



Armed Conflict in Syria: U.S. and International Response

Jeremy M. Sharp

Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

Christopher M. Blanchard

Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

July 12, 2012

Congressional Research Service

7-5700

www.crs.gov

RL33487

CRS Report for Congress

Prepared for Members and Committees of Congress

Summary

Syria is now mired in an armed conflict between forces loyal to President Bashar al Asad and rebel fighters opposed to his rule. Since major unrest began in March 2011, various reports suggest that between 17,000 and 18,000 Syrians have been killed. U.S. officials and many analysts believe that President Bashar al Asad, his family members, and his other supporters will ultimately be forced from power, but few offer specific, credible timetables for a resolution to Syria's ongoing crisis. Some observers warn that the regime's staying power may be underrated. Intense violence generated demands from some international actors for an immediate mutual ceasefire and from others for military intervention to protect civilians or support opposition forces.

In the face of intense domestic and international pressure calling for political change and for an end to violence against civilians, the Asad government has offered limited reforms while also meeting protests and armed attacks with overwhelming force. Nonviolent protests continue, but their apparent futility has created frustration and anger within the opposition ranks. An increasing number of Syrian civilians have taken up arms in self-defense, although armed rebel attacks alienate some potential supporters. The government accuses the opposition of carrying out bombings and assassinations targeting security infrastructure, security personnel, and civilians in Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and other areas. Accounts of human rights abuses by both sides persist, with the majority attributed to security forces and military units.

President Obama and his Administration have been calling for Asad's resignation since August 2011, and have been vocal advocates for United Nations Security Council action to condemn the Syrian government and end the bloodshed. The United States has closed its embassy in Damascus, and Ambassador Robert Ford has left Syria. U.S. officials are actively participating in efforts to improve international policy coordination on Syria. The Administration has given no indication that it intends to pursue any form of military intervention. U.S. officials and some in Congress continue to debate various proposals for ending the violence and accelerating Asad's departure.

After over a year of unrest and violence, Syria's crisis is characterized by dilemmas and contradictions. A menu of imperfect choices confronts U.S. policymakers, amid fears of continued violence, a humanitarian crisis, and regional instability. The potential spillover effects of continued fighting raise questions with regard to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Israel. Larger refugee flows, sectarian conflict, or transnational violence by non-state actors are among the contingencies that policy makers are concerned about in relation to these countries. The unrest also is creating new opportunities for Al Qaeda or other violent extremist groups to operate in Syria. The security of Syrian conventional and chemical weapons stockpiles has become a regional security concern, which will grow if a security vacuum emerges. Many observers worry that an escalation in fighting or swift regime change could generate new pressures on minority groups or lead to wider civil or regional conflict.

Members of Congress are weighing these issues as they debate U.S. policy and the Syrian crisis.

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Background

Syrians have long struggled with many of the same challenges that have bred deep dissatisfaction in other Arab autocracies, including high unemployment, high inflation, limited upward mobility, rampant corruption, lack of political freedoms, and repressive security forces. These factors have fueled opposition to Syria's authoritarian government, which has been dominated by the Baath (Renaissance) Party since 1963, and the Al Asad family since 1970. President Bashar al Asad's father—Hafiz al Asad—ruled the country from 1970 until his death in 2000. The Asad family are members of the minority Alawite sect (estimated 12% of the population), which has its roots in Shiite Islam. They and the Baath party have cultivated Alawites as a key base of support, and elite security forces have long been led by Alawites. The government violently suppressed an armed uprising led by the Muslim Brotherhood in the early 1980s, killing thousands from the majority Sunni Muslim community.

Since taking office in 2000, President Asad has offered and retracted the prospect of limited political reform, while aligning his government with Iran and non-state actors such as Hamas and Hezbollah in a complex rivalry with the United States and its Arab and non-Arab allies (including Israel). Syria's long-standing partnership with Russia has remained intact and is now the focus of intense diplomatic attention because Russia is one of the regime's only remaining defenders.

As unrest emerged in other Arab countries in early 2011, Asad and many observers mistakenly believed that Syria's pervasive police state and the population's fear of sectarian violence would serve as a bulwark against the outbreak of turmoil. Limited calls in February 2011 to organize reform protests failed, but the government's torture of children involved in an isolated incident in the southern town of Dara'a in March provided a decisive spark for the emergence of demonstrations. The use of force against demonstrators in Dara'a and later in other cities created a corresponding swell in public anger and public participation in protests. The government organized large counterdemonstrations.

The Sunni Muslim majority has been at the forefront of the recent protests and armed opposition to the Alawite-led regime, with Syria's Christians and other minority groups caught between their parallel fears of violent change and of being associated with Asad's crackdown. Economic class dynamics also are influencing the choices of Syrians about the uprising: many rural, less advantaged Syrians have supported the opposition movement, while urban, wealthier Syrians appear to have more divided loyalties.

For much of 2011 and early 2012, a cycle of tension and violence intensified, as President Asad and his government paired limited reform gestures with the use of military force against protestors and armed opposition groups. Violence was initially limited to certain locations but now has affected most major cities, including Damascus. Despite international efforts to broker a cease-fire, by the summer of 2012 government and opposition forces have been engaged in all-out armed conflict.

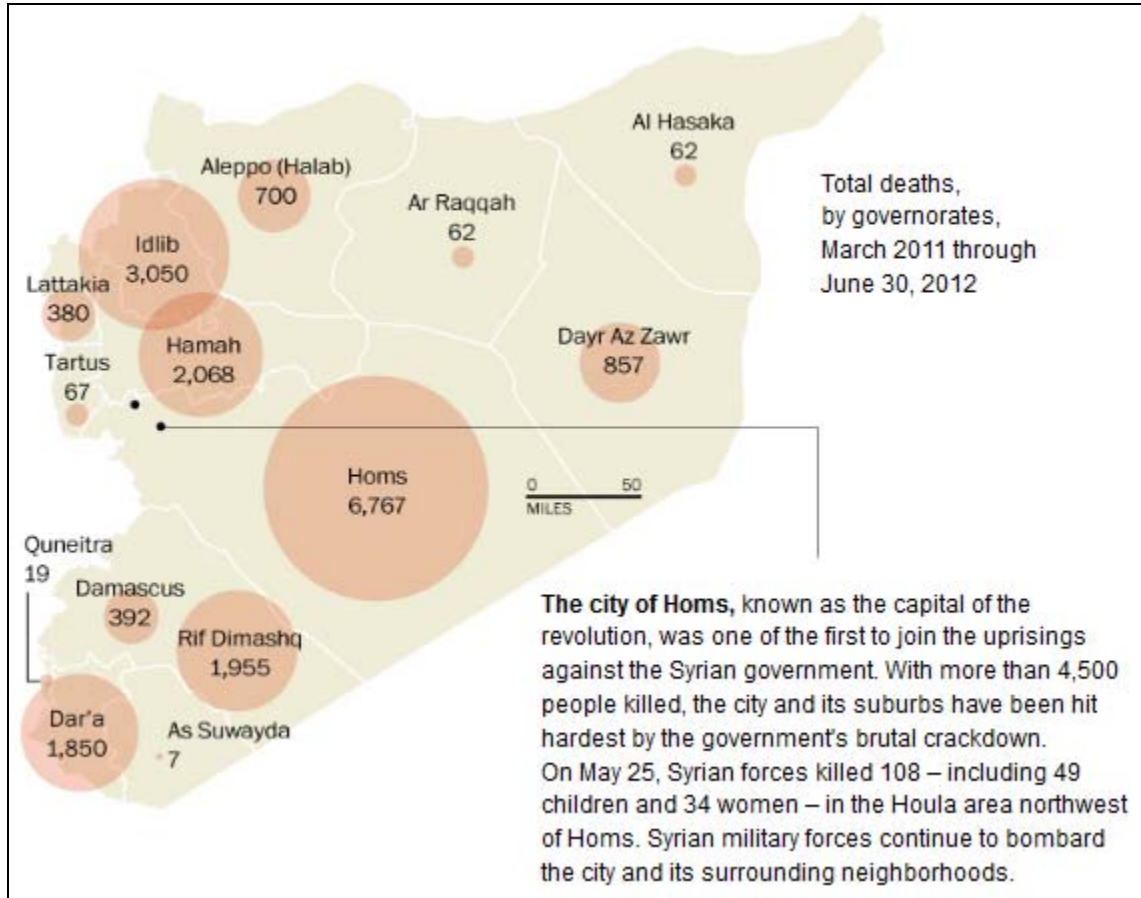
Casualty Estimates

Now in its second year, the popular-uprising-turned-armed-rebellion against the Asad regime seems poised to continue in the absence of a political agreement or decisive military solution. Precise casualty estimates are not available. The Strategic Research and Communication Centre, a research organization on Syria, reports that as of July 2012, over 18,000 Syrians have been killed

since the revolt began in March 2011. The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported in early July that 17,129 Syrians have died since March 2011, including 11,897 civilians, 4,348 soldiers and 884 military defectors.

Figure I. Syrian Casualties by Governorate

As of June 30, 2012



Source: Washington Post and <http://syriansshuhada.com/default.asp?lang=en>

Assessment: The Conflict and Its Aftermath

With Syria now in the throes of a major conflict, it appears that the Asad regime will continue to use military force to suppress the mostly Sunni Arab uprising until it is either victorious or is no longer politically or the militarily capable of fighting. For the minority Alawite-dominated regime, the uprising against it is perceived as an existential threat to the group's more than four-decade hold on power. Though there may be a few Alawite elites who seek compromise with regime opponents, there has been little public dissent within the regime core, indicating that Alawite elites see their community's fate as tied to that of the Asad family. The regime has not

indicated that it is willing to accept a negotiated political solution to the conflict, and 46-year-old Assad has refused to abdicate power.¹

Despite the Assad government's apparent confidence that it can prevail, many observers argue that over time, the regime will gradually lose control over more and more of the country, as its political, economic, and military bases of support erode. This collective judgment is based on a number of factors, including:

- Sustained protest against the Assad government for over 16 months despite a brutal government crackdown that has included the arrest of thousands of citizens and documented cases of torture and regime-instigated massacres;
- Continued reports of defections from the armed forces and from the Sunni political and business elite;
- The growing size and capabilities of the Sunni anti-government insurgency, which has demonstrated resiliency in the face of severe repression and has become better equipped with the help of external arms shipments;
- Recurring rebel attacks against government facilities in Damascus and Aleppo, Syria's two largest cities and symbols of regime control;
- The hardships international sanctions are creating for Syrians disconnected from the political establishment, and;
- The inability of the armed forces to be everywhere at once, as local rebellions have sprouted in numerous locales, creating pockets of opposition self-rule.

Projections of how quickly the current Syrian government may weaken vary.² According to recent statements by unnamed U.S. intelligence officials:

“The regime inner circle and those at the next level still seem to be holding fairly firm in support of the regime and Assad.... Both sides seem to be girding for a long struggle. Our sense is that the regime still believes it can ultimately prevail or at least appears determined to try to prevail and the opposition at the same time seems to be preparing for a long fight.”³

While some observers initially believed in 2011 that the Assad regime would fall quickly, some subsequent projections since then have been more conservative. Some experts note that neighboring Lebanon's sectarian civil war lasted 15 years before warring parties reached a political solution. In Iraq between 1991 and 2003, the late Saddam Hussein retained control over a war-ravaged country despite widespread Kurdish and Shiite opposition to his rule and a Western-imposed no-fly zone covering significant swaths of the country. Nevertheless, it is also quite possible that the regime could unravel over a much shorter time frame. Overall, there are a number of factors that will determine how quickly the Syrian regime weakens, including:

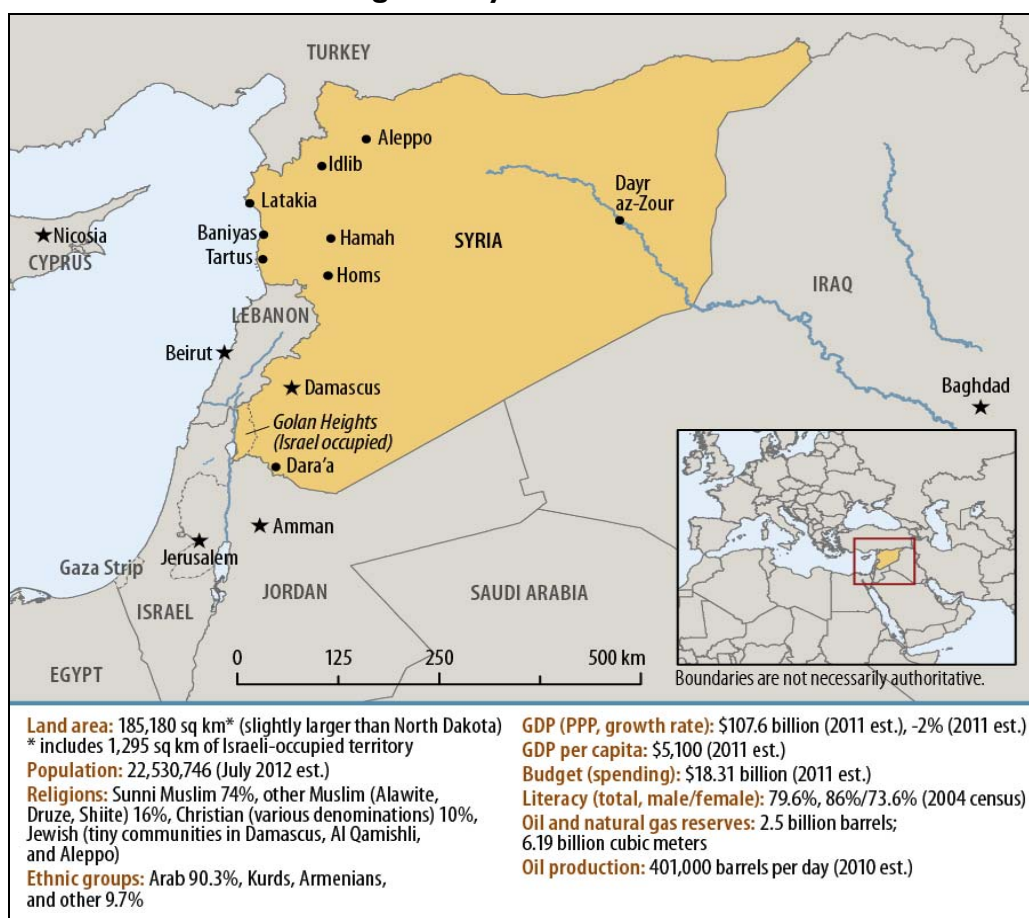
¹ The next presidential election is supposed to take place in 2014. Under the terms of Syria's recently-amended constitution, President Assad, who has already been in office since 2000, could serve an additional two, 7-year terms if reelected, keeping him in the presidency until 2028.

² Neighboring Lebanon's sectarian civil war lasted 15 years before warring parties reached a political solution.

³ “U.S. Intelligence sees few Cracks in Assad's Inner Circle,” *Reuters*, June 26, 2012.

- The ability of various armed and political opposition groups to coalesce around a unified body of leadership that is recognized by the international community and local Syrians;
- The willingness of the Sunni business community in Aleppo and Damascus to continue to support the government;
- The ability of the Syrian government to pay public sector salaries amidst economic sanctions;
- The willingness of minority groups which so far have been either neutral or supportive of the government to join the ranks of the opposition;
- The ability of the Syrian government to continue to receive military and financial assistance from friendly nations, and;
- The morale of the armed forces in the face of ongoing fighting and their brutal suppression campaign against civilians.

Figure 2. Syria at a Glance



Source: CRS Graphics.

Possible Future Scenarios

The historic political changes that have swept across the Arab world since 2011 have confounded many experts, and there is no consensus over how the Syria conflict may be resolved, if at all. With both sides viewing the conflict as a zero-sum game, a peaceful settlement in the near term seems unlikely. Several other potential outcomes appear more plausible.

An Enduring Conflict and State Collapse? As previously mentioned, both sides could wage armed conflict for years, leading to tens of thousands of more casualties before exhaustion settles in and a negotiation over power sharing ensues. If war were to continue indefinitely, it is possible that the modern nation state of Syria could splinter into Alawite, Sunni, and Kurdish regions with cities divided by sectarian neighborhoods.⁴ Or, a country devastated by years of warfare could simply cease to maintain central governance. Though comparisons to a failed state such as Somalia may be too extreme, authority could become concentrated locally, as communities self-organize politically, economically, and even militarily. Total state collapse poses serious risks for the international community due to Syrian chemical weapon stockpiles and security vacuums that present opportunities for transnational terrorist groups to take root— particularly Sunni Jihadist groups from neighboring Iraq which have fought Asad’s forces.

A Military Coup? Though the Alawite core of the Asad regime has not had any significant defections, a military coup is a remote possibility. Some military commanders, when faced with mounting battlefield losses and the prospect of defeat, may calculate that a move against the innermost circle of the Asad family could be enough to salvage a place at the negotiating table during a transition process. However, the unity of Alawite elites is strong and the regime is known for its intricate system of control over commanders in the military and intelligence apparatus. Moreover, many military leaders are linked by kinship ties, further complicating any possible plots against Syria’s rulers.

A Negotiated Solution? As previously mentioned, so long as both the regime and its opponents seek total victory on the battlefield and envision a future Syrian government dominated by their respective sectarian communities, a political settlement will remain elusive. On June 30, the Action Group on Syria endorsed the concept of a compromise agreement “formed on the basis of mutual consent” to create a national unity government, though what role the ruling Baath party would play in such a transition is uncertain.

A Regional War? Though outside powers, such as the Gulf states, Turkey, and Iran, may be supporting proxy groups inside Syria as well as the central government, their direct military intervention could become possible in the event of some unpredictable event. In Turkey, the downing of a recent fighter jet drew serious Turkish condemnation of the Asad government, but not direct intervention. Similar incidents in the future could spark different reactions. Moreover, the fighting in Syria could spill over into Lebanon, where Sunni-Shiite tensions have already

⁴ For example, Frank Salameh, a professor at Boston College, wrote “And so today’s strings of wanton murders, sexual assaults, torture, arbitrary detentions, targeted bombings and destruction of neighborhoods—and what they entail in terms of displacements, deportations and population movements—are nothing if not the groundwork of a future Alawite entity; the grafting of new facts on the ground and the drafting of new frontiers. No longer able to rule in the name of Arab unity (and in the process preserve their own ethnic and sectarian autonomy), the Alawites may retreat into the Levantine highlands overlooking the Mediterranean.” See, “An Alawite State in Syria?” *The National Interest*, July 10, 2012.

boiled over, resulting in violence between rival Sunni-Alawite neighborhoods in the city of Tripoli in 2012.

Latest Developments

- **Tlass Defection.** On July 6, various sources reported that General Manaf Tlass, the son of a former defense minister⁵ and member of a prominent Sunni family, had fled Syria to Turkey and defected from the regime. The Tlass family had been key supporters of the Asad regime, but Manaf and other relatives were angered by the regime's brutal suppression of their ancestral areas around Rastan and Homs. Manaf had reportedly refused to lead Republican Guard units involved against insurgents and had been relieved from duty last year; he may have been under house arrest. By 2012, his family had fled Syria.
- **Friends of Syria.** On July 6 in Paris, the Friends of Syria convened another conference to discuss ways of pressuring the Syrian government to abide by the United Nations peace plan for Syria. Despite calls for new economic sanctions, possibly through the United Nations, the Friends of Syria gathering did not include Russia or China. In response, Secretary of State Clinton addressed the gathering, saying "What can every nation and group represented here do?... I ask you to reach out to Russia and China, and to not only urge but demand that they get off the sidelines and begin to support the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people."
- **Opposition Meeting.** On July 4 in Cairo, the largest gathering of Syrian opposition groups convened to discuss unifying their ranks and developing a common platform. Disagreement continued over the formation of a single opposition council representing all groups. Delegates did agree on an outline for a political transition and on a "National Covenant," which prescribed democratic principles that could be enshrined in a future constitution. However, the meeting featured a walk out by Kurdish members. According to one unnamed Arab League diplomat, "If the international community wanted a nice, organized opposition in Syria, they are dreaming....The reality of the situation in Syria is very difficult and confusing. This is (the) result of 40 years of dictatorship."⁶
- **International Action Group on Syria.** On June 30 in Geneva, Switzerland, the Action Group⁷ on Syria issued a communiqué⁸ endorsing the Annan peace plan and calling for a transitional government of national unity in Syria that could

⁵ General Mustafa Tlass was defense minister from 1972 to 2004 and played a key role in smoothing the transition from the late president Hafez al Asad to his son Bashar after the latter's death in 2000. He now lives in Paris, France.

⁶ "Syria opposition rifts give world excuse not to act," Reuters, July 4, 2012.

⁷ Action Group members include: the five permanent members of the Security Council (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States of America) and representatives from Turkey, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, the European Union, and the Arab League. As part of a compromise over the formation of the group, Iran and Saudi Arabia were excluded from participating. The Syrian government has accused Saudi Arabia of shipping arms to rebels while the opposition has accused Iran of supporting the Asad regime.

⁸

http://www.unog.ch/unog/website/news_media.nsf/%28httpNewsByYear_en%29/18F70DBC923963B1C1257A2D0060696B?OpenDocument

include members of the opposition and current regime. Such a transitional government would be charged with overseeing the drafting of a new constitution and national elections. In order to secure Russian support for the final statement, the Action Group stated that any transitional government “shall be formed on the basis of mutual consent,” a phrase that would give supporters of Assad and the opposition veto power over the selection of unity government leaders. This was an important development for the opposition even though the final statement did not explicitly call for Assad’s resignation. Syrian opposition groups insist that Assad resign the presidency. When asked to comment on why the final document did not include calls for Assad’s resignation, Secretary of State Hilary Rodham Clinton remarked that “Assad will still have to go. He will never pass the mutual consent test, given the blood on his hands.”⁹

- **Syria Shoots Down Turkish Jet.** On June 22, 2012, Syrian forces shot down a Turkish reconnaissance jet. The Syrian and Turkish governments disagree over the path of the jet, with Syria claiming that it crossed over its territorial waters. Reportedly, the Turkish plane carried photo surveillance equipment. The Turkish government strongly condemned the Syrian government over the incident and reinforced its borders, though no new confrontations have occurred since.
- **Suspension of UN Observation Mission.** A spike in violence in early June led the U.N. military observers of the U.N. Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS) to suspend their operations on June 16. Chief military observer Maj. Gen. Robert Mood said, "This escalation is limiting our ability to observe, verify, report as well as assist in local dialogue and stability projects – basically impeding our ability to carry out our mandate. The lack of willingness by the parties to seek a peaceful transition, and the push towards advancing military positions is increasing the losses on both sides: innocent civilians, men women and children are being killed every day. It is also posing significant risks to our observers."
- **New Head of the Syrian National Council.** The Syrian National Council elected Syrian Kurdish activist and professor Abdulbaset Sieda as its new chairman. Some opposition members and observers warned that Sieda would be unable to oppose the dominance of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups within the Council. On June 17, he said “The international community must bear its . . . responsibilities to take decisive decisions through the U.N. Security Council under Chapter 7 to protect civilians.”

Armed Conflict in Syria

The armed conflict in Syria features Alawite regime regular and irregular forces fighting against mostly Sunni fighters organized locally on the ground and nominally coordinated by Free Syrian Army leaders in Turkey. On June 26, President Assad himself said that “we live in a state of war... all our policies, directives and all sectors will be directed in order to gain victory in this war.” As the conflict intensifies with no signs of abating, many analysts suggest that the degree of regime brutality will increase, with Assad’s forces attempting to completely destroy Sunni population

⁹ Press Availability Following the Meeting of the Action Group on Syria, Remarks Hillary Rodham Clinton Secretary of State, Palais de Nations Geneva, Switzerland, June 30, 2012.

centers such as Homs and Hama. In response, opposition fighters, who increasingly are well-armed and better coordinated, may intensify their guerilla-style attacks on government troops and infrastructure in an attempt to gradually weaken the regime to its breaking point. There is no expert consensus on how long this conflict will last. However, many experts predict that over time, the regime will not be able to sustain itself in its current form; the overall strain placed on it by fighting and international sanctions, they argue, will slowly erode its grip on society. Many experts believe that the Asad regime, because it is dominated by a minority group, lacks the manpower to police the country given the current state of opposition. Should regime authority gradually erode, many analysts have expressed concern that disparate groups of militias, local citizens, and other minority communities will self-organize in place of a central government. Few experts believe that the regime, even using all-out-force, can end the rebellion—particularly given higher levels of external assistance now being provided to the opposition by foreign nations. A negotiated end to the fighting between Alawites and Sunnis does not appear to be realistic for the time being. Instead, both sides appear to view total victory as the only option, despite international attempts to stop the fighting.

Key characteristics of the sectarian fighting include:

- **Battlefield Geography.** Though violence has occurred in all parts of Syria, it is most concentrated in Homs and its environs.¹⁰ Overall, most confrontations have taken place inside villages and cities along the country's main north-south highway. However, there has been far less violence inside Syria's two wealthiest and largest Syrian cities, Aleppo and the capital Damascus. In addition to Homs city and governorate, many casualties have been reported in the governorates of Idlib, Hama, Dera'a, and Deir al Zour. According to Joseph Holliday, an analyst at Washington's Institute for the Study of War., "There's a stalemate in which the government controls key major cities. But once you get off the main highway, the rebels basically own it." Rebels seem to have the most autonomy in the northern province of Idlib and the southern province of Dera'a.
- **Alawite Regime Tactics.** Since March 2011, Asad regime forces (numbering between 100,000 to 200,000 est.) have used both regular units¹¹ and irregular militias to quash dissent throughout Syria. In Homs, military units have encircled the city and bombarded it with artillery fire, leveling most Sunni districts of the city while leaving Alawite neighborhoods intact. Overall, the armed forces possess heavy weaponry, such as tanks, armored personnel carriers, attack helicopters, and fighters, giving it an advantage in direct military confrontations.¹² Government forces also have established checkpoints along many of the country's main roads to limit opposition movement. In recent

¹⁰ Reports suggest that Sunni neighborhoods of Homs have been decimated by artillery shelling, and thousands of residents have fled.

¹¹ Syria's elite Republican Guard units consist of an estimated 8,000 soldiers and are stationed mainly in the capital to protect the core of the regime.

¹² Some reports suggest that Syrian military tactics are poor when engaging rebel forces. According to one report, "Syrian military use of tanks and armored personnel carriers also lacks tactical skill. Contrary to standard military doctrine, Syrian armor frequently advances into contested urban zones without the accompanying support of ground troops. This leaves the armor vulnerable to rebel gunners, equipped with rocket-propelled grenades, who fire at the tanks and then quickly retreat out of the tanks' line of sight. T-72 tanks, the type predominantly used by the government, are vulnerable to RPG strikes against the turret, treads and rear engine area." See, "Some Rebels Wonder If Syrian Troops' Poor Use Of Tanks, Helicopters Is Intentional," *McClatchy Newspapers*, June 21, 2012.

months, the government has resorted to using air power in order to limit its casualties on the ground when fighting in hostile territory.¹³ Since the earliest days of opposition, the regime also reportedly has dispatched irregular forces, known as Shabiha ("ghosts" in Arabic), to commit atrocities throughout the countryside and thus terrorize the Sunni population. As violence has escalated in recent months, massacres have been reported, including in the Houla region (At least 108 people killed, including 49 children and 34 women, on May 25) and Al Kubeir (alt. sp. Al Qubair, Qubeir, at least 55 people on June 6). Though the regime has denied any official involvement, Syrian activists suspect that the Shabiha could be behind these massacres.¹⁴

- **Sunni Soldier Defections.** Since the beginning of the uprising against the Asad regime in March 2011, thousands of low ranking soldiers and some high ranking officers have defected to the opposition. Though exact numbers are hard to pinpoint, most reports suggest that almost all army defectors are Sunnis, who make up the bulk of Syria's conscript armed forces but not its core, which is Alawite. The June 2012 defection of a MiG-21 pilot to Jordan was an embarrassment for the Asad regime, since it marked the first time that an Air Force officer had flown a fighter plane outside the country to seek political asylum. Reportedly, there are many Sunni pilots in the Syrian Air Force. According to one report, "Nearly all commanding officers in the air force are Alawites, and the defection generated speculation that Sunni pilots would face new restrictions on any flying missions."¹⁵
- **Sunni Rebel Tactics and Arms Supply.** Over time the military efficacy of Syrian rebel fighters nominally affiliated with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) appears to be increasing due to both external assistance and their own capabilities. However, opposition militias still lack national coordination, and this limits their ability to move beyond local operations. As of late June 2012, there are over 100 Syrian opposition militias fighting government forces. Each militia has anywhere from a few dozen up to 1,000 fighters in its ranks.¹⁶ Various reports suggest that rebel groups hold some Syrian territory, particularly in the far northern areas of the country where some groups have set up committees to provide social services to area residents, such as fuel and food distribution. However, unlike in Libya, rebel groups do not hold a single, contiguous area that can be effectively defended. Some rebel fighters are receiving salaries ranging between \$25 to \$200 a month and funded either by foreign nations (Saudi Arabia, Qatar) or by Syrians expatriates. Smugglers operating on Turkish-Syrian border are allegedly funneling weapons, cash, and supplies to militias in greater quantities than ever.¹⁷ Overall, Syrian opposition fighters, emboldened by their

¹³ According to one report, Syrian air power is limited with up to half of all fighter and helicopters fully operational at any one time. See, "Slipping Out of Assad's Grasp Syrian Army Unable to Stop Flood of Deserters," *Der Spiegel*, June 11, 2012.

¹⁴ "Shabiha Militiamen, Tools of the Syria Regime," *Agence France Presse*, June 10, 2012.

¹⁵ "Syrian Air Force Pilot's Defection Raises Concerns for Military," *New York Times*, June 22, 2012.

¹⁶ "Syria rebels Divided, at Times Violent," *Associated Press*, June 21, 2012.

¹⁷ According to one account, "The first large consignment [of weapons] was handed over more than two months ago and was distributed to select groups operating in and around Idlib, Hama, Homs and the outskirts of Damascus. Each area received several hundred rocket-propelled grenade launchers (with 10 grenades per launcher), Kalashnikov rifles, BKC machine guns and ammunition, according to several sources. The goods are ferried across the border on donkeys, (continued...)"

successes and new weapons, have engaged more openly against government forces, striking at armored units and probing more closely to core elements of the regime ensconced in the capital. Rebel fighters have become particularly adept at using road-side bombs¹⁸, and rocket propelled grenade launchers against armored vehicles.

The International Dimension of the Syria Conflict

Beyond the conflict's internal combatants, there are many international and regional dimensions to the fighting in Syria. At the United Nations Security Council, Russia and China have opposed foreign military intervention in Syria. Both apparently fear that authorizing another intervention along the lines of the 2011 NATO operation against the Qadhafi regime in Libya—which they claim exceeded its initial U.N. mandate—could expand the scope of legal justification for future Western-led action in areas Russia and China view as lying within their respective spheres of influence. Russia and China argue that in Libya, the West pursued regime change under the guise of humanitarian intervention, a precedent they view as dangerous. Moreover, for Russia, Syria is a longtime Arab client dating back to the Cold War, and Russian leaders would likely view the downfall of the regime as a serious blow to their diplomatic prestige and Middle Eastern/Mediterranean¹⁹ influence and military access. Although Russia supported the recent U.N. cease-fire, it has blamed Syrian rebels for escalating the violence and has called on them to disarm and participate in a regime-led reform process.

The fighting in Syria also reflects the regional tensions between Sunni and Shia Muslims, Arabs and Kurds, and Arabs and Iranians that have shaped events in Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain in recent years. Gulf Arab states such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar have advocated openly for armed support to Syrian rebels, hoping that the overthrow of the Syrian government would empower Syrian Sunnis and break Syria's alliance with their rivals in Iran. On the other side, Iran, in an attempt to maintain its alliance with its strongest Arab ally, has reportedly given the Asad government ample support over the past year, including weapons, cash, training, Internet surveillance equipment, and assistance in evading oil sanctions.²⁰ Hezbollah in Lebanon also may be aiding the Asad government, and the Shiite-dominated government in Iraq may be purposely turning a blind eye to Iranian arms shipments crossing its territory or air space into Syria.²¹

(...continued)

as well as physically carried in by the rebels." See, "Opening the Weapons Tap: Syria's Rebels Await Fresh and Free Ammo," *Time.com*, June 22, 2012.

¹⁸ According to one report, rebel use of roadside bombs has nearly doubled in 2012 compared to 2011, though the numbers that percentage is based on are classified. See, "Rebels Show 'Huge Growth' In Capability," *USA Today*, July 10, 2012.

¹⁹ For over 40 years, Russia has retained access to a port facility in the Syrian coastal city of Tartus. It has leased this facility from the Syrian government since 1971, and there have been many reports suggesting that this naval facility is key to extending Russian military influence in the Mediterranean. Other reports suggest that the port facility is sparsely used and is more a symbol of former Soviet Union military power. See, "How Vital is Syria's Tartus Port to Russia?" *BBC*, June 27, 2012.

²⁰ "Tanker with Syrian oil passes through Egypt's Suez," *Reuters*, April 3, 2012.

²¹ According to one report, the Iraqi government has refused U.S. requests to stop Iranian cargo flights to Syria, despite being aware of credible intelligence that the planes are transporting weapons. See, "Iraq resists U.S. prod, lets Iran fly arms to Syria," *The Washington Times*, March 16, 2012.

The United States and members of the European Union have placed strong sanctions on the Syrian government, but have stopped short of offering direct lethal assistance to opposition groups out of fear that more weaponry would only exacerbate the violence. Overarching concerns about ongoing nuclear negotiations with Iran and about regional stability also are shaping U.S. and European calculations. The United States and the European Union have supported the U.N.-backed Annan plan and have supported the June 30 Contact Group's call for a transition government. Both U.S. and European officials have worked together at the United Nations to compel Syrian cooperation to the Annan plan, though these efforts have been stymied by Russia and China.

Key International Actors involved in the conflict in Syria include:

The United Nations

With the United States, NATO, and the Arab League unwilling to militarily intervene in Syria and unable to force President Assad to step down through diplomatic pressure, many countries have somewhat skeptically backed a plan brokered by U.N. and Arab League joint Special Envoy Kofi Annan. The plan seeks to supply humanitarian relief to embattled population centers and establish a long-term cease-fire, monitored by an international observer mission. These measures would support the opening of a national dialogue on Syria's political future. On March 21, 2012, the Security Council endorsed Annan's Six-Point-Plan for Syria, which specifically calls for

- A Syrian-led political process to address the aspirations and concerns of the Syrian people;
- A U.N.-supervised cessation of armed violence in all its forms by all parties to protect civilians;
- All parties to ensure provision of humanitarian assistance to all areas affected by the fighting, and to implement a daily two-hour humanitarian pause;
- Authorities to intensify the pace and scale of release of arbitrarily detained persons;
- Authorities to ensure freedom of movement throughout the country for journalists; and
- Authorities to respect freedom of association and the right to demonstrate peacefully.

In mid-April, the Syrian government accepted the cease-fire, but reserved the right to respond to what it described as "terrorist attacks" and began withdrawing some heavy weapons from urban conflict zones. On April 14, the U.N. Security Council passed Resolution 2042, which approved the deployment of a U.N. advance team of 30 military observers to Syria. It also demanded that the Syrian authorities withdraw security forces from population centers and begin a dialogue with the opposition. The vote marked the first time since protests began that the Security Council was united in demanding a halt to the violence. On April 21, the Security Council passed Resolution 2043, which established—for a 90-day period—a United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS) with an initial deployment of up to 300 unarmed military observers under the command of a Chief Military Observer. The resolution also created a civilian team to help implement elements of the full peace plan, such as the start of a national political dialogue and the government's granting of the right to demonstrate.

However, by late May it had become evident that Syrian government forces were not abiding by the cease-fire and were obstructing U.N. observations. Days after a reported massacre in the Houla region on May 25 that many in the opposition believe was committed by Shabiha killing squads, the Free Syrian Army announced that the Asad regime was in violation of the cease-fire and that FSA forces would resume fighting. U.N. officials attempting to salvage the Annan plan subsequently warned that Syria was spiraling toward civil war.

Despite the subsequent suspension of the UNSMIS observation mission on June 16, U.N. officials are still determined to use the Annan plan as the blueprint for addressing the conflict. The United Nations has sought to establish a “contact group” of various key countries to help pressure both the Asad government and rebel fighters to cease fighting. Some foreign nations wish to strengthen the Annan plan by adding punitive measures under Article 41 of the U.N. Charter for non-compliance. On June 30 in Geneva, Switzerland, the Action Group²² on Syria issued a communiqué²³ endorsing the Annan peace plan and calling for a transitional government of national unity in Syria that could include members of the opposition and of the current regime.

Russia

As previously mentioned, Russia opposes international military intervention in Syria, fearing that such a precedent could theoretically be used against it should it need to respond to possible future domestic insurgencies with violence. In general, Russia also fears the rise of Islamist extremist movements and such movements’ potential to foster instability in the Russian homeland, specifically the northern Caucasus. For these reasons and others, Russia has opposed harsh international sanctions and intervention against the Asad regime. However, Russian officials have not unequivocally backed Asad. Some experts believe that Russian interests lie in the preservation of a friendly central government irrespective of its leader. According to Russia’s Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov, “We have never said or insisted that Assad necessarily had to remain in power at the end of the political process....This issue has to be settled by the Syrians themselves.” It is unclear how Russian officials plan on preserving their influence inside Syria should Asad’s position erode. According to one report, “The Russian objective is still to control regime change without the collapse of the state while preserving Russian interests via a new government composed of the opposition and a part of the current regime whose hands are not yet tainted with blood.”²⁴

In the summer of 2012, Russia has continued to obstruct any international attempts to adopt more punitive measures against the Asad regime while simultaneously playing a more active mediating role between Asad and the opposition. Russia has supported the Annan plan and was one of the main forces influencing its adoption. It also has supported the Action Group on Syria’s June 30 Communiqué calling for the formation of a transitional government formed on the basis of mutual

²² Action Group members include: the five permanent members of the Security Council (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States of America) and representatives from Turkey, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, the European Union, and the Arab League. As part of a compromise over the formation of the group, Iran and Saudi Arabia were excluded from participating. The Syrian government has accused Saudi Arabia of shipping arms to rebels while the opposition has accused Iran of supporting the Asad regime.

²³

http://www.unog.ch/unog/website/news_media.nsf/%28httpNewsByYear_en%29/18F70DBC923963B1C1257A2D0060696B?OpenDocument

²⁴ “Russia Talks to Syrian Dissident, Looks Beyond Assad,” *AlMonitor.com*, April 30, 2012.

consent. Russia also has been hosting various Syrian opposition parties and in July, it announced that it would not sign any new weapons deals with the Syrian government until further notice. According to one observer, “I think they are now waking up to a new reality.... They are realizing that their analysis was wrong and they have to take a new approach.... The question is, will they make a stand in Syria to the end?”²⁵

Obama Administration officials have at times tried to constructively engage Russia on resolving the Syria issue while also attempting to expose Russian military support to the Asad regime. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton criticized Russia for transferring repaired military helicopters back to Syrian control, while Russia criticized reports of third parties arming rebel factions and announced its intention to dispatch two navy ships and a contingent of marines to defend Russian naval facilities at the Syrian port of Tartus.

Table I. Recent Russian Arms Sales to Syria

Estimated Delivery	Type of Equipment	Description
2011	96k9 Pantsyr S1 ^a	Missile Air-Defense System ^b
2011	K-300P Bastion-P	Mobile Coastal Defense System ^c
2011	Yakhont/SS-N-26 ^d	Anti-Ship Cruise Missile ^e
2011	Buk-2M ^f	Medium-Range Defense Missile System
2010	Kh-31AI/AS-17	Anti-Ship Missile ^g
2007	MIG-29SMT/Fulcrum	Fighter Aircraft ^h
2006	Igla 9K38	Vehicle-Mounted Low-Altitude SAM

Source: Compiled by Jennifer Vargas. Open Sources cited include Jane’s Defence, Human Rights Watch, and Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

Notes: Weapon systems use Russian not NATO designations.

- a. Alternative spelling: Pantsir-S1E . 36 Pantsyr-S1 mobile air-defense systems were delivered between 2008 and 2011.
- b. Approximately 700 surface-to-air missiles intended for use with the Pantsyr mobile air-defense systems were delivered between 2008 and 2011.
- c. 2 Bastion-P mobile coastal defense systems were delivered from 2010 to 2011.
- d. Alternative spelling:Yakhont SS-N-26 Strobile.
- e. 72 anti-ship cruise missiles were delivered from 2010 to 2011. They were intended for use with the Bastion-P coastal defense system.
- f. May also be referred to as “ Ural 9K40.”
- g. 87 anti-ship missiles were delivered from 2009 to 2010.
- h. 24 MIG-29 fighter aircraft were ordered in 2007 (delivery pending).

²⁵ “For Putin, Principle vs. Practicality on Syria,” *New York Times*, July 4, 2012.

Turkey

Turkey is another important external player in Syria. Before the Arab Spring, Turkish-Syrian ties were strong, but over the course of several months in 2011, Turkey gradually turned against the Asad regime because its leaders perceived that Asad was essentially uncooperative with Turkish and other international efforts to help broker an end to violence through political reform.²⁶ Turkey also may have calculated that continued support for a regime viewed throughout the region as brazenly repressing the will of its people could have harmed its regional prestige. Turkish leaders have approached Arab countries in transition by marketing Turkey as a possible model for democracy and liberal values in the Muslim Middle East.²⁷

Turkey's leaders say that they do not have sectarian interests in Syria, but many analysts assert that the stance of Turkey—a Sunni-majority country—is affected by the Asad regime's disproportionate targeting of Sunni Muslims.²⁸ Turkey currently hosts the leadership of the dissident Free Syrian Army as well as over 30,000 Syrian refugees who have fled the fighting, primarily from Idlib governorate. Turkey hosted a Friends of Syria conference in early April 2012 (see inset) and reportedly favors the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood over other Syrian political opposition groups.²⁹ Some reports now suggest that Turkey-based opposition fighters may be receiving weapons and training, allegedly with the support of Turkish officials.³⁰

Some clashes between rebels and regime soldiers have spilled over the Turkish-Syrian border, leading Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan to warn Syria that his government was considering taking certain steps, including measures they [the Asad government] “don't want to think about.” As a NATO member, Turkey, if attacked by Syria, could invoke Article 5 of the NATO treaty, which relates to (but does not require) collective self defense by NATO members, including the United States. However, Turkey may be unwilling to initiate a military operation against Syria unless the violence there becomes so destabilizing to Turkey that its leaders feel compelled to act. A unilateral Turkish invasion of Syria would present extremely complicated political and military questions regarding the scope and goals of the operation, its motives (establishing a safe zone/humanitarian corridor or overthrowing the regime), and its justification. Such an operation could endanger Turkey's domestic security and economic well-being and further polarize its politics, while also damaging its regional and international profile. Military intervention in Syria could necessitate a massive commitment of resources to an open-ended

²⁶ Like the European Union and others, Turkey has imposed sanctions on Syria. In November 2011, Turkey suspended the Turkish-Syrian High Level Strategic Cooperation Council; introduced travel bans on several Syrian officials and businessmen and froze their assets in Turkey. It also canceled the sale of arms and military equipment to the Syrian military. Turkey suspended its ties with the Central Bank of Syria and the Commercial Bank of Syria, froze the financial assets of the Syrian Government in Turkey, and abolished a Turkish Ex-imbank loan agreement for the financing of infrastructure projects in Syria. In March 2012, Turkey recalled its ambassador to Syria and suspended all diplomatic work and services at the Turkish Embassy in Damascus. See, Open Source Center, “OSC Report: Annan Plan Dampens Turkey's Hopes of Syrian Regime Change,” April 30, 2012, Document ID# GMP20120430744001.

²⁷ See CRS Report R41368, *Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

²⁸ In Turkey's Hatay province bordering Syria, there are hundreds of thousands of Arabic-speaking Alawi Muslims, a Turkish offshoot Shiite sect similar to the Alawite sect in Syria. Some fear that sectarian conflict in Syria could spill over into Turkey. Turkey also has millions of Turkish and Kurdish-speaking Alevi Muslims, another distant branch of Shiism with a mix of Sufi Muslim traditions. See, “Turmoil in Syria: Border Clashes Lift Turk Minority Fears,” *Wall Street Journal Europe*, April 10, 2012.

²⁹ Bayram Balci, “Turkey's Relations with the Syrian Opposition,” Carnegie Endowment, Commentary, April 13, 2012.

³⁰ Michael Weiss, “Syrian rebels say Turkey is arming and training them,” *Daily Telegraph Blog (UK)*, May 22, 2012.

operation, including a possible long-term occupation by ground forces. Turkey would not want to bear that burden alone.

Turkey may continue to support Syrian opposition groups, though some secular Syrian dissidents are wary of Turkish support of the Muslim Brotherhood. Moreover, Turkish leaders fear that the Syria uprising, no matter how it is resolved, may stir up Kurdish nationalism in Turkey—potentially a major problem given the significant population of Kurds in Turkey’s southeastern region and major urban centers (Kurds make up 15%-20% of Turkey's population).

The Erdogan government has worked on and off over the past nine years to accommodate Kurdish cultural, political, and economic demands and alleviate separatist sentiment, and it hopes to resolve Kurds’ grievances further within the next year through a new national constitution. It would not want to see those efforts permanently unravel should Syria’s Kurds, believed to be aided by the Asad regime in response to Turkey’s support of the Syrian opposition, become more instrumental in rallying Kurdish separatist sentiment in Turkey.³¹

Finally, if Turkey were to act more aggressively toward Syria and violate its territorial integrity, President Asad could openly retaliate by hosting fighters from the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party, a U.S.-designated terrorist organization)—as his father did during the 1980s and 1990s—thus providing an additional safe haven (another is in northern Iraq) from which they could launch cross-border attacks into Turkey.³² On May 23, Turkish Interior Minister İdris Naim Şahin said, “Syria is turning a blind eye to terrorist groupings in areas close to the border to put Turkey in difficulty and perhaps as a way to take revenge on Turkey.”³³

Iran

Iran, one of Syria's few strategic allies, fears that this alliance is likely to dissolve outright if the predominately Sunni opposition succeeds in changing Syria's regime. Iran's relationship with Syria is key to Iran's efforts to support Hezbollah in Lebanon. Syria is the transit point for Iranian weapons shipments to Hezbollah, and both countries see that group as leverage against Israel to achieve their regional and territorial aims. Iran supplies Syria with weaponry and, according to one report, Iranian Major General Qasem Soleimani, Commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps - Qods Force, traveled to Syria in January 2012 and pledged to send more military aid to Syria.³⁴ As international isolation of Syria has grown since unrest began there, the regime’s dependency on Iran for diplomatic, economic, and military support has increased. In a recent interview, President Asad remarked that “We highly appreciate the realistic stance of an important regional country such as Iran.... “As long as Syria’s stability is important for the stability in the region and the world, wise governments should spare no effort to safeguard Syria’s stability.”³⁵

As the crisis in Syria worsens, some experts question whether Iran will continue to throw its total support to the Asad regime or instead pursue alternatives that would retain its influence in Syria even after a change in government. According to Mohammad Saleh Sedghian of the Tehran-based

³¹ Soner Cagaptay, “Syria and Turkey: The PKK Dimension,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch #1919, April 5, 2012.

³² Ibid.

³³ Associated Press, “Turkey says Syria is helping PKK terrorists,” May 23, 2012.

³⁴ “News in Depth: Iran's Spymaster Counters U.S. Moves in the Mideast,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 5, 2012.

³⁵ “Assad, in Taped TV Interview, Calls Iran a Wise Friend,” *New York Times*, June 28, 2012.

Arabic Centre for Iranian Studies, “I believe that Iran does not back Assad as much as it backs the political regime in Syria though there are very strong ties between the Assad family and the Islamic revolution which goes back to more than 30 years....[Iran would deal with a new leader on] condition the new government maintains Syria's constants, which are the backing of Hezbollah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad and opposition to Israel.”³⁶ Others analysts disagree. Andrew Tabler of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy wrote, “Yet no matter how much outside observers may believe that Iran could best advance its interests by supporting a ‘soft landing’ in Syria, Tehran's actual behavior indicates that it supports Assad's ‘hard landing’ approach -- that is, shooting the population into submission.”³⁷

U.S. Policy Toward Syria

U.S. policy toward Syria since the 1980s has ranged from confrontation and containment to cautious engagement. Successive Congresses and Administrations have sought to end Syria's support for Hezbollah and Palestinian extremists; to encourage peace talks with Israel (which captured the Golan Heights from Syria in 1967); and to address Syria's missile stockpiles, chemical weapons, and clandestine nuclear activities. President Obama and his Administration attempted limited rapprochement with Syria in 2009 and 2010 without lasting results.

Since the uprising against the Asad regime began in March 2011, the Obama Administration has pursued the following policies toward Syria:

- **Demands for a Political Transition.** On August 18, 2011, President Obama called for the resignation of Syrian President Bashar al Asad, saying “We have consistently said that President Assad must lead a democratic transition or get out of the way. He has not led. For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside.” The President also added that the United States will not impose a transition upon Syria, stating that “What the United States will support is an effort to bring about a Syria that is democratic, just, and inclusive for all Syrians.... We will support this outcome by pressuring President Assad to get out of the way of this transition, and standing up for the universal rights of the Syrian people along with others in the international community.”
- **International Diplomacy.** U.S. officials have been vocal advocates for U.N. Security Council action to condemn the Syrian government and end the bloodshed. Although the United States has closed its embassy in Damascus and Ambassador Robert Ford has left Syria, U.S. officials are participating in efforts to improve international policy coordination and support the Syrian people, such as the Friends of Syria forum that met in Tunis in February, Istanbul in April, and Paris in July. U.S. officials have cautiously supported the Annan plan at the United Nations Security Council, though reports suggest that the United States had sought more robust measures that were obstructed by Russia and China. With Russia and China continuing to threaten a Security Council veto over any resolution that they perceive as unduly pressuring or punishing the Asad regime,

³⁶ “Syria has Friend indeed in Iran: Analysts,” *Agence France Presse*, June 13, 2012.

³⁷ Andrew J. Tabler, “Annan's Syria Action Group A Hopeful Sign,” Policy Alert from the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 27, 2012.

the Obama Administration has pointed blame at Russia and China for allowing regime-instigated violence against Syrian civilians to continue.

- **U.S. Sanctions.** Since the beginning of the uprising, the Obama Administration has significantly expanded U.S. sanctions against the regime and its supporters. The Treasury Department has designated dozens of individuals and entities, freezing any U.S.-based assets of theirs and denying them access to the U.S. financial system. For more background on U.S. sanctions, please see **Appendix**.
- **Non Lethal Aid.** In 2012, Obama Administration officials have acknowledged that the United States is providing peaceful elements of the Syrian opposition with non-lethal assistance, such as medical supplies, night-vision goggles, and communications equipment. According to one report, such aid includes tools to circumvent regime Internet censorship, such as anonymizing software and satellite phones with GPS capabilities.³⁸ A recent *Time* article reports that the Administration has been providing media-technology training to Syrian dissidents who have received U.S. State Department-administered Internet Freedom Grants.³⁹
- **Intelligence Coordination.** According to open source reports, U.S. intelligence officers are helping to coordinate the delivery of lethal aid to elements of the armed Syrian opposition not affiliated with terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda and its affiliates. One report states that Central Intelligence Agency officers located in southern Turkey are vetting rebel groups for ties to known terrorist organizations in order to “learn more about a growing, changing opposition network inside of Syria and to establish new ties.”⁴⁰ U.S. intelligence officers, in conjunction with foreign governments, also may be helping the opposition develop logistical routes for moving supplies into Syria.⁴¹
- **Contingency Planning.** Though the Administration has not indicated its readiness to intervene militarily in Syria anytime soon, reports suggest that the U.S. military has developed contingency plans for various types of interventions. Reportedly, such planning includes implementing a no-fly zone and protecting chemical and biological sites should Syrian forces protecting them dissipate.⁴²
- **Humanitarian Aid.** To date, the United States has pledged a total of nearly \$52 million in humanitarian aid to international organizations seeking to provide relief to Syrians. This aid includes \$16.5 million to the World Food Program (WFP); \$8.5 million to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); \$14.9 million to non-governmental organizations (NGOs); \$8 million to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC); \$3 million to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA); \$750,000 to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF); and

³⁸ “US Provides Communications Aid for Syria Opponents,” *Agence France Presse*, June 14, 2012.

³⁹ “Hillary’s Little Startup: How the U.S. Is Using Technology to Aid Syria’s Rebels,” *Time.com*, June 13, 2012.

⁴⁰ The report also noted that Administration was deciding whether to provide rebels with satellite imagery and intelligence on Syrian troop locations and movements. See, “C.I.A. Said to Aid in Steering Arms to Syrian Opposition,” *New York Times*, June 21, 2012.

⁴¹ “U. S. Stepping Up Efforts To Organize Syria Rebels,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 14, 2012.

⁴² “U.S. Military Completes Planning For Syria,” *Security Clearance (CNN.com)*, June 14, 2012.

\$500,000 to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.⁴³ It also includes \$12 million in assistance pledged by the United States to the Group of Friends of the Syrian People.

Issues Before Congress

U.S. officials have described the choices they face with regard to Syria as “extremely challenging.”⁴⁴ U.S. concerns about regional security and state-sponsored terrorism are exacerbated by the potential for inconclusive unrest or drastic political change in Syria. The continued spillover effects of the violence raise unique questions with regard to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Israel. Larger refugee flows, sectarian conflict, and transnational violence by non-state actors are among the contingencies that concern policy makers in relation to these countries. A host of concerns stem from reports by U.S. officials that violent extremist groups are operating in Syria and seeking to benefit from the crisis. The security of Syrian conventional and chemical weapons stockpiles has already become a regional concern, which would grow if a security vacuum emerges. Many observers also worry that an escalation in fighting or swift regime change could generate new pressures on minority groups or lead to wider civil or regional conflict.

Members of Congress and Administration officials are now considering these issues as they debate U.S. policy options regarding the Syrian crisis. At the strategic level, the United States has faced the choice of seeking an immediate end to violence to protect civilians or embracing the opposition’s calls for regime change in Syria as a guarantee of longer-term stability. The prospect of weakening Iran’s regional influence also makes regime change attractive to some policy makers. The Obama Administration and some in Congress have already made the strategic choice to call for Asad’s resignation and a political transition in Syria. While regime change in Syria may benefit the United States and its allies by weakening Iran, seeking it also may complicate efforts to achieve an immediate ceasefire and protect Syrian civilians, because it could encourage Syrian authorities and their allies to take a zero-sum approach to the crisis. However, the Asad government’s rule in Syria has long been based on the actual or implied use of violence to suppress political opposition. As such, seeking an immediate end to the conflict may not defuse the domestic political crisis or end the threat of violence against Syrian civilians. Key policy questions at present concern how best to minimize threats to Syrian civilians while achieving political change conducive to stability in Syria and security in the region.

Humanitarian Conditions and Refugees

In cities and governorates where fighting has been the most intense—namely Homs, Idlib, Hamah, and Dara’a (see **Figure 2**, above)—numerous eyewitness accounts described besieged urban areas as humanitarian disaster zones, in which residents of entire neighborhoods have periodically been cut off from food, fuel, medical care, and water. Reports suggest that the

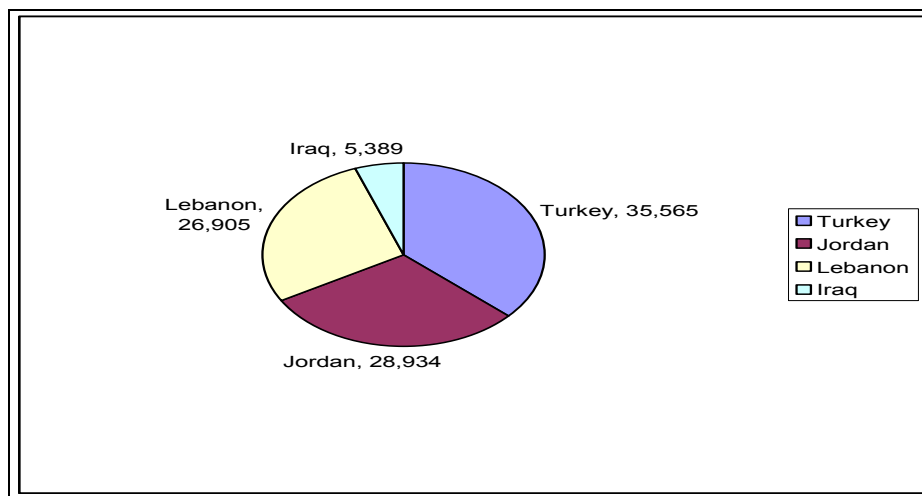
⁴³ See, “U.S. Humanitarian Aid Reaching Syria and Neighboring Countries,” U.S. State Department Press Releases And Documents, June 8, 2012.

⁴⁴ U.S. Central Command Commander General James Mattis, Statement before Senate Armed Services Committee, March 6, 2012.

government has deployed snipers, severed utilities and access to civilian areas, and used heavy weapons such as tanks and artillery to bombard residential areas.

As of late June 2012, there were approximately over 90,000 Syrian refugees in neighboring countries registered with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and tens of thousands of more Syrian refugees who are unregistered. The UNHCR named Panos Moutzias as Regional Refugee Coordinator for Syria and has launched an appeal for \$84 million to support operations for Syrian refugees.

Figure 3. Registered Syrian Refugees



Source: The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Notes: The figures for Turkey are provided by the Government of Turkey. In Jordan, an additional 2,506 persons are awaiting registration and up to 50,000 have been identified by local organizations as being in need of assistance. In Lebanon, an additional 2,000 Syrian refugees in Tripoli, and 1,500 in Bekaa are being assisted pending registration. In Iraq, 347 Syrian refugees await registration.

Security of Syrian Weapons of Mass Destruction Questioned

U.S. and Israeli officials are publicly communicating their assessments of and concerns about the extent, security, and potential unrest-related implications of Syria's reported WMD programs and stockpiles. U.S. officials have expressed confidence that they have a reliable estimate of the quantities and locations of Syrian chemical weapons and have indicated that the "extensive network" of related facilities is being monitored via unspecified means.⁴⁵ Since late 2011, named and unnamed Israeli officials have voiced similar concerns about "huge stockpiles"⁴⁶ of chemical

⁴⁵ In February, Assistant Secretary of State for Verification, Compliance, and Implementation Rose Gottemoeller said, "We have ideas as to quantity. We have ideas as to where they are." Quoted in Lachlan Carmichael, "U.S. concerned about Syrian chemical arms, missiles," Agence France Presse (AFP), February 15, 2012. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper referred to an extensive network of Syrian chemical weapons facilities in testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee on February 16, 2012. See also Jay Solomon and Adam Entous, "U.S. Steps Up Watch of Syria Chemical Weapons," *Wall Street Journal*, February 15, 2012; and, Jay Solomon, "U.S., Israel Monitor Suspected Syrian WMD," *Wall Street Journal*, August 27, 2011.

⁴⁶ Major-General Amir Eshel, head of the Israeli military's planning division, quoted in "Israel Fears Syrian 'Chemical, Biological' Weapons," *NOW Lebanon*, January 17, 2012.

weapons in Syria and have warned that Israel will consider any indication that the Asad regime is transferring WMD materials to Hezbollah or other non-state actors to be an act of war.⁴⁷

Open source reporting on Syria's chemical weapons program suggests that nerve gas and mustard gas production and storage infrastructure is concentrated at facilities in and around Al Safira (southeast of Aleppo), Damascus, Hamah, Latakia, and Homs.⁴⁸ Stockpiles also may be dispersed in other military locations around the country. As the recent discovery of undeclared chemical weapons material in Libya has shown, there are limits to the ability of international intelligence agencies and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to understand and verify the extent of sensitive WMD programs, even when dealing with countries that have ratified international conventions on WMD—which Syria has not.⁴⁹

The Asad regime likely places greater emphasis on ensuring the loyalty of military units involved in guarding elements of WMD programs because of the weapons' relevance as a potential deterrent against foreign attack. In the wake of any sudden regime collapse, efforts to find and secure stockpiles would be both a high priority and a difficult challenge. Neighboring intelligence services in Turkey, Jordan, and Israel may have more insight on the extent of these programs and related security challenges than the U.S. government. Elements of the Syrian military may be in a position to aid in securing materials and sites in the event of regime change, but it remains unclear whether an orderly or chaotic transition situation might ensue and whether such units would be cooperative or antagonistic toward outsiders. According to some press reports, internal U.S. government assessments estimate that as many as 75,000 military personnel could be required to fully secure various WMD-related sites in Syria.⁵⁰

Al Qaeda and Violent Extremists: New Opportunities in Syria?

U.S. officials state that the violence and disorder paralyzing Syria appears to be creating opportunities for Al Qaeda operatives or other violent Islamist extremists to infiltrate the country and conduct or plan attacks.⁵¹ According to Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, "Sunni extremists" have infiltrated Syrian opposition groups, which may be unaware of the infiltration. These extremists may or may not be affiliated with Al Qaeda in Iraq, where reports suggest that violent extremist operations have declined in some areas, a trend which some Iraqi officials attribute to personnel moving from Iraq to Syria. In July 2012, Iraqi Foreign Minister stated that "We have solid information and intelligence that members of al-Qaeda terrorist networks have gone in the other direction, to Syria, to help, to liaise, to carry out terrorist attacks.... Most of the suicide bombers, foreign fighters, elements of al-Qaeda used to slip into

⁴⁷ U.S. Open Source Center Report GMP20120201736004, "Israeli Official: Chemical Weapons From Syria to Hezbollah 'Declaration of War,'" *Yisra'el Hayom* (Tel Aviv), February 1, 2012.

⁴⁸ Rachel Oswald, "U.S. Watching Syrian Chemical Arms Amid Fear of Attack, Diversion," *Global Security Newswire*, December 5, 2011.

⁴⁹ Syria has signed but not ratified the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC). Syria has not signed or ratified the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC).

⁵⁰ Barbara Starr, "Military: Thousands of troops needed to secure Syrian chemical sites," *CNN.com*, February 22, 2012.

⁵¹ In April 2012, Abdel Ghani Jawhar, a leader of the Lebanese Sunni fundamentalist terror group Fatah al-Islam, died in the Syrian city of Qsair. Jawhar, who had recently traveled to Syria from Lebanon, had been preparing an explosive device to be used against the Syrian army. See, "In Syria, Lebanon's Most Wanted Sunni Terrorist Blows Himself Up," *Time.com*, April 23, 2012.

Iraq from Syria. So they know the routes and the connections.”⁵² U.S. officials have warned that there is no readily identifiable successor or alternative to the Asad government and that violent extremist organizations could exploit a power vacuum in Syria. On May 10, 2012, near-simultaneous double suicide attacks outside a military intelligence building killed 55 people. A Sunni Jihadist group calling itself *Jabhat al Nusra li ahl al Sham* (The Front to Protect the Syrian People) claimed responsibility for the bombings. The same group has claimed responsibility for three other attacks in Damascus and Aleppo this year.

Congressional Views of the Syria Conflict

The Syrian government’s continuing use of lethal force against civilians refocused congressional attention on the basic tenets of U.S. policy toward Syria. This policy has traditionally shifted between confrontation and limited engagement, and now appears committed—at least rhetorically—to regime change. Some Members of Congress and nongovernmental observers argue that recent violence demonstrates the futility of expecting any substantive reform by Syrian authorities and suggests that U.S. policy should more aggressively move toward confrontation in pursuit of the stated U.S. goal of regime change. Others have expressed wariness about the potential implications of regime change for regional security, particularly in light of the delicate sectarian balance in the Levant and a lack of established U.S. relationships with government and nongovernment actors in Syria. Proponents and skeptics of regime change have urged a continuation of efforts to increase multilateral political condemnation of and economic pressure on the Asad regime, for example through U.N.-backed sanctions or arms embargoes. The Administration has continued to expand U.S. sanctions on Syria while advocating further multilateral sanctions.

Debating Intervention and other Options

It is unclear how the United States or other parties can hasten an end to the violence in Syria. A commitment of major military and economic resources could prove decisive or could prolong the confrontation by leading others to offer counter-support for the Asad government. According to a Pew Research Center for the People & the Press poll released in March, almost two-thirds of Americans oppose any form of U.S. military intervention in Syria.⁵³ Critics of intervention highlight the potential risks of becoming engulfed in another Middle Eastern conflict with no definitive time frame for the duration of U.S. operations. Other challenges could include uncertainty over the political goals of the opposition movement and understanding what might follow the Asad regime should it fall. Some U.S. officials believe that military intervention risks arming or otherwise empowering extremist groups. Some also are concerned about potentially unleashing a scenario that could jeopardize the Syrian military’s control over large conventional and unconventional weapons stockpiles, including chemical weapons, surface-to-surface rockets, and shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles (MANPADs).

Officials may view the Syria conflict as more of a humanitarian problem than as a direct threat to U.S. security as long as fighting in Syria remains somewhat contained. If fighting were to spill over into neighboring Turkey, Lebanon, or Jordan on a sustained or widespread basis, this

⁵² “Iraq Warns Over Al-Qaeda Flux To Syria,” *Financial Times*, July 6, 2012.

⁵³ Pew Research Center, “Little Support for U.S. Intervention in Syrian Conflict,” Released: March 15, 2012.

perception could change rapidly. Violence in the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli and in Beirut in May 2012 amplified fears that Syria's conflict could lead to sectarian confrontation in Lebanon. Similarly, the trading of accusations between Turkish and Syrian officials over relationships with Syrian rebels and Kurdish PKK fighters highlights the danger of cross-border conflict.

Members of Congress have outlined differing positions on the Syrian crisis, related U.S. interests, and preferred courses of action. Current debate focuses on the potential risks and benefits of various humanitarian or military intervention proposals and those of maintaining current sanctions and diplomacy policies. Some in Congress now argue that the United States should intervene militarily in the Syrian crisis in order to protect civilians and/or to bring about the stated U.S. goal of removing President Asad from power. Specific proposals from nongovernmental observers and Members of Congress variously call for conditionally providing weapons or other assistance to the armed Syrian opposition, carrying out air strikes to protect safe zones for civilians or armed groups, and/or establishing corridors to allow the delivery of relief.

Critics of intervention and arms supply proposals highlight potential risks related to arming opposition forces that are not unified and may include groups with extremist views or individuals who have committed human rights abuses. Others suggest that the establishment of "safe-havens" or "no-kill zones" may be viewed by the Asad government as a violation of sovereignty tantamount to a declaration of war, and thus would require the commitment of air assets and protective ground forces for an undetermined amount of time. Some organizations argue that military intervention could jeopardize the delivery of humanitarian relief by conflating relief operations with the political aims of the opposition.⁵⁴ Some in Congress oppose offering military support to opposition groups, but may favor targeting the Syrian government and its supporters with new U.S. or multilateral sanctions tied to progress toward the ceasefire and negotiated solution called for under the U.N.-backed Annan plan. Providing greater humanitarian support to Syrian civilians through neutral channels also remains an option, but may do little to change basic conditions in Syria or shape the calculations of combatants. The textbox below summarizes legislation introduced in the 112th Congress that seeks to address the unrest and conflict in Syria. **Table A-1** in the **Appendix** summarizes U.S. sanctions activity since the start of the Syria uprising in March 2011.

⁵⁴ For a summary of these views, see Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), "Briefing: Why humanitarians wary of 'humanitarian corridors,'" March 19, 2012.

Syria Legislation in the 112th Congress

The following legislation introduced in the 112th Congress addresses the current situation in Syria.

Bills

- H.R. 2105, The Iran, North Korea, and Syria Nonproliferation Reform and Modernization Act of 2011—States that it shall be U.S. policy to fully implement and enforce sanctions against Iran, North Korea, and Syria for their proliferation activities and policies. Would, among other things, prohibit U.S. nuclear cooperation agreements and related export licenses and transfers of materials, services, and goods with a country that is assisting the nuclear program of Iran, North Korea, or Syria, or is transferring advanced conventional weapons to such countries.
- H.R. 2106, The Syria Freedom Support Act—Would, among other things, sanction the development of petroleum resources of Syria, the production of refined petroleum products in Syria, and the exportation of refined petroleum products to Syria.
- H.R. 5993, The Syria Non-Intervention Act of 2012 —Would prohibit the use of funds available to the Department of Defense or an element of the intelligence community for the purpose of, or which would have the effect of supporting, directly or indirectly, military or paramilitary operations in Syria by any nation, group, organization, movement, or individual.
- S. 1048, The Iran, North Korea, and Syria Sanctions Consolidation Act of 2011—Amends the Iran, North Korea, and Syria Nonproliferation Act to include in the scope of such act a person that (1) acquired materials mined or extracted within North Korea's territory or control; or (2) provided shipping services for the transportation of goods to or from Iran, North Korea, or Syria relating to such countries' weapons of mass destruction programs, support for acts of international terrorism, or human rights abuses. Excludes from such provisions shipping services for emergency or humanitarian purposes.
- S. 1472, The Syria Sanctions Act of 2011—Denies companies that conduct business in Syria's energy sector (investment, oil purchases, and sale of gasoline) access to U.S. financial institutions and requires federal contractors to certify that they are not engaged in sanctionable activity.
- S. 2034, Syria Human Rights Accountability Act of 2012—Imposes sanctions on persons who are responsible for or complicit in certain human rights abuses. Also prohibits procurement contracts with persons that export sensitive technology to Syria.
- S. 2101, Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Human Rights Act of 2012—Imposes, among other things, sanctions with respect to certain persons who are responsible for or complicit in human rights abuses committed against citizens of Syria or their family members.
- S. 2152, Syria Democracy Transition Act of 2012—Imposes, among other things, sanctions on foreign financial institutions that conduct transactions with the central bank of Syria.
- S. 2224, To require the President to report to Congress on issues related to Syria — Directs the President to report to Congress regarding (1) opposition groups operating inside or outside of Syria to oppose the Syrian government, and (2) the size and security of conventional and non-conventional weapons stockpiles in Syria.

Resolutions

- H.Res. 296 (S.Res. 180 in the Senate), A Resolution Expressing support for peaceful demonstrations and universal freedoms in Syria and condemning the human rights violations by the Asad Regime—Among other things, it urges the “President to continue to work with the European Union, the Government of Turkey, the Arab League, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and other allies and partners to bring an end to human rights abuses in Syria, hold the perpetrators accountable, and support the aspirations of the people of Syria.”
- H.Res. 632, A Resolution that, among other things, commends the leadership of the Government of Turkey in calling for an end to the violence in Syria and for its responsiveness to the humanitarian needs of Syrian refugees.
- H.Res. 687, A Resolution that, among other things, calls on the United Nations Security Council, based on evidence that crimes against humanity have been perpetrated by Syrian government forces, to refer the situation of Syria to the International Criminal Court.
- S.Res. 370 (H.Res. 549 in the House), calling for democratic change in Syria, would state the Senate's condemnation of “ongoing, widespread, and systemic violations of human rights conducted by authorities in Syria” and calls on Bashar al Asad to step down. The non-binding resolution would urge the President to support

a democratic transition in Syria, establish a Friends of Syria Contact Group, develop a strategy to encourage further military defections, and “develop a plan to identify weapons stockpiles and prevent the proliferation of conventional, biological, chemical, and other types of weapons in Syria.”

- S.Res. 379, A resolution that, among other things, expresses strong disappointment with the Governments of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China for their veto of the United Nations Security Council resolution condemning Bashar al Asad and the violence in Syria and urges them to reconsider their votes.
- S.Res. 391 (H.Res. 629 in the House), A resolution that, among other things, calls on Syria to (1) open the country to independent and foreign journalists and end its media blackout; and (2) release all detained journalists, videographers, and bloggers.
- S.Res. 424, A Resolution that, among other things, supports calls by Arab leaders to provide the people of Syria with the means to defend themselves against Bashar al-Assad and his forces, including through the provision of weapons and other material support, and calls on the President to work closely with regional partners to implement these efforts effectively; urges the President to take all necessary precautions to ensure that any support for the Syrian opposition does not benefit individuals in Syria who are aligned with al Qaeda or associated movements, or who have committed human rights abuses; and affirms that the establishment of safe havens for people from Syria, as contemplated by governments in the Middle East, would be an important step to save Syrian lives and to help bring an end to Mr. Assad’s killing of civilians in Syria, and calls on the President to consult urgently and thoroughly with regional allies on whether, how, and where to create such safe havens.
- S.Res. 428, A Resolution that, among other things, urges the President to formally establish the Atrocities Prevention Board established by Presidential Study Directive-10 in August 2011, and for the Board to provide recommendations to the President concerning the prevention of mass atrocities in Syria.
- S.Res. 435, A Resolution that, among other things, strongly urges all Governments, including those that have provided military and security equipment to the Government of Syria in the past, including the Republic of Belarus and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, to refrain from providing any additional military or security assistance to the Government of Syria.
- S.Res. 494, A Resolution that, among other things, condemns the Government of the Russian Federation for its longstanding and ongoing support for the criminal regime of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria.

Amendments

- H.Amdt. 1131 to H.R. 4310, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2013, an Amendment to limit the availability of funds for Cooperative Threat Reduction activities with Russia until the Secretary of Defense can certify that Russia is no longer supporting the Syrian regime and is not providing to Syria, North Korea, or Iran any equipment or technology that contributes to the development of weapons of mass destruction.

Appropriations

- In report language accompanying H.R. 5857, the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2013, appropriators note under the heading “Global and Regional Programs/ Middle East Response” that “The Committee is troubled by the ongoing violence in Syria and notes that funds under this heading should continue to be made available to assist the Syrian people. All funds for Syria are subject to the notification procedures of the Committees on Appropriations, pursuant to section 7015(f) of this Act.” In report language accompanying the Senate version of the bill, S. 3241, appropriators recommend \$2 million for the National Endowment for Democracy programs in Syria. According to the report, “The Committee recognizes the comparative advantages of the NED in the promotion of democracy and human rights abroad, particularly given its status as an NGO, unparalleled experience in promoting freedom during the cold war, and continued ability to conduct programs in the most hostile political environments.”

Iran Sanctions Legislation with Provisions on Syria

- H.R. 1905, the Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Human Rights Act of 2012, includes Title VII Sanctions with Respect to Human Rights Abuses in Syria. This section directs the President to identify and impose specified sanctions on: (1) Syrian government officials or persons acting on behalf of that government who are responsible for or complicit in the commission of serious human rights abuses against Syrian citizens or their family members, regardless of whether such abuses occurred in Syria; (2) persons who knowingly transfer or facilitate the transfer of goods or technologies (weapons, surveillance technology, or technology to restrict free speech or the flow of information) that are likely to be used by Syria to commit human rights abuses against the Syrian people; and (3) persons who engage in censorship that prohibits, limits, or penalizes freedom of expression by

Syrian citizens. Underlying the debate over Syria policy is a broader debate about the utility of military intervention as a means to protect civilians and whether or not such protection should be a consistent tenet of U.S. foreign policy. In broad terms, this debate reflects differences of opinion between those who embrace the principle of a so-called “responsibility to protect” and those who argue that such protection, while admirable and even desirable in some contexts, should not be endorsed in general terms because of the commitments it implies and the often unpredictable consequences of military intervention. Other broad debates concern the relative war powers and foreign affairs authorities of Congress and the President. All of these debates emerged during congressional consideration of the recent U.S. intervention in Libya and are now informed by the outcome of that conflict and the complexities of its aftermath.

Possible Questions

- What are the ultimate goals of U.S. policy toward Syria? To protect civilians? To further the opposition cause of removing President Asad from power? Can these aims be separated in principle? On the ground? What might follow Asad’s departure? Would a negotiated solution that preserved elements of the current government be acceptable to the United States? Why or why not?
- How are other countries responding to the crisis? Who is willing and able to implement various humanitarian or military intervention proposals? On what authority? With what specific resources or forces, for what period, and at what cost? How might direct or indirect military intervention affect ongoing relief and diplomacy initiatives?
- What potential risks and unintended consequences may stem from various proposals? What are the potential risks and consequences of refusing to intervene? How will regional security be affected?

Background and Key Developments

Demographic Profile and Political Dynamics⁵⁵

The Syrian population, like those of several other Middle East countries, includes different ethnic and religious groups. Under the Asad regime strict political controls have prevented these differences from playing a divisive role in political or social life. A majority of Syrians, roughly 90% of the population, are ethnic Arabs; however, the country contains small ethnic minorities, notably Kurds. Of more importance in Syria are religious sectarian differences. In addition to the majority Sunni Muslims, who comprise over 70% of the population, Syria contains several religious sectarian minorities, including three smaller Muslim sects (Alawites, Druze, and Ismailis) and several Christian denominations. Despite the secular nature of the ruling Baath party, religious sects have been important in Syria as symbols of group identity and determinants of political orientation.

Within ethnic and sectarian communities are important tribal and familial groupings that often provide the underpinning for political alliances and commercial relationships. Socioeconomic differences abound among farmers, laborers, middle-class wage earners, public sector employees, military officials, and the political and commercial elite. Finally, geographic differences and local

⁵⁵ This material draws from the work of Alfred Prados, former CRS Specialist in Middle East Affairs.

attachments divide Syrian society; for example, rivalries between Syria's two largest cities of Damascus and Aleppo, differences between rural agricultural communities and urban areas, and the isolation of Alawite communities beyond Syria's Mediterranean coast have had effects on political life. Despite being authoritarian, Syrian leaders have often found it necessary to adopt policies that accommodate, to some degree, the various power centers within the country's diverse population.

The Asad Government and its Supporters

President Bashar al Asad was ushered into power in the wake of his father's death in 2000, and was the unopposed candidate of the ruling Baath party for seven-year terms in 2000 and 2007.⁵⁶ Prior to his time in office, he had no government experience and had trained as an ophthalmologist. Until 2011, his tenure was characterized by what some observers described as a "China-style" reform strategy; Asad's government promoted some economic liberalization while offering only fleeting political reforms and cracking down on all outspoken or organized opposition. The Asads sought with some success to attract support from beyond their traditional bases in the Alawite community and the Baath party. Nevertheless, most key positions, particularly in the security sector, have remained in Alawite hands.

President Asad's approach during the uprising has been to offer limited reforms that correspond to political grievances raised prior to the uprising. These include:

- In April 2011, President Asad lifted the formal State of Emergency declaration that had been in place since 1963. The emergency rule had been used to suppress domestic dissent and was widely criticized by Syrians and external observers. In the wake of the decision, the regime continued and expanded the raids, arrests, and detentions that had been common under the emergency rules, leading to criticism that the move was cynically designed to weaken public pressure rather than to implement real change.
- In February 2012, the government held a national referendum on a new constitution designed to open the political system to competition beyond the confines of the Baath party. The exercise was widely denounced by the opposition. The constitution was approved by 89.4% of voters who cast ballots, which the government claims was 57.4% of some 14.5 million eligible voters among Syria's 23 million people. It limits the president's tenure to a maximum of two terms of seven years, but is not applied retroactively, meaning that President Asad could run for reelection when his current term expires in 2014, and, if re-elected, he could serve until 2028.
- The new constitution provided the basis for May 2012 parliamentary elections, the first that were not restricted to the Baath Party and its National Unity List

⁵⁶ The Syrian Constitution of 1973, as amended in 1984, provided for a republican government consisting of a president, up to three vice presidents appointed by the president, a cabinet, and a 250-member one-house legislature elected by adult citizens including women. Under this system, the president has been nominated by the decision-making branch of the ruling Baath Party, agreed to by the legislature, and proposed to the electorate in a referendum. In practice, power has remained concentrated in the office of the presidency and key aides, particularly with regard to all security and defense issues. "Syrians Vote For Assad in Uncontested Referendum," Associated Press, May 28, 2007.

allies. Syrian officials reported that turnout among eligible voters was 51%.⁵⁷ However, most opposition groups and figures boycotted the election, and supporters of President Asad won over 90% of the 250 seats. A handful of opposition figures were elected, and one new party gained a seat in Aleppo.

The government's use of force against protestors, armed opposition groups, and civilians has galvanized some opposition groups' demands for steps beyond the limited reforms offered to date—namely for the ouster of Asad and a comprehensive transition to a new political order. However, the Asad family and the Alawite elite that supports it have shown themselves to be unwilling to peacefully abdicate power, and may believe they have no alternative but to fight as long as their command of the military and intelligence apparatus allows.

The Alawite Community

The minority Alawite community has shown few signs of public discord, although some of its members have joined the opposition.⁵⁸ Some Alawites may feel caught between the regime's demands for loyalty and their fears of retribution from other groups in the event of regime change or civil war. Many foreign observers are debating the motivations for Alawite loyalty in this context. Some analysts suggest that fear of the military-intelligence apparatus has kept the Alawite community politically quiet if not loyal, while others posit that the growing sectarian nature of the conflict only reinforces confessional loyalties and fears. According to one Syria analyst, Professor Josh Landis at the University of Oklahoma,

The broader Alawi community is also likely to remain loyal to the regime, even as the economy deteriorates. Almost all Alawi families have at least one member in the security forces as well as additional members working in civilian ministries, such as education or agriculture. Most fear collective punishment for the sins of the Baathist era. Not only do they assume that they will suffer from wide-scale purges once the opposition wins; many also suspect that they will face prison or worse.... Many do not expect an orderly transition of power, just as many remain convinced that a spirit of revenge may guide the opposition, which has been so badly abused. In short, because the Syrian military remains able and willing to stand by the president, whether out of loyalty, self-interest or fear, the regime is likely to endure for some time.⁵⁹

The opposition Syrian National Council (SNC, see below) released a statement in late February stating that its members “consider members of the Alawite sect to be an essential element of Syria's cultural and ethnic fabric. The Alawites remain an important component of Syria, and will continue to enjoy the same rights as other citizens as we build one nation of Christians, Muslims, and other sects.”⁶⁰ Others have pledged that orderly trials and the rule of law will prevail in any post-conflict setting. However, the opposition leadership's capacity to ensure that such sentiment

⁵⁷ OSC Report GMP20120515693006, “Syrian TV Announces People's Assembly's Election Results,” Damascus Syrian Satellite Television, May 15, 2012.

⁵⁸ In January 2012, a group of Alawite intellectuals issued a statement urging “Alawite Syrians, religious and ethnic minorities afraid of the consequences of a possible fall of the regime, to participate in efforts to overturn the oppressive government and participate in the construction of a new Syrian republic based on the rule of law and citizenship.” See, “Alawite intellectuals reject sectarianism in Syria,” *Agence France Presse*, January 19, 2012.

⁵⁹ Landis, “The Syrian Uprising of 2011: Why the Asad Regime Is Likely to Survive to 2013,” *Middle East Policy*, January 2012.

⁶⁰ SNC Press Release, “SNC Extends Hand to Alawite Community in Syria,” February 26, 2012.

guides its members' actions is uncertain. According to Landis, "such assurances only go so far in calming Alawi anxieties."

Opposition and Armed Groups

Syrian opposition groups have grown more organized as the uprising has unfolded, but they remain divided over strategy, tactics, coordination, and leadership. In February, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper stated that "there is not a national movement ... there is not a unitary connected opposition force. It's very local ... on a community by community basis." According to one report:

The picture that emerges — partial and anecdotal — is of a highly decentralized, proudly local movement, distrustful of the expatriate opposition. Many activists said they wanted both Sunni empowerment and equal rights for all. If there was unanimity, it was in the fierce conviction that future leaders should come from their own ... not from exile groups, like the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and secular movements.⁶¹

During the protest stage of the uprising, "Local Coordinating Councils" active in many areas inside Syria created an informal network linking activists around the country. At present, two opposition coalition groups continue to compete for political leadership (see below).

As the unrest has moved toward greater violence and confrontation, the focus of international attention has shifted to armed opposition activists. Press coverage and anecdotal reports suggest that thousands of mostly Sunni military soldiers (perhaps as many as 60,000) have defected or deserted rather than continue following orders to enforce the crackdown. Not all of these defectors have taken up arms. As of mid-March, a total of seven Syrian generals had defected from Syria to opposition groups based in Turkey.⁶²

Divisions between internal and external opposition politicians parallel divisions between internal and external armed groups. On the ground, many volunteer fighters have organized themselves into neighborhood militias and nominally claim allegiance to the Free Syrian Army (FSA). However, it remains unclear whether FSA commanders outside Syria are able to command the loyalty of the many disparate and local resistance groups that have emerged.

More broadly, it also is unclear whether the armed resistance and the political opposition remain unified. The Assad government's assault on locally organized volunteers has led to angry recriminations by some activists inside Syria that external opposition leaders have abandoned them or are not delivering on promised assistance.⁶³ Some experts doubt whether either element of the opposition exerts any authority over the other.⁶⁴ Strong differences of opinion over the

⁶¹ "Though Disparate, Syria Rebels Tenacious Against Crackdown," *New York Times*, May 9, 2012

⁶² "Syrian Armed Forces Desertion Said to Surge to 60,000," *Bloomberg*, March 15, 2012.

⁶³ In Homs, where armed fighters had been under government siege for almost a month, one local commander of Homs Revolutionary Committee appeared in a YouTube video angrily criticizing the SNC for its insufficient support saying, "We gave you legitimacy, and we can take it away."

⁶⁴ For example, Peter Harling, a Syria analyst for the International Crisis Group, has said, "I don't think the Syrian National Council has much leverage over the Free Syrian Army, and I don't think the Free Syrian Army has much leverage itself over what is happening on the ground."

desirability of outside support also persist. This uncertainty complicates efforts by third parties to identify potential partners and plan a way forward.

- The **Free Syrian Army (FSA)** consists of lightly armed, dissident military personnel and officers who have defected and are targeting government security forces in armed attacks. It also represents a broader coalition of locally organized volunteer fighting groups who seek to affiliate themselves with the national opposition movement but lack integrated command structure, logistics, and intelligence.⁶⁵ Formal FSA forces are rumored to number in the low hundreds with possibly thousands of loosely affiliated supporters. Precise and verifiable estimates are not available. To date, the FSA's equipment has been mostly locally financed with fighters buying small arms and ammunition on the black market, and local supporters selling household valuables to raise money for the rebellion.⁶⁶ The FSA is nominally headed by a former colonel in the Syrian Air Force, Riyad al Asad (not related to the president), who defected to the opposition in mid-March 2011. FSA's military leadership is based in Turkey's Hatay province where Turkish forces maintain tight control over any cross-border activities for fear of Syrian retribution. Some observers believe that if FSA fighters were trained and equipped with more sophisticated equipment (portable and guided anti-tank rockets, Stinger missiles), they would prove to be a more formidable opponent against more heavily equipped pro-government forces.⁶⁷
- The **Syrian National Council (SNC)** was formally organized in Turkey in October 2011 and brings together a range of mostly external activists, consisting of members of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood,⁶⁸ secular elites, intellectuals, and independents. The Council has a general 270- to 310-person body and an executive committee made up of approximately 10 to 13 members. Although he recently submitted his resignation, the leader of the executive committee has been Burhan Ghalioun, a secular Sunni who teaches at the Sorbonne university in Paris.⁶⁹ On February 24, Western and Arab countries convened a "Friends of

⁶⁵ Director of National Intelligence James Clapper recently referred to the FSA as "a blanket, generic name that's sort of applied to the collection of oppositionists." Open source reporting based on interviews with Syrian opposition activists, including FSA commanders and FSA affiliates, suggests that no central FSA command structure exists that encompasses the majority of armed groups in Syria, although the mostly Sunni, locally organized volunteers in Syria's armed resistance share similar immediate goals of ending the Asad government's assaults on them and civilians. See Emile Hokayem, IISS-US Roundtable Discussion - The Syrian Uprising Seen From The Arab World, January 24, 2012; and, Al Jazeera English, "Q&A: Nir Rosen on Syria's armed opposition," February 13, 2012.

⁶⁶ Derek Henry Flood, "Inside the Free Syrian Army," *Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst*, February 24, 2012.

⁶⁷ One local militia calling itself the Farouq Brigade and fighting under the broader banner of the Free Syrian Army claims that it has been more effective in engaging government forces. According to a report, "What the Farouq fighters have found is that the Syrian army, as a force built for a potential conflict with Israel, is poorly equipped for the type of asymmetrical combat the guerillas engage in. That allows the guerillas to inflict heavy casualties on the military when the two sides engage in close combat. It is one reason the Syrian military prefers launching artillery attacks on rebel-held cities from long distances." See, "Rare inside view of Syria's rebels finds a force vowing to fight on," *McClatchy*, April 23, 2012.

⁶⁸ The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has remained in exile since the Hama massacre of 1982. Since then, membership in the group has been, according to Syrian law, a capital offense. Within the Syrian National Council, members of the Brotherhood hold 25% of the seats. Some Syrian opposition activists have accused the Brotherhood of funding its own militias on the ground. See, Yezid Sayigh, "The Coming Tests of the Syrian Opposition," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 19, 2012.

⁶⁹ In response to anger over his reelection to a third term as leader of the SNC, Ghalioun stated on May 17 that "I will not allow myself to be the candidate of division, I am not attached to a position, so I announce that I will step down (continued...)"

Syria” conference in Tunis, where they pronounced the SNC “a legitimate representative of Syrians seeking peaceful democratic change.” However, the international community has been frustrated by infighting within the SNC, its inability to attract more members of Syrian minority communities (especially Christians, Kurds, and Alawites), its inability to convince rival opposition groups to merge with it, and its perceived lack of legitimacy among Syrian protestors on the ground who remain subject to regime violence. In March 2012, several activists resigned from the SNC in protest of its decision making and a perceived lack of effectiveness. Turkey and Qatar are attempting to facilitate a new attempt at unifying the opposition. Unlike other opposition coalitions, the SNC has openly called for international intervention, though until recently it had not clearly defined what type of assistance it was seeking. This hesitation raised suspicions among some Syrians that the SNC is a tool of other regional players, such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. Although the SNC had resisted calls to turn the protest movement into an armed struggle, it has endorsed the imposition of a no-fly zone; the establishment of humanitarian safe corridors and buffer zones; and “an organized and speedy operation to arm the Free Syrian Army.” The SNC leadership is scheduled to meet in early June to select a new leader.

- The **National Coordination Body for Democratic Change (NCB)** was formed in the summer of 2011 and is a Syria-based alliance of leftist groups, Kurdish activists, and individuals associated with the 2005 Damascus Declaration on political reform. The NCB has stated a willingness to negotiate with the Asad regime (predicated on an end to the use of force against civilians) and opposes foreign intervention. The SNC has criticized the NCB for these positions, and repeated attempts to merge the two coalitions have failed. According to one report, “The group is well positioned to play an important role going forward, since it has also invested in keeping channels of communication open with Russia, visiting Moscow as recently as April 17.”⁷⁰ The NCB is also referred to in some press reports as the Syrian National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change.
- The **Local Coordination Committees (LCCs)** were formed after the uprising in Dara’a in March 2011 and continue to organize daily protests. They also track opposition activity and try to disseminate information to the international media. There is some overlap between LCC and SNC membership. The international NGO Reporters Without Borders awarded its annual “Netizen Prize” for Internet activism in March 2012 to the LCC movement for its members’ role in spreading news of Syria around the world.

Non-Alawite Minority Communities

The Kurds. Although there are Kurdish members within the opposition coalitions noted above, by and large Kurdish areas in northeastern Syria have remained fairly quiet amidst the unrest. Since its independence in 1946, Syria has defined itself as an Arab state, despite the presence of a

(...continued)

after a new candidate has been chosen, either by consensus or through new elections.”

⁷⁰ Yezid Sayigh, op.cit.

large, ethnically distinct Kurdish population in Damascus and in several non-contiguous areas along Syria's border with Turkey and Iraq. Syria's Kurds are the largest distinct ethnic/linguistic minority in Syria (7%-10% of the total population). They inhabit agriculturally rich areas, which also contain several of Syria's most valuable oil and natural gas fields. In an attempt to curb Kurdish demands for greater autonomy, successive Syrian governments since the 1950s have periodically arrested Kurdish political leaders and have co-opted certain Kurdish tribal leaders. They also have confiscated some Kurdish land and redistributed it to Syrian Arabs to try to "Arabize" Kurdish regions.

For the past year, the regime has resorted to these divide-and-rule tactics to keep Kurdish areas under control. According to Denise Natali, an expert on Kurdish politics at National Defense University, "to repress the Kurds violently would be another nail in the coffin.... It is one of the communities the regime is trying to co-opt."⁷¹ Despite their problems under the Asad regime, Kurds are wary of supporting a potential Sunni Arab resistance movement that, should it come to power, may be no less hostile to Kurdish aspirations than the Alawite-led Asad government. According to Mahmoud Othman, a Kurdish member of the Iraqi Parliament, "the Kurds in Syria have their own problems.... They are against the Asad regime. They have been for years. They have no rights. But they are not sure about which people will come after."⁷²

In May 2012, a delegation from the Syrian-Kurdish National Council (KNC), an umbrella organization consisting of several smaller Kurdish political parties, traveled to the United States for meetings with the U.S. State Department. The KNC has called for the creation of an autonomous Kurdish region within a federated Syria, a position that has put it at odds with the main Syrian opposition exile group, the Syrian National Council. It also has demanded compensation for historical Kurdish suffering and the removal of the word "Arab" from Syria's official name: the Syrian Arab Republic.

The Christian Community. Syria's various Christian communities fear that the uprising will lead to a sectarian civil war and that they could be subjected to violent repression, just as Islamist extremist groups have targeted Iraqi Christians since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Syria's Christians, consisting primarily of Greek Orthodox along with some smaller sects, comprise approximately 10% of the Syrian population. Most Syrian Christians speak Arabic and traditionally have identified with Arab nationalist movements, which they see as an alternative to Islamic fundamentalism. At the same time, like other Christians in the Middle East, many Syrian Christians feel some affinity for Europe and the United States on religious and cultural grounds. Christians have been well represented in Syrian government organizations under the Asad regime. At present, Christians appear to be taking a cautious approach to the uprising. While some have remained supportive of the Asad regime and grown more so as sectarian violence has increased, others are rumored to be assisting opposition movements, including local armed elements and the Free Syrian Army. Syria's Greek Orthodox Patriarch, Ignatius IV Hazim, patriarch of Antioch and All the East, has taken a cautious approach, recently arguing that "the harmful effects of any foreign intervention in our affairs would touch Christians and Muslims alike."⁷³

⁷¹ "Syrian Kurds seen as revolt's wild card," *Washington Post*, March 8, 2012.

⁷² "Syrian Kurds, facing tough options, flee into Iraq," *International Herald Tribune*, March 10, 2012.

⁷³ "Syria's Greek patriarch opposes foreign intervention," *Agence France Presse*, March 1, 2012.

Syria's Economy and Sanctions

Reports indicate that the Syrian economy and national budget are suffering due to a steep drop in oil exports resulting from sanctions; over a year of domestic unrest and the loss of tourism revenues; and new social and military spending aimed at quelling public anger. Estimates vary on the degree of contraction in 2011, ranging between 5% and 15%.⁷⁴ The Economist Intelligence Unit predicts that the Syrian economy will contract by 8.1% in 2012.

Urban areas are now experiencing daily power outages and fuel shortages;⁷⁵ inflation is rising⁷⁶; and the value of the Syrian pound has plummeted on the black market (from 54 pounds against the dollar to over 103 pounds as of early March), forcing the government to spend resources propping it up. Syria's stock market is down 40% since the unrest began in March 2011. Foreign exchange reserves held by the Syrian Central Bank have reportedly fallen from \$18 billion in the fall of 2011 to between \$5 billion and \$10 billion, and now lose about \$1 billion a month.⁷⁷ With the loss of European export markets due to a European Union oil import ban, Syria has been denied a major source of revenue and hard currency (25%-30% of total government revenue or \$4 billion a year). According to Syrian Oil Minister Sufian Alao, sanctions on Syrian oil exports have cost the country \$4 billion.

Before sanctions, the main buyers of approximately 150,000 barrels per day (bpd) of exported Syrian oil were Italy, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Austria, Spain, and Turkey. Syria produces about 380,000 bpd total, though 2011 total production fell to around 320,000 bpd due to sanctions.⁷⁸ Foreign oil companies that have suspended operations in Syria include Tatneft (Russia), Royal Dutch/Shell Group, Total (France), Gulfsands (UK), Suncor (Canada), and INA (Croatia). In March 2012, Syrian officials announced that the Russian energy company Gazprom would take over INA's oil and gas operations in Syria. The operating status of two Chinese companies with investments in Syria, CNPC and Sinopec, is unknown.⁷⁹ Western countries also have banned new investment in Syria's oil and gas sector. Sanctions are having an impact on other aspects of Syria's energy sector as well, including financing and shipping.⁸⁰ European sanctions do not ban the export of liquid petroleum gas (LPG) to Syria, since it is widely used by ordinary households for heating and cooking.

Since new sanctions were enacted, many analysts have speculated about whether new investors and new foreign markets would arise for Syrian oil exports, albeit at lower prices due to sanctions

⁷⁴ "Cracks Widen in Syrian Economy," *IPS*, January 24, 2012.

⁷⁵ In May 2012, the Syrian government raised the price of subsidized fuel by 25%, just weeks after doubling electricity prices.

⁷⁶ Inflation may be as high as 30% in Syria. According to a June 2012 report, the Syrian government has recently circulated new currency printed in Russia in order to pay public sector salaries amidst a ballooning fiscal deficit. See, "Syria Prints New Money as Deficit Grows-Bankers," *Reuters*, June 13, 2012.

⁷⁷ "Syria Running out of Cash as Sanctions take toll, but Assad avoids Economic Pain," *Washington Post*, April 24, 2012.

⁷⁸ Though oil production declined in 2011, natural gas production increased by 8% due to investment in gas infrastructure made before unrest began.

⁷⁹ "Syria: Voting with their feet," *Economist Intelligence Unit - Business Middle East*, January 16, 2012.

⁸⁰ According to one oil products trader based in the Middle East, "I don't do Syria anymore. Sanctions appeared tougher, so I gave up.... The problem is getting a bank to finance it and a ship owner to go there." "Syria Cancels Fuel Export Tender, Sanctions Deter," *Reuters*, November 3, 2011.

and increased shipping, insurance, and financing costs. Some experts believe that both India and China are in a position to refine the heavy crude that Syria exports. However, others assert that some Asian buyers would find the prospect of purchasing Syrian oil too risky or politically problematic. In recent months, Venezuela has supplied Syria with at least three shipments of diesel fuel in exchange for Syrian naphtha, a refined petroleum product. According to Venezuelan Energy Minister Rafael Ramirez, “We have a high level of cooperation with Syria, a besieged nation, whom the transnational interests want to bring down.” Other reports suggest that Russia and Iran are exporting gasoil and diesel to Syria.⁸¹ Syrian officials also claim to be negotiating fuel import deals with Russia, Iran, and Algeria.⁸²

⁸¹ “How Russia, Iran keep fuel flowing to Syria,” *Reuters*, April 26, 2012.

⁸² “Syria, Russia Negotiating Long-Term Gas, Diesel Fuel Contracts,” *ITAR-TASS World Service*, May 25, 2012.

Appendix. U.S. Sanctions and Legislation

Overview

At present, a variety of legislative provisions and executive directives prohibit U.S. aid to Syria and restrict bilateral trade. Syria remains a U.S.-designated State Sponsor of Terrorism and is therefore subject to a number of general U.S. sanctions. Syria was placed on the State Department's State Sponsors of Terrorism List in 1979. Moreover, between 2003 and 2006 Congress passed legislation and President Bush issued new executive orders that expanded U.S. sanctions specifically on Syria.

- The table below reviews sanctions introduced since early 2011 in response to Syria's uprising.
- Syria-specific sanctions and general sanctions applicable to Syria are also summarized below.

Background on U.S. Assistance to Syria and Restrictions

Because of a number of legal restrictions and U.S. sanctions, many resulting from Syria's designation as a country supportive of international terrorism, Syria is no longer eligible to receive U.S. foreign assistance. Between 1950 and 1981, the United States provided a total of \$627.4 million in aid to Syria: \$34.0 million in development assistance, \$438.0 million in economic support, and \$155.4 million in food assistance. Most of this aid was provided during a brief warming trend in bilateral relations between 1974 and 1979. Significant projects funded with U.S. assistance included water supply, irrigation, rural roads and electrification, and health and agricultural research. No aid has been provided to Syria since 1981, when the last aid programs were closed out. In the event of regime change, the Obama Administration and Congress would need to reevaluate any successor government's policies with regard to support for international terrorism in order to determine Syria's potential eligibility for U.S. assistance.

Table A-I. U.S. Sanctions Against Syria in 2011-2012
(Implemented by Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control [OFAC])

Date	Sanctioned Individual/Entity	Sanction or Related Activity Description
May 30, 2012	Syria International Islamic Bank	Added to OFAC's Specially Designated Nationals (SDN) List
May 1, 2012	Foreign Persons/Foreign Entities that have violated, attempted to violate, conspired to violate, or caused a violation of U.S. sanctions against Iran or Syria, or that have facilitated deceptive transactions for persons subject to U.S. sanctions concerning Syria or Iran.	Executive Order 13608—Authorizes the Department of the Treasury to publicly identify foreign individuals and entities that have violated U.S. sanctions against Iran and Syria and generally bars their access to U.S. financial and commercial systems.
April 27, 2012		OFAC issued General License 4A, which authorizes the exports or re-exports to Syria of items licensed or otherwise authorized by the Department of Commerce and of exports and reexports of certain services. General License 4A replaces and supersedes General License 4, dated August 18, 2011.
April 23, 2012	Governments of Syria and Iran, Ali Mamluk (Director of the Syrian General Intelligence Directorate), Syrian General Intelligence Directorate, Syriatel, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security, Law Enforcement Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Datak Telecom	Executive Order 13606—Blocks the property and suspends entry into the United States of certain persons with respect to grave human rights abuses by the governments of Iran and Syria via information technology.
March 30, 2012	General Munir Adanov (Deputy Chief of General Staff of the Syrian Army), General Dawood Rajiha (Minister of Defense)	Added to OFAC's Specially Designated Nationals (SDN) List
March 5, 2012	General Organization of Radio and TV	Added to OFAC's Specially Designated Nationals (SDN) List
February 23, 2012		OFAC issued General License 15 related to Syria to authorize transactions in connection with patent, trademark, copyright, or other intellectual property protection that would otherwise be prohibited by Executive Order 13582.
February 16, 2012	Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security	Added to OFAC's Specially Designated Nationals (SDN) List
December 1, 2011	Muhammad Makhluaf, Military Housing Establishment, Real Estate Bank	Added to OFAC's Specially Designated Nationals (SDN) List
October 3, 2011		OFAC issued two general licenses related to Syria to authorize payments in connection with overflight or emergency landing and transactions with respect to telecommunications
September 27, 2011		OFAC issued a General License related to Syria to authorize third-country diplomatic and consular funds transfers and to authorize certain services in support of nongovernmental organizations' activities.

Date	Sanctioned Individual/Entity	Sanction or Related Activity Description
September 9, 2011		OFAC issued four general licenses related to Syria to authorize wind down transactions, certain official activities of international organizations, incidental transactions related to U.S. persons residing in Syria and operation of accounts.
August 30, 2011	Walid Mouallem (Foreign Minister), Ali Abdul Karim Ali (Syrian Ambassador to Lebanon), Bouthaina Shaaban (Advisor to the President)	Added to OFAC's Specially Designated Nationals (SDN) List
August 18, 2011	Government of Syria	Executive Order 13582—Freezes all assets of the Government of Syria, prohibits U.S. persons from engaging in any transaction involving the Government of Syria, bans U.S. imports of Syrian-origin petroleum or petroleum products, prohibits U.S. persons from having any dealings in or related to Syria's petroleum or petroleum products, and prohibits U.S. persons from operating or investing in Syria.
August 18, 2011	General Petroleum Corporation, Syrian Company For Oil Transport, Syrian Gas Company, Syrian Petroleum Company, Sytrol	Added to OFAC's SDN List
August 10, 2011	Commercial Bank of Syria and its Lebanon-based subsidiary, Syrian Lebanese Commercial Bank, Syriatel, the country's main mobile phone operator	Added to OFAC's SDN List
August 4, 2011	Muhammad Hamsho (businessman with ties to Asad family), Hamsho International Group	Added to OFAC's SDN List
June 29, 2011	Jamil Hassan (Head of Air Force Intelligence), Political Security Directorate (PSD, domestic intelligence)	Added to OFAC's SDN List
May 18, 2011	President Bashar al Asad, Farouk al Shara (vice president), Adel Safar (prime minister), Mohammad Ibrahim al Shaar (minister of the interior), Ali Habib Mahmoud (minister of defense), Abdul Fatah Qudsiya (head of Syrian military intelligence), Mohammed Dib Zaitoun (director of political security directorate), Nabil Rafik al Kuzbari, General Mohsen Chizari (Commander of Iran Revolutionary Guard Corp Qods Force suspected of human rights abuses in Syria), Al Mashreq Investment Fund, Bena Properties, Cham Holding, Syrian Air Force Intelligence, Syrian Military Intelligence, Syrian National Security Bureau	Executive Order 13573 adds listed individuals and entities to OFAC's SDN List
April 29, 2011	Maher al Asad, Ali Mamluk (director of the Syrian General Intelligence Directorate GID), Atif Najib (former head of the Syrian Political Security Directorate for Dara'a province and the president's cousin), the General Intelligence Directorate, and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – Quds Force (for allegedly assisting Syria in its crackdown)	Executive Order 13572 adds listed individuals and entities to OFAC's SDN List

Source: U.S. Treasury Department.

Notes: As part of its enforcement efforts, OFAC publishes a list of individuals and companies owned or controlled by, or acting for or on behalf of, targeted countries. It also lists individuals, groups, and entities, such as terrorists and narcotics traffickers designated under programs that are not country-specific. Collectively, such individuals and companies are called Specially Designated Nationals or SDNs. Their assets are blocked and U.S. persons are generally prohibited from dealing with them.

Specific Sanctions Against Syria

Specific U.S. sanctions levied against Syria fall into three main categories: (1) sanctions resulting from the passage of the 2003 Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Act (SALSA) that, among other things, prohibit most U.S. exports to Syria; (2) sanctions imposed by executive order from the President that specifically deny certain Syrian citizens and entities access to the U.S. financial system due to their participation in proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, association with Al Qaeda, the Taliban, or Osama bin Laden; or destabilizing activities in Iraq and Lebanon; and (3) sanctions resulting from the USA PATRIOT Act levied specifically against the Commercial Bank of Syria in 2006.

The 2003 Syria Accountability Act

On December 12, 2003, President Bush signed H.R. 1828, the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act into law, as P.L. 108-175. This law requires the President to impose penalties on Syria unless it ceases support for international terrorist groups, ends its occupation of Lebanon, ceases the development of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and has ceased supporting or facilitating terrorist activity in Iraq (§§5(a) and 5(d)). Sanctions include bans on the export of military items (already banned under other legislation, see above)⁸³ and of dual use items (items with both civil and military applications) to Syria (§5(a)(1)). In addition, the President is required to impose two or more sanctions from a menu of six:

- a ban on all exports to Syria except food and medicine;
- a ban on U.S. businesses operating or investing in Syria;
- a ban on landing in or overflight of the United States by Syrian aircraft;
- reduction of diplomatic contacts with Syria;
- restrictions on travel by Syrian diplomats in the United States; and
- blocking of transactions in Syrian property (§5(a)(2)).

Implementation

On May 11, 2004, President Bush issued Executive Order 13338, implementing the provisions of P.L. 108-175, including the bans on munitions and dual use items (§5(a)(1)) and two sanctions from the menu of six listed in Section 5(a)(2). The two sanctions he chose were the ban on exports to Syria other than food and medicine (§5(a)(2)(A) and the ban on Syrian aircraft landing in or overflying the United States (§5(a)(2)(D)). In issuing his executive order, the President stated that Syria has failed to take significant, concrete steps to address the concerns that led to the

⁸³ Syria's inclusion on the State Sponsors of Terrorism List as well as SALSA requires the President to restrict the export of any items to Syria that appear on the U.S. Munitions List (weapons, ammunition) or Commerce Control List (dual-use items).

enactment of the Syria Accountability Act. The President also imposed two additional sanctions based on other legislation.

- Under Section 311 of the USA PATRIOT Act, he instructed the Treasury Department to prepare a rule requiring U.S. financial institutions to sever correspondent accounts with the Commercial Bank of Syria because of money laundering concerns.
- Under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA), he issued instructions to freeze assets of certain Syrian individuals and government entities involved in supporting policies inimical to the United States.

Waivers

In the executive order and in an accompanying letter to Congress, President Bush cited the waiver authority contained in Section 5(b) of the Syria Accountability Act and stated that he wished to issue the following waivers on grounds of national security:

Regarding Section 5(a)(1) and 5(a)(2)(A): The following exports are permitted: products in support of activities of the U.S. government; medicines otherwise banned because of potential dual use; aircraft parts necessary for flight safety; informational materials; telecommunications equipment to promote free flow of information; certain software and technology; products in support of U.N. operations; and certain exports of a temporary nature.⁸⁴

Regarding Section 5(a)(2)(D): The following operations are permitted: takeoff/landing of Syrian aircraft chartered to transport Syrian officials on official business to the United States; takeoff/landing for non-traffic and non-scheduled stops; takeoff/landing associated with an emergency; and overflights of U.S. territory.

Targeted Financial Sanctions

Since the initial implementation of the Syria Accountability Act (in Executive Order 13338 dated May 2004), the President has repeatedly taken action to sanction individual members of the Asad regime's inner circle.⁸⁵ E.O. 13338 declared a national emergency with respect to Syria and authorized the Secretary of the Treasury to block the property of individual Syrians. Based on Section 202(d) of the National Emergencies Act (50 U.S.C. 1622(d)), the President has annually extended his authority to block the property of individual Syrians (latest on April 29, 2011).

⁸⁴ According to U.S. regulations, any product that contains more than 10% *de minimis* U.S.-origin content, regardless of where it is made, is not allowed to be exported to Syria. For U.S. commercial licensing prohibitions on exports and re-exports to Syria, see 15 C.F.R. pt. 736 Supp No. 1. The Department of Commerce reviews license applications on a case-by-case basis for exports or re-exports to Syria under a general policy of denial. For a description of items that do not require export licenses, see, Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS), U.S. Department of Commerce, Implementation of the Syria Accountability Act, available at http://www.bis.doc.gov/licensing/syriaimplementationmay14_04.htm.

⁸⁵ According to the original text of E.O. 13338, the President's authority to declare a national emergency authorizing the blocking of property of certain persons and prohibiting the exportation or re-exportation of certain goods to Syria is based on "The Constitution and the laws of the United States of America, including the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (50 U.S.C. 1701 et seq.) (IEEPA), the National Emergencies Act (50 U.S.C. 1601 et seq.) (NEA), the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003, P.L. 108-175 (SAA), and Section 301 of Title 3, United States Code." available at <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Documents/13338.pdf>.

When issuing each extension, the President has noted that the actions and policies of the government of Syria continued to pose an unusual and extraordinary threat.⁸⁶

The following individuals and entities have been targeted by the U.S. Treasury Department (Office of Foreign Assets Control or OFAC):

- On June 30, 2005, the U.S. Treasury Department designated two senior Syrian officials involved in Lebanon affairs, Syria's then-interior minister and its head of military intelligence in Lebanon (respectively, the late General Kanaan and General Ghazali), as Specially Designated Nationals, thereby freezing any assets they may have in the United States and banning any U.S. persons, including U.S. financial institutions outside of the United States, from conducting transactions with them.⁸⁷ Kanaan allegedly committed suicide in October 2005, though some have speculated that he may have been murdered.
- On January 18, 2006, U.S. Treasury Department took the same actions against the President's brother-in-law, Assef Shawkat, chief of military intelligence.
- On April 26, 2006, President Bush issued Executive Order 13399 that authorized the Secretary of the Treasury to freeze the U.S.-based assets of anyone found to be involved in the February 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. It also affects anyone involved in bombings or assassinations in Lebanon since October 2004, or anyone hindering the international investigation into the Hariri assassination. The order allows the United States to comply with UNSCR 1636, which calls on all states to freeze the assets of those persons designated by the investigating commission or the government of Lebanon to be involved in the Hariri assassination.
- On August 15, 2006, the U.S. Treasury Department froze assets of two other senior Syrian officers: Major General Hisham Ikhtiyar, for allegedly contributing to Syria's support of foreign terrorist organizations including Hezbollah; and Brigadier General Jama'a Jama'a, for allegedly playing a central part in Syria's intelligence operations in Lebanon during the Syrian occupation.⁸⁸
- On January 4, 2007, the U.S. Treasury Department designated three Syrian entities, the Syrian Higher Institute of Applied Science and Technology, the Electronics Institute, and the National Standards and Calibration Laboratory, as weapons proliferators under an executive order (E.O.13382) based on the authority vested to the President under IEEPA. The three state-sponsored institutions are divisions of Syria's Scientific Studies and Research Center, which was designated by President Bush as a weapons proliferator in June 2005 for research on the development of biological and chemical weapons.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ The President last extended the State of Emergency on April 29, 2011.

⁸⁷ See <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/js2617.aspx>.

⁸⁸ See <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/hp60.aspx>.

⁸⁹ See <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/hp216.aspx>.

- On August 1, 2007, the President issued E.O. 13441⁹⁰ blocking the property of persons undermining the sovereignty of Lebanon or its democratic processes and institutions. On November 5, 2007, the U.S. Treasury Department designated four individuals reportedly affiliated with the Syrian regime's efforts to reassert Syrian control over the Lebanese political system, including Assaad Halim Hardan, Wi'am Wahhab, and Hafiz Makhlef (under the authority of E.O.13441) and Muhammad Nasif Khayrbik (under the authority of E.O.13338).⁹¹
- On February 13, 2008, President Bush issued another Order (E.O.13460) blocking the property of senior Syrian officials. According to the U.S. Treasury Department, the order "targets individuals and entities determined to be responsible for or who have benefitted from the public corruption of senior officials of the Syrian regime." The order also revises a provision in Executive Order 13338 to block the property of Syrian officials who have undermined U.S. and international efforts to stabilize Iraq.⁹² One week later, under the authority of E.O. 13460, the U.S. Treasury Department froze the U.S. assets and restricted the financial transactions of Rami Makhlef, a powerful cousin of President Bashar al Asad.

Sanctions Against the Commercial Bank of Syria

As previously mentioned, under Section 311 of the USA PATRIOT Act, President Bush instructed the Treasury Department in 2004 to prepare a rule requiring U.S. financial institutions to sever correspondent accounts with the Commercial Bank of Syria because of money laundering concerns. In 2006, the Treasury Department issued a final ruling that imposes a special measure against the Commercial Bank of Syria as a financial institution of primary money laundering concern. It bars U.S. banks and their overseas subsidiaries from maintaining a correspondent account with the Commercial Bank of Syria, and it also requires banks to conduct due diligence that ensures the Commercial Bank of Syria is not circumventing sanctions through its business dealings with them.⁹³

General Sanctions Applicable to Syria

The International Security Assistance and Arms Export Control Act of 1976 [P.L. 94-329]. Section 303 of this act [90 Stat. 753-754] required termination of foreign assistance to countries that aid or abet international terrorism. This provision was incorporated into the Foreign

⁹⁰ On July 29, 2010, President Obama extended that National Emergency with respect to Lebanon for another year, stating that "While there have been some recent positive developments in the Syrian-Lebanese relationship, continuing arms transfers to Hizballah that include increasingly sophisticated weapons systems serve to undermine Lebanese sovereignty, contribute to political and economic instability in Lebanon, and continue to pose an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States." See, Notice of July 29, 2010—Continuation of the National Emergency With Respect to the Actions of Certain Persons to Undermine the Sovereignty of Lebanon or Its Democratic Processes and Institutions, Federal Register, Title 3—The President, [Page 45045].

⁹¹ See <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/hp666.aspx>.

⁹² A previous executive order, E.O. 13315, blocks property of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and members of his former regime. On June 9, 2005, the Treasury Department blocked property and interests of a Syrian company, SES International Corp., and two of its officials under the authority of E.O.13315.

⁹³ See, "U.S. Trade and Financial Sanctions Against Syria." Available at <http://damascus.usembassy.gov/sanctions-syr.html>.

Assistance Act of 1961 as Section 620A [22 USC 2371]. (Syria was not affected by this ban until 1979, as explained below.)

The International Emergency Economic Powers Act of 1977 [Title II of P.L. 95-223 (codified at 50 U.S.C. §1701 et seq.)]. Under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA), the President has broad powers pursuant to a declaration of a national emergency with respect to a threat “which has its source in whole or substantial part outside the United States, to the national security, foreign policy, or economy of the United States.” These powers include the ability to seize foreign assets under U.S. jurisdiction, to prohibit any transactions in foreign exchange, to prohibit payments between financial institutions involving foreign currency, and to prohibit the import or export of foreign currency.

The Export Administration Act of 1979 [P.L. 96-72]. Section 6(i) of this act [93 Stat. 515] required the Secretary of Commerce and the Secretary of State to notify Congress before licensing export of goods or technology valued at more than \$7 million to countries determined to have supported acts of international terrorism. (Amendments adopted in 1985 and 1986 relettered Section 6(i) as 6(j) and lowered the threshold for notification from \$7 million to \$1 million.)

A by-product of these two laws was the so-called state sponsors of terrorism list. This list is prepared annually by the State Department in accordance with Section 6(j) of the Export Administration Act. The list identifies those countries that repeatedly have provided support for acts of international terrorism. Syria has appeared on this list ever since it was first prepared in 1979; it appears most recently in the State Department’s annual publication *Country Reports on Terrorism, 2009*, issued on August 5, 2010. Syria’s inclusion on this list in 1979 triggered the above-mentioned aid sanctions under P.L. 94-329 and trade restrictions under P.L. 96-72.

Omnibus Diplomatic Security and Antiterrorism Act of 1986 [P.L. 99-399]. Section 509(a) of this act [100 Stat. 853] amended Section 40 of the Arms Export Control Act to prohibit export of items on the munitions list to countries determined to be supportive of international terrorism, thus banning any U.S. military equipment sales to Syria. (This ban was reaffirmed by the Anti-Terrorism and Arms Export Amendments Act of 1989—see below.) Also, 10 U.S.C. 2249a bans obligation of U.S. Defense Department funds for assistance to countries on the terrorism list.

Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1986 [P.L. 99-509]. Section 8041(a) of this act [100 Stat. 1962] amended the Internal Revenue Code of 1954 to deny foreign tax credits on income or war profits from countries identified by the Secretary of State as supporting international terrorism. [26 USC 901(j)]. The President was given authority to waive this provision under Section 601 of the Trade and Development Act of 2000 (P.L. 106-200, May 18, 2000).

The Anti-Terrorism and Arms Export Control Amendments Act of 1989 [P.L. 101-222]. Section 4 amended Section 6(j) of the Export Administration Act to impose a congressional notification and licensing requirement for export of goods or technology, irrespective of dollar value, to countries on the terrorism list, if such exports could contribute to their military capability or enhance their ability to support terrorism.

Section 4 also prescribes conditions for removing a country from the terrorism list: prior notification by the President to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the chairmen of two specified committees of the Senate. In conjunction with the requisite notification, the President must certify that the country has met several conditions that clearly indicate it is no

longer involved in supporting terrorist activity. (In some cases, certification must be provided 45 days in advance of removal of a country from the terrorist list).

The Anti-Economic Discrimination Act of 1994 [Part C, P.L. 103-236, the Foreign Relations Authorization Act, FY1994-1995]. Section 564(a) bans the sale or lease of U.S. defense articles and services to any country that questions U.S. firms about their compliance with the Arab boycott of Israel. Section 564(b) contains provisions for a presidential waiver, but no such waiver has been exercised in Syria's case. Again, this provision is moot in Syria's case because of other prohibitions already in effect.

The Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996 [P.L. 104-132]. This act requires the President to withhold aid to third countries that provide assistance (§325) or lethal military equipment (§326) to countries on the terrorism list, but allows the President to waive this provision on grounds of national interest. A similar provision banning aid to third countries that sell lethal equipment to countries on the terrorism list is contained in Section 549 of the Foreign Operations Appropriations Act for FY2001 (H.R. 5526, passed by reference in H.R. 4811, which was signed by President Clinton as P.L. 106-429 on November 6, 2000).

Also, Section 321 of P.L. 104-132 makes it a criminal offense for U.S. persons (citizens or resident aliens) to engage in financial transactions with governments of countries on the terrorism list, except as provided in regulations issued by the Department of the Treasury in consultation with the Secretary of State. In the case of Syria, the implementing regulation prohibits such transactions "with respect to which the United States person knows or has reasonable cause to believe that the financial transaction poses a risk of furthering terrorist acts in the United States." (31 CFR 596, published in the *Federal Register* August 23, 1996, p. 43462.) In the fall of 1996, the then chairman of the House International Relations Committee reportedly protested to then President Clinton about the Treasury Department's implementing regulation, which he described as a "special loophole" for Syria.

In addition to the general sanctions listed above, specific provisions in foreign assistance appropriations legislation enacted since 1981 have barred Syria by name from receiving U.S. aid. The most recent ban appears in Section 7007 of P.L. 112-74, Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2012, which states that "None of the funds appropriated or otherwise made available pursuant to titles III through VI of this Act shall be obligated or expended to finance directly any assistance or reparations for the governments of Cuba, North Korea, Iran, or Syria: Provided, That for purposes of this section, the prohibition on obligations or expenditures shall include direct loans, credits, insurance and guarantees of the Export-Import Bank or its agents."

Section 307 of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, amended by Section 431 of the Foreign Relations Authorization Act for FY1994-1995 (P.L. 103-236, April 30, 1994), requires the United States to withhold a proportionate share of contributions to international organizations for programs that benefit eight specified countries or entities, including Syria.

The Iran Nonproliferation Act of 2000, P.L. 106-178, was amended by P.L. 109-112 to make its provisions applicable to Syria as well as Iran. The amended act, known as the Iran and Syria Nonproliferation Act, requires the President to submit semi-annual reports to designated congressional committees, identifying any persons involved in arms transfers *to or from* Iran or Syria; also, the act authorizes the President to impose various sanctions against such individuals. On October 13, 2006, President Bush signed P.L. 109-353 which expanded the scope of the original law by adding North Korea to its provisions, thereby renaming the law the Iran, North

Korea, and Syria Nonproliferation Act (or INKSNA for short). The list of Syrian entities designated under INKSNA includes Army Supply Bureau (2008), Syrian Navy (2009), Syrian Air Force (2009), and Ministry of Defense (2008).⁹⁴ On May 24, 2011, the State Department designated the Industrial Establishment of Defense and Scientific Studies and Research Center (SSRC) under INKSNA.

Author Contact Information

Jeremy M. Sharp
Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs
jsharp@crs.loc.gov, 7-8687

Christopher M. Blanchard
Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs
cblanchard@crs.loc.gov, 7-0428

⁹⁴ See, State Department Press Releases And Documents “Near East: Iran, North Korea, and Syria Nonproliferation Act: Imposed Sanctions,” July 20, 2010.