

# An Assertive Plan of Action for Syria

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

**W**ashington Institute senior fellow Andrew Tabler addressed the Canadian parliament's Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development regarding the current situation in Syria. The following are his prepared remarks and policy recommendations.

Mr. Chairman and Ranking Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. Following the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in March 2011, I have had multiple opportunities to speak with members of Canada's government, diplomatic corps, intelligence services, and military either in Ottawa, at the Halifax Security Forum, or in Washington on what now can only be described as Syria's meltdown. While a long-term resident in Damascus, I also had extensive contact with Canadian diplomats concerned with the Middle East and national security issues. As much as I appreciated those meetings, the real reason I am speaking with you here today is that Canada has remained a stalwart ally of the United States in a rapidly changing world in which easy answers to foreign policy dilemmas are no more. And I believe more than ever that we are in this together.

## A Corrosive Conflict with No End In Sight

**T**he rapidly deteriorating situation in Syria now represents not only the biggest humanitarian crisis in a generation but also the most complex in terms of short- and long-term security challenges. The effort by President Bashar al-Assad's regime to shoot its way out of what started as peaceful protests demanding reform has set off a bloody civil war in which more than 130,000 people have been killed, between a third and a half of Syria's population of 23 million has been displaced, and what remains on paper as the Syrian Arab Republic has been divided into three complex entities in which terrorist organizations are not only present but ascendant in each area.

In the western part of Syria, the minority-dominated Assad regime is holding on not only through using the full lethality of its military arsenal, including poison gas and ballistic missiles, but also through the direct aid and coordination with U.S.-designated terrorist organizations. These include the Iranian-backed Lebanese Hezbollah, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and a number of Shiite militias from as far away as Iraq and Afghanistan. In the majority Sunni-dominated center, al-Qaeda affiliates such as Jabhat al-Nusra (the Support Front) and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) have grown in response to the regime's slaughter, the presence of

Iranian-backed forces, perceived international inaction to stop the slaughter, and, particularly, the U.S. decision to put off punitive strikes against the Assad regime for its assessed use of chemical weapons against Syrian civilians. And last but not least, in Syria's northeast, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), dominates Kurdish areas.

The longer the war has gone on, the more bloody and sectarian it has become, particularly between Alawites and other minority factions that dominate the regime and Sunnis that dominate the opposition. Extensive Sunni-Kurdish tension and violence have grown as well, particularly in tandem with the growth of al-Qaeda factions in Syria's center and northeast. Syria's Christian population has very much been caught in the middle, fearful of extremist elements among the Syrian Sunni-dominated opposition all the while knowing that seeking security from the brutal Assad regime is not in keeping with its long-term interests in the Middle East, let alone the teachings of Jesus Christ. As a student of his words and the values they inspired, I share their concerns and fully appreciate their dilemma.

## **Spillover and the "Regionalization" of the Conflict**

**S**ectarianism has grown with the help of each group's regional backers, with Shiite-dominated Iran supporting the Assad regime and Shiite-based forces on one side, and the Sunni Arab Gulf and North African countries standing on the side of the opposition. Assistance has included donations from governments as well as individuals in all of these countries, and the flow of assistance has been haphazard, which has helped fuel extremism on both sides. In many ways, the battle for the future of the Middle East between Iran and the Arab countries is being waged in the streets, mountains, and fields of Syria. But these are not the only regional interests at stake -- Turkey and the Kurds are also vying for power and influence in Syria. Globally, Russia continues to support the Assad regime with weapons, and the West supports moderate factions of the opposition overtly with nonlethal assistance and covertly with small weapons and training.

Las Vegas rules don't apply in Syria: what happens there doesn't stay there. Syria's primary importance to the West, as well as the Middle East region, remains its central geographic position in the regional security architecture -- that is, the Middle East's post-World War I boundaries. The Syrian war is now spilling west into Lebanon, which has seen multiple terrorist attacks in the last few months, and east into Iraq, where similar attacks are taking place. If the fighting in Syria continues apace and spreads south into Jordan, which hosts hundreds of thousands of refugees in and out of camps, and north into Turkey, the Syria crisis will directly threaten the security of key Canadian and U.S. allies, all the while eroding the current state boundaries in the Levant and the Middle East as a whole.

## **Assad's "Forced Solution" and the Possible Partition of Syria**

**S**pillover into the West could happen directly as well. Recent reports citing U.S. intelligence sources indicate that some extreme Sunni factions in Syria could be planning attacks inside the United States and elsewhere in the West. Other reports indicate Iran, the Assad regime's ally and ostensible enemy of the Sunni extremist forces, could be supporting these elements as well. Others indicate the Assad regime is buying oil products from ISIS and refraining from targeting its forces, instead hitting more moderate rebels supported by Western countries -- a Machiavellian strategy that drives all sides to extremes. Syria is increasingly a Middle Eastern twilight zone: a place where none of the usual rules apply.

Making matters worse, efforts to foster a transition in Syria that would have a hope of reuniting the country remain dim. President Assad is now putting forward a forced solution masquerading as a reform plan centered on his "reelection" to a third term as president -- which he last won in 2007 by a laughable 97.62 percent of the vote. Given the level of Assad's brutality and the minority nature of his Alawite-dominated regime, not to mention the Assad regime's past manipulations of elections and referendums, this is a nonstarter for the Sunni-majority-dominated

opposition. Since Assad's forces, even with Hezbollah and Iranian assistance, seem unable to reconquer and effectively hold all of what was the Syrian Arab Republic, implementation of Assad's plan would mean a prolonged de facto partition for the country. Such an outcome would perpetuate human misery, lawlessness, and havens for terrorist groups.

## An Assertive Plan of Action

The days of easy foreign policy options in the Syria crisis are over. The matter is not just as simple as arming the rebels or reengaging with Assad, as the media often portrays it. But that does not mean the West is out of options. The war in Syria is likely to go on for years, and it is important that Canada and its allies explore multiple tracks to constrain, contain, and eventually bring the conflict to an end. I believe the best way to do so is by utilizing a more assertive, three-pronged approach, prioritized by tackling first threats first.

**1. Rid Syria of chemical weapons and implement the Geneva Communique of 2012.** Concern is growing in the U.S. government that the effort to destroy Syria's chemical stockpile "has seriously languished and stalled," not just because Syria is predictably behind schedule, but also because Damascus is now demanding its chemical weapons sites be "inactivated" instead of "physically destroyed" as outlined under the Convention for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. This development, especially following the regime's consolidation of control in the western half of Syria, indicates that the Assad regime is dragging its feet on fulfilling the country's obligations in order to achieve concessions from the United States and the London 11 countries concerning the formation of a transitional governing body in Syria.

In order to counter such pressure, the West should turn the tables on the Assad gambit and use Syria's compliance with the Chemical Weapons Convention as leverage to gain Assad's compliance with a transition in Syria as outlined under the Geneva Communique of 2012. Fortunately for the United States and Canada, both Syria's compliance with the rules set out by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and the Geneva Communique are enshrined in the same UN Security Council resolution -- 2118 -- which is enforceable by Chapter VII measures such as sanctions and the use of force following the passage of a subsequent Chapter VII resolution. In the likely event of a veto by Russia or China, the credible threat of additional sanctions and the use of force should be used to ensure Assad follows through on his obligations to give up Syria's chemical weapons arsenal. Successful follow through could also help foster a real long-term transition in Syria based on, but not limited to, the Geneva Communique.

**2. Push humanitarian access and evacuation.** The humanitarian situation in Syria is rapidly worsening, and the Assad regime continues to use starvation campaigns that violate not only the Geneva Conventions but international humanitarian law as well. Canada should therefore continue to support the current proposed Security Council resolution concerning humanitarian access in Syria (which also emphasizes implementation of the Geneva Communique).

**3. Combat terrorism.** Combating terrorism should occur on multiple levels, including a plan in conjunction with regional allies to back moderate opposition elements at the expense of extremists. But that is not going to be enough. Plans should also be developed using offset assets (e.g., missiles) and drones to hit all designated terrorist groups operating in Syria, no matter what side they are fighting on, that are deemed to be aiming at Canadian, U.S., or international targets.

Such an approach would contain and constrain Assad on the use of chemical weapons, the possibility of their leakage to non-state actors and terrorist groups, and the regime's use of starvation and siege as a form of warfare. It would also contain, alienate, and help eliminate terrorist groups operating in Syria among both the opposition and the constellation of forces helping to prop up Assad.

Doubtless, the priorities on this list will likely change multiple times before the Syria crisis is over. But the basic pillars for present and future courses of action are there. Thank you for consideration of this testimony, and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have. ❖

*House of Commons, Canada*

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