

EXPERT VIEW

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Syria: How to advance transition to a post-Assad future

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KEY POINTS

- The Syrian government is battling a growing insurgency, with the situation developing into a civil war. Neither side is currently capable of overwhelming the other.
- Whilst external powers interested in keeping Assad in power are actively protecting their interests, Western powers calling for Assad to go are relatively passive in supporting Syrian opposition.
- Continued relative Western passivity could result in a very long conflict within Syria, possibly lasting years, developing along sectarian lines and leading to the deaths of many more thousands with no clear outcome.
- With Assad unwilling to negotiate his own departure and the bulk of the opposition unwilling to negotiate any solution with him, the Annan Plan has little prospect for success and a plan B is required.
- The Assad regime's departure would deal a serious blow to Iran and to the Iranian-led axis and encourage those in the region standing up to repression.
- To maximise the chances of Assad's departure, while minimising risks, European powers along with the US should adopt a more proactive policy through:
 - significantly increased, though carefully calibrated support for the opposition;
 - further isolation of the regime;
 - continuing to seek Russia's cooperation, whilst realising that the more inevitable the fall of the regime looks, the more likely Russia is to engage in a process to replace it;
 - support for Syria's neighbours in managing the fallout from the conflict;
 - preparation of contingency plans to secure Syrian strategic weapons and prevent humanitarian catastrophes;

- taking an opportunity to mend fences between Israel and Turkey.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE SITUATION

State of the conflict

A year and a half and some 15,000 dead since the eruption of the anti-regime rebellion in Syria, the country is deep into an insurgency, which is developing into a civil war. Assad brutally and continuously butchers his own people, employing his military and the mostly Alawite Shabiha ('ghost') gangs. Neither his regime nor its opposition are strong enough at this point to overwhelm the other. The end is not in sight.

The Assad regime has lost effective control over large parts of Syria, especially in the northern and central countryside. Its capacity to launch large-scale offensive operations and control the whole of Syria is limited and it therefore focuses on the most important urban centres. Its priorities are securing control and normalcy in Damascus (the political capital) and Aleppo (the commercial capital) and fighting the centres of the insurgency mainly in Homs and Idlib. Damascus and Aleppo had remained relatively calm for a long period, but the violence now also reaches them at times, especially in Damascus.

The insurgency in Syria is decentralised. It is led by small rebel units along local and provincial lines, some calling themselves 'battalions', under the loose umbrella of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), whose headquarters are in Turkey. The political opposition outside Syria does not command the insurgents and is fragmented even within its main umbrella body, the Syrian National Council (SNC).

There is no credible information regarding the number of insurgents. Best estimates put them between 20,000 and 40,000. Many, but not all, defected from the Syrian army, including some pilots and senior officers. The dramatic defection in early July of Brigadier General Manaf Tlass, a Sunni brigade commander in the Republican Guard and a regime insider, is a particular blow to Assad. Nevertheless, the Syrian military of more than 300,000 soldiers still dwarfs the opposition. Though the opposition on the ground has recently received

more weapons from the outside and improved their command and control, structural and operational capacity, it still lacks sufficient arms – especially when confronted with the army's heavy weapons.

Syria is very much divided along sectarian lines. The overwhelming majority of the rebels are Sunnis, who make up approximately 70 per cent of Syria's population. They would for the most part like to see the fall of the Assad regime, which is dominated by the Alawite minority which makes up an estimated at ten to fifteen per cent of the population. On the other hand, most Alawites support the regime. They fear that as a hated minority they will pay a heavy price if Sunnis come to power and therefore believe the crisis is also about their own survival. The religious minorities, such as Christians (about ten per cent) and Druze (three to five per cent), are mostly staying on the fence or passively supporting the regime, fearing the rise of Islamists. Their concerns are heightened by the important role Islamists are playing in the opposition and the attraction the conflict has for Al-Qaida-affiliated Jihadists from across the Middle East, entering through Iraq and Lebanon, even though they are still a relatively small minority among the insurgents. This ethnic fragmentation exacerbates the dangers of a civil war along sectarian lines.

Regional impact and international intervention

Outside forces are involved on both sides of the Syrian conflict but there is an asymmetry in their respective roles. Those who have an interest in the Assad regime remaining in power – Iran, Hezbollah and Russia – are actively protecting their investment. Iran and Hezbollah have sent forces and anti-insurgency equipment to Syria and are active on the ground in helping Assad suppress the rebellion. Russia provides diplomatic cover and provided a continuous supply of weapon systems to the Syrian military, only announcing a suspension on July 9. The Russians appear not to care about Bashar Al-Assad personally, but they care about their direct interests in Syria and the wider region, about the rise of Islamism if Assad falls, and even more importantly about their global posture in the face of the US.

For Russia, Syria provides an important Mediterranean naval base in Tartus, a significant market for Russian arms and a conduit for regional influence that serves their agenda of balancing American power. Russia also worries that the precedent of outside intervention in the domestic affairs of a state could ultimately backfire against it. This concern was increased after Russia felt it was deceived into supporting what turned out to be a regime-change campaign in Libya, and one with a questionable outcome.

On the other hand, international actors who want Assad to leave, including Western leaders who have called on him to go, are active mostly in the field of economic sanctions, diplomacy and rhetoric. They are relatively passive in supporting the rebellion or taking other anti-regime actions on the ground. A variety of reasons are frequently cited to justify this discrepancy. These include: election season in the US; the economic crisis in the US and Europe; fatigue after the military campaign in Libya; Russian and Chinese opposition; and concerns over the fragmentation of the Syrian opposition and the possibility of Islamists and even Jihadists taking over. Above all, fear is expressed that any proactive role would be a slippery slope to military intervention, for which nobody has an appetite, and to civil war. Some also portray the Syrian army and air-defence as hard nuts to crack and claim that confronting them would ultimately require boots on the ground.

Regional actors who favour regime change in Syria, such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, are frustrated by the seeming international passivity. Their own support for the opposition is growing but remains limited. Turkey provides a safe haven for several tens of thousands of Syrian refugees, command and control facilities for opposition leaders and reportedly also some arms, while the Saudis and the Qataris provide financial support and arms to opposition elements, not least among them Islamists. These regional actors are willing to do more against the Assad regime, but condition deeper and bolder engagement on US leadership and international backing. Turkey, for example, has been contemplating the creation of safe zones on the Syrian side of the border, but is looking for US and NATO support.

All Syria's immediate neighbours are heavily impacted by events there. Jordan's already dire economic situation has been worsened by the Syrian conflict. The kingdom is hosting over 120,000 Syrian refugees and is suffering from shrinking trade, with over half its external trade going through Syria. Lebanon recently saw a spillover of violent clashes between pro and anti-Assad elements in its northern city of Tripoli.

Israel is also following the unfolding saga with concern. After some equivocation, Israel now clearly prefers to see this situation end without Assad in power. There is a wide consensus among decision-makers that the fall of the regime would deal a serious blow to Iran and could dissolve the anti-Israel axis binding Iran, Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon. At the same time, Israel does not want to see the rise of a hostile Islamist regime, reflecting and compounding the impact of the rise of political Islam across the region. It is also concerned that Syria's arsenal of chemical weapons and missiles could fall into the hands of Jihadists or Hezbollah who would use them to threaten Israel. Another scenario that concerns Israel, articulated by defence minister Ehud Barak, is that if Assad feels he is about to fall, he may as a final act take aggressive military action against Israel.

The weakness of the Annan Plan

The major international actors including the US and Russia, regional actors and Syria all agreed in April to the UN and Arab League sponsored Annan initiative, crafted by former UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan. The Annan Plan emphasised ending the violence and providing humanitarian relief on the one hand and domestic dialogue leading to a reformed and democratised political system on the other. However, it was clear from the beginning that international parties with conflicting interest read the plan in different ways.

Western powers used it to justify inaction and interpreted the Syrian political process as designed to lead to the departure of Assad, hoping for a scenario similar to the eventual voluntary departure of former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh. The Syrian regime however, and to an extent Russia, saw

it as an opportunity to legitimise the regime by making it part of the solution. In effect, Assad used it as a license to kill. A 300 member observer force, sent to Syria under this plan, proved unable to fulfil its mission and suspended its operations.

In an effort to save his plan, Annan convened the relevant powers in Geneva on 30 June and produced a joint statement about the need for a political solution in Syria. Post-meeting comments, however, exposed the on-going gaps between the parties. Britain, along with France and the US, interpreted the call for political transition as "Assad must go", whilst Russia said that this should be decided only by the Syrian people. With Assad unwilling to negotiate his own departure, and the bulk of the opposition unwilling to negotiate any solution with him, the Annan plan has little prospect for success and a plan B is required.

END GAME GOALS

Before analysing policy options one should ask: what is the desired end game for the Syrian crisis?

In an ideal world, both the West and Israel would like to see:

- a liberal, democratic regime, breaking away from the Iranian-led radical axis, open to the West and to the possibility of peace with Israel and ruling over a unified, stable and functioning Syrian state.
- the protection of civilians, minimising bloodshed; averting the negative impact of a protracted crisis on Syria's neighbours and securing Syria's huge chemical and strategic arms stockpiles from falling into the wrong hands.

It is evident that these goals are unachievable with Bashar al-Assad in power, and that therefore the West and Israel are better off without him. His departure would deal a serious blow to Iran at a time of a critical struggle over its nuclear programme. It could also undo the radical axis, as any regime replacing Assad, unless it is Alawite, is likely to remain distant from Iran and Hezbollah in the future because of their support for Assad in butchering his own people.

Whilst the desired outcome may be fairly clear, it is far from clear whether these goals are achievable or

whether they are reconcilable with each other. Syria is sliding into a bloody civil war, the opposition is fragmented and Assad seems poised to fight till the end. If Assad falls, it is not clear who will replace him and if that regime would be at all liberal, democratic and open to the West. The policy question, therefore, is how to prioritise these goals and whether any outside intervention can impact the length, nature and outcome of the crisis to the desired end.

POLICY APPROACHES AND IMPLICATIONS

Following are the main policy approaches available to the West and a brief analysis of their consequences:

(i) More of the same

Continued relative Western passivity (whilst Iran and Russia actively support Assad's regime) could result in a very long civil war, possibly lasting years. Such a conflict would develop along sectarian lines, radicalising the opposition, leading to the deaths of many more thousands, and possibly resulting in Syria's collapse into a failed state or even, under extreme circumstances, its disintegration. If Assad survives – an unlikely yet possible outcome – it will be a significant boost to Iran and its radical axis. It would also send a dangerous signal to other repressive regimes about how they can hang on to power. More specifically, it will lead the Iranian leadership to conclude that there is no real international resolve facing it and dishearten the bulk of the Iranian people who oppose their regime. A protracted conflict could also spill over to neighbouring countries. Under the pressure of escalating human slaughter and suffering, the international community could ultimately be drawn into a military intervention but it may be very late in the day and therefore very costly.

(ii) A political solution incorporating Russia

Another option is forming a unified international front with Russia on board as a key player, to pressure Assad to give up power and to allow for a democratic, non-violent transition in Syria. The US and some

European powers are currently thinking along these lines and engaging Russia, including in the context of the Annan Plan. They calculate that this option may be preferable to all parties, including Assad, rather than severe economic sanctions, political isolation, and above all, a protracted civil war that could ultimately lead to outside military intervention. The advantages of saving Syria from sliding into years of civil war and bloodshed and from becoming a failed state are obvious. However, as far as one can judge, Assad is not ready to accept this outcome and is unlikely to negotiate his own departure. Whilst the Russian position is gradually shifting, they are still not ready to play an active role in the removal of Assad and probably will not be before they conclude that Assad's fall is inevitable. Even if the Russians become convinced that his situation is hopeless, it is doubtful that Moscow could force him to leave against his will. Assad may ultimately conclude that he stands no chance of survival, but the later Assad concludes that he must leave, the harder it will be to stop a civil war in Syria, which has the potential to continue even in his absence.

(iii) A coup d'état (the Alawite option)

There is the possibility that Assad could be toppled through a coup d'état from within his own ruling/military/Alawite circles, in a bid to save Syria and the Alawite minority. While this scenario has some advantages, it is doubtful whether outside forces could make it happen. In the meantime, Assad's inner Alawite circle looks cohesive, fuelled by the feeling that they are all in the same boat. Furthermore, an alternative Alawite regime might be perceived domestically as more of the same and therefore unable to stop the internal bloodshed. Such a regime may also prove unwilling to move towards democracy or shift Syria's strategic orientation away from Iran.

(iv) Stepping up support for the insurgency

The West could become more proactive by providing significant material and political support to Syrian insurgents, including financial backing, military equipment, professional guidance, intelligence, and communication and medical gear. This approach is

made more difficult due to the fragmentation of the opposition and the emergence of Islamist and Jihadi elements within it. However, Western actors active on the ground could choose which opposition elements to support and strengthen. Arguably by not doing so they leave the field open to extreme Islamist forces and other external actors who support them, including some Gulf states such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

The Syrian opposition is far from a lost cause. There are opposition elements worthy of support and Syrian society, composed of so many minorities, is more secular and less religious than in Egypt. While it is true that the insurgents are far from a match for Syria's regular forces at this stage, if well equipped (especially with anti-tank and anti-air capabilities) and guided, they could inflict heavy damage and significantly increase defections – the key factor in tipping the balance against the regime. The Syrian army is far weaker and more fragile than many in the West believe. It suffers from weariness and low morale after many months of incessant fighting and its Sunni components in particular are vulnerable to pressure. Under constant and mounting pressure it could well collapse. The gunning down of an unarmed and unprepared Turkish combat plane in late June should not be taken as proof of a mighty Syrian air defence system, as the Syrians would like the world to believe.

(v) External military intervention

The option of a Libya-style military intervention involving air strikes without boots on the ground exists, and the Syrian military is likely to crumble under such pressure sooner rather than later. This approach could begin with enforcing a no-fly-zone in Syria. However, it is evident that for the West this option is not currently on the cards. It may be that only after further serious deterioration, or a humanitarian disaster on the ground, could the circumstances be sufficient for military intervention, and only then as a last resort. It is also not clear what exit strategy would be applied to this option, bearing in mind the post-war dysfunctionality of Libya. Israel also does not see military intervention as its preferred option. As long as the Iranian nuclear

threat remains unresolved, Israel wants all the relevant parties to maintain their focus on dealing with that issue, keeping all options, including the military option, on the table.

RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTION

In this complex set of circumstances, no action comes without risk. Nevertheless, the US and European powers have a considerable stake in the outcome of conflict within Syria and inaction is likely to be more costly than certain courses of action, both in Syrian lives, and in terms of Western strategic interests. Summing up the above options and their consequences and striving to maximise their advantages and minimise their disadvantages, the US and European powers should consider the following set of actions:

Calibrated support for the opposition

- Western powers should significantly step up support to the opposition forces on the ground in all of the above-mentioned fields, while carefully choosing whom to support and with what. In so doing they should strive to influence the rebel's mode of action so as not to play into Assad's hands, through miscalculated or savage operations that target civilians, and to coordinate (with Turkish assistance) outside support so that it does not go to the wrong hands.
- In this context, there are those who propose establishing safe havens on the Syrian side of the Turkish and Jordanian borders, for humanitarian purposes and to serve as territorial footholds for the insurgents. However, since the insurgents have already established considerable footholds in Syria's countryside and since the international community would have to commit military air assets to defend these safe havens, which it is not inclined to do, this measure is not advisable at this stage.
- The US and European powers should use the leverage provided by their enhanced support for opposition forces on the ground to encourage both the SNC and the FSA, and their affiliates, to

improve their organisation and internal coordination.

- The opposition should also be encouraged to repeatedly clarify that it is not conducting a war against all Alawites, but only against Assad's repressive regime, and that Alawites will not be targeted if he falls. This is important in persuading Alawites to join the opposition, get rid of Assad and shorten the war.

Further pressure on and isolation of the regime

- Supporting the insurgents should be accompanied by additional measures to isolate the regime and enhance economic sanctions, which are already draining the regime's resources and helping reduce its capacity to sustain a very long domestic war. Additionally, in the face of Assad's refusal to stop the killing and leave Syria, the international community should issue indictments against Assad and those around him for crimes against humanity.
- The US and the EU should keep trying to convince Russia to withdraw its protective umbrella from the Assad regime and to subscribe to a political solution without Assad. The more inevitable the fall of the Assad regime looks, the more likely the Russians are to engage in a process to replace it. Even if Russia cannot force Assad to leave against his will, Russia could provide him with an exit if he chooses to go.
- The international community should also take whatever measures are possible to prevent the flow of arms to the regime.

Support for Syria's neighbours in managing the fallout

- Whilst safe havens within Syria may not be advisable, the international community should support Turkey and Jordan in carrying the burden of safe havens for refugees in their own territory.

Preparation of contingency plans

- All interested parties should have contingency plans to prevent chemical and other strategic weapons from falling into the wrong hands and

should coordinate their actions in this regard wherever possible.

- Even if the major Western actors shy away from military intervention they should nevertheless be prepared with contingency plans, since they might ultimately be compelled to intervene, for example, in the scenario of a severe humanitarian crisis.

Mending fences between Israel and Turkey

- For Israel and Turkey, the crisis provides an opportunity to translate their converging interests in a stable Syria into a process of normalising their strained relations.

Conclusion

In a Middle East undergoing profound transition, events in Syria provide not only risks but opportunities. The challenge is considerable. Only a combination of internal and external pressures on the Assad regime, feeding each other, can improve the chances of shortening the war, minimising bloodshed and securing the best possible, or the least damaging, outcome. In the Syrian case, both humanitarian and strategic considerations point to a carefully calibrated but highly proactive approach from Western powers. Continued inaction may exact a higher price down the road in both Syrian lives and in the regional balance of power. The stakes are high and time is of the essence.

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