

Is the End Near in Damascus?

by [Jeffrey White \(/experts/jeffrey-white\)](/experts/jeffrey-white), [Andrew J. Tabler \(/experts/andrew-j-tabler\)](/experts/andrew-j-tabler)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Jeffrey White \(/experts/jeffrey-white\)](/experts/jeffrey-white)

Jeffrey White is an adjunct defense fellow at The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of the Levant and Iran.



[Andrew J. Tabler \(/experts/andrew-j-tabler\)](/experts/andrew-j-tabler)

Andrew J. Tabler is the Martin J. Gross fellow in the Geduld Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute, where he focuses on Syria and U.S. policy in the Levant.



Brief Analysis

On December 20, 2012, Jeffrey White and Andrew J. Tabler addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Mr. White is a defense fellow at the Institute and a former senior defense intelligence officer. Mr. Tabler is a senior fellow in the Institute's Program on Arab Politics. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

JEFFREY WHITE

Over the past several months, Bashar al-Assad's military position has become increasingly precarious. The regime's defensive capabilities have waned -- it has difficulty holding even the most advantageous positions, and all efforts to roll back opposition forces (using field artillery, airpower, and, most recently, Scud missiles) have failed. YouTube videos show regime forces looking and acting like a defeated army.

Several trends have contributed to this deterioration. First, the rebels have significantly improved their combat capabilities since last winter, allowing them to reduce the regime's presence throughout the country and capture checkpoints, barriers, and police stations. In doing so, they have acquired more arms, ammunition, and combat experience while eroding Assad's ability to control the population. Currently, rebel forces control lines of communication in Idlib, Aleppo, and Raqqa and frequently isolate and harass regime airfields. They have defeated several regime units, contributing to their growing psychological dominance.

Most significant, the rebels are now self-sustaining: they regularly seize antitank weapons, shoulder-fired missiles, rocket-propelled grenades, and other weapons from regime forces, and they appear to replace lost personnel with relative ease. They do not need much if any outside armament; the U.S. debate about whether to send them weapons seems to have been overtaken by events. They do need military aid, however, including training and intelligence.

Second, the regime's military capabilities are declining. Its last large-scale maneuver was in the summer, when it

tried to retake Aleppo city and failed -- perhaps the turning point of the war. Today, the army carries out only local operations, many of which are turned back by the rebels. Attrition of regime forces is rapid, with an estimated 1,000 men killed and 4,000 wounded per month for the past five to six months. By contrast, the rebels have lost about 850 men per month and seem better able to replace them. Regime forces appear largely demoralized by repeated losses of long-held positions and lack the will to engage in offensives.

Third, the rebels have nearly closed the operational gap that the regime enjoyed at war's onset, particularly in terms of armor, mechanized infantry, and cross-country mobilization. The air-to-ground gap is likewise narrowing as rebel antiaircraft capabilities improve. The artillery gap has not yet closed, but the rebels are rapidly gaining capability.

Militarily, the regime faces five possible endgames:

1. Provincial dismantlement, with control falling to the rebels province by province. This process is already underway to a certain degree, though the regime is masking it by maintaining at least a nominal presence in every province.
2. A chaotic collapse, with the Syrian army simply breaking. The situation is trending in this direction.
3. Controlled contraction, with the regime falling back to either Damascus or the Alawite heartland in a calculated maneuver. Currently, the regime lacks the capacity to develop and execute this decision.
4. A rush for the coast, with the regime and its forces fleeing in uncoordinated fashion. There is little sign of this happening.
5. Full recovery, the most unlikely scenario, with Assad completely reversing the course of the war. There is no indication that the regime is capable of this.

One potential game-changer is Syria's stockpile of chemical weapons. A few weeks ago, the regime seemed to be preparing these weapons for use amid fighting near Damascus. Although Assad has since backed off such activity, the international community should be prepared for the regime to use chemical weapons, whether to terrorize the population in a given area, break the link between civilians and the armed opposition, or tactically change the military situation.

Whatever the case, the regime appears to have only a few weeks left before it collapses. As the end nears, its allies may issue desperate pleas for a UN-brokered ceasefire, but the rebels see absolutely no advantage in that approach and would surely violate any such truce. For its part, longtime ally Russia may abandon the regime and evacuate its citizens. Meanwhile, regime forces will increasingly defect to the rebels, refuse to obey orders, or go rogue, while senior regime officials may defect or flee Damascus as part of an Alawite flight to the coast. The truest sign of the end, though, would be Iranian officials burning files at their embassy in Damascus.

ANDREW J. TABLER

S yria's neighbors currently accommodate 450,000 registered refugees and hundreds of thousands more unregistered. The 1.5 million internally displaced Syrians face a much more dire situation. During my recent visit to the Atmeh refugee camp straddling the Turkey-Syria border, there was little shelter, less food, and no toilets for the 12,000 occupants. Children are dying of disease and exposure -- their needs are outpacing most foreign charity efforts, including aid sent by the Maram Foundation, a Syrian American organization named after a girl paralyzed by shrapnel during the war.

In this sense, the external battle for hearts and minds is already here -- while Washington's ability to send aid has been constrained, Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia are solidifying their influence. All three Sunni-majority countries hope to shape the outcome post-Assad by reorienting Syria away from their political and sectarian rival, Iran. Meanwhile, in light of American inaction, the rebels are trending toward Islamism and anti-Western sentiment. Formerly open-minded armed groups are growing suspicious of Western journalists, and extremist groups such as

Jabhat al-Nusra are becoming more popular. The fact that Nusra's recent designation as a terrorist group preceded official U.S. recognition of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC) only exacerbated the already poor impression of Washington and led to protests against U.S. inaction.

The SOC -- an elected, sixty-five-member council that includes fourteen members from Syrian local councils -- was created in Doha in November, with popular imam Moaz al-Khatib as its president. It has since been encouraged to form committees to address security and humanitarian services in liberated areas. A meeting of military council leaders was also convened in Doha, leading to the creation of the thirty-member Supreme Military Council (SMC) on December 7, headed by former chief of staff Gen. Salim Idris.

Distinct from but related to the SOC, the SMC was intended to coordinate the funneling of weapons to the country's more moderate armed groups. Given the opposition's increasing seizure of regime weaponry, however, the council's purpose is now less clear, as is its ability to corral groups through the provision of arms. Both the SOC and the SMC are steps in the right direction, but despite their initial plans to cooperate, there is little evidence thus far that they will be able to overcome divisions within the opposition.

Some analysts believe that the Obama administration's policy on Syria has been a success -- the Assad regime is about to collapse without any direct American engagement. Still, the struggle over Syria will not be complete for some time. Given the SOC's dubious political clout and the armed opposition's growing prominence, those who are taking the shots against Assad today will be calling the shots once he is gone. In the immediate aftermath of his ouster, Syria might look like it did in 1923, with different sects dominating different areas of the country and major chaos ensuing. Because of its reticence to act, Washington may have lost an opportunity to influence that outcome. Therefore, one powerful reason to provide military assistance to the rebels is to engage with them, gaining knowledge of and leverage with factions that will be key actors in shaping post-Assad Syria.

To be sure, the administration's willingness to send diplomats and development officials into such a situation seems remote in light of the fallout from the tragic death of Ambassador Chris Stevens in Libya. Nevertheless, Washington must engage directly with these armed groups in order to promote U.S. interests in Syria. Rebel commanders visiting border areas present valuable opportunities to discover which factions are amenable to those interests without venturing into more dangerous areas. Washington should also work directly with moderate civilian and armed groups to channel humanitarian and military assistance and increase U.S. influence. Most important, any outreach must be done overtly rather than covertly, so that the United States can get much-deserved credit for engaging positively in Syria.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Katie Kiraly. ❖

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