



Next Steps in Syria: A Look at U.S. Priorities and Interests

Ken Sofer August 14, 2012

Introduction

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and what remains of his loyal military forces are currently engaging in what some are calling the “mother of all battles,”¹ a large-scale artillery and ground assault on Syria’s largest city, Aleppo. The northwestern city of 2.1 million people has quickly become the primary battleground between state forces and the rebellion against the Assad regime’s rule in Syria.

The ongoing battle for control of Aleppo comes on the heels of a bombing in Damascus that killed three of Assad’s top security aides,² the departure of Kofi Annan as U.N. special envoy to the country,³ the defection of Syrian Prime Minister Riyad Farid Hijab,⁴ and the downing of a Syrian fighter jet earlier this week.⁵

These recent turns of events—including the expansion of the conflict to regime strongholds and the effective end of prospects for a diplomatic solution to the conflict—mark an important new phase of the rebellion. This new phase poses the most serious threat to the Baath Party’s 42-year rule of Syria, leaving open the possibility for more extreme measures from an increasingly desperate regime.

The United States has so far refrained from taking an active role in Syria, despite calls by some for military intervention against the Assad regime.⁶ U.S. restraint was the right call in the early phases of the rebellion, but the recent escalation in fighting poses greater risks to key U.S. interests and will likely lead to greater U.S. involvement.

Though the overwhelming majority of the international community and U.S. policymakers agree that Assad must be removed from power, many policy recommendations incorrectly use Assad’s removal as the sole litmus test for success. Failing to address the effect of such policies on the range of U.S. interests in Syria could have disastrous results for the United States and its regional allies.

U.S. policymakers should focus their attention on five major priorities in Syria:

- Preventing the spillover of conflict into neighboring countries, including mitigating the effect of refugee outflows
- Securing Syria’s chemical weapons stockpile and preventing their use
- Eliminating the space for Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups to operate
- Safeguarding the country against collapse into sectarian violence
- Preparing for an effective and stable political transition

This issue brief will analyze each priority, why they matter to U.S. strategic interests, and how each is affected by the current situation in Syria, and will recommend options for U.S. policymakers to address these critical interests.

Preventing the spillover of conflict into neighboring countries, including mitigating the effect of refugee outflows

For U.S. policymakers, preventing the violence and instability in Syria from expanding to its neighbors, where the United States has important strategic interests, will be a difficult challenge and one that is largely out of their hands. But efforts to assist the large refugee populations in neighboring countries, along with intelligence and counterterrorism coordination to prevent cross-border attacks, can at least reduce the likelihood of the Syrian crisis becoming a regional crisis.

For the most part, the violence within Syria so far has presented a grave humanitarian crisis but not a direct threat to key U.S. strategic interests in the Middle East. That’s starting to change, as violence begins to affect Syria’s neighbors—Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan—with the potential for the conflict to reach our allies in Israel. The United States possesses few political, economic, or military interests in Syria, but it does possess such interests in every single one of Syria’s neighbors and cannot afford the possibility of regionwide instability and violence.

Widespread violence in a neighboring country inherently carries some potential for spillover, but the large number of refugees, the semisectarian nature of the conflict in Syria, and the potential for transnational terrorist attacks make the likelihood of the conflict drawing in neighboring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan significantly more likely.

The refugee situation in Syria is impossible to untie from the dangers of spillover conflict in Syria’s neighbors. The massive influx of refugee populations—some of which are in refugee camps, some of which are in homestays—places significant strain on the local economies of border communities and has pulled Syria’s neighbors further into the conflict, binding their futures to the resolution of this crisis.

For U.S. policymakers, preventing the violence and instability in Syria from expanding to its neighbors, where the United States has important strategic interests, will be a difficult challenge.

The size of the refugee populations in Syria's neighbors poses daunting logistical and resource problems. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees reports 135,640 registered Syrian refugees, including 50,227 in Turkey, 39,600 in Jordan, and 36,040 in Lebanon as of August 13.⁷ This number, however, vastly underestimates the number of actual refugees in Syria's neighbors since so many refugees are not registered with the commission. Unofficial estimates place the number of refugees closer to 140,000 in Jordan and 90,000 in Lebanon,⁸ a daunting task for any nation to handle. Despite the challenge of accommodating so many refugees, Syria's neighbors have kept their borders open to refugees.

More resources are needed to serve the humanitarian needs of these refugee communities and to prevent their presence from destabilizing the fragile economies of their host countries. The United States should encourage wealthier, actively engaged countries such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia to help fund the refugee commission's efforts. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees and other major refugee organizations should in turn provide direct cash assistance to Syrian refugees, which limits the financial strain on host communities and avoids the frequent logistical difficulties of delivering food, bedding, medical supplies, and other aid products to refugee communities. The leadership role the United States can play in mobilizing aid money from the Persian Gulf and Europe and in pressuring countries to continue their humanitarian efforts for Syrian refugees should not be underestimated.

The influx of 90,000 predominantly Sunni Syrian refugees has also reignited many of the sectarian divisions in neighboring Lebanon. While the rebellion in Syria is not inherently sectarian, the reliance of the Assad regime on Alawite support creates perceptions of sectarian conflict. Alawites, the Shia Muslim sect from which the Assad family hails, comprise roughly 13 percent of Syria's total population.⁹ Sunni Arabs, who comprise 74 percent of Syria's population,¹⁰ are believed to support the anti-Assad rebellion. Other minority groups such as the Druze, Christians, and Kurds remain divided in their support for the regime or the rebellion.

Gun battles along these sectarian lines have erupted throughout Lebanon, particularly in Tripoli, which is home to large Sunni and Alawi communities.¹¹ The sectarian divide in Lebanon matches the country's long, complex relationship with the Assad government in Syria. Assad is one of Shiite political party and militia Hezbollah's most important supporters; the Syrian military maintained a 14,000-troop presence in Lebanon for 30 years;¹² and Damascus is considered by many to be complicit in the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri (a Sunni) in 2005.¹³

It is unclear what effect, if any, the influx of Syrian refugees will have on Lebanon's domestic politics. One cautionary tale, however, may be the influx of Palestinian refugees following the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, which upset the delicate sectarian balance of Lebanon and contributed heavily to the country's 25-year civil war.¹⁴

As a result, Lebanon's various ethnic and religious communities have strong domestic political considerations at stake in the future of the Assad regime and how the refugee situation is handled, making Syria's western neighbor the most likely country to experience a major spillover of violence.

To a lesser degree, the large Kurdish population in Syria poses risks for neighboring Turkey and Iraq, who have their own large Kurdish minorities. Both countries are wary of complete state collapse in Syria, which could lead to an autonomous or even independent Kurdish region, exacerbating long-standing calls in both states' domestic Kurdish populations for an independent Kurdistan.

The Kurdish question, combined with large refugee populations and semiporous borders between Syria and its neighbors, open up the possibility for cross-border attacks by terrorist groups or the Assad regime itself. The potential for cross-border violence, particularly in Turkey, is the most likely scenario for foreign intervention in Syria and should be viewed with great caution.

Turkey's diplomatic and logistical support for the Syrian rebellion, including an operations "nerve center" near Adana to help coordinate anti-Assad forces,¹⁵ has made Ankara crucial to the Free Syrian Army—and subsequently a target for the Assad regime. One potential response by the Assad regime is to use the Kurdistan Workers' Party, a terrorist group that advocates for Kurdish secession from Turkey, as a proxy to attack Turkish citizens, soldiers, or possibly anti-Assad forces in Turkey.

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan claimed in July that Assad had given the Kurdistan Workers' Party five Syrian provinces from which to operate and launch attacks against Turkey.¹⁶ Erdogan's Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu stated that taking measures against a terrorist threat emanating from Syrian soil is "our right and our duty,"¹⁷ which indicates the potential for Turkish military action if Ankara views such a threat.

The possibility of a Syrian or terrorist attack across the border into Turkey and a subsequent Turkish military response in Syrian territory significantly raises the potential for the expansion of violence into Syria's neighbors, drawing our NATO ally Turkey into direct conflict with the Assad regime. During a recent think tank simulation of the Syrian crisis, this scenario led to a full-scale military intervention in Syria led by Turkey and supported by NATO.¹⁸

As the Center for American Progress has previously examined, the practical and logistical challenges of a military intervention in Syria should not be taken lightly and could have a variety of unintended negative consequences on other key U.S. interests in the region.¹⁹

As the Center for American Progress has previously examined, the practical and logistical challenges of a military intervention in Syria should not be taken lightly and could have a variety of unintended negative consequences.

Securing Syria's chemical weapons stockpile and preventing their use

Addressing the danger of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal—including preventing their use by the Assad regime or their proliferation into the hands of nonstate actors—should be one of the most critical security priorities of the United States moving forward in Syria. Their use and potential proliferation opens up a range of dangers to U.S. interests and allies that are unacceptable under any circumstances.

Unfortunately, such a difficult task does not come with a solution as simple as bombing the arsenal. It will require concerted intelligence efforts by the United States and regional allies, coordination with the Free Syrian Army, and cooperation with the remnants of the Syrian military following Assad's fall.

The recent successes of the rebellion have credibly threatened Assad's hold on power, and while this may be a positive development for the Syrian people, it unfortunately opens up the possibility of more desperate and dangerous actions by the Assad regime to survive. The most troubling of these survival options to emerge over the past several weeks is chemical warfare against Syrian civilians, rebel fighters, and foreign forces.

It has long been assumed—since the 1980s—that Syria possesses a large chemical weapons arsenal, including domestic chemical facilities to produce such weapons since 2005.²⁰ But Foreign Ministry Spokesman Jihad Makdissi's comments on July 23 mark the first time the Syrian government has ever acknowledged the existence of such weapons.

At a news conference live on Syrian state television, Makdissi declared that, "Any stock of W.M.D. or unconventional weapons that the Syrian Army possesses will never, never be used against the Syrian people or civilians during this crisis, under any circumstances. These weapons are made to be used strictly and only in the event of external aggression against the Syrian Arab Republic."²¹

Makdissi's comments are the most unambiguous warning by the Assad regime against international intervention and highlight the potential for even a limited international effort such as proposals to establish humanitarian corridors²² to quickly escalate into a full-scale war with Syrian state forces.

Syria is believed to possess hundreds of tons of chemical agents, including sarin nerve agents, mustard gas, and possibly a highly dangerous and rapidly reacting VX nerve agent.²³ The Syrian military is also believed to possess a range of delivery mechanisms for these chemical agents, including chemical warheads for Scud-class ballistic missiles, artillery shells, and air-dropped bombs.²⁴

It is unclear how many Syrian missiles are mobilized with chemical warheads, as opposed to stored separately from their chemical counterparts. Charles Blair of the

Federation of American Scientists recently said, “I’ve heard that Syria has 100 to 200 missiles with nerve agents loaded and ready to go, but that seems extreme.”²⁵

Syria is thought to possess four main chemical production facilities, along with two munitions storage facilities. Three of these facilities are near major flashpoints in the rebellion: Homs, Hama, and al-Safirah, just 15 miles southeast of Aleppo.²⁶ U.S. intelligence and military leaders should work with our international partners in the region to develop contingency plans in the event that fighting between rebel and state forces damages these facilities.

Keeping these facilities secure and safe will be one of the most difficult challenges of the next phase in the rebellion. The U.S. military estimates that roughly 75,000 ground troops are needed to secure Syria’s chemical weapons stockpiles and facilities,²⁷ which highlights the growing logistical challenge, as the Syrian military shifts its focus away from defending the chemical weapons and toward defending the capital.

Barring a full-scale ground invasion by the United States, Turkey, or Israel, the post-Assad responsibility of protecting these chemical weapons from falling into the hands of nonstate actors will fall onto either the Free Syrian Army or the remnants of the Syrian military. Even assuming that the Free Syrian Army would be properly organized to manage such a task, the rebel army is estimated at only 40,000 fighters,²⁸ most of whom are not properly trained or equipped to secure a chemical weapons facility.

The Obama administration is right to warn the Syrian opposition not to repeat the mistakes of Iraq—disbanding the old regime’s security services²⁹—in part because of what this would mean for the fate of Assad’s chemical weapons. Members of the Assad-loyal military will therefore be required to secure Syria’s chemical weapons regardless of the rebellion’s outcome. Ensuring buy-in by the Syrian military to any transition plan will be critical.

One alternative to securing the chemical weapons facilities and stockpiles is to simply destroy them. Several reports indicate that Israeli military officials are currently studying how they would launch an attack to destroy Syria’s vast chemical weapons arsenal.³⁰ In addition to the inherent risks of launching any air attack against Syria’s air defenses, an attack on a chemical facility creates the risk of releasing a chemical cloud and harming nearby civilians.

A chemical cloud released into the atmosphere could be just as deadly as a deliberate chemical attack by the Assad regime or nonstate actors. A classified 2001 study by the U.S. Army Surgeon General estimated that a terrorist attack on a chemical plant in a densely populated area in the United States could injure or kill as many as 2.4 million people as a result of the released chemical cloud.³¹

The risk of accidentally releasing a chemical cloud outweighs the limited probability of successfully eliminating Syria's entire chemical arsenal. Though U.S. and Israeli intelligence have a high degree of confidence regarding the location of Syria's chemical weapons production facilities, it is significantly harder to identify Syria's numerous smaller chemical weapons storage facilities. Additionally, regime forces have reportedly begun moving these chemical weapons out of storage,³² making it harder to track the location of the entire stockpile. Finally, an Israeli attack on Syria's chemical weapons arsenal—even for legitimate reasons of self-defense—could provide Assad with a significant propaganda victory and create an unintended “rally around the flag” effect in favor of the regime.

Eliminating the space for Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups to operate

One disconcerting development in the Syrian rebellion is the growing role of Al Qaeda and other extremist fighters within the Syrian opposition. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper testified in February that Al Qaeda in Iraq was “extending its reach into Syria” and likely was responsible for a series of bombings in Damascus and Aleppo.³³ Earlier this month, NBC's Richard Engel reported that at least 286 Al Qaeda-affiliated terrorists were operating near the Syrian-Turkish border.³⁴

While any Al Qaeda presence in Syria is troubling, domestic and foreign jihadists represent an incredibly small number of fighters compared to the 40,000-person Free Syrian Army. It is important for U.S. policymakers to keep a watchful eye on the terrorist or terrorist-sympathetic elements of the Syrian opposition, but it would be unwise to overemphasize their importance to the rebellion.

The Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point described the danger of jihadists in the Syrian conflict as, “Rather than an overwhelming security challenge, jihadists are a nagging itch ... complicating U.S. policymaking while at times pursuing complimentary intermediate goals.”³⁵

Still, efforts to reduce the long-term role of jihadists in a future Syrian state will need to begin now. One way to limit the influence of jihadists is to reduce their oversized access to resources and finances. According to Peter Harling of the International Crisis Group, “A lot of jihadi discourse has to do with funding. You have secular people and very moderate Islamists who join Salafi groups because they have the weapons and the money.”³⁶ Similarly, the Al Qaeda network has been able to exert greater influence on the rebellion by providing funding and arms to cash-strapped rebel units.³⁷

Many of the resources for more extreme elements of the rebellion come from backers in Saudi Arabia and Qatar,³⁸ who may view Salafi fighters as a better alternative to a Shia-controlled or secular Syria. Convincing our regional partners that promoting extremist

The risk of accidentally releasing a chemical cloud outweighs the limited probability of successfully eliminating Syria's entire chemical arsenal.

Efforts to reduce the long-term role of jihadists in a future Syrian state will need to begin now.

elements in a post-Assad Syria will be more detrimental to their interests than would a secular, democratic state will be a top priority for U.S. diplomats.

Despite the willingness of some rebels to accept arms, money, and even fighters from Al Qaeda and other extremist sources, this appears to be a tactical, not ideological decision. Though some rebel groups will continue to allow jihadist participation if they believe that is the most effective means of removing Assad from power, others actively seek U.S. and Western support to eliminate the role of Al Qaeda and other terrorists.³⁹

Through better, more streamlined support, the United States and other concerned partners such as Turkey or Jordan will need to convince the Syrian opposition that its goal of removing Assad from power is better served by accepting Western instead of jihadi assistance.

Safeguarding the country against collapse into sectarian violence

One of the worst-case outcomes of the conflict in Syria is collapse into the sort of sectarian violence that marred Iraq in the 2000s and Lebanon in the 1980s, or even the complete disintegration of Syria as a contiguous state. The violence and instability that would ensue if Syria collapses into a sectarian civil war or disintegrates as a contiguous state would threaten U.S. allies and interests in the region for decades. The United States and its regional partners will need to work closely with the Free Syrian Army to manage the militarization of the conflict and prevent such worst-case scenarios.

The first step to preventing such an outcome is to minimize the number of civilian casualties in the remaining part of the conflict and incorporate Syria's various ethnic communities into the movement. This should remain an important priority for American interests not only from a moral perspective, but also because a positive Syrian future as a stable, open society cannot afford a fractured, devastated population that requires decades to rebuild.

The growing intensity of the conflict in Syria and the Assad regime's willingness to use heavy weapons against major population centers such as Aleppo have exacted a significant human toll on the country. Current death toll estimates—including civilians, rebel soldiers, and regime soldiers—range from the Syrian government's official count of 6,947 to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights's estimate of more than 20,000.⁴⁰ These numbers don't include more recent deaths from the fighting in Aleppo.

These numbers are also likely to significantly rise regardless of any efforts made by U.S. policymakers. The growing desperation of the Assad regime will lead to continually brutal tactics, as well as the possible use of its chemical weapons arsenal referred to above. The changing nature of the conflict in Syria and the regime's response make civilian casualties highly likely in battles such as the one raging in Aleppo.

The expansion of the conflict to Aleppo and Damascus has forced the Syrian military to divert more troops to defending regime strongholds, in turn promoting the use of heavy weaponry such as tanks, helicopters, and artillery to compensate for the reduced troop presence.

But the use of heavy weaponry and air power by the Syrian military is not purely a question of resources. It also reflects the limitations of a military that is neither trained nor equipped to engage in close-quarters combat with an asymmetrical force such as the Free Syrian Army. Rebel guerillas have been able to take advantage of and inflict major casualties on Syrian soldiers, who are prepared almost exclusively for a conventional war with Israel.⁴¹

Rebels have noted the poor tactics used by the Syrian military when operating in close quarters. Contrary to standard military doctrine, Syrian tanks often enter urban areas unsupported by ground troops, leaving them susceptible to attacks by rebel gunners, who can quickly hide before being targeted by the tanks.⁴²

Such tactical failures and heavy casualties by the Syrian military against an asymmetrical force have incentivized long-range attacks using heavy weaponry and air power. Using fighter jets and firing artillery at a densely populated city such as Aleppo isn't nearly as accurate as using ground troops with traditional firearms. The regime's continued reliance on such tactics and weaponry increases the potential for the indiscriminate use of force and high civilian casualties.

Some rebel fighters and American commentators have called for a U.S.-led no-fly zone in Syria to combat the Assad regime's use of air power on population centers.⁴³ Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced this weekend that the United States is still considering imposing a no-fly zone in Syria in coordination with our NATO ally Turkey.⁴⁴ The attention on Syrian air power grew this week, with the admission by the Assad regime that it is using MiG-23 fighter jets to attack rebel fighters. Rebel leaders claim they shot down a Syrian jet using anti-aircraft guns, while the regime claims the jet crashed due to a technical malfunction.⁴⁵

Some proponents of a no-fly zone point to the recent experience in Libya as a model for the efficacy and relatively low cost of imposing a no-fly zone. But as CAP has previously argued,⁴⁶ the dynamics and geography of the battle in Syria differ dramatically from the battle for Libya. The logistical difficulties, limited efficacy, and potential for unintended consequences of direct U.S. military action in Syria make a no-fly zone a high-risk, medium-reward policy option for the United States.

Instead, the United States can help the rebellion combat the regime's tactics by improving the command and control of opposition fighters through logistical, communication, and intelligence assistance. The United States is already providing a degree of assistance in this capacity,⁴⁷ although the level of coordination with the operational level of the armed rebel-

lion remains limited. Additionally, President Barack Obama recently signed an intelligence finding that permits the CIA to provide covert assistance to the Syrian rebels, according to several reports,⁴⁸ although the type of assistance authorized remains unclear.

The CIA is also reportedly helping our Turkish, Saudi, and Qatari partners decide which rebels should receive arms, but the United States has so far refrained from directly arming the opposition itself.⁴⁹ Most of the weapons provided are small arms such as rifles, but more dangerous weapons such as antitank missiles are beginning to appear in rebel arsenals.⁵⁰

This model of supplying the rebel fighters carries many risks and explains much of the United States's rightful apprehension about directly arming the opposition. The United States should instead begin pushing our regional partners to funnel all arms, equipment, and funds through the Syrian National Council—the leaders of the political opposition to Assad—allowing them to direct these resources to proper channels within the Free Syrian Army and other elements of the rebellion. This will reduce the currently haphazard and messy nature of international support and will allow the Syrian National Council to better police the rebellion, making it clear that tactics such as publicly executing Assad loyalists⁵¹ are unacceptable and incompatible with the goals of the rebellion.

Another way to neutralize the Syrian military is to simply deprive them of the necessary manpower for such large-scale warfare by incentivizing defections. As many as 60,000 members of the Syrian military—roughly 20 percent of the country's estimated 295,000 active personnel—have defected or deserted according to Turkish intelligence.⁵² Additionally, almost none of the 80,000 Syrians conscripted into mandatory military service this year have reported for duty.⁵³ The overwhelming majority of these defections and desertions come from low-level Sunni soldiers.

While the defection and desertion of so many Syrian soldiers helps weaken the overall strength of the Syrian military, the next step will be increasing the number of defections from Syrian military officers and commanders with their units and weaponry intact. Since the uprising began, 28 Syrian generals have defected to Turkey,⁵⁴ including Brigadier General Manaf Tlass, a Sunni general considered close to Bashar al-Assad and his inner circle.⁵⁵

But men such as Tlass are hard to come by. The majority of Syria's officer corps and key commanders are Alawite, with many coming specifically from Assad's tribe, while Sunnis make up the majority of the conscript soldiers.⁵⁶ Among the Sunni officers, few are promoted to the level of Tlass, who was thought to be sufficiently loyal to the regime due to his father's close ties to Hafez al-Assad—Bashar's father and former president of Syria—and his 32 years serving as the country's defense minister.⁵⁷

So far, the Free Syrian Army has had little success convincing Alawite officers to turn on the Assad regime and defect to the rebellion. The defection of more Alawite officers,

who control the most important divisions and weaponry, will have a greater effect on the Syrian military than the defection of lower-level Sunni conscripts.

The United States and allied countries have a limited but important role to help incentivize greater Alawite defection to reduce the de facto sectarian nature of the conflict and limit the efficacy of the Syrian military. The United States can be a leader in the international community generating the moral and political space for Alawi officers to defect to the legitimate popular aspirations of the Syrian people, as opposed to simply the Sunni faction of a sectarian conflict.

Alawi military officers will be extremely concerned with the physical, legal, and financial security of themselves and their families if they defect from the regime. It will be difficult for the United States, regional partners, and the Syrian National Council to assuage the concerns of Alawi officers. But until this calculus changes, Alawi members of the military will be more likely to pin their livelihoods to the future the Assad regime.

As part of the effort to pry the Alawi community from the Assad regime, the Syrian rebellion must also make it clear that it will prevent reprisal attacks on Alawites following Assad's fall. Though the threat to the Sunni community poses the most likely risk of civilian casualties during the rebellion, it is the threat to the Alawi community that poses the most likely risk of civilian casualties during the transition period. Ensuring the protection of Alawites and making sure the Syrian National Council publicly prioritizes this issue is critical to any hope of a stable post-Assad Syria.

If the rebellion fails to incorporate Alawites and build a truly national movement, the country risks collapsing into sectarian civil war or even fragmenting into ethnic ministates. Iraq and Lebanon have yet to recover from their respective sectarian civil wars and remain vulnerable to the re-emergence of violence. Syria cannot be allowed to turn into yet another venue for a Saudi-Iranian sectarian proxy war, with frequent massacres and reprisal massacres of each ethnic community.

The fragmentation of Syria into a set of ethnic ministates is no more desirable. There is speculation that if Assad feels he cannot hold Damascus, he and his inner circle will retreat to an Alawi ethnic enclave along Syria's western coast, protected by the Jabal an Nusayriyah mountain range.⁵⁸ Similar ethnic ministates could break out for the Druze community in the south, near the Jabal al-Druze; the Christian community, near Homs; and the Kurdish community in the northeast. The prospect of an independent or highly autonomous Kurdish ministate would be extremely destabilizing for Turkey and Iraq, which both have large Kurdish populations that have long advocated for an independent Kurdistan.

If the rebellion fails to incorporate Alawites and build a truly national movement, the country risks collapsing into sectarian civil war or even fragmenting into ethnic ministates.

Preparing for an effective and stable political transition

Though the conflict in Syria is far from over, it appears increasingly likely that Assad's reign over Syria will eventually come to an end. The United States and its international partners—particularly Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar—should begin preparing the Syrian opposition to assume control over the country in an ordered and stable manner.

The first step toward this goal is to unify the rebellion—specifically the armed resistance led by the Free Syrian Army and the political opposition by the Syrian National Council—into a single coherent body. According to U.S. Director of National Intelligence Clapper, “There is not a national movement ... there is not a unitary connected opposition force. It's very local ... on a community-by-community basis.”⁵⁹

The Syrian rebellion is currently a coalition of different groups and organizations, often with very different ideologies and visions for Syria's future, who are all working concurrently toward the shared goal of removing Assad from power. Once Assad is removed as a common enemy, the loose confederation that makes up the rebellion could quickly splinter over how to handle the political and security transition of the country.

The Syrian National Council represents the best available organization to unify the rebellion and manage the ongoing transition process. The council is a 310-person body formed in Turkey this past fall by wide range of foreign-based Syrian intellectuals, secular elites, Muslim Brotherhood members, and independents.⁶⁰ The United States and other nations at the Friends of Syria Conference in April referred to the council as the “legitimate representative of Syrians seeking legitimate democratic change.”⁶¹

Significant international support and domestic consolidation is needed before the Syrian National Council can truly manage the transition. The group needs to be more explicit in its vision of a new democratic Syria, particularly on the protection of minority groups, who have so far been reluctant to back the council.

The support of the Kurdish, Druze, and Alawite minorities will be essential to any peaceful post-conflict scenario. The Syrian National Council has said all the right things about the rule of law and the importance of the Alawite community to the social fabric of Syria, but the group will need greater authority to prove it can enforce such sentiments on the ground.

As part of this, the Syrian National Council needs better in-country representation. Its location in Turkey, safe from the brutality of the Assad regime, is not helping its legitimacy and support within Syria. The strategic-minded Council would benefit greatly from stronger ties to the tactical-minded Local Coordinating Councils, which help organize protests and relief efforts in key areas of the conflict.

Finally, the armed resistance led by the Free Syrian Army needs to be incorporated under the control of the political opposition led by the Syrian National Council. Just as any military in a democratic nation should be subject to civilian oversight, the Free Syrian Army should be subject to Syrian National Council oversight. While the army would continue to manage military strategy and pursue the armed portion of the rebellion, it would follow the council's political lead. The council would be the final arbiter of peace and be the ultimate negotiator of a peace deal with the remnants of the Syrian regime.

Organizing the Free Syrian Army under the control of the Syrian National Council would allow the council to be a conduit for international military aid and financial assistance, significantly improving their leverage over other segments of the rebellion. The flow of funding from Saudi Arabia and Qatar to Salafi fighters makes unifying the pipeline of international funding and arms all the more important.

Channeling international resources through the Syrian National Council and conditioning access to these resources on adherence to the council's vision of a secular, democratic Syria also may help isolate the role of jihadists and other actors within the rebellion, who could be a negative influence on the post-Assad transition.

The post-Assad transition will be difficult from a political, economic, security, and social perspective. Preparing the Syrian National Council and giving them the international authority to manage the transition process is vital to U.S. interests, as the previously discussed U.S. priorities are all jeopardized without an effective and stable transition.

For the sake of national unity, such a transition will require buy-in from former elements of the regime, particularly the remnants of the Syrian military. Though the prospect of key ministers and generals in the Assad regime being incorporated into a transition government may be upsetting to members of the Syrian rebellion, wide-scale purges or an Iraq-style de-Baathification program⁶² will only hurt Syria's chances of a stable, peaceful future. Simply replacing one group of sectarian elites (the Alawites) with another group of sectarian elites (the Sunnis) will not benefit U.S. or Syrian interests.

Furthermore, making sure the Syrian people are able to manage their own transition process is also critical because no foreign nation—the United States included—has any desire to place military forces on the ground of the size or duration necessary to stabilize the country. In order to avoid a failed state in Syria, the United States and its regional partners will need to work with the Syrian National Council, the Free Syrian Army, and other segments of the Syrian rebellion to begin organizing for Syria's future.

Conclusion

It seems clear that Assad's dictatorial and increasingly brutal rule in Syria must come to an end, but U.S. policymakers should remain focused on what our key priorities and interests are in Syria. Though Assad's removal from power might positively serve every key U.S. priority, how Assad is removed and what role the international community plays has a significant impact on how well-served our strategic and humanitarian interests are.

The United States cannot afford to allow Syria to collapse into the sort of sectarian violence that plagued Lebanon and Iraq. It cannot afford for the violence in Syria to draw its neighbors into the conflict. It cannot afford the proliferation of chemical weapons and small arms, nor can it afford for Syria to become a new safe haven for transnational terrorists.

U.S. interests will only be served if we properly identify and actively safeguard our interests—not if we tie our fate to an arbitrary standard of success such as the removal of Assad. The steps to safeguard our interests in a future Syria begin today for U.S. policymakers.

Ken Sofer is a Research Assistant with the National Security and International Policy team at the Center for American Progress.

Endnotes

- 1 Korva Coleman, "Syria: 'Mother Of All Battles' looms in Aleppo," NPR, July 28, 2012, available at <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2012/07/28/157530758/syria-mother-of-all-battles-looms-in-aleppo>.
- 2 Neil MacFarquhar, "Syrian Rebels Land Deadly Blow to Assad's Inner Circle," New York Times, July 18, 2012, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/19/world/middleeast/suicide-attack-reported-in-damascus-as-more-generals-flee.html?_r=1.
- 3 "Kofi Annan quitting as Envoy to Syri, blasts nations' inability to unite to stop violence," Washington Post, August 2, 2012, available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/kofi-annan-says-he-is-quitting-as-special-envoy-to-syria-effective-aug-31/2012/08/02/gJQAYvorRX_story.html.
- 4 Damien Cave and Dalal Mawad, "Prime Minister's Defection in the Dark Jolts Syrians," New York Times, August 6, 2012, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/07/world/middleeast/syrian-state-tv-reportedly-attacked-as-propaganda-war-unfolds.html?_r=1&hp.
- 5 Damien Cave, "Syrian Rebels Claim to Have Brought Down a Jet," New York Times, August 13, 2012, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/14/world/middleeast/syrian-rebels-claim-to-have-brought-down-a-jet.html?_r=1&ref=world.
- 6 Khairi Abaza and others, "Foreign Policy Experts Urge President Obama to Take Immediate Action in Syria" (Washington: Foreign Policy Initiative, 2012), available at <http://www.foreignpolicy.org/content/foreign-policy-experts-urge-president-obama-take-immediate-action-in-syria>; Anne Marie Slaughter, "We will pay a high price if we do not arm Syria's rebels," Financial Times, August 2, 2012, available at <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/a03392ce-da35-11e1-b03b-00144feab49a.html>.
- 7 United Nations High Commission on Refugees, "Demographic Data of Registered Population," available at <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>.
- 8 Kareem Fahim, "Jordan Worries Turmoil Will Follow as Syria's Refugees Flood In," New York Times, July 25, 2012, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/26/world/middleeast/jordan-is-anxious-as-syrian-refugees-flood-in.html>; Hussein Dakroub, "Lebanon receives pledges to help with Syrian refugee influx," Daily Star, July 25, 2012, available at <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2012/Jul-25/181884-lebanon-receives-pledges-to-help-with-syrian-refugee-influx.ashx#axzz22z1fW1zH>.
- 9 Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, International Religious Freedom Report 2006 (U.S. Department of State, 2006).
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Nicholas Blanford, "Syrian spillover: Beirut sees worst clashes in four years," Christian Science Monitor, May 21, 2012, available at <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2012/0521/Syrian-spillover-Beirut-sees-worst-clashes-in-four-years>.
- 12 Orla Guerin, "Syria sidesteps Lebanon demands," BBC, March 6, 2005, available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4322477.stm.
- 13 "U.N. probe links Syria to Hariri killing," CNN, October 20, 2005, available at <http://www.cnn.com/2005/WORLD/meast/10/20/lebanon.hariri/index.html>.
- 14 "Lebanon (Civil War 1975-1991)," available at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/lebanon.htm> (last accessed August 2012).

- 15 Regan Doherty and Amena Bakr, "Exclusive: Secret Turkish nerve center leads aid to Syria rebels," Reuters, July 27, 2012, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/07/27/us-syria-crisis-centre-idUSBRE86Q0JM20120727>.
- 16 "Turkey warns it would strike PKK fighters inside Syria," *Ahram Online*, July 26, 2012, available at <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/48718/World/Region/Turkey-warns-it-would-strike-PKK-fighters-inside-S.aspx>.
- 17 Ayla Jean Yackley and Tulay Karadeniz, "Turkey won't allow 'terrorist' groups at Syria border: FM," Reuters, July 27, 2012, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/07/27/us-syria-crisis-turkey-idUSBRE86Q0C320120727>.
- 18 Nora Bensahel, "Lessons from a Syria wargame," *Foreign Policy*, July 10, 2012, available at http://ricks.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/07/10/lessons_from_a_syria_wargame.
- 19 Peter Juul, "Thinking Through Our Options in Syria" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2012) available at http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2012/03/syria_intervention.html.
- 20 "Syria Country Profile: Chemical," available at <http://www.nti.org/country-profiles/syria/chemical/> (last accessed August 2012).
- 21 Neil MacFarquhar and Eric Schmitt, "Syria Threatens Chemical Attack on Foreign Force," *New York Times*, July 23, 2012, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/24/world/middleeast/chemical-weapons-wont-be-used-in-rebellion-syria-says.html>.
- 22 John Irish and Daniel Flynn, "France says wants Syria humanitarian corridors," Reuters, April 19, 2012, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/04/19/us-syria-france-sarkozy-idUSBRE83108D20120419>.
- 23 Jonathan B. Tucker, "The Proliferation of Chemical and Biological Weapons Materials and Technologies to State and Sub-State Actor," Testimony before the Subcommittee on International Security, Proliferation, and Federal Services of the U.S. Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs, November 7, 2001, available at <http://www.biterrorism.slu.edu/bt/official/congress/tucker110701.pdf>.
- 24 Dinshaw Mistry, "Containing Missile Proliferation: Strategic Technology, Security Regimes, and International Cooperation in Arms Control" (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003).
- 25 John Reed, "Just How Deadly Is Assad's Arsenal?" *Foreign Policy*, July 16, 2012, available at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/07/16/just_how_deadly_is_assad_s_arsenal?page=0,1.
- 26 Rachel Oswald, "U.S. Watching Syrian Chemical Arms Amid Fear of Attack, Diversion" (Washington: Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2011), available at <http://www.nti.org/gsn/article/us-watching-syrian-chemical-arms-amid-fear-attack-diversion/>.
- 27 Barbara Starr, "Military: Thousands of troops needed to secure Syrian chemical sites," CNN, February 22, 2012, available at <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2012/02/22/military-thousands-of-troops-needed-to-secure-syrian-chemical-sites/>.
- 28 "Why Syrian army can't crush opposition," CNN, June 25, 2012, available at http://edition.cnn.com/video/?hpt=hp_t2#/video/bestoftv/2012/06/22/exp-syrian-opposition-forces.cnn.
- 29 Anne Gearan and Joby Warrick, "White House cautions Syria rebels not to repeat mistakes of Iraq," *Washington Post*, July 28, 2012, available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/white-house-cautions-syrian-rebels-not-to-repeat-mistakes-of-iraq/2012/07/28/gJQAjX-9uGX_story.html.
- 30 Alex Spillius, "Syria: Israel considers strike at chemical weapons," *The Telegraph*, July 19, 2012, available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9411483/Syria-Israel-considers-strike-at-chemical-weapons.html>; Barbara Starr, "U.S. talking to Israel and others about Syria's chemical weapons," CNN, July 19, 2012, available at <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2012/07/19/u-s-talking-to-israel-and-others-about-syrias-chemical-weapons/>; Ori Lewis, "Israel may act to stop Syrian chemical weapons arms from reaching Hezbollah," Reuters, July 20, 2012, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/07/20/us-syria-crisis-israel-idUSBRE86J1EL20120720>.
- 31 Eric Piani, "Study Assesses Risk of Attack on Chemical Plant," *Washington Post* March 12, 2002, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A10616-2002Mar11>.
- 32 "Syria rebels say chemical weapons moved to borders," *Agence France Presse*, July 24, 2012, available at <http://news.yahoo.com/syria-rebels-accept-transition-led-regime-figure-083329950.html>.
- 33 "Al-Qaeda likely behind Syria bombings: US spy chief," *Agence France Presse*, February 16, 2012, available at <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gajqRjDWax0oBhQk8MU7HX8BwTQ?docId=CNG.8b32ad461489ab05113fc900b5f26049.941>.
- 34 "Al-Qaida fighters infiltrate Syria," *NBC News*, August 7, 2012, available at <http://video.msnbc.msn.com/nightly-news/48560104/#48560104>.
- 35 Brian Fishman, "The Evidence of Jihadist Activity in Syria" (West Point: Combating Terrorism Center, 2012), available at <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-evidence-of-jihadist-activity-in-syria>.
- 36 Neil Macfarquhar and Hwaida Saad, "As Syrian War Drags On, Jihadists Take Bigger Role," *New York Times*, July 29, 2012, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/30/world/middleeast/as-syrian-war-drags-on-jihad-gains-foothold.html?partner=rss&emc=rss>.
- 37 "Al-Qaida infiltrating Syrian rebel groups," *NBC News*, August 5, 2012, available at <http://video.msnbc.msn.com/nightly-news/48520266#48520266>.
- 38 Jonathan Schanzer, "Saudi Arabia Is Arming the Syrian Opposition," *Foreign Policy*, February 27, 2012, available at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/02/27/saudi_arabia_is_arming_the_syrian_opposition?page=0,0.
- 39 "Al-Qaida fighters infiltrate Syria," *NBC News*.
- 40 "Syria army mounts air and land attack on Aleppo," *BBC*, July 28, 2012, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-19025955>.
- 41 David Enders, "Rare inside view of Syria's rebels finds a force vowing to fight on," *McClatchy Newspapers*, April 23, 2012, available at <http://www.miamiherald.com/2012/04/23/2764247/rare-inside-view-of-syrias-rebels.html>.
- 42 Austin Tice, "Some rebels wonder if Syrian troops' poor use of tanks, helicopters is intentional," *McClatchy Newspapers*, June 21, 2012, available at <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2012/06/21/153341/some-rebels-wonder-if-syrian-troops.html>.
- 43 Arthur Bright, "Syrian rebels seek no-fly zone to level playing field with Assad," *Christian Science Monitor*, August 13, 2012, available at <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/terrorism-security/2012/0813/Syrian-rebels-seek-no-fly-zone-to-level-playing-field-with-Assad>.
- 44 Conal Urquhart, "Syria crisis: US and Turkey consider no-fly zones," *The Guardian*, August 11, 2012, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/aug/11/syria-us-turkey-no-fly-zones>.
- 45 Cave, "Syrian Rebels Claim to Have Brought Down a Jet."
- 46 Juul, "Thinking Through Our Options in Syria."
- 47 Eric Schmitt, "C.I.A. Said to Aid in Steering Arms to Syrian Opposition," *New York Times*, June 21, 2012, available

- at <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/21/world/middleeast/cia-said-to-aid-in-steering-arms-to-syrian-rebels.html?pagewanted=all>.
- 48 Mark Hosenball, "Obama authorizes secret U.S. support for Syrian rebels," Reuters, August 1, 2012, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/08/01/us-usa-syria-obama-order-idUSBRE8701OK20120801>.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 Mark Landler and Neil Macfarquhar, "Heavier Weapons Push Syrian Crisis Towards Civil War," New York Times, June 12, 2012, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/13/world/middleeast/violence-in-syria-continues-as-protesters-killed.html?pagewanted=all>.
- 51 Norman Hermant and Matt Brown, "Syrian rebels accused of public executions," ABC News, August 2, 2012, available at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-08-02/syrian-rebels-accused-of-rights-violations-in-aleppo/4171274>.
- 52 Emre Peker and Donna Abu-Nasr, "Syrian Armed Forces Desertion Said to Surge to 60,000," Bloomberg, March 15, 2012, available at <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-03-15/syria-loses-20-000-troops-as-deserters-flee-turkey-says-1-.html>.
- 53 Neil MacFarquhar, "Syrian's Defection Signals Eroding Support for Assad," New York Times, July 6, 2012, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/07/world/middleeast/opponents-of-syrias-president-gather-in-paris.html?pagewanted=all>.
- 54 Suzan Fraser, "Syrian brigadier general defects to Turkey," Associated Press, July 30, 2012, available at <http://news.yahoo.com/syrian-brigadier-general-defects-turkey-103513072.html>.
- 55 MacFarquhar, "Syrian's Defection Signals Eroding Support for Assad."
- 56 "Syria (Syria), World armies," available at <http://articles.janes.com/articles/Janes-World-Armies/Syria-Syria.html> (last accessed August 2012).
- 57 MacFarquhar, "Syrian's Defection Signals Eroding Support for Assad."
- 58 John Allen Gay, "Syria after Assad," The National Interest, July 31, 2012, available at <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/syria-after-assad-7270?page=1>.
- 59 Elise Labott and Adam Levine, "Clinton: Syria opposition credible," CNN, February 23, 2012, available at <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2012/02/23/clinton-syria-opposition-credible/>.
- 60 "Executive Committee," available at <http://www.syriancouncil.org/en/structure/executive-committee.html> (last accessed August 2012).
- 61 Christopher Torchia and Bradley Klapper, "Friends Of Syria Conference: U.S. Among Countries To Fund Syrian Opposition," Associated Press, available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/04/01/friends-of-syria-conference-gulf-countries-fund-opposition_n_1394737.html.
- 62 W. Andrew Terrill, "Lessons of the Iraqi De-Ba'athification Program for Iraq's Future and the Arab Revolutions" (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, 2012).