

# Syria after Assad: Heading toward a Hard Fall?

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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**Rather than ending Syria's civil war, the regime's fall might herald a new, more dangerous phase, and the United States should prepare accordingly.**

**R**ecent opposition military successes near Damascus, Aleppo, and Deir al-Zour make the eventual demise of Bashar al-Assad's regime increasingly likely. Although one cannot rule out a definitive end to the civil war -- one that leads to the creation of a "unified, democratic, pluralistic" Syria, as envisioned by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton -- the regime's departure is much more likely to herald a more chaotic and dangerous phase of the conflict.

## POST-ASSAD SCENARIOS

To a certain extent, the nature of the transition will be influenced by how the Assad regime leaves the scene. If government forces retain their cohesion while being rolled back one village and urban neighborhood at a time, the opposition will have more time to set up rudimentary institutions of governance in liberated areas, and a less disruptive transition may be possible. Indeed, large swaths of the country have already fallen out of government control and are being administered by local ad hoc committees. Much will also depend on whether the regime fights on in Damascus, laying waste to the capital in the process, or withdraws to strongholds in its traditional Alawite heartland, the mountainous northwestern coastal region; -- the former scenario could hinder the development of a new central government for years to come. A sudden collapse by regime forces might presage an even more chaotic transition, as rival opposition forces rush to fill the vacuum.

Once Assad falls, more questions will loom, including whether the opposition moves to purge regime employees, whether government offices are trashed and looted (as occurred in Iraq), and whether a violent power struggle emerges among the rebels. Any of these could jeopardize even an otherwise promising transition.

Because most rebel groups are locally based and highly fragmented and have little if any contact with the opposition in exile, a unitary state with a strong central government is unlikely to emerge from the civil war. The new government will likely face great challenges exerting control over local leaders who fought the regime and delivered

rudimentary services to areas they liberated. Rather than surrendering their hard-won gains to some faraway central authority, they might prefer to forge alliances with other local leaders (including members of different ethnosectarian communities) and/or external powers, as occurred during and after Lebanon's civil war.

## **ALAWITE STATE?**

**A**n Alawite rump state in northwestern Syria would be subject to many of these same dynamics. It might take the form of a unitary entity ruled by Assad, his successor, or a military junta; alternatively, it could be a loose federation of warlords (probably former military and security chiefs) ruling over fiefdoms organized along tribal, regional, or political lines. If internecine tensions could be kept in check among Alawites and the mixed-population coastal cities, such a statelet might be viable. It would control remnants of the Syrian army and, perhaps, the international airport in Latakia and the ports at Tartus and Latakia, enabling it to collect tariffs on imports destined for Syria's hinterlands, Iraq, and Jordan.

The fall of the regime and the creation of an Alawite statelet would likely be accompanied by a new round of massacres and ethnic cleansing (of both Sunnis and Alawites); the statelet would also be subject to constant harassment by Sunni extremist groups. Yet if warlordism prevailed in the rest of Syria, it would be difficult to imagine the fragmented Sunni opposition uniting to undertake a military adventure far from their home turf, such as an attack on the mountainous Alawite region.

## **AN OPENING FOR IRAN**

**A** descent into warlordism would also create new opportunities for external actors, especially Iran and Hizballah, both of which would seek allies among the former regime's Alawite security elite. They would also pursue opportunistic alliances with Kurdish, Druze, and Sunni Arab warlords, consistent with Tehran's policy in Iraq and Gaza of betting on every horse in the race. They might even support Salafi-jihadist groups intent on opening a new front against Israel in the Golan Heights, just as they have facilitated al-Qaeda activities in Iraq and the Gulf.

Iran's deepening involvement in the conflict means that it will likely remain a major player in the Levant even after Assad's ouster. In particular, it will seek to cultivate ties with armed groups in post-Assad Syria as a means of pressuring Turkey, Israel, and Jordan, maintaining overland lines of communications with Hizballah in Lebanon, and preventing the emergence of a Syrian base of support for Iraq's Sunni Arabs. More broadly, continuing violence and heightened foreign involvement in Syria would likely exacerbate sectarian tensions in Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq, as well as Arab-Iranian tensions in the Gulf.

## **EVEN A SOFT LANDING ENTAILS RISKS**

**E**ven a relatively smooth initial transition could sow the seeds for later problems, just as the rapid collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001 and Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003 presaged violence in Afghanistan and Iraq. A revolutionary Sunni government in Syria (whether nationalist or Islamist in orientation) would likely be hostile to Iran and more closely aligned with Turkey, Egypt, or Saudi Arabia. In response, Iran and Hizballah could provide military support to former regime elements in order to wage an insurgency against the new government, keep it weak and focused on consolidating its rule, and prevent it from helping Sunni Arabs in Iraq -- indeed, Iran's ongoing efforts to create a pro-regime militia in Syria reminiscent of its own Basij paramilitary might facilitate such efforts later on. And the Iraqi government, under Nouri al-Maliki, would likely support such Iranian efforts for its own reasons.

## **OTHER COMPLICATIONS**

**A** host of other factors could influence the course of any post-Assad transition and affect important U.S. interests:

- Large-scale looting or destruction of military equipment and facilities could make it much more difficult for a

successor government to establish security, perhaps ensuring the emergence of warlordism. The rebels' inability to secure liberated bases due to manpower shortages and fear of regime airstrikes makes such pilferage all the more likely.

- As the end nears, the Assad regime may resort to using chemical weapons (for more on this prospect, see [PolicyWatch 2002 \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-would-assad-use-chemical-weapons\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-would-assad-use-chemical-weapons) and [PolicyWatch 1964 \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/dealing-with-syrias-chemical-weapons-military-options\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/dealing-with-syrias-chemical-weapons-military-options)). Such a move could create a humanitarian disaster that a successor government would be hard pressed to deal with. Former regime elements might also divert chemical stockpiles in order to provide their Alawite statelet with a deterrent. Alternatively, diversion to insurgent or terrorist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra would raise the possibility that future rounds of fighting in Syria -- or attacks originating from Syria against its neighbors -- might involve chemical weapons.
- A new Syrian government may find it difficult to incorporate Kurdish-controlled regions. Boundary areas and demographically mixed portions of existing autonomous Kurdish enclaves are likely to be violent flashpoints (as they have been in Iraq), while the groups controlling these areas (particularly the Democratic Union Party, or PYD) will probably have a fraught relationship with Turkey -- especially if the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) maintains a presence there.
- Jihadist groups may seek to use Syria as a base of operations for attacks against its neighbors (particularly Israel, Jordan, and Iraq), further complicating the transition.
- An increased refugee flow to Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan could outstrip their ability to provide relief; without greater international assistance, this could lead to a humanitarian crisis.
- The triumph of the Sunni opposition in Syria could embolden Islamists in Jordan and the West Bank as well as Maliki's Sunni Arab opponents in Iraq, with long-term consequences for the political balance of power in these societies.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**M**any of these scenarios pose significant challenges for regional stability and U.S. policy. Given the conspicuous U.S. and allied reluctance to intervene militarily in Syria, what is to be done? At the very least, Washington should continue with preparations to contain spillover from the conflict, building on current efforts to provide humanitarian aid for Syrian refugees in Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon, and perhaps extending this assistance to safe areas inside Syria. It should also maintain counterterrorism support for Israel and Turkey, as well as cooperative efforts to prevent the use or diversion of chemical weapons (or manage the consequences if deterrence fails).

Most important, the United States must learn more about "who's who" in the armed opposition, since those doing the shooting today will likely be calling the shots post-Assad. Although many rebels will bear a grudge against Washington for its relative inaction in their hour of need, they will also require the kind of political, military, and economic assistance that only the United States can provide. To do so effectively, however, Washington will need to know as much as it can about the key players, many of whom will likely hail from the armed opposition -- and, if an Alawite statelet emerges, from the former regime's military and security services as well.

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