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Perspective

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Alternative Futures for Syria

Regional Implications and Challenges for the United States

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In December 2013, RAND convened a workshop to explore a set of alternative futures for the Syrian conflict. This perspective draws extensively on that workshop and compares its findings and discussion with analysis of how events have developed since then. The Syrian conflict has shifted more than we and the other workshop participants anticipated. The successful push of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)[1] into northern and western Iraq and its territorial gains in eastern Syria (amid its continued vicious assault on other Syrian rebels) exceeded our expectations. The Assad regime's steady (albeit costly) progress against opposition elements in northern and western Syria (as well as the continued intense fighting among opposition elements) warrant a reexamination of our assumptions and our futures. The original workshop was meant largely for the benefit of the participants, but the unanticipated significant developments since then argue for documenting both our previous discussions and the ensuing changes on the ground. This paper is intended to provide such documentation. We believe that the four scenarios discussed continue to offer a solid conceptual framework to assess the trajectory of the Syrian war and its implications for U.S. and Western interests.

Participants in the workshop included experts from the U.S. intelligence and policy communities, Washington think tanks, and RAND. These participants assessed four future scenarios devel-

This perspective was drafted just before the United States commenced bombing against ISIS targets in Iraq and Syria and thus does not factor that development into our assessment of Syria's future trajectory. Our initial sense is that the U.S. action against what is quite clearly the Assad regime's most potent remaining adversary reinforces our view that the regime's position is strengthening and that some sort of regime victory has become the most likely scenario. Since the training and assistance program for the Syrian rebels has not yet begun, and seems in any case targeted at fighting ISIS, that aspect of the new U.S. policy has also not been factored into this analysis.

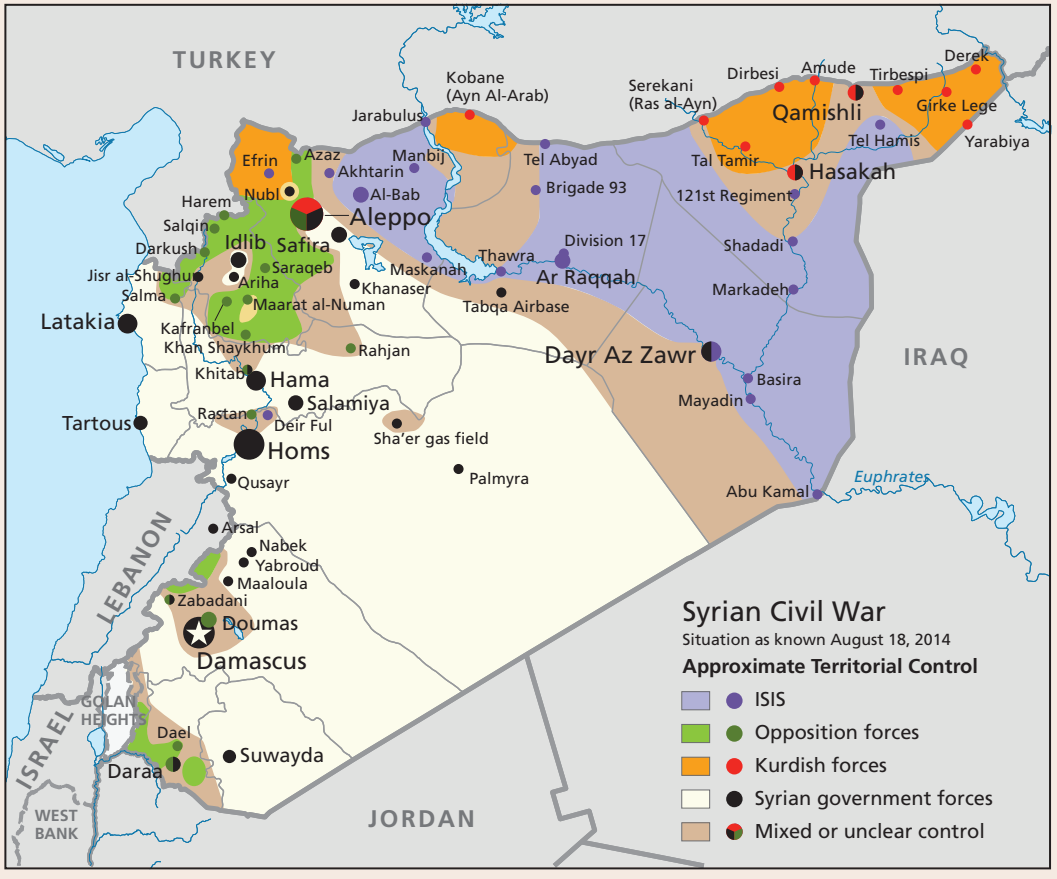
[1] The group has used and is known by many names, including the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Today, the group simply calls itself the Islamic State (IS).

The Syrian Civil War

The civil war in Syria poses a thorny problem for U.S. policymakers. Battle lines have changed and momentum has shifted often during the course of the conflict. The regime appeared vulnerable to the forces arrayed against it early on, but has recently gained ground by marshaling foreign support, organizing local militias, and exploiting deepening rifts within the opposition. The conflict has morphed from a popular uprising against an autocratic Ba'athist regime into a multi-sided battle involving Ba'athist/Alawite government forces, irregular pro-government Ba'athist militias, Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi Shi'ite militias, secular/moderate rebels, Kurdish separatists, traditional Islamist rebels, nationalist Salafi-jihadist rebels, and the transnational Salafi-jihadist ISIS movement. Most neighboring states and several Persian Gulf states have sent arms and money to one or more of the factions in this war. Iran has sent advisors, weapons, and funds to the Syrian government forces, while Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Turkey have each supported one or more of the rebel factions. Recently, the United States has begun to send some significant weaponry to a few of the moderate rebel factions, while Russia has delivered advanced weaponry to the Assad regime since the onset of the conflict. The outcome of the conflict will affect Middle East stability and regional political dynamics for years—perhaps decades—and could exacerbate a wider Shi'a-versus-Sunni sectarian conflict in the region.

U.S. interests in this conflict have grown more complicated since mid-2013. While still seeing the Assad regime as an adversary based on its patron-client relationship with Iran and its implacable hostility toward Israel, U.S. decisionmakers are also dealing with the threats caused by the dramatic recent gains made in Iraq by ISIS and the influence it wields within the Syrian rebel movement—at the expense of the more moderate rebel factions supported by the West. Finally, United Nations Security Council Resolution 2118 of September 2013, which mandated the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons and facilities, made the Syrian government a de facto partner in international weapons of mass destruction counterproliferation efforts.

Disposition of Military Forces in Syria



SOURCE: Evan Centanni, "Syrian Civil War Map: August 2014," *Political Geography Now* website (www.polgeonow.com), August 19, 2014.

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oped by RAND researchers in close consultation with Intelligence Community experts. Our only criteria were that the futures should be plausible based on current circumstances and conceivable in the relative near term (2014–2015). Discussions focused on the following dimensions:

- impact on Iran/Hezbollah equities
- impact on al Qaeda's local and global influence
- impact on Syrian national stability
- overall consequences and implications for the future.

The futures were (1) *prolonged conflict*, (2) *regime victory*, (3) *regime collapse*, and (4) *negotiated settlement*. These scenarios assume that the geopolitical structure of the Middle East does not change substantively (i.e., there is no grand rapprochement between the U.S. and Iran and no final Israeli-Palestinian peace deal) and that there is no major U.S./Western intervention in the Syrian war. The purpose of the workshop was to facilitate a thorough examination of potential futures, not to try to predict the future; however, we did identify the path that seemed most likely in the near term. The scenarios were developed in late 2013 and much of the following discussion relates to the discussion that occurred at the workshop. The final section of this paper explores what has happened since and how our view of Syria's likely path has changed.

Scenario 1: Prolonged Conflict

This first scenario postulates that the civil war continues unabated, with high levels of violence and continued external support to all sides. Battle lines harden and World War I–style positional warfare takes hold across the country as the different factions solidify control over their territorial holdings and no side develops the military capability to break the stalemate. Syria essentially breaks up into a set of de facto mini-states:

- A rump Alawite state, run by the Assad regime and defended by the Syrian army and its National Defense Force militias, would emerge on the Mediterranean coast with control of Damascus; it also would likely control a corridor from Damascus to the Alawite provinces on the Mediterranean coast, perhaps including parts or all of the cities of Homs and Hama.
- A Kurdish statelet would emerge in the far northeast.
- A moderate Sunni Islamist entity would control much of southern Syria, including some of the eastern Damascus suburbs and most of the area between Damascus and the Golan Heights. This entity would also control parts of the area along the Lebanese border and most of Homs province.
- A Salafi-jihadist emirate, run by ISIS (with some areas controlled by the al Qaeda–affiliated al-Nusrah Front), would occupy most of northern Syria (including Aleppo) and virtually all of Ar Raqqah and Dayr Az Zawr provinces in eastern Syria.

Workshop Assessment. Prolonged conflict would be a setback for Iran and Hezbollah. The inability of the Assad regime to retain control over more than limited portions of western Syria would be seen by leaders in Tehran and South Beirut as a reversal and a blow to their regional influence, especially in view of the significant resources that Iran and Hezbollah have poured into the Assad regime. However, workshop participants were almost unanimous in their view that Iran would not withdraw from Syria after this kind of setback. Instead, Iran likely would work to quietly build influence with some of the smaller, non-jihadist Sunni rebel groups and perhaps the Kurds to maintain a patronage network within Syria

that could compensate somewhat for the shrinkage of the Assad regime's power. The Iranians also would continue to provide support to the rump Alawite state to prevent the Assad regime and its military from being wiped out.

Conversely, participants believed that prolonged conflict would amount to a victory for al Qaeda and ISIS. The extremists could tell the Sunni world that they had little presence at all in Syria when the anti-Assad uprising began in early 2011, but had secured a foothold in the country by the end of 2012. By late 2013, both ISIS and al-Nusrah were inflicting serious losses on the other major rebel groups and were setting up governance structures in Ar Raqqah and Dayr Az Zawr provinces, as well as in parts of Aleppo. If ISIS or some combination of jihadist fighters succeed in carving out an emirate in northern and eastern Syria by 2015, they could claim to the Sunni Arabs that they were close to building a true caliphate in a Sunni-majority Arab country neighboring Jerusalem, site of the third most holy place in Islam. Al Qaeda in Iraq could not make this claim during its heyday in 2006–2007, nor could core al Qaeda when it established a web of training camps in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan during 2000–2001.

Prolonged conflict would drive most democratic and secular Syrians to side with the Assad regime because they would have no other choice. Very few rebel groups can be considered democratic and secular. Ironically therefore, many of the secular intellectuals, artists, and civic activists who initiated the early street protests against the regime in the spring of 2011 would return to the regime's fold as the conflict entered its bloody phase of extended attrition.

The regional Middle Eastern environment would probably suffer, as Sunni extremists would feel emboldened by the successes of ISIS/al Qaeda on the ground. Sunni extremist groups in Lebanon would most likely begin some kind of military campaign in Lebanon to weaken Hezbollah, while a Sunni extremist insurgency could begin in Jordan, with cross-border support provided by ISIS forces in eastern Syria and western Iraq. In Yemen, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula might also become more confident and assertive and may try to reestablish itself within Saudi Arabia. Overall, we could expect the spread of generalized Sunni-Shi'a street violence throughout the Muslim world.

Scenario 1 Insights: Prolonged Conflict

Iran/Hezbollah

- Setback for Iran—builds influence with proxies
- Losing Damascus would make Syria less valuable to Iran
- Hezbollah stays engaged

al Qaeda/ISIS

- al Qaeda/ISIS benefits
- Syria remains central narrative: Sunni-majority state that is close to Jerusalem

Syrian stability

- Secularists eventually side with regime
- High risk of sectarian violence

Regional environment

- Extremists empowered
- Sunni-Shi'a conflict spreads
- Lebanon and Jordan most vulnerable

Scenario 2: Regime "Victory"

In this scenario, the regime does not score a definitive blow against the rebels (thus the quotation marks), but instead steadily grinds down the rebel forces in the heavily populated areas of western Syria by using its overwhelming advantages in artillery and air power against rebel units located in and near urban areas. Eventu-

ally, the Syrian army is able to force the bulk of the rebel forces back into pockets of territory along the Turkish border, along the Golan Heights, and in the east along the Euphrates River Valley. Some rebel units would retain positions in the eastern suburbs of Damascus and perhaps in parts of the city of Aleppo. Support from Iran and Hezbollah would be critical in making this government "victory" possible. Another factor helping the regime is the infighting between the various rebel factions, which keeps the rebel forces divided and preoccupied. This second scenario posited that conflict would continue to simmer along the borders between regime territory and the remaining rebel-controlled areas. Peace would most certainly not break out in this future.

Workshop Assessment. Regime victory would leave the Syrian army weak after years of bloody fighting and recovering from what seemed the brink of defeat, but only because outside actors—Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia—and locally developed militias were able to weigh in and alter the momentum of battle. The extraordinary battles of the past half-decade or so exposed tensions between the Syrian army and some of the irregular pro-regime forces, like the Shabiha gangs that have been used to intimidate some anti-Assad towns and villages. These tensions, while less severe than those that exist between the various rebel factions, would serve to hamstring the Assad regime's security apparatus in the otherwise favorable regime victory scenario. Also, this scenario, even with its favorable military outcome for the Assad regime, would leave the Syrian economy wrecked and in need of substantial foreign aid, putting the regime at the mercy of foreign benefactors.

Participants agreed that regime victory would be a win for Iran and Hezbollah. Iranian assistance would be seen as the critical factor that turned the tide and allowed the regime to survive and retain influence throughout urbanized western Syria. This success would likely lead Tehran to become more aggressive in the Persian Gulf region, as it would look to destabilize certain U.S. allies, such as Bahrain and Kuwait. Still, Syria would be "an expensive prize" for the Iranians; its ruined economy and massive refugee problems would require substantial long-term financial assistance. The financial burden of propping up Assad would strain Iran's economy. This pressure could create an opportunity for the United States and its European allies to offer some economic aid to Assad as a way to re-engage the regime—with the goal of pulling it out of Tehran's orbit. Some workshop participants speculated that a long-term counterterrorism relationship with a "post-victory" Assad regime would help the United States and the West reduce the threat of militant Salafi-jihadist attacks in Europe and the United States.

Scenario 2 Insights: Regime "Victory"

Iran/Hezbollah

- Iran more secure; turn to Gulf?
- Syria an expensive prize
- Hezbollah gains in Lebanon, loses in Arab world

al Qaeda/ISIS

- Severe blow to al Qaeda/ISIS
- ISIS would seek to retain a presence in remote parts of western Syria
- Turns attention to Iraq

Syrian stability

- Syrian economy wrecked
- Regime weak, lacks authority
- Dependent on foreign aid

Regional environment

- Defeat for Gulf Arabs
- Aid offers limited opportunities for leverage
- Regime likely open to counterterrorism cooperation

Hezbollah would be a winner, as it played a key role in several battles that turned the tide against the rebels, most notably the Battle of Qusayr in mid-2013. Regime victory would increase Hezbollah's prestige among Lebanon's Shi'a population and cement its position as a real power broker in Lebanon. However, Hezbollah's popularity in the wider Arab world, earned during its dramatic 2006 war with Israel, would plummet. The "Arab Street" would no longer see Hezbollah as an Arab force against Israel, but rather as a "tool of the Persians" in their war against Sunni Islam. In countries like Egypt and Jordan, this would cripple Hezbollah's standing for years to come.

Finally, regime victory would be a stinging defeat for the Gulf Arab states that supported the Islamist rebel groups in Syria. Saudi Arabia and Qatar would suffer a heavy political defeat and both could well end up blaming U.S. indecision as the cause of their defeat. U.S. relations with Saudi Arabia and Qatar would suffer.

Scenario 3: Regime Collapse

In this future, the rebels put enough pressure on the Syrian army in multiple theaters such that the army cannot replace its losses of Alawite personnel, exhausting its loyal recruiting base. There would be no single climactic battle; rather, the Syrian army would go through a slow-motion demographic collapse over a period of 2–3 months. This collapse would probably be aided by some technological breakthrough(s) on the rebel side—for example, acquisition of advanced man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS) that would quickly deny the regime air superiority.

Regime collapse does not result in any national rebel government, but the emergence of a chaotic patchwork of fiefdoms across Syria. There would be moderate Islamist, secular nationalist, die-hard Ba'athist, and extreme Salafi-jihadist fiefdoms scattered around the country, with the borders between them constantly shifting. A low level of violence between the various rebel groups would continue. Without the need to contend with much resistance from the remnants of the Syrian army, ISIS and its affiliates would likely seek to destroy most of the other rebel groups.

Workshop Assessment. Regime collapse would be a heavy blow—the worst of the four futures—to Iran and Hezbollah. Hezbollah would find itself in a precarious position in Lebanon as a range of Sunni, Christian, and even unorthodox Shi'a militias would likely attack Hezbollah forces and interests throughout the country. On the defensive and lacking open supply lines, Hezbollah would struggle to maintain its military position in Lebanon. Iranian credibility and influence in the Persian Gulf would decline significantly. As in the prolonged conflict scenario, Iranian intelligence services would probably try to do some damage control in Syria by quietly building ties with some non-jihadist Sunni rebel groups.

Regime collapse would be a dramatic victory for al Qaeda/ISIS forces in Syria and throughout the Middle East. A new wave of transnational terror plots targeting Europe, the United States, and conservative Arab states such as Egypt and Jordan likely would begin. The strength of ISIS in Iraq would grow dramatically and put much more pressure on the pro-Shi'a (this was true for Maliki and remains the case for his successor, Al-Abadi) regime in Baghdad. A new fault line would emerge between nationalist and transnational Salafists throughout the Middle East; this could cause a bloody internecine war within the Salafi-jihadist community in eastern Syria, as al-Nusrah and ISIS would battle for supremacy in the wake of regime collapse.

Constant armed clashes on the borders between the various rebel enclaves would make conditions dangerous for the remaining civilian population. ISIS could attempt to engage in ethnic cleansing of the Alawite population and even some of the moderate Islamist rebel groups, and this could prompt international pressure for some kind of a U.S./NATO humanitarian intervention to save the Alawites from extinction.

At the regional level, things would not be much better. Mass refugee flows would pour into Jordan and Turkey, putting great pressure on the infrastructures of those states. At the same time, Western policymakers would have to worry about the security of the remnants of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal. Finally, we could expect that the United States, NATO, and Iran would try hard to work with some of the "more moderate" Syrian Islamist groups (e.g., the Islamic Front) to contain the Salafi-jihadist groups and keep them from overrunning more territory.

Scenario 3 Insights: Regime Collapse

Iran/Hezbollah

- Iran loses influence but builds ties to focus on limiting jihadist spread
- Hezbollah is substantially weakened in Lebanon

al Qaeda/ISIS

- al Qaeda now has more capability to plan major transnational terror plots
- Strength of ISIS grows in Iraq
- Struggle in Middle East between transnational and nationalist Salafis

Syrian stability

- Heavy clashes on borders between various rebel enclaves
- Ethnic cleansing of Alawites likely
- Damascus becomes urban battleground between multiple rebel groups

Regional environment

- Security of Syrian chemical weapons becomes a grave concern to the United States/West
- Mass refugee flows into Turkey/Jordan
- United States/NATO/Turkey/Iran work with moderate Syrian Islamists to contain jihadists

Scenario 4: Negotiated Settlement

In this optimistic (and some might say least realistic) scenario, the stalled Geneva peace talks (or some other negotiating effort) succeed when the fighting exhausts all sides. The resulting agreement would isolate and marginalize the militant Salafi-jihadist groups and compel the Assad family (but not the rest of the Ba'athist leadership) to leave Syria permanently. A multi-sectarian council would run the country for a specified period, at which time elections for a new, democratic government would be held.

Skirmishes would continue between the militant Salafi-jihadists, such as the al-Nusrah Front and ISIS, and all of the other factions. A number of external actors, including the United States, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, would jockey for influence with the multi-sectarian council to achieve a position as Syria's dominant external patron. U.S. military advisors would probably be sent to help build a new Syrian National Army, an effort that may take place alongside Iranian advisors.

Workshop Assessment. Most participants were skeptical that this future could occur within the next few years. If it somehow did occur, it would be a blow to al Qaeda and ISIS because it would represent an international effort by the United States, Iran, Western Europeans, the Syrian army, and moderate Syrian rebels to work together, at least in principle, to contain and defeat them. Al Qaeda/ISIS forces would be hit hard, but would manage to keep some kind of small safe haven in eastern Syria near the Iraqi border.

Iran's fortunes here are unclear. Iran and the United States would jockey for influence with the new multi-sectarian govern-

ment, and it might take years for one party to come out on top. Hezbollah would struggle to maintain any major level of influence in Syria, as it would be overshadowed by all of the larger powers moving into the country to help support the transitional government.

Within Syria, the major challenges for the international community would be fair distribution of oil revenue among the various sectarian groups and the process of repatriating refugees to areas within Syria where they would be safe from retribution. Developing a new Syrian army with more Sunni influence at the higher ranks, but with the will to aggressively tackle the remaining al Qaeda/ISIS safe havens, would be another major challenge.

At the regional level, most of the Gulf Arab states would probably support this kind of settlement. The key would be to find ways in which the Western powers could compel the Gulf Cooperation Council governments, especially those of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, to crack down on donors within their borders that have been funneling money to ISIS and al-Nusrah. This would be difficult, however, and the prospect for success would be low.

Scenario 4 Insights: Negotiated Settlement

Iran/Hezbollah

- Iran and United States jockey for influence
- Burden sharing emerges as key issue
- Hezbollah struggles to maintain position

al Qaeda/ISIS

- A blow to extremist influence
- Jihadists continue attacks from limited safe haven in eastern Syria
- Possible Western counterterrorism cooperation with Damascus

Syrian stability

- Key challenges are distributing oil revenue, repatriating refugees
- Extremists continue to stoke violence

Regional environment

- Saudis challenged to cut funding to Jihadists
- Most Gulf Cooperation Council states support the settlement
- Turkey interested in limiting Kurdish restiveness, border clashes

Workshop Overall Judgments

Most participants felt that prolonged conflict was the best descriptor for the situation in December 2013, but momentum seemed to be leaning toward regime victory. A negotiated settlement was deemed the least likely of the possible scenarios and few participants could foresee a future in which the opposition gained enough traction or healed their internal rifts to make sufficient gains against the regime. The participants believed that regime victory would not be the worst possible future for the United States because al Qaeda and ISIS are being empowered by the Syrian civil war; a regime victory would increase the prospects for some long-term containment of the Salafi-jihadist movement in the Levant and Persian Gulf regions. Regime collapse, on the other hand, would enable al Qaeda and ISIS to rapidly expand their influence and territory in those regions and pose a serious threat to a number of regional governments. Most participants assessed that the Syrian war started out as a conflict to bring democracy to Syria, but evolved into a counterterrorism campaign in which both the Assad government and the secular and Islamist rebel factions are struggling to hold off the growing power of the Salafi-jihadist rebel factions. Participants saw regime collapse as the worst possible outcome for U.S. strategic interests.

Although the participants did not see regime victory as the worst outcome, it would impose substantial costs on the United States: Iran would score a big win in the Levant in the short term

and U.S. relations with many of the Gulf Arab states would be damaged. Negotiated settlement would be the best outcome, although it is considered the least plausible in the near future. Prolonged conflict was seen as similar to regime victory in strategic terms, in that it would keep Salafi-jihadist militants in check; it was seen as more likely than both regime collapse and negotiated settlement. It should be noted that none of the futures we considered envisioned that any faction in the Syrian conflict could score a decisive victory over its adversaries. None of the futures envisioned that peace could break out in Syria in the near term; in all of the futures, at least some amount of residual conflict would remain.

Recent Developments

The trends and indicators observed since the workshop suggest that we were too cautious in our analysis, especially in believing that change would come slowly and prolonged conflict was the most likely short-term path (albeit with momentum leaning toward regime victory). Steady gains made by the Assad regime and worsened friction and dysfunction among the opposition groups, but also the shift in ISIS focus from Syria (which some observers have attributed to Syrian/ISIS collusion) to Iraq, has allowed the regime to make progress against the opposition (in the key central and western parts of the country) more rapidly than most of our workshop participants foresaw. Nevertheless, the dramatic success of ISIS, unless staunched in Iraq, foreshadows great dangers ahead for Damascus. ISIS gains to date seem not to have translated into successes on the ground against the Assad regime—but as we have seen, and as we point out later, momentum can shift more rapidly than anticipated, both in the regime's favor and against it. The jury is out as to whether ISIS has overreached in Iraq or whether it

It is regime victory that now appears to be most likely in the near to mid-term.

can continue its successful frontal assaults—both in western Iraq and in Syria. Again, ISIS remains a key wildcard as to whether the regime can maintain momentum to the point that it can argue it has regained control over most of the country.

It is regime victory that now appears to be most likely in the near to mid-term. The emerging international consensus that something must be done to stop ISIS, including airstrikes against its frontline forces in northern Iraq and the prospect for more strikes against the group's leadership in Syria, would bode well for the regime. The regime's embrace of possible cooperation against ISIS with heretofore antagonists, including Europe and the United States, reveals an awareness of the danger the group will pose to Damascus if its military advances continue unchecked.

Regime victory may appear counterintuitive in view of recent media reports that ISIS has "erased" the border between eastern Syria and Iraq and has strengthened its hold over the critical city of Dayr Az Zawr in eastern Syria, which has a commanding geographic position along the Euphrates River Valley. But there are two distinct, ongoing campaigns in Syria. In urbanized and heavily populated western Syria, the regime is systematically using its advantages in artillery and airpower to grind down the various rebel factions. The capture of Homs from the rebels in May 2014 and steady regime advances around Aleppo have been significant military events. The regime has cleared much of the Damascus-Homs-Hama-Tartous corridor of rebel forces. This corridor can be regarded as the main theater of operations for the Assad regime; it is where the regime is

concentrating military equipment and manpower. The west is the portion of Syria that the regime must control to remain viable.

In eastern Syria, the story is different. This is a rural and sparsely populated region that is not critical to the immediate survival of the Assad regime. Its only geopolitical assets are the major oilfields in Dayr Az Zawr province. Eastern Syria is an economy-of-force operation for the Syrian government. In the east, the regime relies on its airpower, a few scattered but heavily fortified army garrisons, a few friendly local Sunni tribes, and Kurdish Democratic Union Party (or PYD) fighters from the Hasakah region to contain the ISIS and al-Nusrah Front forces that dominate the region. In the east, the regime is seeking to prevent the Salafi-jihadist militant groups from building sufficient strength to mount a major offensive in the urban core of western Syria. The regime has neither the manpower nor the logistics capability to exert full control over the remote eastern parts of the country.

The regime's effectiveness in creating a national pro-regime militia—the so-called National Defense Force (NDF)—that has provided enough new, trained manpower to replace the army's battlefield infantry losses in the western theater has contributed to shifting momentum. NDF units have received good military training and are more disciplined than the Shabiha gangs the regime relied on in 2011 and 2012. Many NDF members are ethnic minorities (Christians, Druze, Kurds, Alawites) who fear the specter of a Sunni Islamist state if the rebels win. By all accounts, NDF units fight fiercely when they are sent to the battlefront. These units are now a major source of infantry for the regime and are usually deployed in concert with regular army armored and mechanized units in combined-arms operations. Indeed, the NDF contributed more to the regime's recent military successes than the intervention of Hezbollah, although Hezbollah has made important military contributions.

[T]he rebel movement continues to be bitterly divided and incapable of forming a coordinated military command structure.

In addition to military factors, some political developments offer advantages to the Assad government. First, the rebel movement continues to be bitterly divided and incapable of forming a coordinated military command structure. The rebels are also a long way from being able to produce any kind of unified vision for the political future of Syria. ISIS is engaged in conflict with all of the other major rebel factions, including the pro-Western Free Syrian Army (FSA), the Muslim Brotherhood–oriented Islamic Front, the Islamist Army of the Mujahedeen, and even the al Qaeda–aligned al-Nusrah Front (which is more nationalist in orientation than ISIS). In January 2014, the other rebel factions briefly united to mount an offensive against ISIS in northwestern Syria. This united operation was short-lived and failed to make major territorial gains, but it exposed the large fault lines that exist between the transnational Salafi-jihadist agenda of ISIS and the other rebel groups.

Frictions also exist between the various non-ISIS groups. Clashes have occurred between the FSA and the Islamic Front on several occasions, including one notable incident in December 2013, when Islamic Front fighters looted several FSA supply warehouses storing military equipment received from the West. Also, within the various rebel groups, there is a wide range of geographically based "brigades" and "armies" that jealously guard their autonomy and control over certain areas. Dissension and

turmoil frequently break out within the ranks of the Islamic Front and the FSA. For example, the Islamic Front is a collection of seven groups with differing geographic and ideological agendas: the Aleppo-based Al Tawhid Brigade, the Salafist Ahrar al-Sham group, the Homs-based Liwa al-Haqq, the Idlib-based Suquor al Sham, the Damascus-based Jaysh al-Islam, Ansar al Sham, and the Kurdish Islamic Front. Since the founding of the Islamic Front in November 2013, there have been a number of debates and disputes between the groups over policy toward ISIS and general military priorities.

A second political factor that has helped the regime, in part caused by the number of rebel groups with competing agendas, is the largely uncoordinated external support campaign for the Syrian rebels. During the war in Afghanistan in the 1980s, one of the main reasons for the success of the Afghan Mujahedeen against the Soviets was the unified and efficient external support campaign that funneled money and weapons to the insurgents. The United States, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia cooperated seamlessly in the effort to get support to Afghanistan's most capable insurgent groups. No such effort has occurred in Syria and it is hard to see one developing anytime soon. The United States and its European allies have provided some limited aid to moderate groups, but that aid has, until recently, been limited to largely nonlethal supplies delivered to the battlefield in fits and starts. The Obama administration is troubled by the prospect that any major U.S. weapons delivery program might end up putting advanced weapons in the hands of radical rebel factions like al-Nusrah and ISIS, who could then use them against U.S. and Western interests throughout the Middle East. Good vetting procedures for arms deliveries are difficult to establish in the fluid environment of the Syrian civil war.

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A third factor is the regime's success in intimidating a large portion of the Syrian Sunni population (especially the middle class) through the mass use of firepower against civilian urban populations. The regime's use of barrel bombs (and previously chemical weapons) has had a deep psychological effect and created a sense the regime will stop at nothing to prevent a rebel victory in western Syria. Many middle-class Sunnis have concluded that the regime will set no limits on its military actions as it clings to power and that it therefore makes no sense for them to support the rebels. This intimidation factor is drying up some Sunni popular support for the rebel factions. Waning Sunni support for the rebels is also attributable to the increasing power of the jihadist factions within the rebel movement. Most middle-class, urbanized Syrian Sunnis do not support the Salafi-jihadist ideology and do not want to live in a Salafi-jihadist state. The fact that defections of Sunni officers from the Syrian army have largely stopped within the past year is one indication that the Sunni middle class may be willing to accept regime victory.

A final political factor with military implications favorable to the Assad regime is the reality that, while Western military support to the rebels has been tepid, the Syrian regime has enjoyed steady, reliable arms shipments from its major patrons, namely Iran and

Russia. This has allowed the regime to continue to maintain fleets of helicopters, fighter aircraft, and artillery large enough to give the regime's forces a continued firepower advantage over the rebels. Both Iran (and its ally Hezbollah) and Russia have stood solidly behind the regime and continue to provide financial, diplomatic, and materiel support. Russian diplomacy in moving the West to ignore "red lines" in the wake of Syrian use of chemical weapons—thereby involving the Assad regime in international disarmament efforts rather than moving forward with promised retaliatory strikes—was a critical moment and a turning point for the regime.

Reassessing Implications of Regime Victory. We believe that most of the implications of regime victory developed in the workshop remain valid, but some warrant modification—particularly in view of ISIS's advances in northern Iraq that allowed the militant group to capture Mosul, seize parts of Tikrit, and threaten the Kurdish areas. Specifically, we assess that a regime victory in Syria would not be as large of a blow to ISIS as we assessed in December, because ISIS's advances in Iraq have given the group a new territorial base from which to operate and have increased the group's appeal to young, would-be jihadists around the world. Regime victory would be a setback to ISIS but, even under the most optimistic variants of our regime victory scenario, the group would still hold some parts of eastern Syria that could be linked to its recent territorial gains in northern and western Iraq.

Similarly, we now judge that regime victory in Syria will not offer as large a win to Iran as previously thought. ISIS's gains in Iraq worsened Iran's strategic position in the Middle East and established a new threat to Tehran on its western border. A regime victory in Syria would still be a positive outcome for Tehran, but would not be the same kind of "big win" envisioned during our workshop. Even if a regime victory emerges, the Iranians will still probably face a large ISIS army with conventional weapons that controls land all the way from Diyala province in Iraq on Iran's western border to portions of the Euphrates River Valley in eastern Syria.

The recent developments in northern Iraq would seem to open up some new incentives for the United States and Iran to cooperate, at least politically, in both the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts. For the moment, neither side is interested in direct security cooperation—that is indeed "a bridge too far" right now—but opportunities for some basic political and diplomatic collaboration on these twin conflicts ought not be dismissed out of hand.

Finally, when we discussed regime victory during our December workshop, most participants seemed to assume that ISIS and the al-Nusrah Front would be relatively equal players in the Syrian war for the foreseeable future. Now, however, it looks as if al-Nusrah has been degraded by ISIS attacks in eastern Syria and is now far weaker than ISIS. Thus, in any regime victory future, ISIS will likely dominate any jihadist safe havens that remain in eastern Syria—absent any dramatic military "comeback" by al-Nusrah. The possibility of a strengthened and brazen ISIS playing an even

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more dominant role in post-Assad Syria also dampens Western enthusiasm for unseating the regime.

How Could Another Future Emerge?

Our revised perspective on the plausibility of regime victory since December is a strong reminder of how fluid the situation is. Early assessments suggested that the regime would rout its scattered opposition. Momentum shifted, however, and it appeared that it was only a matter of time before the regime fell, largely due to army desertions and the apparent strength of the FSA. Of course, predicting the future in a highly dynamic conflict such as the Syrian war is always risky. Although we feel that the current trend lines point toward a regime victory, that is certainly not pre-ordained; changes in numerous variables could move the conflict once again in a different direction over the next 12–18 months.

Prolonged conflict would become more likely, for example, if the rebels acquired a new capability that helped counter the regime's advantage in firepower. Perhaps the most likely scenario is that the rebels acquire significant quantities of late-generation MANPADS, although these alone are unlikely at this point to alter the course of the conflict. Another possibility is that the rebels could acquire large numbers of precision rocket systems and/or mortars that could launch effective counterbattery fire against the regime's masses of artillery.

A major increase in ISIS's battlefield effectiveness could also alter current trends. The Syrian army has been able to concentrate much of its attention on the non-ISIS rebel groups over the past year because ISIS, focused on fighting other rebel groups and now the Iraqi army, has largely avoided large-scale confrontations with the Syrian army and allied government militias. This de facto disengagement between the Syrian army and ISIS will soon end, as they—being the two most powerful factions in the Syrian war—each gain more ground and come into closer proximity with one another. If ISIS's military capabilities continue to prove to be better than most Western analysts expected, including gains against Kurdish forces, and if it is able to translate lessons learned against the Iraqi army and the Kurds into better performance in fighting Syrian forces, then the trajectory of the war could shift from regime victory to prolonged conflict. Indeed, ISIS's capture of a number of the Iraqi army's weapon stockpiles in June 2014 gave the group access to a fair number of main battle tanks, armored personnel carriers, armored Humvees, artillery (including some self-propelled), and surface-to-surface rockets. If ISIS is able to develop the maintenance and logistical infrastructure to operate these systems reliably over the long term, it is conceivable that it could challenge the Syrian army in maneuver warfare in a way that no other rebel group has been able to.

Western realization that ISIS poses an imminent threat beyond the region has energized efforts to engage militarily . . . to roll back the group's successes. This U.S.-led effort will almost certainly bolster the Assad regime's prospects for survival.

Even given the strengthened opposition posed by ISIS, regime collapse still seems less likely than prolonged conflict. Western realization that ISIS poses an imminent threat beyond the region has energized efforts to engage militarily (both in bolstering local

forces, such as the Kurds, and in using force directly against ISIS fighters) to roll back the group's successes. This U.S.-led effort will almost certainly bolster the Assad regime's prospects for survival. We assess that regime collapse would require two new developments. First, the implosion of the regime's security forces would be predicated on cooperation among the various rebel factions, something that seems most unlikely given the deep animosities between groups. Too many fighters on each side have been killed by the others for them to agree to fight side-by-side against the regime. If the rebel groups were able to cooperate tightly, they could coordinate their offensives and quickly overstretch the regime's elite armored and mechanized units and create local numerical force overmatches that would allow rebel units to achieve frequent breakthroughs and puncture the regime's defensive lines. This kind of cooperation would likely require some kind of umbrella rebel command council that would have authority over all rebel military operations.

Second, we believe that regime collapse would require many elements of the regime's current coalition (Christians, Druze, Kurds, urban middle-class Sunnis) to defect from the regime, or at least become fence-sitters who support no side in the civil war. For the regime to collapse, the regime's support base would have to be whittled down to just the Alawite population of Syria plus perhaps a few small Christian and Kurdish groups. Such a whittling down of the regime's base would leave the Syrian army and national militias demographically incapable of holding on against a unified rebel coalition.

Negotiated settlement remains the least likely of the four scenarios. We feel that the only path to a negotiated settlement would be one in which the bulk of the external powers supporting factions in the Syrian war come to the conclusion that the ongoing violence was starting to harm their interests and threatening to spin out of control and engulf the whole Middle East in sectarian violence. In turn, these external powers (Iran, Hezbollah, Russia, Qatar, Kuwait, Turkey, the United States, the European Union, Saudi Arabia, etc.) would all decide to cut off weapons and arms shipments to their proxies in Syria, as well as flows of money and foreign fighters. This "shutting off of the spigot" would force most of the various factions in the war (likely with the exception of ISIS and al-Nusrah) to begin to see a long-term negotiating process as the best option for achieving their political objectives within Syria. In such a scenario, the external powers would probably use their influence to force their Syrian proxies to make concessions as a way of ending the war and reducing the risks of sectarian warfare spreading into other parts of the Middle East and beyond into the wider Muslim world. Absent this kind of systematic outside pressure, we find it difficult to see how the trajectory of the current Syrian war could move from regime victory toward negotiated settlement.

Our December workshop produced several interesting results. At that time, our expert participants determined that while prolonged conflict seemed the most likely path for Syria, Alawite gains in the fall of 2013 made regime victory a more conceivable outcome, albeit not necessarily in the near term. The workshop participants also found that regime victory would not be the worst outcome for the United States, because such a scenario would afford the United States and its allies the opportunity to contain the extremist movements, such as ISIS and the al-Nusrah Front, that have so quickly strengthened since the onset of the conflict (and even since our workshop).

Workshop participants also believed that regime collapse, initially the desired outcome for anti-regime forces/powers, may now be the worst possible outcome. This is because regime collapse would create an environment in which the radical jihadist movements would face only a weak and fragmented opposition within Syria and would have ample opportunities to gain additional territory. These radical elements could also create ever-larger safe havens from which to launch terrorist attacks throughout the Middle East and perhaps even into Europe and the United States. Regime collapse would also present Salafi jihadists with opportunities to move into neighboring states like Lebanon and Jordan and would strengthen their hand in the current battles in Iraq. ISIS would then work to pressure local regimes with the ultimate aim of toppling them.

The most surprising change in our perspective on events in Syria is how quickly momentum can shift. We are mindful that this unexpected reversal follows in the wake of other shifts in fortunes and leavens our confidence that this current trajectory is irreversible. It is not. Just six months after projecting a path of fragmentation and prolonged conflict, we now see a more dominant regime making progress more quickly than expected, fighting a more disparate and weakening array of opposition forces. ■

About This Perspective

This perspective draws on a December 2013 RAND workshop to assess four possible future scenarios for the conflict in Syria: prolonged conflict, regime victory, regime collapse, and negotiated settlement. The authors update and reassess these scenarios based on developments in Syria and Iraq in 2014 and explore the implications that each has for Syria, the region, and the United States.

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