

# Realpolitik and the Syrian Conflict

by [Azzam Alkassir \(/experts/azzam-alkassir\)](#)

Feb 26, 2016

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/alwaqyt-alsyasyt-walmart-almmknt-llsra-fy-swrya\)](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Azzam Alkassir \(/experts/azzam-alkassir\)](#)



Articles & Testimony

**Beyond wishful thinking, the current choices for Syria seem limited to either continuing a give-and-take war or having Assad rule Syria much as Saddam ruled Iraq in the 1990s -- under international isolation and with an iron fist.**

**F**ebruary 26, 2016

Following the liberation of Kuwait from Iraqi occupation in 1991, the international coalition participating in Operation Desert Storm had the opportunity to decisively end the rule of Saddam Hussein. Yet based on considerations of realpolitik, the coalition decided to stop short of delivering a knockout blow to Saddam's regime despite appeals from those opposing the Baathist rule in Iraq. The decision resulted in Saddam continuing to silence all opposing voices -- through prison, murder, or threats -- up until the American invasion of Iraq in 2003.

In the 1991 Gulf War, Saddam had shocked the world with his reckless adventure in Kuwait that directly followed a bloody eight-year war with Iran. Everyone, including Saddam himself, understood how much the Iran-Iraq War had cost his country in resources and human lives. During this period, voices opposing Baathist rule began to spread, especially among Shiites in the south and Kurds in the north. In the late 1980s, Western media began drawing attention to atrocities committed by the Iraqi regime through its use of chemical weapons both during the war with Iran and in order to suppress dissent among its own citizens. Nevertheless, the international coalition still decided to keep a deposed Saddam in power after the Gulf War, although the coalition drew clear limits on the dictator's strategic and expansionist aspirations. Saddam would maintain absolute power in a fragmented Iraq burdened by economic sanctions and a no-fly zone over large areas of its territory.

When the West finally decided to end Saddam's rule in Iraq twelve years later, it did so in a new international and regional context. Following the attacks of 9/11, the United States was in need of an international victory to prove that it remained the top world power. It was not difficult for the United States to justify the 2003 Iraq invasion under the pretext of UN Security Council Resolution 1441, which stated that Iraq had breached the ceasefire terms presented in Resolution 687 regarding its weapons of mass destruction program. Later, the United States would claim that Saddam's regime had a relationship with al-Qaeda in order to further justify the invasion.

The years following the 2003 Iraq invasion made clear that there is a long road ahead of the region's people until they reach democracy and stability. Democracy may be the ultimate conclusion of this current chaos, but this potential is a long ways off. The majority of those in the Middle East and most everyone in the West realize this fact, just as they also realize that said chaos is fertile ground for extremism and terrorism. So, matters will consistently not be left to fester without intervention due to the nature of international politics. If change is necessary, then said change will be well studied and implemented to maximize the interests of world powers. The history of the Middle East has shown that phrases such as "betrayal" and the "people's right to self-determination" do not factor into the priorities of international decisionmakers.

In the case of Syria, it is clear that Bashar al-Assad's militaristic totalitarian dictatorship is not most Western nations' ideal choice for an ally. Yet the militarization, Islamization, and chaos resulting from the Syrian conflict has threatened the entire region and made it incumbent upon the West to rethink its choices and the possibilities for Syria's political future.

If we look at the alternatives to Assad, the current Syrian opposition movements are clearly not a strong first choice for world powers. The assortment of fighting groups on the ground in Syria contain among their ranks a number of factions that do not acknowledge the "political rules of the game" or the current international balance of power. More important, these groups do not have allegiance to any single political body that can be trusted or subsequently tamed.

On the other hand, the Assad regime has proven throughout its many years in power to be committed to these international "rules," notwithstanding fiery statements regarding its policies of "resistance" and "opposition" to Israel and the West. It is also important to take into account the shift in Western public opinion toward accepting Assad's continued rule and refusal to support his opponents. For example, only 7 percent of Americans now believe that Assad's continued rule is the biggest threat to their country's interests, according to the 2015 Chicago Council Survey.

The third group created by the Syrian war is the Islamic State, which has embarked on a suicidal adventure in the heart of the Middle East. They seek to establish an entity that acknowledges neither the current political rules nor our world's accepted ethical values.

After taking the Islamic State off the table for control of Syria, the remaining options for control of the area are the Assad regime and the opposition. There is a prevailing consensus that the armed opposition is incapable of achieving a decisive victory over Assad's army. Prior to Russia's decision to throw its full military weight behind the regime, it had been possible for a regional power to intervene in order to resolve the conflict in favor of Assad's adversaries. Now, however, the prospects of a Saudi or Turkish intervention would most likely complicate the situation and prolong the conflict.

If the situation continues along its current path, what is to stop certain international parties from facilitating Assad's hope to regain control over a large portion of territory lost by the regime? The Assad regime is weaker and more limited in its decisionmaking ability than at any time in the past. If the regime is indeed able to reassert control over lost territory, it will remain preoccupied with internal issues.

A declared Assad ruling a ravaged country and an exhausted populace seems to be the most likely end game scenario given the current state of affairs. This should not be understood to mean that Assad will suddenly become an ally of the West. Rather, this scenario will grant the West more time to make adjustments for a post-Assad Syria -- a realization that brings to mind the history of Iraq following the second Gulf War.

Today, the removal of Assad is not in the interest of the majority of international actors. After a few years, a change in conditions in Syria or a change in international relations could make his removal possible. This does not deny the

possibility of Assad developing regional or international relationships ensuring him a longer stay in power -- or for that matter the possibility of the emergence of a politically and diplomatically mature Syrian opposition that adopts a discourse taking into account the country's position and the nature of its international and regional relationships.

Beyond wishful thinking, the choices for Syria are either the continuation of give and take in the current war or for Assad to rule Syria much as Saddam ruled Iraq in the 1990s -- in international isolation and with an iron fist. In both cases the Syrian people will pay the price in blood, starvation, suppression, and displacement. Luckily, one cannot determine with certainty the path of future events due to the impossibility of taking into account all relevant political factors. Therefore, this dark outlook is not inevitable; it is simply the result of an objective reading of historical experience using the vocabulary of realpolitik -- the language of international relations. It is possible to change the future scenarios to achieve justice and freedom for the people of the region, but only if the desire for change is supported by increased awareness, responsibility, and sound strategic planning.

*Azzam Alkassir is a Syrian researcher living in London. This item was originally published on [the Fikra Forum website \(http://fikraforum.org/?p=8753&lang=en#.VtM6X\\_krLIU\)](http://fikraforum.org/?p=8753&lang=en#.VtM6X_krLIU). ❖*

*Fikra Forum*

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

---

### [The Ukraine Crisis Isn't Over: Russia Has Lied About Troop Withdrawals Before](#)

Feb 16, 2022

◆  
Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/ukraine-crisis-isnt-over-russia-has-lied-about-troop-withdrawals)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

---

### [As China Thrives in the Post-9/11 Middle East, the US Must Counter](#)

Feb 16, 2022

◆  
Jay Solomon

(/policy-analysis/china-thrives-post-911-middle-east-us-must-counter)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations

Feb 15, 2022



Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)

### TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Syria (/policy-analysis/syria)