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**REPORT**

# Dissecting an Evolving Conflict: The Syrian Uprising and the Future of the Country

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## About The Author



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## About The Developmental Editor



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## Introduction

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In March 2011, the Arab Spring ushered in a new era of open opposition to the Syrian regime. Starting as a small, inchoate protest movement calling for political reforms, it eventually evolved in the face of a violent crackdown into a full-blown countrywide revolution calling for the overthrow of President Bashar al-Assad and his regime. After two years of fighting the death toll is estimated to exceed 90,000 people,<sup>1</sup> with approximately 3 million Syrians internally displaced,<sup>2</sup> and over 1.5 million Syrian refugees believed to have fled the country to escape the fighting.<sup>3</sup> Nor has this fighting been contained within Syria's borders. This conflict now threatens to destabilize the region, as each of Syria's neighboring countries has experienced some degree of spillover fighting.<sup>4</sup>

The extreme fluidity of events and the difficulty in discerning propaganda from factual events on the ground have rendered the conflict extremely challenging for outside observers to follow. Given the conflict's inherent opaqueness, this report will attempt to better elucidate the crisis by offering a brief description of how events have unfolded over the course of the struggle, highlighting specific transformative episodes, important domestic groups, and the international attempts to put an end to the fighting, in order to give a more comprehensive and informed understanding of this multi-faceted Syrian uprising.

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## Arab Spring Comes to Syria

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Current Syrian President Bashar al-Assad came to power in 2000 when his father, Hafez al-Assad, who himself seized power after a military coup in 1970, passed away. There were initially high hopes for reform under the new president. During the early days of his tenure in office, Bashar loosened political restrictions and allowed some political opposition activities.<sup>5</sup> This period, known as the Damascus Spring, was short lived, and Assad soon returned to the repressive style of rule used by his father. When political reforms failed to materialize, frustration among the Syrian people quickly grew. A coalition of prominent Syrian opposition members united to create the Damascus Declaration in 2005<sup>6</sup> and called for the lifting of the Emergency Law and the implementation of political reform. Although many of the group's leaders were promptly arrested, they remained active and established the most important opposition group in the country, helping to set the stage for events to follow.

The self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi, an impoverished fruit vendor who protested against the economic and political humiliation he had endured under Tunisia's authoritarian regime, sparked a regional protest movement that led not only to the toppling of Tunisia's autocratic leader Ben Ali, but also to the overthrow of regimes in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. When the protest movement, commonly known as the Arab Spring, first hit the region, Assad voiced reserved approval, blaming the fall of these regimes on their pro-U.S. policies. In a January 31, 2011 *Wall Street Journal* interview, Assad expressed confidence that his country was immune to the protest wave. Stressing the need for reform, he qualified this statement saying that Syrians themselves would have to wait for the next generation before they could be implemented—a disappointing statement to those inside the country.<sup>7</sup>

His confidence proved unfounded. Inspired by the ability of peaceful protest movements in Egypt and Tunisia to overthrow their dictatorial regimes, Syrians held a candle vigil on February 2, 2011 in the Bab Tuma neighborhood of Damascus—an explicit act of civil disobedience against the Syrian Emergency Law, which banned unsanctioned acts of public protest.<sup>8</sup> Soon popular demonstrations began to break out throughout Syria in places as diverse as the Alawite heartland of Latakia,<sup>9</sup> the Kurdish city of al-Qamishli,<sup>10</sup> and the largely Sunni city of Hama.<sup>11</sup> Initially, protests were small and called for reform rather than the overthrow of the regime. However, the regime's heavy-handed response to expressions of dissent in the southern city of Daraa transformed the protest movement into a popular uprising against the rule of Bashar al-Assad.

Influenced by Arab Spring protesters on TV, in March 2011, children between the ages of nine and fifteen in Daraa wrote anti-regime graffiti on the walls of their school and were promptly apprehended by security forces. Upon release, their bodies and faces showed signs of severe torture; some had burns and others had had their fingernails pulled out.<sup>12</sup> Outraged over the fate that had befallen their children, people in Daraa took to the street in peaceful demonstrations, dubbed “Friday of Dignity.”<sup>13</sup> During attempts to disperse the protesters, security forces killed four people, an act that triggered new protests and violent regime attempts to repress them. The regime’s resort to violence badly misjudged the prevailing sentiments of the country, leading to the expansion of protests.<sup>14</sup> Opposition activists quickly moved from calls for reform to taking up the slogan of the Arab Spring—“the people want to overthrow the regime.”

During this time a pattern began to emerge where protesters would organize at local mosques after Friday services and then march to city centers shouting slogans against the regime. In response, security forces would fire on the protesters, often resulting in several deaths. This would be followed by large funeral marches for the “martyrs” that also served as anti-regime protests. Security forces would once again fire on the protesters, which would in turn lead to more protests. This created a perpetuating cycle, with each successive funeral and weekly protest swelling in size, sometimes numbering in the thousands.<sup>15</sup>

## Civil Disobedience

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As the cycle of demonstrations and killings continued to grow, the regime attempted to pacify opposition actors by offering limited reforms and promises of greater democratization, while at the same time claiming that the protests were led by foreign-funded conspirators and terrorists—a narrative that the regime continues to espouse. Eventually Assad lifted the much-reviled Emergency Law, issued a decree allowing demonstrations, approved the formation of new political parties, and announced intentions to hold negotiations with opposition groups.<sup>16</sup> These promises ultimately proved to be too little too late; the regime enacted them while simultaneously ratcheting up its campaign of violence and repression.

It was in these days that the regime first began using the notorious sectarian, pro-regime militias known as the *shabiha*, or “ghosts” in Arabic. These civilian militias, comprised overwhelmingly of Assad’s own minority Alawite sect, were often sent into largely Sunni areas to breakup protests, frequently killing unarmed protesters.<sup>17</sup> The *shabiha* became a convenient way for the regime to commit acts of violence and intimidation against opposition groups while denying culpability. Additionally, the *shabiha* painted the conflict in sectarian terms. Sending the *shabiha* into Sunni areas to kill and terrorize the citizens not only increased sectarian tensions, but also had the parallel effect of tying the fate of the Alawites, many of whom disliked the government, to that of the regime. After numerous sectarian massacres were perpetrated by these groups, the Alawites grew increasingly concerned with the possibility for retributive attacks if the regime was to fall. Thus, the regime effectively heightened the mutual fear and suspicion between the Alawites and Sunnis, while undermining the opposition’s efforts to persuade the Alawites and other minorities to abandon the regime.

## Opposition Organizes

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In response to the mounting violence and the regime's inadequate concessions, large numbers of grassroots opposition groups began to materialize. At the village and neighborhood level and often reaching further, Local Coordinating Councils (LCC) and youth activists began organizing protests and orchestrating opposition efforts.<sup>18</sup> Using social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, the LCCs documented protests and violent assaults of security forces.<sup>19</sup> The LCCs helped convey the opposition's story to the world despite government restrictions on international media access and the bias of state media. Even today, as the focus of the opposition has shifted from protests to armed struggle and the LCCs' roles have declined, many Syrians still consider these groups more representative of their communities, as the LCCs' members come from the areas in which they operate, unlike many of the armed fighters.

At the city and district levels, the opposition formed Revolutionary Councils.<sup>20</sup> Consisting of prominent local intellectuals and businessmen, these councils contributed strategic support to the revolution. The councils often formed "media centers" to communicate with the international media and distribute information and footage collected by the LCCs. As the conflict progressed, some have also served as local civilian leadership bodies, attempting to create local government structures that could eventually replace the regime's regional government if Assad is overthrown.

At the national level, the Syrian Revolution General Commission (SRGC), led by the well-known opposition activist Suhair Atassi, was established in August of 2011 to provide a representative organization for fifty-six revolutionary groups and LCCs inside the country. While this group has since disbanded, it played an important early role as a domestically based national coordinator helping to document and support the on-going protest on Facebook pages, such as the popular "Syrian Revolution Against Bashar al-Assad."<sup>21</sup> The SRGC also facilitated spreading awareness of the Syrian regime's human rights violations and in promoting non-sectarian representation of all Syrians.

While the SRGC served as the national level opposition group within the country, the Syrian National Council (SNC) was formed as the national opposition representation in exile. The council, which included many members of the Damascus Declaration and several minority sect blocs, aimed to provide political support for the revolution and to voice its demands to the

international community. The SNC modeled itself on the Libyan National Council (LNC), which acted as a political and military leadership body for the uprising against the Libyan regime. Yet unlike the LNC, whose members domestically coordinated the rebellion against Muammar al-Qaddafi, the SNC's leaders lived in exile. Even though the SNC gained popularity because of the high profile opposition figures in its ranks, the lack of coordination with revolutionaries inside the country complicated its attempts to emerge as the ultimate representatives of the Syrian political opposition.

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## Militarization of Conflict

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As the protest movements grew in size and organization, they quickly became an existential threat to the regime. Assad responded by implementing the ‘security solution,’ modeled after his father’s ruthless crackdown of the early 1980’s rebellion in Hama that led to the deaths of over 10,000 people. Military units were called into the places where the protest movements were deemed most threatening, such as Daraa, the Damascus suburbs, Homs, and Latakia.<sup>22</sup> What had originally been security forces firing into crowds of protesters evolved into military offensives using tanks, artillery, gunships, helicopters, and jets. Soldiers were now being ordered to fire on unarmed and defenseless protesters—not the foreign terrorists they had been told they were fighting. One soldier named Waleed al-Kashami, who launched a trend for future defectors by announcing his defection in a *YouTube* video, explained that his unit had been ordered to attack armed gangs near Damascus. However, when he arrived the people were unarmed and included women and children. Faced with similar situations, increasing numbers of soldiers began defecting, with many choosing to take up arms against the regime.

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In July 2011, Col. Riad Asa’ad, along with six other recently defected Syrian military officers, declared the creation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), a loose military umbrella organization formed to “protect the free and armless Syrian people...[and] to gain freedom, dignity, and overthrow the regime.”<sup>23</sup> In its early stages, the FSA worked in close coordination with the peaceful protest movement. They often served as protection for the demonstrators, helping to prevent security forces from firing upon the protesters. The lines between the protesters and the FSA, which in addition to military defectors also included disaffected civilians taking up arms against the regime, were often blurred during this time. FSA members who carried guns during the week would often disarm on Friday and join the protests. Yet the distinction would become increasingly clear as pro-regime forces’ actions served to radicalize the opposition, eventually undercutting the peaceful protest movement.<sup>24</sup>

### Siege of Homs and Houla Massacre

By the summer of 2011 the armed insurgency was picking up steam. The FSA, which began as a moderately sized force of military defectors, had swelled in size and now consisted of around 20,000 fighters<sup>25</sup> from all over the country.<sup>26</sup> Homs, the third largest city in Syria, had become a major center for armed opposition activity, and the army was ordered to evict them

from the city in June.<sup>27</sup> After six months of failed attempts, Assad launched what was at that point the largest offensive in the conflict in an attempt to dislodge the rebels from Homs in February 2012.

The siege, which primarily focused on Sunni neighborhoods like Baba Amr, caused an unprecedented level of death and destruction as the regime fired indiscriminate artillery barrages into civilian areas, an act that U.N. Secretary General Ban-Ki Moon said constituted “crimes against humanity.”<sup>28</sup> Numerous other atrocities were reported during the siege, including the summary execution of unarmed opposition activists and the murder of women and children. The siege lasted for only two months, but resulted in thousands of civilian and opposition member deaths, with the whole destruction of neighborhoods and the displacement of their residents.

In Homs, the *shabiha* started to assume a much more active and visible role. They were frequently dispatched to clear rebel held neighborhoods after the military had “softened” the areas with shelling. During these operations, the *shabiha* would kill not only FSA fighters, but also unarmed civilians.<sup>29</sup> The worst example of this occurred in the Sunni village of Houla, a few miles northwest of Homs, on May 25, 2012. After intense shelling by regime forces, the *shabiha* were sent in and reportedly massacred 108 people, including forty-one children.<sup>30</sup> According to the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights:

The commission found reasonable grounds to believe that Government forces and the *Shabbiha* had committed the crimes against humanity of murder and of torture, war crimes and gross violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law, including unlawful killing, torture, arbitrary arrest and detention, sexual violence, indiscriminate attack, pillaging and destruction of property. The commission found that Government forces and *Shabbiha* members were responsible for the killings in Al-Houla.<sup>31</sup>

The regime’s brutality at Homs and Houla fully militarized the opposition and further marginalized groups such as the LCCs and Revolutionary Councils.

## Military Victories for Opposition

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The battle for Homs had clearly demonstrated the military disparity between the regime and the insurgents. The regime's tanks, aircraft, and artillery, supplied by Russia and Iran, far outweighed insurgent guns and improvised weapons. As the rebels were expelled from Homs and other urban areas in early 2012, they regrouped in the countryside and suburbs, attracting large numbers of new recruits. Here they were able to refine and successfully implement their guerrilla warfare tactics. By the beginning of the summer the armed opposition began pushing the regime forces out of these regions, carving out large areas in the northern and central countryside that served as safe zones from which they could organize and launch attacks.<sup>32</sup>

On July 18, 2012 a bombing in the regime's National Headquarters during a meeting of Assad's "inner circle" killed four high ranking members of the regime defense apparatus, including both the Defense Minister and Deputy Defense Minister, and severely wounded several other important figures, including Assad's younger brother and Commander of the notorious Republican Guard.<sup>33</sup> This event not only put the regime on its heels as it tried to recover from the deaths of key individuals charged with suppressing the opposition, but also breathed new life into the armed opposition movement. In the weeks that followed, the armed opposition launched several new offensives that would see it gain control of border crossings along the Turkish and Iraqi borders and half of the northern city of Aleppo, forcing the regime to withdraw its troops from most of the Kurdish areas in the North. In another blow to the regime, the Prime Minister Riyad Hijab and Brigadier General Manaf Tlass, a close friend of Assad and son of former Defense Minister Mustafa Tlass, both defected to the opposition.

This period would prove a turning point for military operations against the regime. From this point forward the rebels scored numerous victories in the rural areas and began contesting larger areas of the major cities, forcing the regime to withdraw its forces from battles in the rural areas to shore up its hold on urban areas under attack. The regime's retreat from the countryside allowed the rebels to declare even more rural and suburban villages and towns "liberated areas." Currently, the entire northern and eastern portions of the country are under opposition control, with the armed opposition also controlling large sections in the South along the Jordanian border. Furthermore, the rebels have footholds in every province in the country.<sup>34</sup>

While today the rebels still maintain the initiative, the quick succession of victories in the summer and early fall of 2012 has slowed considerably and the regime has been able to regain

some significant territory including supply routes from rebel control. Drawn out sieges against regime military bases and stalemates in the urban areas under regime control have now set in. Progress has slowed for the rebels, who have been unable to acquire the heavy weaponry and large amounts of ammunition necessary to dislodge regime forces from heavily fortified positions and neutralize the regime's air superiority.

## Appearance of the Islamist Brigades

The opposition's transformation from a peaceful protest movement to an armed rebellion has coincided with the rise of religious fundamentalist groups. In light of their appearance, countries supporting the overthrow of Assad are reticent to arm the opposition, fearing that these weapons will reach extremist groups. While the fears of the West may be reasonable, the majority of those who joined the armed opposition present themselves as soldiers rather than jihadists, seeking the overthrow of the regime rather than the return of the Islamic caliphate advocated by al-Qaeda. Some of the opposition fighters gradually began to use language and signs derived from Sunni Islam, and gave their battalions Islamic names. Yet despite the outward signs of religious fervor, many have adopted Islamic appearances without espousing the ideology; the Salafi-style beard, for example, is not merely a religious symbol, but also one of resistance to the regime.<sup>35</sup>

Nonetheless, one leading Islamist brigade, Jabhat al-Nusra,<sup>36</sup> has been linked to the al-Qaeda movement, with the U.S. government declaring it a foreign terrorist organization. Al-Nusra, having acquired weaponry and experience fighting in Iraq, has been among the most capable fighting forces in Syria, scoring several high profile victories against the regime.<sup>37</sup> Al-Nusra has also been active in providing food and other services in "liberated zones" and gained the favor of many Syrians in desperate humanitarian circumstances. Al-Nusra and other conservative Islamist groups' ability to fight and feed the people are largely due to the substantial assistance they have received from Gulf countries. This is in contrast to the nationalist FSA-related brigades who have not been well-financed or supplied. Despite al-Nusra's military prowess, many Syrians have opposed its control over daily affairs. In places like Deir ez-Zour and al-Raqqah provinces, the people have begun to chafe under the group's ultra-conservative Islamic rule.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, while some moderate FSA brigades appreciate al-Nusra's battlefield acumen, there have been numerous instances of discord and fighting between FSA brigades and al-Nusra.<sup>39</sup> One FSA commander remarked, "We'll fight [al-Nusra] on day two after Assad falls...until then we will no longer work with them."<sup>40</sup>

The rise of conservative Islamist forces has reinforced the regime's narrative, which continues to portray the opposition as "terrorists" and blames al-Qaeda for every Syrian death during the conflict. Presiding over a highly diverse population,<sup>41</sup> and with his own Alawite sect making up only 12 percent of the country's population, Assad has continually advanced a narrative of the conflict that his regime is the only entity preventing Sunni terrorists from taking over the country

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and exacting revenge against the Alawite and Christian minorities.<sup>42</sup> This narrative seemed to fail in the early days of the uprising, as the protest movement included many Kurds as well as some Alawites and Christians.<sup>43</sup> However, many of the minority sects, Syrian secularists, and regime loyalists who stayed on the sidelines, have continued to support the regime as an alternative to a perceived radicalized opposition.<sup>44</sup>

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## International Response

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With the Syrian conflict having descended into what has been called the worst humanitarian disaster since the end of the Cold War, there has been increasing pressure for the international community to act. As early as October 2011, the opposition was requesting the creation of a no-fly zone<sup>45</sup> similar to the one implemented in Libya. Differences among the members of the U.N. Security Council, however, hindered efforts to create a robust and unified effort to end the violence. Along with China, Russia has vetoed three Security Council resolutions condemning the regime's violence.<sup>46</sup> Then Russian President Dmitry Medvedev announced he would not support any resolution against Assad, emphasizing that Russia would not back any steps that could lead to the use of military power against Syria. In addition to the diplomatic cover provided to Syria on the Security Council, Russia has continued arming the regime, stating its obligation to honor existing military contracts.<sup>47</sup>

Even with Security Council actions blocked by Russia and China, the U.N. has tried to play a constructive role in ending the violence and has appointed special envoys to Syria. The first special envoy, former U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan, succeeded in getting Assad's endorsement of a six-point peace plan that called for the regime to pull its troops from contested urban areas and for both sides to lay down their arms. While the ceasefire was eventually called off after both the rebels and the regime announced that they were abandoning the plan, it did temporarily lower the level of violence.

After the ceasefire fell apart, Annan capitalized on international concerns that the conflict in Syria was escalating beyond control to achieve a rare instance of cooperation between the international powers at a meeting in Geneva. On June 30, 2012, the Action Group for Syria, comprised of China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States, Turkey, the Arab League, and the E.U., issued a joint communiqué proposing a plan for a transitional new government and the reimplementing of the six-point peace plan. The "Geneva Communiqué" called for a transitional government that "could include members of the present government and the opposition and other groups and shall be formed on the basis of mutual consent."<sup>48</sup> It also called on all parties to retain and restore the structure of the public services, including the army and security forces, but demanded that they operate professionally and according to human rights. Yet, shortly after the Geneva agreement was reached, disagreement between Russia and the West over Assad's role in the transitional government prevented its implementation.<sup>49</sup>

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In August 2012, criticizing the U.N. Security Council for a lack of organized action towards Syria due to disagreement among its veto-wielding members and frustrated by the escalating violence in the country, Annan announced his resignation. Shortly thereafter Lakhdar Brahimi was appointed new special envoy. Since that time, Brahimi has continued to pursue a negotiated solution based on the Geneva Communiqué. This strategy has not succeeded, as Russia and the U.S.'s views on the communiqué have appeared irreconcilable. Recently, however, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov announced a joint effort to revive negotiations based on the Geneva agreement. While large questions remain over the Geneva Communiqué's viability, Brahimi declared this new effort "the first hopeful news" on Syria in a long time.<sup>50</sup>

While the U.N. Security Council struggled to reach an agreement on resolutions to condemn or sanction the Assad regime for its violent crackdown on the opposition, countries in the region have been taking their own steps to deal with the conflict. After the first eight months of the regime's crackdown on protesting civilians, the Arab League imposed sanctions on the Syrian regime; one month later, they agreed to send monitors to observe the situation in Syria. When the observer mission failed, the League suspended Syria's membership.<sup>51</sup> Acting on their own, the regional countries of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey have also offered significant aid and support to the opposition fighters.

Turkey, which prior to the uprising enjoyed strong relations with Syria, has been highly critical of Assad's actions during the crisis. After breaking off relations with Syria in September 2012, Turkey has allowed the FSA to use its border crossings to transfer weapons and supplies, and has permitted its leadership to use its territory to set up a command center. With Turkey's longstanding problems with Kurdish separatist militias, it is closely monitoring the actions of the Syrian Kurds who now enjoy a large degree of autonomy in Syria with the government forces having pulled out of the Kurdish areas.<sup>52</sup> Turkey's fear that greater freedom for the Syrian Kurds might increase separatist sentiment within its own Kurdish population may help explain Turkey's recent peace agreement with the Kurdish separatist PKK group, whom Turkey has been battling for several decades.

For their part, the Gulf States have offered the opposition high levels of financial and material support, which contributed to the rebels' military victories in the early summer of 2012. However, according to rebel commanders, the military support from Gulf allies has been inconsistent and

far short of what rebel leaders have requested to turn the tide of the war. The limited military support might partially be explained by the increasingly powerful jihadist groups emerging. Given the risk these groups pose to the West, Gulf countries have faced enhanced pressure to rein in their military assistance to the rebels.

The Saudis in particular have been motivated to assist the rebels as a means to weaken Iran by removing its strongest Arab ally in Assad. As the regime is critical for maintaining Iran's weapons pipeline to Hezbollah, the downfall of Assad would strike a serious blow to Iran's ability to project power in the region. As Iran and its Hezbollah proxy take greater steps to prop up Assad, such as training pro-regime militias and sending Hezbollah units into the country to fight alongside Syrian troops, so too is Saudi Arabia likely to increase its support for the rebels.

While regional countries have shown a willingness to offer military assistance to the opposition, the U.S. and the E.U. have been more circumspect.<sup>53</sup> In lieu of providing the advanced weaponry the armed opposition has called for, the West began imposing tough sanctions against the regime in May 2011. Additionally, Obama has worked to assuage the great humanitarian toll that this conflict has created. To date, the U.S. has contributed \$510 million to humanitarian aid efforts to care for the nearly 1.3 million registered refugees located at camps in neighboring countries,<sup>54</sup> as well as the additional millions of internally displaced peoples. The E.U. has also assisted in these efforts with a combined contribution of €410 million (\$545 million).<sup>55</sup>

On the political front, the West has continued to work with the political opposition to form an inclusive representative body that could eventually form a provisional government in exile. Although the West initially hoped that the SNC could be this body, the group was sidelined when it became clear that they both lacked legitimacy with the domestic opposition and was insufficiently representative of the various groups within the country. Since that time the international community has pushed for the formation of a new group that draws its membership from a wider section of Syrian society. In Qatar in November 2012, the formation of the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC) was announced. The group, which aimed to unify the opposition's disparate factions under one organization that could coordinate with Western and Arab backers, elected Cleric Moaz al-Khatib, former imam of the Umayyad mosque in Damascus and long-time critic of Assad, as its leader, with two vice-presidents, Suhair Atassi, and influential opposition figure Riad Seif.

Qatar and the Arab League recognized the SOC as the representative of the Syrian opposition. France later agreed to receive an ambassador for the SOC, with the EU recognizing it as the sole representative of the Syrian people. On December 11, 2012, shortly after the SOC's formation, the Obama administration announced:

[The U.S. has] made a decision that the Syrian Opposition Coalition is now inclusive enough, is reflective and representative enough of the Syrian population that we consider them the legitimate representative of the Syrian people in opposition to the Assad regime, and so we will provide them recognition.<sup>56</sup>

Shortly after the formation of the SOC, the military leaders of the various groups fighting under the banner of the FSA convened to form a council of military leadership, now known as the Supreme Military Council (SMC). The SMC then pledged loyalty to the civilian leadership of the SOC, transferring the opposition a degree of oversight over the moderate forces of the FSA. Having created a more representative body that was capable of exerting a degree of influence over the opposition's action within Syria, the Obama administration in February announced that it would, for the first time, provide non-lethal military assistance directly to the SOC to be distributed by the SMC.<sup>57</sup>

## Current State of the Conflict

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Despite the United States's recent decision to increase support to the rebels, the West remains weary of offering greater material support until the opposition forms a capable and cohesive interim government. In particular, the West desires a credible transitional government that can both provide governance for rebel-held territory and serve as a replacement for the regime should Assad fall. This goal appeared in sight when, after much pressure from the West, the SOC elected Ghassan Hitto as the interim prime minister, tasked with creating an interim government. Disagreement quickly arose over Hitto's selection, who is seen by many as an outsider due to his diaspora status since 1987, and he has yet to be endorsed by many in the SOC and SMC. Reports recently emerged that the SOC is considering replacing him, but nothing has materialized yet.<sup>58</sup> Whatever Hitto's fate, until the SOC creates a viable interim government, the West is unlikely to give it or the SMC the level of assistance it seeks.

Nevertheless, with Russia potentially arming the regime with S-300 anti-aircraft missiles, pressure is mounting on the U.S. government to intervene on behalf of the rebels. While the E.U. has lifted its arms embargo on Syria, future U.S. policy remains unknown. Like Israel, the U.S. wishes to avoid escalating the conflict into a regional war at all costs, and is deeply concerned about the possibility of arms ending up in the hands of Jabhat al-Nusra, an openly al-Qaeda affiliated brigade. Despite this, there are already signs pointing to the growing internationalization of the conflict. Internally the rebels have succeeded in wresting control of almost the entirety of the less populated countryside in the north and east of the country, yet the regime remains in firm control of the critical cities of Damascus, Hama, Homs, and much of Aleppo. Recently the rebels were able to reopen the southern front and have been making large gains in Daraa province and in the Damascus suburbs. However, the regime has recently taken back, with the assistance of Hezbollah, much of the rebel held territory around the Syria-Lebanon border and is conducting successful offensives in the Homs and Hama provinces. At present a bloody stalemate exists with neither side capable of defeating the other.

The dangers posed from the continuation of the fighting are not just limited to Syria. While the stalemate drags on, the risk of the violence in Syria spilling over into neighboring countries is growing. Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey, and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights have all experienced shelling and/or fighting. Perhaps no country is in greater danger than the fragile country of Lebanon, which stands on the precipice of being pulled headfirst into the fighting.

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*While the stalemate drags on, the risk of the violence in Syria spilling over into neighboring countries is growing.*

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The most powerful force in the country, Hezbollah, no longer hides that it is actively fighting for the regime inside Syria.<sup>59</sup> The FSA has responded by launching artillery strikes on Hezbollah positions inside Lebanon,<sup>60</sup> while fighting between Hezbollah and Syrian rebels within Lebanese territory remains widespread. Furthermore, the regime has shown a willingness to commit violent acts inside Lebanon. In February 2013, former Lebanese Information Minister Michel Samaha was caught plotting to assassinate Lebanese religious figures and admitted that a senior Syrian intelligence official had given him the explosives.<sup>61</sup> More recently the regime has bombed the Sunni Muslim town of Aarsal in Eastern Lebanon.<sup>62</sup>

## Conclusion

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After more than two years, this conflict has displaced over 4 million people, inflicted over \$80 billion in damage, caused over 90,000 deaths, and torn the social fabric of a diverse country that was once the model for coexistence in the region to the point where it could take a generation to repair. Unfortunately, these numbers only seem likely to increase as the political and military stalemates drag on.

Politically, the gulf between the opposition and the regime has left no room for dialogue. Hopes for a negotiated settlement were temporarily raised when SOC leader Moaz Khatib made an offer to hold negotiations with the regime on January 30, 2013. However, Assad failed to generate a serious response to Khatib's offer.<sup>63</sup> And although many Syrians welcomed Khatib's initiative, a lack of support for negotiations within the SOC will make it hard for others to make a similar offer for talks in the future.

On the military front, the regime is incapable of extinguishing the rebellion with large swathes of the country already fallen outside of Assad's control. Yet, without a massive increase in foreign arms, and the likelihood of this happening remaining to be seen, it could be years before the rebels defeat the regime. Furthermore, it is not clear what a rebel victory would look like given the growing fragmentation within the country.

Recent events, including the apparent use of chemical weapons by Assad forces, suggest that there may be increasing support for greater intervention. Reports have emerged that the U.S. is secretly training rebels in Jordan, and within the U.S. Congress there is growing bipartisan support for arming the rebels and setting up a no-fly-zone over rebel held territory.<sup>64</sup> The Obama administration has declared that any use of chemical weapons by the regime would be a "redline," and after recent reports of possible chemical weapons attacks the administration has agreed to arm the rebels. Additionally, Jabhat al-Nusra continues to amass weapons, territory, and influence in Syria. As such, the U.S. and possibly the French and British governments may now be compelled to act as the risks of allowing the Syrian conflict to rage indefinitely include greater regional conflagration and the demise of Syria.

The longer the warring drags on the greater the chance for Syria to turn into a failed state, increasing the likelihood of regional destabilization and a growing presence of extremist groups like Jabhat al-Nusra. Without a significant shift in the balance of power through a major

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*Without a significant shift in the balance of power through a major increase in lethal assistance to the rebels, foreign military intervention, or a major diplomatic breakthrough, the conflict is unlikely to end in the near future.*

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increase in lethal assistance to the rebels, foreign military intervention, or a major diplomatic breakthrough, the conflict is unlikely to end in the near future. Unfortunately, time is the biggest enemy, and while the international community struggles to agree upon a way to end the crisis and the military conflict remains locked in a bloody stalemate, the Syrian people are forced to endure ever greater amounts of suffering while witnessing the destruction of their country.

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## Epilogue

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On June 5, regime forces and Lebanese Hezbollah fighters wrested the Syrian border town of Qusair from rebel control, shifting the war's momentum toward the Assad regime. Aided by hundreds of Hezbollah militants and continued support from Tehran and Moscow, regime forces are now poised to launch a major offensive against rebel positions in Aleppo, a vital city linking rebel positions in the North with Turkish supply routes.<sup>65</sup> The decisive defeat of opposition forces at Qusair, combined with firmer evidence of the Assad regime's usage of chemical weapons, provoked the Obama administration's June 14 decision to begin arming the Supreme Military Council under Salim Idriss.<sup>66</sup> As this paper goes to print, the insurgent fight in Syria strengthened following Obama's nod for supporting the rebel forces. Growing regional sectarianism has also spread, with incidents in Egypt and Lebanon traced to developments around the international proxy war in Syria. The fate of political negotiations is in question as militarization intensifies.

*June 24, 2013*

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