International Crisis Group
WORKING TO PREVENT CONFLICT WORLDWIDE

# Syria's Metastasising Conflicts

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# *Executive Summary*

Two years, scores of thousands of dead, a mushrooming regional sectarian war and millions of refugees and internally displaced later, the Syrian war is tying the international community in knots largely of its own making. Once confident of swift victory, the opposition's foreign allies shifted to a paradigm dangerously divorced from reality: that military pressure would force the regime to alter its calculus so that it would either negotiate its demise or experience internal cracks leading to its collapse. That discounted the apparent determination of Iran, Hizbollah and Russia to do what it takes to keep the regime afloat and bring the armed opposition to its knees. It counted without the fecklessness of an opposition in exile fighting for a share of power it has yet to achieve. And it assumed that the Assad regime has a "calculus" susceptible to be changed, not merely a fighting mode designed to last. It is past time to get over false hopes and confront a harsh truth. The options that dominate the policy debate would deepen the crisis, not produce a credible exit from it.

If the goal is to end this horrendous war, the choice is between massive Western military intervention – with attending risks and uncertainties – to decisively shift the ground balance; acceptance of regime victory with the moral and political price that would entail; and a diplomatic solution driven jointly by the U.S. and Russia. The latter is the preferred but today illusory option, in which regime and opposition would settle for a less-than-satisfactory power-sharing agreement, and the region's main rival camps (led, respectively, by Iran and Saudi Arabia) would acquiesce in a Syria aligned with neither. A fourth option – in which allies give both sides enough to survive but not prevail – would perpetuate a proxy war with Syrians as primary victims. It is the present stage and the likeliest forecast for the foreseeable future.

For now, the focus should be on immediate steps to de-escalate the conflict and on mapping out in more detail an endgame that could serve as the basis for a diplomatic settlement. This entails answering core questions: What kind of power-sharing solution can protect regime and opposition interests alike? What kind of state could emerge from a political process and be the foundation of a lasting solution? How must existing institutions change for this vision to gain substance? Is there a way to accommodate the concerns of rival regional actors? This is where most agreement can be found among Syrians and their allies' concerns can be addressed. This report suggests ideas for further discussion.

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That choices are so unpalatable, unrealistic or both owes much to the dynamics of a war that is often misdiagnosed. It is not a zero-sum game in which one side's gains definitely mean the other side's loss. Both regime and opposition can be strong on some fronts, frail on others. Both have undergone consolidation processes and enjoy sufficient domestic and foreign support to endure. Its fighters more battle-hardened and its allies more hands-on, the regime has scored important tactical military victories. It retains loyal constituencies; some once on the fence, well aware of Assad's atrocities yet alarmed by the opposition's desultory record of governance as well as increasingly Islamist and sectarian disposition, hold their nose and lean toward a regime that claims to be fighting on behalf of a significant national cross-section. Most

importantly, the regime has evolved in ways that largely make it impervious to its innumerable failings.

This is one good reason to rapidly discard the tipping-point theory, the fiction that once the opposition reached a critical mass (taking over Aleppo; moving into Damascus; bringing the business class to its side, among other hypotheticals) it would overwhelm the regime. One should do the same with the notion that, under growing pressure, the power structure would turn against itself, in a military coup or by desertion of significant personalities. The regime comes as a package deal – an inseparable whole, whose more acceptable elements cannot be dissociated from its least tolerable ones without bringing the entire edifice down. Assad supporters, often among his harshest private critics, remain persuaded that the remnants of the state would crumble were he to step down.

In its own way but with much the same result, the opposition is nearly impossible to eliminate. There are differences, of course. It is pluralistic and deeply divided, its structures improvised and shifting and its foreign backers less consistent and more uncoordinated. Still, and not unlike the regime, it has acquired a critical and resilient mass of support at least partially immune to the ups and downs of its performance. The large underclass that is its core constituency has suffered such extreme regime violence that it can be expected to fight till the end.

International support has been inconstant in the best of times, ineffectual at others. Yet even the opposition's most reluctant foreign supporters are unlikely to fundamentally reverse course; as the recent decisions by Washington to deliver some weapons and then by others to significantly ramp up their own assistance suggest, they are more likely to do the opposite. Too much has been invested in demonising the regime, and too much is riding on the contest with Iran and Hizbollah for it to be otherwise. For those who view the conflict as a proxy war with Tehran, Assad's survival would be a strategic body blow.

In short, the evolution of regime and opposition alike has made both military and negotiated solutions even more elusive, while transformation of the broader strategic context has made prospects for escalation even more probable. In the words of a former U.S. official, what once was a Syrian conflict with regional spillover has become a regional war with a Syrian focus. That is frightening.

The war is metastasising in ways that draw in regional and other international actors, erase boundaries and give rise to a single, transnational arc of crisis. The opposition increasingly resembles a Sunni coalition in which a radicalised Sunni street, Islamist networks, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, Gulf states and Turkey take leading roles. The pro-regime camp, encompassing Iran, Hizbollah, Iraq and Iraqi Shiite militants, likewise appears to be a quasi-confessional alliance.

By its own admission, Hizbollah is directly engaged in a far-reaching battle against those it denounces as Sunni fundamentalists (*takfiris*) allied with Israel, thereby laying the predicate for long-term involvement. Iraqi Shiite fighters are growing in numbers, and Iran's participation is expanding. Sunni sheikhs around the region are themselves using uninhibited sectarian language to urge followers to join the fight. The conflict has reignited tensions in Syria's most fragile neighbours – Iraq and Lebanon – which recently had their own civil wars.

Stakes have risen for the U.S. and Israel as well. For Washington, acquiescing in the regime's success arguably has acquired graver significance than living with a weakened regime ruling a rogue state and broken society. It is likened by some to

empowering an increasingly integrated, Iranian-led axis of resistance, while handing Moscow a victory in a Cold War replay. The fusion of Iranian, Hizbollah and Syrian military assets could alter Israel's cautious posture, making determination of what weapons system has been transferred to whom highly uncertain and thus a decision to use force more probable.

What is to be done? Already overdue is to vastly increase humanitarian aid within Syria, whether in regime- or opposition-held territory. There is need, too, for a "periphery" strategy for avoiding instability in vulnerable neighbours: giving economic help to Jordan and Lebanon and the refugees they host; prevailing upon regional countries not to further incite sectarian tensions in Lebanon; pressing Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki to adopt a far more inclusive policy toward his Sunni opposition.

Hardest of all is what to do about Syria. The priority should be to end the war; there are no easy choices, but there is at least need to face them squarely:

- One option would be for the West to decisively tip the military balance. This, it almost certainly can do – albeit only by a far more massive intervention than is presently contemplated or, arguably, politically palatable. Even then, it is not clear whether the regime would be "defeated", or merely reincarnated in a series of militias, and even less clear whether the war would be ended or only redefined. Iran, Hizbollah, perhaps even Russia would keep influence, fuel instability and ensure a chaotic transition (Tehran and the Shiite movement have elsewhere proved to be masters at this game), and the regional/sectarian Cold War would endure.
- An arguably most expedient way to tamp down violence would be to starve the rebels of resources, acquiesce in de facto regime victory and seek an accommodation with Bashar. The moral, political and strategic costs would be huge, perhaps prohibitive, and it might well not end the tragedy: enraged Syrians likely would not surrender; an emboldened regime might seek revenge; and Damascus almost certainly would refrain from the domestic or foreign policy concessions necessary for its external enemies to save face.
- The optimal solution – a negotiated, diplomatic one – at this stage belongs pretty much to the world of make-believe. Outside powers – beginning with Russia and the U.S. – would have to fundamentally shift their endgame approach. For Moscow, this means accepting, then pushing for a major transformation of the Syrian power structure; for Washington, it entails moving from implicit regime change to explicit power sharing. Any viable negotiated political outcome would have to empower and reassure Syria's various constituencies. Regional actors, who will support a compromise only if they believe the new political framework gives them sufficient leverage to preserve their core interests, would need guarantees. The West's apparent determination to exclude Iran from a peace conference (perhaps under review in the wake of that country's presidential elections) is short-sighted: keeping Tehran from Geneva will not lessen its role in Damascus.

The West's current trajectory – urging diplomacy while resorting to half-way measures such as arming the opposition or, conceivably in the future, targeted airstrikes and a limited no-fly zone – is an option as well, and one that might produce sizeable ancillary benefits: eroding the regime's military; boosting Western influence over the re-

bels; and recalibrating the balance of power among rebel groups. But it would not produce what its promoters typically claim as justification: moving the regime to seriously negotiate a genuine transition. Nor is there any reason to believe it could arrest sectarian polarisation, contain violence, limit jihadi groups or persuade Syria's allies to back down. Ultimately, it would mean getting further sucked into a dangerously intensifying and malignant Sunni/Shiite sectarian regional conflict in which the West would be running a risk by picking favourites.

If Russia and the U.S. wish to signal seriousness, they should start with efforts to de-escalate the conflict. Moscow should press the regime to end the most gratuitous forms of violence (notably massacres of civilians in the presence of army troops and use of ballistic missiles against civilians) and curtail the use of its foreign fighters (especially those of an overtly sectarian nature). Washington should push the opposition to act against its own most extreme armed groups and implement ceasefires along specified front lines. None of this would fundamentally alter the trajectory of the conflict or truly point to its resolution. But at least it would be a start, which is far more than one can say has been achieved at this sorry stage.

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# Syria's Metastasising Conflicts

## I. Introduction

Amid the war's seemingly inexorable deterioration, both sides at times have felt the tide turning in their favour, only to see it turn against them soon thereafter. The ebb and flow of such expectations, by convincing one or the other that victory at long last was at hand, has helped ensure incremental escalation. By now, almost half the country's urban fabric reportedly has been destroyed;[1] much of society is coping with a devastating humanitarian crisis; numbers of refugees and internally displaced are swelling; and deaths pile up.[2] Still, both sides periodically harbour the hope that, somehow, at some point, the balance will shift conclusively to their advantage. This is a naive, dangerous and terribly costly illusion.

For the most part, regime and opposition place their faith in external factors, awaiting decisive changes emanating from anyone but themselves. For the regime, this has meant closing the door on any genuine political compromise – indeed, refusing to recognise the legitimacy of an opposition with which a compromise could be reached; investing in mounting forms of violence; banking on the international community's divisions and dithering; and relying on its own foreign backers. In mirror image, most opposition factions have shunned serious efforts to engage the regime, its allies and social base, instead throwing themselves into a confrontation they can only expect to win with exponentially greater support from their foreign sponsors. The few among them who sought to resort to politics received nothing in return, further vindicating the hardliners' stance.

Key outside players have been either waiting for, or actively promoting a shift of the military balance on the ground. Russia, Iran, Hizbollah and Iraq have propped up the regime and gradually increased their support, with a view not only to keep it alive but also to provide it with an edge. Saudi Arabia and Qatar have taken the lead in shoring up their proxies within the opposition, which also has enjoyed various degrees of support from Turkey, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), France, the UK and the U.S. Their efforts have come in variegated shapes and shades, but, throughout, the overarching rationale has been that the opposition's endurance one way or another inevitably would spell the regime's demise.

Finally, the joint UN and Arab League special envoy, Lakhdar Brahimi, well aware of the limitations these realities dictate, has mostly been reduced to playing Cassan-

[1] In early April 2013, the UN estimated that 1.2 million houses – "one third of the total housing stock in Syria" – had been damaged or destroyed. http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Syria%20Humanitarian%20Bulletin%20-%20Issue%2022.pdf.

[2] In May 2013, the UN put the number of Syrians in need of humanitarian aid at roughly eight million. www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=44960&Cr=syria&Cr1=#.UZ4V2rU3Dzw. The UN has registered 1,494,437 refugees with a further 20,184 awaiting registration; counted 2,016,500 internally displaced persons (IDPs); and most recently estimated nearly 93,000 people killed. See www.unhcr.org/pages/49e486a76.html; www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=45162&Cr=Syria&Cr1#.UchvLDTryzd; data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php.

dra, warning of inevitable consequences should the parties not rectify courses of action to which they are wedded. His ability to broker any agreement between the Syrian parties to the conflict will remain negligible as long as outside players continue to equate a political settlement with their foes' capitulation.

Over the past several months, this political roller coaster of heightened and then dashed expectations has recurred regularly. In November 2012, a string of regime setbacks gave birth to the notion that it was on its last legs. The opposition formed a new coalition, an apparent reflection of greater Western (and, in the wake of its presidential elections, notably U.S.) resolve;[3] armed groups regained momentum and opened new battle fronts, particularly in Damascus and central Syria; and the regime appeared to signal greater openness to a negotiated solution.[4] Rumours of varying credibility that suggested the regime was vacillating quickly spread.[5] The excitement was reminiscent of that which had swept opposition circles and their external allies in mid-2012, when deadly attacks in the capital were considered harbingers of the regime's imminent fall.

Euphoria once more soon gave way to bitter disappointment.[6] By early 2013, it appeared all too clearly that the newfound coalition was riven by the same rivalries that had dogged the opposition from day one; the West displayed customary hesitancy;[7] and, in some regions, the military situation began to tilt toward the regime. The rebels' radicalisation and criminality, coupled with enhanced influence of fundamentalist groups, became more manifest, attracting the attention of the mainstream media;[8] more importantly, they triggered mounting public hostility, notably among minority groups and members of the urban elite.

In turn, this prompted renewed optimism on the part of regime loyalists. As they saw it, the rise of jihadi groups was their ace in the deck, key to persuading important social constituencies as well as the international community that the current leadership remained their safest bet.[9] Sustained backing from allies – in stark contrast to the fragmented, haphazard posture of opposition supporters – as well as the unprec-

[3] The National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces was formed on 12 November 2012 in Doha, Qatar.

[4] In November 2012, reports of a conversation between a UN representative and a senior Syrian intelligence official – during which the latter apparently suggested regime demise might be near, and "guarantees" might be necessary to ensure the leadership's exit – spread in diplomatic circles like widlfire. Crisis Group interviews, Arab and Western diplomats, November-December 2012. "Are Syria's rebels about to win?", *Global Post*, 30 November 2012; "Assad suffering reversals in fighting and diplomacy", *The New York Times*, 3 December 2012.

[5] A senior Arab diplomat asserted Assad had sent Faysal Muqdad, deputy foreign minister, to South America to seek guarantees for his departure. Crisis Group interview, Cairo, December 2012. The rumour was unfounded and unrealistic. Assad never would entrust a mid-ranking official with such a mission.

[6] For background, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°128, *Syria's Mutating Conflict*, 1 August 2012.

[7] Although Western powers, in particular the U.S., had insisted on a revamped opposition as a condition for enhanced support, formation of the coalition failed to trigger any noticeable shift in outside behaviour.

[8] See "Syria crisis: al-Qaida fighters revealing their true colours, rebels say", *The Guardian*, 17 January 2013; "Eastern Syrian town lives under al Qaeda rules", Reuters, 30 January 2013.

[9] In late 2012, officials began to claim opinion was turning, eg, "we are regaining ground in Aleppo. People there, but also in places like Homs, Raqqa and elsewhere are coming back to the regime. The dynamics are going our way". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, December 2012.

edented offer of talks issued in late January by Moaz Khatib, the then-president of the Syrian National Coalition, reinforced the feeling that President Bashar Assad could reach a solution on his own terms. On 6 January 2013, he laid those out: the opposition was free to take part in an electoral, reform and reconciliation process, albeit implicitly one entirely regime-engineered and controlled[10] and that would occur even as the army and security services continued to "fight terrorism"[11] – a label under which he subsumed all dissent, violent and peaceful.[12]

That feeling too was fleeting. By late February the opposition was said to be receiving larger weapons shipments – presumably from Gulf Arab countries;[13] Khatib's initiative collapsed, overtaken by his harder-line colleagues even before it could be rebuffed by the regime;[14] in March the opposition appointed a prime minister in

[10] Assad said, "any initiative proposed by any party, figure or country must be based on the Syrian vision; meaning that no initiative can replace what we view as a solution to the crisis in Syria. In clearer language, any initiative is an initiative to help what the Syrians will do and doesn't replace that. After posing the ideas by the government, any initiative that comes from abroad must be based on these ideas and assist them. There's no need to waste our time and others' time with initiatives that deviate from this context". For the official translation, see Syrian Arab News Agency, 6 January 2013. Prior to the speech, an official critical of the regime's course said, "the regime will continue down the same road. It is not adverse to a transition, but it must be one that it designs and implements itself. Meanwhile, it sees itself on the defensive, under attack, and doesn't see it as its responsibility to take the [political] initiative". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, December 2012. A senior official concurred: "We have neither time nor respect for the opposition, save its most patriotic figures. The plan is to have elections in 2014, which will only be possible if Turkey shuts down its border. Assad will never leave this country to people who will destroy it". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, December 2012.

[11] He addressed those fearful that initiation of a political track could interrupt military progress: "Some will be worried and feel concerned, considering it a step backwards in terms of security, but I reassure everyone that when it comes to combating terrorism, we will not stop as long as there is a single terrorist in Syria. What we started, we won't stop. Anything we do in this initiative doesn't mean at all that we will neglect combating terrorism; to the contrary, the more we make progress in combating terrorism, the more there's a chance for the success of this vision". Syrian Arab News Agency, 6 January 2013.

[12] Although the regime claims to be combating terrorism, its practices – arbitrary arrests, torture and other forms of abuse – target even the most benign dissent. Four young women who dressed as brides and posed in central Damascus with a banner calling mildly for an end to all violence disappeared for weeks. They reappeared as part of a prisoner exchange involving Iranians detained by opposition armed groups. "Syrian 'Peace Brides' Released from Detention", Amnesty International, 11 January 2013. On 26 July 2012, Assad set up an "anti-terrorism court" that has since led to the detention of a wide array of activists, including peaceful ones. Human rights lawyers faced sentences of up to fifteen years for "publicising terrorist acts", a crime that could be broadly interpreted to mean any form of vocal support to the opposition. Agence France-Presse, 17 May 2013. A businessman with close ties to the ruling elite said, "you can't image the time I spend every week just getting people out of prison, even people who have strictly nothing to do with this conflict". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, February 2013.

[13] "In Syria, new influx of weapons to rebels tilts the battle against Assad", 24 February 2013. Reporters tracked down 160 cargo flights of weapons to the opposition in several locations in Turkey and Jordan over approximately one year. "Arms airlift to Syria rebels expands, with aid from C.I.A.", *The New York Times*, 24 March 2013.

[14] "The opposition didn't even give us time to reject Moaz", quipped a Syrian official. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2013. Prominent figures across the opposition's ideological spectrum joined in rejecting Khatib's call for dialogue. Liberal coalition member Kamal al-Labwani said, "it gave the regime and Russia a lift. They now think that if they can just raise pressure on the opposition, they can resolve this conflict on their own terms". Crisis Group communication, February

exile and was given Syria's Arab League seat, thus challenging regime claims to sovereignty; and the U.S. seemed inclined to adopt a more active posture.[15] Fighting intensified in Damascus, which in February and March appeared besieged.[16] Even in a shrinking circle of central neighbourhoods, residents rarely ventured out in the evening; checkpoints were everywhere; intense fighting in the suburbs left clouds lingering in the sky; and constant explosions shook the ground.[17] Opposition armed groups in the south, benefiting from greater Saudi and Jordanian aid, appeared poised to intensify their pressure on the capital. In March, Raqqa fell to the rebels – the first provincial capital to be taken. Many anticipated that Dayr Zor and even Aleppo soon would follow.

Unsurprisingly, the dynamics changed again. The regime regained footing in Damascus, stabilised the southern front and gained in the centre.[18] Opposition forays were either reversed or halted; in Raqqa, the opposition failed to present an alternative to regime rule.[19] From early April, small regime victories shifted the mainstream media narrative from prospect of imminent collapse to possible long-term endurance.[20] Due to persistent divisions among opposition factions and their sponsors, the new prime minister could not form a government. The U.S. initially suggested that Assad had crossed its "red line" on chemical weapons use but that it required more proof and international buy-in to act; meanwhile a senior UN official, Carla Del Ponte, claimed that evidence pointed squarely to opposition responsibility.[21] A sense of

2013. A Muslim Brotherhood spokesperson cited two reasons for his movement's decision to oppose the initiative: "First, we criticised the manner in which Khatib acted – this type of initiative should only be issued through a joint decision of the Coalition, rather than as a personal, independent call posted on Facebook. Second, we opposed the content of the initiative itself because it violated one of the Coalition's founding principles: no negotiation with Bashar and his ruling circle". Crisis Group communication, Zuheir Salem, April 2013.

[15] The administration suggested it was taking a somewhat different position on the issue of arming the rebels. See, eg, "Kerry says U.S. backs Mideast efforts to arm Syrian rebels", *The New York Times*, 5 March 2013.

[16] Mainstream media reporting reflected this expectation. "Damascus on edge as war seeps into Syrian capital", *The New York Times*, 10 February 2013; "Central Damascus slowly succumbs to war", *Financial Times*, 12 February 2013; "Divided Damascus confronted by all-out war", Reuters, 13 February 2013. The 21 March killing in central Damascus of Muhammad Said Ramadhan al-Buti, the last credible Sunni religious leader supporting the regime, contributed to this atmosphere of impending collapse.

[17] Crisis Group observations and interviews, Damascus, February 2013.

[18] By early May, Crisis Group witnessed and was told by interlocutors of a significant change in the capital, with the expansion of areas under regime control, removal of checkpoints in central neighbourhoods, decline in intensity of shelling and fighting in the suburbs and, overall, a more relaxed atmosphere.

[19] One month after the opposition takeover, a Syrian with whom Crisis Group has had a longstanding relationship complained that "people are deeply disappointed. The local leadership is split and incapable of doing much, and we see no visible presence of the exiled opposition's structures. The services that function essentially depend on what the regime has left behind, not on what the opposition offers". Crisis Group communication, April 2013. The situation reportedly has not changed much since.

[20] See "Assad forces push back at rebels across Syria", *The New York Times*, 7 April 2013; "Assad forces gaining ground in Syria", *The Washington Post*, 12 May 2013; "Is Bashar al-Assad winning the civil war in Syria?", *The Telegraph*, 23 May 2013.

[21] See "White House Says It Believes Syria Has Used Chemical Arms", *The New York Times*, 25 April 2013. On 20 August 2012, President Barack Obama had defined the use of chemical weapons as a red line – or "game-changer" – the regime would not be allowed to cross without facing conse-

despair was felt among many Syrian oppositionists. The regime's June capture (with massive Hizbollah help) of Qusayr, a city adjacent to the Lebanese border, epitomised the reversal of fortunes. Its strategic value could be debated but not its psychological and political impact.

Conversely, the regime, its allies and sympathisers felt empowered. In late April, a Damascus-based Syrian journalist said, "definitely there is an atmosphere of optimism here".[22] Assad's allies appeared more upbeat than ever; Hassan Nasrallah, Hizbollah's leader, pledged in a defiant speech that the movement, along with Iran and Russia, would stand at the Syrian president's side.[23] But these gains as well are likely not irreversible, given the depth of anger the regime provokes, its loss of legitimacy among large segments of the population, the regional fallout from Hizbollah's and Iran's more ostentatious roles and foreign parties' willingness to continue investing in the conflict. It is hard to see how, regardless of short-term military successes, the regime can recover, re-conquer, reconcile, reform or rebuild. Meanwhile, opposition allies recently announced a substantial ramping-up of military assistance that could well signal a reversal of regime achievements and another shift in the balance on the ground.[24]

Throughout, both loyalist officials and opposition figures interviewed by Crisis Group have alternated between wishful thinking and utter dejection. Their foreign allies, though not prone to similar mood swings, have been unable to break a vicious cycle that, increasingly, is sucking them in.[25] Entirely missing on all sides has been a realistic vision, premised on a level-headed assessment of the situation on the ground, of what – other than facilitating their opponents' improbable early surrender or defeat – they could do to help bring the deadly crisis to a close.

quences: "We cannot have a situation in which chemical or biological weapons are falling into the hands of the wrong people. We have been very clear to the Assad regime but also to other players on the ground that a red line for us is, we start seeing a whole bunch of weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus. That would change my equation". *The New York Times*, 21 August 2012. For the statement of Del Ponte, a member of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry for Syria established within the UN, see Reuters, 5 May 2013. The Commission released a communiqué the same day distancing itself from it. Crisis Group interviews and communications, activists and intellectuals, May 2013.

[22] Crisis Group communication, April 2013.

[23] Nasrallah said, "Syria has real friends, in the region and the world, who will not let it fall in the hands of the U.S., Israel, and Tafkiri groups". *Al-Manar*, 30 April 2013. Almost immediately Israel – which largely had stayed out of the conflict – conducted a series of air strikes in Damascus. (It refused to confirm its responsibility, but there seemed little doubt.) Reports suggested the targets might have been weapons intended for Hizbollah. "Israel targeted Iranian missiles in Syria attack", *The New York Times*, 4 May 2013. Pro-regime media stressed the strikes hit either a research centre or chicken coops. See official footage at www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.481100678630255.1073742877.388290427911281type=1.

[24] Meeting in Doha, ministers from the so-called Friends of Syria Group – the UK, Egypt, France, Germany, Italy, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the UAE and the U.S. – agreed "to provide urgently all the necessary materiel and equipment to the opposition on the ground, each country in its own way in order to enable them to counter brutal attacks by the regime and its allies". Reuters, 22 June 2013.

[25] A pragmatic Russian official said in frustration: "Of course we are not naive and don't expect the armed opposition to lay down its weapons and capitulate. But why couldn't negotiations take place even as the fighting goes on? Both sides continue to believe they can make some military gains … [a]nd continue to be held hostage to those who would see any movement toward a political compromise as treason". Crisis Group interview, October 2012.

## II. Distinct Dynamics

For some time, the war has been stuck in an evolving and expanding stalemate. Though neither side is in a position to register decisive victories, the overall picture is far from frozen. Front lines are fluid; violence takes on new forms; and the international landscape continues to morph. Several struggles are rolled into one. Even as the regional and international dimensions assume increasing importance, they sit atop a domestic picture that itself has several distinct, moving parts. What at the outset essentially was an internal conflict pitting the regime against a broad popular uprising with multiple, separate flashpoints[26] has broken into several battlefields and front lines, shaped by local characteristics, including social make-up, the basis for regime presence and the cross-border dynamics.

### A. *Relative Safehavens*

Not all of Syria is a war zone, although most areas have suffered from violence of one sort or another. Some that initially experienced a cycle of protests, repression and counter-violence have become relatively quiet, albeit for different reasons. For instance, several opposition strongholds paid a particularly high price because of their isolation and lack of territorial depth and now either host a small, residual armed opposition or have been crushed into submission. These include Rastan and Talbissa – villages south of the central city of Hama; the old neighbourhood of Khaldiya in Homs; Tall Kalakh, on the Lebanese border; and a number of suburbs in the capital's periphery, such as Qudsaya and Daraya.

Dreading a similar fate, other towns – eg, Nabak, Tadmur and Tell, all of which sit on strategic axes leading out of the capital – largely opted out, remaining mostly quiescent. Large cities such as Hama and Idlib have remained under regime control despite strong pro-opposition leanings, mainly out of fear of suffering the all-out destruction visited upon Homs, Deraa, Dayr Zor and Aleppo.

In the western coastal area, specifically Tartus and Latakia, an explosive mix of Sunnis, Alawites, Christians and displaced persons from other parts of the country appears to have prompted a collective reflex of self-preservation and cemented – at least for now – a truce of sorts, allowing relatives of people fighting each other elsewhere to coexist peacefully.[27] Horrific massacres in May in Bayda and Banyas could signal a shift toward confessional strife and forms of sectarian cleansing, though at this stage they remain the exception rather than the norm.[28]

Finally, several minority-dominated areas – the Druze governorate of Sweida in the south and the predominantly Ismaili town of Salamiya in the centre – have drifted toward a precarious neutrality as the fighting grows uglier. Kidnappings, tit-for-

[26] On its initial "compartmentalisation", see Crisis Group Middle East Reports N°108, *The Syrian People's Slow-motion Revolution*, 6 July 2011; N°109, *The Syrian Regime's Slow-Motion Suicide*, 13 July 2011; and *Syria's Mutating Conflict*, op. cit.

[27] Crisis Group interviews and communications, activists and Syrians originally from the area, February-April 2013. For background on Tartus, see "Amid civil war, Syrian port prospers under Assad's protection", Reuters, 20 March 2013.

[28] Military operations in and around Banyas led to the killing of unknown numbers of civilians, allegedly by regime militias organised under the Army of National Defence label. For background, see *The National*, 8 May 2013.

tat killings and bombings have failed to draw them decisively into battle. The same goes for a few middle-class neighbourhoods like al-Wa'er, a rare area of Homs safe enough for families fleeing violence elsewhere to seek refuge.

Areas spared the bulk of the fighting have absorbed large numbers of internally displaced civilians eager to avoid the fate of their former neighbourhoods. This has reinforced both sides' acceptance of these locations' de facto status as informal (and precarious) safehavens for at least as long as war imperatives do not reverse their calculus. Exceptions exist: the opposition pushed into Raqqa though it had become home to many displaced, both because rebels felt they could prevail and because of its strategic location between the Turkish border and key areas such as Aleppo and Dayr Zor. Conversely, Duma, a sprawling city north of Damascus and home to numerous displaced, likely will become a focus of regime activity, since it is an opposition rear base and sits astride a sensitive axis.[29]

In contrast, neighbourhoods and villages "liberated" by the opposition typically have become targets of regime violence. If the authorities are unwilling or unable to retake them through ground operations, they tend to use mortars and artillery, improvised bombs or rockets to prevent a return to normalcy and to raise the cost of supporting or being associated with the opposition. Tellingly, Raqqa residents, fearing regime retaliation and in particular ballistic missile attacks, fled in droves when armed groups announced the city had been liberated.[30]

### B. *The North*

Each battleground has its own characteristics. In the north, the opposition is dominated by an array of armed groups emanating from a conservative underclass and abetted by competing support networks operating out of Turkey. Countries such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia are known to have funded proxies across the border in uncoordinated and fitful ways.[31] Ad hoc channels involving private sponsors based in Libya and the Gulf also have contributed to a murky picture.[32] Erratic flows of weapons, ammunition and money in turn have given rise to a messy landscape of factions vying for resources, fighting over spoils and reshuffling their alliances.[33] Their opera-

[29] A security official anticipated that it would become a military priority once other areas around Damascus had been "cleared". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2013.

[30] Crisis Group communications, Raqqa residents, March 2013.

[31] Opposition groups periodically complain that sources of weapons and funds have "dried up". See, eg, *The Guardian*, 10 October 2012 and 4 January 2013. A Saudi official explained some of the Kingdom's limitations: "We found it harder to do than we thought, because we are not in the arms-dealing business. We are not authorised to use our own military arsenal because of our agreement with the U.S. prohibiting third-party transfers. So it took us more time. But we finally have found sources of weapons, even though the quantity at times is insufficient, and the quality at times is poor. We have provided some ammunition and RPGs, but what the opposition really needs are landmines in order to target tanks, as well as long-range rockets and surface-to-air missiles". Crisis Group interview, November 2012.

[32] A Saudi official said, "some assistance comes from individual Saudis and Syrian exiles based in Saudi Arabia; how can we stop them? They transfer cash from bank accounts in Europe which we do not regulate, and they do it for a good cause. But that means it might end up with groups on the ground that differ from the ones we would like to support". Crisis Group interview, November 2012.

[33] Journalists reporting from northern Syria have noted the fluidity of rebel affiliations and alliances, as leaders and fighters alike regularly realign in search of better sources of funding and equipment. Rania Abouzeid, "Syria's many militias: Inside the chaos of the anti-Assad rebellion", *Time*,

tions often consist of one-off offensives lacking a broader strategy or goal other than acquiring weapons.

Newly-minted guerrilla fighters tend to flock to whatever group has more guns and bullets, irrespective of its ideological leaning; offers superior opportunities for personal enrichment; or, in contrast, enjoys the most impeccable reputation. In the countryside, "battalions" often chiefly comprise relatives who commute between the front line and their homes. Cousins from a single extended family in different parts of Aleppo joined various groups for the simple reason that they all needed income and gravitated toward whatever they could find.[34] Illustrating the extreme fluidity, a fighter admitted to a visiting foreigner that he had opted out of a jihadi group because he badly missed his cigarettes.[35]

The growth of northern Islamist groups partly should be seen as resulting from the attraction their superior assets have for combatants – whether sharing their worldview or not.[36] Still, a genuine jihadi culture has taken root in several communities, notably parts of Idlib and Aleppo governorates where, in the not-so-distant past, young men had volunteered to fight the U.S. occupation in Iraq.[37] The trend has been energised by funding from conservative Gulf donors and private Islamist networks that often require videotaped evidence of their beneficiaries' deeds.[38] It also has been bolstered by a stream of foreign fighters reported to be significantly larger than that witnessed during the Iraq war.[39] Hard-core Islamists seemingly enjoy support from more reliable sponsors and take the lead in many attacks; this enhances their visibility and gains the grudging acceptance of rival groups.[40] More

5 March 2013; Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, "How to Start a Battalion (in Five Easy Lessons)", *London Review of Books*, 21 February 2013. Competition over spoils has led local activists to condemn the criminal behaviour of opportunistic militants and occasionally resulted in violent clashes, eg, protests in Aleppo against Liwa' Ahrar Souriya leader Ahmad Afash, accused of robbing factories and extorting their owners. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=6tZnQ6IeoQc; www.facebook.com/AkhbarHlbAlan/posts/525531557467725. See also reports of clashes between Katibat al-Farouq and Jabhat al-Nusra, both of which competed for control of the Tell Abyad border crossing with Turkey.

[34] Crisis Group interviews, relatives of refugees in Egypt, Cairo, April 2013.

[35] Crisis Group interview, academic carrying out fieldwork in northern Syria, Paris, May 2013.

[36] See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°131, *Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition*, 12 October 2012.

[37] A security official stressed that jihadism tended to prosper in city suburbs where rural migrants congregate. "In Idlib villages, fighters may look like jihadis but, deep down, they don't share that ideology. More often they simply are concerned with defending their villages and earning some money. We have a far more serious jihadi problem in more urban environments – as we move closer to Aleppo". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2013.

[38] See Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, "How to Start a Battalion (in Five Easy Lessons)", op. cit.

[39] There are indications Syria has far outstripped other war zones as a magnet for European jihadis. A senior French official said, "in all those years of Afghanistan, we tallied around twenty French citizens going there to fight. Over a decade in Iraq we came to a similar number. After one year of jihadi activity in Syria, we already have 200". Crisis Group interview, Paris, April 2013. Over 100 UK citizens also reportedly joined the fight. *The Independent*, 13 March 2013. Conservative estimates are that some 80 foreign fighters have come from Belgium; other sources suggest as many as 300. *Le Monde*, 11 May 2013.

[40] Jabhat al-Nusra, the most visible and effective jihadi group, seeks to ensure its rhetoric and tactics are tolerable to other armed factions. It regularly participates in joint operations with those across the ideological spectrum, demonstrating its usefulness by providing fighters and resources. It seemingly imposes more discipline on members, cultivating a contrasting profile to some rivals' corrupt, criminal behaviour. Noman Benotman and Roisin Blake, "Jabhat al-Nusra: A Strategic

generally, it contributes to their growing dominance.[41] Jihadis took the lead in planning and carrying out the operation to seize Raqqa, then kept other groups at bay for fear they might engage in looting.[42]

In the main, jihadis are drawn to the front lines and display less interest in governing territory on their own. As a result, areas taken by them are not necessarily subsequently run by them. Where they have played a governance role, they generally have done so in collaboration with other components of the opposition, seeking to exhibit discipline and probity while avoiding the impression of forcibly imposing themselves.[43] They have shown a measure of pragmatism in dealing with those who provide services to civilians – whether armed factions, activist networks or foreign (including Western) NGOs.

This is not to diminish the reality or consequences of the opposition's mounting islamisation. It has given rise to friction, first and foremost with constituencies that were ambivalent or even hostile toward the uprising in the first place. Aleppo's urban establishment views jihadis as a socio-political threat, an expression of the rural underclass' revolt. Secularists fear the spread and, ultimately, imposition of more conservative mores. The destruction of Shiite and Alawite shrines alarms Christians and other minorities, who expect to be next in line. Kurds, many of whom dwell along the northern border, distrust Arab Islamists at least as much as they do Arab nationalists.[44] Finally, though not an exclusively jihadi phenomenon, resort to certain violent tactics – car bombs, suicide attacks and decapitations – inevitably bring to mind repugnant memories from Iraq's disastrous insurgency. The regime has made ample use of these trends both domestically and in its messaging to the international community, seeking to fuel (and exploit) Western fears of the opposition's fundamentalist, jihadi drift.[45]

Within opposition circles, efforts to push back against jihadis have grown as well. Anecdotes abound of women removing their veils in their presence, a powerful statement that they reject imposition of extreme conservative mores. Activist networks in Tell Abyad, a small town on the Turkish border, as well as in Raqqa, have insisted on displaying the revolutionary, not the jihadi flag.[46] When, in April 2013, Jabhat al-Nusra – arguably the most prominent jihadi group – pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda

Briefing", Quilliam Foundation, 8 January 2013; Ivan Watson, Kareem Khadder and Saad Abedine, "How Islamists are gaining ground in Syria", CNN, 22 February 2012.

[41] On the Jihadi landscape, see Crisis Group Report, *Tentative Jihad*, op. cit.

[42] Crisis Group communications, Raqqa residents and visiting journalists, March-April 2013.

[43] In Aleppo, for example, Jabhat al-Nusra joined with Ahrar al-Sham and Liwa' al-Towhid (a powerful faction adopting pragmatic Islamist rhetoric) to establish al-Hei'a al-Shara'iya (loosely, the "Islamic Court Commission"). The commission sought to assert itself as a local police authority and Islamic court system, marketing its efforts to impose law and order but earning criticism from local activists for authoritarian behaviour. Crisis Group communication, activist spokesman in Aleppo, 3 March 2013. See also Liz Sly, "Islamic law comes to rebel-held Syria", *The Washington Post*, 19 March 2013, and "حلب في الكراج على الشرعية الهيئة استيلاء لمنع بشرية ودروع إعتصام", *Zaman al-Wasl*, 2 May 2013.

[44] See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°136, *Syria's Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle*, 22 January 2013.

[45] See Anne Barnard, "Syria plays on fears to blunt American support of rebels", *The New York Times*, 24 April 2013. A senior Syrian official described the conflict as his country's own "war on terror", expressing dismay at the fact that "the West has picked the side of the terrorists". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, February 2013.

[46] Crisis Group communications, Syrian activists and ordinary citizens, February-May 2013.

leader Ayman Zawahiri many opposition voices denounced it.[47] Regime sources contend that armed groups occasionally have offered to cooperate with loyalist forces against jihadis operating on their turf.[48]

Features of the northern front largely have been shaped by Turkey's open-border policy. Much fighting has centred there essentially because it is where armed groups most readily can organise and secure resources; moreover, media coverage has tended to focus on these areas given relative ease of access. At the same time, stakes are comparatively low for the regime, which enjoys only limited social support and military presence in a region whose partial loss does not endanger its overall cohesion.

Considering the scope of its efforts and comparatively limited regime interests, the opposition's results have been underwhelming: until the early March capture of Raqqa, it had little to show for months of fighting, enormous destruction and massive human displacement.[49] Instead, the northern front seemed to be turning into a Wild West of competing armed groups whose fratricidal rivalries, criminalisation and/or radicalisation, limited military victories and poor governance record eroded opposition credibility at home and abroad.[50] The situation also demonstrates Turkey's limitations in imposing its will or shaping the arc of the war: its policies essentially have erased the border, accelerated southern Anatolia's integration with northern Syria and forced Ankara to take ownership of the latter's predicament but failed to affect more important dynamics further south.[51]

[47] Its leader, Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, pledged loyalty on 10 April in an audio recording released on jihadi web forums. The statement aimed in part to reject an assertion the previous day by al-Qaeda in Iraq leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi that Jabhat al-Nusra was a component of his organisation and henceforth they would merge under the name "The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant". The dueling statements – and al-Jolani's pledge to al-Zawahiri in particular – generated criticism from a range of opposition leaders, activists and militant factions. See, eg, opposition coalition president Moaz al-Khatib's vehement rejection of al-Qaeda and Salafi-Jihadi ideology on 15 April, www.youtube.com/watch?v=z9aAEZgQGF8; demonstrators in Aleppo rejecting al-Jolani's pledge to al-Zawahiri on 19 April, www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10152881336260727&set=a.10150397575815727.619133.420796315726&type=1; and a 4 May statement by the prominent Salafi militant group Ahrar al-Sham criticising the al-Baghdadi and al-Jolani announcements, www.ahraralsham.com/?p=1324. See also al-Baghdadi's 9 April statement, www.youtube.com/ watch?v=2HPQxA3catY; and al-Jolani's of 10 April, www.youtube.com/watch?v=gFu9Sq8qwIs.

[48] Crisis Group interviews, Syrian officials, Damascus, December 2012-May 2013.

[49] In January 2013, opposition groups overran the Taftanaz helicopter airbase, a victory hailed as a strategic turning point given its role in supporting other regime assets in the north. "Rebels 'take control of key north Syria airbase'", BBC, 11 January 2013. Though a considerable achievement, the base's fall did not perceptibly alter the military balance in the north.

[50] Syrians working for UN agencies, while not supporting the regime, complained about affairs in the north that a plethora of armed groups, some "out of control", produce an environment hardly conducive to delivery of humanitarian aid. Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, Beirut, May 2013. Worsening chaos appears to be discouraging outside actors from crossing into "liberated areas" from Turkey. An experienced NGO executive who did extensive fieldwork in the north and enjoys wide access to the opposition there, suspected it may soon be too dangerous or at least too fragmented and unpredictable for him to return. Crisis Group communication, May 2013. A UN humanitarian agency official said, "on those rare occasions when we can cross the front lines, we find it very difficult to deal with the opposition. We can coordinate with armed groups, but the problem is that you have myriad checkpoints and interlocutors, some of whom cannot be depended upon". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, May 2013. In turn, this fuels Western doubts about arming the opposition.

[51] See Crisis Group Europe Report N°225, *Blurring the Borders: Syrian Spillover Risks for Turkey*, 30 April 2013. Speaking of the border area and the risks of blowback in Turkey, a Western defence attaché said, "there's nobody there. The old watchtowers are empty. I've driven along the border

### C. *The East*

Like the north, the east is a region where the regime largely lacks social support and military assets and that, in certain areas, harbours a jihadi culture – in this instance strongly influenced by its Iraqi neighbour. Still, differences outweigh similarities. Local social structures are more tribal and cohesive and, it follows, relations between armed groups are less fraught.[52] Difficulties in access have kept the area out of the media limelight, diminishing the kind of competition that, in the north, partially has been a function of excess publicity. Opposition control of oil fields is a source of indigenous funding whose long-term impact is yet to be seen. More remote and less densely inhabited than the north and flanked by an Iraqi border that, albeit permeable to smuggling, has been closely monitored by Baghdad authorities determined to prevent their territory from becoming a staging ground for Syria's opposition, the east had witnessed a low-simmering struggle between armed groups cut off from any effective rear base and, loyalist troops detached from the regime's core structures in central Syria.

This may be changing. In western Iraq, the Sunnis' profound sense of sectarian marginalisation and persecution by the central government has given rise to a movement chiefly driven by indigenous grievances and ambitions yet increasingly connected to the war next door by feelings of communal empathy and the conviction they are fighting the same Iranian-led Shiite scheme for regional domination. The ensuing unrest has impaired Baghdad's ability to police these areas. In turn, Iraqi Sunni armed groups and networks supporting their Syrian counterparts enjoy greater freedom to manoeuvre. Many Iraqi dissidents who opposed the U.S. occupation as well as the political process in Baghdad and fled to Syria to evade repression have returned to areas where the government's grip is loosening. Their presence, along with myriad tribal connections, likely will deepen ties between the two sides of the border.[53]

Increasingly, eastern Syria and western Iraq appear to be forming a single, integrated space. Major distinctions remain, of course, but both are defined (to varying degrees) by a sense of disenfranchisement, weakening central government control and growing assertiveness in challenging the capitals. Just as the Syrian conflict has brought Damascus and Baghdad closer together, bound by sectarian solidarity, so too

twice and people are just observing from hilltops with powerful vision equipment. In my view, we've seen the wave of Turkey washing into Syria, and now the tide is coming back. It isn't over yet". Crisis Group interview, Ankara, March 2013. A senior Turkish security official argued the situation still was reversible: "I agree that borders have become meaningless. But if need be, we can harden them again". Crisis Group interview, Ankara, February 2013.

[52] A longstanding contact of Crisis Group who travelled to Dayr Zor and further east described numerous examples of coexistence among distinct armed groups, as well as a general sense of acceptance by the population. Crisis Group communication, May 2013.

[53] On 23 April 2013, the Iraqi government's violent crackdown against protesters in Hawija encouraged former Sunni armed factions to re-organise and reactivate their operations. Cooperation with Syrian rebel groups appears to be limited to weapons transfers but clearly has the potential to increase as conflicts in both countries drag on. A member of the former so-called Iraqi resistance said, "Iraqi resistance fighters have been scattered across the country, but we are counting on the success of the Syrian revolution to acquire more weapons and mobilise more fighters". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 17 February 2013.

it is forging bonds between opposition forces in the areas between the two cities.[54] This dual dynamic both builds upon and revives longstanding social ties in a territorial expanse traditionally known as the Jazeera (island). Delineated by the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, this space's natural integration was interrupted by the creation of separate, European-style nation-states in the early twentieth century. How far this new process might go will mainly depend on whether Baghdad normalises its relations with western parts of the country. Should it fail to do so, and should sectarian strife escalate in its own territory,[55] the ensuing cycle of violence could further erode the Iraqi-Syrian border.

### D. *The South*

The southern front presents yet another set of dynamics. The plain of Hawran, where the uprising originated, is strategically located at the intersection of Lebanon, Israel, Jordan and Syria's hinterland. Mostly rural, albeit densely populated, it is chock-full of military bases originally designed to defend against Israel. Its proximity and deep connections to Damascus – of which it historically was the breadbasket – led the regime to resort to particularly harsh methods against dissenters, including destroying numerous towns and villages. The area's powerful ties to Jordan initially prompted Amman to implement a border policy the reverse of Ankara's. Fearful of regime retaliation, an unmanageable refugee influx and a jihadi blowback, the kingdom took steps to curtail smuggling, the transfer of jihadi fighters and refugee flows, only selectively allowing in Syrians.[56] Until recently at least, the Hawran thus was caught between hammer and anvil.

Yet, opposition in the south has proved remarkably resilient. It also features traits unlike those in the north and east. Although it too draws predominantly on a neglected and conservative underclass, it has been less exposed to jihadi culture, enjoys a cohesive social fabric and takes particular pride in being the birthplace of the revolution – a distinction that has helped counter a sense of inferiority ingrained by centuries of exploitation and prejudice.[57] Arguably more than anywhere else in the country, armed groups emanate from and are accountable to a popular movement that shapes their behaviour, in sharp contrast to the free-for-all characteristic of the northern front. Although the Hawran has not been immune to radicalisation or avoided violent excess – as illustrated by escalating tensions with the Druze minority in neighbouring Sweida – these phenomena seem less prevalent than elsewhere.[58]

[54] A Sunni demonstrator in Ramadi said, "we and the Syrians are part of the same struggle. Both our governments are very close to Tehran, and both of us oppose Iranian plans in the region. Iran wants to turn Baghdad and Damascus into its provinces and form a Shiite axis stretching from Tehran to the Mediterranean Sea". Crisis Group interview, March 2013.

[55] See Crisis Group Risk Alert, "Iraq after Hawija: Recovery or Relapse?", 26 April 2013.

[56] A Jordanian official explained that Amman was selective in help to the opposition and its refugee policy. "We are far from having gone as far as others. For instance, we bloc jihadis trying to get into Syria from Jordan, because we fear they will acquire experience that will turn against us". He added that Jordan would not allow large numbers of Syrian Palestinians to cross over. "This simply is a red line. We won't let them in. A few Palestinians come in with fake passports, but this is something that is happening on a small scale and that we are carefully monitoring". Crisis Group interview, February 2013.

[57] See Crisis Group Report, *The Syrian People's Slow-motion Revolution*, op. cit.

[58] Speaking of her hometown, a secular journalist from the Hawran based abroad said, "local residents control the village, and they had a confrontation with al-Nusra. Nusra is playing dirty, and

This landscape has attracted a number of foreign entities. Saudi Arabia reportedly found the southern front more receptive to its efforts. A Saudi official claimed his government had been frustrated by its Turkish counterpart's and the opposition's "disorganisation, corruption and ideological bias" in the north; he stressed Riyadh's discomfort at the empowerment of Islamists who – whether Muslim Brotherhood or jihadi – at some stage risk threatening the Kingdom.[59] The Saudis consequently appear to have discretely promoted specific military figures within the armed opposition, vetting and abetting proxies in the Hawran, far from the raucous competition that has plagued the northern front.[60]

Moreover, despite historically fraught relations with Jordan, Riyadh could expect a smoother, more mutually-beneficial and effective partnership with Amman than with Ankara. Not unlike Saudi Arabia, Jordan sees the Muslim Brotherhood as a perilous challenge to the status quo and has suffered from jihadi attacks on its territory. Close cooperation with Jordanian intelligence arguably is more appealing to Riyadh than dealing with the unfamiliar culture and agenda of its Turkish equivalent. The relationship presents significant advantages for the Hashemite kingdom as well, particularly at a time of growing regional instability: the prospect of massive economic assistance and of a weighty strategic partner.[61]

Given that the southern border is much closer to Syria's capital than its northern equivalent, investment on this front was expected to yield greater dividends;[62] it is

people are starting to get upset. Sheikhs have been receiving death threats because of their involvement in mediation with Sweida. People here were completely beside themselves when al-Nusra pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda. That said, it still has its fans and young followers". Crisis Group communication, April 2013.

[59] Crisis Group interview, Riyadh, January 2013. A Jordanian official commented on differences between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which has played a leading role in financing the opposition via Turkey. "The Saudis have a different conception of time. They are more patient and guarded than the Qataris. They ponder whether their actions will produce outcomes more dangerous than the situation they were meant to address. Their outlook on the Arab uprisings also is far less enthusiastic than the one prevailing in Doha". Crisis Group interview, February 2013. An analyst noted that Riyadh was less inclined than Doha to support organised movements lest they become a political threat; instead, it is likely to back specific individuals who, it believes, can better and more loyally serve as clients. Crisis Group interview, Paris, May 2013.

[60] Crisis Group interviews, Riyadh, January 2013.

[61] For background, see Nour Malas and Margaret Coker, "Jordan said to help arm Syria rebels", *The Wall Street Journal*, 9 November 2012. A member of the Saudi establishment explained: "Saudi Arabia opposes what Turkey and Qatar are doing: We will support neither the Muslim Brotherhood nor the Salafis. The friction caused by Turkey running the show in the north led Saudi to switch to Jordan in the fall of 2012. The switch wasn't visible because the Jordanians didn't want this to be public – although ultimately they can't prevent it from being known. Saudi Arabia also enjoys more leverage over Jordan than it does over Turkey". Crisis Group interview, Riyadh, February 2013. Around the same time, Saudi Arabia pledged almost half a billion dollars in financial aid to Jordan. See "Jordan secures financial assistance from Saudi Arabia", *The Jordan Times*, 28 November 2012.

[62] The expectation was shared by many officials in Riyadh and other capitals. A senior French official said, "the Saudis have opened the floodgates in the south. They realised their options were narrowing and that all that was left was to prepare an offensive against the capital. But everyone is aware of the risk of simply destroying the city as occurred in Aleppo, so the idea has been to support a gradual build-up that can deliver results". Crisis Group interview, Paris, December 2012. A senior Turkish official argued: "The logistical inflow from Jordan can change the balance of power in Damascus". Crisis Group interview, Ankara, March 2013.

also more sensitive politically precisely because more threatening to the regime. As a result, aid recipients have tended to be discreet. While the northern front has been characterised by publicity and media exposure, the south chiefly has been about stealth. This is more reassuring to the U.S. and more in harmony with its interests, which explains persistent reports that it has been providing training and non-lethal hardware there, eg, communications equipment.[63] Other countries, such as France, are also said to be participating.[64]

Lack of media access helped ensure that the slow but steady opposition build-up in the Hawran largely remained out of view. The alleged delivery by Saudi Arabia of massive quantities of weapons and ammunition supposedly propped up armed groups facing the regime's huge military assets. By late April 2013, these groups had carved up space along the Jordanian border and the Israeli-occupied Golan, besieged the provincial centre of Deraa, cut off the governorate's main axis at Kherbet Ghazale and appeared set to progress in a long, hard slog to Damascus where they would connect with peers operating in the capital's suburbs.

These dynamics appear to have been halted, even reversed. Loyalists regained the initiative in May, notably by retaking Kherbet Ghazale after weeks of pounding it.[65] Rebels complained they lacked sufficient arms, notably advanced anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons.[66] Others question how far Jordan is willing to go, given its vulnerability to possible Syrian reprisals and general sense of insecurity.[67]

[63] A Saudi official said, "It is not as if the U.S. is doing nothing. They are helping in different ways. They provide the opposition with money, training and information regarding targets. What they have resisted so far is directly arming the opposition and allowing us to provide advanced weaponry. They have no problem with us sending other weapons and training Syrians regarding how to operate them". Crisis Group interview, Riyadh, November 2012. In May 2013, the U.S. strongly encouraged the EU to lift its arms embargo on the opposition, suggesting it was likely to do the same. Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, Washington DC.

[64] A French official stressed the role his government was playing on the intelligence level. "Our intelligence services have thoroughly reviewed potential partners within the armed opposition. It wasn't easy. Qatar and Saudi Arabia were not overly preoccupied about who the recipients would be. On the other extreme of the spectrum, the U.S. was too cautious. Turkey tends to change its mind. We offered a more cool-headed appraisal. That formed part of our value-added". Crisis Group interview, Paris, December 2012.

[65] "Assad's forces capture strategic town in southern Syria", Reuters, 7 May 2013.

[66] Western and Arab diplomats as well as many observers attributed this to U.S. caution over end-use of sensitive arms deliveries. Crisis Group interview, French official, Paris, May 2013. Another Western official said, "ever since 9/11, the CIA has been buying up every manpad [portable air-defence system] that shows up on the black market. Countries such as Saudi Arabia cannot provide them to the opposition without handing them their own, thus losing any pretence of plausible deniability". Crisis Group interview, April 2013. Washington arguably would contemplate such deliveries only if fully confident in recipients and the systems were modified to shorten shelf-life. Crisis Group interview, former U.S. official, Washington DC, May 2013.

[67] Crisis Group interview, Western official, May 2013. A Jordanian official expressed characteristic ambivalent, even contradictory views: "I wonder if it wouldn't be better if Assad just stayed. It would be bad, but what we're looking at is even worse. A U.S. intervention would spell further disaster. Ultimately, we would like to see some sort of political solution but it can't mean just caving in. Regardless, we need a buffer zone we are seeking to create by changing the opposition landscape in the south. Otherwise it's just us and the jihadis, face to face". Crisis Group interview, April 2013.

## E. *The Centre*

Syria's centre of gravity comprises the south-western axis along the Lebanese border and, most importantly, Damascus and Homs. Geographically central and a bridge between the seat of power and the regime's heartland on the Mediterranean coast, the latter city is critical. In recent decades and especially under Bashar, this fast-growing, economic powerhouse has absorbed large numbers of Alawites, for whom it has acquired great significance.[68]

Theoretically, the centre ought to be another active battleground, particularly given the notoriously porous Lebanese border as well as the neighbouring state's frailty and its political factions' significant (and competing) stakes in the war's outcome. However, the regime has if not entirely neutralised this front at least limited the danger from it, while maximising help from its own Lebanese allies.

To begin, it deployed considerable resources to secure the border, mining and patrolling it to protect its soft flank, thereby virtually cutting off places like Tall Kalakh, Homs, Qusayr and rebellious towns in the Qalamun mountain range from their Lebanese hinterland. Its allies in Beirut ensured the Lebanese army acted in the same spirit. Moreover, by a strange twist of geography, few contact points exist between anti-regime constituencies on the two sides of the border: Sunni areas in northern Lebanon – by and large sympathetic to the opposition – come up against parts of coastal Syria where the latter is weakest; by the same token, the eastern Lebanese Bekaa plain, a gateway to hotspots around Damascus and Homs, essentially is controlled by Hizbollah.

Regime consolidation in the centre ought not be construed as, or confused with a rational, premeditated policy aimed at carving out a rump Alawite-dominated state. To the contrary, as discussed below, the regime has continued to invest in centralised, national institutions; in a cross-cutting narrative designed to appeal to a diverse audience; and in the longer-term prospect of a comprehensive victory, however ill-defined and illusory. Its ability to cement its position in specific parts of the country – what one might dub its "useful territory", including the western spine – is, from its perspective, a source of immediate, short-term solace. More broadly, it relies on the capital's topography as insurance against an opposition victory. The regime occupies the high ground at Mount Qasioun, with its vast complex of military bases and densely populated Alawite neighbourhoods (including Mezze 86, Masakin Haras, Hay al-Wurud and Ish al-Warwar). It is hard to imagine it being dislodged from such a fortress short, perhaps, of a dramatic change in levels of Western involvement.[69]

Too, if the northern and southern fronts have drawn in pro-opposition foreign material support, central Syria has witnessed the involvement of regime allies. This

[68] Aziz Nakkash, "The Alawite Dilemma in Homs. Survival, Solidarity and the Making of a Community", Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, March 2013. See also Peter Harling and Sarah Birke, "The Syrian Heartbreak", Middle East Research and Information Project, 16 April 2013.

[69] A senior Syrian official said, "this theme of an opposition 'marching on Damascus' is merely a media phenomenon. Damascus cannot become a battleground; the regime is just too entrenched here". Another said, "the battle for the capital would be terrible, if only because of the large Alawite presence – up to 500,000 according to a member of the ruling family". Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, December 2012.

has notably been so in Qusayr, which saw the involvement of Hizbollah combatants.[70] Fighting gradually escalated in this strategic location, which offers the opposition a rare point of access to Homs; by June, the struggle culminated in a victory for the regime and its allies.[71] Likewise, Hizbollah acknowledged its presence in Damascus, where – together with Shiite militiamen from Iraq and as far away as Afghanistan – it asserts it protects the shrine of Sayida Zaineb.[72]

Originally, the Lebanese movement claimed its involvement was only to ward off assaults by armed groups it views as sectarian and to protect either Shiite shrines or Shiite-populated areas; reports suggest it provided training and weapons to Shiite villages exposed to possible retaliation.[73] Even then, its argument was somewhat tenuous: Shiite pockets across Syria undoubtedly have been victims of aggression by opposition armed groups, yet they also massively and proactively served as regime proxies in repressing the uprising.[74] Throughout 2012, Western officials accused Hizbollah of more direct involvement, not only training loyalists (notably militias under the generic denomination "Army of National Defence", *jaysh al-difa' al-watani*), but also sending its fighters in increasingly significant numbers.[75]

Whatever the situation might have been at the outset, there no longer is room for doubt. By its own admission, Hizbollah is directly engaged in a far-reaching battle against those it denounces as Sunni fundamentalists (*takfiris)* allied with Israel, a denomination it uses to encompass large swathes of the opposition.[76] Its secretary gen-

[70] Hizbollah first suggested one of its combatants had died in Syria in October 2012, when a senior commander was buried. "Hezbollah commander killed while on 'jihad duties' in Syria", *The Guardian*, 4 October 2012.

[71] The regime and its allies reportedly took the town on 5 June. Syrian Arab News Agency, 5 June 2013. But it faces a difficult challenge in holding it unless it can convert its military gains into genuine progress on the ground via provision of aid and services to civilians, reestablishment of law and order and acts of reconciliation.

[72] See "Iraqi Shi'ite militants fight for Syria's Assad", Reuters, 16 October 2012. There are reports of Afghan Shiites fighting too, though it remains unclear whether they came to Syria for the current struggle. A few Afghan refugees resided in the neighbourhood prior to the war, and some are said to have taken up arms. Crisis Group interview, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) official, Damascus, May 2013. Sayida Zaineb has given rise to a wealth of internet material, for example on Facebook, glorifying martyrdom in its defence, conflating Shiite symbolism, sectarianism and Hizbollah's own imagery.

[73] Crisis Group interviews, Syrian security officials and members of local vigilante groups, central Syria, 2012.

[74] Crisis Group Report, *Syria's Mutating Conflict*, op. cit.

[75] A range of U.S. officials claimed early on that Hizbollah and Iran were training pro-regime militias and fighting beside the regime. Crisis Group interviews, Washington DC, August-October 2012. For background, Crisis Group Middle East Report N°132, *A Precarious Balancing Act: Lebanon and the Syrian Conflict*, 22 November 2012, p. 18; Crisis Group Middle East Report N°141, *Too Close for Comfort: Syrians in Lebanon*, 13 May 2013, pp. 26-27; also "Iran and Hezbollah build militia networks in Syria, officials say", *The Washington Post*, 12 February 2013.

[76] On 25 May, Nasrallah tied jihadi groups to Israel and the U.S., describing them as members of an alliance aiming to weaken the resistance. "If Syria falls in the hands of the *tafkiris* and the U.S., the resistance will be besieged, and Israel will enter Lebanon. If Syria falls, the Palestinian cause will be lost". Naharnet, 25 May 2013. As evidence of that alliance, pro-regime media reported that a decrepit Israeli jeep allegedly dating to the occupation of southern Lebanon was found in Qusayr. *Haaretz*, 20 May 2013. A Hizbollah official added: "This conflict is a regional war, and it has been so from the outset. Let's not be naive in this regard. The most influential armed groups are Salafist, beholden to Gulf monarchies and viewing us as enemy number one. They want to eradicate Alawites, Shiites and perhaps even Christians. Hizbollah could not let them get away with it". Crisis

eral, Hassan Nasrallah, openly extols such participation as a duty.[77] Outraged by this growing involvement, Syrian opposition armed groups no longer refer to the movement as a regime ally; it has become an immediate enemy and target of reprisals.[78]

Western officials likewise contend Iranian advisers and troops are now deeply embedded in the regime's military apparatus.[79] According to many observers, the recent shift in the army's battlefield tactics essentially can be attributed to this.[80] Syrian officials downplay the importance, though, arguing that given opposition reliance on outsiders, Damascus had no choice but to call on its friends.[81]

In recent weeks, central Syria increasingly has come to resemble a fortress in which the regime and its allies pool resources to boost its defences. This both builds upon and deepens a process of several years pursuant to which Damascus, Tehran and Hizbollah gradually have been integrating their military capabilities, purported-

Group interview, Beirut, June 2013. Hizbollah posits it is strictly fighting *takfiris* but tends to conflate myriad forms of anti-regime opposition and label them as such. Wittingly or not, this inevitably pits it against Sunni constituencies in Syria and beyond.

[77] In a recent speech, Nasrallah said Hizbollah would do all it could to prevent Syria from falling into the hands of Sunni fundamentalists and U.S. or Israeli proxies. *Al-Manar*, 9 May 2013.

[78] "FSA says will hit Lebanon in response to Hezbollah fire", *The Daily Star*, 20 February 2013. Hizbollah-related targets in Lebanon have come under fire; missiles reportedly fired by Syrian armed groups apparently fell near Baalbek in the Beqaa Valley. Associated Press, 1 June 2013.

[79] Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, Washington DC, late 2012-early 2013. In January 2013, Damascus exchanged over 2,000 prisoners for fewer than 50 Iranians held by opposition forces. "Iranian captives freed in prisoner exchange in Syria", *The New York Times*, 9 January 2013. Tehran unpersuasively claimed they were pilgrims; several later were identified as active Revolutionary Guard members. Keyhani.blog.lemonde.fr/2013/01/16/la-vrai-identite-de-sept-otages-iraniens-en-syrie-revelee-par-les-sites-iraniens/. Iran blamed "terrorists" for the killing in Syria of a Revolutionary Guard commander. Agence France-Presse, 14 February 2013.

[80] Crisis Group interviews, Western and Arab officials, April-May 2013. A Damascus-based dissident intellectual expressed views widely shared by regime critics: "Now we are seeing a change that I believe stems from Iranians and Hizbollah playing a key role on the ground. We hear that they command operations, platoons even. I can't prove it, but the best evidence is the progress the army has made. In the past, the military's incredible incompetence explained their massive firepower: because they couldn't retake areas without suffering huge casualty rates, they shelled and fired missiles at them instead". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2013.

[81] Crisis Group interviews, Syrian officials, Damascus, May 2013. Asked if the presence of Shiite fighters risked muddying the regime's patriotic, secular narrative, a security official said, "yes, it is not very rational. But people no longer are rational. In particular, we feel that we sacrificed ourselves for the Arab world [by standing up to Israel and the U.S.], and now they are all coming at us, throwing all these [Sunni] jihadis at us". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2013. In late 2012, a security official claimed Assad was resisting Iran's wish to intervene more forcefully: "The Iranians want to interfere whatever their predictable losses may be. They asked the president to let their forces in. We have the right to do so. The entire world is sending money and warriors to the opposition. But the president said that if we cannot stand by ourselves, then it would be better if we fell". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, December 2012. In May 2013, he sought to minimise (not deny) the phenomenon: "Foreign fighters on the regime's side are not that many. A couple of months ago I would have said 1,500, and not in front-line positions. They train and provide advice. Hizbollah could be in Quneitra [along the Israeli-occupied Golan] if we let it. As I told you, the president pushed back on the idea of drawing more on our allies, although people around him had been clamouring for it. Moreover, the process is reversible. When Hizbollah first appeared in the 1980s, the regime was uncomfortable with it. Soon it came to see it as an asset, a reason being that there are virtually no Shiites in Syria. This could be an ally without a foothold on Syrian soil. I think this logic prevails today as well".

ly to deter Israel.[82] Nasrallah's 30 April speech was unprecedented in this respect, making clear that regime defeat was unacceptable and hinting that Hizbollah and other allies would do all in their power to prevent it.[83] He spoke of Syria's fate precisely as a Syrian official would have spoken of Lebanon's in the past.[84] Iranian officials similarly stressed Syria's centrality to the Islamic Republic's interests.[85] According to a pro-regime Lebanese daily, Assad reportedly offered Hizbollah "everything" in appreciation for its help and suggested he would consider replicating its resistance model on Syrian soil.[86]

Although it is unclear how far this process will go, it appears destined to deepen. By depicting the enemy in sectarian terms and the battle as one against *takfiris*, as well as involving itself in areas that cannot plausibly be described as vital to its interests, Hizbollah has laid the predicate for longer-term involvement.[87] In the same spirit, the regime more openly is casting the struggle in sectarian terms,[88] Iraqi Shiite fighters are growing in numbers, and Iran's participation is expanding. All of which, combined with growing Islamist influence on the opposition, suggests that both sides are locking themselves in a vicious circle of spiralling confessional confrontation.

[82] A Syrian security official said, "Hizbollah fundamentally does not see itself as distinct from the regime. They have developed into being, among other things, the regime's special forces. Our special forces were involved in training them at the beginning, but they outdid their masters, as evidenced in 2006 [the war with Israel]". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, June 2013. See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°97, *Drums of War: Israel and the "Axis of Resistance"*, 2 August 2010.

[83] He said, "How will [Syria's friends] prevent this? The answer will come later, but what I am saying is a fact". Naharnet, 30 April 2013.

[84] Ibrahim al-Amine, *Al-Akhbar* chief editor who often reflects Hizbollah thinking, wrote: "With the expansion of its multifarious capacities, Hezbollah is now a source of power for all those who stand by it. This is what the Palestinians realised in their conflict with the Israeli occupation. It is what the Iraqi resistance against the U.S. occupation found out. And now, it is what the Syrian army is experiencing against the armed groups". "Hezbollah and the New Levant", *Al-Akhbar*, 10 June 2013. He described "the new role of Hizbollah … to lead a Levantine – if not Arab – current, aiming to redraw the political, economic, and social map of a country of 75 million Arabs".

[85] In February 2013, Mehdi Taeb, a high-ranking intelligence Revolutionary Guard officer, said, "if the enemy attacks us and seeks to take over Syria or Khuzestan [an Iranian province] the priority is to maintain Syria, because if we maintain Syria we can take back Khuzestan. But if we lose Syria, we won't be able to hold Tehran". www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/02/130214_nm_tayeb_syria_basij.shtml. Likewise, Iran's ground forces commander offered to "train the Syrian army", making the latter sound like the fledging armed wing of a new-born state. See Press TV (the Iranian Republic's English language news service), 5 May 2013.

[86] See www.al-akhbar.com/node/182681. The notion of a "Syrian resistance" (*muqawama suriya*) is increasingly central in the regime's narrative, justifying the violence it uses at home as part of its purported struggle against Israel. It also is indicative of the state's erosion and helps justify the spread, formal acceptance and institutionalisation of loyalist militias.

[87] In June, Hizbollah reportedly was part of a loyalist offensive in Aleppo. Loveday Morris, "In Syria, Hezbollah forces appear ready to attack rebels in city of Aleppo", *The Washington Post*, 2 June 2013.

[88] The videotape of an early June 2013 meeting in which a local military intelligence chief used explicitly sectarian language to mobilise Shiite volunteers from villages around Aleppo seemingly signaled a shift toward a more overtly confessional logic by key regime components. See www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=zAt7L9Lzl2c. A month earlier, a local commander of the Army of National Defence, speaking alongside prominent Alawite religious figures, was caught on videotape urging the "cleansing" of the Syrian coast. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=m2vNLXmABA. In regime jargon, the term theoretically is meant to target terrorists, though the implicit message was hard to miss. See Mona Mahmood and Martin Chulov, "Syrian war widens Sunni-Shia schism as foreign jihadis join fight for shrines", *The Guardian*, 4 June 2013.

## III. A Process of Dual Consolidation

The war has tended to be viewed through several lenses, each of which has turned out to be misguided or inapposite. To begin, it is not strictly speaking a zero-sum game, in which one side's gains automatically translate as the other side's losses; both simultaneously can be winning in certain respects and losing in others. Likewise, the tipping point theory, according to which once the opposition reaches a critical mass (taking Aleppo; moving into Damascus; bringing the business class to its side, among other scenarios), it will overwhelm the regime, is not applicable, any more than the notion of a purported breaking-point – the stage at which, under the weight of growing pressure, the power structure will turn against itself, resulting in a coup or desertion of significant Alawite personalities.

Rather, the warring camps appear to be constantly adjusting to a multi-layered, ever-escalating struggle, with one or another holding a temporary advantage. Their evolution has made a negotiated solution more elusive still, a reality that needs to be taken into account at a time when members of the international community are poised to begin a diplomatic process.

### A. *The Regime*

As Crisis Group earlier described, the regime has grown both accustomed and impervious to its failings. At the same time, it has consolidated its outlook, internal structures, control over certain areas and external alliances.[89]

To begin, the war's intensification on the face of it has validated regime perceptions. It believes the strife will end only with the surrender of its foes, foreign and domestic, who must accept its conception of a deal. Achieving this requires raising costs of confrontation to prohibitively high levels. Those who challenge the status quo are to be blamed for the extraordinary damage and suffering inflicted on the country; their fundamental goal is neither "freedom" nor "democracy" but rather Syria's subversion. Though officials privately may share more sophisticated positions, the public narrative has hardened around these core arguments.

A corollary is that even had the regime implemented reforms, little would have been different; calls for such steps were smokescreens concealing a far more pernicious objective.[90] Another is that the opposition – except for individuals who spend more time criticising their peers than the regime – consists of foreign-inspired and backed traitors and Islamists; even its Western detractors ought to see the regime as a lesser evil, as protection against jihadis and sole guarantor of Syria's secularism, minority communities and pluralistic makeup. Regime survival thus hinges on Bashar's leadership, which itself rests on praetorian and security forces that only can be reined in and reformed once normalcy returns. The end result of this narrative is that the

[89] Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°33, *Syria's Phase of Radicalisation*, 10 April 2012; Crisis Group Report, *Syria's Mutating Conflict*, op. cit.

[90] Responding to the argument that Assad had abdicated his role as national leader in order to take the helm of one camp determined to crush the other, a senior official said, "it's true that he chose sides, but I think it was inevitable. I can't see what he could have done that would have produced radically different results. The other camp's goal always was the regime's collapse. They would not have satisfied themselves with a political opening or various reforms". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, December 2012.

regime cannot afford to shift course in the midst of struggle lest it dangerously weaken itself.[91]

Within this framework, the regime tends to oscillate between two extreme postures: nihilism and triumphalism, the only middle-ground being apathy. When pressure mounts, it promises a fight to the bitter end, vowing to leave nothing behind, sow the seeds of perpetual instability and take the region down with it.[92] When threats subside, it confidently predicts it cannot be defeated, enemies are weak, and there is no reason to compromise.[93] In discussions with Crisis Group over the past year, officials consistently portray the war as one of protracted attrition. On good days, they exude optimism they ultimately will prevail, albeit at huge cost to regime and country.[94] On bad ones, they appear to accept possible defeat, but at a cost that would make their domestic and foreign enemies' victory pyrrhic. In both instances, they cannot imagine a way for the regime to change its approach: it would be up to others to reverse course and adapt their stance.[95]

Between nihilism and triumphalism, the room for genuine politics has been squeezed. Any political process – negotiations, dialogue or reform – inevitably would run up against the regime's current structure and make-up. The Baath party, government, parliament, judiciary and various ad hoc committees established over the past two years essentially are hollow institutions in a power system that has switched almost exclusively to fighting mode. Other power centres matter: the president, ruling family and their personal networks; elite military units (including but not limited to the Republican Guard and Fourth Division); and the security apparatus's most aggressive components (notably Air Force Intelligence and, more recently, Political Security). These three pillars prop up each other; the removal of one likely would cause the entire edifice to fall.

These power centres also help ensure cohesiveness of the regime's broader bases, which they alternatively infiltrate, organise, terrorise or reassure. These include the army and other security services (such as Military and Internal Security); and the array of civilian proxies the regime has been institutionalising into an Army of National Defence;[96] as well as various constituencies (drawn in particular from the middle

[91] Thus, officials repeatedly stress that they cannot confront abuses by army troops, security officers or civilian proxies as long as they are fighting for survival. They make the same argument about implementing far-reaching reforms or considering any major overhaul of either the repressive apparatus or the political system. Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, 2012-2013.

[92] Expressing this, a pro-regime Syrian journalist said, "the flow of arms and funds will stop when conflicts erupt in Lebanon and Turkey's Kurdish areas; when bomb attacks occur in Jordan and the Gulf; and when the Israeli front reignites in ways that will be far more difficult to manage than in the past. On top of this, the West's support of fundamentalists will come back to haunt it". Crisis Group communication, March 2013.

[93] This has long been part of its behaviour. Crisis Group Briefing, *Syria's Phase of Radicalisation*, op. cit.

[94] In the words of a Syrian security official, "how many times was this regime declared to be finished? At the time of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the 1982 Muslim Brotherhood insurgency, the 1980s economic crisis, the passing of Hafez al-Assad and now the uprising. Each time, it bounced back and evolved to some degree. Why would this time be any different?" Crisis Group interview, Damascus, June 2013.

[95] Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, 2012-2013.

[96] See below. Civilian proxies, popularly known as *shabbiha*, took part in the fighting virtually from day one but initially arose from a multitude of individual initiatives, involving security services, mass organisations linked to the Baath party, retired generals, crony businessmen and local nota-

class and minority groups) that back the regime or at a minimum prefer it to any conceivable alternative.

When, in January 2013, Assad presented his vision of reconciliation, power sharing and reform, he avoided any discussion of possible negotiations over the regime's core (the ruling family, praetorian guards and security elite).[97] Instead, he spoke of potential changes in the fictional realm of the state – via a national unity government, revised constitution and democratic elections, all of which essentially will remain irrelevant for as long as real power is vested elsewhere. Many lower-ranking officials are clear-eyed regarding the need for more far-reaching compromises, but they express impotence in the face of those who call the shots and have everything to lose from a genuine deal.[98]

A fundamental obstacle to any negotiated settlement is precisely that the regime seemingly comes as an inseparable whole, whose more acceptable elements cannot be dissociated from its least tolerable ones. Assad supporters, often among his harshest private critics, remain persuaded that the remnants of the state would crumble were he to step down. In this, the loyalists' narrative is marked by paradox: even as they claim to support the state rather than the regime, they acknowledge that the former is nothing without the latter; the so-called national institutions to which they profess attachment depend on a single individual.

Straightforward logic is at the heart of this construct. Syria's weak, formal institutions are superseded by more powerful ones whose cohesiveness is disproportionately (not exclusively) based on sect. This reality is itself highly dependent on family rule, as lineage alone justifies maintaining ultimate authority – the presidency – in Alawite hands. Assad's role is to hide the reality of communal solidarity behind the symbolism of statesmanship, as well as to legitimise the system by repeated references to the need to preserve and protect the state. As often with authoritarian regimes, the formal power structure is thus both subverted and exploited by its informal counterpart.

Tight interdependence among the power structure's components accounts for the regime's weakness – little to no flexibility regarding non-military solutions – but also its remarkable endurance. Regime survival arguably has become inextricably intertwined with the war itself: the battle against the enemy both holds the regime

bles. The regime has sought to structure and institutionalise them, via first "popular committees" (*lijan shaabiya*), then from mid-2012, the unifying concept of the Army of National Defence. Better armed and trained as well as more "legitimate" in a formal sense than its forerunners, it nonetheless retains the latter's sectarian bias and overall lack of discipline.

[97] See fn. 10 above. In a subsequent *Sunday Times* interview, Assad summed up the regime's take-it-or-leave-it approach to a political process: "We have a plan, and whoever wants to deal with us can deal with us through our plan. This is very clear in order not to waste time". Syrian Arab News Agency, 3 March 2013.

[98] In an interview with a pro-Hizbollah Lebanese daily, Syria's vice president expressed publicly the private frustration of many of his colleagues: "If anyone has the chance to meet Mister President, he would hear from him that this is a long struggle, a big conspiracy with many actors (terrorists, rabble, smugglers). He does not hide his desire for a military solution that achieves a decisive victory, and only then would the political dialogue be actually possible. Many in the [Baath] party, the [National Progressive] Front (NPF), and the military forces have been convinced from the onset of the crisis that there is no alternative to a political solution and that there is no turning back". Ibrahim al-Amin, "Exclusive Interview: Syrian VP Farouk Al-Sharaa Proposes Alternative to War", *Al-Akhbar*, 17 December 2012.

together and is its principal source of legitimacy. For now, no alternative agenda – political, economic or moral – better defines its narrative or more absorbs its officials. Their mission is simple: fight on.

Regime self-confidence is not entirely misplaced. Although there have been defections, virtually none has affected the hard inner core for whom the choice still appears to be either kill or be killed; the number of defectors from the regime's outer layers appears to have steadily declined, as fence-sitters adopt a wait-and-see posture.[99] Not a single state institution, however frail and dysfunctional, truly has collapsed, the most significant among these being the army.[100] The economy has been damaged to the point where the regime no longer can hope to repair it, yet there is no sign of insolvency: the national currency has not entirely collapsed, and the authorities still distribute salaries to public servants and fund the military-security apparatus.[101]

Compared with early 2011, support for the regime clearly has dwindled; yet, amid ebbs and flows, the war gives the authorities sufficient legitimacy to claim they are fighting on behalf of a significant national cross-section. In their view, the opposition's behaviour and failure to reach out convincingly to important constituencies have brought several groups closer to the fold, notably segments of the Sunni urban establishment and minority-dominated towns like Salamiya and Sweida.[102]

[99] A string of spectacular defections – including a prime minister, the regime's spokesman and senior officers – petered out in fall 2012; none even of those belonged to the inner power structure core that emerged in the war. Low-ranking defections also dried up in the second half of 2012. Explanations are varied. The opposition in exile failed to convincingly absorb newcomers, instead greeting them with distrust. Armed groups on the ground increasingly were dominated by not particularly welcoming Islamists; in the quest for legitimacy, early involvement in the uprising carried more weight than subsequent deserters' rank. Dimming opposition prospects also almost certainly discouraged would-be defectors, as did growing involvement of foreign entities on the opposition's side. The lower-ranking soldiers most motivated to change sides did so, leaving behind those more inclined to stay put; fleeing became more difficult as the regime developed means to prevent it or retaliate against relatives; and destruction of whole communities left many bereft of the environment to which they might have chosen to return.

[100] A senior official said, "defections among army ranks have been numerous. We estimate that tens of thousands switched sides. But that meant they left behind the more reliable and motivated troops. In my view, defections are the single most important factor in explaining subsequent army cohesion". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2013.

[101] Several factors arguably explain the regime's relative economic resilience. Its non-military budget has contracted dramatically due to a freeze on all non-essential expenditure and the bureaucracy's shrinkage due to defections. Though revenue from oil and tourism has declined steeply, the war has generated new sources of income, such as skyrocketing telecommunications and payments to evade conscription. The regime also can print money without prompting excessive inflation thanks to the injection into the economy of large amounts of foreign currency by countries supporting one side or the other. Moreover, the pound's slow decline increased the "buying power" of a regime drawing on foreign currency reserves and, presumably, aid from allies. Some Syrian businessmen say the regime at times has speculated on the exchange market, letting the pound slip before buying large amounts cheaply, causing its value to rebound. Finally, the war economy has produced numerous opportunities for enrichment at all levels, including crony businessmen who can take advantage of the departure of most potential rivals and engage in illegal activities with fewer constraints. Crisis Group interview, Syrian businessmen and economists, 2012-2013.

[102] In central Aleppo for instance, the mood has shifted from confusion and fear to more dogged backing of the regime. Crisis Group interviews, refugees whose relatives in the city support the regime, Cairo, March 2013. In a 30 May 2013 interview on Hizbollah's television channel al-Manar, Assad claimed similar shifts were discernible even in originally pro-uprising constituencies. "There was support in some regions for the militants, and I assure to you that was not the result of a lack in

A key element of regime cohesion has been the position of Alawites, overrepresented in the security networks and thus bearing the brunt of the war on the loyalist side. By all accounts, casualty rates have been considerable, a fact many community members view not so much as a reason to question the regime as a tragic omen of their forthcoming slaughter should Assad fall.[103] They are not shy to express both frustration toward and even harsh criticism of those on whose behalf they are shedding blood. But Alawites are highly unlikely to take a step – such as a coup, imposing changes in the power structure or massively defecting – that could precipitate the war's end. Simply put, a genuine community no longer exists; the regime built itself at the expense of the sect's traditional communal structures (whether tribal or religious), intellectual elites (notably the older generation of non-Baathist militants) and original sense of identity (grounded in poor rural areas that remained underdeveloped as Alawites emigrated to towns and were absorbed by state institutions and the security apparatus).[104]

This process left most Alawites stranded. Today, they have nothing to which they can return and so cling to a regime that has superficially promoted their social integration. At the same time, it has engineered their close association with the Assad family's rule, involving them both historically and more recently in forms of repression deemed intolerable by large social segments, while accepting – if not encouraging, as in Damascus – their settlement in suburbs that, in terms of confessional make-up, are more or less uniform.

The result is that the state they defend and on whose behalf they fight is one in which they are exposed; the regime they serve contributes to their continued vulnerability; the society to which they belong is one they fear; and the community from which they originate is now largely in disarray. Lacking the necessary structures and elites to effectively articulate their views, challenge the regime's leadership or engage with the opposition, most are desperate and anguished.[105] Quick to minimise their

patriotism, but a lack of awareness. There are many stories about individuals who submitted to terrorist groups thinking it was a revolution. This support shifted, and many militants left these groups and went back to their normal lives; this is the basic reason".

[103] Anecdotal evidence collected in Alawite villages in central and western Syria suggests virtually no family has been spared. Crisis Group observations and interviews, 2012. An official said, "we have many killed. In any Alawite locality; you have portraits of martyrs everywhere. Alawites are paying a very heavy price, so much so that it has become difficult for the regime to draw on them too much. I think that is why we are turning to other reservoirs such as Hizbollah and Iraqi militias". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2013.

[104] See Peter Harling and Sarah Birke, "The Syrian Heartbreak", op. cit.

[105] The regime has been particularly harsh toward Alawite opposition figures, notably those who might offer some kind of alternative communal leadership. Abdul Aziz Khayyir, a respected member of the moderate National Coordination Body for Democratic Change (NCB), is one such. He disappeared at a checkpoint on the road from the airport to Damascus on 20 September 2012, as he sought to join a Russian-sponsored conference attended by the domestic opposition's most accommodating elements. Authorities argued he was kidnapped by terrorists. Syrian Arab News Agency, 22 September 2012. This was generally rejected, including by Russian officials, one of whom said, "the NCB came to us after Khayyir was arrested, saying 'This is your responsibility, do something!' We requested his release but got nowhere. It's not so easy dealing with this regime". Crisis Group interview, October 2012. An opposition colleague added: "I am very worried. Alawites, who are burying so many of their own, are confused and desperately in need of frames and figures of reference. Khayyir was working on this and as such became a serious threat for the regime. He has an aura, a credibility among Alawite circles that goes back decades in time. He had a vision, a program. And

own misdeeds, they justify continued support for the regime by pointing to the Islamisation and radicalisation of large swathes of society; the role of conservative states like Qatar and Saudi Arabia in fuelling the fighting; the jihadi presence in rebel ranks; opposition armed groups' comparatively harsher treatment of Alawite prisoners; destruction of some of their shrines; and the opposition's inability to offer an appealing, tangible alternative.[106]

Pressure on the regime from its core constituency, therefore, has been minimal. The outer layers of its social base rarely criticise loyalist forces, even when they behave appallingly. Tellingly, the May 2013 massacre in the Banyas area – during which entire families reportedly were slaughtered in cold blood by loyalist militias in the wake of military operations – was met with overwhelming approval in pro-regime circles, at times tacit, at others vocal.[107] Public criticism from regime constituencies has been growing, however slowly, but remains far from the point at which Assad would have to take it seriously.[108]

Most importantly, the regime has been buoyed by its remarkably dependable foreign allies. Iran's and Hizbollah's support never was much in doubt, though Assad's battlefield losses and the regime's underwhelming overall performance conceivably might have prompted them to hedge their bets and distance themselves ever so slightly. Instead, their unwavering backing has followed an escalatory path. Moscow and Baghdad enjoyed limited (and, in Iraq's case, at times conflictual) relations with Damascus prior to 2011; yet, they too have been reliable, not so much out of devotion to the regime as out of hostility toward those – in Syria or abroad – seeking its demise.[109]

Essentially symbolic support has come from other sources. In some cases, such as China, it stems from opposition to the West's traditional hegemony over and manipulation of the international system, as well as hangover from the Libyan experience, during which, it is felt, a UN Security Council resolution authorising a no-fly zone

he was active at a grassroots level. Getting rid of him is the regime's ultimate answer to any notion of a genuine compromise". Crisis Group communication, November 2012

[106] Crisis Group observations and interviews, a broad range of interlocutors, central Syria and Damascus, 2012-2013.

[107] Bassam al-Kadhi, an avowedly pro-regime activist focusing on gender issues, openly denounced the killings, generating considerable debate on his Facebook page.

[108] On 9 May, one of the most popular pro-regime Facebook pages posted a strong condemnation of regime militias' sectarian checkpoint practices; it supposedly was written by Raghda, a staunchly pro-regime actress who has become something of a symbol for online Assad sympathisers. While generally voicing support for the armed forces, she wrote that she has heard enough stories of abuse to make her want "to put on an explosive belt and blow myself up at one of these checkpoints". She added that some popular committees (Lijan Shaabia) manning the checkpoints had become "sadistic committees" (Lijan Sadia) and bluntly condemned their frequent resort to sectarian humiliation and abuse. www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=520064198031591&set=a.194850493886298.36689.194847567219924&type=1.

[109] Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki said, "if the opposition is victorious, there will be a civil war in Lebanon, divisions in Jordan and a sectarian war in Iraq". Associated Press, 27 February 2013. A senior Iraqi security official earlier had stated: "We were enemies of the Syrian regime until the uprising. Yet we fear the future. The path followed by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey risks igniting a sectarian war. This would lead to the division of Iraq and collapse of the Jordanian regime, which thenceforth would be ruled by Palestinians". Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, May 2012. Another official argued: "We do not share Iran's position on Syria but we have no choice. We don't want Syria to be governed by extremists. Besides, Iran is our close neighbour and for the time being the only ally upon which we can count. We have to be pragmatic". Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, November 2012.

served as pretext for regime change. Growing numbers of left-wing activists and politicians appear motivated by antagonism toward the U.S. and sympathy for the so-called axis of resistance. Important Turkish, Western European and Arab voices, fearful of the rise of radical Islamism, have warned against siding with the opposition and basically endorsed the regime as the lesser of two evils.[110] This may not always translate into overt approval of regime behaviour; in almost all cases, it above all expresses hostility to, or fear of something else: chaos, Sunni extremism or perceived U.S. or Israeli hegemony.

Together, these factors give the regime a lifeline, enabling it to reduce diplomatic isolation and avoid an antagonistic international consensus. Neither allies nor more distant friends have yet to make it pay a price for incompetence or repression that, far from condemning, even rhetorically, they ignore.

### B. *The Opposition*

Consolidation notwithstanding, the regime has been unable to gain a decisive edge because it confronts opposition dynamics that broadly mirror its own. There are differences, of course. Its foes are pluralistic and deeply divided, their structures improvised and shifting and their foreign backers apparently altogether less consistent and coordinated. Still, and not unlike the regime, the opposition has acquired a critical mass of support that appears highly resilient and at least partially immune to the ups and downs of its performance.[111] Two years into a devastating struggle in which it too has been unable to score crucial victories or markedly shift the tide, it nonetheless has little difficulty fielding new fighters or maintaining (admittedly less robust or coherent) international backing.[112]

Its core constituency consists of a vast underclass subjected to such extreme forms of regime violence that it cannot turn back. The repression, torture, massacres and massive looting and destruction of property throughout the country have generated

[110] See, eg, "Turkey's leader urges more aid for Syrian rebels, but most Turks say no", Pew Research Centre, 16 May 2013. Delegations of secular Tunisians have been streaming to Damascus, some donating blood in symbolic support for the army. Syrian Arab News Agency, 23 May 2013. See also *The Christian Science Monitor*, 2 May 2013.

[111] Thus, significant regime victories do not appear to produce proportionate effects on opposition morale. A pro-opposition journalist based in Hawran explained: "People tend to think in terms of what they could lose next. When the regime retakes a town like Kharbet Ghazaleh, that is a big setback, but armed groups will fight just as hard in localities around it. Why? Because the regime gives them no option, offers them no future and promises them only death: they are fighting for their lives. The only thing that could change that would be the regime actually caring for its own people, but it seems either unwilling or incapable of pursuing that logic". Crisis Group communication, June 2013. A Christian activist and mother of several children said, "in this conflict we never had much of a choice. The dynamics were inflicted upon us, and all we could do is push on. Radicalisation, islamisation, criminalisation, al-Nusra: we didn't choose them. It's just the way things are, and there is no way back for us. Yes, the opposition commits crimes, but it does so in a chaotic situation; the regime commits crimes in a systematic and deliberate way. Syria's tragedy is in the fabric of this regime. Perhaps everything has to be destroyed for something good to emerge. Were I to wake up some morning to learn that the regime had won and that all had been for nothing, I think I would have no option but to commit suicide". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, May 2013.

[112] A security official expressed amazement at the numbers of Syrians still willing to take up arms against the regime despite the huge casualty rate. He dismissed the numbers of foreign fighters relative to those volunteers. Crisis Group communication, March 2013.

a vast reservoir of individuals with nothing to lose and thus willing to fight to the end. Surrender, they are convinced, would mean merciless vengeance at the hands of a regime that, already, has shot at peaceful protestors, killed untold numbers of detained prisoners, tolerated the slaughter of women and children, bombed villages and fired ballistic missiles into densely populated neighbourhoods. In several areas, many armed groups have fewer weapons than volunteers to bear them. As mentioned, the war-induced economic disaster has made joining the struggle a rare source of income, whether through salaries paid by opposition networks, resources from foreign backers or access to war spoils.

International attitudes toward the opposition have run the gamut from more cautious (the U.S.) to less so (Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey). Several European states (notably France and the UK), have been stridently critical of the regime, lobbied to send weapons to the opposition and, as seen, taken some steps on the ground. The outcome has been an opposition with resources sufficient to escalate the fighting but insufficient to deal the regime a decisive blow. To an extent, this has reflected conviction among foreign backers, bolstered, no doubt, by the Tunisian, Egyptian and Libyan precedents, that Assad's fall was a matter of time, and not even of much time.[113] Many months in, the refrain was that diplomatic pressure and economic sanctions essentially would suffice; all eyes were on Syria's foreign currency reserves, their depletion somehow being seen as the tipping point in the regime's fate.[114]

Over time, the calculus changed and with it the levels of outside financial or military support. Throughout, however, Western nations in particular have remained relatively ambivalent, sceptical of a disorganised, unwieldy and excessively Islamist opposition, frightened by the prospect of regional spillover and uncontrolled escalation, fearful of the aftermath of the regime's abrupt collapse and, notably in the U.S. case, focused on the imperative of winding down two Middle East wars rather than embarking on a third.

An array of often bewildering and fluctuating political organisations, activist networks and armed groups serve as imperfect channels between a determined social base and erratic international sponsors. Their names change frequently, as do their precise configurations, making it difficult for foreign observers to follow. But in any event they are misleading and largely irrelevant. Syrian society is shaped by interpersonal networks far more than by institutional structures, and those networks tend to consolidate regardless of precise labelling. In some places, the passage of time has clarified who can best provide information; protect journalists; deliver humanitarian aid; strike local ceasefires; or handle the next shipment of weapons and ammunition. In "liberated" areas, opposition forces have developed rudimentary forms of justice and relatively sophisticated modes of local governance. In others, local rivalries continue to produce a muddled picture and dangerously unpredictable environment.

Overall, beyond makeshift forms of organisation – some well-meaning, others at times even inspiring – the opposition has failed to erect structures credible and functional enough to persuade sympathisers and sceptics alike of its ability to offer an alternative to the regime. With no prior experience of politics and governance, limited

[113] "Since the belief was that the regime would crumble anyway, that all it would take would be more sanctions and international isolation, why take the risk of more direct involvement?", Crisis Group interview, former U.S. official, Washington DC, May 2013.
[114] Crisis Group interviews, U.S. and EU officials, August 2011.

resources in the face of huge needs, an ongoing conflict and the presence of myriad societal fault lines, there was no reason to expect an alternative model to surface swiftly.

Still, even the opposition's most reluctant foreign supporters are unlikely to fundamentally reverse course. They have gone too far and burned any potential bridge. Western governments, having demonised the regime, couched their posture in moralistic tones, linked it to expressions of public outrage and repeatedly written off Assad, cannot shift gears without incurring tremendous political costs. Qatar and Turkey, having waged an undeclared war against the regime, cannot turn back the clock without losing face. Egypt, after having sought to maintain a somewhat balanced position, recently echoed some of the more aggressive voices.[115] For those, led by Saudi Arabia, who view the war as a proxy struggle with Iran, Assad's survival would be the equivalent of a strategic body blow.

With the benefit of hindsight, many governments might well wish they had shown greater prudence at the outset, avoided direct engagement and refrained from dramatically raising the stakes; to this day, they almost certainly would welcome some form of negotiated compromise. Yet given both their current posture and the improbability of a diplomatic deal, even they likely would find it far more problematic to give up than carry on. As a result, an opposition that by and large has failed to meet its patrons' expectations is virtually guaranteed, at a minimum, the level of support required to endure.

### C. *The State: Between Relic and Promise*

As Crisis Group has described, the regime has been evolving in various ways, from something akin to a state to something resembling a large militia.[116] Nevertheless, it is determined to maintain the appearances of a state. This has proven politically useful, as many Syrians prefer to cling to what is left of the state they know rather than wager on the opposition's increasingly unconvincing promise of a state-to-be.

The regime's narrative has stayed relatively consistent in this regard. Two years into the war, its themes barely have varied: the state is fending off foreign plots; a corner has been turned; enemies are on the verge of defeat; normalisation is near; reform, reconciliation and reconstruction are under way. The official media buttresses this daily, announcing military victories, ignoring setbacks, highlighting even the mildest (or most ambiguous) signs of foreign support and, above all, nurturing an atmosphere of business-as-usual.[117] Committees are hard at work seeking to solve all issues related to the crisis, while the government takes routine decisions so as to project a sense of relative normalcy.[118]

[115] Addressing a large rally in solidarity with the Syrian people on 16 June, President Morsi announced that Cairo was severing all ties to the Syrian government and recalling its chargé d'affaires. Associated Press, 16 June 2013.

[116] Crisis Group Report, *Syria's Mutating Conflict*, op. cit.

[117] The media's tone consistently is upbeat, and officials as well as regime supporters often mimic it. In February 2013, a loyalist tribal leader said, "the conflict is almost over; it will be by May. Extensive forward planning for reconstruction has taken place. The country has been divided into sections that will be managed by the Russians, Chinese, Iranians and so on. All will have been rebuilt by year's end". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, February 2013.

[118] In March, the cabinet approved purchase of ten passenger aircraft from a Ukrainian company, as if embattled airports expected a sudden surge in traffic. Syrian Arab News Agency, 12 March 2013. Later, Assad enacted a new tourism promotion law. Ibid, 21 March 2013.

What is new is that the regime now seeks to back up its narrative with small, concrete and at times effective measures. Not so long ago, it did virtually nothing for the homeless, bereaved and needy. Today, the first lady's Syria Trust for Development provides some humanitarian assistance in Aleppo. She personally has participated in charitable fundraising efforts in the capital and appeared alongside her husband in a show of solidarity for parents of schoolchildren killed in the fighting.[119] Assad's cousin, Rami Makhlouf, advertises his own efforts to help the wounded and relatives of "martyrs". Official media play up the delivery of Russian supplies.[120] Although analogous steps were taken during the war's earlier phases, these now appear more coordinated and consistent.[121]

The government also apparently is extending aid, whether directly or by channelling efforts of international agencies.[122] Authorities reportedly help refugees in Tartus, on the Mediterranean; distribute pension payments to retirees where possible; and even pay civil servants who live and work in opposition-controlled areas, for instance customs officials at Turkish border crossings who in practice serve the armed groups the regime fights.[123]

"Liberated" municipalities often rely not solely on wages, but also on government services like electricity and water. In some cases, the regime has no choice: shutting off supply would provoke opposition retaliation against areas under its control; this is, after all, a centralised state whose administration and infrastructure do not overlap with conflict-induced divisions.[124] But there is more to this than political necessity. To a large extent, regime policy seems driven by the desire to demonstrate that a state offering the prospect of continuity still exists, and normalisation remains possible as long as it occurs on its own terms. Although it is difficult to measure the

[119] Crisis Group interview, NGO executive originally from Aleppo, Cairo, March 2013; *The Telegraph*, 17 March 2013; Syrian Arab News Agency, 21 March 2013.

[120] On the cousin's efforts, see *al-Watan*, 13 March 2013. "11 tons of humanitarian aid arrive in Lattakia airport", Syrian Arab News Agency, 12 March 2013.

[121] A military official argued: "The regime never ignored the humanitarian issue. Rather, it has grown in importance as needs heightened". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2013.

[122] Fearful of antagonising the authorities and committed to respecting state sovereignty, these agencies have been reluctant to bypass the regime and work directly across borders. "Foreign NGOs operate with caution in Syria", Agence France-Presse, 4 February 2013; "Special Report Syria Two Years On: The Failure of International Aid", Doctors Without Borders, 6 March 2013. A French official expressed frustration: "Part of our policy is to help structure the liberated zones. But we have been isolated on this issue, which generated huge resistance. The UN only intervenes in collaboration with member states, and the notion of providing cross-border aid is generally taboo. The EU also objects and falls back on small-scale projects. Until recently, the U.S. was as reluctant. But that has begun to change". Crisis Group interview, Paris, May 2013.

[123] Crisis Group interview, activist with family ties in Tartus, Beirut, February 2013. An elderly women returning to Aleppo after displacement was baffled to receive six months back pension payment as soon as she applied. Crisis Group interview, relatives, Cairo, February 2013. The customs officials can pick up salaries at regional administrative headquarters in Aleppo. The regime also is said to have sent engineers to man and maintain the largest dam, now in the hands of Islamist armed groups. Crisis Group communications and interviews, citizens and activists in these areas, January-May 2013. A prominent opposition figure expressed surprise at learning from contacts in the business that the regime struck deals with armed groups to send engineers to repair damaged telecommunications infrastructure in neighbourhoods under their control. Crisis Group communication, April 2013.

[124] For example, oil fields are in the east, on opposition-controlled land, whereas refineries tend to be in Banyas and Homs, presently loyalist territory.

extent to which this approach is succeeding, anecdotal evidence suggests it might be paying off among citizens who still have something to lose and thus might prefer the devil they know.[125]

The regime has been well-served by opposition shortcomings. In areas under the latter's control, improvised and under-resourced forms of governance are no match even for the state's traditionally low performance standards. Criminality is rampant on both sides: loyalist troops and armed groups all too often behave as roaming, reckless gangs. Yet, in the eyes of many Syrians who are not directly party to the conflict, the regime protects ordinary citizens from abuse marginally better; in Aleppo, for example, it reportedly was more difficult to dislodge opposition fighters from private property they commandeered than to evict soldiers who must abide by a clearer hierarchy.[126] The regime also seeks to contrast the opposition's social model and its own. A senior official originally from central Syria said:

> When you travel to an opposition-held area, you notice that all women wear a veil or *niqab* [a garment covering and concealing the entire body] and that minorities are nowhere to be seen. Now, if you go a state-controlled neighbourhood of Homs, you will witness the usual mix of veiled and unveiled women. Alawites, Sunnis, Christians and others live side by side.[127]

Coastal towns like Tartus and Latakia have mostly retained – at least on the surface and until the Banyas massacres began to chip away at this narrative – a sense of communal pluralism and coexistence that one is hard-pressed to find in opposition-held territory. There, conflict dynamics have tended to exacerbate conservative mores, Islamist leanings, sectarian tensions and minority vulnerability.[128]

The regime thus has been able to evoke the memory of – more precisely perhaps, nostalgia for – a bygone state. It offers a taste of undoubtedly artificial normalcy in which many yearn to believe. This cannot work with those who have directly suffered from its violence, but it plays a key role in consolidating the power structure's base and legitimacy among social segments that by and large have been spared the worst of the repression. For many the relics of a state are better than nothing.

[125] In Damascus in particular, several previously ambivalent interlocutors lean toward the regime, however reluctantly, citing primarily experience in areas outside its control. One referred to lawlessness, kidnappings and risks of being shot indiscriminately by snipers along roads evading the military's grasp. Another was shocked by the arrogance of a local armed group commander, who, while looking for something else in his pocket, took out a wad of dollars and flaunted it nonchalantly to highlight his new status. Many express disappointment the opposition is not "different from the regime" and would rather deal with regime mentality and structures than the equivalent mentality amid chaos. Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, May 2013.

[126] Crisis Group interviews, Aleppo refugees, Cairo, 2012-2013.

[127] Crisis Group interview, Damascus, February 2013.

[128] Along the Turkish border, in Idlib governorate for example, Christian villages have been particularly affected due to several related factors. As elsewhere, fighting has caused considerable destruction, but a class fault-line also is at play. Christians there tend to be more prosperous and less inclined to rebel than their Sunni counterparts; this environment has attracted a large number of criminals and looters as well as fighters drawn to more comfortable lodgings. Moreover, the presence of jihadis and their desecration of religious symbols they consider impious has frightened remaining residents. Crisis Group communication, NGO executive conducting a field-based survey in Idlib governorate, March 2013.

As often, however, the regime undermines with one hand the relative success achieved with the other. In theory, resurrecting the state is the best, perhaps only way for Assad to strengthen and broaden his domestic base. But other, contradictory factors are at play. One is the resort to its own foreign fighters, whether volunteers or dispatched by allies; these further diminish Syria's sovereignty, internationalise the war and exacerbate sectarianism. Too, they risk contradicting incipient, fragile efforts to instil greater professionalism among the troops with whom they interact,[129] reinforcing the trend to a more militia-like mindset.[130]

A related factor involves the "professionalisation" of militias. For all their sins, the *shabbiha* presented the paradoxical advantage of being improvised and illegal. The new Army of National Defence is well organised and officially recognised, as well as equipped with advanced training and weaponry. It has developed as an alternative to conscription, service in local "self-defence" units being more appealing to many than the prospect of deployment on a far-away front.[131] But this raises significant concerns, even among sympathisers and officials, as it reportedly attracts many criminals wishing to erase their past. Moreover, due to its local make-up, its sectarian composition in any given area tends to be homogeneous, further fuelling confessional tensions. Add to this considerable firepower unconstrained by any military vetting and discipline, and it is unsurprising to see it become a legion of thugs likely to spin out of control and undermine the narrative of a state reasserting itself.[132]

[129] Reports, eg, *The Independent*, 26 April 2013, suggest this trend toward greater professionalism and patriotism is partially genuine. A military official explained why, in his view, the army was becoming more effective and more independent from the security services that traditionally infiltrate it: "The army has trained new contingents, and it took a while for them to be ready to join its ranks. Most importantly, it now has been fighting for some time and is learning on the job. I long wondered why we weren't making progress in Daraya, for example. Well, we discovered that the opposition was using an impressive network of tunnels and only gradually did we find ways to deal with this. In the early stages, the army relied extensively on the security services because it lacked information of its own. By now it has developed its own intelligence and is more autonomous than before". A pro-regime businessman offered the following nuance: "The army has a mentality of its own, and like any military it dislikes spooks. Besides, if it is facing such an enemy, they believe, it must be because for years the spooks failed to do their job. But it will be a long process before the army can develop and impose its logic and push back against Air Force intelligence in particular. And it will take real results on the ground. We're only at the beginning". Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, May 2013.

[130] Defending the regime's reliance on Hizbollah, a security official said, "they are here because we have limited human resources and because the other side relies so heavily on foreign fighters. It is only fair for us to do likewise". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, June 2013.

[131] The regime's ability to draft new soldiers reportedly is limited. A pro-opposition Druze intellectual said, "most conscripts flee and won't join. In Sweida, for instance, the regime wanted to muster 1,200. They got a mere 100 and from the worst underclass. These people will do anything for anyone. Alawites respond more voluntarily, and, as a result of other constituencies backing out, they tend to pay a much higher price for the conflict. So they have been balking too". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2013.

[132] An official critical of this trend said, "there is reason to fear that the regime will further transform itself into a set of militias. I think much will depend on what its allies do. They increasingly are involved and can push the regime in this direction". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2013. A pro-regime businessman warned: "The regime has created a huge problem for itself. Many of these people are unreconstructed criminals. Now we call them heroes. But how are we going to regain control over them? Even if we win, we will face a Frankenstein monster of our own creation". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, May 2013.

This may well have happened in Banyas, where military and militia rationales combined to disastrous effect. What began as a conventional military operation – purportedly triggered in part by a deadly opposition attack on a loyalist convoy and the presence of a significant arms depot[133] – turned into something else. Troops paved the way for militias, enabling the vengeful and spectacular killing of civilians. Such behaviour hardly serves regime interests, both defacing the fragile image of intercommunal harmony it carefully has cultivated on the coast (a region whose relative stability it should have little reason to upset) and undercutting its hopes of embodying a more normal state.[134]

All in all, the regime appears stuck in a frame of mind in which little if anything is beyond the pale. It considers itself engaged in an existential struggle where ends justify all means. This arguably has served it well and may continue to do so. But only if it aspires to the narrowest of victories: survival.

[133] Crisis Group interviews, Syrian officials and regime supporters, Damascus, May 2013.

[134] A security official did not deny the massacre but said, "we can't do anything to restrain the militias. If we did, we would be accused by our own constituents of holding back loyalists even as we prove incapable of preventing massacres committed by the opposition. It would create huge tensions. Besides, whether you like it or not, such massacres are quite normal in such times". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, June 2013. An official echoed this view: "The Banyas massacre does not serve our interests, of course. But we are facing a psychological climate we cannot ignore. Our people are enduring massacres and can't accept that we would punish them if we cannot protect them". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, June 2013.

## IV. The Broader Strategic Context

In the absence of foreign involvement, the war might well be approaching its peak. The regime has used most weapons systems at its disposal; it still can escalate, but in ways unlikely to make a significant difference. Its social base appears to have reached its limits, as reflected in difficulties faced in obtaining additional army conscripts. The opposition, too, appears to be reaching a military ceiling. It has been unable to make further progress on the ground, and there no longer appears to be any large, untouched domestic reservoir of potential combatants into which it can tap. It has relied on defectors and on Syrians infuriated by regime conduct, but the former are dwindling, and most of the latter probably already have joined.

Yet, as a former U.S. official put it, "a Syrian war with regional consequences is becoming a regional war with a Syrian focus".[135] To think in terms of spillover has become overly narrow; the war is metastasising in ways that are drawing in regional and wider international actors, erasing boundaries and increasingly forming a single arc of crisis and conflict. Just as the opposition increasingly has taken the shape of a Sunni coalition in which a radicalised Sunni street, Islamist networks, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, Gulf states and Turkey take leading roles, so too is the pro-regime camp (including the Iraqi government and Iraqi Shiite militants) defining itself as a quasi-confessional alliance. Important nuances exist on both sides, but by defining the struggle as against Sunni extremism (seen as the extension of Israeli-U.S. conspiracy), defining all dissent within Syria in that light and condoning their own sectarian violence as a legitimate response to the threat, the regime and its allies unmistakably contribute to this process.[136]

As a result, the most likely factor of escalation today is external. This is consistent with precedent. Lebanon's civil war presumably would have burnt itself out far quicker had new phases not been opened due to Syrian, Israeli, Iranian and Western involvement. In what has become a Syrian arena for a partly indirect, partly direct confrontation between Arab Sunni states and Iran, but also between Russia and the West, there is every reason to fear and prevent a similar fate.

Potential escalatory factors are multiple. The civil war has reignited sectarian tensions in fragile Iraq and Lebanon, which recently had their own;[137] fighters from both are now directly in battle inside Syria. Instability in those countries to an extent already has reverberated back into Syria, widening the arc of crisis, mobilising new constituencies and potentially prompting more intense Iranian, Arab and Western efforts to shape events to their advantage.[138] Sectarianism is reaching boiling point, with Hizbollah's intervention, foreign volunteers streaming to the aid of both camps and Sunni clerics' inflammatory statements.[139] Turkey, though presently appearing

[135] Crisis Group interview, Washington DC, June 2013.
[136] See *Al-Manar*, 30 April 2013.
[137] See Crisis Group Reports, *A Precarious Balancing Act*, op. cit.; *Too Close for Comfort*, op. cit.; Crisis Group Risk Alert, "Iraq after Hawija", op. cit.
[138] A Hizbollah official said, "if the number of foreign Sunni fighters engaged in Syria were to rise in spectacular fashion, then perhaps Iran will dispatch 100,000 troops from the Revolutionary Guard, and many more [Shiite] Iraqis might join the fight". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, June 2013.
[139] On 13 June, a remarkable gathering of Sunni clerics concluded with a call for jihad "to support our brothers in Syria by sending them money and weapons, and supplying them with all assistance to save the Syrian people from this sectarian regime"; it added: "The flagrant aggression of the Ira-

to take a step back, at some point could reverse course in response to real or perceived threats from the Syrian regime or due to developments on the Kurdish front.[140] Neither direct U.S. airstrikes nor additional Israeli incursions are inconceivable at some stage. Neither country presumably wishes much deeper engagement in what is seen as a potential quagmire.[141] Yet, they might well be dragged in the more they perceive the war as a strategic battle of wills with Iran, Hizbollah, Syria and even Russia.

The stakes have become far higher and the problem far more complicated in light of the growing merger of regime military resources with those of its allies. For Washington, acquiescing in the other side's success arguably has acquired graver significance than merely living with a weakened regime ruling a rogue state and broken society. Some see it as potentially meaning empowerment in Syria and across the region of an increasingly integrated, Iranian-led axis of resistance fuelled by a sense of Shiite solidarity; and also possibly handing Moscow a victory in what is shaping up as a new Cold War.[142] Louder voices are heard among officials and observers to the effect that the U.S. cannot remain idle when Hizbollah and Iran are blatantly intervening and when in the run-up to possible negotiations, Moscow has been investing heavily to boost its ally militarily.[143]

This emerging reality could potentially alter Israel's calculus as well. Since the uprising began, Syria and Israel have shown notable restraint in their mutual dealings, refraining from steps that could prompt more open conflict. Even Israel's May 2013 strike against alleged sensitive military facilities[144] was not met with a response,

nian regime, of Hizbollah and of their sectarian allies in Syria amounts to a declaration of war against Islam and Muslims". Al-Arabiya, 13 June 2013.

[140] In May 2013, Ankara blamed Damascus for deadly car bomb-attacks in Reyhanli, a border town in southern Turkey. Syria denied involvement. *The Guardian*, 12 May 2013. Crisis Group Middle East Report N°136, *Syria's Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle*, 22 January 2013.

[141] A U.S. official with close dealings with Israeli counterparts said, "the gravest threat Israel sees is of a fragmented Syria in which various groups operate in the Golan, with missiles being launched toward the Israeli-occupied Golan or Galilee. If that happens, what would Israel do? Bombing Damascus would serve no purpose since the regime would have nothing to do with it. It can go after individual missile launchers, but that won't make much of a difference either". Crisis Group interview, Washington DC, June 2013.

[142] A senior Arab diplomat who favours a compromise solution said, "Russians and Americans are not playing the same game. Washington is only half-heartedly engaged, while Moscow is virtually a belligerent. The U.S. is giving signs of weakness, to which Russia responds by pushing their advantage. They are smelling blood". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, May 2013. A Syrian intellectual both critical and supportive of the regime went further: "We have two camps facing each other and, quite simply, one is determined and ruthless, while the other is hesitant and cowardly". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2013. A Hizbollah official concurred: "The Russians have been telling us that they will support the regime to the end. It is no coincidence that Nasrallah openly announced our participation in the war right after a meeting with a Russian envoy". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, May 2013.

[143] Crisis Group interview, senior U.S. official, Washington, June 2013. The need to respond to Syria's alleged use of chemical weapons often merges with other considerations in this approach – a response being seen as part of a necessary broader recalibration and intensification of U.S. involvement, including arming the opposition and conducting air strikes. Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, Washington DC, May-June 2013.

[144] In July 2012, a bomb attack targeting Israeli tourists in Bulgaria and widely attributed to Hizbollah did not prompt an immediate response from Israel. In October 2012, Hizbollah reportedly sent a drone deep into Israeli airspace, again with no visible reaction. See "Hezbollah admits launching drone over Israel", BBC, 11 October 2013. Nor has Syria retaliated against Israel for mili-

and Israel swiftly sought to reassure Damascus it did not intend to topple the regime.[145] This pattern conceivably could endure. Indeed, a senior Russian official brushed aside the prospect Syria might become an arena for a wider confrontation of this type, asserting that Hizbollah had asked him to convey messages to Israel stressing that it should not consider the Shiite movement's involvement in its neighbour's war as a threat.[146] And, as a number of Israeli officials see it, the gravest hazard they face is of uncontrolled and uncontrollable Islamist armed groups seizing control of areas adjacent to Israel and threatening to fire rockets into the Galilee and occupied Golan.[147] Should that occur, it is unclear how or even against what Israel could retaliate.

Yet, the two core principles guiding Israeli policy toward Syria are increasingly inapplicable: first, enunciating (and living up to) red lines concerning the transfer to Hizbollah of certain weapons; secondly, treating the regime as the responsible address for such threats. Circumstances fit those assumptions less and less. The regime has faded, invested in militia-like forces governed by their own rationale, grown more dependent on its allies and, more broadly, subsuming state sovereignty considerations to its life-and-death struggle for survival. The line between regime and allies is blurring; as parts of their military capabilities fuse, the notion of "transferring" weapons becomes theoretical and assessing who controls what near-impossible.[148] As central power dilutes and to the extent a militia model takes hold, Damascus could well cease to be a power structure one could expect to respect certain rules of the game for fear of retaliation.[149]

tary strikes, one of which, in May, hit several sensitive sites in the capital – allegedly arms depots at Damascus airport and the military complex on the heights of Qasioun that the regime claimed was a research facility. *The New York Times*, 30 January 2013. Syria's deputy foreign minister called the strikes "an act of war", and Iran's deputy foreign minister warned of "grave consequences" for Israel, but no action followed. "Iran, Russia defend Syria after Israeli attack", *The Washington Post*, 31 January 2013; "Syria blames Israel for fiery attack in Damascus", *The New York Times*, 5 May 2013.

[145] "Israel: Air strikes were 'against Hezbollah and not against the Syrian regime'", *The Guardian*, 6 May 2013.

[146] Crisis Group interview, Moscow, May 2013. A Syrian military leader added: "Russia wants to reassure Israel, act as guarantors. They have the means to ensure that the Syrian regime respects certain rules of the game. That's what's behind their suggestion to join the UN force in the Golan". Crisis Group interview, June 2013.

[147] A senior Israeli security official bluntly criticised Western support for the opposition: "The West is repeating the mistake it commits over and over again: it backs groups that eventually will turn against them. We saw it in Afghanistan, Iraq and now here. They never learn". Crisis Group interview, June 2013.

[148] An Israeli security official agreed: "This is a problem, of course. Their military apparatuses are being merged. More and more, Assad is acting as a proxy of Iran and Hizbollah. So far, we still can draw a red line and act when we feel weapons are falling into the wrong hands. But for how long?" Ibid. Access to chemical weapons may be one trigger. Speaking in mid-2012, a U.S. official said, "I have a suspicion that Hizbollah is trying to acquire CW [chemical weapons]; we know they are present at Syrian facilities and trained in their us, but I think they will go farther". Crisis Group interview, Washington DC, August 2012.

[149] The Syrian regime does not appear to have the incentive to provoke Israel. That said, in the future, it and its allies possibly could see hostility toward Israel as a means of restoring a measure of legitimacy and partially addressing the sectarian fallout resulting from Shiites waging war in Syria. Moreover, officials on both sides concurred that an escalatory pattern could create its own dynamic, against Israeli and Syrian wishes. A Syrian official said, "we are worried about Israeli strikes. We won't be able to stand passively and not react for too long. It would be quite embarrassing to do nothing". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, June 2013. An Israeli security official echoed the point:

Containing or cauterising a crisis already engulfing the region is, in some respects, a pipe dream. Still, elements of strategy focused on Syria's periphery should be considered. These include vastly increasing assistance to refugees, notably in fragile states such as Lebanon and Jordan; both overstretched countries also need more general economic aid. Too, there is an urgent need to reduce sectarian tensions in Lebanon, which requires Hizbollah at a minimum to lower its profile in Syria and change its rhetoric and Gulf Arab states to refrain from (rhetorically and otherwise) feeding a confessional beast that – given the balance of power in Lebanon – can only turn to the Sunnis' disadvantage. Finally, the U.S. ought to press Prime Minister Maliki at least to adopt a far more inclusive policy toward the embattled Sunni community lest he further inflame sectarian passions in his country.[150]

"Dynamics could become dangerous – we might act, and at some point Assad will feel compelled to react because he cannot be humiliated without responding". Crisis Group interview, June 2013.

[150] A future Crisis Group report will discuss the situation within the Iraqi Sunni community.

# V. Conclusion: Decision Time

It has been over two years, and parties to the Syrian conflict have been acting as in a headlong rush to ruin. The regime has stopped at nothing to survive: by condoning the hideous behaviour of its rank and file, promoting sectarianism, destroying entire cities, displacing millions and sacrificing Assad's ability to be more than the leader of his own camp, it has created far more problems than it can realistically solve. Iran, Hizbollah, Russia and Iraq have extended virtually unconditional support, applied scant pressure and for the most part placed the onus on its foes.

Prevailing currents within the opposition have been almost entirely fixated on toppling the regime and fighting among themselves for a share of the power they have yet to achieve. Neglecting the crucial work of politics, they project abstract hopes rather than concrete plans for the future. Their regional and wider international supporters have given indecisive support, validating the regime's narrative of a foreign conspiracy while stopping short of posing a real threat. Internecine rivalries within the opposition are mirrored by their external allies' internal divisions, the one reinforcing the other. These distractions at times seemingly absorb more energy that the struggle against a common enemy.

Throughout, the anti-regime camp – both Syrian and foreign – has harboured the expectation that some event would occur to suddenly realise its goals: a U.S. decision to take the lead in directly confronting Damascus; a shift in the balance of forces leading the regime to sue for peace, surrender or collapse from within; a mutiny by Assad's army or U-turn by its allies.

It is past time to put the daydreams of both sides away and come to terms with a realistic assessment of the situation on the ground and available options, which begins with four core postulates.

- Neither the opposition nor the regime can prevail militarily, if by "prevail" one means a decisive victory that leads to either a return to the status quo ante or a dramatic turn of the page. In particular, the regime can be defeated only through massive application of external military force – likely far beyond even some of the more robust scenarios (a no-fly zone or air strikes designed to cripple the regime's air power) occasionally considered in Washington. Even a regime "defeat" offers no guarantee of ending a war that has metastasised, drawn in an array of foreign actors and taken on a pernicious sectarian taint. It is highly possible, even probable, that loyalist elements organised in various armed groups would fight on. Given external dynamics, Iran, Hizbollah, Iraq and perhaps Russia would seek to match any Western or Arab escalation; should they fail, they would find ways to maintain influence, fuel a post-war insurgency and ensure at the least a violent, chaotic transition.

- The easiest way to de-escalate the war and end its most vicious forms of violence arguably would be to acquiesce in a de facto regime victory – in other words, negotiate the terms of Assad remaining in power rather than of his departure. For Gulf Arabs and the West, this would entail essentially closing the tap of military aid to the opposition. Here too, and putting significant moral and political considerations aside, there would be no guarantee of ending the tragedy: many Syrians are unlikely to accept surrender after all they endured, and the regime in all probability would lack willingness, ability or resources to reform, reconcile and rebuild. In a worse – by no means unrealistic – scenario, it would seek revenge

against domestic and foreign foes. While it might try to improve relations with the West and Gulf states, its alliance with those that helped in its moment of need almost certainly would be even stronger.

- Mid-way options periodically contemplated or even acted upon by the West and others – further arming the opposition, mounting limited strikes, even imposing a no-fly zone – are ways of prolonging an already risky and protracted proxy-war, not ending it. They might well advance specific interests, including heightening Western influence with the opposition, tilting the military balance of power against the regime or creating an area largely immune from its violence. But there is scant reason to expect them to fundamentally shift the war's trajectory or intensity, let alone compel the regime or its allies to back down rather than double down. When discussing these possibilities, Syrian officials concede such a shift might prevent the regime from regaining control but evince little worry that it would lead to its downfall;[151] the regime simply would adapt to a long-term conflict in ways reminiscent of the Iraqi regime's adjustment to hardship in the 1990s.
- A negotiated solution remains by far the most desirable outcome but will remain an empty catch-phrase at least until outside players show genuine readiness to work toward one by accommodating some of their foes' core concerns. In other words, at this stage there is greater urgency for – and higher, if still modest, likelihood of – U.S.-Russian cooperation than inter-Syrian understanding, on the assumption that Washington and Moscow could then seek to impose their understanding on their respective allies.

  As a first step, and for any process bringing Syrians together to succeed, their respective backers need to demonstrate a minimum of good-will and actual leverage. Regime allies ought to press it to end the most gratuitous forms of violence (notably massacres of civilians in the presence of army troops and use of ballistic missiles against civilians); and curtail the presence of their foreign fighters. In turn, opposition supporters should push it to act against the most extreme armed groups; agree to implement ceasefires along specified front lines; and articulate a clear political vision for Syria's future, for instance in the shape of a constitutional declaration that could serve as a concrete basis for negotiations.

  More broadly, outside powers must fundamentally alter their approach toward potential endgames. Regime allies should accept the necessity of a transition entailing major changes in the nature of the political system; opposition supporters should lower their expectations and consent to an outcome in which key interests of regime constituents and allies would be preserved. This would be hard to swallow for both foreign parties and their local partners. The regime and its friends fear any concession as a first step toward wholesale dismantlement of the existing power structure; the opposition and its sponsors are highly reluctant to contemplate a domestic power-sharing agreement providing institutional guarantees to those they have fought, let alone a regional power-sharing deal in which Iran would have a place.

[151] Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, June 2013.

Particularly today, with the regime and its partners emboldened, riding a string of victories, such a readjustment appears fanciful. Calls for greater military involvement by the West typically stem from a desire to rebalance the ground situation. But even assuming more forceful Western action could help pressure Russia to change its stance,[152] it would be meaningless, or worse, if not moored to a political strategy that contemplates a realistic outcome. Otherwise, it merely would continue to fuel a widening war. If much-repeated calls for a "political solution" are to be more than rhetoric, discussion of the ultimate objectives is necessary. Rather than focus on Assad's fate – which eventually will have to be addressed – it would be more fruitful to start with defining the endgame: how to rebuild a sovereign state and construct a new political system. Several principles for a domestic and regional bargain suggest themselves:

**Preserving the military while transforming it.** Washington and Moscow assert a common interest in saving what can be of the state and notably the army, a largely dysfunctional, polarising but indispensable institution. Its rank and file is broadly representative of the country's underclass, though its officer corps is Alawite-dominated, and it retains at least some *esprit de corps* and hierarchal structure, though these have been subverted by the overbearing (and legally unauthorised) security services, notably Air Force Intelligence and Military Security.

A goal of negotiations ought to be agreement on the following principles: the military institution will be safeguarded; only elements that can credibly be charged with being responsible for the most serious crimes will be prosecuted; the army's officer corps and rank and file will be reorganised to make room for loyalists on the one hand and defectors and civilian fighters willing to join the professional military on the other; officers and staff from the Republican Guard and other elite units will be subjected to the same rules and merged with other units; Air Force Intelligence and Military Security will be dismantled according to the standards presented below; and the army's formal chain of command, which places it under the defence minister's authority, will be reinstated.

**Dismantling and reintegrating the security services.** Problems plaguing the security services are fourfold: they are massive in size; largely Alawite in composition; operate outside any legal framework or oversight; and some elements have been involved in crimes for which they must be held accountable. This sprawling apparatus needs to be downsized and regularised. Many of its components could be merged with the police, a predominantly Sunni institution that belongs to the state's formal structure and has played – serious shortcomings notwithstanding – an infinitely less polarising role during the war. All security officers, except those covered by the transitional justice system, should be guaranteed reintegration, retirement or other state employment.

[152] Two former NATO secretaries general, Javier Solana (a Crisis Group Board member) and Jaap de Hoop, argue against such a logic: "Rather than secure humanitarian space and empower a political transition, Western military engagement in Syria is likely to provoke further escalation on all sides, deepening the civil war and strengthening the forces of extremism, sectarianism and criminality gaining strength across the country. The idea that the West can empower and remotely control moderate forces is optimistic at best. Escalation begets escalation, and mission creep is a predictable outcome if the West sets out on a military path". "Geneva talks hold the only key to Syria", *The New York Times*, 11 June 2013.

**Setting up an effective transitional justice system.** Due to the massive violence by both sides, the judicial aspect should focus on responsibility for especially egregious crimes, such as ordering or carrying out actions specifically targeting civilians (eg, systematic torture; massacres; suicide and other bombings in residential neighbourhoods; the firing of ballistic missiles into similar areas). Leniency could be shown to all who cannot credibly be charged with such offences. The remaining trauma should be dealt with, over time, through an indigenously agreed-upon series of actions, including truth-telling, reparations and so on.

**Ensuring an inclusive political process with participation of representative of the two sides as well as unaffiliated individuals.** Though it is near impossible to assess the size of the regime's and opposition's social bases, both enjoy significant support, while many Syrians recognise themselves in neither. In its early stages, the political process should focus on formation of an interim government and a committee to debate and agree on overarching constitutional principles. Both bodies should comprise persons with relevant prior experience. Elections should be postponed until there is sufficient stability.

**Offering guarantees to all Syrian actors in the new political set-up.** Given society's extreme polarisation, predictable enduring distrust toward the state, weakness of centralised institutions and the legacy of militias and armed groups reflecting redistribution of power to the local level, any realistic political system presumably will have to both empower and reassure Syria's various constituencies by giving a far more substantial role to governorates, municipalities and provincial police forces – a process of partial devolution that should not be understood as either challenging the state's integrity or laying the groundwork for partition.

**Offering guarantees to regional and international actors.** Outside players will support a compromise only if they believe the emerging political framework leaves them sufficient leverage to preserve core needs. Given the scale of external polarisation (particularly on Iran's and Hizbollah's roles), this will be a huge challenge. But if the goal is both to de-escalate or halt the war and neutralise or at least minimise the risk of regional sectarian conflict, such competing interests will have to be accommodated. As a first step, and assuming the follow-up Geneva conference is held, the West ought to overcome its reluctance to include Iran. In any event, the negotiations themselves are to be held among Syrians with the UN acting as mediator; keeping Tehran out would be tantamount to denying the unmistakable fact of its involvement, not altering it. Hassan Rouhani's election as Iran's new president could provide an opportunity for the West to reverse its stand.[153]

Other initiatives will be required, including a massive humanitarian and reconstruction effort in light of the extensive destruction of the urban fabric and likely return of numerous refugees and internally displaced. If critical steps (mapping needs in key cities, engaging stakeholders, raising funds, etc.) are not taken until the war ends, the ensuing vacuum will minimise recovery chances. Necessary also are efforts to

[153] France, which had been among the most adamant in its rejection of any Iranian participation, was the first to signal a possible shift. In the wake of Rouhani's election, President François Hollande said, "my position is that if he can be useful, yes, he would be welcome". Agence France-Presse, 18 June 2013.

contain strife where communal tensions, refugee and internally-displaced returns, reprisal killings and land disputes make it predictable. Many understandably urge a peacekeeping mission once the war ends, though, in light of the international community's poor performance during the fighting and resulting widespread distrust and resentment, this may be unworkable. At a minimum, it would require broad-based Syrian support and thus considerable political work to ensure its acceptability and survivability.

For now, such notions – both the short-term priorities and longer-term suggestions for a political settlement – admittedly belong to the world of political fiction. But most if not all will be critical if an exit to the war is to be found. Virtually all, however, have been conspicuously absent from the Syrian discussion, whether in the opposition's vision for the future, the regime's offer of reforms or the international community's continuous debates about a diplomatic solution.

**Damascus/Cairo/Brussels, 27 June 2013**

## Appendix A: Map of Syria

## Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 150 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a twelve-page monthly bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in all the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports and briefing papers are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on the website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policy-makers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former U.S. Undersecretary of State and Ambassador Thomas Pickering. Its President and Chief Executive since July 2009 has been Louise Arbour, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and Chief Prosecutor for the International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and for Rwanda.

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**June 2013**

# Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on the Middle East and North Africa since 2010

**Israel/Palestine**

*Tipping Point? Palestinians and the Search for a New Strategy*, Middle East Report N°95, 26 April 2010 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

*Drums of War: Israel and the "Axis of Resistance"*, Middle East Report N°97, 2 August 2010 (also available in Hebrew and Arabic).

*Squaring the Circle: Palestinian Security Reform under Occupation*, Middle East Report N°98, 7 September 2010 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

*Gaza: The Next Israeli-Palestinian War?*, Middle East Briefing N°30, 24 March 2011 (also available in Hebrew and Arabic).

*Radical Islam in Gaza*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°104, 29 March 2011 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

*Palestinian Reconciliation: Plus Ça Change …*, Middle East Report N°110, 20 July 2011 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

*Curb Your Enthusiasm: Israel and Palestine after the UN*, Middle East Report N°112, 12 September 2011 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

*Back to Basics: Israel's Arab Minority and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, Middle East Report N°119, 14 March 2012 (also available in Arabic).

*The Emperor Has No Clothes: Palestinians and the End of the Peace Process*, Middle East Report N°122, 7 May 2012 (also available in Arabic).

*Light at the End of their Tunnels? Hamas & the Arab Uprisings*, Middle East Report N°129, 14 August 2012 (also available in Arabic).

*Israel and Hamas: Fire and Ceasefire in a New Middle East*, Middle East Report N°133, 22 November 2012 (also available in Arabic).

*Extreme Makeover? (I): Israel's Politics of Land and Faith in East Jerusalem*, Middle East Report N°134, 20 December 2012 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

*Extreme Makeover? (II): The Withering of Arab Jerusalem*, Middle East Report N°135, 20 December 2012 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

*Buying Time? Money, Guns and Politics in the West Bank*, Middle East Report N°142, 29 May 2013.

**Egypt/Syria/Lebanon**

*Lebanon's Politics: The Sunni Community and Hariri's Future Current*, Middle East Report N°96, 26 May 2010 (also available in Arabic).

*New Crisis, Old Demons in Lebanon: The Forgotten Lessons of Bab-Tebbaneh/Jabal Mohsen*, Middle East Briefing N°29, 14 October 2010 (only available in French and Arabic).

*Trial by Fire: The Politics of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon*, Middle East Report N°100, 2 December 2010.

*Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (I): Egypt Victorious?*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°101, 24 February 2011 (also available in Arabic).

*Uncharted Waters: Thinking Through Syria's Dynamics*, Middle East Briefing N°31, 24 November 2011 (also available in Arabic).

*Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VI): The Syrian People's Slow-motion Revolution*, Middle East Report N°108, 6 July 2011 (also available in Arabic).

*Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VII): The Syrian Regime's Slow-motion Suicide*, Middle East Report N°109, 13 July 2011 (also available in Arabic).

*Lebanon's Palestinian Dilemma: The Struggle Over Nahr al-Bared*, Middle East Report N°117, 1 March 2012 (also available in Arabic).

*Now or Never: A Negotiated Transition for Syria*, Middle East Briefing N°32, 5 March 2012 (also available in Arabic and Russian).

*Syria's Phase of Radicalisation*, Middle East Briefing N°33, 10 April 2012 (also available in Arabic).

*Lost in Transition: The World According to Egypt's SCAF*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°121, 24 April 2012 (also available in Arabic).

*Syria's Mutating Conflict*, Middle East Report N°128, 1 August 2012 (also available in Arabic).

*Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition*, Middle East Report N°131, 12 October 2012 (also available in Arabic).

*A Precarious Balancing Act: Lebanon and the Syrian conflict*, Middle East Report N°132, 22 November 2012 (also available in Arabic).

*Syria's Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle*, Middle East Report N°136, 22 January 2013 (also available in Arabic and Kurdish).

*Too Close For Comfort: Syrians in Lebanon*, Middle East Report N°141, 13 May 2013 (also available in Arabic).

**North Africa**

*Popular Protests in North Africa and the Middle East (IV): Tunisia's Way*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°106, 28 April 2011 (also available in French).

*Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (V): Making Sense of Libya*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°107, 6 June 2011 (also available in Arabic).

*Holding Libya Together: Security Challenges after Qadhafi*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°115, 14 December 2011 (also available in Arabic).

*Tunisia: Combatting Impunity*, *Restoring Security*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°123, 9 May 2012 (only available in French).

*Tunisia: Confronting Social and Economic Challenges*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°124, 6 June 2012 (only available in French).

*Divided We Stand: Libya's Enduring Conflicts*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°130, 14 September 2012 (also available in Arabic).

*Tunisia: Violence and the Salafi Challenge*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°137, 13 February 2013 (also available in French).

*Trial by Error: Justice in Post-Qadhafi Libya*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°140, 17 April 2013 (also available in Arabic).

**Iraq/Iran/Gulf**

*Iraq's Uncertain Future: Elections and Beyond*, Middle East Report N°94, 25 February 2010 (also available in Arabic).

*Loose Ends: Iraq's Security Forces between U.S. Drawdown and Withdrawal*, Middle East Report N°99, 26 October 2010 (also available in Arabic).

*Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (II): Yemen between Reform and Revolution*, Middle East Report N°102, 10 March 2011(also available in Arabic).

*Iraq and the Kurds: Confronting Withdrawal Fears*, Middle East Report N°103, 28 March 2011 (also available in Arabic and Kurdish).

*Popular Protests in North Africa and the Middle East (III): The Bahrain Revolt*, Middle East Report N°105, 4 April 2011(also available in Arabic).

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*Breaking Point? Yemen's Southern Question*, Middle East Report N°114, 20 October 2011 (also available in Arabic).

*In Heavy Waters: Iran's Nuclear Program*, *the Risk of War and Lessons from Turkey*, Middle East Report N°116, 23 February 2012 (also available in Arabic and Turkish).

*Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (IX): Dallying with Reform in a Divided Jordan*, Middle East Report N°118, 12 March 2012 (also available in Arabic).

*Iraq and the Kurds: The High-Stakes Hydrocarbons Gambit*, Middle East Report N°120, 19 April 2012 (also available in Arabic).

*The P5+1*, *Iran and the Perils of Nuclear Brinkmanship*, Middle East Briefing N°34, 15 June 2012 (also available in Arabic).

*Yemen: Enduring Conflicts*, *Threatened Transition*, Middle East Report N°125, 3 July 2012 (also available in Arabic).

*Déjà Vu All Over Again: Iraq's Escalating Political Crisis*, Middle East Report N°126, 30 July 2012 (also available in Arabic).

*Iraq's Secular Opposition: The Rise and Decline of Al-Iraqiya*, Middle East Report N°127, 31 July 2012 (also available in Arabic).

*Spider Web: The Making and Unmaking of Iran Sanctions*, Middle East Report N°138, 25 February 2013 (also available in Farsi).

*Yemen's Military-Security Reform: Seeds of New Conflict?*, Middle East Report N°139, 4 April 2013 (also available in Arabic).

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