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Post-Asad Syria: Opportunity or Quagmire?

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Key Points

- U.S. policy toward the continued rule of Syrian President Bashar al-Asad is partly based on the impact his rule has had in Syria. Asad's fall might not bring improvement for the Syrian people. But the argument that Asad, odious as he may be, provides stability now looks less and less convincing.
- Whether Asad stays or falls, the current Syrian unrest could have profound implications on the Middle East in at least four ways: the impact on Iran, Asad's closest strategic partner; the perception of the power of the United States and its allies; the stability of neighboring states; and the impact on Israel.
- The more Asad falls on hard times, the more Tehran has to scramble to prevent damage to its image with the "Arab street" and to its close ally, Lebanese Hizballah.
- Asad's overthrow is by no means assured, and U.S. instruments to advance that objective are limited. The U.S. Government decision to call for his overthrow seems to have rested on a judgment that the prospects for success were good and the payoff in the event of success would be high.

The government of President Bashar al-Asad in Syria faces strong pressure from its neighbors and the Western powers. In the background is the fall in 2011 of longstanding governments in Tunisia and Egypt to popular protests and, of course, the overthrow of Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi in a civil war backed by North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) military action. It is not clear if Asad will fall or if he will hold on to power. It is fair to say that because his hold on power is sufficiently in doubt, it is well worth examining what would be the strategic consequences if he fell and what would be the strategic implications if he is able to muddle through Syria's current difficulties. Moreover, given the many sudden and unpredicted Middle East developments in 2011, such an examination should note which low-probability developments might have major impacts on the region and on U.S. interests.

Would Asad's Fall Be Good for Syria?

It is not clear how disordered the process of Asad's overthrow might be or what would be the character of a post-Asad government.

To start with the transition, there is the risk of a violent civil war. Asad seems determined to rally Syria's Alawite minority to support him by exploiting the real risk that if he is overthrown, the more than 40 years of Alawite dominance over the state will end.[1] Although the Syrian government prevents the collection of information on the ethnic breakdown of the Syrian army, it is believed that the Alawites dominate the officer corps while Sunnis comprise a much larger rank and file. If provoked, Sunnis could exact revenge on the Alawites, who make up about 12 percent of Syria's population.[2] Thus, although the Alawites may not like the Asad regime, they feel compelled to stick with it because of sectarian identity.[3]

The majority of soldiers in the key units being used for repressing protestors—namely, the Republican Guard and the 4th Mechanized Division—have proved

willing shock troops against ordinary Syrians. In the rest of the military, a few breaks have appeared: defections have been largely by individual soldiers rather than whole units.[4] Asad is also playing to anxieties about Sunni extremism among the Christian community; Christians make up about 10 percent of the population and are important to the economy. If Asad successfully exacerbates sectarian tension, then his downfall might come only through serious intersectarian strife. Indeed, by November 2011, sectarian tensions in Homs, Syria's third-largest city, were leading to multiple deaths each day and to increasing population movements out of ethnically mixed neighborhoods.[5]

Perhaps the best way to minimize potential sectarian violence is to encourage a split between Asad and key military officials including Alawites, such that he is overthrown from within and the old system continues, presumably with at least some reforms and greater openness. Nevertheless, the prospects for splitting the existing security elite from Asad do not look promising, which some take as an argument for why Asad's rule, unpleasant as it has become, is better than the alternative. Just how a transition could take place is uncertain; equally unclear is what Syria would look like under a new government. Who would rule under these circumstances?

One possibility would be a coup d'état from within, preserving Alawite rule. That could lead to a new Syria that does not look especially different from the old one. The new rulers might well continue Asad's long-established practice of promising reforms when pressured by popular protests, only to back away once the heat is off. Even if the change in government brought new freedoms, so long as the extensive security apparatus remains in place, the new authorities would be well-positioned to reintroduce the old controls quietly and steadily. Since a coup from within would continue Alawite rule, the old Alawite elite presumably would block any genuine popular voice in the government and exploit Alawite and Christian fears that democracy means Sunni rule that is oppressive toward minorities.

If Asad's overthrow leads immediately or ultimately to the collapse of the existing system, Syria will become a fragile state, which might not be much of an improvement for the Syrian people. An International Crisis Group (ICG) report calling for Asad's overthrow was blunt about post-Asad risks:

> *If and when . . . the regime falls, Syrians will have no option but to start almost entirely from scratch. A weak and demoralised army, whose role in the current crisis has earned it no respect, cannot constitute the backbone of an emerging state. The police are notoriously corrupt and unpopular, as is the justice system as a whole. . . . Ethnic and sectarian fault lines run deep in a highly divided society. With powerful and, so far, determined security services, feeble state institutions, and fragile social structures, Syria offers a stark contrast with Egypt and Tunisia, where weak regimes coexisted with relatively strong states—in terms of their institutions—and relatively strong societies—in terms of their degree of cohesion and organisation.*[6]

There are strong counterarguments to the realist thesis that Asad's continued rule, unpleasant as it is, is the only way to prevent calamity inside Syria. It is hard to argue that Asad's rule provides stability when his forces are shelling more and more Syrian cities, with little discernible effect on protests, which resume at full force once the military shifts its attention elsewhere. Asad is already playing the sectarian card and the longer he stays, the more likely it is that sectarian tensions will grow. Furthermore, the protests are increasingly accompanied by armed conflict. The armed opposition operating under the name Free Syrian Army has launched some audacious attacks and appears to be gaining strength.[7] If the choice is between certain bloodshed while Asad rules and prospective bloodshed if he goes, that alone is a good reason to call for his overthrow.[8]

Furthermore, even if Asad were able to reassert control, it is by no means clear how long he could maintain it. Later, if not sooner, the same popular demands for freedom and political say might well resurface. Suppressing the current protest wave might bring only temporary stability, with instability returning at some point. A similar

argument can be made about any coup that would keep the old system of Alawite rule in place; perhaps it would temporarily restore order, but its long-term prospects look poor. In short, it is not clear how to minimize bloodshed and sectarian tensions in Syria, nor is there any guarantee that a post-Asad government would better serve the Syrian people.

The August 18, 2011, decision by the major Western powers to call on Asad to leave office was explained as necessary because he had become a force for instability, as well as because of identification with the goals of protestors.[9] To quote the opening lines of President Obama's statement:

> *The United States has been inspired by the Syrian peoples' pursuit of a peaceful transition to democracy. They have braved ferocious brutality at the hands of their government. They have spoken with their peaceful marches, their silent shaming of the Syrian regime, and their courageous persistence in the face of brutality—day after day, week after week. . . . 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.*[10]

As Obama's statement suggests, what tipped the scale is U.S. identification with protestors' goals. Washington interpreted the protests as showing "the strong desire of the Syrian people . . . for a Syria that is democratic, just, and inclusive," in Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's words.[11] The support of those objectives for decades has been not only U.S. policy, but an important national security interest. Successive U.S. administrations have argued that democratic governments provide the best hope for a peaceful and prosperous world.[12]

In short, the danger of chaos in a post-Asad Syria is real; only when it appeared that the chaos would be greater if Asad stayed did the U.S. Government decide to support his overthrow. This was not an easy call to make, given the risks that the transition could be messy and the outcome not an improvement for the Syrian people.

Asad's Fall Could Have Profound Implications for the Middle East

Besides the issue of what is in the best interests of the Syrian people, another concern to the United States is the international impact of Asad's fall. The record to date of Asad's rule is an important indicator of what may happen if he remains president, but the changed circumstances owing to the 2011–2012 tumult might cause a shift in his government's capabilities and intentions.

Whether Asad stays or falls, the current Syrian unrest could affect the Middle East in at least four ways:

- impact on Iran, Asad's closest strategic partner
- perception of the power of the United States and its allies, particularly including Turkey
- stability of neighboring states, especially Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan
- impact on Israel.

What happens in each of these areas could depend both on *how* events occur as much as on *what* events occur—on how Asad falls or how he reestablishes control, not only on whether he falls or stays. Running through all the permutations would be a lengthy and not necessarily fruitful exercise. It is more useful to note the interests at stake and the range of possibilities.

An important variable will be the extent to which a future Syrian government, under Asad or not, would concentrate on the country's domestic problems, rather than its foreign policy. It seems likely that a post-Asad government would concentrate its attention at home. If Asad reasserts control, then perhaps he will also seek to focus on the home front, but perhaps he will lash out at those he sees as having exacerbated his problems, namely, the United States and its regional allies, including Turkey and friendly Arab League states. Asad also may see tensions with Israel as a way to rally popular support. Most likely, even if Asad wishes to be active on some foreign policy front, his ability to be so

would be more limited than before the recent troubles. For one thing, Syria's finances are in much worse shape.

The Asad Record

Like his father Hafez al-Asad, who ruled Syria from 1970 to 2000, Bashar al-Asad promoted the image of Syria as a force for stability because it did not attack Israel or allow terrorist attacks against Israel from its territory. The reality did not correspond to that image. Asad has frequently violated Syria's international obligations in order to promote instability and threaten peace. Consider just a few of the many examples:

- Syria engaged in clandestine nuclear activities, which led the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) board of governors to notify the United Nations (UN) Security Council about Syrian noncompliance with its international treaty obligations.[13] The IAEA concluded, "the Agency assesses that it is very likely that the building destroyed at the Dair alzour site was a nuclear reactor which should have been declared to the Agency."[14] The only other countries reported by the IAEA board to the UN Security Council are North Korea and Iran.
- Adopted to end the 2006 Israel-Hizballah war, United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1701 mandates that governments prevent the sale or transfer of weapons, ammunition, equipment, and training to "entities or individuals" in Lebanon.[15] Within a month of its adoption, Turkish authorities intercepted a Syrian aircraft carrying weapons from Iran to Hizballah. UN follow-up teams report that arms regularly cross the Syria-Lebanon border, presumably en route to Hizballah.
- The March 2007 UNSCR 1747, one of several imposing sanctions on Iran over its nuclear program, mandates that "all States shall prohibit the procurement of such items [arms or related materiel] from Iran by their nationals, or using their flag vessels or aircraft."[16] Syria regularly violates this mandate by facilitating the shipment of Iranian arms to Hizballah. Several shipments of Iranian arms have been intercepted at sea while bound for Syria, most notably the MV *Monchegorsk*, which was intercepted in the Red Sea by the U.S. Navy in January 2009. Cyprus, to which the vessel was diverted, wrote to the Security Council committee responsible for monitoring UNSCR 1747; the committee's report showed the ship left Bandar Abbas, a strategic port in southern Iran, bound for Latakia, Syria, laden with several tons of shells, bullets, and explosives.[17] Turkey has forced several planes to land that were reportedly carrying arms from Iran to Syria, most recently in April 2011 and then again in August 2011.
- Despite repeated promises to American secretaries of state—most explicitly to Colin Powell—Syria continues to allow Hamas to maintain unimpeded its international headquarters in Damascus.[18] All major industrial countries categorize Hamas as a terrorist group. The Middle East peace process "Quartet"—the United States, the European Union (EU), Russia, and the UN—warned against assistance to Hamas until it meets a set of conditions, including renouncing violence.[19] The irony is that rather than Syria moving away from the terrorist group Hamas, it is Hamas that is reducing its reliance on Syria because of Hamas's concern about Syria's negative image among its target audience.[20]
- Since 2003, Syria has facilitated the flow of insurgents into Iraq, destabilizing its neighbor and providing material support to the terrorists who have killed so many Iraqi civilians and American Soldiers. These actions have not only been detrimental to U.S. and Iraqi interests, but they have also flouted the repeated Security Council calls for countries to assist the new Iraqi authorities.[21] During his September 2003 testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz held up the passports of foreign fighters encountered by U.S. forces in Iraq to show that they had gone through Syria.[22] In September

2007, General David Petraeus gave an interview to Lebanese magazine *al-Watan al-Arabi* in which he described how Syria allowed thousands of insurgents to land at Damascus International Airport and then cross into Iraq. The flow continues: In December 2010, U.S. counterterrorism officials noted an increase in the number of insurgents crossing through Syria into Iraq.

Moreover, Syria in effect occupied its neighbor Lebanon for decades until 2006. While the Lebanese government was coerced into acquiescing to the Syrian military presence, that arrangement was a transparent violation of Lebanese sovereignty. In its September 2004 UNSCR 1559, the Security Council "call[ed] upon all remaining foreign forces to withdraw from Lebanon." Syrian forces did not leave until forced to do so by the combination of a million Lebanese protesting and a concerted international campaign led by France and the United States, with strong Saudi support.

Both Bashar al-Asad and his father, former president Hafez al-Asad, have had a false reputation for being forces for stability and de facto peace with Israel. The reality was quite different. They did not take on Israel in the domain where Israel is strongest and Syria is weak—namely, conventional war. That was not out of any conviction that international disputes should be settled peacefully, but instead out of necessity. After the 1978 Camp David Accords, Hafez al-Asad learned a painful lesson from his unsuccessful effort to reach *strategic parity* (his term) with Israel. Despite massive funding from Arab states in the 1980s and free delivery of advanced weapons from the Soviet Union, Syria could not match Israel militarily. The effort drove Syria into an economic crisis from which it was rescued only by rising oil revenue and renewed Arab generosity once Syria joined the U.S.-led coalition in 1990 against Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait.[23]

In other words, it was Israeli effort, with support by the United States, to maintain a strategic deterrent that kept either Hafez al-Asad or Bashar al-Asad from pursuing the use of force. Israel has deterred Syria by sustaining a massive military effort for a small country. According to *The Military Balance 2011* from the International Institute for Strategic Studies, Israel has more combat-capable aircraft, and its army has more active-duty soldiers, than either Britain, France, or Germany.[24] Upon mobilization of reserves, Israel's army would have more soldiers than Britain, France, and Germany combined, and Israel has more than twice as many tanks as those three countries taken together. It is no surprise that Asad refrains from taking on such a force.

Meanwhile, Asad has supported Hizballah, which has launched attacks on Israel. The 2006 Israel-Hizballah war provided graphic proof about extensive Syrian arms shipments to Hizballah including both Syrian-made and foreign-made weapons.[25] During that war, Syria played a provocative role, as it often did in the past when Israel took retaliatory action against terrorists in Lebanon.[26] The frequent Hizballah attacks on Israel, mostly by mortar and rocket fire, continued until Hizballah was bruised in the 2006 war. In the last 5 years, not one bullet or rocket from Hizballah has been fired on Israel.[27] There is no evidence that Syria played a role in halting the Hizballah attacks on Israel.

In short, Asad's Syria has sponsored terrorism, interfered in the affairs of its neighbors, pursued weapons of mass destruction, and flouted its international treaty obligations. Those are not the actions of a government that promotes regional stability. A more accurate reading is that Asad did much to undermine the stability of the Middle East.

Impact on Iran

Iran has been described as a "strategically lonely" country with few close friends on the international scene.[28] Iran's relationship with Syria has been the great exception: the Islamic Republic and the Asad government have been close strategic allies for more than 30 years.[29] Adjusting to Asad's fall would pose a great challenge to the Islamic Republic.

It would be a great challenge for Iran to sustain the support of the "Arab street," which it has highly prized, if Tehran is seen as backing a brutal dictator, rather than

a champion of opposition to Western domination. Indeed, Iran's popular image in the Arab world rises and falls depending on how well its radical policies are faring. In 2006, when the United States was mired in Iraq, and Israel had conducted unpopular military campaigns against the Hizballah movement in Lebanon, Iran was riding high. In a June 2011 poll, James Zogby found Iran's negative rating in Morocco to be 85 percent compared to 92 percent positive in 2006; in Egypt, Iran was 63 percent negative compared to 82 percent positive in 2006; in Saudi Arabia, 80 percent negative compared to 85 percent positive in 2006; and in the United Arab Emirates, 70 percent negative compared to 68 percent positive in 2006.[30] Zogby attributed these changes to the impact of the Arab spring, Iran's repression of protests in 2009, and the continuing nuclear impasse. Presumably Iran's support for Asad was not yet a major factor, since protests in Syria had not turned so bloody in June when the poll was taken. Nevertheless, the poll shows the challenge Iran faces when its radical stance, such as support for Asad in face of popular protests, does not look so successful or important.

Asad's problems fit poorly with Iranian leaders' "resistance narrative" that radical Islam is the wave of history and is supported by the region's peoples, while the United States and its allies—Israel and the moderate Arab states—are on the wane and lack popular support. Iran's leaders interpret world developments in light of their conviction that Western liberalism is a failed system destined to be replaced by radical Islam. They see U.S. problems in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as Israel's problems in the 2006 war with Hizballah, as proof that the American way of war can be successfully countered by sustained resistance, which, in their view, can lead to America eventually withdrawing from the region. They have interpreted the "Arab spring" as proof that Arab peoples are inspired by the example of Iran's Islamic revolution, overthrowing authoritarian pro-Western governments to install Islamist democracies. This narrative has been used to justify the hardline revolutionary stance at home and to belittle the democratic opposition as stooges of a failing West.[31]

For many months after the protests in Syria started, Iran vigorously defended Asad and denounced the protests, which were presented as a Western plot that good Muslims should reject. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has warned, "In Syria, the hand of America and Israel is evident."[32] Majlis Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Alaeddin Boroujerdi expounded, "In regard to Syria, we are confronted with two choices. The first is for us to place Syria in the mouth of a wolf named America. . . . The second choice would be for us to contribute to the termination of the clashes in Syria. The interests of the Muslim people command that we mobilize ourselves to support Syria." Both the United States and the EU have said that Iran sent elements from its Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force to Syria to assist in the repression.[33] The Iranian state and hardline media give little attention to developments in Syria, but for many months, what mention they gave was to strongly support the Asad regime and belittle the protestors.

Asad's fall would be a particularly difficult blow for hardliners who have interpreted Asad's troubles as a Western plot similar to that which they think caused the protests in Iran after the contested 2009 presidential elections. Ahmad Mousavi, former Iranian ambassador to Syria, put it most clearly: "Current events in Syria are designed by the foreign enemies and mark the second version of the sedition which took place in 2009 in Iran."[34] Khamenei has for years warned that Iran is at great danger of a sudden "color revolution"—what Iranian hardliners call a "soft overthrow"—whipped up by Western agents.[35] If Asad is overthrown in the aftermath of Western governments calling for him to step down, that may increase Khamenei's worries that he may face a similar fate. Already in February 2011, thousands of protestors took to the streets in Tehran and other major Iranian cities, chanting slogans such as, "Ben Ali, Mubarak, it's Sayid Ali's [that is, Sayid Ali Khamenei's] turn."[36]

On the other hand, if Asad emerges from his current troubles, Khamenei may well interpret this as confirmation of the wisdom of a tough, uncompromising stance

such as he took in the face of the 2009–2010 protests in Iran—a stance that he presents as having prevailed over the worst that the West could do against Iran.

If Asad's fall seems imminent, Iran will presumably hedge its bets, in line with Tehran's general practice of "betting on all horses in the race"—a phrase used by U.S. officials to describe Iran's policy of simultaneously supporting the Iraqi government and the insurgents fighting that government.[37] Already in autumn 2011, some mild criticism was directed at the Asad regime by President Mahmood Ahmadinejad and his foreign minister, Ali Akbar Salehi; the former spoke of "needed reforms" and the latter said Asad should "be accountable to his people's legitimate demands."[38]

If Asad did in fact fall, Iran would presumably seek to cultivate good relations with the successor government. Indeed, important Iranian advisor Mohammad Javad Larajani (whose brothers are head of the judiciary and speaker of the Majlis) has argued that if Asad falls, "the future relations of Iran and Syria will be as strong as they are right now" because the successor government would be dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood.[39] While the successor government might be dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood, that movement has been defined by its opposition to the Alawite clan of the Asad family, who are seen as Shi'ites. It would be quite a challenge for the Iranian regime, which presents itself as the protector of the world's Shi'ites, to be an ally of such a government. The problem would be exacerbated if Asad's fall is preceded by worsening ethnic tensions between Sunnis and Alawites.

Iran's regional influence would also be hurt if Asad's troubles—whether or not he stays in power—hurt the Hizballah movement in Lebanon, which has been Iran's closest international partner. Hizballah's military might is an important Iranian instrument of deterrence against an Israeli attack. That may be difficult to sustain if Asad falls. As the ICG puts it, "The effect [of Asad's fall] on Hizbollah arguably would be most visible and immediate. Iran might well continue to supply the resistance movement with arms by air or by sea, but the flow inevitably would be curtailed, making it more difficult for Hizbollah to sustain its current military posture, deter an Israeli attack or restock in the event of an actual armed confrontation."[40]

A further complication for Iran is that its stance about Syria has shaken the Turkish establishment's view that Turkey and Iran could strategically cooperate. As recently as June 2010, Turkey and Brazil brokered a high-profile agreement with Iran about nuclear matters, which infuriated the United States. In the aftermath of the Syria protests, Ankara is now cooperating closely with Washington and has become much more suspicious of Tehran.[41] Were Asad to fall, it would be interesting to see if the new Syrian authorities replace their strategic partnership with Iran with an even closer partnership with Turkey, in what would presumably sideline Iran from the Syrian theater.

The ICG nicely summarized the impact of Asad's fall on Iran as "possibly auguring a profound shift in the regional strategic balance of power—far more significant than a policy of sanctions or pressure against Tehran could possibly bring about."[42]

Perception of the Power of the United States and Its Allies

A strong argument can be made that U.S. prestige and influence around the world suffer if the United States issues a call for Asad's overthrow and yet he stays in power. The United States has a compelling interest in ensuring that any time the President of the United States says something must happen, then it does happen. Indeed, a serious argument for the U.S. military commitment in Libya was that President Obama had said publicly that Qaddafi must go. Talk is not cheap; staking out a position without being willing to act undermines the credibility of every U.S. statement. One might note the costly ramifications of alleged U.S. encouragement to the Hungarians to rise against the Soviet imposed regime in 1956. The advancement of U.S. vital interests is inextricable from the credibility of U.S. pledges. So it is worth weighing carefully what would be the practical impact of a U.S. call for Asad's overthrow.

It is quite clear that Washington has no intention of leading or supporting a military effort to depose Asad. Such a military effort might come in three ways: coup,

support for an insurrection, or military invasion. It is hard to see the United States playing a role in any of these options. The United States has few contacts and little leverage with the Syrian military, which makes implausible any U.S. effort to split the military from Asad along the lines of how Washington encouraged the Egyptian military to break with President Hosny Mubarak. The dynamic of any such split would be different from that in Egypt, since the Syrian army is a sectarian institution dedicated to perpetuating Alawite rule. A military coup could reflect a decision by the Alawite elite that Asad was endangering the Alawite community.

It is not clear if there will be a Libya-style armed resistance that might benefit from external assistance. The current armed actions by the opposition may turn into a full-scale insurrection. If so, neither the United States, NATO, nor Arab League states seems interested in another Libya-style military action. Humanitarian buffer zones (on the Turkish border, for instance) are a much more plausible option. As for open U.S. military intervention, America has no interest in invading Syria, an action which would be widely condemned at home, around the world, and in Syria.

Without military action, the debate about how Washington can contribute to Asad's overthrow turns on the question of what impact U.S. actions have on the protestors and on the Sunni business elite, which has been largely sitting out the regime-protestor confrontation. The question is whether Washington can galvanize European, Turkish, and Arab sanctions and condemnation; whether such actions embolden the opposition and raise doubts among the regime's supporters; and, most especially, whether Asad is likely to fall in any case. It is quite possible that these conditions will be met. Important European countries immediately echoed the August 18, 2011, U.S. call for Asad's overthrow, and the EU has moved with uncharacteristic speed to place biting sanctions, culminating in a ban on imports of oil from Syria.[43] The Arab League has suspended Syrian membership; Jordan's King Abdullah II has called for Asad to step down;[44] Turkey has imposed a variety of restrictions on Syria, and Ankara openly allows the Syrian opposition to operate in its territory;[45] and respected observers say the tide has turned against Asad.[46] The U.S. call for Asad's overthrow may provide an opportunity for Washington to claim credit for something that is going to happen anyway; in geopolitics, it is always good to be credited for making the sun rise in the east.

Were Asad to muddle through, Washington would face some difficult quandaries. So long as Asad is in power, it will be hard to walk back the sanctions imposed on Syria, yet it will be difficult to sustain economic and political isolation of the Asad regime if that government looks like it will be in power for the foreseeable future. If that isolation lessens, then the United States and its allies will look like they lost a confrontation with Asad, which would reduce their perceived clout.

Asad's overthrow is by no means assured, and U.S. instruments to advance that objective are limited. The U.S. Government decision to call for his overthrow presumably rested on a judgment that the prospects for success were good and the payoff, if successful, would be high.

Stability of Neighboring States

Some worry about the impact of the end of the Asad dynasty on stability in neighboring states. The *Washington Post* reported as a flat fact that "the fall of President Bashar al-Assad would unleash a cataclysm of chaos, sectarian strife, and extremism that spreads far beyond its borders" in an article with the headline "'Doomsday Scenario' if Syria Falls."[47]

Indeed, chaos in Syria would create a space in which various radical nonstate actors could operate; in particular, it would give a safe haven to Iraqi insurgents and to Kurdistan Workers' Party fighters targeting Turkey. The spillover effects of Syrian chaos on Jordan and Lebanon could also be considerable. But such spillover is not guaranteed. Most of the neighboring states are quite resilient. Consider that the chaos in Iraq in 2005–2008 had relatively little impact on the stability of its neighbors.

Furthermore, the problem of spreading chaos and sectarian strife may be greater if Asad continues to rule. The longer the protests and vicious repression continue, the more likely that violence and hatred will spread. It

becomes harder and harder to make the argument that Asad, unpleasant as he may be, delivers stability.

Were Asad to fall, that could contribute to the stability of at least one neighbor, namely, Lebanon. Arguably the greatest challenge to Lebanon's stability has been Hizballah's armed might, which it has at times used to impose its will on the Lebanese government. Any Syrian government that follows Asad is unlikely to be as supportive as he has been of Hizballah. Asad has made no secret of his admiration for Hizballah's leader Hasan Nasrallah, who has reciprocated by strongly supporting Asad during the current crisis. Protestors have responded by burning pictures of Nasrallah and chanting against Hizballah. The loss of active Syrian support would gravely complicate the situation of Hizballah's armed forces. U.S. Ambassador to the UN Susan Rice explains, "Hezbollah remains the most significant and most heavily armed Lebanese militia. It could not have done so if not for Syria's aid and facilitation of Syrian and Iranian arms."[48] Without armed might to back it up, Hizballah would pose a reduced threat to Lebanese democracy.

Impact on Israel

It is difficult to see how Asad's overthrow would make Syrian-Israeli peace less likely. During the 40 years of Asad family rule, repeated efforts to resolve the Syrian-Israeli conflict have come to failure. Long-time U.S. Middle East peace negotiator Dennis Ross, known for his optimism, writes:

> *Between Arabs and Israelis the worst always seems to happen. . . . The history of peacemaking, especially between Israel and Syria, suggests that opportunities are fleeting and fragile. . . . For Arab leaders—and no one more clearly epitomizes this attitude than Asad—peace with Israel is a favor, not a necessity. . . . Arab leaders are easily put on the defensive by charges that they have surrendered their rights when compromising with Israel.*[49]

Israel's leading Syria expert Itamar Rabinovich, who is both an eminent academic and a prominent diplomat, argues that, for Syrian leaders, peace with Israel is a "risky adventure" that they will consider only when their domestic position is strong—something which not will happen soon, whether Asad stays in power or falls.[50] He notes the alternative, more pessimistic view: "The failure of the [2000] Geneva Summit [between Syrian President Hafez al-Asad and U.S. President Bill Clinton] provided fresh ammunition to those who had argued since the early and mid-1990s that Asad had never intended to consummate the negotiations with Israel, and that he was merely interested in the political dividends accruing to participants."[51] There is much to support the cynical view that a minority Alawite regime wants continued confrontation with Israel so as to use a national security justification for continued repressive rule over the Sunni majority.[52]

To be sure, it is hard to see a post-Asad government agreeing anytime soon to a peace treaty with Israel, which could be characterized by some, including Palestinians, as selling out to Jerusalem. The most likely scenario—whether Asad stays or goes—is continued stalemate on the Syria-Israel peace track. However, a good case can be made that, in the long run, the prospects for Syrian-Israeli peace may be better if the Syrian government rests on a firm foundation of domestic legitimacy, hence not needing continued conflict with Israel to justify its rule.

Conclusion

Surprisingly, there is little if anything in the extensive public record, extending over months of comments to the media and testimony to Congress, to suggest that considerations about the regional impact of Asad's future were a major part in the deliberations about what U.S. policy to adopt.[53] Perhaps behind closed doors the arguments made were different from those put out to the public. Instead, the focus of the policy debate as reported to the public has been about what is best for the Syrian people.

Again, the ICG captured the most likely impact Asad's overthrow would have on the regional strategic balance: "For Israel and the U.S. in particular,

the stakes are huge. The regime's collapse would significantly hurt its allies, whether Iran, Hizbollah or Hamas, possibly auguring a profound shift in the regional strategic balance of power—far more significant than a policy of sanctions or pressure against Tehran could possibly bring about. . . . The ripple effects across the region would be vast."[54]

Perhaps that is too optimistic a view, although it is difficult to see how the geopolitical complications from promoting Asad's overthrow outweigh the strategic advantages. Nevertheless, there is strong reason to suspect that the ICG is correct that Asad's fall would have profound repercussions across the Middle East. Similarly, were he able to reassert control, that too would have much impact—on Iran's confidence that it and its allies can stand up to Western pressure, on regional perceptions of what the West is able to accomplish, and on the future of democratic forces in the region's authoritarian states, including Iran.

Notes

[1] The sectarian nature of Asad's rule and of his response to protests, as well as the risks that creates of Sunni backlash, is laid out in detail in International Crisis Group (ICG), *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VI): The Syrian People's Slow-motion Revolution*, Middle East/North Africa Report No. 108, July 6, 2011, available at <www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa.aspx>.

[2] Andrew Tabler, interview, October 28, 2011; "It is assumed that most of the rank-and-file are Sunni while the officers are mostly Alawite, some Druze, and a few Christians."

[3] ICG, *The Syrian People's Slow-motion Revolution*, 28; "The security services' decision to close ranks behind the regime in the course of the uprising is less a function of loyalty than it is a result of the sectarian prism through which they have viewed the protest movement."

[4] Jeffrey White, "A Willingness to Kill: Repression in Syria," PolicyWatch No. 1840, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 16, 2011, available at <www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3393>.

[5] Anthony Shadid, "Sectarian Fighting in Syrian City Bodes Ill for All of the Country," *The New York Times*, November 20, 2011, 1, 7.

[6] ICG, *Popular Protest in North Africa and The Middle East (VII): The Syrian Regime's Slow-motion Suicide*, Middle East/North Africa Report No. 109, July 13, 2011, available at <www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa.aspx>, 31.

[7] On the increasing armed opposition, see Martin Chulov, "Free Syria Army Gathers on Lebanese Border," *The Guardian*, November 18, 2011, available at <www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/nov/18/free-syria-army-lebanese-border>; and Nour Malas, "Syria Rebels Vow to Guard Civilians," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 18, 2011, available at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204517204577044421058621062.html>.

[8] For an eloquent argument that the longer Asad stays, the worse the violence is, see Robert Malley and Peter Harling, "How the Syrian Regime Is Ensuring Its Demise," *The Washington Post*, July 2, 2011.

[9] UK [United Kingdom] Representation to the EU [European Union], "UK, Germany and France Call for President Assad to Stand Down," August 18, 2011. The key passage in the joint statement from British Prime Minister David Cameron, French President Nicolas Sarkozy, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel was, "Our three countries believe that President Assad, who is resorting to brutal military force against his own people and who is responsible for the situation, has lost all legitimacy and can no longer claim to lead the country. We call on him to face the reality of the complete rejection of his regime by the Syrian people and to step aside in the best interests of Syria and the unity of its people," available at <http://ukeu.fco.gov.uk/en/news/?view=PressS&id=645689682>.

[10] The White House, "Statement by President Obama on the Situation in Syria," August 18, 2011, available at <www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/08/18/statement-president-obama-situation-syria>.

[11] Hillary R. Clinton, "Remarks on the Situation in Syria," State Department, August 18, 2011, available at <www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/08/170673.htm>.

[12] "IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] Reports Syria to UN [United Nations] Security Council over Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Violations," Board of Governors Resolution, *World Tribune* (Washington), June 12, 2011. "[The agency's board of governors] decides to report, as provided for in Article XII.C of the statute, through the director-general, Syria's non-compliance with its Safeguards Agreement to all members of the agency and to the Security Council and General Assembly of the United Nations," available at <www.worldtribune.com/worldtribune/WTARC/2011/me_syria0715_06_12.asp>.

[13] IAEA, "Implementation of the NPT [Non-Proliferation Treaty] Safeguards Agreement in the Syrian Arab Republic," GOV/2011/30 report, May 24, 2011, 8. The report also complains, "Syria's statements . . . are limited in detail, are not supported by documentation and have not allowed the Agency to confirm Syria's assertions," 2.

[14] The record of Syrian violations is laid out in Nicholas Blanford, "UN Resolution 1701: A View from Lebanon," PolicyWatch No. 1414, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 21, 2008, available at <www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2940>.

[15] UN Security Council Resolution 1701, SC/8808, August 11, 2006, available at <www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2006/sc8808.doc.htm>.

[16] UN Security Council Resolution 1747 (2007), S/RES/1747, March 24, 2007, available at <www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1747(2007)>.

[17] UN Security Council, S/PV.6090, "Non-proliferation briefing by the chairman of the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1737 (2006)," March 10, 2009, New York. Although the report was not released, the speakers in the Security Council discussion of it described its conclusions in detail; available at <www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Iran%20S%20PV%206090.pdf>. An indication of the amount of explosives involved is that when the poorly stored explosives blew up in July 2011, the blast killed the Cypriot defense minister and navy commander and destroyed the country's largest electric power station, causing such extensive economic repercussions that Cyprus has had to consider asking the EU for a financial bail-out.

[18] The State Department's explanation of this episode is set out in Alfred B. Prados, *Syria: U.S. Relations and Bilateral Issues*, Congressional Research Service Issue Brief for Congress, July 2, 2003,

available at <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/22422.pdf>. A fuller account is Daniel Pipes and Gary Gambill, "Signal to Syria: Straighten Up," *The New York Post*, May 13, 2003.

[19] After Hamas did well in the 2006 Palestinian elections, the Quartet agreed on what are generally referred to as "the Quartet conditions," namely, "The Quartet concluded that it was inevitable that future assistance to any new government would be reviewed by donors against that government's commitment to the principles of nonviolence, recognition of Israel, and acceptance of previous agreements and obligations, including the Roadmap," available at <www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/en/declarations/88201.pdf>.

[20] Ethan Bronner, "Tensions Rise as Hamas Refuses to Take Sides in Syria," *The New York Times*, May 2, 2011, available at <www.newyorktimes.com/2011/05/03/world/middleeast/03hamas.html>. In reaction, Iran is said to have reduced or cut off funding for Hamas: Nidal al-Mughrabi, "Foreign Funds for Hamas Hit by Syria Unrest: Diplomats," Reuters, August 21, 2011, available at <www.reuters.com/article/2011/08/21/uk-palestinians-hamas-finance-idUSTRE77K19120110821>.

[21] For instance, UN Security Council Resolution 1790 calls "upon the international community, particularly countries in the region and Iraq's neighbours, to support the Iraqi people in their support of peace, stability, security, democracy, and prosperity," available at <www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2007/sc9207.doc.htm>.

[22] Details in this paragraph are from David Schenker, "Damascus on Trial," *Middle East Quarterly* (Spring 2011), 59–66.

[23] Patrick Clawson, *Unaffordable Ambitions: Syria's Military Build-Up and Economic Crisis* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1989).

[24] International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2011* (London: Routledge, 2011), 104–107, 111–112, 156–159, and 313–314. The number of combat-capable aircraft is shown as Britain, 334; France, 238; Germany, 318; and Israel 460. The number of army soldiers is shown as Britain 102,600; France, 130,600; Germany, 105,291; and Israel, 133,000. The number of army soldiers including reserves is shown as Britain, 175,190; France, 149,100; Germany, 121,642; and Israel, 633,000. The number of main battle tanks is shown as Britain, 325; France, 254; Germany, 768; and Israel, 3,501.

[25] Andrew Exum, "Hizballah at War: A Military Assessment," Policy Focus 63, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2006, 5–8; David Makovsky and Jeffrey White, "Lessons and Implications of the Israel-Hizballah War," Policy Focus 60, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2006, 39–41.

[26] Michael Eisenstadt and David Schenker, "Syria's Role in the War in Lebanon," PolicyWatch No. 1139, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 8, 2006, available at <www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2505>.

[27] One Israeli soldier was killed in 2011 from shots fired across the border by a Lebanese Armed Forces soldier, but that was not by Hizballah.

[28] The phrase appears to have originated with Shireen Hunter; see Barbara Slavin, "'Strategically Lonely' Iran Exploits Opportunities for Regional Influence," Iran Task Force brief, The Atlantic Council, March 25, 2011, available at <www.acus.org/publication/strategically-lonely-iran-exploits-opportunities-regional-influence>.

[29] The strategic importance of the relationship to both Syria and Iran is laid out in Jubin Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006) and, in shorter form, in Abbas William Samii, "Syria and Iran: An Enduring Axis," *Middle East Monitor* 1, no. 2 (April/May 2006), available at <www.mideastmonitor.org/issues/0604/06064_4.htm>.

[30] Dan Murphy, "A stunning shift of Iran's image in the Arab world," *Christian Science Monitor*, September 7, 2011, available at <www.csmonitor.com/World/Backchannels/2011/0907/A-stunning-shift-of-Iran-s-image-in-the-Arab-world>.

[31] Perhaps the most articulate exposition of these views is found in the columns of *Keyhan*, Iran's largest circulation newspaper, which is often described as semi-official; its editor, Hossein Shariatmadari, is a close confidant of Khamenei. In a 2-week period selected at random, *Keyhan* ran at least four editorials on the theme that the Arab Spring is yet more proof of Western decline in face of Iranian success (all translations by the author from the original Persian): "Political Islam Has Returned," *Keyhan*, October 27, 2011, arguing "Iran is becoming the model" for the people of the Middle East in rejecting Western domination and reinstating political Islam after centuries of failed secularism, available at <www.kayhannews.ir/900805/2.htm#other200>; "End of the West's Military Operations in Islamic World," *Keyhan*, October 30, 2011, arguing that the people of Libya, Yemen, Tunisia, and Egypt are rejecting the West, which has had to abandon its failed military efforts throughout the region as evidenced by Iraq and Afghanistan, available at <www.kayhannews.ir/900808/2.htm#other200>; "13th of Aban [Iranian date corresponding to November 4], An Obvious Shift in International Power," *Keyhan*, November 3, 2011, arguing that the West's failure in Libya, Afghanistan, and Iraq plus Israel's failure against Hizballah has "transformed the global equation," available at <www.kayhannews.ir/900812/2.htm#other200>; and "America Will Be Reduced to Dust," *Keyhan*, November 6, 2011, contending that the asymmetrical war by Middle Eastern peoples has and will defeat America's plan for dominating the region, available at <www.kayhannews.ir/900815/2.htm#other201>. As the frequency of these editorials attests, the theme of Western failure in the face of popular resistance inspired by political Islam is a major component of Iranian propaganda.

[32] Quoted in Geneive Abdo, "How Iran Keeps Assad in Power in Syria," *Foreign Affairs*, available at <www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/68230/geneive-abdo/how-iran-keeps-assad-in-power-in-syria>. The Boroujerdi quote is from Robin Pomeroy, "Analysis: Iran Sees Ally Syria Surrounded by U.S., Arab 'Wolves,'" Reuters, August 15, 2011.

[33] In May 2011, the U.S. Treasury Department took action against Mohsen Chirazi, third-ranking leader of Iran's Quds Force, and cited that force's role in Syria. In August, the EU imposed sanctions on the Quds Force for its role in Syrian repression. For a detailed account of Western allegations about Iranian involvement in suppressing Syrian protests, see Henry A. Ensher, "Iran-Syria Relations and The Arab Spring," *Iran Tracker*, July 12, 2011, available at <www.irantracker.org/foreign-relations/iran-syria-relations-and-arab-spring>.

[34] Quoted in Abdo, "How Iran Keeps Assad in Power in Syria." Interestingly enough, when Mousavi quit in August 2011, the Arab press speculated that he left because he opposed how actively Iran was helping Asad repress protestors.

[35] Karim Sadjadpour, *Reading Khamenei: The World View of Iran's Most Powerful Leader* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008).

[36] Brian Murphy, "Egypt Echoes Across Region: Iran, Bahrain, Yemen," Associated Press, February 14, 2011.

[37] For instance, the unnamed "senior U.S. official in Baghdad" quoted in Simon Tisdall, "Iran's Secret Plan for Summer Offensive to Force U.S. Out of Iraq," *The Guardian*, May 21, 2007, available at <www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/may22/iraq.topstories3>.

[38] "Syria Crisis: Iran's Ahmadinejad Criticises Killings," BBC News–Middle East, October 22, 2011, available at <www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15416410>. However, the president and his foreign minister are on the losing side of intense political infighting in Iran, and their statements about Syria are part of their pattern of trying to appear as the more reasonable interlocutors of the West, though that was certainly not how Ahmadinejad acted when he had

greater power. In any case, they are not now the ones setting foreign and security policy, which increasingly comes directly from Khamenei.

[39] Quoted in Bret Stephens, "The Ayatollahs' Consigliere," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 16, 2011, A15.

[40] ICG, *The Syrian Regime's Slow-motion Suicide*, Middle East/North Africa Report No. 109, 27.

[41] Soner Cagaptay, "Turkish-Iranian Rivalry Redux," *Hürriyet Daily News*, October 17, 2011, available at <www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC06.php?CID=1733>; and Soner Cagaptay, "Obama, Erdogan Find Shared Interests," *The Washington Post*, November 11, 2011, available at <www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/obama-erdogan-find-shared-interests/2011/11/11/gIQARNOoDN_story.html>.

[42] ICG, *The Syrian Regime's Slow-motion Suicide*, Middle East/North Africa Report No. 109, 27.

[43] About one-third of Syrian government revenue comes from its oil exports, 90 percent of which goes to EU countries. On September 2, the EU banned imports of oil from Syria, in Council Regulation EU 878/2011, available at <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/JOHtml.do?uri=OJ:L:2011:228:SOM:EN:HTML>.

[44] Ian Black, "Syria's Assad Should Step Down, Says King Abdullah of Jordan," *The Guardian* (UK), November 14, 2011, available at <www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/nov/14/syrian-president-assad-urged-to-quit>; John Leyne, "Arab Spring Revolution at the Arab League," BBC News, November 13, 2011, available at <www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15714771>.

[45] Asli Aydintasbas, "Turkey's New Policy on Syria," PolicyWatch No. 1856, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 5, 2011, available at <www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3406>.

[46] "Syria: The Tide Turns Against Bashar Assad," *The Economist*, November 19, 2011, 49–50.

[47] Liz Sly, "'Doomsday Scenario' if Syria Falls," *The Washington Post*, May 2, 2011. To be fair, the sentence quoted ended with the phrase "analysts and experts say," though note that the formulation implies all analysts and experts agree on this point.

[48] "U.S. Blasts Iran, Syria over Lebanon," CBC News, October 28, 2011, available at <www.cbc.ca/news/world/story/2010/10/28/un-lebanon-rice.html>.

[49] Dennis Ross, *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), 589.

[50] Itamar Rabinovich, *The View from Damascus: State, Political Community and Foreign Relations in Twentieth-Century Syria* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2008), 335. He argues that Hafez al-Asad, knowing in 2000 his death was imminent, did not want to take the risks inherent in a deal with Israel. Rabinovich was president of Tel Aviv University, Israeli ambassador to the United States, and lead Israeli negotiator with Syria.

[51] Rabinovich, 335. A prominent exponent of that view about Syrian motivations is Tony Badran, "Peace Talks, Bashar's War by Other Means," April 13, 2010, available at <www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArchivesDetails.aspx?ID=160312>.

[52] The most forceful statement of that view is Daniel Pipes, *Syria Beyond the Peace Process* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1996), available at <www.danielpipes.org/books/syriabeyond.php>. A less forceful way of stating the relationship is Ross's argument that the more legitimate the government, the easier it is to make Arab-Israeli peace; see Dennis Ross, *The Missing Peace*, 589–590.

[53] Efforts to show that considerations about the regional impact influenced U.S. policy have been unpersuasive. In April, Karen DeYoung and Scott Wilson wrote in *The Washington Post*, "Escalating anti-government demonstrations in Syria have put the Obama administration in a quandary as it tries to protect a range of wider U.S. interests while supporting what it has called the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people." Yet when they came to list the reasons for hesitation, they cited "a palpable sense of weariness among policymakers buffeted by months of crisis across the Middle East . . . ; a reluctance to add further uncertainty to the tenuous Israeli-Palestinian peace process; an unwillingness . . . to readily trade a known quantity in Assad for an unknown future; and a latent belief among some that the Syrian leader can be persuaded to adopt real reforms." Karen DeYoung and Scott Wilson, "Growing Unrest in Syria Puts U.S. Officials in a Bind," *The Washington Post*, April 22, 2011, A1, A9. Only one of those four factors can be called a "wider U.S. interest," namely, the impact on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

[54] ICG, *The Syrian Regime's Slow-motion Suicide*, Middle East/North Africa Report No. 109, 27.

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