

Future Prospects for Syria

A CNA Small Group Discussion

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Introduction

As the Syrian civil war approaches the end of its second year, it continues to confound Middle East watchers and policy-makers. Predictions made during the conflict's initial stages that the Asad regime would fall quickly have been unfounded as the regime's military advantages have frustrated rebels and prevented them from controlling major cities. Now that the sectarian nature of the conflict has increased, and no clear political alternative to the Asad regime has emerged, the conflict threatens to destabilize the fragile security of the region.

On February 21, 2013, CNA's Center for Strategic Studies convened a group of Middle East experts with academic and U.S. government backgrounds for a dialogue on the future prospects for Syria and possible policy options for the United States. The discussion was structured to focus on four key aspects of the conflict:

- Future of regime elites and the minority question
- Changing role of regional states and external influence
- Jihadist networks in Syria and their implications for terrorism
- Options for U.S. policy and involvement.

This paper is a summary of the major themes and debates that shaped the discussion. To encourage idea sharing and openness, the proceedings follow the Chatham House rule of non-attribution.

The future of the regime elites and the minority question

The first session focused on future options for Syria's Alawites and other minority communities. There was general agreement that the future of Syria's Alawite community is inextricably linked with the fate of the Asad regime. Discussion participants outlined three possible options for Syria's minority groups, based on the political transitions of other regional countries:

- *Turkey.* In 1918–1922, at the end of the Ottoman Empire, the Turks violently targeted the Armenian and Greek Orthodox communities. This led to ethnic cleansing and profound social dislocation for these minorities. Syria's minorities fear a similar wave of ethnic cleansing and are uncertain about their safety and the viability of their communities should the Asad regime fall.
- *Iraq.* In the early stages of the Syrian conflict, many observers assumed that it would have parallels with Iraq's recent experience. They believed that there would be a quick, if not messy, political transition, with Syria's Sunni majority rising to the

political fore. But in Iraq, the United States constrained competing Shiite political interests and nurtured the development and authority of the Maliki government. In contrast, there is no major foreign power occupying Syria that can help bring about this transition.

- *Lebanon.* In Lebanon's civil war, the country fragmented into territory controlled by rival ethnic and sectarian militias. While there are implicit differences between Lebanon and Syria, discussants posited that Asad may look to the Lebanese model as a possible end to the Syrian conflict. In this scenario, Asad's strategy would be to cantonize Syria by fragmenting Sunni Arabs along regional differences and refocusing the regime as an Alawite enclave along the coast. During Lebanon's civil war, however, there was an outside power (Syria) that mediated and controlled the conflict—a dynamic that does not presently exist in Syria.

While these examples present future possible scenarios for Syria and its minority communities, they depend on three key assumptions: (1) Bashar Asad will stay in power as the leader of the Alawites; (2) there is no deal that can be brokered between the regime and the opposition; and (3) the Alawites are going to try to remain in Syria.

In response to the first assumption, some participants argued that it is nearly impossible to imagine the Alawites abandoning Asad. Asad is regarded as the leader of the Alawites, and Alawite identity is closely associated with the Asad family. The increasingly sectarian nature of the conflict, and the narrative being pushed by the regime itself, has instilled a feeling among the Alawites that the remaining Syrian army, the Shabiha, and Asad are the shields protecting them from destruction at the hands of "vengeful" Sunni militants. In several villages in the Latakia region where armed rebel groups have advanced, Alawites have already begun to abandon their homes, uncertain about, and not willing to risk, being overrun by militias.

The fact that there is no unified opposition with which the regime can negotiate has reinforced the assumption that there is little potential for a deal to be brokered. There is also evidence to suggest that the Alawites are considering an extra-Syria option. The idea that an Alawite enclave could be established along the country's coastline, potentially as an extension of Lebanon, was explored. This scenario could have dire humanitarian implications, particularly for Sunnis living in the coastal cities (or for Alawites in majority Sunni areas). If Asad is forced out of Damascus, this option may be a way to keep his regime intact, even if that means ceding the rest of the country to Sunni and Kurdish control. However, some participants argued that such a strategy would rely heavily on continued Russian and Iranian support, Sunni Arab fragmentation, and infighting amongst rebel groups. If the coast stays under the control of Asad, the rest of the country would be cut off from economically vital maritime ports, and discussants agreed that it is unlikely that the Sunni Arabs would accept this outcome.

- A fourth potential scenario for the Syrian conflict was also introduced – that of the Algerian civil war in the 1990s, during which the radical Islamist opposition gradually made itself unpopular among the population. As the conflict drags on, if Salafi and Jihadist rebels continue to strengthen and become a dominant force in the armed opposition, there could be a backlash among more moderate Sunnis who might in turn become more favorable toward a negotiated settlement rather than lose out to hardliners.

Currently, it appears that Syria's minorities remain in favor of Assad, mostly out of fear of the instability and chaos that could follow the regime's collapse.

Changing role of regional states and external influence

The second panel discussed the role of regional states and their influence in the conflict. Participants observed that the lack of U.S. engagement has created a power vacuum, with Russia and Iran competing with regional states such as Turkey and Qatar for influence in Syria. Iran has deployed its special forces to the region and uses its relationship with Lebanese Hezbollah to directly influence the situation on the ground in Syria. Hezbollah has been engaged in fighting armed opposition groups near the borders and extending protection to Shiite villages in and around the Al Qusayr countryside. Turkey and Jordan, however, have been limited to supporting the opposition by creating safe havens and creating refugee camps for the hundreds of thousands of Syrians fleeing the violence.

Participants submitted that Iran likely understands that there is little chance of Assad being able to re-exert control over the entire country. Iran appears to be positioning itself for a fractured Syria in which Assad is able to maintain certain zones of control, with other parts of the country divided into a smattering of Sunni Arab and Kurdish enclaves. If this scenario plays out, Iran would retain a vital ally and its access to the Lebanese border and Syria's Mediterranean ports.

Participants then discussed what rising Iranian influence in the Syrian conflict would imply for the U.S.'s regional allies, particularly Israel. There was general agreement that Israel's primary security concern continues to be Iran's nuclear program but that its concerns now also include Iran's possibly growing influence over Assad and a new host of Sunni extremist elements in Syria. Participants considered the regime's loss of control of Syria's chemical weapons to be a secondary concern for Israelis. One panelist, however, pointed out that the recent Israeli strike on a Syrian convoy highlighted Israel's concerns that Syria's advanced weapons could be transferred into Lebanon.

Jihadist networks in Syria and their implications for terrorism

As the conflict in Syria has dragged on, it has become clear that foreign jihadist groups have inserted themselves into the fight. Discussants identified the following factors that have turned the Syrian conflict into a permissive environment for foreign jihadi groups:

- *Lack of a dominant political organization that would be an alternative to the Asad regime.* In other Arab Spring countries, such as Tunisia and Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) was able to establish itself as the credible political group that opposed the former regimes and provided a buffer against radical extremist groups. In Syria, however, the MB had been irreparably weakened by the Hafez Asad regime after the 1982 revolt. The Syrian National Council, dominated by the Brotherhood, operates outside of Syria, and does not appear to have adequate support inside the country to be considered the legitimate alternative to the Asad regime.
- *Influx of outside funding from private Salafist donors.* While it is not possible to track how much money is coming to armed groups from individual financiers, a large amount of private money from Salafist networks is reportedly funding a variety of Islamist groups in Syria. The existence of a multitude of donors creates a sort of “popularity contest” for resources among rebel groups, and the sectarian nature of the conflict attracts financial support.
- *Presence of experienced, well-equipped, and effective foreign fighters.* In general, the foreign fighters coming into Syria are effective, having gained experience fighting in Iraq. Their asymmetric tactics have been effective against the Syrian army, and thus they have garnered the respect of the local population. While the Syrian opposition and the wider population may be uneasy with their ideological inclinations, for now they are helpful in the fight against Asad.
- *Lack of government-to-government assistance.* Jihadists are able to capitalize on the limited foreign assistance being provided to the Syrian opposition. The lack of support enables them to take control of the armed conflict and perpetuate the narrative that the world is standing by while Syrians suffer, and that these jihadi groups are present, fighting, and dying alongside them in a common struggle.

These factors have supported jihadist recruiting methods among Sunni youth. Recruiting efforts are also aided by the fact that as Syria’s economy continues to deteriorate during wartime, young men who must provide for their families have few viable economic options other than to join the militias and jihadist groups fighting in Syria. These jihadist groups are applying lessons learned from Iraq to “win over” the Syrian population, by setting up public services and delivering flour and other goods. Also, jihadists are portraying themselves as a nationalist force in an effort to downplay their sectarian agenda, which they know is disconcerting to the local population.

The momentum of jihadi groups in Syria has troubling implications for Syria's political future. Competition between rebel groups and jihadis could make a political compromise even more remote. Again, there is currently a common enemy – the Asad regime – to unite the efforts of these groups. However, it is not clear how these groups, with their different sets of goals and ideologies, will interact if the regime falls or if Asad is successful in establishing an enclave on the coast. The longer the fighting continues and the more sectarian the nature of the conflict becomes, the more refugees will spill into neighboring states. Depending on the host nation's capacity to handle refugee flows, refugee camps could become havens for terrorists (like, for example, the Tindouf camps in Algeria).

The rise of influence of jihadi groups in the Syrian conflict raised two main questions for the discussion group. First, could the United States have countered this dynamic if it and its allies had become more involved earlier on? Second, what are the implications for Israel and Jordan?

Regarding earlier involvement, participants agreed that in the early stages of the Syrian conflict, the Syrian opposition did not want a large-scale foreign intervention like Operation Odyssey Dawn in Libya. However, Syrians eventually became frustrated as the Asad regime escalated its tactics against the opposition and the international community continued to withhold significant lethal military assistance. Their frustration directly led them to accept assistance from jihadi fighters. As one participant explained, Syrians didn't like groups such as Nusra Front, but these groups gave them the weapons, experience, and know-how to engage government forces more effectively.

Currently, neither Israel nor Jordan views the rise of jihadist groups in Syria as a primary concern. Israel remains focused on Iranian involvement, but the destabilization of Israel's northern border compounded by insecurity on its border with Egypt is a concern. Jordan sees jihadi violence as a potentially complicating factor. But, as one panelist pointed out, Jordan has other problems that threaten its stability: economic deterioration, refugees, and the security of its border with Iraq. Indeed, Jordan could use refugee flows into the country to its favor, by asking for financial assistance to cope with the influx, as it has done in the past.

Options for U.S. policy and involvement

The final discussion panel focused on potential shifts in U.S. policy to become involved in Syria. Four basic options for engagement were outlined:

- *First, “arm the opposition, heavy.”* This option would have the United States supply vetted, armed opposition groups with significant game-changing technology, such as by providing a robust supply of man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS). While arming the opposition was once a politically popular option, some panelists

argued that it is perhaps too late for this option to enhance the United States' position among rebel groups who resent the lack of U.S. military support in the earlier stages of the conflict. Additionally, the original rationale for not arming the opposition groups – that the weapons would come under the control of jihadist groups fighting in Syria – has not abated. However, the reality on the ground is that the moderate opposition groups are unable to counter the influence of the better-armed and well-funded jihadi groups. If the Asad regime falls, these moderate groups will not be able to compete with the jihadi forces for political power. In addition to empowering moderate rebel factions, arming the moderate rebel opposition groups would put the United States in a better position to influence the outcome of the conflict.

- *Second, “arm the opposition, light.”* Based on the rationale that the opposition already has the weapons systems it needs, this option would not include supplying advanced weapons systems to rebel groups. Rather, it would increase the United States' logistical and intelligence collection support to the armed opposition groups so that they can use the weapons they have more effectively. Safe havens could also be established and used to train opposition forces. This option reduces the concern that weapons would fall into the “wrong hands.” Participants raised several questions about this option, including: Would the United States provide this support through Turkey or Jordan? Who would provide the training? Would the United States have to be directly involved? Would this option require special operations forces on the ground, and, if so, how many?
- *Third, “establish a nationwide no-fly zone.”* This option would require taking out Syria's integrated air defense networks, its airfields, and its aircraft. One participant asserted that, too often, people make simplistic comparisons to the no-fly zone established in Libya. In reality, Syria's integrated air defense capability is sophisticated – far more so than Libya's. This would likely be a multi-week, high-risk campaign that would take a heavy toll on the Syrian population and the country's infrastructure.
- *Fourth, “establish a ground-based no-fly zone.”* Finally, this fourth option would build on the deployment of the six Patriot batteries currently in Turkey. The United States could establish a partial no-fly zone, which the opposition could use as a safe haven for training its forces, developing an alternative government, and sheltering refugees. The possibility of executing this option from Jordan was also raised. While this is a more limited option than an air-based no-fly zone, a participant pointed out that safe havens could be turned into a beachhead.

Participants debated the merits of pursuing any of these options (or a combination thereof), with two primary questions in mind: First, would the option make the United States better able to influence the conflict? Second, what would be its effect on Iran?

The use of any of the four options would be considered an escalation of current U.S. policy in Syria. Some participants argued that becoming more involved would allow the United States to develop its relationship with the armed opposition, and possibly influence the outcome of the conflict in the United States' favor. U.S. engagement could also prompt its allies, primarily the Turks, Qataris, and Saudis, to reinvigorate their participation. However, it was not clear to some participants what increased military involvement by the United States or its allies would achieve, or whether it would necessarily improve the United States' standing with the armed opposition or the Syrian population writ large. Even if U.S. military involvement could expedite the Asad regime's fall, there is still no distinct alternative government able to take power and promote stability.

Some participants feared that military involvement in Syria would divert attention from the Iranian nuclear issue. Some suggested that the United States has 18 to 24 months to prevent the Iranians from developing a nuclear weapon – and that focusing efforts on another regional conflict could ultimately detract from this goal. It was also posited that if the United States were to be involved in the defeat of Asad, it could provoke Tehran into increasing its commitment to developing a nuclear weapon and into strengthening its support of Hezbollah.

Ultimately, the United States must decide on its primary goals and long-term interests in the region. The United States is constrained by the complexity of the issue and the lack of a clear path forward in Syria. More direct intervention in the conflict might have myriad unintended consequences and complicate U.S. policy efforts in the Middle East more broadly.

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