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The Dynamics of Syria's Civil War

Brian Michael Jenkins

Principal Observations

For the Foreseeable Future, No Government Will Be Able to Rule All of What Was the Modern State of Syria

Assad's forces, with external support, appear to have stalemated a fragmented rebel movement, but Assad will not be able to restore his authority throughout the country.

Rebel forces nominally control areas of the country where government forces have withdrawn, but they too will be unable to impose their authority throughout Syria, even if Assad falls.

Constrained by Concerns About Defections, Assad Relies on His Elite Alawite Units, Overwhelming Firepower, and Sectarian Loyalists

Limitations on its deployable manpower have already obliged the government to abandon large portions of the country in order to defend strategic areas. This may account for the initial rapid advances made by the rebel forces.

Despite defections early in the armed rebellion, Assad's forces still maintain a significant size and firepower advantage over the rebels.

Syria's counterinsurgency strategy is informed by the experience of the Assad regime in suppressing the 1977–1982 Muslim Brotherhood rebellion and by Soviet/Russian doctrine developed during the Soviet Union's occupation of Afghanistan and Russia's two wars in Chechnya.

One-third of the population has fled the country or has been displaced internally. By the end of 2014, more than half of the population could be living as refugees—a situation conducive to future terrorism.

Pro-Government Militias Are Likely to Play an Increasingly Dominant Role in the Conflict

Local militias are now Syria's "weapons of mass destruction." Operating beyond rules of engagement, militiamen can slaughter under the radar. But there is a risk that local militias will degenerate into criminal gangs, creating a long-term security problem.

Assad's Foreign Supporters Are in It for Themselves

Assad's fall would be a strategic blow to Iran. Iran would not only lose an important ally in the region, its leaders fear that Assad's demise could inspire a domestic movement aimed at bringing down the Islamic Republic itself.

Russia's motives for supporting Assad are complex and include honoring a long alliance, maintaining strategic position, and great-power pretensions. Russia opposes Western military intervention as a matter of principle. Its affinity toward Christian minorities and its hostility toward Muslim extremists are deeply ingrained.

Hezbollah intervened to protect its strategic alliances and arms supply routes. Benefiting from years of combat experience gained in Lebanon's civil war and its two wars with Israel,

Hezbollah's fighters have played an important role in the Assad regime's effort.

Assad's Willingness to Surrender His Chemical Weapons Will Neither End the Conflict nor Weaken His Regime

The removal of chemical weapons from Syria will do little to curb what is likely to become a long and bloody standoff.

Any hope that ridding Syria of its chemical weapons would weaken Assad and lead to his subsequent demise appears to be largely unsubstantiated. It also ignores the enormous impact of Assad's uncontested conventional weapons.

By agreeing to give up chemical weapons, Assad improves his chances of survival during the long and complicated cleanup mission. Sometimes, a lizard has to lose its tail to survive.

The removal of Syria's chemical arsenal will require some temporary local cease-fires. This could prove to be a bigger problem for the rebels than it is for the government, which benefits from the absence of fighting.

An international deal that leaves Assad in power without chemical weapons might seem preferable to reluctant Western supporters of the rebels than continued efforts to oust him if these endanger the elimination of his chemical-weapons arsenal.

The Rebels Cannot Be Crushed, but They Depend on Others to Bring Down Assad

The rebellion mirrors many of the divisions of the broader Muslim world—fragmented and at war with itself.

With help from abroad, Assad's foes have managed to attain tactical victories, but they have been unable to string these together to alter the situation strategically.

The rebels have conducted a nationwide guerrilla campaign, but their activities are local and uncoordinated rather than dictated by a national strategy. They have not been able to make the transition from guerrilla fighters to a field force capable of challenging the government's forces on the battlefield.

The rebels operate locally, occasionally cooperating, but they lack the mobility and logistics to deploy away from their home bases for any length of time. Any concentrations of rebel forces would be vulnerable to overwhelming government firepower.

The rebels can take and hold smaller towns and infiltrate the periphery of larger cities. They can carry out spectacu-

lar terrorist attacks to gain attention, but these actions by themselves will not bring down the regime. The rebels can only hope to create an unsustainable situation that prompts a change of regime from within or that provokes intervention from abroad.

U.S. caution in providing support to the rebels reflects uncertainty about the evolving conflict and concerns that advanced weapons might fall into the hands of jihadists who would use them in terrorist attacks directed against the West.

Islamic Hardliners Will Increasingly Dominate the Rebellion

Through the recruitment of foreign fighters and defections from other rebel groups, the growing role of jihadist groups has divided the rebel movement and discouraged the West from providing significant military support.

The longer the fighting continues, the greater the fear that al Qaeda-linked elements will be able to consolidate their position, giving them a new stronghold from which to continue al Qaeda's terrorist campaign against the West.

While al Qaeda's overall leader has supported its local Syrian affiliate against its bloodier-minded rival, there is an inherent tension between al Qaeda's central command, a revolutionary vanguard that sees itself answering only to God, and local affiliates more concerned with holding the loyalty of the local population. In the long run, no al Qaeda front has remained local in its operations.

Absent a Major Provocation, Western Military Intervention Seems Unlikely

Neutralizing Syria's armed forces will not end the fighting. Nor could intervening foreign forces count on any Syrian national army to maintain domestic order.

The international community's tolerance for atrocity in the Syrian conflict is not clear. Past internal conflicts have produced humanitarian catastrophes without foreign intervention.

The bitter legacy of Iraq and Afghanistan has discouraged Western military intervention, but terrorist attacks launched from jihadist strongholds in Syria could provoke military strikes against the jihadists.

Outsiders may be forced to deal with Syria in parts, as opposed to dealing with the state of Syria.

The Sectarian Undercurrents That Divide the Country and the Region Have Become the Central Pathology of the Syrian Conflict—They Will Impede Its Resolution

Sectarian entities with loyalties that transcend Syria's borders are replacing Syrian national institutions.

Shi'a militias are being recruited abroad not to fight on behalf of Assad, but to defend Shi'a religious sites in Syria, emphasizing a sectarian motive for fighting. Like Hezbollah, they may be more beholden to Iran or Shi'a leaders outside of Syria than to Assad. This has implications for Syria's future.

What began as a rebellion against the Assad regime has been transformed into an existential sectarian war in which none believe they can survive in a Syria dominated by their foes.

The longer the Syrians fight, the more sectarian the conflict becomes, the more savage the fighting, the more sectarian cleansing will occur, the greater the accumulation of reasons for revenge, the less likely there is to be a political solution.

As refugees regroup in sectarian enclaves, fighting will become more defensive, less fluid—a war of edges.

Sectarian enclaves may become the new de facto frontiers, effectively erasing the borders drawn by the colonial powers a century ago.

The growing sectarian nature of Syria's conflict may spread to diaspora communities.

Syria's National Institutions Are Eroding—They Are Being Replaced by Local and Foreign Loyalties

Syria's civil war is grinding down the country's national institutions while creating the conditions for continuing local conflict.

The Assad government does not exercise direct control over Hezbollah; its control over other foreign volunteers is unknown. It may lose control of its own militias.

Although the national government will survive on paper, national institutions, including Syria's armed forces, will decline, to be replaced by a patchwork of increasingly autonomous local entities.

A Political Settlement Is Unlikely

Syria's civil war has become an existential struggle for all concerned. The most likely scenario is a continuing armed conflict lasting many years.

Even the fall of Assad will not end the conflict. All of the elements can continue to fight and are likely to do so.

Atrocities against Sunni civilians ensure loyalty of the regime's security forces—Assad's soldiers and militiamen cannot expect to survive under any other government and will continue to fight even if Assad falls.

At times, the belligerents inside Syria and their foreign supporters seem less concerned with the immediate conflict than with jockeying for position in some post-Assad Syria—establishing footholds, grabbing territory, consolidating gains, stockpiling weapons for a continuing fight.

For the near term, policymaking will have to assume continued conflict and attempt to mitigate its consequences rather than pursue strategies aimed at altering the outcome.

Attempts by the United States and its allies to follow a consistent policy may at times have to yield to pragmatic maneuver.

Syria's Civil War Could Evolve into a Wider Regional War

Protracted conflict in Syria raises the possibility of a wider regional war between Sunnis and Shi'as, with Russia and the United States facing one another across the sectarian divide.

A wider regional war would not necessarily involve open warfare between the major regional powers. National armies would not roll across the desert. It could instead be a war of many fronts, limited military incursions, continuing guerrilla warfare, and multiple terrorist campaigns.

Foreign Fighters Flocking to Syria Pose a Future International Terrorist Threat

Because of their proximity and volume, the thousands of foreign fighters joining Syria's rebellion are viewed in Europe as posing a much larger threat than that posed by the previous generation of jihadist veterans returning from Afghanistan.

Not all of the foreign volunteers joining Syria's rebel forces are determined to fight. Some seem to be little more than jihadi tourists who stay out of harm's way while taking photos of themselves and boasting to their friends back home on social media.

There is nonetheless a concern that once in Syria, foreign volunteers may be redirected to carry out terrorist operations in the West. Recall that Muhammad Atta originally came to fight in Afghanistan but was then recruited by al Qaeda to lead the 9/11 operation.

Syrians Face a Dark Future

A political settlement that allows the return of refugees to their original homes is unlikely. It seems more likely that regroup-

ing and resettlement will make Syria's ethnic and sectarian enclaves permanent features of the landscape. This will slow Syria's economic recovery.

Syrian refugees will add to existing sectarian tensions in neighboring countries. They will become the recruiting reservoirs for new generations of fighters and criminals.

We will be dealing with the effluent of Syria's civil war for decades.

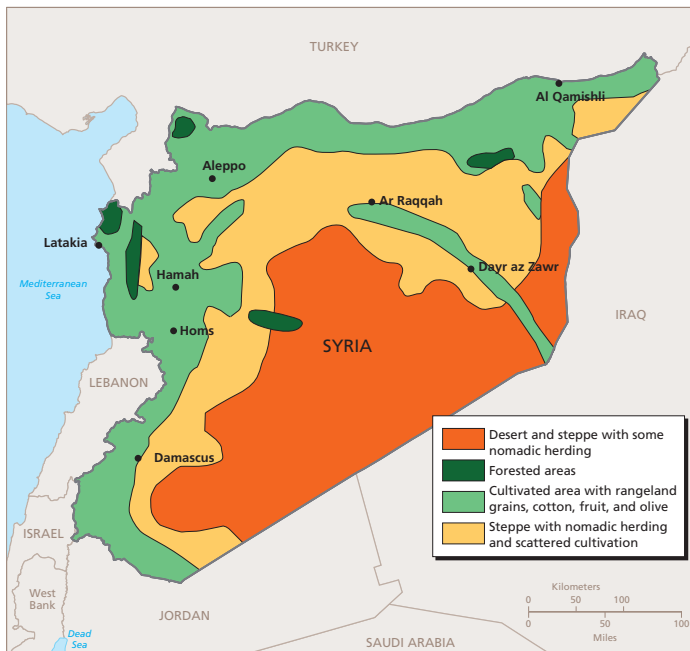
The Dynamics of Syria's Civil War

Other than as a scrap of color on a map, Syria has ceased to exist—no government will be able to rule all of what was the modern state of Syria in the foreseeable future.

- Syria's civil war is about whether Bashar al-Assad will continue to lead Syria's government, but the war increasingly reflects broader sectarian undercurrents that divide the country and the region. This is a central pathology of the Syrian conflict. It will impede its resolution.

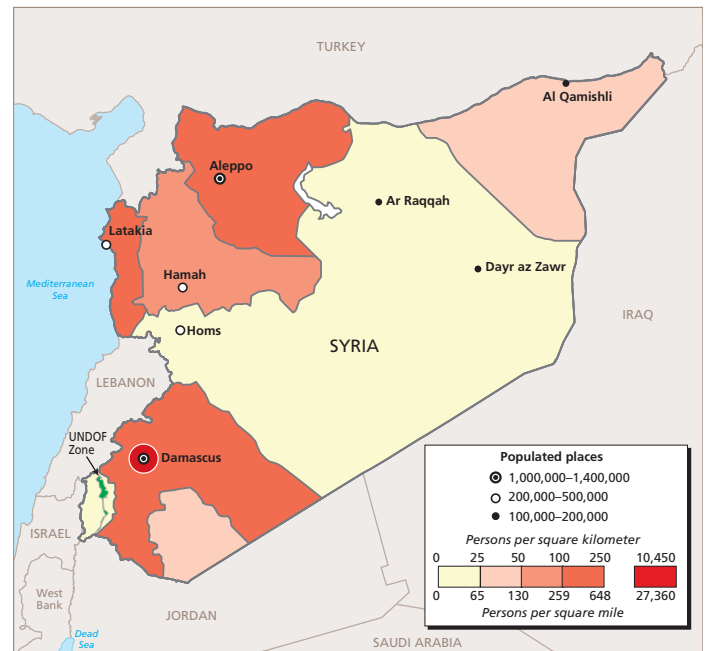
- After nearly three years of fighting, more than 125,000 people, out of a Syrian population of approximately 22 million, have died in the conflict. One-third of the population has fled the country or has been displaced internally. By the end of 2014, more than half of the population could be living as refugees—a situation conducive to future terrorism.¹
- Assad's forces, with support of Russia, Iran, Hezbollah, and Shi'a volunteers from abroad, appear to have stalemated a fragmented rebel movement, but Assad will not be able to restore his authority throughout the country.
- While the rebellion has grown to a force of more than 100,000, it mirrors many of the divisions of the broader Muslim world—fragmented and at war with itself. The rebel forces nominally control large areas of the country where government forces have withdrawn, but they too will be unable to impose their authority throughout Syria.
- The growing role of jihadist elements, with their numbers increasing through the recruitment of foreign fighters and

Figure 1. Land Use in Syria



A map showing who controls which parts of Syria in the current civil war makes much more sense when viewed in the company of other maps of the country. This figure shows land use in Syria. Much of the country is desert and steppe land that allows some nomadic herding and only scattered cultivation. The cultivated part of the country lies along Syria's Mediterranean coast, its northern border with Turkey, and a narrow strip along the Euphrates River.

Figure 2. Population of Syria



NOTES: "Populated places" based on 1989 population estimate. "Persons per square kilometer/mile" based on 1981 census data, by first-level administrative division.

Not surprisingly, most of the population is concentrated in the areas that historically supported agriculture. The fighting has been centered in these three areas: the Mediterranean coast, the northern border region, and towns along the Euphrates River.

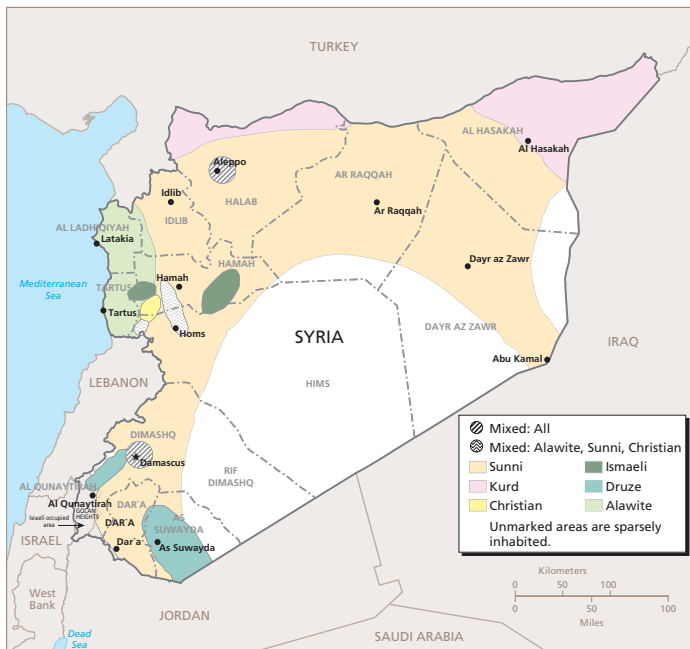
defections from other rebel groups, has divided the rebel movement and discouraged anti-Assad governments in the West from providing significant military support.

- Given this dynamic, there are no obvious game changers. Direct U.S. military involvement, which for a moment seemed likely following the Syrian government's use of chemical weapons, or the removal of those chemical weapons from Syria will do little, if anything, to curb what is likely to become a long and bloody standoff, possibly escalating into a broader regional conflict.
- A political settlement is unlikely.

What This Essay Is About

This essay explores the dynamics of the Syrian conflict—the currents beneath the surface chop of bewildering headlines. It aims to offer an appreciation of the situation without pretending to be able to fill in the many blanks in what we know about the circumstances on the ground. Uncertainty in the

Figure 3. Ethno-Sectarian Distribution of Population



Sunni Muslims make up a majority of Syria's population, but Alawite, Shi'a (Ismaeli), Christian, Kurd, and Druze minorities dominate geographic enclaves.

Syrian conflict is more than a caveat; it shadows every analysis and colors every policy decision.

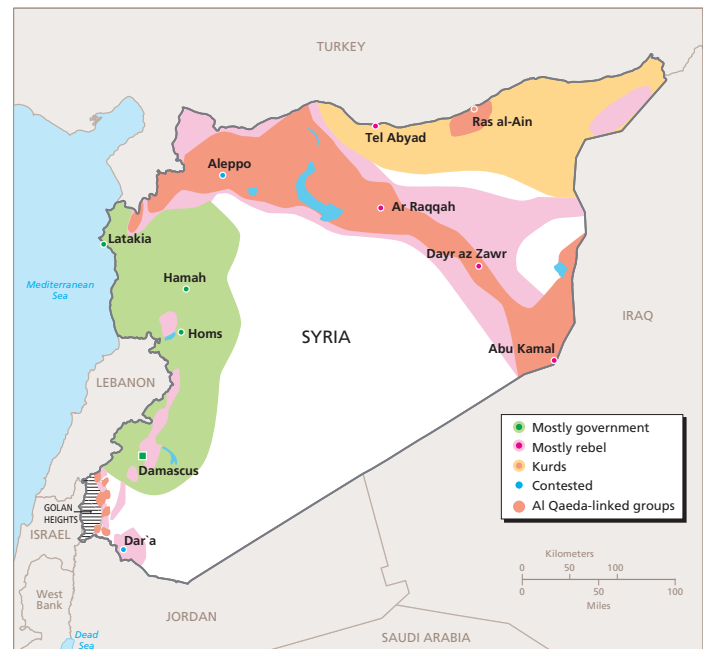
The observations made here are informed by recent discussions with government officials and analysts in the Middle East, Europe, and the United States. I have also benefited from the helpful comments of RAND colleagues and others,² but the paper remains a personal assessment drawing on my own experience and research over the years. To be fair to the reader, comments that derive from my own intuition or speculation are indicated as such.

The Belligerents

Assad's Forces

Current Status. At the outset of the uprising in Syria, the government possessed one of the most powerful armed forces in the Middle East. Its total strength numbered over 300,000, including 220,000 in the army and another 70,000 in the air force and air defense command. These were backed up

Figure 4. Rebel vs. Government Control, June 2013



The situation in mid-2013 shows roughly who controlled which parts of Syria. The government dominated in the Alawite, Shi'a, Christian, Druze, and mixed Sunni areas in the west, with the rebels holding much of the corridor along the Euphrates River and areas in the southwest of the country. The Kurds were defending their own enclaves in the north.

by about 350,000 reservists (the numbers vary according to source). In all, it was estimated that the state theoretically could call up 1.7 million fighters.³

The Syrian army was well armed, with several thousand main battle tanks and more than 4,000 armored personnel carriers. The air force had over 300 fighter and ground-attack aircraft plus 165 helicopters.⁴

Although there was a rash of defections early in the armed rebellion, Assad's forces still maintain a significant size and firepower advantage over the rebels. The rebel forces have been able to capture and now control large areas of the country, but Assad's forces retain Damascus, all of the provincial capitals, and key army bases.

Limitations on Their Deployment During the Revolt.

Because of fear of defections, Assad can deploy only about one-third of his forces. These are primarily the elite units, including the 4th Armor Division, which has played a key role in suppressing the rebellion; the Republican Guard; and the Special Forces regiments that are manned mainly by Alawite career soldiers rather than Sunni conscripts and led almost exclusively by Alawite officers closely linked to the president.⁵ The remaining units, consisting largely of Sunni conscripts, are being kept in their garrisons. There are reports of many officers being held in prison.

The distribution of Syria's advanced weapons reflects political reliability. Loyal forces command the armored units, artillery batteries, missile systems, and airpower, including helicopter gunships, while less-reliable Sunni conscripts make up the bulk of the infantry. Government forces rely on this heavy firepower to suppress the rebellion. This is also consistent with Syrian counterinsurgency doctrine. Syria's airplanes, helicopters, and armored vehicles will wear out with continued use, forcing the government to rely heavily on Russian resupply. Even then, maintenance and morale problems will gradually wear down Syria's regular forces.

With the exception of its elite units, most of Syria's army is manned by conscripts. They normally serve for thirty months, which means that those conscripted when the rebellion began are now serving beyond the usual period of service. They are unlikely to be discharged. The rebellion has reduced the population under government control, limiting its access to new recruits. It is not simply a matter of numbers, it is a matter of reliability. The loyalty of new Sunni conscripts is now

suspect—they may be drafted to keep them from joining the rebels, but they cannot be used in battle.

Limitations on its deployable manpower have already obliged the government to abandon large portions of the country in order to defend strategic areas. This may account for the initial rapid advances made by the rebel forces more than major battles do. It has also caused the regime to seek reinforcements in local militias and foreign fighters such as those provided by Hezbollah.

Militias seem likely to play an increasingly dominant role in the fighting. They solve Syria's manpower and morale problems and can be employed to protect pro-government enclaves and drive rebels and their supporters out of contested areas.

The use of local militias exploits sectarian divides and provides additional opportunities to settle scores. Local militias, operating beyond rules of engagement and supported only when necessary by government airpower or artillery, can slaughter under the radar while giving the regime a thin veil of deniability. But there is a risk that local militias can easily degenerate into criminal gangs, creating a long-term security problem. This type of fighting also accumulates reasons for revenge. Neither is an immediate concern of a regime that is fighting for its survival.

There are two types of militia in Syria with similar-sounding names but different origins. The shabiha (Arabic for "ghost") militias derive from local criminal gangs that engage in smuggling, the theft of antiquities, and other criminal activities. Mostly Alawites, the shabiha are led by relatives of President Assad, who share in their profits and provide them with protection. Essentially, they are hired thugs, and they include ex-convicts released from prison in exchange for loyalty to the Assad regime who are now being used to carry out brutal attacks against opponents of the government.

The second type of militia is the Jaysh al-Sha'bi ("People's Army"), which grew out of the Ba'ath Party's Popular Orga-

The rebellion has reduced the population under government control. . . . It is not simply a matter of numbers, it is a matter of reliability.

nizations, created to defend loyalist towns and neighborhoods during the Muslim Brotherhood uprising in the late 1970s. These “popular committees,” as they now call themselves, have been revived in the current civil war to defend Alawite, Christian, and Druze strongholds against the rebels. Reportedly, they are being organized, armed, and trained by Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards and Hezbollah. One report puts their strength at 50,000.⁶

Local militias are now Syria’s “weapons of mass destruction.” They serve the same purpose as Assad’s use of chemical weapons—to terrorize and drive out civilians who might support the rebels. Backed by airpower and armored units, the local militias are replacing Sunni infantrymen. They have become the regime’s shock troops, rooting out rebel fighters, terrorizing suspected rebel supporters, carrying out ethnic cleansing. As national institutions are worn away, militias will become the primary protectors of the regime’s enclaves. Their role in atrocities against Sunni civilians ensures their loyalty to the regime—they could not expect to survive under any other government and will continue to fight even if Assad falls. That reduces the possibilities of a political settlement.

The involvement of local militias also has implications for any future foreign military intervention. Neutralizing Syria’s armed forces will not end the fighting. Nor can intervening forces count on any national army to maintain order. Instead, foreign forces will confront a host of autonomous military formations and criminal groups.

Foreign Support for Assad. Undeterred by the Western rhetoric that Assad must go, Russia and Iran openly came to Assad’s aid, providing him with political cover and financial and military support at a critical juncture when it appeared that the rebel forces had a chance of taking over Damascus.

For Assad’s allies, it was an easy decision. Assad’s fall would be a strategic blow to Iran. Not only would Iran lose an important ally in the region, Iranian leaders fear that Assad’s demise could inspire a domestic movement aimed at bringing down the Islamic Republic. Assad’s fall also would be a strategic blow to Iran’s ally Hezbollah. Conversely, Assad’s survival would add to Iran’s and Hezbollah’s prestige and influence in the region.

Russia has also remained Assad’s steadfast ally, but its motivations may be more complex. Assad is Russia’s last remaining ally in the Middle East, a major consumer of Russian arms, and host to Russia’s only warm-water naval base,

Local militias are now Syria’s “weapons of mass destruction.”

although of modest strategic utility. Russia also holds on to great-power pretensions. It opposes Western military intervention as a matter of principle. Its affinity toward Christian minorities and its hostility toward Muslim extremists, which is how it sees the Syrian rebels, are deeply ingrained.

In addition to providing Assad with political cover by blocking UN Security Council resolutions that would have condemned the Syrian government for its mass killing of civilians and its use of chemical weapons, Russia has continued to ship military supplies to the Syrian military, including helicopters, air-defense systems, and fuel, and has provided military advisers to man the air-defense systems and to teach Syrian military officers how to use other Russian weapons.

Iran has provided financial support and training for Syria’s militias. It has deployed elements of its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as advisors and reportedly is enlisting foreign Shi’a volunteers to fight in Syria.

The Role of Hezbollah. At Iran’s urging, Hezbollah also joined the battle on Assad’s side. Estimates of the number of Hezbollah fighters in Syria have ranged from 2,000 to 10,000. Whatever the actual number is, there is no question that Hezbollah provides the Syrian military with a force of fighters who are well trained, well equipped, and battle-hardened. Benefiting from years of combat experience gained in Lebanon’s civil war and two wars with Israel, Hezbollah’s fighters were particularly important in the Assad regime’s effort to retake important towns along the Lebanese border, such as Qusair.

Involvement in Syria could bog the Hezbollah organization down, creating a significant drain on its resources and attention while tarnishing its reputation by killing fellow Muslims. Recent reports suggest that Hezbollah is now gradually withdrawing. Whether it is doing so because, having bolstered Syrian forces and protected its own supply routes through Syria, its mission is now largely completed except for the continued training of Syrian militia, or it reflects concerns about possible threats in Lebanon is not clear.

Iran is also helping to mobilize Shi’a volunteers in Iraq and Lebanon. A number of independent Shi’a militias appeared

in Syria in the summer of 2013. Since then, they have played a growing role in the fighting, replacing Assad's less-reliable Sunni infantry units. The Shi'a militias are recruited not to fight on behalf of Assad, but to defend Shi'a religious sites in Syria, emphasizing the sectarian issue.⁷ And while little information is available about their command and control, like Hezbollah, they may be more beholden to Iran or Shi'a leaders in Iraq or Lebanon than to Assad. This has implications for Syria's future—sectarian entities with loyalties that transcend Syria's borders are replacing Syrian national institutions.

The Opposition Forces

The Free Syrian Army. Instead of a two-sided civil war, the fighting in Syria has become a kaleidoscope of internal conflicts. The rebel "army" comprises more than a thousand independent units, many of which call themselves battalions and brigades, but these military terms do not imply the equivalent organization or strength. The independent units are grouped into larger entities on the basis of ideology and nominal loyalty to one or another of the major factions of the rebellion, but their numbers and their loyalties are fluid. Groups coalesce and divide. Individual leaders may split off to form new groups. Rebel fighters transfer their loyalty from one group to another. A rebel order of battle has a short shelf life.

The Free Syrian Army (FSA) is an umbrella group of fighting organizations nominally represented abroad by the Syrian National Coalition (SNC), which comprises the first generation of rebels, augmented, as the rebellion spread and the fighting intensified, by tens of thousands of defectors from the Syrian armed forces. Many of the defectors were Sunni conscripts who opposed Alawite domination and may have calculated that the regime would fall quickly.

The initial wave of army defections (mostly Sunni) is over, and the number of defectors from government forces is now declining. Those who wanted to defect and could defect have

Groups coalesce and divide. Individual leaders may split off. . . . Rebel fighters transfer their loyalty from one group to another.

done so or were shot while trying. Meanwhile, the prospects of the regime's survival appear to have improved, and efforts to ensure the loyalty of its remaining troops have increased. The government's deliberately brutal tactics may, paradoxically, also discourage further defections. Defection is always risky, but Syrian soldiers contemplating defection now fear that they will be promptly killed if they show up in the rebel camp. Unless there is a dramatic change on the battlefield, rebel forces will have to depend on foreign fighters and recruiting in areas already under their control.

With approximately 50,000 fighters nominally under its command—roughly half of the total rebel strength—the FSA has relied on a nationwide guerilla campaign focused on weakening Assad's forces and their infrastructure, but its activities are local and uncoordinated rather than dictated by a national strategy. After nearly three years of fighting, estimates of Syrian territory controlled by all anti-Assad forces, including that controlled by Kurdish militias, range from 60 to 70 percent, although less than 50 percent of the population is estimated to be under rebel control. (Figure 4 gives a rough idea of who controlled what as of June 2013.) Growing support for the government forces from Assad's Russian and Iranian allies, coupled with increased infighting among the rebel forces, appears to have given the Syrian government the edge, at least for the time being.

The SNC appears to be losing its hold over the more Islamist organizations. In September 2013, eleven Islamist rebel organizations, including the al Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra and three powerful but more moderate Islamist organizations that had been part of the FSA, officially withdrew from the SNC and called for a unified effort within an "Islamic frame."⁸ Another round of defections from the SNC by smaller rebel units occurred in October.⁹

The opposition is disorganized and has been unable to form a credible national interim government for the areas it controls, although some rebel groups have set up the machinery of local government. Increased fighting within the opposition has also increased the rebels' difficulties. The main cleavage is between the more-secular components of the opposition forces, represented in the field by the FSA, and the various jihadist groups, some of which are directly linked to al Qaeda. For the time being, Sunni organizations, once linked to the FSA, seem more comfortable with the more extreme Salafis or

Islamist hardliners will increasingly dominate the rebellion.

jihadists, but I suspect that their cooperation with any of the rebel forces depends on the situation at any moment. Meanwhile, the schism between the FSA and the jihadists has progressed to more than disagreements among “partners in arms.” Fighting among the rebel factions in Syria recalls the vicious infighting that undermined the Spanish Republic’s defenders during Spain’s civil war in the 1930s.

In mid-September 2013, fighters from the al Qaeda–affiliated Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) drove FSA fighters out of the Turkish border town of Azaz. The FSA struck back, killing a local ISIL commander. More recently, clashes between the FSA and the ISIL have intensified as ISIL fighters have attempted to capture supply routes that run through the major border crossings between Syria and Turkey.

Syria’s rebellion has generated some high-level government defections, but no military units have changed sides—they rarely do unless the collapse of the regime is seen as imminent. The rebels have ample small arms. They also have some anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles, but they lack the arsenal they need to challenge the superior armament of the government’s forces. With help from abroad, the rebels have managed to attain tactical victories, but thus far, they have been unable to string these together to alter the situation strategically.

Other Rebel Organizations. The Islamic Front (formerly the Syrian Islamic Front) comprises a number of organizations, including the Army of Islam, Ahrar al-Sham, Suqour al-Sham, Liwa al-Tawhid, Liwa al-Haq, Ansar al-Sham, and various other smaller brigades and battalions. These groups can be described as *Salafist*, that is, they believe in a literal interpretation of the Quran, reject Western political concepts that place man above God (e.g., democracy), and support the strict imposition of Islamic law, or Sharia.

They see the overthrow of Assad as leading to an Islamic state. Not all Salafists accept the concept of violent jihad, although Syria’s Salafist rebels are by definition committed to the violent overthrow of the Assad regime, but not all of them can be called jihadists—that is, they do not all embrace al Qaeda’s ideology of an unending global jihad against infidels.

Members of the Islamic Front distinguish themselves from the al Qaeda–linked groups in Syria, which they hope will reassure the international community, but at times they cooperate with the jihadists, as does the FSA. Some, therefore, describe the Islamic Front as moderate, but that is a relative term. Among the groups that make up the Front, one would find a spectrum of salafist to jihadist beliefs. That distinguishes them from the FSA, but even the FSA is not purely secular.

Some claim that the Islamic Front fields 100,000 militants. That seems an exaggeration¹⁰—a more realistic estimate puts the number at 45,000.¹¹ However, rebel fighters are being drawn to the Islamists, who have the money and weapons to fight. The foreign fighters also go primarily to the Islamist groups that promise action.

The Growing Importance of the Jihadists. Islamist hardliners will increasingly dominate the rebellion, reinforcing the Syrian government’s propaganda that the fight is between it and a jihadist badland. Syria represents al Qaeda’s best chance of proving its continuing relevance and establishing a new base in the Middle East. The longer the fighting continues, the greater the fear that al Qaeda–inspired elements will be able to consolidate their position, giving them a new stronghold from which to continue terrorist operations against the West.

For now, it appears that the jihadists have become the cutting edge of the rebellion. Some attribute this to the foreign support they are receiving, in contrast to the cautious support the more-secular rebels are receiving from the West. Others attribute the jihadists’ ferocity to their ideological fervor, while still others assert that the Western news media, eager for gruesome stories of jihadist atrocities but unable to check facts, are exaggerating their importance. Some rebel groups may pretend to be jihadists simply to attract wealthy Gulf sponsors, which are the main sources of funding for the jihadist groups.¹² It is hard to make an overall judgment.

Two groups are linked to al Qaeda—Jabhat al-Nusra and the ISIL. Jabhat al-Nusra started organizing in 2011. Through its ferocity on the battlefield and dramatic suicide bombings, it has attracted financial support and recruits to become what many regard as one of the most effective rebel forces, with approximately 5,000 to 6,000 fighters. It has been designated as a terrorist group by the United States.

The ISIL is the latest incarnation of al Qaeda in Iraq, which emerged after the American invasion. Since the U.S. with-

drawal, the group has continued its terrorist campaign there while expanding its area of operations to include Syria. The ISIL also appears as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). Al-Sham means simply “the north,” reflecting the perspective of the original Muslim conquerors who came from the Arabian peninsula in the south. This is consistent with al Qaeda’s usual practice of naming fronts according to geography, not modern states. But al Sham also refers to the region of Greater Syria, which includes the current states of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and, of course, Israel. It expresses ambition.

In April 2013, the leader of the ISIL announced the merger of ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusrah, claiming that the latter had been created and financed by the ISIL. This assertion was promptly rejected by al-Nusrah’s leader, who while reaffirming his loyalty to al Qaeda’s overall leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, maintained the independence of his group from the ISIL. Zawahiri ruled in favor of al-Nusrah, confining the ISIL’s franchise to Iraq. The ISIL’s leader, in turn, rejected Zawahiri’s ruling, and the rift between the two al Qaeda affiliates in Syria has continued, with fighters of both groups switching sides while other jihadist figures in the region also take sides in the debate.¹³

Both the ISIL and al-Nusrah employ terrorism, but the dispute between the two groups may reflect differences over tactics, with the ISIL representing hardliners who favor violence without controls and al-Nusrah determined not to alienate popular support. This recalls an earlier dispute between Zawahiri, then al Qaeda’s second-in-command, who criticized Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, at that time leader of al Qaeda in Iraq, whose slaughter of fellow Muslims risked provoking an anti-al Qaeda backlash. Zarqawi rejected Zawahiri’s authority then, just as the ISIL’s leader is doing today. The ISIL’s endorsement of uncontrolled violence gives it an edge in attracting foreign fighters.

Meanwhile, some observers suspect that both the ISIL and al-Nusrah are more interested in establishing their control over territory in eastern Syria than in overthrowing Assad. Both are behaving a lot like classic guerrillas, reportedly running courts and schools and providing social assistance to people in areas under their control—these are the embryos of governance. Indoctrination is part of the program, but civic action can also be a response to the government tactics of deliberately destroying food supplies, medical services, and all economic activity in rebel-held areas.

Almost none of al Qaeda’s affiliates have remained local.

This is new territory for al Qaeda, whose fanaticism usually has managed to alienate populations under its temporary rule. Al Qaeda’s central leadership and its affiliates in Syria may share the long-term objective of implementing Sharia worldwide, but there is an inherent tension between a religiously inspired revolutionary vanguard that sees itself answering only to God and a local insurgency that must try hold the loyalty of the local population.

It is possible that future al Qaeda fronts will follow the path of groups like Hamas and Hezbollah, becoming more-complex political enterprises, as opposed to purely terrorist organizations. In some ways, that could make them more difficult to counter, but it also opens up new possibilities. Might local jihadists be weaned from al Qaeda’s global terrorist campaign? History suggests otherwise.

Almost none of al Qaeda’s affiliates have remained local. The organization’s central leadership demands adherence to its strategic line. Local affiliates attract foreign fighters who have little interest beyond fighting. Hardliners come to dominate. Attacks on leadership and setbacks in the field caused by foreign military intervention provoke retaliation.

How important are the jihadists to the rebellion? On September 4, 2013, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry testified before Congress that the jihadists do not dominate Syria’s rebel forces and represent no more than 15 to 25 percent of the estimated 100,000 rebel fighters.¹⁴ This claim has since been challenged, as it was at the time. Some disagreed with his numbers, while others asked what difference it makes as long as the Islamic extremists remain by far the fiercest and best-organized rebel elements.

A Jane’s study released in September 2013 estimated that there are 10,000 jihadists, including foreign fighters, in groups linked to al Qaeda, along with another 30,000 to 35,000 hardline Islamists who share at least some of the ideology espoused by the jihadists but who are focused more on the civil war in Syria than on al Qaeda’s global agenda, at least for now. That would put nearly half of the rebel forces in the hardline salafist/jihadist camp.¹⁵ According to Jane’s, the rebel forces also

include 30,000 more-moderate Islamists, leaving only 25,000 linked to the more-secular or purely nationalist groups.

The discrepancy may derive simply from differences between the U.S. State Department and Jane's on who is a jihadist, which adds another layer of complexity to our understanding of the rebel order of battle.

Our knowledge of the finer points of rebel beliefs derives from their own statements made on web sites or communicated through their postings on social media. The language of their pronouncements and their group photos with black flags and other visual clues tell us where to place them on the theological spectrum. Interpreting this graffiti, all of which is public, has become a fascinating new field of intelligence.

The Kurds. Although Kurds, who make up approximately 9 percent of Syria's population, have long-standing grievances against Assad's government, they were slow to join the resistance. Armed clashes between government forces and Kurdish fighters did not begin until June 2012. These led to the withdrawal of government units from some of the Kurdish areas, but fighting continued around other Kurdish zones. Since then, Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) have fought to defend their territory against government forces, FSA rebels, and, increasingly, jihadist militants who have declared the Kurds to be traitors to the jihad. However, there is also a Kurdish component of the Islamic Front.

The Kurds regard themselves as neutral in the civil war. Some Kurdish fighters are in the FSA, but the Kurds' principal goals are self-defense, self-government free of outside interference by either the Syrian government or rebel forces, and eventually, perhaps, Kurdish independence. Kurdish redoubts in Syria, under continuing pressure from government forces and al Qaeda-inspired jihadists, could unite with autonomous Kurdish zones in Iraq for the purpose of common defense (although it is not clear that Iraqi and Syrian Kurds get along—Kurdish unity has always been elusive). This could, in turn, revive the idea of Kurdistan, an independent Kurdish nation, which the Turkish government fiercely opposes, as it would encourage Kurdish separatists in Turkey.

Foreign Support for the Rebels. Saudi Arabia and Qatar currently provide funds for rebel arms purchases, but FSA units reportedly remain short of funds and weapons. As noted above, conservative private backers in the Gulf, the Levant, and outside the region are the main source of funding for the

jihadist groups. Some of the rebel groups also benefit from funds collected in diaspora communities. And there are reports of funding through criminal activities.

The United States has proceeded very cautiously in providing support to the rebels. Washington authorized nonlethal and humanitarian assistance early on, but only slowly and cloaked in secrecy as it moved to provide weapons. The caution reflects uncertainty about the evolving conflict and concerns that advanced weapons might fall into the hands of jihadists who would use them in terrorist attacks directed against the West. In June 2013, the White House announced that having determined that Syrian government forces had used chemical weapons in small amounts, the United States would begin providing "military support" to moderate elements among Syria's opposition forces. Because this was an intelligence finding authorizing covert assistance, the details of what would be included were not announced. The assistance was believed to comprise intelligence and communications support, as well as light weapons and ammunition. At least initially, U.S. assistance reportedly would not include antitank and anti-aircraft missiles, although antitank weapons could come later.¹⁶ This prospect ran into Congressional resistance.

Following the UN report that confirmed the August 21 use of sarin gas in an attack that caused heavy casualties among civilians, the Obama administration waived provisions of the Arms Export Control Act, a federal law that bans the supply of weapons and money to terrorists, opening the door to supplying the Syrian opposition with weapons.¹⁷ Although this waiver creates a path for openly assisting the rebels, there is a lingering reluctance in Washington and most NATO capitals to provide more-sophisticated weapons, due to the growing role of jihadist elements.

During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the United States armed local resistance forces with antitank and man-portable surface-to-air missiles, which contributed to the eventual withdrawal of Soviet forces. But that was in the 1980s. Fear of terrorism has since become a major factor in all war planning, and there is a concern among Western governments that these weapons might be used against them by jihadist elements loyal to al Qaeda in future terrorist attacks. Following the seizure by Islamist rebels of FSA warehouses where American-provided material was being stored, the United States announced on December 11, 2013 that it was temporarily suspending non-lethal aid to the rebel movement.

The Inescapable Course Of Events

Syria's civil war is at a stalemate. No faction can defeat the others, but that will not open the way for a political settlement. Even the fall of Assad will not end the conflict. All of the elements can continue to fight and are likely to do so to achieve their own ends. What began as a rebellion against the Assad regime has been deliberately transformed into an existential sectarian war. None believe they can survive in a Syria led by their foes, so Syria itself cannot survive.

Syria's Counterinsurgency Doctrine. Syria's counterinsurgency strategy is informed by the previous experience of the Assad regime in suppressing the 1977–1982 Muslim Brotherhood rebellion and by Soviet/Russian doctrine developed during the Soviet Union's occupation of Afghanistan and Russia's two wars in Chechnya.¹⁸

It is a ruthless approach that differs significantly from Western counterinsurgency doctrine, which places emphasis on population protection and avoidance of civilian casualties and collateral damage combined with efforts to win the hearts and minds of the people. That doctrine reflects the fact that insurgencies in distant lands are not viewed as existential threats to Western governments. Moreover, such missions come out of the chutes burdened with guilt arising from colonial pasts or questions about their legitimacy.

Syria's history is different, and so are the lessons the regime draws from that experience. The 1982 uprising in Hama culminated five years of guerrilla warfare and terrorist assassinations. When Islamist rebels seized control of the city of Hama in a final showdown with the Hafez al-Assad government in 1982, government forces sealed off the town and pounded it with artillery before sending in army commandos and Ba'athist Party irregulars to mop up the resistance. The military operation lasted three weeks, razing entire districts and killing thousand of civilians.¹⁹

Although widely denounced by the international community, Syria's brutal response succeeded in snuffing out any wider resistance to Damascus, preventing precisely the kind of chaos seen in the country today. At issue now is regime survival. If Syria cannot be saved, those loyal to the government

are committed to protecting themselves against the annihilation that they believe will be their fate if the rebels triumph.

Syria's campaign against the insurgency is characterized by the static defense of major population centers, sectarian enclaves, military bases, and strategic lines of communication. This has required withdrawing from large portions of the country. Offensive operations in key areas the government must hold feature intensive aerial and artillery bombardment followed by clearing operations carried out by commandos or militias. It is destructive and indiscriminate.

Airpower and artillery are also used to pound areas not under government control, deliberately targeting crops, bakeries (a critical source of food for many), and hospitals—destroying commerce and the infrastructure of life support. The objective is to force people to move out of rebel zones, thereby depriving the rebels of popular support. These tactics explain the vast numbers of refugees.

Military operations are supplemented by intensive propaganda programs portraying the regime's opponents as terrorists and political education efforts aimed at ensuring continuing loyalty to the regime. It is likely that these programs will increasingly exploit the sectarian divide rather than political issues—they will not be about Assad's legitimacy but will warn of the Sunni threat to the survival of Alawites and Christians. (The jihadist rebels are engaged in similar indoctrination efforts in towns they control.)

Rebel Shortcomings. The rebels cannot make the transition from guerrilla fighters to a field force capable of challenging the government's forces on the battlefield. If the fighting continues, they might conceivably do so in a distant future, but for now, they suffer from a number of shortcomings.

There is no central command. The rebellion's nominal military commander can only try to coordinate actions even among those units that nominally recognize his authority.

The rebels operate locally, occasionally cooperating, but they lack the mobility and logistics to deploy away from their home bases for any length of time. Any concentrations of rebel forces would be vulnerable to overwhelming government armor

No faction can defeat the others, but that will not open the way for a political settlement. Even the fall of Assad will not end the conflict.

and airpower. A continued flow of small arms and limited supplies of more-sophisticated infantry weapons will change this only marginally.

External military intervention (cratering airfields, imposing a no-fly zone) could reduce the advantage provided by the government's airpower, but reducing the government forces' advantage in armor and artillery would require a more-ambitious air campaign.

The rebels can take and hold smaller towns, and they have shown that they can infiltrate the periphery of larger cities, forcing the government to use its airpower and heavy weapons to drive them out, thereby causing heavy civilian casualties and collateral damage. They can carry out spectacular terrorist attacks to gain attention and demonstrate that the government cannot guarantee security, but these actions by themselves are unlikely to bring the regime down. The rebels can only hope to create an untenable situation that brings about a change of regime from within or that provokes intervention from abroad.

The State Crumbles. The civil war has increasingly become a sectarian contest between Sunni rebels and Alawite government supporters (along with the Christians and Shi'as), while the Kurds and Druze defend their own territories. Sectarian tensions in Syria are not new but have deep roots in Syria's colonial and precolonial history. Forty years of authoritarian rule under the Assads have held them in check while at the same time increasing the regime's own reliance on its Alawite base, thereby alienating much of Syria's Sunni majority.

Although the national government will survive on paper, national institutions, including the armed forces, will decline and decay, to be replaced by a patchwork of increasingly autonomous local entities, some nominally loyal to the central government, some opposed to it.

The national army has become an Alawite praetorian guard with armor, artillery, and airpower. Its Sunni members have been kept in their garrisons and are deployed only with Alawite-dominated, reliable units alongside.

The government can no longer conscript soldiers in the half of the country—mostly Sunni areas—that is no longer under its control. Conscription can continue in Alawite areas, which have sufficient manpower to sustain a sizable Syrian army. The government also benefits from Hezbollah fighters and unknown numbers of foreign Shi'a volunteers. However, the Assad government does not exercise direct operational

Although the national government will survive on paper, national institutions, including the armed forces, will decline and decay, to be replaced by a patchwork of increasingly autonomous local entities.

control over Hezbollah, and its control over foreign volunteers is unknown. It may lose control of its militias.

As refugees regroup in sectarian enclaves, further undermining national sentiments and institutions, fighting will become more defensive, less fluid. It will become a war of edges, more about population protection, although government airpower and artillery will still be able to render normal life untenable in zones outside its control. Government militias will do most of the fighting on the ground and will carry out ethnic cleansing within their area of control. However, these militias will not be able to deeply penetrate or maintain control of Sunni strongholds.

Potential Game Changers

In addition to the internal and external dynamics of the conflict, there are a number of factors and variables that further complicate any prediction regarding its future trajectory or the likelihood of an actual resolution in either the short or long term.

Foreign Military Intervention. A U.S. military intervention with possible NATO participation (or at least that of the United Kingdom and France) could change the course of events in favor of the rebels. But the dynamics of Assad's foreign support, coupled with the disunity and, in some cases, outright conflict among the rebel forces, suggest that the chances of ending the fighting in Syria are next to none.

It seems unlikely, moreover, that foreign powers would be willing to make the investment necessary to oust Assad with military force. More likely, any foreign military campaign would focus on reducing Assad's airpower, including helicopter gunships, and on destroying the Syrian government's artillery units. This would even the battlefield somewhat and could also underscore the West's determination (with Arab support) that

*Continuing slow-motion carnage . . . is not likely to provoke military intervention. . . .
The world's moral outrage has been blunted by the seemingly endless images of Arabs
and Muslims killing one another.*

Assad must go. Such action, in turn, could demoralize those around Assad and increase the chances of his being overthrown from within his own camp, although that is a wild card.

Such an approach has been advocated by some in the United States, notably Senator John McCain, as well as by some in Europe, including François Heisbourg, former advisor to the French Ministry of Defense and chair of the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies, who said that it would not be “a declaration of war . . . not an international coalition entering Syria to overthrow Assad.” It would be “a one-off operation, one or two days, and then it's over.”²⁰ Whether the military operation would prove to be that easy is questionable.

Future historians will no doubt debate whether a less timid United States, by providing adequate weapons and assisting the rebels in other ways earlier in the struggle, before the jihadists gained strength, might have preserved the dominance of the democratic secularists and hastened Assad's downfall. The rebel movement, however, took time to get organized, and Islamist extremists were quickly on the scene. The movement also included some hardline Islamists from the very start. Moreover, even a prompt rebel victory would not necessarily have ended armed resistance by diehard Alawites and desperate Christians. Assistance to the rebels, even if successful in removing Assad then or in the future, would not end the conflict but would be likely to transition into long-term counterinsurgency and counterterrorism missions.

Additionally, a number of factors, variables, and unknowns further complicate the possible success of U.S. involvement. This is a conflict characterized by fast-moving events, complex cross-currents, uncertain numbers, and fluid loyalties. The ability of external actors to understand developments, let alone influence them, is very limited. Even with the world's attention focused on Syria, UN monitors there, and every satellite—ours, Russian, Israeli—all focused on this one relatively small country, there is much that we do not know about the situation:

- Why does the government decide what it decides?
- What is the basis for continuing loyalty to the regime beyond sectarian animosity and growing fear?
- What is the real strength of the jihadists?

Informed assessments require detailed local knowledge, which can be gained only through access to the country itself. In Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States had thousands of people on the ground whose own observations were directly supported by a broader network of local operatives who would not be willing or able to provide information if the Americans were not there. There is no such presence in Syria.

Given the dynamic situation, assessments have short lives. An order of battle for the rebels would last a day. Not surprisingly, previous forecasts based on regional expertise and fact-based assumptions have proved wrong. Less than two years ago, the consensus was that Assad's days were numbered—no one expected him to remain in power this long. He now seems to be gaining strength, but that could rapidly change. Even those directly involved do not know what will happen next.

Finally, history suggests that limited foreign military interventions do not depose dug-in dictators. In response to terrorist attacks or to demonstrate American resolve, but sometimes with the objective of hastening regime change, the United States has launched measured air attacks against Libya, Iran, Iraq, Serbia, Sudan, and Afghanistan. NATO's air campaign helped topple Libya's ruler in 2011, but rarely have surgical strikes brought down embattled regimes. That requires greater military investment.²¹ The United States could reduce Assad's military superiority, but it would take a major military undertaking with the prospect of hard fighting to bring about regime change in Syria. Many of the rebel forces themselves oppose it.

Continuing slow-motion carnage, by itself, is not likely to provoke military intervention from abroad. The world's moral outrage has been blunted by the seemingly endless images of Arabs and Muslims killing one another. Military intervention would require something even more visible and

dramatic than the August 21 chemical attack. A seizure of chemical weapons by any of the jihadist groups or by Hezbollah, which might also like to get its hands on them, could provoke another international crisis and increase the likelihood of foreign military action.

Some observers in the United States and abroad argue that if there ever was a need and just cause for international intervention, this is it. Memories of the Rwandan genocide clearly color the current debate. But the international community's tolerance for atrocity in the Syrian conflict is not clear. Internal conflicts have produced humanitarian catastrophes without foreign intervention. The world stood by during Cambodia's genocide, in which an estimated 1.7 million people were killed over a four-year period. In Rwanda, more than a half million people were killed in the space of a hundred days. Since 2003, government militias have killed 300,000 in Darfur.

The Syrian conflict is nowhere near that level of carnage, although continued fighting over the next several years could push deaths into the hundreds of thousands. It is difficult to arouse international action against slow-moving slaughters, but a more concentrated event—the equivalent of another Hama massacre—if well covered by the international news media, could increase pressure on the international community to react. However, there was no such response in 1982, and in the context of Syria's ongoing civil war, another Hama, especially if the killing were carried out by militias rather than missiles and therefore the toll were not immediately or as visually apparent, might be viewed as tragedy but not cause for war. It would seem that Assad would want to avoid such obvious provocations. His use of chemical weapons, however, suggests caution in any such predictions.

Given American experience in recent military interventions, the continued threat from terrorism, and what it has learned it will take to prepare and insure that if and when Assad is toppled the new government can maintain law and order, there was never any serious international or even domestic endorsement of large-scale U.S. involvement, even when some kind of military action appeared imminent in August and September 2013.

The bitter legacy of Iraq and Afghanistan—America's two longest wars—has discouraged direct military intervention. At the same time, al Qaeda's presence in Syria makes indiscriminate arming of the rebels dangerous. It will take time to care-

fully vet, train, and arm the “good” rebels. Their effects on the battlefield will not be apparent for years and may not suffice to alter the course of the conflict.

The hard lessons learned in Afghanistan and Iraq, plus new variables in Syria, complicate things for countries like the United States that have openly declared their desire to remove Assad without articulating a convincing strategy of how this might be accomplished or what might take Assad's place.

Some critics argue that America's reluctance to intervene communicates that the United States will no longer fight its wars on the ground, making America more despised abroad while encouraging further public disengagement in the United States. Most importantly, it makes America look less committed to its allies.

Right now, there are no obvious good options. For the near term, policymaking will have to assume continued conflict and attempt to mitigate its consequences rather than pursue strategies aimed at altering the outcome. For the time being, the United States is likely to rely on covert aid, augmented perhaps by special operations aimed at preventing rebel collapse and influencing the course of events in the long run, not changing them in the short run. Whatever is done in this domain must be politically supportable and sustainable for the long run, leading neither to abandonment nor escalation if the immediate results are less than modest.

The United States and other external actors opposed to Assad will need to remain flexible and opportunistic. Attempts to follow a consistent policy may at times have to yield to pragmatic, if not Machiavellian, maneuver.

Could that pragmatism ever extend to Western intervention on behalf of Assad? Right now, such a dramatic reversal of policy seems inconceivable. (Although it is not inconceivable to Israelis, who worry about the continuing chaos, or worse, the prospect of competing al Qaeda factions on their border.) Calculations in the West would change if major terrorist

Policymaking will have to assume continued conflict and attempt to mitigate its consequences rather than pursue strategies aimed at altering the outcome.

attacks were to be launched against the West from a jihadist stronghold in Syria. Under such circumstances, the affected countries, without supporting Assad's regime, might decide to carry out military strikes against the jihadists.

Outsiders may be forced to deal with Syria in parts, as opposed to dealing with the state of Syria. Israel, in effect, does so now, launching attacks in Syria to prevent Hezbollah from expanding its arsenal of rockets.

Neutralizing Syria's Chemical Weapons. We may never know the reasoning behind the Syrian government's decision to employ its chemical weapons. Prior to the August 21 attack, some intelligence analysts thought Assad probably would not use them but instead would save them as a bargaining chip to secure his escape if that became necessary.

Chemical weapons, however, are also instruments of terror—a way of breaking the morale of the rebels, alienating them from their supporters, cleansing entire neighborhoods of potential dissidents. After the August 21 attack, people fled the area. Assad has now agreed to give up this weapon of terror, even though he may still try to conceal some portion of his chemical arsenal, as Saddam Hussein tried to do in Iraq. A major intelligence effort will be required to ensure that Syria no longer possesses chemical weapons.

Although there are some who argue that ridding Syria of its chemical weapons is the first step in weakening Assad's capability to inflict mass murder on the Syrian people and a path that will lead to his subsequent demise, this argument appears to be wishful thinking at best, weak and largely unsubstantiated, given the counterarguments and events since August 2013. It also ignores the enormous impact of Assad's uncontested conventional weapons.

From a practical and political perspective, Assad would likely view giving up his chemical-weapons arsenal as a move that would have little impact on his ability to prosecute his battle with the rebels but would be a way to weaken the rebels' momentum and resolve and, ultimately, a possible path to his and his regime's survival.

Chemical weapons account for only a tiny fraction of the more than 100,000 deaths that have occurred in the civil war. Deprived of his primary weapon of terror, Assad still has an air force and artillery, which often can be heard pounding rebel strongholds almost continuously. Properly considered weapons of mass destruction, chemical weapons have limited military

Sometimes, a lizard has to lose its tail to survive.

application, although Syrian officials might have seen them as a way to flush rebel fighters from urban areas—easier than house-to-house fighting, more efficient than leveling the city with artillery fire and aerial bombardment.

The Russians, I suspect, could have explained to Assad that further use of chemical weapons would increase pressure for international action against the Syrian regime which not even the Russians might be able to prevent and that, therefore, his chemical weapons had in fact been rendered useless. But by agreeing to give them up, Assad could appear reasonable and improve his chances of survival during the long and complicated cleanup mission. Sometimes, a lizard has to lose its tail to survive.

The process of securing and eliminating Syria's chemical-weapons arsenal will now become a major strategic factor in the future conduct of the civil war. It will require the participation of international inspectors and specialized contractors, who, in turn, will require a secure environment in which to carry out this dangerous task.

That means a suspension of the fighting in the areas where chemical facilities and weapons are currently located. The volumes involved are significant. According to a recently declassified French intelligence report, Syria possesses hundreds of tons of mustard gas, hundreds of tons of sarin, and tens of tons of VX, the deadliest chemical agent known.²² In addition to the facilities where chemical weapons are manufactured and stored, chemical weapons are in the hands of Syrian military units. General Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, stated in April that the Syrian government keeps moving the chemical weapons from storage sites to trucks.²³ Whether this is done to keep them out of rebel hands or to evade detection is not clear. Syria's entire chemical arsenal must be identified, catalogued, transported, and destroyed at specialized facilities, hard enough to do in peace, perilous in the midst of an ongoing war.

After the UN adopted a resolution calling for the elimination of Syria's chemical weapons, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated the obvious when he noted that its implementation will require not only the compliance of the Syrian

government but the cooperation of the Syrian opposition. However, the significance of this may not be fully understood. Russia will argue that protecting the disarmament effort means protecting the Syrian regime. If it collapses prior to the removal of the chemical weapons, the risk is not only of failure to neutralize the weapons but of loss of custody in the ensuing chaos. At a minimum, the removal of Syria's chemical arsenal will require some temporary local cease-fires.²⁴ This could prove to be a bigger problem for the rebels than it is for the government, which benefits from the absence of fighting.

We can expect to see international pressure on the rebel forces to go along with such cease-fires on the basis that rebel action in close proximity to cleanup activities risks foreign casualties and, even worse, the release of lethal chemicals. The FSA is likely to feel the most pressure, as it depends more on Western sympathy and support than the extremist jihadist elements, which may be less inclined to suspend operations since it is their continuing combat that attracts recruits in the first place. The only reason the jihadists might agree to a temporary truce would be a needed respite or recognition of their territorial holdings.

If the rebels endanger the removal of chemical weapons, there could be greater reluctance on the part of Western governments to provide support and possible pressure on the rebels' more important financial backers, like Saudi Arabia and Qatar, to reduce the support they now provide, although it is not clear that this would have any great effect. Nonetheless, it could alter the complexion of the rebellion itself, making continued hostilities appear to be a contest between Assad and jihadist fanatics who are willing to endanger the chemical cleanup. This perception would be to Assad's advantage.

Critics of the chemical-weapons disarmament plan fear that the Syrian government will arrange for weapons inspectors to be shot at or will inform them that the situation is too dangerous. This would protract the removal process while blaming the rebels for endangering the operation.

Fear that continued fighting can compromise the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons could also push Europe and America, already obviously reluctant to intervene in the civil war, further toward attempts to negotiate a political solution. A deal that leaves Assad in power without chemical weapons might seem preferable to continued efforts to oust him if these endanger the elimination of his chemical-weapons arsenal.

It seems doubtful that any international political agreement will persuade the jihadist elements to suspend their campaign. They have grown in strength and they will not quit. De facto control of a jihadist enclave in eastern Syria would, at most, offer a temporary stasis, not an end to hostilities. Syria's civil war will continue for the foreseeable future. This will further divide the FSA from its jihadist "partners in arms" and further demonize the jihadists in the eyes of the international community as terrorists rather than freedom fighters.

The Fighting Will Go On, Creating Instability Lasting Decades

At times, it seems that the belligerents inside Syria and their foreign supporters are less concerned with the immediate battle than with jockeying for position in some post-Assad Syria—establishing footholds, grabbing territory, consolidating gains, stockpiling weapons. But what might that situation look like?

A Political Settlement? Can the current international agreement to remove Syria's chemical weapons be broadened to bring about a political settlement or at least a reduction in the level of fighting? There is some overlap of interests among the key external actors—Russia, Iran, the United States, Europe, and the Gulf kingdoms.²⁵

Supporting the Assad regime comes with costs, and it is not clear that Assad's foreign supporters are tied to him personally. Iran's leaders reportedly have mixed views on Syria, especially after Assad's use of chemical weapons on his own people.²⁶ His foreign supporters might see him as a liability and be willing to cut their losses if they could be guaranteed a sympathetic regime in Damascus that protected their interests along with Syria's Alawite and Christian minorities.

On the other side, the West has little interest in seeing the slaughter of Alawites and Christians or in seeing Assad's government replaced by al Qaeda's militants determined to turn Syria into a base for their continued jihad against the West.

But given the rising arc of violence, any settlement seems to be a long shot. And the longer the Syrians fight, the more sectarian the conflict becomes, the more savage the fighting, the greater the accumulation of reasons for revenge, the less likely there is to be a political solution.

Too much blood has been spilled. Peace is not in the cards—the conflict has become an existential struggle for all

The most likely scenario is a continuing armed conflict lasting many years.

concerned. The most likely scenario is a continuing armed conflict lasting many years. There are ample historical precedents, including Lebanon's civil war, which went on for fifteen years, and Somalia's continuing armed anarchy, which has lasted more than two decades.

The Restoration of a “National” Government Under a New Strongman? It is possible that some sufficiently ruthless future strongman could restore order to an exhausted nation. After all, Syria's history between 1946 and 1969 was chaotic, with numerous coups and bouts of internal warfare—although not of the same scale as the current civil war—until the Assad regime (father and son) imposed and kept order for more than four decades. However, the same history also suggests that Syria's instability could last for decades.

Instability is a platform for allowing all players to have their chance at furthering their agenda. The outcome could result in a more traditional single power ruling Syria, a hybrid of the current array of players, or a regional free-for-all.

Permanent Partition? Asked what would happen if there were neither a political settlement nor foreign intervention that removed Assad, FSA Commander General Salim Idriss responded, “Syria will continue to be ravaged; then we will experience more hatred and a total collapse.”²⁷

A protracted conflict will ensure the Balkanization of Syria into government-held cities plus an Alawite stronghold in the west and a Sunni-dominated east. But sectarian lines in Syria are not as tidy as those in Iraq; Syria is much more a mosaic of shifting territories and fronts. This means more local ethnic cleansing will be required to create purer enclaves, and that means ultimately more vendettas. Reunification will be increasingly difficult to achieve.

A political settlement that restores Syria to a prewar situation allowing the return of refugees to their original homes is unlikely. It seems more likely that regrouping and resettlement will make Syria's ethnic and sectarian enclaves permanent features of the landscape. This will complicate future commerce and economic recovery.

A Terrorist Redoubt? The longer the fighting continues, the greater the fear that al Qaeda-inspired elements will be able to consolidate their position, giving them a new stronghold from which to continue terrorist operations against the West. For local jihadist groups like Jabhat al-Nusrah, however, it also represents a chance to carve out and govern a new Islamist caliphate. That means going slow on implementing measures that could alienate the local population and avoiding actions that could provoke Western intervention.

Governance represents a new strategic direction for the movement. For a number of reasons, that would be a chilling development, complicating international efforts to destroy al Qaeda. However, it also opens up new possibilities for al Qaeda's adversaries. Can creative diplomacy exploit differences among the various shades of jihadism? Might local jihadists even be weaned from al Qaeda's global terrorist campaign? History suggests otherwise. Almost none of al Qaeda's affiliates have remained local. Over time, al Qaeda's central leadership has been able to enlist its local affiliates into its global jihad.

The Somalia-based al Shabaab offers a perfect example of a trajectory from local insurgency to global terrorist organization, which Syria's jihadists might follow. Al Shabaab began as an Islamist but purely Somali ideological movement. It too initially tried its hand at local governance. Then, increasingly dominated by hardliners, it upped its status by declaring its loyalty to al Qaeda.

Forced to retreat under pressure from the combined forces of the Somali government and the Africa Union Mission in Somalia, a UN peacekeeping force, al Shabaab struck back with suicide bombings in Uganda that killed 72 people. Its continuing evolution from local Islamist insurgency to international terrorist organization was underscored most dramatically in Nairobi, where al Shabaab gunmen killed 67 people at a shopping mall in retaliation for the participation of Kenyan troops in the Somalia operation. The internationalization of al Shabaab's terrorist campaign was accelerated by foreign intervention, which contributed to setbacks in the field.

Whether Syria's jihadists will follow the path of Afghanistan's Taliban, but avoiding the kind of international terrorist campaign that brought down the Taliban government, or instead follow the path of al Shabaab or al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and join the international terrorist campaign favored by al Qaeda's central leadership remains to be seen.

Regional Conflict? Protracted conflict in Syria raises the possibility of a wider regional war between Sunnis and Shi'as, with Assad forces, Syria's Alawites, Hezbollah fighters, Iraq's Shi'a militias, and Iran on one side, and Syria's rebels; jihadists; and al Qaeda fronts in Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf kingdoms on the other. Russia and the United States would face one another across the sectarian divide. It is, of course, messier than that. Iraq's Shi'a-dominated government has asked for U.S. assistance in dealing with Sunni terrorists, while both the United States and Russia are hostile to al Qaeda, as are the Gulf kingdoms.

What would a wider regional war look like? It would not necessarily involve open warfare between the forces of the major regional powers—Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. National armies would not roll across the desert. It could instead be a war of many fronts, limited military incursions, continuing guerrilla warfare, and multiple terrorist campaigns.

A wider sectarian war would not break out. The fighting would escalate gradually and would differ from the current situation only in its intensity. The civil war in Syria would continue, with Assad's forces increasingly bolstered by Hezbollah and "volunteers" sent from Iran arrayed against secular, salafist, and jihadist Syrian rebels, who are already being reinforced by fighters from Pakistan's Taliban and other radical Sunni groups.

Sectarian enclaves would become the new de facto frontiers, effectively erasing the borders drawn by the colonial powers a century ago. Lebanon's Sunnis, including al Qaeda's new recruits in traditional Sunni strongholds like that in Tripoli and in Palestinian refugee camps where al Qaeda-inspired jihadists are supplanting the old Palestinian terrorist organizations, would take on Hezbollah in a reprise of that country's civil war of the 1980s. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf kingdoms could become the targets of Iranian-instigated subversion, sabotage, and terrorism.

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The Israelis regard the Assad regime as thugs, but for forty years that regime has kept the peace on Israel's border with Syria. Israel now worries that an Assad victory will add to Hezbollah's influence and strength, but his fall could bring a host of al Qaeda fanatics to Israel's frontier, all competing to cause trouble. Meanwhile, the Syrian chemical-weapons agreement has focused unwanted international attention on Israel's own arsenal. For the time being, the least-worst-case scenario, from Israel's perspective, is a continuation of the fighting that saps the strength of all participants.

The Threat Posed by Foreign Fighters

Most of the 6,000 to 8,000 foreign fighters among Syria's rebels come from Arab countries—Iraq, Libya, and Tunisia, plus some from the Gulf kingdoms. They reportedly also include a large number of Chechens, and volunteers from Pakistan are showing up. The latest estimates indicate that between 1,500 and 2,000 volunteer fighters have gone from Europe to Syria.²⁸ These numbers will no doubt increase as the fighting continues.

Some of the volunteers are determined to fight, but others seem to be little more than jihadi tourists who stay out of harm's way while taking photos of themselves and boasting to their friends back home on social media.²⁹

The primary route of entry is through Turkey. Reportedly, most foreign fighters join al Nusra, which is actively inviting foreign fighters and arranges to meet them at the Turkish frontier, but they now may be moving toward the ISIL, which is in the ascendance in their eyes.

These foreign fighters are generally international in outlook. They go wherever the battle is, derive status from their role in continued fighting, and have little interest in settlements that restore peace. That would only send them to another battlefield, although some no doubt hope to gain experience and build networks in Syria that will enable them to carry out similar rebellions in their own countries.

Europe is worried about what may happen when these fighters, some with military skills and combat experience, return home, possibly to engage in terrorist activities. Because of their proximity and volume, Syria's foreign fighters are viewed as a much larger problem than that posed by the previous generation of veterans returning from Afghanistan.

Insofar as we know, few Americans have joined the Syrian rebels—perhaps several dozen as of November 2013—but after a slow start, the momentum appears to be increasing. Discussion among would-be warriors on social media indicates aspirations. The notion of safe jihadi resorts where one can pretend to participate is attractive, although there is always a concern that once there, individuals may be further radicalized and redirected to participate in acts of terrorism at home.³⁰ There is also concern that the growing sectarian nature of Syria's conflict will spread to diaspora communities.

Right now, the lure of Syria's civil war may not be a bad thing, as it could be drawing off some of the hotheads who otherwise would cause trouble at home. Moreover, Syria's jihadist groups may not be looking for a fight with Western countries, which are also opposed to Assad. This attitude could change if the West were to tacitly accept Assad as the lesser evil and abandon the rebel movement, or if Western-backed rebel forces were to move against the jihadists during the civil war or in a post-Assad environment.

This is not an immediate problem, as the flow of recruits is toward Syria, not the other way. However, al Qaeda operatives may recruit individuals to carry out terrorist operations in the West from the pool of arriving volunteers. Recall that Muhammad Atta originally came to fight in Afghanistan but was then recruited by al Qaeda to lead the 9/11 operation.

Syrian veterans from Europe are not likely to return through European airports where they know they will be subjected to close scrutiny. Instead, they may try to slip back into Europe across land borders—especially through Turkey to Bulgaria. This will complicate the refugee issue. Some of the Syrian refugees are already under some suspicion.

Turkey, according to some European officials, is not being especially helpful on the refugee issue. Rather than accepting more Syrian refugees on its own territory, it is suspected of facilitating their underground transfer to Europe. There is also concern that Syrian refugee populations in Europe could become recruiting grounds for fighters who will return to Syria or for homegrown terrorist activities.

Some Policy Implications

This essay has focused on the dynamics of the continuing conflict in Syria and how these are likely to affect its future

trajectory. It was never my intention to prescribe policy. Nevertheless, it might be useful to underscore some of the policy implications (and questions) that arise if Syria's civil war follows the path described.

Uncertainty is unavoidable. There is much that we do not know. This is not the result of inadequacies in intelligence efforts. In the fluid circumstances in Syria, even the participants themselves are not certain what will happen next. The situation can be described as event-driven. It has changed dramatically during the past three years and is likely to continue to change.

Outside powers have limited leverage. Absent a significant military commitment, the ability of the United States and its allies to affect the course of events in Syria is limited. And a major military intervention will have unpredictable consequences.

Caution is in order. The above factors suggest caution—in shaping expectations, drawing red lines, and making commitments. Americans tend to proceed from an assumed imperative of action lest the United States lose its credibility and position in the world. The imperative here is to do no greater harm. This need not mean inaction.

Objectives need to be prioritized. There are many competing agendas—toppling Assad, ensuring a democratic successor, demonstrating U.S. credibility, securing Syria's weapons of mass destruction, preventing a humanitarian catastrophe (another Rwanda), not allowing al Qaeda to obtain sophisticated arms or establish new bases in the heart of the Middle East, preventing a regional sectarian conflict, challenging Russian and Iranian pretensions of hegemony. All are important, but are all equally obtainable?

The conflict in Syria will continue. While this does not lessen a commitment to achieving a peaceful resolution, expectations have to be realistic. The desire for settlement should not propel the United States into agreeing to a bad one.

U. S. policy ought to be opportunistic, flexible, and pragmatic. The absence of good options today does not mean that there will be no good options tomorrow.

Continue to support the rebels. There are worse outcomes than the current situation. The United States will want assets on the ground in Syria. The presence of jihadists in Syria does not make others opposed to the Assad regime unworthy of continued assistance. Right now, they represent the only

We will be dealing with the effluent of Syria's conflict for years to come.

local friends the United States has in Syria. The precise nature of continued assistance to the rebel movement may need to be covert for operational reasons, but not for political reasons.

U.S. efforts must be sustainable and sustained. It appears to be axiomatic in American interventions abroad that large-scale investments tend to have short life spans. This will be a long-term effort. An assessment that U.S. efforts are not working should not lead to precipitate abandonment or prompt escalation.

Address Syria in parts, not as a whole. Syria has become an abstraction. Achieving American objectives may require dealing separately with different problems in different areas of concern and geography. For example, if there is a terrorist attack on the West that is traced back to jihadist groups in Syria, neither concerns about Syrian sovereignty nor continued support for the rebels will constrain direct action against the jihadists. Nor should the actions of jihadists be allowed to undermine U.S. assistance to other rebel groups.

Contain the conflict. Syria's civil war should be prevented from becoming a broader regional conflict, which would be fraught with risks for American and other interests in the region. It may not be possible to prevent the Syrian conflict from spreading, but this should be a goal. It will require working closely with frontline states like Jordan, Iraq, Turkey, Lebanon, and Israel, as well as immediately concerned powers like Saudi Arabia.

Al Qaeda is not going away. Al Qaeda's operational capabilities have been degraded, but as the situation in Syria demonstrates, its global jihadist enterprise is resilient and opportunistic. Whether the new local al Qaeda fronts can be weaned from al Qaeda's war on the West represents a challenge to American diplomacy. But al Qaeda and its affiliates remain a threat to U.S. security.

Syria's refugees represent both a humanitarian and a security concern. The growing number of refugees generated by the Syrian conflict can destabilize surrounding countries, provide new reservoirs for radicalization and terrorist recruiting, and, in Europe, can fan xenophobia and racist reactions. This is one area where a more activist and coherent response is in order.

Conclusion

Civil wars are devastating. Both sides destroy infrastructure and wage economic warfare, causing devastation and displacement. Beyond the casualties of war, human capital is destroyed by the lack of health services and education as investment shifts to weapons. Sectarian conflicts, which Syria's civil war has become, further shred the country's social fabric. They last a long time.

Syria's civil war is grinding down the country's national institutions while creating the conditions for continuing local conflict. Brutal government counterinsurgent tactics, the pervasive lawlessness that comes with the breakdown of authority, and the imposition of harsh Islamic rule in some rebel zones are displacing a large portion of the population. It is not yet clear which side in the contest will be able to offer protection to those who wish to escape Islamist tyranny but can no longer survive in sectarian enclaves loyal to the regime. For many Syrians, flight abroad with slender prospect of return is the only option, but these same Syrian refugees will add to existing sectarian tensions in neighboring countries and will become the recruiting grounds for new cohorts of extremists and the targets of their enemies, furnishing new generations of fighters and criminals for employment in Syria and elsewhere. We will be dealing with the effluent of Syria's conflict for years to come. ■

Notes

¹ According to the United Nations (UN), more than 2.2 million persons have fled the country, while another 4.5 million have been displaced internally. These figures are rapidly increasing. The UN expects that, with continued fighting, by the end of 2014, more than half of Syria's population could be living as refugees (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, undated).

² I am indebted to RAND colleagues Chris Chivvis, Bruce Hoffman, Seth Jones, Dalia Kassa Kaye, and Andrew Liepman and to outside readers Qanta Ahmed, Lawrence Sanchez, and Rebecca Weiner for their helpful comments and advice.

³ Material on Syria's Order of Battle comes from several sources, including Holliday, 2013a. See also IHS Jane's, 2013, and International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2013.

⁴ Holliday, 2013a.

⁵ The Alawites (or Alawis) are technically a sect of the Shia denomination of Islam, although they do not identify with Shias and are considered by other Muslims to be a separate sect—some Muslims consider them to be heretics. They constitute roughly 11 percent of Syria's population, but they dominate its political system—Assad is an Alawite. About 74 percent of Syrians are Sunni Muslims. Christians, who are further divided into several denominations, constitute 10 to 12 percent. Kurds, an ethnic minority who are Sunnis, comprise 9 percent, and Druze, an ethno-religious group, comprise about 5 percent. In addition, there are non-Alawite Shias, Turkomen, and Yazidis. For an introduction to Syria's complex demographics, see Kessler, 1987.

⁶ Anzalone, 2013; DeYoung and Warrick, 2013; Blanford, 2013.

⁷ Smyth, 2013.

⁸ Lister, 2013b.

⁹ Roggio, 2013.

¹⁰ Kayed, 2013.

¹¹ "Leading Syrian Rebel Groups Form New Islamic Front," 2013.

¹² Zisser, 2013.

¹³ The origins and complexities of this split are described in detail in Barfi, 2013.

¹⁴ Hosenball and Stewart, 2013.

¹⁵ Lister, 2013a.

¹⁶ Talev, Walcott, and Atlas, 2013.

¹⁷ The White House, 2013.

¹⁸ Soviet counterinsurgency doctrine in Afghanistan is described in detail in Russian General Staff, 2002.

¹⁹ A detailed account of the Muslim Brotherhood revolt and the siege at Hama is provided in Lefevre, 2013, and Seale, 1988. See also Van Dam, 2011.

²⁰ Walt, 2013.

²¹ Jenkins, 2013.

²² République Française, 2013.

²³ Vandiver, 2013.

²⁴ "Syrian War Overtakes Crucial Chemical-Arms Shipping Route," 2013.

²⁵ Olikier, 2013.

²⁶ Nader, 2013, and "What to Do Now? Iran Torn on Syria," 2013.

²⁷ "Free Syrian Army Chief: 'Why is the West Just Looking On?'" 2013.

²⁸ "Thousands of Young European Jihadists Are Fighting in Syria," 2013. See also Pantucci, 2013; "Syria's Foreign Fighters: Dissecting the Next Decade of Conflict," 2013; Holden, 2013; and Chasmar, 2013.

²⁹ Reuter, 2013.

³⁰ Jones, 2013.

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About This Perspective

As the ongoing conflict in Syria enters its third year, persistent uncertainty regarding the circumstances on the ground, potential outcomes, and long-term consequences continues to confound analysis and possible policy responses. This essay explores the dynamics of the Syrian conflict, including the characteristics and interests of the belligerents, the interests of the foreign powers involved, and the implications that the present course of events has for the future of Syria and the wider region.

It is concluded that the possibility of reaching a political settlement is becoming increasingly unlikely as the sectarian nature of the conflict intensifies and the unity of the rebel groups remains fractious—no end to the current stalemate is in sight. The conflict has become an existential struggle for all concerned, so not even the fall of Assad will bring an end to the violence. Also, the involvement of Islamic extremist groups and other hardliners poses a future international terrorist threat that could be directed against the West. By the end of 2014, more than half of the Syrian population could be living as refugees, which will exacerbate existing sectarian tensions in neighboring countries—another factor conducive to terrorism. We will be dealing with the effluent of Syria's civil war for decades.

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