

## Syria: A Way Forward



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Cover photo: Aleppo, Sayf Al-Dawla District,  
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ICOS Field Research trip

# Syria: A Way Forward

**A report by the International Council on Security and Development (ICOS)**

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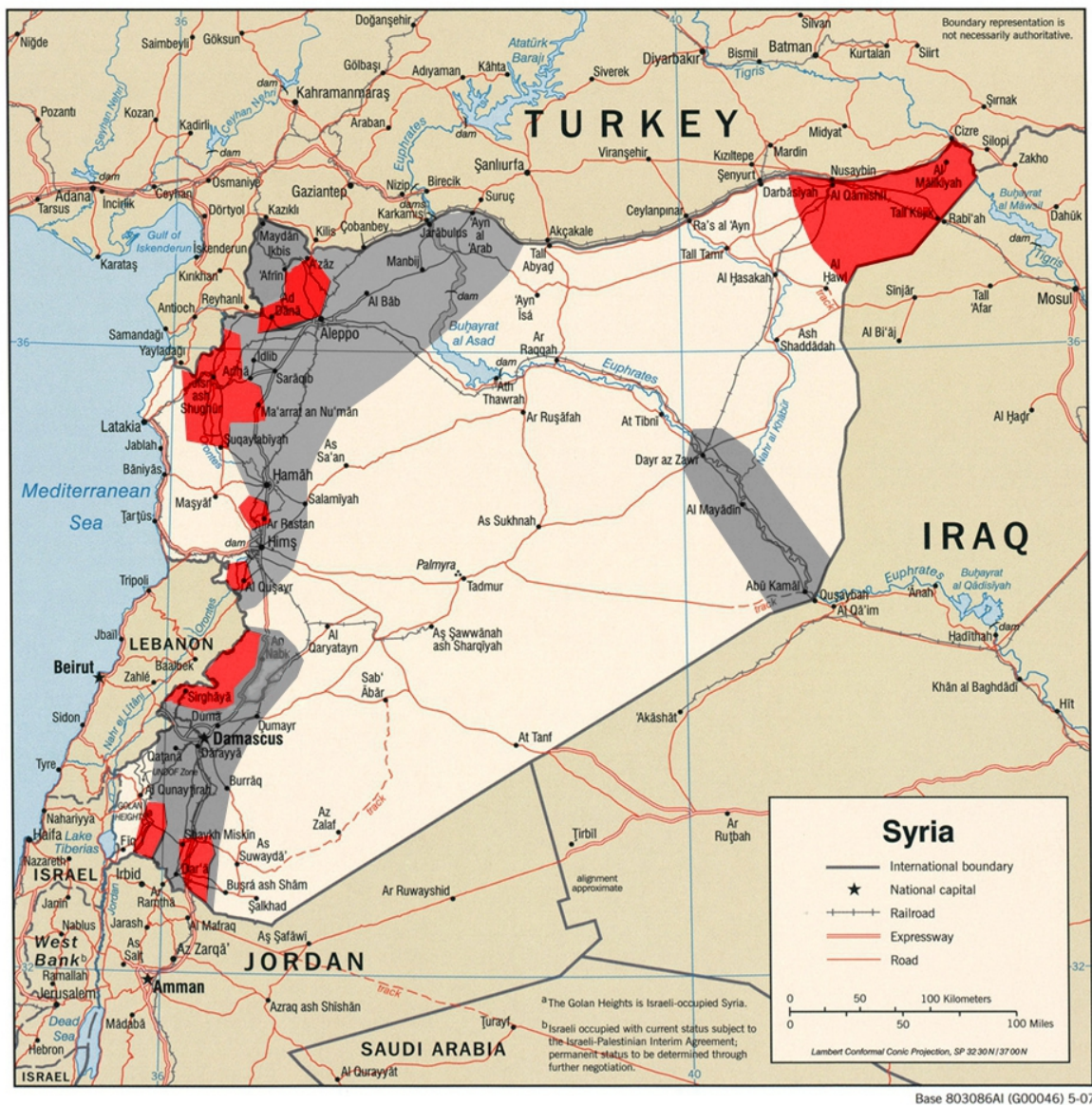
## Maps

### i) Map of Syria in the region<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>

## ii) Map of Syrian Conflict



- Areas of instability
- Areas of intense rebel activity

ICOS map based on in depth field assessment and several sources.



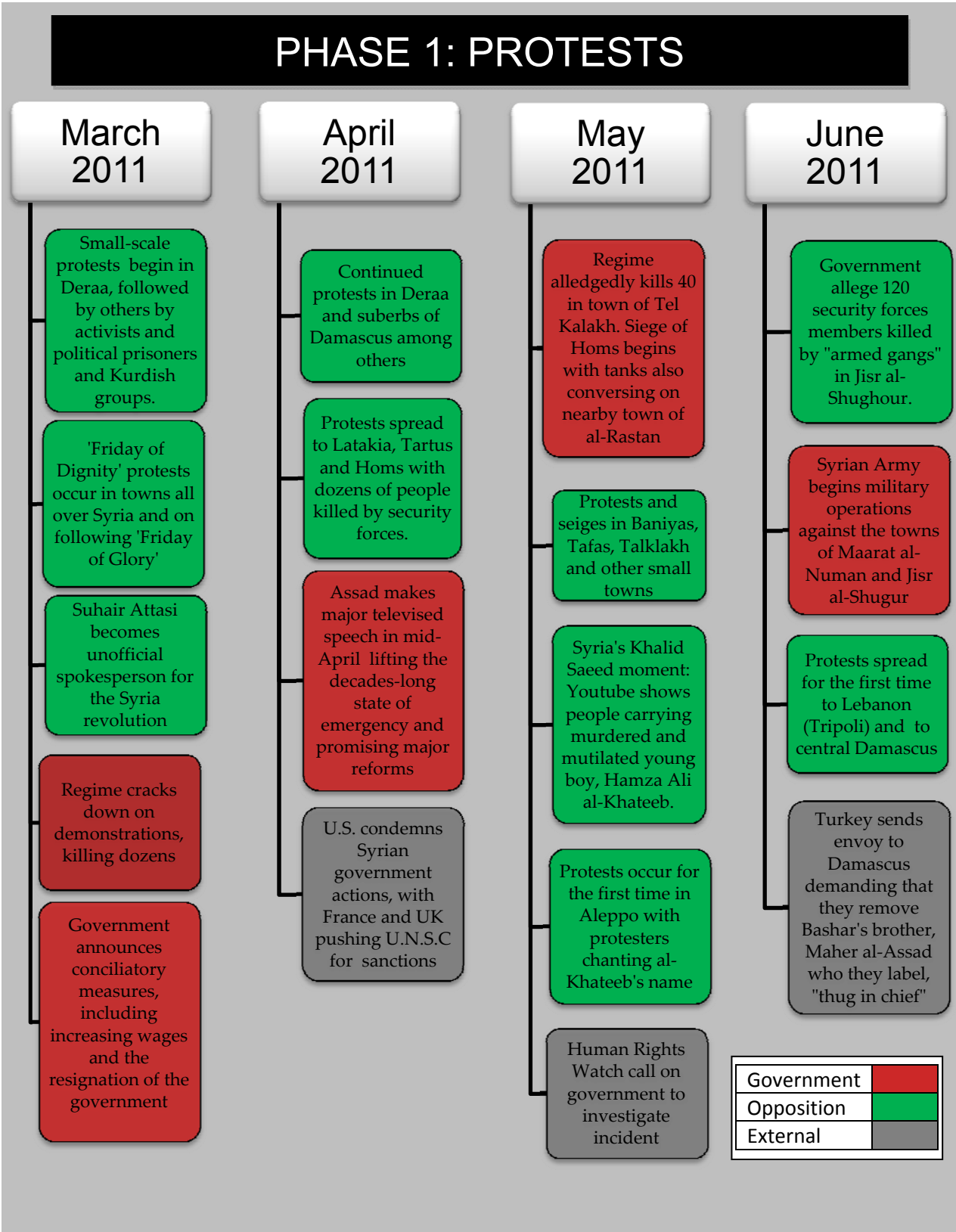
iii) Map of US Military Concentrations in the Region<sup>2</sup>



Please see appendix for a table providing detail on each military deployment

<sup>2</sup> Al-Jazeera

Syria Uprising Timeline - from Protests to Meltdown



## PHASE 2: INSURGENCY BEGINS

July  
2011

1st July: Biggest protests yet, with half a million on the streets of Hama

Security forces launch crackdowns throughout Syria and mass arrests in Damascus

Major protests in Deir iz-Zour in east of Syria

Bloodiest day of the conflict so far with at least 136 killed.  
Government troops attack Hama, Deir iz-Zour, Harak and Abu Kamal

Defections: 1. Riad al-Asad, an Air Force Colonel, defects to the Opposition and establishes Free Syrian Army.

August  
2011

'Siege of Hama' ends on the 4th of August as the government finally stomps city

Protests and violence in many suburbs of Damascus

King Abdullah of Jordan condemns the crackdowns of the Syrian regime and pulls out ambassador. Egypt demands end of crackdown

The governments of the US, UK, France, Germany and Canada all call on President Assad to resign for first time

United Nations Security Council for the first time condemns the human rights violations against Syrian protesters

September  
2011

Free Syrian Army claims it destroyed 17 loyalist tanks in Rastan

3 prominent Syrian Alawite clerics denounce the violence against protestors

Syrian regime attacks protestors in small towns and villages in provinces of Deir ir-Zour, Idlib and Deraa

Turkey cuts all relations with Syria after Turkey and US agree to increase pressure on regime

The EU adopts a ban on importing Syrian oil

October  
2011

Newly formed Syrian National Council says it forged a common front of opposition activists in a meeting in Istanbul

Bombardment of Bab Amr in Homs

Friday 21st: protests across Syria, including across the Kurdish regions in north east

Syrian Army invades Lebanon and retreats back across the border

Defections: 1. Radwan Naddoush, Brigadier-General in the Military Intelligence.

Russia and China veto UN resolution condemning Syria. Turkey responds with announcement of war games on border with Syria

## PHASE 3: SPREAD OF VIOLENCE

November  
2011

Large demonstrations across Syria, including in Aleppo, previously quiet

Ambushes by FSA kill dozen of Government soldiers

Shelling of Bab Amr in Homs intensifies

Arab League suspends Syria for failing to implement an Arab League peace plan. Imposes sanctions

December  
2011

"Major battle" between FSA and Syrian Army in southern town of Busra al-Harir

2 car bombings in Damascus kill 44 with 163 wounded. Government accuses al-Qaida

SNC and NCC sign roadmap for transition to democracy

Reports of massacre of entire village by Syrian Army

Syria agrees to an Arab League initiative allowing Arab observers into the country. Mission led by General al-Dabi arrives later that month

Russia sharpens criticism of Assad regime in a draft UN resolution

January  
2012

French national, Gilles Jacquier, first western journalist killed in Homs

According to Doha Debates 55% of Syrian respondents wanted Assad to stay on.

Suicide bombing of al-Midan quarter in Damascus kills 26 and wounds 46. Syrian government denounces 'terrorist acts.'

Defections: 3, including General Mustafa al-Sheikh

Arab League suspends its mission because of increasing violence.

February  
2012

Government intensifies bombardment of Homs and other cities. Reports of hundreds of dead.

Two explosions in Aleppo, with 25 killed and 175 wounded. Government accuses opposition

Defections: 3, including Arkan Kanaan, a Colonel in the Special Forces.

Russia and China block UN Security Council draft resolution on Syria.

The US closes its embassy in Syria

Friends of Syria meeting in Tunis. 70 Western and Arab nations. Recognition of SNC as "legitimate representative of the Syrian people"

## PHASE 4: CIVIL WAR

March  
2012

Nationwide protests continue, dozens of people dying everyday

FSA claims to kill over 100 soldiers in Damascus

Defections: 5, from military and cabinet. Army intelligence officer Abdel Barakat defects bringing 100s of documents detailing work of Syrian regime

UN Security Council endorses six point peace plan by UN envoy Kofi Annan which Assad accepts

April  
2012

Syria fails to meet the U.N. deadline to withdraw troops from residential areas.

Cities of Homs and Idlib now the two major focuses of violent conflict

The 14-nation "Friends of Syria" group meets in Paris and calls on Syrian authorities to end all violence. GCC announce they will fund the FSA

The U.N. Security Council unanimously approves a resolution increasing the number of U.N. observers in Syria from 30 to 300.

May  
2012

Houla massacre leaves 108 dead, inc. 34 women and 49 children, UN says.

Mass execution in Deir iz-Zour. Jihadist group, Al-Nusra Front claim responsibility.

2 car bombs in Damascus kill 55 and injure 400. Syrian government blames al-Qaida.

FSA launches widespread attacks against Syrian government in central Damascus

Defections: 3.

France, the UK, Germany, Italy, Spain, Canada and Australia expel senior Syrian diplomats in protest.

June  
2012

Assad tells his reshuffled government that they face "real war".

At least 80 security personnel killed in first weekend of June

Syria shoots down Turkish plane that strayed into its territory

Assad's brother-in-law Assef Shawkat and Defence Minister, General Rajha in Damascus killed in Damascus.

30th June sees 174 die, according to LCC

Defections: 8 senior officers

Turkey changes RoE; if Syrian troops approach Turkey's borders they will be seen as a military threat.

## PHASE 5: DEADLOCK

July  
2012

Reports that the FSA have control of a significant amount of the countryside

Suicide bombing of National Security Building in Damascus kills 4 leading regime officials

'Battle of Damascus' begins as rebels try to take capital

Massive protests in Aleppo

US says that the Syrian regime is moving chemical weapons out of storage

Defectors: 16, including the ambassador to Iraq, Nawaf Fares and Republican Guard Commander, Manaf Tlas

August  
2012

Government offensive to recapture Aleppo and claims that Damascus has been cleared of 'terrorists.'

Video of 'summary executions' by rebels, a potential war-crime

More than 100 civilians dying per day according to reports

First report of rebels having Stinger missiles

Defectors: 2, Muhammed Faris, a military aviator and Prime Minister, Riad Hijab.

Kofi Annan resigns as Syria's peace envoy.

September  
2012

Continued fighting in Aleppo and in multiple suburbs of Damascus

Nearly 80% of towns and village on Turkish border outside of control of Damascus, according to SOHR

LCC reports that 260 people died in one day, 115 in Aleppo

Morsi calls for Assad to step down in a foreign policy speech.

New UN envoy, Lakhdar Brahimi arrives in Damascus

October  
2012

Rebels seize the strategic town of Maarrat al-Nu'man, situated on a highway linking Aleppo to Damascus

Car bomb in Christian area of Damascus

92 Syrian Army soldiers die in one day

Syrian mortar bomb kills 5 Turkish civilians in Akçakale district. Turkey fires back.

Turkish Parliament authorises military action inside Syria



## PHASE 6: REBELS ON THE UP

November  
2012

Taftanaz airbase in Idlib province taken by rebel fighters after a coordinated assault

Creation of new opposition organization, 'National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces'

Twin car bombing in a Christian and Druze area of Damascus, killing 34

Key airbase captured in Deir iz-Zour province

Fighting near Damascus Airport occurs for the first time, closing the airport road

Defections: At least one general defects

December 2012

Syria without internet and mobile coverage for three days

Claims by NBC News that Syrian regime preparing the use of Sarin in bombs

Damascus Airport 'under seige'

Along with more than 100 other countries, the US recognizes the National Coalition as the 'sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people'

NATO agrees to deploy Patriot missiles along its southern border with Syria. Russia delivers its first shipment of Iskander missiles

## 1. Executive Overview

### 1.1 Executive Summary

This paper reviews the history of the modern Syrian state and the diverse domestic, regional and international factors that have led to the current conflict. It includes a description of the key government and opposition actors and an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the Syrian military and the Free Syrian Army. The paper also reviews the dynamics feeding into the conflict and the convergence of pressures which have led to the continuing violence in the country.

The paper applies the insights and information about the conflict gathered from a recent ICOS field research expedition in Syria, in November 2012. This research was focused on the views of fighting aged males who were FSA supporters in Aleppo and Idlib provinces.

Although the fighting in Syria has its roots in the wave of revolt in the Arab region, there are three key interrelated factors in Syria's dynamics which have given the conflict its current form.

Firstly, in the last decade, Syria has witnessed a flood of rural migrants – mostly Sunni Muslims - into its cities. This migration, combined with a large proportion of young people living in urban settings has exacerbated existing social and economic deprivation in these areas. Secondly, the Assad regime - a brutal police state - has manipulated anxiety among Syrian minorities, and expanded the Assad cult of personality whilst stifling legitimate forms of dissent. This has contributed to the ruling Ba'th party abandoning its once relatively progressive socio-economic agenda. Thirdly, there has been a resurgence of political Islam in the region which holds a deep ideological aversion to the apparently secular and predominantly Alawite, regime.

When the first protests occurred in Syria 18 months ago, inspired by the examples of Egypt and Tunisia, they were limited in size and scope. But it was the exaggerated violent reaction of the regime to peaceful protests which triggered mass demonstrations across the country and ultimately led to the creation of the rebel Free Syrian Army. Since then the rebellion has engulfed the country.

The Syrian military and intelligence apparatus however was designed to have the capacity to respond to rebellion: a large and heavily-armed conventional army; extensive and relatively sophisticated air defense systems, which despite being largely outdated are far more powerful than for example Gaddafi's; and a loyal, Alawite-dominated officer corps. It is now believed that Syria has one of the largest stocks of chemical weapons in the world and the

largest in the Middle East. (80% of those interviewed in ICOS field research were concerned about the Assad regime using chemical weapons.) Additionally, the Syrian regime is closely allied with Iran and with Russia which has until now protected it from military intervention by the international community.

Since the 1980s, a formal, organized Syrian opposition existed only in exile. From the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011, there have therefore been difficulties in finding unity and a common strategy, and the formal political opposition has had little influence with those on the ground. Indeed ICOS field research indicated the fighters on the ground have little connection to the formal political opposition parties.

In essence, grassroots opposition and the Free Syrian Army appeared as a spontaneous reaction to the use of violence by the Syrian regime, rather than as part of a formal opposition movement. The aforementioned difficulties for the formal opposition – from October 2011 led by the Syrian National Council – meant that it was unable to provide rebel fighters with the arms needed to fight the regime. This made its claims to leadership of the revolution difficult to accept in the eyes of the grassroots opposition and by the international community. The recent creation of the National Coalition, despite being a very positive development, is an indication that grassroots level opposition has the initiative and is influencing the formal opposition structures rather than the other way around.

These weaknesses of the formal opposition left the opposition fighters on the ground more open to wider manipulations from all sides. Arms and other logistical support have been provided from a range of sources. However - and the picture is far from clear - it seems that some of the most reliable sources for arms have been the regional jihadist networks and other patrons in the Gulf. These groups and individuals have used this opportunity to engender reactionary and sectarian forms of political Islam among the opposition. Indeed, there is a fundamentally altered political dynamic in the region, where literalist Wahhabi and Salafi ideologies are now part of the political arena and democratic process.

Syria has an urbane and pluralistic religious heritage but this is a history more of the cities; for the wealthy and the educated. The rebellion has come mostly from the poor, often migrant – almost entirely Sunni – communities, less literate in the traditions of sophisticated religious scholars, disenfranchised and often very young. This key socio-economic component of the revolution should not be overlooked. In the last decade or so, the regime has favored the urban elites at the expense of poor, especially rural Syrians, which has left this mainly Sunni demographic disenfranchised and aggrieved.

For these young Muslim men and women, it is hardly surprising in the face of a desperate struggle against such a violent regime, they should turn to their religion as a *raison d'être*.

The conflict in Syria offers fertile terrain for the development of radical militant ideas; violence, sectarianism and disenchantment with the West: what this paper terms, “*Neo-Salafism*”. These groups, despite in theory sharing literalist and fundamentalist views on Islam, are far from monolithic or inflexible. They have developed and responded to the necessities and dynamics of the conflict and have developed their own unity and coherence away from the confines of formal political opposition. Recent changes in the leadership of the rebel command reflect the new Islamist and Salafist orientation of the rebel brigades at the grassroots level.

Western governments have shown concern in supporting the rebels because they are unsure about the nature of the militant opposition groups, particularly in light of the events in Libya. This concern is self-fulfilling as extremism and anti-Western sentiment among the opposition are fuelled by a feeling on the part of the rebels of abandonment by the international community. Western governments’ lack of clear military and humanitarian support on the ground, inside the country affects the extent to which they are able to influence the future political make-up of Syria.

Of Syrians interviewed in the field research although 83% felt positive about Turkey, and 61% positive about Saudi Arabia, only 13% felt positive about the United States. (99% of the respondent FSA supporters were negative about Russia and Iran.)

93% of those interviewed supported an international intervention of a “No-Fly Zone”, 77% supported more money and weapons for the FSA and 74% supported humanitarian aid for the Syrian civilians caught in the conflict. However, only 5 % supported Western military “boots on the ground”. Interestingly, support for Arab military “boots on the ground” was also low at 6%.

It might seem that the international community is faced with a Hobson’s choice: two routes of action, both of them undesirable.

**The first choice:** Staying with the current course of action. This means standing by while the Syrian regime continues its campaign of violence against its own citizens as it desperately tries to cling on to power, destroying Syria in the process if necessary. As this continues, the “*Neo-Salafist*” movement increases in strength, and the future government of the country (and control of their chemical weapons) could eventually be aligned against Western interests. The downfall of the regime – which looks increasingly inevitable - has the potential to bring about a second phase in the conflict, towards a full-scale civil war, where the state dissolves into its sectarian components or towards a ‘rogue regime.’

**Second choice:** The international community launches military action against Syria. Any military encounter would more difficult than that of Libya, with the added backdrop of Syrian chemical weapons, and for the time being it would mean a political confrontation with Russia and China, and potential Iranian involvement. These tensions in the immediate vicinity – Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq – provide a high risk backdrop to a military intervention, and there the potential exists that a response to one set of imperatives – either humanitarian or security issues – triggers a larger, more complex and more costly conflict in terms of both lives and cost.

**A third choice?** This paper calls for moves to be taken to create a viable third path forward, by changing as much as possible the current dynamics at play both on the ground in Syrian and in the geopolitical dynamics.

## 1.2 Five Recommendations

1. *Acknowledge that the threshold for humanitarian responsibility to protect has been crossed.* Although the “Responsibility to Protect” principle is a recently developed articulation of international obligations, it is important to acknowledge and to put the Syrian government on notice that the level of violence is unacceptable, and those who aid and abet the regime bear co-responsibility. It is important to acknowledge that this responsibility to protect extends to those minority communities who feel threatened by the growing sectarianism of some of the opposition. If some members of the international community, for example Russia and China, are standing in the way of a collective response, it is nevertheless critical to note the threshold has been crossed. With sectarian conflict on the horizon if and when the regime falls, the responsibility falls to the entire international community to act accordingly.
2. *Move chemical weapons higher up the agenda & condition further assistance on dismantling chemical and military infrastructure in Syria.* A vital issue which has until now not received as much attention as it merits, is that of the chemical weapons possessed by the Syrian regime, partly as a result of the blowback from the Iraqi weapons of mass destruction fiasco. The Syrian regime has threatened to use these weapons in the case of any foreign intervention in Syria, and the threat posed by their existence increases both the complexity of the problem and the risks related to international action.

There is a real danger not only that chemical weapons be used by the current regime, but also that they may fall into undesirable hands if and when regime meltdown occurs. These groups could include Hizbullah, Salafists or groups linked to al-Qaeda, or pro-regime militia.

Although this paper argues below for further assistance and humanitarian aid to the Free Syrian Army and its supporters, this assistance by the international community should be predicated on an agreement for the dismantling and destruction of any chemical weapons, and other defense capabilities that fall into the hands of the opposition.

3. ***From Regime Change to Hybrid Transition.*** The matrix of internal and external dynamics and the strengths of the Syrian regime make the process of relinquishing power for the current regime extremely complex and problematic. A radical shift in Western policy on Syria has been needed for some time - away from the current rhetoric of *regime change* to one of *hybrid transition*. Many groups of people – but especially minorities and Alawites in particular – fear the downfall of the regime. Under these circumstances, the regime may turn from being pan-Syrian to a predominantly Alawite militia allied with other groups of non-Alawite loyalists, possibly including Christians, Druze, Shia and some Sunnis. In fact, this may already be starting to occur. The implication of this is that the end of the Assad regime may not herald the end to the conflict, but merely the end of the first phase. The second phase is likely to be a protracted sectarian civil war.

To prevent this from happening, current policy needs to change significantly. *Modus vivendi* needs to be reached with the current backers of the regime – most importantly Russia – and a common policy agreed upon for a transition agreement or at least that effective pressure can be put on the Syrian regime. The international community and the new Syrian National Coalition should endeavor also to reach out to current regime loyalists – the business elite for example – by making solid reassurances as protection and cooperation. Religious leaders also have a key role to play because there are still strong connections with clergy of different sects. These individuals have the influence to calm sectarian tensions and provide a steady and moderating voice in both government and opposition circles. The appointment of the moderate cleric Moaz al-Khatib is a positive step in this regard. Both business families and religious leaders can assist in changing the background to Assad's support base in Syria, and open a path to a negotiated transition.

4. ***Bring a competitive response to "Neo-Salafism."*** The paper applauds the recognition of the Syrian National Coalition as 'the legitimate representative of the Syrian people'. However this needs to be matched by significantly increasing the assistance to the various types of opposition actors, including fighting and non-fighting groups. Beyond providing logistical support for the opposition, an imaginative response to the

increasingly dominant Neo-Salafist narrative among fighting groups needs to be developed. It is not too late to influence the dynamics of the conflict and more effort must be made to identify those groups which are genuinely aligned with the interests of the international community.

The paper describes how the Syrian conflict has provided a fertile environment for the development of sectarian and fundamentalist forms of Islamist groups fighting the regime and how they have been provided with a competitive advantage to more 'secular' counterparts. This is partly as a result of the lack of support from the international community; support that has been given by the international community has not been noted by Syria on the ground. The longer the West maintains a distance from the conflict the less it can have influence over the political make-up of any future Syria.

5. *"Intiqaliya to Ittahadiya": Transition towards a federal Syria with semi-autonomous Alawite and Kurdish regions.* The diversity and inclusivity of Syrian religious and secular traditions allude to the potential for a vibrant and inclusive Syrian democracy. A federal state – despite likely objections – may be the most realistic form for a transitional Syrian government because the Syrian conflict and its sectarianism has progressed too far for a new Syrian state to be feasible in its current unitary form. It is not realistic to suppose that the acute sectarian dimensions to the conflict will allow for a transition in Syria that is both peaceful, and maintains the current unified form of Syria. Alawites, in both their Latakian homeland and elsewhere are deeply fearful of the consequences of the downfall of the regime. This means that Alawites and others will continue to support the regime until the bitter end, at which point the regime may mutate – as described above. As for the Kurds, they desire nothing less than autonomy from Arab control and are positioning themselves as such.

The creation of a Syrian type of federal state – with semi-autonomous Alawite and Kurdish regions – should be brought into the discussion and planning for transition. There is an opportunity to change the dynamics discussed above and increase the chances of achieving a peaceful Syria. This would give the Alawite community an option to the continued support of the regime because it would reassure them as their future in Syria and may be key to resolving the conflict.

### 1.3 ICOS Field Research - Core findings<sup>3</sup>

ICOS conducted a round of field research in early November 2012 in Idlib and Aleppo provinces.

Two hundred and fifty-six fighting ages males who supported the FSA were interviewed and a number of questions on the conflict were asked.

The core findings of this research are as follows:

- The political opposition lacks individuals who have real credibility amongst the rebels on the ground. Often the most praised are those commanders who lead the military struggle.
- Salafism is increasingly prominent.
- There is virtually no hope that a political solution or can be reached or negotiations held between the opposition and the government.
- There is a very strong dislike of both Russia and Iran.
- There is very strong feeling in favor of Turkey, and attitudes towards Saudi Arabia (and the Gulf in general) are positive.
- Feelings regarding the United States are generally negative.
- There is strong opposition to any form of boots on the ground (Western or Arab), but the respondents were strongly in favor of a no-fly zone, weapons and money for the FSA and humanitarian assistance from the international community.
- There is a high level of concern regarding the Assad regime using chemical weapons.
- 35% of those interviewed would accept help from Israel.

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<sup>3</sup> For ICOS methodology and a complete presentation of results, see Appendix I.



## 2. The Back Story

### 2.1 The Arab Revolts: Spontaneity and Inevitability

#### 2.1.1 Egyptian opposition groups

Although many scholars on the Middle East and Arab World failed to predict the timing and extent of the revolts, a number of keen observers of the region were able to perceive a growing illegitimacy of Arab governments in the eyes of their own populations.

In the decade prior to the revolts of 2011, the Arab World had seen a growing number of protests against their governments. In Egypt – still the trend-setter in the Arab World in many ways – a new type of opposition group began to be seen towards the beginning of the Second Palestinian Intifada in 2000. *Kefaya*, formed by a group of activists from various sides of the political spectrum, used Egyptian anger with the Palestinian situation and channeled it towards discontent with the government itself, focused on its support of American foreign policy with Israel. In this way, opposition groups were able to connect the average Egyptian's feelings of distaste for Mubarak's foreign policy with their personal dissatisfaction with Egyptian politics and society at large.<sup>4</sup> Such protests, mixing pro-Palestinian slogans with criticism of the Egyptian government were, for most Egyptians, the first time they had ever protested in the streets and the first time they had ever dared to openly criticize their government. Indeed, breaking down the long standing social taboos against criticizing national governments has been a key feature of Arab revolts.

#### 2.1.2 From Palestine to Iraq and beyond

In Egypt, the passion aroused by the Second Palestinian Intifada expanded into open hostility towards the government during protests against the Iraq War in 2003. This was the first time that Tahrir Square in Cairo became a centre for protests. According to an important *Kefaya* member, the protests which occurred on the day the American Army took Baghdad were the first time that the words '*Isqat al-Nizam* – down with the regime' were heard in public in street protests.<sup>5</sup> The Iraq War protests, and pressure from the American government to allow at least limited freedom of expression, brought groups like *Kefaya* into the public eye both in Egypt and globally, preventing the Egyptian government from simply destroying the movement. As it grew it took on a larger diversity of members, and differences of opinion

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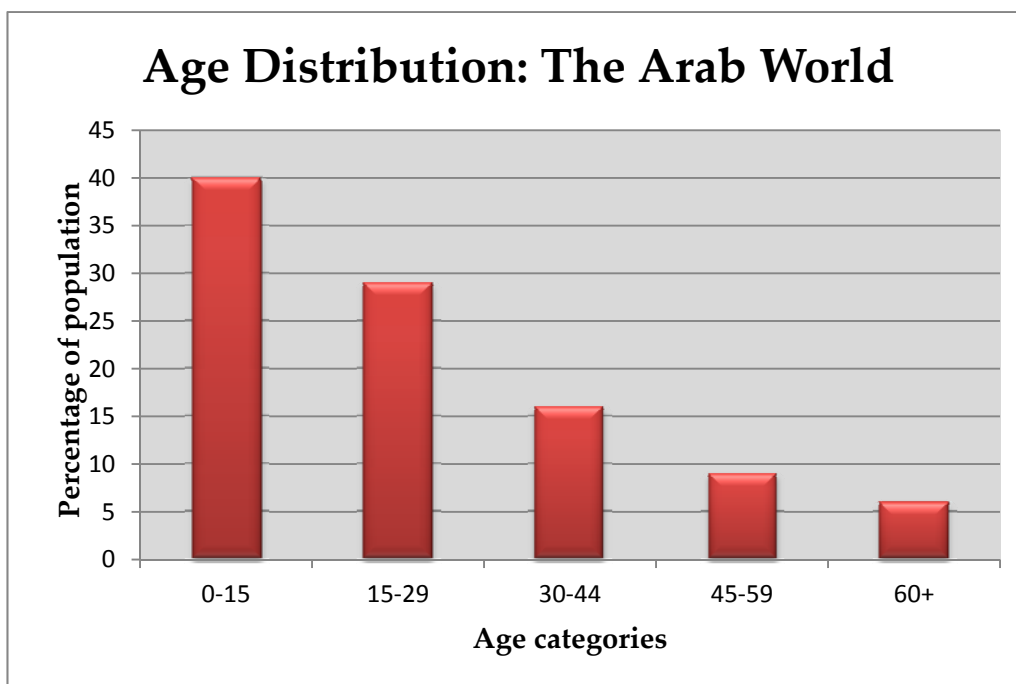
<sup>4</sup> Author's interviews with several members of Egyptian opposition groups

<sup>5</sup> Author's interview with a founding member of *Kefaya*

began between the youth and the older members of the organization.<sup>6</sup> In time, the youth groups began to form groups of their own and use new forms of activism, specifically internet activism, to bring attention to themselves and their messages of opposition to the government. The April 6<sup>th</sup> Youth Movement, now widely regarded as one of the key organizers of the protests in 2011, was one of these groups.

### 2.1.3 The youth bulge and economic reasons for the Arab revolts

Across the Arab World, high birth rates combined with steadily decreasing death rates due to improved access to health care, have increased populations to economically unsustainable levels..



*Data from the World Bank*

At the same time, economic growth has continued to be sluggish and unemployment and underemployment rates – especially for youth have soared. In the last 10-15 years, despite improved levels of economic growth, levels of unemployment among young people have not decreased significantly. The global economic downturn in 2008 affected the Arab World particularly badly with youth unemployment rates especially increasing dramatically.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid

The cumulative effect is large portions of the population under the age of 30 and unemployed or underemployed, creating significant social and economic pressures.

#### **2.1.4 Khalid Said and Mohammed Bouazizi – the triggers to the revolts**

On June 6<sup>th</sup> 2010, a young man Khalid Said was beaten to death by Egyptian security forces in Alexandria, Egypt. A Facebook group brought attention to his death. His story enflamed the growing discontent in Egypt, and led to the new type of silent protests by young men and women in Alexandria and Cairo. On the 17<sup>th</sup> of December 2010 in the small town of Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia, a young market trader called Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire and later died. His act of martyrdom was viewed by many Tunisians as motivated by two factors – economic struggles and police corruption – and it led to street protests which less than 1 month later had brought down the entire Tunisian regime. These protests spread to Egypt no less than 2 weeks later, and by mid-February two stalwarts of Arab autocracy - Zine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak - had been removed from office.

#### **2.1.5 Syrian protests**

Opposition in Syria – for years non-existent because of the repression of the regime – was given cause for optimism on the coming to power of Bashar al-Assad in 2000, when highly repressive laws on expression were relaxed. This period, known as the Damascus Spring, did not last long, but from it new opposition groups were formed - but then repressed or forced into exile once again. The importance of this period in the context of the present conflict is open to some debate as organized opposition groups have historically been relatively unsuccessful in putting pressure on the government.

But after the successful revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, and the beginnings of revolts against Gaddafi in Libya, Saleh in Yemen and King Hamad of Bahrain, the first protests in Syria were seen on the 6<sup>th</sup> of March 2011 in the small town of Deraa in the far south of the country. These first protestors were extremely small in number, and they were mostly young boys, under the age of 15 years old. The reaction of the Syrian security forces was in keeping with a police state, but not sensitive to the altered mood of the time. The young boys were arrested, beaten and tortured and when family members complained, they were told, *'You won't be getting your children back. Go home and tell your useless husbands to make you some more.'*<sup>7</sup> The family members themselves were promptly arrested, and from this incident the protests began to spread.

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<sup>7</sup> Starr, Stephen, Revolt in Syria

Thus was set the pattern of the conflict in Syria, and indeed in the Arab World generally. Protests began, not as a coordinated response to a specific set of grievances, but as a spontaneous expression of discontent amongst the poor and disenfranchised youth. Protests escalated in Syria as a response to the violent response of the security forces, but loyalty to the regime – entrenched as it is – persisted, especially among minorities and the wealthier members of society with more to lose from regime change.

After the failure of the police to suppress the initial protests, the Syrian Army was deployed to quell the uprising. Since then, several cities have been besieged and thousands of people killed with the count at the time of writing standing at approximately 36,000 dead.<sup>8</sup> In context, the Libyan civil war is thought to have cost the lives of 20,000 – 30,000 people.<sup>9</sup>

Civilians and army defectors began forming fighting under the banner of the Free Syrian Army, and political opposition around the Syrian National Council and the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change (NCC). However, these groups have struggled to impose their various principles on the mainly spontaneous groups of opposition fighters and activists, and thus the opposition suffers from an incapacitating lack of coherency and clear aims, apart from the downfall of the regime. Recently a new opposition organization has emerged – The Syrian National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces - designed to unite the different elements of the opposition.

#### **2.1.6 Anti-western sentiment and tensions**

During the same period widespread and violent protests occurred throughout the Middle East and North Africa region against a Western film that depicted the Prophet Mohammad in a negative light. At the same time there were revived debates in the international community with regards to the value and implications of western political and military intervention in regional affairs. With several American officials being killed in protests outside the American Consulate in Benghazi, Libya, sentiments moved away from positivistic intervention strategies which support movements calling for democratic change, towards isolating and protective strategies.

Initially, when assessing the scenarios, it remains important to emphasize two key points; firstly, that several key figures within the academic international affairs community have insinuated that the protests in Libya were not sporadic and unorganized but were in fact a vehicle to represent wider political grievances; and secondly that the number of people

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<sup>8</sup> SNC statistics

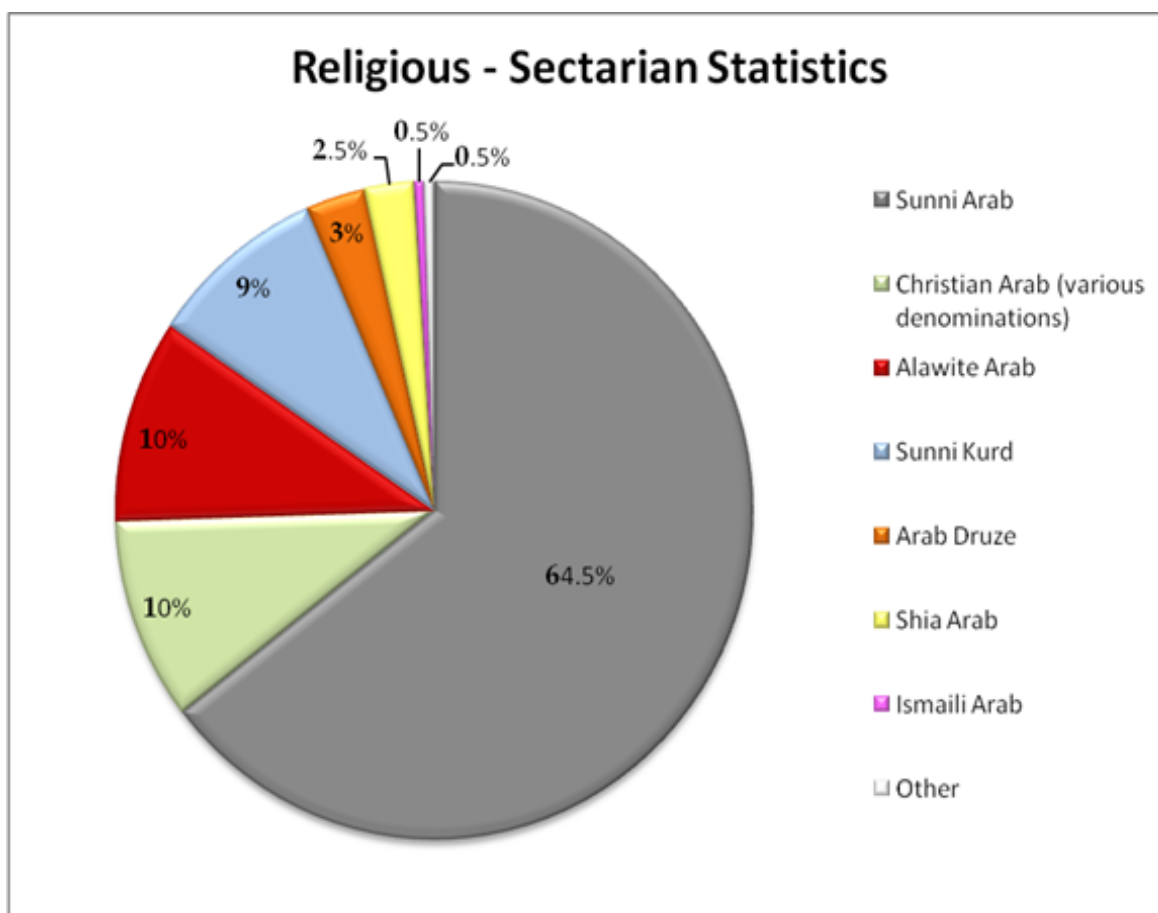
<sup>9</sup> National Transitional Council Statistics

involved in these protests, and the public condemnation of them throughout the MENA region indicates that they are by no means representative of the majority of the population.

### 2.1.7 The rise of Islamism?

Despite recent developments, the initial revolts against entrenched autocracies were not inspired or organized by religion or political Islamism, indeed many Islamist parties joined the fray late - and only once the younger youth groups had begun the struggle<sup>10</sup>. The problem for many revolutionary opposition movements is the transition from enthusiastic hopes for change into solid and well-organized political programs and action. Such political parties and organizations need more help and time to develop legitimate political agendas, whereas political Islam has been organizing for decades.

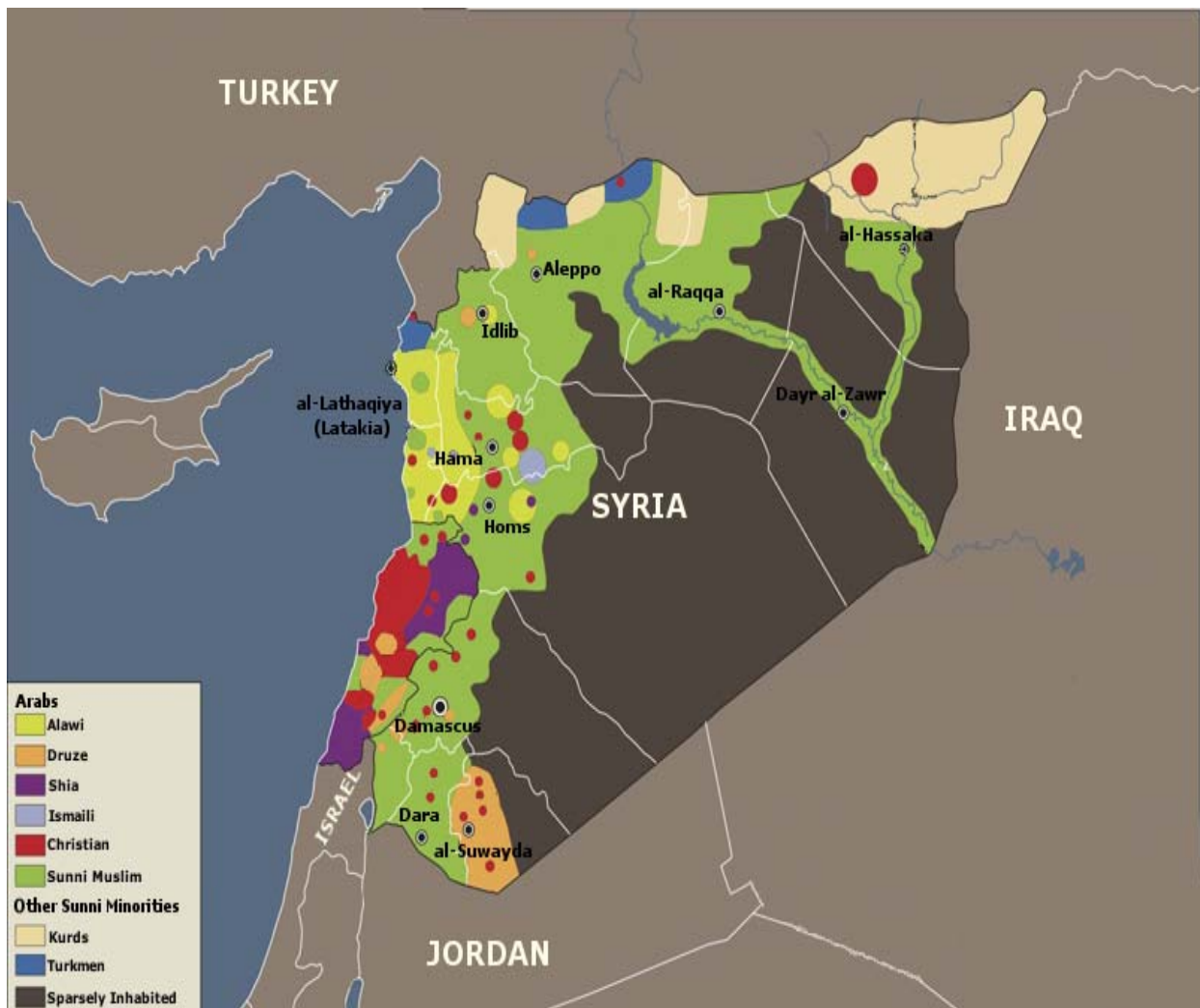
## 2.2 Syrian Demographic Overview<sup>11</sup>



<sup>10</sup> Please see ICOS field research in appendix I

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>

### 2.3 Geographical and Historical Summary of Religious Groups in Syria and Lebanon<sup>12</sup>



#### Sunni Arab

The largest religious-ethnic grouping in Syria is that of Sunni Arabs who constitute approximately 64% of the population. Although Sunni Arabs make up a significant majority of the Syrian population, they tend to be spread relatively evenly across the country. Identity and loyalty amongst Sunni Arabs differs greatly depending on wealth and locality. Damascenes and Aleppines may have loyalties to their cities as much as to a greater Sunni Arab identity, whereas rural people may have loyalty to the tribe and village first and

<sup>12</sup> Map by Limes Rivista Geopolitica. It is important to note that this map is merely an approximation of sectarian concentrations, as in reality, different religious and ethnic groups are remarkably mixed.

foremost. Class and wealth is also a significant determinant of such loyalties, with powerful Sunni families – traditionally the elite in Syria – having an entirely different relationship with the state and other minorities than the poor.

Certainly among Sunni Arabs who live in the region between Hama and Homs – the land of a thousand martyrs – there is a sense of a shared past and one firmly rooted in the history of early Islam. These areas have traditionally shown the greatest resistance to the Alawite state, being relatively middle class but also alienated from the wealthy, bourgeois and more secular elites in Damascus. Sunni Damascenes conversely have generally shown more loyalty to the Alawite-dominated regime, with Damascus as a whole seeing few protests in the first months of the Syrian uprising.

### **Christian Arab**

The Christians are perhaps the oldest of all religious groupings in the country (except for the now tiny Jewish community), having existed in Syria since perhaps the first century AD. The patriarch of Antioch (Antakya now part of the Turkish republic) was considered one of the five patriarchs of early Christianity, with the largest denomination in Syria being the Eastern Orthodox Church of Antioch, followed by the Greek Catholic Melkite Church and the Syrian Orthodox Church. Christians tend to be concentrated in Syria's cities – especially Damascus – and historically Christians have been particularly well educated and during the colonial area were important brokers for the imperial powers.

Christians have been relatively prominent in the Ba'thist regime since the coup in 1962, taking key positions in many governments, and being typically favored by the Alawites, especially since the Muslim Brotherhood inspired Sunni uprising in 1982. Christians make a large proportion of the Syrian middle class. Although there is certainly some debate about the position taken by Christians in general in the current conflict, there is evidence to suggest that Christians, as with many minority communities, have taken a relatively pro-regime stance.

### **Shia Arabs – “Twelvers”**

There are actually different denominations of Shia Arabs - but here 'Shia' refers to 'Twelver' Shia, who make up the vast majority of Shia groups. In modern parlance, it is a convention that Shia refers to 'Twelvers' only. The term 'Twelver' refers to the belief that it was the twelfth 'Imam' (Imam Mohammad ibn Hassan) who went into occultation – in hiding – and is therefore the final Imam, as opposed to other Shias like the 'Sevener' Shia (amongst them the Ismailis) who believe the seventh Imam is the final Imam. Shia communities tend to be dispersed around the country but are particularly in the central region of Syria along with the



Ismailis. Significant groupings also exist in the south west of Syria on the border with Lebanon.

### **Alawites**

Alawites, who dominate the current regime, have historically been almost entirely rural with their heartland being in the north-west of Syria in the provinces of Latakia and Tarsus, where they make up a majority of the population.<sup>13</sup> The Alawites can be considered a syncretic branch of Shia Islam who incorporate a large amount of Shia Muslim beliefs but also many non-Muslim beliefs and practices, and thus generally being considered non-Muslims by Sunni and Shia Muslims alike.

Historically, the Alawites were amongst the most persecuted minorities in the Arab World, with successive groups of Sunni overlords attempting to convert them to orthodox Islam, often at the point of a sword. After centuries of repression, the colonial era brought renewal in the Alawite community, as the French authorities particularly favored them, especially in the military where they formed the core of the colonial troops. Anxieties about Sunni persecution or worse continued throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century; in 1946, leaders of the Alawites community begged the French to stay in control of Syria fearing an Arab nationalism grounded in religious loyalties.

### **Ismaelis**

Ismaelis in Syria are an extremely small community numbering approximately 0.5% of the Syrian population or about 100,000 people. They are a branch of Shia Muslims who believe that it was the seventh Imam was the final Imam (Mohammad Ibn Jaafar), and although theologically similar to Twelver Shia, have shown a different attitude than other minorities to the Alawite government, with the Ismaeli town of Salamiyya protesting against the regime very early on in the uprising.

### **Druze**

The Druze community live in a region spanning Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Israel and although technically a branch of Shia Muslims, have developed so far as to be an entirely autonomous religious-ethnic group, closer to the Alawites than conventional Shia Muslims. Politically, they rarely involve themselves in intra-Arab rivalries and conflict and Israeli Druze have fought for Israel against other Arabs. Most reports about the behavior of the

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<sup>13</sup> It is important to note that while the province of Latakia is majority Alawite, the city of Latakia on the coast is not



Druze in the conflict suggest that they fear what they see as a Sunni uprising. Some reports have even suggested that Druze came out to defend other minorities against the rebels.<sup>14</sup>

## **Kurds**

The Kurdish population in Syria is concentrated in the northern Syrian provinces of Aleppo and Hasakah, on the border with Turkey. The Kurds are an indigenous ethnic group in the modern states of the Kurdistan region and irredentist movements push for the creation of a Kurdish homeland in those areas in which the Kurds make up sizeable populations. Although the large majority of Kurds are Sunni Muslim, Islam has rarely been a motivating and organizing factor for Kurdish political parties or military organizations, with a large number of Kurds – in Turkey especially – being adherents to the spiritualist Alevi group. Despite deep enmity towards the Assad regime, it seems clear that they both fear opposition victory and see the conflict as an opportunity to gain autonomy<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Starr, Stephen, *Revolt in Syria*

<sup>15</sup> Please see section 3.8 for more information

### 3. Syria Dynamics: 'The Suicide State'?

*"In the beginning we had Alawites, Christians and Sunnis demonstrating, but the Christians and Alawites stopped attending protests when we stopped calling for freedom and started calling for the downfall of the regime"*

Sunni man from Hama

#### 3.1 Syria: Birth of a Nation

##### 3.1.1 Greater Syria

Syria as a political entity has a long and complex history. Although it is incorrect to claim – as some historians do – that the colonial era created the very concept of Syria, its current form as a clearly defined nation state was undoubtedly as a consequence of colonialism. Importantly, and despite the great diversity in religious and ethnic groups in the Levant<sup>16</sup>, the (urban) political elites came from within the majority Sunni Muslim population and from the various competing city-states of the plains east of the mountain range running down the spine of the Levant– Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and Hama.

According to most interpretations of the modern history of Syria, it was the shift of power out of the hands of the traditional elite – urban Sunni Arabs – and into the hands of the rural Alawites that is the defining characteristic of the modern Syrian state. This shift began during the time of the French mandate following World War One, wherein the colonial power tended to favor minorities in the colonial authorities and the Alawites were only too happy to oblige.<sup>17</sup>

##### 3.1.2 Alawite supremacy

Under the French mandate however and thanks to their proficiency in warfare, the Alawites were recruited by the French authorities and Alawite units became the most well-organized and effective of any in the French colonial forces. By the mid-1950s the Alawite minority was thought to make up 65% of all non-commissioned officers in the Syrian military, and by the mid-1960s, a highly significant number of commissioned officers.<sup>18</sup> Further, the disintegration of Syrian political life after the end of the ill-fated union with Nasser's Egypt in the United Arab Republic gave military cliques the upper hand against the weakened apparatus of the

<sup>16</sup> Greater Syria: The area comprising of modern day Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and Syria

<sup>17</sup> Khatib, Lina, *Islamic Revivalism in Syria: The Rise and Fall of Ba'thist Secularism*. 2011

<sup>18</sup> Batatu, H, "Some Observations on the Social Roots of Syria's Ruling, Military Group and the Causes for its Dominance," *The Middle East Journal* 35 (Summer 1981)

political parties. After independence in 1946, Alawites were drawn into Syrian politics – dominated as it was more and more by the military – until finally the coup d'état in 1966 by Major General Hafiz al-Assad put an Alawite in charge of the country for the first time in the history of Syria.

Although it initially attempted to gain support amongst the Sunni Arab majority, the Assad regime was undermined by their disastrous intervention in the Lebanese Civil War and other strategic circumstances which created an unprecedented phase of violent Sunni Islamist resistance to Assad. In response, Assad initiated a brutal campaign of repression culminating in the siege and destruction of Hama in February 1982 where approximately 20,000 died.<sup>19</sup>

### 3.1.3 The Assad personality cult

*"Bashar al-Assad is a god to us"*

*Alawite*

Hafiz al-Assad created a most pervasive personality cult combining Ba'athist pan-Arabism with a type of neo-fascism, which persists with the cult of his son Bashar al-Assad to this day.<sup>20</sup> In foreign affairs as in internal politics, Assad's key stratagem was to manipulate regional powers and great powers alike.<sup>21</sup> However when he allied himself with Iran against Iraq in the 1980s as part of his idea of 'strategic depth,' this policy eventually backfired and left the regime isolated in the (Sunni) Arab World. When Hafiz al-Assad died in 2000, he left his son Bashar in control of Syrian regime which was isolated - both internally and externally – from the majority of Sunni Arabs.

Broadly, the key feature of the regime was the remarkable size and scope of the security and intelligence apparatus shaped by decades of personality cults and neo-fascism which emphasized loyalty to the regime, and to the Assad family.<sup>22</sup> The primary weapon the regime used to crush dissent and opposition activity was the use of violence, torture and murder and indeed the entire internal security apparatus of the state had not only become habituated to it, but were ideologically committed to its use.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Zahler, Kathy A. (2009). *The Assads' Syria*. Twenty-First Century Books

<sup>20</sup> See speeches by Rifa' al-Assad

<sup>21</sup> Zahler, Kathy A. (2009). *The Assads' Syria*.

<sup>22</sup> Ismael, Salwa, Violence as a Modality of Government in Syria, LSE Conference September 2012

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

### 3.1.4 Bashar the reactive President

Under such conditions it is extremely surprising that when Bashar al-Assad took power there was genuine belief that he would initiate genuine reform- the so-called 'Damascus Spring.' According to the retired Syrian Brigadier General, Akil Hashim, no-one who genuinely understood the Syrian regime actually believed that any reform was possible.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the 'Damascus Spring' lasted only a few months. The reality of what it meant for a regime whose power rests is the impunity of the security apparatus became apparent and it was crushed.

In fact, during Bashar's Presidency the regime had become even more repressive, less representative and less effective in many areas of governance than under his father.<sup>25</sup> In line with reforms made by other Arab states, the Syrian regime had been slowly cutting back the reach of state institutions as a primary tool for providing welfare, especially in rural areas. This combined with the growing youth bulge of the population to dramatically increase rural-urban migration, and left increasing numbers of youth - especially Sunni - underemployed, alienated and desperate, a phenomenon only too common in the rest of the Arab World. Interestingly, the first areas to see protests in Syria were Sunni urban areas which had large proportions of rural migrants.<sup>26</sup>

### 3.1.5 Alawite entrenchment

Another important phenomenon of the last 10-15 years is the growth of the regional narrative of Sunni dominance, with at the same time the increase in the numbers of conservative, independent Salafist preachers (which Bashar al-Assad decided to allow so long as they did not have a political focus).<sup>27</sup> After 2005, the Assad regime reacted to the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon in two ways. Firstly, the loss of the Lebanese black market precipitated Assad's policy of partial liberalization of the Syrian economy which led to a form of crony-capitalism benefitting members of the business elite, especially Alawites, who had close ties to the regime like Rami Makhluf (see 5.2).<sup>28</sup> Secondly, Bashar al-Assad further entrenched the Alawite power in the upper echelons of the government by replacing Sunni Arabs with his Alawite cronies. For example Abdul Halim Khaddam, a Sunni, was Vice-President of Syria until 2005 when he resigned as a result of having lost influence to Alawites members of the

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<sup>24</sup> Q and A session, LSE, 2012. General Hashim likened reform of the regime to a boy attempting to chop down a branch of a tree only to realising that he is sitting on the branch that will be cut down. That is to say, reform of the regime actually involves dismantling it.

<sup>25</sup> Phillips, Christopher, What went wrong with the Bashar Al-Assad presidency? LSE Conference September 2012

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

<sup>28</sup> Ibid

Ba'th Party. He is now the head of the National Salvation Front in Syria (NSF), an opposition group.<sup>29</sup>

### 3.1.6 Call my bluff

On the eve of the Arab revolts in 2011, the Assad regime was controlled by an Alawite-dominated security and intelligence apparatus entirely resistant to reform whose only instincts to opposition were brutal repression.

Arguably, such policies towards internal dissent were tantamount to a version of 'call-my-bluff' wherein the Syrian regime gambled that no large-scale dissent would occur because the Syrian people knew that the regime would immediately resort to the use of fatal force. Ultimately, Syrian protesters 'called the bluff' of the regime and they indeed did respond with deadly force, which in turn led only to more protests. Such resort to violence is a characteristic of a regime underpinned by an ideology which promotes an 'us vs them' mentality and which has depicted the opposition as "jihadist terrorist groups" from the beginning (a prophecy in some cases increasingly becoming self-fulfilling).

## 3.2 The History of the Syrian Opposition: A house divided

### 3.2.1 Birth of the new opposition and its suppression

On Bashar's coming to power in 2000, a period of intense political and social debate started – the "Damascus Spring", which was led by Syrian intellectuals and culminating in the Statement of 1000, a call for a multi-party democracy in Syria. Many of these intellectuals were prominent in the organizing of the formal opposition at the beginning of this Syrian Uprising in 2011. It would be inaccurate, however to suggest that these intellectuals were responsible for the appearance of the protests on the ground however, and there is little evidence to suggest this was the case.

As well as playing little role in the fomenting protests, the formal political opposition has had little control over the military opposition. This is for two reasons. Firstly, the ruling Ba'th Party (or National Progressive Front) effectively dismembered or co-opted almost all indigenous political opposition over the 40 years of its control over the machinery of the Syrian state. Disenchantment with the regime over the last decade or so has thus been unable to be taken advantage of by organized political parties. The other reason for a divided opposition is that Syrian political geographical has historically tended towards a regional politics related to lack of a unified Syrian nation in the past.

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<sup>29</sup> Zahler, Kathy A. (2009). *The Assads' Syria*

### 3.2.2 Lebanon and the rise of opposition to the regime

As noted, opposition to the rule of Hafiz al-Assad began to surface in the late 1970s and early 1980s, sparked by Syria's intervention in the Lebanese Civil War. Syrian Sunni Arabs increasingly began to identify with the struggle of Lebanese Muslims - both Sunni and Shia - against the minority Christian Maronite government in Beirut, something which was further exacerbated by Hafiz al-Assad's intervention in favor of the Maronites, in part because of the relationship between the Palestinian Liberation Organization and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood<sup>30</sup>. Connections between the traditional elites of Syria – Sunni Arabs - and Sunni Muslims in Lebanon have historically been strong, the political division between Lebanon and Syria having been created in modern times, except for the small Christian Maronite community of Mount Lebanon from where the modern state gets its name.

In fact, Sunni communities in what is now referred to as Greater Syria - most of Lebanon, Syria, Israel (Palestine) and Jordan – have long considered themselves part of the geographical area known as *Al-Sham*. Thus, Assad's intervention in Lebanon brought a new unity between the Sunni Arabs of both countries, and ignited Sunni-Muslim feelings against the predominantly Alawite and secular Syrian regime.

### 3.2.3 The Muslim Brotherhood and the Massacre in Hama

Such feelings united with the growing Islamism in Arab and Muslim politics of the time to give the rebellion strongly religious overtones against the Alawite government. When the revolt came in the late 1970s and early 1980s it was the Muslim Brotherhood which dominated the extensive and sometimes violent campaign against the Syrian state. Another aspect of the rebellion was the extent to which opposition was motivated by the Damascene monopoly on political power in Syria, in a region which historically tended to resemble Italy in its rivalry between competing city states. The Muslim Brotherhood briefly managed to bring together these competing claims to leadership of the opposition in Aleppo, Hama, Homs and others to make the rebellion in the 1980s nationwide, but these geographical divisions were fatal for the rebellion in the end. In 1981, the rebellion was crushed with great violence and the Brotherhood broken, but the brutality and the destruction of the city of Hama seriously damaged the legitimacy of the Assad regime, especially in the eyes of the Sunni Arab community.

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<sup>30</sup> Khatib, Lina, *Islamic Revivalism in Syria: The Rise and Fall of Ba'thist Secularism*. 2011

### 3.2.4 The Syrian regime turns its back on secularism and socialism

The Brotherhood-led revolt highlighted both the growing importance of political Islam in the Arab World and Middle East, and the ongoing discontent of the old Sunni urban mercantile elite. At the same time, the opposition which appeared in various areas of Syrian society convinced the Syrian regime that it needed to impose complete control over society. In this the regime used two methods: suppression and co-optation.<sup>31</sup>

The regime detained hundreds of Brotherhood members, executing a few of them, whilst many others went into exile. Many secular activists were imprisoned as well without trial. All religious institutions were either closed down or subjected to state control and policing. The Syrian regime also brought under control the hitherto independent unions and professional syndicates by corporatizing them under the command of the Ba'ath Party.<sup>32</sup>

The Syrian regime then sought to expand its appeal to counter the economic and ideological discontent which Hafiz al-Assad viewed as the primary reasons for the revolt. Economically, the regime sought alliances with the Sunni Damascene business elite and enacted a selective economic liberalization to strengthen this new alliance.<sup>33</sup> Ideologically, the regime stealthily moved away from its encouragement for aggressive secularism towards the construction of new Islamic institutions and a new moderate Islamism. Thus, the Syrian regime turned its back on secularism by both dropping its promotion of an atheist agenda and re-linking religion and politics.

The consequence of these extensive and intensive attempts to bring all of Syrian society under the control of the regime was to affect the end of Syrian civil society and organized opposition to the regime. It is this which explains the weaknesses and lack of unity of Syrian political opposition as well as the spontaneity of the protests seen in many towns and cities in Syria.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid

<sup>32</sup> Ibid

<sup>33</sup> Ibid

### Variations in opposition to the regime- three towns

*"I hate the Free Syrian Army – they brought death and destruction to our homes and now they are gone leaving us here with the regime soldiers.... when the army comes and they see people on the streets with guns and who are shooting of course they will try and kill them. They think this is their job. They think they are terrorists."*

Resident of Saqba, February 2012<sup>34</sup>

Despite attempts by opposition groups and activists to display a broad and united front of opposition to the regime the reality is often far more complex. As well as this, the Syrian regime has displayed far more sensitivity to the differing types of protest than has been claimed by opposition activists and that media coverage has shown.

In the city of Jadideh Artouz, 11 miles south of Damascus, protests began around June 2011 and occurred daily for at least a year. However security forces - despite their proximity to the protestors – by and large allowed the protests to go on throughout the period, until July 19<sup>th</sup> 2012 when rebel fighters attacked a police station in the town with RPGs, killing five policemen.<sup>35</sup>

In Yabrud a few miles north of Damascus, opposition demonstrations have been going on since summer 2011, with the flag of the revolution flying above the town. The town has been abandoned by the regime and allowed to remain in open opposition to the regime because it does not attempt to join into the wider struggle to bring down the regime and residents have not allowed it to become a base for the FSA.<sup>36</sup>

Saqba is a working-class suburb of Damascus and saw continued protests throughout 2011 and into 2012. In February 2012, members of the Free Syrian Army had participated in a demonstration against the regime. One week after the demonstration the Syrian government attacked the suburb and many locals were killed during the security forces' re-occupation of Saqba.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Starr, Stephen, Revolt in Syria

<sup>35</sup> [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/07/23/the\\_fog\\_of\\_civil\\_war](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/07/23/the_fog_of_civil_war)

<sup>36</sup> [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/in-syria-an-oasis-from-the-war/2012/07/15/gJQA96xCnW](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/in-syria-an-oasis-from-the-war/2012/07/15/gJQA96xCnW)

<sup>37</sup> Starr, Stephen, Revolt in Syria



### 3.3 Islam, Islamism and Jihadism

#### 3.3.1 Islamism and its origins

Amongst the most important questions in the discussion of the Syrian conflict and the nature of the opposition is the role and nature of Islamists fighting against the Assad regime. The difficulty of answering this question is in part related to the highly diverse nature of Islamism itself or more appropriately, the use and understanding of the terms 'Islamist,' 'Jihadist' and 'Salafist.'

The problem for opposition groups has partly been their new-found populism which leaves them open to the wider manipulations and control from all sides, including violent extremists. There is a fundamentally altered political dynamic in the region, where Wahhabi and Salafi ideologies are now part of the political arena and democratic process.

Also in certain cases, some Arab dictatorships encouraged, cultivated and openly supported these groups to oppose and destabilize competitor Arab states. The Syrian Ba'thist regime for example, reportedly aided and encouraged Syrian Islamists to fight the Americans and the new Iraqi state after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003. In the 1980s, Saddam's regime aided the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in their insurrection against Hafez al-Assad.<sup>38</sup>

Scholars of political Islam have quite understandably and correctly focused on the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (*al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun*), the first political Islamist movement and one viewed as being the mother of *Salafi* Islam. A more fundamentalist form of political Islamism, Salafism has been the basis for the most violent and extreme jihadist groups with which the Western world is well-acquainted. Before it was suppressed by President Nasser in the 1950s and 1960, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood took the form of an extra-parliamentary movement, resorting to violence and assassinations, such forms of political action laying the groundwork for the activities of other Islamists groups.<sup>39</sup>

#### 3.3.2 The History of Syrian Islamism and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood

The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, despite being an offshoot of the Egyptian *Ikhwan*<sup>40</sup> was radically different. The Syrian Ikhwan was – unlike the Egyptian variant – one which participated fully in Syrian parliamentary politics – whilst Syrian politics were still parliamentary. It was never an irredentist fanatical Muslim political force and it was happy to

<sup>38</sup> Khatib, Lina, *Islamic Revival in Syria: The Rise and Fall of Ba'thist Secularism*

<sup>39</sup> Lia, B, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt*, Oxford University Press, 1998

<sup>40</sup> Ikhwan means 'brothers' or 'brotherhood' in Arabic

make coalitions with non-religious parties depending on the political situation of the time.<sup>41</sup> The fundamental reason for this is that the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood came from within the traditional urban bourgeois class – unlike the Egyptian or Jordanian Brotherhood.

Until 1963, the Syrian Brotherhood participated in several governments and was represented by a large number of members of parliament. After the Ba'thist Coup in 1964, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood was banned and the leadership responded by bombing government premises and Ba'th Party offices.

Despite attempts by the Syrian regime to weaken the Syrian Brotherhood by making alliances with their main support base – the Sunni mercantile elite in the major cities of Damascus, Aleppo, Hama and Homs – the *Ikhwan* was able to maintain widespread support amongst the urban Sunni community in Syria and even consolidate itself amongst the professional classes.<sup>42</sup> As has been mentioned, Brotherhood-led opposition reached its crescendo in the 1980s and was finally defeated at the great bloodletting in Hama in 1982.

Since then, the Syrian Brotherhood has returned towards a more conciliatory approach with the government whilst deepening dialogue with other more secular minded opposition groups. As one of the oldest participators in democracy in Syria, it was no surprise when the Brotherhood announced the National Honor Pact which expressed the Brotherhood's commitment to democracy. In 2005 the Brotherhood endorsed the Damascus Declaration for democratic change.<sup>43</sup>

### 3.3.3 The Brotherhood in the Syrian Conflict

Since the beginning of the conflict, the Brotherhood has continued to state that foreign and indeed western intervention is the only solution to the crisis and requested Turkey to establish protected humanitarian zones in Turkish territory.<sup>44</sup>

Despite the Muslim Brotherhood being perhaps the biggest single opposition party, the Brotherhood had very little role in the protests. Like other opposition groups, they have struggled to assert authority in the protests and in the subsequent more violent uprising. Like other organised political parties, the Brotherhood has suffered from years of suppression from the Syrian state whilst being in exile disconnected from the Syrian population at large. Finally, the Brotherhood suffers from its longstanding affinity within the urban elites, whereas it

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<sup>41</sup> Teitelbaum, J, The Muslim Brotherhood and the Struggle for Syria, Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 2004

<sup>42</sup> Ibid

<sup>43</sup> Carnegie Centre for International Peace

<sup>44</sup> Ibid

seems clear that recent opposition to the regime appeared first amongst the urban and rural poor, especially in areas with high number of rural-urban migrants.

### 3.3.4 Religion and the regime

After the crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s, organized and effective Islamist opposition to the Assad regime ceased to exist. As explained earlier this was partly as a consequence of the co-optation of the religious agenda by the Assad regime. The Syrian government facilitated the growth of new pro-regime religious organizations – much of them initially Sufi *tariqas* – and moved the regime and the Ba'th Party away from the definitely secular agenda espoused by its founding ideologues.

The other aspect of the new alliance that the Syrian government made with religious organization was in its use of radical Islamist groups as proxies to expand its regional power and legitimize its increasingly tyrannical grip on power. In the 1980s and early 90s the Syrian regime forged alliances with Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Palestine, and facilitated the creation of the Shia militia, Hizbullah in Lebanon.

The Syrian government's use of Arab Islamist groups served two purposes for the regime. The first was the use of these groups as a foreign policy tool – in the continued struggle against Israel for example. The second reason was to control the Arab Islamism which had threatened it during the Muslim Brotherhood revolt and to direct its radical energies into serving the Syrian regime. In this way, alliances with Sunni Islamist resistance groups helped to strengthen the regime's credentials amongst Arabs and propagate the Ba'th Party's pan-Arab vision.

### 3.3.5 Salafism

The problem with the regime's supporting of Islamists resistance movements was that the regime was steadily incubating and strengthening groups whose fundamentalist ideas were likely to become inimical to the Alawite regime. The Alawite's Shia origins, the relative secularism of the Ba'th party, the support for the Shia group Hizbullah and the increasingly strong alliance with Iran put the regime on a collision course with those who saw Shia and especially Alawites as suspect, and an alliance with Iran inexcusable. This recent phenomenon in the Arab and Islamic world has been generally labelled 'Salafism.'

The two most high profile groups of this type are *Jund as-Sham* (The Army of the Levant) and *Ghuraba as-Sham* (Strangers of the Levant).<sup>45</sup> Although, the origins of both *Jund as-Sham* and *Ghuraba as-Sham* are not well-understood, it is though that these groups were created or at least supported by the Syrian regime to fight against the Americans in Iraq. However despite the lack of understanding of the role of Salafist doctrine on these groups and whether they are of genuine al-Qaeda origin, their tactics and doctrine now show clear espousals of al-Qaeda methods and ideology.

However, not only has the violence and repression of the Syrian conflict left a soil ripe for the mutation towards sectarianism and the spread of fundamentalist Salafi ideas, it is important to recognize that the social category in which the uprising took place was also highly receptive to Salafism: the rural and rural-urban migrant poor. The strength of Salafism, compared for example to a more urbane and scholarly Islamism such as that of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, is its inherent flexibility despite the alleged rigidity of the creed. Similar to some forms of Evangelical Protestantism, Salafism is highly literate or clerical and affords freedom to the individual believer compared to long-established institutionalized Islam. In this way, Salafism in Syria – although repressed – has an immediate appeal to the poor and ill-educated. Salafism is also flexible and pragmatic in politics and has been shown to take different approaches to autocracies – sometimes strongly opposing them, sometimes being pro-regime but more often being quietist.

### 3.3.5 Neo-Salafist mutations and al-Qaeda in the Syrian conflict

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, the complexities of religiously inspired ideology defy easy categorization. Whereas most may wish for Syria to be an Islamic state, there are genuine disagreements as to what the nature of this state should be. Certain Salafists may be enthusiastic democrats or least happy to use democracy for their own ends (as in the Salafi Noor Party in Egypt) whereas some may consider democracy prohibited (*haram*) according to Islamic precepts. A vast majority of Salafists amongst the Syrian rebels believe undoubtedly that they are fighting a Jihad against a heretical (*murtad*) and oppressor (*taaghi*) regime but are unlikely to genuinely embrace the global Jihad of al-Qaeda. In the circumstances of the conflict however, differences such as these matter less than fighting effectiveness and thus an al-Qaeda-linked network is able to prove that their effectiveness in their delivery of weapons for example, this is in some way a proof of their ideological credentials also.

In sum, neo-Salafism has the initiative and has been able to adapt to the nature of the conflict and the weaknesses of the formal political opposition. As has been shown, the spontaneous

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<sup>45</sup> Wikas, "Battling the Lion of Damascus: Syria's Domestic Opposition and the Assad Regime," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2007

appearance of opposition to the regime was a function of the lack of ideology and organization. The FSA and the political opposition struggled to provide unity of command on a tactical or strategic level. This combined with their inability to effectively arm the rebels, alongside the increasingly brutal crackdowns on the rebels by the regime left an ideological, political and organizational void that a sectarian and Salafist current has been well-suited to fill.

Other circumstances have given them further advantages. The increased violence in Iraq with the open Syrian-Iraqi border allows for relatively free movement and the shared struggle of Iraq and Syrian Sunni groups colors the conflict as one of the entire Fertile Crescent.<sup>46</sup> A certain time after the first appearance of armed resistance against the Syrian regime, steadily increasing numbers of young, armed men fighting independently of Free Syrian Army units were seen on the battlefield in Syria, which became a highly streamed topic on the jihadist online forums. There has been a steady expansion in the use of car bombings against key regime target<sup>47</sup> and recently bombings in minority areas. Regardless of the al-Qaeda element, the mainstream Sunni insurgency has a growing Sunni Islamist/Salafist element is by its nature potentially highly sectarian. This indeed is the real danger of growing jihadism in Syria – the potential for it to reinforce sectarian divisions which are closely linked to religion.<sup>48</sup>

### 3.3.6 The other 'Islamists' in Syria: Traditional religion and the 'Ulema'

With fears and stereotypes stoked by the narratives of al-Qaeda and violent, fundamentalist Islamism, there has been little focus on the role or potential roles of the traditional Islamic scholars and men of learning. The basis of Sunni Islam in Syria especially is the Sunni scholars of long-established traditions, with lineages going back to the Prophet Mohammad. It was the indeed these scholars who wrote the histories of the region and endowed it with the religious significance natural for what was the seat of the first Islamic caliphate. The two towns of Homs and Hama, sitting as they do only a few kilometers from each other on the fertile plain known as 'the land of thousand martyrs' from the first Muslim conquests have for years provided the bedrock of opposition, with the opposition having often been organized by religious scholars.<sup>49</sup>

Syria's traditional religious scholars, or 'Ulema' have for years taken complex and differing positions towards the Assad regime, and the regime has been genuinely forced to tolerate

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<sup>46</sup> Civil Military Fusion Centre

<sup>47</sup> Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, "Inside Syria: The Rebel Call for Arms and Ammunition," *Guardian*, December, 11, 2011

<sup>48</sup> Making distinctions between different types of jihadists and Islamists is very difficult but a neat distinction is between those whose Islamism still uses the state as a focus of loyalty (local Islamist) and those who do not (a global Islamist). An example of the first type is an affiliate of the Muslim Brotherhood and the second an affiliate of al-Qaeda.

<sup>49</sup> Hussain, T, The Vital Role of the Ulama in post-Assad Syria, *New Statesman*

what they normally would not in terms of dissent because of their status as guardians of religion. At the beginning of the Syrian protests, the leading Sunni Ulema were divided in what approach should be to the protests, but two key Damascene clerics spoke out in those early days - Osama al-Rifa'i and Krayyim Rajih.<sup>50</sup> Interestingly, the Assad regime hesitated because of the authority the two men and concern about moving against the religious establishment itself, and it took several weeks before the two men were expelled from the pulpit.

In the hotbeds of the revolution, a large majority of the Ulema have sided with the revolutionaries, have been prominent in the organization of demonstrations – such as Baniyas - and many clerics have played key roles in the creation of the local grassroots organizing committees, such as the Revolutionary Councils (See 6.5) – in Homs.<sup>51</sup> Importantly, although leading clerics have often been supportive of the revolution and of the armed struggle, they have almost always stood out strongly against sectarian killings.<sup>52</sup>

What is most important about Syrian Ulema is that they are able to take different – almost contrary - positions towards the regime and indeed those opinions still remain valid within the Syrian scholarly tradition. Some, like Sheikh Ramadan Buti have remained pro-government throughout. Others like Rifa'i in Damascus despite his criticism of the government did not openly side with the rebels, an approach that can be labeled 'gradualist' or indeed 'hedging their bets.'

Finally there those scholars from Homs and Deraa like Sheikh Sayasne, Abazayd and Sheikh Mohammad al-Yaqoubi who are behind the opposition.<sup>53</sup> In this way, both 'government' and opposition scholars can be celebrated are indeed are.<sup>54</sup> It is this ability to cross the political divide which stands the traditional Syrian Ulema in good stead to be leaders of the opposition, something that certainly lacks precedent in the last century in Syria. Their connections with Alawite scholars puts them in a strong position to dampen fears of sectarian reprisals and should be cultivated to negotiate a way out of violence and put pressure on the regime.

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<sup>50</sup> Pierret, T, The Role of the Mosque in the Syrian Revolution

<sup>51</sup> Ibid

<sup>52</sup> Ibid

<sup>53</sup> Hussain, T, The Vital Role of the Ulama in post-Assad Syria, New Statesman

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

### 3.4 Sectarian Dynamics: A bloodbath on the horizon

#### 3.4.1 The big taboo

*"Alawites were my friends and neighbors, but no one should ask me to live side by side with them again."*

Radwan Abu-Alsha, commander with the Tawheed Brigade in Aleppo.

Another key to understanding the Syrian conflict and its resolution is the understanding of its complex sectarian dynamics. For foreign as well as domestic commentators, there is great debate over the correct characterization of the Syrian regime; according to some it has protected society from its potential for sectarian violence whilst for others it has been manipulating tensions for its own ends. A key factor when discussing the question of sectarianism in Syria is that discussion of it has been one of the biggest taboos in Syrian society over the decades, to the extent that even the Syrian opposition has found it difficult to talk about it.<sup>55</sup> The reason for this taboo under the Assad regime is because of the dominance of the regime by one sect – the Alawites. The group feeling (or 'asabiyya) amongst the Alawites became, according to some, the dominant theme of Ba'thism in Syria after Assad came to power in 1970.<sup>56</sup>

#### 3.4.2 Minority anxiety

There are two key aspects on the issue of sectarianism in Syria currently. One is the anxiety of minorities over an uprising which is predominantly Sunni. Christians in Aleppo, Damascus and the Diaspora for example, have tended to be amongst Assad's strongest backers. So far, although there have been no known cases of opposition violence killing Christians, the weight of evidence suggests that they greatly fear Islamists among the opposition and have been largely convinced by the regime's propaganda in denouncing the rebels as such. The recent misfortunes that have befallen Christians in Iraq and indeed across the Muslim World only exacerbate these fears.

The second important element is the strengthening and deepening of anti-Alawite sentiment. Although opposition activists have tried to downplay this phenomenon, it is clear that as the killing of Sunni civilians has multiplied, outward signs of hatred towards Alawites have

<sup>55</sup> International Crisis Group, *Uncharted Waters*

<sup>56</sup> Piper, Daniel, *In the Path of God: Islam and Political Power*, New York, 1983



become more common. Clichés about the savagery of the Alawites have been articulated, with the (Alawite) regime's brutality being seen as an expression of an Alawite ethos.<sup>57</sup>

### 3.4.3 Alawite 'otherness'

Amongst all constituencies, the Alawite community- usually estimated to be 10% of the Syrian population - tend to have the most long-standing fears of communal disharmony.<sup>58</sup> Centuries of oppression and worse at the hands of their Sunni rulers coupled with their association with the current leadership, means that they, more than any group feel at risk of sectarian aggression. The history of Alawite and Sunni Muslim antagonism can be traced back to the Ottoman Empires and possibly even before.<sup>59</sup> As a syncretic, Shia sect they under continual persecution by other Muslims with constant attempts to convert them being made by their more orthodox Sunni forebears. Throughout the Ottoman Empire they remained isolated in their mountain villages in north-west Syria (similar to the Maronites in Lebanon) but with the encroachment of the modern Ottoman state in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Alawites had largely become tenants to rich Sunni Muslim landowners and were one of the poorest groups in Syria.<sup>60</sup>

Sentiments like this as well as the historical feeling of the 'otherness' of the Alawite community have resurfaced. This feeling is heightened by the actions and behavior of the Alawite community itself, as discussed later. As well as its seemingly intractable support for the current regime, Alawite communities have begun to isolate themselves from the rest of society, with rumors of Alawite plans to move *en masse* to their heartland in the north-west province of Latakia becoming more substantiated every day. A further problem is the inability of the opposition to put forward a plan to combat these tendencies, or even simply to admit that this is a problem.<sup>61</sup>

As conflict has intensified, Alawites have felt increasingly insecure with Alawite parts of Damascus being turned into closed strongholds run by local Alawite militia. Alawites have invariably sided with the government over depictions of events, often publically voicing support for reforms whilst privately confessing that they saw "destroying", "eradicating" and

<sup>57</sup> Crisis Group Interview, armed opposition coordinator, Homs, May 2012

<sup>58</sup> Nir Rosen, "Syria's Alawite activists stuck in the Middle," Al Jazeera, 8<sup>th</sup> March 2012.

<sup>59</sup> Seale, P. *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East*, University of California Press, 1989

<sup>60</sup> Ibid

<sup>61</sup> International Crisis Group, *Uncharted Waters*. A Druze intellectual described his feelings for Alawites: "We are witnessing unspeakable forms of violence. I saw a video in which *shabbiha* stand around a corpse that they crucified on a table, singing '*shabbiha lil-abad li'uyunak ya assad*' [we'll be *shabbiha* for ever, for your eyes oh Assad] while they desecrate the body. I continue to have some Alawite friends but as a result of this have become allergic to their ideas, even their accent. Just hearing it makes me feel nervous. I am well-educated and moderate. I force myself to maintain contact with these friends. But, deep down, I despise and hate them". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, anti-regime activist, May 2012.

“cleansing” (in the case of Homs) as the only real solutions.<sup>62</sup> To this extent, the Alawites have been increasingly displaying signs of seeing themselves as a distinct sect in society, and by extension, the regime identified as the protector of Alawites rather than one of Syrian national interest.<sup>63</sup> Also therefore, the regime itself is becoming seen to a greater or lesser extent – amongst Alawites and non-Alawites – as a preserve of Alawite power over the country and a ‘militia’ regime in all but name.

This is seen no more so in the use of the Alawite paramilitary force - known as the *Shabbiha* (ghosts) – to act as the street-level bully-boys of the regime, killing, beating and torturing opposition members. According to some theories, the *Shabbiha* were created when the regime granted the freedom to Alawites prisoners in return for unswerving loyalty to the regime and the use of brutal tactics to enforce the will of the state.

#### 3.4.4 Shia mistrust

Perhaps the most poisonous of all sectarian problems in Syria are not those of anti-Alawite feelings, but anti-Shia sentiment. The prejudice against the Shia in Syria cannot be understood without taking into account the mounting Sunni-Shia antagonism in the region; Hizbollah and Lebanon; the conflict in Iraq; and Iranian backing for the Assad regime. So far there have been few examples of anti-Shia violence (although this could be related to where the Shia community tend to live), but feelings towards Shia have deteriorated dramatically.

An account of the massacre of Sunni families at Karem Zaitun illustrates this:

*“The killing of those families was performed by, or designed as a present to, Hizbollah. In their Shiite worldview, the more blood is spilled, the sooner the [disappeared Imam] Mahdi Muntazar will reappear [announcing the end of time]. So they used blunt knives to slit the throats and carve up the bodies.”<sup>64</sup>*

#### 3.4.5 Christian loyalty

Out of all groups, as a whole Christians may be amongst the wealthiest in Syria and indeed have been very successful under Assad rule. After the Muslim Brotherhood revolt in 1982, Hafiz al-Assad made a significant effort to cultivate and entrench Christian support for the regime. Increasing fears of Sunni domination and extremism further strengthened the support for the regime amongst Christians.

<sup>62</sup> Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012.

<sup>63</sup> Crisis Group, Syria's Mutating Conflict

<sup>64</sup> International Crisis Group, Syria's Mutating Conflict

In the first year and more of the protests and uprisings against the regime, this support arguably became even greater as some of the tactics of opposition militants played into the hands of government propaganda castigating the opposition as armed, jihadist gangs.<sup>65</sup> Consequently, rumors of Sunni Arabs targeting Christians spread quickly through Christian communities throughout the early months of the uprising and Christians seemed to display genuine support for the regime.<sup>66</sup> Rural and urban Christians alike displayed intense fear of the opposition and the consequences of their victory, with George Sabra, a Christian member of the Syrian National Council castigated by Syrian Christians for his involvement in the opposition.<sup>67</sup>

### 3.5 The forgotten issue: wealth, class and family in Syria

#### 3.5.1 The Ba'ath Party loses its moorings

From its founding in the 1940s, the ruling Syrian Ba'th Party was ostensibly both socialist and secular. In the tradition of French *laïcité*, it viewed organized religion as one of the key stumbling blocks to progress and the dismantling of clerical authority viewed the key social transformation necessary to bring Syria into the modern world. In the socio-economical sphere, the vital transformation was viewed as breaking the dominance of the feudal urban (Sunni) elite in favor of the development the impoverished countryside.<sup>68</sup> As well as much of the intelligentsia, the key Ba'thist constituency was the rural peasantry – both Sunni and non-Sunni. The Ba'th Party saw the centralized state and the public sector as the engine of transformation and by extension, the private sector as reactionary. (As has been explained earlier in this chapter, it was for these two reasons – the Ba'th Party's attack on religion and on the power of the traditional urban elites - that the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood became the main opposition force to the Assad regime in the late 1970s and early 1980s.)

From a socio-economic perspective the key change in the position of the Ba'thist regime since the Brotherhood revolt of the 1980s was to move away from policies which supported the economic development of the countryside towards those which aimed to make alliances with the urban elites. In the Eighth Regional Congress of Syrian Ba'ath in 1985, the first steps towards policies aimed at cultivating a relationship between the state and the urban business elite through tentative economic liberalization and relaxation of state controls took place.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> However, it is still unclear as to who is responsible the bombings in Damascus on 23<sup>rd</sup> December and 6<sup>th</sup> January and in Aleppo on 10<sup>th</sup> February. Indeed some journalists consider the regime to be responsible although this is far from proven.

<sup>66</sup> Starr, Stephen, Revolt in Syria

<sup>67</sup> [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/07/23/the\\_fog\\_of\\_civil\\_war](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/07/23/the_fog_of_civil_war)

<sup>68</sup> Khatib, Lina, Islamic Revival in Syria: The Rise and Fall of Ba'thist Secularism

<sup>69</sup> Ibid

In the 1990s and 2000s further economic liberalization took place, partly as a result of serious economic crises, signaling a further retreat of state institutions (these trends were mirrored across the Arab World). During the period from 1984 to 2004, the official unemployment in Syria increased by 4% to 12%, as the public sector shed jobs and the private sector was unable to take up the slack, especially considering the persistently high birth rates.<sup>70</sup> Economic liberalization measures also included the cutting of subsidies on basic commodities which affected the poor particularly badly.<sup>71</sup>

### 3.5.2 The rural deficit

In rural areas – traditionally the key support base of the Syrian Ba'ath – people were most badly affected as the government became less redistributionist. The government's liberalization policies extended to the agriculture and more land was turned over to big landowners and intensively farmed. During the first half of the 2000s, the percentage of people living on less than US\$1 a day increased at ten times the rate of those living in urban areas.<sup>72</sup> Possibly the most destructive event for the Syrian countryside was the long drought from 2006 to 2011, the worst in the recorded history of Syria. It wiped out the livelihoods of approximately 800,000 people and in north-east Syria, 85% of the livestock died.<sup>73</sup>

In the last few years the impoverishment of the Syrian countryside combined with high birth rates pushed large numbers of people from the country to Syrian cities, especially Aleppo and Damascus. With this in mind, it is unsurprising that the Syrian uprising began in poor urban areas where large numbers of rural migrants resided and in smaller, more rural towns. Protests in Damascus, for example were very limited for the first few months of the uprising and when they occurred, were generally restricted to poor and migrant neighborhoods.

### 3.5.3 Ba'thism is big business

In Syria, politics has historically been played out by a number of key notable families, and although the role of families and their geographical and sectarian origins has been somewhat subsumed by the state in Syria, the family structure is still among the most important structures in Syrian politics and business life, especially among the urban elite. The recent history of Syria has seen the state allot differing degrees of freedom to private (family-run) businesses, but as shown, the last years – especially since the succession to power of Bashar – has seen greater freedom given to the private enterprise.<sup>74</sup> However, the state has attempted to ensure that these companies remained on close terms with the public sector and the

<sup>70</sup> Al-Laithy, "Poverty in Syria: 1996-2004," UNDP Report, June 2005

<sup>71</sup> Ibid

<sup>72</sup> Ibid

<sup>73</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-20659573>

<sup>74</sup> Haddad, B, "Enduring Legacies: The Politics of Private Sector Development in Syria," in Demystifying Syria

government, and in this way the government has to come to depend more heavily on this collection of merchants and industrialists.<sup>75</sup>

According to academic Salwa Ismael, there are two types of families among the business classes; those which were prominent before the Ba'thist coup and those which became successful as a consequence of it.<sup>76</sup> The first group included the Qalla, Sabbagh, Qabban and Haffar families and were probably never very supportive of the Assad regime or the state in general, especially considering the nationalizations of 1960 which devastated many established families.<sup>77</sup> The second type of big-business family, Ismael refers to as the 'Children of Authority' who owe their success at least partly to the Assad regime. These include the Nahas, Joud and Tlas families and even more directly, the Makhoul, Shalish and Shawkat families (see 5.2).<sup>78</sup> The 'Children of Authority' has particular interests in the import of new high-value products for the wealthy such as computers, telecommunications and network logistics.<sup>79</sup>

Although it is too simplistic to say that elites (in Damascus or in other main cities) simply feared the revolution as one stemming from the poor and are thus siding with the regime, fear of chaos, civil war and the nature of the opposition are some of the key drivers for their continued support of the Alawite regime. Undoubtedly, much of the business elite would prefer a more liberal society and economy, but for wealthier Syrians, the question is whether the alternative to the regime can bring a change to Syria that does not involve destroying their livelihoods.<sup>80</sup>

### 3.5.4 Support for the opposition from big business

Although it is undoubtedly the case that much of the Syrian elite has remained broadly supportive of the regime in the conflict, the relationship between big-business and the regime may be rather more complex. On coming to power, Bashar expanded the policies of liberalization started by his father, Hafez based on the idea of the private sector being a second engine of growth.

As explained above, this partial liberalization policy created a new type of crony capitalism partly dependent on the state. However, there were clear signs that powerful businessmen were starting to emerge on the political scene as well. These powerful businessmen became

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<sup>75</sup> Ismail, S (2009) 'Changing Social Structure, Shifting Alliances and Authoritarianism in Syria.' In: Lawson, Fred, (ed.), *Demystifying Syria*.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid

<sup>77</sup> Starr, S, *Revolt in Syria*

<sup>78</sup> Ibid

<sup>79</sup> Ibid

<sup>80</sup> Starr, Stephen, *Revolt in Syria*

members of the People's Assembly but their independence was striking. They made demands for modernization, privatization and liberalized markets.<sup>81</sup> Ultimately, such demands were not viable in the confounds of a police state, but they show that Bashar's liberalization measures had, inadvertently, begun to create a new liberal business class which had the potential to oppose the regime.<sup>82</sup>

### 3.5.5 Government missteps

In September 2011, the Syrian government showed its instinct to revert inwards, back to the time of Hafiz al-Assad by banning all imports of goods which had to pay a customs tax of 5% or more so as to protect its dwindling foreign currency reserves. This move created panic among much of the business class as those families who had spent years cultivating contacts within the government to be able to sell these high-value, sought-after imported goods risked losing their entire revenues.<sup>83</sup>

The support of the big Syrian business interests and families is vital for continued survival of the Assad regime. Although there is little evidence yet that big families have abandoned the regime there have been some notable examples of their importance. The Tlas, a ('Children of Authority') Sunni family with substantial business interests and one which contributed several individuals to the Syrian Ba'thist regime is an interesting case. Mustafa Tlas served as the Minister of Defence from 1972 to 2002 and his sons Manaf (a General) and Firas (a business tycoon) were both prominent members in the Assad regime.

Manaf defected to the opposition in 2012,<sup>84</sup> with Firas and Mustafa, according to reports, permanently outside of Syria. An interesting aspect of the Tlas family in relation to the Syrian conflict is that they hail from Rastan, a city between Homs and Hama in central Syria, which saw some of the first uprisings against the government and has seen some of the strongest resistance to the government in the entire conflict. In 2005, the Syrian Sunni politician Abdul Halim Khaddam left office as Vice-President of the republic, a post he had held from 1984, was replaced with an Alawite and went into exile to found the opposition group, the NSF. Khaddam comes from the north western town of Baniyas in Tartus province, and this interestingly was one of the first towns in Syria to experience large-scale protests, despite its size and relative obscurity.

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<sup>81</sup> Khatib, Lina, *Islamic Revival in Syria: The Rise and Fall of Ba'thist Secularism*

<sup>82</sup> Indeed, there have been a number of reports from opposition activists and fighters that they have been funded by Syrian businessmen and not simply outsiders

<sup>83</sup> Ibid

<sup>84</sup> Please see Section 5 for more information

### 3.6 Syria, Lebanon and Iran: Shia tensions

#### 3.6.1 Fallout to Lebanon

Of all the states in the Middle East, Lebanon is possibly most exposed to the fall-out from the sectarian turmoil and conflict in Syria. Lebanon's sectarian tensions – a legacy of the civil war – are still extremely problematic, whilst diplomatic relations between the two countries were only re-established again in August 2008. It was only in 2005 that Syria finally withdrew its last troops from Lebanon after the assassination of Rafiq Hariri (with Syrian backed Hizbullah suspected of being the perpetrator), and the subsequent Cedar Revolution.

Despite the withdrawal of Syrian troops, Syria's control over the country has been maintained through the domination of Lebanese politics by the Shia group, Hizbullah, which most regard as an Iranian/Syria proxy in the country. The power of this group and the dominance it gives to Shia Muslims in Lebanon – despite making up only 27% of the population<sup>85</sup> - is strongly resented by Sunni Muslims and Christians alike, thus linking the struggle by Sunni Muslims in Syria against the Alawite Assad regime with that of the Sunni Muslims in Lebanon against (Shia) Hizbullah, also linking both in similar sectarian terms.

Thus what happens in Syria will most likely be reflected in Lebanon, and in many ways conflict in Lebanon has the potential to be just as violent as in Syria, if not more so. As the conflict in Syria develops increasingly into a conflict between Iran and the Gulf States – and thus a conflict between Sunni and Shia in the region as a whole, Lebanon's standoff between Shia and Sunni Muslims, could turn into open conflict.

A recent opinion poll showed the increasingly profound splits between Sunni and Shia Muslims in Lebanon, with 94% of Lebanese Shia supporting Hizbullah and 94% of Lebanese Sunnis hostile to it<sup>86</sup>.

#### 3.6.2 Away from sectarianism

With Iran standing to lose the most in the downfall of the Assad regime<sup>87</sup>, its primary means of escalating the conflict in the short-term is the mobilizing of Hizbullah as well of course the stepping up for the support of Assad. In the same way that the Alawite community fears the overthrow of the Assad regime, the Shia community in Lebanon fears the defeat of Hizbullah, and by logical extension the overthrow of the Assad regime. Indeed there have been reports

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<sup>85</sup> Lebanon – International Religious Freedom Report 2010 U.S. Department of State

<sup>86</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/aug/15/syria-lebanon-proxy-war>

<sup>87</sup> See Page 70



that many Lebanese have joined the fighting on both sides<sup>88</sup>, while recently a Lebanese Shia militia kidnapped Sunni Muslim Syrians in retaliation to the kidnapping of Shia in Syria.<sup>89</sup>

With such close connections between both countries, it is important that any intervention takes into account this fragile sectarian situation in Lebanon. For the sworn enemies of Hizbullah, the downfall of the Assad regime would present a chance to deal a devastating blow to the group.

Again, as for Alawites in Syria, the key to reducing sectarian violence in Lebanon is to present a genuine alternative to Hizbullah for the Shia in the country and promoting constructive diplomacy with Hizbullah leaders. Indeed, despite Hizbullah's close links with Iran and Syria, and its aggressive stance towards Israel, the group is not an entirely inauthentic voice in Lebanese politics. Even its leader Nasrullah has shown that signs that he is realistic about the prospects of the group in the case of the overthrow of the Assad regime, and has made comments demonstrating that he is hedging his bets on the outcome of the conflict. The key to a successful and peaceful transition in Lebanon - just as in Syria - is to integrate all sides of the sectarian spectrum regardless of their political stripe.

### 3.7 The Kurdish wildcard

*"Yes we are Sunni, but the thing you are missing is that Syria's Sunnis are mostly Arab. We are not Arab. The name of this country is the Syrian Arab Republic so in name, this is not our country."*

Mohammad, a Kurd, Damascus, 2011.

#### 3.7.1. Kurdish exceptionalism

Kurds in Syria make up approximately 10% of the population and largely reside in the north and north eastern region bordering Turkey, including the towns of Qamishli, Raqqqa and Hassake. The Kurds are often considered the one 'nation' in the Middle East has failed to gain a state in the era of nationalism. When the borders of the region were drawn on the maps of British and French statesmen after World War One, the Kurdish claims for statehood were rejected. The 30-million plus Kurds - the world's largest stateless people - are now better organized. Buoyed by the oil of Iraqi Kurdistan, they have emerged as the region's wild card; nowhere more so than in Syria.

<sup>88</sup> <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/d086ee26-e7be-11e1-8686-00144feab49a.html#axzz240ov5U4a>

<sup>89</sup> <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/story/2012/08/15/lebanon-syria.html>

Out of all the different religious and ethnic groups in Syria, the Kurds have suffered the most under Alawite rule and benefited the least. In 1962, 120,000 Kurds were stripped of their citizenship and this began an unprecedented period of repression experienced by Kurds in Syria as well as other countries in the region.

Indeed the Kurds in Syria are, according to many experts, considered third-class citizens with even the teaching of their language strictly prohibited. On the question of Kurdish rights, they do not necessarily differentiate between the Assad regime and the current opposition movements. In fact, Syrian Kurds may view the recent populist revolts in the Arab World and the rise of Islamism amongst Sunni Arabs as antagonistic to Kurdish hopes of autonomy. Thus, while they undoubtedly despise the current regime, they may fear the increasingly strongly Islamist opposition.<sup>90</sup>

Among Syrian Kurds however, there are competing factions with different views on their own place in an Arab-dominated Syria. To summarize, there are basically three different political positions amongst Syrian Kurdish groups. Firstly those in favor of a unitary Syrian republic with full rights for Kurds. Secondly, a pro-Barzani (the leader of Iraqi Kurdistan) Kurdish National Council faction favoring a more federalist Syria and closer ties to Iraqi Kurdistan and working more closely with the Syrian rebels. Thirdly, PYD (Democratic Union Party) or PKK (Kurdish Workers Party)<sup>91</sup> faction which aims to use the conflict as a means to further its aims of creating a completely independent or at least autonomous Kurdish region including the Kurdish regions in Turkey and for that end is willing to cooperate with the Syrian regime.<sup>92</sup>

### 3.7.2 Kurdish Moves in Syria

On July 12<sup>th</sup> 2012, the Iraqi-Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani managed to form a national council with rival Syrian-Kurdish groups. At the end of July 2012, Syrian-Kurdish fighters took control of towns of north-eastern Syria after Assad ceded them to shore up his position in Damascus and Aleppo. In the months since the Syrian uprising first began, a Kurdish community wary of both the Assad regime and the Islamist-tinged Syrian opposition has been organising to take advantage of what may be a historic opportunity.

The Syrian regime withdrew from the Kurdish region for three reasons. Firstly, to concentrate on the fight against the FSA in Aleppo to the west; secondly to create rifts between the Kurdish and Arab elements in the opposition; and thirdly to create a buffer zone between

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<sup>90</sup> Tejel, J, Syria's Kurds: History, Politics and Society

<sup>91</sup> The PYD is considered to be an affiliate of the PKK

<sup>92</sup> Please see Section 5

itself and Turkey, complicating Turkish policy to Syria. This means that any potential intervention could possibly incur fights with Kurdish separatists,<sup>93</sup> as the pullout also had the effect of giving a safe area for the Kurdish PKK and PYD from which to launch attacks against Turkey once again. This stunned Ankara, Turkey's chief concern being that the single most powerful organization among Syrian Kurds, the PYD (Democratic Union Party), has close ties to the PKK, the Kurdish groups which has been fighting the Turkish state for several decades. The Turkish military thus began diverting troops to that section of the border.

### 3.7.3 A New Kurdish Federation?

Kurds on both sides of the Syria-Turkey border say they are not seeking independence but instead aiming to establish autonomous and fully-recognized Kurdish regions like that of Iraq. Nonetheless, these regions would also share in some version of an open-border supra-Kurdish federation in Iraq, Syria and Turkey. This view is shared by jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, who believes that the nation-state is obsolete, unsuited to today's situation and the needs of the Kurds.

However, such an entity- a supra-Kurdish federation or something similar – is not an unrealistic proposition because a successful prototype exists already in Iraq. Clearly there is much to be gained for Kurdish groups who seek a semi-independent Kurdish homeland to act to take advantage of the current weakness of the Syrian state. It may even be in their interests to prolong the conflict between the rebels and the Syrian regime because neither side has been calling for Kurdish autonomy and thus for the Kurds, a strong Arab regime in Damascus is likely to reject Kurdish claims for autonomy altogether as they have in the past.

For the Syrian Kurds, there are essentially three choices in the current situation. Firstly, continuing the status quo as a province of a Syrian Arab Republic with no particular autonomy. This is a position likely taken by a small number of Kurds considering their treatment by the Syrian state over the decades. The second position is the support of the PYD and PKK who continue the fight for Kurdish homeland including Kurdish areas of southern Turkey. This necessitates the continuation of the struggle against the Turkish state. The third option is to work with Iraqi Kurds and with Barzani for a closer relationship with Iraqi Kurdistan and potentially a move towards more autonomy for Syrian Kurds. Crucially, this is the only option that may be acceptable to both Kurdish hopes for self-government and to Turkey.

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<sup>93</sup> <http://www.turkishweekly.net/columnist/3667/kurdish-issue-in-syria-what-is-the-truth-of-it.html>



## 4. The Syrian Government – Inside the Regime

### 4.1 Background

The Ba'th Party has been in control of Syria since 1963 and under the Assad family since 1970; first Hafez and then his son Bashar in 2000. The government is dominated by the Alawite sect (approximately 10% of the Syrian population and concentrated in the north-west of the country), with key positions in the cabinet, army and diplomatic service being dominated by Alawites.

### 4.2 Key Figures Syrian Government



**Bashar al-Assad, President** - became first choice to be president only after brother Bassel's death in 1994 in a car accident. Cautious reformer at first, with the Damascus spring and shut down of the notorious Mezzah prison. After crackdowns a year after his accession, debate was centered on the extent to which Assad's hand was forced by the power of the top Alawite generals whose power was threatened by the reforms, especially over the question of Lebanon.



**Maher al-Assad, Brother of Bashar, General and Commander of the Army's 4<sup>th</sup> Division and Republican Guard** - earned the name, 'Butcher of Deraa' after the siege of the city in March 2011. The US, EU and the Arab League have all announced sanctions against him, including a travel ban and a freeze on all his overseas assets. It was reported by a Western diplomat that Maher al-Assad lost a leg at the bombing of the National Security Headquarters in Damascus on 18<sup>th</sup> of July, 2012.<sup>94</sup>

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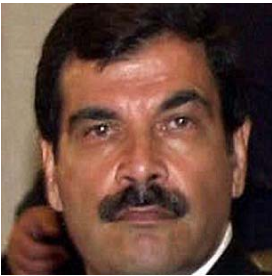
<sup>94</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9480363/Syria-Bashar-al-Assads-brother-Maher-loses-leg.html>



**Rami Makhlef, maternal cousin of al-Assad and one of the most powerful businessmen in Syria** - owns Syriatel, the biggest telecoms company in the country. In May 2011, the European Union has imposed sanctions against Makhlef.



**Colonel Hafez Makhlef, brother of Rami and cousin of Bashar** - Head of General Intelligence Directorate.



**Assef Shawkat, (deceased)** - brother in law of Bashar, the former head of Military Intelligence and Deputy Minister of Defense. He was assassinated in July 2012 by a bomb in the cabinet room.



**General Fahd Jassem al-Freij** - replaced Dawoud Rajiha (killed in the same attack as Shawkat) as Minister of Defense. A Sunni Muslim from Hama, it is believed he commanded the Syrian Army Special Forces in the regions of Daraa, Idlib and Hama.

No photograph  
available

**Dhu al-Himma Shalish** - Bashar's first cousin and head of Presidential Security Directorate.



**Walid al- Muallem** – Muallem is a long serving diplomat and minister. He is currently Minister of Foreign affairs and Expatriates. He has served as Syrian ambassador to Washington and was one of the first Syrian officials sanctioned by the US after anti-government protests.

### 4.3 Assessment of Syria's Military

#### 4.3.1 Overview of Syrian military

President Assad still sits on top of a relatively well-armed military machine. In 2011, the Syrian Army had 220,000 regulars and another 100,000 in the paramilitary forces. Although the Syrian military lacks the most up-to-date air defense systems, it is quite likely that these are being updated by Russian aid and expertise, and the size of the military apparatus would still pose a much greater challenge for any intervention operations than was the case in Libya. In addition, Syria's chemical weapons (discussed below), the diversity in types of opposition to the regime, and the fact that opposition forces still struggle to hold territory outright would complicate any conventional military operations.

#### 4.3.2 Syrian Air Defenses

The most problematic issue confronting western military intervention in Syria remains the country's relatively sophisticated air-defense which they obtained from Russia. Over the last decade, Syria has placed considerable emphasis on the development of land-based air-defense. The army has over 2,000 air defense guns and more than 4,100 surface-to-air missiles. The Air Defense Command (ADC), which operates under the jurisdiction of the air force, controls longer-range surface-to-air missiles such as the Almaz Volga-M (SA-2), S-125 Neva (SA-3) and Antey S-200 (SA-5)<sup>95</sup>. However the armed forces are still heavily dependent on Soviet-designed weaponry and technology.<sup>96</sup>

The air-defense system has potential weaknesses. For example, at present, it is unclear whether they have the trained personnel to operate the system effectively, or whether they are autonomously capable of repairing and maintaining the systems. Among many Syrian activists, rumors abound that much of the most high-tech air-defense systems are being maintained or even operated by Russian personnel.

In terms of Following the Israeli bombing of suspected nuclear facilities inside Syria in 2007, the central government in Damascus engaged in efforts to attain advanced weaponry from Russia to re-structure the country's air defense systems. It is widely accepted that Syrian air defense corps has upgraded older SA-2 and SA-6 models with newer, Russian-made SA-22 systems. The SA-22 is a mobile anti-aircraft system equipped with its own target acquisition and tracking radars. It carries 12 medium range 57E6 radio-guided surface-to-air missiles and two 30 mm auto-cannons. These newer systems are primarily intended to protect ground-

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<sup>95</sup> More in-depth description below

<sup>96</sup> Nerguizian, Aram, *Instability in Syria: Assessing the Risks of Military Intervention*



troops, cities and more advanced, high-altitude surface to air missiles. It is also assumed that Syria has access to high-altitude Russian-built SAM systems, alongside the S-300 air defense system, which is considered one of the world's most advanced SAM systems.<sup>97</sup>

In sum, three decades after Syria's pursuit of a strategic deterrence strategy with Israel, Syria has more recently struggled to maintain equality with the Israeli Armed Forces in terms of air force infrastructure and air defense system, with much of this is now aging and some obsolete. However the size and depth of the system which Syria has at its disposal, especially in terms Syria's ownership of some of the most recent surface-to-air missiles presents a real challenge for all but the largest and most advanced armed forces.<sup>98</sup>

#### 4.3.3 Electronic Warfare Systems

Following Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982, Syria's air defense and air forces were drastically upgraded and expanded to include electronic counter-measures and electronic warfare. Today, Syria has created a dense, but somewhat outdated ground based Electronic Warfare system. Geographically most of this is based around the Golan Heights and along the border with Lebanon. Due to their age and location, these systems only offer defensive capabilities in relation to Israel, with severely limited countering abilities for other threats. The system continues to suffer from weaknesses including early warning, air battle management, signal intelligence and weapon targeting.<sup>99</sup>

#### 4.3.4 The Syrian Air Force

The manpower within the Syrian Air Force is much larger than the combat aircraft available for battle. The government's focus on sustaining multiple different types of air defense system also place too much strain on the air force and weakens man-power quality. As with the Electronic Defense Systems, until very recently Syria's Air Force was focused primarily on Israel and the Golan Heights. Although the numbers here are significant, it mainly consists of aging MIG-21 type training crafts, ill-suited to defense. Syria's modern aircraft, including the Su-24, MiG-23, MiG-25 and MiG-29 interceptors and ground attack aircraft are stationed at Sayqal, Dumayr, Tiyas and An-Nassiriah near Damascus. It is very unlikely any of these systems would survive a hit with GPS-guided weapons.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid

<sup>98</sup> Ibid

<sup>99</sup> Ibid

<sup>100</sup> Ibid

The intangible elements of the Air Force, such as morale are more difficult to ascertain. It is generally accepted however that the Air Force continues to suffer long C4I early warning delays, long responses/scramble times by combat aircraft, low operational readiness and over-centralized battlement management systems.

#### 4.3.5 Summary

Despite considerable qualitative limitations, Syrian air defenses, the Syrian Air Force and electronic warfare capabilities pose a serious challenge to any air intervention force. Although in most cases, weaponry is old and in some cases obsolete, the quantity and breadth of its deployment means any operations to destroy it would have to be very large, meaning effectively that without the involvement of the United States military, any intervention would encounter serious risks and uncertainties. However, much of the air defense system is still thought to be concentrated in the south, so a more limited campaign in the north of Syria would be considerably easier than in the areas around Damascus.<sup>101</sup>

The extent to which air power would be used depends on the strategy of intervention. To secure a safe-zone in the north of Syria, a large-scale air assault on Syrian defenses would most likely not be necessary, considering the strength of rebel forces in the that area. If the intervention wanted to completely incapacitate the Syrian regime and military across the country, then large-scale air attacks would be necessary, which would risk significant civilian casualties.

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<sup>101</sup> The Economist Magazine

## 5. Syrian Chemical Weapons

### 5.1 Background

When the UN Chemical Weapons Convention was written in 1997, Syria was one of 7 countries which did not sign. The Convention prohibits countries from possessing chemical weapons and requires them to destroy existing stocks. The rejection of the treaty has allowed Syria to build up large stocks of chemical weapons. It is now believed that Syria has built up one of the largest stocks of chemical weapons in the world and the largest in the Middle East.<sup>102</sup> On July 23<sup>rd</sup> 2012 the Syrian government officially confirmed its possession of chemical weapons and claimed that if Syria was attacked by foreign forces, it would use the weapons to defend itself.<sup>103</sup>

The centre for Syria's chemical weapons program is at the Centre D'Etudes et de Recherches Scientifiques (CERS) in Damascus. Leonard Spector, from the Monterey Institute of International Studies, contends that Syria has both production and delivery capabilities.<sup>104</sup> The four production facilities are believed to be in al-Safirah, Hama, Homs and Latakia, with the two munitions storage sites at Khan Abu Shamat and Furqlus. However, Spector believes that Syria possesses a large number of other sites whose location is unknown.

### 5.2 Syria's specific capabilities and types of chemical weapons

Despite the Syria's clear capabilities at creating chemical weapons, what is not known is whether Syria is self-sufficient in the production of components – 'precursors' - necessary for producing more chemical weapons. The CIA has noted that although Syria has stockpiled these precursors but has likely run-out, whereas other believe that Syria *does* indeed have the ability to produce these internally,<sup>105</sup> or what delivery methods exist and are operational

According to reports, Syria possesses two types of chemical weapons. Of most threat due to its extreme potency as a nerve agent is Sarin. Sarin has been classified as a nerve agent and classified as a weapon of mass destruction in UN Resolution 687 and the Chemical Weapons Convention of 1993 outlawed the stockpiling of Sarin and classified as a Schedule 1 Substance.<sup>106</sup> Sarin is a binary chemical weapon; that is a weapon where the toxic agent is not present within the weapon in its active state, but in the form of two chemical precursors

<sup>102</sup> [http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/ChemicalWeaponsintheSyrianConflict\\_Ajeylele\\_300712](http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/ChemicalWeaponsintheSyrianConflict_Ajeylele_300712)

<sup>104</sup> <http://www.jpost.com/MiddleEast/Article.aspx?id=254369>

<sup>105</sup> Civil Military Fusion Centre, Mediterranean Review, July 31 2012.

<sup>106</sup> Chemical weapons or precursors to chemical weapons which have no use outside of their use as weapons

which are physically separated within the weapon. Even in the form of the two separated precursors, Sarin only has a shelf life of several weeks to several months depending on the impurities in the precursor materials.<sup>107</sup> Even at very low concentrations, Sarin can be fatal with immediate use of antidotes and is estimated to be over 500 times more toxic than cyanide.<sup>108</sup> Disposal of Sarin, even in precursor form is difficult and dangerous. Sarin was used most recently by Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War and infamously as a weapon against Kurdish civilian in Halabja in 1988, where approximately 5,000 civilians were killed.

It is also reported that Syria possesses quantities of sulphur mustards, commonly known as Mustard Gas. Mustard Gas is a cytotoxic agent (cytotoxicity being the quality of being toxic to cells), regulated under the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention as a Schedule 1 Substance.<sup>109</sup> Mustard Gas is a blistering agent and is both highly mutagenic and carcinogenic. Exposure to the gas can have a variety of debilitating and dangerous symptoms which may not always be immediate. Burning can occur as can damage to the respiratory system, and although death is unlikely unless contamination to the gas has been severe, periods of convalescence are likely to be long. Although Mustard Gas does not degrade quickly, it is relatively easy to dispose of through incineration.<sup>110</sup>

### 5.3 Potential international action and recent developments

Despite uncertainties about the likelihood of the Syrian regime using chemical weapons, there is now no doubt that Syria possesses large quantities of nerve and mustard agents. Furthermore, there have been an increasing number of reports which suggest that the Syrian regime is preparing their mobilization. According to witness reports, the Syrian army tested firing systems for chemical weapons in August 2012 at the Safira chemical weapons centre east of Aleppo.<sup>111</sup> More recently, there have been other reports of the Syrian regime moving and preparing chemical weapons for use. This has very recently included the mixing of the precursor chemicals for Sarin, which if true, would mean they would have to be used within weeks or simply degrade and be no longer effective.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> <http://www.fas.org/irp/gulf/cia/960715/72569.htm>

<sup>108</sup> Council on Foreign Relations - Sarin

<sup>109</sup> Stewart, Charles D. (2006). Weapons of mass casualties and terrorism response handbook

<sup>110</sup> <http://www.cma.army.mil/home.aspx>

<sup>111</sup> <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/syria-tested-chemical-weapons-in-desert-in-august-eyewitnesses-say-a-856206.html>

<sup>112</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/12/05/syria-chemical-weapons-sarin\\_n\\_2248115.html?ref=topbar#slide=1836263](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/12/05/syria-chemical-weapons-sarin_n_2248115.html?ref=topbar#slide=1836263)

## 6. Opposition – A Mixed Bag

Until recently, the two main opposition political blocks were: the **Syrian National Council** and the **National Coordination Committee**. Recently a third potential unifying organization has emerged – the **Syrian National Coalition for the Forces of the Syrian Revolution and Opposition**. A fourth important political force which split from the SNC is the **Kurdish National Council in Syria**. Finally the **Free Syrian Army** - the military arm of the opposition – is also discussed.

On the reasons for the supporting the rebels;

- i. 47% said because they hate Bashar al-Assad
- ii. 40% said so as to establish a democracy
- iii. 33% said so as to protect their family/village/town

Those interviewed in ICOS field research were given a list on individuals who would be able to succeed Bashar al-Assad as leader:

- i. Colonel Riyadh al-Asaad - 19%
- ii. Haitham Malih - 16%
- iii. Burhan Ghailoun - 13%
- iv. Shaikh Adnan al-Arour - 11%
- v. Abdul Razaq Tlas - 11%
- vi. Suhair al-Atassi - 7%
- vii. George Sabra - 7%
- viii. Farouq al-Sharaa - 6%
- ix. Abdul Basit Sida - 5%
- x. Riyadh Hegab - 4%
- xi. Amar al-Qurabi - 3%
- xii. Manaf Tlas - 2%
- xiii. Michel Kilo - 2%

### 6.1 Syrian National Council (SNC)

The SNC was until recently the most prominent opposition group in Syria. It is a coalition of opposition groups and was announced in Istanbul on October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2011. The SNC states that it wished the new Syria to be:

*“democratic, pluralistic and a civil state [secular]; a parliamentary republic with sovereignty of the people based on the principles of equal citizenship with separation of powers, smooth transfer of power, the rule of law and the protection and guarantee of rights of minorities.”<sup>113</sup>*

<sup>113</sup> <http://www.syriancouncil.org>

The SNC is based around the following groups:

- **The Damascus Declaration for Democratic Change**, a movement born of the ‘Damascus Spring’ of 2000/2001. Syrian journalist and activist Michel Kilo and Abdulrazak Eid launched the declaration and the five opposition groups who signed the declaration were the Arab Nationalist National Democratic Rally, the Kurdish Democratic Alliance, the Committee of Civil Society, the Kurdish Democratic Front and the Movement of the Future.
- **The Muslim Brotherhood (MB)**. Founded in Egypt in 1928, it arrived in Syria in the early 1930s. It played a major role in the Sunni-based movement opposed to the secular, pan-Arabist Ba’th Party which culminated in the Hama uprising of 1982 which was crushed by the Syrian military during which the city of Hama itself was destroyed. According to many sources, the Muslim Brotherhood has become the most important group in the Syrian National Council.<sup>114</sup>
- **Local coordination committees**. LCCs are composed of networks of anti-government protest organizers formed by youth who have documented the protests and used social-media to spread activism throughout Syria. However there is much debate as to how well-connected the core of the ground protest movement is to the organized political opposition. *See 6.5 for further discussion*
- **Kurdish factions**. The only Kurdish party in Syria to have declared itself an affiliate of the SNC is the Kurdish Future Movement Party (KFMP) under Mashaal Tammo, himself assassinated after the announcement in the north-eastern city of Qamishli. They differ in approach and goals from the KNC.<sup>115</sup> They are less confrontational about their separatist ambitions and may be biding their time for the right moment to present their demands for increased freedoms. The KFMP also has fewer connections to Kurdish groups in Iraq and Turkey.
- **Tribal leaders and independent figures**. As the movement has gained momentum over the last months, many independent figures and smaller tribes, especially from the provinces in the strongly Sunni east of Syria have joined the SNC.<sup>116</sup>

The SNC struggled to assert influence over the opposition as a whole because it has been dominated by a disparate group of Sunni Muslim Arab (often exiled) politicians and intellectuals. On the ground it found it difficult to exert influence on its fighters for a number

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<sup>114</sup> See section 3

<sup>115</sup> See page 61

<sup>116</sup> The Carnegie Middle East Center, Guide To Syria Crisis

of reasons related to a lack of finance and weapons, coherent ideology and the nature of the opposition to the regime itself.<sup>117</sup> For example, one group of prominent members broke away to form the “**Syrian Patriotic Action Group**” in February 2012, and the **Kurdish National Council**, then comprising eleven Kurdish parties, walked out in April 2012. The Syrian National Council is now a member of the Syrian National Coalition for Forces of the Syrian Revolution and Opposition.

### Key Figures

- **George Sabra.** George Sabra is a leading member of the Syrian Democratic People’s Party and the elected leader of the Syrian National Council. A leftist, pro-Arab, secular opposition figure, George Sabra has been politically active in the opposition since the 1970s. Sabra joined the Syrian Communist Party (Political Bureau) in 1970 and was elected to its Central Committee in 1985. He remained in Syria after the uprising began in March 2011 and was imprisoned in July for two months on charges of inciting dissent. Sabra became the new chairman of the SNC in November 2012. Sabra is a Christian.
- **Abdul Basit Sida.** Sida was the chairman of the SNC and a Kurd supporting decentralization rather than federalism for the Kurdish regions, now a rather minority position among Syrian Kurdish parties.
- **Hassan Abdul Azim.** Azim is a left-wing activist, a main figure in the Syrian opposition and the general coordinator of the NCC.
- **Monzer Makhous.** Makhous is the coordinator of external relations in Western Europe for the SNC and one of the few Alawis in the opposition.

### 6.2 National Coordination Committee (NCC)

The **National Coordination Committee (NCC)**, formed in September 2011, is made up of 13 left-leaning political parties, three Kurdish political parties, and independent political and youth activists:

- **National Democratic Rally** (itself comprising five parties including: the Democratic Arab Socialist Union, the Arab Revolutionary Workers’ Party, the Communist Labor Party, the Arab Socialist Movement and the Syriac Union Party).
- **Democratic People’s Party** (Communist).
- **Together for a Free Democratic Syria-** a Marxist leaning party.

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<sup>117</sup> For more discussion on this issue please see section 3



- **The Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD)**- the one remaining Kurdish party in the coalition following the withdrawal of the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria to join the Kurdish National Council in January 2012.

The three principles of the NCC are: “No” to foreign military intervention, “No” to religious and sectarian instigation, and “No” to violence and the militarization of the revolution.<sup>118</sup> The NCC differs from the SNC in its commitment to conditional dialogue with the regime believing that: “The slogan ‘the overthrow of the regime’ is unpractical, unrealistic and useless.” The NCC calls for dialogue conditional on the withdrawal of the military from the streets, the end of attacks on peaceful protesters by security forces, and the release of all political prisoners. The group is strongly opposed to any form of foreign intervention that would involve military measures, such as a no-fly zone, and would prefer economic sanctions and other diplomatic measures to increase pressure on President Assad.<sup>119</sup>

### Key Figure

- **Michel Kilo.** Kilo is a Christian, an independent writer, a Marxist and one of the founders of the NCC and Syrian Democratic Platform. Following the Damascus Spring movement, he was a central figure in the Damascus Declaration of 2005.<sup>120</sup>

## 6.3 Syrian National Coalition for the Forces of the Syrian Revolution and Opposition

On the 8th November 2012, just days after the re-election of President Barack Obama in the American Presidential elections, The Syrian National Coalition was formed in Qatar. With obvious support from the US and from their Gulf hosts the Coalition contains a large number of major opposition parties and coalitions – including the SNC - and representatives of the Free Syrian Army, military councils, revolutionary forces, local councils with hope to include national figures from all the provinces. The council has 60 seats of which 22 are to be filled by the Syrian National Council. Its president is Ahmad Mouaz al-Khatib al-Hasani and its two vice presidents are Riad Seif and Suhair Atassi.

Although the National Coalition has been established for little over a month, it has received diplomatic recognition as the ‘legitimate representative of the Syrian people’ or ‘sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people from more than 100 countries. This includes the countries that make up the Arab League and the United States, Turkey, France, UK, Spain and

<sup>118</sup> Carnegie Endowment

<sup>119</sup> "العقيد المنشق رياض الأسعد: الحرب هي الخيار الوحيد للإطاحة بالرئيس السوري" (in Arabic). صحيفة العرب - قطر [Al-Arab Qatar]. 8 October 2011

<sup>120</sup> Wright, Robin (2008), *Dreams and Shadows: The Future of the Middle East*, New York: Penguin Press, p. 232

Germany, among others. It has been supported by the Free Syrian Army. However, members of the Salafist al-Nusra with 13 other armed groups including members of the Tawhid Brigade stated that they “unanimously rejected the conspiratorial project called the National Coalition and announces a consensus to establish an Islamic state.<sup>121</sup>” The Tawhid Brigade subsequently rescinded this rejection.<sup>122</sup> The Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) has also rejected the Coalition.<sup>123</sup>

### Key figure

- **Sheikh Ahmad Mouaz al-Khatib al-Hasani.** Sheikh Ahmad Mouaz al-Khatib al-Hasani is the president of the newly-formed Syrian National Coalition. Hasani was a preacher at the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus and chairman of the Islamic Civilization Society until 1995, when he was banned from preaching after openly criticizing the Ba’thist regime. He is well-known for his moderation and he has consistently called for social justice and political pluralism while rejecting sectarianism and violence. Al-Hasani was one of the few prominent anti-Assad clerics who endured government repression to remain in Syria. On November 11, he was elected as the leader of the newly formed National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces. Although Hasani has no formal political affiliation, he is considered close to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. He more closely identifies with the Islamism of the Brotherhood’s Damascene branch than with its current, more hard-line leadership from the Hama branch.

## 6.4 Kurdish groups in the opposition

### 6.4.1 The Kurdish National Council

The Kurdish National Council in Syria (KNC) was formed on October 26, 2011, in Erbil, Iraq, with the help of Massoud Barzani, the president of the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq and led by the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria. The Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria and the KNC call for secular and decentralized Syria and for Kurdish self-determination.

Relations between the SNC and the KNC have been uneasy from the outset. SNC chairman, Burhan Ghalioun, has spoken against federalism in a post-Assad Syria, calling it a “delusion.” Talks between the two have not progressed since. The KNC is closely aligned with Barzani and the Kurdish Regional Government of Iraq but views the Turkish government with

<sup>121</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K-del0nLVXI>

<sup>122</sup> <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/11/2012112016567298627.html>

<sup>123</sup> <http://gulfnews.com/news/region/syria/syria-kurdish-leader-rejects-new-coalition-1.1107985>

suspicion, accusing it of pressuring the SNC to not to accept the KNC's demand for Kurdish autonomy in Syria.<sup>124</sup>

#### 6.4.2 The Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD)

The Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) is a Syrian offshoot of the militant Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the Kurdish guerrilla movement fighting an armed struggle against the Turkish state for an autonomous Kurdistan and greater rights for Kurds in Turkey. Although the PYD is member of the NCC, it has played a limited role and has since joined the PKK opposition body known as the People's Council of Western Kurdistan, which was founded on December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2011.<sup>125</sup> The PYD has been accused of complicity with the Syrian regime for its own ends – because of its hostility to Turkey – but has recently been cooperating more with other Kurdish parties, forming a Kurdish Supreme Council on July 1<sup>st</sup> 2012.<sup>126</sup>

#### 6.5 The Free Syrian Army

The Free Syrian Army was formed in August 2011 by army deserters based in Turkey and led by Riyad al-Asaad<sup>127</sup>, a former air force colonel. One of the most important questions remains the degree of independence the FSA has in its command and control between individual FSA brigades themselves and between the FSA and the political opposition. Whereas previously the FSA had problems with numbers of soldiers, now the problem is obtaining arms for the growing number of deserters and civilians. The FSA's soldiers and officers are largely Sunni Arabs, with the exact numbers of fighters from other religious and ethnic groups unknown and open to some debate, although the FSA claims to represent all Syrians.<sup>128</sup> The FSA has functioned primarily as an umbrella group for army defectors, civilians who have taken up arms and Islamist militants.<sup>129</sup>

One of the few key points where the SNC and FSA were brought together was on the question of arms. The SNC was the only organization reportedly able to *officially* negotiate the transfer of desperately needed weapons from foreign states (Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar for example) to the FSA because it was the only organization which had enough credibility to do so. In early April for example, several Western powers announced that they would provide millions of dollars in "non-lethal" aid to the FSA, including communications and

<sup>124</sup> "Report: Who Is the Syrian-Kurdish Opposition? The Development of Kurdish Parties, 1956-2011," Kurdwatch, European Center for Kurdish Studies, December 31, 2011

<sup>125</sup> Carnegie Middle East Centre; Guide to Syria Crisis

<sup>126</sup> Please see Section 3

<sup>127</sup> Please see below for biography on Colonel Asaad

<sup>128</sup> <http://www.turkishweekly.net/news/124717/syrian-opposition-call-for-no-fly-zone.html>

<sup>129</sup> The Carnegie Middle East Center, Guide To Syria Crisis

intelligence support. Gulf States, including Saudi Arabia and Qatar, meanwhile agreed to set up a fund to pay the salaries of FSA fighters, and reportedly discussed plans to send money to the rebels to help them buy weapons and ammunition on the black market.

However, the higher echelons of the FSA were still consistently unable to obtain equipment - especially anti-aircraft guns and mortars - and thus the FSA became less able to exert control of the different brigades; their politics and their tactics.<sup>130</sup> Official transfers of arms to fighting groups – organized through the higher echelons of the command structure – may amount to a minority of arms obtained by the brigades in total. Most arms have come from the Syrian Army itself, but also through smuggling routes with wealthy Arab (including Syrian) businessmen supplying the hard cash and thus able to support the types of fighting groups that suit their political agendas.

The formation of the National Coalition precipitated the better organization of a more unified command structure of the Free Syrian Army which has sidelined Asaad in favor of tactical-level commanders. The Supreme Military Council, which was chosen on the 7<sup>th</sup> December 2012, is now headed by Brigadier General Salim Idris, with two deputies - Abdelbasset Tawil and Abdelqader Saleh. It is thought that these men are more strongly Islamist than their predecessors.<sup>131</sup>

### Key figure

**Colonel Riad al- Asaad.** He is a former colonel in the Syrian Air Force and defected in July 2011, creating the Free Syrian Army in the process. He went to the Turkish province of Hatay (Antakya), apparently under the patronage of the Turkish Army.<sup>132</sup> Despite being the long-time commander-in-chief of the FSA, Asaad was not invited to the recent meeting of the joint military command at the beginning of December 2012 and although being re-appointed commander-in-chief, this role is now thought to be mostly ceremonial.<sup>133</sup> It is thought Asaad has lost control of the command structures of the FSA because he has not played a key role in the fighting on the ground.

*In ICOS Field Research 19% of those interviewed believe Colonel Asaad to be a viable choice as a leader of Syria after the fall of the current regime – the highest number of any individual*

<sup>130</sup> In a recent ICOS field research expedition in November 2012 to Aleppo, the lack of even basic arms was extremely evident

<sup>131</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/12/08/us-syria-crisis-rebels-idUSBRE8B70AJ20121208>

<sup>132</sup> "العقيد المنشق رياض الأسعد: الحرب هي الخيار الوحيد للإطاحة بالرئيس السوري" (in Arabic). صحيفة العرب - قطر [Al-Arab Qatar]. 8 October 2011.

<sup>133</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/12/08/us-syria-crisis-rebels-idUSBRE8B70AJ20121208>

**Brigadier General Salim Idris.** Brig. General Idriss in the new Chief-of-Staff of the newly created Supreme Military Council of the Free Syrian Army, created at the beginning of December 2012. Idris, who has spent months commanding rebel brigades on the ground, has replaced General Mustafa al-Sheikh.

## 6.6 Grassroots Opposition

*In ICOS Field Research on the question ‘why do you support the rebels’ interviewees responded with the following answers:*

- i. 47% said because they hate Bashar al-Assad
- ii. 40% said so as to establish a democracy
- iii. 33% said so as to protect their family/village/town

One of the great unknowns among the irregular Syrian opposition has been the size, nature, ideology and organizational capabilities of localized, grassroots opposition activists and activist groups. Analysis so far has shown grassroots opposition groups to be a mixture of junior and senior activists led by doctors, lawyers, clerics and other community leaders.<sup>134</sup> Grassroots activists do not seem to be highly motivated by any particular ideology, but being drawn from the lower and lower-middle class, they do seem to be unified in their desire for human rights, dignity and freedom. Like other civilian activists elsewhere in the Arab World, they are able to communicate using new media like Skype and Facebook, this allowing them to coordinate with the FSA and SNC to some degree.

Media across the world has tended to see activists such as these as simply a mass of disorganised youth, but closer analysis of Syrian grassroots protest movements reveals a far more mature and able leadership than their counterparts in Egypt for example, according to the International Centre on Nonviolent Conflict.<sup>135</sup> These activists have been able to create formal structures, known as Revolutionary Councils which organize demonstrations, media outreach, security and armed operations, medical teams and humanitarian aid. The Revolutionary Councils (Majalis Thawar) serve as the primary points of contact for Local Coordinating Committees (LCCs), of which there are at least 400 operating in Syria cities.<sup>136</sup>

Approximately 70% of Revolutionary Councils and a majority of LCCs are represented by the Syrian Revolution General Commission (SRGC). It attempts to express the united voice of the opposition and manage its activities in an organized manner. The relationship between the Revolutionary Councils and organized political opposition groups is far from being

<sup>134</sup> Civilian Military Fusion Centre: The Syrian Opposition

<sup>135</sup> International Centre on Nonviolent Conflict: Syria’s Maturing Insurgency

<sup>136</sup> Civilian Military Fusion Centre: The Syrian Opposition

harmonious, but connections between the Councils and armed groups are seen as much closer, but also rather nuanced. Often the depth of the relationship between armed groups and the RCs is dependent on the extent to which demonstrators requires protection against the government with the level of violence used against demonstrations by the Syrian regime being highly dependent on the specifics of the demonstration and the locality.

A further example of the cooperation between civilian activists and armed groups is the Civilian Protection Commission (CPC). The CPC is an interesting development because it shows the growing organizational capability of the grassroots activists to coordinate with each other and also their willingness to work with the Free Syrian Army. It should be noted however that organizational capacity seems still to be on a tactical rather than strategic level, although the newly created Syrian National Coalition is designed to integrate this tactical nous on a strategic level.

### Key Figure

**Suhair Atassi.** Atassi comes from a Homs family long involved in national politics and is a long-standing human rights activist, founding member of the Syrian Revolution General Commission and is a key member of the Local Coordination Committees.

*Only 7% of interviewees in ICOS field research considered Suhair Atassi as a good choice to succeed Assad as leader of Syria*

## 6.8 An assessment of rebel military strength and activity

### 6.8.1 Arms capabilities

The lack of a formal political opposition structure in Syria means that the military capability of rebels has varied significantly from one group to another and depends significantly on locations. Different groups obtain their military hardware through different routes making coordination of supply more difficult. Weaponry is captured after battles with regime forces and from defectors. These are generally ‘light weapons’, such as the Kalashnikov rifles and Belgian FN FAL assault rifles.<sup>137</sup> The rebels are also reported to carry out organized raids on government checkpoints and buildings for weapons. Some T72 tanks and anti-aircraft weapons have been taken during these types of raids.<sup>138</sup>

<sup>137</sup> <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/middle-east/syria/120606/syrian-rebels-weapons-arms-revolution>

<sup>138</sup> Holliday, Joseph, Syria’s Armed Opposition, March 2012

Arms have also apparently been obtained from duplicitous members of the Syrian Army as supplying rebels with arms is big business.<sup>139</sup> In June 2012, government officials were selling a single Kalashnikov for approximately 1,000 USD, reported Ahmed Al Sheikh, the leader of the armed opposition in Jabal al-Zawiya. Rocket-propelled grenade launchers, complete with a set of four rockets, cost up to 4,000 USD, as did a BKT machine gun.<sup>140</sup> By November 2012, the price had increased significantly. As mentioned previously, the other key source of weapons is smuggled from abroad. Jonathan Eyal, an analyst at the London-based Royal United Services Institute says Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey all supply small amounts of arms. Maritime intelligence and Free Syrian Army (FSA) officers also report arms smuggled from Lebanon and Iraq. Some of these arms are financed by wealthy individuals in Saudi Arabia and Qatar, a security source says, as well as from expatriate Syrian supporters. A former official with Bulgaria's security sector said the Black Sea was also a key route for weapons.<sup>141</sup>

As stated previously, more radical jihadists may have better access to weaponry through long-standing jihadists networks linked to insurgencies in Iraq, Yemen etc. The prevalence of IEDs and other explosives in the conflict which are being used to attack tanks points to Syria-based weapons workshops. Military analysts report a rise in the use of improvised explosive devices such as roadside bombs, with 236 improvised explosive devices discovered or detonated in Syria this year.<sup>142</sup>

### 6.8.2 Rebel movements and activities

This report outlines three phases in rebel activity during the Syrian conflict. The first is from the beginning of armed resistance to the regime when rebel activity was scattered and small-scale. At this time the rebels were only able to operate in mountainous areas, in the countryside and villages – such as the valleys of Qalamoun or Idlib – mounting hit and run attack on the regime but unable to seriously trouble larger formations and especially those containing armor. During this period the Syrian regime tended not to use artillery or air power for fear of the international community intervening or imposing a no-fly zone. Also it was because they were able to defeat rebel concentrations relatively easily, as they were still small in number and lightly armed without anti-armor weapons and were yet to employ IEDs in great numbers.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Please see Section 5.5

<sup>140</sup> <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/middle-east/syria/120606/syrian-rebels-weapons-arms-revolution>

<sup>141</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/07/13/syria-arms-rebels-idUSL2E8IB63H20120713>

<sup>142</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/29/world/middleeast/syrian-rebels-get-arms-from-a-diverse-network-of-sources.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/29/world/middleeast/syrian-rebels-get-arms-from-a-diverse-network-of-sources.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)

<sup>143</sup> Holliday, Joseph, Syria's Armed Opposition, March 2012



The second phase involved the strengthening and better organization of rebel forces, the increased use of IED and anti-tank weapons and the rebel infiltration of larger urban areas. By May 2012, the numbers of armed rebels was estimated to have reached 40,000 with provincial military councils in Homs, Hama, Idlib, Deraa and Damascus.<sup>144</sup> By this period rebel strength had increased to the extent that they were able in urban areas to check larger formations of government troops including armor, using the dense urban environment to take out tanks and APCs with IEDs and RPGs. The regime responded by using artillery, helicopters and jet fighters to pound urban areas, in some cases successfully forcing rebels to leave. With this phase began the large increases in casualties and especially civilian, as shown on the graph at the beginning of this report <sup>145</sup>

The third phase has seen the dramatic intensification of regime attacks on urban areas which have been seized by the rebels, in particular Aleppo and Homs, successfully pushing the rebels out some of the cities taken, through air and artillery attacks. This tactic however has included the strategic abandoning of some areas of the Syrian countryside – the Kurdish north-east for example – as the Syrian government does not have the numbers to commit to large scale operations in urban areas in the north and still hold all the Syrian countryside, given the absolute necessity to maintain control of Damascus and its environs, and the Damascus-Aleppo highway.<sup>146</sup> The FSA has thus been able to strengthen its control over border crossings into Turkey on the roads to Killis and Antakya for example which has improved their fighting ability in innumerable ways. Gradually the FSA has been able to strengthen its control in much of the north of Syria, as well as dominating several key urban areas such as Idlib and Aleppo. In recent weeks, the rebel forces have been expanding their operations around Damascus and control an increasing proportion of the countryside there.

## 6.9 Neo-Salafism<sup>147</sup>

Another part of the armed opposition element is jihadist brigades who fight more independently of other groups and possess an altogether more radical ideology. Although it is undoubtedly the case that much of the armed opposition has a religious outlook, it is important to understand that there are varying degrees of religiosity and varying types of religious ideology.

Al-Qaeda's links with the armed jihadist opposition are through various clandestine groups which are increasingly including fighters from outside Syria, including Libyans, Iraqis,

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid

<sup>145</sup> Ibid

<sup>146</sup> Ibid

<sup>147</sup> Please see Section 3.3

Lebanese, Tunisians, Moroccans and even British fighters.<sup>148</sup> The activity of such militant jihadists groups has been growing with a group called al-Nusrah claiming responsibility for 7 attacks in Syria in May 2012 but 66 attacks in June 2012.

The existence of al-Qaeda affiliated groups among the rebels is a hint to the growing role of Islam in the inspiration or *raison d'être* in Syrian rebel brigades. As has been discussed earlier, this neo-Salafist tendency finds perfect cover in the violent and sectarian terrain of the Syrian conflict. The actual ideological persuasion of these groups is not well understood at this point as they become increasingly defined by the parameters of the conflict.

In ICOS Field Research, interviewees were asked, 'how many members of al-Qaeda are in the rebel fighters';

- i. 71% said *none* or *very few*
- ii. 11% said *some* or *a lot*

On the question of Islamists in the opposition;

- i. 55% said *none* or *very few*
- ii. 34% said *some* or *a lot*

Finally, 47% believed the Islamists were growing in strength within the rebels.

<sup>148</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-19136630>

## 7. Geo-Strategic Tensions

### 7.1 Turkey

*83% of those interviewed in ICOS field research had a positive attitude towards Turkey*

After decades of hostility between the two countries, the years leading up to the ‘Arab Spring’ and the revolts in Syria saw a thaw in Syrian-Turkish relations. This hostility has two causes; the first is the historical legacy over territorial disputes, particularly Turkey’s annexation of Hatay Province in 1939 and the second is related to Turkey’s alliance with the US (and thus Israel) placing it on an ideological and strategic collision course with Damascus. With the coming to power of the moderately Islamist AKP, Turkey began to take a far more independent foreign policy stance and one less beholden to the US. The turning point came in 2003 when Turkey refused to cooperate with the US invasion of Iraq. This precipitated a series of high-level negotiations between the two countries, including the signing of a free-trade agreement in 2004, military maneuvers and finally the Turkish presidential visit to Damascus in 2009. Overall, Turkey’s foreign policy up to 2011 could be described as ‘no problems with neighbors,’ with the aim of reducing tension with surrounding countries.

With the advent of the Arab revolts in 2011, Turkey’s Prime Minister Erdogan took a very different position; strongly supportive of Arab revolutionaries - in line with its status as the only mature democracy in the Middle East. On Syria, Erdogan has increasingly promoted himself as the Muslim reformer committed to bringing down the Assad regime. Such a policy, however arguably contradicts Turkey’s previous focus on cultivating good relations with its neighbors and political stability.

On the 4th of September 2012, the strong rhetoric culminated with Erdogan’s statement that, “the regime in Syria has now become a terrorist state. We do not have the luxury to be indifferent to what is happening there.” Turkey has persistently attempted to push through a plan to bring about the end of the Assad regime but these have been blocked by the UN Security Council.

Erdogan has arguably over-extended himself in his policy towards the Syrian revolt. Although in the case of a direct invasion, the Turks would most likely provide the bulk of the intervention force, they would require substantial logistical support by their partners because of the size and capacity of the Syrian military. Although Turkey could eventually be involved in some type of military intervention domestic support for intervention is weak or non-existent.

Despite retaliation by Turkish forces to the shelling of a Turkish town by Syrian artillery in October 2012, and the Syrian parliament authorizing Turkish action in Syria, it is almost impossible that Turkey will press forward with any larger-scale intervention without firm American support. Indeed it is unclear whether Turkey would provide ground troops for an intervention force, given the lack of public support in Turkey and anxiety over the Kurds.

The key issue for the Turkish government regarding policy over Syria is quickly becoming tied in to the longstanding question of the Kurds. The PKK have been stepping up attacks in the Kurdish region of Turkey with the situation recalling the violence of the late-1990s. Prior to the recent thaw in relations, Syria used the PKK and the Kurdish issue to bait Turkey when it was necessary to pressure Turkey over certain issues, but generally relations were hostile. Finally, Syria cut ties with the PKK in the 1990s and there was a thaw in Syria-Turkish relations. The Syrian regime's withdrawal from the Kurdish regions risks provoking the Turks into an intervention because increased attacks into Turkey from Syria by the PKK, but this tactic also aims to distract the Turks in putting their efforts into the Kurdish question rather than intervening to weaken Damascus.

Ultimately, Turkish support for the Syrian Opposition could be undermined by the growing fears of Kurdish separatism and the infiltration of the Kurdish regions of Syria by the PKK, the Kurdistan Workers Party which is designated a terrorist group by Turkey, the US and the EU. Despite Erdogan's threats, a Turkish military incursion in the Kurdish region is unlikely because it could be disastrous. It would damage Ankara's self-styled image as champion of democracy in the post-Arab Spring Middle East, to provoke hostilities with the Kurds - whether internally or in Syria or Iraq and also antagonize the Syrian-Arab opposition, whose own requests for intervention have been ignored so far. More than that, it would open up yet another front of hostilities in the Fertile Crescent simply adding to the instability at present. The Iraq-Kurdish connection is particularly important as Ankara has developed close ties with Arbil. The Turks want their oil and the Kurds want to sell it to them.<sup>149</sup>

## 7.2 Russia

Russia is a long-standing ally of Syria, a relationship which stretches back into the time of the Cold War. The Ba'th Party of the 1960s was a natural ally of the Soviet Union as it looked to expand its influence in the Middle East through radical pan-Arabism, socialism, secularism and anti-Zionism.

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<sup>149</sup> Time. How The Kurds Have Changed Turkey's Calculation on Syria

Despite this long-standing and close relationship, there are rumors from Russian diplomatic insiders that the Russians may have begun to think a Syria without Assad as more and more inevitable. Russia has important interests in Syria - the port of Tarsus for example - but as a leading Russian think tank, the Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, stated, what Russia fears more than anything is the precedent set by the Libyan conflict of multilateral UN-sponsored intervention especially in Muslim states.<sup>150</sup>

In sum, Russia has two major concerns over Syria. Firstly, it fears – as China does - the precedent of international intervention to assist popular opposition movements against authoritarian governments. This fear – of the potential for the same thing to happen in Russia – guides Russian rejections of UN Security Council resolution more than anything else. Moreover, Russia does not want to be seen as having been forced to abandon the Assad regime – Russia's independence of movement in foreign policy is being placed under threat – another dangerous precedent that Russia will not accept.

Secondly, Syria is Russia's key regional ally and has genuine geo-strategic interests in Syria. Russia is concerned by its declining influence in the region and Syria has been a key regional ally providing Russia with the support and naval base at Tarsus to project naval power and foreign policy influence in the Mediterranean.<sup>151</sup> Hundreds of Russian technicians are still working in Tartus to renovate the docks as a base for Russian ships. Russia has also invested greatly in the country. Apart from arms contracts worth 4 billion USD, the Moscow Times reported recently that Russia's investment in Syrian infrastructure, energy and tourism amounts to \$19.4bn in 2009.<sup>152</sup>

Despite this, there are signs that the Russian government itself no-longer considers the Assad regime likely to survive in its current form, as it views the Sunni Arab powers stacked against it too powerful. Thus they may ultimately see the wisdom of a form of intervention under the right circumstances, such as under a negotiated transition where Russian interests can be protected. Top-ranking Russian officials have of late been speaking dismissively of Assad and his prospects. There have also been public statements by Russian diplomats that al-Assad may step down as part of a transitional agreement.

Russia's fears about a civil war developing in Syria are geostrategic and are not dissimilar to many western strategists' anxieties. Russian Middle Eastern experts compare Syria to Russia's own province of Dagestan in the North Caucasus,<sup>153</sup> with its majority Sunni Muslim

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<sup>150</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15753975>

<sup>151</sup> Center For Strategic & International Studies, *Instability in Syria: Assessing the Risks of Military Intervention*

<sup>152</sup> Ibid

<sup>153</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/dec/02/russia-syria-civil-war-dagestan>

population and thus fear the contagion of Sunni Muslim demands for greater freedom in majority Muslim lands.

So, what is most important for the Russians in Syria is twofold: firstly, being given a place at the post-Assad table and secondly have their concerns over externally sanctioned regime change taken seriously. If a nuanced policy on Syria is able to do this, and at the same time protect its key interest in the country – the naval base at Tartus, it is likely to consent to dropping its total support for the regime. Thus, although Russia has genuine geostrategic interests in Syria, they are not so important that Russia will prop up the Syrian government indefinitely. Ultimately, Russia may be the only actor who has the ability to influence the Assad regime into genuine compromises to allow for a transition, and thus their acquiescence is vital.

*99% of those interviewed in field research held negative feelings towards Russia*

### 7.3 Iran

Syria has long been Iran's major proxy in the region but this relationship has only been strengthened under Bashar al-Assad. The closeness of the relationship is based on a number of factors, including Shi'ism, their mutual anti-Zionism and anti-Wahabism, and the mutual support of Hizbullah in Lebanon. The city of Zabadani is the key port for supplying the Lebanese militia group. The importance of the Syria-Iran relationship is evinced by a report by the Economist Magazine that Iran had from March 2011 to February 2012, sent the Syrian government \$9 billion to help it withstand Western sanctions. The Guardian (United Kingdom) also reported that the Iranian government has been assisting the Syrian government with riot control equipment and intelligence monitoring techniques.

In the case of more direct international intervention it is assumed that Iran will deepen its role in the country to defend its ally. Indeed in the recent months, Iranian officials have been increasingly open about their direct support for the regime and indeed their military presence there; Major General Ali Jafari, a commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, recently stated that the IRG's Al-Quds force 'are present' in Syrian although claiming that their role is merely 'advisory.'<sup>154</sup>

It is important however to understand the context of the statement of al-Quds, coming as it does from an organization amongst the most hard-line in the Iranian state. The al-Quds force

<sup>154</sup> <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2012/Sep-17/188251-iran-denies-revolutionary-guards-presence-in-lebanon.ashx#axzz26g3Makw3>

may be attempting to exaggerate the extent of Iranian support for Syria so as to enhance the role of this force vis-a-vis other parts of the Iranian government. Indeed Iran's actions towards any international intervention in Syria are perhaps not as predictable as they may seem. It may be assumed that Iran would automatically react to any attempt at intervention with as escalation including stepping up military support for the Syrian government and helping to arm Alawite and Shia militias in Syria and activating Hizbullah.

However this exaggerates the extent of unity on what policy should be towards Syria.<sup>155</sup> The Iranian Foreign Ministry, for example, may well take a much more balanced approach towards Syria and support for the Assad regime. Mehmanparast, a spokesman for the Ministry stated that, "Iran has not in any way a military presence in the region, particularly in Syria."<sup>156</sup>

Western policy on intervention thus needs to reflect that there are clear differences in Tehran over Syrian policy and should aim to isolate the hard-liners - like al-Quds - rather than the moderates - like those in the Foreign Ministry. Although it is unlikely that the Iranians will ever publicly be in favour of any transition away from the Assad regime, there are indeed deep splits in the Iranian government over Iranian policy on Syria.

Ultimately, continued Iranian support for Syria should be viewed as one part of the present crisis over the nuclear issue. Finding a position of compromise on Syria may be part of finding a binding solution to the question of Iranian nuclear proliferation.

*99% of those interviewed in field research felt negatively about Iran*

## 7.4 The Gulf States

The position of the Gulf States is the mirror-image of that of Iran, due to the fact that these countries view Shia Muslims and Iran as some of the gravest threats to continued stability in the Arabian Peninsula and their dominant position in the Middle East. Their role in the Syrian resistance to the Assad regime has been prominent with Saudi Arabia apparently providing financial support to the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and paying fighters' salaries, in an attempt to encourage defections. However, despite the obvious benefits from the fall of the Assad regime for the Gulf States, their position is hedged with caution.

<sup>155</sup> [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/09/21/what\\_is\\_iran\\_doing\\_in\\_syria?](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/09/21/what_is_iran_doing_in_syria?)

<sup>156</sup> Ibid



Although the Gulf States' interests are certainly for the weakening of Iranian influence in the region and thus would – other things being equal - welcome the end of an Assad-dominated Syria, there is evidence that Saudi Arabia fears the outcome and the effect on stability of a victory for the revolutionaries as well as continuing sectarian violence. Such fears are hardly surprising given the tone of the revolution being in many ways set by Sunni Islamism. Certain forms of more moderate and modern Islamism – led by the Muslim Brotherhood – have traditionally seen the conservative, Wahhabist monarchy of Saudi Arabia as an enemy. Thus Saudi Arabia and Qatar tread a thin line between encouraging Sunni Arab resurgence (of which they feel very much a part) and giving fuel to an already impassioned - yet at times contradictory - revolutionary Arab awakening, given their status as genuine autocracies.<sup>157</sup>

Reports indeed suggest that the Saudis may be funding the opposition only as much as to sustain their fight against the Assad regime, but not enough for outright victory at this stage.<sup>158</sup> There is even evidence that Saudi Arabia may be supporting more fundamentalist and conservative jihadist militants in favor of more mainstream groups – as they may find them easier to control - although the fact of these groups being better armed may be more related to better networks.<sup>159</sup>

Overall, Gulf and Saudi policy on Syria may at this stage be helping to stalemate the conflict as the amount of aid given is not enough to defeat the Syrian regime and it may well turn Syria further into a proxy battleground for the fight against the Iranians. Gulf support of the rebels on its own therefore may simply prolong the conflict – making it more violent – and thus creating a situation in which Syria will ultimately explode showering the region with Sunni grievances and militancy.

*63% of those interviewed in ICOS field research have a positive opinion of Saudi Arabia*

## 7.5 Israel

Israel's position is particularly complex because Syria under Assad (and Iran) are considered its two major foes in the region. However, a victory for a strongly Islamist group, or turmoil in the region, is seen by the Israelis as of potential concern in the context of the coming to power of the (Sunni) Islamist parties in Tunisia and Egypt. A very well-managed transition would be more acceptable for the Israelis. In the short-term, the downfall of the Assad regime could have one great benefit for the Israelis; the possible fall from power of Hizbullah in Lebanon.

<sup>157</sup> <http://www.reuters.com>

<sup>158</sup> Al-Jazeera, September 19<sup>th</sup> 2012.

<sup>159</sup> Phillips, Christopher, What went wrong with the Bashar Al-Assad presidency?

It is very difficult to estimate in the longer-term the effect of the fall of Hizbullah – and the likely resultant turmoil - on Israeli security interests. Thus, Israel would most likely wish to see a managed transition away from the Assad regime and not the unpredictably that could arise from chaos in Syria. Israel would be wise not to participate in the violent Balkanization of Syria; although undoubtedly eliminating the threat to Israel of a powerful successor state in the short-term, such a scenario would leave the future of the area uncertain and most likely extremely violent and open to exploitation by violent non-state actors. As Israel has learned with Hizbullah and NATO has learned with insurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq, asymmetric warfare against non-state actors can often be more problematic than against even heavily-armed authoritarian regimes.

*36% of those interviewed in ICOS field research would accept help from Israel*

## 7.6 Iraq

As a majority Shia country, Iraq has appeared to grow closer to Iran in the last few years and has tended to follow their policy towards Assad, although there are signs of conflict within the Iraqi government over the issue. Outwardly at least - whether because of pressure from the Iranians or because of fears of a strong Sunni state in Syria which would threaten the new Shia dominated Iraq – the Iraqi Government has backed Assad.

In July, Iraq cautioned for neutrality on the Syria and rejected the Arab League's request for Assad to step down, mirroring Iran's position.<sup>160</sup> Iraq is also threatened by the growing jihadist element in the Syrian conflict, coming as it mostly does through the porous Syria-Iraq border, which is now mostly under the control of the FSA, especially with the recent victories against the Syrian regime in Deir iz-Zour. The fragile nature of that border is also reflected in the growing violence in Iraq. Despite U.S. fears of their growing closeness to Iran, Iraq is still very much in the US geo-strategic orbit. Iraq's sectarian divisions closely mirror those of Syria and there are people in the Iraqi government and parliament in favor of intervention in Syria.<sup>161</sup> Although Iraq is very unlikely to participate in any intervention against Syria or allow foreign troops on its soil, the importance of the Iraqi-Syrian border as a conduit for supplies and militants makes Iraq's position important even if much of the population may wish for it not to be.

<sup>160</sup> <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/07/25/228341.html>

<sup>161</sup> Ibid

## 7.7 China

After years of passivity, Chinese policy in the Middle East has been transformed towards a much more proactive diplomatic approach as China fears US hegemony in the Middle East and believes that Washington's strategy is one of 'encirclement.'<sup>162</sup> Thus despite some commercial interests in Syria, the main drivers of Chinese policy towards Syria and the Syrian conflict are geo-strategic concerns, but also fears the precedents being set for international intervention and violations of sovereignty in undemocratic regimes which have lost popular legitimacy because of the nature of the Chinese regime itself.<sup>163</sup>

It is arguable that the general Chinese approach towards the Arab World is out-of-date and based on the political priorities of Arab nationalism and anti-colonialism. This approach strengthens the argument about the question of national sovereignty, as according to the Chinese view of the Middle East, politics are static and dictated by the requirements of the super power.<sup>164</sup>

Along with Russia, China has continually vetoed UN resolutions calling for increased pressure to be placed on the Syrian regime. The resolution presented before the Security Council on February 4<sup>th</sup> 2012 specifically had provisions removed because of Russian and Chinese pressure, which could potentially have justified military action but was still vetoed by the Russians and Chinese. A similar resolution on the 19<sup>th</sup> of July 2012 calling for sanctions against the Assad regime was also vetoed by Russia and China.

Ultimately, because Chinese policy in Syria is defined by a principle that denies the viability of intervention to effect popular regime change (because China itself fears it), and, because China is not affected by the relatively localized problems of instability in the Middle East as Russia is, it is arguably less likely to change course. However, there is a possibility of China being involved in a more orderly transition should Assad's position become unsustainable. The Chinese fear being isolated on international issues such as this more than the Russians, and thus if Moscow were to drop its complete opposition to any intervention, Beijing could as well.

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<sup>162</sup> Dan Blumenthal, "Providing Arms: China and the Middle East," *Middle East Quarterly*, Spring 2005, pp.11-19

<sup>163</sup> "Syria in China's New Silk Road Strategy", Jamestown Foundation, 16 April 2010.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid

## 7.8 The United States and the West

Undoubtedly, U.S. and Western positions on which path to take on Syria are highly dependent on perceived political and security priorities, many of which may not be reconciled.

Libertarian commentators, for example, contend that the United States would be better served by a foreign policy which does not seek to intervene in external conflicts, whilst individuals believing that America's interests are best served by robustly supporting Israel in the region may favor a strategy which seeks as its number one priority the weakening of influences in the region who see themselves as having the opposite agenda.

The Arab World and the Middle East is experiencing vast and momentous changes, which despite attempts to define them as democratic, secular or Islamist defy easy categorization. As populist political pressures assert themselves, old alliances that the United States forged during the Cold War are being put under strain and becoming undone.

The Arab Spring has shown that the Arab World was ripe for momentous political change. What the Western world needs to come to terms with is that the outcome of the political struggles in the Arab World and Middle East are still in the process of being defined no more so than the relationship with the West. Decisions taken now define that relationship in the future. The Iraqi Kurds did not forget that the Americans supported them against Saddam Hussain. The West cannot afford to neglect its duty to the Syrians either.

There is certainly little or no appetite in the West for yet another political intervention, despite the Libyan adventure being viewed as successful. A military intervention involving the US in any substantial way, as a Syrian effort would, (especially if we are realistic about the need to dismantle the chemical weapons sites) is unlikely to be popular with domestic audiences.

There is an aversion to using a humanitarian crisis as a backdrop for a military intervention, given that this can create a precedent for numerous future interventions. Chemical weapons might have been enough to push the issue over the line, but the Iraq intervention, predicated as it was on the allegation of weapons of mass destruction existing in Iraq, has had an effect of muting any discussion of whether this indeed is a compelling basis for an intervention.

Our ground research indicates that although the locals very much want a no fly zone (which would be American), there are increasing levels of resentment for the lack of response by the United States and the West. This only feeds the type of anti-Western Islamism growing in

Syria. The lack of observable military or humanitarian aid by the West inside Syria has the same result.

Interestingly, neither Western nor Arab boots on the ground had much support, although the concern regarding the use of chemical weapons by the regime against its own population is high.

As a result there is a type of schizophrenia on both sides. The US and the West would like the existing regime replaced with one aligned with Western security interests, but at the moment they are not competing well against other potential suitors for the Syrian people's support.

The Syrians do not want to be aligned with the West – they were educated from a young age to perceive Israel and the United States as their main enemies, but they also look to the West for assistance in unseating Assad – but not if it means they see American troops on the ground as they saw in Iraq.

On the domestic US front there is significant pressure to respond to the humanitarian crisis, from sectors of the political class that normally are very opposed to any type of military intervention. At the same time those who normally would fall into the "hawk" category, argue against a military intervention – because they don't see friends in Syria to intervene for – resulting in a counter-intuitive political debate on the question of the correct parameters that must be present to trigger a military response in the country.

The US "room to maneuver" is very constrained by domestic and international factors, which has allowed the Assad regime to continue and expand its brutal response. It was argued that the US Administration would move following the election period, but to date there is no indication that this will be the case.

In fact following the presidential elections, the US State Department had significant diplomatic success in their work supporting the creation of the Syrian National Coalition and the subsequent formal recognition of the opposition. The recent decision to deploy Patriot missile batteries to Turkey - while it is significant in that it is the first delivery of military resources to defend an ally - falls short of using military resources to defend the Syrian people.

*80% of those interviewed in ICOS field research had a negative opinion towards the United States*

## 8. The Matrix of Internal and External Dynamics

### 8.1 *Après moi, le deluge*: Sectarianism the basis of strong internal support

*"The Nusayris [Alawites] are more infidel than Jews or Christians, even more infidel than many polytheists. They have done greater harm to the community of Muhammad than have the warring infidels such as the Franks, the Turks, and others. To ignorant Muslims they pretend to be Shia, though in reality they do not believe in God or His prophet or His book."*

Ibn Taymiyya, Sunni Theologian (1268-1328)

Perhaps one of the key questions is the extent to which views are becoming shaped by the regime's narrative which pits the minority sects – defended by the regime - against the Sunni majority. As discussed above, the Assad regime is dominated by the Alawite sect, with Assad's inner circle being almost entirely made up of Alawites from the Kalabiyya tribe and significant real power being held by the security-intelligence apparatus. Most of the key men within these organs of power are Alawites with some other minorities but almost no Sunni Arabs. The Alawites' domination of the regime and deep-seated fear of the Sunni majority make the Assad regime extremely difficult to defeat because there they feel they have nothing to lose.

Other minorities, including Christians, Druze and Shia and despite certain exceptions, have generally been supportive of the regime, fearing the alternative. Rich Syrians – including many Sunni Arabs and especially those in Damascus – whilst generally not espousing overwhelming loyalty to the regime, have nevertheless remained fearful of the rebels.<sup>165</sup>

The Syrian armed forces– despite serious qualitative limitations – are well-armed, large and have an implacable officer corps. The armed forces still outmatch the rebels in terms of weaponry and numbers. Syria also possesses an air defense system which would require a sophisticated air assault in order for it to be destroyed.

### 8.2 External backers - Iranian support inevitable, Russian support erodible

The Assad regime can count on a number of countries which have vested interest in the regime remaining in place. Top of list is Iran, for which Syria is major proxy in the Middle East and without which Hizbullah would not be able to receive its military hardware.

<sup>165</sup> Starr, Stephen, Revolt in Syria, Chapter 5, Revolution through the eyes of rich and poor

Russia's support for the regime is less intractable and is more closely related to its perception of the motives of Western support for intervention and the precedent it sets for foreign intervention in domestic politics generally. The Russians will continue to support the current Syrian regime as long as they feel that they are being cut out of a post-Assad Syria. Chinese support is also important in maintaining the veto at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) against intervention, their support being for similar reasons to those of Russia.

### 8.3 Incoherent opposition in Syria: first signs of a split?

*96% of those interviewed in ICOS field research either gave 'no answer' or said 'no-one' to the question, 'who is the current leader of the opposition?'*

The official political and military opposition to the regime has suffered from serious weaknesses and drawbacks. Until the formation of the Syrian National Coalition for Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, the main political opposition to the Assad regime was the Syrian National Council (SNC) which is an amalgam of various opposition groups including Islamists such as the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood – increasingly dominant after the resignation of Dr Bassma Kodmani<sup>166</sup> - and left-wing parties such as The Syrian Democratic People's Party.<sup>167</sup>

A lack of unity among different political parties, and between them and the military opposition has prevented consensus on many key issues, most notably appearing at the Cairo Conference in June 2012 where members of the opposition exchanged punches. The opposition to the regime is shaped by the dynamic imperatives on the ground and thus political opposition made up of exiled intellectuals has found itself irrelevant as opposition on the ground has appeared almost exclusively in Sunni towns and neighborhoods, especially among migrants and the poor.

The group which attempts to coordinate the military struggle against the regime is the Free Syrian Army founded by defectors from the Syrian Army itself in July 2011. It has been outmatched by the size and technical capacity of the Syrian Army in open battle, especially against air attacks. This is starting to change in urban areas where the development of rebel tactics is beginning to tell. Until very recently, the FSA has had no unified command structure because there has been no monopoly on the military struggle against the Syria regime where the armed resistance to the regime appeared spontaneously and on a local level.

<sup>166</sup> [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/09/07/the\\_bunch\\_that\\_cant\\_shoot\\_straight](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/09/07/the_bunch_that_cant_shoot_straight)

<sup>167</sup> Please see Section 5



Despite reports of logistical support from the Gulf countries and more than a year of existence, there is still a lack of advanced weaponry. As a consequence, fighters are increasingly being drawn towards a more radical, sectarian and broadly 'Salafist' outlook. Since the formation of the new Syrian National Coalition, the first signs of a split in the opposition have appeared as a collection of Salafist and more violent jihadist groups – including the Tawheed Brigade and Jabha al-Nusra – declined to give allegiance to the new coalition.

#### 8.4 Neo-Salafism and the law of diminishing returns<sup>168</sup>

*"You can see why the US would want to disengage after what just happened in Cairo and Benghazi....but in fact, the chaos and the Islamists we saw in Libya should be a warning to us about this policy of standing back. Syria could become far, far more dangerous than Libya for the United States and the region, and it's still not too late to make a difference."*

Salman Sheikh, Director of the Brookings Doha Center

Over the recent months, there has been an undoubted growth in the strength of jihadists groups with a more radical 'Salafist' outlook. Their number has grown in proportion to the growth of violence and the inability of less radical groups in the FSA to strike at the government and defend civilians. Syria offers fertile terrain for radical militant ideas; violence, sectarianism and disenchantment with the West. Salafist groups, despite in theory sharing literalist and fundamentalist views on scripture, are far from monolithic or rigid. Whilst few would genuinely share the ideology of global jihad of al-Qaeda, many may call themselves al-Qaeda if only to strike fear into the opponent or as a badge of honor.

As foreign powers increased their rhetoric of support for opposition and have failed to provide physical support, Syrians have felt disenfranchised and betrayed by the West,<sup>169</sup> whilst Salafists are often better funded and better armed than other rebel groups.<sup>170</sup> This may be because they have access to long-running jihadist networks linked to the Gulf and the same networks that brought funding to Iraq.<sup>171</sup>

Ultimately, although the West is anxious about giving arms to the rebels because they are unsure about the nature of the militant opposition groups especially in the light of the events in Libya. This anxiety is self-fulfilling as extremism and anti-Western sentiment among the opposition will only grow if support does not materialize to fight the regime. Also, the longer

<sup>168</sup> Please see Section 3

<sup>169</sup> Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition. International Crisis Group, 2012.

<sup>170</sup> Al-Jazeera, September 19<sup>th</sup> 2012.

<sup>171</sup> Phillips, Christopher, What went wrong with the Bashar Al-Assad presidency?

the West takes to respond to the call for help by the opposition the less they are able to have influence over the political make-up of any future Syria - the law of diminishing returns.

### 8.5 The Chemical Weapon Red Line

*"A red line for us is [if] we see a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around, or being utilized. That would change my calculus."*

Barack Obama, August 2012

It is believed that Syria possesses one of the largest stocks of chemical weapons in the world and although some chemical factories have been identified, it is reported that there may be a dozen sites where the weapons may be stored, with intelligence reports suggesting that many of the sites are in urban areas.<sup>172</sup>

Furthermore, the Syrian government has recently stated that it would use chemical weapons against any foreign forces which invade Syrian territory. There are an increasing number of reports suggesting that the Syrian regime is preparing chemical weapons for use and although it would represent a desperate move, if the regime felt it had nothing to lose, for example in the case of impending meltdown, the potential for the deployment of some form of nerve or mustard agent should be taken very seriously.

*90% of those interviewed in ICOS field research fear that Assad may use chemical weapons*

### 8.6 Humanitarian Crisis: Overspill into the wider region

With continuing conflict, the numbers of deaths in the Syrian conflict have topped 40,000. The volume of Syrian refugees and internally displaced persons has further deepened the humanitarian crisis. Since the beginning of the civil unrest, it is estimated that over 400,000 refugees have left Syria for neighboring countries, with 432,525 registered by UNHCR as of 14<sup>th</sup> September 2012<sup>173</sup>, with from 1.5 - 2 million Syrians being internally displaced due to conflict.

With UNHCR stressing that the situation remains precarious and aid agencies struggling to provide sufficient sanitation and space for the increasing numbers, issues such as the spread of disease, malnutrition and camp violence are increasing problems. Major recipients of refugee communities are Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq, with sizeable numbers also in

<sup>172</sup> See Section 4

<sup>173</sup> <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

Algeria and Iraqi Kurdistan. Neighboring countries are struggling to accommodate such large influxes of refugees, while their numbers threaten to spread the Syrian conflict across the region. Indeed, according to Melissa Fleming, the chief spokesperson for UNHCR, the Syrian crisis has pushed the world's refugee total towards record highs, with numbers predicted to increase.

### **8.7 The shape of the future Syrian government**

The current dynamics of the Syrian conflict make finding a way towards a viable, inclusive and West-leaning government very challenging. Ultimately to secure viable peace - given all the other factors mentioned so far - a realistic plan for a future Syrian government may need to be premised on incorporating parts of the current regime and state-apparatus into any plans. The key questions here are: what to do with the inner circle of the Assad regime; how to reform the repressive machinery of the intelligence services and the secret police; and how to create a new Syrian state and constitution which can appeal to all Syrians regardless of sect. It is however likely that the conflict has progressed so far that the fissures of Syrian society may make a centralized nation state no longer viable and a type of Syrian federalism the only viable option.

### **8.8 What do the West and United States want? Meta-goals**

In a conflict as complex as that of Syria, it is certainly difficult to lay out a clear vision of outcomes that may be in the long-term best interests of the United States and the Western world in general.

This is appealing for Western governments because of consequences of intensive and protracted bloodletting. What is important is to lessen suffering and violence during the process towards resolution and this also reduces uncertainty. Meta-goals therefore are firmly prefaced by how the conflict and transition occurs because this comes to define the final outcome and the repercussions for the region.

## 9. Legal Arguments for Military Intervention

### 9.1 UNSC resolution

Article 2, Chapter 4 of the Charter of the U.N. prohibits the “threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence” of a member state. There are a number of exceptions to this prohibition, the first one being the authorization of force by a U.N. Security Council resolution. A UNSC resolution would be the most straightforward path towards intervention and would condemn the Assad regime for violent suppression of civil protests, massacres and other forms of violence. It could refer members of the regime to the International Criminal Court (ICC) for investigations into war crimes and crimes against humanity and seek international military assistance in protecting the people of Syria.

Resolutions from the UNSC do not need however to call for direct military action for intervention to take place. The campaign to help the Kurds in Iraq in 1991 was undertaken on the basis of a UN resolution which merely called on Member States to “contribute to.... humanitarian relief efforts.” American, British, French and Turkish Governments used this text to justify the deployment of aircraft and ground forces and aircraft to defend Kurds fleeing for the Turkish border. This operation- Operation Provide Comfort- was followed by Operation Northern Watch and Operation Southern Watch, the 1991 no-fly zones imposed on the Kurdish north and Shia south of Iraq.

### 9.2 Libyan Resolution 1973

A liberal interpretation of the text of a UNSC resolution most recently happened in the Libyan intervention. UNSC resolution 1973 allowed for all necessary measures to be taken to protect civilians under threat of attack – invoking the Responsibility to Protect doctrine - with this being applied to mean that all of Gaddafi’s forces could be attacked as they could all be considered to have the potential to attack civilians. In this way, UN resolution 1973 was essentially used as a basis to launch a comprehensive campaign on Gaddafi’s armed forces thus allowing for the overthrow of the regime, ostensibly the goal of the countries behind the UN resolution. It is fear of this “mission creep” that has led Russia and China to continually veto UNSC resolutions, even those simply criticizing the Assad regime. It is argued that neither Russia nor China decided to apply its veto in the UNSC not primarily because they did not believe that the United States and its allies would use the Resolution to justify bringing down the regime, but also because Colonel Gaddafi was not an ally of Russia or China and were not unduly affected by his downfall.

### 9.3 Responsibility to protect – action circumventing the UNSC

Russia and China have continued to veto every proposed UNSC resolution which seeks to put any kind of pressure on the Assad regime. If, in the face of repeated violations of international law, the UNSC is unable to fulfill its “responsibility to protect,” then the case for the activation of Resolution 377A, justifying a military intervention, is strengthened.

Another approach to finding legal justification for an intervention without a UNSC resolution is that the UN General Assembly invokes the “Uniting for Peace” resolution (377A), a precedent established to break protracted deadlock in the Security Council.

The “vote of no confidence” in their own security council by the General Assembly by 133 votes to 12 is a sign that such an invocation is a possibility<sup>174</sup>, as is the recognition of the National Coalition by over 100 countries. One of the key methods of achieving such a momentous vote is presenting further evidence of the continued abuse of human rights by the Syrian government based on the principles of Responsibility to Protect.<sup>175</sup>

Ironically, the UNSC undermined its own credibility with the poor performance of the UNSMIS mission- with Amnesty International being particularly scathing<sup>176</sup> - and thus there is a stronger case for circumventing of the UNSC. Satellite imagery is able to prove the Syrian government’s breach of Article 8, 2(e) of the Geneva Convention covering ‘armed conflict not of an international character.’ It states that a war crime has been committed if a force is:

*“Intentionally directing attacks against the civilian population as such or against civilians not taking direct part in hostilities.”*

A further basis for an exception to Article 2 (4) in the UN Charter is an invocation of self-defense stipulated in Article 51. Two ways exist which could justify the invoking of Article 51 on Syria.

The first is that the crackdowns and human rights violations committed by the regime constitute a dire risk to regional peace and stability. Any intervening power may take action only on the pretext that it is not related to its own political interests, and that the mission is strictly humanitarian. Turkey’s case here is strong with the large numbers of refugees in the border regions, the stability and sovereignty of the Turkish Republic is put under threat, especially considering the volatility of much of the Turkish border regions in the south of the country. Jordan and Lebanon also suffer from the relatively large numbers of Syrian refugees in the territory.

<sup>174</sup> <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=42624#.UM5hK6yUNnA>

<sup>175</sup> <http://www.responsibilitytoprotect.org>

<sup>176</sup> Amnesty International- Public Statement

The second method of invoking Article 51 would be for the United Nations General Assembly to recognize the Syrian National Coalition as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people, and thus the SNC could request international military assistance in self-defense of Syria, thereby arguing that the Assad regime was an occupier. This could carry a strong case in terms of international human rights law in that a claim of sovereignty (by the Assad government) does not allow for the perpetrating of atrocities against civilians or denying them their human rights (Article 8, 2(e)). It is here that the 'Responsibility to Protect' doctrine carries weight as a justification for intervention as was the case for Libya in 2011.

## 10. Other Relevant Transitions

### 10.1 Yemeni Transition – negotiated transition

After months of demonstrations and escalating chaos across the country, Yemen's longstanding president, Ali Abdullah Saleh was forced to sign the Gulf Cooperation Council Transitional agreement on 23rd November 2011. His successor, Abdul Rabbo Mansour Hadi was elected president on 25th February 2012 by an overwhelming majority. After the signing of the Gulf Agreement, a Government of National Unity was formed which was composed of all the major forces present in Yemen, with the exception of the southern separatists who refuse to participate by definition.

A cornerstone of the transition process in Yemen is the national dialogue initiative which began in November 2012 and will bring together all groups including the opposition parties, the separatists, the youth and the northern rebels. It is expected to last 6 months and a new constitution and presidential and parliamentary elections are to be agreed upon during the process. There are six key issues for the transition in Yemen; reform of the military and security forces; inclusiveness of national unity government; inclusion of the new opposition structures which have organized protests - 'the protests squares'; the active role of the international community in enabling new regime to weaken power structures of old regime; lack of security, especially in rural areas leading to factionalism; and separatism in the north and south.

The role of the international community throughout the process of transition has been arguably absolutely vital and continues to be. The threat of personal sanctions by the UNSC was a key factor in persuading Saleh to sign the GCC Agreement and the same pressure has been applied to persuade the reactionary members of the Yemeni regime to accept their removal from the transitional Yemeni government.

### 10.2 Somali Transition – building a federal government

Somalia's transition out of a near-permanent state of civil war is only at a beginning with the final outcome far from clear out this stage. Despite this, it should be recognized that the involvement of the international community and the United States in recent years has been important. From 2004-2012 the internationally recognized government in Somalia was the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) itself created by the Transitional Federal Parliament (TFP). The TFP was made up of members of the four major clans in Somalia, some minor clans, businessmen and civil society representatives. The TFG was backed by the United Nations, the African Union and the United States, and militarily supported by the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), itself approved by the United Nations. In fighting the



violent Islamist militias of al-Shabaab and other al-Qaeda affiliated groups, the TFG and AMISOM allied itself with moderate Islamic groups such as Ahlu Sunna Waljama'a (ASWJ) who opposed the extremism of al-Shabaab and others, to bring the majority of Somalia under the control of the federal government - and importantly Mogadishu itself – by summer 2012.

The international community has played a vital role in re-establishing government authority in Somalia – despite its obvious weaknesses at this early stage - of which there are three key elements. First is the unified support of the UN Security Council in continually approving the mandate of the African Union Mission in Somalia to provide troops in support of the TFG. The second is the agreement of neighboring African states to commit significant ground forces to support the mandate and not to pursue self-interested policies which favor one opposition faction in favor of another. The third key element is the role of the United States in training Somali government and AMISOM troops in the challenging military environment.

The transitional government in Somalia has, from the beginning been as inclusive with regard to the complex nature of Somali politics and society. As well as the diverse nature of the original Transitional Federal Institutions local state governments – such as in the semi-independent province of Puntland – have been allowed considerable authority over their own affairs. Alliances with religious groups hostile to al-Qaeda style extremism, like ASWJ or the Raskamboni movement has been vital in creating legitimacy, splitting the Islamist insurgency and consolidating its authority. Possibly the key success in this type of policy was the reconciliation deal with the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) who previously were the main rival of the TFG but who agreed to power-sharing with the government in 2009. After the ICU defeat to Ethiopian forces at the Battle of Jilib in 2007, less militant members of the ICU decided to give up the war against the federal government and in response hardliners split and formed the militant groups, al-Shabaab and Hizbul Islam. In the end, reconciliation led to the commander in chief of the ICU, Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, becoming President of Somalia in 2009.

## 11. Precedents for Humanitarian Intervention

Any intervention is likely to be predicated on the humanitarian case for action and is likely to revolve around providing protection to civilians caught up in the conflict, despite real concerns over chemical weapons. There are several precedents to humanitarian predicated intervention which differ according to the parameters of the conflict.

### 11.1 Libyan Intervention, 2011 – Libya is not Syria

As stated, the intervention in Libya was predicated on UNSC Resolution 1973 which formed the legal basis of intervention. The resolution demanded “an immediate ceasefire,” authorized the international community to establish a no-fly zone and also authorized the international community to use all means necessary short of foreign occupation to protect civilians. The decision to engage in the Libyan conflict derived from many situational factors. Qaddafi continuously proved his intent to violently suppress protestors and issued statements saying that he would “show no mercy” to rebels and the rebel city of Benghazi in particular.<sup>177</sup>

Strategically, the situation in Libya allowed for much clearer objectives, easier targeting of air strikes and other forms of direct intervention. The rebels had achieved clear control of the east of Libya, whilst other cities outside of the eastern half of the country- specifically Misrata- were under rebel control and holding out against Gaddafi onslaughts. This meant that there were clear front lines in the conflict allowing for much more comprehensive use of air power against Gaddafi’s forces, without endangering civilians.

Gaddafi’s armed forces were also very small, with 50,000 men in the field- although the loyalty of much of these was always in question - and a small and weak air force. Despite all these factors, the Gaddafi regime still lasted nearly 6 months after the first NATO airstrikes and was only finally defeated by the Berber tribes of the Jebel Nafusa south of Tripoli.

### 11.2 The Kurdish intervention in 1991 – Peacekeeping with Politics

The 1991 uprising against Saddam Hussain after the 1<sup>st</sup> Gulf War resulted in an Iraqi military campaign against rebels across Iraq, but specifically in the Kurdish north of the country and Shia south. Millions of Kurds, fearing massacres similar to those of the 1988 Anfal campaign, began fleeing north towards the Turkish border. On 5<sup>th</sup> of April, the UNSC passed Resolution 688 condemning the repression and demanding that the Iraqi government end the repression and respect the human rights of its population. It also stated that Iraq must allow access to international humanitarian organizations to the areas affected.

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<sup>177</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/03/17/gaddafi-benghazi-libya-news\\_n\\_837245.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/03/17/gaddafi-benghazi-libya-news_n_837245.html)

The US, UK and France used UNSC Resolution 688 as a pretext to establish no-fly zones in Iraq even though the resolution made no reference to them. What is of importance for the purposes of examining precedents to any humanitarian intervention in Syria is to examine how the Resolution was applied in this case. The coalition could have decided that it would be applied all over Iraq, essentially providing support for rebels throughout the country to topple the Saddam regime.

In the event, particular focus was given to the plight of Kurds and coalition troops were only sent into the north of Iraq, with humanitarian aid given almost exclusively to them. More widespread intervention would have effectively meant the end of the regime, something President Bush had decided against at the time.

The pretext of providing humanitarian assistance to the Kurdish regions led, whether intentionally or not, towards “Mission Creep” whereby because humanitarian assistance could only be predicated on clear military action and also, because any Iraqi military presence in the Kurdish regions was effectively an act of aggression against the Kurdish people, Operation Provide Comfort ultimately led to the *de facto* independence of the Kurdish region in Iraq.<sup>178</sup>

### 11.3 Intervention in the Yugoslav Civil War – Lessons for a Syrian intervention?

International involvement in the Yugoslav civil war is one of the most complex and contentious examples of humanitarian-predicated intervention. The highly sectarian nature of the conflict and its repercussions are also very instructive for what could be the end result in the Syria conflict.

The initial mandate for the humanitarian intervention in Bosnia was under UNSC Resolution 743, passed on 21<sup>st</sup> February, 1992. NATO’s decision to intervene in Yugoslavia was as a response to the allegations of war crimes committed by the units from various armies and also as a result of the subsequent refugee crisis. The mandate of the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) was for the creation of conditions for peace talks and to establish “safe-havens,” enclaves which acted as United Nations Protected Areas (UNPAs) located in the then Republic of Croatia. UNSC Resolution 762 extended the mandate to include “pink zones” controlling access to the UNPAs, and UNSC Resolution 769 allowed for the monitoring of civilian access to them. Finally, UNSC resolution 770 demanded the demilitarization of the Prevlaka peninsula.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> L.Col. Cavanaugh, J.P, Operation Provide Comfort: A Model for Future NATO Operations

<sup>179</sup> Ivo H.Daalder, ‘Decision to Intervene: How the War in Bosnia Ended’, Foreign Service Journal, Brookings Institute, December 1998

Further resolutions – 781 and 816 created a no-fly zone over Bosnia and authorized states to use force in the case of non-compliance. To enforce the no-fly zone, NATO initiated Operation Deny Flight which allowed NATO planes to militarily engage violators of the zone. On the ground, Serb forces continued to attack UN “safe areas” in Bosnia, but the UN were not able to respond because no mandate was in place to allow them to do so. Finally, the UNSC authorized the use of force by UNPROFOR in Resolution 836 in specially designated zones.

On the opposite side, it was known by the Bosnian Serb leadership in early March 1995, that the fourth year of the war would be its last. The Bosnian Serbs wished to conclude the war by capturing the UN safe zones of Srebrenica, Zepa and Gorazde, then Sarajevo, before the winter. The 20,000-strong UN Protection Force in Bosnia was faced with the dilemma of either siding with the victims of aggression and sacrificing the traditional neutrality of UN peacekeeping, or maintain neutrality and limit its role to protecting humanitarian relief supplies and agencies, effectively leaving the Muslims to face the onslaught unprotected.<sup>180</sup>

A further issue was that most European allies had sent troops as part of the UN operation with the conditions that their involvement would be limited to a humanitarian function. This meant that when limited air strikes in late May 1995 led to nearly 400 peacekeepers being taken hostage, a consensus quickly emerged within the UN that, however limited, NATO air strikes would do more harm than good. This allowed the Bosnian Serbs to implement their strategy with devastating results.

In July 1995, Serb forces began an attack on the Bosnian-Muslim enclave of Srebrenica, despite the presence of Dutch peacekeepers in the town. When the Bosnian Serbs began the attack, there was no resistance either on the ground or in the air. More than 7,000 men of all ages died in the massacre.<sup>181</sup> The horrors of Srebrenica, in part, represented a major turning point for the US and other Western countries towards the war. The change in policy that eventually came about and the increased application of force from the outside became the basis for the diplomatic triumph in Dayton three months later.<sup>182</sup>

One of the points that can be taken from the example for the Syrian civil war is that consensus is not always possible and sometimes escalating intervention can worsen the conflict before resolving it. Further, the idea of safeguarding civilians in a passive capacity which does not allow for responding to attacks is a major flaw. In Bosnia, the Muslims - denied the right to self-defense thanks to an arms embargo - were reliant on the UNPROFOR for protection which was not forthcoming.

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid

<sup>181</sup> Ibid

<sup>182</sup> Ibid

Another important issue was that effective intervention from outside forces needed a working internal component on the ground. Airstrikes or no-fly zones alone are not sufficient to force a regime into submission; they need to be met with counterattacks on the ground as well to further weaken their legitimacy in the country. Lastly, force can lead both sides to the negotiating table.

## 12. A final word

The Arab World and Syria are at a crossroads as Arab autocracies – for so long the only game in town - may no longer rely upon the acquiescence of their citizens. Opposition movements, having finally broken the half-century stranglehold these regimes have had over political, economic and social life, are struggling to provide tangible and convincing alternatives to well-entrenched regimes. The resulting deadlock and exasperation has brought new players into the fray. As this paper has shown, in Syria, this dynamic is at its most pertinent.

At the same time as the Arab World has reached this crossroads, so the foreign policy calculations of the United States and indeed the Western world have been thrown into stark relief. With the invasion of Iraq in 2003, a democratic experiment was delivered.

The broader problem then for Western strategy in the Arab World is how to find the middle road between aiding and abetting opposition movements in the name of freedom and democracy – but not necessary secular visions of progress - and buttressing and supporting governments in the name of stability.

In Syria this choice is most stark. However, although too disturbing a transition has the potential to irrevocably disrupt Syrian society, it is quite clear that a move away from the current regime is absolutely essential.

The current crisis therefore precipitates a new multilateralism in the region to solve deep-seated problems to which foreign relations have been an unwanted diversion. These problems are not *only* those of religion or sect but of poverty and governance. Intervention is just the beginning, what follows it is what will tell the story.

"الش لا يموت بوضعها في قبر"

*"Evil does not die by putting it in a grave"*

*Arabic Proverb*

## Appendix I – ICOS Syria Questionnaire

### ICOS Field Research Methodology

ICOS carried out a field research project from the 1st-4th of November 2012 in Syria. ICOS field research teams asked a set of questions to 256 interviewees from different locations within both Aleppo and Idlib provinces in northern Syria. The target group for these questions was the age group of 16-30 – fighting age males – so that the opinions and motivations of this key demographic may be understood further.

### Questions

#### Who we interviewed:

- The individuals questioned were in a rebel controlled area, and 30% of them stated they were in an area where there current was fighting.
- They almost without exception believe that the rebels are winning the war, and they are a group almost entirely in support of the rebels.

#### What they thought:

- 80 per cent are concerned about the government using chemical weapons.
- They almost unanimously want international assistance but disagree on what kind:
  - i) No fly zone - *yes*, 93%
  - ii) Money and weapons - *yes*, 77%
  - iii) Humanitarian assistance - *yes*, 74%
  - iv) Arab military on the ground - *no*, only 6% *yes*
  - v) Western military on the ground - *no*, only 5% *yes*.
- To the question, 'do you support, peace negotiations between the government and the rebels?';
  - i) 2% said *yes*
  - ii) 27% said *no*
  - iii) 73% said *it's not possible*

#### On Islamists and al-Qaeda:

- They have divergent opinions on the presence of Islamist and AQ in the opposition.
- On the presence of Islamists;
  - i) 55% said *none* or *very few*
  - ii) 34% said *some* or *a lot*
- On the presence of al-Qaeda;
  - i) 71% said *none* or *very few*
  - ii) 11% said *some* or *a lot*



- Those interviewed were evenly split on whether Islamists were growing stronger or weaker

#### **Why they support the rebels, and who they want to succeed Assad:**

- On the reasons for the supporting the rebels;
  - i) 47% said because they are against Bashar al-Assad
  - ii) 40% said so as to establish a democracy
  - iii) 33% said so as to protect their family/village/town
- Only 1 person interviewed was able to respond to the question; who is the leader of the opposition?
- Those interviewed were given a list on individuals who would be able to succeed Bashar al-Assad as leader:
  - i) Colonel Riyadh al-Asaad - 19%
  - ii) Haitham Malih - 16%
  - iii) Burhan Ghailoun - 13%
  - iv) Shaikh Adnan al-Arour - 11%
  - v) Abdul Razaq Tlas - 11%
  - vi) Suhair al-Atassi - 7%
  - vii) George Sabra - 7%
  - viii) Farouq al-Sharaa - 6%
  - ix) Abdul Basit Sida - 5%
  - x) Riyadh Hegab- 4%
  - xi) Amar al-Qurabi - 3%
  - xii) Manaf Tlas - 2%
  - xiii) Michel Kilo - 2%

#### **Geopolitical views:**

- Positive
  - i) Turkey - 83%
  - ii) Saudi Arabia - 61%
  - iii) United States - 13%
  - iv) Russia - 0%
  - v) Iran - 0%
- Negative
  - i) Iran - 99%
  - ii) Russia - 99%
  - iii) United States - 78%
  - iv) Saudi Arabia - 21%
  - v) Turkey - 9%
- 36% of those interviewed said they would accept help from Israel

## Appendix II - Table of US military concentrations in the region

Reference No	Location	Type of Base	Description
<b>Turkey</b>			
<b>1</b>	<b>Incirlik</b>	<b>Air base</b>	Incirlik is used by US, UK and Turkish air forces and hosts more than 1,000 US air force personnel, primarily of the 39th Air Base Wing. It has a 10,000 foot runway capable of being use by large strategic-level bombers
<b>2</b>	<b>Izmir</b>	<b>Air base</b>	Izmir Air Base is a US Air Force facility whose primary mission is to support all U.S. and NATO units in Izmir whilst Izmir itself is the HQ for Allied Land Forces Southeastern Europe.
<b>Israel</b>			
<b>3</b>	<b>Haifa</b>	<b>Naval base</b>	The port of Haifa in northern Israel maintains facilities for the US Sixth Fleet, which often docks naval vessels there.
<b>4</b>	<b>Dimona</b>		The US-owned and operated Dimona Radar Facility consists of two 400-metre tall X-Band radar towers designed to track ballistic missiles from up to 2,400km away staffed by as many as 120 US technicians and guards.
<b>Cyprus</b>			
<b>5</b>	<b>Dhekelia</b>	<b>Air base</b>	British air base, retained by the UK under the 1960 Cyprus treaty of independence.
<b>6</b>	<b>Akrotiri</b>	<b>Air base</b>	British air base, retained by the UK under the 1960 Cyprus treaty of independence.
<b>Kuwait</b>			

7	Ali Al Salem	Air base	Military airbase used by the Kuwait Air Force and the 386th Air Expeditionary Wing of the US Air Force. It is at the forefront of Operation Southern Watch and the deployed home to 1,500 people.
8	Ahmed Al Jaber	Air base	This Kuwait Air Force installation has sections designed for use by the US Air Force, some 120km south of the Iraqi border.
9	Arifjan	Army base	US Army installation that accommodates elements of the US Air Force, US Navy, US Marine Corps and US Coast Guard with approximately 9,000 personnel stationed there.
10	Patriot	Naval base	Also known as Kuwait Navy Base, the Camp Patriot facility is located on the southeast coast of Kuwait. At its peak, the base was home to some 3,000 soldiers forward deployed as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom.
11	Buehring	Army Base	Formerly called Camp Udairi, the Camp Buehring facility is located in a desert area with few Bedouin or livestock. It is the primary location for Middle Eastern Theater Reserve troops.
<b>Bahrain</b>			
12	Sheikh Issa	Air base	This air base hosts the Royal Bahraini Air Force Fighter Wing and the two squadrons that comprise it.
13	Muharraq	Air base	Air field base adjacent to Bahrain International Airport run by the US Navy for shipping supplies in and out of the country.
<b>Qatar</b>			
14	Udeid	Air base	Al Udeid Air Base houses foreign coalition personnel and assets. The base can host several thousand US troops, in addition to the Qatari air force. It is host to a forward headquarters of United States Central Command, headquarters of United States Air Forces Central, No. 83 Expeditionary Air Group RAF, and the 379th Air Expeditionary Wing of the USAF.

15	Sayliyah		The Camp Sayliyah army base serves as the US military's largest pre-positioning facility in the world.
<b>UAE</b>			
16	Dhafra	Air base	The Al Dhafra air base hosts the 763rd Expeditionary Air Refuelling Squadron as well as the UAE air force. The 380th Air Expeditionary Wing of the United States Air Force and the French Air Force use the base as French Military Settlement. The USS Abraham Lincoln is an aircraft carrier nearby conducting maritime security operations in the Arabian Gulf.
<b>Oman</b>			
17	Masirah	Air base	The former RAF airfield is one of the most important bases in Oman, considered one of the most welcoming Gulf countries to US troops. The base also hosts anti-submarine patrol crafts.
<b>Other Deployments</b>			
18	USS Abraham Lincoln	Aircraft carrier	USS Abraham Lincoln is the fifth Nimitz-class super carrier in the United States Navy
19	USS Makin Island	Aircraft carrier	The Makin Island big-deck amphibious assault warship was conducting maritime security operations and support missions throughout the Red Sea in the US Fifth Fleet area of responsibility.

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