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To Save Syria, Assad Must Step Down

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Brief Analysis

At this current juncture there is not a viable path for either Syrian rebel forces nor for the opposition to win the war on their own. Saving Syria requires international cooperation by executing an effective plan to end the crisis. The best way forward is for the United States to enter into a tactical alliance with Russia and Iran, two countries currently with the most leverage in the Syrian war. But saving and restoring Syria must be contingent on removing the Assad family and their partners from power, protecting civilians, and defeating Islamist terrorists.

Terrorism is a Symptom, Not a Cause

In the last decade, Bashar al-Assad's regime advocated for reform in Syria. However, their failure to implement these political, institutional, and economic reforms led to the uprising and civil war in March 2011. At the time, 40 percent of Syria's population was living under the poverty line and more than 25 percent of young men were unemployed. Consequently, many Syrians were immigrating to neighboring countries looking for work and a better life. Since the revolution began, Assad's regime pushed a narrative that the original nonviolent protesters, many of whom were children and youth calling for freedom, were "terrorists." The message he sent to the international community was that the choice was for Assad to stay in power or the so-called "terrorists" would run the country. Bashar al-Assad has managed to deceive many into thinking that he is the lesser of two evils compared to al-Qaeda or the Islamic State: the original protesters were in fact not terrorists, so the regime had to manufacture a threat. Therefore, to create this self-fulfilling prophecy, in 2011 the regime released and gave amnesty to former Syrian foreign fighters, who had fought with al-Qaeda in Iraq, the Islamic State's predecessor, from the infamous Sednaya prison in Damascus. These are the same individuals that the regime helped join the fight with al-Qaeda against the United States to deter America's "War on Terror" from reaching Syria.

The injection of these radicals into the protest movement at the very beginning of the Syrian uprising radicalized elements of the rebel groups. Simultaneously, Assad's army cracked down on peaceful protesters and moderate

rebels. In this way, the regime continued to survive, as extremist groups also targeted the revolutionaries, hollowing out legitimate opposition to Bashar al-Assad and his government. Moreover, according to the U.S. Department of State, which has designated Syria as a State Sponsor of Terrorism since the late 1970s, Syria's "awareness and encouragement for many years of violent extremists' transit through Syria to enter Iraq, for the purpose of fighting Coalition Troops, is well documented." It was these networks which "became the seedbed for the violent extremist elements, including ISIL, which terrorized the Syrian and Iraqi population." The Assad regime has manipulated and exploited terrorism to its benefit, whether exporting it abroad or incubating it locally. Therefore, restoring the key players involved in these policies from the Assad regime in order to save Syria rewards them for creating instability that has not only affected Iraq and Syria, but much of the world.

Assad's Power Sources

In the absence of democratic mechanisms, dictatorial regimes tend to form alliances with like-minded rulers in order to survive, especially when facing civil unrest at home. Therefore, the Assad regime relied on Russia and Iran to support it financially, military, and politically against all forms of domestic opponents. As a result of the United States' absence, Russia took advantage of this power vacuum to advance its own interests and change the dynamics in Syria to its favor. Likewise, Iran, with its Shia militias, and Lebanese Hezbollah agreed to offer help to Bashar al-Assad against the revolutionaries due to the regime's poor fighting performance. This further projected a sectarian nature to the war, radicalizing the opposition and mobilizing Gulf states with their own sectarian geopolitical agendas to help fund what had been an extreme fringe element of the rebel spectrum. Thus, jihadis such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda affiliates in Syria flourished. Without much international or American support, over time many of the moderate rebels fled, were defeated by jihadis, or forced into joining extremist elements due to a lack of alternative options and funds. Inaction led to a multiplication of extremists over the years. This led to a blurring between moderate and extremist rebels and further enforced Assad's narrative: for Syria's future, it was either him or terrorists.

Why Syria is Not Iraq

While the American government and its population were hesitant to intervene in Syria due to the recent memory of the Iraq war, the differences between Iraq and Syria, both before and after the war began, are important to highlight. First, the Iraq war was a foreign intervention that had to do with post-9/11 geopolitics and personal vendettas by then-President George W. Bush and the neoconservative movement. However, what took place in Syria was a legitimate popular uprising calling for the overthrow of the authoritarian Assad regime. Second, the United States is not alone in condemning the Syrian regime and calling for Bashar al-Assad to step down; regional countries including Turkey, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia have urged the United States over the years to intervene diplomatically and militarily, fearing that without international cooperation to bring down the Assad regime, the crisis will ultimately spread to the whole region. Third, the Obama administration incorrectly read the history of the Iraq war. Unlike one of the justifications for the Iraq invasion—weapons of mass destruction (WMDs)—Obama's White House found extensive evidence regarding the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime against its own population. This was further confirmed by UN investigators, who presented these findings over the years to the international community. Therefore, there was a more legitimate argument over international norms to deter future use of WMDs. Fourth, as Islamist terrorist groups have gained territory in Syria, threats to regional and global security have heightened more than ever before. Fifth, this is the greatest influx of refugees and worst humanitarian crisis since World War II. Finally, military intervention in Syria has already been taking place through cooperation with regional allies as well as local Kurdish forces. For instance, American troops are present in northern and eastern Syria to support the Syrian Democratic Forces, an alliance between Kurds, Arabs, and Assyrians against the Islamic State. Additionally, the ongoing airstrikes targeting the Assad regime and its affiliates as well as terrorist groups like the

Islamic State and al-Qaeda is a form of intervention quite different than that in Iraq in 2003.

The Danger of Further Iranian Expansion

The Assad regime is more reliant than ever on Iran, which led the Revolutionary Consultative Council to release a statement in 2015 saying that Iran is occupying Syria. Still, today Iran's involvement in Syria is mainly driven by its aims to challenge its Gulf rivals by gaining hegemony over an Arab state. Iran has also been building alliances with the Houthis in Yemen and Shia parties in Bahrain, and has consolidated its grip over Iraq. All of this could trigger Saudi Arabia to respond by emboldening more Sunni radicals, which is in turn against American interests as well as Russian interests. The Iranian-backed Shia networks in Syria played a key role in radicalizing a segment of the Syrian population and were the main reason why Sunni foreign fighters began going to Syria. As a result, the Sunni moderate rebel groups had no other options but to be killed or join radicals in the fight against Assad and Iran's Shia militias. What made the situation even worse is the absence of American leadership during these critical times. Many Sunnis inside Syria became convinced that the United States is on the side of the Assad regime and Iran. Therefore, restoring the Assad regime will not save Syria, as the pattern will only continue and Islamist terrorists will continue to flourish.

American-Russian Cooperation

The United States and Russia have been negotiating over the duration of the crisis how to jointly combat terrorism in Syria by mainly targeting Islamist terrorists like the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra, an al-Qaeda affiliate based in Idlib. Both countries aspire to weaken and ultimately destroy all violent extremist elements in order to open the door for effective peace negotiations and a potential political transition in Damascus. To make Russia cooperate effectively with the United States, the future of Bashar al-Assad has to be agreed upon by both sides with respect to the wishes of the Syrian people and their legitimate struggle over the past six years to topple a brutal dictator. For Russia, Assad is a weak link, and since Putin is mainly interested in securing his country's investments and military bases on the Syrian coastal region, Assad can be offered amnesty to leave Syria. This would then allow for an interim government made up of the Syrian civilian opposition currently inside and outside the country to be temporarily in control. This interim body should be willing to negotiate with Russia and give concessions in return for allowing Assad to exit peacefully. It is also necessary not to dismiss or eliminate from transitional processes officials and staff in the Syrian government who are familiar with the political system, have no blood on their hands, and are willing to negotiate a peaceful transition. Working with soft-liners to save the institutional infrastructure of Damascus would prevent a total collapse of the state.

Moreover, the United States has repeatedly said that Assad must step down, and the Russian government has the upper hand to make that happen. Although many Syrians want to see Assad behind bars convicted as a war criminal, the more feasible option at this juncture is to give him amnesty and a way out of Syria. This way the anger among the majority Sunni population will be contained and will give the Alawite community a chance to participate in free and fair elections under international monitoring. If Assad does not step down and leave Syria, not only will terrorism continue to be a problem in the country, the region, and around the world, but the international community will risk having another mass slaughter against Sunni civilians who called for the overthrow of the regime in 2011. If Assad remains in power, another bloodbath is inevitable since the regime is merely waiting for the chance to retaliate. Similarly, the Alawite community will face further threats from an angry Sunni population who feel betrayed by the international community.

It is worth noting here that the Alawite minority is not monolithic, and there have been several signs of infighting within Assad's crony clan and growing resentment among Alawites, many of whom belong to the military and state security apparatus. In fact, the Alawites who want to see the end of the Assad regime are now over their fear. The United States and Russia would do well to pay attention to these fissures between the families of the Assad regime

and its Damascus associates, as well as to the anti-Assad communities residing in the coastal region along the Mediterranean Sea.

Ending the Bloodshed

Through a strong and honest American-Russian alliance, Iran's arm would most likely be twisted into cooperation to halt its aggression and interference in Syria's domestic affairs. Additionally, an American-Russian alliance under the supervision of the United Nations would facilitate disarmament and reintegration of armed groups into Syrian society to gradually contain and potentially end fragmentation, terrorism, and militant threats against civilian populations. A fight against extremism should be a fight against the Assad regime, a U.S.-designated state sponsor and enabler of terrorism. It is important to remember that the conflict in Syria became this much of a labyrinth as a result of Assad's own policies on survival and legitimacy. The United States' failure to act more decisively has only exacerbated the crisis both in Syria and abroad. But it is not too late to help Syria move on the correct path forward.



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