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POLICY BRIEFING

October 2012

LOSING SYRIA
(AND HOW TO AVOID IT)

SALMAN SHAIKH

Foreign Policy at BROOKINGS

BROOKINGS

Saha 43, Building 63, West Bay, Doha, Qatar
www.brookings.edu/doha

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Syria as a nation-state is crumbling. As President Bashar al-Assad simultaneously intensifies a brutal onslaught against its own people and loses control of broad swathes of the country, both the Syrian regime and its opponents are proving unable to provide for basic civilian needs. With the acceleration in the militarization of the uprising, we are approaching what increasingly looks like a failed state scenario, or, in the words of one defected senior commander, "a free for all." Perceptions of the regime's loss of legitimacy have spread; recent expressions of Alawi discontent, including clashes in Assad's hometown of Qardaha, suggest cracks even in what some imagined to be an immovable regime constituency. With no transition process in place, however, the failure of the political opposition to organize effectively and present a widely accepted alternative to Assad's rule remains as stark as ever. Instead we see a growing power vacuum, one that threatens to create mutually-reinforcing sectarian conflicts from Lebanon to Iraq.

Limited progress is being made toward the ouster of President Assad. The armed rebellion is gaining ground, but liberated areas in the north and west of the country remain vulnerable to regime attacks; they also suffer from weak governance structures and a severe lack of resources. Further threats come in the form of sectarian strife in mixed areas and deepening rivalries between armed groups. Compounding these problems is the inability of the external opposition to convince many Syrians inside the country, particularly the Alawi and Christian communities, of their vision for a democratic Syria. New initiatives to establish a broad-based and representative national platform are still struggling to overcome the infighting that undermined previous efforts. In the meantime, Syria is steadily being lost.

The United States and Europe, in partnership with key regional states, must play a larger part in stemming the increasingly dangerous dimensions of the Syrian conflict. The reluctance of the United States to pursue difficult – but likely more effective – policy options, as well as the obvious divisions within the international community, are making a bad situation worse. This paper puts forward five policy principles to help revitalize the partnership between Syrians fighting for change and their supporters in the international community:

1. The unification of the Syrian people around a national project to rebuild the country. The Syrian opposition and its international partners must work to support representative opposition bodies, including the Follow-Up and Communications Committee and the proposed Syrian Provisional Council. There are no shortcuts to creating functional opposition institutions, however, and support must not be unconditional; rather, it should be premised on these bodies' inclusivity and internal good governance.

2. A U.S.-led effort to unify international channels of lethal and non-lethal support to opposition groups. To avoid a long-term destabilization of Syria and the region, the United States should work with its allies to create a unified, controlled flow of weapons and other support to the Syrian opposition. Measures should include the integration of defected Syrian army officers and the merging of existing outlets for military aid under a clear command structure. The United States and its allies

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Salman Shaikh is director of the Brookings Doha Center and fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy of the Brookings Institution. Shaikh has held numerous posts in the international system and the Middle East. He worked with the United Nations for nearly a decade as the special assistant of the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process. He also served as director for Policy and Research in the Office of Her Highness, Sheikha Mozah Bint Nasser Al-Missned, the Consort of the Emir of Qatar.

must aim to create a single, functioning rebel army that can continue to contribute to the Syria's stability and security during a post-Assad transition period.

3. Support for community-led projects within Syria that promote opposition unity and cross-sectarian ties. Efforts like the safe zone Sweida's Druze have proposed for displaced Sunnis should be supported and, where possible, scaled up and replicated across the country.

4. Credible dialogue on Syria's Kurdish question. The international community must take all necessary steps, up to and including the involvement of neighboring states and the establishment of an internationally recognized special commission, to reach a sustainable resolution to the status of Syria's Kurds.

5. Coordinated efforts to plan for the post-Assad transition. There is a pressing need to better synchronize Syrian opposition planning and international efforts, which must range from supporting local governance efforts in "liberated" towns and villages in the country's north and west to joint United Nations-Arab League leadership on "day after" planning. In particular, UN planning efforts must be linked to Syrian ones, including those of the Follow-Up and Communications Committee, with bodies such as the proposed Syrian Provisional Council playing a coordinating role.

Inaction by the United States and the international community is making what should be a real and achievable goal – a democratic Syria in which the rights of all communities are guaranteed – substantially more difficult to achieve. Concrete steps such as the ones above must be taken immediately, before possible outcomes for Syria become even grimmer. Moreover, these steps should be taken with the knowledge that the work of hastening the regime's fall is inextricably linked to preparations for what will follow.

SYRIA TODAY

Bashar al-Assad has always stated that without his regime there would be chaos in Syria. An attempt to bring him down would "burn the whole region," he said in October 2011.[1] It seems that his regime has now resorted to fueling that fire. Having lost control of large swathes of territory (some would estimate 50-60 percent), the regime is now subjecting these areas to unrelenting bombardment campaigns. According to a recent Amnesty International report, this bombing constitutes "indiscriminate attacks," killing mostly civilians.[2] Assad's forces are also re-doubling their efforts to incite sectarian and ethnic war in the country. The reign of terror of the dreaded *shabiha* thugs is specifically designed to achieve that end. These militias have been responsible for disturbingly frequent massacres, including those in Houla and Daraya in May and August of this year. A Save the Children report, meanwhile, gives harrowing testimony of the regime's abuse, torture, and killing of hundreds of children.[3]

With the regime increasingly under pressure, such government paramilitary groups may have taken on a life of their own and will prove very difficult to control in the future. There are persistent reports of the regime attempting to create armed vigilante and paramilitary groups from the Christian and Druze communities in certain localities.[4] The senior leadership of Syria's Kurdish community is also bitterly complaining that the government is arming select Arab tribes (those sympathetic to Assad) and blanketing them with propaganda that the "Kurds are trying to enslave them."[5]

At the same time, Kurdish leaders point to rising tensions within their community – again, fed by Assad's forces. Through Iraq, the regime and Iran continue to arm the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian offshoot of the PKK that has now been left in control of Kurdish and mixed areas in the north and east of the country. As a result of tensions both between the PYD and Kurdish National Council (a coalition of sixteen Syrian parties) and between Arabs and Kurds in general, the situation in these areas is on a knife's edge and could quickly deteriorate at any moment. A recent suicide attack on a security outpost in the Kurdish majority city of Qamishli on the Turkish border – the first of its kind in the city – represents the sort of incident that could lead to greater sectarian conflict.[6]

A FRAGMENTED ARMED REBELLION

To make matters worse, the armed opposition groups and their brigades on the ground are struggling to unite. While efforts to consolidate groups at the local and provincial levels do seem to be making some progress (in Idlib and Aleppo, for example), they may be short-lived. Weary civilian commanders regularly form uneasy alliances with other leaders while nervously searching for ways to maintain their advantage and the cohesion of their individual units. What is clear is that divisions are emerging within these militias along religious, rural-urban, civilian-military, and regional lines.

The limited support the militias have received from the international community has remained diffuse and uncoordinated, often contributing to a sense of fragmentation and rising competition between them. This remains the case as regional powers such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey struggle to organize a more coordinated effort to support the rebels. Recent attempts to coordinate their efforts, including the establishment of an Office of Syrian Opposition Support in Istanbul,[7] seem to have achieved little by way of encouraging greater national integration or collaboration on the ground.[8]

The relative prominence and authority of local militias has become a function largely of their ability to secure arms; little-known groups led by local civilian leaders and others driven by Salafi-inspired ideology have risen to the fore, while others – in particular those led by regime defectors – have not. It is the more Islamist groups, such as Suqour al-Sham in Idlib, Ahrar al-Sham in Aleppo, and Jabhat al-Nusra (thought to be closest to the ideology of al-Qaeda) that have achieved some progress in uniting their ranks under the recently formed Jabhat al-Tahrir or Syrian Liberation Front. These groups are fighting not only for the ouster of Assad but are also

likely preparing for the period after the end of his regime. Other, more secular-oriented groups such as Idlib's Martyrs of Syria Brigades (which have been fighting alongside such groups as Suqour al-Sham) have not been allowed to officially join the new Islamist alliance.[9]

With some notable exceptions, the defecting commanders of Assad's army have found relatively little support. Many of the 700 or so officers, some of them senior, are now languishing in refugee camps in Jordan and Turkey. Their attempts to direct and command a "Free Syrian Army" (FSA) have been repeatedly frustrated, primarily because of a lack of external support and a reliable base from which to operate. The FSA's recent decision to move its operational headquarters from southern Turkey to inside Syria left many observers unconvinced that its leader, Colonel Riad al-Asaad, will be able to unify the rebels' ranks. Unless he can show progress on the battlefield, the move will continue to be seen more as a publicity stunt designed to counter Asaad's chief rival, General Mustafa al-Shaikh, who has exerted his authority through the establishment of Military Councils in Syria's main cities and governorates.

Some senior officers and local commanders maintain that establishing one unified channel of external support for these groups would significantly boost efforts to unite armed elements under one military command structure. This support, they say, should come in the form of specific advanced weapons, technical training and expertise, and hard cash.[10] In particular, they stress the importance of receiving military expertise and assistance on how to integrate chains of command and communication between the main groups and brigades. A serious, long-term, and committed effort from key international partners, they believe, would stem emerging rivalries between rebel groups and prevent the strengthening of forces that take an exclusionary or non-cooperative stance.

The need to ensure military unity and the rule of law has become even more urgent in areas seized by the rebels. There is increasing concern that as the Assad-led Baathist state recedes, much of the country faces a security and governance vacuum; that, in turn, could encourage further conflict between a heady mix of ethnicities, warlords, and religious extremists. One senior defected commander called it a "free-for-all."[11] Another defected officer, a brigadier-general, stressed the urgency of his efforts to unite regional Military Councils and brigades at the local level, saying that failure to do so within the next two to three months would lead to a "big mess inside [Syria]". He – like many others – warns that Syria will continue to attract jihadists from across the region and ultimately become its most dangerous and irresolvable crucible of conflict.[12]

The danger remains that if the Assad regime collapsed tomorrow, there would be no force capable of controlling the security situation inside the country. Most of the estimated 22,000 Alawi officers still loyal to the regime (there have been only seven Alawi officer defections to date[13]) may well respond to the President's sudden fall by disbanding and fleeing, taking their soldiers with them. If this were to happen, the Syrian army would effectively collapse before an alternative national military force was ready to take its place. The situation would reflect Iraq after the forced disbandment of its army in 2003, with a probable breakdown of law and order and an increase in sectarian violence. Such insecurity would frustrate hopes for an orderly transitional period and hinder efforts to forge a Syrian national consensus on that transition. The absence of a Syrian national force would also make the mission of any Arab and/or international stabilization force extremely hazardous.

A FRAGMENTED POLITICAL OPPOSITION

Cohesion and coordination remain similarly elusive for the various political groups within Syria's fractious opposition. A broad range of groups (including the Syrian National Council and rival groups such as the National Coordination Body, among several others) successfully agreed on a national vision for the future of the country at a July conference in Cairo. This vision was expressed in two documents: the National Pact, outlining a set of joint principles that would form the basis of a

future constitution; and a Transition Phase Program explaining the steps that would be taken before and after the fall of Assad. However, the documents have received little attention since, and the political opposition outside Syria has failed to communicate and explain this vision within the country. This impasse was caused partly by poor planning and a lack of time at the original Cairo Conference; partly by further disagreements on the contents of these documents; but mainly by political rivalries and arguments over the ownership and politicization of the process. This failure, especially on the part of the Syrian National Council (SNC), has only contributed to a sense of drift and disunity among Syrians. While some of these political forces continue to struggle for unity and consensus, others, perhaps out of understandable frustration, have launched initiatives that actually contradict the plan they had previously agreed to, ranging from truces with Assad to self-proclaimed "governments-in-waiting."

There have been recent efforts to revive and promote the National Pact and Transition Plan through a "Follow-Up and Communications Committee", formed in August with the backing of the Secretary-General of the Arab League and key international partners, in particular the United States. The Committee has only just started its work to promote and discuss the Cairo documents, especially within Syria. Its strength lies in the fact that some 15 organizations have agreed to join the Committee, including prominent grassroots groups operating inside Syria; the opposition's main military organizations; notable political blocs and movements representing the Kurds, Turkmen, and Arab tribes; and religious figures. The absence of the SNC, however, underlines the fragility of such an effort and the tensions that have plagued the political opposition. The Council played a role in early meetings to establish the Committee but later withdrew, in part out of fears that it might come to occupy a political role along the lines of what the Council had envisaged for itself.

At the time of writing, key opposition figures and groups – including the SNC itself – continue to discuss initiatives to establish a joint transitional authority that acts as the "single address for the Syrian opposition" continually called for by international partners. One such figure, Riad al-Seif, has proposed a plan for the formation of a new opposition political authority, the Syrian Provisional Council (SPC). By proposing to expand the membership of the Follow-Up and Communications Committee to include "all opposition groups that adhere to the Cairo documents," Seif is hoping that the new Council can be established as "the sole legitimate representative authority of the Syrian people" – a status which has eluded the Syria National Council.

The SPC's advantage over the SNC may be its greater success in unifying revolutionary groups, military councils, and Free Syrian Army brigades, as well as the representatives of the country's political blocs and minority communities. It may also be more relevant, particularly as transitional issues come to the fore. The SPC proposes a provisional government inside the "liberated areas … as circumstances permit, at the earliest possible moment," with which it will work to ensure security, oversee humanitarian aid efforts, unite a reorganized "National Syrian Army," and work with the international community to prepare the "post-Assad transition phase."[14]

The initiative has been met with a receptive ear in key regional and Western capitals and at the recent meeting of the core group of the "Friends of Syria" held on the margins of the UN General Assembly. It may be what these states have been hoping for, as they have increasingly sought a credible opposition body to serve as an alternative to the regime. However, the initiative's success will depend on the ability of the main opposition forces, inside and outside Syria, to agree on its membership, leadership, and decision-making structures. Currently, over 40 organizations, blocs and movements have been proposed as members of the SPC, though there is no clear consensus on the composition and structure of the new body. Arguments and divisions about these same matters were previously responsible for the failures of the Syrian National Council.

The need for the opposition to convince Syrian minority communities to join a unifying national proj-

ect is more critical now than it has ever been. However, the main political opposition forces have made little progress in this regard, largely because of their own divisions. The reticence of these minority communities – many of which clearly lack confidence in the regime's ability to provide for their security and future – often stems from this very failure on the part of the opposition.

Prominent Alawi figures are increasingly expressing the growing disillusionment among their community. It is a disillusionment driven by anger at the regime's past failures to protect them and by fear of future losses. Recent reports of clashes between two important Alawi factions, the Khayyar and Abboud families, in Assad's hometown of Qardaha are a sign of divisions and tensions even amongst the sect considered most outwardly loyal to the regime. Simmering discontent has seen increasing numbers of Alawi youth join anti-regime protests outside their hometowns and neighborhoods; some young members of leading families have even coalesced into Alawi opposition groups such as the "Peace of the Seashore Movement".[15] There are also reports that regime recruiters are finding it increasingly difficult to recruit males for the security forces from Alawi towns and villages, especially as the death toll rises for this community.

Those who are losing faith in Assad, however, still have nowhere obvious to turn; the political opposition must, therefore, use this discontent as an impetus for dialogue on a unifying opposition platform that addresses these growing Alawi fears. Meanwhile, however, countervailing forces – namely, the efforts of the regime to sow sectarian discord and the increasing chaos of the armed rebellion – continue to push the country towards a full-scale, sectarian-based civil war.

THE STRENGTH OF THE REGIME

The Assad regime is being stripped to a core composed of the Assad-Makhlouf family and other loyalists, many of them senior-ranking officers in the military and security forces. High-level defections of Sunni political and military figures, the desertion of notable business leaders and tribal figures, and the increasing unease of other minority leaders have eroded the legitimacy of the regime and revealed a largely sectarian core.

As the battle between the regime and the armed opposition engulfs Aleppo and Damascus, there are persistent reports of disagreements within Assad's inner circle over both the military strategy and tactics being used to crush the uprising. There is a growing sense of insecurity, as the spectacular bombings of military and security targets by rebel groups become more frequent. However, the regime has recovered from the losses it suffered in the July 18 Damascus attack and the defections of senior Sunni figures. In a more militarized environment, Assad feels that he has been given a "license to kill" – and has not been told otherwise in clear enough terms by a united international community.

Earlier this summer, the regime was not using the full force of its fighting capabilities (including the use of military aircraft), as UN observer team leader Major General Robert Mood declared at the end of his mission. That is clearly no longer the case. The daily use of helicopters and military aircraft to attack Syrians, especially in the so-called liberated zones of northern Syria, is an obvious violation of international law. There is a perception in Damascus, however, as well as in Tehran and Moscow, that the West lacks the collective political will and focus (particularly in a U.S. election year) to defeat Assad and his external patrons. After 18 months of the uprising, the apparent powerlessness of the international community to protect Syrians has become a fait accompli.

THE LIMITS OF CURRENT DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS

As the situation worsens, there are signs in Western capitals that Syria, in the words of one senior European diplomat, is "rising to the top of the agenda."[16] Surely, it is long past time for that to happen. However, what we see instead is a proliferation of diplomatic initiatives, often, one suspects, for domestic political consumption and narrow national inter-

ests. For example, there has been increasing talk of backing a unilaterally declared "transitional" government;[17] this runs contrary to the broader Syrian opposition's own transition plan, as agreed upon by the opposition at the July Cairo conference and endorsed by the Arab League. There have also been renewed attempts to muster support for "no-fly zones"; the establishment or protection of "safe areas" or "buffer zones" along Syria's borders to protect civilians and rebels under attack from the regime's aircraft; and even for Arab armies to intervene in Syria as they did in Lebanon in 1976. Such initiatives to protect civilians are long overdue, but the problem is that those who have been advocating them (a handful of regional powers and France) do not have the capabilities to undertake such costly and risky operations. With the United States, Russia, China, and the other emerging BRICS unable to agree even on a legal basis for such intervention, Assad knows that a more forceful international response is unlikely.

Newly elected Egyptian President Muhammad Morsi surprised many with his forceful call for Assad to step down and for the establishment of a "Regional Quartet" – also including Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey – to forge a regional compromise on Syria. With the initiative very much in its early stages, there are already questions as to whether the parties will find common cause with Iran. Many doubt whether Egypt will be able to deliver an acceptable compromise between the Syrian opposition, the regime, and regional states. Hiccups at the quartet's first two meetings – the absence of the Saudi foreign minister at the first on September 17 and the cancellation of the second at the UN due to the non-attendance of the Turkish Prime Minister – do not augur well for the future success of the initiative. Nor does the deep skepticism that most Gulf states have about dealing with Iran on this issue.

The initiative may have some chance of success if Iran is willing to part ways with Assad for a more strategic partnership with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Syria, and elsewhere. This may be the essence of what Morsi is trying to achieve. The price for Iran would likely be a guarantee that the United States and other Western powers be frozen out in a future Syria, giving it the potential to forge better relations with an Islamist-led government in Damascus. However, if Iran continues to back Assad – as is likely – it will have to forgo the initial warming of relations between Cairo and Tehran and the potential of a longer-term strategic bilateral partnership, as Egyptian officials have publicly warned. Even if the initiative does not work, it may have already achieved another objective, namely to signal Egypt's rise on the regional and world stage.

Diplomatic efforts led by Joint UN and Arab League Special Representative Lakhdar Brahimi are also unlikely to yield results any time soon. The continued divisions within the international community – and in particular within the UN Security Council – mean that he faces a task that grows more daunting by the day. The sad reality is that even a more united international community is unlikely to be able to deter a regime fighting for it survival. Its coercive apparatus has not yet been weakened to the point that it sees a need to rein in its brutal assault. Reaching that tipping point will require a united international effort muscular enough to genuinely pressure and isolate the regime. Given the Great Power games playing out along the Syria fault-line, holding out for such an effort requires some very wishful thinking.

Still, Brahimi, like an experienced prize-fighter, will continue to run around the ring until he sees an opportunity to land some effective punches. The absence of such opportunities pushed him to call for a four-day ceasefire during the religious holiday of Eid al-Adha in the last week of October. However, such efforts will likely meet the same fate of those of his predecessor, Kofi Annan, six months before. Brahimi knows that there is little prospect that Assad will negotiate in good faith. For that reason, talks with the regime will largely be left to Brahimi's man in Damascus, Mokhdar Lamani. As with Morsi's initiative, Brahimi's real effort is focusing on getting Iran to join the negotiations and create the opportunity for a genuine transition. If we start to see senior-level defections from Assad's inner security circle – or even a coup, which the Iranians, with their ties to the security establishment, could encourage – then we will know that

the "Iran plan" has worked.

However, this again seems a tall order, especially when the man running Syria policy for the Supreme Leader is Major General Qassem Suleimani, the head of Iran's covert foreign operations Al-Quds Force. The Quds Force has stepped up support for Assad since autumn last year and is providing high-level technical support and advanced weapons. The Commander-in-Chief of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, Mohammed Ali Jafari, has recently admitted that his men are in Syria but are providing only "intellectual advisory help."[18] Lurking behind this admission, there seems to be an implicit warning that Iran and its regional proxies would come to Assad's rescue if the West and Israel decide to intervene and force his ouster.

Such a message is not lost on the Gulf states, who see this as further proof of Iran's escalating aggression – both in the Levant and in the Gulf itself. They certainly will not trust any effort to allow Iran a role in shaping the solution in Syria, especially without a very close reading of the fine print. With Syria increasingly becoming a battlefield not only between sectarian factions, but between their regional co-religionists, Gulf states now see their own futures wrapped up in the fate of Assad.

THE RISING REGIONAL PERIL

With Syria on the verge of an ever bloodier civil war, we now face a frightening prospect in the Levant: an arc of sectarian-fuelled conflict that stretches from the shores of the eastern Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf. With spillover of violence and refugees already a reality in Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, and Iraq, the challenges for the entire region will continue to rise dramatically. We already face a humanitarian crisis inside and across the borders of Syria, with some 300,000 refugees and over 1.5 million internally displaced.[19] The humanitarian situation is likely to worsen, particularly in the areas around Aleppo and Damascus. The UN High Commission for Refugees has warned that the number of refugees could double in the next few months to over 700,000 – possibly upsetting precarious ethnic balances in some areas, particularly in Lebanon and Turkey.

There is the prospect of growing terrorism and insecurity in Turkey, the reigniting of a sectarian conflict in Lebanon, a further uptick in Sunni-Shia violence in Iraq (especially as Sunnis, aided by Gulf donations, rise again to fight Baghdad), and even the possibility that Israel's northern borders will again be challenged or compromised. In the case of Lebanon in particular, signs of Hizballah's growing involvement in the Syrian conflict[20] have provoked strong reactions from their political rivals in March 14, with former Prime Minister Fouad Siniora saying that the group threatens to "expose Lebanon to unforeseeable dangers which it cannot bear."[21] Credible reports of increasing numbers of Iraqi Shi'i militants fighting alongside Assad regime forces is further evidence of the dangerous sectarian dimensions.[22] Under such conditions, we must ask who would have the ability to stop concurrent civil wars in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq that feed off each other through cross-border tribal, political, and sectarian connections.

The nature of Ankara's response to these threats may be dictated by a calculation that Turkish national interests are increasingly – and unacceptably – compromised by the Syrian conflict. Solid evidence to prove that the PYD, a PKK offshoot, is using Syrian territory to launch acts of terror in Turkey would reinforce that calculation. Growing tensions between a growing Syrian refugee population and the Turkish Alawi community in southern Turkey and fears that the conflict in Syria could have a real negative impact on Turkey's economy would be other important factors.

Turkish military intervention may ultimately be the driver for greater international intervention in Syria. The serious outbreak of cross-border shootings and artillery attacks that started in late September and intensified in early October illustrates the mounting danger of a serious and sustained conflict between Turkey and Assad's military forces. However, Turkey will hesitate, especially having recently discovered that there are few supporters in NATO and Washington for collective efforts to establish humanitarian zones and no-fly zones in

Syria. While NATO has said its contingency plans for protecting Turkey are in place, it has not clearly defined what it would consider a *casus belli*. It seems, though, that acts of terrorism – without firm evidence of state involvement – would not qualify.[23] In the U.S. Congress, meanwhile, there is increasing willingness to prepare contingency plans for "safe zones" inside Syria, but serious backing for such steps has yet to filter from Congress to the White House. A sharp decline Turkish in domestic support for aggressive action at home – caused by a realization of its costs and the political opposition's vocal campaign accusing the government of recklessness – is only likely to further temper Erdogan's recent belligerence.[24] In the end, Ankara may be left to pursue a campaign of bombing and raiding PYD/PKK bases in northern and eastern Syria, much as they have done in northern Iraq.

As supporters of Syria's rebels pause, and the region descends into greater turmoil, they should give thought to the clear possibility that Iran and its regional proxies will be best placed to benefit from the spread of violent chaos. The aftermath of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 provides ample evidence to support such a notion. The influence of the Tehran-led "Axis of Resistance" is steadily collapsing in the region (especially among its Sunni majority). A failure in Syria would, however, present a life-line to those in Iran with extensive experience sustaining pockets of conflict in their wider neighborhood. For Western states and their regional allies, meanwhile, an extension of conflict in Syria and a failure to hasten the beginning of a post-Assad transition would represent a significant strategic failure.

CONCLUSION

To those who know Syria and its rich history, culture, and tradition of peaceful coexistence, the tragedy of the current crisis is all the more shocking. Unspeakable acts of brutality are being inflicted on the people of Syria by the same regime which is supposed to protect them. The conflict threatens to tear Syria, and its social fabric, apart. It seems that Assad has kept his word: If his family cannot keep control of Syria, then no one will.

The inability of the UN Security Council to come together and support the voices for peaceful change that marked the first year of the Syrian uprising has resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of men, women, and children. The intransigence of Russia and China and their unwillingness to take these calls for change seriously have led directly to the militarization of the crisis in Syria and a very dangerous regional situation.

To date, Western states, especially the Obama Administration, have not taken the conflict in Syria as seriously as they should have. Important work has been done by Ambassador Robert Ford and others in the U.S. State Department, particularly in actively engaging the political opposition and providing consistent backing for their efforts to unite. The aid being provided to alleviate the growing humanitarian consequences of the crisis and the rising support – political, logistical, and financial – that has been provided to grassroots organizations is also having some effect. In both Damascus and elsewhere in the region, however, President Obama's statement in late August has only furthered the belief that Washington is not ready to get involved further and that its only red line is the regime's use of chemical weapons.[25] In essence, Washington and its European allies have until recently pursued a diplomatic dead-end in the UN Security Council and actively avoided the consideration of tougher, more interventionist options.

Certainly, Syria presents one of the greatest challenges to Western policymakers in a region undergoing rapid change. Military intervention in Syria, especially for those who have lost blood and treasure in the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, is not easy to justify to war-weary publics. Furthermore, we must acknowledge that there is no regional consensus or, regrettably, a legal mandate for such military intervention. What remains, however, is the responsibility of the international community to protect civilians in Syria. It should be clear by now that this can only be achieved with the expeditious removal of the Assad regime and the start of a legitimate transition process.

The hesitation and lack of coordinated action among those who have declared the Assad regime

to be illegitimate will ensure that Syria continues along its already destructive path. The window for a safe and secure transition is quickly closing. Policymakers in Washington, Europe's capitals and the Arab world need to make tough decisions today to both hasten the demise of the regime and help create the conditions for what should take its place. A key principle must be that Syrians are given the tools to determine their own future, free of the current regime. There must be a better-coordinated international effort to support those Syrians working to revitalize a Syrian national project which is politically inclusive, ethnically diverse, and democratic at its core. Not to do so now will mean that Syria as a peaceful, functioning state will be lost for at least a generation to come. Furthermore, increasingly severe consequences for the interests of the United States and its allies may mean that its current failure to lead will only necessitate a heavier U.S.-led intervention in a more fractured and complex Syria in the future.

FIVE POLICY PRINCIPLES FOR A SYRIAN TRANSITION

1. Unify Syrians around a national project to rebuild Syria. For the future stability and prosperity of the country, there really are no easy shortcuts to this most basic of requirements. Getting Syria's opposition groups to agree on a common vision for the future of the country and to close the gaps between rival opposition militias is a complex and demanding endeavor. The depth of communal hurt and fears of retribution make this clear. Yet there must be recognition of the fact that Syria's diversity can also be its strength. Over the past century, different sects and ethnicities, tribes, prominent families, and civil and religious leaders have traditionally come together under a strong Syrian nationalism. Recognition of Syria's social fabric will help in the practical efforts to build a national project for the post-Assad stage. With this in mind, there is a need for the opposition to coordinate and sustain a dialogue, which to date has been elusive, with Syria's minorities – the Alawis, Christians, Kurds, Turkmens, Azeris, and Ismailis, to name a few. While the Assad regime's efforts to ply the divisions between communities are having some effect, there are leaders within them who continue to seek a credible, unifying national platform for the opposition.

In this regard, the recently formed Follow-Up and Communications Committee is a positive development. The Committee aims to promote and discuss the National Pact and Transition Plan with the Syrian people, especially inside the country. It has ties within Syria and workable plans to develop its outreach network, including among military commanders and revolutionary councils. It is already in communication with several of these groups. However, the Committee is fragile and needs strong support – particularly from key Arab states and the Arab League – in order to continue its work. The United States, which has provided strong support, should persist in its efforts to persuade regional partners to provide urgently needed political and financial support to the Committee.

The United States and its international partners should cautiously welcome the idea of establishing a Syrian Provisional Council, especially since it seeks to build on the work of the Follow-Up Committee and supports the Transition Plan and the National Pact. The initiative to set up the Council is ambitious but long overdue given the failure of the Syrian National Council to act as a national platform for key opposition groups inside and outside the country.

A wholesale embrace of this initiative, however, is not advised before the SPC demonstrates that its organizational structures are its strength and not its weakness. In particular, much will depend on its ability to overcome the inevitable attempts by those who would wish to co-opt the Council to act for their own narrow political interests. In this regard, the SPC must not resemble the SNC, Version 2.0. If successful, the SPC would offer the possibility of a viable pathway towards a political authority which is truly national in character. It can work with the international community to plan and implement the process of transition in Syria, starting with those areas in which the regime has lost effective control.

2. The United States should lead an international effort to unify the channels of lethal and non-lethal support to opposition groups. The militarization of Syria's crisis is a reality brought about by the regime's unflagging determination to use force in its response to the uprising. The nature of that militarization is further complicating the chaos on the ground. The efforts of regional states to unify the fighting brigades and provide lethal support, including advanced weapons, have suffered from a lack of capabilities and a lack of focus. As a result, these efforts have been beset with delays and have failed to provide the security guarantees that could come from the formation of a more united opposition military effort.

It has now become a necessity for the United States to ensure that such militarization does not destabilize Syria for years to come and undermine the long-term security of key regional states, including those in the Gulf. In case we need any reminding, Libya provides an important lesson on the dangers of failing to control the proliferation of advanced weapons to increasingly autonomous armed groups.

A well-resourced and well-coordinated armed opposition effort will hasten the demise of the Assad regime. This requires the establishment of a unified channel of external support to the armed rebels, which currently does not exist. It is high time for the United States to take the lead in establishing this channel. This has been a principal demand of the officers who have defected from the Syrian army and many of the militia commanders; it has also been echoed by the majority of the political opposition blocs. They recognize that the United States is best placed to unify and coordinate the support currently being provided by key regional and European states. The United States is also best placed to provide a much-needed package of military support, which includes expert advice and training, logistical support, key signals intelligence, and much needed anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons. To date, the lack of support by the United States in this regard has led to a growing sense of betrayal and a loss of faith in American leadership, particularly among those fighting on the ground.

There is evidence to suggest that such a U.S.-led effort would help prevent the proliferation of channels of support, particularly from the Gulf. Saudi Arabia and Qatar have, to date, been reluctant to provide advanced anti-aircraft weapons such as MANPADS without American support. They have understandable reservations about being too far ahead of the United States in assisting the armed rebellion, especially given the intensification of a regional proxy war.

Given the fragmentation of the militias on the ground, only U.S. leadership can impose sufficient conditionality for external military support to the armed opposition; that is to say, controls on the distribution of advanced weapons and commitments by fighters to key human rights principles and the laws of conflict. Through this effort, the United States can help forge a more united opposition fighting force and lay the groundwork for a revitalized Syrian national army. As part of this effort, the United States must target its support to elevate the defected officer class which has joined the opposition ranks, including those in Jordan, and increase its presence in the Operational Center in Adana in southern Turkey, through which Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar have sought to coordinate their efforts.

This force must, in a short period of time, be able to give assurances that it seeks to represent all Syrians and that it can establish security and safety in the transitional period following the ousting of the regime. It is a task that is made more urgent by the likelihood that the thousands of largely Alawi officers at the core of Assad's fighting forces will either disappear or be disqualified from a public role in the transitional period.

3. Support community-led projects within Syria that promote the goal of uniting the opposition and building ties between different groups. Liberated areas within Syria will need significant support in terms of humanitarian and other assistance. Those in the international community seeking to provide this assistance should concentrate on existing initiatives that can act as models for joint reconstruction efforts in areas of mixed ethnicities or sects. One such effort is that of the Druze communi-

ty in Sweida in southern Syria, where local leaders have proposed the establishment of a safe zone and provided humanitarian support to Sunni citizens fleeing Deraa and other nearby towns. The leaders of this initiative have already sought to export their model to other mixed areas in the country, talking in particular to leaders of other minority groups. They need further practical support for these efforts, however. Another effort based in the Watan Monastery of Jesuit Priests in Aleppo has provided much-needed humanitarian support to some 700 fleeing families from Homs and elsewhere in the country. This Christian group is now struggling to provide assistance to internally displaced communities in Aleppo itself, again with relatively little support from the outside world; in mid-September, the monastery was bombed by regime forces. One area in which such initiatives could be replicated is northeastern Syria, where Arabs and Kurds are together seeking resources to organize joint committees that address the steadily worsening security, political, and humanitarian situation. They have called for financial and humanitarian support, as well as communication equipment, but have yet to receive much.

4. Establish a credible process of dialogue to resolve disagreements on Syria's Kurdish question. The international community should provide support for an Arab-Kurdish dialogue that addresses Kurdish concerns and facilitates reconciliation with the wider Syrian opposition platform. Kurdish and Arab leaders have already engaged in a series of talks aimed at diffusing rising tensions in their region. Another precedent has been set in the establishment of a working group on the Kurdish issue within the above-mentioned Follow-Up and Communications Committee. There is a need, however, for a broader initiative – perhaps at the level of an internationally recognized special commission – that seeks to resolve these issues through a sustained dialogue. It should involve international experts and regional players, particularly Turkey and the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq. (One case that may act as an example here is the UN-established Kirkuk Commission in Iraq.) The urgency of formulating a sustainable resolution to the Kurdish question in Syria is clear. In the long term, failing to do so could have a severely negative impact on the stability of the transition and could threaten to derail the process of drafting a constitution.

5. Coordinate international efforts with Syrians in developing plans for the post-Assad transition. Clearly, these efforts have to be Syrian-led and Syria-specific. The international community, however, should begin to engage in more concerted efforts to collaborate with Syrians on developing their plan for the post-Assad period. The rival interests of regional players, the complexity and increasing fragmentation of Syrian society, and the ferocity of the forces tearing it apart, point today to the importance of both Syrians and the international community engaging in a rigorous transition planning exercise.

In too many scenarios the international community has applied a "cookie-cutter" approach for post-conflict reconciliation, governance, and state-building. It has thrown in technical specialists with little knowledge of the country or generalists with too little knowledge of the areas requiring real assistance. In the case of Syria, what is required is the provision of effective specialized advice on key issues such as security, transitional justice, and governance that, if left until after the fall of Assad, could threaten to derail the transition or prolong the conflict.

Already, there is a pressing need to better coordinate international efforts to support local and administrative governance efforts where the regime has lost control, especially in the north and west of the country. The current tendency of individual states to "pick" so-called liberated towns and villages in these areas should be strongly discouraged. Instead, the United Nations and the Arab League should jointly lead international efforts to plan for the "day after," taking more of a systematic and coherent approach than they have done to date. In particular, the UN needs to connect its own planning efforts in with Syrians, including through the Follow-Up and Communications Committee, and those member states and international specialized agencies willing to take part. The proposed Syrian Provincial Council would offer an obvious coordinating link between the international commu-

nity and a Syrian opposition political authority. The "Day After Project",[26] formulated by respected Syrian experts and practitioners, also offers useful ideas for the detailed transition planning that is now required. The joint UN-Arab League Deputy Special Representative, Nasser al-Kidwa, could coordinate this work and communicate it among other international actors. If the mandate of the Joint Representative does not allow for this, the UN Secretary-General should consider appointing a Special Adviser to work on transitional and governance arrangements in Syria. Libya's difficulties in establishing an effective civil administration in the transitional period, despite the notable efforts of the National Transitional Council, is a sobering reminder of the extent of the coming challenge in Syria.

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