't control a part of Syria from where it can base itself without risk. Not surprisingly, there are sharp divisions between those inside the country bearing the brunt of the regime's brutality and those who live safely outside Syria and represent the country abroad. So far at least, the rebels enjoy some sympathy from international governments but at most limited, active support from major powers — which are also quick to emphasize that international military intervention is not on the table.

In short, the Syrian dictator is not strong enough to subdue the opposition, but they are not strong enough to oust him — a scenario for continued civil war.

So, if Assad is to go he may need a push from the international community. Particularly important is the effort to build up the Syrian opposition: uniting it and training its militias so they can be more effective in battle. At the same time, the opposition must be pushed to avoid

religious sectarianism at all costs. Not only will this make the Alawites and other minorities fight all the harder, but it will also make Syria more difficult to govern should Assad fall. In Libya, one of the less dramatic but more important steps Western powers took was to build up the Libyan opposition and make it a more representative and effective institution.

But intervention must also be on the table to signal that the regime cannot put down the opposition by force — U.S. and allied rhetoric should warn that this option will grow more likely if Assad doesn't step down. Ratcheting up the pressure today will help convince Assad loyalists that the regime cannot weather the storm and that they need to abandon ship now — rather than do so when the opposition is more bloodthirsty and less in the mood to

bargain. Only this forceful effort will end the rule of the leader who has been walking his people into a nightmare. Any less will see the bloodshed continue indefinitely, possibly sucking in neighboring states like Turkey and Israel, disrupting Iraq's fragile state-building efforts, raising tension further between Iran and the West, and giving autocrats elsewhere in the Arab world credibility when they claim that the alternative to tyranny is not freedom but chaos.

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## Rebels Without a Clue

*By Justin Vela, January 31, 2012*

ISTANBUL — Omar Muqdad can usually be found smoking and drinking coffee all night in an empty room in Istanbul or Ankara. As a longtime Syrian activist, he can access senior Syrian opposition leaders, as well as their network of supporters around the world, with a phone call. He enjoys a sterling reputation among the activists and defected soldiers who risk their lives daily along the Turkey-Syria border.

But over the months, Muqdad's frustration with the Syrian National Council (SNC), the body intended to serve as the political representation of the Syrian opposition, has grown. He has diligently traveled around Turkey, arranging coverage of the Syrian uprising by major media outlets, holding meetings in Western embassies, and coordinating with activists inside the country. In the meantime, he has

come to see the SNC as disorganized, disconnected from the Syrians on the ground, and out of step with the broad spectrum of Syrian society.

“We know it is impossible to be 100 percent representative of the nation or the opposition,” Muqdad told me. “[But the SNC] does not know the principles of running the opposition.”

Last weekend, defected soldiers belonging to the Free Syrian Army (FSA) waged fierce battles with the Syrian military in the suburbs of Damascus, stirring activists' hopes that the end of President Bashar al-Assad's regime is closer than had been expected. The U.N. Security Council is also meeting this week to consider a new resolution that could condemn the regime for the violence and possibly

endorse an Arab League plan that would lay out a blueprint for the transition of power. Even as Syria's revolution gains speed, though, the SNC's struggles may hinder international action against the Syrian regime.

It's not only Muqdad whose initial optimism regarding Syria's organized opposition has faded. A wide range of activists and diplomats are voicing concerns with the SNC, criticizing its lack of cohesion and effectiveness. While the majority of them have not given up on the council, they paint a picture of an organization out of touch with the protesters on the ground and dominated by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood.

"No one from the SNC has influence inside Syria. Most members of the SNC are jumping on a train that started from the street," says Ammar Qurabi, a Syrian human rights activist, arguing that SNC leaders are trying to use the momentum of the demonstrations to take political power. Qurabi refuses to work with the SNC and plans to launch his own opposition group in early February.

The SNC is composed of a nine-person executive committee, sitting on top of an approximately 250-person body. The organization's leadership is primarily made up of Sunni Arabs, and though it has made an effort to include members of other sects and ethnicities, few are present on the council.

Qurabi notes that the SNC has been particularly negligent in incorporating members of Assad's Alawite sect. "No Alawite on the executive council — that is a scandal," he says. "Especially when we fight Assad, who says, 'I am Alawite. I protect Alawites?'"

Diplomats have also criticized the SNC for focusing too much on building support for foreign intervention and neglecting ties with the grassroots movements that have driven the revolt. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton drove home this message after meeting with SNC leaders on Dec. 6, saying that a transition in Syria "is more than removing the Assad regime" and must include the establishment of the rule of law and protection of minority rights.

"Syrians will have to use their own hands," says an Ankara-based Western diplomat. While Western governments have provided the Syrian opposition with some political training and technical support, such as communications equipment, the diplomat said that military intervention from the United States, Turkey, or Arab states remains unlikely in the next six months.

Indeed, the SNC's difficulty winning over Syria's minority groups has decreased the chance of foreign intervention. More aggressive action would likely only be possible, the diplomat told me, after Western countries recognized the SNC as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people — a step that is currently impossible given the fractious state of the opposition.

The latest spasm of violence has also raised questions about whether — if the conflict is increasingly defined as a guerrilla war — Syrian military defectors will usurp the role played by the SNC.

"The Free Syrian Army could leave them in the dust unless the SNC can do something for the FSA," the diplomat worries.

Admittedly, many of the difficulties that have plagued the SNC have been beyond its control. Its mission has been badly hampered by 40 years of repression by the Assad regime, which fractured Syria's political forces and created an atmosphere of mutual distrust. According to Samir Nashar, a member of the SNC's executive committee, the process of bridging these divides has been slowed by a lack of funds. "We mostly depend on our pockets and some donations," he says.

The Syrian regime's domestic repression is also the reason that the SNC leadership lives in exile and why the council has had difficulty building connections to those on the ground. "Very few would go back and have popular support," says Enana Bisan, a Christian member of the SNC living in Turkey. Bisan told me she "just woke one day" to find herself part of the council, because of its need for minorities.

But other wounds have been self-inflicted. One particularly damaging stumble occurred when SNC Chairman Burhan Ghalioun signed a draft agreement with the National Coordination Committee, a Syrian opposition group largely based inside the country, in an attempt to unite the two groups. The agreement rejected foreign military intervention and called for dialogue with the regime, conditions that infuriated many Syrian activists. In the face of widespread opposition, Ghalioun backed away from the agreement.

“They lost a lot of prestige [because of the deal],” says Malik Al-Abdeh, editor of the London-based opposition channel Barada TV. “[That] hurt the SNC big time.”

The most divisive issue surrounding the SNC, however, clearly remains the prominent role played by the Muslim Brotherhood. “The Muslim Brotherhood is the only party in town,” says the Ankara-based Western diplomat.

The Brothers have been exiled from Syria for 30 years after losing a bitter armed conflict with the regime in the 1980s, and some activists distrust its outlook on democracy and the future composition of a post-Assad government. Muqdad’s initial optimism about the SNC faded, he says, when he realized the extent of the Brotherhood’s dominance. While he has been in close touch with Western diplomats, he thinks that non-SNC members have been blocked from speaking publicly and that the SNC takes credit for activities that it was not involved in.

“We have no problem with [the Brotherhood] as a political party,” explains Muqdad, a Sunni Muslim who joined the opposition in 1999 and claims to have spent years living underground. “[But] they are using the wrong ways to lead.”

Muqdad notes that the SNC has taken some positive steps recently, such as including the well-known Christian opposition politician George Sabra in its ranks. He fears, however, that the revolution for which thousands of Syrians have died would fail if an unrepresentative government took power in the post-Assad era.

“It happened to us one time before. That’s how the regime came to be in power in Syria,” he says. “We don’t want to go back to the same story and the same game. The people paid in a lot of blood, and we will not allow that to happen again. It’s a simple way: Just come and sit with the people, all the opposition, as equals.”

The Brotherhood’s prominence has also opened old wounds with former members of the Syrian military, who had counted the Islamist movement as its primary domestic foe before the current revolt. A defected Syrian soldier in the Free Officers Movement, which is aligned with the Free Syrian Army but does not take orders from it, describes the Brotherhood as “malignant.”

“[The Free Officers Movement] has a limited relation with the SNC because they are controlled by the Muslim Brothers,” he told me.

The officer, a Sunni, said that the Brotherhood’s presence was particularly problematic in Syria due to the large number of minorities in the country. It would be difficult to convince minorities, especially the Alawites, that their rights would be guaranteed with the Muslim Brotherhood steering the political opposition, he says.

Mohammed Farouk Tayfour, the deputy secretary-general of Syria’s Muslim Brotherhood, insists that his movement will cooperate fairly with other opposition groups.

“The Muslim Brotherhood throughout history always worked with others,” he told me. He gave examples such as the 1947 parliamentary elections, in which the Brothers ran on electoral lists with a range of candidates, and described how some Christians hid Muslim Brothers in their homes during Syrian President Hafez al-Assad’s 1982 massacre in Hama.

The SNC is also well aware of these hurdles, and its leadership says that it is taking steps to improve. Nashar, the SNC executive committee member, says that he first met the Brotherhood’s political leadership in September and that all parties are willing to make concessions so

that all the elements within the SNC can work together. “I believe I can build bridges with a large number of Islamists,” Nashar insists. “The SNC is increasingly united.”

Despite its flaws, the council derives its legitimacy as protesters’ lifeline to the outside world. Most activists continue to see it as the only opposition body that has managed to make their fundamental demands — the complete removal of the Assad regime and support for some sort of foreign intervention to make that possible — heard at high levels in the international arena.

“We have what we call in Arabic saqf al-matalib, the ceiling of demands. The SNC is the only opposition that has managed to reach the highest level of demands [of activists],” says Rami Jarrah, a Syrian activist who often goes by the pseudonym Alexander Page.

But for the exhausted corps of Syrian activists, who have spent the past 10 months risking their lives for the revolution, there is still a long way to go. The increasing violence in Syria and the uncertainty of outside help mean the SNC needs to get its act together. Only then will Syria avoid a potential bloodbath when Assad falls — and can activists get some much-deserved rest.

“All Syrians have the mentality that they want to be president,” Muqdad says. “Except me. I want to be on Miami Beach.”

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## Collectively failing Syrian society

*By Peter Harling, January 24, 2012*

For months, neither the Syrian regime, the international community, nor the opposition in exile have offered much hope in a dangerously deteriorating crisis. Increasingly, they seem to be unintentionally conniving in bringing about a civil war although it will serve no one’s interests, destabilize Syria for years, and suck in the rest of the region. Their enduring pursuit of maximalist demands may sabotage what chance still exists for a negotiated transition.

The regime’s vision consists in cracking down decisively against residual pockets of foreign-backed trouble-makers, then opening up politically within sensible boundaries — similar to Jordan’s or Bahrain’s promise of limited reforms. Outside players currently bent on its demise, it wagers, ultimately will realize it cannot be destroyed;

already hesitant for lack of good options and fear of ensuing chaos, they will grudgingly move to softer forms of pressure and, in time, even resume engagement. The regime’s sympathizers and allies are all too keen to believe that it is strong, that the reach of the protest movement is wildly exaggerated by hostile media, that the foreign conspiracy is both all-encompassing and impotent, and that Syrian society is so disease-ridden — a hodgepodge of fundamentalists, thugs, and third party proxies — that it cannot but deserve the security services’ tough medicine.

This narrative is flawed in more ways than one. For ten months, the regime has been collapsing in slow-motion, and it is showing. Its political structures, weak at the outset, have eroded beyond repair; the executive has lost

any ability it once had to implement policy and the ruling party is an empty shell. The security services remain largely cohesive and ready to fight, but in many places they increasingly resemble at best an occupying force cut off from society, at worst a collection of sectarian militias on a rampage. The military is fragmenting, slowly but surely. The regime's territorial control depended on the protest movement remaining largely peaceful. Now that an insurgency is spreading, it is losing its grip. Arguably, the regime has refrained from using much of the firepower at its disposal, for fear of tilting the balance decisively against it within the international community. It could easily muster enough troops to put down resistance in any specific area, but at the expense of letting things slip elsewhere in a losing game of whack-a-mole; other rebellious areas would go for broke, knowing their turn would soon come if the regime was allowed to deal with them sequentially. Meanwhile, the economy's collapse is accelerating. Because none of this is lost on a majority of Syrians, once spectacular demonstrations of loyalists have narrowed to the point where official footage prefers close-ups to aerial photography. The "silent majority" the regime claimed to have on its side is now angry and scared: it both blames the country's leadership for spelling disaster and distrusts the protest movement, exiled opposition, and outside world for offering no clear prospect for the future other than growing chaos.

On a popular level, the picture also differs from what the regime, its sympathizers, and allies would like to believe. The protest movement, which to this day remains conspicuously absent from the official narrative, is remarkably broad-based, intuitively cohesive, and in many ways sophisticated. Until now, it has effectively contained the more thuggish, criminal, sectarian, and fundamentalist strands that clearly exist within society. In fact, the protest movement's better sides are the only bulwark against such demons, at a time when the regime's course of action — exacerbating communal tensions as a divide-and-rule tactic, targeting non-violent activists, and compartmentalizing its territory while losing control within screened-off areas — is making things worse by the day. Unlike the case of Libya, it took months of bullying,

disruption, and despair for Syrians to call for international intervention (which they ordinarily would loath), to pick up arms on a large scale (an option the vast majority agreed should be kept as the last resort), and to allow a political struggle to give way insidiously to civil strife (as is occurring in some parts of central Syria). If chaos deepens further, criminals, foreign volunteers, and home-grown fundamentalists are bound to become more striking features of this crisis — a self-fulfilling prophecy come true.

The conspiracy theory also has its limits. True, the protest movement may not have survived, let alone thrived, without a sympathetic — and in some cases deeply biased and unprofessional — international media, as well as considerable logistical support from abroad, notably from within an expansive and mobilized diaspora. But even taking such factors into account, realities on the ground don't come anywhere close to the regime's narrative. Bloodthirsty Islamist terrorists sponsored from abroad are hard to find in a sea of angry ordinary citizens motivated by local grievances, and above all the brutal, unaccountable behavior of the security services (which by now is all that a large proportion of Syrian society sees of the regime). Emerging armed groups complain bitterly about inadequate weapons and shortage of ammunition, suggesting for the time being a dearth of strategic depth.

The international community, powerless and deeply divided, has so far not been acting decisively. The West, which initially hoped the regime would do a better job at managing the crisis — and thus spare it from a risky adventure in a sensitive part of the world — has come full circle: although the practicalities remain unclear, the consensus now favors regime-change, with dreams of regional change lurking in the background giving a hoped-for domino effect on Hezbollah in Lebanon and a besieged leadership in Iran. Russia appears concerned about heightened instability in the area at large, the prospect of further empowering Islamists, and the West's typically cavalier attempts to push its agenda under the guise of noble moral values.

The Arab League has been engaged constructively, sending observers that may have failed to solve the crisis but which

have staved off the escalation in violence on all sides one could have expected in their absence. Unfortunately, its more assertive members are those with the least credibility to take the lead — Gulf monarchies that united to put down popular protests in Bahrain tend to adopt a sectarian perspective on regional events, and have paid only lip service to reforms at home. Other Arab countries are essentially in disarray, bogged down by domestic tensions, fearful of more regional instability, and distrustful of the West, given its track record of making things worse, not better, in this part of the world. The result has been a slow-moving but determined effort to lock the regime into a set of constraints that could force it to recognize the reality of its domestic crisis and negotiate an exit, while fending off any risk of hands-on Western involvement. Thus the transition plan announced this week, involving a caretaker role for the Syrian vice-president, the establishment of a national unity government, the election of a constitutional committee, and reforming the security apparatus, offers a mechanism that can be built upon and consolidated. If support for a negotiated transition comes from all quarters, critical pressure will be brought to bear on a regime whose primary asset now consists in playing Russian support and Western brinkmanship off each other.

Part of the problem has been the dismal performance of the opposition in exile. Its members, even as they repeatedly talk on satellite channels about the sufferings of their kin back home, have in fact spent the better part of their energy squabbling over personal rivalries, lobbying for international recognition, and debating a foreign intervention that — whether it is desirable or not — simply will not happen in the foreseeable future. Focused on following the mood on the Syrian street rather than leading the way forward, they have shut the door on any negotiated transition, decried the Arab League's initiative instead of suggesting ways to optimize it, and failed to articulate a credible, workable strategy. Even the more obvious political imperatives, such as offering the prospect of a reconciliation process with those who, although carrying out the repression have not ordered it, have run up against the opposition's preference for echoing the frustration felt by ordinary citizens after months of escalating regime

violence. However, key to any resolution of the deep social divide that has emerged within Syria will be a firm but smooth process to overhaul the existing security apparatus, as the lessons of the Iraqi disaster make clear.

All sides have been incapable of agreeing on what would be a reasonable U.N. Security Council resolution: making clear it does not endorse foreign military intervention, both to reassure Russia and because within the current parameters of the conflict it is not in the cards anyway; calling all parties to cease fire; blaming the regime for bringing the country to the brink; holding it fully accountable for seeking a solution; demanding it implements the Arab League's transition plan; and insisting it respects peaceful protests under a reinforced observers mission, with the additional deployment of Arab monitors embedded within the security apparatus where required in the face of armed groups. The regime may choose to ignore what some would describe as a toothless resolution. In fact, what has enabled it to shun international pressure until now is the sense that key players like Russia and others condoned its approach, a decisive factor of self-confidence within its own ranks. A Security Council resolution is the one available lever that could be brought to bear on a Syrian leadership that feels sheltered by the prevailing divisions on the international scene, and would rather take the country down the road to civil war than negotiate in order to obtain what still can be achieved (not least guarantees for the Alawite community, a phased hand-over of power, and the assurance of institutional continuity) at the cost of giving up on the hope that hunkering down and making reforms that only satisfy its supporters somehow will enable it to stay in power.

It should come as no surprise that in the absence of any glimmer of hope, despair has been taking hold of Syrian society. It is already expressed in multiple forms, all of them disturbing, but things are poised to get worse. As more Syrians come to believe that their collective efforts are in vain, that the world has forsaken them, and that the regime can only be fought with its own methods, the nature of the struggle could be transformed into something more fragmented, narrow-minded, and brutal. Those who

have given up on everything but God will be easy recruits for the Islamists. The logistical needs of armed groups will offer opportunities for whoever is willing to sustain them. Communal rifts may further deepen. Violence predictably will serve as a vehicle for the advancement of the more thuggish components within each community. The creative, responsible, and forward-looking activists within the protest movement could soon feel overpowered — many already do. That feeling, combined with unrelenting pressure from the security services, is gradually pushing some to give up or even flee abroad.

Until now, the regime and a majority of its supporters, allies, critics, and foes appear to have been operating under the same assumption: that the deadly stalemate the crisis

is locked in will endure a while longer, until the other side gives way. This could still be true, but within the current parameters, it is becoming increasingly improbable that the power structure will suddenly unravel, that it will succeed in regaining lost ground, or that its opponents will accommodate it in any way. If this impasse endures any longer, the struggle could quickly mutate into an open-ended civil war. Although the regime bears most of the responsibility for bringing the situation up to this point, the international community and exiled opposition have no excuse for moving it further along this terrifying path.

*Peter Harling is director for Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon with the International Crisis Group.*



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## No military option in Syria

*By Marc Lynch, January 17, 2012*

It is time to think seriously about intervening militarily in Syria, argues Steven Cook today. He joins a small but growing chorus pushing for such a move. Some parts of the Syrian opposition have moved toward requesting an intervention, albeit with serious reservations and furious internal disagreements, as has the emir of Qatar and some other Arab officials. And then of course, there are those who have been pushing for hawkish policies toward Syria for years who have seized the moment to push for action, and others who generally support military solutions. This is the kind of temporary coalition which can drive real policy shifts.

It is easy to understand the urgency behind such a call. The brutality of the Syrian regime has produced unspeakable atrocities which challenge the conscience of the world. The daily death toll, and the horrific videos and images which

circulate freely, can easily make the passions overwhelm the interests and push us to set prudence aside. I supported the intervention in Libya, and believe strongly in the importance of advancing regional and global norms against regime violence.

But the United States should *not* be contemplating military intervention in Syria. Risky, costly foreign policy decisions cannot simply be taken to express moral outrage. They need to have a serious chance of success. None of the military options currently under discussion have a reasonable chance of improving the situation at an acceptable cost, and their failure would likely pave the way to something far worse.

Syria is not Libya, and has few of the unique conditions which made that intervention appropriate. The moral

outrage at the depredations of Assad's forces, as well as the fevered hopes of those hoping to change the region's strategic equation by bringing down Iran's main Arab ally are not enough, any more than hope is a plan. Military intervention in Syria has little prospect of success, a high risk of disastrous failure, and a near-certainty of escalation which should make the experience of Iraq weigh extremely heavily on anyone contemplating such an intervention. There is no magic number of deaths at which the U.S. must embark on a self-defeating and foolish adventure.

If Syria really did resemble Libya, then the argument for a similar intervention under the mantle of the Responsibility to Protect would be stronger. But it doesn't. The Syrian opposition is far weaker, more divided, and does not control any territory. There are no front lines dividing the forces which can be separated by air power, no tanks and personnel carriers conveniently driving along empty desert roads to be targeted from the sky. The killing in Syria is being done in densely populated urban environments. There is no U.N. Security Council resolution authorizing the use of force. The geography and sectarian landscape are different, as is the regional environment and the risk of spillover into nervous neighbors such as Israel, Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and Iraq.

A no-fly zone (NFZ), the most commonly requested intervention, is almost completely irrelevant to Syrian realities. The Syrian regime is not using helicopters or fixed-wing airplanes to carry out its crackdown. Controlling Syrian airspace alone would do little to affect its ability to act. Syrian anti-aircraft capabilities may be old and unimposing, but when the United States acts militarily it will not take any chances of losing an aircraft. Establishing a NFZ would require significant preliminary bombing of Syrian anti-aircraft capabilities, which would be well-primed for the engagement and would not be taken by surprise as they were by the Israeli strike a few years back. Many Syrian anti-aircraft capabilities are located in or near urban areas, which raises the risk of significant civilian casualties. And, of course, the airspace over Syria — between Israel, Turkey, Iraq and Iran — is among the most politically sensitive areas in the world.

A NFZ would almost immediately escalate to the more aggressive "No Drive Zone" which hawks urged in Libya when that conflict stalled. This expanded use of airpower, rather than the more limited operational details of a NFZ, are what should be debated before moving down that path. This would entail large scale bombing and aerial action against ill-defined targets in urban environments with extremely limited human intelligence or information on the ground. The fact that most of the killing is being done in densely packed urban areas makes any effort to intervene primarily through air power, as in Libya, extremely problematic. A No Fly Zone in Syria is not a cheap alternative to war - it is war, and one which would quickly become messy.

Some therefore advocate directly using U.S. and allied air power to strike against Assad regime targets. For some, this seems to be purely punitive, an expression of moral outrage or punishment. Without a U.N. mandate, this would of course be illegal. It would also be the classic example of something which would feel good momentarily and then create a world of new problems. Some expect that the Assad regime is highly brittle and would quickly crumble in the face of a show of military might, as the regime loses morale and protestors surge forward. Such "shock and awe" offensives, aside from lacking legality and risking significant civilian casualties, have an extremely poor track record in the real world. The Gaddafi regime did not crumble on first strike, under far better conditions for NATO and the opposition. If the Syrian regime does not fold immediately, then once again the United States would be faced with the demand to escalate.

The Syrian National Council has recently explored the idea of the establishment of a Safe Area to protect refugees and to create a Syrian version of Benghazi where the opposition could establish and build an alternative government. In reality, this would entail carving out a part of Syria from the sovereign control of the state and providing the military means to defend it. Declaring it simply in principle would set up the nightmare scenarios of Srebrenica in the Bosnian war, in which the international community proved unable to protect the civilians under its umbrella.

If Srebrenica is the worst-case, the experience of the relatively successful Operation Provide Comfort in northern Iraq after 1991 should prove equally sobering. An operation which was envisioned as a short term response to crisis, on the expectation of Saddam Hussein's imminent fall, instead turned into a decade-long commitment. Maintaining that safe area required some 20,000 troops, near-constant air raids, and an increasingly contentious international debate at the U.N. which consumed the Clinton administration's international diplomacy — and, in 1996, did not prevent one Kurdish leader from inviting Saddam's troops in to help settle internal political scores.

A Safe Area might allow the Syrian opposition in exile to organize, but it would not be a Benghazi where an alternative leadership formed through the indigenous efforts of a militarily and politically successful opposition. It would more likely resemble the Iraqi National Congress in the 1990s, which established a presence in the Kurdish areas for the largely unrepresentative and ineffectual opposition in exile. That consumed a great deal of external support, but never proved capable of winning broader support. Creating a Safe Area would require a significant and direct investment of troops and resources, clearly violate Syrian sovereignty, and likely set up a long-term commitment. There is little reason to believe that such a Safe Area would hasten Assad's collapse, or even to expect it to be useful for the humanitarian mission of protecting Syrian lives. It would be concrete, visible evidence of the foreign conspiracy to divide Syria about which Assad already speaks.

If none of these indirect forms of intervention hold out hope for success, what then is left? On the one hand, direct intervention. It is all too easy to imagine the failure of indirect intervention creating a drumbeat for military forces to directly engage Syrian regime forces, not because anyone wanted that but because of the logic

of escalation and reputation. And then we will be right back to the Pottery Barn rule, the urgent pressure to deal with the post-regime situation, and the kind of disastrous occupation which eight years in Iraq should have made unthinkable. If repeating the Iraqi disaster in Syria is what advocates of intervention would like to propose, then that should be the terms of the debate.

Military intervention in Syria to stop the killing appeals to the soul but does not make sense. That doesn't mean ignoring the slaughter. The United States and its allies must indeed do more to support the Syrian opposition forces. It should work to achieve a U.N. Security Council mandate for comprehensive international sanctions against Damascus, and continue to work with its regional allies to build bilateral and regional pressure. Now that Michael McFaul has finally been confirmed as ambassador to Russia, and the Arab League mission has largely failed, the U.S. can hopefully make more progress in shaping a strong Security Council resolution. The U.S. and its allies should push International Criminal Court indictments and hold the regime accountable for its crimes. More ways could be found to help build the nascent Syrian opposition, and to engage with and support the groups emerging on the ground as opposed to the exile groups. More could be done to plan for a post-Assad future and to communicate to terrified Syrians sitting on the fence that they have a place in that new Syria. I am in the middle of drafting a report offering more concrete proposals along these lines.

I have my doubts about whether the Syrian regime is truly crumbling, as so many claim, but I do believe that the Syrian regime is destroying itself through its repression, losing political support and control over much of the country. The United States needs to hasten those processes, not insert itself in the middle with military action which can not hope to succeed.



## Assad's continued defiance in the face of growing isolation

*By Julien Barnes-Dacey, January 12, 2012*

Another month and another delusionary speech by an Arab autocrat hanging on for power. If recent history is anything to go by, surely Bashar al-Assad's end is now at hand? The Syrian president's unwillingness to concede any of the legitimate demands of protesters, his continued reference to terrorist infiltrators, and his stated willingness to maintain an "iron-fist" incurred broad condemnation and a widening consensus that his days are numbered. And, yet, to dismiss his speech and subsequent hard-line address to crowds gathered in Damascus yesterday, as the ravings of a madman and suggest that Assad is all out of ideas may also be mistaken. Is the president really facing a fight against the clock?

Despite some analysis to the contrary, Assad did not come off as wooden or uneasy during his most recent public appearances. If anything, the physical strain visible in a previous June speech was less apparent, and he spoke with the confidence of a man still in control of some of his rational powers, and perhaps even enjoying a quiet self-belief in his assessment of the regime's strength. While Assad showed apparent delusion in failing to acknowledge what is unfolding around him, the regime's brutal security response to date suggests otherwise: Assad knows what he is facing, but may not be on the back foot as much as people would like to think.

If Assad is indeed maintaining a certain confidence, this is likely to derive as much as anything from the facts on the ground. While the regime is facing an unprecedented challenge and despite the steady drumbeat of opposition activities for ten months now — including an increase in the number of daily protest over recent weeks (perhaps a positive side-effect of the much-maligned Arab League observer mission) — the balance of power on the ground has not fundamentally shifted in the opposition's favor. Most pointedly, despite growing defections among army conscripts and the burgeoning emergence of the Free Syria Army (FSA), there have been next to no defections among

the regime's inner core or the key security apparatuses upon which it depends. Much of the population, despite likely sympathy with opposition aims, has remained on the sidelines; meanwhile, the political opposition continues to squabble among itself, weakening its ability to project credible leadership.

In large part Assad's speeches were aimed at shoring up this base and cementing the narrative that he has fostered since his emergence in power in 2000: without him, so goes the story, the country will descend into instability and communal violence as occurred in neighboring Iraq and Lebanon. The fear that Syria could also fall into a similar form of hell — a scenario that is already unfolding in some measure — cautions many Syrians against radical change. Yes, this is a narrative that Assad is himself cynically creating through the violence of his security forces; yet to deny that it has some semblance of truth would also be mistaken. Syria's many societal and opposition divisions and its political stagnation under decades of Assad dictatorship hint at the potential for a messy transition. In his speeches, then, Assad presented himself as the vehicle of an orderly reform transition. His offer of some political change and a new constitution, counterpoised with fear-mongering references to the spread of terrorism, will strike a chord — however delusional it may appear to outside observers — with some elements of the population, including religious minorities, who have to date not joined the hundreds of thousands of brave protesters.

Meanwhile, his criticism of the Arab League suggests a man who has already recognized the inevitability of his international isolation, and to a certain degree may be feeling slightly liberated for having done so. Syria still gives great importance to its international position — particularly on the economic front as the impact of sanctions begin to bite — but his speech suggests that Assad may not be overly concerned. In part this may reflect his view that foreign intervention remains an

unlikely prospect — an outcome Assad tried to cement in the address; by making it clear that he will battle on, Assad sent a pointed message that any intervention will come at great cost for those attempting it.

Thus, on the back of Assad's pronouncements, the options for moving forward remain as hazy as ever. Assad faces international condemnation and a widening chorus of calls to step down, but it remains uncertain just how this end can be achieved. In truth, without the prospect of some form of Libya-style military intervention, it is hard to see what the international community can feasibly do to loosen the regime's short-term grip on power. Economic sanctions will inflict pain, and may succeed in forcing the regime aside in the medium term, but the suffering they impose on the population at large is also likely to increase exponentially in the months ahead. Meanwhile, without more significant defections from the regime's core base — including a quiet chunk of the population that continue to back him — the fundamental pillars of the regime will not be quickly overturned. The regime is also likely to believe that in the prospect of a civil war — a scenario that may only serve to cement its fear-mongering narrative among the silent majority — it would maintain the military upper hand.

The principle Syrian opposition body, the Syrian National Council (SNC), now appears to have acknowledged this truth, calling for Syria to be referred to the United Nations Security Council and for foreign intervention, a scenario that was anathema to them only a few months ago. However, it is hard not to deduce from this transformation that the SNC, despite its growing position as the primary voice of the opposition, is increasingly out of ideas and that

without foreign intervention, change — at least in the short term — is unlikely.

Despite this reality, the likelihood of military involvement by external actors remains slim at best on the basis of well-versed arguments regarding the complexities of Syrian society and the potential for devastating regional spill-over. While the international community should continue to pressure the regime with as many levers as possible, most notably by seeking some international consensus that includes Russia — which has hitherto blocked U.N. action and which is allegedly now supplying arms to Assad — it holds precious little leverage. This will have to be a Syrian struggle — and one that may ultimately have to involve negotiation with the regime if a devastating conflict is to be averted.

Assad's eventual demise is therefore by no means assured. The growing groundswell of popular opposition, widening violence, and the grim state of an economy quickly heading for collapse makes it hard to envisage how he can maintain his grip on power in the long term: while the regime has remained united thus far, it will surely eventually crack under such sustained pressure. Yet, other similarly odious rulers have survived in similar circumstance, and if Assad's recent appearances are anything to go by he may feel he can hang on for longer than many people imagine.

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## Assessing Assad

By Bruce Bueno de Mequita and Alastair Smith, December 20, 2011

The assessments of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad following his interview with Barbara Walters in early December all strike a common theme. A U.S. State Department spokesman, for instance, declared that Assad appears to be “utterly disconnected with the reality that’s going on in his country.” One analyst opined, “It’s now clear that Assad meets his own definition of crazy.”

What prompted these conclusions was Assad’s answer when Walters asked, “Do you think that your forces cracked down too hard?” He replied, “They are not my forces; they are military forces belong [*sic*] to the government.... I don’t own them. I am president. I don’t own the country, so they are not my forces.” In a Western democracy, it’s hard to imagine how a leader could so blatantly deny responsibility for the actions taken by his own government. But is it Assad who is out of touch with reality? Or is it us?

Following the logic we set out in *The Dictator’s Handbook*, we believe Assad has been misunderstood and maybe, just maybe, even misjudged. In the book, we argue that no leader — not even a Louis XIV, an Adolf Hitler, or a Joseph Stalin — can rule alone. Each must rely on a coalition of essential supporters without whom power will be lost. That coalition, in turn, counts on a mutually beneficial relationship with the leader. They keep the ruler in office, and the ruler keeps them in the money. If either fails to deliver what the other wants, the government falls.

Assad is no exception. Just as he said, it is not his government. He cannot do whatever he wants. He might even be a true reformer, as many in the Western media believed prior to the Arab Spring, or he may be the brute he now appears to be. The truth is, he is doing what he must to maintain the loyalty of those who keep him in power.

Assad depends on the backing of key members of the Alawite clan, a quasi-Shiite group consisting of between 12 and 15 percent of Syria’s mostly Sunni population. The Alawites make up 70 percent of Syria’s career military,

80 percent of the officers, and nearly 100 percent of the elite Republican Guard and the 4th Armored Division, led by the president’s brother Maher. In a survey of country experts we conducted in 2007, we found that Assad’s key backers — those without whose support he would have to leave power — consisted of only about 3,600 members out of a population of about 23 million. That is less than 0.02 percent. Assad is not alone in his dependence on a small coalition. Iran’s Ayatollah Ali Khamenei’s coalition is even smaller. His essential supporters include the Revolutionary Guard’s leadership, the economically essential *bonyad* conglomerates, key clerics, and a smattering of business interests, totaling, according to our survey of Iran experts, about 2,000 in a population of well over 70 million.

Any political system that depends on such a small percentage of the population to sustain a leader in power is destined to be a corrupt, rent-seeking regime in which loyalty is purchased through bribery and privilege. Syria possesses these traits in spades. Transparency International reports in its latest evaluation that Syria ranks in the top third of the world for corruption. So, when Assad says it is not his government, he is right. If he betrays the interests of his closest Alawite allies, for instance by implementing reforms that will dilute their share of the spoils, they will probably murder him before any protesters can topple his regime. Of course, the uprising or international intervention might eventually end his rule. But those possibilities remain potential. Should the loyalty of his 3,600 supporters falter and they stop working to neutralize protest, Assad will be gone immediately. Captive to the needs of his coalition, he ignores the welfare of the 23 million average Syrians and shuns world opinion.

There is, in fact, real evidence that Assad has modest reformist tendencies. During his 11 years in power, he has increased competitiveness in the economy, liberalized — a bit — the banking sector, and did, according to our 2007 survey, expand his Alawite-based winning coalition

by about 50 percent when he first succeeded his father (though, having secured his hold on power, he was able to purge some of these surplus supporters and by around 2005 had reduced the coalition's size back to what it had been under his father). Syria has enjoyed a respectable growth rate under his leadership, though it is also suffering from high deficit spending, deep indebtedness (about 27 percent of GDP), and high unemployment, especially in the countryside and in Damascus's poverty belt. Although official unemployment figures claim about 8.9 percent unemployment, at least one well-regarded Syrian economist estimates the rate at 22 to 30 percent.

And with the Arab League endorsing stiff economic sanctions, Assad's regime now risks steep economic decline. With Syrians facing a society in which the rewards go to so few and confronted with the example of the uprisings elsewhere in the Arab world, it is little wonder that the people have rebelled. It is equally unsurprising that the privileged few have responded brutally to preserve their advantages.

There are two effective responses to a mass uprising (other than stepping down, of course, which leaders almost never do until all other options have been exhausted): liberalize to redress the people's grievances or crack down to make their odds of success too small for them to carry on. Leaders who lack the financial wherewithal to continue paying off cronies often choose to liberalize. (Remember South Africa's F.W. de Klerk, who negotiated a government transition with Nelson Mandela's African National Congress when economic decline made the apartheid system unsustainable.) Those who can muster the money to sustain crony loyalty do so. This is why the rich oil states to Syria's south have resisted reform and why, despite its popular uprising, Libya will not become democratic. Here is another case where Assad's statement that it is not his country is true, but only partially. As president, he could liberalize to buy off those rebelling, but his key backers will almost certainly not allow him to do so as long as there is enough money to keep paying foot soldiers to crack heads. With Syria's oil wealth in decline and with stiff economic sanctions, the regime's two choices are to liberalize or to find new sources of money. They have succeeded in the latter pursuit.

Reuters reported on July 15 that Iran and Iraq offered Assad's regime \$5 billion in aid, with \$1.5 billion paid immediately. The \$5 billion is equal to about 40 percent of Syrian government revenue. Since the announcement of Arab League sanctions, Iran, Iraq, and Venezuela have signed agreements to expand trade and investment in Syria to the tune of more than \$7 billion in 2012, including building an oil refinery. That is just what Assad's political-survival doctor ordered. This injection of cash in the short term is likely to keep the military and security forces on his side. The military core of his coalition is likely to do whatever it takes to keep the president in power as long as that money keeps on flowing. That is the essential synergy of all leader-coalition arrangements.

In the long run, meaning two to five years, reform is likely in Syria, perhaps through internal uprising and perhaps driven by forces outside the country. It could be that Assad will turn out to be the instrument of change, but the process of getting to that point will continue to be ugly, painful, and brutal as long as the likes of Iran, Iraq, and Venezuela care more about currying favor with Assad's regime than they do about the well-being of the Syrian people.

How long they can do so is open to speculation. Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez is rumored to be terminally ill. Will his successors care about sustaining the costs of closer ties with Syria? With Iran facing its own economic problems, how long will the Islamic Republic's regime sacrifice to sustain Assad? If Iran's regime focuses more of its energy on internal affairs, will Nouri al-Maliki's Iraqi government, itself likely to face stiff internal resistance, continue to build closer ties with its Syrian neighbor? In each of these cases, we don't believe the current arrangement will last long. That, in the end, may be the greatest hope for the Syrian people.

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## Inside Syria's Economic Implosion

*By Stephen Starr, November 15, 2011*

DAMASCUS, Syria – A Quran sits atop a 4-foot Sony speaker in Wissam's modern Damascus office. It is 9 a.m., and Wissam, a stout 30-something businessman, seems flustered. He arrived a little late for this interview, wiping beads of sweat off his forehead before sitting down next to a cabinet, where books authored by Bill Gates and Warren Buffett peek out. Wissam's company owns the import rights for Sony products in Syria, but he's unlikely to sell many speakers or flat-screen televisions in the near future.

"Business activity has recovered slightly, but it is still down about 40 percent" since March, when the protests began, he said. "I think companies can survive another six or maybe even 12 months, but beyond that it will be impossible."

Wissam, like others in his position, is trapped. He recognizes the regime's actions have damaged the country's businesses, but feels powerless to do anything about it. "They feel they are under siege, and they won't be moved," he said, referring to the authorities.

Syrian business leaders, with much to lose and deeply fearful of the regime's security apparatus, are unlikely to join the country's ongoing revolt anytime soon. Even the businessmen interviewed for this article blanched upon seeing their remarks about the dismal state of the Syrian economy in print, quickly requesting anonymity to express themselves freely. The government's rose-tinted pronouncements about the condition of Syrian finances aside, there is no doubt that the country's economy is in dire straits.

The official line is that Syria's economy is fine. In an August interview, Central Bank Governor Adib Mayaleh said that foreign reserves remain strong at about \$18 billion — the same figure he was quoting earlier in the summer. President Bashar al-Assad has been somewhat more honest, arguing in June that "the most dangerous thing we face in the next stage is the weakness or collapse of the Syrian economy."

But the facts on the ground are irrefutable. The International Monetary Fund projected in September that Syria's economy will shrink by about 2 percent this year. Tourism, worth about 12 percent of GDP, has ceased completely. Employees in the huge and overburdened state sector have been asked by the authorities to "donate" 500 Syrian pounds (about \$10) from their monthly salaries to help boost state funds. Deposits in Syria's private banks declined as much as 18 percent in third quarter of this year, according to figures released by the Damascus Securities Exchange, despite high interest rates meant to shore up bank coffers.

Yehia is the vice president and executive director of a major aluminum manufacturer and is from a family business that owns several car dealerships. "Before the crisis we sold between 12 and 15 cars per day," he said. "Today we sell two or three."

But though Yehia is openly critical of the regime, he denies that Syria's merchant class is primed to move against Assad. When asked whether he would financially support the Syrian National Council, the umbrella group that claims to represent the protest movement, Yehia said he would. "But it is just way too dangerous; there are spies inside the opposition."

The United States and the European Union have responded to the escalating violence by slapping new sanctions on Syria, effectively isolating the country from the world financial system. Funds held in international banks cannot be accessed through Syrian banks, meaning that foreigners in Syria hoping to get cash through local ATMs will be left disappointed. Sanctions have also driven credit card companies out of Syria, denying businessmen access to an important means of making transactions. Popular Turkish clothing items that once swelled the Syrian market can no longer be found. One businessman who imports generators from Turkey complained he can no longer get letters of credit from overseas banks. "No one wants to do business with us anymore," he said.

Wissam, the vice president of a leading Damascus-based conglomerate that has interests in Syria's pharmaceutical, imports, banking, hotel, media and foreign exchange sectors, notes that these sanctions have already kept numerous companies out of the country. "BlackBerry couldn't enter the Syrian economy because, as a Canadian company, it didn't want to go against America's lead in sanctioning Syria," he said.

As he points out, the West's economic moves will undoubtedly affect all Syrians, rather than just a narrow few. "The sanctions are supposed to affect certain individuals, but we know this will not be the case," he said.

But while sanctions have no doubt harmed Syria's economic outlook, other wounds have been self-inflicted. In September, the Syrian government imposed a ban on imports that carried a tariff of over 5 percent, resulting in hoarding and a dramatic rise in the price of household staples. The arbitrary nature of the products that fell under the ban only further incensed the business community. Swordfish were at first exempt but later banned; fish with teeth from Australia and Antarctica, however, were allowed. Saddles and bicycle seats, too, were exempt under the ban. Car imports were banned. Perishable food products on the way to or at the border had to be thrown out. Syrian businessmen and the wider population scratched their heads in wonder.

Realizing its error, the government reversed the ban less than two weeks after it was imposed. In an attempt to boost government revenues, a 10 percent increase in Syria's car import tax was introduced in October following its cancellation.

Mohammad, the vice chairman and managing director of a group of companies involved in retail, agriculture exports, and marketing, blasted the import ban as "completely dimwitted; it made no sense at all. It was made without any notice, any plan, any research," he said.

Mohammad believes the decision to introduce the ban was made by Mayaleh, the central bank governor, whom

he holds responsible for the massive depletion of the state's foreign reserves. "For months Syrians were able to take out up to \$10,000 per month, and this destroyed the state's dollar reserves. It was a stupid decision — of course everyone who had money would convert to dollars," he said.

Although the Assad regime's relationship with the business elite in Damascus and Aleppo has long been a pillar of its strength, Mohammad said that the merchant class was too cowed to register its discontent with the import ban. "The Damascus Chamber of Commerce should have resigned," he said. "They were afraid to go further up to the president and ask about why this decision had been made without the business community."

He thinks the import ban was revoked so quickly because the regime realized other countries would simply stop imports of Syrian goods in retaliation, not because the business community used its muscle to pressure the regime.

The same dynamic appears to hold true in Aleppo, Syria's most populous city, which has largely avoided the mass protests that have seized other parts of the country. "I visited Aleppo recently, and the businessmen there are totally pro-regime — every single one I met," said Abdullah, a managing director of a glass and steel manufacturing company. "The business communities in other cities and around the country think the Aleppo businessmen have betrayed them, and this could cause problems in the future."

On the street, Syrians have had to tighten their belts. The price of cigarettes, for example, has gone up between 40 and 50 percent. Mazout — the diesel oil used to fuel the country's transportation system and which will be needed to heat 22 million Syrians this winter — is reportedly running at more than double the official price.

As sanctions take their toll, the regime has also been forced to increase its spending just to keep the economy afloat. The government has increased its budget for 2012 by 15 percent to \$26.5 billion, according to *al-Watan*, a pro-regime daily.

With oil revenues set to plummet, however, where will the money come from? Oil exploiter Gulfsands Petroleum has been asked by the state to decrease production due to a lack of storage. Syria attempted but failed to barter crude oil for fuel during a tender offered in September. This month, the European Union will cease importing Syrian crude oil following a decision made in September. Prior to the ban, Syria exported about half its crude production, with the EU by far its largest market.

Foreign currency is growing increasingly scarce in Syria as both businessmen and the general public seek to get their hands on safe euros and dollars. Abdullah, the glass and steel manufacturer, admitted that he tried to buy \$100,000 from the black market several weeks ago, but couldn't. "It simply isn't there," he said.

He explained that imports taxed over 1 percent have to be paid in foreign currency to the Central Bank and that businessmen turn to the black market for those funds to finance that expense. "We pay 53 Syrian pounds on the dollar [on the black market], but this is increasing," he said. The official rate stands at about 49 Syrian pounds to \$1.

Many businessmen told me that though their fortunes were down, their companies are surviving and they have managed to avoid mass layoffs. Wissam said that his company has avoided firing anyone out of "patriotic duty."

The reluctance of some employers to lay off workers may play a role in tempering the protests. Few are positive about the future, however. "I won't go and protest; I've got a degree, and I could leave the country," said Mohammad. "But my employees probably would, should they lose their jobs."

With thousands out of work since the unrest took hold last March, many restaurants in Damascus, particularly those that cater to low- and middle-income Syrians, are empty. Around the capital, clothes shops are continuing summer sales well into fall. Taxi drivers complain of empty streets. Fear of the future is palpable.

It is clearly fear of the country's security apparatus that concentrates the minds of many businessmen. "There is too much fear for any business leader to turn against the government," Yehia said. "The security can get to whoever they want — it doesn't matter how big the businesspeople are. There are no boundaries. It [turning against the regime] is just not going to ever happen."

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