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Forces loyal to Syria's President Bashar al-Asad ride in a tank in the al-Mansoura area of Aleppo's countryside, June 2, 2013 | Reuters

BREAKING THE STALEMATE: THE MILITARY DYNAMICS OF THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR AND OPTIONS FOR LIMITED U.S. INTERVENTION

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The tragedy of Syria roils on with no end in sight. It nags at our collective conscience and threatens American interests. Many Americans would like to see it ended. Yet our diplomatic efforts are so moribund as to have become a cruel joke to the Syrian people. There is a growing recognition that the Syrian civil war is now dominated by its military dimension, and until there is a breakthrough on the battlefield, there will be no breakthroughs at the negotiating table.[1]

Unfortunately, that seems a distant prospect. Both sides remain convinced that they can defeat the other in combat, and both are terrified that losing will mean their physical destruction. For the foreseeable future, however, it is unlikely that either has the capacity to vanquish the other, although they can certainly make important tactical gains. Both would need considerable assistance to win outright but neither side is ready to trust their lives to the other's promises, whether spoken or written. Consequently, bringing an end to the conflict in Syria must start with changing the military dynamics of the conflict. As long as the current conditions persist, the war will drag on.

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Americans have understandably shown little appetite for another Iraq- or Afghan-style commitment of ground forces to the Middle East. Instead we have focused on limited military options that might allow us to do something to assuage the suffering of the Syrian people and defend our interests without requiring another massive effort. Yet the current debate has become obsessed with the cost side of the question of limited military intervention and largely ignored the effect side. There are certainly many things that the United States could do in Syria, but it is not clear what impact they would have, and many of those under consideration may not affect the military balance significantly. Thus we risk adopting options that will incur real (even if limited) costs but will have little prospect of securing our interests. That could prove to be the worst of all possible worlds.

Calling Things by Their Right Names

It is important to start by clarifying the nature of the conflict. Syria is not Egypt. It is not Tunisia. It is not about "the Syrian people" toppling a hated dictator by the name of Bashar al-Asad. At least, not only that. It is no longer a revolution. The conflict began that way, but it has now devolved into something bigger and worse.

Neither is it an insurgency. Syria is not Afghanistan. It is not Vietnam. It is not El Salvador. The two sides hold different parts of the country. They have distinct power bases within the population, rather than competing for support across a single population. They both employ guerrilla tactics where they are weak (just as any army does), but the fighting has been primarily determined by conventional operations.

The conflict in Syria is now an intercommunal civil war. It is a struggle for power among a variety of different "identity" groups. In the case of Syria, these

groups are largely bound up with religion, and to a lesser extent, with ethnicity. Today, the conflict primarily pits a large number of Sunni Arab groups (joined by a small number of others) against the Alawi community and elements of the country's other minorities—Arab Christians, Druse, Kurds, Turkmen and others—who have thrown in their lot with the Alawis. The former constitute the "opposition," such as it is. The latter are typically referred to as the "regime," although this is true only in the sense that the Alawis formerly dominated the government and they remain the heart of their coalition. What unites the regime coalition is primarily one thing: fear of the Sunni Arab majority. Fear that if/when the Sunnis finally wrest back power, they (and particularly the Sunni Islamist extremists that comprise their core military strength) will oppress, even slaughter, all of the minority communities as they themselves were oppressed and slaughtered by the Alawi regime.[2] Not every member of every Syrian minority supports the regime—even some Alawis don't—but too many have been forced to choose sides and too many have thrown in their lot with the former regime, whether willingly or grudgingly.

The problem is that the Alawis and other minorities may well be right about their fate in the event of an opposition victory. Sunni Arabs are a majority in Syria, comprising roughly 60-65 percent of the population. This demographic weight gives the Sunni Arabs an important long-term advantage in a fight like Syria's. And it has frequently been the case in intercommunal civil wars that victory is accompanied—even achieved—by mass slaughter and ethnic cleansing. Thus, it is not irrational for Syrian minorities to rally around the regime, which protected them (even favored them) during the period of Alawi control from 1966 till 2011.

As for Asad himself, Washington's rhetoric has greatly exaggerated his role. He remains the leader of the regime coalition, although it is impossible to know how much power he wields. It is not uncommon in these conflicts for other leaders to emerge and supplant those nominally in charge at the beginning—and even to leave them in place as figureheads while making all of the real decisions from behind the scenes.

At most, Asad should now be seen not as the "dictator of Damascus," but as the warlord leading the regime coalition. He could be killed or overthrown tomorrow and it might have no impact on the fighting whatsoever. Although it is possible that his death or downfall would throw the regime coalition into chaos and create an opportunity for a quick opposition victory, that is unlikely. The opposition lacks either the combat capabilities or the unity of command to properly take advantage of such a situation, and the Alawis would doubtless quickly select a new leader for fear that allowing a power vacuum to develop would lead to precisely such a Sunni victory—and the massacre of their community. Indeed, that is by far the most likely scenario, with Asad simply being replaced by another warlord (perhaps one more competent than he has proven) to continue the fight.

Thus, demanding that "Asad must go" or predicting that "Asad's days are

numbered" has absolutely nothing to do with the realities of Syria today. He could "go" tomorrow and the most likely result would be no effect whatsoever. And while his days are doubtless numbered, because that is true for all of us, in Bashar's case the number may well be very high because the military deadlock that has set in could endure for a very long time.

The Armed Opposition: Strengths and Weaknesses

The opposition's military forces have four things going for them, although each of these advantages is at least partially offset by a concomitant disadvantage.

It starts with quantity. One simple way to understand the military dynamics of the Syrian civil war is to think of Jim Morrison and The Doors: "They got the guns, but we got the numbers." The opposition coalition represents the Sunni Arab majority of the country, and numbers always matter in warfare even though they are rarely more than part of the outcome of any battle. Numbers tend to matter more in intercommunal civil wars both because it is hard for any group in such a conflict to consistently field many high quality formations, and because it is the nature of these conflicts to go on for very long times, which helps the weight of numbers to take their toll through sheer attrition. It is not mere coincidence that Shi'ite Hizballah ultimately prevailed in Lebanon in the 1980s, the Pashtun Taliban in Afghanistan in the 1990s, or the Iraqi Shi'a in the 2000s.

One way to understand the military dynamics of the Syrian civil war is to think of Jim Morrison and The Doors: "They got the guns, but we got the numbers."

Nevertheless, the Syrian opposition has often had difficulty taking full advantage of its numerical superiority. On paper, the various opposition forces boast anywhere from 100-150,000 fighters. However, no more than 30-40,000 of these troops can be called on to fight beyond their own neighborhoods and towns. Consequently, it has been hard for the opposition to sustain offensives and translate tactical successes into strategic advances because so many of the formations involved in any victorious battle are unwilling to push beyond the immediate battlefield.

Second, the opposition has the moral energy of decades of repressed anger on the part of the Sunni community, which was deprived of political power and economic prosperity commensurate with its demographic weight. More than that, because the Alawis and their allies feared the Sunni majority, the Sunnis were often badly oppressed and famously butchered by Bashar's father Hafiz to end Syria's first civil war, in 1976-1982 (itself a product of spillover from the Lebanese civil war). The Sunnis have a lot riding on this war and they know it, and that has given them a willingness to fight and die for their cause.

However, this motivation is often dissipated by the divisions that have plagued the opposition from its inception. As has become painfully apparent, the rebels are badly fragmented. The "Free Syrian Army" is an aspiration, not a reality. There is virtually no unified command and control, let alone planning, training, communications, logistics or doctrine. Most of the locally-based companies and battalions are commanded by Syria's traditional tribal elite, while the commanders of the "FSA franchise battalions," represent a grab bag of former Army officers, scions of great families, religious leaders, and would be revolutionaries. As a result, there is considerable friction both among the FSA commanders and between them and the commanders of many of the local opposition militias.

Adding to the opposition's advantages are those elements with considerable cohesiveness, determination and combat skills, particularly Islamist militias affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood (*al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun*) and Salafist groups like *Jabhat al-Nusra* (JAN), *Ahrar al-Sham* and al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI). Elizabeth O'Bagy and Joseph Holliday of the Institute for the Study of War estimate that JAN and AQI have at least 5,000 fighters in Syria between them, and they may field twice that number. Moreover, they constitute some of the most committed warriors in the country. For its part, Ahrar al-Sham boasts an equal or greater number and it is widely considered one of the most effective elements of the opposition military. Many other opposition militias are linked to Syria's Muslim Brotherhood. These groups are all potent players in the Syrian civil war. Their devotion to fundamentalist visions of Islam makes them disciplined and determined fighters and the presence of foreign fighters trained by al-Qa'ida and blooded by the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere gives them some useful combat capabilities.

Yet these groups are as much a part of the problem as the solution. Many hate one another and have begun to fight one another for resources, authority and control over territory. AQI in particular seems more interested in controlling and administering parts of Syria than in fighting the regime. It is not clear that the Ikhwan is a better alternative. Although fragmented like everything else related to the opposition, some of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's most important components reflect an old-style, unreconstructed Islamist organization that has little interest in pluralism, tolerance or democracy. Prior to 2011, the Egyptian branch was considered peaceful, progressive and enlightened in comparison with its Syrian counterpart.

Finally, the opposition is receiving some degree of support from a variety of Arab and Western countries. Although the unclassified reporting is unclear, it seems that they are getting small arms and some man-portable anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons from a variety of sources, primarily the Gulf oil emirates. This seems to be complimented by non-lethal aid (communications gear, medical supplies, etc.) and training in weapons handling and some basic tactics by various Western powers.

Yet this too has its downsides. First, some of the opposition's backers are

effectively fighting one another by proxy. In particular, the Saudis and Emiratis are terrified of the Brotherhood, having concluded that the worst facet of the Arab Spring has been that it has "unleashed" the Ikhwan to try to take over the entire Arab world. Consequently, the Saudis, Emiratis and Kuwaitis have been funding Salafist groups against the efforts of Turkey and Qatar, who have mostly backed the Ikhwan-allied forces. In that way, opposition groups are rewarded for not cooperating with others fighting ostensibly for the same cause. Many of the opposition's foreign backers have furthermore insisted that the weapons and other resources they provide be used in specific locations or to attack designated areas—and they have withheld support when the opposition tried to use its resources to fight in other regions. In many cases, the operations that the foreign powers have demanded have less to do with defeating the regime than with protecting the specific interests of the foreign powers. Naturally, all of this deepens the fragmentation, lack of coordination and absence of a unified strategy on the part of the opposition.

The Regime: Strengths and Weaknesses

The regime coalition has a number of advantages that have allowed it to maintain its hold on the Alawi heartland and continue to contest Syria's main cities, but it too has important limitations. To start, like the opposition and arguably to an even greater extent, the regime coalition is highly motivated. The Alawis and other minority groups know that they are outnumbered by the Sunni Arabs, and know that the Sunni Arabs have spent decades chafing against their oppression. They realize that the Sunnis smell blood and believe this to be their chance to take back power. And the minorities fear, not necessarily wrongly, that they and their entire families will be massacred if the Sunnis win. That is a powerful set of motivations to fight, kill and die.

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The regime coalition also has a certain geographic advantage. Syria's Alawis and a number of the other minorities are largely concentrated in the country's mountainous west, along the coast and around the seaport of Latakiya. Likewise, most of Syria's main population centers—Damascus, Hama, Homs, Aleppo—are all concentrated within about 30 kilometers of these mountains. The helpful defensive terrain of the mountains and cities has aided the regime's ability to hang on despite the advantages of the opposition, especially early on when the regime was disorganized by the disintegration of much of its security services.

The greatest advantage of the regime coalition, however, is the remnants of the Syrian armed forces. When the protest movement snowballed into civil war, much of the Syrian military fell apart, most of its personnel deserting—and a fair number joining the opposition. But the regime had always limited the number of Sunnis able to rise up through its officer ranks, and had reserved a number of "elite" formations for Alawis and other minorities to ensure that loyal, capable units would be available to crush any popular uprising like that which morphed into the current civil war. These units, like the Republican Guard and 4th Armored Division, now constitute the core of the regime's military force. They are backed by elements of other key Syrian military formations, like the 14th Airborne and 15th Special Forces Divisions, as well as the 1st and 3rd Armored Divisions, all of which had heavier percentages of Alawis and other minorities.[3] Overall, the regime can count on about one-third of the 220,000-strong prewar Syrian Army as well as important elements of its air, air defense and naval forces. Thus, although the military defending Asad is a pale shadow of the prewar Syrian armed forces, it remains a formidable power in the context of the civil war.

Qualitatively, the Syrian armed forces were never mistaken for the *Wehrmacht*, having failed in virtually every interstate war they ever fought. Their maintenance practices were appalling, their technical skills limited, and their tactical leadership was deplorable.[4] However, the Syrian military did have some talents, particularly a crude but effective logistical network and a surprisingly high degree of unit cohesion. Both of these advantages have been on display during the civil war, with some regime garrisons holding out for long periods despite being cut-off and surrounded by superior opposition forces. Moreover, because the regime coalition has been able to retain both the governmental and military hierarchies, the regime has a unity of command that the opposition can only dream of.

Beyond this, the remnants of the Syrian armed forces now fighting for the regime coalition have generally preserved their discipline, chain of command and much of their heavy weaponry. All of these have proven important in the conflict, the last arguably the most. Historically, Syrian infantry were not terribly capable and Syrian attacks typically consisted of little more than massed bombardments followed by clumsy frontal assaults. Against untrained and uncoordinated opposition forces, however, this same combination has often proven effective. Regime forces have leaned heavily on firepower—both offensively and defensively—in lieu of maneuver or sophisticated tactics. And because of the dearth of heavy weapons among the opposition, this has often sufficed. Regime forces tend to rely on tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, anti-aircraft guns (deadly against infantry too), mortars and especially artillery to hold off rebel attacks and retake fallen towns.

The regime can also probably muster 60-90 operational fixed-wing aircraft, mostly MiG-23s and Su-22s—the latter ideal for straight-forward ground attack missions. This air power has garnered considerable attention, but in military terms it appears to contribute quite a bit less than the regime's ground equipment,

particularly its artillery and mortars. Certainly some regime aircraft have been committed in tactical support of ground operations, but these have been relatively few according to figures compiled both by Joe Holliday and Jeff White of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Historically Syrian air strikes were rarely competent enough to have a tactical military impact and there is nothing to suggest that they have improved during the civil war. Instead, the regime has enjoyed greater successs using its air power in ethnic cleansing operations, sending planes of all kinds (and even Scud missiles) to strike enemy-controlled and Sunni population centers to cause panic and civilian flight.

In addition, to counter the demographic advantage of the opposition, the regime has bolstered its ranks with large numbers of irregulars, called *Shabiha*. This militia may consist of as many as 100,000 members and is overwhelmingly Alawi in composition. Although at first just young thugs with guns raised to try to suppress the initial protest movement, many Shabiha are now receiving formal military training and the regime is increasingly using them to garrison conquered territory and hold quieter sectors of the front to allow the regulars to concentrate wherever the fighting is fiercest.

Although all of these foreign contingents are small, their commitment and—especially in the case of Hizballah and some of the Iraqi militiamen—combat experience give them an outsized impact in battle against haphazardly organized, poorly-armed and indifferently-led opposition fighters.

In recent months, the regime's forces have been bolstered by small numbers of highly-motivated and, in some cases, more skillful, foreign contingents. The best known example is Hizballah, which may have committed as many as 3-4,000 of its own troops to the fighting—although many of these may have only deployed for selected engagements, such as the battle of Qusayr. Iran is also collecting volunteers from its own populace to fight on behalf of its Syrian allies, and at some point in the near future, companies of these men may join the conflict. Several Iraqi Shi'a militias have also been sending units to Syria to aid the Alawi-led coalition, and Michael Knights of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy estimates that there may be several thousand of them in country already.[5] Although all of these foreign contingents are small, their commitment and—especially in the case of Hizballah and some of the Iraqi militiamen—combat experience give them an outsized impact in battle against haphazardly organized, poorly-armed and indifferently-led opposition fighters. Indeed, in some recent battles, the regime appears to have relied on foreign formations to lead their attacks when firepower alone proved inadequate and the regime's infantry lacked the ability to do so on their own.[6]

Manpower is only one aspect of the support that the regime is receiving from outside powers. In addition to its volunteers, Iran has sent several hundred or more military advisors and trainers to work with Syrian regime formations, and possibly to command them in some sectors or situations. Tehran is also reportedly providing Damascus with oil, financial credit, spare parts and ammunition. There are reports that Russia and China are also providing both financial support, weaponry and combat supplies to the regime. Although this aid may not be much more than what is reaching the opposition, it is nonetheless important to keep the regime coalition's tanks, cannons and warplanes running and shooting. Russia may also have provided military advisors to the regime's forces.

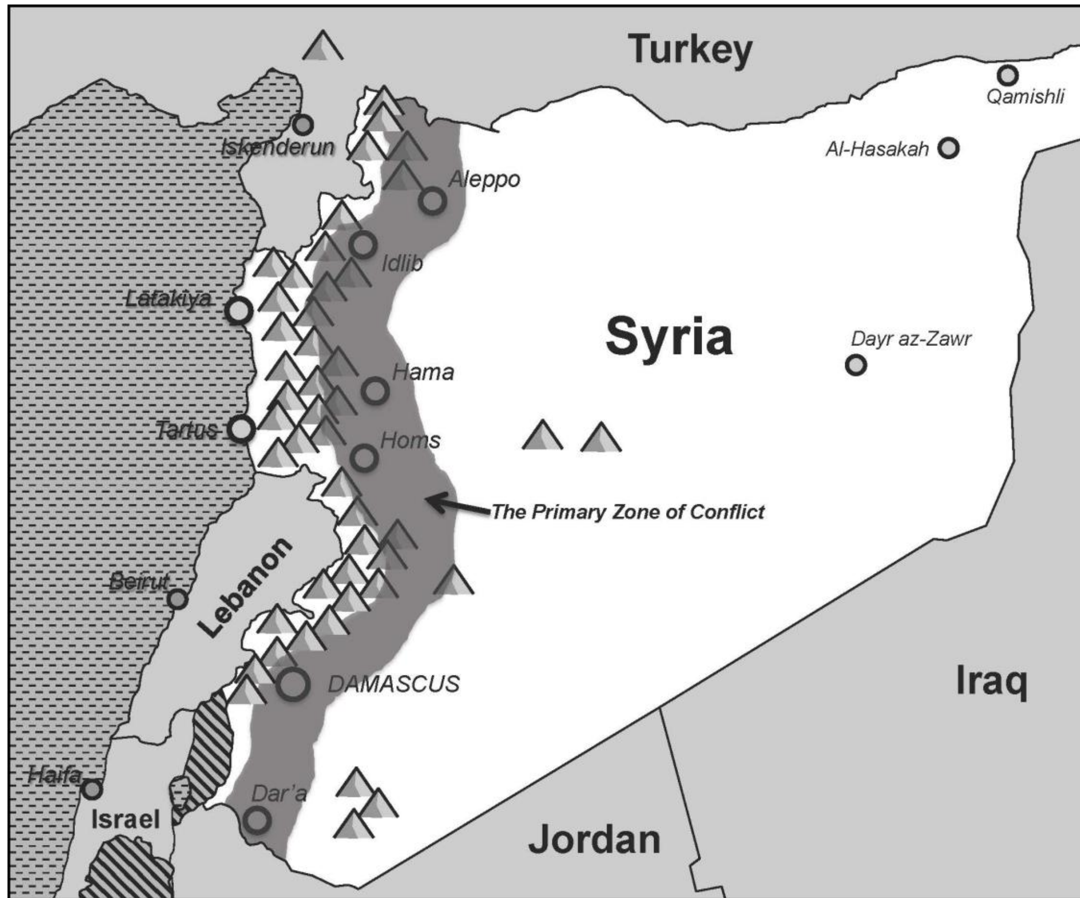
Finally, the regime also benefits from the weaknesses of its opponent. The opposition forces remain a gaggle of disjointed groups who have considerable difficulty cooperating. Most of the opposition began with little military experience, and even those who came from the Army tended to be from the lower ranks and did not benefit from fighting as part of long-standing units with an established chain of command.

Still it is important not to make the regime's forces out to be more than they are. They are relatively small and are stretched thin holding a front the width of Syria. As Holliday and O'Bagy note, the regime has repeatedly been forced to withdraw troops prematurely from one battle to defend against attacks in other sectors—for instance, pulling troops from its successful offensive against Aleppo to fend off (uncoordinated) rebel threats to Homs and Hama. This has significantly limited their ability to make meaningful gains. The regime's forces are not terribly competent and depend heavily on firepower. Moreover, vast as Syria's prewar stockpiles of weapons and ammunition may have been, at some point, the regime's poor maintenance practices and fire discipline are likely to catch up with it and attrition will begin to wear away the singular advantage of its heavy weaponry. When that happens, unless it receives large-scale resupply (including new tanks, artillery, and other heavy weapons in addition to spare parts and ammunition), the regime will see its ability to match opposition manpower with firepower erode.

Stalemate

Because the advantages of the two sides are now more or less balanced, the fighting has bogged down into a predictable (and predicted) stalemate. The opposition controls 60-70 percent of Syrian territory, but the regime controls 60-70 percent of the population—which is concentrated in the west of the country. Indeed, the countervailing advantages of the two sides have resulted in a rough deadlock along a line running north-south from Aleppo, through Idlib, Hama, Homs, Damascus and down to Dara'a. Virtually all of the major combat has occurred in a belt roughly 50 kilometers wide centered on this chain of cities—Syria's primary zone of conflict.

Syria's Primary Zone of Conflict



Until some new factor is added to the current mix, it is unlikely that either side will improve its combat capabilities enough relative to the other to enable it to achieve a major breakthrough soon. As in Lebanon throughout the 1980s and Afghanistan throughout the 1990s (where the Taliban fought a similarly endless and bloody attrition campaign to reduce the last great Tajik stronghold in the Panjshir valley), the most likely scenario for Syria, all other things being equal, is for the fighting to drag on more or less along the current lines for a long time. Certainly months and easily years. Cities and towns will be lost and regained as each side finds ways to exploit various tactical advantages, but the overall battle lines are unlikely to shift beyond the zone of conflict.

Meanwhile, thousands will die. Potentially tens or even hundreds of thousands more, depending on how long the fighting lasts. The regime has already demonstrated a willingness to employ chillingly typical methods of ethnic cleansing, but it is also inventing some new ones of its own—like firing surface-to-surface missiles into cities and towns and employing chemical warfare agents to frighten opposition civilians from contested areas. Andrew Tabler of the Washington Institute, reports that the Orontes river valley west of Hama and

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Homs has witnessed numerous horrific efforts by the regime to depopulate the area of Sunni Arabs, and then bring in Alawis displaced from other parts of the country to settle and secure this key terrain. Of course, the opposition is fast catching up with the regime in its own ethnic cleansing operations, particularly in parts of the country where JAN or AQI hold sway. And the cauldron of civil war will not only keep boiling within Syria's borders, it will also keep spilling over onto the neighboring states.

Breaking the Stalemate

This state of affairs sets the context for any discussion of possible U.S. intervention in the Syrian civil war. In particular, it strongly suggests that if the United States is serious about tilting the military balance in favor of the opposition, it is going to have to make a much bigger investment than it has been willing to take on so far. Because of the large and complex array of factors contributing to the current situation, breaking the deadlock will almost certainly require considerable external assistance related to many of those factors—both to build up the capabilities of the opposition and to diminish those of the regime. Concentrating solely on one or the other, or making only minimal efforts to do both, is unlikely to shift the military balance decisively in favor of the opposition, let alone the more moderate elements within the opposition that the U.S. favors.[7]

Training and Equipping the Opposition. There is no question that the opposition could use considerable help. However, the nature of that help can vary greatly, and prove extremely valuable or utterly irrelevant depending on what is provided.

The opposition could certainly benefit from better weaponry, particularly weapons that will give it a greater ability to take out the regime's heavy equipment. However, it is difficult for light infantry—even light infantry well-equipped with modern anti-tank and other crew-served weapons—to defeat enemy armor backed by artillery. If it were easy, the world's armies would look very different from how they do today. Over time, providing large numbers of advanced anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons can certainly help attrite enemy formations and increase the cost of regime victories, but they are unlikely to significantly affect the battlefield outcomes themselves. In Afghanistan in the 1980s, Stingers and Milan anti-tank weapons caused losses among Soviet forces that Moscow was unwilling to bear; they did not lead to battlefield defeats for the Red Army. For the Soviets, Afghanistan was a "war of choice" and they had the option of walking away, an option they exercised when the costs got too high. For Asad and the Alawis, the Syrian civil war is a "war of necessity" and they are unlikely to give up and risk slaughter at the hands of the opposition simply because they are losing more tanks and helicopters in each battle, especially if they keep winning the battles.

Even if advanced weaponry and small unit training enabled the opposition to strip the regime of its heavy weapons, this probably would not prove decisive on

its own. Even a large-scale reduction in the regime's ability to employ firepower is unlikely to cause the Alawis and other minorities to give up the fight. In other, similar civil wars, the gradual attrition of heavy weaponry simply caused a shift to a more traditional light infantry conflict. In that case, the fighting in Syria would look different—and the numbers of the opposition would count for even more, since the regime could not offset manpower with firepower—but it would not necessarily result in a rapid opposition victory. The high motivation of the Alawis and other minorities, their unity of command, and their defensive terrain advantages might still counterbalance the opposition's potential advantage in numbers. That said, in such circumstances it would still be much harder for the regime to make big gains on the ground (like retaking major cities) unless it could generate much larger numbers of troops than the opposition to do so.

The opposition needs to be able to field a large, properly-trained, -led, and -organized conventional military able to meet the regime forces on their own terms and beat them.

A better course would focus on training, unifying and organizing the opposition. At present, most of the training they are receiving emphasizes weapons-handling and small-unit tactics. That too is unlikely to prove sufficient. Instead, the opposition needs to be able to field a large, properly-trained, -led, and -organized conventional military able to meet the regime forces on their own terms and beat them. One way of understanding what is probably required is to compare American support to the Afghan Mujahideen in the 1980s with our support of the Croats (and Bosniacs) in Bosnia in the 1990s. The U.S. provided the Muj with the same kind of weapons-handling and small-unit tactics training we are now providing the Syrian opposition. In Bosnia, on the other hand, the United States helped the Croats build a conventional military armed with tanks and artillery of their own. It was trained in both tactics and operations, directed by a unified command structure and led by a professional officer corps. Unlike in Afghanistan against the Soviets, that conventional Croat army, assisted by NATO airpower, smashed the Bosnian Serb armies in a series of battles that convinced the Serbian leadership that military victory was impossible and so made the Dayton Accords possible. Given the Syrian regime's advantages, the Afghan war-approach to training and equipping is unlikely to prove adequate—especially on its own—and the Croat approach will probably be necessary.

A critical goal of the United States and all of Syria's neighbors is not just the defeat of the Syrian regime coalition, but the creation of a stable, alternative government in its place. Here as well, the Afghan approach of merely arming and training extent militias is likely to prove inadequate if not counterproductive. In

Afghanistan, this level of support did nothing to secure a stable, post-Soviet Afghanistan. Instead, it merely ensured that once the Soviets were gone, the victorious Mujahideen groups turned on one another in a new, and even bloodier civil war that lasted until the Pakistan-backed Taliban rolled in to crush them all and conquer most of the country.

In contrast, applying the Croat model of helping the Syrian opposition to build a large, apolitical conventional military able to hold territory and defeat the regime's forces would also be invaluable to the opposition politically. Such a force could help overcome the current fragmentation resulting from the predominance of militias as its goal would be to replace them by co-opting them, squeezing them out and/or eventually disarming them. Moreover, such a professional, apolitical force (similar to what the United States eventually—but only temporarily—created in Iraq in 2007-2010) could serve as a powerful, secular institution around which a new Syrian government could be built. As in Iraq during that period, such a Syrian military could ensure that no group could use violence to advance its political goals, and that all would be safe from violence employed against them. That is the critical pre-requisite for the new political process that would have to be established after a ceasefire to ensure that the peace holds.

Stopping Resupply of the Regime. Because the regime is leaning heavily on its residual stockpile of heavy weapons to wage the civil war, finding ways to diminish its ability to generate firepower would help level the playing-field for the opposition. As rugged as Soviet tanks, armored vehicles, mortars and artillery tubes are, they don't last forever. They break down. They get destroyed. They need spare parts regularly and replacements eventually. In addition, they consume fuel, ammunition and a range of other things. Thus, it goes without saying that the more that external powers are able to prevent the regime from being regularly resupplied, the faster its pool of operational heavy weapons will shrink and the faster its stocks of ammunition and other combat consumables will run out—both of which would be helpful to the rebels.

That said, there are a number of important unknowns shrouding how the United States might go about helping in this area. First, it is unclear just how massive the regime's stockpiles were prewar, or how much of those stocks it has been able to hold on to. Second, it is equally hard to know just how much is being consumed by regime forces on a daily basis—and White and Holliday have both argued that there is evidence to suggest that their expenditure rates are relatively modest given the apparent intensity of the fighting. This means it is hard to know just when the regime's prewar stocks might run out.

Second, it is equally difficult to know what the regime is receiving in external assistance. Iran is flying cargo aircraft with supplies for the regime on a routine basis. However, air is an extremely inefficient way to move military supplies, and Fred Kagan has suggested that while these flights are doubtless important to the regime, they are also unlikely to be providing anything like the amount of supplies that regime forces appear to expend daily. The Syrians have not received many

shiploads of weaponry or ammunition over the past 18 months, and that would probably be necessary to maintain the regime's current pace of operations once its prewar stockpiles run out.

Still, these various analytic points suggest that a naval blockade (ideally coupled with a no-fly zone to prevent resupply by air and the provision of advanced weaponry to the opposition to increase attrition rates) could diminish the regime's ability to rely on firepower at some point in the future, when its prewar stocks dissipate. As noted, this probably would not be decisive, but it could be helpful.

Attacking Regime Infrastructure Targets. One of the options that the U.S. military has acknowledged considering is the idea of striking Syrian regime military bases, power-generation plants, transportation choke points (including bridges), and other key infrastructure.[8] There are two theories about how such a campaign could assist the opposition. The first is that it would shock the regime and its supporters and cause them to give up the fight. This is a variant of the time-worn strategic air power argument that dates back to the 1920s. It simply does not work and it is exceptionally unlikely such air strikes would result in the rapid collapse of the regime's coalition in this case.

The other idea, however, is that doing so could help the opposition by speeding the attrition of regime field forces. This is a realistic possibility, at least in its more modest versions. Air strikes against Syrian regime fuel depots, ammunition dumps, warehouses, equipment storage and repair facilities and the power and transport networks that serve them would undoubtedly help whittle away the regime's heavy weapons and ammunition stocks. In that sense, they might nicely complement the provision of arms and training to the rebels and any efforts to limit the resupply of the regime.

Such campaigns take time—typically months, not weeks—but they can work. One example was the massive Allied air campaign in France after D-Day. Although in the popular imagination it is assumed that American and British aircraft killed lots of German tanks and soldiers on the front lines, in reality they mostly destroyed German trucks, trains, bridges, warehouses and wagons in the rear. As a result, German forces simply could not keep replacing the losses they took in the grinding attrition combat with Allied ground forces in Normandy, and by the end of July 1944 the German divisions had become so worn down and overstretched that American forces were finally able to break through in the western sector of the front.[9] Thus, coupled with other efforts to limit regime resupply and bolster the opposition—particularly a major effort to train and organize a unified, conventional Syrian opposition army—such an option could have a meaningful impact on the Syrian military balance.

A No-Fly Zone. A traditional No-Fly Zone (as in Iraq in the 1990s) that prevented hostile aircraft operating over Syria could help in two respects, but both would only contribute modestly to opposition fortunes. A No-Fly Zone (NFZ) would prevent aerial resupply of the regime. While this is not inconsequential,

because it is so difficult to provide the kind of resupply the regime forces likely require *by air*, shutting down aerial resupply on its own would not be decisive. As part of a wider package of support to the opposition, however, it could make a contribution.

At a more obvious level, a NFZ would prevent the regime from employing its own fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft to wage the war. Regime airstrikes get lots of attention, but do not appear to contribute nearly as much to its combat operations as artillery, mortars and other ground-based fire support. As the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Martin Dempsey, noted in his letter to Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Carl Levin, ". . . the regime relies overwhelmingly on surface fires—mortars, artillery, and missiles."[10] On the other hand, the regime does employ air strikes to aid its ethnic cleansing efforts, and it also employs some tactical airlift to shift personnel and resources from one sector to another. Regime forces could obviously move by ground if denied air transport, but this would be slower, and potentially more difficult, especially for regime units isolated by opposition forces. Again, all of this would complicate the regime's operations, although it would not be decisive on its own.

A Tactical Air Campaign Against Regime Ground Forces. The last option for "limited" U.S. intervention in Syria would be for American air forces to wage a sustained air interdiction campaign against regime ground formations themselves.[11]

Regime airstrikes get lots of attention, but do not appear to contribute nearly as much to their combat operations as artillery, mortars and other ground-based fire support.

Such an operation might help tip the military balance in the opposition's favor in several ways. First, Western air forces would likely inflict significant damage on regime ground forces, speeding the attrition of the regime's combat power. Second, it might help demoralize the regime's troops themselves if the United States and its allies intervened directly in the conflict and targeted them specifically. Third, Western air forces could provide on-call fire support for opposition operations, they could hinder or prevent enemy forces as they shifted from one sector to another, and they could greatly complicate the regime's offensive and defensive operations themselves, all of which could result in tactical victories for the opposition and tactical defeats for the regime. Taken together, these various effects could significantly help the opposition to victory, as similar campaigns did in Afghanistan in 2001 and Libya a decade later.

Nevertheless, even this level of commitment would not be a guarantee of success. Setting aside the various costs and potential requirements of such a

campaign (which could be *very* sizable), it is not clear if it would be able to hurt the regime's ground forces enough to enable the opposition to prevail. During the six weeks of Operation Desert Storm in 1991, Coalition air forces flew 38,000 interdiction sorties against an Iraqi army in the Kuwait Theater of Operations that began with over 500,000 men.[12] Although those strikes did tremendous damage to Iraqi forces, key units (principally Saddam's Republican Guard) still fought fiercely against the overwhelming Coalition ground offensive and retained the strength to crush both the Kurdish and Shi'i revolts that broke out after the end of Operation Desert Storm. In Kosovo, NATO air forces flew 3,400 interdiction sorties over 78 days against roughly 100,000 Serbian troops, and caused much less damage than against Iraq.[13] Moreover, that air campaign failed to enable the Kosovo Liberation Army to make any significant headway against Serbian Forces. Finally, in Libya in 2011, NATO flew over 9,700 interdiction sorties over 203 days that helped Libyan rebels defeat 20-40,000 Libyan regime troops and paramilitary forces.[14]

The more that the United States can simultaneously bolster opposition capabilities *and* degrade the regime's strength, the greater the likelihood that the U.S. will achieve its objectives.

It is hard to gauge a priori how a U.S.-led air campaign to support the Syrian opposition against the Syrian regime's forces would turn out. Whether it would follow the Afghanistan-Libya pattern and produce an opposition victory, or the Iraq-Kosovo pattern in which the enemy army retained enough strength to defeat lightly-armed opposition forces. However, it would be a mistake to assume the best.

More is More

All of the options for limited U.S. intervention in the Syrian civil war have the potential to affect the military balance to a greater or lesser extent. However, because of the dynamics of that conflict, none has a high-likelihood of producing an opposition victory independently, and those with the best chance to tip the balance toward the opposition entail the greatest costs and commitments by the United States. Of course, all of these options could be mixed and matched to great effect, and collectively, their impact would be considerably greater than any one employed in isolation. The more that the United States can simultaneously bolster opposition capabilities *and* degrade the regime's strength, the greater the likelihood that the U.S. will achieve its objectives.

Yet even embracing all of these options, and employing all of them to the maximum extent imaginable would not guarantee victory, and doing so might not

seem very “limited” at all. The one potential exception to this rule is the idea of building a Croat-style conventional opposition army, one with the potential to defeat the regime’s forces and serve as a stabilizing institution for postwar political reconstruction. However, that option—especially if it is accompanied by a U.S. or Western air campaign against Syrian regime forces as in Bosnia—would also be the most expensive and time-consuming of our limited options.

That conclusion is not meant as an argument against (or for) U.S. intervention in the Syrian civil war. It is merely an acknowledgement that the options that have the lowest cost—and therefore seem to be Washington’s preferences—are likely to have little impact on the military balance, and so probably won’t contribute much to accomplishing American goals. Indeed, the Administration’s commitments so far have only a modest chance of decisively affecting the conflict on their own and therefore arguably constitute both a waste of American resources and a failure to properly resource stated American objectives. It represents a dangerous proclivity to try to achieve ambitious goals with limited resources and conjures the misguided, creeping U.S. escalation in Vietnam. There is a strong argument for intervention in Syria and a strong argument against. Both would require far more decisive action by the United States. Neither is served by the current U.S. approach.

[1] This assessment was based in part on a lengthy seminar on the military dimensions of the Syrian conflict held at the Brookings Institution that included Elizabeth O'Bagy, Thomas Donnelly, Michael Eisenstadt, Joseph Holliday, Frederick Kagan, Kimberly Kagan, Michael O'Hanlon, Kenneth Pollack, Andrew Tabler and Jeffrey White. Much that is included in this report derived from that seminar, and in many cases reflects their thoughts and input. It is thus a synthesis of the author's analysis and those of this group. In particular, both the author and this group relied heavily on the superb work of Joseph Holliday, Kimberly Kagan, Elizabeth O'Bagy and Jeffrey White, all of whom have meticulously reported on developments in Syria from the outset of the protest movement. Their work remains the best on the changing battlefield events in Syria available in the unclassified literature. In addition, the author would like to thank Daniel Byman, Michael Doran, Elizabeth O'Bagy, Michael O'Hanlon, Bruce Riedel, Salman Shaikh, Andrew Tabler, and Jeffrey White for their extremely helpful comments on this paper.

[2] Of course, some Sunnis still support the regime, largely because they were part of its elite and therefore benefitted from Alawi rule. Likewise, there are some Alawis that do not support the regime and even support the opposition for a variety of reasons, including an idealistic desire to rid Syria of the Asad dictatorship or an expectation that the regime is going to lose.

[3] Joseph Holliday, "The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War," PowerPoint Presentation, July 2013, Institute for the Study of War, slide 2.

[4] On the military history of the Syrian Armed Forces since 1948, see Kenneth M. Pollack, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), pp. 447-551.

[5] Michael Knights, "Iran's Foreign Legion: The Role of Iraqi Shiite Militias in Syria," Policy Watch 2096, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 27, 2013.

[6] This pattern is broadly reminiscent of other Arab armies in combat, particularly the Libyans. Throughout their Quixotic invasions of Chad in the 1980s, the Libyan Armed Forces tended to provide only stand-off firepower—in the form of tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, artillery, rocket launchers and air strikes—in battle, leaving the infantry tasks (scouting and attacking) to their Chadian allies. Not surprisingly, when their Chadian allies deserted them in 1987, Libyan formations found themselves virtually helpless against their Chadian adversaries. See Pollack, *Arabs at War*, pp. 375-412.

[7] In this section, I deliberately ignore questions of cost. For each of these options, the costs could vary widely based on a range of conditions and assumptions. Moreover, as noted, the U.S. debate has focused excessively on what the U.S. is willing to do and what costs it is willing to bear, with too little discussion of what impact the options for intervention might have on the Syrian military balance, and therefore which are most likely to accomplish American goals. The intent of this essay is to begin to address the latter.

[8] Mark Landler and Thom Shanker, "Pentagon Lays Out Options for U.S. Military Effort in Syria," *The New York Times*, July 22, 2013.

[9] For the most sophisticated analysis of this subject to date, see Russell A. Hart, *Clash of Arms: How the Allies Won in Normandy*, (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), esp. pp. 371-408.

[10] Landler and Shanker, "Pentagon Lays Out Options for U.S. Military Effort in Syria," Ibid.

[11] Although often euphemistically wrapped up into the concept of a NFZ (indeed, in Libya, NATO successfully stretched its authority to impose a NFZ into just such an interdiction campaign), an interdiction campaign against enemy ground forces should be treated as a very different option because these are two distinct operations. The U.S. could impose a NFZ without striking the regime's ground forces, though it would be unlikely to undertake a campaign against the regime's ground forces without securing air supremacy and so creating a de facto NFZ.

[12] Eliot A. Cohen, General Editor, *The Gulf War Air Power Survey, Volume V, Part I: Statistical Compendium*, (Washington, DC: GPO, 1993), p. 233.

[13] Department of Defense, *Report to Congress: Kosovo/Operation Allied Force After Action Report*, (Washington, DC: DoD, 2000), p. 86.

[14] "Fact Sheet: Operation UNIFIED PROTECTOR Final Mission Stats," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, November 2, 2011; Simon Rogers, "NATO Operations in Libya: Data Journalism Breaks Down Which Country Does What," *The Guardian*, October 31, 2011, available at http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2011/may/22/nato-libya-data-journalism-operations-country. In addition, the daily break down of sorties is available as a link to this article at https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/ccc?key=0Aq-FnOoJcl-ndG9KUHFFNDgyNENWRW5TTUl6QnFDcXc&authkey=CPeKjPMB&hl=en_US&authkey=CPeKjPMB#gid=1.