

SEPTEMBER 2012

## Asad Under Fire

### *Five Scenarios for the Future of Syria*

#### POLICY BRIEF



By Melissa G. Dalton

The brutal conflict now underway in Syria jeopardizes key strategic interests of the United States, but leaves Washington with few attractive options to protect them and little leverage over the future trajectory of the country. Given these challenges, the United States should pursue a strategy that mitigates both the short- and long-term risks to its interests. Other U.S. policies will rightly focus on condemning the atrocities of the Syrian regime and alleviating the humanitarian suffering of the Syrian people. This policy brief focuses on threats to U.S. security interests and how they might evolve under five different scenarios for the future of Syria:

- President Bashar al-Asad is killed, followed by a period of conflict
- An opposition-led government takes power through a managed transition
- The opposition deposes Asad violently and takes control of Syria
- Asad retains power after an extended civil war
- Syria disintegrates along sectarian or religious lines

Eighteen months ago, the best possible result for Syria involved the political opposition convincing Asad to step down, culminating in a peaceful transition of power. It is too late for that now, however. Despite months of diplomatic efforts, the conflict has escalated, weakening Asad's control over the state but strengthening his resolve to stay in power, emboldening the opposition and fringe al Qaeda-inspired radicals, and deepening long-festered sectarian divisions. The once-peaceful opposition has had little choice but to combat violence with violence. Damascus and Aleppo are under siege, the number of deaths exceeds 20,000, and hundreds of thousands of refugees have fled to neighboring countries.<sup>1</sup>

As the conflict continues to escalate, public debate in the United States has focused on specific policies to address the current conflict, including arming Syrian rebels directly or imposing no-fly zones to support the Syrian opposition. Meanwhile, far too little attention has been paid to what may happen when the conflict ends. Current reports suggest that U.S. policymakers are focusing on the prospect of a managed transition after Asad falls from power,<sup>2</sup> but this is only one possible outcome. As the United States learned so painfully in Iraq, preparing effectively for the aftermath of conflict requires exploring a wide range of possible outcomes, not just the ones that Americans prefer.

## U.S. Interests in Syria

Since the future of Syria is uncertain, U.S. leaders must plan for a range of scenarios. This effort is vital because the United States has key strategic interests at stake:

**Preventing the use and proliferation of Syria's chemical weapons.** As the conflict escalates, the regime's chemical weapons – which reportedly include tons of sarin, mustard gas and VX nerve agent – could be used against the Syrian people or fall into the hands of terrorists.<sup>3</sup>

**Preventing the spread of conflict to neighboring countries.** Syria's conflict could also cause arms, militants and sectarian tensions to spill over into neighboring Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan and Turkey through Syria's increasingly porous borders, common trade routes and familial and tribal ties.<sup>4</sup>

**Minimizing Iranian efforts to foment conflict in the region.** Iran's alliance with Syria has enabled it to project power into the Levant and support Hezbollah in Lebanon and, to a lesser extent, Palestinian militant groups, with destabilizing effects on countries in the region.<sup>5</sup> A new Syrian government could be less friendly to Iran and constrain Iran's ability to resupply Hezbollah. This could isolate Iran further and reinforce U.S. and international efforts to pressure it to accede at the nuclear negotiating table. Iran could also feel more threatened and – in the absence of the forward strategic retaliatory capability in the Levant provided by its alliance with Syria – more motivated to obtain nuclear weapons.

**Preventing al Qaeda-inspired groups from operating freely in Syria.** Al Qaeda-inspired groups reportedly are growing in number and increasingly involved in Syria's conflict. These groups could try to establish safe havens in parts of the country that are not fully controlled by either the regime or the opposition.<sup>6</sup>

**Ensuring Israeli security.** An Islamist-dominated regime in Damascus could be more antagonistic toward Israel, but a new regime that limited its ties with Iran and Hezbollah and sought to partner more with the West might be more receptive to eventually making peace with Israel. Israeli leaders are deeply concerned about the security of Syria's chemical weapons as the Syria conflict escalates and a potential transition of power looms.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, these core strategic interests are only some of the interests the United States has at stake in Syria. The U.S. government also seeks to support Syria's political transition and mitigate humanitarian suffering. The United States is encouraging elements of the Syrian opposition to create a unified transition plan and has pledged to provide more than \$100 million for humanitarian activities both inside Syria and in neighboring countries.<sup>8</sup>

Although the United States has reportedly provided nonlethal assistance to the rebels and has begun to facilitate the arming of opposition elements by Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar, the U.S. government appears reluctant to take a direct combat role in Syria, fearing substantial risks that seem only more acute in a U.S. presidential election year.<sup>9</sup> These risks include becoming entangled in a prolonged stalemate, hindering U.S. plans for a strategic rebalancing toward Asia over the long term and ultimately making the situation in Syria worse rather than better.<sup>10</sup> U.S. military intervention could exacerbate the conflict and embolden al Qaeda-inspired groups. It could also lead to a proxy war with Iran and Russia, which could undermine efforts by the U.N. Security Council to maintain international pressure on Iran.<sup>11</sup> If substantial U.S. military assets were diverted to Syria, fewer forces and capabilities would be available for a military contingency with Iran, whether triggered by an Israeli strike on Iran's nuclear program or some other event.

## Five Scenarios for Syria

Each of the scenarios presented below starts with a triggering event, followed by a set of possible responses by key players, including elements of the Asad regime and the Syrian military, the opposition and outside powers. This set of scenarios for Syria's future is far from exhaustive but attempts to identify the most likely trajectories for Syria.

### SCENARIO 1: THE SUDDEN DEATH OF ASAD

This scenario starts with the Syrian opposition or al Qaeda militants assassinating Asad.

Key developments:

- Remaining regime members maintain control of the majority of state institutions, but uncertainty and confusion following Asad's death allow the opposition to increasingly challenge the regime. State institutions remain largely intact, but the safeguards on Syria's chemical weapons grow weaker.
- The Syrian opposition claims victory after Asad's death but lacks a coherent strategy for a post-Asad transition.
- Al Qaeda-inspired groups take advantage of the period of uncertainty in Syria's governance, gaining additional ground in key urban centers and staging attacks against regime loyalists.

In the confusion following Asad's death, the regime's control over chemical weapons safeguards could slip as remaining regime leaders focus on reasserting their authority and preventing the regime from collapsing. Rogue opposition fighters or militants with insider knowledge could exploit this vulnerability to gain control of some of the chemical weapons.

Asad's assassination could be the death knell of the current regime and could help galvanize Syria's opposition elements, but conflict probably would not end immediately. Syria's civil war could drag on for several more years. Some regime members

might choose to defect. Although the number of Sunnis continuing to support the regime is dwindling, other loyalists might not readily give up power, given the long-standing political, economic and social links between Alawite, minority and Sunni families at the core of the regime.<sup>12</sup>

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Even if state institutions were to remain largely intact, the uncertainty of who would lead Syria's government could diminish their effectiveness. In addition, Syria's military and security forces would likely have a difficult time establishing credibility and trust with the population as the lingering regime attempted to govern and enforce law and order. Brutal atrocities committed by some members of Syria's military and security forces against the rebels and, by some accounts, the Syrian population could motivate some Syrians to retaliate against the regime.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, even if regime loyalists ordered their forces to scale back operations against the rebels, Syria's military and security forces would likely have difficulty overcoming their suspicions of rebels or perceived rebel sympathizers after the past year of intense civil war.<sup>14</sup> Even if the decapitated regime decided to make peace with the rebels, increasing sectarian tensions among the rebels might prevent them from sticking to the terms of any negotiated settlement.<sup>15</sup>

Syria's opposition elements and the international community would probably not have enough time



to plan for a political transition and would not have resources ready to execute their strategy effectively. These gaps could enable regime loyalists to recover from the shock of Asad's death and reenergize their pursuit of the rebels.

Al Qaeda-inspired groups could also exploit the likely ensuing frustration, find recruits among Syria's population and operate with impunity as Syria's old and new powerbrokers continued to fight on the battlefield and at the negotiating table.<sup>16</sup> These militant groups could also galvanize support by claiming responsibility for Asad's death.

Iran and Russia would likely continue to back efforts by regime loyalists to quell the rebellion, but the two nations might also adopt a hedging strategy to establish relationships with emerging Syrian opposition leaders. Iran might also react to the sudden news of Asad's death by launching proxy attacks elsewhere as a show of force.<sup>17</sup>

## SCENARIO 2: MANAGED TRANSITION

In this scenario, Asad and his immediate circle depart.

Key developments:

- The majority of the state structure initially remains in place, but its capability and credibility grow weaker over time.
- With international funds and assistance, the Free Syrian Army and major militias decisively defeat Asad's forces in Aleppo and Damascus and consolidate gains in other main population centers.
- Military opposition leaders unite with defectors and lower-ranking regime officials to form a transitional government.
- Al Qaeda-inspired groups are marginalized by an increasingly unified and credible opposition with a political strategy that explicitly includes minorities and former regime members.
- Syria's transitional government controls the chemical weapons stockpiles, with international advice and support.
- Low-intensity conflict continues for several years in Syria until the opposition achieves a sustainable political transition. The flow of refugees into neighboring countries eases, and refugees gradually return to Syria as security conditions improve.

*No matter how well the opposition managed Syria's political transition, state institutions would be weakened not only by months of conflict but also by deep-seated fear and mistrust among Syria's population that predate the civil war.*

Asad could leave power in several different ways in this scenario – including a negotiated settlement with the opposition, some form of external intervention (possibly led by Turkey)<sup>18</sup> or even a military coup.<sup>19</sup> Regardless of how Asad departed, a managed transition would rely on senior-level defectors from his regime cooperating with Syria's political opposition to create a strategy for political transition.<sup>20</sup> Other opposition members might distrust defectors, however, particularly if they were close to Asad, which would likely constrain the ability of those defectors to lead the opposition's political consolidation and transition efforts.

No matter how well the opposition managed Syria's political transition, state institutions would be weakened not only by months of conflict but also by deep-seated fear and mistrust among Syria's population that predate the civil war.

*If the United States or its allies became directly involved in efforts to stabilize Syria after Asad's departure, the chances of militant attacks on U.S. or allied entities and interests would increase.*

Because the Asad regime governed through fear and repression, Syrian opposition members who have struggled to overthrow that system might reject regime institutions unless they were substantially reformed. This issue may be most acute in Syria's military and security services. Although the United States would want to encourage the Syrian government to heed the lessons of Iraq by not disbanding Syrian military and security services, government leaders would need to overhaul the entire security sector<sup>21</sup> for the population to accept these services as legitimate and trustworthy.<sup>22</sup> Syrians would probably have to grapple with these issues over the long term.

Some former regime officials would undoubtedly understand the systems that Syria currently uses to safeguard its chemical weapons. The United States could help connect those former officials with members of the opposition's security forces and could help provide training, advice and assistance to store (or even reduce) stockpiles.

Not wanting to risk losing its Levantine partner, Iran would likely seek a strong relationship with the Syrian regime (witness Iraq next door). But Iran might also hedge its bets by reaching out to rebels while providing material support to Asad's regime.<sup>23</sup> However, some members of the Syrian political opposition have indicated that the Syria-Iran strategic relationship would not endure after Asad left power.<sup>24</sup> A new Syrian government that reduced its support for Iran and for Hezbollah's activities in the

region could emerge if given economic and security incentives to engage more with the United States, Arab states and the international community. This approach could further isolate Iran, reinforcing U.S. efforts to limit Iran's options and pressure it to compromise at the nuclear negotiating table.

Militants uninterested in participating in Syria's political transition might exploit the period of uncertainty as power changed hands to establish safe havens in Syria, mount attacks against former regime entities or find new opportunities to stir up unrest in Lebanon and Iraq. If the United States or its allies became directly involved in efforts to stabilize Syria after Asad's departure, the chances of militant attacks on U.S. or allied entities and interests would increase.

Syria could be more antagonistic to Israel in this scenario, particularly if Islamist members of the opposition assumed power. Islamist leaders in Syria's new government might advocate a more aggressive stance toward Israel, not only inviting Hamas' political wing back to Damascus but perhaps also seeking to provide more lethal support to Palestinian militant groups. Alternatively, Syria's new government could adopt a stance toward Israel similar to that of the Asad regime – maintaining relative peace on the Golan Heights while remaining technically (and rhetorically) at war with Israel. Even if members of the new Syrian government were willing to explore normalized relations or peace talks with Israel, they could be heavily criticized by other Syrian leaders and members of the population who reject that path. Yet there might be no better way for Israel and the United States to jointly engage the new Syrian government than with revitalized Syrian-Israeli peace talks.

### **SCENARIO 3: THE OPPOSITION EVENTUALLY DEPOSES ASAD AND CONTROLS MOST OF SYRIA**

In this scenario, Syria's civil war becomes increasingly sectarian and violent. After more than a year

of bitter struggle, a few regime officials defect and Asad departs, is forcibly removed or is killed.

Key developments:

- Regime loyalists maintain relative control over the state, although the opposition increasingly contests that rule.
- As Asad's loyal forces are increasingly deployed to combat rebels, safeguards on chemical weapons stockpiles weaken. Asad attempts to move chemical weapons again for safekeeping and disperse them further in order to deter foreign intervention.
- The opposition gradually takes control of Damascus and Aleppo and eventually holds ground in the majority of the country, although rebel groups continue to compete for power and territory.
- State institutions do not survive the civil war.
- The flow of refugees to Iraq, Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan increases, straining these countries' capacity to absorb them.<sup>25</sup>

The risks for U.S. interests would increase dramatically with this scenario. With few defections from the senior ranks of the Asad regime, the opposition would likely rely more on foreign advice and assistance to oust Asad. However, foreign support for the opposition could escalate the conflict, resulting in an even bloodier standoff between the rebels and the regime. Russia and Iran's continued support for Asad could drag out the conflict, and some foreign supporters could calculate that increasing the lethality and sophistication of weapons provided to the rebels might give them an advantage. Neighboring countries might deploy troops to border regions with authorization to pursue militants across the border into Syria.<sup>26</sup>

Foreign support to proxies probably would not end once the opposition controlled territory and began

to form its government. Syrian political players would also likely continue to rely on foreign sponsors for financial (and possibly military) support in the post-conflict period. Warlords with divergent interests could emerge on the political scene, as seen in the civil wars of Lebanon and Iraq.

*The United States would likely compete with Iran for influence over the new Syrian regime, as it currently does in Iraq and Lebanon.*

With constrained budgets, donor fatigue and weariness in the aftermath of Iraq and Afghanistan, some members of the international community may have little appetite for a robust post-conflict reconstruction effort. The United States and its allies could, however, help lead fundraising efforts under the auspices of the Arab League to provide assistance for post-conflict reconstruction, relief and aid for returning refugees, and help to the emerging Syrian political leadership in building a strategy for Syria's future. Although Iran could play a constructive role in this international effort,<sup>27</sup> it would likely view the relative power vacuum in Syria as an opportunity to reassert its influence with the emerging Syrian regime and re-establish its supply routes to Hezbollah. The United States would likely compete with Iran for influence over the new Syrian regime, as it currently does in Iraq and Lebanon.<sup>28</sup>

Even with international assistance, however, significant internal obstacles would make it difficult for the Syrian opposition to consolidate power and govern. In its dogged pursuit of regime loyalists, the mostly-Sunni opposition and its sympathizers would increasingly marginalize and condemn the

Alawites, particularly if no high-profile Alawites chose to defect. Retribution killings would grow in number and brutality and could expand to include other minorities (Christians, Druse and others) that are seen as complicit with regime loyalists – even if they simply chose not to take sides. Fearing annihilation, many Alawites could remain loyal to the regime to the end, possibly conducting their own brutal killing raids on the Sunni population.<sup>29</sup> Some research suggests that ethnic divisions play less of a role in driving civil conflict than other factors such as poverty and instability.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, Syria's bitter conflict – compounded by years of suppressed resentment and political, economic and social divisions – would likely make it very difficult to form an inclusive post-Asad government.<sup>31</sup>

Militants uninterested in forming a new government, including those inspired by al Qaeda, could take advantage of the power vacuum created by the protracted conflict and post-conflict consolidation of power to gain support among the ravaged population. They could potentially threaten the stability of Syria and surrounding countries and draw the U.S. counterterrorism focus back to the Levant.

In the waning days of Asad's regime, the status of the regime's chemical weapons would grow more tenuous. The most vulnerable point would likely occur after the regime's command and control disintegrates but before the opposition could assume control of the weapons. A militant group with insider knowledge of the safeguards on chemical weapons could exploit this period and gain control of weapons or disperse them to entities inside or outside of Syria. Dispersing the weapons would make it more difficult to contain and safeguard them if the United States or other partners decided to intervene at some point. Israel (and possibly the United States) might opt to intervene to prevent Asad from dispersing his weapons further. Although unlikely, some Asad loyalists in the waning days of the regime

might consider using chemical weapons as a last ditch effort against the rebels – or transferring the weapons to Hezbollah for "safekeeping." The latter move would likely provoke a swift Israeli response to prevent that transfer.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, Hezbollah might not be willing to risk accepting the transfer.<sup>33</sup>

#### SCENARIO 4: ASAD HOLDS ONTO POWER AFTER A PROLONGED CIVIL WAR

In this scenario, Syria is engulfed in a protracted civil war over the next year or more. Asad retains power, backed by Iran and Russia, but ultimately has weaker control over the state.

Key developments:

- Rebels hold marginal territory in outlying areas, but Asad crushes the majority of the opposition in a campaign that includes mass killings, executions, torture and imprisonment of the rebels and civilian sympathizers.<sup>34</sup>
- Syria's chemical weapons are at risk during the civil war but ultimately remain under regime control.
- Flows of refugees increase as Asad pursues the rebels.
- Iran redoubles its efforts to strengthen Asad in the aftermath.

This scenario reduces the risk of WMD proliferation. Wanting to avoid an international response, Asad would not be likely to use chemical weapons to retake territory in order to avoid an international response. His forces would be more likely to rely on conventional means to slaughter, torture and intimidate the rebels.

Asad's survival would diminish the credibility of the United States and other countries that have called for him to step down. This scenario would also likely deliver a crippling blow to Arab uprisings and transitioning states throughout the region. Asad's resiliency could encourage entrenched autocratic actors in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Yemen to resist participating in their respective political



transitions. U.S. and international efforts to support political transitions in those states would become even more difficult to move forward.

A stronger Iran-Syria-Hezbollah alliance could emerge in this scenario. Moreover, Asad's victory could embolden Iran and make it less likely to cooperate on a nuclear deal. Iran could also ramp up its support for Hezbollah and militant Palestinian groups in the aftermath to demonstrate that its strength in the Levant had not diminished.

Asad would likely seek to stamp out al Qaeda-inspired groups that could threaten his regime. However, virulent underground anti-regime militancy could take root among an increasingly frustrated and insurgent Syrian population. This could create a reservoir for recruitment for al Qaeda-inspired groups. As Asad pursued the militants, they might seek refuge and establish new bases in neighboring countries (as seen in post-conflict Iraq and Libya), which could further destabilize the region.

Still, it would likely take time for Asad to rebuild his regime and reconsolidate his control over all of Syria. In this scenario, the regime would never be as strong as it was before the war. Some pockets of resistance could remain, backed by foreign sponsors. The regime might be wary of the threat of the rebels mounting another offensive, which could make retaliatory strikes all the more brutal. Civilians might flee contested areas, and neighboring countries would need U.S. and international assistance to help absorb and care for refugees. Indeed, from a humanitarian perspective, the cost of Asad remaining in power after years of rebellion would be the most disturbing of all.

#### **SCENARIO 5: SYRIA DISINTEGRATES ALONG SECTARIAN OR REGIONAL LINES**

In this scenario, a grinding civil war over the

next several years destroys state structures. Syria descends into anarchy with significant civilian casualties. Conflict grows increasingly sectarian, as do rebel groups. Retribution killings increase. Asad departs, is killed or becomes marginalized, and the remnants of the regime are reduced to a militia.<sup>35</sup>

Key developments:

- The opposition fails to cohere politically. Disparate rebel groups largely act independently of each other.
- Rebel militant groups not only attack regime elements but also fight each other as they jockey for power and territory. Militant groups hold territory in scattered pockets. Regime loyalists fall back to areas along the Mediterranean coast, on the Lebanese border and in Damascus.
- Chemical weapons are at the highest risk of falling into militant hands. The United States leads and coordinates an international intervention to safeguard or destroy the chemical weapons.
- Flows of refugees and militants across borders skyrocket.

This is the riskiest scenario for the United States. As state control over Syria's chemical weapons disintegrated, regime loyalists might choose to use chemical weapons to repel opposition advances against their territory. Militants could also gain control of some of the weapons at this point, although many of Syria's chemical weapons facilities are reportedly located in the western region of the country, where the loyalists are most likely to be embedded.<sup>36</sup> Regime loyalists could also transfer the weapons to Lebanese Hezbollah, either as an interim measure or as a means to hedge against an Israeli attack on Syria, and Israel might consider invading Syria unilaterally to secure or destroy the weapons.<sup>37</sup> At that point, the United States would have a strong interest in leading an international



intervention to secure and destroy the chemical weapons,<sup>38</sup> in order to prevent a unilateral Israeli intervention that would likely be longer, harder and more lethal. Regime loyalists would probably fight back against any intervening forces, however, which could lengthen the intervention and cause more Syrian casualties.

Al Qaeda-inspired groups could more easily establish safe havens in this scenario as the state disintegrated and ungoverned space increased. These groups might label the international intervention to secure chemical weapons as a foreign occupation and gain more Syrian recruits and sympathizers. Rebel groups and regime elements would likely be preoccupied with fighting each other and, therefore, might be less willing or able to act against militant groups. Furthermore, as borders became more porous and unmonitored, militant groups and arms would more freely flow into neighboring countries.

Prolonged conflict could lead Arab states, Turkey and Iran to provide additional resources to proxies in order to help those proxies consolidate power over a greater portion of the country. These proxy wars could escalate beyond Syria and spread to neighboring countries, particularly Iraq and Lebanon. Although reduced to a regional militia, regime loyalists may continue to rely on Iran's military and financial support. Their concentration in the west, near the border with Lebanon and on the coast, could facilitate some arms transfers, as well as logistical and communication linkages to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Meanwhile, after losing its strategic Syrian partner, Iran might further strengthen its influence in Lebanon, which is already quite strong because of its partnership with Hezbollah, to ensure that its influence in the Levant does not wane.<sup>39</sup> The United States could help contain some of the spillover effects of this proxy conflict by bolstering intelligence sharing

and security cooperation with Syria's neighbors, although it is arguable whether it could do more than it does now.

Alawites, Christians, Druse and other minorities could move to regime-controlled areas, fearing retribution from Sunni rebel groups. Violence would likely increase as large populations attempted to move to safer areas where their sects were concentrated.<sup>40</sup> These casualties would compound the significant loss of life and dislocation from the civil war. The United States could offer more robust aid to the countries that are absorbing considerable refugee flows, but even here its ability to assist refugees and contain spillover effects might be limited. For example, significant Syrian refugee flows could not only strain Jordan's fragile economy but also further deepen its domestic political grievances against Jordan's monarch (who happens to be a key U.S. partner).<sup>41</sup>

As populations concentrate along sectarian lines, ethnic fault lines might rupture, and Syria's restive Kurds might declare independence or even seek to join a union with Iraqi or Turkish Kurds. Turkey could use military force to pursue or eradicate Kurdish militants across the border if it suspected they were using the power vacuum in Syria to carve out a base from which to launch attacks into Turkey.<sup>42</sup> This could disrupt Turkey's overall stability and its relationship with Iraq. It could also potentially keep Turkey from partnering with the United States on other U.S. priorities, including containing arms and militant flows from non-Kurdish sources in Syria.

### **Implications for U.S. Policy**

The five scenarios presented above all put U.S. interests at risk, and those risks will increase dramatically the longer the conflict lasts. While the United States has very little leverage with the Syrian regime, opposition or public, the

*The United States may not see the effects of its policies immediately, but it must work with international partners to implement them now to help set Syria on the right course and to protect U.S. interests over the long term.*

United States should adopt several policies now to help mitigate risks to its interests as the conflict evolves and the post-Asad Syria unfolds. The United States may not see the effects of its policies immediately, but it must work with international partners to implement them now to help set Syria on the right course and to protect U.S. interests over the long term.

U.S. policy should:

- Engage all emerging leaders in Syria, making it clear that U.S. assistance will be predicated on certain principles (e.g., the protection of minority rights in Syria and Israeli security), while being willing to work with individuals who share pragmatic interests. Recent diplomatic overtures to a broader base of Syrian opposition members are a positive step in this direction.
- Acknowledge that even if the current Syria-Iran alliance is severed with Asad's departure, Iran will likely play a role in post-Asad Syria – as it does in Iraq. Just as in Iraq, however, Syria's new leaders will want to set themselves apart from the old regime and could be open to economic, security and peace initiatives from Arab states and the United States that could draw Syria away from Iran. A Sunni-dominated Syrian state would be more likely to turn to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and possibly the West than to Iran.
- Continue buttressing plans for chemical weapons contingencies with regional partners, particularly Turkey, Israel and Jordan.<sup>43</sup>
- Caution both Israel and Turkey that intervening in Syria carries significant risks, but plan to collectively mitigate those risks in the event that intervention becomes necessary.
- Increase counterterrorism intelligence sharing and security cooperation with Syria's neighbors to track and limit the growth of terrorist cells in Syria. Just as U.S. regional partners have an interest in contingency planning for Syria's chemical weapons, they also have an interest in preventing terrorist safe havens from emerging in Syria.
- Amplify calls to partners and allies to develop a strategy for post-conflict assistance led by the Syrian opposition.<sup>44</sup> Syria will need at least some, and possibly extensive, post-conflict reconstruction assistance, as state structures will be weak even in the best-case scenario. Resource-constrained allies will be wary of contributing to a post-Asad reconstruction effort. This international effort will have to rely on Gulf countries to do much of the investing – and with this comes the risk that their interests and motives may not always match U.S. intent. Nevertheless, the United States should pursue this effort under the umbrella of the Arab League to mitigate the nationalist backlash that would likely emerge against a U.S.- or Western-led initiative.
- Continue encouraging regime officials to defect by offering financial incentives and security protections for defectors' families. Defections could be pivotal not only to encourage the fall of Asad's regime but also to assist in rebuilding Syria in the aftermath. Defections could be particularly powerful if they included senior Alawite officials with broad appeal and if Syria's opposition integrated

defections into its strategy. Persuading Alawites to defect might become increasingly difficult as the conflict becomes more sectarian.

- Work with regional partners to develop a strategy to contain the spillover effects of the conflict in Syria.
- Strengthen calls to the Syrian opposition to include transitional justice as a plank in its political platform, along with assurances for inclusivity and fair and representative governance to allay minority concerns. Make lethal assistance to opposition members conditional on their compliance. Although some Syrian rebels may resist reaching out to Alawites seen as complicit with Asad's brutal rule, transitional justice must be applied early and often to stop retribution killings.
- Continue efforts to persuade Russia to back Syria's political transition. U.S. officials should emphasize that proxy wars in Syria or state disintegration would set a terrible precedent for Russia's own rebellious regions.

## Conclusion

The current conflict in Syria will imperil U.S. interests regardless of how it unfolds. Thus, the United States must prepare for a range of future scenarios and implement policies to hedge against risks.

Even with a hedging strategy, challenges will persist. In particular, tensions among U.S. interests are likely to complicate policymaking. For instance, policies that support Syria's opposition and reduce Iranian influence over a new Syrian regime may also result in weakened control over chemical weapons stockpiles, especially during a transition of power. Support for Syrian rebel forces could hasten Asad's fall but also undermine efforts to keep Syrian army units intact and weaken their ability to provide security for civilians during a period of political transition. Challenges in providing

logistical and intelligence support to internal Syrian rebels may skew U.S. and international assistance to favor opposition members working outside of Syria. But rebels in Syria may have greater legitimacy domestically and ultimately have more power over Syria's trajectory.

The United States has much at stake in Syria's future. Risks abound and leverage is limited, but thoughtful planning with allies and partners and a commitment to protect U.S. interests over the long term could result in the possibility of a new, if challenging, beginning for Syria.

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## ENDNOTES

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10. While the U.S. military will continue to contribute to security globally, the United States has stated that it will, of necessity, rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region. "Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense," U.S. Department of Defense, January 2012, [www.defense.gov/news/Defense\\_Strategic\\_Guidance.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/news/Defense_Strategic_Guidance.pdf).
11. Anne-Marie Slaughter, "We Will Pay a High Price If We Don't Arm Syria's Rebels," *Financial Times*, July 31, 2012, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/a03392ce-da35-11e1-b03b-00144feab49a.html#axzz22fWztEvP>.
12. For a detailed analysis of the political, economic and social foundations of the Asad regime, see Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999). For a more concise overview of these dynamics, see Bassam Haddad, "The Syrian Regime's Business Backbone," *Middle East Report*, Spring 2012, <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer262/syrian-regimes-business-backbone>.
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14. Ibid.
15. Roy Licklider, "The Consequences of Negotiated Settlements After Civil Wars," *American Political Science Review*, 89 no. 3 (1995), 681-690.
16. This dynamic would be similar to the ways in which Al Qaeda in Iraq successfully exploited Iraq's political morass. Abdel Bari Atwan, "Al Qaeda's Hand in Tipping Iraq Toward Civil War," *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 20, 2006, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0320/p09s01-coop.html>; and Joost Hiltermann, "Violence in Iraq? It's the Politics Stupid!" *CNN Global Public Square*, July 30, 2012, <http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2012/07/30/violence-in-iraq-its-the-politics-stupid>.
17. Iran and Hezbollah's alleged plots in India, Kenya and Bulgaria may have been a scramble to lash out after covert attacks on its nuclear program. See Nicholas Kulish and Jodi Rudoren, "Plots Are Tied to Shadow War of Israel and Iran," *The New York Times*, August 8, 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/09/world/middleeast/murky-plots-and-attacks-tied-to-shadow-war-of-iran-and-israel.html?pagewanted=1&\\_r=1&hp](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/09/world/middleeast/murky-plots-and-attacks-tied-to-shadow-war-of-iran-and-israel.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1&hp); and Kevjn Lim, "Iran's Secret Weapon," *The National Interest*, August 9, 2012, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/irans-secret-weapon-7313>.



18. For example, Turkey could establish a safe zone along its border with Syria, perhaps with U.S. air cover or support. The safe zone could ostensibly be for humanitarian and refugee relief, but it could also create a beachhead to allow opposition elements to organize and funnel arms to strongholds in northern Syria. It could also put pressure on the Syrian military and security forces — redeploying along the border of the safe zone might require them to reduce their presence in other rebel locations. The net result could bring Asad down.

19. A military coup in Syria could follow the same broad pattern as the transition in Egypt: The military could oust Asad and then lead a transition effort, leaving much of the state's structure intact. Assuming that Syria's military would eventually relinquish or share power with the Syrian opposition (which may be a big assumption), this approach would provide more time for Syria's opposition to coalesce, but the same risks of other managed-transition scenarios would apply. For a discussion of what a military coup could look like in Syria, see Mona Yacobian, "The Road to Syria's Salvation Runs Through Moscow," *Foreign Policy*, March 1, 2012, [http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/03/01/the\\_road\\_to\\_syrias\\_salvation\\_runs\\_through\\_moscow](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/03/01/the_road_to_syrias_salvation_runs_through_moscow).

20. Ignatius, "Looking for a Syrian End Game." Nonetheless, even a transition of power in the short term could challenge U.S. interests. Asad and his senior officials are unlikely to step aside until the opposition becomes stronger and more cohesive, both politically and militarily. Although the Syrian opposition has demonstrated some resiliency and increasing military capabilities in recent months, it will need more robust foreign assistance from the United States and U.S. partners to improve its ability to consolidate power and govern. The United States has thus far reportedly provided only nonlethal assistance, command-and-control support, and coordination of arms flow from foreign partners to the rebels. It has also sought to encourage cohesion among Syria's internal and expatriate political opposition elements. However, the United States has reportedly resisted providing lethal assistance to the rebels, given how little it knows about members of the opposition and their intent. The nonlethal support approach limits the risk of the United States aiding and abetting potential terrorists, but it is based on the assumption that an incremental approach will give the rebels enough of an advantage to consolidate their gains and that Syria's opposition elements have the resiliency to sustain significant casualties and oppression in the meantime.

21. One recent study finds that the strength of state institutions, committed foreign advice and assistance, the quality of rebel militia forces, and effective management of the security-sector reform process are key factors in determining whether a state succeeds in integrating rebel forces and regime security services after a civil conflict. Failure has occurred because one or more of these four factors has been absent. See Stephen F. Burgess, "Fashioning Integrated Security Services After Conflict," *African Security*, 1 no. 2 (2008), 69-91.

22. Some analytic accounts point to Syria's military increasingly being perceived as an occupation force. See "Syria's Mutating Conflict."

23. "Iran Offers to Host Syria Talks," CNN Online, July 15, 2012, [http://articles.cnn.com/2012-07-15/middleeast/world\\_m-east\\_iran-syria\\_1\\_syrian-opposition-press-tv-syrian-government](http://articles.cnn.com/2012-07-15/middleeast/world_m-east_iran-syria_1_syrian-opposition-press-tv-syrian-government); and "Top Iran Military Official Aiding Asad's Crackdown on Syria Opposition," *Haaretz*, February 6, 2012, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/middle-east/report-top-iran-military-official-aiding-assad-s-crackdown-on-syria-opposition-1.411402>.

24. Emile Hokayem, "Syria and Its Neighbours," *Survival*, 54 no. 2 (April-May 2012), 8.

25. Refugees from Iraq's civil war, for example, drove up fuel, water and electricity prices; strained health and education services; and corresponded with a rise in criminality in neighboring Syria and Jordan. See Andrew Harper, "Iraq's Refugees: Ignored and Unwanted," *International Review of the Red Cross*, 90 no. 869 (2008), 169-190.

26. Indeed, with the Turks on edge about increasing Syrian Kurdish activism and connectivity with Turkey's own Kurdish rebels, they may decide that cross-border pursuit is a favorable option. "Turkey Military Drill on Syria Border Eyes Kurds," ABC News, August 1, 2012, [http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/turkish-minister-meet-iraqi-kurds-syria-16902204#.UBIEIKR3\\_LL](http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/turkish-minister-meet-iraqi-kurds-syria-16902204#.UBIEIKR3_LL).

27. Iran arguably played a constructive role in the 2001 Bonn conference on Afghanistan. See James Dobbins, "Engaging Iran," in *The Iran Primer*, United States Institute of Peace, 2011, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/engaging-iran>. Also, Iran has offered to host meetings between Syrian rebels and the regime; see "Iran Offers to Host Syria Talks."

28. See Anthony Cordesman, "U.S. and Iranian Strategic Competition" (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2011), <http://csis.org/program/us-and-iranian-strategic-competition>. Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey also have significant interests in Syria's outcome, which may differ from those of the United States.

29. The Asad regime has already reportedly used armed militias called *shabiha*, comprised mostly of Alawites, to conduct killing raids against Sunni villages. Harriet Alexander and Ruth Sherlock, "The Shabiha: Inside Asad's Death Squads," *The Telegraph*, June 2, 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9307411/The-Shabiha-Inside-Assads-death-squads.html>.

30. James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War," *American Political Science Review*, 97 no. 1 (2003), 88.

31. Political, economic and social divisions may underlie many of the Syrian rebels' grievances, but they may not ultimately play a role in determining the outcome of the war in Syria. See T. David Mason and Patrick J. Fett, "How Civil Wars End: A Rational Choice Approach," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 40 no. 4 (1996), 546-568.

32. "Israel Fears Syria's Chemical Weapons Could Be Seized by Hezbollah or al-Qaida," *Haaretz*, July 22, 2012, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/israel-fears-syria-s-chemical-weapons-could-be-seized-by-hezbollah-or-al-qaida-1.452722>.

33. Iran and Hezbollah have shown restraint in the degree to which they threaten Israeli or regional stability so as not to incur U.S. or Israeli retaliation. See Colin H. Kahl, Matthew Irvine and Melissa G. Dalton, "Risk and Rivalry: Iran, Israel and the Bomb" (Center for a New American Security, June 2012), <http://www.cnas.org/riskandrivalry>.

34. For the Asad regime, there is no middle ground between absolute triumph and fatal defeat. See "Syria's Mutating Conflict."

35. For the antecedents of the regime's transformation into a militia, see Ibid.

36. According to recent reports, Asad has dispersed Syria's chemical weapons to as many as 20 sites throughout the country. See "Suspected Production of Chemical Weapons," Spiegel Online, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/bild-847203-382218.html>; and Warrick, "Worries Intensify Over Syrian Chemical Weapons."

37. Ronen Bergman, Juliane von Mittelstaedt, Matthias Schepp and Holger Stark, "Fate of Syrian Chemical Weapons May Trigger War," Spiegel Online, July 31, 2012, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/israel-prepares-plans-to-neutralize-syrian-chemical-weapons-a-847203.html>.

38. Mark Hosenbell and Phil Stewart, "Securing Syria's Chemical Weapons May Take Tens of Thousands of Troops," Reuters, August 16, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/08/16/us-syria-crisis-chemicalweapons-idUSBRE87F16520120816>.

39. Firas Maksad, "Washington, get ready for more Iranian influence after Bashar al-Asad falls in Syria," *The Christian Science Monitor*, August 2, 2012, <http://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/Opinion/2012/0802/Washington-get-ready-for-more-Iranian-influence-after-Bashar-al-Assad-falls-in-Syria>.

40. Increased violence and large population displacements commonly occur during civil wars, especially when territory is formally or informally partitioned (as in India/Pakistan, Bosnia and Iraq). As one observer noted, "The grisly massacres running riot through the Syrian countryside are not mere sectarian outbursts or bouts of senseless killings and retaliatory counterkillings; they bear the telltale markings of what became known in Yugoslavia of the 1990s as 'ethnic cleansing.'" See Franck Salameh, "An Alawite State in Syria?" *The National Interest*, July 10, 2012, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/alawite-state-syria-7173>.

41. Karim Faheem, "Jordan Worries Turmoil Will Follow as Syria's Refugees Flood In," *The New York Times*, July 25, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/26/world/middleeast/jordan-is-anxious-as-syrian-refugees-flood-in.html>.

42. Aaron David Miller, "Why Syria's Rebels Can't Have it All," *Foreign Policy*, August 1, 2012, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/08/01/why\\_syrias\\_rebels\\_cant\\_have\\_it\\_all?page=0,1](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/08/01/why_syrias_rebels_cant_have_it_all?page=0,1).

43. The United States and these partners have reportedly developed contingency plans that include sending experts to work with Syrian rebels to secure the chemical weapons. Other contingency plans reportedly include deploying military forces if the chemical weapons sites are overrun during the course of the conflict, or if the regime or its supporters prepare to use the weapons. James Blitz, "Fears Grow over Syria's Chemical Arms," *Financial Times*, July 15, 2012, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/02f97808-ce63-11e1-bc0c-00144feabdc0.html#axzz22xzSqKZ3>; and Warrick, "Worries Intensify Over Syrian Chemical Weapons."

44. The Day After Project, which was facilitated by the United States Institute of Peace and the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), provides a solid foundation for Syria's transition planning process. See <http://www.usip.org/the-day-after-project>.

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Free Syrian Army fighters celebrate after hearing that their comrades destroyed a Syrian Army tank in Idlib, north Syria.

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